

RE ZERO DETAILED SUMMARY PHASE 5

And that's phase 4 over. A short phase. A baby phase. Midget phase.

The usual reminders, because it's always good to be reminded:

These are still summaries and I am still taking liberties to skim etc. when the mood strikes me. The mood is simply not striking me much now that the arc is in full swing.

My Japanese still could be better and I am still unqualified to be translating it. Mistranslations will happen, but hopefully not egregiously.

Proofreading is still not COME BACK

For these reasons combined, I would recommend erring on the side of scepticism while reading. But ideally it will still be enjoyable scepticism.

My Email is still ankaa.burner@gmail.com

And previous chapters are still available at MEGA here: <https://mega.nz/#F!VNdzDYYK!nK9fNU3LeprlZSbRAnlsRg>

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If any of this is new information to you, then you may be lost. This document begins at Chapter 98 of Arc 4, and is not where you should be if you have not read the previous 97 chapters. Please finagle your way toward the MEGA (I have hidden the link you seek somewhere on this page) and begin from whichever point is best for you: if this means immediately after the end of the anime, then you would want the document at the top which is labelled 'peruse first'. If this does not mean immediately after the end of the anime, I got nothing. You must locate where you left off by your own power.

And that is the end to this rather sparse advisory. Now I will fill space with Rem.

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT

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CHAPTER 98: A BED LOST OF WARMTH

—Close her eyes, and the memories of then come back vivid even now.

White. A world of white.

Awakened and breathing frigid puffs, young Emilia realises that she is amid a snowscape.

Why? asks her heart. But there is no answer.

She cannot remember the context for this, and her consciousness is spotty.

She uprights her fallen body, runs to the window, and looks at the wintry scene outside. White demise cloaks the entirety of the village inside the familiar, verdant wood, now midway through a slow and progressive process of freezing.

Being that this is Emilia's first time seeing it, she cannot recognize with certainty that this is the phenomenon known as snow. But her instincts sear the biting chill vividly into her young memory.

Still unknowing of what is happening, her throat taut, Emilia breaks into a run with her expression tense.

The moment she bounds out of the old house—out of the great, hollow tree—a cutting gale on her skin and a piercing cold at her feet assault the girl with their baptism.

The snow immediately grabs her foot, and she tumbles face-first to the ground.

Freezing. Crystallized snow in white flakes. Encountering these white, falling flakes of ice births a terror in Emilia. They are so awesomely beautiful, but so horrifyingly cold.

With only these simple clothes—just a garment of thin cloth wrapped around her body—Emilia cannot counter the chill. The shivers racking her from her core originate from both the cold and from her terror.

The snow pillages her of body heat, and the white crystals could captivate her heart. Emilia wails as she shoos the snow drifting around her away, and again runs.

Snowflakes dance down from the sky endlessly. The flakes fall to her jaw as she pants, sticking in her throat. She coughs, running, tears travelling down her face.

She didn't know why she was crying.

But it's scary. She's afraid. Why was she alone here? Where did everybody go? Where did everybody, kind to her, who smiled at her, who would help her—where did they go?

She attempts to envision everybody's faces, but a muck clogs her thoughts.

The faces of everybody in her mind—their faces, their smiles, the images painted over by black shadow, attempting to steal their presence out of Emilia's head.

Emilia: “—hk”


Shaking her head messily as tears flow down her face, Emilia keeps running.

She must not think. If she thinks about everybody, the black shadow will consume them. Everyone precious to her will disappear from her mind.

But if she does not think about everyone, she will be alone. In a cold, impenetrable world of white, alone—that was an unbearable terror for the young Emilia.

Young Emilia is without power and without knowledge. All she can do in this white demise is struggle.

The falling snow coils around the struggling Emilia as if in mocking, her little body descending steadily into pure white doom.

—No one's here. She cannot meet anyone. Now, she will never  everybody, just as she never had.

Emilia: “—Nhaa!”

Lost of where to go in this white world, her limbs numb and unmoving, Emilia falls into a squat as she cries like a baby.

Her legs sink into the soft snow from the knees down, and although it must be cold, she does not feel it. Her white skin, often compared to the snow, now burns cold in ruborous red because of that very same stuff.

Just like that, running away from absolutely everything, Emilia clutches her head as she sinks into the snow.

The snow falls mercilessly upon the young girl, piling up, as Emilia's small body disappears into the white, and—

???: “—EMILIA!!”

With her eyes closed and fallen into wakeless sleep, a scream rips through the silence to call her. Fringed with their long lashes, Emilia's eyes open as she springs up. The instant she does, her light body is pulled out of the snow and into an embrace.

Emilia: “—a”

???: “It's okay, Emilia. Everything is okay, you're okay. Thank goodness... I found you...”

She attempts to speak, but her perfectly frigid throat only manages a hazy breath. But the other understands Emilia's condition, hugging her, their voice trembling in pure joy at Emilia's safety. Brushing her face against their short silver hair, her nose red and sniffly, Emilia expresses her emotions bodily. To convey that, while they give her the ultimate in love, she feels the same way about them.

This happiness again, of being cradled in their arms, and to speak there with them.

Amidst the snow which had conveyed little Emilia the despair—*perhaps everything is all over*—there definitively existed a warmth, here, right here.

Still hugging Emilia who shivers from joy and cold, the woman with short, silver hair and a relieved expression now stiffens her face, looking around the surroundings as she starts running. She draws her lips close to Emilia's ear, exhaling breaths of white.

Woman: “Emilia, hear me? I know you must be worried about lots of things, and not know what's going on, but... everything is okay. I'll do something about all of this. Even if you and me maybe end up separated, you will absolutely never be alone...”

Though the woman's words are urgent, Emilia does not understand what she is hearing. But the idea

that she would be separated from this person is terrifying. Her numb fingers grip at the woman's chest, and she shakes her head vigorously.

For young and ignorant Emilia, appealing to the emotions of others is her only point of savvy. It was by continuously doing this that Emilia managed to remain an Emilia loved by everybody. She had always done it. And so here at this juncture, too, and from hereon out—

Emilia: “—!”

Woman: “No, you musn't, Emilia. Even if it was okay so far, you can't keep doing it from now on. You need to be a strong, smart, brave girl. If you aren't, you won't be able to accept yourself, and I know you'll meet a sad end. And for me, that's... for everybody, and for my brother, that's a sorrowful thing.”

Emilia: “—u”

She frantically shakes her head.

But nevertheless, the woman heartlessly disregards Emilia's urging. She rebukes Emilia's reliance on others, saying she musn't do it.

She can't believe it. Of course she would find it painful.

Doing this had always allowed her to do something about things, even things she was told she mustn't do. So why wasn't it working this time?

Why was her usual practice ineffective now, at the most painful, difficult, and scary moment thus far? If there were more correct methods, then how had she managed to reach this point without knowing them? —She was rather starting to detest everybody.

Emilia: “—!”

Woman: “I'm sorry, Emilia. I am so sorry. Never told you even a single important thing, hiding absolutely everything... letting you stay a cute princess forever, please forgive me... forgive us.”

—No forgiveness. No forgiveness. No forgiveness. No forgiveness. No forgiveness. No forgiveness.

Woman: “The people around you who treasured your smile, and the tender lies they told, please don't hate them...”

—Hated them. Loathed them. Loathed them. Loathed them. Loathed them. Loathed them. Loathed them.

Emilia: “—”

She hated lies. She detested lies. Lies were entirely sad things. Lies were the reason behind everything which hadn't gone her way. Lies were making Emilia alone. She hated lies.

Detested lies. Detested liars. Everybody is just a stupid ██████████.

Woman: “Our adorable Emilia... someday, to you...”

Emilia: “—”

Emilia screams in silence. She doesn't want to hear any more. Hearing whatever wouldn't change

anything.

The blustering gale, and Emilia's shriek, drown the woman's final words to nothing.

The silver-haired woman looks sadly at Emilia's rejection, and her rigorous struggling, but nevertheless she dispels all her emotions as she faces onward—

Woman: “—Auh,”

—That is when the true end comes.

The woman who ran with Emilia in her hold perceives the presence before her, and stops.

The faint jolt prompts Emilia to look up, and into her vision—she sees the face of the woman holding her, looking more tense than Emilia has ever seen.

In her expression is surprise and sorrow, rage and grief, disgust and aspiration—and a slight relief.

Battering at Emilia's cheeks, the cold, white gale intensifies.

The blizzard whirls strong enough to make even opening her eyes an effort. Overwhelmed with terror, Emilia puts her hands to her nigh-frozen ears—screams.

And—

And—.

_____.

_____.



The fifth morning in SANCTUARY—which for Natsuki Subaru is the big day for prevailing over this loop series—begins with the absolute worst of news.

Ram: “Barusu. —Where has Emilia-sama gone?”

Subaru: “—Huh?”

Having washed his face at the waterin' spot and wiped himself with a wet cloth, Subaru listens to Ram's statement as she unhesitatingly barges into a location full of shirtless men, and responds to her with blank astonishment.

Early morning has just passed. In the old world it would be approximately 8 AM. The evacuees and residents have woken up, and the men are at the waterhole, just done washing off their sweat from the night.

And then Ram magnificently showed up and fired off that question.

The presence of a woman here as if that is natural flusters some of the men, who swiftly evacuate, but Subaru has no time to tease them for it.

After all, he doesn't comprehend what Ram said in the least.

Subaru: “Emilia... what?”

Ram: “It's as I said. I went to wait upon Emilia-sama, only for the building to be vacant. I had been certain that you'd taken her outside, but...”

Subaru: “Vacant... how did that happen? I left the building after properly talking with her when she woke up... then, here.”

Unable to hide his shock, Subaru thinks back on the happenings from this morning. He had held her hand through the night—or been told to—and upon waking in the morning and seeing Subaru watching over her at her bedside, a quiet smile had arisen on Emilia's face. Subaru had thought that another uncharacteristically good awakening from her. She lowered her gaze down to her hand, still gripped in Subaru's, before speaking quietly to him with his desire to continue the conversation from last night.

Emilia: “I want to talk after I've sorted it all out in my head properly. I'll have Ram arrange my outfitting, and when that's done, I know I'll be able to talk.”

And with that she expelled Subaru from the room. While Subaru had been impatient, considering what Emilia's feelings were, to rush her would be cruel. Most importantly, Emilia was calm. Attending to her too much might wind up having the opposite effect than intended. Is what Subaru had determined, but...

Subaru: “So I left, and was thinking to leave the rest to you...”

Ram: “And you exited the building before receiving me... is what happened. I see. —You blundered, Barusu.”

Subaru: “—”

Subaru has no defence. Letting his guard down about Emilia and failing to transfer her over to Ram was his mistake. But he hadn't conceived that it would've resulted in this, when the one in question was Emilia.

Subaru: “Could she've stepped outside a second for nature's call, or...?”

Ram: “Do you think I am careless enough that I would have neglected to check the surroundings along the way here?”

Subaru: “That wasn't what I... but, if that wasn't it, then...”

Ram: “You truly do not understand?”

Ram's gaze is cold as usual, but just in that instant, the chill intensifies. Her eyes carry the same look as they had last night, when she glanced at Subaru seemingly in boredom. Seeing the disappointment and dejection in her eyes, Subaru lowers his own.

Subaru: “—Emilia ran away, is what you're saying?”

Ram: “How else is there to interpret this? Or do you mean that the faction opposing SANCTUARY's

liberation had been waiting with a tiger's vigilance for yourself and myself to stray from Emilia-sama's side, and on this very morning, actualized their plots... is that what you wish to believe?"

Subaru: "...It's not entirely impossible."

Ram: "To cling to that is incorrigibly repulsive. Either way, it will not change the fact of Emilia-sama's absence. Even should you disregard her inability to leave SANCTUARY, this is bad."

Her attitude is harsh, but Ram does have the forethought to keep her voice quiet enough that no one will overhear. Should it get out that Emilia disappeared after challenging the TRIAL, it's liable to result in Roswaal's reputation getting soiled.

Ram must have judged this topic as one to be handled discreetly.

Subaru: "Emilia..."

Subaru calls her name as he raises his head, his voice a weak murmur.

Like Ram said, even assuming that Emilia has abandoned everything and is attempting to run away, there is no way that her half-elf self can exit SANCTUARY's barrier.

Emilia remains bound to SANCTUARY, running and running but never to get away.

She isn't so foolish that she would fail to recognize that. But, assuming that she had been so cornered that she nevertheless wanted to flee, then...

Subaru: "That's my and Puck's responsibility..."

Puck's failure to imagine how great the shock of the contract breaking would be to Emilia was his mistake.

Subaru's failure to notice her signals and misreading her as being calm was his mistake.

Ram: "Accepting that Emilia-sama has fled and is in hiding... Barusu, ideas?"

Subaru: "Wait. Don't just decide that she's run off. Even saying she's going somewhere, not like you can just get around this SANCTUARY without anybody seeing you. It basically never happens that Emilia goes wandering around the place, either."

Ram sighs, giving a slight nod.

Ram: "I will recognize that was hasty of me, but what are we to do? You're here, so it's obvious that the men have not seen her. Then are we to put our hopes in the chance that the women, remaining in the cathedral, have spotted her?"

Subaru: "The people from Arlam Village will come tell us if they saw Emilia staggering around by herself. Worst case, one of SANCTUARY's people might've seen her... we can start going through them first, and we shouldn't be too late to come up with conclusions after."

Although speedily setting up these plans, Subaru more or less understands that all he's doing is postponing the conclusion. Ram is listening to Subaru's proposals, but most likely she is thinking the exact same thing.

The common points of recognition between Ram and Subaru are that Emilia has absconded of her own volition, and that it would be inconvenient for that information to get too widespread. Whether they're thinking it for the sake of Emilia or for Roswaal is another issue, though.

Ram: “Should one of us find her swiftly, it will be our narrow escape. But it would be best to keep the worst of possibilities in mind. You do understand, Barusu.”

Subaru: “...Don't really want to think about it, though.”

Ram's reminder doubles as an admonition: *Do not avert your eyes from the worst possibility.* The chance that Emilia misses the TRIAL, they proceed to go without finding her, and the fact of her absence leaks throughout SANCTUARY—there would be no recovering from the injury. Subaru and the others, who know the situation, must put in efforts to resolve the issue before this can happen.

Subaru: “If we go asking around and still can't find her...”

Ram: “We'll need to expend all the effort we can to comb the forest.”

Subaru: “...That's not gonna be finished in just one or two days.”

Raising his head, Subaru looks at the trees of the forest surrounding SANCTUARY, his brows furrowing.

While SANCTUARY has the barrier severing it from outside contact, this woodland is plenty big enough to hide an individual person. And supposing that Emilia is hiding in the forest, she wouldn't even have to stay rooted in one place.

Today, and tomorrow. There are at most 48 hours left before the deadline for the bet and the contract.

Within that timeframe they have to find Emilia, make her challenge the TRIAL, and beat it.

—Can he do it?

Can he, who cornered Emilia this deep, and had not noticed the storminess of her heart, grant a cornered Emilia the strength to move forward?

Subaru: “You're seriously overestimating me here, Puck...”

Ram: “...I wonder if this is also connected to the contract with the Great Spirit severing.”

Subaru: “In the sense of her losing her biggest mental support, doubt it's unrelated. But neither of us thought it'd make her snap like this.”

There was one more trigger, something, which had added to her stress.

Thinking back on calm Emilia from last night and this morning, that's all Subaru can figure.

Subaru: “—”

No way, he thinks.

He had surely acted after confirming it properly.

But, just hypothetically, supposing that Emilia had noticed—

Otto: “—Natsuki-san!”

The sharp call makes Subaru's shoulders jolt in surprise.

He looks, to find a grey-haired young man giving a big wave of his hand, sprinting toward him from the village plaza.

It's Otto, who has not participated in the morning bath, and had supposedly been preparing breakfast with the villagers in the cathedral.

He reaches Subaru, pale-faced, putting his hands to his knees as he breathes ragged breaths.

Otto: “Th-there are several things I need to report. There are quite a number if you go into the particulars, but... for now, the larger two. There is good news and bad news.”

Subaru: “Your news has my interest, but first I have a question. Did Emilia show up at all over at the cathedral? Was anyone talking about her, anything?”

Otto: “—? No, I've yet to see her this morning. I haven't heard anyone at the cathedral saying anything, either.”

Otto scrunches his face as Subaru prioritizes a question of no obvious purpose over the news. Subaru and Ram's expressions both darken in hearing the answer.

Otto perceives their unrest, but judges that his report is more important than mentioning that.

Otto: “So, good news and bad news... which would you like?”

Subaru: “Don't like that they're a pair but nothing to do about that... okay, good news first.”

If he hears the bad news, he'll probably need a lot of time to figure out a counter-plan. And regardless he's presently in the worst of situations, where Emilia is missing. He would prefer to avoid doubling up on horrid news and getting stuck in a conundrum.

Otto crosses his arms, nodding.

Otto: “The good news, then. I've completed negotiations with the evacuees exactly as we arranged. They've made their respective preparations, and are ready to go today at any moment you want. I requested that they keep themselves ready to respond even to abrupt instructions, so they're possible even immediately prior.”

Subaru: “—Right. Sorry. Really, I should've been the one talking to them and getting them to help.”

Otto: “Fortunately, my amicability with everyone had intensified over these few days. And when you consider our ongoing acquaintance, it's sincerely serendipitous that I had this opportunity. But either way, preparations went without problems.”

Otto voice is firm, but despite his laudable achievements, his face is nothing bright. Whatever problem happened had been serious enough to overshadow that good news, then?

Yielding to Otto's silent gaze, Subaru presses for the other report—the bad news.

Subaru: “And so what's the bad news?”

Otto: “Just a moment ago, an enraged Garfiel came storming into the cathedral, irate and looking for you.”

Subaru: “Looking for me? Why? I don't think I've meddled enough yet this time for this to be happening...”

With this loop being the final one, Subaru's persuasion of Garfiel awaits. He needed to practice extreme caution while interacting with Garfiel, and even after arranging things with Otto and establishing the bet with Roswaal, Subaru had avoided conversing with Garfiel as much as he possibly could.

It had paid off, and he had managed to reach the Big Day without ever really interacting with Garfiel, until this morning.

Subaru: “If we can, it'd be more ideal to deal with him after negotiating with Lewes Theta...”

Otto: “That's the thing.”

Otto raises his finger.

Subaru's eyes widen in surprise, not understanding what Otto's THAT is referring to.

While Subaru remains confused, Otto speaks with his expression grave.

Otto: “That Lewes-san apparently went missing this morning. Garfiel is searching through the village, his expression frantic. This is how he's looking to talk to you.”

CHAPTER 99: ALONE IN A CONFINED SPACE

—A situation where two important characters have gone missing simultaneously.

Faced with an experience which has never happened before in this loop series, Subaru's guts blaze with entirely panic.

Subaru sprints through SANCTUARY, heading for the lodgings where Lewes is residing. Apparently she had been living in a small hut on the village outskirts while lending her house to Emilia.

Garfiel: "...So yer fuckin' came."

Subaru belts the door open as he storms inside, for Garfiel to be inside and welcoming him imposingly. He crosses his arms, scrunching his nose in clear irritation as he glares at Subaru.

Garfiel: "Yer slow. How long're thinkin' t'keep people fuckin' waitin'."

Subaru: "I-I was running fast as I could... But anyway, what's this about Lewes-san being gone?"

Garfiel: "Can't yer goddamn see 'swhat it is?"

Garfiel jerks his chin, indicating the cramped room. Subaru surveys his gaze over the space—or would, if it were wide enough for such a verb. Lewes' temporary lodgings are a tiny shanty shack, barebones, with the only furniture being a bed.

And if Lewes is not present upon that bed, then without any doubt she is absent from this house.

Composing his breathing, Subaru rigorously wipes the sweat off his brow with his sleeve.

Subaru: "It's obvious she's not here, but... isn't saying she's gone missing exaggerating things? Lewes-san looks young but she's really a splendid adult. Starting a fuss because she's gone out on a walk or something isn't very..."

Garfiel: "Fucking shut up! Fuck would you goddamn know! Y'see th'granny, she ain't even once gone without showin' up at breakfast f'no reason. Never seen her oversleep or stay in bed 'cuzza sickness, either, and yer sayin' she's havin' a walk? I'll eat you goddamn dead."

Subaru: "The way you said that was so coarse, but man it's crazy how comfy a relationship you have with Lewes-san..."

Circumstances are circumstances, but the basis for the idea that Lewes has gone missing is incredibly weak, and Subaru slumps as he untenses. But Garfiel pays no mind to Subaru's exasperation.

He approaches Subaru, who has fixed his posture, baring his fangs as he speaks.

Garfiel: "Something that ain't ever happened before 's happenin' now this mornin'. If something that ain't ever happened 'n this village before's happenin' now, 's cause you people're involved with it, even an idiot'd know that. —Yer did some fishy with th'granny."

While Garfiel has incredible intuition for making baseless conjectures and false accusations, this time his suspicions hit the bullseye.

Lewes's—today it should be Lewes Theta—disappearance is almost unmistakably because of

Subaru. It's highly unlikely that someone would've kidnapped Theta simultaneously with Emilia. She left this spot on her own two feet, without even telling Garfiel. She is identical to Emilia in being obstructed by SANCTUARY's barrier, so she will not have fled to the outside. Meaning that Theta's goal is to go into hiding. —And the time limit for her is even more pressing than Emilia's.

Subaru: “If I don't find Theta-san before today's over...”

...the rotation will shift, and tomorrow a new Lewes—Alpha, Beta, or Sigma—will take her place. Should that happen, it is highly unlikely he will be able to speak with Theta within the two day limit, and perfection of the SANCTUARY route will be impossible.

Garfiel: “Theeter?”

Asks Garfiel in confusion.

Subaru had been thinking to ask for Garfiel's help in finding Theta, but seeing his expression, decides to ditch that plan.

The question surging up inside Subaru stops him from saying anything.

Subaru: “—”

It was a simple question, but not one he had ever confirmed.

—Does Garfiel actually know about the four representative Lewes personalities?

Garfiel knows about the ruined experiment site deep in the woods, and about Lewes Meyer in the crystal. He had challenged the TRIAL, met Echidna, and was qualified as an APOSTLE OF GREED. Garfiel, possessing the command right for the Lewes duplicates, knows that there are multiple doubles who all look exactly the same.

But what about the rest? Does Garfiel know about the presence of the four Lewes personalities Alpha, Beta, Sigma, and Theta?

Garfiel: “N'what? Yer fuckin' shut up aller a sudden. If yer got some kinder clue, fuckin' fess up on th'double. Yer think we're doin' a SIMPLE SINCERE LIB-LIB, SWINDLED AND IN BLISS here?”

Subaru: “Lib-Lib's going to be swindled forever, like that...”

Imagining a story about joyful prince, Subaru puzzles over how best to reply to Garfiel.

Confrontation with Garfiel is the final barricade for the SANCTUARY route. Subaru is overwhelmingly unprepared to face him without having heard Theta's motives. But his responses here are, unintentionally, going to influence the issue.

—How should he respond? At the end of his deliberating, Subaru,

Subaru: “Hey, Garfiel. If you felt like it, couldn't you just summon Lewes-san?”

Garfiel: “—*hk!*!”

Garfiel's expression shifts violently. With his eyes wavering in discomposure, he grabs Subaru's collar and yanks him close.

At a range so close their foreheads could touch, Garfiel's golden eyes host rage—rage, abounding, so intense his gaze alone could practically burn his opponent to nothing.

Garfiel: “My amazin' self ain't gotter shred ovva speck ovva glimpse ovva Miufram's inklin' f' what yer tryin' t'say 'n the slightest.”

Subaru: “I-I don't know what a Miufram is, but... this is not the reaction of someone who doesn't have a shred of a speck of an idea... stupid, let go.”

Perhaps flipping out and grabbing Subaru was something he did to calm himself down. Garfiel's words as he attempts to cover things up are incoherent nonsense.

With Subaru's statement being entirely correct, Garfiel's hands slacken, and Subaru uses the opening to escape. He smooths out his crinkled clothes, taking one step away to open distance.

Subaru: “What I'm trying to say is exactly what it sounds like. Your brains aren't unfortunate enough that you wouldn't get it. You have methods. You have the fastest, easiest solution. Why aren't you taking it?”

Garfiel: “Fuckin' saying this bullshit so fuckin' cheerily...”

His cheeks twisted in frustration, Garfiel glares at Subaru with utmost hatred.

But even while the ratios of fury and hostility in those eyes intensify, there is enough grief creeping in that even Subaru can identify it.

Subaru's expression shifts as he notices Garfiel's sorrow. Garfiel clicks his tongue, the shades of his emotion having been witnessed, as he looks away.

Garfiel: “Heres's who's qualified, n' so no allowance fer carelessness. 'S a complete unknown what that asshole witch fucking schooled into you. Fuck off. Fucking fuck off.”

Subaru: “—”

Garfiel: “Yer sayin' y'fuckin' know about granny's test site. Then probably y'fuckin' know 'bout th'granny in the source rock too... it ain't something t'just use.”

Garfiel cradles his right arm across his heart, attempting to hide it from Subaru's gaze. While most likely it is not actually there, this is probably him indicating that he possesses the invisible thing known as the command right.

With his arm still shielding his chest,

Garfiel: “My amazin' self ain't anythin' like you or Roswaal. This thing'f knowing it's there, and still thinking t'use them... never.”

Subaru: “...Garfiel.”

Garfiel: “Just me alone is enough. So long as I got me, I don't need anythin' else. Like fuckin' hell I'd use this power, 'less isth' fifty-ninth second f'the fifty-ninth minute f'the 'leventh hour. —She's mine nanna.”

The close comes with a whisper.

Subaru has heard Garfiel call Lewes 'nanna' once before. But this time, he dropped the ostentatious 'my amazing self' as well.

That slip was likely Garfiel's true opinion on it.

Garfiel: “—Tch.”

Realising that he said something unnecessary, Garfiel kicks at the floor in irritation. The exorbitant force makes the shoddy house lurch, spilling down dustclouds to tickle Subaru's head and neck, himself waiting for Garfiel's next move.

Recognizing that his outburst is his own fault, Garfiel's face twists in further discomfort. He shoves Subaru, who stands before the door, rudely out of the way.

Garfiel: “Move. I ain't got business with you anymore. If you ain't givin' ideas t'where th'granny went, then my amazin' self'll find her first's all. And then I ain't letting yer touch her again.”

Subaru: “Sure's nice of you to decide that I'm behind this.”

Garfiel: “B'fore you... 'fore all you people came, nothin' went on here, n' it was peaceful. My amazin' self's getting that back. Not inside n' not outside, I don't need anything... don't need it.”

Is the weak note he ends with as he strides out of the shack. Immediately after exiting he bends his knees, and with bestial leg strength bounds away—so quick that despite his path being straight, he disappears from view after only a handful of seconds.

Batting away the dust that Garfiel's departure kicked up, Subaru decides to check over the room again before leaving.

Nevermind Garfiel and his hasty conclusions. Did Lewes truly disappear without leaving any trace? Perhaps if she hadn't left behind a clue as to her location...

Subaru: “Yeah right, if she had then someone who's known her longer would've spotted it ages ago. My nose isn't better than his, and my eyes're nastier too.”

After five minutes of searching around and finding nothing, Subaru sighs his self-flagellating laments. He exits the building, gazing over toward the village, thinking.

Subaru: “—”

Emilia and Lewes Theta have disappeared almost simultaneously.

Most likely, they left their buildings of their own accord, and are fleeing from Subaru and everyone else. Perhaps possibility exists for them to be cooperating.

Subaru: “I don't remember ever seeing Emilia and Lewes-san being close, but...”

This is Emilia, whose mind is constantly addled with the Selection and the TRIAL. Subaru presently is having trouble remembering any occurrence where she interacted relaxedly with anyone here. While she has had some whimsical conversations with Subaru, Ram, Otto and so on, it doesn't seem like she's spoken very much with the representatives of SANCTUARY, Lewes and Garfiel.

Thinking back on it now, the scantness of her interactions with outsiders might be because the desires of her clique made her feel isolated and obligated. The thought makes Subaru's lack of consideration come to fore. If Subaru had taken better action, he would have managed to find a clearer solution which would have left Emilia without this overflowing excess of emotion.

Subaru: "All of it's just way too late..."

This isn't the time to be thinking about the underlying causes for Emilia's disappearance. And more importantly, if he probes into it, all it's going to do is aggravate Subaru's self-invalidation. Right now he lacks the time to be letting his negativity-prone self engage in that self-loathing.

Subaru: "Call it fortune in misfortune that Garfiel didn't know Emilia's gone missing... probably wouldn't've gone looking for her before Lewes-san, but no idea what he'd start saying if he had that to be his pretext."

But even this relief will be pointless if Subaru does not secure Emilia, and quickly. The situation with Lewes Theta is not one he can postpone, either. If he fails to find Theta before Garfiel does, then she will fall into overprotective Garfiel's charge, and making contact with her will be difficult. So, to clearly stipulate the things Subaru must do:

Subaru: "Secure Emilia and Lewes Theta before Garfiel can. Both need to be secured within half a day, then I need to find out why Theta's opposing SANCTUARY's freedom, get Emilia back on her feet, and have her challenge the TRIAL... I think."

Otto: "...Natsuki-san, how brambled does the path need to be before you're satisfied?"

Says Otto, who shows up at the shack's entrance at the perfect timing to butt into Subaru's bleak conclusion.

Otto, who has arrived considerably later than Subaru who sprinted, looks around the room Subaru had dishevelled as he looked for traces of Lewes. Otto furrows his brows.

Otto: "I'd request for a little more elegance when searching a house. The conversation with Garfiel looks to have ended safely."

Subaru: "Ended safely, but hard to really say anything profitable came of it. Anyway, we've re-recognized what the situation is, and our schedule for what to do next's what I just muttered."

Otto: "I could only hear that muttering as, new problems have piled into a jumbled mess before we could resolve the other problems."

Subaru: "..."

Unable to joke around at Otto's correct impression, Subaru slumps his shoulders. That he nevertheless feels slightly more at ease than before is perhaps the empowering thought of THERE'S NO NEED TO KEEP DELIBERATING ALONE that Otto's presence brings.

Otto: "...If you keep looking blatantly relieved like that it's truly going to be problematic."

Subaru: "—? What?"

Otto: "Speaking to myself. You mustn't have noticed. No, you didn't. If you did and you're doing this to me, then clearly you already have me perfectly in your pocket, aaugh grief."

Otto scratches messily at his grey hair as Subaru tilts his head. But rather than reply to Subaru's

confusion, he yells,

Otto: “Anyway!”

Otto: “It's clear that a previously-stalemated situation has degraded further. What will we do? Requirements which would already prompt one to flee have overlapped with even worse requirements, and how will we break this deadlock? I have a feeling that if we did it right at this moment, though, we could still be afforded to abandon everything and escape.”

Subaru: “Desert everything involved with what we've seen and heard up to now? Neither of us have personalities which could pull that kind of irresponsible stunt.”

Otto: “...Although, Emilia-sama may have done exactly that.”

Mutters Otto with a sigh, averting his gaze.

It's likely not out of spite, but just him wanting to voice the dissatisfaction holed up in his heart.

Subaru consciously keeps himself from criticising Otto for the attitude.

But he does give a small shake of his head.

Subaru: “Turning tail and running from her problems isn't the kind of girl Emilia...”

Otto: “Is, is something you can assert? Natsuki-san. I've been thinking to say this for a while now, but don't you find you focus far too much on the attractive things about Emilia-sama?”

Subaru: “...What're you getting at. Well yes I mean Emilia is so beautiful my eyes could explode.”

Otto: “That I will frankly agree with, but I'm sure you understand that that wasn't what I meant.”

His poor jokes easily done away with, Subaru frowns as Otto's gaze showers upon him.

Otto raises his finger, his expression one of seeing something painful to watch.

Otto: “Listening, now?”

Otto: “I understand the desire to see only the good things about somebody you love. I'm sure that such a thing is very common. There is nothing to condemn about projecting ideals upon your partner.”

Subaru: “—”

Otto: “However, Emilia-sama is not a perfect person. In fact, she has many issues. She does, and that would include the things which Emilia-sama herself cannot do anything about. Her lineage, her standing, and many other fetters come attached to Emilia-sama.”

Hearing Otto's fluent speech, Subaru figures that probably he has been intending for a while now to give him a lecture close to this, and had prepared his lines.

And indeed his words are entirely sound, with no purchase at all for rebuttal.

Otto: “Naturally, those external factors are unrelated to Emilia-sama's own essential purity. And let us sincerely recognize her beautiful appearance as another point of charm. But you see, Natsuki-san. Emilia-sama is still of mankind... she is an ordinary, regular woman. She surely would possess

the worries, weaknesses, and uglinesses suited to an ordinary woman.”

Subaru: “No but, when it's Emilia...”

Otto: “That you blindly regard Emilia-sama as extraordinary like this is truly odd. Natsuki-san, surely in this SANCTUARY you've witnessed Emilia-sama's insufficient aspects to the point you're sick of it. That would not be something limited to this place alone, and is entirely probable to surface in the future as well. The place she desires is beyond the reach of ordinary people with its height, you see.”

The Throne. The height Emilia is reaching for, which Otto judges as the zenith. Subaru knows the others, who are also aiming for that peak.

Noble and sincere, possessing great ideals and assured ability, Crusch Karsten.
Proud and insidious, but consequently never to waver in her self-concept, Priscilla Barielle.
Greedy and calculating, concentrating everything she has to realising her dream, having ascended to her present social position through her matchless competitive strength, Anastasia Hoshin.
Poor and weak in initial position, but nonetheless possessing ambition which would not permit her to stagnate there, having exhibited capabilities disproportionate to her age, Felt.

All of the candidates are facing the Selection while possessing virtues, and strong wills which shall not bend to anyone.

Was Emilia fit to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with these worthy opponents?

She was merely kind, kinder than anyone else. Was that alone not enough?

Otto: “Presently, Emilia-sama is lacking in many things. She is not complete. That is how Emilia-sama is, and so she becomes timid when faced with hardship, and surely she sometimes wishes to escape. How is it that you do not believe now would be one of those times, and she has desired to flee?”

Subaru: “...That's. It's that, about Emilia, I would never...”

Never. Subaru is rather incapable of stating what to say next.

He can't find the words. Assuredly present and smouldering in his heart, his feelings toward Emilia. Which words to use to ornament this thing, his rebuttal to Otto, which will explain it?

Subaru: “—”

Otto: “...Stubborn, aren't you.”

Subaru bites his lip, looking at Otto with a gaze fully hosting rebellion. Otto responds to the silent gaze, shrugging his shoulders, before giving an astounded shake of the head and staring at the village.

Otto: “It's not essential that we reach a conclusion about this right now. Our talking won't move the situation along, after all. Nothing has changed about us needing to search for Emilia-sama and Lewes-san.”

Subaru: “...Sorry. I know there's heaps of things I have to talk about with you more properly.”

Otto: “We're friends, I'll overlook it. —Now, what do we do?”

Jerking his chin to indicate the outside—indicate SANCTUARY—Otto leaves their course of action up to Subaru.

Run, or fight? Which of the two missing persons should they search for? These questions were Otto's very trust in Subaru itself.

While he has no intention to treat them lightly, Subaru does laugh at himself for the incredible abundance he's been given.

Subaru: “Garfiel doesn't know Emilia's missing. And if Garfiel does find Emilia, it's not a huge issue. —The worst would be for Garfiel to secure Lewes-san before we can. If we don't have any opportunities to talk with Lewes-san, we're essentially getting further from the best ending.”

Otto: “...In sum?”

Subaru: “—We're looking for Lewes-san. We find her before Garfiel, and hear her story.”



???: “—Emilia. Everybody's about to have an important talk. So are you okay to wait patiently in the usual spot for a moment?”

Being shut in the hollow of the great arbour deep in the forest—shut in the Princess Room—with this line was an affair which greatly dissatisfied young Emilia.

Emilia was raised loved by everyone, in a village in the forest where the elves lived in hiding. All the adults were nice to her, and they'd entertain her selfish little whims without looking reluctant at all. She did feel some loneliness about the fact that she only rarely got to interact with children her age, but she had to follow her instructions. *Rules like that are to be firmly kept*, her mother substitute Mother Fortuna had told her.¹

Fortuna was taking care of Emilia in the elf village. She was her substitute mom. With her silver hair and amethyst eyes, her characteristic features were identical to Emilia's. But because long hair was annoying, she cut hers short, and her sharp eyes were also a large point of difference from Emilia.

Emilia didn't remember how long it had been since she started living with Fortuna. But she had heard that she was not her real mother, and was a blood relative somewhere in the vicinity of an aunt.

Fortuna: “I'm your dad's younger sister. My brother... your dad and mom are busy right now and can't be with you, so I'll be looking after you.”

1 The name of Emilia's mother figure is フォルトナ (Fortona/Fortna/Fortuna) rather than more straightforward katakanaizations フォルトナーナ (Fortuna) or フォーチューナ (Forchuna/Fortuna). This may or may not wind up being another Petelgeuse Thing, but since I can't come up with any close-but-not-quite alternate names and because this spelling appears to be commonly used to mean the goddess Fortuna/officially romanized as Fortuna in other contexts, I'm content to leave it put (until surprise arc 8 happens and it winds up being a Petelgeuse thing).

Fortuna's explanation had greatly shocked Emilia. But that said, the shock was not a negative one. While Fortuna had emphasized time and time again that she was not Emilia's real mom, as far as Emilia cared, she was undoubtedly her mother.

Then, neverminding Mother Fortuna's presence, Emilia learned she had a dad and a real mom also. Usually people's parents only numbered to two, their mom and dad. But Emilia had one dad, and two moms. *What happiness*, she thought.

Fortuna: "Your silver hair is from my brother. And your eye colour too, it looks like our family really showed up there. ...But your kind face is from your mother. Everyone on my side has nasty eyes."

Emilia: "...But I like your eyes, Mother Fortuna."

Harsh, stern eyes were the regular. Occasionally Emilia would disobey her instructions and make Fortuna mad, and her stern eyes would compound in sharpness, and it would make Emilia tremble. But, excluding those times when she was in an angry mood, Emilia considered Fortuna an ideal Mom. Those sharp eyes of hers did of host loving emotions, too.

Fortuna was a strict, but kind mother.

She instated rigid discipline toward Emilia's behaviours, so much so that young Emilia sometimes thought it excessive, but even so she had always understood that all of it was done with Emilia in mind.

Violence never accompanied her discipline, and she never scolded Emilia over anything unreasonable. While it had happened that Emilia did something bad and she cried from the scolding, they would reconcile and spend the night in the same bed, sleeping together and hugging.

Fortuna: "There are some things I regret sooo much. Where I wish I could've been kinder to people. If I had thought that way sooner, I'm sure my brother wouldn't have relied on me last."

A loneliness would arise on Fortuna's face when she said 'sooo'.

That had left a very, very strong impression on Emilia, and so she consciously decided to copy it. Not when she was sad, but when she was happy or laughing were the times she chose to use it.

My mom doesn't have any sorrows or lonelinesses, was the shallow, childish sentiment with which she attempted to overwrite her mother's characteristic quirk with good memories.

Emilia: "Hmp... so boring."

The story returns to the opening, where Emilia is confined to the Princess Room alone.

She did not like being called 'Princess' very much, but it was what everybody in the village called her. By now she had found herself unwittingly and entirely accustomed to it.

Because she knew they were not making fun of her, and were instead saying it with affection, Emilia never requested that they stop. But that they even used the moniker for this confining room was one of Emilia's few dissatisfactions in life.

Emilia: "What could everybody be doing..."

Emilia's confinements in the Princess Room always occurred when somebody was visiting the village. It wasn't that anyone had told her there were a small number of people entering the forest and visiting the elves' hidden community, she sensed it on her skin.

This sensation was because Emilia was unconsciously interfering with the forest's minor spirits, and

she was acquiring information from them. But, Emilia had not realised this back then.

She would merely sit in the cramped room, hugging her knees, passing time by flipping through the pages of the time-killer books she'd been given, or playing with the crappy dolls Fortuna had made. It was a secret meeting that only the adults knew about—was what she'd been told, but apparently the other kids were involved in the meeting, too. And that was another one of Emilia's more recent dissatisfactions.

It was Mother Fortuna who had taught Emilia that you mustn't lie or keep secrets. So was it not a bad thing of Mother Fortuna and the adults, that they were keeping secrets and lying to Emilia?

Once every ten or so days did the visitors come, and accordingly did Emilia spend her short stays in the Princess Room. While Emilia did have her dissatisfactions, she was not a naughty enough girl to let them show.

However, this was her don't-even-know-what-th time in the Princess Room, and she and Fortuna had had an argument the night before. Most importantly, she had forgotten to bring along the dolls Fortuna gave her, and had left them in her bedroom—the decisive blow.

Emilia: “Wanna go outside.”

She wasn't saying it to anyone. It was just a mutter. Nothing more than that.

But while she hadn't been saying her mutter to anybody she knew, the THEM she knew had heard it perfectly clear.

Emilia: “—?”

Inside the hollow, in a room lit by the white glow of lagumite crystals, spots of pale-blue light now mingled. With one blink from her, those abruptly-visiting glimmers captivated Emilia's attention. The lights danced before Emilia's eyes, and still keeping the young girl a prisoner to her curiosity, they migrated to a corner of the Princess Room—where they disappeared, as if sucked into the wall.

Emilia: “—”

Emilia stood up, before tottering toward the spot where the lights had vanished. She was a little scared, but it was her curiosity which burned hotter in her chest.

Standing before the wall which had sucked in the lights, Emilia touched her hand to the thing, confirming the feel of the wood. Which was when she discovered, just the perfect size for her little arm to go in, an open hole in the wall.

The glimmering lights had disappeared through this hole.

The front door of the Princess Room was barred from the outside, and could not be opened from inside. It was an arrangement where Emilia could not escape, even if she attempted to flee.

Thinking back on it, that treatment was excessive and assuredly not fit for peacetime. But Emilia had thought the whole thing normal, and had no purchase to question it.

However, having discovered that a supposedly unexitable place may in fact be exitable, Emilia's heart vacillated between her curiosity and her mother's teachings.

She wanted to know what everybody was doing in the village while she was away.

But Mother Fortuna had firmly taught her to listen to her instructions. She needed to stay here and wait until Fortuna returned to the Princess Room.

But what if she sneakily tested this exit route, and after peeking on what everybody was doing, came back here?

It was the adults who had first broken the rules to not tell lies or keep secrets. If it was just one, if Emilia broke just one rule, then would they not be even?

Emilia: “—”

Young Emilia considered it with all her might. This was a small, but just cause.

This hole she had stuck her hand into, with a closer look, was a gap between the entangled roots of the tree. If she put all her strength into it—and although only slightly—the opening would expand. With her sense of touch as her guide, young Emilia pushed away the roots, eager to secure a space large enough for her to pass through. Her brow dripped with sweat, and dirt muddied her clothes, the vestiges of her deeds too visible to get away with saying 'No nothing happened at all' to Fortuna. Regardless Emilia managed to widen the gap in the roots, succeeded in crawling out from the hollow, and exited into the outside.

Emilia: “—a”

Emilia's heart harboured a strange sense of accomplishment as the outside breeze showered her. She had done something bad, where she would be told off if people knew, but she greatly felt the urge to immediately go to Fortuna and brag: Ahehem, I did it. Naturally the scolding would be as vicious as flame, and so Emilia yanked on the breaks before she could start running. That was a dangerous moment.

But, here are Emilia's thoughts:

—If I had listened to my idiot logic back then, and gone to get praise from Mother Fortuna, and she scolded me vigorously, and I cried and wailed and regretted it and forgot about that stupid gap in the roots, everything would've been so much better.

If I had done that, then this would have all ended without the trigger for the tragedy afterwards being pulled.

—What was the tragedy, exactly?

Deaf to the question and successful in her escape from the Princess Room, young Emilia dashed triumphantly off to where everybody probably was.

Her stealthy hiding as she travelled, peeping around the place, magnified her recognition that she was doing a bad thing. Help from the minor spirits meant she more or less just kind of knew where everybody was.

Emilia soon discovered everybody gathered in the village square. Saw them, alongside a group of people in unfamiliar black clothes.

Emilia: “—”

She hid behind a notably large tree, before nimbly climbing up its branches to the top. Young Emilia was quite a rascal, and so when she scampered from tree to tree to tree like an animal, it would horrifically panic the adults, who would frantically attempt to catch her.

The acrobatics she learned from these activities thus allowed her to watch over the conversation, from the adults' blind spot.

The total population of the elf village numbered to about forty. Everyone from adults to children was assembled there, except for Emilia. The black-robos were fewer in number, and totalled to perhaps twenty.

Some of them were in the middle of the assembly, participating in the discussion, while the rest were transferring luggages. The black-robos looked to have come here with wagons, and as they delivered the luggage from those carts to the villagers, the villagers' faces would brighten, and they would bow their heads.

???: “—We can't thank you enough for all the care you give us.”

What could they be doing? What could they be saying?

Just when she thought to lean a little bit forward, out of the tree, Emilia heard a voice so close it could've been whispered in her ear.

Emilia jerked in surprise. She scanned the area, but failed to find anybody who could be the voice's owner. And before getting to that, that voice just now unmistakably belonged to Mother Fortuna. Said Fortuna was directly below Emilia—leading the group, and in the middle of a discussion with one of the black-cloaks.

Fortuna: “It really does help everyone that you're procuring us this stuff we can't get in the forest. We're glad to accept them.”

Cloak: “And I am grateful to hear so. Our inability to present you any other succour is greatly vexatious to us. We lay burdens upon you perpetually, Fortuna-sama.”

Fortuna: “We're laying them on you as well.”

Emilia clearly heard the conversation, which carried enough wry smiles for two.

Fortuna's gestures from below Emilia informed her that without a doubt, that exchange happened right now at this instant. Apparently, Emilia's hearing was presently outrageously sharp.

It was actually the tactful work of the minor spirits who obeyed Emilia's will, but naturally young Emilia did not notice their discretions.

Fortuna's conversation partner, garbed in a black robe, was a man of bold countenance.

His muscles and height made him stand out prominently among the village of oft-skinny elves. But so in spite of his martial appearance it seemed unimaginable, he was interacting with Fortuna with his posture bowed low.

Seeing this brawny man direct unsparing respect toward Fortuna inspired pride in the peeking Emilia.

The awesome person making this big man grovel is my Mother, she thought.

Man: “And now, while I recognize I ask on each occasion... how is the seal?”

Emilia had puffed her chest out in her misdirected bragging, but the moment the man voiced this change in topic, that sentiment violently dispersed.

That was how complex and grave the emotion the man had spoken with was.

Fortuna: “You're just a worrier— isn't any way to dismiss this. Don't worry, it's stable as ever. There isn't even a million in one chance it could come undone. —I wouldn't be able to show my face to my brother or sister in law again.”

Man: “It is an incredible regret, about your elder brother and his spouse.”

Fortuna: “...My brother'd surely been resolved. Though I still don't know what my sister in law thought. But I do understand the weight of the responsibility trusted to me. I don't want to abandon that, or leave it only done at half-measures. And aren't you the same?”

Man: “I... I am one incapable of anything else. I suspect it different from the sentiments of duty, or of responsibility that you bear, Fortuna-sama. Obsession, attachment... perhaps in that vicinity.”

The man gave a breathy laugh. Fortuna watched on, pained.
But that little exchange held no significance for Emilia.

—It is an incredible regret, about your elder brother and his spouse. What could it mean?

Mother Fortuna's brother was Emilia's father. And his spouse meant his bride. His wife. Probably Emilia's mother.

What could 'those two are a regret' mean? Why, after hearing it, did Fortuna not ask this?

Emilia held on to the branches, sticking out her neck and straining her eyes as she attempted to get a little closer to hear their conversation. Still unawares that the minor spirits' blessings rendered her actions pointless, Emilia grit her teeth with her expression frantic, insistent not to miss even a single syllable of their talk.

Fortuna: “The impetus has nothing to do with the good virtue of the deed. What you're doing is something you ought brag to everybody about. It's actually sooo frustrating that you can't go around openly talking about it.”

Man: “Huhuhuhu. Your commendations humble me. However, that indeed would be onerous. Should the world learn the true purposes of our deeds, I suspect that stable society would again submerge into a sea of chaos. Neither you nor I, nor most importantly she, would desire that.”

Fortuna: “...Yes, you're right.”

Fortuna nodded in agreement.

It seemed the topic had diverged from what Emilia wanted to hear, and the conversation proceeded to transform into some harmless, idle chattering.

The two groups finished exchanging goods over the course of Fortuna and the man's talk. One of the adults called out to Fortuna, who replied with a nod before turning back the man.

Fortuna: “The spirits' blessing keeps the changing of seasons from affecting the forest very much, but... it's still a huge help that we're getting these clothes, even these beds. Thank you.”

Man: “You are persons who truly deserve greater cordiality, with your achievements. It is inconceivable that you be forced into inconvenience in such this a place.”

Fortuna: “Don't say such this a place. We love the forest.”

Fortuna spoke somewhat jokingly, a small smile arising on her face. A slight grin etched itself over the man's expression as well, and for a period, an atmosphere of calm flowed between the two. When—

???: “Cardinal. We have concluded in delivering luggages and preparing our return. Please make haste.”

Man: “Yes, understood.”

One of the black-robos so addressed the man, who glanced over the village, seemingly reluctant to part. He then bowed to Fortuna. She and the other adults put their hands to their chests, their actions directed at the group of black-robos, closing their eyes as they answered with a bow. The group of black-robos turned their backs, pulling their wagons into motion as they departed— with the man standing as the last of the procession.

Man: “Right, I absolutely must ask you this.”

Fortuna: “...”

The man turned back around with his finger raised. Fortuna wordlessly urged him to continue. After closing his eyes once, his gaze then seeming to peer into the depths of the forest,

Man: “—Has Emilia-sama been in health?”

Emilia: “—hk”

After hearing this man speak her own name, Emilia's throat unwittingly jarred. It was thanks to the sigh she had sighed immediately prior that she had not shrieked instead. Thankfully deaf to Emilia's slight noise and ignoring it entirely, Fortuna slowly nodded to the man.

Fortuna: “Don't worry. Emilia's full of energy, and is growing up as a good girl. Such a good girl she's wasted on me. ...But, I apologise. Her meeting you isn't something we can...”

Man: “Nothing more would I need to hear. I do understand. Provided I may confirm Emilia-sama's good health, that alone is enough. To wish for any further would be a desire beyond the place of this sinner.”

Fortuna: “...”

Self-deprecation, or more actually self-adomition?

Whichever it was, Fortuna responded with no simple consolations.

He raised his head, his expression suggesting that Fortuna's silence was actually a relief for him. Silently, each gazed at the other.

???: “Would there be something the matter, Cardinal? —Cardinal Romanée-Conti.”

One of the black-cloaks returned from the group which had proceeded onward and left the man behind. The man spread his arms in response.

Man: “There is nothing the matter. Now, allow us departure. Fortuna-sama, may our next meeting be soon.”

Fortuna: “Always, thank you. ...I'm sorry, Juice.”

Smiling slightly at Fortuna's final words, the man called Juice this time assuredly went to leave the forest alongside the black-cloaks.

After watching over their departure until they disappeared from view, Fortuna's shoulders slumped and she gave a sigh. She then clapped her hands, grabbing the attention of everybody present.

Fortuna: “Now, let's quickly bring the luggage in and partition it up. We'll have the divisioning done as always, please. I'm off to go bring Emilia out.”

Emilia: “—!”

Seeing the adults and children shoulder the luggage and start moving just as Fortuna instructed, Emilia tumbled out of the tree and sprinted with all her might to return to the Princess Room. She twisted her small body through the gap in the tree-roots that she had used to escape, sustaining scrapes and cuts here and there. Immediately after returning to the room, Emilia noticed that this was not the appearance of a girl who had been waiting patiently, and was dumbstruck.

Emilia had thought until just a moment ago that even if Fortuna discovered she had gone outside and scolded her, she would immediately forgive Emilia so long as she reflected and apologized for it.

But now that she had overheard that conversation, Emilia could not manage to possibly think so optimistically. In fact, she inevitably had to feel that the talk had been one Fortuna would not want Emilia exclusively to have heard.

Emilia: “What do I do, whatdoIdowhatdoIdowhatdoIdo”

It would not be long at all before Mother Fortuna returned and removed the bar on the door. Should she come under the light, Emilia's appearance would quickly inform Fortuna of her escape. Young Emilia came to believe Fortuna's potential discovery that Emilia had heard the conversation as tantamount to her absolute ruin.

Emilia: “If I can at least hide the grazes...”

She was scratched here and there, her knees and arms scraped all over, oozing with some blood. It was unlikely that sharp-eyed Fortuna would overlook them, and it felt that it would seep into the water when she took her bath, and that was scary too.

I have to do something! was the single notion she focused on.

Emilia: “—Huh?”

And so when the pale-blue lights appeared inside the Princess Room again, Emilia considered their glow as a pathway to rescue.

The lights wavered to and fro in Emilia's sight, and after toying with her attention with their motions, the lights this time scattered themselves toward Emilia.

Emilia: “—a, ah.”

Just like how they had been sucked into the wall before, the lights this time were sucked into Emilia's body. They amassed at the sites of her cuts and scraps, their dim gleam painting her open wounds in white—and after the lights disappeared, all that remained of the grazes was a faint redness.

Emilia: “—”

This abnormal happening, done to her own body, led Emilia to stiffen wordless and rigid. The wounds on her elbows, knees, and elsewhere had vanished to nothing, as had their pain. Emilia's present condition was identical to how she had been prior to escaping. Emilia quickly threw off her clothes and changed into another outfit which was inside the Princess Room. After troubling over how to dispose of her torn, holey clothes,

Emilia: “With this...!”

She overturned her pottle of drawing ink, messily staining her old clothes. It was just when she had dirtied her outfit so greatly that even a wash would not remove the pigment that,

Fortuna: “—Emilia? Are you up?”

Hearing Fortuna's voice call from beyond the door, Emilia jerked up straight. Her heart pounded violently at the hairs-breadth timing, and although intending to reply to her with something, she could not get any voice out.

Fortuna: “Emilia? You're sleeping?”

Emilia: “I-I'm up! I'm awake, Mother Fortuna. But, it's...”

Fortuna: “What, so you were up. I'm sorry for making you wait so...”

Relieved to hear Emilia's reply, Fortuna removed the bar across the door as she entered the room. Fortuna was smiling, but the moment she entered the room her expression shifted, and her pretty nose scrunched up.

Fortuna: “...What is this? It reeks of ink.”

Emilia: “Erm... I'm sorry. I spilled my drawing ink lots... lots got on my clothes.”

Emilia stood before the ink pottle fallen in the middle of the room, entirely puzzled on what to do. After looking between Emilia and the ink bottle, Fortuna put her hand to her face.

Fortuna: “Oh, geez.”

Fortuna: “Well, nothing to do about that. Thank goodness I left a change of clothes in here. If I hadn't, I'd have to bring you back home with you naked.”

Emilia: “Um, Mother Fortuna... I...”

Fortuna: “It's alright, Emilia. You don't need to be afraid, I know you didn't mean to do it and I

won't be mad with you. And more importantly, are you unhurt?"

After matching her eye-level with the timidly-approaching Emilia, Fortuna inspected her beloved daughter from head to toe. She sighed in relief at the lack of visible wounds, and quietly hugged her.

Emilia: "Mother?"

Fortuna: "It's nothing. Just, I... missed you sooo much. I'm so sorry. Let's stay like this for a moment."

Still hugging Emilia, Fortuna brought her cheek near. Fortuna usually avoided such embarrassing, mushy behaviours. Emilia thought this action horrifically unusual, and thought Fortuna rather lonely. And so,

Fortuna: "...Cheeky."

Muttered Fortuna, who opened her eye as Emilia stroked her short, silver hair. But Emilia judged that Fortuna was not telling her to stop, and so she slowly, quietly, continued to pat Fortuna's head kindly.

There were so many things she wanted to ask her. But young Emilia lacked in too much and knew of too little for her to be able to put them into words. She proceeded, saying nothing.

Fortuna: "Emilia."

Emilia: "...mm."

Fortuna gazed at Emilia as she continued to quietly stroke her head, and narrowed her eyes. Emilia saw—in those eyes of amethyst equal to hers, the arisen teardrops. Alongside her blinking the tears flowed down, dripped off Fortuna's cheek. She went without even wiping them away as she smiled at Emilia.

Fortuna: "—I love you."

There were so many things she wanted to ask, wanted to know. —But for this moment, Emilia determined herself satisfied with just this one statement from her mother.



Dragging her legs, with pale-blue lights floating around her, Emilia traverses the darkness.

Her exhaustion robs her of the strength to walk, causing her legs to drag. But her will remains healthy and will not permit Emilia stop walking as she yet continues on.

Memories of her childhood, skimming through her mind.
Why was she remembering this past now?

The past Emilia saw in the TRIAL differed slightly from what she had just remembered. The past she remembered happened just a little earlier than the events shown in her TRIAL.
If she could return to that time—surely, she'd be able to do everything in that past over differently.

Emilia: “Mother, Fortuna...”

Kind, warm, strong Fortuna remained even now as Emilia's ideal in women.
She had always wanted to be like Mother Fortuna, to act being as like Mother Fortuna. And despite that she always worried and regretted over little things, feared them, and beckoned in consequences beyond any repair.

Emilia: “ue... heu, hk...”

Consequences beyond any repair. Unassailable anguish races through Emilia's chest at the thought. This sorrow and this regret and this pain, this jumble of emotion overwhelms her, her foolishness and insufficiency so embarrassing that she comes close to tears.

She's always like this. She'll always be like this.
She was frantic, desperate, putting in her all, meaning to cut no corners in the least, but still Emilia's hands never grasped the things she truly desired, or even touched them.
Even the things she was supposed to have had, the things that her hands were supposed to have clutched, fell like sand through the gaps in her fingers, enchanting Emilia with their transient glimmer before disappearing to nothing.

It was like that with Fortuna, with Puck, with Subaru, all of them.

Emilia: “It's... my fault. I'm a bad girl. I can't even follow instructions, and so... everybody...”

Sobs pouring from her throat, Emilia drags her feet on.
Amid this abundance of green, sluggish and slow, but still proceeding onward.

Emilia: “And so everybody, always hid it from me, kept it... but, no. If I never knew, never learned, never noticed... It'd be so much better, and still... and still...”

Amongst a forest of trees. Lights and their pale blue gleam. Black-robed men. Mother Fortuna. Snake, large and black. Closed door. Snow. World of white. Silver snowscape. Ending, world ending. Father, mother.

Emilia: “I...”

The endless vortex of words races through her head.
Battered around in their wake, Emilia raises her head, and walks onward.

Emilia: “—”

Frail voice. Faltering gait.
—But eyes wet with not a single tear.

CHAPTER 100: MEMORIES BURIED IN DUST

—Searching blind isn't going to get them anywhere.

This was the conclusion Subaru reached after running around the village in search of the missing Lewes, overtaxing his lungs, every breath excruciating and painful.

Subaru: “—Haaah, haahh, haaaa...”

Hands to his knees, his shoulders heaving violently, Subaru parcels oxygen into his aching lungs. The mental fatigue from the past few days contributes to the heaviness in his feet, as if they were jammed full with lead. Even breathing is difficult.

Otto: “Are you alright, Natsuki-san? I truly have to say, you're excessively quick to tire.”

Subaru: “Shut, up... Kinda, just remembered something right now... I was still in the middle of medical treatment, and with all the problems that've come up since coming here, my exhaustion's definitely hit peak...”

Otto: “Right right, I hear your sour grumblings of defeat. Now, sit down over there for a moment. Let's give ourselves a rest and use the break to think. I'll go fetch us some water.”

Says Otto, only lightly puffed, to an entirely exhausted Subaru. He points to a shaded tree, indicating it to Subaru, before heading off toward the waterin' spot to get some water. Watching Otto go, and grimacing at how pathetic his own self is, Subaru seats himself in the tree-shade and concentrates on calming his breathing.

Subaru: “—”

It's been about an hour of sprinting around SANCTUARY in search of Lewes Theta, now. He and Otto were presently engaging in human wave tactics for it, but presently nothing has come of it. Their inability to openly recruit more helpers results from the same rationale as not doing it for Emilia's search.

They must not let the citizens of SANCTUARY or the evacuees know that Lewes, representative of the place, has gone missing and seemingly abandoned her post. And because Garfiel is thinking in the exact same way, he's probably searching alone.

Subaru: “Emilia's...”

Speaking with entire sincerity, Subaru would rather worry about Emilia's well-being than Lewes Theta's.

He doubted she would pull anything rash, but considering how mentally feeble she would be in her current probably-alone state, the desire strikes him to immediately dash to her side and support her. But the real priorities exist unfeeling, and indeed Lewes holds higher precedence. Subaru's self-interests have no room to butt in on that.

If only Ram's separate search effort could find Emilia for us, he thought.

Subaru: “Feels like that'd mean conceding something to Roswaal though.”

Ram is pretty plainly on Roswaal's side. She is assisting in the Emilia search out of concern for Roswaal's future societal well-being, and not out of support for Subaru and Otto. Her efforts in backing Roswaal just happen to aid Subaru and Otto this time.

The optimal flow would be for Subaru and Otto to secure Lewes, then dovetail into securing Emilia. If Subaru can spearhead both these conversations, that would be best. But ideals remain ideals. Empty rhetoric. Counting chickens before they etc.

Subaru: "Things stay like this, and we're gonna hit time without securing either of them. That's the absolute worst case, absolutely cannot happen. ...Have to do something."

Stewing over it will not present him any results. Would it not be more worthwhile to concentrate on combing through SANCTUARY, than stopping to ruminate like this?

Subaru: "But if that would find them, Garfiel should find them first. An hour's gone by already. He can get around at more than twice the speed as me and Otto, and him not finding them yet means..."

—Lewes was fleeing, without even Garfiel finding her.

Subaru: "—"

Thinking that far, Subaru feels a tugging in his mind, his breath stopping. Something here is off. Lewes was fleeing from Garfiel. That much is fine. Or no, it's not fine. Why was Lewes fleeing from Garfiel? Wasn't Lewes Theta fleeing because she wanted to avoid interaction with Subaru? Subaru's thoughts had been that she didn't want to encounter him and have to talk about challenging the TRIAL, and so she'd gone into hiding and was waiting for her rotation to end.

But there was something strange about this. If Theta's motives were truly to reject conversation with Subaru, and distance him, then all she had to do was mention that desire to Garfiel. Should Garfiel have clear reason to, he would not hesitate a moment in removing Subaru. And if Garfiel seriously attacked him, Subaru had no means to fight back.

If Theta is truly intending to keep her past a secret, she should incite Garfiel into this. Why hadn't she done this, had gone without doing this?

Subaru: "She's running, because she wants to be chased... maybe?"

Otto: "No, surely you run because you wouldn't want to be caught. What are you talking about?"

Subaru touches his chin as he mutters, for a killjoy to interject. He looks up to find Otto, flabbergasted and with a pitcher of water in his hand, presenting the drink.

Otto: "Although I do understand what it's like to get discombobulated with so many things to think about. Back when I spent four consecutive days without sleeping, dashing around doing business negotiations, on that last day I was loopy."

Subaru: "Stockpiling that war story away for a chat over tea another time, anyway it's not like I've

gone crazy. ...I'm not crazy, I don't think.”

Otto: “You've lost your confidence about it.”

Accepting the presented drink, Subaru gulps the water down from the pitcher's watering-can spout. Relishing in the coldness slipping down his throat, Subaru organizes his muddled words.

Subaru: “What's your take on why Lewes-san's disappeared?”

Otto: “...That'd be because she'd rather not participate in an inconvenient discussion, wouldn't it? Regardless of whether she's willing or not, if she comes across you today, she'll have to have that talk. ...Well, considering the fact that she can't leave for the outside, I cannot deny that it feels like a stopgap.”

Subaru: “Right, it's a stopgap. But you know if Lewes-san seriously wanted to do something about the problem from the bottom up, she's got an easy way to do it?”

Otto: “—You mean Garfiel.”

Otto scrunches his brows as he crosses his arms, in thought.

Otto: “Yes, that logic does... which means, perhaps Lewes-san would rather Garfiel not know about her disagreement with you, Natsuki-san.”

Subaru: “But that said, Garfiel's already suspecting that we're involved in it. Straight out, hearing his theory about how any abnormal events happening in SANCTUARY right now're because of us tripping the flags had my jaw dropped.”

Garfiel's ideas had pierced accurately to the core of it.

Either way, the root cause of Lewes' disappearance has leaked to Garfiel. Lewes should be a capable enough person that she could anticipate what Garfiel would think of her actions.

Subaru: “Meaning there's two conceivable possibilities.”

Otto: “The possibility that she is truly hiding, thinking that she must not meet either yourself or Garfiel. And...”

Subaru: “The chance she knew we'd search like this, and's waiting to be found... maybe.”

