

RE: ZERO SIDESTORY – ONE DAY II

This is a short sidestory that takes place between arcs 4 and 5. The first seven chapters are indispensable reading for arc 5, so it can be considered something like 'arc 4.5'.

The last two chapters (8 & 9), which focus on how Wilhelm came to join Crusch's faction, are less essential by my reckoning. For that reason and also for reasons of whimsy and impatience, they will be skipped unless I randomly feel like doing them later.

As always

It's best to consider these documents as things given to you in private by a friend rather than a definitive translation

and

Proofreading is still only a vague concept in my mind rather than a real thing that people do

If you have not read Arc 4 in its entirety but are nevertheless reading this sentence, what are you doing!? This place is not for you! Come back once you have read it.

<https://mega.nz/#F!VNdzDYYK!nK9fNU3LeprlZSbRAnlsRg>
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CHAPTER 1: THE RELATIONSHIP OF THESE SISTERS

—Everyone subject to the scene would agree: this is unbearable to witness.

Garfiel: “H-Hey, Sis. That luggage looks pretty heavy there. Want my amazin' self to carry some?”

Frederica: “Garf... no, do not worry. I am merely offering some slight assistance, since it discomforts me to be constantly served as a guest. Feel free to relax, Garf.”

Garfiel: “O-oh. W-well, got it. Jus' holler 'f yer need anythin', 'kay?”

Garfiel scratches his cheek, standing stock still as Frederica pushes the trolley. Frederica gazes at him for a moment, but immediately pulls herself together and refocuses on her work.

The small wheels roll across the floor, their noise fading further down the mansion's hallway. Garfiel dazedly watches his sister grow distant.

Subaru: “...So annoying.”

Garfiel scratches at his short, blond hair, sighs, and walks off in the opposite direction from Frederica. Subaru puts his hand to his forehead, having witnessed this scene from around the corner of the hallway, and bemoans the irritating exchange.

Emilia: “They've had a week to calm down and talk... but they still look sooo uncomfortable.”

Says Emilia, hidden in the same place and same manner as Subaru. Subaru was squatting while Emilia spied the exchange from above him.

Subaru feels Emilia's breath grow distant as he stands up and rotates his hips.

Subaru: “It's a decennary reunion... and one without any contact during the decade. I heard their goodbye wasn't exactly an invigorating one where they were wishing each other success, and I can understand it being awkward, but...”

Subaru crosses his arms and tilts his head.

He can understand it, but it's still irritating. Annoying. Watching them makes his back itch.

Garfiel and Frederica have been like this ever since their reunion. While they pretend to be on acceptably affable terms when others are around, things are actually poor.

Garfiel might look emotional and impulsive, but he's a surprisingly good actor when he puts his mind to it. And there's no need mentioning how well Frederica conducts herself. They probably hadn't been planning to, but the siblings have successfully deceived quite a number of people in this handful of days.

But it's obvious to Subaru, who has often caught the two of them alone, and now Emilia's witnessed it too.

Emilia: “It looks like Garfiel's trying to approach her, but Frederica can't look at him straight in the eye. Even though they're finally back together. How come?”

Subaru: “It's hard to enjoy the reunion when the goodbye's so messy. I mean, I'm just going off my manga knowledge here. ...I think the problem's Frederica.”

Emilia is right – Garfiel is ready to be open with Frederica. But Frederica looks less promising. Frederica might be feeling guilt toward her brother, who was left behind in SANCTUARY. During all of that time, Garfiel sharpened his fangs to secure a stubborn, childish heart. Which comprised a third of the obstacles that Subaru had to deal with in SANCTUARY. Yes, Frederica is partly responsible for Garfiel's attitude.

But having said that, Frederica did not purposefully ruin Garfiel, and nobody is in the wrong here. Actually if anybody is in the wrong, then it's Roswaal. And so not Subaru and not anyone else casts blame on Garfiel or Frederica.

—But it seems like they feel otherwise.

Subaru: “Man, what a mess...”

It boils down to Frederica having an excessively strong sense of responsibility. Frederica left for the outside world so that she could create a home for the people of SANCTUARY once the barrier was broken. She bore an incredibly noble and lofty burden for a ten-or-so year old girl. Perhaps that ambition of hers had been what caused her to leave Garfiel behind.

Ultimately SANCTUARY was lost, and what Frederica worried would happen did. But thanks to her actions, there were places ready to accept them, scattered and shoddy though they were. And that was something she ought to take pride in. Still, she feels more guilt than accomplishment. Because her guilty conscious must be overly strong.

Subaru: “What the hell, you can't do that. When you pull off something amazing, you have to puff out your chest with pride.”

Emilia: “Mm. I agree. And if you think you did something wrong, apologize. Then they'll forgive you... I just want them to get along.”

Both Garfiel and Frederica have vanished from the hallway. Emilia looks at the spot where the two had faced off, her amethyst eyes narrowing. Subaru peers at her and nods.

Subaru: “Yeah.”

Subaru: “Alright. We're gonna give them a little push so they can sort this out.”

Emilia: “Give them a push... you mean, have them make up?”

Subaru: “Yup. We have complicated brother-sister, sister-brother, human relations here. If the mood's so sticky they can't move, then how about some third parties cause enough ruckus to jolt things?”

Subaru claps his hands, raising his finger as he makes his proposal. Emilia considers it for a moment in silence, before giving a determined nod.

Emilia: “You're right. Mmhm, families should get along. Okay. Let's do it. Let's do our plumb best to have them make up.”

Subaru: “Who says plumb anymore?”

Mutters Subaru as a motivated Emilia balls her hands into small fists.
While thinking: *Man, it's been a while since we've done those lines.*

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The reprieve from issues stemming from SANCTUARY had only been fleeting, as the two problems of terrible post-processing and housing assaulted Emilia's faction.

Roswaal's plot (parts of which he claimed no responsibility for) had burned down the mansion. They could rebuild it, but reconstructing a building that had been burnt to a clean crisp would take time. It seems that there is no convenient magic in this world to reform objects that have lost their shapes, or any Full Metal Alchemist-style techniques to erect buildings in an instant. Their only choice was to contract a builder from a nearby village or town, or perhaps an architect specializing in noble estates and villas, to build it.

Roswaal: “Hoooooowever, that mansion was not my main house... it was an inconspicuous spot to shelter Emilia-sama while leading up toooooo the Royal Selection. I was planning to move to the main house shortly after the Selection started. Soooooo it's not as much of a problem aaaaaaas you're making it out to be.”

Is what Roswaal said when they started looking for somewhere to relocate. Apparently the Mathers family has several mansions on hand, and the main house has already been prepared as their base of operations.

Nobody is residing in the main estate except for those maintaining the place. Once the workers have everything prepared to welcome their masters in, the group will relocate their headquarters to there.
But where do they stay in the time between now and then?

Roswaal: “Don't worry, thaaaaaat's also been addressed. Some relatives of mine have a mansion in a region nooooooot far from SANCTUARY. They're a branch of the Mathers family. We can stay there for a while. Though I suspect the large number of guests will trouble them.”

'Roswaal's relatives' is an incredibly unsettling phrase, but nobody had any better plan. After that discussion, the main players in Emilia's faction went to the relative's mansion, while Arlam and SANCTUARY's people went to Arlam Village. Perhaps so that SANCTUARY's residents could be accepted as residents of Arlam, they were purposefully introduced to other villages within Roswaal's territory. Frederica had been the one to set the foundations for this, and it all ought to be considered her achievement.

Though, while all of SANCTUARY's residents are part-demihuman, they're also all half-bloods. None of them look too different from an ordinary human, so blending in won't be too hard. And though they might have different customs due to their ignorance of the outside world, the kind people of Arlam would surely teach them the basics without hesitation.

Everything might look settled, but the problems will still keep piling up. Even so, no obvious trouble is occurring at the present, since everybody has done their absolute best. Subaru prays that all the noticeable problems will be resolved before anything can happen.

—And he has judged Garfiel and Frederica's relationship troubles as something to resolve during this blissful, boring period.

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Subaru: “And thus masterplan Make Garfiel and Frederica Friends Again is a go... is sort of where we're sitting, do you have any suggestions?”

Ram: “This is the first thing you say to me upon entering the room? Intruding on my peace is a heavy crime to pay, Barusu.”

Says Ram in an emotionless voice, seated and glaring up at Subaru. Her face is expressionless as always, but Subaru's relationship with her means he picks out the wisps of emotion swirling in her eyes. As a qualified interpreter of Ram's emotions, Subaru judges that she is currently 'displeased'.

Subaru: “I know you look at me like that a lot, but does that mean that you're basically always displeased when interacting with me? Don't you ever get tired of being cross all day?”

Ram: “Do relax. I only do this when speaking with someone annoying or pointless to interact with.”

Subaru: “I see, alright th... no hold on.”

Subaru furrows his brows at Ram while she implies that he is currently one of the two. Ram snorts at Subaru's reaction before closing the book in her hands. She stands from her seat and offers it to Emilia, who stands beside Subaru.

Ram: “Here you are, Emilia-sama.”

Emilia: “Thank you. But it's okay. I know it's exhausting if we stay for too long, so we'll be done quickly.”

Ram: “I see. Then I shall gladly take it.”

Subaru: “So you're not offering it to me. You weren't kidding about gladly, geez, Sister.”

Subaru shrugs as Ram seats herself back in the chair. But something that Subaru says makes Ram's brows furrow slightly. She must be reacting to the word 'Sister'.

Emilia: “Rem-san's still the same as before.”

Ram: “...Indeed. Again today, she's sleeping so quietly that you cannot tell she's alive.”

Emilia speaks with concern, and Ram replies with her voice slightly lowered. On the bed next to Ram's chair, where the pair are looking, sleeps a girl. With short, blue hair and a face identical to Ram's. A light blue sleeping gown garbs her, and the size of her chest as it pushes the blanket up is the only point of difference between her and Ram.

Obviously, this girl's name is Rem. She remained asleep through the mansion fire and their relocation. Until they remove whatever is causing it, she will likely remain sleeping forever.

Subaru: "Do you feel like accepting it yet?"

Ram: "I did tell you. I'm not so thoughtless as to believe entirely everything when I still haven't spoken to her yet. ...Though what I'm seeing is far too persuasive to dismiss entirely."

Complex emotion arises in Ram's eyes, and Subaru winds up frowning. Ram's expression as she watches Rem sleep is horribly melancholy from Subaru's perspective, being that he knew their relationship. The elder doted on the younger, and the younger respected the elder. Rem and Ram's relationship was the exact picture of beautiful, familial love.

As Rem sleeps, Ram's memories contain not name nor recollection nor existence of her beloved sister. Subaru knew this would happen, he had anticipated this would happen, but it still makes him horribly disconsolate. But even so—

Subaru: "You say it's complex, but you come visit here every day for her."

Ram: "...I do wonder. Honestly, not even I know what I'm trying to do. But it calms me down to be with this girl you call my sister. ...No, part of me is unsettled too, but..."

Subaru: "Unsettled?"

Ram: "Because I'm seeing my own face... isn't quite it. When I look at her as she sleeps, I feel something astir in my heart. It's as though I'm chasing after mist, something which my hands will absolutely never grasp."

Ram puts her hand to her chest. Subaru quietly gulps. Everyone in the world except Subaru has forgotten Rem—but even so, she remains a thorn inside her only blood relative, Ram. Ram doesn't seem to know the name of that thorn, but if it's something that Rem left to her dearest elder sister, then it constitutes more than enough of a clue.

Subaru: "I'm open to tell you everything I can about what she's like or the times we've spent."

Ram: "—I think we better not."

Subaru offers to help Ram recover her memories, but Ram shakes her head. Subaru's brows furrow as Ram puts her hand to her chin in thought.

Ram: “It's this, unreachable hollowness. It's like there's a hole inside me where she used to be. And if there is, anything you fill it with will definitely fall out. And even now, just hearing she's my sister... her appearance is the most obvious indicator, but it still doesn't feel real. It feels like, the moment I stop these daily visits... even what I'm feeling now will disappear.”

Emilia: “...And that's the curse of the Witch Cult's GLUTTONY?”

Emilia interjects, looking like she cannot let the topic slide. Ram looks up to find Emilia with her brows lowered in a rare display of anger.

Ram: “A gross feast of NAMES and MEMORIES... My impression of the Witch Cult was never good, but it's certainly abhorrent now.”

Emilia: “...Witch Cult.”

Mutters Emilia quietly, her gaze lowered.

While Ram's speculation surprises Subaru, the maliciousness of it also makes him wince.

This doesn't feel real for Subaru, who remembers Rem clearly, but it isn't that Rem's existence is 'missing' from Ram and Emilia's memories. It's that it's 'missing in perpetuity'. Just how sand never stops falling from an hourglass, it is continuous, ongoing now and forever.

Subaru: “We can't do anything unless we stop what's causing it...”

The more Subaru talks about their memories together, the quicker the sand will fall. Perhaps even Subaru will forget the memory the second that he voices it.

Ram is concerned that Rem will disappear from the world—or at least that must be part of it.

Ram: “It seems that you have some thoughts about the Cult, Emilia-sama.”

Subaru bites his lip while Ram looks up at Emilia. Her pale cheeks stiffen as Ram's cerise eyes gaze at her, before she slowly nods.

Emilia: “I've done lots of thinking about the WITCH. Because I've been cursed at so much for looking like her... but, the Cult is...”

Ram: “—”

Emilia: “Apparently it's something I wanted to forget. But I can't regard the one I remember and the one that's there now as the same. What could have happened since then, that it's like this now? ...That's what I want to find out.”

Subaru: “I don't really wanna say this, Emilia-tan, but... you get that they're not people you can really communicate with? It'll probably end up as a painful experience.”

He doesn't want to snuff Emilia's will, but it's unfair for him not to say it.

The Witch Cult that Subaru knows is a giant mass of malice constructed by a bunch of religious crazies. He doesn't know what it used to be like. But that's what the cult is like now.

Emilia: “Thank you. For worrying about me.”

Subaru's concern makes Emilia smile slightly, and she shakes her head.

Emilia: “It's okay, I understand. What happened in my memories, and the people I was with... it's all a century ago. There's no way they could still be alive. One hundred years is sooo much of a person's lifespan. I don't think I can meet them again.”

Subaru: “But you still want to know what happened... right?”

Emilia: “I'm sorry, I know it's selfish. But I think I'm the only one who needs to find out. Because I'm the only one who saw what happened there, and the feelings that were there... and what Juice and Mother felt.”

Emilia's eyes are sad as she imagines the two, but her mouth remains set in a gentle smile. There's her mother's name, and Juice. They're important memories for Emilia, and apparently connected to the old, utterly different Witch Cult.

Subaru: “Got some really mixed feelings here, Juice-san...”

Mutters Subaru to himself with a sigh, somewhat resentful toward someone he's never even seen. Emilia feels familiarity and sorrow for the name, and hearing it gives Subaru complex feelings. If the Witch Cult hadn't changed its course from when 'Juice' joined the fold, Emilia probably wouldn't have been put through so much crisis.

If he was going to be Emilia's ally anyway, Subaru would appreciate if he could've stayed at her side from start to finish. ...is the breed of selfish resentment he finds himself thinking.

Ram: “—I doubt I can be as kind as you, Emilia-sama.”

Although as quiet as ever, her voice is full of chilling animosity.

Subaru's breath catches as he looks at Ram as she looks at Rem. Her face is expressionless, but the glint in her eye is shockingly red.

Ram: “The Witch Cult's particulars have nothing to do with me. I won't object to your desires to hear their story, Emilia-sama. I won't, but do remember that my revenge is another matter entirely.”

Emilia: “Ram...”

Ram: “I couldn't care less about this Cult or Gluttony, but I return what I'm given, be it debts or enmity. Dismembering the heart-gouging hellion still won't be enough for me.”

Grisly rage overflows from Ram, her petite frame seeming to blur.

As if a giant were there, emitting an overwhelming sense of presence—indeed, as if an oni were there.

Ram: “I'll eviscerate Gluttony so thoroughly that the memory demands awe.”

It's less 'resolve' and more 'death sentence'.

The recipient is absent, and her tone is utterly calm. Nevertheless, this is unmistakably a death sentence—it feels like an icicle has speared down Subaru's spine, making him hesitate even to speak.

Subaru: “—”

With that, silence falls upon the room.

Even the noise from his fidgeting feels like it would break the tense atmosphere, so Subaru cannot move. What does shatter the stressful mood is in fact the person who caused it.

Ram: “It was unlike me to say that.”

She sighs, the tense atmosphere vanishing entirely. Subaru lowers his shoulders in relief,

Subaru: “No, it wasn't unlike you. The Ram I know was someone who did get violent when stuff involved her little sister.”

Ram: “...I see.”

Ram's statements had been disturbing, but she had definitely been thinking purely about Rem when she spoke them. Subaru appraises it on that point alone, making him feel glad for Ram's sentiments. Besides, Subaru can't forgive GLUTTONY either. If he can then he wants Gluttony's neck for himself, without even handing it over to Ram.

The sensation of murder. —The slipshod conclusion to his fight with Betelgeux left very little direct feeling in Subaru's palms. Perhaps Subaru's hesitation toward taking a life could stymie him at the critical moment.

But still, he cannot forgive GLUTTONY, and he has the resolve to do it if it's to save Rem.

Subaru: “...We got really off topic.”

Subaru scratches his head, his dark thoughts not showing in his expression.

Ram looks at him meaningfully, and Emilia looks at him concernedly, but Subaru had managed to smile at both of them, surely.

Ram: “You're right. Now, since you're intruding on me as I enjoy my unexpected holiday, I'm sure your business must be suitably important.”

Subaru: “Why are you so audacious when pressuring people? Frederica's in your position and she feels so apologetic about getting guest treatment that she's helping in the mansion...”

Ram: “I'm wounded. And Frederica's the one failing to read the mood by working when she's being received as a guest. ...She can't stay composed when with Garf, and Clind is inciting her into it too.”

Subaru: “Clind-san is?”

This is the name of the Mathers family's young butler who is tending to Subaru and the others.

He is handsome, with a slender face, who exudes an incredible aura of grace and capability. He gives a similar vibe to Julius, but unlike Julius Clind is polite and incredibly considerate.

And so Subaru thinks it strange that Ram doesn't seem to think too fondly of him. Though perhaps that's just what everyone looks like to Ram when they're not Roswaal.

Ram: “You should ask Frederica and Clind themselves about how poorly they interact. Anyway, I'd like to return to my reading, so do state your business quickly.”

Emilia: “I’m sorry, we just keep on talking. I think Subaru mentioned this right at the start, but it’s about Frederica and Garfiel...”

Emilia valorously gets to changing the topic.

'Let's do something about Garfiel and Frederica's awkward relationship!' was a nice idea and all, but Subaru and Emilia found themselves absolutely stuck on what to do.

Since neither of them are very experienced when it comes to mending sibling relationships.

Subaru is an established only-child, and so is Emilia.

Neither of them have been blessed with siblings, so nothing comes to mind when it comes to non-parental blood relations. And in Garfiel and Frederica's case they don't even have ordinary parental relations, but we'll leave that part aside.

So they wandered around the mansion in search of advice, and visited Ram, who stays in a fixed location.

And Subaru considers her the closest sister he knows. Though her relationship with Rem is gone from everyone's memory except Subaru's, he hopes that Ram might have something useful to say, considering that she and her sister had such a good relationship.

And even disregarding that, Ram is childhood friend of Garfiel and Frederica. Maybe something from an episode that Subaru wasn't around for will make her hit on an approach to fill this decade-long divide.

Emilia almost gives Ram an expectant gaze, when her lips come to a halt.

Subaru tilts his head at the frozen Emilia, wondering what happened, before following her gaze—and freezing still as well.

Ram: “...What?”

Ram narrows her eyes, looking terribly uncomfortable.

