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Web Novel

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ARC 4 – THE EVERLASTING COVENANT

Chapter 1 [The Place They Returned To]

The grey gloom of the sky mirrored the state of Subaru's heart.

In front of Crusch's mansion, six dragon carriages lined up in a row. Those that fled from the Roswaal domain, the villagers of Arlam(or so the place was called) were all loaded up. Only the final special carriage was reserved for Subaru and Emilia.

The road will be long. So unlike the way here, they won't be riding with the children, since there is a mountain of things he has to say to Emilia… and he wasn't so insensitive as to let the children ride alongside "her"…

[I will become rather lonely]

Silently gazing at the dragon carriages, Subaru heard a voice from behind him.

Turning to see, it was Crusch looking at him. Her long green hair caressed by the misty wind, she closed her eyes, and seeing her, Subaru scratched his head.

[Subaru: It's not like anything will happen if I stay here, I'd feel bad to just keep sponging on your hospitality —to be honest, I really should be taking some time to recover, but it can't be helped]

Opening and closing his hands, Subaru thought about the state of his health, and smiled awkwardly. Back then, it was to recover his health that he came to Crusch's mansion in the first place. Roswaal had a hand in sending him here, and it still annoys him to see that Clown's wishes fulfilled so perfectly. As a matter of principle, even if he fulfills any of that guy's wishes, it should be by continually stomping it.

[Crusch: Natsuki Subaru-sama, you know you're welcome to sponge here as long as you like… even though it's hard to say that out loud]

[Subaru: Thank you for your offer… but while I want to, there is still a pile of loose ends I need to tie up. There's the White Whale, "Sloth", and the whole deal with the merchants guild…]

Declining Crusch's offer, Subaru shook his head. He was thinking of Julius and Anastasia.

Out of the three factions that joined forces against the White Whale and "Sloth", only Anastasia's purely benefited.

Crusch's camp, by slaying the White Whale, had accomplished a glorious feat four hundred years in the making — but Crusch's amnesia was a devastating blow.

As for Subaru and Emilia's camp that defeated "Sloth", the supposedly well-informed Roswaal's absence from it all doesn't bode well at all.

In terms of casualties, although they didn't suffer heavy losses like Crusch's camp, to Subaru, his loss was far too great to bear.

In comparison, only losing a portion of her mercenaries and supply trains, Anastasia's forces are almost completely intact. And even though she wasn't the main player in either battle, her forces made tremendous contributions with minimal losses, a highly profitable investment.

While the damage to their forces made the other two factions hesitate in publicizing their victories, it was not a concern for Anastasia.

In order to check Anastasia's ascent, close coordination between Crusch and Emilia's factions will be necessary…

….Seeing Subaru deep in those thoughts, Crusch yawned lazily. Subaru's brows frowned when he saw this, and Crusch, an embarrassed expression on her face, only waved [nothing] with her hands…

[Subaru: Sorry to be so sentimental… but I'm ashamed I can't repay you for your kindness…]

[Crusch: The ones that repay favors right away are not worthy opponents. Don't worry about it when there is so much on your plate. Besides, we received plenty in return already]

Listening to Crusch's courteous words, Subaru turned to look at the front of the special carriage. Compared to the others, it looked like an overly-decorated high-class VIP dragon carriage, and the honor of pulling it goes to—

[Crusch: Such an unambitious request… you want to treat this ground dragon's wounds and take care of her?]

[Subaru: I do owe this ground dragon a great deal. Even though it's only been a relatively short time, the number of times we rode into the brink of death is more than I can count. And I intend to face many more challenges together with her, so I won't consider Patrasche to be a toy]

[Crusch: —In that case, I have no need to worry]

The ground dragon— Patrasche glanced at Subaru as he spoke, and then, as if rejecting his admiration, turned to Wilhelm. The old swordsman, who up to now had been checking the carriages before their departure, nodded at their conversation.

[Wilhelm: "Diana" is the most difficult breed of ground dragons to please. To shield her master with her own body, Subaru must be quite adored by this ground dragon]

[Subaru: Even though I don't remember much, before the battle with the White Whale, I just decided to choose this one all of a sudden]

It’s true they have a bond. This was more than fortunate, because if he picked any other ground dragon, whether it’s the White Whale or Betelgeuse, he would not have made it out alive. Anyway,

[Subaru: I can no longer be satisfied by any other ground dragon besides you… Ah, seductive Patrasche!]

Touching the smooth texture of the side of Patrasche’s stomach with the palm of his hand as if to show off his affections, Subaru looked into Patrasche’s rather pissed-off looking eyes.

To Subaru’s overly intimate molestation, the ground dragon reacted with an expression of profound disgust from the bottom of its heart, and jerked her body as if trying to break Subaru’s fingers.

[Subaru: Ow! That’s overreacting just to hide your embarrassment! Though with all that exercise wiping windows back in Junior High, my fingers won’t break so easily!]

[Wilhelm: The ground dragon is joking with you. Such amiable communication must be an indication of the unwavering trust between you two]

[Subaru: Does that look like communication? It seemed to be just me offering my love one-sidedly and Patrasche rejecting me with her body language!]

That unspoken trust on the battlefield… is woefully absent right now. Now it’s just a sassy attitude… But in the end, even with the cold demeanor, Patrasche allowed him to pet her.

Anyway,

[Subaru: So I got my name into the credits for slaying the White Whale, and then I saved Emilia by killing “Sloth”. And now I got my beloved ground dragon… The reward is quite nice isn’t it]

[Wilhelm: Killing the White Whale, how significant that was, Subaru-dono not realizing this is something admirable indeed. Perhaps one day the world will properly thank you for this great achievement. I look forward to that day]

[Subaru: Yeah I think so too! Wait.. but wasn’t I just running around the Whale’s nose like bait all that time?]

To Subaru’s not even humble words, Wilhelm looked on with a warm smile. His insides itching from that warmth, Subaru shook his head as if trying to get rid of that feeling.

[Subaru: All that aside… I won’t be seeing you for a while Wilhelm-san. Please take care of your wound]

[Wilhelm: Sorry I made you worry. It seems the distance is getting farther, the bleeding has stopped. But no matter what, the day when I fight alongside Subaru-dono again will come. Until then]

Wilhelm’s wound — the unhealable wound dealt by the Previous Generation Sword Saint, Thearesia van Astria. Mentioning this brought a sharpness into Wilhelm’s gaze. His mind turned to the Sin Archbishops that assaulted Crusch, “Greed” and “Gluttony”.

If the death of the “Sword Demon”‘s wife had to do with something other than the White Whale, these two are the most likely suspects.

Subaru, same as Wilhelm, holds a strong hatred for Gluttony. No matter what, they must eventually come face to face with this Sin Archbishop. While the Witch Cult is something they would rather avoid, “Gluttony” is an entirely different matter. For they must defeat this Sin Archbishop to retrieve those irreplaceable things… Crusch’s memory is one, and more importantly—

[Subaru-kyun, Rem-chan is settled in, want to check?]

Saying this, from the carriage window poked out a head with cat-like ears — Ferris. Seeing Ferris step out of Patrasche’s special carriage, Subaru walked over. Peeking in, in the spacious interior, some seats had been replaced with a makeshift bed, and on it, a girl was sleeping.

She was not wearing the familiar maid’s dress, but wore a soft blue sleeping gown, that matched the color of her hair. A girl in an unwaking slumber, forgotten by all the world. She loved Subaru, and Subaru loved her. Perhaps, she was that kind of girl.

[Subaru: That thing is safe right?]

[Ferris: Hey I’ve been careful, I am a healer nyan. Though Rem’s physical wounds are already healed, she is no longer a patient nyan]

Silently, Subaru gazed at her sleeping face. Ferris’ words were brash, but the side of Ferris’ face showed something different from the usual playfulness. Perhaps Ferris was feeling the pain of his own powerlessness, not in regards to Rem, but Ferris’ peerless master, Crusch.

[Ferris: You really want to bring her with you?]

[Subaru: Yes, I’ll bring her with me. She won’t get better by staying here… no I didn’t mean it’s your fau…]

[Ferris: I know nyan, Subaru-kyun isn’t that mean nyan]

Seeing Subaru’s embarrassment after his remarks, Ferris smiled awkwardly.

[Ferris: In fact]

Pointing a finger at Subaru,

[Ferris: Aside from Rem, an even bigger concern is Subaru-kyun isn’t it?]

[Subaru: Me?]

[Ferris: Don’t play dumb nyan, your gate is over-strained nyan. While healing you I had to forcefully inject a large amount of Mana through your gate, it could be a bit damaged nyan. Are you feeling weak or tired, physically and magically?]

At Ferris’ question, Subaru turned his neck and shoulders. Spinning around, he couldn’t find anything wrong. He jumped a bit and there seemed to be nothing to worry about.

[Subaru: No problem. Both the used parts and the unused parts are fine. Putting the gate aside, I don't usually use magic anyway]

[Ferris: You're not a magic user after all. If it's Ferris, Ferris would have to avoid using magic except in emergencies nyan… en, that's good nyan]

Seeing Subaru aloof to the critical condition of his health, Ferris gave up. With wide, round eyes, Ferris looked around Subaru's neck, pulling around his collar.

[Ferris: But no more straining yourself. Even though Ferris can squeeze out every toxin from Subaru-kyun's body, if your gate shatters into a thousand pieces Ferris won't be able to fix it nyan. So take the time to properly recover it… about two months nyan]

[Subaru: Two months without magic… for a guy who didn't use magic for 17 years, it's nothing!]

Joking around after hearing the diagnosis… come to think of it, Subaru hasn't even been in this world for two months, even though from his perspective it was more like 4 months — it all feels like a very long time.

Thinking about all that happened since he came to this world, how hard would it be to finally rest for two months? He wasn't sure himself.

[Subaru: En… although I do always manage to get myself caught up in some disaster… Wait, did I just trigger a "Flag"!? I think I heard the sound effect!!]

[Ferris: Too bad, Ferris is no expert on treating brain problems nyan]

Subaru apparently appalled by his own remarks, Ferris looked at him rather disinterestedly.

Affected by this reaction, Subaru decided this conversation should be coming to an end. After some thought, he reached out his hand to Ferris.

[Ferris: Nyan?]

[Subaru: No, I really should thank you for everything you've done to help me. For healing me, and when we're against the Whale and "Sloth" if it weren't for you, it would've all been a mess…… and for Rem, thank you]

[Ferris: ….nyan. You don't seem to be mocking me nyan, so be it]

[Subaru: Ooo! My ability <> has activated! Stay calm!]

A clumsy expression of thanks, but Ferris seemed to like it. In any case, his feelings got through. Ferris held onto the out-reached hand, and they shook.

[Subaru: Such soft, slender fingers… I can't imagine what you'd be like with masculine hands]

[Ferris: On the cute and perfect Ferris, wouldn't that be too disappointing nyan? Be it body hair or skin, everything on Ferris is all natural nyan]

Ferris raising a hand with pride, Subaru caught a glimpse of the impeccable white legs under Ferris' skirt. Taking in the sheer beauty of its form, Subaru's shoulders dropped dejectedly.

[Subaru: But, he's a guy…]

[Ferris: Yep, Ferris is a man in body and soul nyan]

[Subaru: How do you get so smug about it? Which part of that is like a man?]

Dressed like a beautiful girl, calling Ferris a man is just too much — Although Subaru isn't traditional or anything like that, even he knew Ferris' behavior is the opposite of what would be called manly.

Against Subaru's question, Ferris placed a finger on the corner of those lips. And with a charming shake of the waist,

[Ferris: Because, Crusch-sama said this suits Ferris, what I am, I am, and this most suits the radiance of Ferris' soul. —Crusch-sama's words, Ferris shall repay with everything that I am]

[Subaru: But…]

…the current Crusch doesn't know this… but Subaru held back his words. Even if he doesn't say it, Ferris already knows. And if he does say it, it will only hurt.

Subaru, more than anyone, would hate to do this. If someone talked about Rem, Subaru would be just as agitated. Perhaps Ferris knew this as well.

[—No matter what becomes of the House of Karsten]

[Subaru: ……?]

Suddenly, the voice struck Subaru's eardrums.

Quiet, cold, a voice of frozen emotion.

Who that voice belonged to… if he heard it now, it would still give him pause.

Head lowered, Ferris' expression is hidden behind the hair of his forehead, impossible to see.

In this way, Ferris held tight onto Subaru's hand.

[Ferris: Only Crusch-sama, I will protect with my life]

[Subaru: …Ferris?]

[Ferris: That – Is – Why]

In front of the dumbfounded Subaru, Ferris' head suddenly lifted, smiling with a jubilant voice. But compared to the playful, mischievous eyes Subaru was so used to seeing, in this instant, it appeared as if those eyes were lying.

[Ferris: Remember the agreement, Subaru-kyun! Otherwise all the Mana in your body will go on a rampage frying your brain until you die nyan]

[Subaru: What are you saying with that smile on your face!? And why are you threatening an ally!?]

[Ferris: Threatening? More like a death sentence nyan]

[Subaru: Worse than I thought!]

Flinging Ferris' hand out of his own, Subaru turned away. For a brief moment, in all this commotion

—he faintly hoped perhaps Rem would react.

Sighing slightly, he pushed his dashed hopes out of his mind.

Near the luggage outside the dragon carriage, he found Emilia and Crusch talking.

[Emilia: Ah, Subaru. Is Rem-san's bed prepared?]

[Subaru: Yep Ferris set it up perfectly. Behold! This is me and Patrasche's GREAT CIRCUS COMBO! We'll show you something even the Great Kinoshita Circus wouldn't be able to show you!]

[Emilia: Even though I don't know what you're talking about, I got a bad feeling about this… let's not do the Great Circus]

[Subaru: The sky! It's too unfortunate! But my heart had already been beating up and down expectant of Emilia-tan's misattribution of arousal!]

Subaru called it the "In this speeding carriage my life is in danger, could this increase in heartbeat be LOVE!?" self-directed battle plan.

But to hear Emilia say "Rem-san"… a piercing pain of unfathomable degree lingered in Subaru heart, refusing to disappear.

For an instant, Emilia's eyes caught onto Subaru's mouth, which had suddenly stopped moving. But before her words came out, Ferris came up behind Subaru.

[Ferris: Well, the dragon carriage is prepared nyan. Sorry it took so long nyan. It's sad to say goodbye — Crusch-sama, anything to say?]

[Crusch: En, yes]

Ferris went to Crusch's side. Subaru went to Emilia's. Taking them both within her sight, Crusch took a deep breath, and placed a hand in front of her chest.

[Crusch: First, though I have said it many times before, you have my deepest gratitude. Even though I can no longer remember, I know that before I lost my memory, I wanted us to cooperate, and to be friends. I thank you once again]

[Emilia: No… I, Crusch-sama, there is nothing to thank me for. These days I've only been kept in the dark and left out of everything…]

[Subaru: En, it's true Emilia-tan didn't do anything. But I have everything handled so don't worry. After all, my achievements are my Emilia-tan's achievements too!]

Seeing Emilia shriveling in embarrassment, Subaru pounded his chest proclaiming this. Stealing a glance at Subaru, Emilia nodded slightly.

[Emilia: Thank you Subaru… Even though I don't remember becoming "your" Emilia…]

[Subaru: M – my battle plan to "subconsciously inject impression of a romantic relationship into third party listeners" has been seen through…!?]

[Emilia: Because I was listening carefully… oh, sorry about that]

All the air pressure deflating from his chest, Subaru sank down, and Emilia apologized to Crusch, who was quietly observing their amiable exchange.

[Crusch: No, the relationship between you two seem wonderful. I must quickly work to return to the way I was with Ferris and Wilhelm]

[Ferris: Ferris will always be open to Crusch-sama in both body and soul nyan!]

Ferris, covering his cheeks with both hands, swerved left and right. While Ferris was swerving like an octopus behind her, Crusch seemed to accept it as it is, with a warm, even feminine, smile emerging on her face.

[Crusch: We will meet again very soon, I think, Emilia-sama and Subaru-sama. I wish we would forever be friends]

That was not a lie, it must have been her true thoughts… Subaru thought this.

Despite losing her memory, she did not lose the nobility of her heart. Honesty illuminates her conduct, false flattery and lies are not compatible with that.

Perhaps because that came through so clearly, Emilia's eyes opened wide with surprise, her lips trembling faintly.

[Emilia: I am… For Crusch-sama, I am an opposing Candidate. The Alliance… one day it will return to competition between us]

[Crusch: En, that is true. With Emilia-sama as an opponent, I will take care not to fall behind, so I will do my best as well]

[Emilia: And even without that, I am a Half-Elf. With silver hair… Doesn't it scare you?]

[Subaru: Emilia-tan that's…]

She didn't need to ask that, Subaru thought, trying to stop her. Seeing the desperate determination on the side of Emilia's face, he knew this conversation mustn't continue.

Emilia was serious, in asking that question. The emotional part of her knows she should never bring up her identity lightly.

Above all, to bring it up in front of Crusch Karsten. Subaru knew, to let this continue would be…

[Crusch: The soul determines the value of its own existence. For myself, and for others as well, to live with the Soul's fullest radiance, unashamed, is the way we should live]

[Emilia: —-]

[Crusch: Somehow it feels like I've said that many times before. How should I say it…. Now that I've listened to myself, that was pretty sophisticated, wasn't it?]

Crusch covered her mouth and couldn't hold in her laugh. Hearing this, Emilia stood dumbfounded, and did not say a word.

[Crusch: Emilia-sama, are you ashamed of the way you carry out your life?]

[Emilia: …I'm, not. Even if everyone around me thinks so, as long as I am not hated by myself, I can carry on and live this way]

[Crusch: If so, then don't regret anything. Improve yourself, try your hardest, and stay true to the self you deserve. —You have a beautiful Soul]

Smiling, Crusch extended the hand in front of her chest toward Emilia.

[Crusch: To get to know you, I am happy. Fear? Not a single bit]

Biting her lips, Emilia carved those words into her memory, her chest hurting with emotion. She gazed at the outstretched hand. Crusch patiently waited for her. Then, Emilia's fingers met the palm of Crusch's hand, and they exchanged a handshake softly.

[Crusch: No matter what, I expect we will meet again soon]

[Emilia: M-me…… no. Me too, this time I should stand tall in front of Crusch-sama, shouldn't I? Until then, I wish you the best of health]

This way, the two fellow Candidates of the Royal Selection, their promise to each do their best, was sealed.

Looking on from the side, Subaru's heart swelled with the sense of accomplishment. That was one of the goals of Subaru's struggle after struggle… Even though in the end it's impossible for everything to be perfect…

[Subaru: ….after everything we accomplished… why do I still have this sad expression on my face? I don't want to blame it on you… I don't……]

Glancing toward the dragon carriage, appearing in Subaru's eyes was the girl sleeping inside.

In such a happy occasion, Rem would not forgive me like this… Rem wouldn't want to… I'm so selfish aren't I?

[Crusch: Natsuki Subaru-sama, please take care. I will look forward to your future activity… and her recovery]

[Subaru: Much more activity from me… I don't think that's a good idea… To be honest, I'm the kind of guy that runs around trying to do everything as the last resort and still ends up being completely useless. About Rem… Miss Crusch is not an outsider. No matter what, she will recover. I promise, she will]

Crusch extended her hand to Subaru. But to shake hands in this state, isn't that way too embarrassing? To cover up his embarrassment, Subaru gave her a high five.

A small sound rang out, and the brief contact between Subaru and Crusch's hands ended. Her hand bouncing off, Crusch's eyes blinked ever so slightly.

[Crusch: We will certainly meet again]

With these words, the master and servant bowed, seeing Subaru and Emilia off.

On the road home, a strange, stifling gloom descended on the dragon carriage.

The carriage itself, Crusch had gifted to Subaru along with Patrasche, as another sign of gratitude. Even without the ornamentation, it was clear that it was an expensive piece of craftsmanship. But from the softness of the seats to the glamour of the interior, everything felt a bit excessive.

The spacious interior could fit ten people and still have room left over, so it's no wonder they didn't know what to do with themselves, with only three passengers riding inside.

In the carriage, Emilia, Subaru and Rem kept the silence. Rem was, of course, sleeping. Sitting next to her, Subaru was waiting, without even the thought of moving from his place. Perhaps out of consideration for the unconscious Rem, Emilia held back her words.

[Subaru: ……m]

This is bad, Subaru thought, crossing his arms. Though it'd be outrageous to have a lighthearted conversation under these circumstances, there is so much they need to talk about. They have to decide on their stance regarding the Royal Selection, they need to get up to date on the Alliance with Crusch's faction, and they still haven't even talked about what happened over the past few days.

Then there was Rem. How would she be taken care of at the mansion if no one but Subaru remembers her? Even though it's inevitable, just the thought of what Ram might say, when she sees the unconscious Rem, sends shivers down his spine.

[Emilia: I know you're worried, but right now I feel the atmosphere might have been better if the kids were riding with us…]

Of course, the children were also in the entourage heading back to Roswaal's domain. But they are riding with their parents right now. If they asked about Rem, it would be difficult to explain, and what if the villagers think it's a disease… Unfortunately, the result is the current silence.

What to do now. — It is unusual for Subaru to feel so restrained, he looked up at the ceiling thinking.

[I don't know what, but can't you two think of something to talk about!? Aaaah, I can't take this awkward silence anymore!!]

[Subaru: What are you saying!? Sneaking in out of the blue!? Wait, were you there all along?]

[Otto: That's rude! Of course I was here! Do you even remember the conditions under which I agreed to help you out!?]

Otto said in an over-exaggerated way, sticking his head into the carriage from the opening in front, sending a bit of spittle flying along with his voice. Otto was the one driving the carriage, sitting outside in the driver's seat. He stuck his head through the hole connecting to the carriage's interior just to comment on the quietness inside the carriage.

At Otto's objections, Subaru tilted his head and nodded while muttering [Ah, ah]

[Subaru: I remember, I remember. Right, I remember you asked me to help you meet Roswaal, right? … Ah, but, what can I say…]

[Otto: What is it!?]

[Subaru: Well if you're just chasing after guys it's one thing, but when the guy is Roswaal… I'm straight by the way, and I already have Emilia, so please don't come after me]

[Otto: That's not why I want to talk to him at all! What do you think I am!?]

[Subaru: A trader looking for some excitement?]

[Otto: Why do you treat me like a pervert!?]

Looking at Otto as if pitying him from the bottom of his heart, Subaru shook his head sadly from side to side. Emilia, who had been quietly observing their conversation, suddenly opened her eyes wide and said with a surprised expression

[Emilia: You two… are really good friends, aren't you? I'm surprised!!]

[Subaru: Oy, oy Emilia-tan. Please stop it with the jokes. Putting me in the same basket as this money-grubbing merchant… The only thing I'm greedy for is your love!]

[Otto: You're greedy too then!! Ah, wait, I'm not greedy to begin with!]