If it's the former situation, then Subaru and Otto will likely have to throw in the towel. If petite Lewes sincerely attempts to hide, then definitely she can buy enough time to waste half a day. The only one who could find her would probably be Garfiel, with his initiative and sense of smell.

But if it's the latter situation, it's a fifty-fifty between Subaru's group and Garfiel. And in that case, Lewes would surely have made proper preparations for them.

—If a method other than blindly searching at random has potential to find her, then...

Subaru: “We should search somewhere related to Lewes-san.”

Otto: “But in that saying, she was absent from her house... And her legitimate home is where Emilia-sama went missing, making that situation even more problematic.”

Subaru: “Right, you're right. Really doubt she's gone to Roswaal's, and the test site... is probably where Garfiel went first. Meaning...”

Where there's an equal chance for Subaru and Garfiel, not somewhere that Garfiel would immediately investigate first, the place Theta would choose would be...

Subaru: “...Otto, I think I got it.”

Otto: “T-truly? From just this minute conversation? You're certain you're not misapprehending?”

Subaru: “No clue why you're being negative on me, this's likely to be it. Or actually if this isn't it, then that's basically the towel.”

Nodding at the stunned Otto, Subaru gulps down all the remaining water in the pitcher. He wipes his mouth as he stands up, gazing in the direction of his IDEA.

If Theta was there, then she had not fled. She had simply been waiting in a spot appropriate for this conversation.

Waiting for Subaru, or perhaps waiting for Garfiel.

Subaru: “Don't you damn notice this, Garfiel. —We're gonna be finishing up the interview with your guardian before you can.”



Fortuna: “We're about to have an important talk, so could you wait here for just a second?”

Emilia: “Yes, Mother Fortuna.”

Replied Emilia obediently to Fortuna, who had brought the girl to the Princess Room and instructed her to wait.

A smile arose on Emilia's face at Fortuna's send-off, and Fortuna's eyes widened slightly in seeing in. But she then stroked Emilia's long, silver hair, and just gave a gloomy sigh.

Until now, Emilia had displayed plain and extreme dissatisfaction about staying in the Princess Room. While Emilia had intended to hide her displeasure, those puffed-up red cheeks and averted eyes would inform anyone of the young girl's piled displeasure.

That simple-to-decode attitude of Emilia's had been absent for a while now. Of course Fortuna would think it suspicious.

Fortuna: “...Emilia.”

Emilia: “Whaaaat?”

Fortuna: “—Nevermind. It's nothing.”

With her hand entwined in the girl's hair, and having been on the verge of asking some question, Fortuna shook her head. She departed Emilia and her innocent gaze with a quiet smile. Something about this did not feel right to her, but she would best welcome Emilia's lack of fuss. She was also making the visitors wait, and so for the moment, Fortuna accepted Emilia's attitude.

Emilia waved Fortuna goodbye, and the sound of the door's bar clunking into place to echoed from beyond the thing's closed face. The door to the room was soundly locked, and Emilia was alone in the Princess Room.

—Or no. Lately, that had not been the case.

Emilia: “It's safe to come out now.”

Emilia waited for a minute to confirm that Fortuna was not coming back, before calling to somebody in whisper.

She was naturally the only figure present in the room, and there would clearly be nobody to answer her—when the pale-blue lights crossed into the somewhat bright chamber.

Emilia looked at them, glowing their dim glow, for her amethyst eyes to waver in delight. These were the mysterious creatures which Emilia had abruptly become capable of consciously interacting with during her time in the Princess Room—the fairies, as Emilia called them. Truly they were minor spirits, and while Emilia's name for them was close, the nuance was slightly disjointed.

Regardless, the minor spirits went without chiding young Emilia for her rudeness.

Emilia: “Fairies, thank you for today again.”

Said the girl, thanking them for giving her company. The lights expressed themselves by dancing about, gleaming.

Emilia: “—”

Emilia gazed at the sight of the dancing spirits. Her recognition that these lights were good allies to her simultaneously intensified.

Once they sprinted into this room she had believed lonely and isolated, they would do everything they could to help Emilia fulfil her desires. Whenever Emilia neglected in proper vigilance, and she was close to being spotted while walking around outside, they would indirectly inform her about it.

—She had made countless escapes from the Princess Room, now.

Apparently no one noticed the penetrable gap in the roots of the tree, for Emilia succeeded in constant escapes from the room through that passage. Her forceful manoeuvring at the beginning meant she had injured herself and damaged her clothes, but now that she had worked out the knack to it, those things no longer presented concern.

She had used excuses two, three times in sequence about her dirtied clothes, and it had been getting really about time for them to stop working and for Fortuna to realise what was happening. A close call.

Emilia: “She definitely was sooo suspicious. But it's all ok now. Hehem.”

Emilia puffed out her chest as she bragged of her improvements, and the blue glimmers frolicked around her head in praise of her. It stung her eyes very quickly, giddied her.

So while Emilia had been escaping on the regular, her grand adventures outside ultimately amounted to cute little capers. She would peep on the adults' conversations and eavesdrop as she had the first time, or eat the fruit from the trees without permission, or sneak into people's houses and move the objects around, leaving them there, that par of mischief.

But mischief is a thing which compounds in intensity, and not even a homespun girl like Emilia presented any exception to that.

Emilia: "Okay. Say it's about time to head out today."

Fairies: "—"

The lights swayed in agreement with Emilia, and with this heartening reinforcement, she magnificently escaped the Princess Room.

She spread out the gap between the branches, considerably slackened from these repeated ventures, winched her little body into the opening, and dragged herself out of the tree-hollow. Emilia tumbled down the moment she exited the hole to land on a soft cushion of piled leaves.

This was an escape device that she had prepared over countless tumbles and falls.

Emilia: "What'll I do today?"

Emilia asked the lights beside her as she plucked the leaves out of her hair. She knew that they wouldn't speak back, but seeing them respond by strobing the intensity of their gleam made her know that she was not alone.

It was fine and good that she was outside, but her usual deeds were not anything quiet. Her mischief had leaked as being her doings, and it might even leak that she had been escaping the Princess Room. The hole getting plugged would be no good at all.

Emilia: "Gotta play it hands off 'till the fires cool down."

Muttered Emilia as she affected the air of a crafty criminal before walking around the village without any particular intention. Everybody would be in the square in the middle of the woods, just starting their talk with the black-cloaks like always. The black-cloaked people would give presents, and the adults would accept them.

Mother Fortuna would talk with the tall man during this exchange, and after sighting him countless times, Emilia had noticed people calling him ROMANÉE-CONTI or JUICE. She herself mentally referred to him as JUICE.

But even though she had found the adults' conversations enrapturing at first, repeated occurrences of eavesdropping had robbed them of their freshness, and Emilia steadily tired of them.

Fortuna and Juice would talk about lots of things that young Emilia did not understand. That she still frequently listened in on them was because they would mention her mom and dad's names like they had the first time, and Emilia reckoned she could learn where they were and what they were doing.

Very unfortunately, Emilia's plots had yet to succeed.

Emilia: "Hokay..."

How about sneaking onto the wagons that Juice's group owned?

If Emilia slipped her small body into the shadow of the luggage of those canopied wagons, she could probably be ferried outside of the forest very easily. Emilia had yet to see Juice and the others inspect the wagons when they left the woods.

With the fairies' help, she should at least be able to find an opening and sneak in.

Emilia: "...Hrm."

After thinking in this vein, Emilia immediately gave up with a: *No way I could.*

Because attempting to leave the forest would violate her most important promise to Mother Fortuna. —She absolutely must not leave the forest. There were lots of things outside that would be scary for her, and it would be dangerous for her until she grew up, so no! Was how she had been firmly instructed.

That she was not selfish enough to, although already breaking a rule that very moment, dismiss other promises as the same case and break them as well was the virtue of this girl called Emilia. And thus she scrapped in the draft phase her plans of escaping hidden in the wagon. By deciding that there were other ways she could find out what her mother and father were doing.

Emilia: "—Hup, hup."

During her time spent thinking, Emilia arrived at the spot where the adults and Juice's group were talking. Emilia darted up a nearby tree, lay belly-down atop the branches, and strained her ears. As always, Fortuna and Juice were chatting off to the side while the deliveries were going on. But Fortuna's expression today was especially warm.

Fortuna: "Emilia's been so cheerful lately, and sooo full of energy. Though it's really troublesome how she keeps getting covered in mud and dirtying her clothes."

Juice: "Gracious me... it is good to hear that she is well. If your will suits, we will provide you with replacement apparel. The cold season will soon visit outside the woodlands, so I am sure many garments shall be discarded in favour of dress more apt for the season."

Fortuna: "We're already imposing entirely on you, and now it's like we're demanding things too, I really am so sorry. ...Will that include adult's clothes?"

Juice: "Certainly. I am sure you will look very nice in them, Fortuna-sama."

Said Juice, his expression mild, for a complex shade to arise on Fortuna's face. She scratched her cheek embarrassedly.

Fortuna: "...Where could you've learned to say that? I know we've known each other a long time, but since when have you been able to tell these jokes?"

Juice: "I was merely voicing my honest appraisal? I must have said something peculiar."

Fortuna: "With your nature I know you're not lying, which really makes dealing with this impossible..."

Fortuna put her hand to her forehead with her expression astonished. However, the smile etched over her lips proved that she assuredly did not find that exchange unpleasant. Or no, actually, it in fact looked that maybe, Fortuna enjoyed that exchange.

Emilia: "...Hmp."

For some reason, seeing her mother looking like that made Emilia feel unamused. Fortuna tended to give the impression that a stern face was the norm for her, and her showing such a plainly gentle expression happened rarely to her fellows, and often to Emilia. It was like something important of her mother's had been stolen, and it peeved her.

Emilia: "Hhrmph, dumb Juice."

Said Emilia, lashing out at somebody in her one-sided acquaintance. She puffed out her cheeks, determining that if Juice continued to not say anything she found interesting in this conversation, she would pull some kind of mischief on his wagon today.

Maybe make cloths catch in the wheels, or spill oils on the luggage bed. Such were Emilia's petty revenges, but these heart-rending scenes of vengeful tragedy would not be occurring.

Juice: "—Now then, is the seal fine?"

Juice lowered his voice as he asked Fortuna the usual question. Fortuna nodded, and like always,

Fortuna: "No changes. Same as always, it's a sturdy thing."

Juice: "For that is its purpose. Regardless, the season is the season. While the predicament may be cyclical, this year notably hosts many nights where the moon is hidden, and the mana circulation is insufficient. I find myself wondering if perhaps, it may negatively influence the seal deep in the forest as well... I cannot keep from the anxiety."

Fortuna: "The moon... of course, agreed. So that's why the forest's lesser spirits have been doing poorly lately. ...Understood. It's not impossible the seal could loosen, so after this I'll go check it myself."

Juice: "I bid you may."

Fortuna responded to Juice's bow with a serious gaze and a prompt nod. While eavesdropping on their conversation, Emilia muttered, "Deep in the forest..." to herself.

Emilia had explored essentially the whole of the elf village. She naturally had conquered all the places in the forest where Fortuna permitted she may go, and while she would not voice the sentiment, she did think of the forest as her own garden.

But not even Emilia could envision this DEEP IN THE FOREST place that Fortuna and Juice were talking about. Most likely it meant one of the places deep in the woods that had been deemed off limits—so they were hiding things again. Emilia's dissatisfaction entirely compounded.

This was where Emilia's dissatisfaction piled to the utmost.

They had said nothing about her parents that Emilia wanted to know—as always—and even her

once-exciting adventures outside the Princess Room were getting trite. And to top it off, despite how they talked themselves blue about the things Emilia mustn't do, the adults themselves were both lying and keeping secrets, and so much proof for that had arisen just in this short timespan.

—How about she give everyone some trouble?

Who could fault Emilia for thinking this?

Nobody faulted or criticized Emilia's mischievous spirit back then. They had allowed it to swell, which accelerated the coming of THEN.

And so were there anybody who would fault Emilia for this, it would be Emilia herself. She could rebuke her own self's past foolishness beyond compare, and it would still not suffice for all the sins that resulted.

—But those future regrets do not reach young Emilia.

Just when Emilia rolled up her sleeves with misplaced motivation, Fortuna and Juice finished their talk. The exchanging of goods also ended without any problems, Juice's group bowed, and the adults saluted their departure.

Emilia easily sprung down from the branches before speeding back to the Princess Room. She soared through the gap in the tree roots, reaching the hollow, before frantically composing an alibi. She quickly finished some drawings, changed her dolls' clothes, and gobbled down her sweets. It was when she finished her work and wiped the sweat from her brow that she heard Fortuna calling from outside.

Fortuna: “Sorry for the wait, Emilia. Were you a good girl today?”

Emilia: “Ueh... I-I was a good girl. I was. Mm, yes, I was very good.”

Foiled her with my great performance, thought Emilia with her expression satisfied. Fortuna silently narrowed her eyes as she stared at the girl.

Although she felt uncomfortable with the sharpness of the gaze, Emilia judged that doing anything strange here would only intensify Fortuna's suspicions.

Emilia: “W-what is it, Mother Fortuna? Looking at me like that, when me, I haven't done anything. I ate my sweets, drew pictures, and played with my dolls. I didn't go outside at all. I'm telling the truth.”

Fortuna: “—Well, then it's all fine.”

It appeared Emilia's acting had deceived Fortuna utterly. Although it did guilt her to deceive her mom, Emilia scolded herself that she must not be bothered by this, and proceeded to plan out the script for her merciless revenge.

Fortuna and Juice had talked about a SEAL or something deep in the woods. SEAL meant it was a place where they were hiding something, was how Emilia's memory decoded the term. So basically, they were hiding something that would be trouble, if it got outside.

—The manner for Emilia's revenge against Fortuna and the others was decided.

She would find where they were keeping this secret SEAL, deep in the woods, and when Fortuna and the others scolded her, she would use it in her rebuttal as a bargaining chip. She determined to utilize the seal's location as her trump card for when they learned she was escaping the Princess Room.

Her eyes sparkling at the majesty of her genius plan, Emilia failed to notice the contradiction in escaping the chastisement for exiting the room by sullyng her hands with something even worse.

Her mother took her hand and guided her out of the Princess Room. After bringing Emilia back home, Fortuna said she had some things to do. Going by her conversation with Juice, Fortuna was going to check the SEAL.

And so,

Emilia: “—Please do it, okay?”

Emilia begged the pale-blue lights to follow her mother, one eye shut. A snapshot of Emilia's matured and beautiful visage, enough to enrapture another with only a smile, had already begun to bud in young Emilia back then.



This was the second time Subaru had visited this place, and in this loop, a first.

The buildings stands isolated atop a small hill. Not a seedy enough place for 'shabby' to be an appropriate descriptor, more of a mediocre family home, absent of any notable characteristics. A bedroom and a living room comprised its floorplan, the lounge hosted a simple kitchen, and the whole thing divided its rooms like an old world apartment. Not constrained enough to be uncomfortable if living alone, but probably cramped for an adult and two kids.

That is the sentiment Subaru harbours as he finally divines the significance of this building. He stands before the door, knocks. A short period of silence comes before he hears a “Go ahead,” from inside, and the knowledge that his idea was correct relieves him.

He immediately strains that relief taut, put his hand to the knob, and opens the door. The faint scent of old house wood skims his nose. The air is lukewarm on his skin as he steps inside, and,

???: “Yer got here later than I thought.”

There in the back of the room, upon the austere bed, sits a figure. It seems they had just deemed this moment as about time to get a refill of tea, for they are pouring boiling water into their cup. That was probably the culprit behind the dampness pervading the room. Subaru confirms that three cups rest atop the table—but only one is filled.

Subaru: “So I'm the first guest to arrive?”

Lewes: “That's right. Yer the first, Lil' Su. Hope yer don't mind yer tea being brewed strong.”

Subaru: "Either way doesn't matter. Say it's strong or say it's weak, leaf flavour's still leaf flavour."

Lewes: "There's a statement with no favour fer tea. Now I understand what Ram wers grumbling abert."

Smiling wryly at Subaru, Lewes—Theta—pulls an empty cup over to herself. She pours the boiling water into the cup, puts leaves in to soak, and pushes it over to Subaru.

Theta: "Here, yer throat must be thirsting. Glug a cup, tardy."

Subaru: "I feel like when I'm done sculling this cup, my HP's gonna be something where I'm headed off to church. Anyway that aside," itadakimasu.

With his joking making Theta's brows knit in confusion, Subaru blows on the cup to cool it before bringing it to his lips. The thick flavour of grass passes over his tongue and down his throat. No matter what kind they are, and no matter who brews them, leaves are leaves.

Subaru: "I couldn't even get used to Rem's tea... my body just doesn't accept this stuff, seriously."

Theta: "Now there's enough of yer impressions, didn't even have ter ask ter know 'em. I ain't ever brewing fer yer again."

Glaring at Subaru as he scrunches his face and sticks out his tongue, Theta drinks all of her tea in one go. She strokes at her long hair, her sleeves trailing as she plomps herself back on the bed, opposite Subaru again.

Theta: "I was thinking that wouldder settled us down befer getting ter the talk, but lerks like it just caused unexpected trouble."

Subaru: "When you throw information from sidestories into the main text, the readers who just happened to miss it will wind up being confused so let's go without any of that. Switch gears switch gears switch gears, and let's have our talk."

Theta: "Sure is easy ter say it..."

Sighs Theta, dumbfounded, before staring intently at her small hands. Her gaze then passes through Subaru, seeming to stare beyond the door, to the outside.

Theta: "But leaving that ers that... so it wers you after all, Lil' Su. Thought it would be. Yer'd be more likely ter show up than Lil' Gar, er otherwise neither erv yer would think of the place before my rotation."

Subaru: "...You sure set up some disadvantageous terms for Garfiel. He'd probably start grieving if he heard that."

Theta: "Grieving, bawling, it's good fer him to do that. ...But I'd anticipate a more serious reaction. If it'd been Lil' Gar who came here, that wouldder done away with that worry..."

Theta looks at the living room wall, her smile somewhat sad.

Subaru follows her gaze, to see hanging on the wall the silvery metal shields—two of them, crossed over each other, decorating the wall as they had been before.

Those were the shields Garfiel and Frederica had used to play battering matches when they were young, full of memories—in short, this place is Garfiel and Frederica's family home.

Subaru doesn't understand Theta's motives in choosing this place for the final conversation. But thinking back on the time he spent here in a previous loop, this was a place which held special significance for both the Leweses and Garfiel. Subaru had relied on that memory to lead him here, and Theta was here just as anticipated, waiting for Subaru.

Theta: “It's a good thing yer came here alone, Lil' Su. This isn't something I erspecially want people ter hear.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I left Otto behind. Didn't seem like I could bring him along for what's coming up here.”

While the statement sounds like one of discarding a warrior who lacked in sufficient strength, that isn't what Subaru is aiming for. It's simply that Lewes's past is probably going to need to touch on the WITCH. It's fine that Subaru be the only one to intrude on that topic. And so Otto was presently tasked with another role.

Subaru: “Theta-san, I'm safe to think you're one of the Lewes-sans who's been in the tomb, yeah?”

Theta: “Theeter?”

Subaru: “Ah, my bad. For expediency, been calling you that. Yesterday was Sigma-san, the other two are Alpha and Beta. I doubt you really like it, and I mean I can hold back on it...”

Theta: “...No, dersn't bother me. I see, so that's what it meant. Ah, I see, I do see... it's surprisingly nert that bad.”

After muttering “Theeter, Theeter” to herself multiple times, Theta's cheeks slacken in embarrassment. She closes her eyes, and after several seconds of silence,

Theta: “What I'm abert ter talk about is everything I've seen erv SANCTUARY's foundation, and... a part of the events leading up ter Lewes Meyer being sealed in the crystal.”

Subaru: “—Right.”

Theta: “Just what yer gonner think in hearing it, and what yer gonner say fer me afterward... will be something which, as one erv the four representative Leweses of SANCTUARY, I will leave up ter fate.”

Theta smiles. Subaru swallows his breath.

Theta: “It's something yer'd better tackle with careful attention, yer see.”

CHAPTER 101: THETA CHAPTER 1

One of the Lewes representative personalities, who Subaru calls Theta. She had entered the tomb and touched the past of her progenitor, Lewes Meyer, but her memories of the event were incredibly fragmentary, and even the chronology of events was indefinite.

Theta figured that this resulted from her being an existence crafted from multiple fragments, severed from the original Lewes Meyer's soul.

Perhaps, then, the other Leweses. Alpha, Beta, Sigma, and potentially the doubles which had not fostered a personality, would all see different glimpses of the past.

But even should this idea be correct, Theta would prefer the others not enter the tomb. —Because to show the past she saw to the other Leweses would come alongside unbearable, intolerable agony for Theta.

???: “—What do you want, I suppose? Staring isn't going to make me give you anything, in fact.”

The memory began with a girl, her hair faintly hued, who glared at her.

This girl was one with a lovable face. Her hair was so pale it seemed to meld into the light, her skin so white as to be nearly transparent. Her bluish eyes were large and round, her appearance described easily with the word 'sweet'. Her hair was tied in two long, winding pigtails, whose appearance alone communicated their smooth, silky texture, and springy softness.

She wore a dress of a subdued hue, which made the immature-looking girl appear somewhat adultlike. But, considering the ostentatiousness of what comprised the girl, the dress's colour inevitably felt to harmonize alongside that.

Lewes: “—”

Lewes recoiled, pierced by the lovable girl's harsh gaze. Compared to this girl, Lewes's own attire and appearance were the very definition of shabby. They were of the same general age, which made her own wretchedness even more conspicuous, and just standing here in this spot was now incredibly embarrassing for her.

Girl: “Hmp. Coward, I suppose.”

The girl snorted in dissatisfaction at the silenced Lewes. Her lovable appearance transformed that even that conduct into something cute. For Lewes it came accompanied by pain not from being belittled, but from the hurt of something constricting her chest. But before she could recognize that this was something akin to terror for displeasing the girl—

???: “Beatrice. What is that attitude? I don't remember teaching you that behaviour.”

A mild voice called. The girl's face stiffened. The voice came from behind the girl—otherwise said, from directly where Lewes was looking.

Exiting from a small hut in the back of the village was a woman of IMMACULATE WHITE.

In white did her hair stretch long. Not even light could be as glowing as her skin. Only her eyes, lips, long-sleeved outfit and skirt gave her any slight pigment, informing those around that her that yes, her existence was one of reality.

The person walking slowly toward Lewes and the girl was a great benefactor for this village—the witch, Echidna-sama.

It was to Echidna's voice that the girl reacted dramatically. The so-called Beatrice turned around, her expression still tense.

Beatrice: “Auh, erm... you misunderstand, in fact, Mother! Betty wasn't doing any... just, this girl was...”

Echidna: “I don't remember teaching you to make these disgraceful excuses, either. Speak the accurate truth. If you're confident that you're not at fault, then you shouldn't hesitate at all in doing this. Am I wrong?”

Beatrice: “You're, not wrong, I suppose...”

Echidna's voice harboured no sharp emotions, but did contain a silent, pressuring strictness. Beatrice's shoulders slumped. She brought her hands together, expression timid.

Beatrice: “Exactly as you instructed me, Betty was quietly waiting here outside, in fact. And then this girl came over, I suppose. Staring at me from far away... so rude, in fact. So I called out to her and asked what she wanted, I suppose.”

Echidna: “Hm. I see, then. Now, you here, do you find that telling correct?”

Lewes: “Auh... Y-Yes, I, do. Please forgive me. I-I, was very rude, and...”

Beatrice was speaking accurately.

Lewes had, from the village outskirts, vacantly gazed at Beatrice as she leaned against a fence. She surely had been waiting there for Echidna to finish whatever she was doing. Her posture, her eyes, had looked rather lonely—and Lewes felt something squeezing her chest.

But even if she talked to Beatrice about it, she would probably just get snorted and laughed at. Lewes shrunk her small self up even smaller, and attempted to outlast the storm by keeping her head down.

Echidna: “So you don't deny it. Then it'd turn out that Beatrice was correct, and you might've been a little rude, Lewes.”

Beatrice: “True in fact, Mother. Betty didn't do anything wrong at...”

Echidna: “However, it's your mistake that your imperious approach frightened her this much, Beatrice. I'm certain that I'm always telling you. You are special, but it's not so that you can look down on others.”

Beatrice: “Ueh, mhu...”

Lewes watched their exchange, and realising that Echidna had remembered her name, felt her guts almost tremble with how moved she was.

It was a small village, sure, but Lewes was just some worthless kid. The Great Witch, her benefactor, remembered her name nonetheless. This was an overwhelming honour for the people of SANCTUARY, who dedicated to the WITCH OF GREED their gratitude and respect.

Echidna: “Let's entrust the corrections on that front over to Juice once we return to the mansion. I predict he'll be very enthusiastic.”

Beatrice: “...I don't like Juice very much, I suppose.”

Echidna: “He says himself that it's his duty to be disliked, so I'd say he'd be fully willing for that.”

Echidna gave the grimacing Beatrice a faint smile, before turning to face Lewes. Lewes' heart sprung. She had missed the timing to participate in conversation, and figured that really she better leave. That Echidna's attention focused on her again was a surprise. Echidna proceeded to approach Lewes, whose shoulders remained hitched and rigid.

Echidna: “Apologies for surprising you, Lewes. Her name is Beatrice... she's something like my daughter. As you've seen, her discipline isn't quite up to par yet, which is a little embarrassing.”

Beatrice: “It's not 'something like', I am exactly your daughter, in fact.”

Echidna: “Well, I suppose that's how the situation looks. She'll be accompanying me in visits to SANCTUARY rather often now. You'll have more chances to interact with her, and I'd like it for you two to get along.”

Lewes: “U-Understood. Please entrust this to me, Echidna-sama.”

With Echidna's hand on her shoulder, Lewes's heart trembled in joy as she nodded. Echidna nodded back with full satisfaction. Behind her, Beatrice muttered:

Beatrice: “...Whatever, I'm fine being alone, I suppose.”



???: “Excuse me, you there. I'm certain that Echidna-sama would be present somewhere around here, have you seen her?”

Called to a halt and carrying a basket of laundry in her hands, Lewes turned around. And, recognizing who it was who stopped her, she about yelped. Her surprise meant she verged on dropping the basket, when an outstretched arm swiftly came in and propped it back in place.

???: “Ah, hup—”

Lewes: “Wuah, auah, I am so sorry,”

Lewes bowed her head to the boy, who had slid in to support the basket.

Seeing this, the boy raked his fingers through his long, navy hair.

Boy: “No, no need to worry.”

Boy: “I’m who should apologize, for failing to notice you were carrying something. I was lacking in forethought.”

Lewes: “Surely that’s not... I am undeserving, Mathers-sama.”

Mathers: “Whoever they may be, all must remember to practice consideration toward women. ...To correct you on just one point, I don’t especially favour being called by my surname. I’d like for you to call me Roswaal.”

Said the boy, Roswaal, as he winked.

He was perhaps four or five years older than Lewes, and one head taller. He had not finished growing yet, and his far-projecting voice had not completed its alteration into that of an adult’s, either.

He possessed that rather sensual appeal attainable only in the short timespan between boy and man, his behaviour so abounding in natural dignity that even Lewes felt his charms.

As she surely would. Roswaal despite his youth was the head of the Mathers household, which governed multiple territories. He was assisting the Witch Echidna, was managing SANCTUARY, and was a paragon.

He was contributing to SANCTUARY’s preservation in a different way from Echidna, and people constantly said never to be rude to him.

With her cheeks reddening thanks to Roswaal’s wink, Lewes frantically grappled for the topic he had stopped her for.

Lewes: “Well, um... so, Echidna-sama... I have not yet seen her today. Beatrice-sama was not at the usual place, either.”

Roswaal: “I, see. Then she might be delayed. Echidna-sama aside, it’s inconceivable that Beatrice would fail to immediately come see you.”

Lewes: “Ermm, um... I sort of think, it’s really coincidence that Beatrice-sama and I talk so often...”

Roswaal: “You’re saying it’s coincidence because that’s what Beatrice calls it, yes?”

Lewes silently nodded.

She had interacted with Echidna’s daughter Beatrice countless times since their first meeting, now. Beatrice would come alongside Echidna in her visits to SANCTUARY, which the witch worked into her busy schedule, and then often loiter about the place while Echidna finished her business. And then she would interact with Lewes exceedingly often.

Visits while Lewes was gathering the laundry, or going off to pick wild plants, were surprisingly frequent.

Unable to hold it in, Roswaal laughed.

Roswaal: “Beatrice isn’t honest at all. Not that you should consider yourself as doing poorly with

her.”

Lewes: “I am doing poorly, what in the world are you saying. She is being so good to something like me. I'm the one who is always making Beatrice-sama displeased... it's to the point that I'm worrying whether she might hate me.”

Roswaal: “You're fine. Beatrice's dislike isn't anything particularly credible. If she truly hated you, she'd find some reason to not come along.”

Would she? wondered Lewes, tilting her head.

Through most of Beatrice's interactions with Lewes, she would be complaining, and she seemed prone to grumbling in response to every single action Lewes took. That was what Lewes always saw of her, so despite being told that Beatrice did not actually hate her, she had trouble believing it. Lewes, and many of SANCTUARY's people, had often been selected as the recipients for hatred and hostility in the outside world. Beatrice's thing was overwhelmingly tender compared to what Lewes knew, and it had a warmth to it, but acerbity remained acerbity.

Roswaal: “I hope the time will eventually come where you all would understand that too.”

Lewes shivered, seeing the sad smile arise on Roswaal's face, wondering how she had messed up to make his expression be such a thing.

But before she could spout any words to varnish the situation over, Roswaal blinked his yellow eyes, having spotted something.

Roswaal: “Ah! Teacher! I heard you were present, and came soaring in!”

Roswaal raised his hand, utterly discarding his mature attitude, his face that of an exhilarated child as he broke into run. Lewes watched Roswaal dash past, his sprint leading him toward a woman—Echidna.

Echidna spotted Roswaal zooming over, him entirely ecstatic. She raised her brows slightly.

Echidna: “Roswaal, huh. I don't remember me ever allowing you to call me your teacher.”

Roswaal: “You cannot say that today. I'm now fully capable of achieving the assignment you presented to me before, Teacher. Balancing four types of mana at equal concentration, and creating rainbow mana. —And by my own power, I reached the point where I can add the remaining two. What do you think?”

Echidna: “You self-studied to the point that you can bind six of them? My goodness... You could perhaps call that a foreboding rate of expertise, and also obsession. I'm sure in a bind now.”

It was rare that Echidna's expression ever be one of surprise.

This was Lewes's first time ever seeing it, at least. Roswaal puffed his chest up in pride as he waited for Echidna to respond. Even Lewes, younger than him, found his attitude adorable. It plainly abounded in the loving respect for Echidna which he could not fully hide, as well as even greater emotion than that.

Beatrice: “What're you standing around doing nothing for, I suppose?”

Lewes: “Ah... Beatrice-sama.”

Lewes gazed at the two from afar when Beatrice abruptly appeared at her side, peering at her face. Lewes unwittingly stepped back. Beatrice crossed her arms, posture practised, and snorted at Lewes.

Beatrice: “Going on with your staring, just rude as always, in fact.”

Lewes: “P-Please forgive me. I apologize for my impoliteness.”

Scolded, Lewes found herself ashamed in her own shameless behaviour. But Beatrice's brows only furrowed further at Lewes' apology.

Just by smiling, or not pursing her lips, did Beatrice's face give a softer impression. That Lewes nevertheless always made the girl grimace thanks to her thoughtlessness was truly inexcusable.

Beatrice: “How long do you intend to stay sulking like that, I suppose? It's dismal. If you've got time to hold onto laundry baskets forever, you ought to hurry up and move on to the next chore, in fact.”

Lewes: “R-right. That is what I shall do. Please excuse me.”

After bowing her head to unsparing Beatrice, Lewes swiftly left the scene. When, just as Lewes began to speedily walk off, Beatrice tottered along behind her, her dress dragging as she followed.

Lewes: “Beatrice-sama?”

Beatrice: “It's nothing, I suppose. Just killing time, in fact.”

Answered Beatrice, dispassionate as usual, as Lewes glanced back. But just when she thought to look back ahead, Lewes remembered her conversation with Roswaal.

He had insisted that Beatrice did not dislike speaking with Lewes, but—

Lewes: “Beatrice-sama. Would it interest you to help me fold the laundry?”

Beatrice: “...Wha?”

Beatrice's eyes opened wide, her expression shifting to one of shock, with a tinge of anger. Lewes began to regret Roswaal's urging her into this.

Beatrice: “—If you alone won't be enough for it, then there's no choice so I guess I'll help you, I suppose.”

Lewes: “Huh?”

Beatrice: “I'm not saying it again, in fact. Come on, get going, I suppose.”

Said Beatrice as she speedily passed Lewes, who had unwittingly stopped walking. Lewes saw in the moment she passed that her mouth was slacked half in astonishment, and half in some other emotion.

A heat flared in Lewes's chest as she trotted over to catch up with Beatrice. She gazed at her face, walking alongside her.

Lewes: “Would you be interested in holding some small amount of the laundry?”

Beatrice: “Don't get carried away, in fact. —There's no choice, so just a small amount, I suppose.”

Said Beatrice, her expression one of reluctance, as she reached out to Lewes.

CHAPTER 102: RECOLLECTIONS ABSENT IN MEMORY

—She succeeded in finding the seal with much more ease than anticipated.

Emilia: “This is the seal?”

Young Emilia gazed at the strange object before her, her amethyst eyes blinking, and tilted her head.

What stood before Emilia was, discovered in the depths of the depths of the depths of the woods, a peculiar door in a clearing surrounded by trees.

Although being a door, it connected to no building, and even after circling around behind it, Emilia found absolutely nothing. It was merely a door, plunked down in the middle of the forest and large enough that Emilia could crane her neck back to look at it.

Emilia: “How come it isn't falling?”

Emilia thought it mysterious and so pushed the door, but it did not move or open an inch. Emilia's skinny arms would of course not topple the door either, the thing instead receiving the pressure in the same way that one would receive a pleasant breeze.

The door looked to be made of wood, but its cold touch felt more like ice. Its surface was smooth, the sensation strange, like polished stone.

In the middle of the closed double-doors was an ancient lock, its keyhole gaping as large as Emilia's hand. She had not the slightest idea whose pockets could carry a key for something so big.

Emilia: “Queer...”

Emilia tapped the back of her hand against the door, confirming that despite its supposed hardness, it sounded back with no echo. Still unsure of what this thing she uncovered really meant, Emilia tilted her head.

Emilia: “But what could it be? Hm?”

Fairies: “—”

The dim points of light circled round and around Emilia's head as she sought their agreement. Emilia had recognized that the fairies existed here and there throughout the forest ever since her encounter with them in the Princess Room, and after revealing that she was searching for the SEAL, they found its location for her rather quickly.

Although they had been the ones to lead her here, it seemed that they did not know the significance of the seal either.

But even if they did know, they could not speak, and so they would have no way to inform Emilia.

Emilia: “Dunno, boring. But I did find it. Clapclapclap.”

Emilia applauded herself by herself, and after giving a big nod, left the seal.

Now, if it leaked that she was escaping the Princess Room, she had her ace prepared. Assuming hypothetically that Mother Fortuna and the others found out about Emilia's great escapes, so long as she revealed that she knew about the seal—and well she didn't really understand this but probably, they would be on even conversational terms.

Not that she could really remember what had first spurred her to think this way.

Emilia: “Harump. Mother Fortuna and everybody else is wrong. Juice is wrong.”

Emilia recollected on the tall, black-robed man, before sticking her tongue out at him in his absence.

He was someone, who was not Emilia, who made Emilia's dear Mother Fortuna make her secret faces. She knew that he was not a bad person, but undeniably, he was her enemy.

Although she had undergone no direct showdown with him yet, should Fortuna ever present an opportunity for her to meet him, Emilia's volition was primed on the idea to stomp his foot.

Emilia: “The fairies fly in his face, and while he's confused, I step on his foot. And I'll step on him with both feet. And using my heels. ...That'd hurt probably, I'll use my toes.”

She did not forget to insert a wisp of kindness into her heartless plans.

No ally would accompany her in her cruel warfare. While keeping watch for the enemy with the fairies, Emilia crept through the forest, departing its depths, on her way back to the village.

This was not her escaping the Princess Room, and was instead Emilia's normal free time. Fortuna would be away at this hour, venturing around the forest to check that its barriers were steady, leaving the village occupied only by the elderly and by children around Emilia's age.

The elders could not join Emilia on her adventures, and for some reason none of the children would really approach her. That did make Emilia feel lonely, but when that happened Fortuna would put all her energy into playing with her and make her forget about it. It was thus not that big a deal for Emilia that she could not play with the other children.

Emilia: “And I bet I'm the only one who knows about the siel.”

She alone knew something that nobody else did.

That trifling sense of superiority supported Emilia's trifling self-importance. She puffed out her chest, bringing the fairies with her as she steadily proceeded through the forest.

Her destination was her abode. Today, she would send her brush running over paper all she wished, drawing pictures on the irregularly large quantity of sheets that Mother Fortuna had prepared for her.

Emilia: “The artiste for today feels like drawing a red sky, and a white forest. —?”

She mimed the action of slapping paint to canvas, when abruptly she noticed that the fairies' movements had turned irregular. She closed one eye as she gazed to follow their path, them splitting off from the forest trail and moving to disappear deep in the bushes.

Emilia: “Trouble feels afoot...!”

The fairies would usually disappear by turning into particles of light, but presently they were disappearing by fluttering deeper into the woods. Emilia determined that this meant trouble afoot, or otherwise that they were telling her to come this way.

She separated from the path and stepped into the shrub, to then breezily climb over grasses and bushes that were taller than her. She ventured between the trees, twigs catching multiple times in her long, silver hair, exiting to find—

???: “This is quite a predicament I've found myself in. ...The promised time will end up delayed.”

—In the dark forest, standing on a narrow trail, leaned against a skinny tree, a distressed man.

Emilia: “—Auh,”

Emilia unwittingly yelped, then immediately clamping her hands over her mouth. But this was a quiet forest, and that was a child's loud voice. The sound reached the man's ears clearly and inadvertently pulled his attention.

Man: “Who is there?”

The man tilted his neck, turning his head toward Emilia's thicket. Meek features. Evenly-cut green hair. His face was skinny, but his body gave a lean impression rather than a frail one. He was tall, taller than Fortuna, and even compared to this foliage that Emilia could only peek out of by jumping frantically, he was taller. This familiar man was Emilia's detested foe, Juice.

Juice: “—”

He stared wordlessly at the thicket, Emilia clutching her head and regretfully resigning that he would not just let this pass. What was actually happening was, with her clutching her head and so facing backwards, Emilia's bum was protruding from the thicket and Juice could see it entirely. But Emilia did not realise that, and Juice did not point it out. Dejected and uncomfortable, Emilia poked her head out of the thicket.

Juice: “Goodness me, a darling young lady has app—*hk!*”

A gentle smile arose on Juice's face—or did, until his shock aborted his sentence halfway. His eyes shot open, his lips trembling as he stared at Emilia. The fixedness of the gaze was atypically uncomfortable. Part of that was because Emilia regarded Juice as an enemy, and part of it was because she could not decipher the complex emotions packed into Juice's stare.

Juice: “Young miss, would... no, you couldn't possibly, perhaps...”

Emilia: “—”

Juice spoke with his voice trembling as he shook his head, as if he were witnessing something unbelievable. Emilia timidly looked up at him, saw the overwhelming frailty in his expression—and felt it heartbreaking. He looked like a lost child, or like someone who had always been walking through darkness now seeing light, an expression of something both feckless and fleeting, which prompted Emilia to forget everything she had as yet felt toward Juice.

Emilia: “...Juice, are you ok?”

Juice: “—! aua, aaauaaa, AaaaaAaaaaa...”

Emilia walked over, clutched the hem of Juice's black vestment, and spoke. Juice's expression disintegrated further in that instant, his spine trembling as if a lightning bolt had

transmit from Emilia's fingers, and he fell to his knees on the spot.

Emilia's shoulders trembled. Juice was on his knees, bent over, his eye level matched to Emilia's. From his eyes there spouted an outrageous flood of tears.

The unstoppable stream of tears cascaded into a river down Juice's face. This was the first time Emilia had ever seen a grown-up cry, and all she could do was watch it happen, her breath still.

Taking hold of Emilia's petrified hand, Juice looked the girl straight in her amethyst eyes.

Juice: "I am, okay... yes, yes! I am very well. There is not any issue, at all... I, I... I have just, truly just now, been saved beyond any parallel."

Emilia: "Really? You were saved, even though you're crying?"

Juice: "I am not crying from sadness... these are tears of gladness, of delight, of bliss... Such tears of happiness, do exist. That is what I, undoubtedly am... b-because you, all of you, taught me.... and..."

His overwhelming emotions communicated through his trembling fingers, and Emilia felt no urge to shake them away. She laid her free hand over the one already grasping hers.

Juice bowed his head low, his teardrops dripping to the ground, wailing and wailing and wailing unstoppable sobs, his so-stated tears of happiness proceeding to flow.

—So, crying could be happiness? Then, he was blissful right now?

Emilia: "You're happy, but crying..."

She did feel that she understood it.

Emilia had occasionally spent nights sleepless and alone. She would climb into Fortuna's bed when that happened, cradle herself in her mother's arms, and pass the time in warmth until the dawn came.

Emilia would be liberated from her unease, blanketed in happiness, sometimes coming close to tears. So what Juice was experiencing was a similar feeling to what Emilia felt back then?

Was there something Mother Fortuna could do, that Emilia also could?

Emilia: "It's ok, Juice. You're ok. Everything's ok."

Juice: "—*hk*"

Consolingly, Emilia patted Juice's head.

A quake jolted through his body. Emilia took Juice, who still faced downward, and held him to her little chest. His sobs transmitted to her bosom, his intensity surged into her interior.

She had thought about stepping on his feet before, and now she wound up doing this.

What an impossible guy. A hopeless opponent. No way she could do something awful to someone who was crying. Surely, Mother Fortuna would forgive this as being hopeless as well.

Emilia: "It's lonely to cry all by yourself."

Once Juice finished crying, they returned to the village hand-in-hand.

She had to tell Mother Fortuna about this.

About her walk through the depths of the forest, and about a grown-up crying.
Because the two who shared her secret were no longer enemies, but something like friends.



—Leaning against the hardness at her back, Emilia returns from her momentary forfeiture of consciousness.

She shakes her head, twining her fingers into her silver hair, grimacing at the shrill, incessant ringing of tinnitus in her ears.

What was that short dream she just had?

That scene was nowhere in her memory. It shouldn't be.

But nevertheless, the unfamiliar sight burst out as if she had actually witnessed it before. The characters involved were people that Emilia knew, and she definitely had been present for this production, but they were performing scenes entirely unknown to her.

She knew Fortuna, knew Juice, knew the fairies, knew her young self.

But she did not remember these events. Unknown events. Conversations not shared in memory.

Dripping down, overflowing, Emilia's unseen sights.

The door-seal. Escapes from the Princess Room. The fairies' guidance. What Juice's black robes meant. Mother Fortuna's final words, to Emilia.

Emilia: “—Auh, hhk,”

An especially sharp pain rips through Emilia's skull.

She rigorously wipes her welling tears away with her sleeve, the pale skin around her eyes swelling with red as she sighs.

Ever since her contract with Puck terminated, these unknown memories have been emerging one after another in Emilia's mind. She had absolutely no idea what they meant.

But she did know that they were not meaningless, and were not baseless delusions.

The fundamental core of Emilia's heart was not rejecting, and not distancing these memories.

She did know. The deepest depths of her heart did know these scenes.

Which meant that these events were ones which truly happened? If so, then why hadn't they been in Emilia's head before?

Her past, which she witnessed during the TRIAL.

A memory of being in the forest of snow, Fortuna slinging hatred and umbrage at her, what made her want to scream. Some definitive something, which linked to that point, was missing from Emilia's memory.

Was the link to that missing piece somewhere in this sea of memory?

If so, then Emilia would have to delve deeper, dredge the depths, and discover what had drowned.

Emilia: “Have to... find it, quickly...”

Her head, in pain. Her body, heavy. Her vision wavers, the strength sapping from her.
But nevertheless she must lean against the wall, prop herself back up, and keep going.

Slowly, laboriously, dragging her heavy body along, deep into the darkness, deep into the depths,
her face near to tears, by herself, she walks.

Alone.

CHAPTER 103: START OF SANCTUARY, START OF DESTRUCTION

Theta: “These memories are fragmentary, but I have figured a sorter chronology to them. I think, most probably, this ers the way things proceeded...”

Subaru: “...”

Subaru responds to Theta's faltering speech with silence.

He can only choose silence. The information load he's been given is too heavy, and he needs to organize it before he can properly come up with anything to say.

The foundations of SANCTUARY, back in the generation where Lewes Meyer lived. Meaning that these were events from four hundred years ago, where there casually existed a witch. Where there existed the WITCH OF GREED, Echidna.

Subaru: “Honestly, I can't imagine a time where Echidna was just strolling around the place.”

Theta: “The Great Witch's presence might feel distant ter yer, Lil' Su, seeing as yer weren't involved in things back then. Or no, rather, I just feel that she's close, it ersn't that I know her directly.”

Subaru: “When you talk about things you vaguely know about as if you actually lived them, it feels like you're on the first step to senility. Anyway... Echidna visited SANCTUARY a lot?”

Theta: “It's jerst happening because they're not truly my memories. But, guessing from what I've seen and what they said, it seems like the visits were reasonably frequent.”

Unlike Theta, who saw the memories, the whole story lacks in truthiness for second-hand-listener Subaru.

But if there were anything about what Theta said that was bothering him, it would of course be—

Subaru: “Beatrice and Roswaal were in SANCTUARY 400 years ago too...”

Theta: “Like I mentioned, Beatrice-sama was as Echidna-sama's daughter. And fer Lil' Roz, the Roz I'm talking about wers the founder erv the Mathers household... the first generation Roswaal, who created the opportunity fer the Mathers household ter enlarge. The name Roswaal ers inherited down the line.”

Subaru: “...Was he friendly with Beako?”

Theta: “From the look erv things, had a charming relationship with her.”

What Theta's story made him envision was Beatrice exactly, dishonest as ever.

So she had gone four hundred years without changing, never being upfront with anyone, always curt? Even four hundred years later, her attitude remained the same?

Without ever allowing anyone to see how she truly felt, hiding her sentiments inside her little self. Unchanged.

As he recollects on the girl in the Archive, a keen emotional pain runs through Subaru's heart. He puts his hand to his chest, enduring the sensation as he shakes his head.

Subaru: "It surprises me Echidna brought Beatrice along with her. From how she was talking, it didn't seem like she had any kind of familial love for Beatrice."

Theta: "It isn't that I've ever met the Great Witch directly. But going from what I saw in Lewes Meyer's memory, it feels like the Great Witch did have some kind of humanity."

Subaru: "Somehow, I'm agreed with you there."

Say that she doesn't match Subaru's conception of Echidna, and the story ends there. There was a gap before and after her death of four hundred years, and that is how much time she spent. Perhaps it wouldn't be strange, in that castle in a dream, for her to inadvertently take an estranged view on life.

Subaru: "My end with her was definite, and I'm seriously still trying to put hopes in her?"

Even he has to call it unsalvageable weakness.

This is different from with Ram and Rem. Echidna understood Subaru's feelings and hopes, and with that understanding, attempted to trample all over them. There should not be any future where he joins hands with her now.

Subaru: "Anyway, everything so far's been a charming reflection on the past. Doesn't feel like anything terrifying enough happened for you to purposefully be hiding it from everyone, Theta-san."

Theta: "—"

Subaru: "Please tell me what came next. What happened back in SANCTUARY, where everything seemed right?"

In response to Subaru's low-voiced demand, Theta sips her cold tea. She mutters to herself,

Theta: "Tastes poor..."

Theta: "What happened, is it?"

Subaru: "—"

Theta: "Ruin happened. And I learned the true reason why SANCTUARY was made."

Subaru: "True reason?"

Subaru swallows his breath. Theta nods.

She narrows her eyes, again opening the lid on her memories.

Theta: "The Great Witch and the first Roswaal were in SANCTUARY back then. If something intimidating and out of the regular happened, it wouldn't just be me, anyone in SANCTUARY would feel anxious about it."



—The air hung taut and heavy. Parched was Lewes' throat.

???: “We must flee here immediately. The preparations are not in order yet. —That he currently knows SANCTUARY's location means our plans will fail.”

???: “—”

???: “Teacher! Even these moments are precious! He is... he's already nearby!”

The slender-faced boy slammed his hands on the cabin's table.

This boy was one who never lacked in composure or grace—presently, wearing an expression abounding in frantic panic.

The listener to his appeals was, her eyes closed in silence and hands linked together, the Witch Echidna. The boy leaned forward toward Echidna, gesticulating intensely as he appealed again.

Boy: “We have no time to hesitate! His power is immense! And I cannot be your strength yet! Should you ask I be your shield, I will shield you gladly. But as we currently lack countermeasures against him, even should I shoulder the role, it will amount to my purposeless death...”

Echidna: “We do have methods. —To an extent, I had anticipated this.”

Interrupting the boy—Roswaal's—speech, Echidna opened her eyes and glared at the grain of the wooden table.

Roswaal: “Wh?”

He exhaled in astonishment. Echidna quietly shook her head.

Echidna: “I've formulated theories over my multiple trips into SANCTUARY. The conditioning on the barrier should function with considerably high probability.”

Roswaal: “T-then, we...!”

Echidna: “—But the NUCLEUS to activate the barrier is insufficient.”

Roswaal: “—”

Roswaal's expression was one of hope, until Echidna's pained voice made him swallow his breath.

Echidna: “The barrier will not operate without a NUCLEUS. Without the barrier, it is impossible to repel him from here. If we can't preserve a safe zone, he'll eventually find and destroy us.”

Roswaal: “Which is why we took careful time, preparing this SANCTUARY... we got so far, and... we were only one step away!”

Wailed Roswaal in frustration as he slammed his fist on the table. The aged table's legs creaked. Roswaal's hand seeped with blood.

Silence fell upon the room.
The hour stretched late. A viscous, phlegmy weight infected the air.
Amidst this environment, a girl nervously raised her hand.

Girl: “Erm, about the barrier's NUCLEUS... could I perhaps do it?”

Echidna: “—”

Girl: “I heard before that this would be possible. That I concord with the conditions for your barrier, Echidna-sama. ...Which she said was why she was paying me privileged attention.”

Echidna: “—Beatrice did?”

Girl: “Yes, ma'am.”

Nodding with quiet determination, her hair pink and long, was Lewes Meyer.
Her cheeks pulled taught with resolution as she stared expressionless Echidna in the eye.

Lewes: “Beatrice-sama said that you have confirmed the concordance between myself and the requirements. I suppose those multiple mana extractions over these past months have been related to that.”

After a slight silence, Echidna nodded.

Echidna: “Indeed, you do have high compatibility with the barrier's assembly. It will be possible to maintain the barrier if we keep you inside SANCTUARY. I have theorized this much. If we take more time, and harmonize your mana and SANCTUARY's earth into even concord, it should be possible.”

Lewes: “You mean to say that we cannot presently do it.”

Roswaal: “It's not just some simple barrier. For this one to break is impermissible. We've paid careful attention, proceeding with matters cautiously. We keep the half-bloods we've assembled over the years inside to condition the barrier. We need you for the final push. But...”

Roswaal cut off his speech, his expression chagrined.
Lewes did not understand the exact details, but it appeared that even with clever Echidna and Roswaal conspiring together, a difficult obstacle was impeding the plan's success.
Were there truly no means to do something?

—*Surely there are*, determined Lewes.

Lewes: “Is there no kind of definitive method?”

Echidna: “—”

Lewes: “...I am an individual saved by yourselves, Echidna-sama and Roswaal-sama. I came to this land, entered into a life absent of disparagement and ostracization, and was happy. If it is possible that I may repay my debt for having partaken in this experience, I am sure that would be my reason for living.”

She presented her heart.

Lewes clenched her pale hands so tight that they whitened even further, Echidna's black eyes steadily freezing, losing their warmth. It was instead Roswaal, standing at the witch's side, who found himself beset by complex emotion.

Roswaal: "T-Teacher..."

This was not a statement to entrust the decision to Echidna, but a statement carrying the nuance of *you couldn't possibly...*

Nevertheless, it was what pulled the trigger.

Echidna: "—If we crystallize your od and turn it into the nucleus of SANCTUARY, we can shorten the process to harmonize the soil and your mana. We'll likely erect the barrier."

Lewes: "And in doing so, save SANCTUARY?"

Echidna: "Avoiding the ruin that the approaching threat presents will likely be possible, yes. And if we can just buy ourselves time, we'll probably also be able to refine countermeasures."

Lewes: "—"

Echidna's response was no mere consolation. She spoke neither consolations, nor statements of wishful thinking.

If Echidna determined that something was possible, it was possible.

Meaning, if Lewes sacrificed her life, that would definitely protect this land. Her dedicated desire to repay her debt would assuredly be fulfilled.

Lewes: "...When do we start?"

Echidna: "—If possible, I'd like to start preparing immediately. I'll ready the anchor for your crystallization, and assemble the algorithm. The one to buy us time against the threat will be..."

Roswaal: "My role, correct? I'll work to my utmost ability. ...Lewes-kun."

Roswaal raised his head, his face grim. No frailty or weakness rested in his expression any longer. He gazed the determined Lewes straight in the eye.

Roswaal: "I apologize. My ability is too lacking to save my Teacher."

Lewes: "No, Roswaal-sama, you are my benefactor and have conferred me with an irreplaceable time. I am grateful for that, and there is no grudge to hold in the least."

Lewes put her hand to her chest as she shook her head.

Roswaal took a short breath in, a breath out, and looked at Echidna.

Roswaal: "I'll leave immediately. Teacher, your preparations... and, please summon Beatrice."

Echidna: "...Don't you think it'd be better for Beatrice not to know?"

Roswaal: “If we do not call Beatrice now at this juncture, she'll resent both of us for the rest of her life. ...Though, she still might even if we do call her.”

Echidna: “She will? ...Alright. I'll call her afterwards.”

After watching Echidna nod, Roswaal turned to exit the room. Partway along his departure, he placed his hand on Lewes' shoulder, and gave a single, firm squeeze. The slight pressure of his nails informed Lewes keenly of the fact that Roswaal cared about her. She shut her eyes.

Lewes: “...Beatrice-sama.”

Quiet, muttered words.
The thought of the absent girl led Lewes's heart to, minutely, wrench.



Again, a shift in scene.

Lewes: “—”

—As she witnessed that overwhelming pressure, a terror even greater than being resolved for death sprouted in Lewes' heart.

Roswaal: “—ghaa, hgu”

Roswaal shrieked in pain, spitting blood, as his body flew horizontally across the surface of the ground. Seeing him fallen shoulders-first to the ground, casting up clouds of dust as he tumbled, all Lewes could do was watch on in such stunned astonishment that she forgot to breathe.

Roswaal L. Mathers, who manipulated six hues of magic, and despite being a teenager, had scaled to the highest peak of the sorcery that the human race could accomplish. With his overpowering magic he scorched swaths of land to ash, sliced through stone cliffs with blades of wind, created waters to reverse the flow of great rivers, and could manipulate earth and rock to craft castles. This was something so overwhelming, that not even Roswaal with all his power stood a chance.

???: “...You're still going?”

The boy with his dark brown hair walked, perpetually listless, his head swaying. He was about the same age as Roswaal. The colour of his hair was almost black, with his bangs hanging low enough to cover his eyebrows, and his face attractive enough to be mistaken for a woman's. His drowsy, narrowed eyes were of a dark hue, his shirt white and pants black, and overall he was a person with a horrifically plain outfit.

—With every step he took, with every pebble he idly kicked, Roswaal's body would expel sprays of

blood as he ricocheted. Ricocheted. Ricocheted away.

Roswaal: “Ghh! Ghk! Gkkh!”

Boy: “A racket. A bother. Tiresome. Irsome. Drains me. Depresses me.”

The boy spoke lines of negative words, his voice low. But with every mutter and step he took, Roswaal's screams intensified—and despite the distance, Lewes heard his bones creak. Roswaal's fallen body was being steadily pressed into the earth, as if the air overhead was crushing him down. His limbs were already buried in the ground, his flesh torn, bloody tears flowing from his bloodshot eyes.

Boy: “Can't you just stop now? You worked yourself hard. Can't win against me, but you worked and you worked. Entirely worked, and this has to be enough. ...Working hard is pointless anyway.”

Roswaal: “Speaking this, idiotic... How could, I possibly... not stop you, here—ghaaah! Aaah! GuuhaAAaa!!”

Boy: “Haaaaau... it's this that weighs my head most. Nauseates my chest. Dampens my spirits.”

The boy bent his knees and squatted in response to Roswaal's lack of surrender. After giving a deep sigh, the boy stroked the earth. In accordance to the movement of his fingers Roswaal's limbs flattened, twisted, shrieks of pain and severed flesh sounding out in unison.

Boy: “I hate this. I really did back off. It's really been so long since I've backed off this much and it's the worst. The worst, the worst, the worst of the worst of the worst of the worst. —So much tristitia.”

Roswaal: “Gagh, aaugh—hk!”

The moment the boy voiced final word—enough to depress a person just by hearing it, that decisive term—Roswaal's torso crumpled beneath the unbearable, compounding pressure. His abdomen caved in, so much blood abounding from his mouth that one could wonder if he puked out his guts. His teeth bared, his limbs convulsing. The young magician's reward for never once letting his fighting spirit wane was for his lifeblood to be mashed to bits.

Boy: “Aaaauh, aaaaaaaaaauh, aaaaaaaaaaaaaauh. What is this. Just whaaaaaaat is this. Look at this. Just look at this. Aaaauh, and I didn't even want to. I feel sick. I feel down. I feel low. All this tristitia. Tristitia, tristitia, tristitiatristitiatristitiatristitiatristitiatristitiatristitiatristitia—”

Roswaal dripped with blood, no longer capable of shrieking. The boy's apathetic eyes gazed at his pulped body, speaking screeds of melancholy mutters. The gruesome end of Roswaal, and the uncanny boy who had brought it about. Lewes was only able to watch as it happened, the situation beyond any help, when she finally remembered that she had forgotten to breathe.

Lewes: “—Hauh.”

Her lungs, strained to the limit, kicked into action as her body and brain demanded oxygen. She needed to take one single breath, get the air inside her, and then hide in silence again. It felt that

even a single fluctuation in the atmosphere would catch some fragment of the boy's attention, which terrified Lewes.

She had witnessed her benefactor be battered atrociously, but rather than slay the foe, she opted for self-preservation. She did not even recognize in this moment her attachment to her miserable life.

Boy: "Aaauh? Could there be someone over there?"

Lewes: "—hk!"

As if proving Lewes's worries as sound, the boy tilted his head to look towards her.

Lewes had been watching Roswaal and the boy fight in the plaza from inside a small building, a little distance away. She had put her eye to a hole in the wall's wood, and peeked through the slim crack.

The boy's statement, suggesting that he had noticed that meagre crack from such a distance, made Lewes shiver. There was no way he could have found her. The hole was minuscule. There was no possible way, not in the least, that he could have perceived her.

But nevertheless, the boy began walking toward her, without any hesitation.

Boy: "Wellllllllll but you know, it's not like I'm that interested in doing this. Killing everyone isn't going to make anything goooooood happen. ...Would appreciate it if you'd save me some effort, though."

Lewes: "...Eep."

Boy: "Hrmmmm. Well, so somewhere kinda around there... no, I'll just do the whole thing. God, I seriously want to just dump everything and go home. I feel sick. I feel down. All this tristitia."

The boy faced his palm out toward Lewes' building, his gloomy statement her death sentence.

A chill raced up Lewes' spine as the stabbing pain of needles jabbed into her skull. Her eyes welled with tears, her throat choked on a wail that she failed to endure.

Just like this, an invisible weight would mash Lewes's small body and bones, and she—

???: "AL GOA!!"

With a blooded roar—or no, quite literally a bloody roar—an explosion of flame burned the plaza in crimson.

The extravagant heat, warming Lewes's face despite the distance, combusted into existence within a second—its point of origin being the fallen Roswaal's raised hand, its aim being to scorch the boy from behind.

Boy: "—"

Even the boy had to show some unrest in face of this overwhelming wave of heat, and turned around. But turning to face the hellfire revealed that this violence was nothing conquerable within the limits of human knowledge.

With him unable to do anything about it, the rush of red light consumed the boy.

Boy: "Sweat is unpleasant. —Irks me."

—Or would have, if the words he muttered the instant before it hit had not slammed the

concentration of scarlet mana to the ground.

This blazing fireball—which should have burned the boy into absolute nothing—went without its searing heatwaves even dispersing around the area, and instead shrunk into tiny red sphere and tumbled to the ground.

Roswaal: “Auh, ue, hu...”

Boy: “It still isn't gone, just what power did you put into this? Don't make me use too much strength. The more I do, the more I want to die.”

The boy grumbled as he clenched his raised hand, hard. As if obeying that gesture, the downed, shrunken fireball imploded.

The air popped once with a crackle of heat. With that alone, the fire's energy vanished entirely.

Not even the ultimate in fire magic, Al Goa, had done anything.

Roswaal in his moribund state had attempted to rescue the situation. Having seen the outcome through, he found himself utterly dumbstruck. He had mustered his dying efforts, for this.

Even Lewes, who had managed by a hair's breadth to alter the timing of her death, keenly knew that both Roswaal's death and her own death had merely been postponed slightly.

Roswaal: “You damn devil... no, you damn warlock!”

Boy: “That's a nasty name, it depresses me. Do you think I'm like this beeeeeeecause I wanted to be?”

Roswaal: “The person who, from limited selections... of how their lifestyle would be distorted, chose for this one, was you. Don't you dare pretend you're a victim... Hector of TRISTITIA!”

Hector: “Your sound logic is painful to hear, and feels mortifying. You really are sooooooomeone I have trouble with.”

The boy squatted down beside the fallen Roswaal. He reached his hand out, toward Roswaal's head. His destruction had been overwhelming, and without contact. Should his fingertips proceed to touch, and the boy proceed to transmit his invisible annihilation, Roswaal's body would be flattened without even its fundamental structure preserved.

Roswaal: “Ghhk... Ul...”

Hector: “You're too late, you won't make it, and I won't let you.”

Said the boy nonchalantly as Roswaal strained his mana in an attempt to cast. The deathly fingers reached Roswaal—sending guaranteed death to the dying figure.

Roswaal: “—Rhu, bhhb”

Hector: “Bones, clattering. Guts, squelching. Heart, crunching. Hoooooow dooooo you like it?”

A short scream. That consisted Roswaal's death wail.

The boy looked down at the perfectly motionless Roswaal, wiped his knees, and stood. This time, assuredly, he turned back toward the petrified Lewes.

He acted without any warning as he aimed his palm toward her and launched that invisible weight.

Lewes: “—hk”

She could not withstand it for even a second.

Pressure pressed down from above, the force many times greater than her own tonnage. That she toppled down to her chest was a fortune, for if her posture had been different, her limbs would have snapped into impossible angles as the force squeezed her prone to the ground.

Hector: “If you can't fight this, you're not Echidna. And if yooooooooou're not her, I don't even give a crap any more.”

Lewes: “—e, eep”

Hector: “Be crushed, and drown in the dirt. Save me the effort of digging your gr—”

An invisible hand pulled Lewes' skin taught, the feeling erroneously that of the ground skinning her alive. The instant that she considered the boy's voice would be the last thing she would ever hear, the pressure vanished.

She exhaled in ragged breaths, her face dirty with tears and drool as she looked up, wondering what happened. In the path of her gaze was—

???: “Made it in time—would be pretty hard to say in this situation.”

Hector: “Nooooooooo, don't worry. Your student did great work stalling me and buying time. Thanks to him things aren't quite going how I wanted, and my mood is seriously wrecked.”

???: “Your speaking really hasn't changed at all. You're exactly the same as when we left each other.”

Hector: “And your gab is dismal as always, too. Why did you start talking in this uncute way? And when you were so cute before.”

The boy shook his head in lamentation. Standing before him, obstructing the space between himself and Lewes, was a black-garbed woman of white—Echidna.

The witch glanced at the fallen Roswaal. Her eyes narrowed slightly.

Echidna: “This sight pains my chest more than I anticipated. A failure to remain objective toward a result is supposed to be an embarrassing faux pas for me, and yet.”

Hector: “Detachedly dealing with it with your emotions would keep him from resting him in peace, iiiiiiiiii in this situation. Not that I care. If you wanna cry, how about we pause for that? Not even I'm so cruel.”

Echidna: “How are you daring to say this?”

While their acerbic words hinted at an acquaintanceship between them, their relationship was blatantly not a friendly one.

The two steadily gauged their distance as they faced off. Lewes did not doubt in Echidna's strength, but she had equally believed in Roswaal, and he had been easily crushed by that overwhelming power.

With that established, Lewes could not assert that Echidna's backing gave her any peace of mind.