In her hands she holds a book, at which Emilia and Subaru stare.

The title, “How to Grow Closer to Your Younger Sibling,” is horrifically critical to the current affair.

—It seems that they aren't the only ones feeling clueless about sibling relations.

CHAPTER 2: YOUNG SOULS AND WATCHER

Having learned that Ram is useless regarding sibling problems without her memory, but that she is nonetheless a good sister, time passes on for Subaru and Emilia with no good progress.

Subaru: “But don't you feel like Ram was being pretty unsympathetic?”

Emilia: “Don't say that. Ram has her own opinions. ...She's known them longer than we have, so that's probably the difference.”

Emilia smiles wryly at the pouting Subaru as they walk down the mansion hallway. They have left Rem's bedroom and are reflecting on the encounter as they venture about. Through Subaru's mind passes the words that Ram left them with before their departure:

Ram: <Garf and Frederica's relationship? It should be fine to just leave them be. They aren't children... well, Garf is a kid, but he's not bereft of his own ideas. Though said ideas tend to be inaccurate. They'll manage something on their own.>

It's a rather ruthless judgement on Garfiel, what with how fond he is of Ram. But it's possible that Ram regards Garfiel as something like a younger brother. His crush could be called cute, were the feelings not so intense and violent. Poor Garfiel, infatuated with a fortress of a woman.

Emilia: “—? Hm? What's wrong?”

Subaru: “No, it's nothing. Was just reflecting that man, Garfiel's not the only one looking at a tall hurdle.”

Emilia: “—?”

Emilia tilts her head cutely.

Subaru hates how her mind utterly fails to put together what his gaze and words mean. Perhaps the fact that he winds up forgiving it is one of those foibles of loving someone.

Subaru: “Anyway, so Ram's out... who to consult next?”

Emilia: “Huh? You're going to keep trying?”

Subaru: “Well yeah. We haven't solved anything yet, and there's nothing manly about giving up 'cause you stumbled on the first step. Don't you want to improve their relationship too, Emilia-tan?”

Emilia: “I do, but... Ram knows them best, and that's what she said, so maybe that's the best thing to do.”

Subaru: “Leaving them be might solve the problem over time, but you can't forget that it's been a decade since they parted. I'm not going to wait another decade for them to reconcile. I want to give them a shove so they make up quickly.”

Subaru insists that they stick with the plan, while Emilia seems somewhat pressured by Ram's statement. That said, while Subaru does want Garfiel and Frederica to reconcile, he also wants to

keep this chance to do things with Emilia from escaping.

Since no matter what Subaru does in this caper, it won't escalate into bloodshed. Could this heart, after all that protected trial and error, ever feel so light?

Emilia: "What happened? Subaru, you just burst into a grin..."

Subaru: "No, was just thinking that mulling over things without being frantic about it is bliss. Wow! No matter how everything falls, there's no bloodshed and nobody dies!"

Emilia: "Subaru..."

Subaru shoots her a thumbs up, his teeth sparkling, but Emilia looks at him with incredible pity. Subaru thinks back on his statement, figuring that he must have said something strange. And then shocks himself at what a brutal, inappropriate comment it was, and how impoverished his desires are.

Subaru: "D-Disregard that, Emilia-tan."

Emilia: "It's okay. I know it's been hard. I'm sorry I didn't realise how you felt. Subaru, maybe you should spend the day resting in your roo—"

Subaru: "No not happening and that reaction's for when you don't realise how I feel!"

Emilia gazes at him with sympathy.
And, at that point in the conversation,

???: "...So you're the ones making this racket, I suppose."

Sighs a voice. Subaru looks over to the speaker, to find a girl in an extravagant dress standing there—Beatrice.

She has come from the other end of the hallway and stopped to look at Subaru and Emilia, her brows furrowed on her cute face.

Beatrice: "You two are certainly enjoying yourselves, in fact. I can hear your arguing from the other end of the mansion, I suppose."

Subaru: "There's some sarcasm. If you're sad you're not included then just say it. We'll let you deliberate with us in our profound discussion hour."

Beatrice: "Who said anyone is sad about being left out, in fact! Don't just go saying whatever you want, I suppose!"

Beatrice crosses her arms, her cheeks red with indignation. Both Subaru and Emilia have to smile at how incredibly Beatrice the attitude is.

About a week has passed since Subaru and Beatrice formed their contract. That said, nothing especially dramatic changed about their relationship.

Subaru teases Beatrice like always, and Beatrice overreacts. These exact same exchanges unfold endlessly for these two.

But, Beatrice has been more out and about lately. And sometimes, as if remembering something, she

comes to hold Subaru's hand.

Subaru: "And so on is what you say, but really you're here because you wanna hold my hand. Oh geez this poor girl's too much."

Beatrice: "Don't distort Betty's actions by giving them these weird pretexts, in fact. Betty keeps touching you because circumstances demand it, I su... Subaru, I suppose."

Subaru: "It is adorable how you reminded yourself to say that."

Emilia: "Subaru."

Emilia cautions Subaru as Beatrice's face goes red. Subaru pokes his tongue out at Emilia and reaches out for Beatrice.

Her hand lightly closes around his fingers, before she re-thinks it and timidly grasps his hand proper. It's what Beatrice always does.

He feels her small fingers on his palm. This tickly, awkward touch is the fruit of Subaru's labour.

But this time Beatrice does not do it, and instead she simply stares at Subaru's hand, hesitant.

Subaru: "What's up? I do wash my hands after going to the bathroom."

Beatrice: "I wasn't worried about that, but now that thought's going to be in my head and it's disgusting, in fact! No, it's something else..."

Beatrice glares in response to Subaru's unneeded comment, and she glances behind her. Subaru tilts his head at that, when he hears the answer come from down the hallway.

???: "Where'd you go, Beatrice-chan?"

A voice calls from down the hallway, beyond a corner, searching for Beatrice. The voice is female, filled with affection and friendship.

But hearing it makes Beatrice's shoulders hitch up,

Beatrice: "Eep!"

Squeaks Beatrice, her eyes darting around before she dives into a nearby room. Subaru and Emilia watch on wide-eyed as Beatrice peeks out from behind the door.

Beatrice: "Tell her that I'm not here, I suppose. Please, in fact."

Subaru: "Hey."

Beatrice: "Please, I suppose."

With that, she silently shuts the door. Subaru shrugs while Emilia furrows her brows in confusion. And,

???: "Oh! Subaru!"

A girl appears from beyond the bend in the hallway, her face lighting up as she comes darting over. With the skirt of her maid outfit fluttering, the auburn-haired girl trots near—it's Petra. Petra is also staying in this mansion following the incineration of Roswaal's estate. Considering the danger that comes with being involved, Subaru had tried to convince her to go back to the village, but she refused to listen.

Petra has been utterly focused on helping with odd jobs around this mansion as part of her maid training. *What an ambitious, disciplined girl*, Subaru thinks. As if complimenting Subaru's thoughts, Petra curtseys politely to Emilia,

Petra: “Please forgive me, Emilia-sama. I present my apology for having raised my voice.”

And says that.

The childishness she displayed toward Subaru instantly disappears, and Emilia's eyes widen at the maidly behaviour.

Emilia: “Ah, um, it's okay. Don't worry. You can please relax, knave.”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, 'knave'?”

Emilia is going to need to learn how to respond when others humble themselves around her. But putting aside that messy-yet-heartwarming conversation,

Subaru: “So, what's up, Petra. Something happen?”

Petra: “No, nothing has happened... but since I've finished my work, I was thinking to entertain Beatrice-chan. But I haven't been able to find her.”

Emilia: “Beatrice-chan... gosh.”

Emilia's breath hitches, and she puts her hand to her mouth as she holds in her laughter. Subaru also comes close to snickering. Beatrice, for all of her hauteur, has been dubbed with a -chan by Petra. Subaru burst into laughter when he first caught them interacting.

Petra: “Is there something the matter, Emilia-sama? Have I perhaps said anything strange?”

Emilia: “No, nothing. I just thought that was a bit sooo funny.”

Petra: “‘A bit’ but ‘sooo’?”

Sometimes Petra's childishness does come to the fore. Emilia gives her a smile and glances to Subaru, her gaze asking him what to do. Subaru pretends to mull over the issue,

Subaru: “Right. Beatrice. She loves the attention, so I'm sure you have fun fussing over her too?”

Petra: “Mhm, I do. Beatrice-chan isn't honest at all. She's super cute whenever I'm with her. I don't think people like her should be left on their own.”

Subaru: “Why do you think that?”

Petra: “‘Cause she'd be lonely. You can't leave her there.”

Subaru nods to Petra's smart-yet-simple reply.

It took a lot of words to get there, but ultimately it's the same reasoning by which Subaru dragged Beatrice out of the Forbidden Archive. Children see to the truth of things. Or really Subaru and Beatrice just argued at each other using child's logic.

Petra: “How come you're laughing now too, Subaru?”

Subaru: “It's not that I'm making fun of you. It's just that you're so brilliant, Petra.”

Petra: “Really? Eheehee.”

Subaru pats Petra's head and gives her a nod.

Then he puts his hand on the doorknob behind him, and swings the door open.

Beatrice: “Whaugh!?”

With a thunk, an eavesdropping loli gets sent to the floor.

The loli pushes herself back up, her eyes teary and forehead red from the door belting against her.

Subaru: “The heck are you doing.”

Beatrice: “Moreso what the heck are you doing, in fact! This hurts! This sincerely hurts, I suppose! It hurts and furthermore you broke your promise...”

Subaru: “I didn't promise anything, and I didn't even say I'd do it. After taking careful consideration of who to support, I decided that supporting Petra'd be funnier.”

Beatrice: “Funnier! Funnier, he says, in fact! Just abysmal, I suppose!”

Complains Beatrice, rubbing her forehead while Subaru blocks his ears, pretending not to hear her. When a girl cuts into their exchange. Petra faces Beatrice directly, making Beatrice's mouth gawk open and pigtails bob.

Beatrice: “Ah, erm, um, don't get the wrong idea, in fact... I, I wasn't hiding from you or anyth...”

Petra: “Come on, Beatrice-chan. You're going to get told off if you play hide and seek in other people's mansions. Though I understand wanting to play so much you can't help it...”

Beatrice: “What!? S-stop acting as though Betty were a child, I suppose! Though I might look like this, I am fully an... erm, fully an...”

Petra: “Fully an?”

Beatrice: “...Nevermind, in fact.”

In the end, Beatrice surrenders. Emilia looks surprised, and Subaru also closes his eye at the

unfamiliar happenings.

The entertaining thing about Beatrice and Petra's relationship is that somehow Petra is the dominant one.

Beatrice always maintains a haughty, cocksure attitude when interacting with anyone. Subaru and Puck had been the exceptions, and now Petra has thrust herself into that count.

For some reason, Beatrice can't interact with Petra using her normal demeanour. Not even she seems to understand why that is. But Subaru has spotted her holding hands with Petra, looking rather reluctant about the whole thing, several times now.

Nevermind what Beatrice thinks, to an outsider they're just a couple of young girls. And this is two girls, with portents of feature beauty, holding hands. A charming spectacle.

Petra looks slightly older than Beatrice. Perhaps it's happening because Beatrice struggles to counterbalance Petra when she behaves like an older sister.

Petra: "Okay, let's go. We don't want to interrupt Subaru and Emilia-sama's work. And Brother Clind got some sweets for us, so let's go eat them together. In the dining room."

Beatrice: "O-Okay, I suppose. I'll go... so you don't need to pull me along, in fact."

Beatrice sends a pleading look to Subaru as Petra leads her out of the room by the hand, but Subaru cruelly replies with a thumbs up. Emilia waves her goodbye as Petra drags her away, still looking mad and with her tongue sticking out.

That circumstances-demanded skinship with Subaru will have to come later. Emilia puts her finger to her lip as she contently watches one girl abduct the other,

Emilia: "That is sooo surprising. I didn't expect Beatrice to be weak to Petra."

Subaru: "Right? It stunned me at first. It's adorable to watch though so I didn't say anything. And I think Petra's totally right."

Emilia: "She'll be sad if left alone?"

Subaru: "I don't mind being with her all hours of the day, but that defeats the point of leaving the Archive. If she's making memories, then the pages of her photo album ought to have as many people in them as possible."

Since she has to compensate for four centuries of blank pages. If Subaru consumes all of the space in her album, it's going to get samey quick.

Her memories need to be full of lots of people and lots of faces. Subaru believes it best to stand at her side as she clicks the shutter, sometimes slipping into the frame.

Emilia: "Subaru... sometimes you are sooo cool."

Subaru: "Huh, what, seriously? What happened, what RNG was that!?"

Emilia: "It really is only sometimes though."

Subaru scratches his cheek as Emilia giggles.

While it was somewhat joking, compliments from Emilia inevitably get him excited. He wants to always be reminded of this feeling whenever he teases Beatrice. Gotta keep teasing her now.

Subaru: “Feels like the aims and the means swapped places, but you do get that sometimes. Now, we got to see that heartwarming sight, so next is...”

???: “Indeed, a heartwarming sight. The spectacle of two girls with their lovely souls, smiling as they join hands... that is this world's splendour. Effulgence.”

Emilia: “Eek!?”

Just when Subaru starts moving to the next topic, a voice speaks up that makes Emilia yelp. Because the speaker's arrival is just that abrupt and unexpected. And their location is just as unexpected as their arrival. This character stands behind Subaru, so close that he can feel their breath on his neck, their expression nonchalant as they join the conversation.

???: “I do apologize for the surprise. But I could not suppress my occupational urge to present you with astonishing service. Misfire.”

Subaru: “C-Clind-san?”

Clind: “Yes, this is Clind. I do hope that I have not fouled your temper? Trepidation.”

A handsome, slender man gives them a perfect bow. His blue hair is just long enough to touch his shoulders, and he wears a monocle on his left eye. His starched, black butler suit seems to take joy in being his clothing as it perfectly displays its potential, his every movement so refined that Subaru unwittingly has to stand up straight.

This man's posture is so perfect that it could be a match for Wilhelm's, but the aura that Clind exerts differs from the Sword Demon's.

If Wilhelm gives the impression of a honed blade, then Clind is the flow of pristine waters. Material beauty is dissimilar to conceptual beauty. Though both soothe the mind equally.

Subaru: “It's kind of shitty to show up behind people out of nowhere, Clind-san... almost had a heart attack.”

Clind: “Should that occur, we will devote our utmost efforts into your resuscitation. There is no need to fret for everything is well. Death's Door.”

Subaru: “Um!?! Except that's no help at all!?”

While Clind's polite gestures remain strong, his reply falls apart terribly. However, his current behaviour gives no indication to his personality or capabilities. Clind is as excellent a servant as he appears, being the paragon butler of the Milord household.

Although young, he keeps the mansion in order with his bold personality. And that isn't all—he's even capable of swordsmanship in an emergency. He is so skilled that, when they first met, Garfiel tried to pick a fight with him: “Guy's pretty fuckin' good.” Though Clind ignored the duel invitation.

However, for all of Clind's excellence, he does have some flaws. One of them is his demonstrated penchant for mischief. Another is,

Emilia: "Petra hasn't been any trouble for you, has she? I know that you're letting her participate in the work, but I'm still kind of worried..."

Clind: "There is no need for worry. Petra is outstanding for a girl of her age. I await to see how her proficiency and beauty shall bloom. Envy."

Emilia: "I see. Thank goodn—"

Clind: "However, she shall grow into an adult. ...Which I find a terrible shame. Chagrin."

Clind furrows his brows, looking utterly disappointed.
This is one of his flaws, and a big one.

Clind is extremely interested in young girls like Petra and Beatrice.
Putting it straight, he's into little girls—a lolicon.

Clind: "What could be the matter, Natsuki-sama? You look as though you've seen a prospective criminal. Have I perhaps done something untoward? Confirmation."

Subaru: "It sort of seems as though you're self-aware about it, considering how precise that comment was. I'm not really into younger girls so you have that, but seriously when they're that young..."

Clind: "It appears that you could be under a terrible misapprehension. Smile."

Smile, he says, while not smiling in the least. His attractive face darkens dejectedly as he adjusts his monocle, and he turns to face Subaru.

Clind: "Do I have your attention? I do not admire Anne-Rose-sama, nor Petra nor Beatrice-sama because they are young. It is because I am infatuated with the promise and youth of their souls. To be enraptured by pure, immaculate souls is natural. And it happens that many possessors of such souls are young. Thus Misapprehension."

Subaru: "Well... great."

Clind gives a speech to rebut Subaru, though Subaru tunes out for most of it. However, Clind's next words destroy that attitude of Subaru's.
He looks at Emilia, and,

Clind: "In fact,"

Clind: "My eyes perceive a similar lustre to Emilia-sama's soul. Purity."

Emilia: "Me?"

Subaru: "Goddamn geez, Clind-san!"

Emilia tilts her head. Subaru can only find himself shocked and awed at Clind's perception. It should not be possible to determine that Emilia is mentally much younger than she appears without investigating her background and upbringing. Clind's eyes have penetrated straight through that, and he has ascertained that Emilia is mentally a loli.

A lolicon's nose is to be feared, thinks Subaru in dumb astonishment.

Subaru: "So then Lewes-san or something'd be..."

Clind: "Her appearance is exceedingly darling, but her soul is matured. It is beyond the means of someone as callow as I to divine promise from someone so set in their ways. Recklessness."

Subaru: "Amazing..."

It truly impresses Subaru that he can see through the loligranny. Emilia has been party to this exchange, but doesn't seem particularly interested in Clind's fetishes.

Emilia: "Clind-san, there's something I kind of want to ask..."

Clind: "Please ask whatever you wish. Inquiry."

Emilia: "Did Frederica use to work here before she started working in Roswaal's mansion?"

Clind: "...Indeed. Affirmation."

Subaru furrows his brows, sensing that Clind was tongue-tied for a second. The hesitation makes Emilia blink too, but the conversation continues as is.

Emilia: "Which means that you've known Frederica for a long time?"

Clind: "Frederica and I have known each other for a decade—I was still a manservant who had only just begun work when the Margrave brought Frederica to the Milord household. We would have known each other since then. Old Friends."

Emilia: "I knew it! Okay, so I have a question about Frederica. Is there anything she likes or dislikes that we can use as a starting point for her to reconcile with Garfiel?"

Clind: "A starting point for reconciliation. Ruminating."

Clind puts his hand to his chin, in thought. He looks pretty as a portrait even while ruminating. Subaru fiddles with his track suit zipper while lamenting, "So hot guys can get away with being lolicons..." about the amazing differences in beauty.

After a minute of thought, Clind nods with a quiet sigh.

Clind: "I shall make chicken the primary dish for Anne-Rose-sama's next birthday. Plan."

Emilia: "Where'd Frederica go!?"

Clind: "...Ah, forgive me. Whenever I attempt to meditate upon her, my brain unfailingly rejects it. I'm afraid this is my idiosyncrasy. Beg Your Pardon."

Emilia: “Do you maybe not get along with Frederica, Clind-san?”

Clind: “Preposterous. Denial.”

Clind shakes his head at Emilia.

Clind: “She is an excellent servant who conducts her work swiftly and accurately, and is also proficient in tact. Should you ignore that her appearance sullies her station, what demands the maid to be adorned in splendour and beauty, I have not any complaints about her. Indifferent.”

Emilia: “Um? I think I just heard something extremely prejudiced, but is that just me? Subaru?”

Subaru: “No it's not just you, it's just Clind-san.”

It seems like Clind's unrelenting prejudice springs from Frederica's appearance. While yes, the initial impact of it did startle Subaru, Frederica is actually both diligent and abounding in femininity. There's nothing wrong about her as a woman except her appearance.

Clind: “I sense that Natsuki-sama has reached the same conclusion as myself. Espy.”

Emilia: “Did you? Subaru?”