[Subaru: Otto, shut up]

Sighing at the travelling merchant, Subaru got up and took hold of the flap to close the window to the driver's seat.

[Otto: Ah, wait, don't just treat me like I'm in the way!]

[Subaru: Ok, shutting you out!]

Pulling the flap shut with a clap, the face of the man who had been trying until the very end to say something finally disappeared. Joining his fingers and stretching his arms like someone who had just completed a rough task, Subaru turned around to see Emilia blankly looking up at him.

[Subaru: …Puh]

[Emilia: Hihahaha!]

Looking at each others faces, they suddenly burst out laughing.

For a while they let themselves be taken along by their laughter, but after a little while, their laughter started to wane, until silence once again descended upon the carriage.

At that moment,

[Subaru: Letting this heavy atmosphere be, really isn't like me, is it?]

[Emilia: You're right, it's not like you at all. The Subaru I know is a much more spirited, unreasonable, lively person. So much so that no matter what I'm feeling at the moment, he completely blows all my bad feelings away]

[Subaru: I feel like that could also be translated into an airhead who can't read the mood…]

In any case, Otto being there had actually cleared up the mood tremendously. Thanking Otto for this would probably make him angry, but nevertheless, Subaru thanked him in his mind while getting up and sitting down next to Emilia as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Seeing this put a wry smile on Emilia's face.

[Emilia: You always just naturally sit next to me huh, Subaru?]

[Subaru: Well, it's natural for someone to want to sit next to the girl they like, so I want to sit as close as I can, and breathe the same air as you]

[Emilia: Geez, the first half of that sentence was embarrassing, and yet somehow the second half of that sentence gave off a really bad feeling]

Being hit straight with an earnest confession of love made Emilia's face turn red, but the pervertedness of the second half made her scowl. Leaning his head toward her at her reaction, Subaru said

[Subaru: Hmm, I was just trying to act like I always do, you know]

[Emilia: Come to think of it, I guess you've always been like this. It's because you're like this, that I'm never able to just take in what you're saying…]

As Emilia looked at him, her voice turned into a quiet mumble, then faded completely. Subaru scratched his head, considering whether or not he should pick up the conversation…

[Subaru: Guys just can't mentally handle being straightforward, and not pretending to be kidding around when it comes to this sort of thing. Me loving Emilia-tan, me looking at Emilia-tan in a

perverted way, and me wanting to help Emilia-tan are all my true, honest feelings. You can believe that you know?]

[Emilia: I believe it, but believing and accepting are two different things…]

[Subaru: That's fine with me, believe me, and I'll work hard until you accept my feelings]

Thinking about it again, that was a pretty aggressive proclamation. In fact, hearing that from Subaru, Emilia's face was blushing.

Fighting hard to remain unflustered, her cheeks and ears already turned so red that her expression couldn't keep up. She must never have had anyone confess their unconditional fondness for her before. Of course Subaru, the one trying to hit on her, didn't have any experience either, so his face was also completely red.

Even so,

[Subaru: Rather than walking on with a downcast expression, this is more like me. Right, Rem?]

[Emilia: …just now, did you say something?]

[Subaru: I was just thinking how nice it would be to lift up your hair so I could stare at your neck pervertedly]

[Emilia: Right there, you are trying to distract me again… You care a lot about Rem-san, don't you?]

Subaru still trying to wisecrack his way out, Emilia's incisive words blocked his escape. Accepting defeat, Subaru smiled bitterly, and turned toward Rem, still sleeping on the bed.

[Subaru: I do, yes. Immensely… I care about her. I'm always thinking I must do something, and I think, and I want to keep on thinking. Even though I wanted Emilia-tan to be the first in my thoughts, this can't be ranked… I'm sorry]

[Emilia: I'm not a bad child that will get angry and throw a tantrum. I won't get angry about something so important… I can tell just by looking, she is very important to Subaru]

Like Subaru, Emilia turned her narrowed gaze to Rem in her sleep. Her lips trembled. Then after a short moment of hesitation, she asked

[Emilia: You… like her. Don't you?]

[Subaru: I like her. I love her. I love her as much as I love you]

[Emilia: I don't know how I feel about this, but… Subaru, are you the kind of guy that flirts around?]

[Subaru: I thought I was supposed to be a pretty faithful guy, but having someone be so devoted to you is… a guy whose heart isn't moved by that, I don't think he could have a drop of blood or tear in him]

Thinking back to the loops over the past few days, he remembered, how many times he had received Rem's unconditional love. Receiving it all, how could his heart not move? By the time he noticed, her existence inside his heart had already grown far too large to ignore.

[Emilia: Even though you told me that you love me]

[Subaru: Just to make it clear, I love Rem a lot, but Rem still loves me WAY more, you know? She's completely fallen head over heels for me, and I seriously can't understand why]

Hugging his shoulders, he wondered how she could love him so selflessly. To be loved this much by a girl like Rem, was he really worth it?

He still couldn't help but wonder why. But even so… as the man she fell for, the very least he could do, is to try to live up to what she sees in him.

Seeing Subaru's downcast self appraisal, Emilia's lips relaxed.

[Emilia: I think I understand her]

[Subaru: Huh?]

[Emilia: The reason Rem-san came to reeally love you. I'm sure it's because she got to see Subaru's good side up close, a lot. You're kind of like a disease that sometimes becomes really incredible, and does some reeally incredible things]

[Subaru: A disease? I… can't actually deny that]

Subaru scratched his cheek and pouted, showing his dissatisfaction. Emilia, unaffected, held her stern expression as if to say "it's true you know", then, closing her eyes

[Emilia: I won't fall for you that easily you know]

[Subaru: That makes the effort all the more worth it! One day, I will make Emilia-tan go all gooey and fall for me, wake Rem from her sleep, and settle this in a nice way. Aaaah, I'm smiling just thinking about it!]

To have Emilia and Rem each pull on one of his hands, fighting over his one and only body. That would be a such a blissful, incredible sight.

Which is why definitely, definitely one day—

[Subaru: I'll have you two pull me until I split into a thousand pieces!]

[Emilia: I have no idea what you're thinking, but I feel like I have to say this: I'm not going to do anything like that!]

After that conversation, the discussion inside the carriage went on smoothly.

After all, they've been waiting for the larger half of a day to talk. And since there was a lot they had to talk about, they had only just enough time to do it.

Sharing everything about the past few days with Emilia, eventually Otto joined their conversation as well, and even took part in their planning for the future.

To sum it up,

[Subaru: Basically, if we don't meet with Roswaal then we can't plan anything, right?]

After all that, the conclusion was the same as the starting point of the conversation.

Roswaal is the only person who understands the full capabilities and powers of Emilia's Faction, so nothing can proceed without him.

[Subaru: Well, if Ram, who went to the Sanctuary, met Roswaal, we could naturally get him to return to the Mansion. But I'd slap him in the face first, before we have a good talk with him]

[Otto: You're very aggressive toward your employer, huh, Natsuki-san?]

[Subaru: I think I have a right to do that after all he did! He'd deserve every bit of it!]

Thinking back on the mess Roswaal left for Subaru to clean up, this is more or less an appropriate response. In fact, Emilia didn't seem to have any intention of stopping Subaru, as if permitting him to do it "just this one time".

As their discussion was summed up and their topic turned toward matters of the Roswaal domain, their dragon carriage left the forests and entered the village

—they instantly realized something was wrong.

The village that Subaru had gotten so used to seeing, seemed just as desolate and dreary as right after the battle with Betelgeuse. There was not even any sign of the soldiers of the Expedition that stayed behind.

To put it simply, it seems none of the villagers had returned.

[Otto: I don't see anyone, Natsuki-san. It doesn't look like the area was devastated or anything, it just looks like nobody is here]

Getting off the dragon carriage, Otto voiced his thoughts as he looked around the village with several of the returning villagers. Even Subaru, who looked with a different group, came to the same conclusion.

In the somber silence, memories of past loops — where the villagers were slaughtered, massacred by Betelgeuse' fingers, all of a sudden struck Subaru like a nightmare returning. But he was certain that he was just overthinking it.

But then, that raises another question

[Subaru: Ram said from here to the Sanctuary is only about 7 to 8 hours… but then why are they later than us, if we stayed in the Capital for three days?]

[Otto: They might not know that we took down the Witch Cult, so maybe they're being cautious?]

[Subaru: Roswaal abandoning his lands? I assume if Roswaal fought "Sloth" face-to-face, Roswaal would probably win. Even if it isn't "Sloth"s style to fight in the open, Roswaal should have at least come here to scout]

Roswaal, who can even fly, could easily return to his territory. If he intended to, he could scout the perimeters of the Mansion for any remaining threats, and ensure the land was safe to return to. But he didn't.

[Subaru: Either he's being overly cautious or…]

[Emilia: Something's happened in the Sanctuary?]

Both Subaru and Emilia's opinions matched. Looking at each other, they shared a nod.

No matter what, they have to find out what the situation at the Sanctuary is.

Besides their concerns, the villagers had worries of their own.

After all, about 60% of the villagers had headed for the Sanctuary. Those that returned from the Capital: the children who resolved to accompany Emilia, their parents, and the young men's militia that went with them, only comprised about 40% of the villagers. Without the rest, the functioning of the village is severely affected.

Besides, the people's minds tend to always turn to the worst.

[Subaru: Anyway, we have to do something… For now, let's head back to the Mansion. I want to settle Rem down as well. Plus, Otto, you don't have anywhere to stay, so come to the Mansion with us]

[Otto: What!? To trouble the ma-Margrave for lodging!? If I have to be in such a heck of a situation, I would rather sleep in the dragon carriage!]

[Subaru: Shut up, you're already involved. Better get used to it because I'll use you until you die off!]

Ignoring Otto's objections, Subaru said goodbye to the villagers and told Patrasche to head for the Mansion.

In a distance of 15 minutes on foot, and 5 minutes by carriage, lies the nostalgic Mansion of Roswaal.

Last time, he didn't have the chance to appreciate the sight, so when he looked up at it again, this time, there was something emotional about it all.

[Subaru: Well, nothing seems to have changed. …Ram and the others don't seem to have returned, either]

[Emilia: But, Beatrice must still be inside. I hope she knows where the Sanctuary is]

[Subaru: Wha- really? Crap… I thought Emilia-tan would know where the Sanctuary is. Then how do we confirm if Roswaal's alright?]

The fundamental objective of their plan collapsing, Subaru furrowed his brows at the looming darkness ahead.

Emilia's beautiful face also showed the colors of grief. Otto, unable to join in the conversation, only looked up, enchanted by the great Mansion and its surroundings, as if driving through a dream.

[Subaru: Tch. Crap. Well, we just have to hope Beatrice knows something about it]

[Otto: Hey, why were you clicking your tongue while staring right at me?]

[Subaru: Tch. It's your self-consciousness. No one cares about you as much as you think]

[Otto: Wow that's a terrible comment!]

Ignoring the partially depressed Otto, Subaru parked the dragon carriage in the front yard, and headed straight to the entrance.

First, get Beatrice, then, scout the Mansion, then, secure a bed for Rem, then think of future plans again—

[Subaru: I'm back, Roswaal's Mansion! Here comes my nostalgic h…]

Saying that, pushing open the grand door, Subaru's voice clogged up.
Because what greeted him was a completely different sight than what he expected.

The entrance hall was spread with gorgeous carpets, in the corners of the stairs leading to the upper floors were expensive looking vases filled with colorful flowers.
From the ceiling, hung beautiful crystal lamps that could be the chandeliers of this Parallel World.

The familiar entrance hall… was very much different from what he expected.
Instead of what he expected—

[Subaru: It's not even vandalized…… it's actually arranged!?]

The mats were straightened nicely without a single crease, and the flowers in the vases in the corners of the stairs were blooming vibrantly, the chandeliers were delicately taken care of and were shining graciously, even more than usual.

Stunned by this surreal scene, Subaru lost his words and stood still.

Because of his amazement, his reactions were all too slow.

[Subaru: —Who is it!?]

A small, weak, almost inaudible sound. Subaru frantically shot his glance toward its direction.

But, when he noticed the Shadow, it was already too late.

The Shadow had already ran up behind him and then—

Subaru saw it. From behind him, as if eclipsing the moon, the shadow engulfed him whole.

In that shadow… a mouth filled with white fangs, as if of a beast, were clear in the back of his eyes.

—And in the next moment, before he could even realize… Subaru's consciousness, and his world, had been dragged to darkness.

Chapter 2 [Insults and Gratitude]

—Oy, Subaru, dying here would be pretty miserable.

Still muddled, lying there shaking his head, Subaru lifted himself up and looked around.

He was usually good at waking up, but the reason he couldn't get his thoughts together was simply because he wasn't exactly "sleeping". He tried hard to remember what had happened before he lost consciousness, but the first thing that occurred to him was that he was in a very familiar room.

[Subaru: This is the Mansion's living room… isn't it?]

[Oh, Subaru, you're awake?]

A voice mumbled as if trying to make sure, then the door opened and Emilia's face poked through.

Her silver hair in a braid, she had a slightly bright expression on her face as she walked over to Subaru on the couch, and bending over, she met his gaze.
Being stared at so intently by her wide, round eyes, Subaru shrank down a little.

[Subaru: Uhm, Emilia-tan, what happened?]

[Emilia: As soon as you entered the mansion we heard you scream. Otto and I were really shocked. Then when we ran inside to see…]

[Subaru: I, was sleeping?]

[Emilia: Saying it like that is a little deceiving……but it's not technically wrong, I suppose?]

Emilia put a finger to her lips, and tilted her head slightly to the side. There was no sense of urgency in her reply.

Scrambling when he just woke up, now seeing her in this relaxed manner, Subaru realized there was no emergency. Yet even so, he couldn't shake the feeling that something was out of the ordinary.

He was certain that just before he lost consciousness, some kind of animal with sharp fangs had——

[Miss Emilia, might I have a moment?]

There was a knock on the door from the outside, followed by the sound of a woman's voice calling out to Emilia. Looking in the direction of the voice, she gave her assent with a small [Sure], and the door opened slowly.

Looking at the door casually opening, Subaru couldn't help but feel mystified.

—I don't recall ever hearing that voice before.

His doubt was soon confirmed when he saw what stood just outside the doorway.

[I brought drinks and additional hand towels —Oh, I see you are awake already]

The form of the smiling woman imprinted itself into Subaru's eyes.

It was a woman with long, almost translucent blonde hair, the lines of her back were in perfect posture. Her appearance and behavior was in every way refined, and in her fluid motions there was not a hint of unnecessary movement.

She was wearing the same familiar outfit as other servants of the Roswaal Mansion —the cute and practical maid's uniform, with not so much as a crease or wrinkle visible.

The plate in her hands held a water pitcher and hand towels, which she placed softly down on the stand in the center of the room without making a sound. —If she were being scored, she would have passed with flying colors…

…that is, only if you overlooked her ferocious-looking physique and her fiendish smile.

The uniform may be worn perfectly, but the one wearing it was slightly taller than Subaru, with an athletic build similar to his. If she were a he, it would have seemed healthy and strong, but when it was on a female, everything instantly crumbled.

What's more, the smile at the end of her perfectly fluid motion —was completely ruined by the set of sharp fangs peeking out through the corner of her mouth. Looking even closer, there was something unnatural about the sharpness of her gaze, and her greens pupils seemed to give off a glinting light, like a carnivorous, feline beast eyeing its prey.

[Frederica: It is a pleasure to meet you. I am a servant of the household of Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers, Frederica Baumann…］

[Subaru: Scary face—!?]

Her respectful introduction was interrupted by the overly candor words that slipped out of Subaru's mouth. Upon hearing this, the woman's expression congealed, and after her fiendish eyes blinked several times ——tears began to form.

[Frederica: …sniffle, sniffle…]

[Subaru: Wha…?]

[Emilia: Subaru you dunce!!]

Without a word, the woman turned her face away, and even Subaru was shocked. Right after, he was assaulted by both an angry voice, and the painful sensation of having his ear pulled. [Ow, ow!] Letting out a cry and turning to look, he saw Emilia with her usually gentle brows furrowed angrily.

[Emilia: That's a terrible thing to say to a girl! Frederica did so much to take care of you and you…]

[Frederica: I-I ask that you might let it go, Miss Emilia. It is quite alright. I was…I was the one in the wrong after all. I was so happy to have been called back to the mansion, I got too over-excited…and forgot that my looks are usually unpleasant for many…]

Pulling on the hem of Emilia's sleeve, she— the woman called Frederica was shaking her head. With her other hand she was covering her mouth.

[Frederica: I apologize for startling you so. More than that, I did something very inappropriate a short while ago. I never thought I would mistake Natsuki Subaru-sama for an intruder]

[Subaru: Intruder….ah, wait a minute. I think I understand what happened now]

Released from Emilia's chastisement for the moment, Subaru massaged his ear while taking in her words. In fact, he kind of realized the gist of what happened.

Basically, the mysterious figure he ran into right after entering the mansion was—

[Subaru: When I returned to the mansion, Frederica-san thought I was an intruder, and so tried to take me out. Then, Emilia-tan came in after me, and cleared up the misunderstanding, and that brings us to now…right?]

[Frederica: That's exactly right…you really can process things quickly I see]

[Subaru: There are things I can't read from just the situation though…no, before that]

Frederica's agreement confirming his thoughts, Subaru then turned his gaze to Emilia who was now standing behind Frederica, nudging her chin to point in Frederica's direction. He was painfully aware of the meaning behind Emilia's action. So Subaru stood up from the couch, and facing Frederica, said

[Subaru: Nice to meet you, I am very sorry for saying something so uncalled for all of a sudden. I know I can't make excuses like having just woken up, or that I was just joking around and expect to be forgiven. You can decide whether to boil or fry me…though I would be really thankful if there wasn't much pain involved]

To say he was acting like a man, it was more like Subaru dipped his head while saying this somewhat limp apology.

They definitely started off on the wrong foot, but unlike her, who had only attacked a suspicious intruder, Subaru's words were just completely rude. So, just as he said, if it would clear up her anger, Subaru would willingly accept any kind of punishment.

Preferably without physical pain, and his hopes were rather leaning towards emotional abuse instead…

That much was the commitment of the man Subaru's rather effeminate apology.

[Frederica: —-Haha, you really are a funny guy]

With those words, her smile hiding behind the hand covering her mouth, Frederica blew it all away.

At the question mark floating above Subaru's head, Frederica bowed, the translucent, golden hair flowing around her face.

[Frederica: I should really be the one apologizing. On Miss Emilia's request, I have been testing you]

[Subaru: Testing?]

At Frederica's words, both Subaru and Emilia tilted their heads. They had no idea what she was talking about.

It'd be fine if Subaru was confused, but if he were to believe her words, then it would be strange to see Emilia showing the same air of confusion as well. Looking at their synchronous response, Frederica's smile deepened.

[Frederica: Even though I may have been acting according to my sense of duty to protect the mansion, what I did to Subaru-sama was still rude. I was prepared, or rather left with no other choice, but to be relieved of my position after such an act]

[Subaru: No, I think you jumped to that conclusion way too soon. I'm a guy who will understand if we talk things out, right?]

[Frederica: Then, Miss Emilia asserted herself ever so firmly. She really tried so hard, I thought for sure even my face would turn red from the flowery things she was saying about Subaru…]

[Subaru: Wha!?]

Shocked by what she had just said, Subaru let out a strangled cry, looking towards Emilia. While Emilia was standing there trying so hard to hide her own deep scarlet countenance.

[Emilia: Fre–de–ri–ca–!]

Hands on her hips, Emilia uncharacteristically let out a hysterical voice, glaring sharply at the maid. On the receiving end of all that, Frederica calmly retorted

[Frederica: Oh my, so scary… I see Miss Emilia hasn't changed, still not cute at all. Normally, whether what I said was true or not, turning red and getting flustered would have been the prettiest response]

[Emilia: Eh, really…? Wait, I'm not going to get tricked today. Even someone like me, always getting tricked, would learn to know better! That's right, I know when you're lying, one of your eyes goes lazy!]

[Frederica: I had no idea that was the case. By the way Miss Emilia, did you know that whenever you lie, your ears get a little longer?]

[Emilia: No way!?]

Emilia's expression of victory, an arm outstretched and a finger pointing towards Frederica, was interrupted when she darted her hands back to grab both her ears. Getting this response, at that point Frederica's victory was complete.

Still flustered, Emilia seemed not to have realized she lost, but Subaru, who had been watching her intently, let out a sigh and shrugged his shoulders.

[Subaru: Seems like I've been completely defeated… My name is Natsuki Subaru and… do I even need to do an introduction?]

[Frederica: Yes, of course. I would love to hear it. Let's start over and get to know each other properly this time]

With those words, Frederica removed the hand covering her mouth, revealing a smile lined with pointed fangs. This time, seeing her weaponized-smile, all the wind left Subaru's lungs.

[Subaru: Come to think of it, I think I heard of you… a maid who quit a little while ago before I arrived here, right? I came to the mansion about a month ago… so it's been three months since you left?]

[Frederica: That seems to be right. I had resigned my position due to personal reasons, and I still remember how painfully lonely it felt, leaving here. … But it seems that I was able to return much sooner than I expected]

Covering her mouth with her sleeve, Frederica smiled. As long as she covers her mouth, her beautiful golden hair and her cold, barely passable gaze, would combine into something even resembling feminine beauty. But her mischievous personality and her mouth-full of fangs tend to negate that no matter what.

In the living room of the Roswaal Mansion, Subaru and Frederica have just exchanged some basic information beyond their names. Listening to her self-introduction again, he seemed to recall having heard that name before.

[Subaru: Three months ago, so that means you're acquainted with Emilia-tan, right?]

[Emilia: Hrmph! That would be correct, yes]

[Subaru: Who says 'Hrmph' these days? Also sulking like that is so outdated it's cute, geez]

To Subaru's question and gaze, Emilia sat down onto the couch, averting her eyes as if refraining from joining the conversation, though she was obviously still listening intently. She had been acting like this ever since she realized, too late, how Frederica had tricked her. But that aside,

[Subaru: It's only been two or three days since you returned, right? We left from the village three days ago……four if you count the traveling time. It seems to be quite a coincidence]

[Frederica: I was surprised too when I returned to the mansion to find it empty. Luckily, there was a letter explaining things in the master's study, so I avoided the worst of the confusion]

[Subar: A letter?]

[Frederica: Yes, from Ram. She was the one who called me back to the mansion, though she was rather haphazard in her communication…. I know it's indulging her too much to pass it off as her personality, but that's how I feel]

Through Frederica's half-awkward smile, Subaru saw the time-worn bond she and Ram must have shared, and all the wonderful days they have passed together. At the same time, erased from her memories, her time spent with Rem must have been just as long.

[Subaru: Could you tell me why Ram called you back?]