???: “—Are you going to lie gracelessly there forever, I suppose?”

Lewes: “...huh?”

Lewes raised her head from her prone position, when a hand grabbed her from behind and pulled her up. As the force dragged her nearer, Lewes yelped in surprise and turned around. Behind her was a lovable girl, her expression sour and familiar.

Lewes: “Bea, trice-sama...”

Beatrice: “This isn't the time to be gibbering in surprise, in fact. Get away from here quickly, while Mother is buying us time, I suppose.”

Lewes: “B-But, Roswaal-sama and Echidna-sama ordered me to wait here...”

Beatrice: “It was thanks to said Roswaal's bungling that he realised you're here, in fact. Enough, just follow me, I suppose. Mother instructed me to take you, in fact.”

Lewes: “Echidna-sama instructed...”

Beatrice's brows furrowed in irritation, but regardless her expression was stiff. Even she, abounding in self-confidence as she was, felt overwhelmed by the unknown boy. Nevertheless, she was infinitely stronger than Lewes' own self, who had merely curled trembling into a little ball.

Beatrice: “The preparations are in place. That's what Mother said, I suppose. She said you'd understand if I told you that, in fact.”

Lewes: “—I understand.”

Lewes held her breath as she gave Echidna's message a nod. Beatrice narrowed her eyes in puzzlement of Lewes' reaction, but lacked any time to probe into it. A torrent of mana was peaking behind them. The conflict between Echidna and the boy was only a matter of time. No one could anticipate how the battle would go. The most important factor for securing a definite win would be Lewes's own decisions.

Lewes: “Let's leave. Beatrice-sama, where are the preparations set?”

Beatrice: “...They're inside this old, stale stone room. I transported it along because Mother told me to, but let me tell you it was tiring work even with my Gate Crossing, in fact.”

Beatrice guided Lewes by the hand as they began their migration. Lewes followed after Beatrice's bouncing pigtails, glancing back one last time at Echidna, before sending to her back a bow of her head. —Surely, they would never speak again.



The crystal was a transparent blue, so beautiful that Lewes trembled.

Beatrice: “Don't get enthralled and stupidly touch it, in fact. It'll swallow you if you do, and you'll become a part of the crystal, I suppose.”

Lewes unwittingly spilled a passionate breath, forgetting the situation. Beatrice stood beside her, arms crossed, as she warned her to do nothing careless.

Lewes, quite liable to commit that such-dubbed stupidity, panickedly withdrew her outstretched fingers.

Lewes: “Ah, please forgive me.”

Beatrice: “Whatever, it's nothing to apologize about, in fact. ...So, what now, I suppose? Betty was only instructed to transport the crystal and summon you here, in fact.”

Lewes: “Beatrice-sama, how did you transport the crystal?”

Beatrice: “When you're on my level, it's easy to move something of this par without touching it, I suppose. The accuracy and range on Gate Crossing is enough that Mother praises me for it, in fact.”

Beatrice's expression was dispassionate as always, but perceiving her as nevertheless proud, Lewes's cheeks reflexively relaxed.

She had become very accustomed to talking like this with Beatrice. At first she had accepted Beatrice's statements at face value, and been horrifically ashamed with herself multiple times. But over their period of knowing each other, she had learned that the seemingly-imperious Beatrice was actually surprisingly easy to understand. With that knowledge, she was exactly the darling girl that she looked, and Lewes achieved in smiling with her together.

How nice would it be if she continued this commonplace conversation with Beatrice.

All while forgetting the disaster besetting SANCTUARY, and the fate awaiting Lewes—not that she possibly could.

Beatrice: “...? That smile you have right now is incredibly unpleasant, in fact.”

Perhaps Lewes's sentiments showed in her expression, for perceptive Beatrice pointed this out. Beatrice had been paying Lewes enough attention that she could determine when her smiles were of a different nature than usual. The moment that Lewes realised this, tears arose at the corners of her eyes.

Beatrice's eyes shot open. Lewes hurriedly wiped the stuff away with her sleeve.

Lewes: “P-please forgive me... *hk*. There's simply some, gunk in my eyes...”

Beatrice: “I-it, wasn't like I was worrying about it, I suppose. —Even Betty at least knows this situation is one where it's hard to say 'stop being anxious', in fact.”

She was off the mark, but nevertheless Beatrice's words were ones of compassion.

A warmth spread deep in Lewes' chest. This was the strength that Beatrice's words gave her. Right now, it felt so grand she could boast about her.

Lewes: “Beatrice-sama.”

Beatrice: “What, I suppose? If your preparations take too long, I'm leaving you to go help Mother, in fact. Roswaal's basically presumed dead already, and nevermind it being him if I don't help, he...”

Lewes: “For a very long time, you have taken good care of me. However—now is our goodbye.”

Beatrice: “—wha”

Beatrice blinked in confusion.

Beatrice and Lewes, inside a cold stone room—two girls, facing each other.

Beatrice blinked again and again and again before glaring at Lewes, who gazed her straight in the eye. Lewes, who knew her warmth, did not flinch even in the slightest at the sharp gaze.

Beatrice: “What exactly do you mean by goodbye, I suppose? You're running away?”

Lewes: “No, I am not. Should I run and live, perhaps I would someday reunite with you, Beatrice-sama. But this goodbye shall be one for life. I doubt we will ever be able to speak with each other again.”

Beatrice: “...”

Beatrice pursed her lips as she peered into Lewes' eyes, searching for the girl's intentions. Seeing Beatrice's confusion for the first time ever, Lewes quietly selected her words.

Lewes: “The preparations that Echidna-sama spoke of meant something required for placing the barrier around this SANCTUARY. It apparently should need more time before the barrier can entrench itself in SANCTUARY's soil, but... the present situation means that we do not have that time.”

Beatrice: “Insufficient time... the barrier won't make it? You mean that barrier was an indispensable means to keep that man away, I suppose.”

Lewes: “I do. I have clearly seen the danger of that man. He is a peril. I understand why Echidna-sama is attempting to defeat him at any cost. And I suspect that Roswaal-sama's noble devotion was because he understood that he could not save Echidna-sama should his efforts be anything less.”

That was how overwhelming that boy was.

Lewes did not know in what exact fashion the activated barrier would benefit Echidna, or whether it would contribute to exterminating that creature from existence.

But there was one thing that Echidna had assured her.

Lewes: “Echidna-sama has promised me that, should the barrier be activated, it will be possible to protect SANCTUARY. ...However, myself must be sacrificed for this purpose.”

Beatrice: “D-don't say anything stupid, in fact. Sacrifice yourself... you don't have any groundings in magic, how could you possibly...”

With panic in her eyes, Beatrice began to hastily speak. But, being clever as she was, her sentence

cut off halfway as her own statement led her to her question's answer.
Her eyes shot open in shock as she glanced at the blue crystal looming beside the two.

Beatrice: “You root yourself to the crystal's core... act as the central od, spread around the entirety of SANCTUARY... and if you do that, there's no need to take the time to harmonize?”

Lewes: “Yes. Echidna-sama has stated the same thing.”

Beatrice stood still, wordless. Lewes circled around to enter Beatrice's view, and gave her a smile.

Lewes: “The affinity between myself and SANCTUARY's mana... Beatrice-sama, you are the one who gave assurance about this.”

Beatrice: “—*hk!*”

Beatrice's face sprang up.
Her white teeth bit down on pink lips, blood seeping from the flesh.

Beatrice: “I did'n...*hk*. Betty... Betty, didn't mean to do that when I... wait, no, wait, I suppose. Wait, in fact. B-Betty will go and speak with Mother, I suppose. Mother might act that way but she spoils me, I know she'll listen to me, and...”

Lewes: “There is no time. We must decide in this instant.”

Beatrice: “Then Betty will go and assist Mother immediately, in fact. If Mother and I are working together, that guy's gonna get trounced, I suppose. And I heal Roswaal up too, and the three of us...”

Beatrice shook her head with childish reluctance, her sentence tapering off to a weak end.
Even she herself realised how unpersuasive her statements were.

Beatrice was indeed amazing. Lewes entirely revered how a girl her own age could handle magic so skilfully, and how she never slacked on her daily studies.
In the spare time she had while doing laundry, sewing, or cooking, Lewes had always been watching how, simultaneous to her loving respect for her mother and quarrels with Roswaal, Beatrice would diligently practice her magic.

Beatrice accurately understood her own abilities, and so she clearly comprehended the differences in fighting strength between herself and others.
She could not expose her mother to danger due to a comforting pipe dream.

Beatrice: “—We can evacuate everyone with Betty's Gate Crossing, in fact.”

Lewes: “...”

Beatrice: “Right? Let's do that, I suppose. I might need to push myself just a little for it, but Betty can manage it, in fact. While Mother is buying time, we gather up everyone in SANCTUARY and have them flee to Mother's mansion, I suppose. I'll find an opening to collect Roswaal, and if Betty and Mother can slip through the door, we'll escape him. ...Yes, this is what we should do, in fact.”

Lewes: “And then live in fear that he will pursue us again? We were ostracised by many people, and

now it concludes with us abandoning our place of safety... how much time will we need before we can craft such lives for ourselves again, in a new place?"

Lewes shook her head, her statements gentle yet harsh.

She saw the wounded look expand across Beatrice's face. An intense pain ran through Lewes' chest. Lewes needed to trample over the compassion of a girl who cared about Lewes, about Lewes's people so much, reject it, and force her own way though.

Just to what extent did this cruel and selfish conduct betray the days that they had spent together until now?

—The feelings that they had built up over the days they had spent together, and now, their betrayal.

Lewes: "Beatrice-sama. I love SANCTUARY. I am truly glad that I have been able to live here. I love the smiles of everyone who dwells here. I do not want to lose them."

Beatrice: "—"

Lewes: "I have already lived warmth aplenty. I do not think my polluted blood apt for the happiness that I experienced. And so I am satisfied entirely."

Beatrice: "That couldn't, possibly be... J-just what, kind of place do you all, what true meaning do you think, there is to this place that you..."

Lewes: "Yes. We do understand it."

Beatrice: "—hk"

Lewes nodded to Beatrice, whose expression was one of regretting her words.

Lewes did understand. The true meaning of this SANCTUARY.

Of course she understood that Echidna and Roswaal's gathering of peoples shunned by their races was not out of simple altruism.

A paradise where the ostracised and belittled could live their lives with pride—was the superficial hope that they mustn't cling to, but did wish to believe in.

And now she couldn't help but simultaneously resign and comprehend that inevitably, she would always only see the dazzling positives of the place.

Lewes: "The purpose of this place is to do something about the person pursuing Echidna-sama."

Beatrice: "..."

Lewes: "I now understand that that is what this place is for, and that that is what we are for."

Beatrice: "If you... if you understand that, then why?"

Beatrice shook her head in utter confusion.

Lewes smiled in response to Beatrice's pleading gaze.

Lewes: "It's fine. Perhaps that is what it had been at the beginning. But that does not mean that all

of the time we spent living here was entangled in Echidna-sama's plots. As was not the case for the all time I lived here, and all the talks I had with you.”

Beatrice: “—”

Lewes: “It isn't the beginning which is important. It's how it ends, and what you feel along the way.”

Beatrice: “—”

Lewes: “My life here was one of happiness. And so I shall pass on for the sake of protecting it. Beatrice-sama, I express to you my gratitude for all the compassion you have given me, and are giving me even now.”

A distant boom echoed to the stone room.

This ground-quaking, air-shaking force was an after-effect from the conflict between Echidna and the boy, taking place in SANCTUARY's centre.

The fact that it was slowly but steadily approaching proved better than anything that Echidna, fighting to keep the conflict from reaching this place, was not winning.

Lewes: “—hk”

Lewes closed her eyes, steeling her will. Beatrice's shoulders heaved as she frantically forced herself to think, searching for the words.

The magic words to dull Lewes's will, overturn her feelings, and reverse her opinions. But such convenient magic existed not in this world.

Lewes: “Beatrice-sama.”

Beatrice: “...What, I suppose?”

Lewes: “Take care not to eat too many sweet foods.”

Beatrice: “—”

She could never stop herself from reaching for the sweets during teatime, and she was so cute, but it would all be spoiled if she got fat. Her teeth, too, did Lewes want for her to keep pretty. Because, although she did not show it much, she was a truly adorable girl when she smiled.

Lewes turned around and wordlessly approached the blue jewel—the crystal.

The deep glow of the crystal, entrancing. Should she touch it, she would truly be engulfed.

Would it hurt, and would she suffer?

She was resolved to face her end, but she did not know what form the thing would take.

Say plainly that she was scared, and yes, scared was the only thing she felt.

Once that light swallowed her, she would make this SANCTUARY genuine.

And if that genuine world would be a place where everyone was kind, and could live their lives in peace...

If Echidna and Beatrice would continue to watch over that SANCTUARY for her...

Lewes: “—”

A tug came at her sleeve.

Lewes turned around. Beatrice stood directly beside her.

She was gazing at Lewes with an expression she had never seen from her before, her fingers forlorn as they tugged on Lewes' sleeve.

The strength in those fingers was weak, and not even Beatrice could have known what she was attempting to do with this touch. She reached out regardless. Lewes thought it the action of a girl who could not honestly put her emotions to words, expressing her feelings honestly.

Lewes: “—”

Lewes tenderly unhooked the fingers clutching at her sleeve.

Their fingertips touched, they shared each other's warmth, making Lewes smile at her end.

Lewes:

“Thank you. —Goodbye, Betty.”

—With those words as her last, Lewes's consciousness was swallowed in blue light,

And vanished.

CHAPTER 104: THETA CHAPTER 2

Theta: “That makes up all the fragments erv the past I saw in the tomb.”

Theta puts her cooled tea to her mouth, wetting her tongue.

Subaru, seated on the bed and having listened meekly to the story, holds his breath as Theta announces that the tale is over. And with a long, deep sigh, he expels everything clogged up inside him.

He strains his lungs to the limit, spitting out all the air and indescribable emotions in him—then, raises his head.

Subaru: “Those were the true foundations of SANCTUARY, and Lewes Meyer's memories.”

Theta: “I'm sure yer already now what happened ter Lewes, swallowed by the blue crystal. She's still preserved exactly how she wers back then, deep in the Great Witch's research facility.”

Subaru: “But this doesn't match up with what I know about the crystal's purpose. Echidna didn't say Lewes Meyer in the crystal is about SANCTUARY's barrier, she said it was for something else...”

Going from what Echidna said in the dream, Lewes Meyer is sealed in the crystal owing to Echidna's experiments in attempting to achieve immortality.

The process of sealing Lewes in the crystal, crafting duplicates of her, and then transferring Echidna's own memories into them would accomplish a kind of mock-immortality. Echidna's death or some kind of mechanical defect meant that the experiment failed to bear fruit, and with the passage of time, the mechanism continued to autonomously create more and more Lewes doubles.

Theta's story mentions absolutely nothing about all this immortality business.

In fact, it's presented multiple pieces of information which cannot be overlooked.

Subaru: “The real reason Echidna made SANCTUARY... basically it's because of that guy they tried to remove, but who is he?”

Theta says nothing.

Subaru: “They called him TRISTITIA during the story, but I haven't seen or heard anything about this guy before. It's news to me that he exists. I'd been thinking the whole time that the person chasing Echidna was the WITCH OF ENVY.”

The WITCH OF ENVY, who destroyed the six witches of sin.

Subaru had thought entirely that she, who he had met in the dream, was the one who cornered Echidna. Only for the story to present someone entirely different, who Subaru had not heard even the vaguest mention of until now.

Of course he would be confused.

But, with how he's being called TRISTITIA, Subaru did have some ideas. Albeit ones that he'd rather not be true.

Subaru: “The seven cardinal sins are pride, envy, wrath, sloth, greed, gluttony, and lust, yeah? ...But I heard they used to be different, and there's other deadly sins which got absorbed.”

The term 'Seven Deadly Sins' was one of the keywords to give people of Subaru's ilk heartflutter. Subaru naturally had some brushes with this information before, and after mobilizing his memories into action, he finds that yes, there it is.

Subaru: "I think it was... TRISTITIA and VAINGLORY used to be counted as deadly sins."

The ex-deadly sins, separate from the main seven, TRISTITIA and VAINGLORY. If TRISTITIA existed, it wouldn't be strange for VAINGLORY to exist too.

Supposing that these were different people, missing from the witches who were extensively known in the past...

Theta: "It'd be a help fer me if yer guessed on yer own why I couldn't speak carelessly abert these memories."

Subaru: "Why you couldn't?"

Subaru scrunches his brows. A sly grin, unfitting to Theta's appearance, arises on her face.

Theta: "What yer just said wers exactly right, Lil' Su. I haven't heard a single lick erv anything abert anyone carrying the title TRISTITIA, erkscept in these memories. And that's the same no matter who yer ask. Though the world may'erve fergotten the names erv the witches of sin, their existence is still told—but people don't know that a presence which possessed such incredible power even existed. ...It's terrifying."

Theta's explanation, her eyes cast down, illuminates her concerns. Indeed, there was something strange about this.

The WITCH OF ENVY has been talked worldwide through the generations as a synonym for terror and hatred. The other witches are sidelined into being existences consumed by the WITCH OF ENVY, but their presence does still remain in history.

Nevertheless, not even the faintest traces of TRISTITIA's existence are known about at all. Had it just coincidentally happened that the topic never came up anywhere around Subaru or Theta?

—Was it truly plausible that Subaru, who had attended a witch's tea party and interacted with all the witches, would not have caught any minuscule sign of this person's existence?

Subaru: "...Did the first Roswaal die? If he did, then what about his descendant, the current Roswaal? Is he from a different branch of the family?"

Theta: "He didn't die in battle, ers what I heard. From what I've seen of the memories he wers half-dead, but he must'er managed ter narrowly hold onter life. Though he wersn't ever gonner recover well enough ter live a normal life. ...After that, this first Roswaal who had supposedly reached the peak in sorcery continued ter devote himself inter deeper and deeper studies erv magic, I hear."

Theta knew the truth, and so surely she had once attempted ask about this. She must have been the one who most wished to verify whether these memories about TRISTITIA were factual. But seeing how her response is not very clear, it seems her efforts amounted to no success.

Subaru: "SANCTUARY's true purpose is to keep TRISTITIA away from Echidna. Lewes Meyer went

along with Echidna's plots and sacrificed herself to protect SANCTUARY. ...Then the crystal's creation of duplicates is something that came later...?"

Theta: "The ability to generate duplicates is unnecessary for a system only meant to create a barrier. In all likelihood, you're right. The issue here is what could the motive be for installing a double-creating system afterwards."

Subaru: "If it was Echidna who did it... then the motive'd be immortality. But if it was... then I have no idea what she was thinking when she came up with the idea."

What were Echidna's decisions, after she found Lewes Meyer sleeping in the crystal?

Echidna must know about TRISTITIA. Going off Theta's memories, that is definite. But, for knowing about him, there's an incredible and compounding unnaturalness about her behaviour during her dialogues with Subaru.

—This just-spawned, isolated awareness has its answer where, exactly?

Subaru: "I'm seriously still missing pieces for this?"

Gritting his teeth, Subaru thinks vexedly about the segments he's missing for this puzzle.

He scratches at his head, deciding to postpone the labour of finding the answer for the present. Now, in the final part of Theta's story, the part which Subaru can't overlook is—

Subaru: "—Beatrice lost her friend at the end."

Theta: "...She did."

Lewes Meyer was a thing of awe. Beatrice was a thing of obstinance.

Perhaps Lewes Meyer had been unable to recognize that until the very end of the end, and Beatrice had been unable to recognize that even in the final moment.

Lewes Meyer, now melded into the crystal. How greatly did her final, curselike exhibition of love wound Beatrice's heart?

Was the consequence of this parting Beatrice, and her continued rejection of others for four hundred years?

Subaru: "She lost someone in a painful way, so of course it'd scare her to hope again. ...I do get how you're feeling."

He has to remember Beatrice, rejecting Subaru's hand, pleading: *Please let me die.*

Her inability to have hope in others was because her four hundred years of isolation, and because the starting impetus for her isolation—the memory of her parting with Lewes Meyer—left that deep and cutting of a wound, then?

Finally, Subaru feels he understands why grieving Beatrice had become dependant on the existence of Echidna's THEY, and why over a long span of time, her heart abraded.

The wound on Beatrice's heart, herself having lost her only friend, had remained forever as a scab. Her meeting with THEY and fulfilment of Echidna's instructions should have healed the injury—but with the progressing of an absurd passage of time, the thing festered with pus, and had practically swollen to burst.

The girl felt herself at her limit.

Subaru: "...Have the Lewes-sans ever met Beatrice?"

Theta: "Nerr, never. By the time us duplercates started being born, Beatrice-sama had stopped coming over ter SANCTUARY, and she never visited again. The other doubles don't know abert the memories, but I do, and my view says it's best we don't meet her."

Subaru: "—"

Ultimately, Subaru does agree with Theta's thinking.

In the crystal there sleeps Lewes Meyer. Theta, a duplicate of her, shares the exact same appearance as Lewes Meyer did back then. But Theta has no memories of interacting with Beatrice as Lewes Meyer.

If Beatrice meets Theta and the other duplicates now, when the wound remains gaping open, all it will bring about is anguish for her.

But—

Subaru: "It's essential that I have her meet you and the others."

This is necessary to get the girl, present at the moment of SANCTUARY's creation and inheritor of Lewes Meyer's wish, to start walking again.

Subaru: "Is it okay for me to think there's nothing else to why you hid the past so much that you went into hiding?"

Theta: "...Yer fine. That's the whole erv it. There's the existence erv that strange warlock called TRISTITIA who I saw in Lewes Meyer's memory. The thing existed, but that truth remains nowhere. It's overwhelmingly odd, abnormal."

Subaru: "Agree with you there. There has to be some trick to it, and to Echidna's attitude."

Theta: "But anyway... right."

Subaru furrows his brows as Theta cuts off, her casting her gaze down. She keeps her gaze away from Subaru as she continues.

Theta: "If this SANCTUARY is Lewes Meyer's... if this is a place created by the wishes of our progenitor, and this barrier was created by sacrificing her life—I have ter wonder what significance it'd carry, ter break the barrier and liberate the place. I lacked the bravery for it."

Subaru: "—"

Theta: "The times are the times. We're centuries separated from Lewes Meyer's era. The treatment toward half-bloods, ostracized and despised in the generation where the WITCH OF ENVY's terror wers most abundant, must'erv improved some by now. ...We're even getting people urging that we ought to free the place, and set our sights fer the outside."

Subaru: "...Naturally though, I'm not saying that everything will be great. Discrimination is still around, here and goddamn there. And I'm sure there's going to be lots of unpleasant times even should you leave. But."

Subaru recalls the happening at the palace.

Emilia, who had put her will and thoughts to words, and withstood the malevolence aimed at her. A world where Emilia's ideals were achieved would be a world where the people of SANCTUARY would be saved. Lewes Meyer's wish would be granted.

Subaru: "And once Emilia's achieved that, this ended SANCTUARY will begin again. Once everything's worked out well, everyone will be able to call the entire world their SANCTUARY."

Theta: "—"

Emilia would surely endeavour for it to happen. And although not entirely definite, at least half the other Selection Candidates seemed like people who would also endeavour for that purpose. There existed between people no superiority or inferiority surmisable by race. There would surely come a time where this idea, a natural one to Subaru, would be favoured far and wide.

Theta: "Fantasy. Comforting, pleasant words."

Subaru: "They sure are. Got your heart wavering?"

Theta: "Working yer tongue on this senile old biddy, yer a bad boy, Lil' Su."

Stifling her chuckles in the back of her throat, an elderly air covers Lewes's young expression. Subaru shrugs as he jokes around, Theta's face glorious.

Theta: "I'm interested in having those pleasant words coax me, and maybe that is me being a senile old biddy."

Subaru: "You're a girl, might be my dangerous allure getting you dizzy."

Theta: "Pff,"

Subaru: "That is the first time any of the Lewes-sans has ever snorted a laugh at me!"

Hoisting both hands to the heavens, Subaru poses in defeat. Theta shakes her head at him before setting her emptied cup on the table.

She looks up at the silver shields, crisscrossed on the wall.

Theta: "The world outside this SANCTUARY—and the time where its whole is a SANCTUARY."

Subaru: "That time will come. And when it does, it's gonna be a waste staying holed up here. Cause the biggest fun once we're done's gonna be us taking everyone who said we couldn't, and giving them the finger."

Overcoming something of which others have judged you incapable creates merit. Battles, and challenges, adhere to that.

Their goal in their venture was a dream lacking limits, and that gave their struggle magnificence.

Theta: “—Alright, Lil' Su. I want you and Emilia-sama ter go along doing what yer like.”

Subaru: “Theta-san...”

Theta: “I'd decided from the start. That if yer were the one ter find me here, I'd tell the story and leave the decision up ter yer. Yer heard the story, and yer still not thinking ter stop SANCTUARY's freedom in the least... and yer also laughed off my unease.”

Subaru: “Not that I put on enough bravado to actually laugh it off, but yeah.”

Theta: “Even so, that's fine. Mm, it's fine.”

Dispelling something from her mind, Theta nods several times as she affirms Subaru's stance. Subaru realises that Theta, having been stuck in the prison called this memory, which she could never reveal to anyone over these many years, has finally reached out her hand. Would she take the hand of another, and allow them to lead her outside? —That was the decision she had entrusted to Subaru.

Subaru: “And so, there are no longer any Lewes-sans opposing SANCTUARY's freedom.”

Theta: “That's what it'd be. ...But this ers entirely something which only holds significance once SANCTUARY has been freed, and the barrier comes undone. Nothing changes about the TRIAL's conquering resting on Emilia-sama.”

Just when Subaru gives himself a relieved pat on the chest for eliminating one issue, Theta speaks. Hearing her, Subaru's relaxed cheeks stiffen again. He definitely had gotten somewhat lax after finding Theta. But the problems remain present and unresolved.

He had found Theta before Garfiel could.
But he had not found Emilia yet.

Theta: “Yer definitely sure that Emilia-sama has a chance erv overcoming the TRIAL?”

Subaru: “I've taken the measures for it... or more like made her take it. But the medicine worked a little too well and right now she's kinda sorta a missing persons case. We're hoping for a quick resolution.”

Theta: “M-Missing persons!? Y-you're really certain this ers going to work, right!? If Emilia-sama bungles after I jerst revealed this past, it's gonner be an undermining erv so much of my resolve!”

Subaru: “Your anxiety's sound and it's really hard for me to say anything, but... well, after hearing your story, I thought of something.”

Lewes Meyer, who sacrificed her own life to save SANCTUARY.
Her self-sacrifice, as she prioritized others above herself to the very end, overlapped incredibly with that girl—who infinitely suffered disadvantage as a result of prioritizing others first.

Even when undergoing compounding pain, repeats of agonizing experiences, her heart withered—Subaru doubted she would lose sight of what people wanted from her, and what she must do.

Subaru: “I have an idea of where she is.”

Theta: “—”

Subaru: “And even if that's not it, we searched frantically all around this cramped SANCTUARY. My buddy should be half in tears right now, tumbling around the place. If all that isn't finding her, then there's only one place we wouldn't find her.”

Seeing Subaru's conviction, a once-panicked Theta gives a deep sigh. She goes without investigating into Subaru's idea as she speaks,

Theta: “If yer saying that yer'll find Emilia-sama, and she'll overcome the TRIAL... that'd make Lil' Gar the last gateway ter get through.”

Subaru: “Going from the fragments I got from Sigma-san, his past's about his goodbye with his mother. You were in the tomb around the same time, Theta-san, so do you have any ideas?”

Theta: “Seeing that he doesn't want ter talk about his family, yes. Yer have how he fusses over me... and he's enduring the thing with Frederica, too.”

Frederica and Garfiel's parting became something definite when Garfiel shook away Frederica's hand as she left to journey in the outside world.

Garfiel stayed behind in SANCTUARY to protect the residents, who could not leave unlike quarter-blooded Garfiel and Frederica, from potentially-existent threats.

—This coincided with Echidna's statement that Garfiel was afraid of the outside world.

Subaru: “Trauma from parting with his mom... huh. Maybe he hates the outside world? I mean I kinda want him to help me out with something in the outside world, but.”

Theta: “Lil' Su and Lil' Gar standing shoulder ter shoulder... hm. Mm, that sounds good.”

As she thinks of Garfiel, Theta's smiling visage loses all youthful factors, plainly overflowing with motherly compassion for her grandson.

Perhaps for the four doubles playing the role of Lewes, the emotion none of them entirely shared but all commonly felt was a familial love for Garfiel.

And surely, Garfiel felt the same toward them.

Subaru: “...I need to see Emilia first.”

Preparations are proceeding along to deal with the worst-case scenario for the Garfiel Route.

Being that Subaru has contracted with Roswaal—that this has been established as one of Subaru's requirements to win the bet—conversation with Garfiel is an unavoidable quandary.

Emilia prevailing over the TRIAL was something Roswaal had also deemed as impossible, and Subaru must have Emilia overcome it on her own.

Having lost Puck, Emilia is missing her mental support. In exchange, she supposedly has lost the CAP ON INCONVENIENT MEMORIES which is impeding her victory over the first TRIAL.

If things are going in line with Puck's ideas, then this should be what is happening. Once Emilia

overcomes this and faces the TRIAL, she should be presented a different scene than what she has been seeing thus far.

Will Emilia be able to give her solution?

—Natsuki Subaru's self-imposed role has been to do everything he can so that, even though he may not be present, she will be able to give her answer at that moment, and proceed to be able from thereon out.

Subaru: “I know you'll probably be wanting to support Garfiel right now, but Theta-san, can you stay right here for a little bit? If he doesn't get too close to here and doesn't find you, then Garfiel's distractable.”

Theta: “And while Lil' Gar's attention's elsewhere, yer gonna get into yer nefarious plotting.”

Subaru: “Everyone's been saying what I'm doing's a 'nefarious plot' and a 'conspiracy' like it's entirely an obvious thing to call it, but do I actually look like that kind of conniving scoundrel?”

Theta tilts her head but does not answer.

Feeling a badness about that silent reply, Subaru gives a sigh as he scratches his head.

Subaru: “Can I keep thinking that today's the scheduled day, and tomorrow's the reserve? If Emilia's where I think she is, then the worries left are Garfiel and Roswaal.”

The bottleneck of these two people, who potentially will obstruct Subaru from achieving his win conditions for SANCTUARY.

His plans with Otto to keep the bottleneck away are scrupulous. The problem is their timing for it, their prep time, and the chances of it working.

The timing is sporadic. The more prep time they have, the more prep time they have. Their chances increase in proportion to the goodness of their timing and length of their prep time. —It's an obvious outcome, but it's the one they want.

Subaru: “Whether we're laughing or crying, we have to sort everything out within two days. We can't mess up at the critical moment. ...Right, Theta-san?”

Theta: “Yer can look at me fer agreement, but I got nothing I can say. —It's when a man's face is determined that yer've hit that time. I'll be waiting with expectations.”

While she does not go along with Subaru's ideas, Theta does affirm his volition.

That troubled smile of hers perhaps was the same one that Lewes Meyer had given time and time again. Surely, this expression was one Beatrice had seen on many occasions.

Persuade Garfiel, support Emilia, and receive Beatrice.

The things he has to do, and obstacles in his way, are entirely too numerous.

The thick stormclouds still hang heavy, and he still hasn't found any clear-cut answer. But despite it all, Subaru's heart mysteriously isn't downcast.

Because the things he has to do, and the things he wants to do, are the exact same things.

This present, where he can clearly see the walls he needs to tear down—no matter how difficult it

will be—is so much better compared to before, when he was lost on what he needed to do.

Finally, the preparations are in place for him to reach out to this insubstantial thing called fate.

Subaru pulls his cheeks taut with his hands, a peal ringing out as he psychs himself up. Lewes's eyes widen. He smiles at her as he gives a light wave and heads for the building's exit. With his hand on the door, he glances back as if just remembering something, and says:

Subaru: “Actually, Lewes Meyer spoke in a normal way for her age, so how come you duplicates talk like grannies, Theta-san? Something to do with crafting your persona?”

Lewes: “What in the world er yer saying. —I'm talking plenty normal fer my age.”

With an indignant snort, Theta puts her hands to her hips as she puffs out her flat chest. Calling it normal for her age when she looked like that was surely, entirely impossible.

While thinking of the girl in her dress, who would never mature no matter what time passed, Subaru exits the building—bathes in the wind.

His mood still someways sunny, to face the final challenge.

—Natsuki Subaru's fight to end SANCTUARY, and begin SANCTUARY, begins.

CHAPTER 105: THE MERCHANT'S TRAP

Garfiel: “—”

Scrunching his nose, the sudden awriness leads Garfiel to stop moving.

His body had been wind as he sprinted great steps over the earth, him now slamming the breaks on his travel. He jams his right foot into the soft dirt, dust clouds billowing as he stoops his posture low, turns his head to and fro.

Sniffing and scrutinising the scents in the air, Garfiel is inside the forest surrounding SANCTUARY. He has been dashing around within the scope of the barrier, searching for the missing Lewes.

He has already checked all the places he thought she might have been, pumped his legs more times than he can hope to guess, in search of her small, familiar form.

The acceleration of his heartbeat originates from the panic that this sense of foreboding provokes. Garfiel senses that a development which is horrifically inconvenient for him is unfurling. Outsiders have been pushing their weight around inside SANCTUARY, and even LEWES is acting different from usual—she didn't even consult with Garfiel before making her decision.

Garfiel: “These fucking... what the shit is happenin'!?”

Clawing at his short, blond hair, Garfiel traces his finger over the white scar on his forehead.

It was Garfiel's habit to touch this injury when he was confused, when he was lost, when his heart was close to losing its calm. It was something of a trigger, to stabilize his mind.

Tracing his finger over the scar always made him remember when he got it. And remembering the time where he sustained this lifelong wound, where he was at his most foolish, let him regain his composure.

Many people who know this character named Garfiel judged him as being quick-tempered, and the possessor of a crude personality. That appraisal resulted from his usual conduct and attitude, his appearance and so on, but actually that judgement would be a mistake.

The character named Garfiel Tinsel was unexpectedly coolheaded and determined, perpetually urging himself to think.

This too resulted from Garfiel's creed—for he knew that brute strength alone would not be enough to see his beliefs through, and had indeed keenly realised such.

What did he need to know, need to do, to fulfil his wish? Garfiel allocated all his focus into considering these questions, and such was how he fostered his obstinate credo.

However—

Garfiel: “And even with all that... why th'fuck is goddamn everybody goin' round doin' whatever th'shit they like... *hk*,”

Garfiel howls—in frustration, in agony, his sharp canines bared.

Indeed, the situation had continuously strayed from what Garfiel intended. And because his stubborn beliefs are the basis for his ideas when he thinks ahead, Garfiel is hideously weak when it comes to flexible thinking.

Garfiel infinitely possessed only one solution, one stance in regards to SANCTUARY.

And even supposing that the track to reach that answer split into countless branches, it alone

remained the point he would never concede on. And so he felt that he had paid heed to all the branches he could conceive.

But Lewes's independent activity and the outsiders' undercover operations had not been included in those possible considerations.

And sadly, although Garfiel never stopped thinking, nothing meant that had experienced anything that made him superior to others, or made him especially wiser than any normal person. He was merely frantic, desperate, and only that.

Garfiel: “—hk”

Taking a deep sniff, Garfiel narrows his golden eyes.

The light fuzz on his back stands on end, confident that he has caught the scent, as he fleetly bends his legs to leap—and resumes his migration. His feet land on the branches of trees as he uses their snap-back elasticity to get higher, to go faster, to soar freely through the foliage, chasing after the scent.

Garfiel: “Group'v 'em... hell're they planning, huh!?”

Clicking his teeth, Garfiel roars as he puts his irritation to sound.

The bellow he looses is close to that of a feline beast, his eyes filled with rage.

What Garfiel scented was the stench of excessively many living beings. The stench of sweat, the stench of trodden grass and dirt, the stench of tension seeping out from anxious human bodies, the stench, the stench, the stench—

Garfiel: “—!?”

This was perfectly the stench of a mass migration of humans.

The dense smells numbered to over ten, closer to fifty. The possibilities of that high a quantity, at this exact timing, migrating in the present SANCTUARY belonged to only one group.

—The evacuees from the village near Roswaal's mansion.

The bunch who'd evacuated here to escape danger. What were they planning, acting in ingratitude and starting to move at this timing?

Garfiel: “That, son of a bitch... fuckin' pissin' around with me!”

What skims though Garfiel's mind is the sight of boy who Garfiel intensely disliked—a boy with short black hair.

He was a character with sharp eyes in opposition to his conspicuously frivolous, blithe attitude. But despite that, he was also a man with a gaze that was occasionally lucid and piercing, as if he had seen right through Garfiel.

That look of his, as if he were here but looking elsewhere, reminded Garfiel of another man that he disliked. Inevitably he loathed it.

And this man who he disfavoured even in peaceable times had unmistakably perpetrated this.

This sudden migration of the refugees was obviously happening because that guy stirred them up. For some reason these evacuees placed exorbitant trust in the boy.

He had no strength, no special powers to be seen, and seemed only proficient at insincere prattle. As far as Garfiel cared he was the most loathsome, stupid, weak, and selfish breed of creature in the world.

Garfiel has to find himself thinking that truly, he should have dealt with him sooner. There were multiple chances for it, and he was so incredibly open—but his resolve to face pain alone possessed something unnerving, eerie, and inadvertently Garfiel wound up holding back. His reward for his hesitation was this present predicament.

And most importantly he had been made to lose sight of what he should most prioritize—his family, Lewes—as the mob threatening SANCTUARY's peace went off doing whatever the hell they liked. No matter what, he had to keep the evacuees from exiting the barrier. It would've been a different thing a few days ago, but the situation has changed.

Garfiel: “Fuckin' prick knows that granny ain't normal.”

There is a crystal in the place that Garfiel calls a test site, that Lewes calls the progenitor room, where the forbearer for Garfiel's family member Lewes, Lewes Meyer, sleeps.

Honestly, Garfiel doesn't harbour much interest in that crystal. The girl sleeping in the crystal looks identical to his family, but if her insides are different, then she's something entirely separate. If on the topic of beings which look the same but have differing insides, then Garfiel would already know the existence of over twenty Leweses. It was impossible for Garfiel to feel the same love and attachment for each individual Lewes, and he didn't intend to try, either.

Garfiel possessed the right to command the duplicates who shared the same face as his grandmother. And Garfiel would not shirk from utilizing that privilege. That he regardless endeavours not to use the command right results from Garfiel's own disposition. Teaming up with others and ordering people around was nothing to Garfiel's liking. Doll-like creatures which followed his instructions without complaint annoyed him indescribably.

Those were the only sentiments Garfiel held about the girl in the crystal. He possessed no further emotions about her. And while Garfiel did think himself broad-minded, he did not consider himself someone with wide reach. There had always been little he could give. Two arms, two legs, one body. What he could present was limited, and necessity existed for him to limit who he presented to. And so, Garfiel would only give what he could to those who he favoured.

Garfiel: “N so... 'F y'think my amazin' self's gonna be cordial t'all yer fucks, that's yer misunderstandin' it perfectly, a rookie's assumption.”

He kicks hard off the trunk of a tree, leaping above the forest. Garfiel hugs his knees as he spins through the air, leaves swirling up in his wake as he makes incredible touchdown. The earth caves in beneath his feet, the roars of ground dragons peeling out from between the trees.

The impact from his landing courses over the earth. Garfiel slowly straightens his back. That he scrunches his nose is not because he is scenting anything, but because he is furious. He

clicks his neck, rattles his pointed teeth, his eyes sharp and wrathful as he glares ahead.

Standing before Garfiel is a line of two carriages.

The dragons pulling the carriages are shocked by Garfiel and his murderous presence, going into a state of extreme agitation as the coachman frantically calls out to calm them.

The coachman is a familiar character to Garfiel.

Garfiel: “Just when'm wonderin' who it is, turns out it's th'wimpy guy. *Ha!* Suppose 's only what yer'd expect, yer are the chief in gettin' led around by that asshole.”

???: “That statement is very... no, nevermind, I know all too well what people's opinions of me are.”

Garfiel plunges his hands into his trouser pockets, as the coachman—a troubled-looking man with longish grey hair who is named Otto, gives him a wry smile.

Otto controls the reins skilfully, beautifully calming the upset dragons down as he sighs.

Garfiel: “What, y'think it ain't no big thing? 'F my amazin' self got serious 'bout threatenin' 'em, wouldn't be weird fer yer freaked dragons t'vegone runnin' off n' outter control.”

Otto: “And so was the vigorous persuasion to keep that from happening. And furthermore, I'd already informed them beforehand that you'd likely be coming.”

Garfiel: “Eh—?”

Garfiel's ears twitch as he listens to Otto's important statement.

His fingers reach out to touch his forehead scar without his notice as he steps forward, intending to question Otto as to his motives.

Garfiel: “Whatter yer mean with that? Yer fuckin' came here thinkin' yer'd use th'ruckus t'escape outta here, then my amazin' self found you n' now yer glarin'ly blocked. Ain't that what goddamn happened here?”

Otto: “Indeed, it would be. Taking advantage of sudden troubles while thinking to secure the greatest profits is orthodox for us merchants. But just when I'd been promised a considerable reward, and had been intending to succeed in this without any incident...”

Garfiel: “...”

Otto buries his face in his hands, his schemes ruined. But, perceiving a kind of calmness in both Otto's gestures and words leads Garfiel into confusion.

This is not the attitude of someone whose big plans have been crushed. In fact, is this disposition of Otto's not entirely identical to Roswaal's, when having someone play right into his hands?

Garfiel: “Yer face n'yer attitude... look exactly th'same 's the asshole I hate most.”

Otto: “That would be yet another horrendous opinion of me, but... for reference's sake, would you mind me asking who you are referring to? Since I'd like to establish good relations with yourself from now on.”

Garfiel: “*Ha!* You, n' my amazin' self? 'M gonna goddamn snigger, moron. —The asshole my

amazin' self hates most 's loungin' 'n th'nicest room n' SANCTUARY, gettin' waited on professionally even now, this very second.”

Otto: “I see, very much understood. When the one you have feelings for is so enraptured by a rival in love, I'm sure it must be difficult for you. I sympathise thoroughly with your plight.”

Garfiel: “I got no goddamn problems with usin' muscle t'shut yer loose mouth.”

Garfiel clicks his tongue in annoyance as Otto mocks his feelings for Ram. And truly, Garfiel could use his muscles to overturn this situation. This flight of the evacuees ended in failure the moment that Garfiel found out about it.

They are not getting outside. But so long as they refrain from attempting to force themselves out anyway, Garfiel doubts there is any need for violence.

What he has to do right now is settle this problem down swiftly, and return to SANCTUARY. His priorities are entirely to preserve SANCTUARY, and this present problem is undoubtedly just surplus.

Garfiel: “Anyway, as of now yer escape plan's failed. 'F that son of a bitch's here get him out. I'm makin' him apologize for pullin' th's stupid fucking bullshit, n' dependin' what he says he might havet'a see some pain.”

Garfiel needed to have him clear some of this resentment pooled up in his gut. And additionally, it was necessary for Garfiel to know what that boy—what Natsuki Subaru—was thinking in pulling this.

He had blustered that he would beat the TRIAL and free SANCTUARY only a couple days ago. Even saying he had lost heart, it was happening excessively quickly. Said more frankly, it was an excessive lack of willpower.

Garfiel would take those screwy ideas of his, slap them into better order, and—

Otto: “Ah, well I truly am sorry, but I'm afraid I cannot even attempt to observe your request.”

Garfiel: “Eh?”

Otto: “Haven't you noticed? I am presently wearing an identical face to that of the man you detest most in the world. Then surely must you not consider this the face of someone liable to do something that that detested person is liable to do?”

Garfiel: “—”

Indirect and roundabout, Garfiel cannot perceive the intent of Otto's statement. But Garfiel does judge these statements as ones that he must not ignore. Most importantly, wearing the same face as the man Garfiel hates—the same face as Roswaal—means planning something and trying to jangle people around in the palm of your hand.

Garfiel: “...Fuck're you plannin', oi.”

Otto: “Indeed, about that. If I'm to speak while wearing the face that you and I both know, then I'd suppose you'd call it a nefarious plot?”

Otto rubs his nose as he speaks, his expression one of being influenced by something bad. Garfiel narrows his eyes, only now noticing the strangeness of this scene.

There are two carriages before him, two dragons, and Otto. —But upon the driver's platform for the rear carriage, there sits no coachman.

Or no. The full extent was far greater than that.

Garfiel: “How come, even when th'dragons got that damn freaked n' jolted the carriages, none'f th'bastards inside're showin' up?”

Otto: “Now, why could it be?”

Otto shrugs as he plays stupid, doing nothing to stop pale-faced Garfiel from approaching the carriages. Garfiel nimbly hops onto the carriage's rear, and wrenches the door to the passenger car open.

Witnessing the scene in the carriage, Garfiel gives a shrill click of his teeth.

Otto: “—You realise that there's nobody inside?”

Garfiel: “Look'n 's fuckin' obvious...hk. Th'fuck is going on! My amazin' nose smelled th'stink'v a bunch of people inside these moving carriages, 'n—!”

Spit flying as he steps into the passenger car, Garfiel aborts his sentence halfway.

At his feet, where he has tread into the car, there is sprawled a pile of clothes. Many clothes. Men's, women's, adults' and children's all dumped here together—and seeing it, Garfiel recognize that his nose has been deceived by a remarkably simple trick, his cheeks twisting.

Garfiel: “By this stupid, children's dupe...!”

Otto: “Around this time, the other carriages which departed late from locations separate to these two will be aiming to escape SANCTUARY. Not even your legs will be able to catch up with them in time.”

Garfiel: “From other places? Th'fuck're you sayin'. It ain't fuckin' easy t'fuckin' run away from here without usin' this forest path, this road! Th'joke here is they get lost 'long thway, and my amazin' nose catches them. Y'don't even fuckin' know that I can cross th'barrier.”

Otto: “You're correct, there is a lot that I do not know about your capabilities. However.”

Garfiel alights from the carriage, standing to face Otto. Garfiel's chest burns with panicked impatience as Otto approaches.

Otto: “I doubt you know about me, either.”

Garfiel: “—”

Otto: “You are the type to pay no heed to people like myself. You are the type which most detests people such as me and Natsuki-san, who are proficient only in prattle. And so you paid no mind to the actions I have taken thus far, and neglected to realise what it is I have done here.”

Garfiel: “Fuck're, you goin' on about?”

Otto: “I mean to say that I did not walk around the forest and spend late nights in the stables with the dragons over the past few days without purpose. I have uncovered escape routes which do not rely upon this road, and thoroughly instructed them.”

Otto hoists up both his arms, his expression triumphant.
Garfiel's sharp eyes widen. His mouth gapes open.

Instructed. Instructed who? The drivers of the carriages? That doesn't really connect with what he's saying. He spent time in the stables talking to the dragons? Is that what he's trying to say?
If this is true, then,

Garfiel: “Yer really are that bastard's accessory...”

Otto: “Wheh!? I am having some trouble agreeing with your methods of agreeing at me!”

Garfiel gives a sympathetic gaze as Otto kicks up a noisy fuss. This is familiar behaviour from him, the kind of thing he's always doing when Garfiel spots him around SANCTUARY.
This entirely normal behaviour is indeed, in this context, abnormal.

Garfiel: “Either way, yer goin' back inside now. I'm gonna be findin' th'others n'draggin' them over.”

Otto: “They've dispersed in separate directions, to keep that from happening. It is impossible for you to catch them. But if you nevertheless intend to run and capture them, I've been told to tell you this: —The evacuees know nothing about the truth of SANCTUARY or about Lewes-san. You lose nothing by letting them flee. ...How do you find that?”

Garfiel: “Ain't you just fuckin' great at the groundwork.”

The message is almost unmistakably from Subaru.
He had seen entirely through why Garfiel did not want people to leave. The feeling of being more and more entangled in another's plots does detonate Garfiel's irritation, but indeed, he has lost reason to go chasing after the evacuees.

Garfiel: “F what yer sayin's real fact, yeah.”

Otto: “Truly suspicious, aren't you? I will state that we—and that includes Natsuki-san—do not want to worsen relations with the people of SANCTUARY. In fact, we would like to elect for liberation while having preserved friendly relations... and I must wonder whether the thing impeding a mutually cordial relationship is yourself.”

Garfiel: “...Whatever, I ain't thinking t'make friends er get'n th'way even 'n th'slightest. So long's we're talkin' bout the inside.”

Otto: “So staunch in your opinions.”

Garfiel: “This's the only thing I ain't ever givin' up.”

Otto's face is one of astonishment as Garfiel gives a heavy sigh.

But, even though he's displayed suspicion about it, Garfiel judges that the message is probably truthful. There's the fact that he purposefully bothered to give the warning, but moreso if we're talking about Subaru—who recognized Garfiel's reasoning for wanting to keep people inside—then for him to keep the evacuees from possessing information liable to hinder their escape was logical.

Garfiel: “But, still. 'F that's it, then... I don't get why he's trying so hard t'get them outside SANCTUARY that he's pulling these tricks n' monkey business. If he's doin' it 'cause he think's they're gonna get injured stayin' inside, that sure ain't puttin' any trust in people yer wanna be friends with, huh.”

Otto: “Assuming hypothetically that that is the case, what an impressive statement that is to hear from the one most likely to lead the charge. I too had my questions about it, but according to Natsuki-san, this is reliable insurance. And also, I'd say it works for purposes of buying time.”

Garfiel: “—”

The moment Garfiel hears the words 'buying time', his expression stiffens. What was the significance of the term 'buying time' in this situation? Garfiel's tongue wets his lips.

Garfiel: “What fuckin', nasty plots're you...”

Otto: “Ensuring that a man and a woman will be alone together with no insects intruding on them, I'd suppose.”

Otto shakes his head, his expression one of exhaustion, but also one of accomplishment. Garfiel moves to refute him, ask what the fuck he's pissing around about, but seeing that expression makes him stop. That was not the face of somebody telling a lie. Meaning that he is speaking the truth. And the man and woman he means practically have to be Emilia and Natsuki Subaru.

Garfiel: “—”

Intuitively, Garfiel realises that these two must not be allowed to meet. The beastman blood coursing through his veins senses something instinctively.

He springs his head back up, turning to glance toward the village. If he leaves Subaru and Emilia alone to interact with each other, that will cause the worst of situations for Garfiel. SANCTUARY's liberation will be achieved, and—

Garfiel: “—”

There's no way they can do it, says Garfiel's rationality. He himself had witnessed Emilia, overwhelmed by the harshness of the TRIAL, her spirit broken. And yesterday she had lost some mental support of hers, lessening her strength even further. Could that girl, her heart so incredibly abraded and kneeling before a nightmare, truly get back on her feet after only a couple days?

But his instincts scream that he must sprint over there and stop them. The PAST shown in the TRIAL. Garfiel knew the pasts differed, but the common point between them

was that they would unseal the lid on the challenger's most unpleasant memory. Garfiel had ignorantly stepped into that tomb, and been forced to see the PAST.

When he thought back on that event he would go pale, and some unbearable and hollow thing would seep into his heart.

After that he had lived constantly thinking to be strong, so strong that he would never betray his decisions. That was how wounding a thing the TRIAL was on the heart of the challenger, cutting, deep, gouging.

Garfiel: "Situation's changed. My amazin' self's gettin' back to SANCTUARY right this instant. I gotta find th'two yer talking about, make them change their minds immediately, or else..."

Otto: "Do you believe that I will simply let you escape from under me?"

Garfiel: "—"

Just as Garfiel turns to head for the village, Otto calls him to a stop. But Garfiel's response is a stern one.

Otto: "—Oueg, ghuh"

Garfiel: "Shut up, take a nap. I ain't got the time t'be playin' with you."

Closing the distance with one step, Garfiel drives his fist into Otto's stomach. He avoids the bones, boring into Otto's guts. He goes flying, dribbling as he is hurled away to hit the ground.

Garfiel had gone easy on him. He had put in too much force to just be stealing Otto's consciousness, but considering this a repayment for how beautifully he had been swindled, he was actually being lenient.

Garfiel clicks his tongue at the prone Otto before digging his sole into earth, and—

Otto: "—Now where do you, think you're going?"

Garfiel: "—!?"

—Just when he intends to start running, he stops.

A dumbstruck Garfiel glances back. His gaze lands on Otto, standing.

With his hand to his stomach, coughing up spit, but nevertheless not unconscious.

Garfiel: "Fuck? Not that I was tryin' t'kill you, but I ain't got any memory'v throwin' a punch so weak it wouldn't knock yer out, oi!"

Otto: "Really, don't you? Then, it would seem my endurance has exceeded your powers of imagination. Ahh... stern and daily work-outs truly did have benefit. ...A merchant's body is their capital, and so there is nothing greater than, being in health..."

Seeing Otto laugh in pain, the foreboding that Garfiel feels leads him to properly turn around. He would strike again, and shear away his consciousness.

All he has to do is go harsher than last time, and aim for the head. This is highly likely to leave damage, but it will surely knock him out.

Garfiel: “S gonna hurt more this time, y’better grit yer teeth’n—”

Otto: “You’re still attempting to end this by going easy on me? That contempt is why you will lose!”

Garfiel leans forward, stooping his posture low, when Otto screams. He glares at Garfiel with bloodshot eyes, swinging his limp arms up with all the strength he can muster.

The next instant, a screen of up-flung leaves obstructs Garfiel’s vision, birthing a momentary opening.

Garfiel: “Th’, f—!?”

Hit with a spur of the moment happening, Garfiel winds up freezing, going still.
And—

Otto: “Eat this!!”

Simultaneous to Otto’s piercing shriek, through the curtain of twirling leaves does that thrown object rip, glow—

—For a light of blazing red to consume Garfiel.

CHAPTER 106: OTTO SWEIN

Grimacing at the crackling heat on his skin, Garfiel violently kicks a pile of nearby leaves.

Garfiel: “Fuckin' thanks for th'gift, huh.”

Garfiel's mutter is one of irritation, but also one of honest praise. *Contempt will be your undoing*, the man had declared. And his statement was irrefutable fact.

Garfiel had unmistakably, thinking Otto had not a speck of combat ability, underestimated him.

Garfiel: “Fire spellstone... what's he plottin', using one that ain't threatenin'?”

A momentary, sight-obstructing curtain of fire. For a single instant it had singed his petrified body before disappearing. Garfiel reflects on the thing, annoyed.

It was a lark of an attack. It did sting his skin slightly—but it amounted to nothing more than sunburn, far removed from any prospects of damage.

But there is one thing he can state clearly.

Garfiel: “F that hit'd been a deadlier one, not even my amazin' self wouldda gotten out unscathed...”

His opponent had forced him to circumvent something which should have been fatal. What to call that except being shown mercy? An opponent who he had held back on, and failed to knock unconscious, had turned around and slugged him. And with that, Garfiel is overwhelmingly wretched, foolish.

Garfiel: “He's goddamn fucking with me!”

What's even more annoying is that his opponent had entirely ignored Garfiel, attention pilfered by the flames, and instantaneously chosen to run. Garfiel's late reaction to the resolute deed, which paid no heed in the least to prospects of attack, meant he had completely lost sight of Otto.

Soft dirt. Piled leaves. For an environment which should be unfamiliar to him, he certainly did manage to get away skilfully. This agrees with his statements about walking around the forest at night.

Nevertheless, if this turns into a genuine chase scene, then there is no way he will escape Garfiel. Every ten steps that Otto runs is a distance that Garfiel can close in two. That's how great the racial difference in physical ability is between them.

But even this, Otto had cleverly compensated for.

Garfiel: “—Ghgg! What, hell is!?! This... augh! Fuck, my nose's broke!”

The instant that Garfiel sniffs in an attempt to pursue Otto, an intense, painful stench spears his nostrils. Garfiel's inhale had been incredibly deep—and he wrenches back, shaking his head at the sting, so intense that his vision strobos.

Garfiel looks, to find sitting there in the spot where Otto had been standing, a transparent bottle. A colourless liquid flows from the uncapped thing, and Garfiel perceives that this is where the rancid

odour originates. But that is the limit of what his nose will tell him.

Garfiel: “Asshole... bet he thinks he's fuckin' won, sealin' off my nose.”

Baring his fangs, his options steadily being cut off, Garfiel voices his anger. Just how many Anti-Garfiel tactics has Otto come up with? Every step of the way, these plans have suppressed Garfiel perfectly.

Garfiel: “—”

Touching his forehead scar, Garfiel takes a ragged breath as he undergoes his ritual to calm himself. He takes a deep breath to settle his heart and lungs, wrangling his sense before his fury can drown it. Thinking is not a faculty which will trigger any more of Otto's traps. Why was Otto throwing himself into this reckless battle?

And actually, this situation where Otto is challenging Garfiel is already weird. His objective is to buy time—to pull Garfiel's attention onto himself, allowing over that period for the evacuees to escape along disparate routes. If Otto's statements are true, then indeed, there is no way that Garfiel will be able to stop all the carriages now.

The idea to utilize the command right and have the Lewes doubles chase them crosses Garfiel's mind, but being that he does not know exactly where each of the carriages departed from, the effort will amount to nothing.

The doubles lack knowledge and experience, and can only succeed in executing very broad commands.

And furthermore the girls would not even eat meals regularly unless instructed, and should they hit their limit inside the forest, they would shrink up into little balls as they attempted to abandon life. Going to the frantic effort of finding them before they could disappear was yet another prospect Garfiel was sick and tired of.

Garfiel: “N'th'end, only thing I can count on's my amazin' self. *Ha!* Just like always.”

He is lacking in moves. His nose is suppressed.

But nevertheless Garfiel takes no pessimistic view. What he has is this tempered and strong body. More than enough power remains in him to run through the forest, and achieve his goal.

Regardless of whatever Otto's objective is, he has been opposing Garfiel. Surely he was resolved to earn Garfiel's umbrage, and to have claws and fangs borne at him.

Garfiel has stopped disdaining Otto as being nothing more than simple prey.

He deems him as a catch which requires the utmost in effort, absolutely to be cornered and slain.

—Garfiel fails to notice that the instant he is thinking like this, it means he has already forgotten his initial goal, and is being wheedled into Otto's plans.

Garfiel: “Sure're behavin' good, y'two. 'S another thing that bastard instructed yer... 's the crap he's seriously fuckin' sayin'.”

Just before moving to enter the forest in pursuit of Otto, Garfiel turns his head, his sight landing on the carriages.

Two dummy vehicles, feigning a flight of evacuees. But that said, the two earth dragons heading the carriages are legitimate, and they have been seated there ever since the start of Garfiel and Otto's dialogue, keeping entirely out of the issue.

Garfiel: “Yer make a bad move, n's possible my amazin' self'll hurt ya, huh? Clever of yer. But actually, ain't that I wanna do any unnecessary kills at all.”

Shaking his head, Garfiel passes the dragons as he again reaches out for the passenger car. A great number of clothes had been piled inside the car to fool Garfiel's nose into thinking the villagers were here. Garfiel had dropped the issue after confirming that, but perhaps he should take another look around.

Garfiel's foot nudges the messy scattering of clothes out of the way as he gazes over the seats and walls. Nothing particularly stands out, and just when he moves to end the search and alight the carriage—

Garfiel: “—Eh?”

As he turns around, there hidden on the rear side of the carriage door, is something pasted to its face.

The white paper flutters in the wind, placed in a position where it is only visible from inside.

—Feeling a sense of foreboding, Garfiel marches to door, tearing the fluttering thing off and unfurling it in his hands.

<—If you are so completely in the palm of my hands, then doing this was worthwhile.>

Reading the message, Garfiel's vision flashes to furious crimson.

The next instant—the seats of the carriage overturn as a black bundle inside this cramped space explodes. Beneath the gale-force buzz of the swarming insects' wings, Garfiel's roar drowns to nothing.

✱ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※

—When Otto Swein was young, for him the world was a cradle of hell.

???: “—”

???: “xxxxxxxxxxxx”

???: “✱ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※”

???: “*****!#!*”

Perpetual and indefinite, Otto's ears kept hearing words arcane to him. He would sit dazedly on the floor while, spoken as proximate whispers, otherwise as faraway shouts, sometimes as lilting songs, elsewhere as shrieking deaths, the world constantly inflicted Otto with its connection.

No matter where he went in the world, the voices chased Otto without end.

Days and days without reprieve. The eternal echo of this discordant chorale. This cacophony, this entirely unhelpful infernal concerto, remained constantly attendant at Otto's side.

—How does everyone live in this noisy world like it's nothing?

This was the question Otto held, amid a hell where he could not properly understand the speech of those around him.

His parents would hold him close, and alongside their smile, fling some kind of words at him. But regardless of how great a love these words abounded in, the clamour and dissonance would consume them, never allowing them to reach Otto's ears.

His parents noticed their son's abnormality, and immediately took him to see a doctor. Wouldn't laugh, wouldn't anger, wouldn't cry. His absolute failure to foster any emotional expression owed to the fact that Otto perceived all external influences as being exactly identical. Thus, to the point that it worried his parents, Otto spent his infancy as an emotionless human being.

Perhaps call it fortune that the Swein household was a merchant family, and preserved a middle class standard of life, with more than enough savings to send their son to and from the doctor's. But no doctor could find anything physically wrong with Otto. Of course not. If one were to name Otto's condition, it was assuredly deafness resultant from excessive noise.

A brother two years his elder, and a brother two years his junior. Unlike Otto, his siblings passed their days as healthy children, growing up heartily alongside their parents' love. Their parents' attention toward Otto steadily thinned as love proportioned for three people was instead allocated to two, distancing Otto from his parents' warmth.

Otto held no grudge or jealousy for his brothers or about his parents. For one thing he hadn't fostered neither the negative nor positive emotions of hatred or finding things enviable, but moreso, even though Otto generally would not understand what they were saying, his brothers would interact with him patiently. He thought his parents' mental exhaustion inevitable. Otto didn't know, had he been in his brothers' position back then, whether he would've been capable of being so insistently kind to such a strange family member. So in fact he was grateful to them.

Sounds may not reach him, but written word did allow for communication. It was his elder brother who both discovered this, and attempted to read books aloud for Otto.

Learning to read and write was naturally the ultimate in difficult tasks. He could not register the sounds needed to comprehend the words. For Otto to understand what a sequence of words meant took him ten times longer than ordinary children. But that said, he found no suffering in that. Quite sadly, the sensibility required to find things agonising was absent in Otto, and children incapable of proper lifestyles lacked in daily activities.

<—Thank you, for everything.>

After he wrote and showed his parents this message, they hugged him, tears streaming down their faces. Otto still remembers it vividly.

Though he did not clearly understand what gratitude was, he had been treated in a manner where he ought to do this. That was the decision his young self had made, and after having the words he wrote out of obligation be judged in this manner, a wave formed in Otto's heart.

—That might have been the first time since his birth that he cried himself hoarse, screaming. Supposing it was, then that makes it Otto's second birth wail.

???: “Thiydnyityitkauoubibibibi”

???: “カモカカモヤヤモカモカヘヤカヤカカモヘカヤカムモモ”

???: “miii miii muuu miii meeh miii miii”

It happened immediately after Otto's second birthing cry that he discovered a faint consistency within the hellish and once-arcane chorus.

The chaotic noises of this din assaulting his ears could, little by little, be progressively screened and removed according to Otto's own volition.

It was around Otto's eighth birthday that he became capable of perfectly separating himself from the ambient noises at will.

Otto was practically a healthy child now, and as if pouring water into an arid desert, he greedily consumed everything he could.

He had already had to forsake learning what most children did in their first eight years of life. Also had he endeavoured over his time-consuming studies to learn reading and writing, but nevertheless his comprehension level was inferior to children his age. Using the weapon so called 'concentration', Otto shortened that gap in one fell swoop.

Otto Swein's sleeping talent, here, bloomed.

He was on par even with his brothers. Or no, his comprehension level and thinking ability surpassed them. Otto with his exceptional ability to learn then steadily joined the ranks of his peers, distinguishing himself among them and he—

—Magnificently made repeated blunders at human relations and was entirely friendless.

Otto: “How does everyone live in this difficult world like it's nothing?”

Muttered Otto as he hugged his knees, his face red and swollen from the slap of a girl he was interested in.

At ten years old, Otto was working diligently in his studies, so as not to shame himself as a merchant's son. Environments where one could receive a proper education from youth onwards were not so common in this era. He unmistakably lived in blessed circumstances, spending ideal days alongside his peers.

The problem here was Otto's methods of emotional expression and mental age, both of which were seven years immature compared to other children his age.

Otto had neglected to make the mistakes that many children naturally did, and now that he was capable of them, he was naturally making those same mistakes. However, most of those blunders were forgivable because they were committed even when young for children, and when an Otto who had already passed the majority of that life period perpetrated them, it resulted entirely in things only describable with the word 'perpetrated'.

And even less fortunately, Otto Swein was a boy blessed with bad luck.