Subaru: “I'm trying to end my habit of probing for other people's flaws, so could you please not!? Emilia-tan your looks are a mega critical on me!”

Emilia: “That's not what we were talking about, geez. ...But, thank you.”

Says Emilia, her cheeks slightly flushed.

These compliments seemed utterly ineffective before, but since Emilia finished the TRIAL they've starting working on her somewhat, which is novel.

Puck isn't around to give Emilia lessons on fashion any more, and she's gotten into the practice of dealing with her own grooming and dress. Apparently she's been doing some trial and error on what looks stylish.

Though naturally when she started thinking about chopping her silver hair short, everyone collectively yanked the breaks on it.

Either way, it doesn't seem like they're going to get any useful information about Frederica from Clind. Subaru and Emilia sigh, hitting a quick dead end yet again.

When Clind speaks up,

Clind: “Simply as speculation...”

Clind: “Judging by what I have heard, could you be seeking an improvement to the sibling relationship between Frederica and Garfiel-sama? Conjecture.”

Emilia: “Yes, we are. But neither me or Subaru have any brothers or sisters, so we have no idea what to do. We've been asking around, but...”

Clind: “Being that Frederica's only issue is her appearance, I believe that issues pertaining to

Frederica that are unrelated to her appearance will resolve themselves if left alone. But it seems that you may find this stance unsatisfactory. And so I offer. Proposal.”

Both: “Proposal?”

Clind raises his finger. Subaru and Emilia tilt their heads in unison.
For the first time that day, Clind smiles.

Clind: “If you are concerned about them, then ought you not speak to the person closest to them? Not Ram, but another? Opinion.”

Emilia: “Closest to them... oh!”

Emilia claps her hands, her eyes shooting open as she finally hits upon this idea. Subaru reaches the same conclusion, but something is bothering him first.
Which is,

Subaru: “Not Ram? I’m pretty sure we only mentioned her ages ago, Clind-san, how long’ve you been listening to us talk?”

Clind: “It is because I am the butler entrusted with the peace and chores of the Milord household. Declaration.”

It kind of sounds like an answer and also kind of doesn't.
Subaru scrunches his face up while Clind bows respectfully.

His conduct as a subordinate is so perfect that it overwhelms any observers.
All Subaru can do is shut his mouth, and look sour.

CHAPTER 3: PRETTY GIRL, PRETTY LADY, PRETTY GRANNY

Subaru: "And thus we hastened to speak with Lewes-san who we figure knows them best."

Lewes: "I'd call yer approach conscientious, all told. I don't mind yer relying on me... but I don't gert much I can say on the topic."

Subaru: "Meaning?"

Lewes: "Meaning I agree with Ram and Lil' Clin'. Their problem ers their problem. It's not something outsiders need ter get too involved with."

It doesn't look like Lewes is too interested in Subaru's proposal as she sips her tea. However, she is undeniably a key figure in this whole affair. Subaru is sticking his neck into their business with too little frivolity to back down that easily.

Subaru: "I get that their circumstances are an annoying mess. Since I've been involved in it if only tangentially."

Lewes says nothing.

Subaru: "But I don't think it's something to just leave alone. I mean maybe it will resolve itself in time... but it's aggravating both to them and to onlookers how they're trying settle things, but it just isn't working. If a third party can do something about it, then they should."

Lewes: "That sounds like a load'erv hard-nosed meddling."

Subaru: "Well I do have a reputation for being shameless and dense."

Subaru puffs his chest out in pride although it likely wasn't a compliment. Lewes smiles wryly at him.

The two of them are in a corner of the large room given to Lewes, sitting across from each other at a table as they sip from their cups, silently wetting their throats with tea. When,

???: "Excuse me, guys?"

A voice calls to them from a short distance away.

The speaker narrows their amethyst eyes, their gaze akin to glare as it pierces Subaru.

Dissatisfaction laces the voice of the speaker, uninvited as she is in the conversation, Emilia.

Subaru: "What's up, Emilia-tan? I mean you're cute when you're angry, but your forehead's getting all wrinkled."

Emilia: "If you think so, then shouldn't you come and help!? Geez! You're so mean, Subaru! You ninny!"

Subaru: "Who says ninny anymore?"

Subaru smiles at Emilia's proficient and adorable use of outdated language as he sets down his teacup. He looks again at Emilia, and tilts his head at the situation she faces.

Subaru: “You can really call this a spectacle. A fantastical drama unfolding between a pretty lady and some pretty girls.”

Lewes: “Yer gonner make me blush, saying that.”

Subaru: “You mingle too and it’ll be a drama between pretty girls, a pretty lady and a pretty granny.”

Lewes: “Yer gonner make me blush, saying that.”

Subaru: “Seriously!?”

It shocks Subaru that, just when he expected her to grumble at him, she accepts it. Lewes's cheeks as she watches on with Subaru are faintly red.

The two of them gaze at a bunch of Leweses identical to the blushing Lewes, surrounding Emilia in a mob.

—They brought 26 Lewes doubles from SANCTUARY in total.

These are the subservient, non-sentient doubles who are not the representative Lewes. Though the faction has no tasks for them, they cannot simply leave them sitting there, so they present another issue for everybody to mull over.

And the biggest problem here is,

Emilia: “Don't just look, Subaru, come help me.”

Subaru: “I'd love to, but they're not gonna listen to me. You and Garfiel are the only ones who can command them. Just gotta finagle them with some witty eloquent language.”

Emilia: “I know, but... we only just had a terrible fiasco when I told them to STEP AWAY. Did you forget, Subaru?”

Subaru: “Nobody would forget a three-days-passed organized search effort that went all the way over the mountains.”

Subaru thinks back on the debacle from three days ago.

Crystals in Sanctuary govern the doubles' command right. One had been installed in the tomb, and one in the laboratory, each of which recognized either Emilia or Garfiel as rightholders, and presently continue to do so.

Meaning that the doubles remain in a doll-like state, unable to act without Emilia or Garfiel's orders. They pay no heed to anyone else's instructions. Garfiel says that, if they leave them without any tasks, they will literally sit there doing nothing until they die and disappear.

The debacle from three days ago happened when Emilia, ignorant to the command right's limits, tried to have the doubles spread out a little distance from the mansion by telling them to 'step away'. The annoying part is that the doubles have their own personal differences, and interpreted the command in slightly different ways. Some of them perfectly adhered to Emilia's intentions, some of them exited the mansion, and some of them sprinted far from the mansion into the distance. Were it not for Garfiel's nose and legs, they might not have retrieve them all. They can't just leave

these cute, doll-like girls to walk around undefended. And it's problematic if people start questioning the doubles.

Subaru: “Twins or triplets is one thing, but nobody'd believe in twenty-sextuplets...”

Subaru doesn't remember what the Guinness World Record was, but it was probably less than ten. There's no point even considering it; there is no way they can use the siblings excuse here. And as for why they have to come up with excuses in the first place,

Lewes: “They were obviously made using forbidden techniques. Frankly said, it'd be an uproar if people found out what we were.”

Subaru: “Aaa figures.”

Lewes: “Yer taking someone as a foundation point, and constructing mock-od of a similar nature to them to make them—essentially yer making infinite soldiers. There's people out there who'll want that.”

Leaving aside the question of practicality there, they are useful for research. Since they're basically an infinite subject base. You can use the command right to keep them from rebelling, and they disperse into mana when they die so there's nothing to clean up.

Subaru: “Which is all absolute shit.”

Lewes: “It relaxes us ter know yer think that, Lil' Su.”

Subaru feels something indescribable as he watches Lewes smile thinly. Repulsion that his acquaintance could be exploited, and aversion due to the ethical issue. Those feelings are why Subaru feels adverse to the concept. But when he dispels those feelings, and considers the technique detachedly, how long will his resistance really hold against the sheer convenience of it?

Everyone, including him, pursues an easier and easier course. *Hate being so weak*, he thinks.

Emilia: “Okay! So what am I meant to do?”

Emilia yells, having been somewhat excluded from the situation, as she hits her limit. The mob of Leweses isn't doing anything, but the silent pressure they exert on Emilia isn't sanitary for her mental health.

Subaru crosses his arms as he wonders what to do.

Subaru: “Maybe try pacifying them with an order they can't misinterpret?”

Emilia: “Like? They went so far when I just told them to step away, so I don't know what to...”

Subaru: “I think saying 'sit down' would work?”

Emilia: “...Subaru, you're a genius.”

It's nothing that brilliant, thinks Subaru while Emilia asks the Leweses to sit, and they each plonk

themselves down on the spot.

It feels like Emilia is the teacher at a kindergarten now that all these little girls are sitting cross-legged around her, but actually the situation is more desperate than that.

They have to come up with some smart way to deal with this. Subaru has some relevant proposals he wants to make when Roswaal returns, so now it's an issue of waiting for him.

Subaru: "Since there's 26 of them, naming them after the letters of the alphabet might work to individuate and remember them all."

Lewes: "Yer look like yer up ter some nefarious plotting again, Lil' Su."

Subaru: "Nefarious plotting' makes it sound bad. All I'm doing is working my brain so everyone I know reaches a happy conclusion."

Subaru gives her a big grin. Lewes sighs, looking astonished.

Did she find his efforts credible or not credible? Subaru decides optimistically that his smile just looked untrustworthy. When Emilia, freed from the swarm of doubles, approaches Subaru and Lewes. Subaru presents her with her teacup.

Subaru: "You did a good job, Emilia-tan. Putting in good efforts as always."

Emilia: "Thank you. But compared to Garfiel, I'm barely doing anything. Garfiel does such good work, ordering them all whenever it's mealtime..."

Emilia takes a sip and sighs as she looks at the doubles.

The people usually looking after these girls are the representative Lewes, and Garfiel, the other command right holder.

Garfiel especially is tending to the girls with exquisite care, ensuring that none of them starve to death or get stranded, grumbling about it all the way.

He's had far more experience with them for he's been interacting with them throughout his time in SANCTUARY.

Though that's unlikely to console Emilia.

Subaru: "Well, just gotta take it easy. Garfiel's doing some amazing stuff, but I think it'd be nice to have a more advanced solution."

Emilia: "Advanced solution?"

Subaru: "I'll tell you once Roswaal's back. Until then, care to soothe my mind by freaking out some more in a herd of little girls?"

Emilia: "You are so mean!"

Emilia puffs out her cheeks in indignation, which is adorable.

Either way, his plans are still in the draft stage and thus unready for the public. He'll iron out more of the details before he reveals it and basks in the praise.

Subaru: "Anyway, how about we leave the Lewes double problem for a moment, and get back on topic?"

Lewes: “My answer's still the same. I'm not thinking ter do anything... much ter get them moving. I think they're trying ter keep from werrying me. They act like things're going reasonably well between them whenever I'm erround.”

Emilia: “That is so saucy of them...”

Subaru: “Who says saucy anymore?”

Subaru averts his gaze to disregard Emilia's glare, and thinks about the wily siblings. They are equally unwilling to make Lewes worry. And they've figured out how to compensate for it without actually discussing it with each other.

Though they know each other so well, they can't make that last step. The key reason for that has to be—

Subaru: “Yeah, it's because of their mother.”

Lewes says nothing.

Emilia: “Their mother... you mean, the one who left them behind in SANCTUARY when they were little?”

Subaru: “I've only heard the second-hand story, and I haven't asked about what she was like. Actually no, Frederica told me she was extremely unlucky, but that's about all. I mean I figure it's a given, but you did know her, right, Lewes-san?”

Lewes puts her teacup to her lip, letting the time drag on and on. But this is not enough to escape Subaru and Emilia's focused gazes.

She gives a long sigh, and without looking at the couple,

Lewes: “Their mother, Leashia Tinzal, isn't a topic I perticularly wanner talk abert.”

Subaru: “So she's someone you'd rather not remember?”

Lewes: “I didn't dislike her 'er nothing. Liked her a lot actually. She had that friendly kind erv charisma, and... her circumstances were the unfortunate thing, which yer can see since the misfortune didn't kill her. Her household was ruined and she wers sold inter slavery, then bandits attacked and destroyed the traders. The bandits took her home as their spoils, got her pregnant... it's essentially the picture erv misfortune.”

Subaru: “—”

Frederica has told him all this before, but it's still a horrible story. Emilia has no words for how heartrending it is. Though that final part of the tale may have eclipsed her understanding.

Lewes: “But Leashia didn't end in misfortune. The bandits took a liking ter her so she lived and raise her child. Until another band of bandits destroyed the ferrst one, and they entertained themselves with her again.”

Subaru: “Most people wouldn't recover after all that.”

Lewes: “But she did. The bandit group collapsed, she met Lil' Roz on her travels and gained his patronage, entrusted Frederica and Lil' Gar ter him, then left SANCTUARY ter search fer Lil' Gar's dad.”

Subaru: “—She did? Garfiel said he thought his mother abandoned them.”

Lewes: “...Thert's probably his weakness talking. Since there's hope in being abandoned.”

Subaru's breath catches at the seemingly inappropriate word: hope.

Where in this tale is there any hope? Before Subaru can figure it out, Emilia lowers her eyes.

Emilia: “She isn't coming back because she abandoned us... means that their mother might still be alive, is that the hope?”

Lewes says nothing.

Emilia: “If she promised that she was leaving for a purpose, but still wasn't coming back... it's too frightening to think about.”

Lewes shakes her head, looking miserable.

Lewes has told them the real reason why their mother left SANCTUARY. And why had Leashia's promise never been kept? —The question lends itself to a horrible answer.

Garfiel has seen his mother's passing.
And that fits everything perfectly.

Emilia: “I wonder if they know.”

Lewes: “Leashia left them after Frederica wers old enough ter be self-aware. I doubt she's fergotten it. And Lil' Gar... well, who knows.”

Emilia: “I think Garfiel remembers... no, remembered too. Otherwise he wouldn't look so joyful when looking at Subaru.”

It's possible that Emilia's thinking of something different from Subaru, but he figures that the happening in Garfiel's past—his farewell to his mother—has been resolved and reached conclusion. The problem is that Frederica and Garfiel have not secured that closure equally. Frederica might still feel something very deep-rooted about the whole issue.

It does seem like Frederica is the one avoiding Garfiel. That's the impression Subaru gets when thinking back on their exchange.

Subaru: “Incidentally do you know anything about what happened to Leashia-san after that, Lewes-san?”

Lewes: “...I never asked abert it. And that ain't a lie. Sermetimes you just don't want ter know the truth, and so it goes for me.”

Lewes averts her gaze, ignoring the truth that she has likely already grasped. Subaru is not heartless enough to call it weakness.

A ripple crests through the dregs of tea in the teacup on the table.
He watches the wave melt into nothing, a gloomy silence upon the scene.

; ; ; ; ; ; ; ; ; ; ; ;

Subaru: "I'm feeling that if this goes on, everything'll end as us prying further and further into their affairs like a couple of nosy rubberneckers, but how're your feelings on this Emilia-tan?"

Emilia: "Uhrm... I-I'd sooo rather avoid doing that."

Subaru and Emilia leave Lewes's room and walk down the hall as they consider their accomplishments, terrified that they may fail to produce any decent results. They would rather this not end as them uncovering gossip and indulging in rumours. Naturally, their top priority is to improve Frederica and Garfiel's relationship, but it's just life that problems spring up when you're dealing with problems.

Emilia: "But since neither talking to Ram or Lewes-san went anywhere... maybe we're out of options? Since Roswaal isn't back yet either."

Subaru: "If we're assuming that we shouldn't rely on the passive approach of 'it'll resolve itself over time', then we can say that yeah the issue is probably family. But where their mom is... or rather, whatever happened to her after their goodbye, isn't the issue. It's their mental states back then compared to now, and the stances they held when they parted ways."

Emilia: "Wouldn't it be easier to just lock them in a room together?"

Subaru: "Here I am in shock at Emilia-tan's unexpectedly barbaric plans."

Subaru looks startled, but Emilia looks serious as she puts her finger to her lip.

Emilia: "I mean, right?"

Emilia: "I think what they need isn't really time, but a reason to start talking. They've considered so many things over these ten years... so if they get the time to talk about it, I'm sure they'll manage something."

Subaru: "Hrnhmhm, but that feels passive too. It's not really any different from the majority opinion of 'it'll resolve itself over time'. When people say 'it'll resolve itself over time', they mean that the conversation you're talking about will naturally occur during that period."

Emilia: "So why don't we make that conversation happen for them, unnaturally? I know my idea was pretty extreme... but I think it's basically what Ram and Lewes-san are saying. That we just have to leave it to them while they're alone together."

Emilia lifts her finger from her lip and gives it a wag. Subaru listens to her with his arms crossed and brows crinkled in deliberation.

Is that really all they need to do?

Subaru does understand what she's saying. In fact it makes perfect sense. He's just troubling himself over simple anxieties.

But is it really safe for their involvement to be so shallow? They don't have to pre-arrange things in more detail for this to work out? Nothing will hit any kinks, and needlessly escalate in complexity?

Emilia: "Subaru."

Subaru: "Nuh."

When Emilia pokes Subaru in the forehead.
She looks up at him, brought back to reality.

Emilia: "I know you're a worrier, and work so hard for everybody's sake..."

Subaru: "You're going to make me blush, saying that..."

Emilia: "But I worry as much about you as you do for us. You need to know that you don't have take everything upon yourself like this. They'll be fine."

Subaru: "...I suppose."

With everything dismissed by the word 'worrier', Subaru feels the weight fall from his chest. The burden in his heart was that kind of intangible boulder—which he had gone shouldering upon himself.

Emilia: "It'd make me happy if you trusted me, and went along with my ideas too sometimes."

Subaru's shoulders untense as he sighs.

Perhaps it's not the conclusion he was after, but it seems like events are going to wind up according with the general consensus of opinion.

Subaru: "Okay. Then we'll figure something out and—"

???: "—Goodness, if it isn't Natsuki-san and Emilia-sama. What are you doing here?"

And just when he tries to adopt Emilia's plan, someone intrudes.

A grey-haired young man carrying a massive stack of papers shows up before the two. Recognizing him, Subaru puts his hand to his chin in thought.

Actually, of all the important people in the mansion, there is only one they haven't spoken to due to reasons other than absence.

With that thought, Subaru considers how useful this man will be for tackling the problem, and nods.

Subaru: "Okay. Then we'll figure something out and make that happen."

Man: "Do you mind me asking why it feels as though I don't exist in this conversation!?"

The shout from the familiar voice echoes loudly through the Milord Mansion.

CHAPTER 4: BIRTH OF THE EMILIA FACTION INTERNAL AFFAIRS MINISTER

While working away at the massive mountain of paperwork, Otto listens to Subaru and Emilia who sit on the reception sofa.

He withdraws the needed documents from the pile, his quill pen occasionally darting over them. He scribbles formulas on a sheet of paper, does some kind of calculation before jotting them onto the paperwork, and references nearby documents while stamping the first with a seal. With how smoothly his work progresses and how frantically his eyes move it's questionable whether he's paying attention to Subaru, but his occasional interjections suggest he isn't just ignoring them.

Emilia looks impressed as she watches Otto work, Subaru sitting beside her as he explains what they've been doing. He finishes his speech at nearly the exact same moment that Otto raps his pen into its holder.

Otto: "So you're looking to improve sibling relations, are you? ...Then if you'd like to consult me, I could tell you—"

Subaru: "Where's this going?"

Otto: "You're seeking pertinent advice from someone with siblings, correct? Then I believe that instead of consulting this quagmire of only children, you'd be better off consulting me, what with my elder and younger brother, indeed."

Subaru finds himself overwhelmed by Otto's abounding confidence. Subaru has never asked about Otto's family make-up, but apparently he's the middle brother in a series of three. So yes, Subaru and Emilia are indeed craving his advice. However,

Subaru: "But weren't you chased out of your house for being a bad son? It'd be one thing if you had good family relations, but advice from the black sheep isn't exactly helpful."