[Frederica: I don't completely understand the reason myself. But Miss Emilia was here at the time, I am sure she would know]

At once, both their gazes poured onto Emilia inquisitively. Even now, Emilia continued to maintain her "I'm still really, really angry," attitude, turning her face away. But, as she slowly became unable to resist the attention focused on her, she tried to steal a quick glance in their direction. Only, it ended up being a rather obvious glance.

[Subaru: Emilia-tan, cheer up… or, actually, I'm not the one who upset you this time. Frederica, apologize properly would you?]

[Frederica: I ask for your forgiveness, Miss Emilia. What I did a moment ago was not nice and I apologize. I was so happy we could meet again after so long, my bad side just, slipped out]

[Emilia: …You won't tease me like that anymore?]

[Frederica: No, I will refrain from doing so. For all the world I will never again tease Miss Emilia in that manner again]

Subaru couldn't quite get rid of the feeling that the wording of Frederica's apology left some room for interpretation. However, our Goddess Emilia seemed to believe in those words without a second thought, and her up-to-now sulking expression relaxed into one that seemed to say, "I suppose it can't be helped".

[Emilia: I understand. I'm not angry anymore. Is that good enough?]

[Frederica: Yes, I am very sorry for before, Miss Emilia. ——Too easy.]

Somehow, only Subaru heard that last part. He jerked his head to look at Frederica, but she was playing dumb. Emilia, who had no idea she was being considered "too easy," placed a finger to her cheek and said,

[Emilia: So, let's see. The reason Frederica was called back to the mansion… umm]

[Subaru: Yeah, yeah. Rushing to call back someone you fired would mean there's some kind of emergency…actually, I think I might have an idea]

There was indeed an emergency, it was only a few days ago that the Mansion and Arlam village were targeted by the Witch Cult. Considering her skill, which had been able to knock Subaru unconscious in an instant, Frederica must be another shady maid of the Roswaal Mansion with some crazy combat abilities. In short, Ram must have called her back to buff the mansion's defenses during their state of—

[Emilia: It was because Ram's aptitude for housework is catastrophic, and the mansion ended up in an unimaginable state of disarray. It was only a few days, but it kept getting harder and harder to live in]

[Subaru: That's actually a very compelling reason!! She really is all talk and no… wait, Ram knows she's hopeless, she even said so herself! She's right about that at least, but then she should have put in some effort to improve!! Right!?]

Subaru's chest felt like it would explode from how compelling that reality was compared to his over-guessing of the situation.

Emilia let out a wry smile at his outburst, and shifted her gaze to the living room— or rather, to the entirety of the mansion, as though she could see through its very walls.

[Emilia: But, since Frederica returned, the mansion really has become quite tidy. I think Ram made the right decision in leaving it to someone capable, rather than make things worse by ignoring it]

[Subaru: Emilia-tan, I don't think you meant it, but that statement's like a slap to the face! And, well, I still don't think that's a good enough reason for her to give up so easily]

[Frederica: Putting Ram's assessment aside for the moment, it has been such a long time since I have been given the opportunity to do some really worthwhile work. Luckily, since no one was around, I was able to spend the time on further cleaning the mansion]

Listening to Frederica speak of diligently holding up this household, Subaru held his breath, unable to ignore the pain wrenching in his heart.

For this, was the forces of the world compensating for the eradication of Rem's existence by the Authority of "Gluttony".

[Subaru: I guess since Ram can't run the mansion by herself, the obvious solution was to rely on someone else…]

So Ram had contacted Frederica, who had resigned, asking her to return to the mansion. Without Rem, the Roswaal estate couldn't continue to function, and so, Rem's replacement, Frederica, had arrived.

Yet, the only one in the world who knows of this sad truth is Subaru. Ram had only done as necessity demanded, without stopping to think about why she needed Frederica's help all of a

sudden, or just how she had managed to take care of the estate until then. That was all there was to it.

But,

[Subaru: Sorry for being serious all of a sudden but… is it a requirement for all the maids of Roswaal's Mansion to be so quirky?]

[Frederica: ……? Considering who our master is, what's the point of even asking that question?]

[Subaru: That's annoyingly persuasive!]

At this point, all of Subaru's doubts have been answered. Seeing his response, Frederica nodded her head contentedly, and resuming her perfect posture, stared fixedly at Subaru. Then, casually, in a lowered voice,

[Frederica: By the way, the driver of the dragon carriage outside the mansion has been left out there for over an hour now……is that alright?]

[Subaru: Hmm? Oh, you mean Otto. I see, it's already been an hour…… Well, I don't think it's that big of an issue. I want to hurry and let Patrasche rest in the stable, but you don't need to pay attention to that Otto guy too much…]

[Otto: For a companion who shared a near-death experience together, that is really quite heartless, Natsuki-san! I never thought I was lower in priority than a ground dragon!]

Right on cue, Otto dramatically opened the doors to the living room. His shoulders hunched up angrily, he was glaring at Subaru while disapprovingly breathing through his nostrils. At his entrance, Subaru slowly stood up, shook his head, and sighed.

[Subaru: No, Otto, you're mistaken]

[Otto: How am I mistaken? It's too late to take back your words from a moment ago……]

[Subaru: It's not that you're lower in priority than a ground dragon. It's that you are much, much lower in priority than a ground dragon]

[Otto: That's twice over! That's even worse!]

Content with Otto's response and foot-stomping, Subaru turned his gaze toward the window. That is, toward the front yard where the dragon carriage pulled by Patrasche was parked.

Otto followed his gaze, and seemed to understand its meaning. With a still somewhat bitter face, he spoke,

[Otto: I've already put Patrasche in the stables. She is a proud and difficult child, but she didn't want to cause Natsuki-san any trouble, so she was quite docile]

[Subaru: Hearing that from you, it makes me doubt your Divine Protection of "Animal Whispering". If she were a woman, Patrasche would have been a total kuudere, even though she'd be soft on the inside. When did this change happen??]

[Otto: How would I know that kind of thing. More importantly……]

As Subaru was still struggling to understand just what made Patrasche so devoted to him, Otto moved the conversation to the other matter regarding the dragon carriage, that is—-

[Otto: What should be done about the girl sleeping in the carriage? I think it's rather pitiful to leave her shut up in there. If you are busy I could carry her to a room……]

[Subaru: —Don't you lay a finger on Rem]

There was not a hint of malice in Otto's proposal. But his own voice was ice cold… Subaru himself was surprised by the razor sharpness of it, when he saw Otto flinch.

It was almost a whisper, the words were low and dark, a reflection of the viscous heaviness of his mind. It was good that this did not reach the ears of the girls, but still, Subaru was deeply disturbed by the abnormality of the sound that had escaped his throat.

[Subaru: ……I'll bring her in, so you don't have to do anything. Your back would be screaming if you had to carry around a girl anyway]

[Otto: You know, merchants are always handling heavier goods during their work. We aren't as weak as you seem to think, Natsuki-san]

Subaru tried to cover up his last statement with a quip, and was thankful for Otto's conciliatory reply, which came after a moment of hesitation. He let out a sigh.

No matter what, his reaction was too extreme. Even though it wasn't intentional— Or rather, it was precisely because it was not intentional that it was a problem. His nerves had been on-end, and anyone who even tries to interfere with Rem, regardless of their intentions, seemed to him to be an enemy.

[Subaru: This is not a good pattern……Damn it, I feel so wretched. Why am I always so……]

He was supposed to have overcome this, yet here he was immediately stumbling over the first pebble he came across. Why does he never have the strength to stay standing tall?

If Rem was here, if Emilia was watching— if both of them were here now with him, surely he would have that unwavering strength.

[Subaru: I brought it upon myself….. No, I forced Rem to pay that price. What a deadbeat I am!]

There should have been a better, more perfect way.

He had believed that he did his uttermost, up to the end of the loop several days ago he deeply believed that. But there must have been an even better, seamless, perfect outcome somewhere. But Subaru had missed his chance to find it, in his complacency, in his cowardice, he compromised into an imperfect future. And Rem's sacrifice was the price.

If he had been more competent, he would have noticed it.

Before evacuating Emilia and Ram from the mansion, the handwritten letter he had given to Crusch's messenger had already turned blank. He had thought that a Witch Cultist accompanying the messenger had switched the letter in a ploy to sow confusion, but that is laughable.

There was no chance the Witch Cult could have been aware of their threat, and how could he have believed that the Witch Cult would use such a roundabout way to plant seeds of distrust between their two forces? More than that, if they went to all this trouble, compared to a blank letter would it not have been more effective to alter the contents?

Then why, why was the handwritten letter blank? If it was not the work of the Witch Cult, then there could only be one answer.

[Subaru: Rem wrote the letter. I was the one who asked it to be delivered, and Crusch was the one who gave it to the messenger, so the reality of it being handed over remained, and only the contents were erased]

That is the Authority of "Gluttony", and the fate of those whose name and memories were eaten. An existence erased from the world, leaving only a complex web of incongruities behind. If you weren't aware of it, you'd never feel the unease, you'd never even realize anything had been missing.

If that was the case, for who, or for what, would have been the purpose of that existence—-.

Looking deeper into the fact that the letter was blank, properly investigating, fathoming, delving into the truth, perhaps he could have done it.

What Emilia had said then, come to think of it, the letter had arrived on the evening before the final day. At that moment, the contents of the letter were already gone, then Rem would have been attacked before that time. If so, then hardly any time had passed since Subaru and Rem had parted ways. The chances of being able to catch up were minuscule, but at least there was a chance.

Only, Subaru had let that chance slip by. Why it had slipped by, he could no longer tell. Had he really not felt anything was out of place?

Ram, with her sister-complex, Emilia, who was aware they had left Rem with him in the Capital, yet they had not mentioned Rem at all, so why—

[Subaru:—Ah]

He finally realized it.

At that moment, Subaru let out an idiotic cry and brought his hand to his forehead. With wobbly movements he slid over to the wall, and smashed his head as hard as he could against it.

Shock and pain. But once wasn't enough, again, again, and again he repeated.

[Emilia: Wh, Subaru!?]

At his inexplicable action, the three with him were shocked into speechlessness. But Emilia was first to return to her senses, and called out to him bewilderedly. She gripped his shoulder from behind, turning him around,

[Emilia: What's wrong all of a sudden? It's not like this is the first time you've done something strange, but this is… Oh—, look your forehead has gotten all red!]

[Subaru: The extent of my stupidity, from the bottom of my heart I am amazed, really]

Feeling the coolness of the tips of Emilia's fingers on his forehead, Subaru shook away his head in a trance of self-loathing. Like he said, he could not bear to look at this own foolishness.

Then, suddenly drawing close to Emilia, Subaru fixed his gaze into her's.

[Subaru: Emilia-tan, I have a favor to ask]

[Emilia: Wh, wha—? Hold on, Subaru, your face is close, and your eyes are scaring me……]

[Subaru: My helpless idiocy… could you please insult me a little?]

[Emilia: Huh?]

Startled, Emilia grew wide-eyed. Seeing rejection in her response, Subaru reached out to place both hands on her shoulders, holding her tightly preventing her from running away, and then brought his face in even closer.

[Subaru: Please. Don't forgive me, just insult me]

[Emilia: Th, that, I can't do that. I don't think you've done wrong or anything……]

[Subaru: JUST FIND A WAY!]

[Emilia: Even if you ask me that……]

[Subaru: Please! If you do this for me, I'll offer you my very soul……!]

[Emilia: Saying something this heavy is only making me more uncomfortable! Geez, I guess I really don't have a choice]

Emilia hesitated agonizingly against Subaru's desperate, perverse plea, but finally she nodded in resignation. She cleared her throat and looked up at Subaru.

[Emilia: Subaru you blockhead!]

[Subaru: Uuu—]

[Emilia: You naughty, hyperactive, stubborn, selfish, rascal, don't know when to give up, get way too cocky jerk!]

[Subaru: Gu..gu..gul…]

[Emilia: No one asked you, yet you only worry about other people, and don't know your limit. You're a softie who supports a hated half-elf. When I am rebuked and feeling depressed, you take my place, and behave rashly, get abused and do reckless things]

[Subaru: gu…..Eh?]

[Emilia: You listen but don't respond properly, a coward who flirts and then runs away. A fool who comes to help someone in trouble, even after they had a huge fight. When things just aren't working out, when you want something you say the right thing it's so unfair. Then, when it's all over, and everyone is running around taking care of the loose ends, you go to sleep by yourself and slack off. Subaru, you dullard!]

[Subaru: Dullard, now there's a word you don't hear much anymore……You know, Emilia-tan]

He had been expecting a rebuke, but the abuse he received was far from it. The words didn't scratch at his heart and leave ugly scars, instead they were deep and kind, and left their mark on his and Emilia's hearts alike.

At Subaru's call, Emilia kept her gaze pointed up at him, pursing her lips.

[Emilia: What]

[Subaru: How do I say this… is that how you feel about me?]

[Emilia: I know, it's like all my feelings just flew out. Then I sort of went with it and after a while I had no idea what I was saying. …Subaru, do you think that is how I really feel?]

[Subaru: I wonder. When you get caught up in the moment, are they your true feelings……I don't know if I could tell]

At the very least, Subaru had experience regretting things he said in the heat of the moment.

Were those long pent up feelings wanting to finally escape her heart, or just the thoughtless emotions of a moment blurted out all of a sudden?

He thought no one could ever answer that question.

[Subaru: Thank you, Emilia-tan]

[Emilia: All I did was say bad things about you. To get thanked for that……Subaru, you really are abnormal aren't you?]

[Subaru: 'Abnormal', but for Emilia-tan alone. If I hear it from you, then no matter if it's insult, abuse or a traffic safety poem, it will stir up my pleasure senses]

[Emilia: The last one I didn't understand, but it seems like something I reealy don't need to know so I'll forget I heard it. —So, are you satisfied now?]

She tried to respond while suppressing a giggle, but in the very end, her eyes looked tinged with sorrow.

It was unfair, the raw expression she showed him sometimes, and it was why he couldn't leave her be.

In answer to her gesture, Subaru smiled a broad smile that showed his teeth.

[Subaru: Yeah, I'm fine now. Actually, maybe I'm still not okay. But, if I were to get a kiss from Emilia-tan to break my curse, I should be able to find the courage I need, if only……]

[Emilia: That's too bad, because the request office has closed for the day]

[Subaru: Damnit! I screwed up! Why am I always……too late……ah!]

As if full of regret, Subaru fell to pieces. Seeing this, Emilia let out a wry smile. After spending some time looking wretched, Subaru finally stood up and looked around the room.

[Subaru: That said, I'm afraid there is some business I need to take care of. I feel bad for leaving everyone and Emilia-tan, but I need a little time. I don't think it will take too long but….What's with your face, Otto?]

[Otto: I feel like charging you for reparations after witnessing that ticklish scene, but I'll leave the negotiations on pricing for later…What were you doing!?]

Otto, forgotten until now, voiced his discontent, to which Subaru crossed his arms and cocked his head in contemplation. Come to think of it, Otto doesn't know about the last person in this mansion he has yet to become acquainted with.

If that's the case, to tell Otto where he was planning on going next, just what words would be proper.

After agonizing over the problem for just a bit, Subaru unfolded his arms and said,

[Subaru: Well, I'm going to go meet a loli with drill curls holed up in a room that smells like mold]

With that, he completely abandoned any responsibility to explain the situation, and left Otto to his state of confusion.

Chapter 3 [Reunion and Passing]

[Subaru: Wha—? This is odd!?]

Even though Subaru had heroically volunteered to find Beatrice and set out full of bravado… it's not going so well.

Usually, when Subaru wants to call Beatrice to come to dinner, all he has to do is to open the first door he sees and he'd find Beatrice and the Forbidden Library on the other side. One time, he even found her just by opening the door to the dining room.

Beatrice's magic, "Door Crossing" is a Spatial-Transition Dark-Type magic of a level far beyond Subaru's comprehension.

A little girl, and an expert user of Dark Magic, Beatrice uses the doors of the mansion to randomly obscure the Forbidden Library's entrance. Basically, there is only one right choice, and as if to toy with anyone who seeks to find it, the right choice would continually change without warning.

Somehow, Subaru easily breaks this with what he casually calls his "Door Breaking" ability, and it's unclear exactly why the one person who can always find the door in the first attempt just also happens to be someone who utterly can't read the mood.

[Subaru: To suddenly stop working at a time like this, it's a whole new level of disappointment, geez… After bragging like that to Emilia and Ram, if I still can't find you—— I don't think I can just play cute and charm my way out of it, so please come out, oy…]

He muttered while opening all the doors in the servant's quarter one by one, having already opened all the doors in the central building where he first started, he's wasted quite a lot of time. This is the first time he's had so much difficulty finding Beatrice, and even if he tries to make light of the situation, it still won't stop the sweat from forming on his brows.

……

No matter what, in an empty mansion opening every single door one after the other only to be disappointed again and again, all this must look pretty pitiful to a bystander.

[Subaru: Damnit, I can't find it! This is bad, I'm running out of time! Should I give up and run off leaving things like this!? My conscience hurts just at the thought of the way Emilia-tan was looking at me with all that faith in her eyes… but maybe I don't have a choice?! I'll just have to tell everyone Beatrice has a serious stomachache and couldn't leave the bathroom——]

[——You can't think of any better excuses I suppose, you jerk!?]

As Subaru tore at his head, bemoaning his situation, he was met by the abrupt retort the moment he opened the door.

Before his eyes, the room that was supposed to be the bathroom was instead piled with the kind of paper used for something other than wiping one's butt— In short, it was replaced by a library stuffed full of books. The Forbidden Library, a sight he had grown so used to seeing, yet one he hadn't seen for a long time. Its guardian, a little girl wearing an extravagant dress, sat in front of him as always.

Entering the room, there was a wooden stepladder straight in front of him, and seated on top of it was a girl with a thick book open in her lap.

[Subaru: Beako, found you in the bathroom safe and sound— My instincts aren't half bad if I don't say so myself]

[Beatrice: It's only that I took pity on you, since you won't give up I suppose. And for the sake of Betty's good name, it would be troublesome if you started telling people something strange]

[Subaru: Don't worry about it! Everyone poops, and in an emergency with an upset stomach, not many people would want to respond when they're called. But I shouldn't be saying something so insensitive when you're here straining yourself, sorry!]

[Beatrice: What you just said is already the most insensitive thing in the world I suppose!]

Standing up from her stool, Beatrice was huffing with outright indignation. Watching her curls thrashing about wildly, Subaru tried to calm her by saying [My bad, my bad], and waving his hands lightly.

[Subaru: Putting that aside, it's been a while. I was looking all over the mansion for you, it's like you wouldn't open up to me at all]

[Beatrice: ……That is how the Door Crossing is supposed to work when I'm paying attention. Even you, if I really tried, you would not be able to enter I suppose]

[Subaru: The fact that you let me in here makes that hard to believe! Tsundere!]

[Beatrice: If I didn't let you in, you'd have gone around threatening me with that scandal!]

After shouting angrily, Beatrice seemed embarrassed by her outburst and wore an awkward expression on her face. Seeing her change in attitude, the corner of Subaru's mouth relaxed a little as he walked up to where she was sitting.

[Subaru: That aside, I'm glad I was able to find you. I'm sorry this is so sudden, but could you get ready to leave? It'll be problematic if you stayed here]

[Beatrice: Betty won't be leaving]

[Subaru: Hah?]

At those abrupt words rejecting his suggestion, Subaru stopped in his steps.

He looked at her, and, looking back at him, she sighed at his dumbfounded expression.

[Beatrice: 'Betty won't be leaving,' that's what I said. I have no intention of leaving the Forbidden Library, or the mansion for that matter I suppose. It would be best if you accept that, and just leave]

[Subaru: Wait a second, you just don't understand the situation right now. You can't stay here, it's too dangerous, so let's go together. I'll tell you everything!]

[Beatrice: Even without you explaining it, I already understand the gist of it I suppose. Also, stop treating me like a child]

Glaring at Subaru, Beatrice reached out towards one of the bookshelves, taking down a book too large for her hands that looked like an illustrated encyclopedia. She returned to her step ladder hugging the book to her chest as she always did, then, she sat down with the book open in her lap as though nothing had changed, as though she really had no intention of leaving.

[Subaru: Oy, come on, don't end the conversation like that, shutting me out all of a sudden]

[Beatrice: There's nothing left for Betty to say I suppose. You are just one-sidedly wanting to continue, and even if you do, my answer won't change. Like me, you have no time to waste either I suppose?]

[Subaru: Guu……If you know that much, then help me out. I'm taking you with me. You're coming with me. Okay?]

[Beatrice: No thanks. It's the same no matter who comes. —Yes, no matter who it is, I won't let them set one foot inside the Forbidden Library I suppose]

Her eyes dropping down to her book, Beatrice's quiet reply was strong and firm. Scratching his head at her stubbornness, Subaru let out a sigh,

[Subaru: Look, I didn't come here this time just to make a fuss, or because Ram has dinner ready. I don't want to say it, but the Witch Cult is coming. They don't discriminate in who they attack, and if I leave you here in the mansion……]

[Beatrice: You should be well acquainted with the power of my Door Crossing ability. And even if anyone dares set foot in here……I won't show them any mercy I suppose]

[Subaru: ——!]

For a moment, Subaru felt the dangerous presence pouring out of Beatrice as she said those words. An icy shiver ran up his back. Sucking in a sharp breath, he realized these were the aftershocks of the waves of magic radiating from her entire body.

The enormity of the Mana flow was such that even Subaru, who has very little experience with magic, could tell how overwhelming it was.

[Subaru: ——! Even so, I am taking you with me]

[Beatrice: That again……]

[Subaru: Whether you are strong or not, it has nothing to do with that! You're a girl, you're little, that's reason enough! I don't want to leave you here where it's dangerous, do I need any other reason?!]

Even being pressured by the might of her aura, Subaru planted his feet firmly on the floor, shouting.

Seeing the man in front of her arguing even more vehemently, Beatrice's eyes opened wide with astonishment. Then, as though enduring something painful, she closed them again.

Subaru furrowed his brows at her response, but still pushed forward intent on taking her with him. Just then,

[Beatrice: Betty, can't go with you. Please, don't confuse things anymore]

[Subaru: I'm not mistaken. You are. ——That's all I have to say]

[Beatrice: You're stubborn I suppose. ——You know, I hate stubbornness]

Beatrice murmured something in a whisper. Uncertain what she said, Subaru was about to ask, but before he could, Beatrice stood up from her stool.

[Beatrice: I see, I suppose, you win. I'll do as you asked, I suppose]

[Subaru: Oh? O-oh, that's good. You understood, that good. For a moment, after you stood up, I was getting ready to get blown out of here flying you know]

[Beatrice: For Betty, blasting you away so only your shadow remains in this world would be too easy……but I won't do something so cruel as that]

Saying something so frightening as though it were nothing, Beatrice returned the book she had taken back into its shelf. Curious at her movements, Subaru realized something and raised his brows. Perhaps it was because she had agreed to go with him that he let his guard down. On a whim, he asked,

[Subaru: By the way, there are tons of books in here, but are you familiar with any languages other than the Yi Ro Ha systems?]