Have his parents tell the story, and Otto's misfortune begins immediately at post-partum, when he almost drowned during his first bath. And despite this being entirely unintentional he would always

get dropped, get hit with bird excrement, almost drown in vases, generally his life was one constantly beset by misfortune.

He had lacked awareness about the fact because he had failed to foster any sense of what misfortune felt like.

Looking back on his past after having fostered that sensation, Otto shuddered at his own history. What on earth was it that made a person spend their days so absolutely disowned by fortune?

???: “big one, went. now, just went. its gone.”

???: “shining, shined, shine is, passing, shiny, shiny, shining.”

???: “hey, bad thing's coming. hey, bad thing's coming.”

It was around this time that a change occurred in those noises which Otto could now shut out. The chorus, once entirely bereft of any meaning, had become meaningful. Its majority was things where he even though he understand what it said, he did not understand what it meant—but, after running around in an effort to transform confusion into comprehension, Otto discovered the true nature of the hell from his infancy.

Apparently, he could communicate with non-human creatures.

Eleven years after its manifestation, this power later to be discerned as the BLESSING OF XENOGLOSSY, had finally been recognized by Otto Swein.

What happened next was that Otto, interested in learning the limits of this gift bestowed to him, ventured all around town as he tested his blessing. Over repeated sessions of trial and error, he discovered that the more intelligent the creature, the clearer their messages would be. He spoke with the family's pet ground dragon in presence of his brothers, and revealed that he had possessed the blessing since his infancy.

Brother: “Right, okay. Right. ...Um, so... Otto. That power is, erhm, it's something. Right, it's really something and... well, you know. Don't use it where anyone can see you.”

Possessing a blessing meant being blessed by the world, but not everyone welcomed possessors of such powers. It was one thing if the blessing benefited many people, but Otto's ability only applied to himself, and his young mind could think of many ways to use it for misdeeds. Indeed, Otto could agree with his concerned elder brother's opinion.

After making a promise with his brother, whose face was pale and gaze averted, Otto resolved not to let those around him know about his BLESSING OF XENOGLOSSY.

It wasn't just about him; this power could be dangerous for those in his vicinity, as well.

Up sparked in the young Otto a sense of duty: he must protect his beloved family.

Three days after his promise with his elder brother his BLESSING OF XENOGLOSSY became common knowledge and all of his peers shunned him entirely.

His younger brother caught him talking with the family dragon, and Otto reluctantly told him about his blessing. He also informed him that their elder brother was concerned about it, and that his powers were incredibly dangerous.

The next day his younger brother dragged Otto along into a huge group of kids in an attempt to brag about him, they witnessed him talking to a bug, and for the first time in years Otto saw hell.

The BLESSING OF XENOGLOSSY's flaw was probably that it needed to use the other party's language during communication. Put succinctly, when Otto spoke with ground dragons he would roar like a ground dragon, and when he spoke with bugs he would sound like a bug.

It took only an instant for the epithet 'the awkward zoddabug bugger' to spread.

Otto henceforth sealed away his BLESSING OF XENOGLOSSY and determined never to use it again. Over several years he managed to undo his horrendously poor reputation, succeeding in erasing the mortifying memory from the minds of many people. He achieved it when he was fourteen. A delicate age.

Being fourteen, excuses about his mental maturity would stop having any effect. His physical maturation was also steadily proceeding into adulthood, and once he finished growing, Otto possessed rather decently attractive looks.

Grey hair, and somewhat luckless, tender features. Mild eyes alongside a disposition to pour his best into his activities. Otto had grown to possess surprisingly many factors which tickled the maternal instinct, and just when he, like any boy his age, began taking interest in romance—

He made an enemy of the most influential figure in town's daughter by using his BLESSING OF XENOGLOSSY, and was banished.

It was just before Otto's fifteenth birthday, during the cold season.

Sparing the details, he had gotten dragged into some romantic drama affair.

On the night of the most influential figure in town's daughter's birthday party, her boyfriend had come storming in enraged and claiming that his girlfriend had been together with another man. The crosshairs landed on, having been spotted talking with the girl immediately prior, Otto.

Otto replied sincerely that he had just been asking her the time, but the red-faced man and his screams of “Zoddabuggerer!” had no intentions of hearing it.

With this supposedly-erased history dug up on him, yes indeed even Otto had to lose his usual compunctions.

Thus he unsealed his powers, did everything he could to clear away the suspicions cast on him, and after listening to every single creature across town, he discovered that the problem girl on the problem night had actually been with seven different men, and he cheerily conveyed to the poor guy: “It would seem that you're the eighth!”

After the man punched him, the girl with her relationship statuses exposed hired an assassin on Otto, who scrambled to escape his birthtown. He relied on his father's connections to then wind up working for an acquaintance's company.

He accumulated experience, setting out to journey as a travelling merchant when he was sixteen—this being Otto Swein's establishment of his independence, as a man.

Otto's journey as a merchant would safely be called a string of difficulties.

His nature to suffer misfortune, despite the passing of the years, had not loosed its grip on him. Horrendous weather would strike whenever he was transporting fragiles, whenever he thought to take shortcuts through the hills he'd be attacked by mountain bandits, and whenever he went camping in a joint venture with other merchants, Otto alone would be attacked by bloodsucking insects.

That Otto somehow managed to survive despite this constant misfortune was because, quite sadly, he had been blessed with outstanding enough business ability to counterbalance his poor luck.

He made no big profits, but suffered no debilitating losses either. He helmed a miraculous and merchant-wise nigh depraved sense of balance, sitting on the line of net zero, four years passing in the blink of an eye to land him at twenty years old.

His failure to lose spirit and return home resulted from the presence of the one he had brought along when he was expelled from his hometown, who he had known since he was little, his ground dragon Frufoo.

Honestly he did have some complex feeling about Frufoo, trigger for his brothers finding out about the BLESSING OF XENOGLOSSY as he was, but as far as the present Otto cared he was a definite bond, and something like a beloved family member.

For some reason Otto generally couldn't make other merchants team up with him, and so he often spent sleepless nights talking with Frufoo to distract himself.

Let me sleep already, Frufoo would say, to which Otto's imploring would somehow manage to get him to keep going.

It was the usual outcome that other merchants, witnessing him talking in dragon roars beside his fire in the dead of night, would take detours away from him.

While from an outside perspective that uniformity looked rather uneventful, for Otto the days he spent were considerably frantic ones—when there came a turning point.

—He had lost out on a business opportunity, and utterly screwed up.

Otto was peddling oil. It would sell for outrageously high prices in northward Gusteco during the cold season, is what he heard from a red-faced bald man with an eyepatch. Otto exchanged his metal wares for oil before triumphantly setting his sights on Gusteco—when an entirely unanticipated breakup of foreign relations slammed him, and he lost any hope of selling his goods. The next shock to his heart was the news that the metal goods he had struggled to exchange at any decent value were selling for exorbitant prices in the Capital.

Hit with this development, Otto sensed that his life as a merchant was in peril.

His neglect to search for means to turn the situation around and resuscitate himself was because it would likely mean letting go of Frufoo. Or forget that, it could even wind up with him leeching off his family.

That situation alone was one that Otto would never let himself get into.

He had gone five years and over without seeing his family, but his love for them had not waned in the least. His ability to live his present life, however imperfect it may be, was thanks to his family who had gone without abandoning him when he was young.

Over those ten years Otto had already given his family a lifetime's worth of trouble. He had to spent the rest of his life making repayments for those ten years.

His calculations of loan and debt were accurate. After all, Otto Swein was the son of a merchant.

—A trader he knew presented him with an opportunity to make a profit. Otto took it.

However the necessities for this job were not goods, but his dragon's legs. Someone wanted to get people on traders' carriages, and then have them transported in large quantities.

Otto leapt for it without hesitation, using his BLESSING OF XENOGLOSSY to blast away at top speed, enthusiastic to reach the destination before anybody else could.

He zoomed through shoddy roads, travelling along unmarked paths, ignored Frufoo's statements of "Ought we stop already, wee bub," and reached the destination quicker than anyone.

Where,

???: "My my my... where could you be destined with such... HASTE?"

He fucked up.

A group of people with lunatic eyes imprisoned him, rendered him immobile by wrapping him up, and here Otto sensed that his misfortune had truly, truly hit its peak.²

They separated him from Frufoo, stripped him of his belongings and tossed him into a cold cavern, their capricious amusement turning him into merely a creature waiting to die.

Who could possibly understand the depth of the despair which submersed Otto's heart back then?

Surely no one.

Because back then Otto had strained all the abilities he had in an attempt to escape, wrenching his BLESSING OF XENOGLOSSY to full power, as he searched for means to flee their wicked clutches.

What broke Otto's rebellious spirit was the entire, overwhelming silence. —When he unleashed his BLESSING OF XENOGLOSSY, a hell equivalent to what assaulted him in his youth should have struck.

The familiar, loathsome cacophony rang entirely, utterly mute.

Insects, woodland creatures, things that supposedly dwelt in the forest and caverns, all of them hiding from this diabolical presence—and Otto, prepared for hell. Witnessing a hell far transcending what he resolved, Otto's heart fractured.

His eyes lost their vigour, the strength sapped swiftly from his body. He knew it was all over.

Nothing he could try would work, and here in this cold cavern he would end.

The despair was too great for tears. It happened around the time that he had numbed to the passing of the empty hours that suddenly, Otto Swein's fate was salvaged.

???: "Whasserere! Damned there putzes witch cult, no discriminates in there's work, har! Nothing other cuerr'yar expect!"³

A booming voice reverberated through the cavern, bringing Otto out of his trance and jolting him back to reality.

He lifted his head and called in frail voice for help. The person who heard and appeared before him was a large, dog-faced beastman with proficient command of the Kararagi dialect, who freed the captured Otto.

Beastman: "Happy luck for yours, fella! Say wes weren't coming, and no question twice there's bunch had you slaughtered! Make usses here later and same thing farryarr. Y'gotin by a nick! Byarr nick! And course for usses, but sameways make your thanks for the boss kid!"

Otto: "B-Boss, kid?"

Rotating his once-bound limbs, Otto tilted his head at the boisterous beastman.

2 Referring to a method of execution where an individual is wrapped up and bound in a straw/bamboo mat before being thrown in a river. Otto's case lacks rivers and also likely bamboo.

3 WELCOME TO HELL

His eyes widened in response to Otto's doubts, before he smacked him in the back with his enormous palm, earning a wail from Otto.

Beastman: “Boss's a boss! Kid's a kid! Smack there up farra boss kid! Saying honcho, guy ordering usses upter this far! Won't have a look like his head's chugging muchaways, gottarr say's there where a straightwise looks say nothing'arr their fella! Ghahahahaaha!”

Otto: “Ha, hauh.... U-understood. Anyway, I thank you very much. And, right, I'll also have to...”

...Thank him as well, is how Otto meant to continue, when he noticed something.

The beastman was looking at him, and had scrunched his face up in surprise. Otto had no clue as to what this meant. The beastman withdrew a shockingly white napkin from his pocket and handed it over.

Beastman: “Wharyarr doing, say yours innarr cry then make your cry wharryarr unseen. Whole pathetic where a man there bawling in public.”

Otto: “Weh, aeh... c-crying?”

Beastman: “Teardrops'errr got yours eyes splashing whole! Call what for this saying there's not crying! Sweat!? Heart having sweat!? Fella, even usses Kararagi folk long quit having that joke!”

The beastman turned his back to Otto, considerately taking distance from him. Otto put the cloth to his face, incredulous, to then witness the great volume of tears that the handkerchief caught—sincerely surprising him.

The moment he realised he was crying, greater and greater did they overflow.

Otto: “Auh, shit... wh-what is, this... this...*hk*”

Otto clenched his teeth at the unstoppable torrent of tears as he pressed the cloth to his face. He could not understand why he was crying, a stream of incoherent curses filling his head to full.

—He'd been released from a despair so intense that his tears had dried up, and so perhaps accordingly, he was in tears now.

Otto: “I-I'm so glad, I... didn't, die...”

He hadn't achieved anything yet.

He had not repaid a single one of his debts.

If he had died there, he would have ended without his life having any meaning. As it never had. It was because he survived it that he now recognized that fact.

—With every single teardrop shed, Otto keenly felt his life beginning again.

His first birthing cry, upon being given life in this world.

His second birthing cry, upon learning of his parents' love, and the whereabouts of his own heart.

And his third, upon bypassing the death he had supposedly resolved himself for, and comprehending what it meant to live for a purpose.

—Otto Swein, on that day, screamed a birthing cry once again.



Otto: “—Not that I was actually requested to buy time like this.”

Taking great strides, dedicating himself to unfitting acts of physical labour, a wry smile arises on Otto's face.

These memories of his shameful bawling are awkward enough things that he'd like to forget about them, but unfortunately all his memories of crying are precious. He couldn't forget them even if he tried.

The beastman Ricardo who had saved Otto back then said nothing to anyone, and kept Otto's amazing sobfest a secret for him. That was a debt he would have to repay someday.

And,

Otto: “I repay my debts no matter what. —Since after all, I am a merchant.”

—Who saved his life, the boss kid.

Otto Swein owed something to Natsuki Subaru that he needed to reciprocate. He would expend his everything to repay the debt of him saving his life. It was a natural mentality for a trader.

But most importantly—

Otto: “—I am doing it for a friend!!”

Both as a merchant, and as an individual human being, Otto was impelling himself to here, now, stay his ground.

Otto Swein was entering into a challenge where he was unlikely to succeed. He had taken a bet with disregard to chances of success, and would dedicate everything in his power to increasing Natsuki Subaru's chances of victory.

That was Otto's merchant soul at work, and the proof of his friendship.

—Distant from here, coming from the abandoned carriages, he hears the roar of a beast.

Sensing that the fight has begun in earnest, Otto unleashes his blessing—and as he entrusts himself to the familiar hell, intent to muster everything he has, he runs.

CHAPTER 107: WITH THE FINAL TRAP,

Subaru: "Alright, counting on you for buying time like we planned."

Said Subaru to Otto after safely finding Lewes and reconvening with him.

This being a handful of days after the situation was first divulged to Otto, he immediately sensed that this was the signal. They would engage the processes which they had spent the past two days preparing for.

Otto: "I have no scruples against that, but do you have any thoughts as to Emilia-sama's whereabouts? If you cannot reconvene with Emilia-sama while I'm buying time, anything we try will end in absolute purposelessness..."

Subaru: "That's going without oversight, 'd be pretty tough to say. It's because that went with oversights that we're in this situation now. But, well, you don't need to worry about it."

Scratching his head and his expression rather miserable, Subaru's face stiffened.

When he with his sharp, or more rather genuinely nasty eyes made a serious expression, that alone made him seem like he was barely holding in his anger about something.

While they haven't known each other long, Otto did know Subaru's character and so would not misinterpret his expression, but inevitably did think him the owner of a rather unfortunate visage. Subaru thought the same about Otto. Otto's failure to recognize that marked one of those weird points of commonality between friends.

Subaru: "I've got an idea of where Emilia is. Honestly it's pathetic how I was flipping out panicking after hearing she was gone, but... calm down, and this's all it could be."

Otto: "I, see. And incidentally I'd... no, I'll refrain from asking."

Subaru: "Yeah? You know I don't mind if you keep talking, taking up the duty of praising my deductions?"

Otto: "I'll refrain. I'm quite unwilling to be your sycophant, Natsuki-san, and supposing my timebuying ends in Garfiel capturing me, it'll surely be problematic for you should I prattle on and on, spilling everything?"

Subaru nodded.

It truly was a situation to worry about. Otto didn't think himself resilient against hurt to any notable degree, and he had no memory of ever sustaining pain that went beyond his limit.

If a cornered Garfiel injured him, it's possible Otto would spew out all the information he knows. He did not wish in the least to sabotage Subaru in that fashion.

Subaru: "Well, though saying it's you who's leaking the info, I really can only think it's over."

Otto: "—"

And Subaru's response was a 'no worries go for it'.

His expression suggested he had no idea how the recipient would feel, hearing that statement.

With this much unconscious trust placed in them, who could betray it?

Subaru wasn't even aware that he was doing it, which truly made him an outrageous friend.

Otto: “Regardless, I will endeavour my utmost to ensure it goes smoothly for you. Since whether or not you pull this off will greatly impact my future.”

Subaru: “Yeah. If I screw up splendidly, your future's hitting rock bottom. ...If you think it's looking bad, just run away. He's probably not going to take any joking today.”

Otto: “...Yes, I will keep that option considered.”

Otto responded to Subaru's considerate words with a faint grin.

Resultant from his planning with Subaru, Otto laid the groundwork and finished making the necessary preparations: The Arlam evacuees are in their carriages with instructions to begin their escape shortly after himself, the bait, departs.

The plan was that Otto's two carriages, loaded with the villager's clothes to fool Garfiel's nose, would venture along a highly conspicuous exit path as a lure.

He had stuck through the nights investigating the routes the evacuees could use to flee, and firmly drilled them into each of the earth dragons.

No failings anywhere. Supposedly.

Then Otto's status as a decoy just needed to leak, while the evacuees succeed in escaping outside, and they're all good.

Alongside their escape from the Sizeable Hare, due to attack in two days, they would provide Subaru and Emilia the time they need to speak. Then potentially Garfiel would return to the village, find Subaru, the situation unfolding into one of combat—

Otto: “—”

I must not allow that to happen, determined Otto.



Otto Swein is not a character abounding in physical ability.

He had learned some degree of self-defence so that he could evade danger while travelling as a merchant, but compared to people whose lives were ones of genuine battle, he was not merely one but ten steps behind.

He would never neglect to bring bodyguards when transporting valuable goods, and before when attacked by bandits while taking shortcut through the mountains, he had tearfully abandoned his luggage and fled.

Everyone knew that he lacked the martial aptitude to brute force his way through his problems.

Otto: “And so why am I, presently, facing him as an opponent...?”

Wiping the cold sweat from his brow, Otto forces his near-stiff cheeks to give way to a grin. It was a merchant's principle to always smile during disagreements.

Having been born into a merchant household, Otto had that precept trained into him. Although he only had about half his life, from ten years onward, in experience using it.

Regardless, this custom was nothing to mock.

If he could make himself smile, and force himself to believe that THIS BATTLE WAS MERELY ONE REQUIRING THE USUAL PERSISTENCE, he could steadily find himself accepting the stress as something comfortable.

His arms move. His legs move. He can certainly run further.

It's a mystery how he has managed to keep running across such terrible ground, and not be out of breath. The lightness of his sobered heart allows yet another unseen power of Otto's to bloom.

Otto: "Although, it amounts to little when it's only just been realised. Self-conceit is useless, negligence is the enemy."

As he runs through the gaps between the forest trees, Otto urges utmost caution from his own luckless self.

Garfiel, abandoned and far behind, has not found him. But that said, Otto cannot keep running away like this. His role is to pull Garfiel's attention and prevent him from returning to SANCTUARY.

He must not let Garfiel realise that there is no necessity for him to face Otto.

Otto had hidden in the forest and successively unveiled the traps he set for Garfiel. His motives for doing so in fact resulted entirely from that thought.

Absolutely. There is no necessity for Garfiel to face Otto.

The key for him to succeed in his goal of preventing SANCTUARY's liberation is to suppress Subaru and Emilia. Otto amounts to nothing more than a side.

Being that Garfiel had not paid Otto any attention thus far, he must have understood that fact better than anyone.

Up-flung leaves and a spellstone. A great swarm of winged bugs inside the carriage.

With these two ostentatious, harmless traps, Otto utterly succeeded in enraging Garfiel.

Garfiel had presently lost his composure, and his views narrowed to regard Otto as someone he needed to defeat. But truly, doing so carried no necessity.

Otto: "But in saying, he'll immediately notice that if he gets the time to."

Thus all Otto can do about Garfiel, who is entirely dangerous to approach, is continue provoking him from a reasonable distance.

With Garfiel's nose suppressed, Otto would avoid anything fatal so long as he kept out of sight. But should he be noticed, Garfiel could close the distance on Otto in an instant—the disparity of ability between them truly enormous.

Indeed, this demanded a tightrope-esque stress, and caution.

Otto: "—"

Still hidden in the bushes, Otto peers out at the scene before him.

Twenty meters ahead is Garfiel, glaring over the surroundings. His keen nose had attempted to sniff, and thanks to the kinsis oil slathered over the carriage's wheels, his sense of smell is utterly dead.

His visage as he relies on his vision in his search for Otto, annoyed, exudes the wary air of a

wounded beast.

Meddling around with this *thing* to draw its attention was a deed equivalent to sticking one's hand into a blazing fire, guaranteed to leave a burn, an act of idiocy.

Otto: <Now, I'm counting on you!>

???: <aaaaiiiiaaaaaaiiooo—>

Otto loses a high-pitched voice. The responding cry passes through his eardrums, being converted into meaning.

In accordance with Otto's signal, the forest stirs.

Garfiel: “Eh?”

Hearing the rustling of the swaying trees and seeming to find something awry, Garfiel looks up. Targeting his face, simultaneously launched from the surrounding trees, are the globs of dirt and dung.

This was the threat display of these tall trees' residents, the woodmice.

Their globs possessed no properties which could leave an injury, but having been attacked from all directions, Garfiel panickedly leaps away in an attempt to dodge. However, he cannot avoid all of them, with several hits muddying his legs, him clicking his tongue at the stench and clinging dirt.

Garfiel: “Th' fuck, is! Shit! Why's this... another one of that pisshead's tricks—”

Wiping the unclean stuff off on a nearby tree, Garfiel voices his suspicion of Otto's involvement. But halfway through voicing his doubts, he notices something, his nose scrunching.

—Woodmice globs possess no wounding powers. They dirty clothes, entrench items in stink, and nothing more.

But the stench of their dung does draw out the insects who live in the forest.

Garfiel: “—*hk!*”

Something wriggles up from underground, beneath Garfiel's feet, before bursting out of the earth and leaping at his legs, entangling them. Garfiel's breath stops. The crawler venturing up his leg is a long, black, centipede-esque insect.

The centipede, long as a man's arm, crawls up to the thigh of Garfiel's dung-soiled left leg, pressing its grotesque mouth against him as it consumes the vestiges of the globs.

Garfiel: “Fuck! Gross!”

Brandishing his claws, Garfiel bats the centipede off him. But more and more of the creatures crawl up from the ground, leaping not only at Garfiel's legs, but fighting with each other over the globs which missed him, the scene transforming into an infernal spectacle.

These centipedes liked the tree-fruits which were lumped in with the woodmouse dung.

Having walked all through the forest with need to lay his traps, Otto had spoken with many of the creatures here, and utilized absolutely everything which could probably be useful.

Contrary to their repulsive appearances, the centipedes were no carnivores, and not venomous in the least, but find yourself so surrounded by them and they produced more than enough of a threat. And Garfiel presently—

Garfiel: “—*hk!* Augh! Y'cheeky pieces of shit!”

—Was screaming, spit flying, as he lost his temper with the horde of centipedes. He swings his leg up high, then slamming it down to pierce the ground with all the force he can muster.

Immediately following, in the shape of a rectangular platform with Garfiel at the centre, the earth springs into the air.

Otto: “—”

Witnessing the incredible sight, Otto unwittingly swallows his breath. Upon the ground Garfiel sent airborne, with the shockwave keeping the centipede horde from moving, Garfiel brandishes his claws and feet to successively claim his kills. The floating platform crashes thunderously back to the ground, the entirety of the centipede horde around Garfiel repelled, the stragglers burrowing back into the underground out of fear.

The trees the woodmice resided in, too, were caught and felled in the detachment of the earth, the inhabitants who aided Otto now scrambling to flee. It seems they had wound up paying a rather high price in exchange for that sugar water.

Otto: “Well, I suppose that's just another outcome of trade... or really, being that it depends on the negotiator's abilities whether or not a business deal is a profitable deal, I'd prefer I not be resented here.”

Having witnessed a fragment of Garfiel's strength, Otto breezily reflects on his deeds in an attempt to calm himself down. That done, he silences his footsteps as he retreats, preserving distance from the now-walking Garfiel as he leads him to the site of the next trap.

He hadn't gone two and a half days without sleeping racing around this forest for nothing.

—The instant that all this was over, he'd sleep so furiously he wouldn't even dream.



???: <a big one's coming>

—I am aware, yes, I am very aware of that.

???: <behind you, a big one, coming soon, coming now>

—I did tell you that I know about that, I have already fully considered it.

???: <you'll die. you're so dead. poor guy.>

—I would not actually mind it if you could please stop the pessimism!

With his BLESSING OF XENOGLOSSY unleashed, a din of discordant noise floods into Otto's ears. These were the voices of the bugs, of the critters, of every living creature which possessed a will who lived in the forest—voices of which Otto was screening for statements relevant to himself, the peak in difficult listening.

This was approximately twenty years since his BLESSING OF XENOGLOSSY manifested, and about ten years since he became proficient with it. Even with all of this time, he had never once attempted something as insane as this before.

Even when he had used his blessing in an attempt to absolve himself of false charges, albeit provincial that episode had been set in a city, and there was a limit to the number of creatures living there.

But place him in the middle of an expansive forest, and the quantity of noise for Otto to deal with far exceeded his maximum limit.

In the air, in the trees, in the leaves, in the dirt, in the stone, these bugs, these critters, possessed many many dwellings. Listening to all the voices of these hidden creatures equated to over 100 human voices slamming into his brain simultaneously.

It wasn't just hearing.

The BLESSING OF XENOGLOSSY demanded comprehension from Otto. Meaning that all of Otto's neural activity was expending itself on processing everything that his BLESSING OF XENOGLOSSY picked up.

Otto: “Bhg...”

A stabbing pain races through Otto's head as his body sways, him leaning against a tree. And, upon the sleeve he puts to his face to wipe away his sweat, there lands droplets of vivid red blood. A nosebleed. This blood leaking from his face was proof that his brain was acting beyond its permissible limit. His brain creaks, creaks, creaks intermittently, the buzzing tinnitus echoing in his head with no signs of alleviating.

Otto: “Ah, I didn't know. So this is what happens when you keep using it, this blessing of mine. Entirely unmanageable... or rather said not unrepentantly convenient, leaving me in a predicament.”

He rigorously wipes the nosebleed away, rubbing at his brow as he breaks into a faltering run.

His ears yet continue to ring, but he has no intention in the least of calling off his blessing. Otto could not keep this chase going by himself.

As before, voices call to inform him of Garfiel's actions. Their observations act as Otto's eyes, for he cannot glance back behind him.

Otto did not know what others thought about enlisting the aid of insects and mammals, creatures which possessed wills differing from that of a human's, but it made for no easy task.

For their thought patterns diverged from that of humanity.

What would delight them, what would they hate? What was normal for Otto was outrageous for them. There was no way he could know what exactly he should use as his weapons when negotiating.

And even among insects and mammals, the greater their intelligence, the more that personal differences formed. Members of the same species of bug would often possess entirely different stances on what they favoured and disfavoured.

Otto's imperfect but successful attempt at continuously evading the threat known as Garfiel entirely resulted from him securing a short albeit definite period of preparation time, and within that time period expending every moment he had, as well as expending all his best efforts.

—Had Subaru found Emilia yet, and was he talking with her properly?

The time that Subaru had to speak with Emilia—It was solely for the sake of elongating this period that Otto had placed himself in this hardship.

If Subaru's guess had been wrong, if things hadn't gone according to plan and no apparent progress was being made on Emilia, then everything would amount to nothing, a transient effort.

Just why was Otto supporting Subaru to such a degree?

During a spate of thinking done to distract himself from his pain, Otto lands on this thought. Subaru had saved his life, and Otto was helping him as repayment for that debt. That was truth. Subaru had accepted him as a friend, and sought Otto's assistance, and so Otto inevitably had to be helping him. That was also truth.

But was Otto truly such a zealous man that, off only those bases alone, he would achieve more than what was demanded of him?

Otto: "...Ah, I see."

Something slips through his mind in that moment. It is the trigger which leads him to recognize the reason.

Otto can't keep himself from smiling.

It's all very simple.

Otto's reason for having faith in Subaru, and helping him, was ludicrously unprofound.

Otto: "Giving up, thinking that no one can understand you, perplexed and troubled... it's all something that I should know better than anyone else."

BLESSING OF XENOGLOSSY, the power to hear things which others cannot.

Otto, who heard the voices of other animals and knew things he plainly should not, was considered a nuisance by many people. He lost those who were once his friends and could no longer see his family. To him, his BLESSING OF XENOGLOSSY lacked any utilization beyond breaking through times of emergency, otherwise a superfluous tool.

But because of this blessing, his experience had strayed.

His experiences of being excluded because of his BLESSING OF XENOGLOSSY taught Otto the pain of being beyond the comprehension of others. He knew how irritating it was to know something, but be unable to fully communicate it, despite giving an explanation. It conferred him the resigned frustration of, *well nobody would understand it anyway*.

Everything was entirely identical to Subaru before he opened up to Otto.

And so he trusted in Subaru, overlaying the image of him now with the image of Otto then, and ran.

It's the only possibility.

Otto did not only wish to save Subaru. Through him, Otto had wished to save his own past self, to save Otto Swein.

???: “Fuckin', found—ya!!”

Otto: “—hk!?”

The moment he notices yet another of his truest thoughts, Otto hears a voice coming from an angle differing from his BLESSING OF XENOGLOSSY—for an impact to slam into his shoulders and send him tumbling across the earth.

He falls to his side, the soft dirt catching him as he tumbles.

Otto: “Bhah, ptt! Wh-what just—ghhk!”

???: “Don't you fuckin' mess 'round with me!”

Otto spits the leaves out of his mouth as he uprights himself, when clawtips jab into his torso. His constricted lungs wring themselves of air, another violent kick sending him flying across the ground.

Up and down swap their places and swap their places messily, his head spinning, his thoughts shaky. No oxygen cycles through his brain, and the blood in his veins feels to clot, the pain transferring through his capillaries to his whole body.

Garfiel: “Evein' sayin' my nose's dumb, my amazin' self's still got ears. Yer had some goddamn trick t'get th'bugs fuckin' whinin' on n' on... n' this's th'end of that.”

Otto: “Y-You really must wonder. ..You cannot say you have won yet, just by catching up with ghgahuh”

Garfiel: “Shut yer backtalk. Yer sure put in a good fuckin' effort... but my amazin' self ain't got th'room t'waste any more time.”

Garfiel sets his foot on Otto's chest, applying considerable pressure.

Creak, go Otto's ribs. Supposedly-petite Garfiel applies more force than his actual body weight, Otto shrieking as his limbs flap uselessly.

Garfiel: “My amazin' self steps on yer with all I got, n' yer gonna be smithereens. Bet yer fuckin' saw me have the ground launch int'r th'air. Th'same shit 's *that* is gonna be happenin' t'yer body. Wanna try it?”

Otto: “—Sorry, but I'd rather not.”

Garfiel gazes down, expression intimidating. Otto's words come paired with the smile of a poor loser, the attitude leading Garfiel to pale. But,

Garfiel: “Well fuckin' ain't you makin' a face like you got some fuckin' guts. I'd seen that 'fore this fight started, n' we woulnd need t'have this goddamn runaround.”

Otto: “...”

Praise, or something close to it does lace Garfiel's words.

Otto turns his head as he slips a slight sigh. His thin, strained exhales continue as Garfiel narrows his eyes.

Garfiel: “’F this were all it was, then yer thing ain't nothin' big. 'S how I would overlook it...”

Otto: “—”

Garfiel: “But th'second yer got fiesty, the whole fucking forest turned against me. Even at th'start where yer threw up th'leaves, the fuckin' bugs under them all flew at me. N' in th'carriage, n' with th'mouse shit, n' th'centipedes, n' th'snakes springin' from th'trees, n' th'birds who led me into a fuckin' field of poison flowers, there has t'be some reason fer allerit.”

Indeed, all of these snares were traps that Otto had set while sprinting around the forest. Means to whittle away at Garfiel's energy, and buy time.

None of them misfired, and all succeeded in drawing Garfiel toward him.

But Garfiel had deemed these multiple natural wonders, inconceivable as coincidence, as all being Otto's doing. He had noticed that Otto was the reason behind it all.

Garfiel: “Thinkin' ain't my strong suit, but that yer think anyway's what yer call livin'. N' so I thought. Thought, thought, thought, n' here's what I got. Big majority 'v th'inexplicable crap that happens in this world, 's 'cause a blessing's involved. —Yer got one 'v those fuckin' blessings too.”

Otto: “...Hu.”

Garfiel: “’S Blessing of th'Forest, or Blessing of Dirt, or fuckin' whatever, but sayin' y'got one then it ain't weird fer this t'be happenin'. Yer ain't givin' any carelessness 'r mercy, throwin' out everythin' yer need t'sort this out. ...And so.”

Striking the silent Otto with words, Garfiel leaves him to tremble, kicked, as he glances behind him. His sharp eyes narrow in pity.

Garfiel: “Don't think I ain't noticed what yer plannin', with those poor quitter eyes'er yers.”

Otto: “—”

Garfiel's gaze lands on an open clearing, where there is gathered a mass of white light. Sunlight spilling through the foliage—is absolutely not what this multicoloured lights is, it instead being a mass of mana so thick that it is visible to the naked eye.

Witnessing a swelling of mana so dense that one would be apt to find themselves a raucous drunk should they carelessly bound into it, Garfiel scrunches his face and looks down at Otto.

Garfiel: “*That's* yer ace. It ain't like th'empty threats yer had goin' so far. There's something about *that* thing which's got th'something t'overpower my amazin' self. ...’F yer'd manage t'keep me stuck n' a bind, yer might'a been able t'push me into it.”

Otto: “...auh, euh”

Squatting down, Garfiel lifts the groaning Otto by the collar. Blood from his overworked brain again streams out Otto's nostrils, dyeing the bottom half of his face in grisly sanguine. Garfiel turns his head away.

Garfiel: "Yer did great, but yer ain't ever gettin' on my level. Shouldda known yer place, n' behaved."

Otto: "My, place, you say..."

Garfiel: "Yeah. Yer ain't got any chance'v beatin' my amazin' self. —Couldn't give a crap whatever trap that thing is, but we'll have you b'th'one t'taste it."

With that line, Garfiel throws Otto gently. Following an incredibly brief feeling of flying through the air, Otto fails to catch himself as he tumbles across the ground, hurtling into the hive of dense, white mana.

Amid a smog of cloying mana, his head, already dullish in peaceable times, is contaminated. His eyes spin, his tongue numbs, his nosebleed streams without end.

Trap. The final trap. Flung into it, and now, there was something, happening.

Garfiel: "I'll watch 'till 's over."

Crossing his arms, Garfiel waits for the fallen Otto's end. Prone, and capturing that sight in the corner of his vision, Otto strings together his scattered thoughts: where is here? What does he have to do? And he recognizes.

—His final trap's fruition.

Otto: "...Do you mind if I ask you something?"

Garfiel: "Eh?"

Putting his hand to the ground, Otto frantically uprights himself. Garfiel's eyes shoot open in shock, not having conceived that Otto could still move. Witnessing Garfiel's surprise makes for a satisfying feeling. Indeed, Subaru's statements were correct. To succeed in the deeds of which others believed you incapable was entertaining. It truly was. Unkind, but this delight shows no signs of stopping.

Otto: "In getting here, Garfiel-san.. how many trees have you felled, and how much earth have you gouged open?"

Garfiel: "I ain't got any clue what yer tryin' t'say."

Otto: "The greatness of the quantity of mana stockpiled here where I am... is because that is how greatly you have angered the forest, that is what it means."

The sense of achievement leads Otto to forget his pain and fatigue.

A firmness comes to his precarious speech, Otto seating himself on the ground as he looks at Garfiel.

Garfiel uncrosses his arms, finally realising that he has acted just as Otto planned, making an attempt to move—
Too slow.

Otto: “—Al Dona.”

The abounding mana transmits through the whole of Otto, taking shape in the world by means of a canto.

—The overwhelming speed and force of the coursing wave of earth batters the whole of the slow Garfiel, sending him plummeting far beyond the edge of the forest.



Otto: “Haah... haaah... haauh...”

His arms aloft and shaking, Otto breathes breaths so languorous they could be bloody, one after another.

He had invested all of the ambient mana into that magic, exhausting it.
The sensation of mana drunkenness has faded, fatigue taking its place, his body pained and aching.

—The final trap Otto laid was a simple thing, connecting all the various traps thus far.

With the primary assumption that he would secure the cooperation of the forest's insects and critters, he would propose that everyone punish the enemies who hurt this woodland.

It seems that Garfiel swaggered around the forest on the daily, and dear oh dear, how audacious his behaviour must have appeared for the animals of the woods.

Cutting down shrubs to sharpen his claws and build his muscles, even gathering the firewood needed for daily living—taken from a wider perspective, these were acts of destruction upon the animals' home.

These nefarious deeds had piled up, and now quite sadly, the majority of the forest's wildlife considered Garfiel a big, strong, bad guy.

Otto had negotiated with the wildlife, requesting that they assist him in punishing Garfiel. He then laid numerous traps, and alongside their activation, Garfiel inflicted even further destruction upon the forest. The woodland's residents concentrated their mana all in one location, promising to lend Otto their greatest strength.

A concentration of mana so vast as to be visible is AN OBVIOUS TRAP.

Having tripped so many traps and now become attuned to them, Garfiel avoided this one, and flung Otto into it.

Meaning that he inadvertently aided Otto in borrowing the aid of the forest, and let him utilize greater magic than he actually possessed.

The resultant wave of dirt thus slammed into Garfiel, inflicting decisive damage upon his previously-undamaged self.
Garfiel's negligence, thinking that Otto lacked the strength to oppose him, had helped spur this.

Everything had gone as Otto planned.
Meaning,

Otto: "This time for sure..."

???: "—Yer out of moves."

Otto gives a despondent sigh. Garfiel's figure appears from between the trees, glaring at Otto.

His clothes are torn, his bare skin flecked with cuts from sharp stones. But his head's important places appear to have been guarded, with little obvious impact evident in his gait, either.

The pure disparity in power had far transcended Otto's imaginings.

Garfiel: "Honestly, I'm damn surprised."

Otto: "...Are you, now."

Garfiel: "Really, I didn't think you'd be able t'do this much. Hell, forget that, I looked down on ya, thinkin' yer'd give up. —F'give me. My amazin' self pulled some stupid shit when dealin' with a man."

Says Garfiel, his expression meek. Otto shakes his head, not needing the apology.
The only thing he wanted to hear was: I concede. But despite Otto doing his everything and fulfilling his role perfectly, he had not managed to topple Garfiel.

Thus here is where Otto's resistance ends.
Garfiel feels his hands, flashes his sharp claws. Otto would be shown no mercy this time.

—Had he done everything he could?

He keenly felt that he had played every card he had.
Including his BLESSING OF XENOGLOSSY, friendship, negotiation, he had used everything to full.

If he nevertheless failed to achieve it, then there was simply nothing he could do.
Otto's capabilities ended here.

And so.

Garfiel: "See ya. —When yer wake up, clean up this mess."

Otto: "Let's call my individual fight as ended here..."

Garfiel: "—"

With that breathy mutter, Otto closes his eyes, exhausted.
The attitude far seemed to lack the resolution required to surrender, and—

Garfiel: “No way...”

Garfiel shudders, questioning if there's still more, the hair down his body standing on end as he warily glances around the area.

There are no signs of anything from any direction. If there is to be more, then it—

Garfiel: “—*hk!*”

Baring his fangs, Garfiel directs his claws upwards.

He takes a breath, his lungs expanding so he may howl. But this produces a delay. He opens his eyes wide, his mouth bellowing with no roar.

What he yells is no bloodlust, no hostility, but a name.

???: “GARF!!”

A silhouette leaps from the treetops overhead, on descent toward him.

Their short skirt flutters, the point of their wand fixes its aim on Garfiel's head.

Mana congregates at the tip of their wand, light emanating, Garfiel screaming as he watches on.

Garfiel: “Why the fuck are you... RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAMMMM!!”

The blade of wind bursts the next instant, butchering SANCTUARY's forest to shreds.

CHAPTER 108: A MAN OF ONLY GOOD TIMING

Mana concentrates at the tip of the wand, the canto overwriting the world—

Whistling wind turns to blades, blades tear toward the entity standing in their eye, and as they burst—they splay their destruction in every which direction.

Garfiel: “—*hk!*”

The eye of the storm—the one standing in the path of the surging blades is Garfiel, looking up, roaring.

The blades beat Garfiel's torso, their sharp edges slicing away at his rocklike abdominals. Blood spills. His failure to be bisected results from his speedy leap away from the maelstrom.

Between the options of counterattack and evade, Garfiel immediately opted to run. Although some hesitation arises at the corner of his eye, Garfiel manages to avoid fatal injury by covering his head with his arms, sliding over the ground to flee the blades of wind.

But these were blades launched as a surprise attack, fired to dictate the end of the fight. The wind does not permit Garfiel any easy escape as it vigorously pursues his retreat. He kicks off the ground, clicking his tongue at the invisible slashes.

Garfiel: “Th'fucking cheek—!”

Immediately following his extreme backtracking, Garfiel yells as he meets the oncoming windblades head-on.

He drives his heel into the earth, caving the ground in beneath him, his foot the axle for a rectangular section of earth to slant upwards and spring into the air. The windblades surging in from below strike the ground, annihilating the earth's face before dispersing.

The floating platform obeys gravity as it crashes to the floor, kicking up thick clouds of dirt. An ordinary person would, faced with this incredible scene, surely be struck dumb and paralysed. But this was not an ordinary person, and this was not be their first time witnessing Garfiel do this.

???: “Hauh!”

Garfiel: “Ch!”

Tearing through the plumes of dust, leaping forth with her short skirt fluttering is a girl. Beneath her evenly-cut pink hair, her cerise eyes gleam with strong volition. Enough mana exudes from the tip of her wand to warp the atmosphere, this being the origin point for an outstretched, unseen blade of wind.

It extends to greater length than one glance would suggest, handled with precision befitting a maestro of wind manipulation.

Contrary to the inherent vagueness of a blade of wind, these slashes exhibited keenness superior to that of any half-hearted sword-blade. Garfiel had readied his claws at his hips for a counterattack, but indeed even he would find the comparison between claws and sword unfavourable.

Still poised to attack and having retreated, Garfiel prepares to jump to flee further back. But the

wand-wielding Ram's free left hand interrupts him.

Ram: “Fula!”

Garfiel: “Ghhk!?”

A short canto. A strike from the lowest class of wind magic. The attack beats Garfiel's back from behind, keeping him from taking the preparatory step to run. It inflicts no damage. But, it does stop him.

Garfiel's gaze as he looks up lands on Ram, her already brandishing her blade—

Garfiel: “—”

What would be best to do here? Before he can consider the thought, Garfiel's body moves. His claws and fangs, his natural armaments, will not be capable of meeting the blade of wind. Considering how he's been outmanoeuvred, dodging it will be tough as well. Which leaves only one option.

Garfiel: “RrrhhhhHHHAAAAAAAAA!!”

Roaring, Garfiel slams his palms to catch the point of the invisible sword flat between his hands. While it may look like he has stopped the sword, when practising this move upon an incorporeal and invisible blade, the action would amount to no defence.

But, even being a blade of wind, the thing certainly did EXIST. Garfiel's palms as they slam down disrupt the sword's edge, and his skin which would have been torn to shreds instead gets away with only a laceration.

The attack's been neutralized, judges Ram, belatedly.

Garfiel: “Fucking 'round with me!”

His launching kick aims for Ram's abdomen, her having just made touchdown.

Garfiel's foot drills through the air, practically enough to break through boulders—but it will not strike Ram, who stoops her posture down low to dodge. Her stance degenerates so much that she may as well be sleeping on the ground as she reforms her windblade, aiming a slash for Garfiel's foot.

Garfiel: “—hgg!”

One-footed, Garfiel leaps to avoid this attack liable to sever his limb from the ankle down. He succeeds in dodging Ram's blade, but,

Ram: “Your feet stopped touching the ground.”

Immediately following this whisper as it grazes past his ear, a heel slammed down from above sends Garfiel plummeting toward the ground.

This offbeat attack came from Ram, who dove out of her post-swing stance, launching herself and her leg out forward while rotating on the vertical.

Midair and unable to neutralize the attack, Garfiel immediately draws his arms up to protect himself. His bones creak as he is shunted away, ricocheting off the earth to crash to a stop against a

tree-trunk.

His breath escapes him as he glares at Ram, his eyes golden and furious.
However,

Ram: “Ul Fula.”

There congregates, apt to crush a region of the forest, an overwhelming windstorm—with Garfiel in its centre as it ravages both him and woodland alike.

Garfiel: “Ghhah—agh!”

The raging wind strikes Garfiel, slices him, tosses him, smashes him against the dismantled foliage. He is flung so thoroughly he cannot discern up from down, left from right. Having separated from the ground, Garfiel lacks any way to protect himself, capable only of being beaten by Ram's magic.

The wind stops, the sole aftermath of the storm being Garfiel, barely managing to stand upright. But blood covers him as he gazes skyward. He falls to his knees, his consciousness halfway gone.

He had been thrown into perfect traps, and taken two hits from extreme tiers of magic. The very fact that he was still alive illustrated his dumbfounding, shockingly great vitality. Although it was because his opponents anticipated such liveliness that they neglected any mercy.

Confirming the damage on Garfiel, Ram gives a small sigh. She directs her gaze to Otto, him having watched the surprise attack from behind.

Ram: “I already anticipated this, but it truly is difficult to lay eyes on you, with how graceless you look.”

Otto: “Spoken to someone who put all their heart and soul into fighting, that opinion surely has to be unjustified...”

Ram: “All that everything is is the results. Did your efforts succeed, or not succeed? The process to reach the result is secondary... and so I will say it again. You look so graceless it is difficult to lay eyes on you.”

Otto: “Aauh, she's merciless, truly. ...This is exactly who Natsuki-san described.”

Ram shows Otto not a speck of appreciation for his efforts, instead giving him a slight snort as he smiles wryly.

The damage to Garfiel resultant from his fight with Otto was rather considerable. Leaving aside the tricky and incessant traps' provocation of him, that final strike did come with enough strength to conceivably defeat Garfiel.

But if Otto had made any miscalculation, it would be,

Ram: “It seems you didn't remove Garf's EARTHSOUL BLESSING.”

Otto: “Earthsoul... pardon?”

Ram gives a small sigh. She shakes her head in astonishment, looks down at the confused Otto with

a gaze of absolute disdain, and sighs again.

Otto: “How much disappointment are you going to show? Since I have to say that this does hurt!”

Ram: “Garf's EARTHSOUL BLESSING literally means a blessing where he receives the blessings of the earth. Provided that his foot is touching the ground, a powerful aegis of dirt encases his body. — And even were it not, earth magic's affinity here is abysmal. Your ace was an A1-class spell, and then it just had to be Dona...”

Putting her hand to her forehead, Ram closes her eyes as she looks down.

Ram: “Your luck is so poor, I cannot even feel sympathetic.”

Otto: “So my misfortune detonated again even at this juncture, terrifying! Or actually, if you were aware of this beforehand, Ram-san, don't you think you would have contributed notably more to the effort if you had just informed me!?”

Ram: “Ram-sama, surely?”

Otto: “Why is it that everyone has to try kicking me down to the absolute lowest stratum!?”

Ignoring Otto as he raves, Ram swishes the tip of her wand as she heads out to deal with Garfiel. He truly should be unconscious, but Garfiel's limitless stamina merits admiration. The greatest obstacle for liberating SANCTUARY is unmistakably him. He must be restrained immediately, and kept under strict supervision until matters are resolved—

Ram: “...”

Stopping in her approach, Ram's brows furrow slightly. Her pursed lips feel the dry air, her red tongue peeking out for merely a glimpse.

Ram: “Garf.”

Garfiel: “...Goddamn swear. Really truly a merciless lady, you are.”

Garfiel raises his slumped head in response to Ram's call. His sharp eyes blaze with indignation and hostility, his teeth bare and rattling, illustrating that his will to fight has not waned.

The surprise attack had supposedly been perfect. It could not have possibly been better. But even that is not enough to defeat the monster known as Garfiel Tinsel.

Unfathomable quantities of blood pour from Garfiel, but he easily flits to his feet in a manner that suggests no great fatigue or damages. Everything the windblade and storm had done to him was entirely superficial.

The lacerations covering his skin are shallow, and the relentless beating had missed any vital areas. Not a single speck of damage to decisively impair his usual condition had hit him.

Garfiel: “When y'had me pressed against the tree, and cast that spell, I thought I was absolutely done for. Wound up for that one instant thinkin' like crazy, tryin' t'figure out what t'do. But I couldn't

come up with any damn ideas at all... n'so I stopped thinking.”

He stopped fussing with his tiresome thoughts, instead entrusting his body to evade for him. His instincts had greedily elected to survive, magnificently operating his body so that he suffered minimal damages through the unavoidable storm. This was the fruition of his racial instinct as a fighting creature.

The fighting sense is enough that even expressionless Ram gives a slight gulp. Ram boasted that even should her fundamental ability be lower than another's, her nature meant she always made the better choices. It was rare that she so experienced anyone on par with herself. While she thought there no necessity to say anything at this moment, her opponent was Garfiel. That was one of the factors contributing to the inexpressible emotion inside Ram.

Garfiel: “Say, Ram. Why're you teamin' with him? What's gone'n made y'do that?”

Ram: “—”

Garfiel: “Y'do know, right? You teamin' with him means y'support th'plot t'free this SANCTUARY. Ain't that goin' against that prick Roswaal's will? That asshole... well at least, right now he shouldn't want SANCTUARY freed.”

Ram: “Do you mean to speak as if you understand Roswaal-sama while in my presence, Garf? We've known each other for a long time, so surely you would know? That I would never pay heed to such form of blather.”

Garfiel: “I know full well yer stubborn. N' I like it n'fell for you. N' so that's why my amazin' self can't agree with this. If yer not givin' up yer principles of Roswaal Supremacy, why're yer teamin' with them? I don't get how they coaxed you.”

Ram closes her eyes.

It is rare for Ram's lips to tremble like this, for her to visibly be withstanding some style of emotion. Garfiel's eyes widen, but Ram's expression disperses like mist after only an instant.

Ram: “I... I am acting in the way I believe most meaningful in regards to my wish. That's all.”

Garfiel: “Yer wish... that is?”

Ram: “Naturally, the fulfilment of Roswaal-sama's deepest desire. —And nothing other.”

Garfiel gives a deep sigh.

Ram possessed no further inclination to speak with Garfiel about the contradiction between her actions and intentions. Nobody could understand Ram's feelings. That is, excluding the single man who had noticed her core disposition, and called for her like this—

Ram: “He truly is an aggravating man, that Barusu. ...Not that even I understand why that is.”

Ram harboured an indescribable feeling of aggravation when it came to Subaru.

Call it visceral repulsion, or antipathy fostered over their time spent interacting, for the feeling probably did include such sentiments—but Ram inevitably had to think that this was ingrained in something deeper.

Almost as if he were a detested foe, who had stolen something precious from her—that kind of baffling emotion was what Ram felt for Subaru.

Ram nevertheless agreed to Subaru's invitation. His proposal shook things connected to her heart's deepest core to that incredible extent.

Ram: “Surely you'll have recovered enough to stand?”

Otto: “Y-you truly are rough in your treatment... I'm sure no one would punish you if you could please cast just a little healing magic on me...”

Ram: “Do relax. Healing magic is outside my abilities. As there had never been necessity for me to learn it.”

Otto: “I have never seen a maid so little associated with recuperation before!”

Wailing, Otto taxes his shaking legs as he manages to stand. His body sways dizzily, the nosebleed finally over. Standing up obviously did not make him quantifiable as any combat force. But seeing how Otto's will to fight has failed to wane, Garfiel gives an annoyed snort.

Garfiel: “Y'goddamn... was pretty sure our last bout told yer full well there's nothin' y'can do. Ain't you seen how damn lively my amazin' self is after y'used yer ace? Be a loser 'bout givin' up and it makes yer less of a man, oi.”

Otto: “Unfortunately, I do not ever remember forfeiting my deviousness to any degree that would allow me to accept surrender. I'll strive to be bankrupt; if I still have a body, I can still run. Or at least that's what I imagine my friend would say here, right as he'd move to start running.”

Garfiel: “...'gain with that pissant.”

Garfiel clicks his tongue at Otto's word: FRIEND.

Garfiel: “How can yer trust so much in that all-talk asshole? He ain't got any real power. No ability either. He can get his tongue working, n' that's goddamn it. 'S a guy like that any bastard worth helpin', huh?”

Otto: “Worth, really does invite question. Presently Natsuki-san may lack it.”

Garfiel: “...eh?”

Otto: “But the future will be different.”

Garfiel tilts his head at the unexpected reply, while Otto's grin intensifies. He had exhausted his stamina and had spent himself on much labour for his tactics, but neverminding the nigh absolute absence of hope, Otto speaks with not a speck of unease.

Otto: “It's because I am a merchant. I don't think it sounds such a bad deal, to try placing an investment in someone liable to greatly benefit me in the future. You see, I feel that with Natsuki-san... just maybe and just possibly, he might perpetrate something huge.”

Garfiel: “—”

Otto: “But that comes with the condition that he musn't be smothered here. And so just what flowers will bloom from the sprout Natsuki-san is, and what expensive a thing will they be? ...My role is perhaps to prune him and cast away the insects.”

He truly does cost a lot of time and effort, says Otto's wry smile as he scratches his head. Hearing this, Ram gives a bored sigh.

Ram: “Honestly, I cannot tell whether there's anything about Barusu that'd merit that impression. That he's weak, useless, cannot brew a proper cup of tea and incompetent is something on which I agree with Garf.”

Otto: “Overstatements are... per, haps not the case here.”

Ram: “But Barusu is a man with strangely good timing when it matters.”

Ignoring Otto as he timidly attempts to support Subaru, Ram makes her assertion. The men tilt their heads and ask, “Timing?”. Ram nods.

Ram: “Timing. A man of only good timeliness, that is what Barusu is.”

He's a man who is ordinarily useless, and you have no idea what role he could possibly serve—but nevertheless the character named Natsuki Subaru had a mysterious propensity to be at the places you wanted him in, at the times you wanted him there.

When Emilia strayed away from Ram at the Capital, Subaru protected her in Ram's place. Wounded, he was taken to the mansion, and there came the ruckus with the witchbeasts. This again concluded in Subaru saving both the village and the children, and he participated in exterminating the beasts. He was not the contributor of the greatest services, but his presence truly did help. When Emilia returned from the Capital and entrusted the mansion to Ram, and signs of unrest began to spread across the surrounding region, Subaru returned with a military unit in tow and beautifully repelled the danger.

The man named Natsuki Subaru was a man with abnormally good timing. Ram found not a single appealing thing in him, and nothing sexually charming about him either. She had no idea as to what his good points were, and on occasions felt frustrated with him. Although she could not remember what it was that frustrated her, or what it was that was tugging at her. Regardless, Natsuki Subaru amounted to nothing more than that.

Which was why for this affair, Ram would again—

Ram: “It's safe to trust in the goodness of Barusu's timing. —Once Barusu thinks he's seen a chance, and so acts with that belief, that remains the only single method to salvage any victory.”

Otto: “It looks like you do have some trust in Natsuki-san, Ram-san.”

Ram: “It's Ram-sama.”

Otto: “Is this truly the time to be bringing that up!?”

Displeased by the man grinning beside her, Ram shuts him up with a sharp glare. The two coincide in their approval of Subaru's intentions. They mutually agreed on the issue of them becoming fighters, and on saying nothing about buying time like this to Subaru.

They were aware that they had already bought plenty enough time, but...

Otto: “Somehow, it's mysterious, but this urge to do more isn't going away.”

Ram: “That the traps and the surprise attack caught him perfectly but he still isn't down is an insult. This is impertinence, Garf. —As you'll be soon to understand.”

Otto: “Aeuh, scary. This woman is scary. I'm starting to feel that maybe Natsuki-san lied, about that sleeping girl being a kind person.”

Muttering and running his mouth is Otto.

Verifying her grip on her wand, with mana again congregating at its tip, is Ram.

Faced with the two and their readiness for battle, preserving his silence, is Garfiel. He looks down, listening to the two's voices, before finally, sluggishly, stepping forth.

Garfiel: “—”

Sensing that battle will again unfold, Otto and Ram stiffen. But in response to their resolve,

Garfiel: “...enough, already.”

A frail, muttered voice.

Otto and Ram furrow their brows.

Garfiel: “Thinking is just a goddamn fuckin' pain—”

Spoken in exhausted tone, Garfiel mutters.

And.

???: “——㗎!”

Rocking the whole of SANCTUARY's woods, there thunders a bestial bellow. Every creature in the forest trembles, bows their heads before this pressure.

—The beast, appears.

CHAPTER 109: MISSTEP

Otto: “Just as how we discussed before, I'm about to have the villagers escape while I lure Garfiel. Natsuki-san said he would be fine with just buying time, but I'm feeling greedy for something more... could I hope for you to assist me?”

After parting with Subaru, before departing on the two bait carriages, Otto spoke with Ram there at a corner of the village.

Ram crossed her arms in response to Otto's rather unconfident query, herself leaning against a wall as she closed her eyes. She proceeded in her silence, while the impending start of battle threw Otto into impatient panic.

Otto: “Erm, excuse me... honestly, there isn't very much time...”

Ram: “Impatient men go unliked. I mentioned this before, but nothing has changed about it depending on the requirements.”

Ram opened one eye, before promptly discarding Otto's imploring gaze. The BEFORE she mentioned referred to an event from three days ago. The night where Subaru challenged Roswaal to a bet, and Otto proposed a joint fight with Ram.

Roswaal urged Ram to leave the room when Subaru visited him, leaving the two alone. Back then, Otto had been intending to make contact with Ram when she left the building. Otto accurately determined that Roswaal would distance Ram provided an important matter related to the gospel came up, and he managed to catch her in a moment of her free time.

Plainly said, three days ago Ram and Otto were crossing the line for shallow acquaintanceships. They could count their interactions on one hand, and furthermore short of something incredible happening, Ram had not a shred of interest in any men except Roswaal. The people she conversed with in SANCTUARY, excluding those related to the Roswaal Mansion, were probably just Lewes and Garfiel.

And thus when Otto called out to Ram and she looked at him as he were a pebble lying on the road, he needed to begin the conversation by building up cordial relations.

Otto: “Greetings, erm... Ram-san. It sure is a nice night out.”

Ram: “—”

Otto: “Hello?”

Ram: “— Ah, I was wondering who you were, and it turns out you're that man who was prostrating himself behind Barusu. You give so thin of an impression when separated from him that I could not tell what kind of creature you were.”

Otto: “So I'm less than human!? That truly does hurt to hear. Or, no, erm, I mean I do understand why I'm being treated like Natsuki-san's accessory...”

Ram: “A man who accepts being anyone's accessory is worthless. Begone.”

Otto: “Unsparing!?”

Ram's unapproachable attitude swiftly tore Otto to shreds. With not the slightest interest in Otto, Ram leaned against the wall beside the door as she crossed her arms.

Otto: “Excuse me, would you mind if we talked?”

Ram: “Leaving aside whether or not I remember it, have you ever considered starting conversations by first presenting your name? Leaving aside whether or not I remember it.”

Otto: “Why is it that you reminded me twice about whether you'll remember it? Hauh... My name is Otto Swein. A humble travelling merchant, although I would greatly appreciate it if you could at least memorize my face and name.”

Ram: “That would depend on how interesting this talk of yours is.”

Ram conceded not a speck of her dominance in this conversation. Although indicated that she would listen to Otto's talk, she stated that she would immediately cancel it should the topic be worthless. Otto again pumped himself up to present a perspective that his conversational opponent would not have expected.

Otto: “This would be related to what Natsuki-san and the Margrave are presently discussing, but... Ram-san. Would you be interested in assisting myself and Natsuki-san to liberate SANCTUARY from its barrier?”

Ram: “—What a farce. My wish is the fulfilment of Roswaal-sama's deepest desire. Should I respect Roswaal-sama's will, then to liberate SANCTUARY by that method carries no meaning at all.”

Otto: “But that would suppose that matters proceed exactly as the Margrave intends... correct? Ram-san, would you be aware that events have already diverged from that path?”

Ram: “—”

It was Otto who proposed, following his conversation with Subaru, that they drag Ram in as an ally. Subaru had been overwhelmingly reluctant about it, but going by what he told him, Otto judged that this bet was one they had definite chances of winning.

Ram opened her eyes and looked at Otto with her emotionless cerise gaze. She uncrossed her arms, the fingers of her lowered left hand grazing, most likely, against her wand equipped there beneath her short skirt. His choice of words either would or would not incur her wrath, and her rage would bear the shape of a windblade.

Otto swallowed his breath, wet his lips with his tongue, and smiled the same fearless smile he always did when making a challenging business deal. The tenseness of his body vanished as his quickened pulse clicked into a more comfortable pace.

Now, just like always, time to ENDURE.

Otto: “A path diverged from the Margrave's plots—and there being, the first possibility that your true wish may be accomplished. My belief is that Natsuki-san and I could aid you with this.”

Ram's fingers wavered, hesitating—before leaving her wand. Seeing this, Otto determined that his sales pitch was nothing to be belittled.

Having listened to Otto's proposal and learned the details of the plan, Ram presented several terms. Revealing their entire plan to Ram was truthfully a rather large gamble for Otto and Subaru. Should they misjudge how their proposal affected her heart, then all of their plans would leak to Roswaal. But there existed enough merit in converting Ram to risk the danger.

Ram stated several terms necessary to secure her cooperation, and finding them entirely reasonable, Otto accepted them.

Otto did not tell the details of Ram's terms to Subaru. Necessity existed that he secure the greatest cooperation he could from her, and keep their proceeding actions a secret from him.

If Otto informed him, Subaru would stop them. If he ran off his feelings and stymied Otto and Ram's movements, that would likely leave the outcome on many problems as down to luck.

Ram: “Your disposition is an unfortunate one. I haven't any clue what you do as an occupation, but you wouldn't be suited to being a merchant.”

Otto: “But you absolutely do remember that I'm travelling merchant, don't you!”

Alongside Ram's snort at Otto's secret determination, a pained wail echoed through the sky of SANCTUARY.



—Faced with the overwhelming pressure exerted from the vicious beast, Otto thought it strange that he was not trembling.

This aberrant form looming before him, with its four meters of length and powerful flesh, was that of a monster.

Crooked, sharp fangs stretched like sabres from its overlarge mouth, its claws curved in grim crescents as the life-reaping scythes of a psychopomp. Every single strand of golden fur coating its body was like a wire, and thick enough to entangle any weapon which possessed a lacklustre blade. The glint in those eyes as golden as its fur alone retained vestiges of before the transformation, the complete lack of common points between now and before Otto last blinked conversely making it all seem unreal.

Having shed his human body and revealed his shape as a mighty tiger, Garfiel was there. His vile-smelling breath came laced out his throat in growls, a pressure strong enough to freeze creatures from their core out dominating the whole of the forest.

Otto: “—”

Consciously crafting a smile, Otto attempts to distract himself with a joke.

But his frozen throat utters no noise, and even his supposedly-grinning cheeks have ignored him and remain rigid.

Getting belatedly onto this track, Otto realises why he is not trembling.

—It wasn't that he wasn't scared. It was that, faced with absolute DEATH, Otto's body had given up on the faculties extant to promote survival.

Trembling in fear was defence mechanism which incited the body's survival instincts to try and keep the soul alive.

It was a phenomenon where the body would demand that the soul not surrender—but when placed in a situation where this would be entirely pointless, it was actually natural that he not be trembling.

He had heard about it. And so he had imagined it.

Garfiel possessed both beastman and human blood, and he could transform into a beast. Otto had heard that.

But the reality of it annihilated Otto's flimsy imaginations, manifesting a creature beyond any human knowledge, devouring his spirit whole.

To this thing, in presence of this creature, Otto had proclaimed some nonsense about 'Buying time is fine, but how about we defeat him?'. Of course it would condescend him a fight. As if Otto had any hope of winning this.

And yet,

Ram: “Garf transformed... we've met all the requirements now.”

Says the petite girl standing beside him, her inflection entirely identical to before this overwhelming creature existed.

He could not even question her: *requirements for what?* Regardless, the movement so mechanical that his neck may graunch, Otto manages to look at her—at Ram.

Ram's mouth relaxes slightly, and for the first time, she shows Otto something like a smile.

Ram: “Garf made a mistake by picking this obvious choice. —We've won this fight.”

Otto: “—”

Goddamn really? quips Otto mentally, forgetting his politeness.



—The terms for cooperation that Ram presented to Otto amounted to three.

Ram: “To, regardless of the divergence from Roswaal-sama's plans... from the gospel's writ, in whatever fashion preserve Roswaal-sama's will to live in this world.”

This term was fulfilled once Subaru challenged Roswaal to the bet.

Roswaal, having been on the verge of abandoning absolutely everything, again bore his war paint and resolved to once again challenge the world, his eyes brimming with life.