Otto: "Who are you implying was so poor a son that their parents disowned them!? I've never spoken even a single word of the like! My elder brother inherited the house, so I as the second eldest left to go trading of my own will! Perhaps it's unexpected, but I do believe myself cleverer than my brothers, you see."

Subaru: "What if you're the only one thinking that and your family's relieved the parasite's gone?"

Otto: "Does it somehow displease you for me to be here!?"

Otto pounds his hands on the desk, his face red. Subaru shakes his head with an, "Of course not." Merely the thought of Otto being absent is terrifying. It's just that Subaru found himself insulting him before he could thank him. Which is another one of Otto Swein's characteristic virtues.

Emilia: "But for some reason you feel really undependable, Otto-kun. I wonder why that is? ...Even though you did so much to help."

Otto: “E-Emilia-sama too...”

Subaru's thoughts express themselves vicariously through Emilia as she puts her hand on her chin, in thought. Apparently she is also a victim of Otto's virtues.

This man's aura of dependability correlates negatively with his actual capacities.

Subaru: “Look at how you're tormenting Emilia-tan, you sinful bastard.”

Otto: “Utterly unjustified! What did I even do!”

Emilia: “So anyway, Otto-kun. I'd really appreciate it if you could tell us what we should do about them.”

Otto: “And right into the topic! Now aren't you two truly just master and servant!”

Otto spends a moment overreacting, before seeming to realise that his hysterics are utterly pointless. The back of his chair squeaks as he puts his hand to his grey hair.

Otto: “Well, I believe the important thing to start with is their mutual feelings. From what I've seen, Garfiel doesn't look to be the problem. His stubbornness is akin to a child's, and I imagine that he'd like to reconcile as he loves his family.”

Emilia: “Mm, I think so too. Garfiel wants to make up. But Frederica's having trouble approaching him.”

Otto: “Frederica-san must be in a somewhat difficult position. She is the elder sibling, so as the superior she needs to let Garfiel have his way if they're to reconcile. But from what I've heard, it doesn't seem that Frederica-san has erred. She may simply be exhibiting her sisterly generosity. If we consider her capacity to tolerate the younger's tantrums as the crux of this affair... what's the matter?”

Subaru stares at Otto as he neatly arranges his argument, and shakes his head when Otto complains.

Subaru: “No, you hit me with a way more serious opinion than I expected, and I'm stuck on where to throw in jokes...”

Otto: “It's a serious matter that deserves serious consideration for a serious conclusion!”

Subaru: “Please forgive me. I'm too incompetent to play off your convoluted lead-up...”

Otto: “Are you trying to resolve problems or to encourage them!?”

Of course Subaru wants to resolve them, but it hurts to defy his primordial desires.

Otto and Subaru's conversation aside, Emilia nods admiringly in reply to Otto.

Emilia: “Then...”

Emilia: “We have to address Frederica's feelings first.”

Otto: "I believe so, yes. It doesn't seem that Frederica-san will exacerbate the situation by deeming Garfiel unpardonable. And honestly, I doubt anything so finicky will be necessary for this. It's one of those problems that time can res—"

Subaru: "We don't want time to resolve it and that's why we're trying to hurry it along. Did you even listen to me all the way to the end? I swear."

Otto: "I shouldn't have to be hearing this!"

Sensing that Otto is reaching the exact same conclusion as everyone else, Subaru snorts somewhat mockingly. Otto is indignant, and Subaru harries him further with,

Subaru: "So where would you show off that older sibling magnanimity, if it were you? You mentioned a younger brother, so surely you've had a fight where you showcased your broad-mindedness. That's the tale I wanna see, hear, sing."

Otto: "If you'll pardon me on the seeing and singing, yes, a tale. Honestly, my family was rather harmonious. My siblings were good people, my parents were kind, and... hold on, have we ever actually fought bef..."

Subaru: "Useless!!"

Otto: "Wh-why on earth are you saying that! What is so wrong about a peaceful family! Are you suggesting that relationships are illegitimate if they never once involve fights? That's ridiculous! What is there to complain about peaceful relationships with no great flaws!"

Subaru: "Well it's the worst card you could've played in this situation!"

Just when it seems like Otto's going to come up with something poignant and useful, he plays a zero.

Seeing that Otto can counterbalance even Subaru's ridiculousness, he probably never got so enraged that he started slinging curses and insults around pertaining to issues of family.

Or perhaps everyone in the Swein family shares the same bullyable temperament as Otto. A home where life was peaceful, but only because no tormentors were around in the empty Eden.

Subaru: "This poor, sheltered young lad..."

Otto: "It feels like you are insulting me immensely but perhaps that's just my imagination!"

Emilia: "...Huhuhu."

Otto yells at Subaru, who lets his imagination spread its wings. When Emilia, watching the exchange, puts her hand to her mouth as she fails to suppress a smile.

The two men fix their gaze on Emilia. She shakes her head.

Emilia: "No, I'm sorry. It's just that you look like you're getting along sooo well... kind of like brothers."

Otto: "I'm rather sure that my brothers were kinder to me than this..."

Subaru: “Don't say that, big bro. We always treated you like this, brother, you just didn't realise. Face the reality, my brother.”

Otto: “Oh shut up!”

Otto has already exhausted the words and willpower needed to reply. Subaru pouts at him as he incessantly continues, “Brother mine, dear brother, broham, broski, bub-bub, broseph, Esteemed Brother My Elder,” and so on. Emilia gives a clap of her hands.

Emilia: “Ah. What do you two always do when you reconcile? I think Otto-kun always concedes, but figuring this out might bring us closer to the answer.”

Subaru: “It's amazing how naturally that turned into Otto always conceding.”

Emilia: “What if you try letting him win, Subaru?”

Subaru: “I... even supposing I yield to everyone else in the world... am absolutely never, ever yielding to Otto...!”

Otto: “Oh shut up!”

Barks Otto at Subaru's atrocious little drama, rubbing at his temples as he thinks. It seems like he is seriously considering Emilia's idea.

Otto: “Eerhm, what do I do when I argue with Natsuki-san, hrm...”

Subaru: “Give up usually!”

Otto: “The answer didn't even bear thinking and now even I'm wondering what I'm doing!”

Otto cradles his head atop the desk as Emilia stands up and pats him consolingly. While jealous about Emilia's kindness, Subaru judges that he won't be able to get it himself in this scene and bats at his lap before standing up.

Subaru: “Well, that did help. We'll try Frederica first, and depending how that goes we'll judge how we'll enact Emilia's plan.”

Otto: “You realise that this is merely you fussing, and you may be breaking your back for no reason?”

Subaru: “I still think it's a lot better than actually breaking your back. You disagree?”

Otto: “—Haah...”

Otto gives a resigned sigh.

The way his mouth relaxes into a smile is essential his answer to the question.

Emilia must also perceive the same thing as Subaru in Otto's expression. She stretches easily on the spot, and gives Otto a smile.

Emilia: “Well, Subaru and I’ll be going now. I’m sorry we interrupted you when you were so busy.”

Otto: “No no no, I’m the one who invited you. Also I am surrounded by suffocating mountains of paperwork. The occasional breather helps to make it easi...”

Otto's expression snaps into awareness.

Otto: “Hold on, why am I working so frantically on Margrave Mathers's feudal paperworks? At some point I get asked to assist with some municipal tasks, and then am permitted to inspect even the territory's administrative logs... I'm sure I was only trying to secure a quote for the prices of that oil...”

Subaru: “Oops, Emilia-tan. We stay any longer and we'll be impeding Otto's work. Let us vacate the room while happily holding hands!”

Emilia: “Huh? Oh, erm, yes let's.”

Otto puts his hand to his forehead, beginning to feel bewildered about his current circumstances when Subaru and Emilia abandon him. Subaru takes advantage of the moment to grab Emilia's hand and exits OTTO'S OFFICE. And just when Subaru attempts to flee the room, his hand on the door,

Otto: “Oh, Natsuki-san—”

Subaru: “Hm? What. Just relax. You're not sitting there because of any mistake or hypnotism or powerful suggestion. You have merely been beguiled by circumstances, conversational finesse, and...”

Subaru's sentence cuts off halfway.

He cannot keep joking for he senses something grave in Otto's gaze as he looks at Subaru. As though he is trying to talk about something important.

Subaru shuts his mouth, and Emilia tilts her head. Otto looks at the two while a mere microsecond of hesitation flashes through him.

But it all disperses when Emilia glances back.

Otto: “—No, nevermind.”

Subaru: “Come on, I'm curious now. If you're gonna say something then say it.”

Otto: “I would like to say it, but... well, we'll say that presently it would be like trying to hold a cloud. We'll discuss it once things begin to look more hopeful. Since I cannot tell yet whether it would help you or just bring you unease.”

Otto scratches his head as he explains his hesitation.

Subaru tries to make Otto change his mind by silently staring at him, but he just seats himself and retrieves his quill.

Otto: “I'll be returning to my work, so I leave Garfiel's case to you. When the military cabinets are not functioning properly, the civil cabinets in the back are too anxious to work.”

Subaru: “—Got it. But when you can say whatever that was, do, Minister of Internal Affairs.”

Otto: “Why of course I w... civil, cabinet? Minister of Internal Affairs?”

Subaru: “Let's go, Emilia-tan. We'll just be bothering him if we stay any longer!”

Leaving Otto behind as he begins troubling over the change in his position yet again, Subaru hurriedly pulls Emilia along by the hand and leaves the room.

Emilia's eyes dart about in confusion, and she glances back at Otto the moment before the door closes.

Emilia: “Ah, um, erm, Otto-kun, good luck with your work!”

Unclear whether she's worried for him or giving him a boot in the ass, Emilia calls out to Otto as she leaves the room.

; ; ; ; ; ; ; ; ; ;

Having left Otto's Office, Subaru and Emilia's course of action grows more definite. Or really they already had a defined course when the foreign element called 'Otto's opinions' butted in, and now they're moving ahead with a plan just as definite as before.

Subaru: “Thinking about it, that was a complete waste of time...”

Emilia: “Don't say that. Otto-kun's story was, erm, well, it was... mhm, ah, erm, yes... it helped?”

Subaru: “Your unmaskable honesty shows in that question mark and it's adorable.”

Emilia fails in her desperate attempts to back up Otto as Subaru praises her and focuses on searching for Frederica.

Anyway, the problem with the siblings is the sister. Garfiel's already made up his mind. Now is just to give Frederica impetus to make up hers, then—

???: “My, if it isn't Emily and Subaru. May I ask what you are doing?”

Subaru: “Ueg.”

Emilia: “Ah.”

A voice calls from behind them. Subaru's breath hitches awkwardly to a stop, and Emilia plainly shows her surprises as she glances back.

Their gazes land on a girl in a dress with her navy hair in a braid.

She is less than ten years old, even younger than Petra or Beatrice. She's identical to Beatrice in that she wears an extravagant dress, but hers is decorated more simply than the pigtailed girl. Unfitting to her youth, her eyes are stern and her face is dignified.

This girl's name is Anne-Rose Milord.

She is scion of the Milord family which is looking after Subaru's group, currently acting as lord of

the manor in the true lord's absence, and the one receiving Subaru and the others. While Clind and the other excellent members of this household attend to arrangements and the like, Anne-Rose is the one giving the orders, and she is suitably bold in her bearing.

A statesman's condescending mien—in the form of a child.

This is the Milord family of sorcerers, split from the main household of the Mathers family what belongs to Roswaal. Anne-Rose already has all the backbone needed to inherit this house.

Lovable childishness—is something she lacks, which is seemingly why Subaru has trouble with her. It feels like, when he's facing her as another individual human being, he is being far eclipsed in refinement by a girl about ten years his junior.

But regardless of all that, Emilia's reaction is very clear.

Emilia: “Augh, Anne. How many times do I have to tell you that I'm not Emily, I'm Emilia.”

Anne: “Why do forgive me, Emily. Though you are at fault here for hesitating in your speech when you first introduced yourself. I find Emily an easier and cuter name than Emilia.”

Emilia: “Really? I mean, I don't really mind it either, but... I guess there's no choice.”

And with that, Emilia permits Anne-Rose to use this nickname.

Emilia has got along strangely well with Anne-Rose since they met. Ask why, and they weirdly seem to just suit each other.

Anne-Rose's sentiments seem similar to Emilia's, as she displays not the slightest negativity even around the half-elf. She could be counterbalancing it with her mental capacities, but that in itself presents a problem when considering Emilia's age.

Anne: “Now what is it you're doing with Subaru, Emily? Having a tryst?”

Subaru: “Ah, does it look like one? Does it? Well oh dear, we've gotten so close that it looks like a tryst. You're allowed to blush when the shyness takes you, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “No, that's not what we're doing at all. All we're doing together is some nefarious plotting.”

Subaru: “You know exactly how I feel and you just cast it aside, geez!”

Anne-Rose looks extremely interested as she asks her question, and Emilia easily shakes her head in reply. It appears that Anne-Rose hadn't been expecting especially anything, for she looks condescendingly at Subaru with an, “I see,” and breathes a sigh.

Her eyes are definitely mocking Subaru's ineffectiveness. But Subaru can't see himself as being at fault. He has constantly been flirting at Emilia, and she's just gotten better at ignoring it.

Anne: “I shall inquire into your nefarious schemes later, for have you seen Clind anywhere? I need him and he is utterly missing.”

Emilia: “Clind-san was watching over Petra and Beatrice just a moment ago.”

Anne: “...Phrasing truly is the crux of matters, Emily.”

Anne-Rose grimaces, seeming to infer everything from that statement alone.

She's known Clind for a long time, so she must know full well his disposition. After all, his tenacious LOLI SOUL is usually fixed entirely on his master, Anne-Rose. There's no need to inquire about his resilience or keenness or hopelessness.

Emilia: "He said he bought sweets for them, so they should eat. I wonder if he bought any for me. It's kind of sooo bugging me."

Anne: "...I doubt that Clind would be so impolite, so surely there are some for you. He already visited myself and presented me with tea as well."

Emilia: "Ah, did he? I'm so excited."

Emilia clasps her hands together in joy while Anne-Rose pleasantly watches. They are in the complete opposite positions to their heights and ages. It is a heartwarming scene, but Subaru has to tilt his head.

When Anne-Rose notices him doing this, and narrows her blue eyes.

Anne: "You seem to have time available, so I'm sure you wouldn't mind. Would you care to accompany me for a request of mine?"

Subaru: "Hey now. We might look like we have free time, but we actually don't. What's actually happening with this apparent free time is that we're using this period to substantiate a definite course into doing something productive for abating future troubles which..."

Emilia: "What's your request? I don't mind so long as it's something I can help with."

While Subaru starts spinning the long-winded excuses, Emilia thoughtlessly accepts. Anne-Rose gives Emilia a smile, looking at the pair with eyes so mature they could not conceivably be a nine-year-old's.

Anne: "There is a man of whom I would like to shock, and a maid of whom I have long known who I would like to conciliate."

CHAPTER 5: ANNE-ROSE'S TRAP & BROTHER-SISTER RELATIONS

Why are they readily going along with the nefarious plots of a nine year old?
Subaru watches the back of the small girl leading them down the hallway, annoyed at his own failure to prevent this.

—Anne-Rose Milord.

Being from a branch of the Mathers household that Roswaal heads, she shares many distinct characteristics with him. Such as her notably navy hair and blue eyes.
Her hair is in a crown braid, but since Subaru doesn't know what the hairstyle is called, he mentally refers to her as Braid Loli.

She possesses a keen intelligence unfitting for a nine year old. Her cleverness and wits do make her seem a relative of Roswaal's, but the thing most reminiscent of Roswaal shows through:

Anne: “Emily, would you care to hold my hand?”

Emilia: “Huh? Oh, sure, Anne.”

Anne: “So I oblige. Also, Emily. Would you care to let me hug you?”

Emilia: “Huh? Oh, sure, Anne.”

Anne: “So I oblige. Also, Emily. Would you care to carry me in your ar—”

Subaru: “Enough.”

Subaru gets Anne-Rose, seeking hand-holding and hugs and upsy-daisies, away from Emilia.
Emilia's eyes widen. Anne-Rose brushes off her lap, undeterred, before exaggeratedly patting at her shoulders where Subaru touched her.

Anne: “How brutishly you separate people who desire to touch one another, Subaru.”

Subaru: “Where'd you get those statistics? Questionnaire looked to be about walking the Milord estate alone to me.”

Anne: “Your limited your stature must be, Subaru, if you are unable to overlook a child's endearing mischievousness.”

Subaru: “Except I would've kept my mouth shut if it was just childish mischief!”

Anne-Rose coolly attempts to justify her actions. Despite her words, she is still trying to grasp Emilia's hand whenever the opportunity appears, so Subaru can't get careless.

Anne-Rose is a blood relative of Roswaal's, a prodigy beyond her nine years.
And her idiosyncrasy is—for some reason, she likes Emilia way too much.

Ever since the day that the group came to stay in this mansion and they introduced themselves, Anne-Rose has shown inordinate fondness for Emilia. Emilia is a gullible airhead so she may view it as a cute show of affection, but Subaru views it otherwise.

After all, she's related to Roswaal. While his Demihuman Fancy has been overthrown by his actual Echidna Fancy, it may not be the same for his relative.

Many of the servants in the Milord household are demihumans. Ones that Roswaal assembled from all over his lands who have apparently suffered persecution, and are effectively taking asylum in the Milord residence by Roswaal's will.

Considering that Anne-Rose was born and raised in this environment, demihumans are a familiar presence for her. So, while she isn't prejudiced against Emilia the half-elf, her friendliness is excessive.

Put simply, Subaru is trying to keep Anne-Rose from stealing Emilia.
And Anne-Rose is trying to keep Subaru from monopolizing Emilia.
Making them rivals for Emilia's affections.
Although,

Emilia: "Come on, Subaru. I don't know what's rankling you, but you can't be mad at Anne like this when she's still so little. You're being immature."

Subaru: "Who says rankling anymore? ...No I mean, nevermind that, look Emilia-tan. Plainly said, Anne-Rose's gaze isn't the kind you can dismiss as her still being young and..."

Emilia: "No excuses! I'm so sorry, Anne. I think Subaru's still flustered from being in someone else's mansion."

Subaru: "...and it still applies even when you act like I can't settle into unfamiliar beds!"

Subaru and Emilia have disparate stances toward Anne-Rose, so whenever the topic gets onto how they feel about her, it turns into one of these fruitless arguments.
Why can't Emilia notice how cloying Anne-Rose's gaze is?

Subaru: "I bet that it's one of those things where only people aiming for Emilia-tan's affections can notice when others are doing the same yes that's definitely it!"

Anne: "Emily. Subaru has just confessed that he lusts for you. How indecent."

Subaru: "Your word choice's the indecent thing here! How are you only nine!?"

While Beatrice is only superficially offensive, Anne-Rose actually is offensive. Subaru could dismiss that 'indecent' as a simple riposte, supposing it came from Beatrice's mouth, but somehow it feels like a real insult when Anne-Rose says it.

Emilia: "How come you two can't get along? It's sooo baffling..."

Subaru: "It's because we both l..."

Emilia: "You both?"

Subaru: "—Mhn, nh."

Emilia tilts her head. Subaru cannot get the rest of the sentence out.

He's stated his fondness for her countless times, but voicing it around other people makes it feel cheap. Also he's saying it unintentionally while running off momentum, which makes it both cheap and embarrassing.

In the corner of his eye, Anne-Rose smiles victoriously.

Anne: "Now then, I will refrain from teasing Subaru further. For let us speak inside my room, which we have reached."

Says Anne-Rose to pure Emilia and red-faced Subaru.

Abruptly, Subaru realises that they have walked down the whole of the hallway, and indeed stand before an overly ornate door. It's Anne-Rose's room. Apparently Emilia has been invited here many times before, but this is Subaru's first venture here.