[Beatrice: I was wondering what you would ask all of a sudden……By Yi-Ro-Ha I suppose you mean the alphabets like Yi and the others? Using an expression like that, it is bound to anger the professional linguists]

[Subaru: Yeah yeah, my bad my bad, sorry. But, getting down to business……]

Giving Beatrice, who was glaring sharply at him, a nervous smile, Subaru pulled a single book out of his jacket. The book was bound all in black, and its contents——

[Subaru: Well it's this thing, but all the letters inside are nothing I've ever seen before. I was wondering if you might know……]

[Beatrice: ——I should like to know, why you are holding that right now I suppose]

Suddenly, her rigid voice overpowered Subaru's words, cutting him off. Looking at her, Beatrice's eyes were stretched wide, staring fixedly at the "Gospel" in his hands.

Subaru was surprised by the intensity of her reaction, having only brought up the subject casually.

[Beatrice: I would like to know why you are holding that right now I suppose. Answer me]

[Subaru: Even if this is trash… I took it from that idiot from the Witch Cult. He was treating it with some crazy religious zeal, so I thought it might have some clues written in it]

[Beatrice: Took it? From the Witch Cult? You, of all people……]

Putting a hand to her forehead, slightly swaying back and forth, Beatrice's expression changed. The blood drained from her already pale complexion, Subaru was disconcerted by the way her eyes swam, unfocused.

She seemed as if about to fall over at any moment, so without thinking, Subaru reached out a hand to steady her.

[Subaru: Oy, oy oy, are you okay? If you aren't feeling well, don't push yourself]

[Beatrice: Betty is….it's no good, if that's how things are. But, leaving it in his care……It's unthinkable, but maybe Roswaal has been, until now……?]

[Subaru: Hel—lo—? Sorry to interrupt you when you are looking so serious, but can—you—hear—me—?]

[Beatrice: I am only thinking right now I suppose, so you can just wait for a moment]

Beatrice silenced the worried Subaru with a sharp look, and he calmed down quietly. He closed his mouth as he watched Beatrice shut her eyes, changing her expression.

After some time had passed, and she seemed to remain unresponsive, Subaru opened the Gospel in his hands for the first time in a while, flipping through the pages he still couldn't understand.

Then, he suddenly noticed it.

[Subaru: This book, the latter half is all blank. … But, was this page here before?]

It was written in an unknown alphabet, and the second half was missing pages that seemed to have been ripped out. These two facts hadn't changed. Only, the last page to have writing on it seemed to have had words added to it.

Though he couldn't read it anyway. Perhaps he was just imagining it, there was no reason to worry about it that much.

[Beatrice: ——That book, what do you plan to do with it I suppose?]

Beatrice, who had been silent for a long time, asked all of a sudden.

Resting her hand against her lips, as if reaching some conclusion to her own mind, Beatrice threw this question at Subaru. [Even if you ask me……] Subaru responded, affected by her demeanor,

[Subaru: Decipher the contents……though I'm not interested in the teachings of the Witch Cult or anything, it's just in case there is any kind of useful information here. Otherwise, I wouldn't want to be carrying around a book that creepy guy cared so much for]

[Beatrice: …..At the very least, Betty can't read what's in there. However, if you don't want to hold on to it, you could entrust its care to me I suppose]

[Subaru: Entrust it?]

[Beatrice: It is a strange book that was once cherished by a strange owner I suppose. If you have any reservations about carrying around a book like that, I could take it off your hands for you]

Beatrice reached out timidly towards him.

From that gesture, he could tell, at the very least, that this wasn't a book she longed to have. These were not the words someone would use if they were planning on reselling it for a tidy profit.

They were words filled with good intentions. That, and from the way she had been acting, she obviously understood the book was undoubtedly a Gospel. Thus,

[Subaru: Sorry, but I have to reject your offer]

Subaru said, gently pushing Beatrice's extended hand down.

At his words, Beatrice's eyes flickered for only a moment, before her lovely face turned into something stern and heavy.

[Beatrice: Why, I suppose. You instinctively know what an evil thing that is, don't you? At the very least, you realize that it's not something good to be fascinated with I suppose. In that case, rather than hold it yourself, Betty……]

[Subaru: I'm like an evil imp that doesn't want to give something away even if someone wants it so badly, and even if I've no use for it. … I guess that's my stance. Really, that's it]

This book, called a Gospel, seemed to hold a high significance for the disciples of the Witch Cult. Even more, its owner was Betelgeuse, quite a high ranking member of the Witch Cult. Memories of how attached that man was to this book were still fresh in his mind. Even though he had already been captured and debilitated, Subaru was still wary.

[Subaru: It's a book some scary old man might come drooling over to get back. There's no excuse for a guy to give something like that to a little girl just because it's creepy to hold onto]

[Beatrice: ——!]

[Subaru: If it's dangerous then I'll hang onto it. After all, I'm here to get you to someplace safe you know? Putting you in danger on purpose would be flipping that on its head. Don't treat me like I'm a cold-hearted guy, come on]

Lightly smiling, Subaru placed the book back into his clothes, hiding it from Beatrice's view. He had no idea what was going through her mind as she saw that.

She blinked just once, her lips parting as if to speak.

[Beatrice: ————]

But unable to say anything, her mouth closed again, and she turned her face away.

There was something unnatural in her response, but her expression prevented him from asking about it. Instead, he cracked his neck, and proceeded to change the topic.

[Subaru: Ah, well it's no big deal. For now, since we decided to move I'll leave the preparations to you. Don't bring anything too big, but two or three important books shouldn't be a problem. Maybe two or three sets of clothes as well…]

[Beatrice: ……The library will follow Betty wherever I go. More importantly, you have convinced the other two already I suppose?]

[Subaru: I just heard something really convenient! Yeah, I convinced them alright. You're the only one left. We're all going to evacuate to the Sanctuary, where Roswaal is]

[Beatrice: Roswaal, I suppose… Subaru, what happened to the maid's younger sister that went with you?]

Unexpectedly, Beatrice changed the topic to Rem.

Hearing her suddenly talk about Rem was surprising, and Subaru couldn't help lifting his brows, looking slightly astonished. Realizing this probably wasn't the best response, he tried to relax his expression, saying,

[Subaru: If you're talking about Rem, she's taking care of things in the capital at the moment. We caught this giant fish on the way here, kind of. It was so big, that she had to go back to prepare a really luxurious feast. Once this is all settled, let's all go over there and stuff ourselves]

[Beatrice: You look really happy when you talk about her you know. —Did anything happen?]

[Subaru: Erm]

Hearing Rem's name, Subaru overreacted a little. He couldn't deny that he was talking faster than usual. Beatrice's remark had hit the nail on the head, and Subaru turned his gaze away, whistling nonchalantly.

[Subaru: No, n-nothing happened really]

[Beatrice: Being attended to so tenderly, it would be more strange if no feelings emerged I suppose. Betty won't say anything about it, so you can do as you like]

[Subaru: I, I'm not trying to hide anything you know? Only, it's gonna take a lot of courage to face Emilia-tan and her sister about this so soon……so I guess I'm in kind of a tactical retreat]

Fumbling for words, Subaru pressed his index fingers together and, embarrassed, turned his back to Beatrice with his head sunk down.

It was what it was, and there was truth in Subaru needing courage to bring it up. Surely Emilia wouldn't want to hear him say, all of a sudden, "I will have both you and Rem!" It would be like pouring water in her ears. Though this was his overall plan in the end.

[Subaru: It's a good thing to raise the goal to work towards. That way motivation and effort comes more easily. I don't dislike hard work, you know. Only I haven't really had a plan for the future until now——!]

His excuses puffing him up higher and higher, carried away by his emotions, he was suddenly stopped by an unexpected sensation.

He felt a warmth against his back, followed by arms wrapping around his waist, holding him tightly. They were small, thin arms, and he knew immediately whose they were.

Beatrice.

[Subaru: Oh, it's only Beako. Startled me there. Don't surprise me like that all of a sudden, come on…]

[Beatrice: That response really irritates me I suppose. ——But, it's enough]

[Subaru: Huh?]

Just as he tilted his head at her unexpected words, a sudden bright light blinded him.

Before he realized it, the door opened all on its own,

[Beatrice: Farewell——]

[Subaru: Huh, wh—!?]

The arms that had been holding him let go, and he was pushed forward by an immense pressure from behind. Unable to resist, he began falling forward, sliding towards the door.

This way, as if being sucked through, he flew toward the door—

[Subaru: Beatrice——!]

[Beatrice: Betty……can't go with you]

Twisting himself around, Subaru looked back into the room just before he was swept through the door. The form of the girl caught in his field of view, had large droplets of tears emerging in her eyes.

[Subaru: ————!]

Unable to form any words, his vision twisted. Caught in the shifting spatial dimensions, his body moved down a path that shouldn't exist as the link to the Forbidden Library began to fade.

Just like that, Subaru's body was flung from the space of the Forbidden Library, disappearing some place far away.

[Beatrice: ——other]

Watching this unfold, Beatrice shut the door that had been left open.

There was a sound of space ripping apart, followed by the deep silence that descended once again upon the Forbidden Library.

[Beatrice: ——Mother]

In a small voice, as though about to cry, Beatrice called to that name. The large droplets of tears had already disappeared from her eyes, though her expression remained.

[Beatrice: Just…… how much more…… must Betty……]

About to break down crying, Beatrice walked back to her stepladder, laying down all her weight onto it. She reached out her arm behind the ladder—— from a shelf that was usually behind her, she took down a book, and hugged it close.

[Beatrice: Mother…Mother……Mother……!]

Like a child, lost, clinging tightly to the book pressed against her chest, Beatrice's quiet cries resounded through the Forbidden Library.

The book in her embrace, bound all in black, never responded.

——Slowly, focusing only on turning the doorknob in his hand, Subaru held his breath.

He had a feeling this was the one.

Quietly wandering through the mansion like this, he'd all of a sudden notice a door that particularly draws his attention.

Leaving Emilia and the others behind in the living room, having been granted a little bit of time, Subaru wandered through the mansion alone, and found it just as he set foot into the hallway on the second floor.

The moment he touched the doorknob, his suspicion turned into conviction, and as he started to push it open, there was not a single doubt in his mind.

And, taking in the existence of “that room”, in that place, at that very moment, he stepped inside,

[Subaru: Hey, it’s been a while]

The Forbidden Library, just as he remembered it, stretched out in front of his eyes.

The little girl, who is the master of that dimly lit room, hadn’t changed a bit either—— Sitting on a stepladder like it’s a makeshift chair, she was in the middle of leafing through a book.

[Beatrice: ——The mansion was noisy today, I figured you returned I suppose]

Her eyes lifted for a moment to take Subaru into her gaze. ——However, after muttering as if she was bored, she immediately lost interest, and dropped her eyes back into her book.

[Beatrice: If you’re back, that means Nii-cha must be back as well. I sense that girl, and a few other annoying insects as well I suppose]

[Subaru: Puck hasn’t shown up yet, he’s recharging his batteries I think. Ah, I don’t like how you talk about Emilia-tan like she’s in the same category you know! Though I don’t mind the part about Otto]

[Beatrice: You’re really noisy]

Beatrice huffed her nose at Subaru’s smalltalk, and rearranged her legs under her extravagant dress. Seeing that, Subaru continued to walk closer, stringing words together as he did so.

[Subaru: But it sure has been a long time since I saw you. Since that time with Bete… Ah, wait, that didn’t happen… the last time was before I left for the Capital wasn’t it? It’s about ten days now…]

[Beatrice: Not long at all I suppose. While Betty is in this room, the flow of time outside really doesn’t matter that much]

[Subaru: And there you are saying strange things again, geez. Also, when you’re talking with someone, you really shouldn’t have your nose buried in a book you know! Seeing me again after ten days, I’d understand if you’re so happy that you want to hide your blush but still…]

[Beatrice: I can make your mouth spit blood instead of noise until you turn pale in the face, you know]

At the girl’s unhidden annoyance, Subaru loosened the tension in his face.

Whenever he comes to talk with the girl guarding the Forbidden Library, Subaru couldn’t help but want to do things to poke at her stubborn attitude and mess up that deadpan expression of hers.

Cracking jokes and clowning around, annoying her until she gets really pissed off, then keep prodding her until she finally couldn’t stand it anymore and throws him out.

There is a part of himself that thoroughly enjoys these exchanges. But just why does he always have this feeling towards her, he isn’t quite sure if he knows.

[Beatrice: I take the fact that you've returned as a sign that the recent disturbances around here have settled, I suppose]

[Subaru: You noticed…… Well that's only natural I guess. Emilia and Ram ran around all over the mansion looking for you, you know? It would be nice to apologize to them later]

[Beatrice: Betty? Apologize? To whom, and for what, I can't imagine why I should do such a thing]

Huffing with her perfectly formed nose, Beatrice closed her book with a loud clap, and rose from her seat on the stepladder. Then, putting the thickly bound book back onto its shelf, on tip-toes, she stretched as hard as she could to reach for the one right next to it.

Seeing she was having trouble getting it out, Subaru walked up beside her.

[Subaru: This one? Here]

[Beatrice: ……No, it's the one next to it I suppose. If you're trying to give help that people haven't asked for, at least try to help them correctly]

[Subaru: Such a thankful loli… Oy, careful not to drop it. You will get hurt if this brick falls on your toes]

As Subaru was pulling out the book with one hand, he found it surprisingly heavy. Once he had carefully handed it over to her, Beatrice accepted it, hugging it to her chest. Subaru briefly tried to read the title, but as someone who could barely understand anything beyond the "Yi" alphabets, it was too far beyond Subaru's ability to comprehend.

[Beatrice: I don't think I will thank you I suppose]

[Subaru: I know you're trying to follow the tsundere path and all, but frankly, you saying that and you just straight up saying "Thank you" pretty much carry the same meaning at this point]

At least, the fact that she'd acknowledge that his actions would be generally considered worthy of thanks, was in itself a testament to her good will.

In response to Subaru's retort, Beatrice frowned and turned her face to the side. Seeing her obstinate attitude, Subaru scratched his head,

[Subaru: I don't mind if you never thank me until the end of time, but make sure to at least thank those two, ok? They were really worried, leaving you behind in the mansion]

[Beatrice: It's not like I ever asked them to…]

[Subaru: Don't say something lame like that. Most people never asked to be born but are born anyway, and even if you don't want people to worry about you they will still worry. ……And that second part is only true when you have kind hearted people around you]

There was no need to specify that Emilia and Ram were that kind of people. Emilia's everyday way of life pretty much gives her a good-person score of 100 out of 100, although Ram's score would probably go into negative numbers, how she is on the inside is a different matter.

Regardless, Beatrice didn't show any sign of agreeing with him. Instead, turning away, she bit her lip slightly and said,

[Beatrice: But in the end, they still left the mansion I suppose…… without Betty]

[Subaru: What do you mean? Are you trying to say you didn't want to be left behind? You cut yourself off with that Hikikomori Door spell, far away, would it have been too troublesome to come out yourself?]

[Beatrice: It's "Door Crossing". Don't change it to a ridiculous name like that I suppose. Besides, such a suggestion is insulting to Betty]

Without acknowledging Subaru's words, Beatrice continued facing to the side, her obstinate attitude unbroken. He sensed this time there was something different, and dangerous, beyond her usual act. Subaru furrowed his brows and didn't know what to do.

With her acting like this even before they'd started talking about what he had actually come here to ask her, he wondered how he could bring it up now. Even so, perhaps he still had one more trick up his sleeve to lift up her mood……

[Subaru: Oh well. If you're going to be that stubborn, I'll just tell Emilia-tan that you wouldn't stop repeating "thank you" with tears of gratitude streaming from your eyes]

[Beatrice: You shouldn't make up lies?! It's been a very long time since I last shed a tear I suppose]

[Subaru: What, you're saying you're too embarrassed to cry? If you say that kind of thing while you're still a kid, you're gonna find it hard to express your emotions when you grow up you know? Kids shouldn't worry about what other people think and just cry when they're sad]

[Beatrice: I have some reservations listening to this coming from a man who cried his heart out on the lap of the woman he likes]

[Subaru: Can't you please forget about that!?]

Perhaps Emilia herself knew not to remind Subaru of this embarrassing history.

He was acting like an idiot to distract himself from the dread he carried deep inside his heart, unconsciously building up an increasingly unsustainable dam.

Lying on Emilia's lap, all this collapsed, and all the emotions he had been bottling up ever since first being summoned to this world came rushing out in a flood of tears.

Reminded of that time again, his face felt like it was about to burst into flame. Although, along with that heat, deep within his heart he also felt a radiant light shining from that memory.

Scratching at his cheek, while trying to redo the seal on that particular memory, Subaru snuck a quick glance at Beatrice. Looking bored as always, she had sat back down on the stepladder with the book Subaru had retrieved for her. She had just slowly started letting her eyes run over its contents.

She was clearly trying to shut off any further conversation, but if he were to let her do that, there would be no meaning in him coming here in the first place.

[Subaru: Anyway, putting crying or not aside…… I have something I want to ask you, is that ok?]

[Beatrice: You're free to ask I suppose]

Within her reply, accompanied by the sound of a page turning over in her book, there was the unspoken message "whether I answer or not is another story". There was no indication of cooperation from her, but at least she gave him permission to ask. Subaru quietly mumbled [alright then] under his breath and, intending to breach the subject of his visit——.

[Subaru: ——Come to think of it, considering all that commotion was going on outside, wasn't your reaction kind of lacking?]

However, what came out of his mouth didn't carry the meaning he had intended, and instead only served to reignite the conversation he had just tried to close off.

Hearing Subaru's words, Beatrice raised her eyes from her book. Sensing his reflection within her clear, immaculate gaze, Subaru sucked in a small breath,

[Subaru: Wh… while you were sitting in here acting like nothing was happening, it was getting pretty crazy outside you know? This strange group of guys had the mansion surrounded, and……]

[Beatrice: Stop it]

[Subaru: If I hadn't somehow managed to bring back reinforcements with me from the Capital, you have no idea what would have happened. And, it's not like it was easy for me to make my way back here……]

[Beatrice: I really want you to stop now I suppose]

[Subaru: It was actually a journey so rough, if I were to tell it to you, both you and I would be in tears by the end, but having finally cleared that hurdle……!]

With a loud, cracking noise, Subaru's rant was forcibly cut off.

Looking around, the source of the sound was the book Beatrice had been holding in her hands which she had slammed shut with all her strength. Subaru tried to understand Beatrice's expression, and her intentions, but she turned to face him with a sharp and merciless glare, and said,

[Beatrice: How about you say what you actually came here to say, you spineless coward]

[Subaru: ……yeah]

He couldn't deny it.

She was right, and had clearly seen through his attempt to run away. To run away from the answer to the question he knew he had to ask.

[Subaru: Do you…]

Gulping down his breath, he squeezed shut his eyes, listening to the beating of his heart.

Beyond his closed eyelids, he saw her sweet smile, smiling back at him.

[Subaru: Do you… remember Rem?]

——His question became sound and, having exploded into reality, could no longer be taken back.

In the loops after the slaying of the White Whale, Subaru had only spoken to Beatrice once in the Forbidden Library.

The purpose of that conversation was to convince her to escape from the Witch Cult, but she refused, and in the end, the girl was left in the mansion all alone.

While he could no longer remember everything they had discussed, looking back, there was one fact that he could not miss.

Beatrice, at that point in time, had asked him about Rem, who was supposed to have returned with him.

By that time, the handwritten letter had already turned blank when it reached the Mansion.

In other words, the conversation took place after Rem had been attacked by the Sin Archbishops, and Beatrice, who had never seemed to care much about Rem up to that point, had suddenly asked about her——

[Subaru: Answer me. Do you remember Rem who used to live in this mansion?]

He wanted her to remember, she must remember, thinking this, Subaru's voice distorted toward the end.

The depths of his memories confirmed this, and his ever weakening heart, so close to sinking, to drowning, yearning to be revived, would not deny this…

Beatrice silently stared at Subaru.

Within her pupils, there was neither feeling nor emotion. What she was thinking was impossible to read.

Normally, she was a girl whose emotions are easy to understand, but at this moment, Subaru could not pick up anything at all. His teeth itched, it was as if time stood still, and Subaru's heart was burning down to ashes.

[Subaru: Hey……]

Why don't you say anything.

You either remember, or you don't, it's not a difficult question to answer…

…Of course, there was only one answer he wanted to hear. That Beatrice remembers Rem, and that she would laugh at the sheer stupidity of his question.

Memories eaten, name swallowed, removed from the world, what a stupid notion that is.

Let her feel as he feels, let her feel that same indignation at the cruel outrageousness of this World. Or, even if they could just share the common reality of her existence, perhaps they would find the solution together, and that would be enough.

So, tell me you know her.

Like Emilia, like Crusch, like Wilhelm, like all the others, Rem—— don't tell me you have forgotten her.

Wanting to hear her answer. Dreading to hear her answer. Agitation, contradiction, his emotions wrenched and twisted.

Then, to Subaru's faltering, convulsing heart, Beatrice spoke

[Beatrice: ——I don't want to answer]

She turned her gaze away from Subaru, answering neither yes or no.

Losing his breath with a "Ha", for an instant, Subaru's mind stopped. Then bewilderedly flinging his arms in the air

[Subaru: Wa, wait. What do you mean you don't want to answer? Doesn't that question only have the answers YES or NO?]

[Beatrice: I don't know what you mean by '/yes/'or '/nō/' I suppose. And my answer will never change. I don't want to answer]

[Subaru: I'M SAYING THAT ISN'T AN ANSWER!]

Swinging his arms down, Subaru stepped forward furiously.

The girl sitting on the stepladder did not even glance at his intense gesture, and only firmly closed her lips. Seeing her obstinate attitude, flames engulfed his chest, impossible to stop.

[Subaru: Those are not the words I want to hear from you!]

[Beatrice: Why does Betty have to answer in words you want to hear I suppose? ……Stop making a fuss. The Library will get disordered I suppose]

[Subaru: You……!]

Subaru stormed toward Beatrice.

The face that did not even want to look at him, Subaru wanted to force it around and ask her face to face how could she say something so heartless. But,

[Subaru:————]

The moment he was about to touch her, Beatrice looked at Subaru.

And then, in that instant, her eyes filled with waves of emotion, Subaru's hand stopped. Because it was as if she——

[Beatrice: That question of yours, are words querying about someone eaten by 'Gluttony']

[Subaru: ——! So, you……]

[Beatrice: This sort of thing, if one is familiar with the Authority of Gluttony, is not difficult to deduce I suppose. Roswaal too, and Nii-cha, and Shaula would all know this as well]

[Subaru: Ros…!?]

An unexpected name flying out, Subaru's throat clogged up.