Ram: “To, unrelated to that issue, ensure that Emilia-sama maintains her spirit to challenge the TRIAL. If a world diverged from Roswaal-sama's plots yet means to continue, she inevitably will have to stand for herself. ...We'll prepare a setting to test this, until the day of action comes.”

This term was one that Otto would have to leave to Emilia and Subaru, but at least going off the fact that she was hearing him out, Ram more or less considered this condition as cleared.

When he heard that Emilia had gone missing, Otto thought that everything was utterly over. But apparently, Ram didn't. He was scared to ask her about it and for her to change her mind, and so had not probed into the topic.

And,

Ram: “Supposing those two requirements are met, I have little issue in conspiring with you. ...The conditions for my cooperation in this plan you're keeping secret from Barusu will have to be somewhat more complex.”

Otto: “I'm wondering whether, if I may hear it, I might sight some clues for securing victory even on my own.”

Ram: “If I am going to assist in fighting Garf, it's going to be after the prospects of winning have been broadened. First is inhibiting his nose. Then inflicting some amount of damage on him, and robbing him of his composure. I will not interfere until the decisive moment has come, so accomplish these without my assistance. Being that you've gone out of the way to propose me this plan, surely you have some ace in mind?”

Otto: “That is, well... more or less, yes.”

Ram: “Of course. And with that established, so, here's the final requirement.”

Otto: “Right.”

Ram: “Make Garf transform. —That is the final requirement for attaining victory.”



Ram: “His sense of smell is still subdued, yes?”

Otto: “...”

Ram: “Pathetic.”

Otto: “Gaeuh!”

Seeing Otto so debilitated that he cannot even answer the question, Ram plunges her elbow into his side. Wailing at the sharp, gouging pain, Otto gasps as he remembers to start breathing.

Otto: “Aeg, aghu... I-I thought I, was going to die... just now, die from just the pressure!”

Ram: “That is preferable to failing even as a flimsy soft meatshield, stay firm. His sense of smell

should still be subdued, yes?"

Otto: "Forgetting about that unforgettable statement, indeed, it's ruined. Makoil pollen is an extremely powerful animal repellent, and even humans will fall unconscious should they smell it from close proximity."

Ram: "And evenmoreso when it is Garf, with a sense of smell many times superior. This means the single benefit of his transformation has been nullified. Then is the time, and the damage from before his transformation... both are as we expected."

With a breezy breath out, Ram flits her heels off the ground as she shifts to stand on her toes. Maintaining that posture, she lowers her heels again, then lifts, then lowers, lifts, lowers, commencing some simple leg exercises.

Otto furrows his brows at Ram's strange behaviour, tilting his head.

Otto: "R-Ram-san? What are you doing?"

Ram: "I'm warming up. Quickly loosening my body before I begin. Loathe as I am to admit it, Barusu is correct about this being efficient."

Otto: "Erm, no, that wasn't quite it... what are you doing those exercises for?"

Ram: "That's simple."

With Otto and his trembling voice in the corner of her vision, Ram finishes her exercises and closes her eyes. She then opens her eyes again, her feet heading forward—her manner entirely casual, her gait one of taking a leisurely stroll, as she begins closing distance on the beast.

Otto: "Whah!?"

Ram: "Be silent."

Otto's eyes bulge as he witnesses her boldness. But Ram rejects his call, her speed slackening not at all as she heads to meet the tiger.

The tiger stoops low as it glowers at the prey before it, its body stiffening in unguarded surprise for a moment at the little creature's action—but immediately, it judges the behaviour as an insult toward itself.

Rage arises in its golden eyes as it raises its forepaw, the thing thicker than Ram's torso, those vicious claws extended. A single strike from these claws, each big as dainty Ram's arms, possessed enough force to instantly transfigure her limbs into clumps of gore with just graze.

The wind screams as the reaper's scythe, clad in the shape of claws, ousts Ram's life from the world.—Imminently.

Ram: "Deplorable, Garf. —Who do you think it is that you're facing?"

Crouching down, Ram bypasses the mighty paw overhead as she speaks to the tiger in commiseration.

Having put the force of its entire body into the swing, the tiger flounders while Ram's small figure

dives for creature's chest. With her legs folded in, Ram then stretches out her whole body as she shunts out her readied fist—

Ram: “Have you ever beaten me in a fistfight even once?”

Garfiel: “——㗎!”

The fist from below embedded in its torso sends a beast exceeding several hundred kilograms in weight soaring into the air.

Its body arcing from the force of the strike, a pained wail spills from the beast's maw. The shockwave destroys the forest as Otto hears the noise of the air bursting.

Otto: “No, way.”

A girl a head shorter than him had just punched a powerful beast so tall that looking up wasn't enough to sight the whole thing. And just like that, with her fist still contacting the tiger's torso, Ram's free hand was slapping the animal around even further.

The blows swap from one hand to the other as they beat the enormous tiger, the thing shrieking alongside its retreat. Its great jaws aim for Ram with fangs bared, but the nimble girl sets her foot upon the tiger's nose, and her forceful kick instead sends the beast's face slamming down to the ground.

The earth shreds away as the incredible beast writhes, attempting frantically to tear apart the limbs of the girl so toying with him. But Ram dances through the air like leaves in the wind, evading the tiger's attacks mockingly, driving pointed attack after pointed attack into places where its fur is shallow.

Her heel into its throat. Her hand into its torso. Her fist punches her past the thing's paw, allowing her to send a kick into the creature's unguarded face.

The unreal feeling of witnessing her subdue the tiger, as if he is reading a picture book, grasps Otto's heart.

What on earth was he watching?

Sighting Garfiel bereft of his human shape inflicted Otto with so much despair that his body gave up on living. Was meant to be the case, so what on earth was he watching, here?

With every swing of the girl's arm, the beast's body would go flying beneath the force of the blow. A tremendous monster whose very roars could likely slaughter a creature was accomplishing entirely nothing, unable to land a single hit on her.

The tiger's furious paws defectively mowed through trees, sliced into earth, the chaotic violence altering the shape of the forest, but the gradually shifting land caused Ram no issue at all.

They could win. Like this.

He looks an imbecile for doubting Ram's pre-battle remarks.

Her statements about purposefully getting Garfiel to transform now held definite credibility.

Garfiel's presence when he transforms into a tiger is overwhelming, something which shows its power in one-versus-many situations. His very mass is a weapon in itself, and even should he fight a single individual, he clearly should not lose.

But when said individual possesses fighting ability beyond that of human capabilities, that changes the story.

His muscled body becomes a target, his powerful tree-felling forepaws become weapons fraught with openings, and his decimating strength creates a dimwittedness that keeps him from entirely opting for either retreat or attack.

Calmly analyse the situation, and it is possible to deduce all of this.

But that said, these ideas only work, and defeating him only looks easy, when presupposing the presence of AN OVERWHELMING INDIVIDUAL.

A friendly wildcard to counter a transformed Garfiel. The very act of securing one of these uncommon things as part of his team was Otto's greatest contribution to the fight.

Otto: “We can... we can do it! If it goes like this, then Garfiel...”

Clenching his fists, Otto cheers as he sights the prospects of victory.

Ram's fist supports that hope as it slams the tiger in the side of the face, the creature kicking up plumes of dust as it skids magnificently across the ground, further and further away.

When—

Ram: “—ghg”

Unable to suppress her groan, and with a stream of blood coursing from her forehead, Ram's body sways tremendously.



With the flowing blood dying her vision in crimson, Ram's frantic legwork allows her to somehow withstand the sensation of her body as it borders on collapse.

The sharp, stabbing pain flashes just above her brow—in the very centre of her forehead. Ram finds the agony originating from the faint scar there a bothersome thing, her clicking her tongue at it.

Behind her, Otto's voice cracks as he shrieks. Annoying.

It was no one but Ram who best understood that the situation had nosedived. It wasn't that any of Garfiel's attacks had hit her. With those thoughtless, opening-laden swings, trying to get hit would be the more difficult option. These screams are annoying. Wanna hit him.

Ram: “—hhu.”

Giving a short breath, Ram's unsteady feet kick off of the ground.

Immediately, the tiger's claws swing down to strike the land she jumped from. Clods of dirt spring into the air, the dirt projectiles mixing with vivid red droplets as Ram spins, dances to evade.

She was obviously on a time limit, but by some way or another, she could move. She kicks the tiger's exposed jaw from below, the creature shrieking as she follows with another strike from her other leg. She uses her momentum from the kick to backflip into a retreat, taking range and then making touchdown, only for her stance to instantly crumble.

Ram: “—a,”

Garfiel: “——㗎!”

A hair's breadth. Ram is slow to dodge the claws as they slice through a tuft of her hair, pink scattering as it dances through space.

That she dodged that strike was complete coincidence. If her feet had not just happened to slip, then Ram's head would have unmistakably burst like a red fruit.

Feeling that she is in proximity of death, feeling something indescribable rushing up her spine, Ram's red lips tear into a grin as she howls.

The exhilaration of battle. Her forehead scar throbs, something between pain and an itch flooding down her whole body.

Her broken horn. Proof of being oni. In order to fully demonstrate Ram's potential, she absolutely needed her horn to amass mana from the inexhaustible ambient supply. Her body, having lost the organ, could not demonstrate even a tenth of its actual ability.

She understood beforehand that should she overtax her body like this, she would immediately be hit with a backlash.

She had thought to ready the requirements regardless, for if she ended this in a quick fistfight, she wouldn't lose. And yet.

Ram: “—You've become strong, Garf.”

Ram's murmur overflows with an emotion she rarely shows to others.

Of course Otto seldom witnessed it, and even Subaru's sightings of it were sparse. This was the kind of emotion she would show to her family, vanished from her memory.

With the gentle smile still etched upon her face, her fists beat and beat the tiger's face mercilessly. She feels his tough skin on her fists. Her hands have lost their hardness, the recoil from each strike hitting her directly, breaking the bones in her hand. It feels good. She's fighting. She's living. This exhilarating sense of killing, being killed. What dominates her is abounding euphoria. More. *More*. There is more after this. There is yet another dimension to reach.

Her right hand shatters, no longer capable of forming a fist. The tiger with its crushed face bellows. Breath like a windstorm looms in before her, her left hand slices through the wind to gouge the thin skin on the tiger's neck. Blood spouts, the flesh her fingers hook tears down, away, the blood spouts. Sanguine speckles her white cheeks gruesomely, the lick of her tongue on sweet iron intoxicating. If her shattered right hand is useless, constrict their neck with her arm. The neck's width far exceeds her own body, one arm will never make it. Soaring, grappling, using her legs too to strangle the beast's arteries, claws pressing in to tear her away—dodged. Put in all her body weight and, snap, goes her finger. The shriek feels good, like she's back home.

Ram: “Bgh, hgn, aggbh,”

This dance they're having is so fun, but her hazy head is aggravating. The bleed from her forehead shows no signs of stopping, her nose and mouth also beginning to overflow with blood.

She has passed her limit, and her body is beginning to break down. Her body, receiving no mana to supplement it, cannot keep up with the potential vested in Ram's nerves as they operate her flesh. Ram continues to move at blazing speeds, still evading Garfiel's claws. This is combat ability so

overwhelming that not even a single strike grazes her. But the wicked hands of destruction indeed gorge upon her flesh as they seek her end. Before the claws or fangs can land any hit, she will be over.

Ram: “—egh, ghh,”

Immediately after taking a deep breath in, a deep breath out, the overflowing stuff spills out of Ram's mouth in a torrent.

The blood splashes to the ground, and as if the expelled stuff were Ram's very energy, her body loses its strength.

Her shoulders slump, her legs collapse. The beast surely would not overlook this moment. Its beaten and enraged visage bares its fangs, swinging its paw to strike Ram's slim body.

However, it—

Otto: “Aaaaauuuueh! Dona!!”

Alongside the screeched canto, a wall of earth shoots up from the ground.

It cuts in the space between Ram and the tiger's paw, dulling the attack's force for only an instant before immediately being torn to smithereens.

But in that single instant a force drags Ram's body back, and with all the possible strength it has, flings Ram backwards.

—She gets the sense that this is the second time someone has thrown her like this during a fight.

She soars through the air, dazedly staring at the sky as that out-of-place sentiment hits her. The impact of her back to the ground robs her of her breath, while she nonetheless swiftly raises her head to register the situation.

There in front of her, in the place she had just been, now stands Otto. It seems he had both judged Ram's condition as odd and the situation as disadvantageous, and so plunged himself in.

But even having said that, surely there's nothing he can do—

Garfiel: “——𐄂!”

Enraged that a powerless creature has intruded on the battle between itself and Ram, the tiger intimidates the pale young man with a forest-jolting bellow. Should he freeze, he would assuredly become food for those fangs. At a juncture which demanded immediate action, Otto balls his hands into fists and stomps the ground as—

Otto: “——𐄃!”

—His slender throat expels the exact same bellow as that of the beast's.

This was the BLESSING OF XENOGLOSSY that Ram had heard about prior. He had bragged that so long as it was an intelligent lifeform, be it a dragon or a critter, or even an insect, he could speak with it. Apparently the power could even communicate with Garfiel, transformed into A BEAST DEVOID OF RATIONALITY.

Ram couldn't tell what Garfiel's roar sounded like to Otto.
And she cannot tell what Otto's response made Garfiel feel.

But this exchange of roars does create a brief opening before the beast can unleash its claws and fangs.

That period is more than enough time for Ram to realise Otto's true motives in throwing her.

Garfiel: “——ㄎ!”

Otto: “——ㄎ! Aaeuh! That's, my throat's limit...”

Struggling to withstand a shriek liable to literally draw blood, Otto presses down on his throat as he coughs.

Punctuating the end to this conversation, the tiger raises its paw, aiming to annihilate Otto with a single strike. Otto raises his hands before him, his expression determined as he screams in desperation.

Otto: “El Dona!!”

A thick wall of earth extends before Otto, who neglects to finish watching the thing form as he sprints backwards. The tiger's paw breaks through the wall in pursuit, kicking up a whirling plume of dust, looming in on the fleeing Otto's torso—for a direct hit. The slender man flies through the air like a dead twig, plunging nonstop through bushes and trees.

Whether he lives or dies is entirely determinant on Otto's fortitude.

Ram pays no attention to the result of his decision and actions. To pay no attention in itself was the deed most appropriate to repay Otto for what he had done.

Ram: “Garf. —Transforming truly was a misstep.”

Announces Ram to the tiger, which turns to attack her next.

Leaning against a tree and freed from the exhilarating feeling of blood, Ram steadily regains her composure, her wand grasped in her barely-operational left hand, its point aimed at Garfiel.

Mana—shifting.

Ram: “Supposing you had even a speck of reasoning ability left, I doubt you would have overlooked me.”

Garfiel: “—”

The tiger scrunches its nose warily.

But does nothing further. It has no idea what is coming.

The eyes of the dimwitted tiger do not understand what it means that Ram IS STANDING AMID A MASS OF WHITE LIGHT.

Having transformed, and over the course of its fight with Ram ravaged the earth, the trees, the forest, the residents of the woods regard the tiger as an irredeemably violent and wicked guy—

Ram: “I'm not bungling this the way he did.”

Garfiel: “—!”

Realising something, the tiger stoops low as it charges for Ram.
Too late.

Ram: “—Al Fula.”

The mana congregated from the rage of the forests' residents assembles at the tip of Ram's wand, bursting into an explosion of light.

—The forest fight in SANCTUARY now, concludes.



Getting the feeling that he just heard a beast roar, Subaru stops walking and glances behind him.

Subaru: “Nah, no way.”

It's way too early for that, is Subaru's very simple impression.

It had been perhaps twenty minutes since he asked Otto to buy time and parted with him. It's questionable whether Otto has even departed on the carriages yet, and there's no conceivable way the situation could've progressed that far.

He does come up with the theory that his anxiety is making him hallucinate, but that thought is actually the terrifying one. Just how unconsciously anxious about this situation is he?

Subaru: “Gotta believe, gotta believe. Otto's devoting himself to buying time. After all, he said that he'll spill everything once Garfiel catches him... and we didn't tell the Arlam villagers anything they didn't need to know, so they shouldn't be targets.”

The context for Garfiel attacking the villagers and by extension Subaru as they attempt to leave, by Subaru's speculation, was whenever he has spoken with Garfiel about the Lewes doubles. Meaning that Garfiel doesn't want information about the Lewes doubles to leak outside.

Subaru didn't know what the root reason for that is, but if Garfiel doesn't exterminate everything which might know about them, he cannot be at ease. The loop where he slaughtered all the villagers except Subaru probably resulted from his inability to determine whether or not Subaru had leaked information to one of his fellow escapees.

How much trust Garfiel would place in Subaru's assertion that he didn't tell them was a bet, but he had a mysterious conviction that if he sincerely emphasized the point, Garfiel would probably be receptive.

Garfiel does not seem the type to deal with finicky thinking well. Perhaps Subaru's impression came from some idea where all he had to do was hand Garfiel some basis that'd allow him to settle the matter without really thinking it over.

Subaru: “And according to Otto, we've got Ram's help secured. Worst case, so long as he's not cornered, he shouldn't try laying hands on her...”

If there's anything to worry about, it's the possibility that Ram will provoke Garfiel more than necessary.

The two have known each other for a long time, and share a past that Subaru can't quite deduce. If some fissures erupt thanks to their mutual backstory, that could lead to an unforeseen development. But the reasoning for Ram agreeing to help them was so that Roswaal would keep living in a world diverged from the gospel, and she should autonomously work to keep on that path. Or at least that was how Subaru interpreted it, and figured that she would need to cooperate with him and Otto to achieve it.

Even if Otto's icebreaking dissatisfied her, she would surely, probably go along with it.

Subaru: "Believing in you, Sister. No matter how unreliable Otto is, please listen to him."

Putting palm to palm, Subaru prays his utmost for their safety.

Unaware that the two had gone off and made a decision skirting the boundary of life and death of their own accord, Subaru finishes his solitary prayer.

Subaru: "Okay, time for me to fill my role then."

Tugging his cheeks to psych himself up, Subaru gives a shake of his head before proceeding forth. The moment that Subaru's foot steps inside the gaping entrance, the unpleasant sensation of freediving, plummeting through air—of his guts floating upward assaults him.

Subaru: "Euhghhh..."

Putting his hand to his mouth, Subaru forces the welling nausea back down as he treads onward. This perpetual feeling of floating. The sense that with every step, his guts are strewn in further disarray. The overwhelming discomfort of his blood seemingly flowing backwards, of the air slathering its tongue over his eyeballs.

Sustaining a great sense of rejection while the world does everything it can to rebuff Natsuki Subaru, Subaru takes deep breath after deep breath, his hand to the wall and his face pale as he drags his feet onward.

Subaru: "Stop, being so cold... y'know this does, actually sting..."

Having anticipated this, Subaru left his stomach empty in advance. Regardless this stomach-churning nausea demands that gastric juices spill from his mouth.

Subaru forces the feeling down, and forces his eyes open, as he frantically creeps step after step.

And—

Subaru: "Ah, thank goodness. —Finally found you."

Having proceeded entirely down the short distance of what felt like an endless path, Subaru's shoulders slump in relief.

Opposite Subaru, leaning against an aged wall, seated there in the dirty and dusty corridor with her hands hugging her knees, the girl looks up at him with an expression of astonishment.

???: "Su, baru?"

While her voice is faltering, the fact that she called his name confers him full satisfaction.

Subaru settles himself down beside the seated girl—

Subaru: “Now—let's talk, Emilia-tan.”

Using the same icebreaker as back then, when he could not entirely accept his mistakes, this time it is Subaru who initiates.

CHAPTER 110: REASON TO BELIEVE

Having found Emilia, curled up small and hugging her knees, Subaru feels an inopportune relief.

Part of it came from the fact he found Emilia, and part of it came from the fact Emilia was here. He was convinced that this was the only place she could be, and was wishing that this was the place she would be. Both of these things proved legitimate, leading something leaden and heavy in the pit of his stomach to fall.

Subaru: “So anyway, I was thinking, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “...”

Subaru: “In this spot, you definitely can hole up alone without anyone finding you. There's only so many people who can get in here, and all the people who can get in wouldn't want to anyway.”

Aside from Emilia, only three other people could enter Echidna's tomb. One of them rejects the TRIAL and loathes the tomb, one of them had witnessed a past belonging to someone other than themselves and consequently entrusted SANCTUARY's future to another, and the final one had earned the witch's displeasure midway through the TRIALS and had their qualifications revoked.

All other persons who possessed the qualifications adhered stringently to the rules imposed on them, and so would not enter.

Indeed, this was a hiding spot that only Emilia could get to.

Emilia gives no reply to Subaru's words of honest praise. She simply remains small, looking silently up at Subaru.

Subaru: “—Mind if I sit beside you? Standing's, honestly pretty taxing.”

Emilia: “...”

Subaru: “Where I'm from, silence means yes. Alright, 'scuse me here.”

Bathed in her focused stare, Subaru magnificently says his piece and seats himself beside Emilia. A range between them as big as two fists is the limit that Subaru's manly spirit and courage can muster. Getting any closer would have to come after their words and attitudes diminished the emotional distance between them.

Since right now, the sentimental distance between the two was likely much bigger than a fist.

Subaru: “—”

Emilia: “—”

Seated next to each other, the two fall into silence.

Subaru patiently waits for Emilia to speak. Emilia gazes at him as he does, her lips quivering multiple times, and with some hesitation,

Emilia: “Subaru...”

Subaru: “—”

Emilia: “How come... you're here?”

Subaru: “Ask me how come, and well that's a tricky one. It's because I'm always thinking about you, Emilia-tan, and thus magnificently figured out where you were, I guess.”

It's really something of an honour.

Since it meant that he was the one who, at least in this SANCTUARY, thought about Emilia the most and most accurately supposed her feelings.

Though if he were truly attuned to Emilia's feelings, he definitely wouldn't be speaking with her like this right now in the tomb.

Emilia's eyes widen as she hears Subaru's response.

And she shakes her head, as if that was not the reply she was looking for.

Emilia: “No. No, that wasn't it, Subaru. I don't mean 'why did you come here'... I meant how. Only people with the qualifications are meant to be able to get here.”

Subaru: “Sure you're not the one forgetting, Emilia-tan? On our first day here, I rushed into this place to bring you out after you dead collapsed inside. Apparently if you're like Roswaal and the witch super hates you, it feels like you'll pop just from going in, but it's not that bad for me. Feels floaty like I'm on an elevator that's perpetually a second before touchdown is all. It's nothing I can't handle.”

Emilia: “...So that's it.”

She speaks with chagrin that her estimates about this place being impenetrable were inaccurate. Her gaze as she glances at Subaru, beset by nausea, is worried.

She must be frantically trying to organize a mess of her own mental stuff right now, but that she regardless winds up caring for others in this situation is lionhearted, pitiable and sweet.

Emilia: “How come... you knew I was here?”

Talking distracts him better than silence, and gives him some relief.

Perhaps having noticed that while he was speaking, and now watching Subaru as he takes deep breath after deep breath, Emilia presents a new question.

Her query comes laced with suspicion and resignation, mingled with other complex sentiments. The resignation was cavalier, and the suspicion needlessly paranoid. Both were incredibly rare to see from Emilia—this might even be Subaru's first time witnessing them.

Emilia: “...Subaru?”

Subaru: “Ah right, sorry sorry. Okay, asking how come I thought you were here, well it's probably *that*. That that where there's nothing about Emilia-tan that I don't know.”

Emilia: “Liar.”

It wasn't that he was trying to jest, but his frivolous statement nevertheless faces prompt rejection.

With her chin set on her knees, Emilia tilts her head as she looks at Subaru. The emotions flickering through her amethyst eyes mark the pinnacle of chaotic turmoil, enough to nigh swallow him.

Disliking how those emotions are being delved, Emilia averts her gaze, pouting so Subaru can't see it.

Emilia: “That talk won't fool me. —I don't even know myself well. It's impossible that you would.”

Subaru: “It's surprising how little it is you see of yourself. It does happen that people will be paying attention to you perfectly, all the way down to your weak points.”

Personal experience— isn't what he'd call it, but things in that vein do occasionally happen to him. It often occurs that when he's fired up, he cannot reflect on how thoughtless, reckless, and senseless he is being. It has also occurred where others pointed it out for him, and only starting from there would he recognize it himself.

Once, someone did point out that Subaru was like this, and starting from there—

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, I figured you were here half off of trust, half off of hoping for it.”

Emilia: “Half and half...”

Subaru: “I ran around the village, but couldn't really find you. Instead of thinking about where you went, I put all my effort into thinking about why'd you gone. And when I did, I figured you'd probably be here. And when I found you was a crazy relief.”

Emilia: “...Just, a relief?”

Subaru: “Hm?”

Subaru's mouth relaxes into a relieved smile, when Emilia asks her question. Her voice is quiet, liable to disappear. Subaru's brows shoot up in hearing it, only for Emilia to stare at him fixedly, peering into his eyes.

Emilia: “You found me here, and all you were was relieved? ...You weren't mad?”

Subaru: “Heck is that, Emilia-tan. No way, you were scared I'd be mad at you?”

Her timid attitude leads Subaru to almost slip a breathy laugh. Running off without telling anyone where you're going, but then having your location found and being scared of reprimands, was exactly what a child would do. While he can somewhat agree with that idea now that he knows about her real age and real age mentally, the behaviour is incredibly unlike her. But Subaru purposefully pays the strangeness no heed, instead shaking his head.

Subaru: “I'm not mad at all. I was feeling hurried, and honestly in a major mega panic, but not mad. And with the thing where I found you here counted in too, I'm glad.”

Emilia: “...Are you.”

The emotions Subaru felt for the missing Emilia were not anger.

Supposing hypothetically that there was any anger, it would be for the fact that Emilia had done something unanticipated and he had missed the warning signs, his crossness aimed at himself. This hurried, panicky feeling of his, liable as it was to ruin all of the preparations he had made thus far, had also drowned beneath the flood of relief he felt from finding her. And so Emilia's worries are needless. That is what he is trying to tell her.

Emilia: "You're not mad."

That is what he was trying to tell her, but the accompaniment to her mutter is not relief.

Subaru: "—Emilia?"

Emilia: "You are not mad at me. —You won't be mad for me."

Quiet, hoarse, and shaking.

By the time Subaru's brows scrunch in puzzlement, it is already too late.

Looking down, biting her lip, Emilia opens her eyes wide.

As she endures the flood of tears in her eyes, trying to keep them from spilling.

Emilia: "Why won't you be mad?"

Subaru: "Emili—"

Emilia: "I did something selfish, didn't I? I did something that distressed you, didn't I. I said nothing and went away, and I worried you, didn't I? I made you anxious, wondering if I'd run away... that's what I did, isn't it. And when someone does that to you, you get mad, don't you? Or aren't you like that, Subaru?"

Cutting off Subaru, Emilia speedily speaks line upon line of her emotions.

She emphasizes the selfishness of her own actions, closing in on Subaru in an attempt to make him condemn her.

Overwhelmed by her uncanniness, Subaru finally realises that he made a decisive error when choosing his words.

Emilia wasn't scared that Subaru would be mad at her.

Emilia was scared that Subaru would not criticise her actions.

And she was so because—

Emilia: "Why won't you be mad? Are you not mad b-because, you weren't expecting anything from me? You saw how I failed, but you're still being kind to me... is it because you're not disappointed in me? Is it because you don't think it would've worked out?"

Subaru: "—"

These might be the anxieties that Emilia had been harbouring the whole time, but been unable to ever voice, the very darkness wallowing in the pit of her heart.

Repeatedly she challenged the TRIAL, only for her heart to fold every time and for her to return. She thought herself weak for it, and while there were those who would show their dejection when

she failed, their number included people who would not fault her, like Subaru and Puck.

While the presence of Subaru and Puck did relieve her, she also, always, had been fighting with this persistent anxiety.

Disappointment occurred because expectations occurred.

She thought herself weak because it sickened her that she couldn't put in a fight.

But no matter how many times she repeatedly failed, should she regardless be kindly consoled, and while that worked as a temporary reprieve, it exacerbated a larger, greater sense of anxiety.

Emilia had always feared Subaru and Puck being kind to her.

Subaru: “No, Emilia. That isn't what I think.”

Far too belatedly comprehending the height of the wave cresting in Emilia's heart, Subaru speaks.

If he does not capture Emilia right here, right now, something terrible is going to happen. Should she continue to reject him, then even if he reaches out, he will never seize her again.

And so without any leeway to even wonder what he should best say, he talks.

Subaru: “I can't be mad at you, but it's not because I think anything like that...”

Emilia: “If that's true, then...! How come! How come you didn't keep your promise?!”

Subaru: “—hk!”

With his knee-jerk statement denied, the new topic leads Subaru's face to stiffen.

The PROMISE. That meant the one he and Emilia had shared last night, and if questioning whether it had been properly fulfilled—

Emilia: “I asked you to hold my hand until morning! And you promised me by saying 'I will'... so why did you let go of my hand? Why didn't you keep your promise?”

Subaru: “—”

Emilia: “B-Both you, and Puck, broke... your promises, and went away. You left me behind, and went away... you liars. Subaru's a liar. Puck's a liar. ...Liars, liars... liars...”

Her voice in tears, Emilia violently condemns the violation of promises.

Facing down and with teardrops streaming out her eyes, Emilia butts her head into Subaru's shoulder, before weakly slapping her hand to his chest. The force is equivalent to nothing. But even so, it hurts as though he's been punched clean through.

This was the whole of the pain that Subaru had not noticed and overlooked, borne by Emilia.

Which Subaru and Puck had showered upon her.

Emilia: “P-promises are, important... and I told you that, I told you that before! That for practitioners of the spiritual arts, for me, promises are important... and so I want them to be kept... you're supposed to have apologized to me for not having kept one... and, even still you broke, a promise again...”

Subaru: “...Emilia.”

Emilia: “Don't break promises... don't tell lies... you mustn't break promises... if, you do that, if I do, then, Mother and Juice...”

With her face still pressed against Subaru's shoulder, Emilia's emotions lack any harbour as she lets them wander, lost. Her surging emotions and grief for the betrayal have torn her thoughts into tiny, disjointed shreds.

Her inarticulate speech turns further incoherent, ending with Emilia sobbing in the diction of a wailing child,

Emilia: “Don't tell lies... don't do it...”

Her voice shakes with grief. A clawing pain tears at Subaru's chest.

PROMISE—a word which carried multiple different connotations when used between Subaru and Emilia. Subaru had once disregarded their promises, wounding Emilia, and spawned a mutual divide between them.

After their reunion he ascertained the significance of a promise, and they tied one between themselves in the form of a bond.

And regardless the word PROMISE again echoes without kindness, instead binding the two with overwhelming weight.

More than anything, Emilia's state when she talks about PROMISES differs tremendously from usual. Something, some important part of Emilia's foundations, tethers her to promises.

Emilia: “—”

With her head buried between her knees, Emilia weeps.

Every second Subaru spends witnessing this cuts another lash of guilt into his heart.

The sobbing echoes into his ears as he frantically considers what to say.

Should he apologize? Should he pretend he understands? Should he rigorously console her? How much compassion is safe for him to convey?

Subaru's head spins and spin as he thinks, unable to grasp any hint toward the solution.

What to do, what could he, what should he, what ought he, what would be, the best—

Subaru: “—”

He thinks, and thinks, and thinks, Subaru closing his eyes amidst his whirling thoughts, and—

He feels that he has reached the answer of what to do.

Subaru: “Emilia. —I love you.”

Emilia: “—”

Those words truly had no business being spoken in this situation.

Emilia: “...Huh?”

Hearing Subaru's statement, Emilia gives an astonished yelp as she looks up.

Her teary amethyst eyes open wide as her gaze captures Subaru. His visage is warped atop the sheen of her tears—and so he manages to resiliently maintain an unshakable heart. After all, he no longer has any hesitation on what to say.

Subaru: “Every fucking night, you go shunting yourself again and again into the same exact TRIAL. The hell is the TRIAL? It's just the goddamn past. Stop dawdling around getting caught up in things that're already over.”

Emilia: “...ah, euh,”

Subaru: “And just when I think I'll do it for you, you start saying you have to do it yourself and get so fucking stubborn about it. It'd be one thing if saying that made it possible for you to clear it, but if the outcome's the same, all it amounts to is talk. How about spending a moment to consider what it feels like to have to watch you lose over and over?”

Emilia: “S-suhbaru...”

Subaru: “And to top it off when your pet-slash-guardian goes missing, you can't even stand for yourself. You throw a tantrum and worry everybody, then shirk your duties to go sulk in bed. Well how lovely for goddamn you, enough's enough, I'm sick of it.”

Emilia's eyes bulge in disbelief as Subaru spits word after word. Her wet eyes forget about their tears thanks to her abundance of shock, her lips unable to voice any meaningful words and trembling.

Unmistakably, with no parallel, Emilia's heart has been wounded.

Faced with the scorn and disgust of Natsuki Subaru, never once directed at her before, her heart is torn to pieces.

Emilia's expression contorts.

This was not lachrymose, nor a pending conniption, nor the hollowness of resignation.

Hit with curses she has never been showered in before, Emilia's expression changes. Not to any of the more fitting candidates, but to something entirely different.

—What arises on Emilia's face is a horrifically dry smile.

Emilia: “That's... right, isn't it. O-of course you'd, think this about me as well, Subaru...”

Subaru: “—”

Emilia: “They're all things, that you just have to call awful... they are. Ever since I came to SANCTUARY... no, way before that... I've always caused just so many problems, and so, I...”

Subaru: “Yeah. You honestly haven't done a single good thing since coming to SANCTUARY. I know I'm not one to talk here, but it's too horrendous to ignore. There's no way to back it.”

Subaru validates the trembling Emilia's invalidation of herself.

Emilia's throat gives a choked noise. A sob, or something close to it is what she swallows down, her pained smile still on her face as she speaks.

Emilia: “And so, I... both by Puck, and by you... w-was, abandoned, which's natural...”

Subaru: “Yes. You pulled a ton of crap, and there's still no signs of improvement. For the sentiment of 'I'll do something about this' to be weaker than 'oh please just let anything happen here' is overwhelmingly natural.”

Emilia attempts to reply to Subaru's invalidation.
He grabs the final part of her response, with which he judges her harshly.

Subaru: “—But.”

Moments before the conversation reaches its end, Subaru cancels his negations.
Emilia looks up at Subaru. Arisen in her eyes is an emotion that only Subaru would understand.
—Because that same exact emotion had one been arisen in Subaru's eyes as well.

Subaru: “I love you. —Emilia.”

Using the same thing and the same words which he could not escape from, Subaru blocks Emilia's escape.



The long lashes bordering her eyes tremble, Subaru's statement robbing Emilia of her awareness.

The sight of her, frozen, with even her thoughts ground to a halt, leads Subaru to smile faintly.
Not relief, and naturally not ridicule, put a name to it and it'd have to be nostalgia.

So nostalgic that he wants to start screaming everything, including what Emilia's looking for.

Subaru: “I love you. I love you and love you and love you, love you so much it's hopeless.”

Emilia: “Wh-what are you... all of a sudden...”

Subaru: “I love your super pretty silver hair, I love your amethyst eyes and how when they're wet they look like jewels, I super love your voice and how I get dreamy just from hearing it, and your slender long legs and your pale skin, and our height difference and all of that is so to my ideal I can't stand it, just being with you makes my heart race I can't stop it and oh god I love you.”

Emilia: “—”

Subaru: “I love how you're just a little dopey, it's adorable how you put your best into everything, I revere how fervent you get for other people's sakes, I think the way you disregard yourself can't be left unattended, and all of your expressions, and all of your emotions, are things where if I could witness them from your side, nothing could be better... I am always thinking this.”

Emilia: “Why are you, right now... stop messing around with me!”

His feelings for Emilia, flowing out his mouth.
Emilia casts his words away with a shriek.

Her shoulders heave, her brows shoot down, as Emilia sees how Subaru's attitude is sidestepping the issue, is fleeing from the condemnations he made, is attempting to ruin everything they spoke about, and bares her fury.

Emilia: “Why are you suddenly saying this! This wasn't what we were talking about! Y-You were saying I'm utterly useless, that I'm entirely lacking, that's what you said! You're sick of it, you can't bare to watch it... y-you said that I'm, damn...”

Subaru: “Yeah, I did. Get subject to seeing all that uselessness, and how the results are always something where you just want to sigh over how it was all insubstantial talk, then consider that I'm impatient at best of times, and I would've long stopped feeling any love. That's saying if it weren't you, Emilia.”

Emilia: “Why!?!”

While agreeing with the worthlessness of her actions, Subaru denies the single most important part. Emilia raises her voice, unable to agree, unable to allow this pass.

Emilia: “The uselessness and hopelessness, all of it, that's me! So then why are you trying to overlook it? Why are you forgiving me? Why...”

Subaru: “If it's just answering that, I'll say it endlessly. Because, I, love you!”

Emilia: “—hk”

Emilia sobs as she presses in closer, Subaru equally jabbing his face in nearer as he yells. Emilia flinches back, overwhelmed, but for every step she retreats, Subaru closes that exact distance. No shift comes to the fact that they are within breathing range and gazing at each other.

Subaru: “I love you. And so no matter what unfortunate things I see from you, it feels like I just discovered another side of you, even when you're lacking I wind up supporting you thinking it's a barrier for you to overcome, and no matter how fed up you are with yourself, I'll never dislike you.”

Emilia: “—”

Subaru: “Even if you hate how weak and pathetic you are, and brood thinking a that others should be judging you negatively as well... I'm gonna keep expecting things from you. I am never going to use your weakness as a reason to desert or to abandon you.”

Emilia's eyes waver.

Her gaze has been fixed on Subaru—her eyes full of acceptance for his invalidations of her, receptiveness toward resignation, and her weak desire to drown in a pool of sorrow and grief. Emilia wanted to be invalidated. It does happen that by having everyone generally accept that you are hopeless, by learning that you are beyond any saving, you only then begin to feel any sense of relief.

Subaru knew that feeling, but he also knew what it was to be guided out of it. Because Natsuki Subaru had once attempted to abandon himself, but had been unable to have another abandon him.

Subaru: "I am head over heels for you. Everything good about you shines brilliantly for me. And of course I know not everything about you is good. You're... you're not an angel, not a goddess, you're an ordinary girl. Pain and suffering makes you want to cry, you want to avoid and bypass things you don't like, and you have a desire to choose only the easy and fun options so long as they're available."

Emilia: "—"

Subaru: "But even including those weak parts, or even call them ugly parts, I entirely love the person who is Emilia. And so... even now, I'm not disappointed in you in the least."

Emilia: "—*hk!* Don't you! T-think that's being far too selfish!"

Spilling from Subaru's mouth, the form of his feelings.
Hearing them spoken in sequence, Emilia fails to suppress her disorder as she refutes him.

Emilia: "You invalidated me, you said lots of times that I'm useless, and now you're still saying you love me? ...W-who could believe! Subaru, how can you believe in me like that, that's... that's the thing I don't understand!"

Subaru: "No! No, that's utterly wrong! There's some reason I believe in you, and so I love you. — That idea's wrong. I love you. And so I believe in you. That way around!"

Emilia: "Just love alone is not a reason to believe!"

Subaru: "—! If love alone weren't reason enough to believe, then who the hell'd willingly go through all this suffering to help a pain in the ass woman like you!"

Voices peaking, the two's emotions crash into each other.
Subaru puts his hand to the wall as he drags himself up to stand, for Emilia to also stand up to face him.

Close enough to butt heads, both their eyebrows lowered, Subaru and Emilia howl their feelings. With spit flying, faces red, yelling 'No you're wrong!', having never before raised their voices at each other, these two.

Subaru: "I love you! I love you so much it makes me crazy, so much I'd be okay to die. And so I cope with the pain and the suffering, I am bordering on puking right now but here I am hanging around you!"

Emilia: "I did not! Ask for that! Going off saying whatever selfish things you want... *You're* the one who's never thinking about my feelings, Subaru! Like you are now... where it's my fault you have to deal with it, and you're always being hurt... you have no clue what it feels like for me!"

Subaru: "Like I could have any goddamn clue, and I'm not gonna think about it, either! All I'm ever thinking about is how to look cool around you! What will make you think of me best, or what will make you happiest.... people are going through all the damn effort for it, how about going with the plan and looking cute every once in a while!"

Emilia: “Don't talk like I'm a doll! If you want me to be happy, if you're thinking like that for me... th-then, why did you break your promise! All you had to do was stay by what I asked you! How come you won't do that for me! I bet you actually hate me!”

Subaru: “I love you!!”

Emilia: “You're lying!!”

Subaru screams the whole of his feelings in desperation, only for Emilia to yell over him. How great of a detour had he once taken for the sake of voicing these feelings? How great an obstacle had Subaru overcome for the sake of telling what ought to be told? These love confessions, thrown around so much they practically look cheap, were all entirely Subaru's truest sentiments, spoken from the whole of him, seeped through to every portion of his soul in their legitimacy.

Subaru: “I'm not lying! I love you! How about you talk, what do you think of me! You've always got this attitude where you're making these fucking insinuations! Do you have any fucking idea what a jolt it is to my heart every time you make these cute expressions and it looks like there's hope!? Stop fucking around with me!”

Emilia: “I-I'm not messing with you! I'm just being normal, stop saying weird things! I have so many things to think about right now and am facing a serious problem, and you're asking what I feel about you... I'm not able to think about it! Stop it! Don't pester me!”

Subaru: “Who's pestering who here! It's you! Pestering me!”

Emilia: “But it's you! Pestering me!”

Not a fragment of logical debate, this is a collision of emotional reasoning. Like two tantruming children showering insults on the other, Subaru and Emilia both loudly assert their feelings.

Their voices echo through the dim, cramped tomb, all the uproar since the long-silent structure's construction resounding through the place. The intensity of their argument could practically slap the tomb's sleeper awake, the two breathing raggedly as they commence their fruitless quarrel.

Emilia: “I can't trust anything you say anymore! You are a liar! You broke your promise, and even still you come showing up around me like nothing happened... y-you thought I didn't notice, didn't you! But I watched it! I watched whether you were going to keep your promise with me!”

Subaru: “Stop being an asshole! Doesn't it embarrass you to pull this crap, pretending you're weak so you can test people!”

Emilia: “There's no reason I have to hear that from a promise-breaking liar!”

Subaru: “Me breaking the promise has nothing to do with this!”

Emilia's cheeks redden with fury as Subaru easily attempts to sidestep the issue. She cannot fully dispel her anger, the emotion so intense that she cannot speak. Emilia takes several ragged breaths before straining the words out her throat.

Emilia: “Why... why did you break your promise?”

Subaru: “...I do feel bad about breaking the promise. That I wanted to keep holding your hand and stay with you until morning was truth.”

Emilia: “That's not what I asked. —Why did you break your promise?”

Subaru: “...I can't say it.”

Gritting his teeth, Subaru replies to Emilia's question with an anguished moan. Seeing him attempt to dodge questions this late, Emilia gives a long sigh.

Emilia: “You won't keep your promises. You won't tell me why you break them, either. ...And now you're yelling at me to do something. If you're going to tell me you love me... then act like it! If you don't do that, I... can't, believe you...”

Subaru: “Emilia.”

Emilia: “If you'd kept your promise and stayed with me until morning! Then I know I'd be able to believe you! I'd believe in you, and be able to entrust everything to you! But you broke your promise... and so it's, just over for me... I mean, both you and Puck, you left me behind...”

Grimacing, Emilia sticks her fingers into her silver hair, and faces downward. Her fervour shifts forms, shifts directions, as Emilia grasps herself.

Emilia: “Now that Puck's gone, these scenes have been going through my head. ...They're in my head, these scenes I don't know, conversations I don't remember, they keep flowing and flowing...”

Subaru: “—”

Emilia: “I thought I had remembered everything, but all these memories are things I know nothing about... but still, they really are my memories... and every time I remember them, when something that's meant to be there but I forgot about comes up, I get anxious...”

These memories Emilia is referring to would be her true memories, which she had wished to ignore. Emilia had used Puck to seal away a past that she did not want to remember. Her contract with Puck was ceased, and without their yoke the memories began to overflow, drowning Emilia's interior in her true recollections.

But for her this was a dramatic thing, which meant an alteration of her very self.

Emilia: “I finally realised that I was leaning on Puck, and running away from lots of things... I'm certain that Puck left so that he could tell me that. But I'm scared. I'm scared. Puck's gone, and my real memories are coming out... It's like I'm steadily not being me.”

Subaru: “—”

Emilia: “Once all these memories are here... I know I'm going to be a me unlike who I used to. My present self thinks that I started in a place with memories which aren't my real ones... but, once I

remember where I really started... I know the me who got this far is going to disappear...”

Emilia's resolve and determination had been formed with false memories as their origin points. Thus once she regains her true memories, once her beginning changes its form, Emilia's present resolve and determination, and the whole of the path she has walked thus far, will have what happen to it?

???: <—What's important isn't the beginning or the middle, it's the end.>

Subaru: “—”

A voice passes through Subaru's mind.

This familiar but distant voice was a close one for Subaru, belonging to someone he would regardless never see again.

At the very end of the end of their goodbye, these words given to him as homework.

Yeah. You're right, he thinks.

No matter how events begin, no matter how the path proceeds, until they reached absolute end of the end of the end, did anybody have the goddamn right to decide whether it had all been a mistake?

Subaru: “No matter what you remember, nothing'll change. I love you. I'll always be loving you.”

Emilia: “—hk. I can, not believe you. This me who you say you love... I-is going to, even if she's gone, are you still, going to say you...”

Subaru: “Yes. No matter what happens, you won't be gone. I love you.”

Emilia: “...You're a liar. Y-you wouldn't, let me believe... in you...”

Subaru: “—Well then, I'll make you believe.”

Her voice shakes, her eyes waver, as Emilia attempts to reject Subaru.

His words are not communicating this. His attitude would not convince her either. In that case, the only way to convey his feelings for her was through action.

And so,

Emilia: “Suhbar...”

Subaru: “If you don't want it, dodge.”

Within breathing range—or no, not even their breaths could intervene in the space between them. Subaru reaches out for Emilia's shoulder, and draws his face in closer. As she witnesses Subaru's approach, confusion arises in Emilia's eyes, her body going rigid.

For one second, he waits.

If she's going to push him away, this is the moment.

Emilia: “—”

But Emilia closes her eyes.
Whether it was resignation, or the result of hesitation, Subaru couldn't tell.

Subaru: “—Mmh”
Emilia: “—Ngh”

Their breathing intermingles as Emilia then holds her breath, Subaru's brows furrowing in pain. The quiet noises come from the force of their teeth striking together. It all begins with that slight, achy pain, but that immediately disappears from even the crevices of his mind when faced with the intensity of this heat.

Soft lips. Nothing more than a mutual touch, this kiss.

This being the first for Emilia, and for Subaru his second time kissing her. It is unlike his first time, with its cold taste of DEATH. His second kiss tastes of LIFE, hot.

In simultaneous movement, their lips separate.

They draw their faces away from each other, both forgetting to breathe as they gaze at the other. Flushed cheeks. Watery eyes. The him reflected in Emilia's eyes also looks entirely enchanted. The pathetic expression leads Subaru to come back to his senses first, him remembering how to breathe as he proceeds.

Subaru: “I love you.”

Emilia: “—”

Subaru: “No matter what bad things I see of you, no matter what arguments we get into, I'm unchangingly going to keep loving you. That'll never change no matter what happens—and so I am always believing in you. If you're going to ask why.”

Emilia: “It's because, you love me...”

Carrying on from where Subaru finished, Emilia touches her lips in astonishment. She traces her fingers over them, as if grasping the vestiges of the touch, her eyes overflowing with water. The tear descended to her pale cheek falls, glittering like a drop of the moon.

Subaru: “Of course you'd be anxious when unknown memories are coming up. And I understand being scared because it feels like an unknown you is going to come out. But that doesn't mean the path you've walked will vanish, or that your feelings will change.”

Emilia: “How come you're... able to say this?”

Subaru: “What's important isn't the beginning. It's the end. —The woman I respect most in the world told me that.”

Worst in the world at suppositions, but still somehow taught him the most important thing in the world, his mother.

He didn't think that he understood it entirely, but he did wish to gradually learn. Because there was a girl right in front of him, with whom he wished to learn it together.

Emilia stands dead still in her anxiety, while Subaru gives her a relaxed shrug. To tell her it's no big deal, and blast her worries away.

Subaru: "It's okay, Emilia. No matter what you remember, I'm on your side. It's fine no matter what forgotten things you remember. But if you're still afraid even then, let's find it."

Emilia: "Find it... find what?"

Subaru: "Just like how I go zooming around off my love for you, the precious feeling which'll let you zoom around without worrying about people around you."

Emilia never hesitated to volunteer herself for the sake of another. Although, that stated, Subaru did think her attitude as she prioritizes others first noble, beautiful, and loved it.

The words 'for the sake of ANOTHER' are horrifically kind, horrifically sad. Because the feelings held for someone of unseen visage would surely never rival feelings held for someone whose face existed in plain view.

Subaru: "I'm kinda sorta expecting for said precious feeling to get aimed at me."

Emilia: "My... precious feeling..."

Perhaps she was not listening to Subaru, for Emilia puts her hand to her chest and lowers her eyes. Her fingers reach for where Puck's jewel would have been. With their bond broken, there is nothing for her to touch. Her fingertips scratch at empty air. But Emilia grasps her hand firm.

Emilia: "When I've recovered all of these memories... maybe it'll be there, my precious feeling."

Subaru: "Yeah. It's there. A reason to keep walking."

Emilia: "—Mn."

Dubious, is not how suspicious an expression it is, but regardless it is not one of perfect agreement. After watching Emilia give a slight nod, Subaru closes his eyes as he faces up to the ceiling.

He gets the sense that the words which had similarly uplifted him had been more powerful. Gets the sense that it had been kinder words, stricter words, stronger words that saved him.

—Had he managed to be Emilia's strength?

Subaru: "—"

To ask the question would be incredibly lame. He sighs, and the instant he drains of his strength the sickness he forgot about jolts him. He impulsively puts his hand to the wall, just barely managing to keep himself from puking.

Emilia: "Subaru?"

Subaru: "It's nothing... is what I wanna say but, it's something. I am pretty bad right now. Anyway, if we're going to keep arguing or fighting can we kinda do it outside."

Emilia: "Geez... But I don't even want to do those."

Emilia's lips form into a faint smile.

But the weak thing carries the strong appearance of her usual frantic charade. She has not reached a clear-cut answer yet. Her anxiety has not been fully dispelled.

With his hand against the wall, Subaru starts walking for the tomb's exit.

Subaru's steps are unsteady ones, while Emilia's hand wanders back and forth, indecisive about whether it should touch Subaru's stomach. It seems their previous meeting of lips had indeed affected her considerably.

Thinking back on it now, that was pretty ballsy of him. His face flushes hot.

But all those sentiments would have to be left behind for now.

Subaru: "—"

The optimum in showing Emilia that he was her ally, and acting for her sake.

The act of fulfilling the role he had allotted to himself, protecting her, and protecting his feelings for her.

And so—

Subaru: "I have to finish doing all the things I gotta do."

They exit the tomb.

Bright sunlight greets the two as they step out of the darkness.

Where,

Subaru: "—Hey, kept you waiting."

???: "Tch."

There, clicking their tongue in irritation as Subaru gives a wave—

???: "—Whatever, ain't like I was waitin' any."

—with his body slathered in blood and hostility in his eyes, stands Garfiel.

CHAPTER 111: GARFIEL'S BARRIER

Even Subaru can see that Garfiel is drowning in injuries.

The bleeding of his innumerable wounds covers his body in crimson, his breathing ragged and his shoulders heaving. Blood seeps from his numerous lacerations, and except for the loincloth-esque garment covering the lower portion of his petite frame, he is entirely exposed. He has even lost his shoes, standing there barefoot. Subaru lowers his raised hand.

Subaru: "...That's sure not the getup I was expecting for this hello. I figured you were going to be mad, but not that you'd wind up looking like that."

Garfiel: "Don't worry nothin' bout me. Jus' had a lil' slip n' fall."

Subaru's cheeks stiffen as he speaks, Garfiel responding with a dissatisfied look. Garfiel's statement is of course entirely bullshit. Subaru cannot help the bad visions he gets from seeing the guy so wounded.

Garfiel had been speeding around SANCTUARY in search of Lewes, and got wonderfully caught in Subaru's plots for Otto's group to buy time by stalling him. Subaru can think of only one possible situation where he would wind up having this kind of appearance. That being,

Subaru: "You moron, Otto, I told you to just spew everything and run!"

Garfiel: "Guy was damn brave. He weren't any fuckin' suited fer battle, n' also ain't been in any real fights before. N' then he starts spoutin' this idiot shit 'bout it bein' for a friend... he handed my fuckin' ass t'me."

With his cheeks twisted in irritation, Garfiel touches the white scar on his forehead. He's had that injury since before this, but was he saying that every other wound of his had seriously happened during his fight with Otto? Having gone through a fistfight—or really it was too one-sided to call it that, but—having traded fists with Otto, Subaru does understand. Otto is more accustomed to fights than Subaru, but in a world abounding with people who possess ludicrous combat ability, Otto ought to be classified as a noncombatant.

When placed in serious combat against a fighter—against Garfiel, who sits at the very peak of combatants that Subaru knows—there is no way he should win. And that goes without touching on the fact that Subaru requested only that Otto buy some time through trickery. Nothing more.

Subaru: "...He's not, dead. Right?"

A frigid line of sweat drips down Subaru's forehead. His worst-case conception is that the scene ended with Garfiel's claws shredding Otto apart. He would like to laugh it off as a needless fear, but seeing Garfiel's state, he cannot. With how incredibly wounded Garfiel is, it's clear that he was forced into a difficult fight. But still, to demand that Otto under-perform would likely be overwhelmingly selfish. But, even said, supposing that Otto is dead, it's just pointless.

Not Otto's death. It's Subaru's life that stops having any point.

Emilia: "...Subaru."

Right as he swallows his breath and verges on pessimism, a silver bell calls his name. These fingers which had before hesitated to touch him, here as his shoulders border on sagging, now touch. This faint sensation contacting him from behind leads Subaru, on the edge of looking down, to stop.

He glances behind him, to find Emilia standing there and looking at him with concern. She still has yet to consolidate the emotions eddying inside her.

This situation where Garfiel is standing here, indignant and covered in blood, must be incomprehensible from her perspective. But she likely has recognized that this was not any mundane affair. In her eyes as she watches Subaru, her concern beats out her anxiety.

Subaru: "Don't worry, Emilia. My bad for being pathetic. ...I just remembered who it is that's standing behind me, so I'm calmed down now."

Supported by her gaze, Subaru gives a deep breath out before turning back to face Garfiel. The entrance of the tomb sits on a slight incline, so Subaru is looking somewhat down at Garfiel. Garfiel's posture as he slouches is poor, his sharp gaze piercing through Subaru with enough intensity to practically kill him.

Garfiel: "Looks like while my amazin' self was rushin' around, yer bastards sure went pullin' whatever the fuck shit yer wanted. Fuckin' sneakin' sneakin' sneakin' sneakin... eh? What's that? Yer didn't fuckin' know my amazin' self hates these dirty fuckin' tricks?"

Subaru: "I didn't know we needed your permission to do stuff around here. Or actually it's obvious that's the kind of character you are so I did know that just from looking at you. Figured you'd be mad, but also figured nothing more than that'd happen."

Garfiel: "Eh?"

Garfiel's stance is one of intimidation, but Subaru just replies with a shrug. Perhaps because Subaru's statement carries no more effort spent psyching himself up than usual, Garfiel scrunches his nose.

Looking down at Garfiel's annoyed expression, Subaru's face tightens.

Subaru: "Garfiel. What happened to Otto."

Garfiel: "He went n'pulled all that nice fuckin' bullshit on me... n' so my fangs maim'd'm t'bits n' now his body's out fertilizin' th'forest."

Subaru: "—"

Garfiel clicks his oversharps fangs as he licks his lips, causing Emilia to swallow her breath. Overwhelming rage emanates from all of Garfiel. That fact alone conveyed how great a fight Otto had put in against him.

As well as the fact that Garfiel had been unable to cut any corners while fighting him. And so,

Subaru: “So he's alive then. The heck, you had me fucking worried... My guts were seriously frozen there wondering if everything'd been ruined, no joke.”

Garfiel: “...Eh?”

Subaru: “But why the hell did he go off doing... couldn't've been, I mean he said he managed to get Ram's help, did she wind up putting some weird ideas in his head? Sounds like something Ram'd do... I mean she didn't tell us how she'd move at the critical moments.”

Garfiel: “Oi, OI, Fuck off!”

Subaru: “Which means Ram goddamn helped with tearing you up. I mean yeah. No way Otto could do this much solo. The hell. This had me wondering if that damn Otto'd been hiding some secret powers from me, was sorta fracturing my feelings of friendship with him.”

Garfiel: “—Fucker! Th'fuck're you goin' on about! Eh!?”

Garfiel howls in rage, his flood of emotions slamming into the ground, rupturing it. The earth caves in beneath the force of Garfiel's stomp, creating a crater with him in the centre. Fissures spread across the pit of the crater as its dust wafts around Garfiel, him baring his fangs.

Garfiel: “I fuckin' killed him, that's what I'm tellin' you! Th'guy's gone! He used his mystery blessin' t'get th'forest on his side, fuckin' humiliated my amazin' self with goddamn bugs n' mice. N' at th'end he hit me with some huge magic he ain't got any chance'v actually usin' by himself. N' so... my amazin' self paid my respects f'r th'bastard's fightin' spirit. —Paid him with my claws, n' fangs!”

Subaru: “The forest on his side... Right. So that's another way you can use the BLESSING OF XENOGLOSSY. That ass, hiding something that important from me...”

Garfiel: “N'same for Ram, who th'guy wheedled on! Y'see that Ram, she came'n fuckin' butted int'r our fight, fuckin' attackin' me full force... n' so my amazin' self's fangs chewed her dead too.”

Subaru: “...”

Gritting his teeth, Garfiel buries his face in his hands as he looks up at the sky. While he wordlessly watches Garfiel's laments, Subaru ruminates over Garfiel's statements.

So yes, Ram and Otto had established a fighting unit, and confronted Garfiel. Having Ram's assistance, it's possible that they managed to corner Garfiel to the very brink of defeating him. But regardless, the barricade presented by this beastman was thick.

Garfiel: “I ain't got any urge t'chase after th'guys who ran off durin' him buyin' time at th' moment. But I ain't got any thought t'overlook what yer bastards're doin' here either. You get away from there, n' don't get any closer. No one's goin' n' th'tomb any more. My amazin' hands 're tearin' th'thing down.”

Subaru: “You do that, and there'll be no way to break the barrier. ...This SANCTUARY'll be a closed little garden forever, you seriously good with that?”

Garfiel: “M good with that. Everything 'cept that is bad.”

With that statement, Garfiel's feet lead him out of the crater and toward the tomb. His gait loses all sign of doubt, communicating that he will not hesitate an instant to make the deed the just stated a reality.

Bloody and fraught with total injury—but even in this state, an extreme disparity in strength exists between Subaru and Garfiel.

Even with all his wounds, the ability of the man named Garfiel far exceeds that of Subaru.

Both his creation of the crater and the rancour emanating from him make that obviously clear. However,

Emilia: “I-I, am not letting you do that!”

Subaru excepted, there exists yet another person present here to block Garfiel.

Emilia steps forward from behind Subaru, standing in Garfiel's way as he attempts to close in on the tomb. Garfiel looks up at her, unimpressed.

Garfiel: “What, *oi*. Get outta my way, y'flimsy woman.”

Emilia: “No, I will get in your way. I'm not letting you destroy the tomb. Because no matter what, I'm going to overcome the TRIAL.”

Garfiel: “It's damn obvious yer can't do it. Day after fuckin' day yer wah wah wah wah cryin' all over th'damn place. N' now yer lost yer friends, can't help that yer gonna be sad. Go curl up n'bed n'fuckin' cry. Y'do that, and I ain't doin' nothin’.”

Emilia: “—hk”

Sorrow flashes over Emilia's expression in response to Garfiel's cruel statement. But said expression only last for an instant as Emilia immediately swallows down the pain.

Emilia: “I'm sorry, but even if you say those things, I can't step back for you. I need to challenge the TRIAL. And then face my past, and...”

Garfiel: “Just goddamn fuckin' everybody!”

Cutting in halfway through Emilia's statement, Garfiel clicks his tongue in irritation, fury blazing in his eyes.

The grisly pressure he expels compounds in intensity, Emilia's shoulders trembling. Seeing her fear, sharp-eyed Garfiel snorts.

Garfiel: “What happened t'that blusterin' 'bout yer past? Th'second yer scared of my amazin' self, all goddamn chance is gone yer ever gonner get over what yer most afraid of. —No one can do anythin' 'bout that shit. The witch just does this malicious crap so she can goddamn laugh at people.”

Subaru: “Well isn't that a disparaging invalidation of the witch.”

Garfiel: “Eh?”

Garfiel shifts his blazing gaze from Emilia to Subaru, and jabs his finger at him.

Garfiel: “What? Yer sayin' yer wanna fuckin' protect that asshole witch? They say NO MORNING OR AFTERNOON FOR POTOTSK, but is yer fuckin' stinkin' self just whole out that witch's slave, eh?”

Subaru: “—”

Subaru shuts his mouth.

Garfiel's brows furrow in puzzlement, but he does not seem to understand why Subaru has gone silent.

The witch sleeping in the tomb is ECHIDNA. And the witch's miasma enfolding Subaru belongs to the WITCH OF ENVY.

Only informed to some marginal degree, and unable to smell the miasma himself, Garfiel's comprehension of the situation is not great enough to recognize that discrepancy.

And having had his spirit broken after challenging the TRIAL only once, Garfiel does not even understand the meaning of Echidna's TRIAL.

Subaru: “You're just half measures about everything, Garfiel.”

Garfiel: “...Fuck you'd just say?”

Putting together all of Garfiel's statements and actions thus far, this is how Subaru appraises him. Garfiel responds to Subaru's curt words in low, threatening voice. But even while faced with this looming and ghastly pressure, Subaru looks him in the eye without fear.

Subaru: “It's something you were unable to do, so others'll also be incapable of it. That's how I think, so undoubtedly you're that type. —How awful've you let your complacency get?”

Garfiel: “...”

Subaru: “Yes, you're right, Emilia has failed the TRIAL multiple times. That she's been forced to watch a past she doesn't want to see and came out bawling afterwards is another thing I can't deny. When Puck left she lost it to a revolting extent, and I can't even assert she's righted herself yet.”

Garfiel falls silent as Subaru jerks his chin toward Emilia, who stands beside him.

Emilia looks at Subaru in surprise at these sudden comments from him. But, perhaps impressed with Subaru's expression as he voices these unkind assessments, she refrains from interfering.

These opinions Subaru was stating were ones that Emilia had already accepted herself. While they definitely ought to be embarrassing for her, they were not statements that she should ignore.

Subaru thought her ability to judge that, and face these things, splendid of her despite her weakness. And so,

Subaru: “Maybe challenging the TRIAL won't presently lead to any change. She might lose today as well, and come back crying again.”

Garfiel: “If yer fuckin' know that, then why're yer havin' her, over n' over...”

Subaru: “But, Emilia will challenge it. Countless times. —Unlike you.”

Garfiel: “—*hk*”

Garfiel swallows his breath.

Seeing exactly how a quiver flashes through Garfiel's sharp gaze, Subaru speaks without fear. And once more, as he stares down directly at Garfiel,

Subaru: “Garfiel. You lost and you ran away, and Emilia is not like you.”

Garfiel: “—*hk*! Don't, you fuckin' dare, get cocky!!”

Immediately following Subaru's statement, Garfiel shouts in rage, his right foot shattering the earth. The impact of his stomp sends the ground flying aloft. By some unknown logic it takes the shape of a rectangular slab the size of a tatami mat, which Garfiel's left foot shunts into. The earth block rotates on the vertical at horrifying speeds, wrapping itself in a galeforce wind as it zooms right past Subaru—and slams into the wall aside the tomb's entrance, impacting the ancient structure.

Dust and a section of entangling ivy, of moss and so on, peels away to fall from the tomb wall. They rain upon Subaru's head but he remains unflinching. Emilia's shoulders do hitch up for a moment, but having heard Subaru's statements immediately prior, she does not make any motion to move away.

Seeing the faint but definite bond of trust between the two, Garfiel's eyes shoot open outrageously wide. The gleam in his bloodshot pupils compounds in ferocity.

Garfiel: “Fuckin'! I can't stand either're you! Aauh! Can't stand you! Can't goddamn stand you! With yer fuckin' know-it-all mug! With yer fuckin' unruffled mug! If my amazin' self feels like it, th'two're yer bastards're chunks've gore so mutilated yer won't be tellin' yer goddamn apart! You don't fuckin' know that, huh!?”

Subaru: “I do know. That you're incapable of doing that.”