Anne-Rose takes Emilia's hand and easily moves to welcome her into the room. But Subaru intervenes and pulls the breaks on that.

Subaru: "Wait. 'Anne-Rose's room' is such a fishy series of words so I'm going in first."

Anne: "—Huu. Very well, proceed. You are free to do what you wish."

While she does seem bothered at first, Anne-Rose concedes to Subaru with a sigh. Subaru puts his hand to the doorknob and, slightly tense, enters the room. Where,

Clind: "I have been awaiting your presence, Natsuki-sama. Tea and biscuits have been prepared. Please do find yourself a seat and relax. Powwow."

Clind welcomes him with a formal bow.

Stunned speechless, Subaru glances back, to see that Anne-Rose looks utterly unfazed.

Emilia: "Huh, Clind-san? But I thought you left to go eat with Beatrice and Petra?"

Clind: "So I did, Emilia-sama. However, it appeared that the Mistress found it in her mind to hold a tea party in her room, and thusly, I attended to those preparations. Urgency."

Emilia: "You're right, Anne did say something like that."

Clind: "Indeed, the Mistress so thought of me. Perceptiveness."

Emilia peeks her head out from beside the frozen Subaru as she speaks with Clind. But it seems their conversation doesn't quite mesh.

It's almost like Clind said 'thought of me' instead of 'asked of me'.

Anne: "It shall drive you to lunacy, should you attempt to rationally comprehend Clind's peculiarities. It is best for the mind that you simply accept it."

Clind: "I am always vigilant to remain one step ahead of my summons. Objective."

How the hell does vigilance achieve that.

...Is what Subaru's thinking, but Anne-Rose and Emilia seem unbothered as they start taking their seats. While mentally tilting his head, Subaru joins the tea party too.

Anne: "Seeing that Clind has prepared the tea, we may proceed with our conversation."

Clind: "The one regarding the bettering of Frederica and Garfiel-sama's relationship. Conciliation."

Subaru: "Clind-san, are you one of those butlers where there's actually several of you?"

Clind: "That position has already been filled by Lewes-sama. Rehash."

Clind seems to think that his inclusion in the conversation will just stymie it. He readies tea and biscuits for everyone, before going to a corner of the room where he stands as still as a statue. His gaze locks onto Anne-Rose, but she ignores it, long used to it.

Anne: "Now, Clind's assessment is correct, this regards our mutual interest in swiftly bettering Frederica and Garfiel's relationship... would be a valid thought?"

Emilia: "Yes, that's right. We've been racking our brains trying to do something, but we haven't really come up with any wonderful ideas. It's been a real kerfuffle."

Anne: "You're adorable when you're stressed, Emily. —Then, now that you have ventured about the mansion to discuss the issue, and found yourselves at a standstill, you have come to me."

Subaru: "Stop subliminally throwing your ulterior motives in there."

Anne-Rose, nonchalant, looks utterly unaffected by Subaru's jab. Either way, she seems to understand Subaru and Emilia's situation, which saves on the exposition.

Subaru: "But anyway, you're looking to have them make up too? What's the occasion? Everyone else just insisted to let time resolve it."

Anne: "Perhaps because I am less inclined to resignation, and less accustomed to waiting? I must say that the people you spoke to are largely of that disposition."

Subaru: "Frank, aren't you. ...No but, we also asked Otto."

Anne: "Then I amend that to include those ignorant to success."

Subaru: "Harsh!"

And how sad Otto is that Anne-Rose has managed to get this impression of him, when they've only known each other a week.

But it's best that Subaru keep silent, considering that he can't refute her.

Anne: "I cannot deny that time will resolve the issue. A divide of ten years separates them... given another decade, the issue shall resolve itself. But that is far too protracted. Why, ten years, that's the same length of time since my Mother and Father last kissed!"

Subaru: "gggggggn?"

Halfway through an unchildlike screed, she abruptly hits a childlike conclusion.

Subaru groans, unable to keep up with the sudden shift in gears, prompting Clind to put his finger to his mouth in request of silence.

Subaru doesn't have a complete grasp of the situation, but perhaps her knowledge in *those* topics actually is that of a nine-year-old. Though he'd rather not probe into it, since Emilia is right here and also under the exact same misapprehension.

Anne: "Care to explain that bizarre groaning of yours, Subaru?"

Subaru: "It's nothing. Just some phlegm and despondency stuck in my throat."

Anne: "I see. What tribulations puberty brings. ...Regardless, I have no intentions of making them wait for a decade."

Emilia: "We're thinking the same way. But, do you have any ideas, Anne?"

Anne: "What were your thoughts on the issue, Emily?"

It's replying to a question with a question, but regardless Emilia furrows her pretty brows and puts her finger to her lips.

Emilia: "Erm..."

Emilia: "I think they do want to make up. I feels like Garfiel's trying to make time so they can talk, and though Frederica's uncomfortable, I think she does want to talk."

Anne: "I see, understood. And so?"

Emilia: "And so I've been wondering if it'd be easier to just lock them in a room together."

Subaru: "Sure are going for the barbaric plans, huh, Emilia-tan!?"

While Subaru has no better ideas, it's shocking to hear it coming from Emilia's mouth. Also he does endorse the idea, but there are some questions to be had with it. Particularly,

Subaru: "I mean we could throw them in a room, but those two can bust out of basically any room when working together. I'd prefer we didn't destroy half the mansion doing this. So instead of a busted mansion we have a week to get them hanging out together, what is this, a speedrun?"

Emilia: "Then what should we do, Subaru? Should I use ice to make a room that we can lock them in?"

Subaru: "I don't think we need to use such extreme conditions to revive their family love, no! Just, look! Something like, have them go into a room while sharing the exact same goal!"

Emilia: "The same goal...?"

Emilia tilts her head, puzzled.

Subaru manages to get away from any criminal ideas, but his proposition doesn't go any further than that.

He's conceived of making them share a goal, but has no concrete idea of what it would be. Should

they defeat some monster that they can only take on together?
Where exactly are they going to find such a convenient monster?

Anne: "In truth, my thoughts are identical to Subaru's."

Subaru: "Huh? You know where to hire Cyclopes and Chimeras?"

Anne: "Nevermind."

Anne-Rose gazes scornfully at Subaru, who apologizes by poking out his tongue and donking his head.

The nine-year old sighs while Emilia's cheeks grow flush, eyes lit with expectation.

Anne: "We share the same thoughts, when it pertains to making them share a goal. But I expect that what we know about them differs, and so differs the ideas we conceive, Emily."

Emilia: "What we know about them?"

Anne: "For you have greater knowledge of Garfiel than Frederica. While I have known Frederica for surpassing eight years. That fanged face has been familiar to me ever since I've been aware."

Subaru more or less understands what Anne-Rose is trying to say.

Her relationship with Frederica means that she can supply the information needed to fill the gaping hole that Subaru couldn't address—that is, what common points could lead to a common goal between Frederica and Garfiel.

Subaru: "You're sure this'll work?"

Anne: "Provided that I may secure helpers, yes. Now, Frederica presents no issue, but Garfiel does."

Subaru: "Garfiel does?"

Anne: "Should Garfiel's personality be exactly what I have observed over this handful of days, then we should see no issues."

Subaru doesn't know how intensively Anne-Rose has paid attention to Garfiel's attitude, but as far as he can tell, Garfiel's been entirely himself during his stay here.

He isn't being pointlessly stubborn like he was in SANCTUARY, or trying to hide his fourteen-year-old immaturity. Subaru can assure that much.

Subaru: "Garfiel's being entirely genuine, so no issues there."

Anne: "Excellent. Next is the issue of helpers... perhaps we might enlist help from Lewes-san, their family."

Subaru: "From Lewes-san?"

She's who you'd name first if listing people most related to them.

But she didn't seem entirely cooperative, and it's unknown whether she'll entertain this. Regardless, Anne-Rose seems to think otherwise, and gestures her butler over.

Anne: "Clind."

Clind: "We may delay preparations for this evening's dinner by two hours and use the kitchen. Proposal."

Anne: "I see. Very well. Do inform whoever's tending to dinner of that."

Clind: "As you command, I swiftly shall. Haste."

After that quick exchange, Clind silently exits the room. Subaru and Emilia watch on in surprise while Anne-Rose takes a sip of her tea, smiling.

Anne: "Now, let us see this issue quickly done away with. For others yet remain who must be tended to."

She says, plunging Subaru and Emilia deeper into confusion.

; ; ; ; ; ; ; ; ; ; ;

The second that Garfiel enters the kitchen and spots that UNFAMILIAR STATURE, he sighs, recognizing that he's been caught in a trap.

Garfiel: "...Fuckin' everyone's gettin' so over fuckin' involved."

Despite his cursing, a smile arises on his face.

Garfiel's nose is custom-made. His sense of smell is so strong that it bares no comparison to the average man's, and he caught the scent before he even entered the room.

That he nevertheless kept himself unaware is Garfiel's final speck of stubbornness, or perhaps his pride as a man.

???: "Garf?"

Garfiel scratches his head while the woman glances back, and calls to him in unfamiliar voice. Before Garfiel stands a woman with long, lustrous blonde hair. She is taller than him, and her build is assuredly robust. The horde of fangs decorating her mouth, combined with her powerful frame, makes her seem somewhat savage and violent.

Were it not for her gentle voice and the tender gleam in her eyes, people would constantly be getting the entirely wrong impression of her.

Frederica Baumann. Is how she's been introducing herself, or so Garfiel Tinsel hears. Tinsel is the name of their mother, and Baumann that of her father.

Garfiel doesn't know why Frederica insists on using her father's surname, and has opted not to think about it.

He doubts that those who devised this meeting took those complicated sentiments into account. Or perhaps Garfiel is just exaggerating the whole thing, and to outsiders it doesn't look like a big issue.

Garfiel: "Ain't often I see ya here, Sis."

Frederica: “And I could say the same. To think that you would find yourself here... dinner has not yet been prepared, you will find nothing here to pilfer.”

Garfiel: “I ain't here fer food. Stop treatin' me like a damn kid.”

Frederica: “But is it not childishness to balk when treated as a child? And I suspect that you are still young enough that you would desire such babying, Garf.”

Garfiel: “Nah, 'm fourteen 'm over that hump. Who th'fuck's a baby here!?”

Feeling pricked, Garfiel howls in rejection.

Frederica shakes her head at Garfiel's overreaction and returns her gaze to the front—to look into the kitchen.

Frederica: “I'm occupied with a task at the moment. Garf, I cannot devote all of my time to relaxation as you can.”

Garfiel: “Ain't like I'm spendin' all my amazin' time playin' 'round either. And I ain't here t'kill time. ...Think 'm here fer th'same reason 's you, Sis.”

Frederica: “The same reason?”

Garfiel: “Looks like yer got asked by someone else tho.”

By those words alone, Frederica seems to figure it out.

Frederica: “So that's it,”

she mutters in comprehension.

Frederica: “I did think it peculiar. Out of nowhere, Anne-Rose-sama began saying that she would die should she not have one of my meat pies.”

Garfiel: “How th'hell did that manage t'trick you, Sis.”

Frederica: “What did they say... no, what did Grandmother say that brought you here?”

Garfiel: “Sh'said if she ain't gettin' one'v my amazin' meat pies she's gonna go more senile.”

Frederica: “I also must wonder how you managed to find credibility in that statement.”

Garfiel shuts his mouth.

Hearing her say it does make him question it, but he had been sincerely worried so there's nothing to do.

Garfiel: “Well maybe y'just can't understand seein' as yer gave up on lookin' after her. Ain't weird t'all fer 'er t'show up askin' 'f dinner's ready yet even after sh'just ate. 'Course I'd fuckin' worry.”

It's actually a sad misunderstanding coming from the fact that, when the Lewes personality changes

her rotation to the next one, the new Lewes doesn't inherit memories so extensively as to discern whether dinner happened or not. But Garfiel will never notice that and neither will Frederica. The siblings' concern for Lewes's mental health compounds.

However, Garfiel's statement pricks Frederica in a different manner than described. Because, although unintentionally, he struck on the issue of her decade-long absence.

Frederica: "...Indeed. I never returned to SANCTUARY even once over that decade. And you're the one who protected SANCTUARY during that period. ...I have no right to speak as if I know what happened there, or what has come of Grandmother."

Garfiel: "No, I... that ain't what I was meanin' t'say with that. I w's just..."

Frederica: "—"

Frederica glances back, forcing Garfiel to face her again.
Her face remains unfamiliar.

It's been a decade. During all that time, Garfiel's mental image of his sister remained constant from ten years ago.

Even though he's had this reunion and spent some time with her, he is having trouble accepting it. And the situation's the same for Frederica. She must be viewing him with trepidation, just as he views her.

But it bothers Garfiel. Why is her trepidation casting waves as intense as his own?
What was it that he made her feel?

Garfiel: "...Oh."

With that gaze upon him, Garfiel breathes a sigh.
The answer thunks into his heart.

Got it.

Crap, he got it. He knows exactly what the emotion in Frederica's eyes mirrors.

It's the same look that Lewes would occasionally have, back in SANCTUARY. The same look that Garfiel would see on his own face, reflected upon the water.

Which means that it's melancholy. Combined with apology.

Garfiel: "Course it'd be."

Garfiel had assumed that the events from ten years ago had been resolved.

Inside the tomb, he remembered the goodbye with his mother from when he was young. He now understood what his mother felt as she left them, and that resolved the issue for Garfiel.

He assumed it had been equally resolved for Frederica.

But it's not.

What happened in the tomb only affected Garfiel.

Garfiel came to understand his feelings for his sister, and his mother's love. He never told or

informed his sister of them, distant as she was.

And so Frederica gazes at Garfiel without any resolution to what happened a decade ago, unsure of what to say.

Even though she has matured, her gaze is identical to what it was ten years ago.

Garfiel: “Sister.”¹

Frederica: “—!”

Garfiel: “’M sorry I didn't say anything. But 's okay. 'M okay. I know what happened with mom, and with you.”

Frederica: “Garf...”

Frederica's eyes grow teary and wet in the wake of the violent emotion.

What should he say? While frustrated at himself for his lack of eloquence, Garfiel searches for the words that will convey his feelings accurately.

He searches his head, and all the books he has ever read, for the words he must say.

Garfiel: “I get why you left SANCTUARY, and why you never came back after that... ain't what I'cn actually say but, I am trying t'get it. So it's... well, y'know...”

Frederica: “You are... ready to forgive Mother?”

Garfiel: “—What's there t'forgive?”

Garfiel's mouth relaxes into a smile as he replies to Frederica with a shake of his head.

Exactly. What's there to forgive?

The love and hatred that Garfiel kept in his heart this whole time had been misaimed. He knew nothing of the truth, didn't even know his own feelings, lashing out in anger at the impenetrable darkness—all a tantrum and nothing more.

Now that he knows the truth, it's all insignificant.

There was nothing to forgive or resent.

Garfiel: “I know now that mom loved me... that she loved us.”

Frederica: “—”

Garfiel: “So there ain't no point tryin't'keep me 'way from what happened. Ain't got nothin' t'do with my amazin' self. So how 'bout we get t'talkin' 'bout somethin' a li'l less crap, Sis?”

Garfiel's speech pattern returns to normal as he rubs his reddened nose.

Frederica give a long, deep sigh. She wipes the tears from her eyes.

Frederica: “Garf... you truly have grown.”

1 Nee-chan

Garfiel: “Fuckin' sarcasm! I ain't grown a damn inch compar'd t'you! The hell happened t'yer! How'd you get so damn—ghhhah!?”

Frederica: “We may be family, but that is no excuse to say such things to women, Garf you idiot.”

Frederica grabs him by the leg and slams him to the ground, the back of his head banging against the floor.

Garfiel's eyes spin as he stares up at the ceiling, Frederica standing in his view above him. Her face is back to a smile.

Frederica: “Come now, stand up.”

Garfiel: “Yer th'one who fuckin' flipped me over.”

Garfiel takes her offered hand. Gets back to his feet.

He lightly brushes himself off and peers over at the counter that Frederica had been using.

Garfiel: “So? How far yer got with yer meat pie, Sis?”

Frederica: “I have gathered the ingredients and had just begun to chop them. Though, it impresses me that you remember how to make it, considering that you only ate it when you were young.”

Garfiel: “S 'cause some persnickit left th'recipie behind so I could make it after she left. 'Kay, my amazing self'll knead the dough.”

Frederica: “Then I will do the chopping.”

Garfiel stands before the ingredients as he wraps a towel around his head, prepared. Frederica brings out the cooking utensils for him as he does so, smoothly passing them over to him.

The siblings begin working in conjunction, no decade-long divide in sight, as they easily attend to the familiar work together.

CHAPTER 6: JUST ONE MORE LEFT

Subaru: “But seriously I wonder if it'll work out...”

Emilia: “Really? But I thought our plan was sooo good. I bet Anne and Lewes-san's acting totally fooled Garfiel and Frederica.”

Subaru: “You sure? ...Honestly I found Lewes-san's hamminess and Anne-Rose's last-second stage fright absolutely shocking.”

Anne: “Silence yourself, Subaru.”

The three of them sit at the dining table, waiting to see how their plan worked out, when Anne-Rose interjects on Subaru's musings. Her cheeks burn bright red in embarrassment, which makes her look her age for once.

Anne-Rose's plan to remedy their sibling relations was extremely simple. The topic was Emilia's proposal, combined with the part that Subaru couldn't figure out—that is, how to throw Garfiel and Frederica in the same room while sharing the same goal. Anne-Rose utilized a memory shared between the two of them to easily overcome the issue.

These meat pies that Frederica occasionally cooked had been her speciality ever since her time in SANCTUARY. They couldn't be certain that Garfiel also knew how to make them, but,

Anne: “Frederica often mentioned it. That her Grandmother taught her how to cook this, and how she remembers that her Mother cooked it for her. Naturally, Garfiel must have also been raised on this cooking, and I believed it highly likely that he inherited the recipe from Lewes-san. From what I've seen, Garfiel is something of a nanna's boy.”

Subaru: “I've got nothing against all that. My issue's not with how you insightfully figured this out.”

Anne: “Hrmp.”

Anne-Rose puffs out her cheeks, but Subaru won't let that erase her mistake. They managed to successfully catch Frederica and give her an excuse to get her in the kitchen without any problems. The issue is how they dispelled Frederica's suspicion and the motive they gave her.

Subaru: “It's with this affliction where you die without pies. Apologize to the pie.”

Anne: “It was merely a slip of the tongue. There is nothing that necessitates me to apologize to...”

Emilia: “He's right, I'm kinda unsure about that too. Okay, I'll apologize with you.”

Anne: “I-I suppose I have no choice! When Emily says so I suppose I have no choice!”

Anne-Rose's face flashes bright red as she readily agrees with Emilia. Subaru averts his gaze from the charming yuri and looks at Lewes, who sits meekly at the table.

Subaru: “Lewes-san, looks like you're feeling some guilt that you snagged Garfiel in your trap so

perfectly.”

Lewes: “Erv course not... nononono, wait! Explain that, that phrasing yer using to erksacerbate my guilt. Yer quit that, that stuff pains the heart.”

Subaru's mean-spirited statement does bring back some of Lewes's usual attitude. Then she notices that Subaru had said what he did to energize her, and,

Lewes: “So late, after so merch has happened. I'm sterll not sure if I'm glad I did that. I do wernt them ter reconcile, erv course. But...”

Subaru: “You don't have worry yourself over it. They would've wound up the same as ever saying we just left them to themselves. So the outcome stays the same. All we did is make said constant outcome happen a little earlier. ...I think it's best that things happen sooner when they can.”

Lewes: “Why's that?”

Subaru: “Otherwise it's a waste of time when you could be having fun. Humans are certain to die, so we better take action while we still have sand in our hourglass, right?”