Roswaal knowing the Authority of Gluttony —— does that mean there might be a chance that he remembers Rem? No but before that,

[Subaru: How much do you guys know about the Witch's Cult? Even Roswaal should have known, that once Emilia's identity as a Half-Elf was known to the public, the Witch Cult would start taking action. Yet, if I didn't do anything, the Mansion and the village would all have been destroyed. What is going on?]

[Beatrice: ……]

[Subaru: There is no way he didn't plan anything, that was what Rem and Crusch-san told me. Yet, it looks to me like he didn't prepare for anything at all, because if he did, how could it have end up so catastrophically…]

[Beatrice: Betty doesn't know how much Roswaal has thought about it I suppose. But…… I don't think Roswaal would have thought nothing on it]

Listening to Beatrice's statement, Subaru narrowed his brows, trying to pick out some indication of Roswaal's preparations at work during the battle against Betelgeuse. Yet, no matter how much Subaru searched through his memories, he couldn't find anything of the sort.

[Subaru: Is it a misconception? Or are we overestimating his capabilities? If Roswaal did something, then why was I faced with so much trouble……]

[Beatrice: If you don't know, then no one could possibly know]

Her sigh carried a color of disappointment, Beatrice seemed to have given up on his lack of understanding. Even though he was displeased by her attitude, Subaru noticed the conversation had strayed off the topic.

[Subaru: Wait, compared to that, if you know something about the Witch Cult, tell me everything. About the Sin Archbishops, about ‘Gluttony’, there’s a mountain of things I want to ask you…… and this too]

One after another, Subaru wanted to ask Beatrice everything.

Subaru put his hand into his jacket, and took out a book with black binding.

The book, dirtied with black-ish blood on the cover and partially on the inside, was the loot he received after a fierce battle against a formidable opponent, several days ago.

[Subaru: I know this thing is a really important and deep part of the Witch Cult… I can’t read what’s inside, but as the guardian of the Forbidden Library you might know something……]

[Beatrice: ——A Gospel]

Looking at the book in Subaru’s hands, Beatrice’s eyes opened wide.

Her peach-colored lips trembled, staring at the Gospel with a frozen gaze.

The illegible words written on the cover — she skimmed over them, and with an incredulous expression,

[Beatrice: Why do you, of all people, have……]

[Subaru: I plundered it, but it’s not that I actually wanted it, you know. Like I said, the Witch Cult had the mansion surrounded. So I took it off of their leader. The owner……. doesn’t exist in this world anymore]

[Beatrice: Took it…….but, that]

Beatrice’s voice quivered, as she reached out her hands for the Gospel held by Subaru.

Though he hesitated, seeing Beatrice’s small fingers trembling, Subaru slowly placed the Gospel in her hands. Receiving the book, as if checking, she traced her finger over the mysterious letters on the front cover, and

[Beatrice: Its owner…… died, you said, I suppose?]

[Subaru: ……Yeah. He’s dead. He got engulfed by the carriage wheels and …… I killed him]

All things considered, Betelgeuse wasn’t directly killed by Subaru.

But still, everything from the reason, the circumstances, to the events leading up to the reality of his demise, were all inevitable extensions of Subaru’s actions.

Subaru wanted to kill Betelgeuse, for if he didn’t take that man’s life in a duel to the death, in his Soul, he would never be able to forgive himself.

Therefore, Subaru had no reservations about his intention to murder Betelgeuse.

But even without reservations, it could not be said that dirtying his hands did not leave him with any regrets. He could not pretend it didn't affect him, nor would his heart lie for him on this matter.

The fact that he killed Betelgeuse, and had once been killed by Betelgeuse as well, he will never be able to forget.

For as long as he lives, he will be carrying the life he took from that man——but these sentiments did not come out of Subaru's mouth.

Betelgeuse was an existence that deserved to die, and Subaru, believing this, murdered him.

That's all.

But, to all these thoughts carried within his words, Beatrice did not show any reaction.

She only quietly murmured [I see……], keeping her eyes dropped down at the Gospel in her hands,

[Beatrice: So even you went leaving Betty, huh, Juice……]

[Subaru: ——? Who is that?]

[Beatrice: There is no need for you to know. What happened to the 'Witch Gene', if you have killed 'Sloth' I suppose?]

[Subaru: Witch, gene……?]

At Beatrice's question, Subaru wrinkled his brows and tilted his head.

Seeing this gesture from Subaru, Beatrice's expression was one of bafflement, and she narrowed her eyes as if trying to read Subaru's emotions from his expression. But, searching, her gaze could not find what it was looking for.

Subaru clicked his tongue in agitation,

[Subaru: Tch, don't use professional terminologies on a guy who doesn't know anything about the situation, come on. What is that, 'Witch Gene'? Ugh sounds wonderful already]

[Beatrice: You don't know……? Wait, seriously? Then, for what reason did you kill 'Sloth' I suppose? I don't understand]

[Subaru: I was just getting rid of falling sparks! What are you trying to tell me!]

The conversation that just doesn't seem to mesh is straining Subaru's patience, but unlike Subaru, who was trying to force the pace, Beatrice is getting closer and closer to a complete silence. Placing the back of her hand against her lips, as if in deep thought, she only continued gazing at the front cover of the book,

[Beatrice: I, don't know. ……This is beyond Betty's ability to decide]

[Subaru: What are you trying to decide alone ——hey]

Shaking her head, Beatrice threw the Gospel at Subaru.

Quickly catching the thrown book, Subaru breathed a small sigh of relief and,

[Subaru: What are you doing all of a sudden. I'm not saying it's dangerous, but it is still an eerie book. Handle it more carefully!]

[Beatrice: ——You should hold onto it, I suppose. What would the Witch Gene choose, or not choose… Either way, a decision will be forced. When that time comes, if it helps you in your decision, Juice would be able to pass on peacefully too, I suppose]

[Subaru: What do you mean a beverage passing on! You're……!]

Nothing at all, Subaru understood none of it as he clung to the incomprehensible words. But, before Subaru could say anything, there was a strange feeling forming behind him.

——There was the sound of space being bent by an unnatural force. Subaru instinctively understood, though he didn't know why he knew this,

[Subaru: Are you going to kick me out? I haven't been able ask you anything yet…… You want me to leave with just this, seriously!?]

[Beatrice: The answers you want to hear, and the words you want to hear — why must Betty say them I suppose? Selfish…… Stop being Prideful]

[Subaru: Pri……! ——Just tell me, I want to know! I won't ask for any more! So, please…]

[Beatrice: ——Betty is…]

All the hair of his back stood on end —— for they were being physically drawn backwards by a force pulling Subaru's entire body back.

Space was distorting —— only when he turned his head to look behind him, he saw that the door which was supposed to be shut, had been opened, and he knew that the space of absolute darkness shall soon engulf him.

No wind was blowing, nor were his legs or arms being grabbed by anything.

Only, there was an indescribable pressure all over his body from the front, and a gravitational force invisible to naked eyes from the rear, as if embracing him, pulling him away.

—Absolute and forceful, it was the true form of Door Crossing.

[Subaru: Beako…… Beatrice!]

[Beatrice: What is trying to get out is your body, and your soul]

[Subaru: What are you—]

[Beatrice: Your heart doesn't want to hear the true answers, because of your weakness your gaze avoids reality, and your selfish mind does not want to look at your own Sins. All this, distances your body further from this Forbidden Library]

But,

[Subaru: I——]

[Beatrice: Betty is not… a convenient tool for you]

[Subaru: ——!?]

[Beatrice: What you want to hear, when you want to hear it, in words you want to hear, in the way you want to hear it…… I am not a convenient existence, like that]

As these words wrenched through Beatrice's lips, Subaru could not pronounce another syllable.

They penetrated deep, and pierced the mark, and completely unprepared, Subaru was mauled by those word into speechless astonishment.

Then, as void emerged, Subaru's body's resistance collapsed, and

[Subaru: Cra——]

This way, as if being sucked into the door behind him, Subaru's body was pulled toward the Door Crossing.

If he goes through, he would be kicked out of the Library. At the last moment, Subaru grabbed the edge of the door, and as his other half was about to swing out, he stomped onto the other end.

Panting, clenching his teeth tightly, he looked up—— in front, there was a girl with an expression full of sorrow.

[Beatrice: If you have something you want to know, ask Roswaal. ——Nii-cha or Betty, won't say anything to you]

[Subaru: ……Why are you, almost crying]

At Subaru's final query, Beatrice cast down her eyes, and did not respond.

At last, the girl extended her fingertips and wrapped them around Subaru's fingers on the door——and took them off.

Sucked in. Thrown off. Locked out.

To the door, from the Forbidden Library —— by the heart of a girl named Beatrice.

[Subaru: ————]

Sliding through, the door vomited him out and sent him flying into the hallway.

In front of his eyes, the door that threw him out closed up violently, seeing this Subaru extended out his hand to the flap, but it was too late.

[Subaru: That Drill Loli……]

The other side of the door was not the Forbidden Library, only another unused guest room.

He looked around at the Mansion, but couldn't feel the sixth-sense which connects him to the Forbidden Library.

——Today, he can't meet her anymore.

This realization fell on Subaru's heart.

What he wanted to hear, what he wanted to know, rather than that, he was only turned round and round by the girl's mystifying words, and kicked out before gaining anything.

[Subaru: What the hell! If you know something, then cough it up, you stingy brat! You mopey shut-in-hikikomori! Which son of the Natsuki-family do you think you are?]

Subaru kicked at the door which up until a few moments ago had been connected to the Forbidden Library, and let out a long sigh.

Shaking his head, he tried to forget the image in his mind — The last thing he saw at the time of their parting, Beatrice's expression, would not leave him.

But, surely she was…

[Subaru: With a face almost crying like that, stop shutting yourself in all alone, stupid]

Thinking it was his fault that she had that expression on her face, and having accomplished nothing, he could not blame her at all.

Chapter 4 [The Next Place]

——After Beatrice ejected him from the Forbidden Library, Subaru returned to everyone in the living room empty handed, looking rather ashamed of himself.

Awaiting him, the living room was the same as when he left. The only difference was that Otto was now sitting in Subaru's seat, and seemed to have just finished discussing something with Emilia.

Putting on a face that left no doubt in anyone's mind just how much he resented another guy talking to Emilia in anything vaguely resembling an intimate way, Subaru headed towards Otto.

[Subaru: I see you're happily chatting with Emilia-tan while I was gone, it would be nice if you go and drop dead now]

[Otto: It's not in my nature to just sit around silently and let time pass… More importantly, what kind of sane person says a line like that immediately after coming back!? It's very unpleasant when you always take your anger out on me you know!]

[Subaru(girly voice): D-don't talk like you can understand! As soon as I buy your oil and fulfill my promise, it's all over between us, we're through! So don't get the wrong idea here!]

[Otto: Could you please not talk like there's something between us that might cause a misunderstanding!?]

In the short span of time it took Otto to yell at him for being a tsundere, Subaru, as if suddenly completely losing interest, turned towards Emilia.

Kept out of the conversation, she was clearly waiting for him and Otto to finish talking, and seeing him looking at her, she looked back up at him and asked,

[Emilia: ——Were you able to meet with Beatrice?]

A surprisingly difficult question. On the one hand, the answer to her question was YES, but the answer to the question she was actually asking was closer to a NO.

While he had been able to make contact with her, he hadn't actually broached the most essential topic. He almost wanted to laugh at what a limp, indecisive, cowardly Adventure RPG protagonist he was.

[Subaru: No, it just wasn't happening]

[Emilia: Oh… Oh well, I guess that was to be expected. When Beatrice hides using ‘Door Crossing’, I guess there’s no way to find her. Neither Ram nor I have managed to meet her after all, so…]

[Subaru: Ehm, actually, I did manage to find her. But she was, how should I say this… I guess she was in a bad mood, a bit mopey… Anyway, I wasn’t able to get an answer from her. Stupid, right?]

[Emilia: You… found her?]

Having thought that he’d never been able to make contact with her in the first place, Emilia’s eyes widened in astonishment. A bit surprised by her reaction, Subaru let out an “Ah?” and nodded his head.

[Emilia: I’ve been thinking this for a while, but… You and Beatrice are actually really close, aren’t you?]

Emilia murmured in a low voice, lightly touching her lower lip with her finger as though pondering something.

In response, Subaru put on his best disapproving frown, working hard to further improve the expression that was shaping his face into something no one could misinterpret.

[Subaru: Me and Beako, friends? Please… She’s like my arch-nemesis, ever since the moment we met. The first time we met she sucked out all of my Mana you know!? I don’t think there’s enough time left in the world for that horrible first impression to go away!]

[Emilia: Even though you made up with Julius? After all that happened between you? Subaru you’re like this sometimes, being stubborn in a reeeaally meaningless way]

[Subaru: Being meaninglessly stubborn is the measure of a man! I’m the kind of guy who continues to carry around that kind of stupid idea, even though I know it’s a bunch of crap. Plus, I HAVEN’T made up with Julius. I, hate, that guy, FOR-EH-VAR]

[Emilia: Sure, sure]

Emilia lightly brushed aside his disingenuous objections with a small laugh. Seeing this, Subaru screwed up his face to show his dissatisfaction. However, on the inside, he just felt relieved that the subject had been laid to rest.

He still hadn’t had time to process his conversation with Beatrice. The sad expression on her face at the very end, he had no idea of how to even begin to make sense of it.

[Subaru: By the way, where’s Frederica gone off too? How could her good judgment be so lacking that she would leave my Emilia-tan and Otto alone together…]

[Emilia: Setting aside the matter of me supposedly belonging to anyone for another time… Frederica has gone off to prepare one of the guest rooms… Since we’re going to need a place for Rem-san to rest]

[Subaru: Ah, I see]

Subaru responded in a low whisper. Emilia, looking pained, narrowed her eyes.

While he hated himself for causing this expression on her face, he simply couldn't hold back the rending pain filling up his chest every time he was reminded of Rem.

However, with a blink and a shake of his head, he extinguished the grief from his expression to keep his pain from extending to Emilia. Relaxing his lips he said,

[Subaru: In that case, I better get Rem from the dragon carriage. She shouldn't be lying out there all alone…… Oh, sorry about what I said before, Otto]

[Otto: No, no, I don't blame you. After all, I sense that…… a lot has happened between her and Natsuki-san. I can hardly ask you to have your emotions in check given the circumstances]

[Subaru: It's just that when I think of you touching my Rem with your dirty, money-grubbing hands, I can't help myself…… I'm really sorry]

[Otto: There's no way you'd say something like that if you were really sorry! I also really don't think that's a line a person who just labelled a totally different girl as his should be saying!!]

[Subaru: That's just me using you in my plan to make Emilia-tan fall jealously in love with me. Don't make me say it out loud, idiot]

[Otto: You said that out loud all on your own!!]

Grinning at Otto's reliably explosive reaction, Subaru snuck a glance at Emilia's face. Having been intently observing their exchange, Emilia's lips seemed to soften just a little, and the sorrow of moments ago had all disappeared. Confirming this, Subaru drew a small sigh of relief.

[Emilia: Subaru and Otto-kun seem to be reeaally close. Even though you only met just recently…]

[Subaru: Huh, that's what you got jealous at!? Compared to my feelings for you, Otto is just a toy, a plaything on the side! I want a real and passionate relationship with you, Emilia-tan!]

[Otto: Why am I the one being discarded!? Even though this whole thing has no basis in reality, I still really don't like that!!]

Seeing the two guys heat up more and more, Emilia suddenly burst out laughing. Covering her mouth with her hand, her shoulders shuddering with laughter, Emilia managed to squeeze out an [I'm sorry] before she was finally able to continue.

[Emilia: I don't think this is the kind of situation where I should be laughing like this, but I just can't help myself… Are you sure you two haven't actually known each other for a really long time?]

[Subaru: He's a travelling merchant you know? Once his business is over, he'll be out of here before you know it…… Actually, just the thought of an un-shipped male character other than myself coming near Emilia-tan, aaah I can't stand it!]

[Otto: I don't know what that is, but in the short time I've gotten to know you I can already tell it's probably something really awful so I don't like it——!]

Seeing Otto putting his hands on his head with a somewhat traumatized expression on his face, Subaru snorted loudly, twisting his mouth.

In a way, those exaggerations were actually his true feelings. Ever since baring his heart to Emilia, Subaru chased her with an air of indomitable invincibility, and his heart is set ablaze with jealousy whenever another guy approaches her.

This is surely because the depth of his possessiveness, and jealousy, are both many times that of any normal person.

The rampant conversation in the living room was coming to an end just as Frederica returned from preparing the guest room.

[Otto: I was thinking, I'd like to check on how things are in the village nearby. Since I'm holding onto the certificates for the other merchants regarding the purchasing of their cargo, I can, to an extent, take care of distributing things to the village. Though I'll get the Margrave to pay for the costs later, of course]

After saying this, as if the fatigue from the long trip did not affect him at all, Otto hustled off towards the village.

No matter how much he showed the face of a calculative merchant, his proposal was, as 60% of the evacuees had not yet returned, nothing short of aid and support for the still nonfunctional Arlam village.

Watching Otto hide all this behind a money-hungry demeanor, Subaru was forced to quickly cover up his sense of gratitude by pretending to spit on the ground.

[Frederica: I have prepared a room in the servants quarters as instructed. …Strangely, there was only one room that appeared to have been thoroughly cleaned]

[Subaru: Thoroughly cleaned…… The innermost room on the second floor?]

[Frederica: —Yes, that's right. Only that room seemed clean, as if everything had been thrown out except the bed… Do you, know something about it?]

As Frederica spoke of the room she had just prepared, Subaru struggled hard to keep his grief from emerging in his eyes.

The room she talked about——the innermost room on the Mansion's second floor in the eastern wing, was the room Rem had used. Hearing the explanation that everything in the room must have been tidied up, Subaru deeply felt the overwhelming power of "Gluttony"'s Authority: the eradication of existence.

[Subaru: ……No. I just had a hunch; there's no real meaning behind it]

Frederica, who saw the truth behind Subaru's words, didn't say a thing.

She too, seemed to possess an extraordinarily excellent disposition as a maid.
Most likely, Rem and Frederica were the two who had kept Roswaal's overly-spacious mansion functioning… Ram doesn't count.

Going around back of the Mansion, a soft snorting sound greeted Subaru as he headed towards the dragon carriage.

Looking at where the carriage was parked, he saw an unfamiliar building that looked like a storehouse——most likely it was the place used to shelter dragon carriages, like a garage.
He saw the building, and Patrasche stabled in the adjacent barn.

The ground dragon with jet black skin let out a valiant cry, extending her neck out towards the approaching Subaru in a gesture of tenderness.

Placing a fingertip against the approaching nostrils, he tickled the rough skin.

[Subaru: Sorry I never thanked you properly, Patrasche. A lot of things happened, and I know it's late, but, I'm counting on you from here on out too, partner]

[Patrashe: ……]

In answer to Subaru's words, Patrasch licked the palm of his hand with her rough tongue.
Looking at their friendly exchange, Frederica tilted her head.

[Frederica: She really cherishes you. One look, and anyone could tell she is a competent ground dragon, yet to see how tamed she is…it's astounding]

[Subaru: I haven't done anything close to taming her? If normal ground dragons are difficult to pet and hug, then I guess it's just because Patrasche has a deeper emotional capacity than the others. Or, maybe I'm just so incapable, she can't leave me be]

It's not like Subaru was being humble, it was simply the only way he could appraise Patrasche's lovableness.

Within just 3, 4 days from meeting her, how many times had he had his life saved by this softhearted ground dragon.
Conversely, Subaru hadn't done anything for her in return yet. He couldn't help but think his meeting with this ground dragon was nothing short of a blessing.

As though understanding Subaru's self-assessment, Patrasche extended her head, which was licking Subaru's hands, and rubbed her muzzle against the inattentive Subaru's cheek. Surprised at the sudden offensive, Subaru smiled wryly at the raspy sensation on his face.

[Frederica: I, think I understood what kind of person Subaru-sama is. —You, have your own hardships]

[Subaru: ……]

Instead of Subaru, who had his hands full with Patrasche, Frederica's words and kind gaze were directed at Patrasche, who was frolicking with him.

Patrasche stopped her movements for a moment at the deep emotion behind Frederica's words, looking at her with the pupils of a reptile, before resuming her toying of Subaru.

In that moment, the women somehow understood each other, and Subaru was completely unaware.

Anyways,

[Subaru: Sorry for making you wait, Rem. I'm sure it was cramped and dark, right? I'm gonna carry you to your room now, okay?]

After spending some time playing with Patrasche, he headed for where the dragon carriage was parked——in other words, to where Rem had been left sleeping.

There was no change, Rem was still in a deep sleep. She didn't raise any objections.
Sulking at being left behind, her head turned away, cheeks puffed out…saying "Subaru-kun is so mean!", or laughing at Subaru's apology—none of it will happen.

[Frederica: —I heard about it earlier, but still I am surprised]

From behind Subaru, who was immersed in nostalgia, Frederica, who saw Rem for the first time, was unable to hide her surprise. When Subaru tilted his head at Frederica's surprised response, she quietly shook her head.

[Frederica: Nothing. It is just, her face looks very similar to the Ram I know. The only difference I see is the color of the hair… twins, as you said]

[Subaru: I'm sure it must be hard to believe, what with losing your memories and all, but I'm glad you believed me. It would make me glad if you remembered her, without thinking it was some kind of cruel joke]

Nodding at the reason for Frederica's surprise, Subaru stretched his palm out to touch Rem's cheek.

Somehow, he felt no warmth nor coldness. There was no doubt all her life-functions were active, but there was nothing left living within her.
Confirming what he had already checked countless times, Subaru again received an incurable wound to the depths of his heart. Even knowing this, he still could not help but check.

[Frederica: Subaru-sama. It would be fine for me to carry…]

[Subaru: I want to do it. Please let me. I want to be the one that takes Rem to the Mansion… to her room. Sorry I'm being selfish]

[Frederica: Not at all, it's really touching. Your eyes look like those of a murderer, but you are kind, I see]

[Subaru: I also have a heart that gets damaged from such casual dissing!]

Responding to Frederica's words, Subaru wrapped Rem up in his arms. He has carried her several times now to move her, but even so he was reminded of how light she was.

It was with this body she had stood in front of him, fighting hard to protect his useless self. The more he dwelt on this, the more his feelings of just how precious she is swelled up.

[Subaru: I'll wake you, as soon as I can. So, please, scold me angrily for feeling the softness of your body with these fingertips of mine]

[Frederica: It was such a good line, until you had to go and ruin it.]

Subaru exited the dragon carriage, leaving Frederica's disgruntled words behind him.
He nodded a quick goodbye to Patrasche, who had poked her head out of the stables. Subaru then entered the mansion, led by Frederica.

Led to the Eastern Maid's room——The bedroom, the room that once was Rem's.

[Frederica: You talked, with Beatrice-sama]

The statement was thrown out abruptly, as they walked.
Subaru, who had been carefully going up the stairs, looked up at Frederica's back.
She narrowed the pupils of her sharp eyes, and looked back down at Subaru with a gaze that held only intimidation. Although, Subaru understood it was only a misunderstanding, as he had the same kind of eyes, with more white area than was usual.