Garfiel breathes raggedly as he kicks at the earth, voicing threats upon threats upon threats. But his vigorous intimidations no longer have any effect on Subaru's heart. Of course not. With everything that's happened, from his conversation with Lewes, and this present situation—putting it all together, even Subaru finally understands what lies at Garfiel's core. Although showing this much rage, and hostile toward Subaru's group, Garfiel—

Subaru: “You won't kill me or Emilia. Or no, it's that you can't. I mean Garfiel... you've never killed anyone before, have you?”

Garfiel: “—”

Subaru: “You had a fight with Otto and Ram, but you made sure you didn't kill them. Otto's one thing, but it goes absolutely for Ram. They're not showing up because you did something to immobilize them... and stopped there.”

Garfiel's irritated behaviour comes to a stop.

He quiets his breath, staring at Subaru. Hearing the words that Subaru flung at Garfiel, a look of confusion arises in Emilia's eyes.

Being that she has only seen Garfiel's usual disposition, Subaru's declarations must be rather difficult to accept for her.

But Subaru is confident.

Garfiel, at least while in humanoid form and possessing his own will, could not make the decision to kill anybody.

—Subaru has confronted Garfiel several times throughout these loops.

Over differences in opinion. Otherwise when Garfiel abruptly viewed Subaru with hostility. He once took a hit from Garfiel which stopped him when he practised violence upon Roswaal, and lost his eye.

But it was also Garfiel who healed the one-eyed Subaru afterwards, and even when he took a hostile stance, he had never once killed Subaru.

There was one exception. Garfiel had transformed into a tiger and slaughtered the evacuees. It's a memory that Subaru would rather not recollect. But it is also an impossible memory for him to forget, vivid, an event which made him even now feel things about Garfiel that he could not really swallow.

But, reflecting on the event, there is something Subaru noticed.

Garfiel could not speak while transformed. He brandished his claws and fangs according to his instincts, having degraded into an animal. Even when he turned his weapons upon the villagers, that had likely been according to instinct.

But, back then, that first villager—that first single person who became the trigger for the slaughter—when Garfiel killed him, it was to the very end of the end, truly scraping to the borderline, that Garfiel hesitated about it.

Back then, the excess of rage and panic had kept Subaru from understanding.

When Garfiel turned to approach that very first person, Subaru thought his panic had made everything look sluggish. But that was not the case. It was legitimate hesitation.

Once he killed him, once he lost that hesitation, was the moment Garfiel truly became a beast.

Cognizant to the taste of blood and life, the eyes of that tiger were things that Natsuki Subaru remembered with loathing.

Subaru: “Your eyes aren't like they were back then. You won't let yourself kill anyone, yet.”

Garfiel: “Fuck's your, basis fer that. Nevermind Ram, my amazin' self ain't got a speck've a reason t'hesitate in gnashin' yer lackey dead.”

Subaru: “Exactly, nevermind Ram.”

Emilia: “H-Hey... you two, is there some kind of grudge you have against Otto-kun...?”

Emilia timidly cuts in to comment about Otto, who is receiving very unfortunate treatment in this conversation.

But, perhaps for the first time ever, Subaru consciously ignores Emilia and jabs his finger at Garfiel.

Subaru: “If you'd thought to hit me right now, you could've done it. But you didn't think to hit me. You just used threats. It's murderousness as an accessory. Wonder which of us's the scared one.”

Garfiel: “Oi, oi, OI... watch how yer prattle yer mouth, bastard. Go any further, and yer never know which words're gonna be yer last.”

Subaru: “Quit making threats you can't follow through on. I had my fill of cowardly people trying to act tough back in the alleyway with Tom Dick and Larry. Though at least they had enough guts to stab me.”

Garfiel: “Stop... stop it...”

Gritting his teeth, Garfiel looks at Subaru with an expression of fury. However, his opponent is Natsuki Subaru. No greater juncture existed for him to show off his talents than when pissing people off. And so,

Subaru: “And your oh so prided claws and fangs too, you groom them nicely every day, but just leave them there as decoration. If you want, how about trying on some stylish nail stickers? It's what all the girls do where I'm from. Don't think it's a perfect match for your spineless, girly self?”

Garfiel: “I told you t'fuckin' stop—!!”

Another strike.

The gouged-out earth bounces into the air, skimming over Subaru's head to crash into the tomb. There's no need to dodge. Garfiel never had any intention of hitting.

Subaru: “If you're gonna play with mud, go do it in the sandbox. Do you understand that this thing behind me's a priceless historical artefact? And aren't you stationing yourself as the fangs or whatever that guard this SANCTUARY? This thing behind me's the grave of the local witch. She's your buddy, don't discriminate against her.”

Garfiel: “She ain't! My fuckin'! Buddy! It's because that fuckin' buried witch's here that... my amazin' self... my amazin'...”

Subaru's gab is in perfect form. Even Garfiel's breathing gets choppy and feeble, faced with Subaru's fluent provocations.

Garfiel had come here while pushing his wounded body. Then he continued in this tiring conversation, and spent no time hesitating to waste his energy on pointless threat displays. His bloodflow accelerates in tune with his emotions, some of his supposedly-stable injuries opening again.

Garfiel takes ragged breaths and stands very still as he glares at Subaru. When his gaze switches to Emilia. His nose scrunches up, as if he has noticed something.

Garfiel: “Oi... fuck off, you. Fuck's with those eyes.”

Emilia: “...”

Garfiel: “If yer got somethin' yer tryin' t'say, goddamn say it! It's fuckin' pissin' me off I'm gettin'

looked at like that!”

Perhaps seeing something in Emilia's eyes as she wordlessly watches him, Garfiel howls. Complex emotion rests in Emilia's amethyst gaze. She shakes her head.

Emilia: “Garfiel... what are you so afraid of?”

Garfiel: “I'm, afraid... yer sayin'?”

Emilia: “Well you're afraid. You're talking loud, reaching out as best you can, and stomping the ground to cheer yourself up, aren't you?”

Garfiel: “Like yer know, fuckin' anything 'bout me...”

Emilia: “I do know. After all...”

Cutting off Garfiel's quieter statement, Emilia takes a single breath.

Emilia: “—I've also been living in constant fear of many things.”

Garfiel's breathing freezes.

Emilia touches her chest, her fingers confirming the absence of the crystal, a fleeting sense arising in her eyes.

Emilia: “I managed to get to this moment while always scared of lots of things. I left lots of things to Puck, I leaned on him... I didn't notice I was doing it, and I made it here. But today, since just a moment ago, I feel like I finally understand it a little.”

Garfiel: “Shut up.”

Emilia: “I don't clearly know what's right yet, or what it is I have to do. But I feel like I know that there's SOMETHING. And I can find that SOMETHING inside the tomb. I can't move out of your path.”

Garfiel: “Shut it. Disappear. Don't talk to me.”

Emilia: “...But don't you truly already have that SOMETHING?”

Garfiel: “—*hk!*”

Past his limit, Garfiel's head springs up. His knees bend slightly, for his petite frame to go bounding off like a shot.

He leaps for Emilia with horrifying speed. —But just before he can reach her, Subaru cuts in between them.

Subaru: “Garfiel!”

Garfiel: “—Tch!”

Reaching his arms out toward the oncoming Garfiel, Subaru charges while simultaneously protecting Emilia. Subaru collides with the strike, going tumbling, wincing in pain at the battering.

After rolling several times from momentum, he stops face-up on the ground. Garfiel puts his claws to the fallen Subaru's neck as he bares his fangs at Emilia.

Garfiel: "Right now! Right fuckin' now, get away from here! Don't, n' I'm paintin' yer clothes red with th'blood from his dismembered neck!"

Emilia: "Subaru—"

Emilia prepares for battle.

She may have lost Puck, but she is still a practitioner of the spiritual arts. She could enlist help from her contracted minor spirits to use magic. Leaving aside whether she would win, she could fight Garfiel.

And thus Emilia immediately moves to build up mana—

Subaru: "Emilia, stop! I'm fine! He won't do anything anyway!"

Garfiel: "Shut it! Fuckin' enough, 'm sick of this crap! My ears're rottin' off listenin' t'th'bullshit from yer n' that woman! 'F I rip open that loose mouth'er yers n' cut off yer jaw, maybe yer ain't gonna talk none'v this shit anymore?"

Subaru: "—gh,"

Leaning down on the fallen Subaru, Garfiel runs his sharp claws over his left cheek. Their points gouge into his flesh, Subaru wailing quietly at the burning pain. But even still, his eyes do not yield.

Subaru: "You get us out of the way, destroy the tomb, and then what? ...You think running and running and running is going to let you get away?"

Garfiel: "It's yer own regret. Goddamn who can do anythin' 'bout it? That thing ain't got th'slightest idea 'v lettin' us get away. Why is it you ain't gettin' that!"

Subaru: "No, I'm not getting it, Garfiel. —Since your past, and your regrets, can be overcome."

Garfiel: "—"

Subaru asserts.

Garfiel and Emilia swallow their breath.

Subaru: "It was painful, it was suffering, it was so overwhelmingly pathetic that I couldn't face anyone and I gave up. But the only who thought it was hopeless was me, and actually, nothing was beyond hope at all."

Even saying they were fake events, false parents, and created from memories.

Subaru faced his biggest regret, and procured a single answer as well as a goodbye.

The TRIAL assuredly did confer Subaru with pain. Just remembering it made his insides creak, the thing in his chest was perpetual, and the TRIAL had branded Subaru with both his past and with suffering.

Subaru: "But, including that pain and absolutely everything, I swallowed my past. Swallowed

it. ...While yes the witch is an asshole, and I'll never forget how she betrayed me when I tried to trust her.”

Passing through his mind is the visage of the white witch, always smiling mysteriously. No matter how much time passes, Subaru will never unravel his complicated feelings about her.

But, there should be no need to betray even the feeling that he acquired back then.

Subaru: “I'm grateful to the witch. I'm glad I could face my past. I ran, I ran, I ran and I ran... but I'm glad I couldn't escape.”

Garfiel: “—”

Subaru: “Garfiel. —Are you seriously still running from your past with your family?”

Garfiel: “Wh—!?”

Garfiel's face changes colours.
It reddens in rage, pales in shock, and now, turns pallid.

The clicking from his fangs results from the trembling of his chattering teeth.
With chills, or perhaps in dread, Garfiel looks down at Subaru.

Garfiel: “Who, told you... about my past?”

Subaru: “Basically everyone you're thinking of. Do you think that's a betrayal? Or do you think it's something else?”

Garfiel: “ue, au, aehu...”

The overwhelming fury keeps Garfiel from even speaking as he gives choppy, faltering breaths. His breathing comes intermittent. Witnessing this violent shock happening immediately before his face, Subaru continues.

Subaru: “The witch told me that you're afraid of the outside world.”

Garfiel replies with nothing.

Subaru: “Frederica told me that when she offered you to leave with her, you denied her.”

Garfiel replies with nothing.

Subaru: “Lewes-san told me that what you saw in the tomb, was your goodbye with your mother.”

Garfiel replies with—

Garfiel: “Moth, er...”

Subaru: “I heard the superficial outline of you and Frederica's circumstances. You're siblings from a human mother, and two different half-blood demihuman fathers. You two quarter-bloods aren't

bound by SANCTUARY's barrier. Frederica left SANCTUARY so that she could create a place to receive the people from here, for when the barrier is eventually broken.”

Garfiel: “Sister...”

Subaru: “But you didn't take Frederica's hand, and stayed inside. Why did you? What is it you want to do, for what purpose is it, that you're still here?”

His breathing labours.

Garfiel's hand as it presses Subaru to the ground starts putting in more force. He was not doing this to silence Subaru. Garfiel was so entirely ruined that if did not put his strength into something, cling to something, he would imminently break down.

Subaru: “In the tomb you saw your past. You saw your mother leaving you and Frederica behind in SANCTUARY... did you?”

Garfiel: “—“

Subaru: “That's the reason you're avoiding the outside world?”

Silence is to be taken as a 'yes'.

Garfiel remains silent, looking at Subaru with weakest gaze he's given yet. It could not even be called a glare, this powerless look.

His expression was that of a small child, scared of his secrets being exposed.

Guilt for cutting into another's wounds arises in Subaru's chest. He subdues the feeling, grappling it down, as he presses Garfiel for the truth.

He stabs his finger into the faintly visible wound, forcing the hole wider, letting the blood flow.

Subaru: “Because your mother abandoned you. Because you hate your mother who abandoned you, because you hate the outside world that took your mother, you detest the outside world!?”

His theories from speaking with Lewes.

His advice from Echidna, saying that Garfiel fears the outside world.

The reason that his goodbye with his family remains in Garfiel's heart, and even now stings him as barbs.

Hearing the assertive tone of Subaru's statement, Garfiel frantically shakes his head.

Garfiel: “No! No, nononononono, yer wrong!! The fuck'd you goddamn understand! Stop runnin' yer mouth like yer know shit!”

Subaru: “That's right! What I said is my imaginings, and what my mouth's running is know-it-all bunk. The only one who can say what you're really thinking is you. If I'm wrong, then what are your actual feelings on this!?”

Force presses down on his lungs. Subaru shows no pained expression as he raises his voice. Showered in Subaru's voice from below him, Garfiel's face stiffens. He looks away.

Subaru: “You rejected Frederica who left for the outside, you bound yourself with the duty to protect SANCTUARY, and you're interfering with people who challenge the TRIAL while they attempt

to break the barrier! What is it you're scared of! What is it you fear! So you just hate the outside world!?”

Garfiel: “Yer, all wrong...!”

Subaru: “So you just hate your mother who abandoned you! You challenged the TRIAL, saw yourself being abandoned, and so that's what you're afraid of!”

Garfiel's expression twists in grief.

He lifts his hand from Subaru, uprighting himself in an attempt to escape Subaru's verbal pursuit. But he will not get away.

Subaru reaches out, grabs the back of Garfiel's neck, and pulls him to a stop.

With Garfiel's gruesome, bloodsoaked face within breathing range, Subaru glares at him, presses further.

Subaru: “Answer me, Garfiel! What is it you're afraid of!”

His theory from speaking with Lewes, Echidna's words, Roswaal and Frederica's attitudes, Ram's expression when she looks at Garfiel—Subaru saw an answer differing from all of them.

If he was right, if this was the truth, then...

Garfiel: “No, my amazin' self's... my amazin'...”

Subaru: “What is it you truly think!!”

Garfiel: “My amazing... mine, mother...”

Garfiel swallows his breath, gazes up at the sky, his fangs chattering as he,

Garfiel:

“—I wanted her to be happy!”



Garfiel: “We were in the way, weren't we!? Myself and my sister, we were in the way of her happiness, weren't we!?”

Flowing over.

Everything that Garfiel had been holding in until now.

Garfiel: “Well I knew that! She abandoned me and sis. And of course she would!”

Garfiel's reasoning, which he had kept in his heart, never revealed to anybody.

Garfiel: “Couple of goddamn brats she couldnt've wanted, n' ones with demihuman blood at that... of course we'd impede her from living in the outside world! Leaving us behind, throwing us away,

what is weird about that... there ain't nothing... incorrect with that!”

Unable to hide his wavering voice, he buries his face in his hands to hide his wavering eyes.

Garfiel: “I get why we were abandoned. So I don't resent mom for abandoning us! 'S goddamn obvious! Myself and my sis, we were impeding our mom's life! She threw us away, and left SANCTUARY so she could be happy!”

While still young, Garfiel had seen his mother off as she left the two of them behind and exited SANCTUARY.

He could not have understood what he felt back then. But the feeling had laid its roots in him, grown inside him over a long span of time, and bloomed into a single answer.

Being: His mother had just abandoned them.
However,

Garfiel: “But y'know, that night... I, saw it. There in th'tomb, in the TRIAL, I saw it. I saw it. S-she, left us, and left SANCTUARY, and... right then, right after she left, her carriage got caught in a landslide, swallowed in the dirt and she just died...”

Subaru: “—!”

Garfiel: “Sis doesn't know... Sis fucking thinks mom's off somewhere, forgotten about us and living a happy life. ...But reality's not that! Mom, the second she abandoned us! She died!”

Fragments of the truth, sobbed out of Garfiel's mouth.

The harshness of it overwhelms both Subaru, aware of the circumstances, and unaware Emilia.

Garfiel remains before the silenced two, head still buried in his hands, his breathing ragged with his weeping.

Garfiel: “She just damn died... she never got to be happy...”

Subaru can give no reply.

Garfiel: “Why? But you know she left for the outside so that she could be happy?”

Emilia can give no reply.

Garfiel: “But you know she left us because she wanted to be happy?”

Neither Subaru nor Emilia can give Garfiel any reply.

Garfiel: “She abandoned us, but if she never got to be happy and just immediately died, then...”

The unanswerable questions stream from Garfiel's mouth.
And surely—

Garfiel: “What are we meant to do about our sadness, about this feeling of being thrown away?”

—These questions had always, always chorused eternally inside his heart.

Garfiel: “I wanted mom to be happy!”

Power comes to his teary voice.

Garfiel draws his hands away from his face, gritting his teeth as he pauses.
His fangs could crack. His canines could tear through his lips.

Garfiel: “The sadness we felt! And the loneliness of being disowned! It was meaningful because it was for her happiness, that's what I wanted to think! I wanted to be able to hate mom!”

Having lost any harbour for his feelings about his mother, Garfiel's heart has been trapped inside SANCTUARY.

Without anything to strike against, his emotions had been the fuel to keep aflame the blaze consuming his soul.

Garfiel: “But mom just died! Me and sis, we had a sad experience and that was it. Mom didn't get to be happy at all, heavy rocks and sand buried her, she died in agony.”

Having reached this conclusion, there amid the smouldering ashes inside him, Garfiel decided.

Garfiel stands up. He draws away from Subaru.
He looks up at the tomb, and in a low voice,

Garfiel: “—I ain't ever going t'the outside world.”

His voice shakes.

In rage, in sorrow, in vestiges of fury, the flame still blazing even now.

Garfiel turns around.

He looks down at the fallen Subaru, and clicks his sharp fangs.

Garfiel: “Desertin' th'place and going outside ain't going to give you happiness! Trying to change anything comes accompanied with pain, and not everybody can withstand that hurt!”

Subaru: “—”

Garfiel: “There's shittons of hopeless people out there! This place's full'v'em! What'm I meant to do! Just make them sacrifices for happiness, and give them sad experiences?! Just be like my sis?!”

Subaru: “—”

Garfiel: “I will—my amazin' self will—protect them.”

He clenches his fists.

His howling stops, his eyes hosting quiet determination as he pauses.

Garfiel: “My amazin' self'll protect them. Everything my hands can reach, my amazin' self'll protect. Protect, protect, protect... never ever lose anybody... never let anyone experience anything like what my mom did!”

Not anger, not sadness, prompts Garfiel's heart to tremble.
Neither Subaru, nor Emilia, can move when faced with these feelings of Garfiel's.
Garfiel spreads his arms wide, turning his back to the tomb, and shouts.

Garfiel: "I'll be the barrier! A real one, dividing inside and outside, a barrier!"

Subaru: "Garfiel..."

Garfiel: "I! Will! Protect SANCTUARY, protect everyone! Protect nanna! My amazin' self's the only one who can do it! My amazin' self's the only one who knows it! And it's fine for them not to know!!"

Garfiel's nigh bloody scream, his resolve, his determination.
Faced with that, they cannot speak.

Garfiel has steeled his resolve entirely.
And so,

Emilia: "—Subaru."

Subaru: "It's okay, Emilia."

Emilia calls out to Subaru as he stands up, steps forth.
He gives a wave of his hand to her concerned voice as he approaches Garfiel.

The two face each other, mutually between an arm's reach.
Words would no longer stop Garfiel.
And so, there was only one thing to do.

Subaru: "You goddamn stubborn, oblivious bastard..."

Garfiel: "—"

Subaru: "I understand your resolve. My assumptions'd been wrong. And your assumptions are wrong too. And so... I'll go and rectify them."

Garfiel stoops down slightly, his arms dangling at his sides.
Although he may look undefended, an abnormal and ghastly aura emanates from him as he takes this serious battle stance.

Subaru raises his hands to take his own battle stance, as well.
With Garfiel as his opponent, having determined that words will not work, to fight him on his turf.

Subaru:

"I'll force you into absolute surrender, and teach you. —That you're a kind, weak, stupid idiot!"

CHAPTER 112: THE INSTINCT TO REJECT WEAKNESS

—The fight peaked with unimaginable severity.

The two men face each other, trading fists from straight on.

Hard bones batter into flesh, muscles bursting, blood dripping. There come the wails, the unpleasant heaving of frothy respiration, the wretchedness of the sloppy fistfight as it burns into the eyes of the observer.

Emilia: "...Subaru."

Standing before the tomb's entrance, the onlooking Emilia puts her hand to her chest.

Her eyes host confusion, her fingers waver in search of something to cling to. The perpetually reliable presence at her chest and their warmth, aware as she is of its absence, still binds her heart.

Subaru had said things to her inside the tomb.

Subaru asserted that he loved her, cherished her, and so he believed in her.

Indeed, a part of her did feel saved by these words. But it also came with compounding anxiety.

Her true memories were being resurrected alongside the ticking of the seconds.

She had believed that false memories were where she began, and with that belief, reached this point. Once her beginnings, her trigger for getting this far, changed, just how would it change her?

Her truest feelings conflict with each other in argument, unease rooted deep within Emilia.

Subaru had shouted that even if Emilia changes, his love for her will remain unchanged.

This boy who had hurt and suffered for her, and attempted to fight to the end for her—she had not a speck of doubt about his feelings. He had proved them continuously.

—What she can't trust is her own self.

She walked along a path which had its foundations set in an incorrect beginning, and although she thought she had the end of this road in sight, she stopped. She wondered whether she might be walking in the wrong direction, hesitating despite seeing the end.

Her feet have stopped moving.

Would she be permitted to start walking again?

Would the path she walks be a new road, or the same road she walks now?

Emilia: "—"

She wanders within the labyrinth of unanswerable, impenetrable questions.

Even now, unable to speak up, and aware that she lacks any right to stop them, Emilia watches the two men fight.

A scream, and to great heights, the blood spatters.



Cutting through the air, the swing of a fist.
Knuckles come looming for his face—at depressingly slow velocity.

“Tch!”

No need for an overblown dodge.

He tilts his head in the barest minimum, evading the fist without sustaining even a graze. His opponent's stance disintegrates due to that big swing, and there into the adversary's undefended stomach, he jabs his knee to gouge their bowels.

His knee feels their rib-bones and flimsy muscles, the attack transmitting to the depths of their gut. Their mouth, already multiple times subject to expelling fluids, vomits up blood unrelenting.

“Ggauh, aug,”

They hold their stomach, their movements faltering, their visage atrocious. He pounds his uplifted arms into their slouched back, following from his frontal attack to now scramble their innards from behind.

They had managed to withstand the kick, but they fail to endure the strike from behind and easily collapse. He kicks them to rotate their fallen body upwards, then follows up his attack by driving his toes into their left flank.

Their screams peal.

Their breathing heaves with vomit and blood.

His fists, his knee, his toes. With every strike the sensation of their skin, of their flesh paring away, rebounds to him.

Usually that would jubilate him, but presently he only felt incredible discomfort.

These actions repeated over and over and over and over—and what in the world was the point of it?

“Enough's goddamn 'nough, fuckin' give up already.”

He casts jeers on his coughing, unsightly opponent as they spit up blood.

He is failing to take their consciousness. He can strike their head, kick their stomach, but they quite detestably will not concede it.

Especially detestable, when is attempting to make them understand the disparity in strength between them.

Garfiel: “Yer sure a fuckin' brainless bastard, oi! Yer ain't got a hint ovv'er a chance'ev winnin'! Yer back's slouched! Yer swings're pointl'ssly big! Yer balance's wobblin' everywhere, 's a goddamn tragedy!”

Subaru: “...My bad.”

Garfiel: “Aaugh, yer fuckin' shitpile! Do yer know what it fuckin' feels like t'have t'entertain this pointless, pighead'd game of yers? Fuckin' fuck off, fuck off.”

Garfiel spits his insults at Subaru, who attempts with laborious breaths to upright himself.

Subaru's hands contact the ground as he struggles to push himself up. Recipient to punches, his face is swollen, and his nosebleed coats the lower portion of his visage with red. Some of his teeth surely must be broken or missing. His guts, his ribs, wouldn't be strange for some of them to be busted.

With the violent pain ravaging his body, he should not be able to even remain conscious. And yet.

Garfiel: “What's th'damn point! Didn't yer challenge me 'cause yer thought yer had hopes'v winnin'! All yer fuckin' doin' is showin' off how goddamn ragged n' beaten yer are I can't even watch it! ... Take a fuckin' nap!”

Subaru: “—Ghguh!”

Obstinacy, stubbornness, those words cannot describe the tenacity Garfiel senses as he once again brutalizes Subaru.

He sweeps Subaru's legs out from under him, drives his foot into Subaru's flank when he collapses. Blood spews from Subaru's mouth as Garfiel kicks his tumbling form skyward, then drives his elbow into his suspended frame to shunt him back to the ground.

He ricochets off the earth, the hard ground beating his body before he comes to lie spread-out on the floor.

His eyes peel wide, he exhales an airy breath, and this time for sure lies motionless—finally knocked him unconscious. Garfiel gives a long sigh.

Subaru: “Fuck're you, looking like it's, over...”

Garfiel: “—hk!”

Garfiel's shoulders heave with his ragged breaths, when the voice he hears from below prompts his eyes to shoot open in shock.

The man he surely had knocked unconscious somehow, wavering, manages to stand.

Garfiel: “Don't, goddamn joke...”

Subaru: “Yeah... this's, no joke here. With how beaten, up I am I... can't think of a... single, funny anecdote...”

Garfiel: “That ain't what I m—”

Subaru: “—Hhhah!”

Exhibiting a nightmarish doggedness, Subaru spits a sharp breath and swings his fist.

Naturally, no matter how desperate the punch is, from Garfiel's perspective it's equivalent to being assaulted by a child. His hand easily catches and diverts the oncoming fist, and as compensation he drives the heel of his palm into Subaru's guts.

The strike drills into a space between his organs, rippling to impact his internal fluids—his already-vacant stomach constricts, and up flows blood and yellowy bile.

Subaru: “Gugh, bhuhh...”

Garfiel: “S th'same thing no matter how many times yer try, how many fuckin' times do—”

Subaru holds his stomach and crumbles on the spot as Garfiel once again urges him to surrender. He cannot bear to watch the disgusting atrocity of it. Garfiel averts his gaze, clicking his tongue.

Garfiel: “—!”

And past his face roars Subaru's fist.

Garfiel: “Wh!?”

Subaru: “Garfiel, you fuck. Who gave you permission to just ditch me?”

Left arm forward, right arm back.

Seeing Subaru readied in combat stance, his will to fight not abolished in the least, Garfiel feels something near a shiver.

He doesn't consider Subaru a threat for even a moment.

Anyone could tell that Subaru was making empty threats, the strength gap between him and Garfiel too great for any amount of struggling to compensate.

He could keep sending Garfiel these reckless punches, but be it a thousand times or a million times, the ironclad strength gap meant Garfiel would simply dodge every attempt.

All of Subaru's struggling, every single moment of it, was futile.

No matter how many times Garfiel punched, kicked, threw him, no matter how much pain he sustained, his overstressed body would never touch Garfiel.

Garfiel: “Y'fucker, stop shittin' around!”

Subaru: “Haah?”

He was facing an opponent who could not win, but nevertheless lofted stubbornness alone as his weapon.

His spirit alone would not fold, his feelings alone would not falter. Perhaps that mentality ought to be called strength, a strength unbound by the flesh.

Seeing him stand up after falling again and again perhaps did jolt Garfiel's heart to some degree.

But, if he was hoping that this display would make Garfiel change his mind, that constituted an insult beyond parallel.

His spirit alone would not fold, would not bend. These concepts possessed what point, exactly?

Garfiel: “Do yer really fuckin' think that 'f yer keep bein' bullhead'd, even knowin' yer won't win, my amazin' self's eventually gonn'er stay my fists? Really fuckin' think that my amazin' self's gonn'er get sick'v punchin' n' kickin' yer, acknowledge yer spirit n' stand down... that I'm gonn'er lose by ceding to emotions, is that what yer trying t'fuckin' say!?”

Subaru: “—”

Garfiel: “Don't fuckin' joke. This fight between me and you ain't any fuckin' game! Yer beat them down, er yer get beat down. There ain't any other endings t'this!”

He stomps the ground.

The power of his EARTHSOUL BLESSING fills him, the earth supplying his body with overflowing

vitality.

Compared to when he had finished fighting Ram and Otto in the forest, and so pushed his ruined body to venture here, his flesh is in better condition. This not-even-a-fistfight with Subaru was not exacerbating his fatigue, in fact he may as well be sitting in trees shade and having a pleasant reprieve.

And this minuscule influence of Subaru's is meant to sway Garfiel's heart just goddamn how?

Garfiel: “Yer goddamn said it, didn't you! That yer gonna teach my amazin' self that I'm weak, that's what yer goddamn said! Well th'fuck is this, then! The fuck is weak! The fuck're you teachin'! The one who ain't got th'strength and 's gettin' forced into surrender, the brain' ss idiot here is goddamn you!”

Garfiel remembers every syllable of Subaru's pre-battle declaration.

It was utter buffoonery. Entirely farcical. Every inch of this man defined the word fraudulent.

Garfiel: “N' that guy n' Ram too! Both've them who battled me at least had th'guts t'try 'n win! N' that's why I fought them back with everythin' I had. They worked their brains comin' up with plans, compensatin' for where they lacked by usin' their smarts... those two had th'guts enough for me t'acknowledge them. But what about you!”

While he did not know the exact details of how it worked, Otto had used his blessing to get the forest on his side, and cornered Garfiel. His methods of herding Garfiel into that final blast of incredible magic illustrated that he had utilized all his vitality and intellect, his fighting spirit so great that Garfiel would gladly commend it as the apex of what the weak could do.

Ram's offensive which began with her surprise attack, although conferring him with an agony equivalent to betrayal, was indeed a fight perfectly befitting of Ram. Merciless, no punches pulled, a battle between persons of genuine strength.

Both had made their most desperate efforts while fighting Garfiel, and fully intended to steal victory.

Their methods deserved esteem. So much so that Garfiel had to recognize them as foes and yet glorious.

Garfiel: “Compared t'them... there ain't any way t'be more obscene. Y'get done in 'n done in 'n yer still stand up... n' so fuckin' what? No matter how much yer beaten, yer spirit won't yield... n' fuckin' what does that say? Even sayin' yer hopes'v winnin' er zilch, yer ain't ever fleein' the fight... what's so fuckin' commendable!?”

Subaru: “—”

Garfiel: “Yer think I'm impressed? That yer bloodsoaked, wobbly legged, can't even open yer fuckin' eyes right, n' yer still standin' up thing, 's gonna stir my feelin's n' I'm gonn'er stand down? I'm gonna churn you t'goddamn mincemeat... What fuckin' idiots do yer want t'make of me, n' of th'people who acted for yer sake?”

The greatest indignation Garfiel has ever felt in his life blazes within his chest.

The fight has been defiled. He has been insulted. And not only that, but this man's methods were attempting to pollute the nobility, the resolute will, of those whose fights Garfiel had acknowledged.

Garfiel: “Take a fuckin' nap. Pull the fuck out. You fucking disgusting, miserable pile of pile of pile of shit. Yer best answer 's to accept yer've lost n' curl up t'nap in yer cot, you halfwit.”

Subaru: “...”

Still in his fighting stance, Subaru bathes in Garfiel's lines and lines of curses. His head wavers unsteadily, his eyes near swollen shut but somehow managing to capture Garfiel. His will to fight was not waning, which precisely made his filthiness an eyesore.

If all these words, these blows, these punches were not leading his spirit to bend, then what did he have to do to break him?

If pain will not achieve it, then only one solution remains.

Garfiel: “How 'bout you try goddamn tellin' him, huh!?”

Turning around, Garfiel calls out to Emilia, observing the fight from the tomb's entrance. Her shoulders tremble minutely as the conversation is suddenly aimed at her. The display of weakness makes Garfiel click his tongue in irritation.

Garfiel: “Yer can't bear t'fuckin' watch, now you goddamn tell him that! He ain't fuckin' listenin' when I say it. Have th'girl he loves tell him he looks disgustin' n'lame, that his efforts ain't achievin' nothin', that he's benign shit!”

Emilia: “...I-I,”

Garfiel: “What!? Yer sayin' y'can't fuckin' do it? Does it look t'you he still has any hope'v winnin'? Or do yer like watchin' this? Yer watch the guy who loves you get torn up n' broken down for yer sake, n' does that delude you into feelin' yer loved, fuckin' really, oi!?”

Emilia: “—hk!”

Emilia freezes rigid, her eyes wide open, as the spite showers upon her. Garfiel's merciless statements thrust daggers into onlooking Emilia.

If Garfiel's fists will not stop Subaru, then Emilia's words are the only option. His body would be broken by Garfiel, his heart would be broken by Emilia, and so being even Subaru would surely yield.

Over the course of watching the fight, Emilia's face twisted multiple times in pain as she witnessed Subaru be beaten.

Unlike Subaru with his mysterious resolve, Emilia's heart has not steeled itself for anything yet. She is still the same girl who lost the TRIAL and sobbed wailing afterwards.

Garfiel had no great intention to lambaste her for that. To be overwhelmed by the TRIAL, by your past, was natural. Who on earth could negate the memory of their greatest regret?

The concept that you could overcome your past, your regrets, was utter bullshit.

Subaru had mixed up what were realistic ideals and what were unattainable fantasies, a madman. This boy persistently standing before him chased entirely after fantasies, and demanded that others do the same thing. He was legitimately insane. He was the same breed as Roswaal, an imbecile whose vision encompassed one thing and nothing more.

Garfiel: “Fuckin' stop him, n' end this! Both me, n' you! We're dancin' to th'tune of that witch's bullshit. N' that's all that's goddamn happenin'.”

Emilia: “I—”

Emilia's back straightens as if struck by lightning, her eyes shooting open. Her captivating eyes are damp with tears as she looks at Subaru. Her lips quiver, Garfiel's gaze still fixed on her, as she moves to call Subaru to stop. Everything will be over then. But—

Subaru: “Emilia.”

Emilia: “—”

Before she can speak, Subaru is the one to call. She closes her mouth as she listens intently to Subaru's faint voice. Frantic, so as not to miss whatever he may say to her. To her, Subaru states merely one, single thing.

Subaru: “...Watch me.”

Nothing more. Spoken in frail voice, practically whispered to himself. But Emilia hears it, looks up in astonishment, and after several seconds of hesitation—

Emilia: “—Mm.”

—Puts her hand to her chest and nods.

Garfiel: “...Hah!?”

Faced with their exchange and entirely uncomprehending, Garfiel shouts in confusion. His eyes widen in fury, only for Subaru to jab at him his finger.

Subaru: “...So you've been going on griping for a while now, but you got it wrong, Garfiel.”

Garfiel: “Th'fuck?”

Subaru: “Maybe to you, I look like an idiot putting in their all despite having no chance of winning... but I'm not joking around. I've learned crazy goddamn well when it comes to knowingly getting into fights I can't win after suffering pain thanks to you. Never doing it again.”

Subaru's face is a swollen mess, yet it still manages to twist into a scowl.

This event that Subaru is referring to is nothing that Garfiel could know, but apparently it relates to some overwhelmingly detested memory of his.

But even pitted against that sentiment, there is something he said which Garfiel must not overlook.

Garfiel: “Fuckin' ridiculous. It ain't even ideals or fantasy anymore, yer straight out not seein' what's there. F' y'stopped challengin' opponents y'can't beat... then th'hell's this situation, oi. Th' fuck is this situation!?”

Subaru: “Isn't it obvious, stupid? I still... haven't abandoned the fight for even a moment.”

Perhaps his consciousness compounds in clarity as his speaks, for strength begins to return to Subaru's voice as he makes his assertion.

This baseless vitality of his seals Garfiel's throat mute with how it enrages him.

Subaru: “Long as I can still stand, I haven't abandoned the fight. ...And the point where I stop standing back up only happens once I'm dead.”

Garfiel: “...”

Subaru: “And with how you chicken out during the decisive moments, you can't kill me. ...Meaning you can't stop me. It might only be bit by bit, but I'm inching toward my win. My victory is definite.”

Garfiel: “Y'fuckin' imbecile! This ain't a thing 'f me bein' able er not able t'kill you. How the fuck! With what struggle! Are you fuckin' possibly goin't'beat me!?”

When wounded head to toe and as ragged as an old dishrag, any amount of words ring hollow. Subaru's statements equate to nothing more than extravagant prate. 'You can't stop me unless you kill me' was merely him expressing his volition. And assuming the claim was legitimate, he was then meaning to state that unless killed he could keep fighting, and eventually manage to land a fatal blow on Garfiel?

That would not occur, and would need incredible quantities of time and miracles to ever happen.

Garfiel: “My amazin' self breaks yer limbs, n'then yer can't do nothin' n' it's over! Whether yer conscious, er whether yer wann'er win! 'D have nothin't'do with it!”

Garfiel roars in furious rage.

His feet siphon vitality from the ground, his once-fatigued body regaining strength halfway to his usual. This constituted more than enough power for mutilating Natsuki Subaru.

He stomps off the earth, goes flying for Subaru.

Faced with Garfiel's approach, Subaru jabs out his fist as if happy about this turn of events. It's moronic. Slow. Unequivocally insufficient. He easily dodges it, strikes him in the abdomen. Pistons his knee into his chin, grabs him as he recoils and throws him hurtling to the ground. He drives his heel into his fallen form, wresting out two, three screams of agony.

A merciless series of attacks. And with this—

Subaru: “...It's over, you think?”

Garfiel: “—!! Pisshead, what the fuck IS THIS!?”

Supposedly sustaining even more grievous bodily wounds, Subaru stands up. Witnessing it, an unknown, arcane feeling begins to mantle Garfiel's heart.

He couldn't defeat him? He couldn't win? No, those were not where his anxiety lie. It was in the suspicion that maybe, truly, exactly as this man stated, merely accumulation of physical damage would not manage to stop him.

Garfiel: “What th'fuck is th'point in riskin' yer life for this! Say you somehow manage t'beat my amazin' self, do yer really think that half-witch can beat the TRIAL! You seriously think that's th'case here, huh!?”

Subaru: “...”

Garfiel: “Like those miracles could happen! Like that convenient shit could happen! Million to one, billion to one chance, sayin' yer beat my amazin' self, doing that ain't gonna change anythin' 'bout that woman! N' it's th'same for anyone! When yer have a messed up, hopeless past... when yer see how yer regrets've stewed, you can't do goddamn anything about it! Why ain't you understandin' this!”

Subaru: “You're the one who should be hearing that question!!”

Garfiel: “—!?”

It lacks in enough momentum to be a burst of outrage, possesses too much emotion to be an appeal. The cracks skirting though Garfiel's logic-devoid words fracture further beneath Natsuki Subaru's yell.

Subaru: “Stop goddamn going off deciding everything on your own, Garfiel!”

Garfiel: “Fuck're you...”

Subaru: “Stop goddamn going off deciding what Emilia's limits are. She isn't that weak.”

Distant, standing before the tomb, Emilia swallows her breath.

Subaru: “Stop goddamn going off, deciding what my limits are. No one tells me to fold, or to abandon everything and cower. My surrender is never happening.”

Spitting blood, the glint in Subaru's eyes grows stronger.
And,

Subaru: “Fucker, don't goddamn go off giving up on yourself. You can do goddamn more. More's out there for you. ...You were a damn kid, you weren't even fully grown yet. Fucking clinging to an intractable idea you came up with when you didn't even have pubic hair!”

Subaru straight-out informs Garfiel that the belief he stubbornly held, the creed which had kept his heart bound to SANCTUARY, is imbecilic.

Garfiel: “—”

Garfiel immediately opens his mouth to reply.

But something feels to have stabbed into his chest, keeping any speech from exiting his throat.

He cannot say anything. Nothing is coming out.

His head blazes white. It isn't that he thinks Subaru correct. There is no possible way Garfiel could be wrong. The self he started being after he realised he was wrong was not wrong.

He must not be wrong.

And so this man claiming that Garfiel was wrong, must not be permitted to be here.

Garfiel: “Hah... hahhh... got it...”

Subaru: “...”

Garfiel: “I need to stop you. I ain't got any idea'v any'v what yer sayin'. But it's makin' me feel sick. N' so, I'm stoppin' you.”

He must stop him.

And the way to stop him is surely, the exact way the man had previously stated.

—So long as he still breathes, this man cannot be stopped.

Garfiel: “Then... I'll, kill you...”

Subaru: “Can you?”

Garfiel: “Fuck off. —The method t'do it was always right here.”

If he will not stop unless killed, Garfiel would now kill and stop him assuredly.

Now, here, he would make the choice.

—Make the choice to entrust himself to the abhorrent, vile blood of the beast sleeping inside him.

Garfiel: “—σσσσσ”

He holds himself, all the blood in his body seething with incendiary heat.

The inferno feels to superheat his every exhale with red. His cells squirm, his muscles swell, his mass explodes in size.

His limbs grow thick as logs, his abdomen bloating to snap off his loincloth. Golden fur sprouts across his whole as his sharp fangs mature instantly into elongate sabres.

His face protrudes into a snout, the world changing colour alongside the slitting of his pupils.

His thoughts solder. The mind of the once-present Garfiel Tinsel drowns.

The exhilaration of transformation, and the feeling of his bestial instincts driving out his rationality. Once everything's done and he returns, what remains before him will be ravaged chunks of scattered gore. The final visage of Natsuki Subaru.

He had not been able to stop him short of doing this.
He had neither intent to lament, nor to repent for that.

People who lacked strength were bad.
The weak could proffer nothing. All there was to it.

His consciousness was fading.
His bestial instincts screech in jubilation, jaws opening to devour their miserable prey—

—The dimwitted animal's vision drowns beneath an eruption of ink-black fog.

CHAPTER 113: JEWELS NEVER COME FROM THE SOLITARY QUEENE

His eyes won't open fully. Blood flows through him so poorly he veins might as well be clogged. But the scarlet dripping from his nose and his wounds shows no signs of dampening—was he or was he not wanting for blood? Bleeding some of it out might actually be perfect for his broiling brain.

With all the punches he's taken, Subaru's recognition of the world comes with just a smidgen of lag while he shakes his head and thinks these thoughts.

It really felt he had been standing up solely for the purpose of getting punched again. He did not mean to stand there doing nothing, but even supposing he punched or kicked back, his attacks would not hit. With every blow he sustained he spat blood, suppressed his pain, made himself smile a cryptic smile which screamed 'your attacks are entirely ineffective!' and stood back up. And repeated this.

They were not ineffective.

Both the insides and outsides of his body groan, the entirety of his guts practically burst and mashed together. The bones supporting his body feel erroneously to have crumbled to dust, and the fact that all his limbs still move according to his will can only be described with the word 'miracle'.

However, not a single one of these things resulted from a miracle.

Every time his consciousness seemed about to fall, about to falter, his fading awareness would be grabbed by the neck and dragged back to him in stern reprimand.

From inside his pocket crackles a hot, sharp pain—an excessively spartan compass, practically cooking his brain.

While it's something he had requested himself, his cheeks still twist at how relentless it is.

He was using tricks to keep himself from losing consciousness. Regardless, numerous other strategies existed for Garfiel to stop Subaru.

That Subaru nevertheless, as he recklessly continued to stand up, never sustained damage which would perfectly incapacitate him, was entirely due to Garfiel's own judgement.

If he took a real hit from a Garfiel in top form, then Subaru would be done in a flash. Just one hit would transform him into sloppy chunks of gore.

The exorbitant damage Garfiel sustained from Otto and Ram's fight did contribute to why this has not happened. But Garfiel, who strained his wounded body to get here, still possessed the fangs to kill Subaru in one bite and the claws to shred him apart with one swing.

That this has not happened is due to, unable to fatally injury another no matter what his own condition is, Garfiel's judgement.

Ultimately, Garfiel is far too kind—is likely the situation here.

The Leweses, Frederica, even Ram, all of them had appraised Garfiel that way.

His usual crude disposition and boorish behaviour made unimaginable the sensitivity of his heart. Although he spoke of violence, internally, he constantly nurtured and focused his strength in a manner that would protect.

Someone he found unforgivable, someone liable to destroy SANCTUARY.

Even with such a person as his opponent, he could not make the decision to take their life.

Subaru: “—”

Subaru knew he was taking advantage of Garfiel's disposition and kindness. Utilizing Garfiel's personality had been a principle of Subaru's for fighting him all along. With Garfiel as his opponent, too kind to give it his all, then Subaru was somewhat convicted that he would not be killed.

But even said, he has a grievously wounded Garfiel facing him, and he's getting decked. If Garfiel had been in peak condition, Subaru surely would not be getting away with so little. For that he felt grateful to Otto and Ram, who had endeavoured for him while ignoring his plans.

—Could they be dead?

Being that Garfiel's personality keeps him from killing Subaru, it's inconceivable that he would have killed Otto and Ram. Even if it had wound up happening, Garfiel's attitude would give it away. And most importantly, if Garfiel had killed Ram, then no reason existed for him to show up and stop Subaru in human form. To rationalize, and remain in bestial shape would be natural.

Garfiel had not denied Subaru's statements about his neglect to kill them. Meaning that the conclusion to Otto, Ram, and Garfiel's fight amounted entirely to that.

Garfiel: “—σσσσσσσ”

Garfiel cradles himself as his body starts transforming. His arms, his legs, enlarge not one but two times over, his torso's thickness and size shifting into something overpowering. His claws and fangs become sharp as blades while his face morphs from that of a human to that of a feline. Golden fur coats his bare skin. Four feet contacting the ground lug his great body.

—What materialized here, with Subaru reflected in its slit-pupil eyes, was a golden tiger.

He needed to kill Subaru to stop him. After countless swings of his fists, Garfiel finally reached that conclusion. And so to kill the Subaru that he needed to kill, Garfiel made his decision.

He would call to the blood sleeping within him, to his bestial instincts, become a tiger and take Subaru's life. All while in the shape of a dimwitted animal, to end this without witnessing anything.

Subaru: “But that's where you're messing up, Garfiel.”

His inability to kill his opponent, and inability to strike them down with his fists, was kindness. Making the decision to protect SANCTUARY, to protect himself and those around him, was also kindness.

But running away to where he would not witness his actions, all for the sake killing of someone he could not kill, had nothing to do with kindness. What it was was Garfiel's weakness.

And Natsuki Subaru would not hesitate to take advantage of it.

Subaru: “Begging you, body of mine. Don't break down from this!”

Hostility fills the transformed Garfiel's eyes, their reflection being Subaru.
His limbs bend. Omens that the beast will come charging to rip Subaru apart.
This is the sole juncture he has for decision. Subaru grits his teeth once before focusing on his body's centre—on the gateway tied to the point just below his navel, and shouts.

Subaru: “—SHAMAAAAAAAAC!!”

Garfiel: “—”

The instant the tiger opens its mouth, the world answers to the fervid call.
Ink-black fog erupts in the space between Subaru and the beast, drowning away the form of the towering creature. Moments before its consumption there swings an outstretched paw, but it strikes nothing before vanishing beneath the smoke.

Once the spreading abyss of dark swallows the beast, the unfurling confusion hoists the creature's existence into end.

Subaru: “ue, aauh...”

The instant he finishes watching the events through, an impact like a blow to his head assaults Subaru's skull.
The sharp pain of a drill boring into his cranium from both within and without makes his vision strobe in crimson, lights dancing all around. Unlike the dull pain of Garfiel's punches, this was an unsparing sharp hurt, as if shaving away at his soul—hurt he manages to swallow down, ingest.

The taxation of his gate, which he had been warned not to use.
The Capital's greatest healer had cautioned that he may never be able to use magic again. Betraying that advice, Subaru utilized the thing once more.
He feels his imperceptible gate burn. The foundations of this gateway within his centre sways tremendously, and somewhere far and distant and separate from his body, something severs.

This pain of something violently, messily, being wrest away.
Alongside the lossful sense of what will never be recovered, it brings Subaru's heart understanding.

Subaru: “Thank you.”

A strand he had continuously relied upon is cut.
He doesn't mind. An option that he supposedly lacked in the first place had merely been eliminated in earnest.
Regardless, it was owing to that power that he managed to get this far, and for that he was grateful.

For this was farewell.

Subaru: “—”

He looks forward.
His last cast of magic had failed to fully enshroud Garfiel's tremendous form. While crucially his

head is veiled in the centre of the smoke, his overhanging body has its right flank peeking out.

He put in his absolute best, and still managed only this.

He sighs out his nose. A clot of blood stuck there dislodges, spills. He rigorously wipes it away with his sleeve as he leads his unsteady legs to step forward.

He reaches for his pocket. Palms the hard thing, feeling intense relief that it has not broken over the course of this battle. Should this thing be gone, he didn't have a fuck of a chance.

Subaru: “—”

The inky fog is steadily beginning to thin.

How many seconds since he cast? Ten? Five? Might even be shorter. He seriously had not a single speck of magical talent in him. But right now he was grateful for it.

The tiger's right flank was visible. Captured in a world of obfuscation, body immobile.

While the magic had been imperfect, it conversely robbed Subaru of any need to deliberate.

And so there is no deliberation in his course.

Right foot, left foot. Far too slow to be called running. But so goes this laggard, momentum-helmed sprint.

There, once he draws close enough to touch this immense frame—

Subaru: “Get back down into my court, Garfiel.”

—Into that thick shoulder, Subaru takes the shining blue crystal from his pocket and pushes—stabs.

Light, spilling over.



<After your contract with Emilia's broken, you're back to being a free spirit... yeah?>

<Well, I suppose that's what it would be. But, even calling me free, my individual power is pretty immense. Your run-of-the-mill person wouldn't be able to provide the mana to maintain me. And besides, no matter who else it could be, I don't have any urge to contract anyone but Lia.>

<So that mana to maintain you.. it has to seriously be a lot?>

<Yup. For example's sake, Subaru, we'll pretend that you tried to conduct me, and even borrowed power from the ambient mana... Mhm, I suppose you'd dry up in say, a day.>

<Uh...? Sounds tighter than I thought. But is that enough that you could you fight?>

<That day we're talking about is where I'm not materialized and you're just carrying me around. If I materialized would be, mm, I guess it'd take five seconds before you're out. Want to try it?>

<How about no. But man, seriously what happened to that thing about me having affinity with

spirits?>

<So long as we're talking about these spirits over here, might be preface you needed for that. But even if that wasn't what it meant... my situation comes with special circumstances. I seriously am a spirit specially for Lia.>

<—>

<The plan to employ me after my contract's broken and freak out Lia is hitting some setbacks.>

<I wasn't asking you about this as a plan to shock or freak her out. But... are you kidding me? Guess my ideas were off then.>

<Sorry. And even pretending that it would probably work, there's the problem of the anchor... actually, since we're here, we might've been able to manage something about that.>

<Anchor... something like the crystal hanging around Emilia's neck?>

<That one really is special. But fortunately there should be something made of the same material around here, and we could at least figure something out if we borrow just a tidge of it. But either way, even if I'm stuck inside the crystal, and left just stuck inside the crystal, the mana just isn't...>

<—So, something I wanna ask.>

<Hm? Yes?>

<Leaving aside whether it's a contract, is it possible to just have you inside a crystal if you're agreeing with it? Um, so long as the mana supply's there.>

<That'd be right. But, securing that mana supply would be incredibly difficult. Because I'm literally draining the mana, in my case. Sucking and sucking, until you're incapacitated...>

<—>

<...Subaru?>

<Say, Puck.>

<Mhm?>

<So those replacements you mentioned for the crystal, where are they?>



—Stabbing into the tiger's right shoulder, expelling a terrific light, is a blue crystal.

Neither polished nor sanded, the cut-away jewel's sharp point drives into the animal's skin, where it grabs the creature's vitality and siphons it away.

Subaru: “—ghh!”

Dazzled by the light, Subaru topples backwards as if assaulted by forceful winds. He falls on his behind, retreating as he watches the scene before him, where the tiger swallowed in smog still has yet to notice the alternation to its own body.

That crystal sizeable enough to grasp in the hand would voraciously drain the mana of creatures it stabbed. Just keeping it stored in his pocket had exhausted Subaru incredibly.

What would happen when that effect was applied directly to the body? The answer lay right in front of him.

Garfiel: “—auh, aaaghh!?”

The smoke clears.

The visual obstruction from the fog, and forced confusion from the magic.

By the time he is released from both of these, the tiger—Garfiel—has lost the majority of his animal flesh, on his way back to his original shape as a young humanoid man.

His fur flakes away and to the ground, limbs once the width of many logs tied together returning to a sane thickness. His fangs and claws shrink, his body cracking and creaking as it reverts to human form.

The one looking most baffled by this transfiguration is none other than Garfiel himself.

His eyes shoot open in shock at his loss of his bestial shape and return to his original body. He raises his arms, staring at his human hands with quivering, golden eyes.

Garfiel: “Th, ridicu... what th', hell...”

Subaru: “I did tell you, Garfiel. —I don't get in fights I can't win.”

Garfiel's head springs up to look at Subaru.

Subaru wipes off his rear as he stands up, his face swollen but smiling insidiously. Garfiel comprehends the alternations to his body, and the fact that he remains severely wounded. He turns his head, to notice the foreign object stabbing into his shoulder.

Garfiel: “Hell... 's, this? No, this thing is...”

Subaru: “Pretty sure you recognize that light. Me and you should both know it.”

Garfiel: “Yer bastard, where'd you... get...”

Subaru: “Obviously. —From Lewes Meyer's crystal. It's one of the jewels from the stock to keep it going.”

—The laboratory deep in the woods.

Lewes Meyer, who became the cornerstone of the barrier to protect SANCTUARY. The crystal which held her trapped and eternally crystallized depended on some fraction of the duplicates to maintain its functions.

At regular intervals, Lewes duplicates would exchange the driving mechanisms inside the glowing crystal's lower base. And of course, those crystals were not infinite in quantity. The supply in

SANCTUARY would eventually run dry, and no longer work to maintain its faculties.

Subaru: “Which means they have to be brought in here regularly with food and stuff. When you're one of Roswaal's backers, there's more than enough opportunity to pinch say, one of them.”

Garfiel: “But, just doin' that... just stabbin' me, ain't gonna, drain my strength like this... what goddamn, trick did yer put...”

Subaru: “Well. ...Maybe there's a preposterous and starving monster inside that crystal?”

His breath faltering, Garfiel struggles to speak

He reaches for his shoulder, attempting to somehow pull the jewel out—but the blue crystal practically rejects Garfiel's fingers as it stubbornly remains in his flesh, unyielding.

Giving a deep sigh, Subaru lets his body untense as he turns to look behind him.

He looks up to where Emilia quietly looks down upon him. Subaru's situation must have appeared doomed even to her.

Regardless, she never attempted to stop Subaru's battle. This girl who, when he fought battles while running off a stubbornness unreasonable in either of the two's case, had once so fervently attempted to stop him.

Even Subaru understood that there was something, which he not quite assert as being trust, between them.

That something between them surely was some something which they had yet to put into either words or form.

The crystal has pinned Garfiel's actions to a stop.

Emilia must have noticed something, seeing that glow. She didn't know what. But it was fine that she not know. For now.

Subaru: “Watch me, Garfiel.”

Garfiel: “Eh..?”

Subaru: “If you want to stop me, then do it by your own hands. Don't leave yourself to that blood inside you, where you can't damn tell what you're doing. You're the one who's making idiots of people.”

He steps forth.

His body creaks, blood dripping without pause from somewhere.

His life is flowing out. But he has no intent to either stop, or let himself be stopped.

Subaru: “You're trying to stop us. We will stop you. —Emilia will challenge the tomb. SANCTUARY will be freed. We don't have time to sit around at stalemate.”

Garfiel: “Jus' spoutin' whatever fuckin' bullshit y'goddamn like! Who fuckin' asked! Who fuckin' gave you permission! This place, just as it is, stayin' as it is, without any changin', is fine!”

Subaru: “Not like it can possibly stay unchanged, stay stagnant, stay like this forever. That's something that... centuries ago, before the place wound up like this, someone ought to have

realised.”

Garfiel: “There're people! Who don't want it t'change! Who want it t'stay the same!”

Subaru: “I figure it'd be fine if you, keeping things entirely unchanged, could keep reigning as the place's guardian eternally and forever. ...But, y'see, there're things you can't achieve alone no matter how hard you try.”

Time would, the generations would, both eventually leave Garfiel behind. Eventually, he would lose the power enough to keep protecting the unchanging SANCTUARY.

Subaru: “Just like how we all ganged up to corner you, there's gonna come a time where you can't manage it on your own. Like any second.”

Subaru walks, to arrive before Garfiel.

Garfiel clutches the crystal in his shoulder, his breathing unsteady but his eyes nevertheless strong as he glares at Subaru. Subaru reciprocates the glare from straight-on.

They both knew that merely slinging words at each other would not suffice. And so—

Subaru: “Go get dead collapsed, Garfiel. Behold the power of numbers.”

Garfiel: “There had t'be other goddamn ways t'say that!”

Garfiel roars.

A fist comes swinging below. But sluggishly. With the crystal draining his energy, barely any strength remains in Garfiel. Subaru breezily tilts his head aside—and fails to move as intended and so eats a fist to the face. His vision swims.

Garfiel: “Yer who's gettin'th'goddamn lights out! Then my amazin' self's knockin' th'tomb down, n' you n' the others, I'm keepin' all'er yer here 'till yer dead!”

Subaru: “So that's what you were fucking planning, huh!”

Subaru responds by stretching out his faltering legs and slamming his fist upwards. Unavoidable, the punch smashes into Garfiel's face. For the first time this whole fight, Subaru lands a clean hit.

Terrible posture, the core of his body unsteady, his arm not even fully extended, a shitty excuse for a punch.

He naturally could not expect the strike to be as powerful as he hoped, but against the present Garfiel, it was more than enough.

Garfiel: “—Gh, ghaug,”

Now accompanying his bodily wounds, the mana supporting his body is being leeches from his core. Garfiel already stood at the precipice of martial incapacitation, and Subaru's strike would be the decisive blow to send him hurtling off.

But,

Garfiel: “Ain't, gonna work!”

Subaru: “Ghhge!”

Garfiel's two feet stomp the ground as hard as they can, his posture lowering as he drives his elbow into Subaru's solar plexus. Subaru screams, utilizing his lowered head to strike Garfiel's forehead with a headbutt. The two both recoil at the numb pain to their skulls, both send out their fists as they right their heads, both land their hit.

With fists mutually driven into the other's cheek, blood begins to flow from the noses of the two. Subaru was at the limit for physical damage, while Garfiel was, with the mental factors included, sitting in critical territory.

The glow of the crystal in Garfiel's shoulder steadily grows dimmer. That perhaps proved that Garfiel was near exhausted of mana, or otherwise said, proved the battle in proximity of conclusion.

Subaru: “—Ghhabh!”

Garfiel: “Fuck're you dozin' off for!”

The instant he drops his guard, the fist at his cheek flicks open, sending his face rebounding with a smack.

For a moment the strike sends his consciousness soaring off to elsewhere. He immediately grits his teeth, hard, the pain of his cracked tooth as it shatters guiding him back to consciousness. He could not rely on trickery any more to keep himself from falling unconscious. Now the object was contributing in a different form, in a fashion without any greater parallel. Subaru would have to withstand all the pain on his own.

Negligence. Conceit. Idiocy.

Subaru would always be weak, and would never sincerely be the superior party in a fight.

Subaru: “And so... I can't be slacking off!”

Garfiel: “Ggha,”

He swings his left arm down to hook Garfiel by the neck, sending the two of them toppling to the ground. With his body battered, Subaru grimaces in pain as he attempts to upright himself. When a vicious pain spears across his left arm, pinned to the ground as it is.

He looks to find Garfiel's fangs biting down on the upper portion of his arm.

Subaru: “Geeuhe!”

Garfiel: “—Ghggg”

Subaru: “Aaaih! Get off! This hurts, you idiot!”

Subaru punches Garfiel in the face to make him let go. His arm is squelched into freedom as the fangs release, but a limb pierced to the bone has no hope of moving. And his right arm—

Garfiel: “Got... yer!”

Subaru reaches out his right arm in an attempt to repossess his left, when Garfiel grabs his shoulder. While he may have lost the strength to throw a swing or a kick, he has not lost the strength to grasp. Constrictive force enough to shatter a boulder destroys Subaru's right shoulder, bones and all.

A dull cracking resounds through the air alongside Subaru's silent shrieks. His upper left arm has been mutilated and his right shoulder has its bones destroyed, both nonfunctional. With his arms robbed of their capabilities, Subaru's eyes shoot open as Garfiel kicks him down.

Garfiel: “S th'end! Now there ain't nothin' y'can do! What I shouldd'er done was this... was turn yer into a floppin' sardine from th'start!”

Seeing Subaru writhe on the ground, Garfiel's cheeks twist in victorious jubilation. He gets to his unsteady feet before turning his head to the sky, letting loose his voice. The howl of an animal, an aria of triumph. Now all Subaru could do was wait to be stepped on, finished off, and—

Subaru: “...How many times do I have to tell you, don't decide my end!”

The blow of the headbutt thrust up from below bashes Garfiel in the nose, sending his eyes spinning. He stumbles off course. Subaru stands with his arms hanging limp. It's impossible. Ridiculous. This isn't a question of strength of will, but an issue resting on an entirely different dimension.

Subaru: “My end, and your end... neither are here yet.”

Garfiel: “G-goddamn... fuck off... don't yer dare stand. Quit standing... I...”

Garfiel's face twists in agony as he takes a single step in retreat from the standing Subaru. As if, unable to use his arms and capable only of standing as he was, he was scared of him.

Garfiel: “Th'fuck is this persistence gonna do! Th'people here, every last one v 'em! Every single one's a hopeless dreg! The outside rejected 'em, n' here's th'only place they have! They go outside, and what! What happens!”

Subaru: “You leave, and be something. If you're going to be here to end peacefully, then do it. Neither one of those options are available here any more.”

No matter how much strength Garfiel flaunts, and no matter how he fights, it will not change the coming future.

Garfiel by himself cannot stop the threat the Sizeable Hare presents. No matter how hard he tries, he will fail to save some people. And each time that count increases, he will lose his strength, until he is eventually defeated in the face of insatiable hunger.

If Subaru could communicate that future to him, perhaps he could be impelled into action right here.

But that would not mean that he changed his mind.

It would only be a temporary push. His heart would remain sealed inside SANCTUARY. Once he

knew the danger had passed, he would return here, still pretending the place was a paradise while he submerged into stagnation.

Ignoring the push at his back, ignoring the hands offered to him, disregarding all of it, Garfiel Tinsel would feign his mourning of his mother's death while unceasingly consoling himself.

Subaru: "Leave this place, Garfiel. This blockade you're scared of doesn't exist."

Garfiel: "There is a blockade! I am one! I'm an unfailing blockade, separatin' inside and outside! Me, n' nanna, n' the others! We all stopped still! It's already the end for us!"

They gave up once. The people of SANCTUARY feared connection with the outside, retreated into their paradise, and gave up on contacting the world outside the forest.

And so Garfiel was trying to protect that enclosed paradise. Asserted he would.

That was equivalent to letting their lives be made consummate. Because of one person, going off doing things on his own.

Subaru: "Then we'll break that blockade... right here and right now, us!"

Garfiel: "That guy! And Ram! They're havin' beddy byes! And yer gonna be gettin' yer peace too! This 'us' yer talkin' about don't fuckin' exist anymore! Here's the end fer me and fer all you!"

Subaru: "Do you think it's fucking smart to give up? It's damn obvious that it's cooler not to! You think that when you give up on everything and stop, walking means the end for you? Just take a little rest and walk again! The opportunity for it visited you goddamn ages ago!"

The TRIAL which resulted in him fearing the outside world.

Garfiel experienced that TRIAL, and Lewes and Frederica nevertheless loved him.

Frederica chose to step into that outside world, to create a place where the people of SANCTUARY could live, once the barrier was someday broken.

She would have turned to look back, and offered Garfiel her hand.

She would have seen Garfiel stopped still, and offered that he walk again.

Of course. After all, Frederica was Garfiel's sister.

When a little brother cries themselves stuck, it's their big sis who reaches out for them.

Subaru: "You said Frederica left for the outside world, and left you behind. But you're wrong. You're absolutely wrong, Garfiel. You aren't bound to the barrier. If you wanted to follow her, you could've any time. You're the one who neglected to!"

Garfiel: "...I,"

Subaru: "You're the one who drew away first, Garfiel! Then you fucking winge winge winge about it being your sister's fault! You don't think it's fucking pathetic!?"

The pit of his chest burns. What on earth was he saying? He was starting to lose track himself. Deep in his gut, in that very core, something dark squirms.

The supernatural gateway beneath his navel, connecting Subaru to the outside world, has lost its function.

So then, right now, this thing in the pit of this body, asserting its presence, was what, exactly?

Still unsure of his head, of his body, of this man before him, he screams.