Lewes: “—”

Lewes's eyes widen, and she gives a powerless sigh.

Lewes: “Yer one erv those, errn't yer, Lil' Su. A guy who don't second-guess his life principles fer a second.”

Subaru: “Nope, that's not it. You barely get anyone who gets stuck second-guessing minuscule things the way I do. I just try not to ruminate over it by telling myself that it's okay not to, and I'm hoping to stick to that precept.”

Lewes: “It's okay, nert ter ruminate.”

Subaru: “Yeah. We have people we want reconciled, and the reconciliation makes everyone happy. So it's fine not to ruminate, let's get them reconciled. When there's someone you wanna be with, save the worrying for later and go over to them with an 'EMT!'. Is what I've been considering lately.”

Though of course, he can't apply it to everything.

Subaru truly is a weak person who agonizes needlessly over trivial things. While having limited time and only a handful of available choices.

He would at least like remove his second-guessing about the choices he does make.

Lewes: “Yer right. When yer get old as me, yer've got so many things ter teach and ter learn it's overwhelming. Doubt I wouldder thought anything like this if I stayed in SANCTUARY ter my end.”

Subaru: “You don't usually get bored of being alive when you live life. But I expect everyone's figured that one out without my input?”

Lewes: “Then I gerrss I better enjoy myself in my limited time, too. I'll start by getting excited fer

my cute grandchildren ter make up, and come looking fer me ter spoil 'em.”

Subaru: “Honestly I can't really imagine them just accepting anyone spoiling them.”

Frederica is serious to a fault, and Garfiel is a contrarian.

Neither of them are going to nicely accept their grandma's pampering. But since the two—no, the three—desire family love more than anything else, they all make for something quite charming.

???: “I apologize for intruding on the discussion. Rudeness.”

When the voice of a butler who silently appeared in this room whispers at Subaru's ear. Subaru's eyes shoot open in surprise as Clind takes his place to stand beside Anne-Rose.

Anne: “What's happened, Clind? I will tell you that I was enjoying a blissful moment with Emily just then.”

Clind: “It pains me to so interrupt you. Heartache. However, I am required to inform that Roswaal-sama has made his return. Notice.”

Anne: “He has? Another return from him timed so perfectly as to be calculated...”

Mutters Anne-Rose in dissatisfaction, her brows furrowed.

While Subaru weeps silently at how even Roswaal's relatives feel this way about his habits, Anne-Rose stands from her seat.

Anne: “It appears that my uncle has returned, so I shall be excusing myself to welcome him. Emily, Subaru, and Lewes-san, I request you relax as you wait here for the siblings to return. ...Particularly Emily and Subaru. You will be busy.”

Emilia: “Erm? Okay, got it. I'll wait here.”

Emilia gives an earnest nod, and Anne-Rose gazes at her with affection. Then she glances to Subaru, piercing him with her gaze and negative aura.

While Subaru frowns at the disparity in their treatment, Anne-Rose exits the room with Clind.

Which is when Subaru notices the cups of tea assembled before himself, Emilia, and Lewes, and nearly squawks.

Subaru: “Did anyone see Clind-san set this tea?”

Emilia: “No, I didn't. Clind-san did excellent work as always.”

Lewes: “Mhm, a real professional. This tea is cooled erkzacktly ter my taste.”

Subaru: “I mean my tea's at the perfect temperature for me too but... how about you, Emilia-tan?”

Emilia: “I like it hot, so mine is sooo hot.”

Subaru: “What the hell is Clind-san?”

Anne-Rose said to just accept it, but Subaru is having difficulty. Perhaps this is the fundamental

difference between living in a parallel world, and being born and raised in one.
...Is what he figures as he glances at Emilia and Lewes, who also look to feel overwhelmed by Clind. What, so he's a deviation after all. When,

???: “Hell, so here's where all th'masterminds been fuckin' lurkin'.”

A few minutes after Anne-Rose and Clind leave, a blond tiger-man opens the door and makes his entrance.

He looks to have noticed that Subaru and the others were obviously behind the trap, his expression extremely complex. Either way,

Subaru: “Looks like someone found out we're the villains.”

Garfiel: “C'n tell yer that y'fuckin' got me good, I looked so frickin' lame.”

Emilia: “How'd it go how'd it go? Did you talk?”

Garfiel clicks his fangs as he comes over, when Emilia excitedly accosts him. Lewes tucks her head in, awkward, while listening intently for Garfiel's next words.

Garfiel looks at the two ladies, and sighs.

Garfiel: “Yeh, thank yer fer yer excessive unneeded meddlin'. Sis n' me... sure, we had our talk. Y'ain't gotta worry none.”

Emilia: “Really? Then how come you didn't come here together, holding hands?”

Garfiel: “Y'think we're capable 'v that embarrassing crap! Maybe they made up, but that don't mean a bro n' a sis're gonna hold hands so easy. Don't even joke.”

Emilia: “But I don't think it's embarrassing, I think it's wonderful.”

Emilia looks not to be teasing, but to sincerely think this, quite unfortunately. Garfiel has nothing more to say to her as he instead look at the hesitant Lewes.

Garfiel: “Granny.”

Lewes: “...What's it, Lil' Gar?”

Garfiel: “'M sorry for makin' you worry. 'M fine now, 'n Sis's fine too. Y'don't have't worry.”

Garfiel rubs his nose as he talks, and Lewes falls into silence. Her mouth relaxes, and an aged smile unfitting to her youthful looks arises on her face.

Lewes: “I see. That ers a relief. Yer can't put ter much stress on yer elders. Makes them meet their end quicker.”

Garfiel: “It ain't a damn joke when you say it, granny, better watch out.”

Lewes regains her casual demeanour. Garfiel snorts.

Garfiel: “Anyway, Captain. N' also Emilia-sama, 'm sorry fer makin' yer do that.”

Subaru: “Don't worry 'bout it. Me and Emilia-tan were just killing time by improving the interpersonal relations in this mansion. Nothing that deserves an apology. Right?”

Emilia: “Subaru, you were only killing time? This was a serious issue for them, you have to take it more seriously. Hpmf!”

Subaru: “Whah!?! My face-saving modesty backfired!?”

Emilia fails to notice Subaru's roundabout consideration for Garfiel. Or so he thinks, when a smile etches itself onto Emilia's face and,

Emilia: “Heehee, just kidding. I know what you're doing. You're not honest at all, Subaru.”

Subaru: “My god... EMK (Emilia-tan Maji Koakuma) strikes, and her mystique compounds... she must be trying to kill me...”²

Garfiel: “The fuck did yer just do t'my apology, oi.”

Says Garfiel, stunned. Subaru and Emilia share a glance, before facing him again and,

Both: “—We were happy to help.”

The two give their reply to his apology.

Garfiel frowns in dissatisfaction as Lewes shrugs in exasperation. Subaru shoots Emilia a thumbs up as she happily watches the two.

Subaru: “Also, Garfiel. What happened first with the reconciliation, but also with the supposed trigger for the whole thing, the meat pie. Honestly I was really looking forward to it.”

Garfiel: “Yer don't make a pie that fuckin' easy. Th'trick's t'cook it in th'oven good n' slow t'get that sumptuous taste. SUMPTUOUS ENOUGH TO PUT A BAUMBEM TO SLEEP 's a damn good saying here.”

Subaru: “The hell's a Baumbem. Is it like a baumkuchen? But I'm pretty sure if you leave baumkuchen unattended for too long it goes bad before it gets sumptuous.”

According to Garfiel, it will take two hours before the pie is ready.

Which means it'll coincide with normal dinnertime, and probably wind up as a dish there.

???: “—Which I must say soooooounds quite convenient.”

Having lost any way to distract himself from his hunger, Subaru redirects his attention to how to kill two hours of time—when a familiar voice speaks up.

The four glance over to the speaker, unanimously sour-faced.

???: “Myyyyyyyy goodness. I leave the mansion to attend to business, and whaaaaaaaaa an unwelcoming hello aaaaaaaaawaits me.”

2 Emilia-tan is Seriously a Little Devil

Subaru: “Not that I'm not thankful for your work. But can you please just rationalize this as you reaping what you sow, this thing where we reflexively make this expression? Also me and them are still being nice. Look at Garfiel, he's gonna burst a vein.”

A vein bulges on Garfiel's forehead as his eyes begin going bloodshot. This is the arrival of man whose refreshed expression remains stable even before Garfiel's glare—easily deduced from his characteristic speech pattern, Roswaal L. Mathers.

Roswaal was the mastermind behind the events in SANCTUARY, and having confessed so, has suffered a drop in amicability from basically everyone. Garfiel's rage burns particularly hot, and it's impossible to predict when he'll explode.

Subaru also feels mixed emotions about Roswaal. And after hearing postface to Roswaal's confession, his uncertainty has only peaked.

Subaru knows that Roswaal is not responsible for everything that happened in SANCTUARY and the mansion.

For some reason, Roswaal has only revealed this information to Subaru. Subaru doesn't know why this is, but feels no urge to purposefully reveal the truth to everyone else.

The onus lies entirely on Roswaal—or at least, 90% of it does. The remaining 10% lies on some other party.

Subaru would rather not encourage any unneeded anxiety at the moment.

Emilia: “Subaru, are you okay? The face you're making is sooo weird.”

Subaru: “Seriously? What's it look like?”

Emilia: “Umm well, it's like your eyes gweenked nastier, like this.”

Subaru: “Seriously? My face looks that cute?”

Emilia: “But it's not cute!”

Emilia's fingers pull the corners of her eyes upwards as she mimics Subaru's expression. Even when she's trying to emulate something so awful, her cuteness overrides it. Such is her charm.

Emilia pouts while Garfiel angrily seats himself. Subaru watches Lewes prepare tea for Garfiel as he speaks to Roswaal, the only one left standing.

Subaru: “Anyway, welcome back. Did you finish what you went out to do?”

Roswaal: “Ahhaaaaaa, how keenly I doooooooo feel Subaru-kun's kindness. And yes, without issue. I visited several villages within my domain, and our new domicile.”

Subaru: “Nevermind the domicile, you went around the territory? For what?”

Roswaal: “Beeeeeebecause of the ruckus from the territory's Lord's mansion buuuuuuurning down. Should I fail to demonstrate my good health, some rapscallions may begin deeeeeeevising plots. I make it a rule to attend thoroughly to my land's peace aaaaaaaaand safety.”

Subaru: “Thoughts on the land's Lord being the worst rapscallion devising the worst plots?”

Roswaal: “Hoooooow harsh. My citizens suffered no harm, and the villagers of Arlam are ignorant to the truth. Do you not think that this persistently thorny attitude of yours will hinder us iiiiiiiiiin the future?”

Subaru: “Ghnng.”

Never misses a beat.

With that sharp jab of criticism, Roswaal regains his previous composure. If Subaru publicly reveals that Roswaal was the one behind this whole affair, then it only disadvantages them, both in regards to the Royal Selection and management of the territory. And so even the people of Arlam Village still believe that Roswaal is a good Lord.

Only Petra, who knows the truth, holds a different opinion. But she understands her current circumstances, and that the only thing to gain from revealing the truth is self-satisfaction. So it's doubtful that she'll do anything extreme. Cleverness does occasionally force people into making cruel decisions.

Subaru: “But that doesn't make it fine for you utilize this. You forget that, and once Emilia-tan's on the throne you're getting the guillotine.”

Roswaal: “Terrifying. Hoooooowever, even then I maaaaaaay have a chance to fuuuuuuulfil my goal.”

Garfiel: “We ain't fuckin' talkin' 'bout yer meeting yer goddamn goals. Gonna make Ram cry 'f yer keep comin' up with more bullcrap ideas, y'piece of shit.”

Surprisingly, Garfiel cuts in to stop Roswaal's provocations. Roswaal's brows shoot up in surprise and he casually raises his hands.

Roswaal: “Goodness, aaaaaaaalright. I don't paaaaaaaarticularly wish to fight with you all aaaaaaaaanyway. Why must this escalate into an argument, when I oooooonly came here to show my return? I must find this all raaaaaaaather unproductive.”

Emilia: “It's because you're saying things to make Subaru and Garfiel mad. And I can tell you're doing it on purpose. Enough of that, stop provoking people. You're not a child.”

Roswaal: “—”

Roswaal attempts to condescendingly resolve the issue, when Emilia presses down on him from further above, her hand to her hip. Roswaal's eyes shoot open in surprise while Emilia continues.

Emilia: “You don't have to be so anxious, we all remember what you did and what you promised. There's no point in purposefully acting bad and worrying everyone. You are just so hopeless.”

Emilia sounds like she's scolding a disobedient child.

But it seems impossible to dismiss her statements as incorrect or misplaced, and Roswaal remains silent without any rebuttals. In fact, the way he narrows his eyes and grimaces awkwardly makes it feel like Emilia hit the bullseye.

Though Subaru doesn't actually believe that Roswaal is seriously operating off such childish

sentiments.

Subaru: “That really did clear the air though. As we expect from Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “...? Mm, thank you. Also, there had to be more reasons for why you went around the domain than just that. What else did you do, Roswaal?”

Roswaal: “Ahahaaaaaaa, you've grown more perceptive. I patrolled the region for reasons as stated, to demonstrate my health, and... to prepare the residents of SANCTUARY for their migration.”

Garfiel: “Th'preparations to move!”

Those words keep Garfiel from staying silent. Lewes hurriedly returns to his side as he slams his palms on the table.

Garfiel: “That means prepping where they're goin', yeh?”

Roswaal: “Assuredly. Their time as refugees means that Arlam Village is the best place to aaaaaaaaccept them. But there's a limit to what the village can hold. Should their population double from its original number, they won't be able to sustain themselves. They could expand the village, of course, but that runs into the problem of the barrier.”

Garfiel: “Barrier? Y'fucker, you fuckin' laid more'v those fuckin' things all over th'fuckin'—”

Subaru: “No hold up, Garfiel. We're not talking about a barrier like SANCTUARY's. There's a whole bunch of witchbeasts lurking in the mountains around there. So there's a barrier around the village to keep them away. That's the one Roswaal's talking about.”

That barrier is what spurred the whole witchbeast debacle.

It's entirely infeasible to coexist with the witchbeasts, and being that the village needs this segregation, it's difficult to expand Arlam Village.

Roswaal: “Subaru-kun explained it perfectly, theeeeeere's the issue. Whiiiiiiich means that the people of SANCTUARY must be distributed partly to Arlam Village, and then iiiiiiiindividually to other contenders. Regardless of where they go, they cannot stay together as people of SANCTUARY infinitely. I do feel the heart-wrenching sorrow, as I watch them leeeeeeeave the nest.”

Lewes: “Impudence and prattle...”

Lewes cannot hold in the insults as Roswaal feigns tears.

Roswaal crafts a smile and continues,

Roswaal: “Aaaaaand so, I made a quiiiiiiick rounds of the territory. Though for interests of distance and time, Iiiiiiiii merely visited the neeeeeee nearby locations. I sent messengers to the other townships, seeeeeeing as we have an abundance of issues that need resolution.”

Subaru: “Yeah seriously. You don't get back to your office quick, and Otto's gonna die from karoshi. It's where you die crushed between the weight of responsibility and work.”

Roswaal: “What a novel way to die. Veeeeeeery intriguing.”

Subaru agrees, but doesn't pursue the topic.

Roswaal's back, so Ram should be more lively. ...Is how far Subaru thinks before he tilts his head, feeling something awry.

Emilia: "Actually, Anne said she left to welcome you, but... she's not with you?"

It seems that Emilia hit upon the same question. Roswaal raises his finger.

Roswaal: "That's because I had a reeeeeeeeeequest for her. I was thinking to address one of those issues requiring resolution."

Emilia: "Issues requiring resolution?"

Roswaal: "The one in the banquet hall. I believe that you have already prepared yourself for it, Emilia-sama."

Emilia: "—!"

Emilia's shoulders jerk up in surprise.

But the shock only lasts an instant. Her expression immediately turns serious, and she glances at Subaru with strong volition in her amethyst eyes.

He savours the tingle down his spine as he tilts his head, questioning.

But nobody gives him a clear answer.

Emilia: "Okay. Is it starting right now?"

Roswaal: "We can start the instant that you are ready. And we still have time before the pie is done cooking. I would say that now is the perfect time for it."

Emilia: "This is such an important thing, but doesn't this all feel sooo sloppy?"

Roswaal: "It's presently difficult for us to schedule any designated times. Considering that you'll be occupied from tomorrow onwards, should we not take advantage of this opportunity?"

Emilia: "Yeah... okay. I'll do it."

Roswaal nods, entirely satisfied.

The two of them look to have reached an agreement, but Subaru has no idea what they're discussing. Garfiel and Lewes must also be in the dark.

Subaru: "Hey, stop going off agreeing to things by yourselves. What are you talking about? You better not be trying to make Emilia-tan do anything funny again."

Roswaal: "That would be a teeeeeeeeeerrible misunderstanding, Subaru-kun. And do relax. This issue not only involves Emilia-sama, but very much yourself aaaaaaaaas well."

Subaru: "What do you mean I'm also—"

Involved? Before he can finish his sentence, Roswaal draws his face near. Subaru unwittingly backs

away, his back hitting the wall, and Roswaal's finger landing on his nose.

Roswaal: “—We're discussing the ceremony for your cherished knighthood.”

; ; □; □; □; □; □; □; □; □; □; □;

Subaru: “You know! Usually you don't keep the details of an important event a secret from the people involved! Do people throw surprise weddings for the bride and groom? Are surprise funerals ever a thing? No they are not.”

Having been dragged into a room to get changed, Subaru complains while taking off his track suit. The news from Roswaal in the dining room was an absolute shock to him.

—Knighthood.

The ceremony where the master acknowledges their subordinate as their Knight, and all others recognize their change in status.

It comes with extensive formalities and etiquette, which surely differ by the country and by worldview. Subaru has witnessed many such ceremonies in manga and anime, but it's inconceivable that he'd remember what they had in common and what diverged.

And of course he can't be expected to know the etiquette for a Lugnican accolade.

Subaru: “Expect they all went and fucking prepared everything like that's the obvious thing to do. Maybe that damn Anne-Rose was jealous about how I'm all over Emilia-tan and's trying to humiliate me!”

Otto: “I'd surely think not? While naturally the star of an accolade is the knight who receives it, their master is the one obligated to inform them. If Anne-Rose-sama acted out of such pointless bullheadedness, it would humiliate not only yourself, but Emilia-sama. Do you believe that someone as clever as her would do that?”

Subaru glances over to Otto, who is assisting with his change of clothes. You may ask how do you possibly assist with a change in clothes, but these ceremonial outfits have various modes of dress. That Subaru doesn't know.

Clind: “Natsuki-sama. The correct way to wear this requires you to begin with this undervestment, and proceed with these lowers. Advice.”

Subaru: “Ah, thanks. Or no actually these clothes fit me so well it's creepy, how long has this ceremony been planned exactly?”

Clind: “It was raised in discussion instantly following your arrival in our household. And once decisions were made to hold the ceremony after Roswaal-sama's return... I assure you that Emilia-sama has studied and rehearsed the ceremony thoroughly. Report.”

Subaru: “The report's late! And why was Emilia-tan keeping it a secret too!?”

Otto: “Perhaps because it would be awkward? Anyway, you truly don't know a single step of the process? That would present something of a problem...”

Subaru puts his arms through the sleeves of the clothes that Clind gives him, lost on what to do. Otto perceives Subaru's genuine discomposure, and seems to start seeing the obstacles impeding this ceremony.

Subaru: “Right? It's doomed. I'm glad Emilia-tan feels this way, and it's crazy how honoured I am to receive a knighthood, but we're screwed if this ceremony fizzles out aren't we? Yeah okay I better get on my hands and knees and beg for this to be postpo—”

???: “Y'step forward when yer called, and kneel before Emilia-sama. Then y'draw yer sword from its scabbard and pass it t'her. Emilia-sama takes the sword and puts it to yer neck, she speaks the oath... then you accept the oath in return. Thassall.”