Coming to the correct assumption that his silence was affirmation at her question, Frederica said,

[Frederica: Is she doing well? I ask because, since my return to the Mansion, I have yet to see her face]

[Subaru: I already told Emilia-tan, but she was doing ok…I guess. Though, I couldn't talk to her as much as I normally do, since she was in a worse mood than usual]

[Frederica: Is……that so]

As though anxious, her expression at Subaru's answer was not a bright one.

Seeing that look, Subaru couldn't help but wonder about something. It was about what the role of the girl named Beatrice actually was, in the Mansion.

Up until now, Subaru had not dug deep into her position or background.

The girl, in the Mansion of Margrave Roswaal, stayed in a mysterious magical space, the Forbidden Library, and was treated by Rem and Ram as both guest and nobility.

Then again, she seems to childishly adore Puck, a spirit contracted to Emilia, a candidate for the Royal Election, as though he were an older brother. Also, the way she behaved towards Subaru seemed appropriate for her age, though her actions during their last encounter——they were all mysteries.

[Subaru: Umm, Frederica, you've been working in the Mansion for a while?]

[Frederica: Oh, are you interested? Emilia-sama, the girl in your arms……and Beatrice-sama…you seem to have a lot of interests]

[Subaru: Stop mixing Beako in so smoothly, I'm not interested in young kids. You can see that both my hands are filled with Emilia-tan and Rem, right? Frederica is…Honestly, it's only been a short time, but you're not my type]

[Frederica: Oh, I'm hated]

[Subaru: It's no good, you trying to yank my chain feels just like what one of Roswaal's maids would do. Oh, and it's only an issue of personal preference; I don't hate you or anything]

Frederica's eyes danced, and she laughed at Subaru's comeback, while covering her mouth with its cruel-looking fangs.

[Frederica: I'm not much concerned. You, also seem to be a worrywart]

[Subaru: It's because I hurt you when we first met. You laughed it off, but it still hurt a bit, didn't it?]

[Frederica: ……]

At Subaru's words, Frederica's eyes flickered with an expression of surprise this time. The smile wiped from her face, she stared at him. The gold in her eyes sparkling, she slid her gaze to meet his, and Subaru was met with the sensation that she was trying to look through him.

Slowly letting out a small sigh, Frederica said,

[Frederica: It is not very often that someone sees into my heart. I would appreciate it, if you refrained from doing so]

[Subaru: I just tried to put back together what I'd trampled over. Besides, I'm one to talk, what with my eyes being just as fierce looking……well, for me it's the whole family though]

Since both his parents had naturally fierce expressions, their son had it too.
During dinner, they all wore the same expressions as they squirted out mayonnaise from their own personal tubes, and it probably looked as though they were performing some Black Magic around the dining table.

Frowning as he saw his own memories objectively, Frederica deepened her sigh even further.

[Frederica: You are not a discomforting guy, just really strange. I think I understand why Emilia-sama behaves the way she does]

[Subaru: Emilia-tan, what?]

[Frederica: It is nothing. This time, Emilia-sama would truly be upset with me. What will you do once you know how long I have worked here?]

Shaking her head, Frederica shifted the topic back.
Even though he couldn't make sense of those words, Subaru too returned to the original topic.

[Subaru: So the thing is, I wanted to talk about Beako… Beatrice. If you worked here as a maid for a long time, then I wanted to ask how long she's been living in the Mansion]

He hadn't voiced it as a question or anything, but from Subaru's estimation, Frederica was several years older——Around 23 or 24. Even if she was a veteran maid of ten years, and since Beatrice was around twelve now by all accounts, all he had to do was count back and he could come up with an estimate.

But, at Subaru's question, Frederica shook her head.

[Frederica: I am sorry, but I do not know. Beatrice-sama has shut herself up in the Library a long time, since before I started working in this Mansion]

[Subaru: Ah, well I guess it can't be helped. Your background as a maid doesn't necessarily mean it directly correlates with how long you've worked in Ros-chi's Mansion. So you came to the mansion as an expert maid then…]

[Frederica: No, that is not the case, Subaru-sama]

Frederica interrupted Subaru, who felt his conclusion had been denied by a rather plausible reason.

As Subaru furrowed his brows, she straightened her back, and complemented by her vicious countenance and a noticeable concern, she said,

[Frederica: The only place I have worked at as a Maid, is here at the Master's mansion. And when I was first taken in as a servant, I was 12 years old. That was over 10 years ago]

[Subaru: ……Wait, isn't that weird? Because, calculating back since then, that would mean Beako has been shut-up in that moldy room from when she was a toddler]

[Frederica: Don't you, already know?]

As though criticizing Subaru's stubbornness, Frederica shook her head.

With her attitude confirming a doubt he had held within his heart, Subaru understood what he had tried to avoid thinking about too deeply.

In other words, the girl in the library—

[Subaru: Her appearance hasn't changed. …… I guess she really isn't human then]

[Frederica: Since the beginning of the Mathers Family, the librarian who took an oath to continue watching over the Forbidden Library——that is who she is, the Great Spirit Beatrice-sama]

Unable to detect a lie in her words, Subaru was left with no choice but to accept them. The true identity of the girl he had interacted with until now, was an existence that belonged to a completely different dimension.

[Subaru: Great Spirit… that title is the same as Puck's, but she looks really different and all]

[Frederica: It relates to the absence of a contract and the oath…… no, this is more than I should say. Please forget it]

[Subaru: Impossible, totally impossible]

How many times had Subaru's ignorance caused him to be dragged around by what other people knew but wouldn't share.
Frederica did not care about Subaru's scornful glare, and tightened her lips; it seems she had no intention of touching the subject again. At her attitude and behavior, Subaru sighed, recognizing that he would be unable to pursue talking about Beatrice.

Remembering their talk had continued on while their legs had ceased moving,

[Subaru: Frederica]

[Frederica: Forgive me, Subaru-sama. My tongue was a little too loose. I was just glad someone appeared that cares about Beatrice-sama. Please, forgive me]

[Subaru: It's okay, but my arms are at their limit]

His upper arms shaking, Subaru looked up at Frederica with a stiff expression on his face.

He was acting strong because "it's a light light body" and "anything's possible with love", but things like his arm strength, muscle stamina, and so on, ignored those lines, attacking him in force.

[Frederica: Oh, oh]

[Subaru: So, step away, please!]

Subaru swore to himself he would never do something as foolish as setting Rem down on the floor, or handing her to Frederica; then brushed past her and her offer to switch, heading to the guest room with hurried steps.

The sounds of soft footfalls running echoed from behind; it seemed Frederica was following behind him. Reflecting on the horrible way he had ended their talk, he arrived in front of Rem's room.

[Emilia: —You really, took your time]

Emilia said, her expression showing how monotonous her wait for Subaru had been.

Laying Rem down on the bed, Subaru pulled the quilts up over her chest. The beating of her heart, and the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed, gave testament to the fact that she still lives. Until the day her eyes open again, he wondered just how much time she would spend here.

[Subaru: I guess that'll depend on how hard I try, huh]

Turning his feelings into a new vow, Subaru gently brushed away Rem's hair resting on her brow, and then, he turned around to face Emilia, who had been standing silently behind him.

[Subaru: Sorry for making you wait. Frederica and I ended up talking about all sorts of things, and I wound up with some serious build-up of lactic acid in my biceps]

[Emilia: It's wonderful if you were sidetracked in conversation. What were you and Frederica talking about?]

[Subaru: I started by asking some questions relating to rehabilitating the shut-in little girl. How long has she been shut-in, when did it start, how she treated people after it happened… they're all closely related to her recovery]

[Emilia: Hmmm, I see. Subaru, you're really informed when it comes to shut-ins. It's amazing]

[Subaru: Emilia-tan, I'm sure you didn't mean it but… your words sometimes cut me to my core. Just like right now]

It was a bit disconcerting how genuinely she seemed to be praising him. Emilia, her expression purely innocent, tilted her head and looked at Subaru, who was frowning. He replied with a wry smile, and shrugged his shoulders.

[Emilia: So, you weren't able to get Beatrice to tell you anything, then?]

[Subaru: Her mouth is shut firm and she doesn't budge. By the way, I know I've asked this a lot already but …where's Puck?]

[Emilia: —No luck, there's still no response. This happens once in a while, but the timing is reeealy horrible this time. Geez, this is really distressing]

Reaching into her shirt, Emilia pulled out the green crystal stone. Fit in a pendant, the stone was faintly glowing. Within, a bewitching light swirled where the Great Spirit resided. It was the link that sealed the contract between Emilia and Puck, and Subaru, having seen his materialized form going in and out of that crystal almost daily, knew this as well. Only, as one could deduce from their conversation, there has been no hint of him within the crystal stone these past few days. He was gone ——It was hard to believe, but he wasn't responding to their calls.

[Subaru: This, happens sometimes? But, that's got to be really exasperating for you]

[Emilia: Whenever I really, really need Puck's help, he always comes. So, I don't think he's not watching… I've asked him about what he does when he's not around, but he's never told me]

Hearing Emilia's apologetic words, Subaru scratched his head, saying, [That's…]. He couldn't hide his disappointment at the fact that Puck, who was aware of everything, would choose to remain silent. With this, all the important figures he could have relied upon for help with his doubts, had all gone silent at once.

[Subaru: Puck and Beako, both quit talking to me at the same time. …This blows]

[Emilia: I know……Hey, Subaru, what should we do?]

Subaru, resting his hand on his forehead, was in deep thought when Emilia asked him for his decision.

He cast down his eyes at her call. Seeing the reliance and trust that dwelt within her gaze, he despised himself for feeling so happy at a time such as this. Realizing that she was relying on him, out of that trapped, stifling feeling, he understood what he must do.

[Subaru: Since the two who might actually know something suddenly went quiet, we really don't have a choice but to move on. …Although, even if we find that guy, whether he'll tell us anything is another matter…]

[Emilia: You mean Roswaal, right?]

[Subaru: Yeah, it's about time he spilled his guts and told us everything that's been going on, I think]

Seeing Emilia's grasp of the situation, Subaru nodded his head. Since she recognized his train of thought, she was probably thinking the same thing as well.

Emilia placed a hand over her chest, and seemed relieved that their opinions aligned.

[Emilia: I'm so glad, that Subaru agrees with me. I was wondering what I would do if you object to my proposals like Roswaal and Ram always do]

[Subaru: I might disagree depending on the details, but overall, I'm a hundred-percent behind Emilia-tan, you know? Even if I disagree with you, it'll always be because of my love for Emilia-tan, I hope you can believe me]

[Emilia: Love… —Subaru, you reeeally know how to pick the opportunity to flirt]

Subaru's irresponsible pick-up line took Emilia by surprise, and she quickly turned her face away. Subaru's cheeks were reddening slightly as well as he clenched his fists, while Emilia, still refusing to look at him, said,

[Emilia: Then, I have a proposal for you, Subaru, since you're always on my side]

[Subaru: Alright, let's hear it, whatever you want]

Subaru placed a hand to his chest in respectful subservience. Seeing this, Emilia closed one of her eyes saying "Since you said it so nicely", pursing up her lips and looking back at him.

Then, taking a moment to let out a deep breath, Emilia stared directly into Subaru's dark pupils.

[Emilia: There are things we need to talk about with Roswaal, and we also have to know what happened with the villagers, right? That's why, I want to go to the "Sanctuary"]

[Subaru: "Sanctuary"……]

It was the name of a place he had heard countless times at the Roswaal Mansion. Subaru had unfortunately never been able to find out where it was, but the evacuees led by Ram had headed there to avoid the Witch Cult. At the very least, now that the sect of the Witch Cult led by Betelgeuse had been annihilated, the threat level at the "Sanctuary" should be no more than that of the mansion.

[Emilia: I've been told it's a place I'd need to visit sometime anyway, so I think this is the perfect time. I've decided that this time, I'll finally talk with Roswaal about everything]

[Subaru: W, wa, wai, wait a minute! You aren't thinking of leaving me behind are you!?]

[Emilia: Eh?]

Holding his hand up in front of him at Emilia's enthusiastic words, Subaru put a damper on her decisive declaration. But even so, Subaru had to say it.

[Subaru: Emilia-tan, I know you're getting pumped, and I'm in agreement, but you can't just leave me behind. I know I'm weak and dimwitted, but I'd hate it if I couldn't try my best by your side. I know it's selfish, but please understand!]

Hearing Subaru's ardent, relentless words, Emilia's eyes widened.

But they were unmistakably his true thoughts. Subaru was going to stay with Emilia. If he wasn't with her, he couldn't protect her. He couldn't do anything for her. There was no pretense to his feelings, it was simply that his existence was necessary to help her. It had nothing to do with him wanting something in return, it was simply what he wanted to do.

Emilia's expression still showed her astonishment at the forcefulness of Subaru's words. Deciding that now would be the best time to throw her off balance, he continued.

[Subaru: It's no use if you try and stop me. I'm going with you. I've no intention of getting left behind. Whether it's the "Sanctuary" or Roswaal we're going to face, nothing will stand in the way of my burning love for——]

[Emilia: There's no way I'd leave you behind. Come with me]

[Subaru: I don't want to get left behind, no no NO! —wait, what did you say?]

Subaru, still half-way down on the floor and about ready to grovel and plead, asked Emilia this question.

Seeing his display, Emilia placed a hand against her lips, her face reddening ever so slightly.

[Emilia: Like I said, come with me. I'd be too anxious if it was just me]

[Subaru: Eh, Emilia-tan……]

[Emilia: Subaru, I'm counting on you. I don't think you're weak, or dimwitted. I, need your strength]

[Subaru: ———]

The impact those words had on Subaru went beyond description. His mouth agape, Emilia's face clouded over with uncertainty at his stillness. Lifting up her hand, as though struggling over whether to reach out and touch him or not,

[Emilia: Ah, uhm, wh, what's the matter? Did I say something strange again?]

[Subaru: The switch to my motivation is in your hands. Whether it's on or off, depends on just a word from you. I can't take it]

Covering his face in his hands, Subaru spoke teasingly to Emilia. [Eh? Eh?? What do you mean?], unable to read the intention behind his words, Emilia fumbled for a reply. Seeing her so confused, he almost wanted to rub it in her face. After all Subaru had just went though at her hands, he's savoring every last bit of it.

[Frederica: —It sounds like you've come to an agreement]

[Subaru: Gyaa—!?]

Their exchange, which must have looked like two people flirting, was tragically interrupted by a knock on the door followed by Frederica's entrance.

Emilia wasn't surprised by her arrival, but Subaru, trying hard to conceal the thumping of his heart, couldn't help but glare at her. Even though Frederica must have easily seen through Subaru's feelings, not a hint of it appeared in her calm, but still vicious-looking expression.

[Frederica: I have no objections about the two of you heading to the "Sanctuary". However, preparations will take about two days]

[Subaru: By preparations, does that mean you're coming with us?]

[Frederica: Not at all. As I still have duties here, I will be unable to accompany you. I will instead give the directions to the "Sanctuary" to the ground dragon you brought back with you]

[Subaru: You mean Patrasche?]

Subaru widened his eyes at the unexpected proposition. His response received a [Why, yes] from Frederica, who continued as though it were obvious.

[Frederica: Ground dragons are very clever creatures. If you instruct them properly, they can understand which roads to take well enough that a guide is unnecessary. Since she seems especially clever, I don't think it will be an issue]

[Subaru: Patrasche, you just keep on getting more and more valuable! Really, just what triggered this turn of events?]

[Frederica: More importantly, there are several things I must tell you two]

Subaru tilted his head trying to understand his partner, but Frederica ignored his question, straightening her muscled body, she looked at both of them,

[Frederica: If you are headed for the "Sanctuary", there are several things I would like you to remember. Especially Emilia, I would like you to be careful of the issue of your birth and appearance]

[Emilia: ——Yes, I've prepared myself. After all, I've heard it's a place with some complicated issues]

At Frederica's dire warnings, Emilia tightened her jaw, the look in her eyes carried her strength of will. To show he respected her decision, Subaru moved to stand beside her.

[Subaru: Honestly, I don't know anything about that place except that it's called the "Sanctuary"……but my supreme goal is to support Emilia-tan. So I'll listen to whatever you have to say]

[Frederica: Actually, I sense a very refreshingly pure, ulterior motive there]

Exasperation and admiration flashed through Frederica's eyes at the same time,
then, blinking once, she pushed down her sentiment, and held up a finger.

[Frederica: In that case, let me tell you about the "Sanctuary". But before that, there is one thing I need you to remember]

[Subaru: Need us…]

[Emilia: …To remember?]

Subaru and Emilia's heads tilted at the same time. Seeing this, Frederica nodded with a [Yes], dropping her voice ever so slightly.

[Frederica: ——Beware of someone named Garfiel. Within the Sanctuary, you two must be very careful, of coming into contact with that man]

Chapter 5 [The Emilia-Faction]

Just as Frederica declared, it was two days later when they set out for the Sanctuary.

In between her duties at the mansion, Frederica had been teaching Patrasche in the stables about the location of the Sanctuary. Since she was responsible for most of the work at the mansion, Subaru suggested she could lighten her workload if she just told him the location of the "Sanctuary" directly, but

[Frederica: My apologies, but the location of the Sanctuary is of great importance to our master. As a mere servant, I cannot act rashly in this matter. I would have prefered to not even teach it to the ground dragon if I could avoid it]

So she politely refused to teach him.

Although it didn't sit well with him, complaining about Roswaal's over-cautiousness wouldn't get him any closer to the Sanctuary. And considering how things were unravelling, Subaru had no choice but to submit to Frederica's judgments.

And so, Subaru spent two uneventful days hanging out with the villagers, and, returning to the role of a servant, performing some of the menial tasks at the mansion.

All the while, pursing up her lips in annoyance that Puck still wouldn't come out, Emilia, who also had nothing to do, would timidly follow Subaru to the village and make an effort to reduce the distance between the villagers and herself. And also, reading all sorts of books and texts Subaru couldn't understand, she spent her time building her knowledge.

As they each spent their two days in their respective ways, there were a few changes that occurred.

The first was,

[Otto: Aaah! Why is everything dumped in a heap!? Documents that need to be prioritized, documents that can be discarded as soon as they've been read, and documents that aren't even worth reading, when they aren't sorted properly it ends up like this……!]

Scratching his head violently while grumbling, Otto sorted the documents around him at an incredible speed. Quickly looking over a document and roughly grasping its contents, he tossed it into one of the giant sorted piles on the table, then onto the next, and the next, he continued to separate and organize. Watching Otto's eyes and hands flicker here and there, turning his head

from side to side so quickly one would almost expect to see flames shooting out, across the table, Subaru, resting his chin in his hands, sighed in amazement,

[Subaru: Haa, that's amazing! If it was me, even if they were printed out neatly it'll still be gibberish to me…]

[Otto: It's not as if I'm trying to understand them. I'm only separating them into documents relating to finances, relating to petitions, and various other types efficiently first. If only each document was sorted when they first came in…… But, looking at this arrangement, it's organized in a way that only the man himself could understand, I'm afraid]

It was unheard of, that Subaru should find himself feeling a sense admiration for Otto, who was glaring at the mountain of documents looking rather appalled. Hearing him speak of the documents' owner —— Roswaal's face emerged in Subaru's mind, and he couldn't help but feel that, despite being blurted out casually, Otto's theory was probably spot on.

It's a frightening thought, to think Roswaal would be so capable that he could see some kind of logic to this giant pile of documents. But the problem was, that since no one else could understand it, without him here, there was no choice but to sort them all from scratch.

[Otto: Ok, it's in broad categories now. Next, is to arrange them in chronological order… But before that, maybe I should separate them more into processed and unprocessed first…]

[Subaru: I don't know whether I should call you meticulous or obsessive compulsive, but Otto, you're definitely a Type-A, aren't you]

[Otto: What's a /taɪp eɪ/? That doesn't sound like anything good at all]

Seeing Otto stare at him, Subaru waved his hand from side to side without bothering to explain. It's not like he actually believed that blood type had anything to do with one's personality, aside from being useful as a half-assed conversation topic.

Incidentally, Subaru is Type-B ——or rather, the entire Natsuki-family is Type-B. Whenever this was mentioned to someone, the reply they get would always be [I knew it], and so it wasn't a very pleasant subject for them.

[Otto: Wait, now that I think about it…]

[Subaru: What's that, why did you stop? You were going at such a great pace, keep going]

[Otto: As someone who cares about efficiency, I don't really mind doing this, but isn't this situation a bit odd? Why am I, a travelling merchant, standing in the Margrave's office with sweat all over my forehead working so hard to sort through his documents? Isn't my position a bit odd here?]

[Subaru: That took you pretty long to notice, didn't it?]

Seeing Otto only just now noticing all this, Subaru lowered his head and laughed deviously. The reason Otto was performing this menial task—— rearranging documents pertaining to the Margrave's affairs no less, was all entwined with Subaru's schemes…

That is, to secure useful talents for the Emilia-faction in the Roswaal-camp.

In the present situation, as Subaru sees it, Emilia's position in the Royal Selection isn't good at all. As her Knight, or at least as someone generally recognized as such, he was instrumental in repulsing the Witch Cult and slaying the White Whale, but, compared to the abysmal negativity still surrounding Emilia's situation, just how much of an effect did all this have is still a question.

Compared to each of the other camps, Emilia was behind before the race had even begun. Further increasing the difficulty of her position was the fact that her key supporter, Roswaal's true intentions are still utterly indiscernible. Although he was publicly backing her, so far, Roswaal's performance as her patron could only be described with the word "failed".

He failed to prepare a single countermeasure against the Witch Cult even though he should have foreseen it from a mile away, and now, after having overcome that threat, they don't even have a way to contact him. If he could just come out and announce whether he is an ally or enemy already… either way, he is certainly a troubling existence.

On top of that, the people surrounding Roswaal all tended to keep their mouths shut when it comes to their master's true intentions. Revering Roswaal above all else with unquestioning devotion, Ram's behaviour was only to be expected, and Frederica, with her strong dedication to her role as a servant, would not say anything either. Even Puck and Beatrice would not break their silence on the matter to Subaru and Emilia.

In other words, there was not a single person Emilia could safely confide in.

Of course, Subaru wanted to become that person to her, and was in fact acting in a way befitting such an existence, but Subaru's reach was too short, even compared to an average person. He was sadly aware of the fact that he was not a man who could reach her every itch, and by himself alone, he could not wipe away her every discomfort, and this bothered him to no end.

So then, the one who caught Subaru's eye was the man going back and forth between Arlam village and the mansion, the one who would smack his lips after dinner and tea saying things like "Aaaa, having no ambition and getting settled down like this would surely make anyone rot" while smiling relaxedly… Otto.