Subaru: “Any time! Any moment! When you want to act! When you want to change! The instant you think that marks the starting line!!”

Suffer failure, lose everything, wallow in resignation and stop, hug your knees and cower. Even should the disappointment in yourself, the disappointment of others, the isolating feeling of being abandoned by your precious ones all feel to steep you from your depths upwards, and you're stuck thinking that you're worthless.

Subaru: “Raise your head again, walk the path in front of you. And how can anyone order you to give up on that!”

Give up! Relinquish! Surrender!
Idiocy. All of it, insipid bullshit warranting no heed.

If there is someone hugging their knees, and you feel the caprice to call out, you best as well support them.
Do your best! You can do it! I don't know what's up, but if you stand and keep running, you'll reach somewhere.

—His chest, burns.

Subaru: “Aren't I right, Garfiel!”

He calls the name of the man before him, his eyes wavering feebly, his visage small.

—His guts, blazing.

Subaru: “Aren't I right, Emilia!”

He calls of the name of the girl behind him, her gaze looking down at him, her standing on the threshold between weakness and something else.

—His eyes, with it spilling over.

Subaru: “Say—aren't I right, REM!!”

His head raised, mouth open, eyes wide, he calls the name of the person who gave him the impetus to stand.

He had been taught that giving up and coming to a stop should surely not mean the end.

Natsuki Subaru desired that the power he was given that day reach every single person there was.

Subaru: “—”

A power which does not belong to Subaru squirms within the core of him, shrieking its birthing cry. Cheering the fact of its birthing, and welcoming the fact of its birth.

With Natsuki Subaru as an intermediary, it again connects to the world.

Heat, spilling over.
In the centre of Subaru's body, a conflagration burns.

It eddies in the space before Subaru, scarlet flowing out his bloodshot eyes, and takes form, tampering with the world.

Garfiel: “I!”

Garfiel soars.
He raises his claws to swing, bares his teeth to show, no longer using words, but actions to deny Subaru's assertions.

Unable to spin words, unable to put his feelings to form, this is the only method he can conceive. He doesn't know anything else. And so Garfiel reaches his claws for Subaru.

Heat spilling from bleeding Subaru is congregating right in front of him, but he doesn't notice. Right in front of the Subaru he is leaping at, there spawns a warp in space, an inconceivable fissure in the world, but he doesn't notice.

—He does not notice the overwhelming force extending from that fissure.

Well naturally. He cannot see it. Or no, nobody except Subaru could see it. Because this thing, which only Subaru can negotiate, is UNSEEN HAND.

Subaru: “—”

The world looks to move in slow motion.
This sensation is a far too familiar one for Subaru. While on the brink of dying, or in the instant before sustaining a fatal wound, or when suffering punishment for voicing the taboo, it's always during pain and depresses him.

But unlike those times, this illusory sensation is presently, here for Subaru's sake.

He sees oncoming Garfiel very clearly.
Full hostility—but, it also carried the wisps of a child's tantrum.

Subaru focuses his gaze on the tip of Garfiel's chin.
Somehow, he knows. Before makes it happen, he gains comprehension.

All he has to do is fix his aim, and let this thing he's tugging taut loose.
That alone, and surely, it would be accomplished.

—And so Subaru does exactly that.

Garfiel: “—!?”

The unleashed power shouts in glee, sniping defenceless Garfiel from below.
The outstretched torrent of force takes the shape of a fist, extends to the shape of an arm, which

slams a punch into Garfiel's face midway through his leap, shooting him high skyward.

Garfiel: “—wh, wha!?”

Struck by a completely unanticipated attack, Garfiel fails to catch himself as he slams back to the ground.

He tumbles to a stop, splayed out on the earth. Subaru understands that he has just fired the decisive blow.

Simultaneously, an incredible load of something is wrested away from inside him.

Subaru: “Euhg, auh... au,”

He falls to his knees, his body folding as he vomits all he wishes. But not a single drop of blood or bile comes out. Not a drop of scarlet or saliva, for nothing extraneous remains within him. That was what a final strike it was, on the tail of so much effort.

The torrent of power unravelled and dispersed immediately after sniping Garfiel. Its fountain likely remains inside Subaru even now, but he doesn't sense that he can withdraw it. The present Subaru, at least, lacks anything more he can give. If he uses that arm any more than he just has, he will need to sacrifice more.

But, being that the fight is over, for the moment that necessity is—

Subaru: “Come on... you're joking.”

Garfiel: “—Don't, und'resti, mate...”

Broken down, bordering on unconsciousness. His vision edged with white, so exhausted any blink could be his last.

He had expended such incredible efforts, and still. Garfiel Tinsel, with an outrageous nosebleed streaming down his face, is standing.

Subaru: “Seriously, just how tough are you...”

Garfiel: “F I ain't, ain't foldin', it... ain't, ain't end, endin'...”

Garfiel's consciousness is halfway gone. His unfocused gaze appears to look at Subaru while not looking at him at all. Tenacity alone was allowing Garfiel to stand, rejecting that final push.

Almost surely, Subaru could shove him and that would topple Garfiel. But the strength to enact that attack was equally lacking in Subaru. Nevermind taking a hit, Subaru was ten seconds away from losing consciousness too.

They had both done their absolute best, having used up every power in their possession to reach this conclusion.

It had always been true for Garfiel, but unmistakably for Subaru too, all of their strategies are done.

If Otto and Ram had not worn Garfiel down, Subaru probably would not have been able to get this far.

The idea that he could do something so long as he had the blue crystal as his hidden ace had been naive. Help in maintaining consciousness, and debilitating Garfiel to the utmost. Even with both of these things, Subaru surely would not have managed it.

The blue crystal on Garfiel's shoulder flickers.

It both seemed encouragement and reprimand for a Subaru on the verge of sinking into failure, and unwittingly he finds himself close to giving a wry smile.

Subaru, the crystal, Otto, Ram.

All of this power combined, and they still could not beat Garfiel. He is, without a doubt, strong. Subaru would sincerely acknowledge that. And so,

Garfiel: “And now, yer...”

Subaru: “Don't... think bad of this, Garfiel. I did say we're breaking that blockade.”

Garfiel: “There ain't nobody...”

With unsteady steps, Garfiel closes in on Subaru.

His arm hangs aloft, and at its tip and dirtied with blood, there exist dull claws. Should they reach him, Subaru reaches his end.

Garfiel puts the whole of his focus into this attack.

And so he does not notice. The tremors, the noise, of what is approaching.

—The final push, to secure Garfiel's defeat.

Garfiel: “O, ver!?”

???: “—ㄉ!”

Drowning out his shout comes the dignified roar of an earth dragon.

The charging black dragon rams head-first into undefended Garfiel, striking him in the side and sending him flying.

Garfiel: “—Gaugh!?”

Stricken with an impact which literally carts him away, wide-eyed Garfiel shoots off as easily as a kicked pebble.

He bounces once, twice, three times off the earth, kicking up dust plumes and caking himself in dirt before coming to lie face-down on the ground.

He does not twitch an inch.

Seeing this, the contributor of the merciless final attack arches her head, roaring.

Subaru: “What do you think, Garfiel...”

Aside Patrasche as she bellows of the victory, Subaru calls out to the fallen Garfiel. In a voice so frail, it's questionable whether he heard it.
The key which decided this battle. What was it?

Well it was simple.
In a fight against strong Garfiel, weak Subaru did not fight alone.
Meaning,

Subaru: "This—is the power of numbers."

Garfiel: "Had t'be, other... goddamn, ways t', say that..."

Motionless Garfiel responds sourly to Subaru's words.
Subaru's cheeks relax slightly in hearing it.

Subaru: "Okay then, it's the assemblage of everyone's feelings, a victory for bonds."

Garfiel: "Haah... 's like a damn, JEWELS NEVER COME FROM THE SOLITARY QUENE..."

With that, Garfiel falls silent.
Seeing that fact through, Subaru comprehends their definite victory, before looking up at the sky.

Subaru: "Finally heard a saying that worked..."

With that satisfied statement, he abandons all consciousness and allows himself to fall.

CHAPTER 114: LIES INTO WISHES

Carried on the roar of a ground dragon, the battle's end echoes through the skies of SANCTUARY.

A black dragon, which had rammed into wounded Garfiel, landed the decisive blow for the fight. This dragon, Patrasche, had run to the scene as if sharing a telepathic link with Subaru, and beautifully given an unparalleled assist in the final stage of the combat.

Patrasche: “—ㄤ!”

This was the second confrontation between Garfiel and Patrasche in SANCTUARY.

On they day they arrived here, carriage-lugging Patrasche had gotten into combat with Garfiel when he arrived to repel the invaders, and suffered a doubtless defeat.

There exists a border between soldiers and civilians. No one could blame Patrasche for being made to eat dirt. Naturally, Subaru did not fault his steed either.

But Patrasche's thoughts on it were an entirely different matter.

She had failed to protect her master, and underwent disgrace.

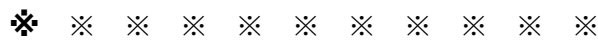
For a member of the proud Diana bloodline, this was a dishonour which needed to be overturned unequivocally.

Being that Patrasche and Subaru cannot communicate verbally, the swift arrival of this opportunity was not a topic they could discuss with mutually perfect comprehension.

And so, with the parts she could not convey included, she demonstrated her thoughts by action.

This roar from the dragon was devoted to her master and to her ancestors.

With how the sound came mingled with accomplishment and satisfaction, and how the dragon drew her snout close to the unconscious Subaru, surely anyone would understand that.



Listening to Patrasche's roar in her restored honour, Emilia gives a deep sigh.

It felt like breathing had been banned. Or rather, the fight had been one to make you forget about breathing entirely.

Watch to the end, Subaru had told her. While keenly perceiving her own powerlessness, Emilia spectated the mens' gruesome confrontation to conclusion.

Subaru had spat blood, moaned in pain, broken down.

Who could suppose how many times Emilia bordered on calling out and running over?

But every time Emilia's weak heart came near to discarding that she wait, Subaru's words of, *watch me*, and his nigh-perfectly timed gaze stopped her.

Neither her action, nor her speech, were pardonable here.

It frustrated her, and she found it hard to bear, but she must not avert her gaze.

It wasn't that anyone told her.
But Emilia's heart quietly perceived that she absolutely must not do those things.

She did not understand this feeling revolving around her chest which had kept her stopped. Subaru had exhibited incredible stubbornness, Garfiel had howled with such incredible ferocity, the confrontation came to its end following the two mens' sloppy fistfight—what was it that the fight was founded upon? Being an outsider to the situation, and a woman who struggled to understand male logic, Emilia could only grasp the situation in fragmentary terms.

But Subaru had demonstrated his doggedness and faith with this fight, enlisting much aid to defeat Garfiel.

And that fact did indeed cause an indescribable feeling to swell within Emilia's heart.

Still driven by that feeling, Emilia recognized that the two's fight was one which deserved commendation.

Meaning that the significance of their battle absolutely must not be tarnished.

And so—

Emilia: "...Roswaal."

With one hard blink, Emilia abandons her hesitation and turns to face forward.

Her gaze oversteps Subaru and Garfiel toppled on the ground before her, reaching to the gaps in the trees beyond.

—Where there wordlessly stands a warlock.

Emilia: "It makes people uneasy if you're just quiet like that. They'll start to think you're up to something."

Roswaal: "Myyyyyyyyyy goodness, how that certainly does sting. And all when I came here, pushing my wounded body, for the sake of yooooooooourself and Subaru-kun..."

Emilia: "If that's really what you think, then I'd want to be more relaxed, but..."

Out from the bushes in front of Emilia there emerges someone tall—Roswaal.

In these several days since their arrival in SANCTUARY, Emilia has only seen him in bed. That he's outside and loitering around here makes her somewhat wary.

Roswaal fundamentally is a backer of Emilia's in the Royal Selection, and her only ally, politically speaking. The one who brought Emilia out of the forest and presented her the path to the throne, and suggested that the villagers sleeping in ice could be saved, was also him.

And so, leaving his idiosyncrasies aside, Emilia had never truly viewed Roswaal as an enemy, or as offensive, or as dangerous so far.

So far as just a couple seconds ago.

Emilia: "The minor spirits have been noisy and restless for a while now."

Roswaal: "...Hrrrrrrrrrm."

Emilia: "Everybody's saying they sense something sooo menacing. ...And right now, even I can see

it too.”

Her voice low and tense, Emilia slowly descends from the tomb's entrance down to the open square. Subaru's face as he lies there is satisfied, while Garfiel's is twisted in regret. Beside Patrasche as she stands between the two is where Emilia takes her place, putting her in position to protect the three of them should anything happen.

Protect the three—she ultimately must have that thought, with how irregular a vibe currently emanates from Roswaal.

A dense, abnormally thick concentration of mana is warping the atmosphere around Roswaal. Just how concentrated was the mana inside this man? This was Roswaal L. Mathers, who commanded all six types of magic, known as the greatest magician in the country. When this man detonated his magic to its greatest limit, just what miracles could happen?

Emilia: “—”

Feeling tipsy off the dense mana, Emilia swallows her breath. Patrasche moves to stand in a place where she is blocking Roswaal's line of sight to Subaru, stretching out her neck as she growls intimidatingly at the warlock. She had also sensed a threat in Roswaal's anomalous atmosphere. Seeing the two's caution, Roswaal gives a shrug, his attitude entirely the same as always.

Roswaal: “How scary. I woouooooould prefer if you could abstain frooooooom looking at me like that. Aaaaaaaalthough, my nature is one where animals and so ground dragons disfavour me ridiculously. Should the same apply for spirits, that does explain why Beatrice won't be cordial wiiiiiiiiith me.”

Emilia: “Stop fooling around. And I'm certain she's unhappy with you because of something else. ... I don't know if it was always like that, though.”

Roswaal: “Noooooooooooo. A long time ago... truly a long time ago, it waaaaaaaaasn't like that. When there were no earth dragons, it used to be that people came here riding grim oxen—riding farrow.”

Emilia: “When, there were no earth dragons...?”

Emilia's brows furrow.

While she is not exactly the most knowledgeable on the topic, earth dragons are creatures firmly joined to everyday living, and the culture and history surrounding them—their connection with humanity—has supposedly gone on for a long time.

What Roswaal must mean is IN LUGNICA. Emilia's studies are too lacking for her to pinpoint just when earth dragons started being densely used in Lugnica, though.

Roswaal slips a small sigh at Emilia's confusion. Somehow, it gives a sense of pre-anticipated disappointment.

Roswaal: “Then you would not know either, Emilia-sama. Weeeeeell, I suppose you wouldn't. While you may have inherited blood from the long-lived elves, your years only amount to a century and some... when you have spent the most of that time asleep, surely you wouldn't remember the world aaaaaaaaaas it was then.”

Emilia: "...You're saying weird things, Roswaal. If we're going to talk about this, then you're way younger than me. Um, but I lose if we mean time spent awake."

That Emilia spent up to a century inside the ice, abandoned by the world and its time, was history that Emilia found embarrassing.

Even with the world at large considered, she plainly should be an elder of the population. But she lacks the experience and knowledge fitting to her age.

Including her inability to beat the TRIAL, her time in SANCTUARY has made her recognize that there are many areas in which she lacks—including this.

But Roswaal just responds to Emilia's worries with a snort, laughing them off. The reaction is an unanticipated one. Emilia's brows shoot up in surprise.

Emilia: "Wait, Roswaal. Why are you laughing like that?"

Roswaal: "— Please excuse me. It truly was noooooothing important. ...Merely reflecting that ignorance occasionally does create situations which are so humorous that it's sad."

Emilia: "...You mean, you're making fun of me. I can at least understand that much."

Roswaal's rather insolent statement leads Emilia's brows to rise, her wariness compounding. Strange mana encircles Roswaal. As if spurred by this stuff he has whetted, Roswaal's attitude toward Emilia is different from how it has ever been.

Emilia has never experienced clear spite from Roswaal before.

The Emilia that Roswaal knew was someone who was always screwing around, often spoke mockingly, and told jokes on Subaru and Puck's par for idiotic, but like them he had never said anything which was disparaging toward Emilia.

Because Roswaal needed to cooperate with Emilia for the sake of his goals, and interact while placing her in the superior position of RULER.

Tracing the logic backwards, Roswaal does not presently see the merit in acting such with Emilia. He had probably lost his temper with her and her constant inability to beat the TRIAL, and given up on her. And that was okay. Because if that was the situation, she could at least understand and agree with it.

But something else presently scares Emilia more than that.

Emilia: "Roswaal... how long were you watching Subaru and Garfiel fight?"

Roswaal: "—How long, which is to say?"

Emilia: "I noticed you there... just a minute ago. When Subaru and Garfiel were hitting each other... right after Subaru used Shamac."

Taxing his ragged gate, Subaru had used magic for the who-knows-what'th time.

He had strained the dregs of mana that he had and used magic as if mustering the absolute last of his power. It resulted in a rather ineffective spell, which soon dispersed.

Thinking back on it, that had been the exact moment where Emilia truly wanted to run over to Subaru.

Subaru once strained the last of his power to cast Shamac in Emilia's presence before, and it had ended in his overwhelming and unquestionable loss.

Surely no one would fault her for envisioning his image back then overlaid atop his image right now, and come close to calling out. But when Subaru jabbed his hidden ace, the crystal, into Garfiel and the odds shifted to fifty-fifty, an emotion other than panic sprouted in Emilia's heart.

And having lost that pressing sense of urgency, Emilia first noticed it. Noticed the irregular signs of someone watching the battle, just like her.

Emilia: "At first, I thought you were there to help Subaru if he reached his limit. It looks like Ram and Otto-kun did something to try stopping Garfiel, so I wondered if you were here as reinforcements for Subaru too. But..."

Roswaal: "Yooooooooou're exactly correct, I indeed came here as reinforcements for Subaru-kun. Is what I could say, but you wouldn't beeeeeeeeeelieve me."

Emilia: "Even without Puck, I can at least figure out mana currents. You were watching the fight where you could intervene at any time... but, who you were aiming for was..."

Roswaal: "—"

Roswaal's odd-coloured eyes narrow as he looks at Emilia. His eyes had been narrowed like this while he was watching the fight. With his magic at its peak and always ready to fire, with his aim fixed on Subaru.

Emilia: "Answer, Roswaal. —What were you thinking to do to Subaru?"

Emilia faces her palm out toward Roswaal. Puck is not with her. There's anxiety to be had over her mana control. The minor spirits are trying to warn Emilia, them terrified of Roswaal and the ominous magic he dons. If she cannot depend on them to help her entirely, then she has to do it herself.

Emilia: "Please, answer. If you don't, I..."

Roswaal: "We are far past any question, and you're stiiiiiiiiiiiiill hesitant in your decisions. No end exists for your blitheness. Or perhaps you place too much expectation in the goodwill of others? It was supposed to be that your days thus far were ones where you were recipient only to malice. How is it that you manage to be so incredibly exposed?"

Emilia: "—hk"

Roswaal overpowers Emilia's pleading words with unrestrained spite. His heterochromatic eyes equally host animosity, him not conceding Emilia an inch. The same applies to the multiple forms of mana churning chaotically inside him.

Matters are proceeding in a questionable direction. Emilia unwittingly reaches for her chest, then remembers that the familiar touch there is absent, and grits her teeth. Her weakness, unconsciously trying to entrust her worries to Puck, frustrates her. To obfuscate that weakness, Emilia increases the strength in her glare as she gazes at Roswaal.

Emilia: “You don't want to answer my question. Then, I won't—eep”

hold back either, is how she means to continue.

The instant she determines so, and begins to build a concentration of mana, something bumps the side of her head.

Surprised at the dishevelment of her silver hair, Emilia looks to her side, to see the snout of a ground dragon.

It's Patrasche. Her push—or really strike, being that it was too forceful of a shove to be described otherwise—prompts Emilia's eyes to widen. The snout of the black dragon's elegant face once again butts into Emilia's forehead.

Emilia: “You...”

They cannot speak with each other, but even still, it seems like Patrasche is supporting her.

—Calm down. With composure, do what it is you ought to.

Feeling that Patrasche is sternly telling her this, Emilia realises that she has gotten fired up. She closes her eyes. By the time she turns back to face Roswaal, her hand no longer touches her chest.

Roswaal: “Truly... I have noooooooo good memories with ground dragons.”

Seeing the change in Emilia's expression, Roswaal gives his irritated opinion of Patrasche. Patrasche's care had so effectively destroyed Roswaal's plans. Meaning that just then, Roswaal had wanted Emilia to get violent on him.

Emilia: “I don't know at all what you're thinking right now. If she hadn't stopped me just then, I know I would've... but, it's almost like you wanted me to.”

Roswaal: “I will simply mention this for consideration. It's because I doooooo dislike being hurt.”

Emilia: “...? But everyone dislikes that.”

Emilia furrows her brows. Roswaal's lips look to slacken sardonically. Emilia can not figure in the least what that smile means.

Either way, brute force is not the option she should be picking here.

Emilia: “Tell me, Roswaal. It's obvious that you're not your usual self right now. How come you're... being desperate like this, tell me.”

Roswaal: “...Desperate, you say. Hrm, goodness my goodness how surprising.”

Emilia: “It's like you're abandoning everything, and you could've been hit with magic and you didn't care... you could tell me it's not desperation, but I wouldn't believe you.”

Emilia could understand that destructive behaviour where you grow sick of yourself, and let yourself act like an absolute insane wreck. The question is whether you direct it inside, or outside. Emilia was the type to direct it inside. Perhaps Roswaal was the same.

Emilia: “If you are, then talk to me. I don't know what I can do for you, but I can help. I mean, up until now you've helped me with so many things, and...”

Roswaal: “—No. That is enough, Emilia-sama.”

But Roswaal's frail voice rejects Emilia's offered hand.

He speaks with the most level voice he has thus far, his eyes numb as he looks down at Emilia. His clown makeup—beneath those laughing cosmetics, Emilia can tell that he is suppressing his emotions to a painful extent. She gulps.

Roswaal's expression looks like he has given up on absolutely every single thing there is.

Emilia: “Enough... what do you mean?”

Roswaal: “What it sounds like I mean. I do not intend to have you understand my plots, and these two's wounds and the TRIAL... and even the Royal Selection dooooooon't matter a for a second any more. —For already this world is an ending one.”

Emilia: “An ending world... or, what's this about it not mattering? The Royal Selection and the TRIAL don't matter... Roswaal, what are you saying!?”

Emilia yells in anger, unable to comprehend what Roswaal is saying.

Roswaal is bathing in suspiciousness. But the hollowness of his expression, and the mana encircling his form, are so abounding in emptiness that it could physically constrict.

Roswaal's heart was presently hitting the peak of instability.

While did Emilia understand that, his claims were not something she could accept.

What Roswaal wanted to abandon was everything important to Emilia, an undefinable something which Subaru's risk-taking had demonstrated.

Garfiel's shouts had clearly illustrated where his stance lie.

He wanted to destroy the tomb, and keep the TRIAL from existing any further.

What was he seeking by making SANCTUARY's barrier unbreakable? Probably an unchanging day to day life, is what Emilia just kind of figures.

And Emilia could sympathize with Garfiel's stance.

Going without changes, being able to go unchanged. That path was a tranquil one, and comfortable. If you could have a mundane life where you spend your time in a peaceful place with those you cherish, then nobody could deny the desire to remain submerged in that environment.

But Subaru point-blank denied that desire, demonstrated his stubbornness, and cast the concept aside.

Emilia was identical to Subaru in terms of stance, for she was urging that change come to SANCTUARY. But her reasoning was not as definite as Subaru's, nor did she understand the feelings of SANCTUARY's people as thoroughly as he did.

This place was a necessary step along the way for her to achieve her goals, nothing more than a spot where she had trodden. What would those around her think of the changes her interference brought? Being entirely focused on her own interior, Emilia had failed to ask this entirely obvious question.

The one who instead asked had been Subaru.
Once again she had made Subaru shoulder her burden, and overlooked everything.

And it was because she keenly realised that that this presented existed.
But Roswaal was trying to discard this present which Subaru's risk-taking had opened.

Emilia: "Roswaal... what are you trying to abandon? It's what... what started with you and me, right? And halfway through, you're... this isn't forgivable!"

Emilia snarls, for Roswaal's brows to react.
A wisp of strength returns to him as he covers his blue eye with his hand, his yellow eye trembling.

Roswaal: "It started with me and you? What are you talking about?"

Emilia: "Huh...?"

Roswaal: "It started with me and my Teacher. —Assuredly, nooooooooot you. And so, allowing it to end should be within my own and my Teacher's liberty. Of course it is."

Emilia: "You can't just do that!"

Even with the incredible aura overpowering her, Emilia raises his voice.
She glares at the clown, swinging her arms up.

Emilia: "So maybe it did start with you and this person... but the issue isn't just about you two any more. It's not just my issue either. We dragged lots of people into it, caused problems for lots of people, and we've kept going like that! You can't just go ending it whenever you want!"

Roswaal: "The road leads only to end now. So whaaaaaaaat could be inconvenient about letting it all end beeeeeeeefore we reach that terminus? Indeed it was hopeless for us... We'll place our expectations in our next selves, and Subaru-kun."

Emilia: "In Subaru?"

Put expectations in Subaru, meaning what, exactly?

Emilia glances at the fallen Subaru, renewing her awareness that Roswaal's words must not become reality.

Of course.

Subaru had already done more than enough. If expectations were put in him, he'd answer them excessively. They should not be seeking any more from him than he has already done.
When something is given, it naturally ought to be repaid.

Emilia: "How can you say that the path Subaru opened leads to the end? Subaru's group all worked together to open a closed path. Isn't that what this battle was?"

Roswaal: "To go either left or right will lead to a dead end. When faced with this crossroads, aaaaaaaaany struggle is in vain. For, the entirety of the truly correct course is written here."

Roswaal withdraws a black tome from his pocket.
Seeing this unfamiliar thing, an impulse rises inside Emilia, clawing at her chest. Her eyes open wide.

That book gives her a terribly bad feeling.
It has no title or cover-wrap, looks an entirely mundane book, but for some reason just looking at the tome makes Emilia feel a pressure which nigh fosters mental instability.

Emilia: “That book's...”

Roswaal: “A replica of the BOOK OF WISDOM. Or perhaps it could be called a superior gospel. To all except myself its writing appears as illegible scribbles, but not for me. It is a text which accounts the path along the correct history, which ought to be followed.”

Emilia: “History which ought to be followed... you mean like the Dragon Stone?”

Roswaal: “They follow the same principles should you trace back their roots, is what Teacher told me.”

Only when Roswaal says the word 'Teacher' does emotion return to his eyes.
His tone was one of envisioning someone darling, as if that simple two-syllable word had long carried emotion he could not fully suppress, a diction which allowed much such supposition.
Roswaal was capable of thinking of someone this way, no issue at all. He was capable, but he was attempting to deem everything he saw as worthless.

Emilia: “You mean, because we're going a different course than what that book says, you'll ruin everything? But what will doing that accomplish? If we look for a different path, different from the book, which isn't a dead end...”

Roswaal: “You're saying the exact same things as Subaru-kun. Is this another idea coming second-hand from him?”

Emilia: “—hk!”

Roswaal laughs slightly. Feeling that he hit the bullseye, Emilia's throat jars.
Her expression prompts Roswaal to give a bored sigh.

Roswaal: “Borrowed words, opinions pre-prepared. Even the idea that you ought to challenge the TRIAL was something that you were pushed into... Weeeeeeeell, I will not fault you. It was I and those around you who demanded that you do it, not yourself. Words spoken with the knowledge that your empty, insignificant self can do nothing other than this... Subaru-kun encourages cruel things.”

Emilia: “Cruel things...”

Roswaal: “The subject here is him, so ooooooof course he went without explaining the logical necessity or whatever have you about challenging the TRIAL, and merely gave you a motivating speech, yes? He pushed his complacency onto you, and claimed that you could do it if you willed. Indeed. Iiiiiiiindeed I know. Aaaaaaaafter all, he and I are ooooooof the same breed.”

Emilia: “You and Subaru are the same? What do you mean?”

Roswaal: "It means that we impose our ideals upon the women we love."

Assertion.

Roswaal closes one eye, gazing at Emilia with the yellow. His smile is strong as he throws statement upon statement at the silenced Emilia.

Roswaal: "With what words did he accost you? Entirely statements pleasant to the ear, yes? He spoiled you, imposed ideals upon you, treated you so tenderly and carefully as if he were handling a fragile object. He didn't consider for a second that you are in actuality weak and brittle, that you are fearful and desire to flee, that you possess such a mundane breed of heart. He doesn't have a shred of interest in the real you. What he's infatuated with is the sparkling version of you he has in his own head. —Coooooooooorrect?"

Emilia: "—"

Roswaal: "I am also that way. With her, I only saw the ideal. You're wonderful, you're brilliant, there's none greater than you. That's how I consoled her, what I kept telling her, focusing my love as if handling a work of glass... even though those things carry not even the slightest of meaning."

Speaking quickly, Roswaal averts his gaze, seemingly irritated.

Was he talking about Subaru, or was he discussing himself? Perhaps not even Roswaal himself could clearly distinguish it.

Overwhelmed by his momentum, Emilia takes a small breath.

Takes it so that can say what she has to say, even though intimidated by Roswaal's attitude.

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

Roswaal: "—"

Emilia: "That's all the common points you think there are between you and Subaru?"

Roswaal looks suspiciously at Emilia.

A doubtfulness has risen inside him. His neglect to say anything is obviously his answer to Emilia's query. Which means yeah, she has to say it for him.

She has to correct his idea.

Emilia: "If that's all you were trying to say, then..."

Roswaal: "—"

Emilia: "You and Subaru are nothing alike."

Indeed, Subaru had spoken lines upon lines of idealism, and not explained the significance of liberating SANCTUARY to Emilia.

But Subaru's argument assuredly did not consist entirely of niceties and Emilia-focused lip service.

Emilia: "So, Subaru, he called me a pain in the ass of a woman."

Roswaal: "...What?"

Emilia: “That who do I think I am, doing so much crap but causing so many problems. Always fussing over what's already gone, stop giving others these empty expectations. Every word out your mouth is just insincere talk, you're lacking in everything, it's unbearable to watch. —Subaru said all of this for me.”

Roswaal: “—”

Emilia: “Subaru is paying proper attention to me. Now I'm thinking that I can't keep showing him only my lame parts. You pretend you're looking ahead when you're really not looking at anything at all. You're nothing like Subaru.”

If Natsuki Subaru was someone who could only envision an idealised image of Emilia, then surely she would still be hugging her knees inside the tomb.

And with Garfiel, too. If his opponent had not been Subaru, who knew more than the ideals but nonetheless opted to argue with idealism, then he would not have listened.

Subaru saw Emilia's weakness, but still told her he loved her.
Subaru knew Garfiel's kindness, but still demanded he change.

Whoever they were, if they wished to stay stuck in one place, Subaru would run over and reprimand them.

You can't be here, there's more you can do, raise your head, look forward, swing up your fists, you don't have time to be staying put.

—You can't stay standing still forever.

Roswaal: “Natsuki Subaru, made the correct choice in this SANCTUARY...? That kind of ludicrous thing couldn't... that would mean, the writ of this Book of Wisdom...”

Emilia: “My memories were revived, and I was anxious. Puck went away, and I was close to being crushed.”

The discrepancy between what he thought and the answer Subaru gave leads Roswaal into confusion.

Emilia puts her hand to her chest, not to feel for the presence there, but to feel the thumping of her heartbeat.

Emilia: “I thought that, once I remembered everything, I'd turn into somebody else. I thought that, once that happened, it'd wind up that the person I've been until now was wrong.”

Inside her mind even now is a girl lost in memories.

Once that girl attains a definite image, someone irreversible will appear.

Once they come, Emilia's world will change completely.

Emilia feared that change, leaned toward rejecting it, but, she knew the shift was necessary.

No matter what changes, that will not make the path she has walked thus far disappear.

No matter how Emilia changes from hereon, even if she becomes a self with a differing origin than what she currently has, that does not make the feelings she presently holds a mistake.

She may be at stalemate, may have stopped still, but she would walk again.
Sight what direction seems forward, and proceed.

Emilia: “When I want to do something, when I want to change something, when that's what I want to do—I have someone who will tell me it's okay, and lead me forward. That's what I learned.”

Roswaal: “That is trickery!”

Emilia: “It's not a lie at all. Subaru told me he believes in me, and I want to believe in him. Though what he said might look like baseless nonsense. Though I might want to say it was a lie... I have to make it so that it isn't a lie.”

She did not want to let the label of 'liar who went around preaching about the insubstantial hopes there are in useless unsalvagable Emilia' fall onto Subaru.
Natsuki Subaru asserted that Emilia could do it.

And presently, Emilia was making that statement a lie.
But if she broke through her shell, and achieved what she could do, his lie would not be a lie.
These were what people called WISHES.

Emilia: “Turning lies into wishes, by doing these things I have to do now, is what I want to do.”

As Subaru frantically, desperately taught her.
What rested inside Emilia, previously beyond her ability to put into form, finally takes shape as words.

She cannot tell whether this is truly the correct answer.
What would change something indefinite into something correct would be Emilia's actions.
And she would like to proceed without hesitating to do it, without indecision about it.

Roswaal: “—! Absurd!”

Roswaal's face pales as he draws backward.
He casts away his usual composure, and the emptiness he had until now, strangling out his voice with his expression despairing, shivering in fear at Emilia's answer.
He swings up his arm, points at Emilia. His voice cracks as he shouts.

Roswaal: “Why, how! How did you wind up reaching that answer now, here!? How did Natsuki Subaru earlier communicate to you something I couldn't communicate to Teacher!? Him, right now! At this stage! It isn't okay for him to achieve those feelings!”

Emilia: “I remember what I was afraid of. Right now I'm in the middle of steeling myself to face it... what are you afraid of?”

Roswaal: “It's obvious! Deviations from the writ! Going on without history proceeding as it is written here, and no longer being able to achieve our promised reunion! What else would I be!”

Emilia: “But it feels like that isn't what you're having a problem with right now.”

Roswaal: “—!”

A fire of rage sparks in Roswaal's eyes.

He was voicing his wrath at the fact that he could not sympathize with Subaru's mentality. Roswaal wanted Subaru to feel something which he himself had experienced in the past. What he said before about him and Subaru being the same breed probably had been no idle bantering, but what Roswaal was convinced should be the way of things.

Perhaps he thought that himself and Subaru should follow down the same stream in how they confronted their lovers, and suffer the same wounds. That unshakeable conviction of his was now close to crumbling.

That was how Emilia perceived Roswaal's present turmoil.

Roswaal: “Aaaaguh, what is happening! How is this happening to me of all people!”

Roswaal puts his hand to his mouth, uncaring of his paint as it falls away, his cheeks twisting.

Roswaal: “Have I been dancing on strings since the moment of the bet? Garfiel's loss, and Emilia's recovery, all of it was calculated? ...Was I in error from the moment I started making plots in counter to a sage's ability to preclude? ...But then, for what purpose am I...”⁴

Emilia: “Roswaal?”

Absorbed in a dizzying storm of thought, Emilia's presence flies out of Roswaal's awareness. What he's thinking about so frantically is probably how to correct a world that has deviated from his plans.

But no method to achieve such a thing existed in this world any more.

Emilia did not know what kind of prophecies were written in his book. Roswaal is this cornered. The deviation must be incredible.

So much so that you could already call this place a different world—

Roswaal: “—Ahh, I see.”

Roswaal slips a mutter.

His voice has regained its intelligent tone, making Emilia anticipate that he has temporarily dealt with his discomposure. Through a logical conversation, they could find a point of compromise and —

Roswaal: “There's nooooo need to worry about anything. After all, there's the CONTRACT. There was no puzzling to be had about whether or not he would reach LEGITIMACY.”⁵

Emilia: “What are you talking about? Roswaal, what is it...”

4 Ability to preclude → more literally 'ability to stop action from happening, ability to make someone give up on their plans; deterrence.'

5 Could also be 'no puzzling to be had about whether or not he would reach THE LEGITIMATE X' where X is unspecified.

Roswaal: “Nothing. It was not any thing at all, Emilia-sama. My deepest apologizes for worrying and for troubling you. You best proceed in the way that is desired of you, and that I expect of you.”

Bowing, Roswaal casts away his clownish demeanour as he gives Emilia a smile. Emilia of course cannot just agree with this. In a complete change from his previous disarray, he's back to his usual attitude. That the disarray looked the considerably more GENUINE behaviour is insane.

Emilia: “...Acting in a way you expect. What are you expecting from me?”

Roswaal: “It's natural. —That you challenge the TRIAL as you please, and that results be reached.”

Roswaal neglects to mention exactly who those results would favour. *Perhaps he's desiring it whichever way it goes*, Emilia just kind of senses.

She doesn't understand why Roswaal desires that. Nor why he got so cavalier, nor why he swallowed it down and it settled. It's just a sea of things she doesn't understand. But,

Emilia: “Right now, you... definitely won't tell me about them, will you.”

Roswaal: “...”

Emilia: “It's okay. I won't try to force you to say it. I know I'm not qualified to do that right now. — But don't you get the idea that you can keep hiding it forever.”

Roswaal: “—Heartening, indeed. Knowing the truth, and now recovering yourself, we'll see if you can stay to your bluffs.”

He ends with a rather spiteful statement, but also a statement Emilia finds pleading. With that, Roswaal turns his back to her and walks. He is likely heading back to the lodgings where he was recuperating. In the end, she doesn't know why he came here and watched the fight. But the churning dense mass of mana remains, inside Roswaal's body as it pines for a miracle.

Roswaal: “Yes. —Emilia-sama, a warning.”

Emilia: “Yes?”

Roswaal stops, raises his finger. Emilia's brows raise. Roswaal smiles wryly at the fact that Emilia displays a far too undefended attitude when facing someone she had just finished having an effectively hostile conversation with.

Roswaal: “About Garfiel... you would best not underestimate how deep-set hiiiiiiiiis nature is. His obsession is not so shallow that a simple defeat in a fistfight would change his mind.”

Emilia: “—Got it.”

Emilia accepts it. With that, Roswaal leaves the scene. She sees him off, to realise that the only things remaining here are Emilia's breathing, and the

breathing of the black dragon which had glared at Roswaal's retreating back to the end.
And then the deep, sleeper's breathing of the two unconscious men.

Emilia: “Hauh hh...”

Emilia's brows tremble as she gives a deep sigh.
Noticing that Patrasche's eyes widen in response to this, Emilia gives a wry smile.

Emilia: “No, it's okay. It's thanks to you that I kept my composure. ...But that was sooo tense. That could've turned into a fight with Roswaal.”

Patrasche: “—”

Emilia: “Mm. I hate fighting when I don't even know why we're fighting. And why was Roswaal being like that? ...Maybe Subaru would know.”

Emilia replies to Patrasche's caring gaze while she kneels down beside the bloodstained Subaru, and gently lifts him up.
Her fingers rub away the drying blood as she strokes his swollen face. His expression twitches, as if feeling the tickle of the pain.

Emilia: “I need to heal them. Subaru and Garfiel both hate pain.”

Patrasche: “—”

Emilia: “Ah, it's okay, you don't need to look so concerned. I'm a little worried about my control since Puck's not here, but when it's just some simple healing, I can have the minor spirits help.”

Emilia speaks to the surrounding spirits, their dull glow shrouding her form as she enlists their aid.
The tender lights veil Subaru and Garfiel, their injuries beginning to mend.

Subaru's expression looks to relax.
Emilia gives a small smile as she gently places his head upon her lap.

How many times has she lent Subaru her lap, now?
She's been given far too many things, so many that she has no idea what to do to repay them.

Emilia: “When you wake up, there are really sooo many things I want to ask you.”

With that whisper, Emilia twines her finger into Subaru's bangs.
Subaru's face scrunches up. Emilia's cheeks relax slightly.

—It happened ten minutes later that Otto emerged from the forest, Ram shouldered on his back, to reconvene with them all.

CHAPTER 115: YOU ARE NEVER A MATCH FOR THE GIRL FROM YOUR YOUTH

He feels something precious shedding away inside him.

The sensation is unlike that of his gate, whose existence has reached finality. Something entirely separate, different, squirms within Subaru.

Was it hot? Cold? The fever it carried gave indication of neither. Was it with shape? Without? Its nebulousness indicated not even that. The dingy muck had coursed through Natsuki Subaru, cheering in joy for its release outside, to demonstrate its power and disperse.

But its vestiges remained fluctuating through Subaru even now. The abnormal sensation gave Subaru an indescribable feeling. This was not something he recognized, or something he had felt before. But he did possess both knowledge and understanding about it.

So while he does question WHY? and HOW?, he does not question WHAT? or WHAT FOR? He did not need to ruminate over the identity of this thing. He would be best off to question WHY, but presently his query would not reach anyone who could answer. Meaning that Subaru has only one thing to consider.

INVISIBLE STRIKE, UNSEEN PALM, UNNOTICEABLE BLOW.
All of them sound either lame or rehashed, lacking in style.

A black hand which only Subaru could see.
What only Subaru could control, which was—



Subaru: “THE IMPERCEPTIBLE WILL OF THE GODS... We'll call it Invisible Providence...”

???: “...Huh? What did you say?”

Squinting open his eyes with his consciousness still fuzzy, a fragment of his thoughts slips out his mouth.

That instant, the silver-haired visage immediately in front of him opens its eyes wide.

After several blinks, Subaru recognizes that he has returned from the world of unconsciousness into reality. He notices the connection between the soft sensation beneath his head and Emilia's proximity.

Subaru: “Oh. I'm getting a lap pillow from Emilia-tan again.”

Emilia: “You are. What's the count now? For me lending you my lap when you're unconscious.”

Subaru: “Take some conditions into account and maybe three. Have to win a big bout to reach this

paradise.”

Emilia: “Y-you're sooo not drowsy at all... do you remember what happened before you fainted?”

Subaru: “Yeah and clearly. I'll reminisce on it nice and slow, while we chat and I gaze at your face...”

Subaru jokes around while he pushes aside the thoughts in his weighty head and gets his ideas into order. He then remembers the shower of furious blows he sustained before fainting, and comprehends.

He immediately puts his hands to his face, kneading his cheeks as he looks up at Emilia.

Subaru: “Crap. Actually I think I got beat up pretty bad. Emilia-tan, am I okay? My face isn't so messed up it's unlookable?”

Emilia: “Don't worry. It doesn't look that weird.”

Subaru: “And spoken without any malevolence!”

Emilia tilts her head in mystification. Subaru removes his hands from his cheeks and promptly checks that his joints are all okay. A faint numbness hangs around his shoulders, lower body, and neck region. But most of his wounds are sealed, apparently post-healing.

Emilia: “Subaru, it tickles if you move around on my lap too much.”

Subaru: “Ah, sorry. No! I wasn't trying anything dirty with that! I mean I wasn't but, how about I double check just to be sure?”

Emilia: “Don't. I'm going to shove you off my lap if you keep saying this stuff. Stop being so saucy.”

Subaru: “Who says saucy any more?”

After responding to Emilia's harsh gaze with a wry smile, Subaru uprights himself from her lap. While it does hurt to part with it, he can't impose forever.

His physical status, compared to his top form, is sitting at about 60%. Definitely not perfect, but he's thankful for Emilia's healing.

Subaru: “Thanks for healing me. You managed to heal without Puck?”

Emilia: “My contract with Puck might be broken, but my contract with the minor spirits isn't. And... I don't know how this will sound, but it's not like I can't use magic.”

Subaru: “Really? My knowledge was magicians and spiritualists have different structures in how they handle mana... that you can't have both.”

Lessons learned in the mansion from Puck and Roswaal.

Magicians can only use magic proportionate to their internal store of mana, while spiritualists must establish communication with a spirit so that they can utilize the inexhaustible ambient supply. That's the entire extent of how Emilia's ability to use magic vaguely diverts from Subaru's

knowledge.

Emilia lowers her gaze.

Subaru's brows furrow at her strange reaction. She gives a small sigh.

Emilia: "I didn't think I could either... but, I did mention that my memories are coming back. Part of them was knowledge about how to just use magic... which I think got sealed as well."

Subaru: "Your memories sealed your ability to use magic?"

Emilia: "Yes."

She nods. Her failure to articulate is probably because she cannot tell what this all signifies. Subaru does not understand why her ability to use magic was sealed in the recesses of her memory either. And his present information load is looking too sparse for speculation. Either way, she used her newly-usable magics to heal Subaru.

Subaru: "Nevermind the circumstances, if it meant you were able to heal me, it's a huge help. How is everyone..."

else, is how he intends to continue, when he realises that this is not the time for him to be relaxing. He should have recognized this fact the moment that he remembered why he fell unconscious. Subaru's opponent Garfiel, and Otto and Ram who apparently opposed said Garfiel. Are they safe?

Subaru: "Don't think the situation's too risky, but I'm gonna go before they end up as forest fertilizer and help—"

???: "I appreciate that you're worried about me, but I would manage well without having to hear your imaginings about these worst-case scenarios."

Subaru: "Huh?"

Animating his wavering body to stand, Subaru moves to start running away from the tomb and into the forest. When the astonished voice of a young man stops him. He careens to a halt and glances behind him, to see someone sitting on the tomb's stone steps—Otto Swein, with his hand raised.

Subaru: "Aaah, aaah!?"

Otto: "How glad I am to see your surprise. I apologize for worrying you, but seeing as the worries go both ways we'll agree not to mention it, and..."

Subaru: "Hi-yah!"

Otto: "Eewhauhg!?"

Having confirmed their mutual safety, a rather satisfied smile arises on Otto's face—when Subaru charges. He rides the momentum as he leaps to acquaint Otto with a flying kick. Stuck between the stairs and Subaru, Otto cries out.

Otto: "Ow! Ouch! Stairs are, grinding my head—ow! M-my hair! I'm going bald! Wh-Natsuki-san,

what on earth are you doing!?”

Subaru: “Shut it, stupid! Stop trying to be cool. What's going on with this vibe where it's like you did something big? Who told you to do anything more than buy time? You know how close my plans were to winding up par for course because of this? But if you hadn't helped I don't think I would've beat Garfiel so I can't say I don't thank you!”

Otto: “I have no idea what you're even saying any more!!”

Unable to give a sincere thanks, Subaru scuffles with Otto on the stairs while he speaks, when Otto kicks him away. Subaru rolls down the steps to land on his backside before standing up.

Subaru: “Either way, glad you're safe. If you died you'd make for an annoying visitant bedside.”

Otto: “I'd rather we leave these eccentric customs undiscussed. ...Or actually, why didn't those sentiments of yours show up nicely and at the start?”

Subaru: “Don't slather on too much praise, we're talking me here!”

Otto: “I am aware of that, yes!”

Otto puts his hand to his brow, before noticing that Emilia has been quietly watching their exchange.

Otto: “Ah, Emilia-sama. I apologize for excluding you. Though it's all Natsuki-san's fault.”

Emilia: “Mm, I was watching so I know. Don't worry.”

Subaru: “No friends in sight... No, I mean I'm drowning in friends and that's why I'm in this situation. —Anyway, you being safe means that Ram's okay too?”

Emilia and Otto look at each other and nod. Subaru sticks his tongue out at them before inquiring as to the safety of their unseen and final collaborator. Otto nods.

Otto: “Being what her condition was after I woke up and found her, I have to say I was chilled. ...Fortunately her situation wasn't as horrendous as it looked. Although, she awoke while I was carrying her to reconvene, and did speak some rather potent venom...”

Subaru: “Sympathies. She seriously is harsh-tongued with people outside her circle. ...It's impressive you managed to talk her into this. How'd you do it?”

Otto: “One of the terms for securing her cooperation would be that I do not tell you that.”

Otto puts his hand to his mouth, indicating that he is not going to talk.

Subaru's lips quirk, eager to say something, but he determines that speech is not going to get Otto to bend and he promptly abandons any further inquisition.

If some vaguely harsh questioning was enough to get him talking, then he wouldn't have risked his life going along with Subaru's practically-nonsense plots.

Stubborn, a nuisance, and a great friend.

Subaru: “Crap!”

Otto: “Ow! Why am I getting hit!?”

Subaru: “Just be quiet.”

Subaru shoves Otto's shoulders, then paying no heed to his complaints before turning to face Emilia. To find that Patrasche has materialized beside her at some unknown juncture and is pressing her snout into Emilia's silver hair, the two of them smiling.

Subaru: “What's this? Since when've you been such good friends?”

Emilia: “Some things happened while you were sleeping... and she really helped me. She's sooo great.”

Subaru: “Right? She's my pride and my partner, no joke. Yeah, Patrasche?”

Subaru approaches and reaches out to stroke her back. But the dragon dodges away before his fingertips can touch her, avoiding his hand.

Subaru: “Gahugh!?”

Patrasche: “—”

The swing of her tail strikes Subaru in the ass, leaving him half in-tears from pain as he leaps. He looks at her, questioning and defiant, to see that her sharp eyes have sharpened further and she is growling displeasably at him with her neck stooped low.

Otto: “Would you like a translation?”

Subaru: “No, even I can figure this one out.”

Subaru replies to Otto's considerations with a shake of his head. He gives a small sigh.

Subaru: “—It's 'don't make me worry', isn't it.”

Otto: “Additionally, don't get carried away. I'm not doing it again. Imagine what it's like for me. But with a 'yes fine you can come in' nuance in the anger.”

Subaru: “Seriously what is going on with your heroine power? Are you throwing your name into the heroine race?”

Subaru gives a wry smile and reaches out. This time his fingers do touch Patrasche's tough hide. She closes her eyes, accepting it as if inevitable, Subaru's gratitude for the tolerant dragon unending.

Patrasche's assistance in the Garfiel fight, that being the decisive blow, occurred as a factor of her incredible and unhesitating trust.

As always, flimsy Subaru needed to indebt himself to many people every time he wanted to scale

any mountain. Would the day ever come where he would settle those debts?
He doubted it. But had to do it.

Subaru: “So what's going on with the conquered and debt-producing mountain, Garfiel?”

Emilia: “Garfiel's recovering and is over there. But it might be better not to interrupt.”

Subaru: “Interrupt?”

Subaru tilts his head. Emilia puts her finger to her lips.

Emilia: “Ram's looking after him right now, you see.”



Ram: “Are you awake, Garf?”

What Garfiel sees when he wakes up is the face of a familiar girl.
This was someone he wanted to see upon waking, who he did not want to see upon waking. It's a complex feeling.
But he cannot deny that his chest has begun to beat faintly faster. Garfiel hums.

Garfiel: “Yeah... 'm up.”

Ram: “I see. Then move. This has gone on far long enough, and my legs are numb.”

Garfiel: “Augh!”

The instant they establish communication, Garfiel is expelled from the soft touch as his head falls to the ground. He hadn't been expecting a kind reaction, but this kind of coldness does hurt.
And especially so when his pride is already wounded, and his crush is the one being icy.

He rubs his head and gazes bitterly at Ram. She sits on the grass with her legs folded, patting at the spot where Garfiel's head had been resting, her thighs. She responds to Garfiel's gaze with a displeased “What?”.

Garfiel: “Ain't nothin'... Same 's always, yer a lady who ain't got a scrap'v kindness.”

Ram: “When the moment requires kindness and the recipient merits kindness, then of course I'll be kind. That I'm not being so now means that this isn't one of those moments.”

Garfiel: “...My amazin' self got that merit?”

Ram: “It's utterly transparent what you want me to say. You mustn't be like Barusu, Garf. If you wish to know what a woman truly feels, devise a cleverer scheme.”

Garfiel lowers his gaze. He head goes springing back in the wake of Ram's poke to his forehead. The shock races through the point just above the scar that Garfiel always finds himself touching.

His fingers brush across the scar on his brow as he sighs.

Garfiel: “Thinkin' back... yer the one who gave me this injury.”

Ram: “— I had to act frantically to settle your shenanigans. Do you think I did something as drastic as knock your face into the stone because I wanted to?”

Garfiel: “Feels same 's t'day when yer were beatin' me down, that yer were smilin' like crazy...”

Ram: “My life isn't unlimited. When it's merely doing something that I'm reluctant to do, it's profitable that I smile and convince myself it's enjoyable. Desperate measures.”

Garfiel: “How 'bout thinkin'v th'mental scars that leaves f'r th'guy who gets his head cracked open, oi!”

Ram just sighs, her expression even more bored.

Of course. She would never accept that she was wrong, and her stubborn mentality would never bend. Proud, noble, tough, tenacious.

Which is why Garfiel admired her, and wanted her.

Garfiel: “...You ain't wounded any, Ram?”

Ram: “Who could suppose. I have had Emilia-sama mend the conspicuous injuries, but it might be impossible to remove all of them entirely. How are you going to take responsibility for despoiling me?”

Garfiel: “Make you my wife...”

Ram: “You'll fail. Think of a different method. —And that was audacious of you, Garf. That you dared to abandon the losers.”

Garfiel: “...”

Ram's harsh gaze silences Garfiel.

The anger in her eyes is a condemnation of the fact that he practised leniency at the battle's end.

Garfiel had neglected to finish off both Ram, defeated, and Otto, upside-down in the shrubs. Indeed their survival had been his decision, and it may have sullied the glory of the fight.

But Garfiel could not brandish his claws at the unconscious girl. Even disregarding his feelings for her, and other different and varied factors, he surely would not have managed it.

After all, he lacked the courage most vital for a warrior.

Ram: “It impresses me that you avoided my last cast of magic.”

Garfiel: “...Ain't like I was tryin' to. When I was beaten down n'started reversin' my transformation, I got this foreboding feelin'. Then my body moved quicker th'n my head. Thassall.”

When the forest's mana had been assembled, and Ram cast the most advanced wind magic there is, rather than think, Garfiel left everything to his survival instinct and evaded the blades of wind.

He used the feeling of the invisible gale grazing millimetres past his skin to escape. The attack had ravaged every tree in sight down to nothing, and alongside his rather artistic dodges he managed to flee from its range.

Once he returned to the scene, he found the fallen Ram and Otto.

Were Garfiel a true warrior, he would have boasted of his survival and taken their lives. But Garfiel, who needed to surrender himself to his animal blood if he was going to take a life, could not do it.

Garfiel: "I'm..."

Ram: "—"

Not a warrior. Merely someone who wears a warrior's airs, speaks empty threats, a fake. He had stubbornly believed that even a fake like him, provided he had the power, could subdue everything and protect those he wished to protect without taking any lives. But his ideas had been largely invalidated.

He had believed that he possessed enough strength to defeat even great groups of outsiders. But in reality he lost to merely three people and a ground dragon. And for each of their reasons all of those people were practically non-combatants. If a hostile warrior came to SANCTUARY, they would easily destroy Garfiel. This was what he was, after running his pompous mouth with talk about being SANCTUARY's barrier.

—He mulled over many thoughts in this deficient head of his.

Throughout the battle, and even outside of battle, Garfield never stopped using his assuredly poor brain.

What strategy would be optimum? What action would best help everyone? Was there a way to do this without hurting anybody? And even if someone would be hurt, it was fine so long as the only injuries were to himself.

All his days spent holding these beliefs and doing his best had been entirely superficial, acting only to conceal his weakness.

Ram: "Garf."

Garfiel: "..."

Ram: "I'm going to give you a word of advice. Listen well."

Garfiel: "...Yeah."

Still looking down, Garfiel gives a nod.

What words would Ram, his crush, shower upon him? Her usual statements were harsh, but she had probably never truly washed her hands of him.

Ram's personality was one where she was soft to people inside her circle. And although their relationship was not without its faults, she and Garfiel had known each other for a long time, and she considered him as part of that count.

But now her hostility was clear. He probably was not included in that category any more.

Her imminent announcement would be Ram's parting with Garfiel in earnest, and—

Ram: “Garf, you're stupid so thinking is utterly pointless. A waste of time. Otherwise said, a waste of life.”

Garfiel: “...eh?”

Ram: “You're who said it. Garf, you dodged my magic when you acted without thinking anything. And that is exactly the case. You may not have noticed it, but when you are thinking nothing you are considerably stronger in fights. When you're being a barefaced idiot, considerably.”

Unable to comprehend what he is hearing, Garfiel's eyes widen.
While he had expected her to find him useless, her statements are aiming somewhere entirely unanticipated.

Ram: “I don't mean for you to abandon all rationality and transform. In fact I will mention that your transformation makes you even weaker than when you are thinking. You become a bigger target, and your weapons are slow. Stay in human form, focus on your opponent, and fight without thinking.”

Garfiel: “Th-th'hell's this!? Since when was this th'topic'v....”

Ram: “This is important. —Because now you're going to fight on many occasions as an ally to me and Emilia-sama.”

Garfiel: “—!!”

Emotion clogs Garfiel's throat.
His face flashes red, his sharp fangs clicking as he speaks.

Garfiel: “Fuck off! Y'fuckin' piss 'round with me, be enemies, crush my ideas... n'yer still forgivin' me, n'tellin' me t'forgive you!?”

Ram: “Don't be an idiot. I don't forgive you and so I'm demanding you serve us. If we forgive you and our standings become equal, we'll need to make requests to gain your cooperation. Foolishness. We are the victors and you are the loser. I don't forgive you and so I am ordering you. Understand?”

Garfiel: “S fuckin' nuts!”

Garfiel bares his fangs as he stands up.
His body sways for an instant, but with how most all of his wounds have been healed, it isn't a problem. Healed. The moment he reaches that thought, even more shame claws at his heart.

Garfiel: “I accept I lost! Cause I did! But that ain't th'same deal as whether 'm gonna back down! I lost, yer got me, understood! But my amazin' self's still alive 'n kickin'! 'F yer really gonner move things along without askin' me, then what yer shoulder done was kill me! Second you ain't doin' that 's the exact second yer cowardice's th'same 's mine!”

Ram: “Cart before horse. If we let you die when we need your strength, that contradicts our goals.”

Garfiel: “...But I!!”

Ram: “Incessant snivelling!”

Before Garfiel can roar in anger, Ram gets to her feet and howls.
Her cerise eyes host fury as she glares at Garfiel.
It's menacing. Overwhelmed, Garfiel winds up shutting his mouth.

Ram: “You lost. You have lost. Then act like the loser you are and heed the commands of the victor. How wretched must you be in presence of a woman you like, flaunting your inane and girlish temperament as a sore loser, before you will be satisfied, Garf? Your flagellation of others becomes flagellation of yourself the moment that you lose, all you have changed is the aim of your braying, idiotic.”

Garfiel: “Uawh.. ah,”

Her statements are spot-on. Garfiel cannot manage a single word.
Before the fight, he had imposed certain issues onto other people. Now that he's lost, he's imposing his own weakness. It proves that nothing has changed about his wretchedness as he yells at whatever he thinks is weak.
He stopped yelling about the outside which he thought weak, and started yelling about his own self who he had to acknowledge as weak.

Garfiel: “But what'm I meant t'do!? Go laughin' like a stupid idiot n' stand'n line with yer entourage!? I can't do that! I'm acceptin' I lost... but that don't mean I'm acceptin' yer words 's bein' right!”

Not a dodge, but Garfiel's true thoughts.
He acknowledges his loss. His opponents being numerous is a topic irrelevant to discussion. If he starts expounding why he lost, he would never end.
The problem is that nothing has sprouted in the depths of Garfiel's heart to instil him firm conviction in Subaru's claims.

Ultimately, the ideas he has obsessed over all until this point remain unchanged, and even should someone demand that he fight alongside them, he cannot simply nod in assent.

Garfiel: “What'm I meant t'do, with this, half-way situation...”

Ram: “If you don't want to be stuck at a half-way, then all you need to do is prove that you're moving.”

Garfiel: “...What?”

His breathing still ragged, Garfiel looks at Ram.
Her expression has regained its usual composure as she looks Garfiel straight in the eye.

In her eyes he sees the reflection of his own feeble face.
He would rather look away, but Ram's gaze does not permit him to.

Ram: “I don't know what Barusu said, but I can imagine it. And so, Garf... you should confirm it for yourself.”

Garfiel: “Confirm it, myself... confirm what?”

Ram: “Whether you're capable of changing, or whether you're still a petrified, whimpering child.”

Garfiel finally recognizes what she is telling him.

The instant he comprehends it, his heartbeat assaults him, thumping at an unprecedented speed.

Cold sweat streams down his back, sticking to him, spreading inside him.

His pulse grows wild, a ringing reverberating endlessly in his skull.

This is his trauma, with its barbed chains constricting his heart, great enough to bring these abnormalities all across his body.

He feels a chill, looks behind him. The tomb looms there as ever.

—Confirm. Something, in there.

Even supposing he went in, what could he confirm?

What new answer was Ram expecting him to find there?

Nothing would change. Nothing could change.

But why, even knowing this, was he failing to assert I WON'T GO, and instead wavering between I WILL and I WON'T?

Garfiel: “...What'll I learn by going in?”

He's getting hooked into it. Utterly.

He didn't think anything would change, but he also desired to confirm it.

He stiffens in terror, his heart wailing in rejection, but his soul howling.

He wanted to confirm. He needed to confirm.

Confirm whether the bloody shrieks of the boy blocking his path, whether the assertions of Natsuki Subaru, were correct.

Confirm whether everything he had lived thus far had been mistaken.

Ram: “You look resolved.”

The chattering of his teeth, and the unrest of his heart, have calmed.

All signs of his cold sweat are gone. Garfiel wordlessly turns to face Ram.

Garfiel couldn't tell what she was expecting of him, with her stern words of encouragement.

And perhaps the question of whether or not Garfiel would ally with them was not where Ram's focus lay.

They've known each other for a long time. There's some things he just understands.

What Ram seeks is not exactly for Garfiel to join them.

She seeks that Garfiel will reach a conclusion on how to live his life. Everything else is secondary.

She's a good lady, someone to be thankful for, thinks Garfiel.

Ram: “Don't worry, Garf.”

Perhaps unsettled by Garfiel's silence, a rare warmth peeks through in Ram's tone. She gives Garfiel's bare shoulders a light tap.

Ram: “If anything frightening enough happens that you cry, I'll comfort you. —Our relationship goes back a long way, after all.”

CHAPTER 116: WITH GRANDMOTHER, WITH MOTHER, WITH SISTER; AS GRANDSON, AS SON, AS BROTHER

Ram: “Apologies for this when you're motivated, Emilia-sama, but Garf is entering the tomb first.”

That is Ram's first line after finishing her chat and returning to the group with Garfiel. Subaru's eyes widen. Emilia and Otto are also plainly surprised.

Subaru: “Garfiel's doing the TRIAL... seriously?”

Ram: “Most seriously of seriously. Yes, Garf?”

Ram nods and glances up to Garfiel, who stands beside her. Their height difference is not that great, but regardless Garfiel is slightly taller than Ram. He sticks his fingers in his bangs, matted with dry blood, and averts his gaze so as to not engage in the conversation. Ram grabs that unengaged ear of his and yanks it.

Ram: “Are you listening, Garf? What nerve you must have, ignoring us.”

Garfiel: “Auahg! Adduhd!? Oi, Ram!? My amazin' ear's barely hangin' onter my head right now! 'S seconds from coming off... 's bleedin'!”

Ram: “It seems that introspection you had after that beatdown from us isn't functioning. I'll mention now that our side still has Emilia-sama left, who hasn't exhausted her stamina in the slightest. You do recognize what will happen if you rebel?”

Emilia: “I-I... wasn't thinking to do anything violent...”

Everyone is drowning in wounds and sitting at the peak of exhaustion—except for Emilia, who had not participated in the fight and remains in top condition. They had just ended a battle where the whole point was to not get Emilia involved, and still Ram is instantly using her to start making threats. Terrifying backbone.

Garfiel: “Yeah, I get it. We start fightin' again here and my amazin' self ain't gonna win. EARTHSOUL BLESSING's given me a lotter my strength back... but it ain't enough fer a fight.”

Subaru: “That's a relief to hear. I'd seriously rather not get into any more fistfights with you. Thought I was gonna die. You're sitting second or third in this month's rankings.”

Otto: “Natsuki-san, just how many butchereries have you squeaked through? It's scary.”

Subaru recalls on his fistfight with Garfiel and shivers. Otto envisions the grisliness of the scene and shivers. This ranked in second or third place for his experiences in almost dying—but considering that he has also actually died, perhaps the peril he faced here was not really so hazardous.

Garfiel: “...How'm I th'second or third?”

Subaru: “Well that's where you are. Second or third.” something something We take this outside and more's gonna happen.

Garfiel: “*Ha!* Yer smooth talk ain't gonna hook me. 'S a DERDERDE LURKS IN THE SHADOWS OF QUICK RICHES.”

Garfiel snorts away Subaru's challenge, and traces his fingers over his forehead scar. His sharp gold eyes then gaze at the sight behind Subaru and the others—at the tomb, looming.

Garfiel: “Wheedlin', n' actual force... still can't believe yer used both. Now's t'try seeing things with yer view, n' decide.”

Emilia: “What are you deciding?”

Emilia quietly asks Garfiel.

He looks at her. She looks back at him straight-on.

This might be the first time that they have ever faced each other in earnest.

Emilia is recipient to Garfiel's horrifically violent gaze. But even so, her amethyst eyes do not waver in the least.