Subaru: “...What, seriously?”

Mutters Subaru in shock.
Everyone in the room gazes at Garfiel, who crosses his arms.

Garfiel: “What. Y'don't believe me?”

Subaru: “It's not that, it's that I'm shocked that you know this. How out of character is it for you to be versed in formal events like this...?”

Garfiel: “No, Captain. It ain't that I know anythin' 'bout formal events.”

Garfiel waves his hand in astonishment, but that doesn't eliminate the fact that he just outlined the formal process of an accolade. Subaru furrows his brows questioningly, and,

Garfiel: “S just that knighthoods 're awesome so I memorized it.”

Subaru: “Oh, okay. Got it.”

The reasoning is so convincing that Subaru instantly agrees with it.
His mighty chuuni mind offers assistance even here. Of course Garfiel would know about accolades! ...Is the persuasiveness of this argument.

Otto: “Does that account align with your knowledge, Clind-san?”

Clind: “I am only scantily versed in the topic, but my knowledge does coincide with what I heard. I bow my head before Garfiel-sama's mastery. Succinct.”

Otto: “But that makes it sound as though you also know the procedure... no, nevermind. Disregard that comment.”

Otto's life is one of opening cans of worms to find demons inside.
Nobody who witnessed the mysterious gleam in Clind's monocled eye would criticise Otto for his retreat.
Either way, Subaru smooths the wrinkles out of his clothes, puts on his jacket, and begins adorning

it with the required ornamentations.

Subaru: "This outfit is crazy. It took me ages to get used to the butler uniform, but I don't think I'll ever own this look."

Otto: "You won't be granted enough opportunities to wear it that you could say that you 'own' it. It would be another case, were you entering nobility... though, I suppose it's yet unclear what your future will bring."

Subaru: "Meaning?"

Otto: "Emilia-sama is on the social ladder. Being that you are following her, I suspect you will attend more than a few events in this vein. This outfit was specifically tailored, after all."

While feeling admiration for Otto's piece, thoughts of the future depress Subaru. He imagines these formal events, and his heart shivers, inept as it is at remaining stoic. Though these worries are only to be had if he safely gets through this upcoming ceremony.

Subaru: "Goddamn Roswaal, bet he hid it on purpose to make a laughingstock of me..."

Garfiel: "Sulkin' ain't gonna help yer none, Captain. Now repeat what my amazin' self said t'make sure yer don't forget it."

Subaru: "I kneel, draw the sword from its scabbard, give it to her, and say the oath. I mean I've gone through two graduation ceremonies, I can at least memorize this much."

Except he attended those ceremonies after properly practising for them.

Subaru: "I know it's way late in saying but if this's an accolade then all the imperial knights must've done it."

Otto: "Not only the imperial knights, but everyone who holds the title of Knight. Though I believe it's rare to disregard all these requirements and pledge directly to a master. Usually you would swear fealty to the nation before selecting a master."

Subaru: "So it's the difference between serving the country and serving an individual. I think it's right to be serving an individual."

Either way. He can say 'I am a Knight', but it doesn't feel true.

Subaru has proclaimed himself as Emilia's knight multiple times. Insisted it.

Even though he knows his false title is gaining legitimacy, he cannot exactly accept it. He also questions how exactly being recognized as a Knight will change him, too.

Subaru: "All this after you dressed me in these actual clothes. Seriously this fits me perfectly, when did you take my measurements?"

Clind: "Daily, interspersed between breaks in your awareness. I had already confirmed that it fit, but it elates me to see you dressing. Splendiferous."

Subaru: "I'm unsurprised about the measurements, but when did you check the fit? Have I somehow

been dressed in this outfit before?”

Clind gives no reply as he smiles, and brings Subaru, who has finished dressing, over to a mirror. As Subaru stands reflected in the full-length mirror, his breath catches.

He wears a black ceremonial outfit that clearly exceeds his standing, opulently but not outrageously decorated. No matter how Subaru poses, the captivating clothes make it look good. And when he holds himself soberly, indeed this is an outfit for formal ceremonies.

But, yeah, it definitely feels like Subaru is inferior to the clothes. Something feels off, like he's attending Shichi-Go-San, or something. Even so—

Otto: “Mm. It looks better on you than I expected.”

Garfiel: “Does feel like th'clothes're wearin' you, but they ain't totally defeated ya. Y'c'n relax, Captain.”

Clind: “Indeed, it suits you well. Emilia-sama's impression of you shall surely climb to even greater heights. Amicability Rising.”

Subaru: “You sincerely think that? You all sincerely honestly think that?”

Subaru readjusts his collar times upon time as she glances suspiciously at Otto, who despite his frankness, failed to mock Subaru's appearance. But Otto's expression remains perfectly stable, and he gazes at Subaru with pride. Not even Subaru can possibly reply to that.

Garfiel: “Here, take this, Captain.”

No amount of fiddling will invite any dramatic change. Subaru sighs as he turns around, and Garfiel supportingly hands him his knightblade. Subaru reflexively accepts it, when the slender thing makes him swallow his breath.

Clind: “It would be best that you used your own favoured blade, but being that you possessed none, our household provided this. You may keep it should you so fancy. Gift.”

Subaru: “A knight's sword... huh. And it's real, naturally?”

Otto: “I doubt you would ever find a wooden sword with such excellent craftsmanship. Only a child would would find joy in something like th—hm? Am I sensing a new business opportunity...?”

While witnessing the potential birth of wooden swords in parallel world souvenir shops, Subaru feels the weight of the sword in his hands. This is not his first time holding a sword.

Last was during the witchbeast affair in Arlam Village, when he went into the mountains with Ram to search for Rem. He accepted a sword from the village's men's brigade, wielding the thing with barely any thought. The sword broke before he could use it to fight any witchbeasts, so while it didn't manage to be

anything decisive, it did provide Subaru with his first experience in stabbing a living creature with a blade, which he has never done since.

This knightblade should be thinner and lighter than that previous one.
But the weight he currently feels in his hands is beyond compare.

Subaru: “—”

He unconsciously clicks his throat, a constricting feeling in his chest.

The weight from that sword and this sword are entirely different.
And Subaru knows that the entire purpose of this ceremony is to recognize that fact.

Otto: “—Natsuki-san. I'll come and call you before it begins. I'll do the final inspection of your dress then, so please make sure to keep it orderly.”

Subaru: “...Understood.”

Otto must have seen the shift in Subaru's expression, and sensed how he was beginning to properly face the ceremony.
With those words, he and the others leave the room.

Subaru: “—”

Left by himself in the room, Subaru drags over a nearby chair and seats himself before the mirror.
With the sword in his hands and his visage in the mirror, he submerges himself in thought.

Knight. The weight of the title presses down on Subaru's shoulders.

Had Subaru ever seriously considered the significance of this word he so frivolously used?
Naturally, he had been entirely serious back then. He would not use this as armour to conceal his rashness in proclaiming himself as Emilia's knight.
However,

Subaru: “Julius, Reinhardt.”

Subaru thinks of the upper echelon of knights in this country.
One is the Knight Of Knights. One is the Knight Impeccable.

They are the pride of knighthood, and the emblem of anything knightly.
When Subaru called himself a knight, ignorant to those facts, Julius sternly beat the truth into him.

Subaru: “What a knight needs is power and fealty... I think was it.”

If those are the requirements, then Subaru is still unfit to be a knight.

Subaru's feelings for Emilia are nothing as majestic as fealty.
He is incapable on his own, and fails to meet average capabilities even with Beatrice's help.
Both his power and his fealty are as insufficient as ever.

But now he has the will that he previously lacked.

It's not fealty, but it's comparably strong.

He might lack power, but he has the spirit and resolve to compensate for what he lacks.

He can't change that he seems too awkward to be called a knight, but that's what makes it Subaru. Like hell Natsuki Subaru is suited to anything so magnificent as chivalry.

???: “What. Seems that I didn't need to visit after all, in fact.”

It happens as Subaru faces himself in the mirror, having resolved one point.

He sees a small silhouette standing beside him, hunched forward as he is. The girl reflected aside him in the mirror, with her long, extravagant pigtails, is Beatrice.

Subaru: “I'm getting dressed. You dirty loli.”

Beatrice: “You're already dressed, I suppose. And I was asked to come here to do something since you looked so persistently uncertain, in fact. So I had to come here to give you a slap on the back, I suppose. —But it seems that I didn't need to, in fact.”

Subaru: “Those guys...”

Who was the meddler here? Otto? Garfiel? Perhaps even Clind? Or maybe it was all of them, and Subaru has to smile bitterly at how probable it is.

Indeed. There is no one more suited to give Subaru a pep talk at this moment than Beatrice. She is the best choice. So he'll impose on her care.

And accordingly uplift Beatrice's expression, as she regrets the needlessness of her presence here.

Subaru: “My back.”

Beatrice: “...?”

Subaru: “If you're gonna slap me, then please do it. I do feel like I've sorted some things out... but I'm still looking for that final push.”

Beatrice's eyes widen in shock.

Her expression is so incredibly darling that Subaru has to keep himself from chuckling,

Subaru: “Come on, please.”

Beatrice: “You don't have to worry yourself... I know I'm not worried myself, I suppose.”

Subaru: “I'm not saying this out of worry. I just think that, no matter who gives you that slap on the back, that winds up being the final push. So if I'm choosing who that person is then I want it to be you.”

Beatrice: “—”

Subaru: “I want you to slap me on the back and be the final strength I need to be Emilia's knight. It

feels more like me that way.”

He might just be saying it for peace of mind, but that's great, what's so bad about peace of mind? Perhaps it's just an issue with how he's feeling. But that just makes it more legitimate; of course he should have her make him feel better, then.
Because the heart always expresses itself with the simplest language.

Beatrice: “Y-you hopeless fool, in fact. You'd be absolutely lost without Betty, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I would. I'm utterly useless without you. And when I'm with you I'm normally useless.”

Beatrice: “Which means you're still useless, in fact! Sheer discourtesy, I suppose!”

Subaru: “And now this useless fool's gonna be Emilia's knight and gradually stop being so useless. So whenever I do start bordering on uselessness, I'm putting my hopes on you.”

Subaru lifts himself from the chair and pats Beatrice's head.
Beatrice looks dissatisfied with his vigorous manhandling, but makes no motion to stop him, and voices not a single complaint.

Subaru: “—”

After sating himself with Beatrice pats, Subaru slowly turns to present her his back.
And surely she understands what this means.
She takes a faint breath, readying herself.

Beatrice: “—Hiyaah, in fact!”

Subaru: “—!”

With an adorable shout, the noise of her palm peals through the room.
The impact from her small hand stings more than Subaru expected. And an even greater shock runs from his back into his whole body.

Subaru: “Man you're surprisingly strong.”

Beatrice: “I didn't walk around carrying big, heavy books every day for nothing, I suppose.”

Beatrice's bragging makes him think back on her time in the Archive.
Why yes, Beatrice was always reading books sizeable enough to conceal her small frame. Today is where she showcases the effects of constantly bearing all that weight.
Though he doesn't know if muscle work-outs actually do anything for spirits.

Subaru: “So we've unexpectedly uncovered a muscle magician. Massive Beako.”

Beatrice: “I suspect you just used an incredibly terrible epithet on me, in fact.”

Subaru: “Just your imagination. And man that fired me up. Thanks.”

Beatrice: "...You're my contractor, so of course I'd do this, I suppose."

Blushing slightly, Beatrice averts her gaze from Subaru.
It makes him want to pat her again. But before he can reach out to her—

Clind: "—Natsuki-sama, the time is near. Preparations."

—Clind knocks on the door and peers in, summoning him.
With the seconds looming in closer, he gulps from the tension.

But his limbs and face feel less rigid than he expected. The pent-up tension loosens him up in a good way, and he quietly sings the praises of Beatrice's unexpectedly effective slap.

Clind: "A seat has been prepared for you as well, Beatrice-sama. As I shall also be humbly attending, I would hold the greatest of appreciation supposing that you may accept my presence. Understanding."

Subaru: "Okay, got it. Please don't laugh if I mess up."

Clind: "As you command. Solemnity."

Clind waits outside the door to escort Subaru, who gives a sigh and clicks his neck.
He glances back to Beatrice, unsure of what to say,

Subaru: "Well, I'm off."

Beatrice: "As you should be, in fact."

It's a simple exchange, but it's enough.
Her words and actions have already given him more than enough.

Beatrice: "—Subaru."

But at the very end of the end, Beatrice halts Subaru one last time.
Just before he leaves the room, Subaru glances back to a red-faced Beatrice,

Beatrice: "That outfit looks great on you, I suppose."

And with that, she supplies him with the last bit of confidence he needed.

FINAL CHAPTER: A NONSENSE DANCE, UNDER THE MOONLIGHT

—Subaru has been in this hall before, but it looks nothing like how he remembers it.

Candelabra line the red carpet. The flickering of their crimson flames steeps the room in further formality, prompting everyone in attendance to straighten their posture.

Almost all of the important people of the mansion stand evenly by the wall. Which means the main players of this story, but also includes some attendants from the Milord household.

Assembling only people relevant to Subaru means monopolizing the assembly with his ingroup. Even he understands that many more people must play witness to this event.

But, having said that, should they truly have brought all of the Lewes doubles along?

Lewes nodded at him, telling him not to worry about it, but of course it's going to nag at him.

Although he knows that the girls are harmless unless directed, the uncertainty over what they might possibly do unsettles him.

Though, everyone else must share that same anxiety, except about Subaru.

There are so many points worthy of ridicule among the people here.

All the main players are primly dressed in formalwear, which is hilarious.

Nevermind Roswaal and Anne-Rose, who seem accustomed to the outfits: Otto and Garfiel look even more awkward in their getups than Subaru. And disregard how Garfiel scrunches up his face, irked by his stuffy collar, Otto hasn't even noticed how blatantly awkward he looks. Guy's a riot.

The servants include Frederica and Clind, who are always in formalwear. Subaru does have some qualms about Ram, who stands with them in her maid outfit as if this is entirely reasonable. But once he sees what is beside her, his breath catches.

A blue-haired girl, seated in a chair.

Her eyes are closed. Naturally. She is still asleep. Subaru resents how considerate Ram was to bring her here, and have her attend the ceremony. He resents how Ram smirks at him, announcing that she was the one who proposed this.

Subaru looks further along to find Petra gazing at him, finely dressed as he is, with pride.

Her dress amplifies her splendour, and she shines brightly enough to match Anne-Rose and

Beatrice. She's meant to be a simple village girl, so how do you explain her composure here?

Beatrice wears the same outfit as always, but her expression towards Subaru is gentle. Her flushed cheeks remind him of their exchange in the dressing room, which starts making Subaru embarrassed as well.

And standing before him—

“—”

—Is a silver-haired girl, waiting.

In her ceremonial outfit, Emilia enchants Subaru with an utterly new kind of brilliance.

Her silver hair shimmers like moonlight, and her amethyst eyes glimmer like jewels. Her face is tantalizingly beautiful as she purses her lips, apparently tense about this vital ceremony.

The outfit amplifies the purity that Subaru usually feels about Emilia, hallowed as a priestess' vestments, lined with sublime gold that keenly announces the nobility and seriousness of this ritual.

The instant that Subaru sights her, everything in his head falls hush.
The last vestiges of his bubbling emotions disperse, and everything except Emilia disappears from his mind.
He is absolutely not going to make a mockery of this ceremony, or of the people watching.

What does he need to do? Who does he need to be looking at? Where is his heart sitting?
No need to tell him. He already knows.

“—”

Nobody instructs him; his feet take the step forward.
His footsteps make no sound upon the rich carpet. He forgets the weight of the knightblade at his hip, focused with passion holding him aloft, but calm as a resting sea, as he approaches Emilia.

Even through the storm of onlooking gazes, his heart remains unshakable.
The only thing to cast ripples in Subaru's heart, in this instant, is Emilia.

He draws near to her, close enough to touch her.
She stands on a dais, her tantalizingly beautiful cheeks rigid. Subaru kneels before her.

With his knee to the ground, he bows his head.
All the ceremonial customs that Garfiel told him about take instant command of his body. He keeps his eyes closed as her intense gaze stares down at him.

He could almost forget to breathe in this atmosphere. Pleasant stress plays on his skin as he looks up, and he takes the sword from his waist.

He reverently lifts the weighty blade, unsheathing it horizontally before his chest.

Light from the candles washes over the steel, lighting Subaru and Emilia's eyes equally bright.

“—”

The beauty of the unsheathed blade burns itself into Subaru's eyes as he presents it to Emilia.
She sees the sword cast before her. Her lips tremble with some form of sentiment.
But she instantly asserts control over the words before they can spill, and she holds herself firm beneath the surge of emotion.
Her pale fingers touch the sword. She slowly lifts the heavy thing, until its tip points to the ceiling.

Emilia is beautiful as she holds the sword aloft. Subaru restrains his desires to witness the sight, bows his head, and closes his eyes.

What is presented to Emilia is the sword, the pride of the knight, alongside his being and his neck, which are those of the knight.

“—”

A Knight devotes their life to their Master.

Subaru's posture illustrates this vow, making Emilia's lips and eyes waver. But her hesitation only lasts a moment. Her pursed lips and focused gaze carry not the slightest indecision.

The point of the sword descends upon Subaru's left shoulder.

She rests the flat of the blade on his shoulders, and the weight almost makes him cry out. The pressure bearing on him is nothing physical, but mental.

Perhaps this sensation is the one that every knight must bear, that thing called 'pride'.

In this exact instant, Natsuki Subaru finally understands it.

The point of the blade moves to his right shoulder.

He feels the weight identically, but the coolness of the blade remains with him this time.

Of course. This is where the ceremony's most important moment begins.

“—”

“—”

Silence falls upon the hall.

No. The hall had been silent so far. The silence until now had been steeped in a strange tension, ardent and loud.

But the silence in this instant carries a new fire.

Absent of tension, absent of zeal, absent of anything, this silence is legitimate.

A quiet that falls equally upon the heart of Emilia, of Subaru, of everyone in attendance.

Only one person is granted the right to shatter it.

“—To the sun that gazes over the radiant world, to the stars that watch the realm in its sleep. To the winds, to the waters, to the earth, to the light, to the spirits residing in everything.”

The silence shatters.

Emilia's lips sing the ceremonial rite.

“—To the grand world that received you, that nurtured you, that delivered you.”

Trembling. His heart is trembling.

His teeth don't feel to sit right. What is his heart having trouble with?

It irritates him to even question his mental turmoil.

All he wants to do in this moment is drown in the chime of that bell.

“—To the pride that supports you, that you built, that you fostered.”

He feels the heat in the gaze upon him compound.

The passion burning inside him is ready to combust.

His heart thumps wildly, maniacally, as he regardless waits for the question.

“—To everything that watches over you, to the world that raised you, to the pride that supports you, let your way cast no shame. Without fear, without dread, without doubt, be as you are in your heart.”

The rite ends.

The question is coming.

This will end the ceremony. Not even Subaru knows the answer to this question.

However,

“—With your will always strong, and as everything that surrounds you does, will you swear to protect me from this moment forth?”

—His heart does know how to answer Emilia's question.

“To the sun, to the stars, to the world, to my pride—and.”

He will announce his gratitude and determination to everything stated in the rites.

Before he makes the pledge, he thinks of people who he assuredly must thank.

And so the words come naturally from his lips:

“—To my mother and my father, I swear.”

“—”

“I will protect you. I will realise your wishes. —My name is Natsuki Subaru.”

He raises his head.

The sword remains at his right cheek. But its gleam fails to catch his eye.

The only thing he sees is the brilliant amethyst, gazing back at him.