[Subaru: In other words, the "if there aren't any allies around, why not start cultivating some now" battle plan]

[Otto: I find what you suddenly said somewhat disturbing, but what does that have to do with me!?]

[Subaru: Hmm, I dunno… Maybe… Ah, Otto-san. You still haven't sorted the documents over here]

[Otto: Oh, sorry. Let's see, the mining locations for arcane minerals and the quantities of their reserves and this…… AREN'T THESE THE KIND OF DOCUMENTS OUTSIDERS ABSOLUTELY SHOULDN'T BE ALLOWED TO SEE!?]

[Subaru: Aah, you saw… I see, you saw them… Aaah, ok, ok. Yeah, well, I'll to do my best to explain it to Roswaal, so don't worry, ok?]

[Otto: It's amazing how nothing in that sentence puts me at ease!]

While Otto was complaining and trying to hold the documents he'd just been given as far away from his eyes as possible, Subaru just grinned, acting like he was only some innocent observer. Seeing Subaru's attitude, Otto's face took on a look of horror, and he said, with his lips shaking,

[Otto: I don't want to believe it, but are you really trying to make me disappear by showing me documents no outsider should see, and then not coming to my defense when there's trouble? Just to trample over the terms of our agreement?]

[Subaru: Of course not! The payment for your cargo and the favor you asked, I intend to fulfil all of them. And on top of that, I'm going to drag you even further into this, until you're in so deep that you won't be able to run away]

[Otto: Do you really have to be so twisted!? I'm just a little traveling merchant, I don't know why you are trying to put so much weight on my shoulders, but please stop it!!]

With a face that looked completely overwhelmed, Otto tried to object. Hearing this, Subaru felt he might have gone a little too far, so nodding his head lightly and changing up his expression, he mumbled [my bad] softly,

[Subaru: I went a bit too far there. I have so many different things filling up my plate, and I'm in such a hurry to sort out all these tangled threads, that I didn't even think to ask you how you felt about it, sorry]

[Otto: Ah, no, if you become so reasonable all of a sudden, I'll feel disoriented. ……Uh, I wonder if I can ask, but… What makes you expect so much from me?]

Seeing Subaru suddenly talking to him so normally, Otto got a bit confused, but he basically accepted this, and asked him this question.

After all, from his perspective, he had only known Subaru very recently, and there wasn't really anything to justify much trust between them. Of course, even for Subaru, their relationship wasn't a very strong one.

They had some contact in the previous loops, so now he had a slightly favorable impression of him, but that was all.

But if so, then why was he drawn to Otto like this?

[Subaru: Honestly, it's not like I have any particular reason to be interested in you or anything. It's not like I value you as an individual… so it has mostly to do with you meeting the criteria]

[Otto: That's awfully frank! ——I guess I can understand… but what was the criteria?]

[Subaru: The fact that you're completely unrelated to any of the factions in the Royal Selection. And being good at weighing gains and losses, and your ability to negotiate and gather support are obviously valuable qualities. And, most importantly, you don't seem to discriminate against Emilia for being a half-elf, or see her in a different way because of it]

[Otto: ——]

Hearing these three reasons, Otto stared at him without saying a word.

Considering the situation Subaru and the others had found themselves in, these are all conditions that cannot be neglected. And up to now, as Subaru judged, this man: Otto Suwen, was the only person to have met all of them.

Otto, still without a word, was waiting for Subaru.

Unlike when they were bantering just moments earlier, his eyes were lit with a calm, calculating brightness, flickering as if trying to peer into Subaru's mind.

Subaru understood he was being evaluated. Nor was he trying to hide. He had been evaluating Otto to begin with, so of course this is only fair, but…

[Subaru: Also, and this is just my personal opinion…]

[Otto: ——Let's hear it]

[Subaru: I feel like I can get along with you. Frankly, even though there is nothing better than gaining more allies for Emilia-tan, it's an extra bonus if we can get along. Ah, and also because you don't have any feelings for Emilia-tan as a woman. Because if it ever comes to that, even if we were lifelong friends I'll have to cut you down……!]

[Otto: You'd kill your love rivals!?]

[Subaru: If I had any rivals, I'll have zero confidence in me being able to win! Don't you underestimate my self-loathing! In my life up to this point, the number of people who actually like me can be counted with a single hand, you know!]

Specifically, his parents, Rem, Wilhelm, Emilia, and with some reservations, Julius and Reinhart… and that's about it. Actually, come to think of it, the count went past one hand just now.

Receiving this kind of appraisal after coming into this Parallel World… perhaps he was actually becoming more respectable after all. Even though he couldn't see any of it in the mirror.

Anyway,

[Otto: Geez, you really are a refreshingly straightforward person. But, without any kind of reservations when sitting across a merchant on the negotiation table, you might as well be a sitting duck, you know?]

[Subaru: If this were a negotiating table even I might try to hustle you a little, but it's not a merchant and a duck sitting here, it's just me and you, right? But, if that's how you see things, I'll go change my equipment and my attitude…]

[Otto: After having just praised me for my aptitude as a merchant, you go and say something like that? That idiom about how your tongue hasn't even dried before changing your words applies perfectly here! ……What is it with you?]

With a bothered-looking expression, Otto sighed, and all signs of the suspenseful and guarded attitude of moments ago disappeared from his face. He took a quick glance at Subaru, who was trying to look indifferent, and said,

[Otto: I don't know why I'm saying this here but, Natsuki-san, I have a goal too… It's not something so grand that I could brag about to other people, but it is a dream nonetheless]

[Subaru: I think a man's dreams can either be so ridiculous that they need to be ludicrously exaggerated, or so ridiculous that they have to be kept inside and never told to anyone, those are the only two kinds there are, I feel, but are you going to tell me yours?]

[Otto: The fact that I agree with you is really unpleasant… Anyway, you see, I was born the second son of a fairly successful merchant family. Ever since I was little, I was brought up in an affluent environment, though when it came time for me to become independent, I didn't receive much support]

Subaru didn't know how many similarities there would be between the sibling situations of this world and the world where he came from, but at least the same basics of passing on titles and inheritance seemed to apply here as well ——specifically, that it would be passed on to the eldest son.

In that case, as Subaru had expected of a fantasy-world set in the middle ages, Otto, having been born as the second son, only had a choice of either becoming his elder brother's assistant, or aiming for independence by himself.

[Otto: While helping my brother manage his business, I learned the fundamentals of the trade, and managed to save up enough money to set out on my own. With that money, I bought Furufu, my ground dragon, as well as a wagon to go with him, and… Well, I also had the Divine Protection I was born with, so all in all, it went pretty smoothly, I think.

[Subaru: By Divine Protection, you mean the Divine Protection of "Anima Whispering", right? Being able to talk to different kinds of animals, depending on how you use it, I guess you could make quite a crazy profit from it]

[Otto: But it's not as useful as you make it sound… There are quite a few inconvenient problems that comes with it that Natsuki-san hadn't thought of. In any case, it was followed by several years of me plugging away and barely scraping by, but in that time, something of a dream had sprouted inside my mind…]

Continuing with his story after delving into how he became independent, Otto once again brought up the word "dream". Hearing that, for no particular reason, Subaru sat up properly, as if to listen attentively. Receiving this attention, Otto smiled warmly, and started off with [It's a pretty common dream, you know],

[Otto: Any merchant who's been a traveling merchant will have this dream. ——It's to own a place of my own, just like having my own castle, to have my own shop… to settle down there and do business there. If I could have this in some big city, it'll probably be the greatest happiness a merchant can hope for]

[Subaru: That's your dream, Otto?]

[Otto: It's a pretty boring thing to hope for… But after having traveled and traveled, in the end, all I want is just to have the same thing I had when I was growing up. But, well, I guess you could say, that environment had been the symbol of happiness for me]

Scratching his cheeks in embarrassment, Otto spoke faster and faster to try to cover it up. Subaru took in Otto's answer, and, wondering whether he would get a favourable reply, he leaned back, and dropped all his weight into his chair.

But, aloof to Subaru's concern, with a [That's why], Otto continued on,

[Otto: A chance to make a big shot like the Margrave indebted to me… as the second son of a trader family, as a traveling merchant, and as a great merchant of future to come, I can't possibly let such an opportunity pass me by. Especially considering I'd be selling a favor to someone who might become the future King of this country, it's a business opportunity so huge that even if I redo my entire life I won't be able to find the likes of it again, isn't it?]

[Subaru: Ok, so you'll join us then. Thanks, I'm glad. I knew you'd make the right choice, Otto. Now keep sorting the documents]

[Otto: What!? That was a pretty good speech just now wasn't it?? Isn't that reaction too lacking!?]

[Subaru: I feel like letting it make an impression on me would mean that I lose somehow… Well anyway, the moment you touched these documents that no outsiders are allowed to see, there was already no way out for you. Kekkekeke!]

[Otto: No matter how I look at you, you're still a terrible person!]

At the end of this long conversation, it seemed as though nothing had actually changed, and Otto didn't receive much compensation for his newfound determination.

But even while teasing Otto like this, deep down, Subaru was thankful for it…… Though these words will never come out of his mouth.

[Otto: But I have to say this first, unlike Natsuki-san who supports Emilia-sama unconditionally, I'm only cooperating because of the present circumstances. If the Margrave and Emilia-sama ever fight amongst themselves inside the faction, I'll need to weigh the gains and losses before choosing a side. So please don't mistake me for a full-fledged ally]

[Subaru: If you're weighing Emilia-tan and Roswaal on a balance scale, you're completely in my hands. I will slowly and surely feed you all of Emilia-tan's good qualities, so don't you worry. —You heard everything loud and clear just now, right?]

Brushing aside Otto's long-winded excuse, at the end his last sentence, Subaru turned his face and his words toward a completely different direction. Seeing Subaru do this, Otto, stunned with a dumbfounded expression on his face, turned his gaze to where Subaru was looking. And there,

[Yep… I mean, Yes. I heard it properly, Subaru-sama.]

With a lovely smile, the girl in maid's uniform swung her chestnut-colored hair, standing there at the door.

Of the changes that took place in the Mansion during these two days, this was the second.

–

With only Frederica, (Subaru was also helping, but his ability as a servant was half-assed at best, and his health still hasn't fully recovered yet) managing everything at the mansion alone was physically impossible. So Frederica, understanding this, went down to the village personally to recruit some help, and that's where this girl jumped in with open arms — Petra Leyté.

Being a resident of Arlam village, and being among those who evacuated to the Capital, she had safely returned with them. But since most of the other villagers had not yet returned, it must have been an unsettling time for her.

But still, when Frederica came to recruit a new maid for the mansion, she instantly jumped in. And as there were no other candidates who were interested, she was picked up, and was now working in the Mansion in temporary employment.

[Subaru: You are still so small, but you're leaving your parents and coming here to work as a maid, you're amazing, Petra]

[Petra: I'm already twelve, so I'm an adult who can work now… Actually, I am just an adult. Subaru-sama could you treat me like one please?]

[Subaru: I will consider it, if you say it politely, after you get the "temporary" part removed from your "temporary employment" and after you get an official certificate from Frederica. Until then, I'll always treat you like a cute little girl~]

When he patted her head clumsily as she squirmed around, the girl, with her neatly arranged hair all messed up, let out a quiet [Eeek—], and clung onto him tightly. It was a completely different reaction than what he expected, but it was certainly a lot better than being abused and spat on.

In any case, she was at an age where she wants to be older than she is and stand up on tiptoes. Petra, with her surprisingly strong character, and her own way of growing up, her aptitude for being a maid was really quite high. Although she didn't meet all the points, in cleaning up the Mansion and preparing food with Frederica's support, she has already surpassed Subaru in ability.

….Well, Subaru is really useless.

–

So, from outside the door of the Master's office, she had been pricking up her ears to listen in on the conversation inside. She was, of course, acting on Subaru's instructions, and needless to say, it was all part of his scheme to lure out Otto's commitment and cut off his escape.

Noticing all this, Otto's face turning red, he glared at Subaru,

[Otto: It was a s-set-up—— !?]

[Subaru: It's nothing to be concerned about. With a third person involved, your statements earlier are now legitimate official record. It was an emotional, heartrending manipulation in order to secure witness testimony for the jury later…… so think of it like that]

[Otto: What is so emotionally heartrending about a man talking about "manipulation"!?]

Hugging his own head, Otto, finally understanding there was now nowhere to run, shouted at them in a half-crying state, but it was too late. Giving Otto a grin, Subaru held up his thumb to Petra, who was standing at the door.

[Subaru: Good job, Petra! But won't you get scolded by Frederica, using time on something like this?]

[Petra: Right now, I'm spending my time sweeping the corridor. Using even more time to sweep the corridor in front of the the Margrave's office, I wouldn't be scolded.]

[Subaru: You're very shrewd~. Even a small girl is a woman, after all……]

Listening only to the second half of Subaru deeply emotive words, Petra cheerfully loosened her cheeks. Seeing her predictably unchanging reactions and attitudes, it was true that there was something in there that warmed Subaru's heart.

Petra, like Otto, is another ally who is not under the influence of Roswaal.

Compared to Otto, there was not much she could do for Emilia, and her significance and influence is probably even less than Subaru's. But, she is not afraid of Emilia. On the road to the Capital City during their evacuation, she wholeheartedly remained at Emilia side. Subaru would not forget that, and, probably, Emilia would never forget either.

Her being there, perhaps there will be a time when Emilia will be saved by that existence.

[Subaru: It never hurts to have more allies. What you can do isn't a problem… What is important is what you are willing to do, and what you will strive to able to do for that person. After all, if I am counting the number of things I can do, it'll look really bad for me…]

His merits and his deficiencies, Subaru could probably count with his fingers and figure out that he had more deficiencies. But even so, he wants to be her ally, and so he has to use the few things he does have to their full potential, and keep on going, one way or another.

With a to-hell-with-it attitude, with nothing to stop him, embracing this over-optimistic explanation,

[Subaru: We are definitely small, but let's do our best from now on. This is what we are, the very first members of the Emilia-faction!]

Making a fist and punching it out into the air, Subaru made his declaration.

Seeing that, Petra and Otto, having been left out, looked at each other's faces, and

[Otto: I never said that I'm a part of that faction, right? Please don't misunderstand, okay?]

[Petra: I want to be an ally of big sister too, but I don’t want to lose to her in what’s important…]

Otto looked appalled, holding his head. Petra, joining her hands behind her back, looked down and muttered hesitatingly.

But still, in the end, they succeeded in matching up their fist bumps, so that there could be no doubt remaining in any bystander’s mind that they totally knew what they were doing.

——The two days before setting out toward the Sanctuary, even though it was only a tiny step forward, there was something real in all of that, and, thinking this, the wait had already come to an end.

Chapter 6 [Along The Road To the Sanctuary]

[Frederica: I will not be able to accompany you, so please take care during your journey. Also, if you would, please tell the Master that Frederica is watching over the estate]

It was the morning of departure, and the dragon carriage was parked outside the front of the mansion. Coming to see them off, with these words, Frederica bent the small of her back in a bow.

Her form in her bow was so beautifully refined, that anyone receiving it would be intimidated into naturally straightening their backs.

In any case, receiving this, Subaru and Emilia met each other's gaze.

[Emilia: I am the one who should be sorry, I know how hectic things are right now… Roswaal is absent, and I really should be the one acting in his stead, yet……]

[Subaru: Anyway, Emilia and I are clueless when it comes to caring for the mansion. Even if I can handle routine tasks, everyone could see how much of an amateur I am when numbers are involved. I tried throwing Otto into all that to sort it out, but it's like sprinkling water on hot coals]

Looking at the results over the past two days, Subaru could only smile wryly at how futile their efforts had been.

He and Otto wandered aimlessly through the cluttered office, and the only thing they learned was that "it's impossible without any explanation from the one responsible" …That one statement pretty much summed up the extent of their progress.

Frederica seemed to have a rough idea, but it would take time to cover the discrepancy after her months of absence. Actually, thinking of how much work was involved in just maintaining the mansion, it wouldn't have been right to increase her workload even further.

Emilia had attentively taken care of some of the simple tasks, but aside from that, she had no choice but to plug her ears to the rest of it, even though she knew they would start piling up.

[Subaru: It's like that feeling when you put off doing your summer holiday's homework, and then the next thing you know, it's the first day of the new semester. But I was never the kind of guy who doesn't hand in his homework, though]

[Emilia: I don't really understand, but isn't that a good thing? Right now, I feel the complete opposite, and my chest reeealy hurts. It's not that I feel guilty, but I know it's not good to leave everything neglected like this]

[Subaru: It's not actually our fault, that's how I would rationalize it, but it's hard for Emilia-tan, isn't it? Well, I totally understand how unpleasant it feels to just watch things go from bad to worse…]

It was vexing, to have to neglect things that really shouldn't be put off. But while he could sympathize with Emilia's sense of guilt, it was also true that there was not much he could do to help.

In the end, he was insufficient, so the only thing to do is to call someone more competent:

[Otto: The ground dragons are all ready to go. Even though it's only been a few days since they exerted themselves, Natsuki-san's Patrasche looks like she's chafing at the bit to get going]

[Subaru: She's a good hard-working girl, isn't she? Her previous owner must have had an impressive character, unlike her current one… You think she can guide us there? It'd be horrible to get lost on the way and end up stranded]

The one who broke into their conversation was the man sitting in the driver's platform of the dragon carriage, conversing with the two ground dragons, Patrasche and Furufu ——— Otto.

Since the Divine Protection of "Anima Whispering" only applied to Otto, to a bystander, he just looked like he had a screw loose in his head while he was talking to the ground dragons, but Subaru didn't remark on it.

Not noticing that Subaru was sending him a heart-warming look, Otto only responded to his question with a straightforward [uh-huh], nodding.

[Otto: Frederica's directions were good, and there doesn't seem to be any problems. I'm sure we can make the trip in under half a day]

[Subaru: I see, I see……But, were you really planning on coming too?]

[Otto: Of course I am coming!!]

After Otto's gave his seal of approval on Patrasche's directions, Subaru nodded and moved on to his next question, to which Otto stomped noisily on the wooden platform, bulging his eyes.

[Otto: After all, this will be my first meeting with the Margrave. Sure, I was the one who asked you to introduce me, but imagining the kind of introduction you'd give if I wasn't there……It's too frightening, I can't just leave it to you!]

[Subaru: Oy oy, I'll get all flustered if you keep trusting me so much]

[Otto: Yeah, though we've only known each other for a short while, I already trust you120% ——I can be certain that Natsuki-san will alway do exactly what I don't want you to do!]

Subaru twisted his lips at these words, and Emilia, who had been listening silently up to now, let out a sudden burst of laughter.

The two men turned to the source of the laughter at the same time, and Emilia timidly raised up her hand,

[Emilia: Really, you two are such good friends. Whenever I see you together, you're always bickering so affectionately, it makes me kinda jealous]

[Subaru: If you want, I'll be affectionate toward Emilia-tan too, only I'll be flirting instead of bickering. I'll move Emilia-tan's bickering time to Otto's timeslot, and replace it with the affectionate time from Otto's timeslot]

[Otto: If you do that, there won't be anything between us except insults and fist fights!?]

Subaru was pretty confident in his skill with words and insults, but if it comes to fighting Otto in a melee, he's not entirely sure he could come out on top. Otto looks pretty genteel, but Subaru knew personally how strong he was.

In a previous loop, after a harsh exchange, Otto had thrown him off a carriage. Knowing that his opponent wasn't just a pushover, Subaru figured his chances were pretty slim if they ever ended up head-to-head.

[Subaru: Thinking about it like that, my combat abilities are crazy low. I knew that already, but it's still depressing]

Like previously mentioned, Subaru would lose to Otto, and it goes without saying that hecouldn't beat Emilia, who knows magic. He had already been demolished by Frederica, and there was no need to mention the sleeping Rem or the shut-in Beatrice. In that case, the only one Subaru had a chance against in the mansion was——

[Subaru: Come to think of it, the only one I've got a chance of beating is Petra, and I don't see her around. What gives?]

[Emilia: I'm scared to ask… but how did your train of thought shift to who you can beat? Anyway Petra has been in the mansion……oh, here she comes]

A bit astounded by Subaru's futile efforts to gain victory by process of elimination, Emilia looked toward the mansion, her purple eyes faintly flickering. Being affected, and looking toward the same direction, he saw the form of a girl swinging her sleeves in her brand-new maid's uniform as she ran up to where they stood.

[Petra: Wait, wait a minute. Suba-, Subaru-sama……!]

[Subaru: You don't need to rush, I wouldn't do something so heartless as leaving all of a sudden, only Otto would do something like that. Right, Otto?]

[Otto: Don't you remember what you just said three seconds ago!?]

Smiling at the out-of-breath girl, who was resting her hands on her knees, Subaru pulled Otto into the conversation with some light-hearted teasing as he waited for the girl to catch her breath. Then, wiping her brow softly, Petra looked up.

Her flushed cheeks and her big, round eyes looked adorable. She let out a long breath, releasing her fatigue, and shifted her angelic face into a smile.

[Petra: I wanted to give you this before you leave. Please take it with you]

With that, she held out her hand, revealing a simple handkerchief that seemed nothing out of the ordinary.

The edges of the white cloth were laced with a golden-color, and the tips of his fingers told him it was made with meticulous workmanship. Receiving it, he turned it over to look at the other side.

[Subaru: It's……embroidered. Oh, it's really good]

Sewn into the surface of the white cloth, was an embroidery that was most likely hand-stitched by Petra herself. It was done with grey, pink and black colored threads, and the design was something Subaru was very well acquainted with. Just then, Emilia, who had been peeking over his shoulder, let out a small laugh [Aha].

[Emilia: It's the same Puck you drew, Subaru. Oh wow, it's really well done]

[Subaru: My disfigured Puck, yeah this is really well done. There mustn't have been much time to study it either]

[Petra: I got the stamps after doing the Radeeo Calisthenics every morning]

Forgetting to speak politely, Petra pulled something out from around her neck. It was the stamp card Subaru had made and given out to the village children. ——Every morning when they participated in the radio calisthenics, he had stamped their cards with an image he'd engraved onto a sweet potato, in place of a real stamp.

She held in her hand the most recent stamp, the disfigured Puck's "Gloomy Monday". She must have worked hard, pricking her fingers as she sewed in the design.

[Subaru: It really is well done. As a Sewing Master, I can't afford to lose here]

[Petra: Will you take it……Ah, no. Would you please take it?]

[Subaru: It's actually, "Would you please accept this". ——Of course, I'll gladly accept it. It seems a shame to use it for wiping blood, sweat or tears, so I'll just keep it close as a good luck charm]

Carefully folding the handkerchief, Subaru tenderly, and with great care, put it into his chest pocket before looking back towards Petra. Then, as gently as he could——he looked to the vicious, narrowed eyes and the sharpened fangs filling up the diabolical smile that was currently pointed at Petra. Hearing his words, Petra placed both her hands on herblushing face and looked away.