Perhaps seeing something in the eyes of the other, both of them smile.

Garfiel clicks his fangs, while Emilia's fingers reach for her chest, before she seems to remember something and stops.

Seeing that, Garfiel reaches for his left shoulder.

Garfiel: “Ngh, hah...!”

The blue crystal jutting from his shoulder comes out with a splorch.

He does begin bleeding, but he forces the flow to stop by tightening his muscles. Emilia's eyes widen at it as he tosses the removed crystal to her.

Emilia: “Ah, oh...”

Garfiel: “Jus'take it. 'S probably right fer you t'be th'one holdin' onter this thing.”

Emilia promptly catches the crystal, looking at it while Garfiel speaks bluntly.

She accepts Garfiel's statements while the brilliance of the crystal in her hands leads her to gulp.

The jewel glows dimly, strobing, almost seeming overjoyed that Emilia has caught it.

Subaru crosses his arms as he watches on from aside. *Still the same even though he can't speak*, he thinks.

Emilia: “Thank you, Garfiel.”

Garfiel: “My view is I just chucked away somethin' annoyin' fer me s'all. No reason fer yer t'thank me.”

Garfiel looks up at the sky with no particular intention.

Tangerine hues creep across the panoramic, soon to welcome night. Before long, the TRIAL will be

ready to start.

Garfiel: “—I'm gonna be checking. Whether I'm who's wrong, or you're who's wrong.”

Garfiel's shoulders slice the wind as he turns around.

His path leads him toward the tomb—the nightmarish place which had carved abhorrent memories into him in childhood.

After all this time, what will he see there now?

Subaru: “Hey, Garfiel.”

A call from behind stops the supposedly-determined Garfiel.

He clicks his tongue and glances behind him, to find that Subaru is who halted him, his hand raised.

Garfiel: “What?”

Subaru: “I mean, not trying to rain on your parade or anything. But seeing as there's still an ounce of time before the TRIAL starts...”

While entirely raining on Garfiel's parade, Subaru scratches his head.

It looks like he's having difficulty saying something. Garfiel clicks his fangs to urge Subaru on. Subaru sighs.

Subaru: “Please at least get dressed. You're in only a loincloth that's ready to fall off any second, there's a line for tawdry here and you've crossed it.”

Barbarian style with the breeze tickling his privates.

A vein pulses on Garfiel head. Ram gives an astonished sigh.

Ram: “What a tawdry episode.”



—After getting dressed and entering the tomb, Garfiel senses that meets the TRIAL's conditions.

The air hangs damp within the stone structure. A chilly breeze blows past, carrying the scent of dust, making Garfiel grimace. His nose is far too effective, and the stench from the enclosed chamber is an assault to his senses.

Garfiel: “Don't wanna be stayin' 'round here too long.”

His mutter echoes down the corridor. Nothing replies.

He feels firm ground beneath his feet, firm ground beneath his feet, as he intrudes deeper and deeper into the tomb.

Garfiel recognizes that his pulse has accelerated without his notice.

He challenges the TRIAL, and he will see the consequence. He was ready for that. But still he cannot be calm, because the memory for Garfiel is one which evokes intense and irremovable dread.

Experiencing it again will make something change, his heart insists.

What on earth about Garfiel would change from witnessing that debacle again? He had never even forgotten it for an instant in the first place.

The vivid memory has burned into his brain far too vividly.

What would seeing it again do except reinforce that memory further?

Garfiel: "...P'thetic. I'm here b'cause that's what I wanna check."

Garfiel mocks himself as he lines up screeds of tenable logic, insistent to flee.

It's a girlishness where he can agree with Ram's scolding and derision of him. He had never wanted to know or realise that he was such a coward of a man.

—But if he is the kind of man who submits to frailty and girlishness, what is going to do?

Garfiel: "—"

His feet stop atop the stone-paved path. He focuses his attention on the ground below him.

A warm wave of power courses up from his soles, the gift of the earth to Garfiel and his EARTHSOUL BLESSING.

His may have been wounded, brutalized, and exhausted, but merely contacting the ground is enough to restore Garfiel's body, his strength compounding.

Nevermind how he was in the instants after being beaten. Now that he's had a short rest, he's at 40% of his top capacity. He should be capable of destroying the tomb if he wanted to.

And Subaru and Ram and the others would not be able to stop Garfiel's destruction. It would utterly eliminate the point of their strenuous efforts spent defeating Garfiel. He could eliminate the point, right now.

Were they so stupid that they hadn't considered that?

Garfiel: "Fuckin' shitheads."

Of course they had.

Emilia was probably ignorant to the concept of 'doubting people', and Otto was probably missing a few important screws, but nevermind them. Calculating Subaru and that Ram would surely not overlook the possibility.

They're thinking that even if Garfiel regains his strength, he will not destroy the tomb.

Did they think him too cowardly to, or did they just trust him?

Garfiel cannot tell which it is.

Would this solution come after he defeats the TRIAL too?

Garfiel: "...Stupid."

With that, Garfiel resumes walking.

Thinking about complicated stuff is not his speciality. His poorness at using his head remains the same both in his daily life and during battle. He regardless frantically works his brain because someone long ago told him to.

Ram: <Think more while you're fighting, Garf. It'd make me happy if you did.>

Garfiel: “—eh,”

He remembers who told him to think while living.

Which was why he had so earnestly, with such asinine sincerity, remained to fixated to the idea.

The exact person who had told Garfiel to think while fighting had wound up informing him that he was better at fighting when not thinking. Crossing the line for absurdity.

Garfiel: “This's damn bullshit, oi... huh?”

A smile wells up inside him.

Just when he attempts to stifle the smile dead, Garfiel spots the corridor's end.

A rectangular space welcomes him. The TRIAL room.

Pale ghostly lights phase the chamber in from darkness. Garfiel steps inside, his stress somewhat calmed, and he looks at the stone door at the back of the room.

This door will open after the three TRIALS are cleared. Though since he has never seen it open before, he does not know if that is the truth. Nothing gives any indication of what is inside, either.

If he remains here standing still and waiting, the TRIAL should start.

Garfiel: “—Eh?”

Garfiel crosses his arms, bored as he glances around the chamber, when his brows rise. Into Garfiel's nocturnal vision there slinks an oddness about the room.

He strains his eyes in attempt to confirm exactly what it is, and—

<—First face your past.>

A voice.

Instantaneously, his vision wavers, his consciousness blurring.

The past, was here.



???: “I didn't think at all that you'd be coming here again. —It makes me feel very happy.”

Once his consciousness reaches sobriety, Garfiel realises that he is standing in a forest.

He turns his head, to see the sight of a familiar woods—but compared to the scenery that Garfiel knows, these woodlands are somewhat YOUNGER. It's only a few years of difference, but being that it's a place he interacts with daily, Garfiel can easily notice the discrepancy.

This is the past.

And he is in a dream, challenging the TRIAL.

After smoothly accepting these facts, Garfiel checks to see how he is. His limbs are there. Everything from his neck up, eyes and nose and ears and etcetra exist without issue. He opens his mouth and bites down hard, for his fangs to click like unsheathed blades. He's fine, no problems. Actually it feels like the injuries he sustained before entering the tomb have been healed.

???: “Your injuries from reality aren't carrying over because this place only hauls in your mind. If you suffered a wound serious enough to influence your mind, then it wouldn't heal even in the dream. This one's already been verified, so for example if someone who was missing an arm in reality was invited to this world, their missing arm wouldn't heal and...”

Garfiel: “Shut it with yer long-winded blabberin'. Can't yer tell 'm ignorin' yer?”

???: “Indeed I can. But even so I just have to speak with you. I'd sorta like it if you could respect these feelings of delight I have for our prolonged reunion.”

Wanna try it? Says the doll-like smile of the girl standing opposite Garfiel. From top to bottom a black funeral dress-esque vestment garbs her, her hair and skin pure white. Her smile was alluring enough to enchant any man, but facing her was enough to tell that it was utterly empty.

This visage was another thing which had not changed an inch from what he remembered.

Garfiel: “My amazin' self's grown up, but you ain't changed a bit.”

Girl: “Because I am very unfortunately deceased. Dead, with only my soul stuck in the world. No matter how the time passes, I can't walk the same trail as the living. This is a pretty sentimental topic, isn't it? It's not really like you.”

Garfiel: “‘Like me', now there's words only people who know me real well got any business sayin'. Our meetin' happened ages ago n' we only did it once. Ain't that we talked 'bout anythin' important either.”

Girl: “Perhaps that's exactly how I look to you. But I have to wonder if that'd have any bearing on whether the time I've spent looking at you has been equivalently equal.”

Garfiel: “—Tch.”

He knows that he can't outfox her in conversation.

While withstanding the urge to click his tongue, Garfiel glares at the witch standing there with not a speck of ill will on her face—Echidna.

Perhaps acting as an inspector for the TRIAL, Echidna had accompanied Garfiel like this the last time he saw the past, as well. Not out of any human concern for him as the TRIAL brutalized his heart, but to make sure that he did not miss a single one the events unfolding, out of a gross kind of curiosity.

Losing will to speak with her any further, Garfiel looks at the forest.

If this production which was the past has already started, then the arrival of the actors is only a

matter of time.

Garfiel has not the slightest intention to delight this witch who mere conversation can delight.

Echidna: “So cold.”

Echidna accepts even this attitude of Garfiel as something pleasant as she stands beside him and strokes her white hair.

During this juncture, where he's watching her from aside, the change happens.

Garfiel: “—”

Faced with a scene he supposedly knew was coming, Garfiel swallows his breath.

The edge of the forest—also said, the dividing line for the barrier which delineates SANCTUARY's inside and outside.

Just being around the barrier is enough for those trapped within it to come near to unconsciousness, and undergo the unpleasant feeling of their being being thrown into disarray.

In the environs of this boundary line there appear four silhouettes.

One is Lewes with her long pink hair, her appearance identical to what it is in present reality.

Another is a girl of perhaps ten years with beautiful, silky blonde hair—Frederica.

And standing opposite to Lewes and Frederica is a woman, her blonde hair tied in a ponytail, her face gentle.

In her hands she cradles an infant. A blond child, with nasty-looking eyes.

Garfiel: “ah... M-mom...”

The instant he sights the woman and recognizes who she is holding, a feeble sound escapes his lips. But his call for his mother does not reach any of the four.

—Naturally. Nobody can interfere with the past.

Echidna: “Even supposing that you reach out, you won't touch her. Nothing you say will make her smile back. I know it sounds ridiculous coming from me, but I sympathize with how you're being forced to watch something cruel.”

The witch's sentiments, which make him want to shout *Don't you goddamn talk!*

But the eyes of the witch as she watches Garfiel, his face twisted in anguish, host no malice. This scene is not something that the witch prepared with malicious intentions.

How would the challenger's regrets manifest, how would the challenger face them—and what would be the outcome of it? That alone was what this natural disaster sought.

Garfiel: “—”

Garfiel trembles. The four are having a conversation.

Their statements, their words, the tone of their voices, none of it is reaching Garfiel.

They are opening their mouths, making sound.

But when it travels through the air and vibrates against Garfiel's eardrums, no definite meaning

arises from it.

Anguish arises on Lewes' face. Frederica bites her lip in an attempt to keep herself from crying. Their mother looks worried, while Garfiel in her arms smiles happily.

No sound accompanies this painful scene because this is Garfiel's memory. Young Garfiel did not store the content of this conversation in his memory. And so the words they speak do not reach present Garfiel.

But this memory is one that tugs at him dimly, shallowly. The scene has been reproduced, the performance playing on as if to rile him up.

Echidna: "I wonder what they could be saying. Can you figure anything?"

Garfiel: "Stop talkin' t'me. —Yer just gonna give some stupid answer anyway."

Considering what happens after this, he can figure what they're saying.

His mother is attempting to leave for the outside world, while Lewes and Frederica are trying to convince her to stay. Young Garfiel is unable to participate in the conversation, merely being held by his mom and basking in that joy.

Garfiel: "—Ghhah!"

An unbearable urge strikes Garfiel, leading him to step forth. Echidna's brows rise as Garfiel lumbers over to the four. He stands right beside them, but none notice him. He gazes at his sister, shorter than him, Lewes, unchanged, and himself and his mother, all from straight-on.

Cradled by his mother, young Garfiel smiles guilelessly. It pisses him off. This guy doesn't know what's coming next, he's not even qualified to participate in the conversation to convince his mother to stay, just sitting there smiling.

How to quantify the regret and despair that came of the fact that he merely sat there, smiling?

Garfiel: "Augh! Ghhah! Aaaaagghghhh!!"

He swings his arm up, his claws ripping through the air. He wanted to stab his claws into the infant's happy face and overwrite it with despair. He wanted to make him know how imbecilic his decision was.

But his claws pass through the infant's face, and even through the arms of his mother as she cradles him.

He could stomp the ground and use his blessing to try and send them flying, but nothing would result. The swings of his arms grow larger, the phantom of his mother getting wrapped up in the destruction, but no change occurring at all.

Garfiel: "Why! Am I! Being shown this shit!!"

He swings his arm up fruitlessly. Strikes the ground.

But the destruction does not transmit to the world of memory, which remains sternly as is.

Unable to vent his anger or make the past disappear, his voice shaking, Garfiel turns around and bares his fangs at the witch.

Garfiel: “It's the same! It ain't changed at all! Nothing's changing 'bout how mom didn't stay, or 'bout what happened to her after! You satisfied now, eh!?”

Echidna: “You're free to messily throw attacks around however you want, but don't you think it's slightly extraordinarily selfish to blame me for this? It's definitely not a mistake that the past is unfurling because of things I intended... but you're the one who, knowing what this place was, came back here. If you were anticipating for something to change, then the one you should lambaste for its failure to change isn't me. It's you.”

Garfiel: “Me?”

Echidna: “Entirely. This place hasn't changed because you haven't changed. You can't accept the past in a different manner from before because you can't accept change in yourself. If you accept yourself to change, or elect not to change, then you'll be capable of overcoming the TRIAL. And actually, there was a boy who elected for change who did overcome his past.”

Garfiel cannot manage a single word in response as Echidna tells him of a previous victor. It's easy for him to disregard it as just Echidna bullshitting. But if it's not her bullshitting, then—the moment he thinks it, Garfiel knows fear.

Someone has overcome their past before.

SANCTUARY has not been freed. This person who overcame their past did not manage to conquer the following TRIALS. But even still, presuming that they overcame their past—

Garfiel: “N-No... yer can't trick me! Yer need t'have demihuman blood t'be qualified t'challenge the TRIAL! It ain't possible that anyone thinner than a half-blood who ain't me or sis's come to SANCTUARY before! Meanin'! Anyone qualified's still in SANCTUARY! And this guy who took the TRIAL here and beat their past don't...”

exist. Garfiel hesitates on the final word of his assertion.

The witch's provocations tug at him, and just when he comes close to doubting his own thoughts, the facts to refute her come flying at him. But is he truly correct?

The witch smiles somewhat happily.

This was not her welcoming the destruction of her lies, nor her welcoming Garfiel's debate. This expression was one of waiting, for something that would more intensely tickle her curiosity.

Echidna: “This guy who beat it doesn't what?”

From the bare-faced tone of her question and from her attitude, Garfiel senses it.

Echidna is looking for something. Waiting to see whether, from the information that Garfiel himself has presented, he will or will not reach the solution.

And Garfiel realises.

Just who the witch, who Echidna, is talking about.

Garfiel: “No goddamn way...”

Garfiel was talking about the requirement to challenge the tomb.
But an exception existed.

The witch had not directly stated this, and this was entirely Garfiel's speculation.
But most likely, being an APOSTLE TO THE WITCH OF GREED simultaneously qualified someone to challenge the TRIAL.

Garfiel knows only one person to whom this applies.
And hadn't he already told Garfiel before?

—I've taken the TRIAL, and seen my past.

Garfiel: “But, he said he couldn't overcome th'past, he said himself he couldn't overcome the TRIAL...”

Echidna: “You don't think that saying those things would avoid unneeded conflict? Or that unwanted things would happen if people knew that he overcame the TRIAL, maybe?”

Garfiel: “Shut it, I ain't talkin' t'you. Don't butt in!”

Echidna's words lead Garfiel's brain to strobe, his thoughts in turmoil.
It is correct to acknowledge that he—Natsuki Subaru—had challenged the TRIAL. He knew that the TRIAL meant facing the past before Garfiel could mention anything.
Garfiel recollects on Subaru back when he said he failed to overcome it. Garfiel had been so shocked to learned that Subaru was qualified that he inadvertently ended the conversation before asking what he really ought to have, but—

Garfiel: “—hk”

Subaru's expression back then was not the face of a man battered by his unconquerable past.
He did look frustrated about a failure to achieve something, but it was not the look of a man harbouring a personal problem. That look was one which, reflected on the water's face as he went to bathe, Garfiel got to witness every day.

Subaru's bearing as he attacked Garfiel did not carry the visage, nor the voice, nor the assertions of a man suffering prolonged hangups with his past.

Garfiel: “He... overcame, his past? You can overcome your past?”

Echidna: “Just for hypothesis, supposing that something where he gave you some kind of pompous lecture happened, wouldn't it make sense that he preached because some basis made him capable of it?”

Garfiel's hazy mind thinks back on his exchange of fists with Subaru.
Subaru and Garfiel had both been hitting their limits for staying conscious. He could not remember the entirety of what Subaru yelled back then. No, he mustn't give up. He must here, right now, remember those words and question himself.

What was he told? What was yelled at him?

His past, his stagnation, his immobility, his barrier, his SANCTUARY, his family.

What happens to the hopeless, to those who have stopped moving?

If you want to start something, then you are free to start anything.

???: “—Then you are going to leave regardless of anything?”

A familiar voice strikes Garfiel's ear.

But this is a voice which should not be audible.

Because this was not the voice of someone who could interfere with Garfiel here, and not the voice of someone Garfiel could interfere with here.

???: “Yes, I am leaving. I know I'll be causing problems for you, Lewes-sama.”

???: “Yer don't hafta worry about that. The problem's how the kids're gonner feel.”

The voice are the familiar ones of his family, and the unfamiliar ones of his family.

The sounds match to the movements of Lewes and her sour expression, and the movements of his mother who faces her.

For the first time in his life, Garfiel hears his mother's voice.

Garfiel: “—”

He swallows his breath as the scene robs his attention.

His mother gazes down lovingly at the Garfiel in her arms, rocking him gently. Frederica grasps the hem of their mother's skirt as she looks up at her, and strains out her voice.

Frederica: “M-Mother... I-I... I...”

Mother: “I'm sorry, Rica. I know how it's going to worry you.”⁶

Frederica: “That's okay. I will be fine. But, poor Garf...”

Mother: “Should I take him with me? But your mommy is a bumbler. I'm sure he'd go through bad experiences. Rica, you're my girl but you're so dependable, please look after him.”

Frederica, although sad, gives her goodbyes to their mother.

Garfiel hadn't known that his sister agreed with their mother's departure from SANCTUARY. Lewes, as she holds Frederica's trembling shoulders, also looks to respect their mother's decision.

Mother: “Gar, your mommy will be coming back.”

Their mother lifts Garfiel up.

Ignorant to his mother's determination, he smiles cheerfully. She holds him close. Kisses his forehead.

6 Her nickname for Frederica is フー (fuu) from フレデリカ. It doesn't work in English.

In the exact same spot that Garfiel now has a scar.

Mother: "I'll be coming back with your daddy. Until then, wait for me."

Garfiel: "—*hk!*"

Her eyes abound in affection, her voice abounds in compassion.

To keep from losing the unforgettable memory, again and again, his mother kisses him.

Eventually, she hands young Garfiel to Lewes.

Lwes cradles Garfiel firmly as she and his mother share a nod. His mother then hugs Frederica, and showers her beloved daughter's forehead in a rain of kisses too.

Garfiel: "—Haa, auh. Aauh, aaagh.... aaaaaaagh..."

While witnessing this, Garfiel has at some unknown juncture fallen to his knees.

What in the world is he watching?

He doesn't know this. He's never seen this before.

This was supposed to be the memory from when he was young, when he knew nothing, when he challenged the TRIAL, where he saw something more hopeless, more garnished in crushing despair.

And even though he remembered it, even though he remembered that vivid feeling of being abandoned in that memory, he had believed the memory a precious one and cultivated his obstinance.

All the empty threats, all across his days up until now, which he made to hide his sorrow and misery—peel away, crumble away, as something entirely different overwrites them.

What was this? This memory?

Hadn't his mother abandoned him and his sister, leaving them in search of her own happiness?

Hadn't she expelled these nuisances from her life and determined to walk her own path?

It's utterly reversed.

His mother deserted himself and Frederica and left. Explaining why Garfiel had been capable of so securely creating the person who was GARFIEL TINZEL.

The second Garfiel realises that it's all the illegitimate result of misdirected ideas, his secure barricade morphs into a brittle dirt wall, his world collapsing beneath him.

Garfiel cannot even stand any more as his family's goodbyes reach their end.

His mother, reluctant to part, touches Frederica and Garfiel one last time, and entrusts everything to Lewes as she takes her bag and turns to exit the woods.

She stops many times along her path. Glances back, at Frederica who is waving. Sees how Lewes is holding Garfiel's hand, making him wave his goodbye to his mother, and she waves back.

She collects herself and again begins to walk. Stops. Glances back, waves.

Over and over, over and over and over and over, as his mom exits the forest—

Garfiel: "—Wha!?"

Just when he moves to stand up and follow her, his vision warps.
The world is losing its edges, and not entirely because of the teardrops swamping Garfiel's eyes. It's happening for a more clear-cut reason.

The edges of his vision are swarmed in white light, and the forest is disappearing.
Like the end of the world. The unanticipated finale leads Garfiel to turn toward the witch behind him, and yell.

Garfiel: "Why! Why is it ending here! It ain't reached the fundamental..."

Echidna: "No, it's over. There's no need to see anything further. It's not me who determined the dream as finished, but you. Congratulations, Garfiel. You've rewritten your past."

Garfiel: "What're you...!?! Stop fucking with me! Th'part my amazin' self most has t'do something about 's after this!"

Echidna: "There's no need to see what comes next, and even supposing that you've envisioned some idea of what does happen next, interfering with it is out of your scope."

Garfiel: "Auh—"

You can't change the past, the witch is saying.

Garfiel's reddened face pales as he falls, partway to standing up, back to his knees.

He knows how his mother truly felt. And now this.

The fate of his mother, having left this place, would not change?

His mother left SANCTUARY for Garfiel and Frederica's sake in search of his father. But immediately after its founding that journey was crushed, alongside his mother.

—Didn't this just escalate an already hopeless memory into something even more dismal?

Didn't a memory of despair piled upon despair just switch into one of hope crushed by hopelessness? What about himself was he supposed to change, with this?

Frederica: "Mother loved both you and I, Garf."

Garfiel springs his head up.

Looking down at him as he kneels is his sister, still young. She is looking at him. A supposedly blind past, incapable of interaction, is interacting with him.

Frederica: "Our Mother left SANCTUARY for the sake of our family. Does that dissatisfy you?"

Garfiel: "Don't, fuck with me! So fuckin' what that we were loved! D-don't, shove u-undue memories onto me. I...!"

Frederica: "How much easier it was to be unloved."

Says young Frederica, somewhat mocking toward Garfiel.

Their height difference is literally that of a child and an adult. But Frederica pays not the slightest care to his height, talking from straight-on and with an expression suggesting that he is such a handful of a little brother.

Frederica: “Allowance to believe that your love is unreciprocated gives you capability to justify yourself.”

Garfiel: “No!”

Frederica: “You love her, and she loves you... should you have discovered this, you would no longer be capable of justifying your neglect to soar outside, your remaining holed in SANCTUARY.”

Garfiel: “No! No, no! And when yer don't even fuckin' know anythin'... what do you think happened t'mom!”

Frederica: “—Surely I would know.”

Garfiel leaves himself to his anger as he roars, when a shock hits him like a slap to the face. Frederica's expression vanishes. She looks at Garfiel, seeming to endure some emotion.

—What did she just say?

Frederica: “Surely I would know. Even should we suppose that after Mother left SANCTUARY she perhaps faced instantaneous misfortune... surely that information would have reached me.”

Garfiel: “N'so... so what!?”

Frederica: “And surely you understand that this information could not have reached you. You are no longer a juvenile, Garf.”

Frederica knew what happened to their mother.
And even Garfiel understands why she had been unable to tell young Garfiel that.

Who on earth could inform a young boy that his mother had met a cruel demise?
If he had not peeped on the TRIAL in this tomb, Garfiel never would have known. That he did know was because he had trampled over many considerations and kindnesses which had been trying not to let him find out.

Frederica: “In truth, you did remember that Mother loved you.”

Garfiel: “...”

Frederica: “You yourself wounded the spot where Mother had kissed you, where she had last touched you, in an attempt to pretend that it had not happened.”

His fingers touch his forehead scar.
This wound had not existed on his brow when he was young.

He sustained this injury immediately after he challenged the TRIAL. In a state of pandemonium, Garfiel bashed his head open on the walls, on the floor, harming himself so greatly that he suffered

a permanent wound.

This scar was his injury from back then. And the truth behind this scar was, surely, what Frederica had just said.

Frederica: "It's ending now."

Frederica whispers.

Before he can realise it, the world has already lost almost all of its shape.

The forest is gone, as are his departing mother and Lewes. Not even the onlooker witch is anywhere in sight, the world remaining with only the siblings Frederica and Garfiel.

Frederica: "Even should you use wounds to conceal it, you cannot erase your past. Nor can you erase the fact that you were loved."

Garfiel: "What'm I... meant to do?"

Garfiel feebly asks Frederica.

Garfiel: "If mom's end isn't changing, then that means th'outside's still scary for me. Going out there, and Nanna and everyone else having to go out there, scares me."

Frederica: "You must ask this small elder sister of yours before you can figure any answer?"

Garfiel: "I know it's p'thetic! But yer th'only one I can ask. C'mon, tell me... Sis, why did you..."

Frederica: "What is it that you wish to do, Garf?"

Interrupting him, Frederica tilts her head.

Garfiel's sentence jams. What he wants to do? That's not what they're talking about. It's what should he do, what does he need to do. That's what he's asking.

Frederica: "What is it that you wish to do, Garf?"

Looking somewhat exasperated, Frederica repeats the question.

Garfiel swallows his breath.

Garfiel: "I want t'do, what people're looking for."

Frederica: "What which people are looking for?"

Garfiel: "I wanna do what... what the people who need me are looking for from me."

Frederica: "Why is it that you feel this way?"

Garfiel: "Because... they're what made me remember."

Remember what? Frederica doesn't ask.

But, those eyes, the same gold as his, do ask the question.

Garfiel: “—That my mother loved me.”

—The world of the dream shatters to dust, the past vanishing into the beyond.



Subaru sees Garfiel's expression as one of having undergone exorcism.

Subaru had spent approximately an hour fidgeting outside the tomb with his arms crossed, waiting. The group been anxious, never looking or speaking to each other, as they simply waited in silence for whatever would happen.

Subaru: “So what're all our plans if reneges on his promise and destroys the tomb?”

...Is a joke that Subaru told in an attempt to ease the mood, only for Otto to say something incredibly inconsiderate to the situation and eat a dropkick from Ram, but generally speaking it was all very quiet.

Lewes: “...Lil' Gar.”

Lewes has reconvened with them, her expression anxious and hands linked as she restlessly looks at the tomb.

This present Lewes should be Theta, but regardless of which Lewes it is, they would all care about Garfiel dearly.

There's the whole affair where they ganged up in a group of 5 to beat up Garfiel, and also that whole affair where Garfiel had a complete change of heart and entered the tomb. Both of these events must have given Lewes more than a little shock to the heart.

Emilia looks at the tomb in suspense as she stands beside Subaru.

While naturally she must be curious about Garfiel's attempt too, once Garfiel exits the tomb, it's her turn to go inside.

The argument inside the tomb, and the fight between Subaru and Garfiel afterwards.

Subaru cannot tell what kind of change those events have had to her mental state. But her anxious expression is deeply steeped in concern for Garfiel, with not an ounce of reluctance toward her own TRIAL. This is ideally not a bad omen.

Otto: “—Ah!”

Subaru thinks his thoughts, when suddenly Otto points at the tomb and speaks.

He's saying something situation-dumb again, thinks Subaru as he grimaces, Ram clicking her knuckles. But this time it rather seems their conclusions are hasty ones.

Lewes: “Lil' Gar!”

Lewes stands up and dashes for the tomb.

Following her gaze, Subaru realises that a silhouette has appeared at the tomb's entrance.

Short blond hair, scar on brow. A sharp gaze, canines bladelike and pearly.

With a small frame and slouched posture, but emitting a dreadful and imposing aura.

Garfiel Tinsel.

Otto: “See, it's exactly what I said it'd—hyeek!”

Recipient to a jab from Ram's knee, Otto goes tumbling across the grass.

But without anyone raising the topic of Otto's suffering, they instead run over to Garfiel.

Subaru bounds up the stone stairway to reach him. Lewes has already arrived and stands before Garfiel, hemming and hawing over what to say.

Lewes: “L-Lil' Gar. Erm, I...”

Garfiel: “Don't go making a face which don't look like yer. 'M sorry fer worryin' you.”

Lewes: “Lil' Gar.”

With that blunt statement, Garfiel puts his hand on small Lewes's head.

Patting his grandmother's head—is incredibly indecent, but given their heights, it's natural for these two. And seeing as Lewes isn't complaining about it, to point it out would be the epitome of tasteless.

Ram: “How did it go, Garf?”

Ram clears the stairs following Lewes and Subaru, and calls out to Garfiel.

It was Ram who gave Garfiel the direct impetus to challenge the TRIAL. Aware of the background circumstances, a rare-in-Subaru's-presence shade of worry peeks through in her expression.

Garfiel hums in thought.

Garfiel: “Can't yer see with yer eyes th'results? Gotta say I expected somethin' more.”

Subaru: “For some reason that sounded like a middle schooler bragging about shoplifting, but if this's what you're saying... you did it?”

Garfiel: “—Lined off an era for myself, m'thinkin'.”

Garfiel gives a deep sigh out his nose.

Everyone comprehends him instantly, but it's a different sentiment which rises to fore.

Garfiel has overcome the TRIAL, and reached a conclusion about his past.

This means a step has been taken toward SANCTUARY's liberation, and proves that the TRIAL is not unreasonable or impossible.

Subaru: “Alright then. You keep riding off that momentum and go for the other TRIALS too, and...”

Garfiel: “Piss off. Only TRIAL my amazin' self's takin's this one. It ain't my thing t'be doin' th'others. Yeah?”

Emilia: “Yes, you're right. The rest of this is my job. Can't have it be taken away.”

Garfiel glares at Emilia, who accepts the gaze from straight on.

Garfiel: “Witch's got her usual asshole thing goin' on. Make sure t'watch out.”

Emilia: “Huh? You're giving me advice? Thank you. I'll remember it well.”

It's Garfiel's breed of encouragement, and sardonicism. Emilia accepts his encouragement while beautifully ignoring the sardonicism.

Garfiel looks utterly thrown. Seeing that expression makes Subaru's cheeks relax into a smile—and this time, Garfiel's gaze lands in Subaru.

Subaru's brows shoot up as Garfiel scratches his cheek.

Garfiel: “Uh, I need to, right... yeah.”

Subaru: “What's up? Skittishness's out of character for you. You're an archetype which just kills those hesitant or broody patterns, we'll do tribal play instead.”

Garfiel: “I ain't got any idea what th'damn hell yer sayin', but I can tell yer makin' fun of me, oi. Yer gettin' yer teeth beat in... aeh, er, no nevermind.”

He swings up his arm, only to lower it without doing anything.

Garfiel's suspicious, or really not-exactly-getting-to-the-point behaviour makes Subaru tilt his head. When a smile arises on Ram's face, as if she understands everything.

Ram: “Garf.”

With that, she pokes Garfiel in the hip.

Garfiel sighs, shaking his head resignedly.

Garfiel: “It's probably 'cause of you that I passed the TRIAL. Thank you.”

Subaru: “...Did you just thank me?”

Garfiel: “I ain't sayin' it again. But, I got t'remember somethin' I wanted t'remember. So goin' in there was... beneficial. Fuck!”

Perhaps with his embarrassment peaking over his time spent talking, Garfiel's face reddens in agitation as he jabs his finger at the wide-eyed Subaru.

Garfiel: “Listen! My amazin' self did lose, n' my TRIAL did change. But! Yer ain't gonna see me accept every word'v everythin' yer said as correct n' raise th'white flag n' surrender! Yer talked fuckin' big, sayin' yer'll change this SANCTUARY! F'that change hurts or pains th'folks inside, yer not gonna be gettin' any mercy!”

Subaru: “U-uhh... r-right, as reasonable...”

Garfiel speaks overwhelmingly menacingly, Subaru overawed but nevertheless managing to get words out.

Subaru could give Garfiel no absolute assurances. But he could promise that he would be doing his best to make things good. That much was definite—and just as he goes to say so,

Garfiel: “So I'm gonner be watchin' yer from right up close t'see whether yer wind up just bein' some all-talk bastard'r not. —You better pull it off, CAPTAIN!”

Subaru: “—”

Garfiel vigorously slaps Subaru's shoulders, gaze fixed on him, and makes that incredible statement. His unexpected form of address and his attitude stun Subaru so much that he's slow to react.

During that delay, Garfiel immediately passes by Subaru and descends to the bottom of the stairway with Lewes. Almost as if he's scared that someone will see his face.

Emilia: “Garfiel, your face is sooo red.”

Perhaps catching a glimpse of his face before he can pass by, Emilia speaks while trying to hold back a smile.

Which means that no Subaru's ears were not tricking him.

Subaru: “Captain... I'm not the one heading this group, that's Emilia.”

Emilia: “But it was your group which beat Garfiel, Subaru. He accepted what came out of a man-to-man conflict, which means his Captain is you. Isn't it great, Captain?”

Emilia smiles without any ill will, Subaru lost on how to respond.

Ram jabs the troubled Subaru in the side.

Ram: “Accept it.”

She shrugs.

Ram: “He isn't sure what he should be doing when he gets emotional either. Let him do what he wants.”

Subaru: “But still. I am utterly weak to it, but it's...”

Ram: “Leaving aside strength in a fight, you're the older party, Barusu, so at least give him that much leniency. Garf is a child despite how he appears. Doesn't it feel as if you've got a younger brother now?”

Subaru: “No hold on.”

Ram: “What?”

Subaru: “Can you go over that?”

Ram: “Over what?”

Subaru: “Garfiel's younger than me?”

Ram: “Ah,”

Ram gives a comprehending nod.

Ram: “You didn't know? Garf is younger than you, Barusu.”

Subaru: “How young.”

Ram: “I believe he's fourteen this year.”

Subaru: “*Fourteen!*? Fourteen... you're a chuuni!?”

The entirely unanticipated news makes Subaru's voice crack in surprise.

Suddenly he can agree with being called CAPTAIN, and with Garfiel's overly childish stubbornness.

Subaru: “A middle schooler in the peak of his rebellious age... right there's a nightmare to tame...”

Mutters Subaru, his voice even more exhausted than after their fistfight.

CHAPTER 117: LOVE LETTERS

With Garfiel's hostility quashed and the shocking reveal of his age, a period of rest falls upon the scene outside the tomb.

Everyone surrounds Garfiel, each waiting for their chance to speak.

Subaru: "But man... our guy to guy fight sure starts feeling different now that it was just us ganging together to beat up a middle schooler. It's iffy."

Otto: "Garfiel's age is a shock to me as well, but surely those misgivings would be unwarranted? The fact that our opponent, who we all needed to work together and gang up on to defeat, was actually fourteen holds not the slightest bearing on the details of the combat."

Ram: "Exactly. Garf is disproportionately powerful for a babyish teen, and no rationale exists to begin hemming and hawing over the fact that we ganged up on him."

Garfiel: "All of yer shut yer traps 'bout gangin' up on me! Yer lookin' fer another tussle!? Eh!? My amazin' self's always ready fer it!"

Subaru, Otto, and Ram all nod. Garfiel sends spit flying.

Thinking back on everything that Garfiel's said and done so far, and seeing him yelling and asserting himself the way he is now, yes indeed this is a fourteen year old.

The way that Subaru had been treating Garfiel as if he was in the same age-group may have actually placed a filter over how he interpreted everything that was happening.

Subaru: "Actually, how old were you when you took the TRIAL before? It'd be from that point that your stubbornness got worse."

Garfiel: "My memory fer it ain't perfect, but... think I was three or four. Don't 'xactly remember anythin' 'cept th'TRIAL."

Otto: "You'd expect that, yes. Three or four... why, that's the same age as when I still thought that the world was hell."

Subaru: "You're bringing up heavy stuff out of nowhere, stop. I don't wanna hear it."

A grim smile arises on Otto's face as he speaks.

Otto must have his problems, but delving into them right now is going to be overload. Subaru's arms are already chock full of more baggage than he can carry, and he's resorted to balancing it on his head and hammocking it in his lap.

Emilia: "Do you mind if I ask you for specifics?"

With the joking over, Emilia kicks off the real topic. Her face is tense.

Her gaze fixes on Garfiel, and her question most likely means SPECIFICS ABOUT THE TRIAL. Garfiel snorts.

Garfiel: "No real spec'fics t'tell. Me n' you're gonna have different pasts n' they're gonna need t'be beaten' differently. Don't think I'cn tell yer anythin' useful."

Emilia: “I know. My TRIAL is my trial. It won't help very much to ask you about it.”

Garfiel: “—? Then what on earth're yer askin' 'bout?”

Emilia: “Now that you've overcome the TRIAL... no, overcome your past, do you feel like you've changed? That you can accept that change in yourself?”

Garfiel narrows his eyes in silence.

The atmosphere is getting tense. Subaru and the others swallow they breath as they wait for Garfiel's response.

A period of silence. Garfiel touches his nose, for his fingers to then trace upwards along his scar. With that done,

Garfiel: “Can't tell whether t'say ths'thing changed, or t'say that I got it back.”

Emilia: “Mm.”

Garfiel: “This scar on my noggin's somethin' I did t'myself. T'try n'forget a bad memory.”

Garfiel taps his forehead, his gaze fixed on the person standing beside and looking at him—Ram. Her cerise eyes blink.

Ram: “Garf.”

Garfiel: “Shut it, don't say nothin' 'Tll make me miserable. Pushed th'blame fer it ont'er someone else so I could hide a bad memory. ...Realising now how yer knew that n'went along with it fer me suddenly makes me feel like crap.”

Garfiel grumbles. Ram watches him somewhat resignedly.

Subaru cannot grasp the exact significance of what they're talking about, but he can tell that this information refers to things that only Garfiel and Ram would understand.

And can also tell that Garfiel and Ram have a definite, warm, and familial kind of bond.

Garfiel: “Anyway, whether we're sayin' it changed er came back, I ain't th'same as before. Yer guys changed me. So now's to see how yer'll all change... makin' sure yer don't wind up all talk.”

Emilia: “Mm. Good. ...And I'll be doing my best to match your expectations.”

Garfiel's cheeks twist while Emilia smiles, full of determination.

Subaru abruptly realises that if you consider the mental factor alone, these two are the same age.

Fourteen year olds.

A boy and a girl in the emotional throes of puberty, and a situation requiring that the future rest on them.

Subaru is seventeen verging on eighteen so he can't say much, but what a manga-ish, anime-ish, something-in-that-vein-ish predicament that this has wound up being.

Emilia: “...Staying too long is just going to dampen my resolve.”

Emilia stands up and wipes off the grass from her waist. She gives a deep breath out, her eyes gleaming with strength and looking at the tomb—the site of the TRIAL.

Subaru: “You're going?”

Emilia: “I am. ...Following Garfiel's performance, I'm absolutely going to beat it.”

Garfiel: “Can yer do it?”

Emilia: “I am doing it. I've decided not to fear change.”

Subaru's question, Garfiel's question, Emilia nods to each. Subaru stands up and falls into line beside Emilia as she starts walking toward the tomb. He might not be able to enter and stay with her, holding her hand, but he has determined to keep at her side until her departure.

Ram: “Emilia-sama.”

Emilia stops and turns around, for Ram to give her a curtsy. While holding her skirt, solemnly, as if she were a servant paying respect to someone of higher status.

Subaru: “Well no crap. Emilia-tan is a master to her.”

Ram: “Silence your muttering, Barusu. Practice prudence enough to know that this is no situation for that.”

Ram sternly rebukes Subaru's mumbling. Emilia's eyes widen, and Ram collects herself by once again bowing her head.

Ram: “I request forgiveness for my rudeness. I had, in full sincerity, doubted whether you would rise to the situation.”

Emilia: “...Mm. I'm sorry, for being so ineffective.”

Ram: “Indeed you were ineffective and a blight to onlooking eyes.”

Subaru: “Oh come on.”

How much courage had it taken Subaru before he could convey that sentiment to Emilia? While grinding his teeth at Ram and her easy scaling of difficult hurdles, he listens on.

Ram: “But now you have risen, and have resolved to challenge. Whether that was anteceded by a desire to, or whether your sincere wish had been to flee, presents not the slightest of an issue.”

Emilia: “...”

Ram: “I had determined. Would your stance be one to challenge the TRIAL, or be else? Where I would entrust my own problems rested upon that. Should you have exhibited a desire to flee in surrender, I would have followed to the world's course. But should you have exhibited desire to

fight—”

Ram glances at Subaru.

How did he connect to this part of her speech, punctuated here at it was? Perhaps that provided the answer for why she allied with Subaru and Otto to fight Garfiel.

Ram: “May your endeavours proceed well, Emilia-sama. For your safe return shall I await.”

Ram curtseys in silence, an impeccable exhibition of a maid giving farewell to her master. Seemingly empowered by Ram's send-off, Emilia gives a firm nod with her expression cheery.

Seeing this, Subaru uncrosses his arms and nods.

Subaru: “So just with how this conversation's going, you got anything to say Otto?”

Otto: “Well it's amazing how demanding that prospect feels now, but is this truly a situation where I should be saying anything!? Don't you find anything wrong with this!?”

Subaru directs the conversation onto Otto, figuring that he will have prepared something to say, but apparently whatever he had in mind can't beat Ram's speech. Seems like he wanted to pay consideration for the situation, and let it all end cleanly—but.

Emilia: “Okay. Please go ahead.”

Otto: “—!”

Unheeding to Otto's distress and figuring that he'll encourage her, Emilia is 100% ready. She waits with her expression tense, failing to notice his panic.

Otto puts his hand to his forehead with a look of resignation.

Otto: “Erm well yes, Emilia-sama.”

Emilia: “I'm listening.”

Otto: “It happens that actually, I've paid some rather considerable damages thanks to this whole debacle. Though yes naturally this includes a 'joint-investment' nuance, and the damages involved are ones where I had factored in beforehand the fact that I would be paying them...”

Emilia: “Um?”

The topic transforms into money business. Emilia, not the brightest in mathematics, looks confused. Otto bites his lip and raises his finger.

Otto: “Well yes so!”

Otto: “I chose to undertake these damages with the anticipation that someday you would grow into something great and hefty. So you will need to prevail and ensure that I regain the expenditures I made for this bet!”

Emilia: “...I think I'm already all grown up. Eating will make me fatter though.”

Subaru: “Don't use tricky phrasing on our sheltered angel. Also Emilia-tan I think everything you're doing right now hits the golden ratio so just keep going like that. Right now you are loveliest.”

From her head to her toes, Emilia's current state is perfect.

That said of course he'd still find her lovable regardless of whether she thins down or fattens up.

But leaving Subaru's sentiments aside, Otto looks like he cannot find anything to say about the fact that his statements aren't communicating, and after a bit of flailing,

Otto: “...Come back safely. I'm supporting you.”

Emilia: “Mhm, understood. Otto-kun, thank you for helping me too.”

Emilia responds to Otto's hideously safe summarization with a strong nod.

Garfiel gives slumped-shoulders Otto a comforting shove. Witnessing that, Subaru and Emilia once again head for the tomb.

Night has fallen over SANCTUARY. Time is such that the TRIAL will occur.

Emilia takes one last session of deep repeated breaths, in and out, to steel herself. With her beside him, Subaru considers what would be the best thing to say to see her off—what would? What would? And—

Emilia: “Subaru.”

Subaru: “Hm?”

Emilia: “So about the thing in the tomb...”

She's anxious about the TRIAL.

Figuring this, Subaru waits for Emilia to continue. But she is unable to say anything as she glances at him sporadically, her expression uneasy.

For some reason, her cheeks are tinged red.

Subaru: “Emilia?”

Emilia: “S-so, erm, the thing in the tomb.”

Subaru: “Thing in the... oh, you don't mean what's coming up, you mean the stuff from before?”

Emilia: “Yes. Geez.”

It's so obvious I was, says Emilia's expression as she puffs up her cheeks. But considering how the whole scene had been going until now yeah Subaru can't agree with this criticism of hers.

Like anyone would think that Emilia, ready to imminently challenge the TRIAL, was worried not about the future but the past. Though considering that the TRIAL waiting inside the tomb is also the PAST, the whole topic of time starts getting fuzzy.

And though the momentum and all the grisly stuff that followed meant Subaru forgot about it, thinking back on it, the deed that he committed was something which could send his face bursting

into flame.

Talking with Emilia, slinging insults, shoving love at her, snapping down to steal a kiss—calling it an explosion of all the resentment he had built up over these five loops makes for no excuse.

That whole affair is probably what's troubling Emilia.

It's pleasant to see the crimson on her pale skin, but Subaru has no leeway to be getting transfixed here either.

Emilia: “Inside, where we, um... you know.”

Subaru: “Y-yeah... mhm, right.”

Emilia: “And um, I think it's going to be tough. But it's important, so... when the TRIAL and everything else is done, let's take our time to talk, okay?”

I already think my mind's taking it tough, he thinks while nevertheless promptly nodding to Emilia's proposal.

It's Subaru's first time, and definitely Emilia's first time. Their feelings crashed into each other, and they have mountains of things they need to sort out. And Subaru would also need to string together excuses while getting on the unavoidable topic of REM.

Either way,

Subaru: “Oh. You're thinking about the past, pretty calm, huh, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “Am I calm? I'm not sure. I might just be bluffing.”

Subaru: “But if you can bluff then it means your head's not full to bursting. You'll pull it off. I can bet on it.”

Subaru shoots her a thumbs up, his teeth sparkling. Emilia tilts her head in mystification.

Emilia: “Bet what on it?”

Subaru: “The right for us to go on a date.”

Emilia: “Then what happens if you win, and what happens if I win?”

Subaru: “I win and I can go on a date with you, you win and you can go on a date with me.”

Emilia slips a laugh, and for a period, the two chuckle together.

It truly does seem that Emilia is neither stressed nor anxious.

Emilia: “I'll bet for me beating the TRIAL.”

Subaru: “Okay, I'll bet for you beating the TRIAL.”

Emilia: “And if we both win?”

Subaru: “Two dates.”

Emilia: “Uh-huh.”

Like always, Emilia smoothly ignores Subaru's flirting. She glides forward. Her silver hair dances on the wind, glimmering under starlight. Subaru raises his hand as he sees her off.

Subaru: “Take care now. Watch out for cars, and men.”

Emilia: “Stop being silly.”

With a wry smile, Emilia's shape disappears into the tomb. The unlit corridor swallows her beneath darkness, robbing her silhouette from Subaru's sight.

There is no longer anything Subaru can do for Emilia. Everything is now a problem that she must overcome herself.

Garfiel: “Stop lookin' so worried, Captain. Makes yer less'v a man.”

Subaru: “Man when I think that you're a middle schooler somehow I can just accept this stuff you say. I was like you too once upon a time.”

Garfiel comes over to an antsy Subaru's side and scolds him. Subaru shrugs, when Garfiel strikes his fist to his palm, remembering something.

Garfiel: “Oh yeah, Captain. When we were fightn' n' yer smacked me flyin', what was that?”

Subaru: “You mean Invisible Providence?”

Garfiel: “Inv... what?”

Subaru: “Invisible Providence. THE IMPERCEPTIBLE WILL OF THE GODS. Isn't it cool?”

Garfiel: “S crazy cool yeah.”

Garfiel has found a compatriot. UNSEEN HAND's rap is pretty bad, so let's hope that Invisible Providence catches on. But either way, doubtful that all Garfiel's asking about is its name.

Garfiel: “Magic... ain't what it is. 'S just a feelin', but th'vibe ain't right.”

Subaru: “If we're gonna bother classifying it, honestly I have no clue either. But it's definitely occult. Try all you want but you'll never copy it.”

Garfiel: “Ain't gonna. Hittin' someone where they can't see it 's chicken.”

Subaru: “Ch-chicken he says this punk...!”

He had merely wanted mutual understanding as to Invisible Providence's awesomeness, only to shockingly be stricken down. “My bad my bad,” says Garfiel looking completely unapologetic, but making no effort to inquire

any further. Probably, he's sensed it. This occult thing makes no good territory for a man to delve.

Subaru: "...But still, what karma?"

Invisible Providence is—unmistakably—Betelgeux's UNSEEN HAND. There's a discrepancy in strength, and he could only produce one hand, but the sensation is exactly it.

Why was the same power that the abhorrent madman held now dwelling inside Subaru? Perhaps, it had something to do with the WITCH FACTOR that Echidna had mentioned.

Witch Factor. The words suggest nothing pleasant, and Betelgeux had also used the term. And Subaru's first time using this UNSEEN HAND-esque thing was not during this recent battle. To evade a charge from tiger-form Garfiel in a previous loop, he had used it unconsciously.

Meaning, the witch factor is steadily taking root inside Subaru.

Subaru knew that he could no longer use Shamac. Repeated abuses of his gate had extinguished that function of the exhausted magical gateway. His once-non-existent link to the magical world was no longer anywhere within his perception.

He had lost his yearned-for magical powers, and gained occult powers in their place.

Subaru: "Better than having no aces up my sleeve. Using it, feels like there's a technique but also doesn't really..."

Regardless, nothing has changed about the scarcity of his options in battle.

He would wring and wring his wily little brain, enlisting help from others while divining an escape from fatality.

The height of the walls Subaru must face remain as high as ever.

Garfiel: "Oh, jus'thoughter somethin', Captain."

Subaru: "What's up? Or really this whole Captain thing is still throwing me off."

Garfiel: "Yer'll get accustomed. Anyway, there's somethin' I gotta 'pologize for."

He hasn't accepted the change in name, but Garfiel just admirably looks on. The case was the same with Emilia, but Subaru has to give a wry smile with how conversation topics keep coming up. He shrugs to urge Garfiel on. His fingers trace over his scar.

Garfiel: "My amazin' self went in th'tomb. N' so my amazin' self went in th'TRIAL room."

Subaru: "Uh-huh."

Garfiel: "N'so, I saw them. —Yer, erhm. Those. Frantic results."

Subaru's brows furrow for an instant—but he immediately realises what Garfiel is referring to, and his eyes shoot open.

Shocked, Subaru's ears blaze red.

He saw them. He saw them he saw them he saw them!

Garfiel: “W-wasn't tryin' t'do anythin' bad. But t'think it'd wound up bein'...”

Subaru: “S-stop talking! Forget it now! You, crap... I forgot! I mean... I mean, I didn't think it'd wind up that you'd go in the tomb! And then it... augh, fuck!”

Clutching and shaking his head, Subaru's face grows hotter.

Garfiel as he watches on with pity is currently an odious thing. Perhaps even more loathsome than during the fistfight.

Subaru: “You forget about it! That's all I'm looking for! Okay, conversation over! Done!”

Garfiel: “Yeh, will do. ...But, here's what I thought when I saw'm. Yer an absolute, incredible moron... but I'm glad yer ain't dead.”

Subaru: “I said it's over, are you some braindead brat!? Wait! You are a brat!”

Although called a brat, Garfiel has grasped Subaru's weak point and remains the superior party. He laughs away Subaru's screams of sad defeat before descending the tomb stairs.

Following after Garfiel as he returns to everyone else in the clearing, Subaru prays for Emilia's good fortune, while simultaneously begging that she does not notice his CHEERS.

If that breed of thing doesn't reach its intended recipient before anyone else, it's over.



Subaru begs in vain.

Emilia: “I'm here...”

Exiting the stone corridor, Emilia arrives in the room where the TRIAL takes place.

Amid the cold, damp air, Emilia walks with the dimly-glowing wall as her guide and gazes at the door in the back of the room. This closed door will likely open once the TRIAL has been cleared. Garfiel came back to the group without opening the door. Meaning, she—

Emilia: “Have to do my best to get inside there.”

She doesn't know what could be lurking in those depths.

But the TRIAL does not end with only one, as the WITCH had told her of multiple.

When she thinking of the witch conducting the TRIALS, a painful itch spreads through Emilia's chest. This again resulted because the white witch's reception of Emilia was—

Emilia: “Huh?”

Momentarily in thought, Emilia casts her gaze about the room, when she notices something odd. During her time spent hugging her knees and waiting for night in this tomb, Emilia had kept halfway through the corridor, and had not ventured as far as this room. Meaning that this is her first

time witnessing the chamber in two days.
Only been two days, but something has changed over that time.
While mulling over what that something is, Emilia realises what is so odd.

Emilia: “This is...”

Brushing her fingertips over the wall, Emilia murmurs.
Her amethyst eyes begin adjusting to the dark. They capture the change amid the dim clearly.

Emilia: “You idiot, Subaru.”

With a laugh in her voice, Emilia finds herself saying this.
Because that's just it. Look at this, think like this, and there's no way you don't wind up saying it.

Emilia: “You are such an idiot.”

Contrary to her words, Emilia's expression abounds in tender affection. This change on the portion of wall she is touching, over the wall before her, over a whole face of this room, top to bottom:

—Etchings. Pictures, letters, chiselled into the wall all large and crooked.

This big chibi drawing of a cat is a familiar picture of Puck. Many drawings of Puck are etched into the wall, all surrounded with writing.

The messy I-glyphs, strewn everywhere as if written by a child, prove beyond any doubt that he had worked frantically with Emilia's interests in mind.

<You can do it, I know you can!> <Me and Puck are supporting you, everything's okay> <This girl I'm into is amazing! Have confidence in yourself!> <Once this is all over let's go on a date!> <Go for it, Emilia!> <Nobody is expecting anything from us. Is there anything more fun than proving them all wrong?> <I love you! So I believe in you!>

Emilia: “Idiot... idiot, idiot, idiot... You featherbrain, Subaru.”

She had to challenge the TRIAL now, and was bracing herself to face something painful and unpleasant, and here he is pretending to support her while making her cry, this awful man.

She understands.
She understands now.

Emilia last came here two days ago. There was only one day of opportunity for these drawings and writings to be etched.

And that was the only juncture where Subaru had time to leave Emilia's side, and only juncture where he so stubbornly kept silent about what he was doing over that period.

Emilia: “—Mm. You're right. Let's go for it, Subaru.”

With her fingers lovingly brushing the letters, Emilia responds to the etched words.
Instantly, she feels herself falling into slumber, the world's edges turning dim.

The TRIAL is coming.

That terrifying past is coming.

—But Emilia's lips stay smiling.



Subaru: “Broke my promise to go write love letters, and then someone else winds up seeing them first... My life's over...”

Garfiel: “Yer exaggeratin' it...”

Surrounding Subaru who is too stricken by shock to stand, Garfiel and the others allow themselves to look as flabbergasted as they want.

But having said that, there is nothing for the group to do here except wait for Emilia to come out. While it does sound cool to hang around here believing in her, it also composes a trial for everyone who has to sit around and wait.

Subaru: “It took Garfiel about an hour... so we should probably think that Emilia'll take that long too.”

Otto: “Supposing that she succeeds, you'd be corre—ow!?! Also awgh!?”

Otto's reward for his insensitive gaffe is Ram's elbow. Seeing Otto jabbed by Ram, Garfiel's face twists in jealousy and he sends his finger flying to poke Otto's forehead.

Otto topples backwards as he tumbles to the ground, which nobody mentions as they,

Subaru: “Actually, there was something I wanted to ask you and Garfiel, Lewes-san.”

Lewes: “Sermthing ter ask me and Lil' Gar?”

Lewes stands there uncomfortably as she looks up at Subaru.

She had gone into hiding, and although unintentional, wound up aiding Subaru and the others in their plans to defeat Garfiel. She still seems somewhat lost as to how to approach Garfiel, their grandmother-grandson conversations having been rather awkward for a little while now.

That said, Lewes is the only one worrying about it, and Garfiel feels not a scrap of negativity toward her.

Subaru: “Yes. A question. Though that said it's tricky whether or not you'll be able to understand it right now, Lewes-san.”

Tricky to understand right now, meaning tricky to understand for Theta.

Alpha, Beta, Theta, and Sigma are the four Leweses representing SANCTUARY. With the Garfiel problem resolved, the Leweses' stances toward SANCTUARY's liberation should hopefully be in accord, but it's essential to check.

But most importantly, there are still some things which don't feel quite right.

Subaru: “Garfiel, you're all for SANCTUARY's freedom now right?”

Garfiel: “It ain't a thin'v bein' fer it, Captain. My amazin' self lost t'yer. N'so I'm not gonna get in yer way while you go freein' SANCTUARY. I'm gonna be actin' t'make sure th'people in that changed SANCTUARY ain't sufferin'... 's my stance now.”

Subaru: “Right, that standpoint right there.”

Garfiel: “Eh?”

With his finger raised, Subaru pulls the breaks on Garfiel's speech. Garfiel looks mystified, as does everyone else listening. Nobody must have felt that Garfiel said anything strange. But Subaru is uneasy.

Subaru: “When we first came here, your standpoint wasn't for it or against it, it was pretty neutral... the same kind of thing like you said just now.”

Garfiel: “...I was thinkin' yer'd all get on guard 'bout me 'f you knew where I was leanin'.”

Subaru: “But you got wary about us instantly and plainly. Maybe we tripped and made some blunder, or say tripped on a tiger's tail, but anyway what was with that change in mentality?”

It's just weird.

At least on Emilia's first day taking the TRIAL, or until just around the time that she took the TRIAL, Garfiel's presentation towards Subaru's group was friendly.

Garfiel always exposed his hostility on that night after she failed the TRIAL. With the witch's miasma emanating from Subaru as his pretext, Garfiel would declare himself an enemy.

But Garfiel cannot actually smell the witch's miasma from Subaru. Someone else is noticing the miasma, and Garfiel is entirely opting for hostility after learning about the fact from them.

The person reporting to Garfiel about the miasma, and spurring him into hostility is—

Subaru: “Lewes-san, not in favour of SANCTUARY's freedom, was eyeing me.”

While looking down at the silenced Lewes, Subaru rests his raised finger on his crossed arms. The Lewes here is Lewes Theta—the only duplicate which had been not in favour of SANCTUARY's liberation.

Alpha and Beta are in favour of liberation, and Sigma is neutral. Theta knows of the true Lewes Meyer's past, and views SANCTUARY's liberation as dangerous. If he's going to add any more support to his speculation, then it's to note how inconceivable it is that any other Lewes would spur Garfiel's change of attitude.

Garfiel nods, his face puckered.

Garfiel: “Yer nailed it, Captain. Nanna told me that...”

Lewes: “Yer got it figured wrong, Lil' Su. I never told Lil' Gar about...”

Their voices coincide, but their arguments conflict.

Subaru furrows his brows as Garfiel and Lewes look at each other. Garfiel's mouth flaps open and shut uselessly as he points at the stunned Lewes.

Garfiel: “H-Heck're yer sayin'? Yer told me on th'first night that lady took th'TRIAL. Yer smell witch from th'Captain. Then there's th'half-witch lady too, maybe they're the witch's assistants... n'so, I...”

Lewes: “Did I mention...? No, I herv noticed the miasma around Lil' Su, and I dern't have the most spotless thoughts about Emilia-sama's heritage, but... that ern't relevant ter this. I wers trying ter make my decisions ter follow along with Lil' Roz's outline as best I could, and...”

Subaru: “Wait! Wait, freeze! Lewes-san, you just said you don't know anything about this.”

Lewes is rejecting Garfiel's statements.

Garfiel looks to be in utter disbelief, but being that these are words coming out of Lewes's mouth, they are true.

The people of this SANCTUARY are contracted NOT TO TELL LIES while inside SANCTUARY.

Subaru: “Leaving aside situations where the person doesn't think they're lying, Lewes-san's assertions that she hasn't done something can't be a lie.”

Garfiel: “But, it's true that I!”

Subaru: “I'm not doubting you. ...I know you've been lied to. Lewes-san. Do all the Lewes-sans accord with what you just said?”

Lewes's face pales as she nods.

This means that none of Leweses Alpha, Beta, Theta, or Sigma are the LEWES who spurred Garfiel's change of attitude.

But Garfiel himself had stated that his change of attitude had been prompted by LEWES.

Subaru raises his head, looks at Garfiel's face.

He clicks his teeth as he shakes his head, not a trace of a lie in his complexion. His personality isn't suited to telling lies anyway.

And now that his pretence of being SANCTUARY'S BARRIER has been stripped away, it's ever the more apparent.

Subaru: “Ram.”

Ram: “...I will mention that no magic exists to change a person's shape. Not even Roswaal-sama would be capable of such a thing.”

Subaru: “What do you think's going on, then?”

Ram has no response.

She must not know how to resolve this contradiction either. But Subaru is generally convinced that this is A TRAP SET BY ROSWAAL. Or more really, there's no other options for what it could be.

Subaru: “Would like to wait here 'till Emilia comes back, but...”

Only ten minutes have passed since Emilia entered the tomb. Once she clears the TRIAL and comes back out, Subaru wants to be the one to welcome her with arms spread wide. Wants to celebrate her. But—

Subaru: “Let's interrogate Roswaal. Have to find out what bad things he's doing at this last hour.”



—Emilia cannot tell whether waking up inside a dream ought to be called awakening.

Until just a moment ago she had been inside a stone chamber. Ejected from the TRIAL room, Emilia now finds herself inside a familiar forest.

Tall trees surround the environs, cool breeze on her skin and warm earth at her feet.

These memories, flashbacks.

What she would see during her TRIAL, a white forest snowscape.

But that has not begun yet.

No snow falls, green being the welcome to Emilia's consciousness-only self.

Where,

???: “Hey. These past few days have had a real turnout.”

While Emilia holds her breath to confirm her own position, she hears a voice.

Emilia's visitation has formed this dream world. Within a scene from a memory which until now had not even existed, standing there in the tree-shade, as if this is all entirely natural, is somebody.

Head to toe garbed in black vestment, hair and skin like scattered snow, this woman of white. With only two hues in repertoire, but having divined from them sublimity, this witch of beauty.

Who presides over the TRIAL, lord of the tomb which shows visions of the past—the WITCH OF GREED, Echidna.

The witch stands with the tree trunk aiding her as she tilts her head at Emilia. Emilia stares back at the witch from straight-on. Swallows her breath.

Echidna: “Truly, a turnout. Both of guests warranting a warm welcome—and the undeserving uninvited.”

Emilia: “...”

Echidna: “It's amazing how you can come back so shamelessly after flaunting all that hideousness. Even I have to find myself shocked at your audacity and at your failure to quit.”

The witch staring at Emilia strikes her with words, things full of spite and disdain. These numb, dark eyes have not the slightest resemblance to those dark eyes which always look at her so kindly. With all the malice she has known and been showered in, Emilia can tell.

This is malevolence on an entirely different dimension from what she knows.

All of the spite aimed at Emilia until this point had been for A SILVER-HAIRED HALF-ELF, a blade

lacking reason.

But the spite from this witch is not like that.

This is not for A SILVER-HAIRED HALF-ELF, but EMILIA-focused enmity.

Echidna: “You hit setbacks and bawl, but provided you can debauch a man into embracing you you don't care, you whore. You defiler who desecrates my world. Shameless and self-loving you are as he forgives you over and over, you reprobate. —What do you think, witch-child?”

Until recently, these abusive words had clawed at Emilia's heart.

It wasn't that she yielded before this malice and gave up on the TRIAL, but these words did begin the flaying and abrasion of her heart, chipping away at her capacity to resist her past.

The witch did not wish for Emilia to take the TRIAL, or to overcome it.

The witch did not have any single expectation that Emilia would overcome the TRIAL at all.

<Nobody is expecting anything from us. Is there anything more fun than proving them all wrong?>

Why indeed Subaru is exactly correct.

And so Emilia raises her arm, jabbing her finger toward the heavens.

The same way that Natsuki Subaru did when stating the audacious, when stimulating his courage.

Emilia: “My name is just Emilia. Born in Elior Forest, the Witch of Glaciation.”

Emilia can tell that the witch is daunted.

Feeling satisfaction in that, Emilia lowers her skyward finger to point at her.

Emilia: “A fellow witch's spite isn't going to make me bend. After all, me, I'm a pain in the ass of a woman.”

7 Echidna's pronoun during Garfiel's trial was watashi. For Emilia's it is back to boku.
Echidna's comment about getting men/a man to “”embrace”” her can also be a euphemism for sex.