“Emilia. I am your knight.”

“—Mm.”

He says the words, and she gives her answer.

Emilia's eyes flood with emotion.

But she manages to keep anything from spilling as she lifts the sword from Subaru's shoulder.

She fixes its alignment and presents it back to him.

He respectfully accepts it in both his hands, and sheathes it in its scabbard.

Subaru returns the blade to his hip as he looks up at Emilia, still kneeling.

He sees Emilia give a slight nod, and stands up.

Where he,

“Also Emilia-tan you look mega sexycute in that outfit.”

“You dummy.”

—Shattering the seriousness of the ceremony, Emilia pokes out her tongue, red-faced.

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Many dishes line the table in the banquet hall.

Social standing and class present no issue as everyone present at the accolade chats with each other, turning the buffet into something of a get-together.

Subaru: “I just went through one of the most stressful things of my life, and look at you, having all the fun.”

He watches the banquet from the terrace outside, bathed in the night wind.

A plate of food from the table and a drink rest on the nearby railing, but the swell from before hasn't passed.

He's having trouble getting any food or drink down his throat.

The hot flush from his neck upwards isn't going away.

His stomach tells him that he's hungry, but his chest is too full for anything to get through.

Subaru: “—”

In the corner of his eye, he sees Petra dancing at the head of the hall in her dress. It's the kind of dance they do during festivals in Arlam Village, but with Petra's take on it, and with her proficiency in it, it is certainly fit for a noble's mansion.

She pulls a blushing Beatrice along with her, forcing her into a shoddy dance. Though she tries desperately to stay apathetic and expressionless, Subaru spots how her ears and nose tremble, unable to hold it in.

As always, it's Petra dragging helpless Beatrice into it.

Subaru's cheeks relax as he takes his glass. He's managed to secure enough composure to at least wet his tongue. Though, he's not ready to reach for Garfiel and Frederica's pie just yet.

???: “—There you are, Subaru.”

Subaru leans on the bannister, staring up at the sky, when a voice calls him. He looks down to find a moon pixie, her beauty only embellished beneath its light.

Subaru: “Or no it's Emilia-tan. Thought it was an angel.”

Emilia: “You're saying weird stuff again. Are you drunk?”

Subaru: “I'm still underage so no I'm not drinking. If I'm drunk on anything, then it's on the atmosphere and my own ego.”

Emilia: “See, so you are drunk.”

Emilia giggles, and Subaru has to furrow his brows at that.

He sees her pale skin peeking out from beneath her neat dress—and the flush on her neck and cheeks, which makes him agree with her current state.

Subaru: “The heck, Emilia-tan. You go asking me if I'm drunk, when it looks like you're who's been

drinking.”

Emilia: “I haven't been. They just gave me some punch. I never drink alcohol and go all funny.”

Subaru: “Man you're cute.”

Emilia pouts, completely forgetting the seriousness from the ceremony.

Meaning that this right here is just a completely normal adorable girl.

Emilia: “So, Subaru. What are you doing alone out here?”

Subaru: “Well, I already told you. I'm drunk on the atmosphere and my ego.”

It's a frivolous reply, but not a completely inaccurate one, either.

What is there to call this but going out into the night alone, moping, unable to vent?

Not that he can divulge his feelings to anyone so easily.

Emilia: “Do you regret it...?”

Subaru: “Absolutely not. Gonna be hearing none of that, Emilia.”

Emilia: “Mm, I'm sorry for that. Sorry. But I'm happy too.”

Her cheeks still flushed from alcohol, Emilia takes a step closer to Subaru.

She leans on the bannister beside him. Their shoulders are close enough to touch, and even with clothes between them, Subaru's body flares hotter.

Emilia: “Subaru. I apologize that the accolade came out of nowhere. I'd been ready the whole time, so I thought you knew about it too.”

Subaru: “No I'm probably just an idiot for not realising. Thinking back, you did keep asking me if I'd practised, but I just came up with bullshit answers to brush it off every time.”

Emilia assumed that Subaru knew, and had been regularly checking on his progress.

Subaru had simply never realised it, getting through the conversations with frivolities as they came, never understanding what Emilia was trying to say, while devoting himself to other things.

And anyway this whole accolade thing was,

Subaru: “Roswaal's fault. Actually almost everything's been his fault lately. Is he trying to humiliate me? He's been going seriously overboard this last while.”

Emilia: “I kinda think Roswaal's always been like that... but, yes, it does feel like he's been provoking you more than he used to. Maybe he wants your attention.”

Subaru: “That's terrifying, Emilia-tan.”

Subaru's attention will only make Roswaal an even more hopeless person, so let's not have that.

Subaru grimaces at the surprisingly possible idea, and Emilia laughs, waving her hand easily.

Emilia: “I'm just joking. I don't think Roswaal knows how he should act now that we know about

his plotting. I'm sure that, in a bit, he'll go back to being like before.”

Subaru: “If he goes back to 'being like before' it sounds like he didn't learn anything, but... well, it's better than him changing on us and leaving us lost on how to respond.”

It might seem like a half-hearted decision, but Subaru will agree with it for now. With that part of the conversation over, Emilia takes a sip from her glass. She's had it with her the entire time, and if Subaru's guess is correct, then it's the alcoholic kind of punch. It feels like Emilia is getting more intoxicated, which both scares and interests him.

Emilia: “Say, Subaru.”

Subaru: “Hm, what? The alcohol's heating you up so it's time to get undressed? Better not do it here. Okay, let's find somewhere else. Off we go.”

Emilia: “Sorry. I'm not entirely sure what you're saying. No, we're staying here.”

Emilia shoots Subaru a slight glare. It makes him shrink back and lower his head, when she jerks her chin toward the banquet hall.

Emilia: “They look like they're having fun.”

Subaru: “Errryeah, they do. It's a noble mansion but even the servants are welcome, feels really cozy. As a member of the lower-middle class peasantry, I'd say it's basically the ideal.”

Emilia: “Mm, I agree. I think it's sooo wonderful.”

Subaru notices the affection and desire in her amethyst eyes.

Subaru and Emilia might not be witnessing the same picture. Emilia is surely seeing a peaceful scene, absent of any class- or race- based discrimination.

Subaru only perceives the superficial layer of things. Their viewpoints differ completely.

They see the same thing, but think differently.
And Subaru thinks the discrepancy is fine.

Emilia: “What's going on, Subaru? You look sooo peaceful.”

Subaru: “I wonder. Maybe I'm just happy that I'm here, seeing the same things as you, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “Really? Then I'm happy that you're seeing things the same way.”

Subaru: “I don't know. I might not be. But I think it's alright for us to differ.”

Emilia glances at Subaru. He feels her gaze but keeps looking straight ahead, his cheeks relaxing into a slight smile.

Emilia notices him smiling, and nods.

It happens right when they reach their understanding that,

Subaru: “Oh, goddamn Otto. He's overdoing it, doubt he can even hold his liquor.”

In the middle of the hall, Garfiel challenges Otto to drink a full glass of expensive-looking alcohol in one go. Otto slams the glass back down to the table, having beautifully chugged the whole thing, to the applause of the onlooking crowd.

But Otto's face flushes bright red before swiftly paling dead white. Following this transformation, Garfiel immediately shoulders Otto and goes rushing out of the hall.

Subaru: “Guess they're going to the toilet.”

Emilia: “Will Otto-kun be okay? Um, he kind of looked like how the dogs in the forest do when they eat poison mushrooms, just then...”

Subaru: “You should know what's up now that you've drunk yourself to your limit and hit adulthood, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “Is that how it works?”

Subaru: “No I mean I don't know.”

He's underage.

And how expensive was that liquor that Otto just drank, and is probably regurgitating? Doubtful that anything cheap or mass-produced is going to be included in this banquet.

Subaru shoots Roswaal a glance. Perceptive as he is, Roswaal catches the look and raises his glass to Subaru. The Margrave in his clown make-up easily drinks the same alcohol that defeated Otto. Either his dignity is winning, or he's just used to the liquor.

Emilia: “...Subaru. I want to tell you something.”

Subaru: “What a coincidence. I want you to tell me something too.”

Breaking the silence that falls between them, Emilia whispers quietly enough to Subaru that only he will hear. He nods, and while still leaning on the railing, adjusts his posture.

Emilia turns to face him too, leaving them gazing at each other within breathing range. Subaru reflexively steps backwards, but,

Emilia: “No running.”

Emilia's hand grabs him, stopping his retreat.

The step he took winds up as a half-step, putting them even closer than before. Subaru stumbles forward and bumps onto Emilia's forehead.

He hurriedly tries to draw back, but Emilia's grip on his ceremonial dress prevents him.

Subaru: “E-Emilia-tan? I'm happy about this situation but, it's sorta a little tense for a conversation...”

Emilia: “I'm tense too. This is my first time having such an important talk with anyone. So we're even.”

Subaru: “N-no I think I'm winning here...”

He desperately tries to smile and brush this off, but Emilia won't let him go.

Emilia is warm against him as he attempts to at least ease his own stress, and awkwardly moves to hide Emilia from the banquet hall.

It is obvious that they're hugging when they're horizontal like this. If Subaru shuffles over a little, then it should just look like he's got his hands on the railing, staring up at the night sky and waxing poetic.

Subaru: “Ok so those worries are dealt with, now tell me anything.”

Emilia: “...Okay, here's a talk between me and my Sir Knight. It's about why Roswaal invited me to participate in the Royal Selection.”

Subaru: “—”

Emilia has never discussed this with Subaru before.

And it must have something to do with the Trial, that so consistently discouraged her.

Subaru swallows his breath and looks down at Emilia.

Their gazes crash into one another. Seeing himself reflected in Emilia's eyes, Subaru nods with determination.

Emilia: “Before Elixir Forest was frozen, I used to live there with my Mother and... with the other elves.”

It's a tale of happy memories, a tale of sorrowful memories.

While it comes with its hiccups and pauses, Emilia sincerely tells Subaru the story.

Emilia didn't know her parents. Fortuna loved Emilia in their place. The villages kindly accepted them when they had nowhere to go. And then there was the organization called the Witch Cult, secretly helping the village, and this character named Juice.

It was a limited world, but one that showered Emilia in love and kindness.

And it was all ruined on the day that Elixir Forest froze.

The Witch Cult acted brutally as the witch named Pandora and the Cardinal appeared. The arrival of the Witchbeast Blacksnake, and Fortuna and Juice's tragedy. Emilia kept her mother's problems, and so lost both her and the village. Then came Puck, who she met upon awakening after a long time in the ice.

Emilia: “Puck said he'd always been waiting for me, that he'd always been looking for me. Then he stayed with me, protecting me, just like he said he would. Even now, he's inside this spellstone, waiting to be woken up. ...I can tell.”

Subaru: “But you can't speak with him, can you?”

Emilia: “He's still asleep. But it's not because he's denying a contract with me. I don't think this spellstone will work as his anchor if he's awake. It needs to be a higher grade, colourless spellstone. If I can just find one, and then something to trigger it... I know he'll come back.”

A blue spellstone hangs on a pendant around Emilia's neck.
It's a piece of the massive spellstone that sealed Lewes Meyer. It proves insufficient for holding Puck, and the sleeping spirit cannot communicate with the outside.
As if his help during the Garfiel fight was really, truly his final contribution.

Subaru: "I understand what's going on with Puck. But, about the Royal Selection?"

Emilia: "Me and Puck spent all that time in the frozen forest. Sometimes I went to the nearby towns too, but they weren't really very welcoming."

Subaru cannot even imagine how alienating that 'weren't really very' was. And it's doubtful that Emilia ever anticipated that she would speak of it.

Emilia: "Then Roswaal came... I think, not even a year ago yet. But it was so sudden that it left me and Puck sooo shocked."

Subaru: "Well I'd be shocked too, if a guy in clown make-up popped up outta nowhere."

Emilia: "That's true, but what shocked us was that he was in this inaccessible forest. I was on my way back from the village, and he was just standing there waiting for me. And he was playing dumb like always, like, 'weeeeeeeeeeeelcome back'..."

Subaru: "Well..."

That's certainly surprising.

It's too late to be commenting on Roswaal's mean-spiritedness, but Subaru can imagine the shock it gave Emilia and Puck at the time.

Emilia: "Puck got so cross... he went from morning to night, just fighting with Roswaal. Thinking back on it, it's a good thing he didn't freeze Roswaal solid."

Subaru: "I mean your smile's adorable, but that's not really something to smile about."

Emilia: "I guess. Anyway, Puck and Roswaal told each other what they wanted while they were fighting, and they managed to start a discussion..."

Subaru: "And Roswaal lured you in by proposing to melt the forest."

Emilia's eyes widen. Subaru smiles wryly at her reaction.

Subaru: "It's obvious from how the story was going. And I happened to hear something along those lines before. But, y'know..."

But there's been a shift in Emilia's awareness since then.

Before, she said that she was incapable of freezing Elixir Forest. That she was unable to thaw the ice, even with Puck's help.

However,

Subaru: "If you froze the forest, can't you unfreeze it?"

Emilia: "...Mm, I had that thought too. But I doubt I can."

Subaru: "How come?"

Emilia: "I just can't reach the same power that I had in my memories."

It's an anxious, but confident statement. Subaru furrows his brows.

'The power I had in my memories'. If what Emilia's said is accurate, then that means power beyond human knowledge. Not even this witch Pandora could find an opening in Emilia's assault. So how come Emilia doesn't have it now?

Subaru: "But you fought the Sizeable Hare without backing down an inch."

Emilia: "I don't need Puck or the minor spirits' help to cast magic any more. But that's all. I still can't draw that power out."

Subaru: "—"

Lamenting her powerlessness, Emilia clenches her fist and weakly shakes her head.

Her expression, ashamed of her inadequacy, instead shames Subaru for feeling dejected.

Emilia, of all people, is frustrated about herself. Subaru knows this, so he should not be capable of casting any criticism on her.

And it's not even that he wants Emilia to be strong, really.

Subaru: "OK, no more self-blame. Back to the topic. We'll agree that you can't melt the ice... so how is Roswaal thinking to do it?"

Emilia: "..."

Subaru: "If you can't do it and Puck can't do it, then Roswaal shouldn't be able to either. Maybe he's an amazing magician, but he can't be ten or twenty times stronger than you. So, how?"

Emilia: "It's not that Roswaal himself is melting the ice. But Roswaal knows something that might melt the ice... all he did was tell me about it."

Subaru: "Something, that might melt it?"

Something that can thaw the forest that not even the Witch of Glaciation could melt, not even with a spirit's help, and not even with ultimate magical power. What on earth could it be?

Emilia: "Dragon's blood."

Subaru: "—"

Emilia: "The blood of the Dragon, that grants bountiful harvests upon the land, and cures deviant earth. He said it could definitely thaw the forest."

Subaru: "Emilia, but that means..."

Killing the Dragon. Doesn't it?

She means to sacrifice the Dragon, which has always protected the Kingdom of Lugnica, for the sake of her forest?

For an instant, the incredible question rushes through Subaru's mind. But,

Emilia: "No, Subaru. I only need one drop of blood. And the Dragon's blood has been used to revitalize the soil during a famine in Lugnica before. I read that in a history book, so it's definitely true."

Subaru: "What, so... no, that seriously freaked me out for a second. I mean if we did something like kill the Dragon..."

Would that not free the Witch, sealed by the Dragon's power?

Subaru: "—"

Anxiety clenches in Subaru's chest, and he forgets to breathe.

The witches he met at Echidna's tea party. And the Witch of Envy, who saw him off at the end.

Subaru has not forgotten her.

He will never forget his resolve from their last instant of goodbye.

But she must not be let free.

She must not be loosed on the world.

His instincts assuredly tell him so.

Emilia: "The royalty of Lugnica get a chance to talk to the Dragon when they form the covenant. And some drops of the Holy Dragon Volcanica's blood have been kept in the palace, from back then. When I'm Ruler, I want to use that power."

Subaru: "So that's why you're participating..."

Emilia: "...I told you before. The reason I'm participating is sooo selfish. And there my selfish reason is."

He can hear a smile in her words, but it's an uneasy one.

And her eyes do waver with anxiety as she looks up at him.

She looks scared of what he will say, and what he will think of her resolve.

It seems he's allowed to believe that he is such an implacable fixture to her, that he can make her feel this unease.

Subaru: "Don't worry, Emilia-tan. I'm not gonna get disillusioned over something like that."

Emilia: "...Subaru."

Subaru: "You say it's self-centred, but you're not looking for your own gain. You know how to save people you want to save, and instead of dirtying your hands with something like theft, you decide to use legitimate methods. There's nothing to criticise about that."

Subaru gives her a reassuring smile. But her expression remains anxious.

Subaru knows. This isn't what she wants to hear.

If he's going to give her something closer to what she's really looking for, then:

Subaru: "Are you shrinking back because you think your motivator is inferior to the other candidates'?"

Emilia: "—hk"

Subaru: "That's a case of grass's greener on the other side. Crusch-san's an amazing person with an amazing goal, yeah, but think about Anastasia-san and Priscilla. Their rationale'sre nothing praiseworthy."

Greed and ego. That's what motivates them to participate.

Subaru wasn't there to hear it, but what venerable reason could Felt give to be participating in the Selection?

Emilia's desire to save people is not in any way inferior.

Subaru: "And no matter what you wanted at the start, it's something different now, isn't it?"

Emilia: "...How can you tell?"

Subaru: "Because you were looking so peacefully at the banquet hall."

Unfolding in the Milord banquet hall is a sight where humans and demihumans, nobles and servants and commoners, all interact without any division between race or class.

Subaru called it the ideal, and Emilia gazed at it with longing.

Subaru knows exactly how the fire in Emilia's heart is kindled.

Subaru: "If your goal's to see that again, I'm helping you. I agree that it's wonderful. No one's gonna stop you from adding that onto your list of reasons for trying."

Emilia: "You'll... really, help me?"

Subaru: "What do you think I just swore to you? Stop worrying, I want you to rely on me first. When you want help I'll help you, and when you're unsure we'll solve the problem together."

Emilia: "—"

Emilia swallows her breath, her eyes wavering

What should she say? Her trembling lips cannot clearly state what she feels.

Emilia: "—Mm."

So she mutters only that.

And smiles.

—*That's all I need*, thinks Subaru.

Subaru: "Alright, my doubts are all vanished."

With that, Subaru drinks what's left in the glass on the railing. Then he grabs his thoroughly-cooled meat pie, tosses it in his mouth, chews. The cool cannot degrade this flavour, and the pie just melts in his mouth. Indeed this is a masterpiece that lives up to Garfiel's boasting.

Emilia: “Subaru, you'll choke if you eat so quickly.”

Subaru: “I'll savour every bite if you feed it to me.”

Emilia: “I feel like I've done that somewhere before, when you were exhausted...”

Subaru grins somewhat wryly in response, and leads Emilia by the hand to the hall. She looks up at the sky once, before accepting Subaru's escort and entering the hall alongside him.

The party is still underway, and heats up with the star guests' return.

After bringing back a drunk Otto, Garfiel blacks out at the hands of Frederica and Ram's joint sneak attack, denying him his attempts to drink alcohol.

Petra and Beatrice's uncoordinated dance reaches its climax. Sweat drips from Petra's brow, and Beatrice is determined to put in an equal effort.

Anne-Rose looks displeased that Subaru has returned with Emilia, but Clind pokes his master's puffed cheeks, aggravating her.

Lewes and Roswaal stand side by side, toast to their repaired relationship, and sip from their glasses.

Subaru: “It's wonderful, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “Yes. It's exactly what I want to see. I'll always remember it.”

So let's have a night to always remember.

They intrude on the two girls, dancing in the most conspicuous spot in the room.

They don't know a single step, but they enjoy themselves all the same.

Through a sea of smiles and confusion, the Knight and Witch—the new master and servant—begin their nonsense dance.