[Petra: I shall await your safe return. Oh, and big sister and the noisy guy too]

[Emila: It kinda seems like I'm just an extra…]

[Otto: Wait, wasn't my assessment a little too harsh!?]

Emilia and Otto responded to Petra's words in turn, a wry smile making its way onto their faces. Subaru couldn't help but find himself smiling, as Petra seemed to think nothing of the dense pressure emanating from Frederica behind her.

He had no doubt that the moment they leave, Petra will be set upon Frederica's harsh education. Petra, live strong!

[Subaru: Well then, while it's hard to leave you all, we should be on our way]

[Emilia: If we spend too much time talking here, it'd have been meaningless to try to leave so early]

Subaru interjected, putting an end to the vibrant conversation, before hopping up into the cargo space of the dragon carriage. After that, he held out his hand,

[Subaru: If you would, Emilia-tan. Into my arms]

[Emilia: I'm sure it would be pleasant to see the scenery from the driver's platform once in awhile?]

[Subaru: Ahh, heartless! E · M · K (Emilia-tan Major Koakuma*)! ——Oh, wah!] *little-devil

Being treated so cruelly, Subaru was almost about to withdraw his hand, when it was pulled so forcefully that he nearly fell out of the carriage as Emilia passed casually beside him.

Her silver hair brushed against his nose as she went by, until she landed inside the dragon carriage with a tiny sound. Softly sitting down across from Subaru, she tilted her head looking at him,

[Emilia: Something wrong?]

[Subaru: Nope—, nothing—?]

With these words, Subaru loudly stomped his way over to where she was, and plunked himself down beside her. Considering the inside of the carriage was very spacious, Emilia smiled at Subaru's cramped use of it.

Otto, watching their exchange, grumbled [I can't stand being associated with you] as he sat down in the driver's seat, gripping the reins and looking up at the road ahead.

[Otto: Alright then, we're off. Take care not to bite your tongues please]

[Subaru: Right back at you, don't shake the carriage too much. And if you're going to suddenly apply the brakes ——please use the signal we talked about before. Without that, it'll be hard for me to time when to push Emilia-tan down]

[Emilia: You're thinking of something like that?]

[Otto: I! I never heard that devilish plot in my life! Wait, when did I get turned into an accomplice!?]

Emilia turned a gaze of near-disdain upon both Subaru and Otto, and didn't seem to acknowledge Otto's outcry at the false accusation. Thinking Otto's wailing at the injustice of it all suited himself well, as though that had nothing to do with him, Subaru lifted up his hand,

[Subaru: Alright. Destination: "Sanctuary". Let's be off——!]

[Otto: Who are you to say that!?]

Seeing Otto sulking in the driver's seat, Subaru replied [You aren't good at getting hyped, are you] complainingly, before sticking his head out the window to look at the two who were here see to them off,

[Subaru: Okay now, we're leaving the place in your care. Also……I'm counting on you… to take good care of Rem]

[Frederica: Please, leave it to me. In return, I leave Emilia-sama and the Master in your hands]

[Petra: Take care, and come back safe]

Subaru's voice held none of its usual playfulness, and as they prepared to depart, Frederica and Petra bowed in farewell.

After that stupidly formal exchange, this time, Subaru decisively ——well, unfortunately, not without some hesitation, severed his thoughts from the mansion.

[Subaru: Oy, we haven't left yet Otto? You're slo—w]

[Otto: I can't understand this treatment!!]

This exchange blowing away the rest of the tension, they set off for the Sanctuary.

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[Frederica: It seems I'm going to have to teach you to speak more politely, and bow properly again]

[Petra: I'm so sorry. It's just……I wanted to be cosseted, if only a little]

Petra quickly lowered her head, her gesture nearly perfectly imitating Frederica's teaching. She was a fast learner, and could take things in quickly, and was certainly a student worth teaching.

The exchange from a moment ago was understandable given her age, so there was no reason to scold her over such a minor thing.

[Frederica: I know that you have been close with Subaru-sama and Emilia-sama these past few days. Still, it is not good to forget that your relationship is that of servant and employer]

[Petra: ——Yes 'mam. I am deeply sorry]

The girl was conscious of the fact that her behavior had been selfish.

She could have behaved exactly as she had been taught, and seen Subaru and the rest off properly, but she had instead intentionally separated herself from her duties as a servant, and chose to see Subaru and the others off as just a simple girl… there must have been a reason for it, and perhaps the reason was small, but it was one she was unable to part with.

[Frederica: There is no propriety in discussing this further. Instead, as penance for what you did, you will be hand-copying extra texts this afternoon]

[Petra: Uuhh……Will the number of topics increase?]

[Frederica: You should have been prepared for at least that much. Then again, if you had already calculated this would be your punishment to make up for your actions, then I am quite looking forward to your future as my student]

Saying that, Frederica clapped her hands with a [Now then], continuing,

[Frederica: Even if Emilia-sama and the rest are out for now, Beatrice-sama is still in the mansion. We can't afford to become lax with meals and cleaning. If we don't finish quickly, there won't be enough time for studies. So Petra, hurry up and finish your tasks]

[Petra: Yes, 'mam. I'll go finish them in no time!]

Watching the young girl run off, her clothes flapping, Frederica's mouth softened ever so slightly, revealing her fangs. With a practiced motion, she covered the smile with her hand, and looked towards the direction where the no longer visible dragon carriage had gone ——towards Emilia and the rest who had departed from the mansion.

[Frederica: It is as you said it would be, Master. Whether they can overcome the "Sanctuary" or not, is up to Emilia-sama and Subaru-sama now]

Closing her eyes, she let the gentle wind wash over her.

[Frederica: Will Emilia-sama be able to overcome it? Bound with the Witch's blood, that inescapable impasse that is the garden of paradise——]

[Subaru: So, Puck hasn't shown his face yet, after all?]

[Emilia: No, he hasn't. I do call out to him, and I still feel his existence inside the crystal but…… this is the first time he has gone missing for this long, so I'm kind of worried.]

In the smoothly galloping dragon carriage, sitting together, only Subaru and Emilia's voices resounded in the car.

Under the Divine Protection of "Wind Evasion", the sound of the wind and all the noises outside were almost completely cut off from the dragon carriage. Even while running with such great speed, the near absence of turbulence or sound all made it feel like being in something of a dream.

Perhaps, this was the same luxurious feeling that might be felt while riding in the premium seats of the Shinkansen Bullet Trains, but Subaru never had a chance to experience those seats, and not even the normal seats, for that matter.

Anyway, in the quiet interior of the carriage, the words exchanged between them can be heard crisp and clear. And here, the topic of their conversation drifted to the change that had been bothering them for the past few days —— namely, the absence of the one that was usually by Emilia's side, that father-figure cat who was always thwarting Subaru's advances on Emilia… Puck.

[Subaru: Now that I think about it, he had not shown up since before we returned to the Mansion… The last time we saw him was…]

[Emilia: For me was it in the Capital City, when we were in Crusch-sama's Mansion. I thought everything was very normal, but I couldn't meet him again after that morning. Even when I call him, he doesn't show up…… I was worried if I had made him angry or something]

Looking down, Emilia played with the tips of her hair, trying not to show her face to Subaru. These few days, her silver hair had been fixed in a braid.

Seeing Subaru stare at her, as if understanding the intention behind his gaze, she nodded [Yes],

[Emilia: The final contract I made with Puck the last time I saw him was "Keeping my hair in a braid". After that, I had not been told what to do, so I kept it as it is.]

[Subaru: Your hairstyle is your contract with Puck? Really? That's really light…… isn't it? Although, it's said that hair is the life of a woman, so that's as if Puck's contract is holding a life…]

[Emilia: I think that is a reeally light price to pay. I didn't know this until I got out of the forest, but for getting into contract with a spirit like Puck, conditions like this one are way too light. Roswaal was also very surprised. In reality, you apparently need to have humongous amounts of Mana or complicated terms]

Seeing Emilia loosening the corners of her lips as she said this, Subaru nodded as if thinking of something. But then, he quickly lifted up his jaw to shake Emilia off of her weakened smile,

[Subaru: Well, for restricting even a little bit of Emilia-tan's time, for me, I would say that is a really heavy price]

[Emilia: Lines like that, if you keep saying it so lightly it would become superficial. If it was something important then it would be better to keep them for important timings, I think]

Emilia voiced her objections at how Subaru was finding more and more ways to flirt. On the other end, Subaru slightly raised both his hands and shook his head,

[Subaru: The secret lines reserved to tell Emilia-tan in important scenes are kept separately. This one was for daily life, one of the many lighter things to say to Emilia-tan]

[Emilia: Really, Subaru, you have a silver tongue. ……Oh no, maybe my face is red so don't look!]

Seeing Emilia suddenly hold up her palms to cover her face, Subaru laughed, confirming he got what he wanted. And, trying to bring the conversation back on topic, he continued with [Well…]

[Subaru: Since Puck is absent, there are some serious concerns in the combat aspect of this trip. We can't rely on Otto for fighting, and I'm obviously no good at all. And, Emilia-tan is also not as tough without Puck, right?]

[Emilia: Oh, you say things like that, huh. But I'll have you know, I can still use magic when Puck's not here. It's not just Puck, I have contracts with micro-spirits too. I have no problem communicating with them, so I can fight. I will protect you no matter what happens.]

[Subaru: Oh no, so manly… That'll mean I'm way too pathetic, aren't I… Those words, I myself will eventually say them to Emilia-tan one day, so please wait]

[Emilia: I'll be waiting without any expectations]

As if proving Emilia's words, coming nearer, and gathering closer onto Emilia's fingertips, the micro spirits appeared drifting, shining. While they looked like Julius' demi-spirits, their existences seemed weaker in comparison —— and though their power was a world away from Puck's, at least, they certainly didn't appear to be a collection of defenseless beings.

The only girl in the group, and the one he has a crush on, no less… having to rely on her for protection would really be embarrassing…

[Subaru: That said, my reliance on other people hasn't changed much since the battle with the White Whale. I was completely dependent on Rem then, and even before that……wait, was there never a time when I worked everything out on my own!?]

Of course, that was the story from his perspective, and it might have been too much of an undervaluation.

But in any case, since there was no one with enough information to find fault with this conclusion, Subaru's horrified reaction upon realizing all this was just passed off.

[Subaru: Well, Sanctuary, huh. Actually, what kind of a place could it be…]

After a bit of self-reflection, he gazed out at the scenery outside through a little window, muttering this under his breath.

Right now, to Subaru, the Sanctuary was a place of absolute unknown. The sound of the name itself did not give off a very dangerous impression, but Frederica's warnings as she spoke of the Sanctuary weighed heavily his mind. Out of those words,

[Subaru: "Beware of Garfiel", huh]

[Emilia: You hadn't met him yet either, right, Subaru? I have only heard the name too, and Frederica didn't tell me in detail either]

As if following Subaru's mutterings, Emilia's neat eyebrows narrowed anxiously as well. The scene that emerged in her mind, was probably the same as the one in Subaru's.

The scene of Frederica's warning, to be wary of the man named Garfiel but refusing to say any more.

Even when Subaru voiced his dissatisfaction at the tiny amount of information he had been given, she only stubbornly rejected, saying [It is because of my Oath], and would not say another word. Emilia and Subaru, not knowing what to do, did not push her further.

[Subaru: I really should've gotten more out of her… Knowing full well he's a dangerous character, she's sending us there with only a name, it's just too much]

[Emilia: It can't be helped, it's an Oath. *Agreements are Holy and Inviolable, never to be breached. Contracts and Oaths and Pacts, though they vary in gravity, must all be kept equally*]

Swinging her raised finger, Emilia recited this to Subaru as if instructing him.

Contracts and Oaths and Pacts, like a word-game they flew into his ears, and the question suddenly coming into his mind, he let it slip from his lips,

[Subaru: So, between Emilia-tan and Puck is a Contract. Between Frederica and Roswaal is an Oath out of moral obligation. And then, the agreement exchanged between the Dragon and the Kingdom, is a Pact…… am I right? Or did I get something wrong?]

[Emilia: It isn't separated out so distinctly, but as I understand it, Contracts are between individuals, Oaths are made when one party swears to another, and Pacts are agreements that transcend individuals, and transcend even Time… That's how I was taught, at least]

[Subaru: I see. It does fit that understanding of it…]

Nodding to Emilia's explanation, Subaru proceeded to violently scratch his head, and continued with [But still],

[Subaru: It's adorned with such lofty words, though… *Agreements are Holy and Inviolable,* right?]

[Emilia: Agreements…… Promises are important things. Of course, Oaths, and even Contracts have no force to protect them. It isn't there, but still, we keep promises. We work hard to keep them, right? Even if no one is watching, or no one realizes it, Promises are kept. Whether it's the other person or myself, we would do our best to keep it]

Holding her hands to her chest, Emilia locked her gaze on Subaru, who had asked the question so lightly. The tone of her voice was gentle, and there was no sense of blaming him… but his heart hurt all the more because of it.

[Emilia: Because we believe this, we give our word, and work hard to fulfill them. Because promises are kept to protect the trust between one another, right?]

[Subaru: About that… I am really sorry——— !]

In the interior of the carriage, without the slightest hint of turbulence, Subaru fell onto the floor and dropped his head straight in front of him.

Seeing him rubbing his forehead on the floor in a full DOGEZA*, for a moment, Emilia flapped her eyelids in astonishment, then a few seconds later, reflecting on what she just said combined with Subaru's current movements, she seemed to understand.

*(*Dogeza is falling prostrate and pressing one's forehead and hands on the ground, for kneeling to one's lord or when praying to a God. Tappei wrote DOGEZA in English in the Japanese text :3)*

[Emilia: Oh, I wasn't blaming you or anything. Well it is true that you didn't keep your promise, and then didn't even apologize, and instead turned on me, so it's true that I had gone like "what's this!"…]

[Subaru: Ow ow ow my ears hurt!]

[Emilia: But then, after thinking about it, I realized I was being unfair and was only seeing my side of things. I should have gone to reconcile with Subaru right after but I was so obstinate, that I didn't, so it was also my fault. Really, sorry]

[Subaru: Ow ow ow my chest hurts!]

[Emilia: Agreements and things like that, maybe they are deeper and heavier for me… because I am a Spirit-Arts user, contracts are more vital to me than to normal people. Spirit-Arts users must honor our contracts with spirits above all else, and that's why I'm over-sensitive when it comes to this…… Yeah, so promises are a reeeaally big deal for me. Now that I think about it, Subaru, reflect on what you did]

[Subaru: Ow ow ow my heart hurts!]

While she was blurting all this out, as if remembering everything Subaru put her through, Emilia started to pout. Sensing this, Subaru pressed his head down even harder.

It was clear now, why she was so infuriated with him in the Royal Palace.

It was not just anger due to a broken promise. For her, the promise in itself meant something far more, and far heavier. When Subaru had broken it so lightly, even a soft-hearted person such as herself could not stay calm.

Because, without realizing, Subaru had trampled on something very important in Emilia's heart.

[Emilia: Did you, reflect on your actions now?]

[Subaru: I repent. Deeper than the oceans, higher than the mountains, wider than the skies, and more expansive than the cosmos.]

[Emilia: Alright, I forgive you]

Softly poking Subaru in the forehead as he looked up, Emilia then touched her finger to her lips, smiling lightly. Relieved that there was no hint of anger from her, and also because her next movement was so adorable, Subaru found himself unable to connect his words.

Not paying any mind to the way Subaru was moving his mouth like a breathing fish, Emilia turned to look to the road ahead, and,

[Emilia: The Sanctuary, and Garfiel. And Roswaal, and everyone from the village…… there are so many people to talk to, right now my heart is already pounding]

[Subaru: Don’t worry, I would never let Emilia-tan be put in any danger. Please trust your second shield, myself]

[Emilia: You’re the second? Then, who’s the first?]

[Subaru: Right now, he’s driving the dragon carriage and flirting with my Patrasche]

Looking at Subaru, who had just named Otto as a meat shield without his consent, this time, Emilia couldn’t hold it in and burst out laughing. Watching her breaking out in laughter, Subaru was content, and in his mind, he wondered how many obstacles will be waiting for them in their road ahead.

Ever since he came to this world, he had been presented with one problem after another without a moment’s rest.

Even along the road to the Sanctuary, worries and expectations of what lies in store in that unknown land were brewing within his heart. Anyhow, Frederica herself had instigated it, and Roswaal and the fact that the other villagers had not returned only added to his doubts, and there was Subaru’s own inability to get Puck to come out, and… what he left in the mansion… worried him to no end.

[Emilia: Were you, thinking about Rem-san?]

[Subaru: ……You can tell?]

Subaru had suddenly fell silent. Gazing at the side of his face, Emilia tilted her head.

Her silver hair slid off of her shoulder as she did so, and lifting the tip her braid with her fingers and swinging it side to side, she said, [I can], and,

[Emilia: Just like the way you always look at me, I’d think about Subaru the same way, too]

[Subaru: So that means, Emilia-tan, you are thinking about me all the time?]

[Emilia: Oh, actually take it as half of half of half of that]

[Subaru: That means 3 hours…..!]

[Emilia: Half of half of half of……]

[Subaru: I’ll get hurt if I hear the exact number, so no more!]

Calling out to stop Emilia, who had been trying to calculate the exact realistic number, Subaru dropped a small sigh and scratched his cheek, and,

[Subaru: I’ve entrusted her to Frederica and Petra, so there is no need to worry. There shouldn’t be…… but still, this anxiety that shouldn’t be welling up in me, I can’t explain it in words]

[Emilia: You worry because you are worried, it can’t be helped. It just means that’s how important she is to you. To be thought about like that, I’m actually a little bit jealous]

[Subaru: Let me say this right now, I feel just as strongly about Emilia-tan…… wait, you just tricked me into saying that, right?]

[Emilia: Yes, I was being mean. Sorry]

Sticking out her tongue, through that one act she forgave it all.

In front of Subaru, who couldn't help but make gargle sounds with his throat, Emilia said [But…] looking up at him,

[Emilia: The one you're even more worried about is Beatrice, right?]

[Subaru:……Unless, Emilia-tan, are our hearts connected to each other? The "GOOD END" is already in sight!]

[Emilia: Usually you would go "There's no way I'm worried" even though you are, but today, you didn't even say that. It must mean you are really worried]

Being hit right on the mark, Subaru almost let out a "Guu", and bit his lips with a vexed expression on his face.
But he quickly snapped out of it, and

[Subaru: Worried? I'm not worried or anything. It's just, breaking off with a fight like that, I couldn't meet with her again afterwards. So leaving the Mansion without seeing her again left me with a bit of a bad feeling, that's all. Yeah, just a little bit. Just that tiny bit, just the tip]

[Emilia: That sounded a bit dirty to me, maybe I'm thinking too much into it…]

[Subaru: You're not imagining it, that was just me]

Hiding his happiness at getting the reaction he was aiming for, Subaru looked at Emilia, who tilted her head, still smiling slightly as if not understanding a thing, and

[Subaru: If Beako's hikikomori problem gets worse, being originally a hikikomori myself, I'd feel some kind of responsibility…]

[Emilia: Hikikomori…… Subaru, you know a lot about that right? Beatrice, is she coming out?]

[Subaru: It'd be really hard, actually. Without finding a good opportunity, just pulling her out forcefully isn't good, but then taking too much time would be indulging her too much. Those hikikomori are such a pain in the ass to…… Wait! I was one myself!]

After that stupid ending, he tried to correct the direction of the conversation again.

After all, since they were heading to the Sanctuary right now, it wouldn't be something they'll deal with until their return.

[Subaru: After I get back, I'll have to talk over a lot of things with Beako. Last time, I couldn't get her to tell me any of the things I wanted to know]

[Emilia: Beatrice and Puck, it feels like they know all sorts of things, and are hiding them from us]

[Subaru: I get the same feeling. Even with Frederica, but then, everyone associated with that Mansion has a habit of saying something suggestive and then leaving the answers out for later. It's like a disease already. Not the good kind of disease, either. And that Beako, returning the Gospel like that, saying things that I still can't get out of my mind…]

The Gospel, which Beatrice had thrown back at him along with her mystifying words, is currently safely in Subaru's keeping. If it was just going to be a nuisance, he could have left it behind, but in the worst case, he could interrogate Roswaal about it, so he brought it along with him.

But because it was so creepy, he kept it at the very bottom of his bag, as if quietly hiding it from sight.

[Emilia: ——I think we've entered the forest]

Emilia, suddenly lifting her face, and brushing away the hair from her forehead, said this as she looked all around. Following her, Subaru also raised his head, but from inside the carriage he could not see it right away. Stepping toward the window and peeking out, it's true that the colors outside had become deepened with green.

[Subaru: You didn't even look outside but you could tell, huh]

[Emilia: Even though it's mixed, it's because I have Elf's blood in me. They say that Elves are the race of the Forests, and so the Elves and the Forests have an inseparable bond——]

Then, just as Emilia said this with a fleeting smile,

A sudden, subtle sensation shocked Subaru's skin, and he looked around to see what it was. But of course, the impact that surged through the surroundings, was not something his eyes could see.

Inside the carriage, the Divine Protection of "Wind Evasion" still separated out the rest of the world.

But,

[Subaru: ——!? Hey, hey!]

[———]

Emilia's slender body was swaying powerlessly, and just like that, began to fall, and Subaru, sliding in, managed to catch her just in time.

Her momentum stopped by his embrace, lying feebly in his arms, Emilia's eyes were closed, on her face was a pained expression as she lay faintly panting.

[Subaru: Wait, Emilia-tan!? What happened, Emilia!?]

Emilia couldn't seem to reply. She looked as if she was in pain, but other than her shallow, accelerated breathing and her excruciating expression, there was no sign of fever or even sweating.

Lifting her up lightly in his arms, Subaru immediately realized he could not deal with this by himself. So, rushing to the front, he stuck his head through the small window connecting to the driver's platform, and

[Subaru: Otto! Something's wrong, Emilia suddenly collapsed! Do you have any medicine or……]

[Otto: Oh– Natsuki-san, sorry]

Subaru's impatient words trailed off. Otto, at whom he had thrown these words, had sweat forming on his forehead. Turning to Subaru, he replied with a voice that seemed to have lost all strength.

Subaru noticed two things— The first, was that the carriage had stopped. Patrasche and Furufu had halted their steps, and were standing still between the trees. So overwhelming was his emotion in the previous moments that had not even realized that the carriage had stopped, but now, there was another, even more serious problem.

That was the second thing he noticed,

[???: Just waltz'n in straight from th'front, y'got some nerve, stranger]

As if spitting out the words, unlike the literal content of what he was saying, there was not the slightest hint of friendliness in the way he said it.

With only this one sentence, one could almost grasp the character of the person who spoke those words.

True to that impression, the man flaunting himself in front of the dragon carriage looked exactly what he sounded like.

With spiky short blonde hair, a white scar prominent on his forehead, the sharp leer of his eyes did not lose to Subaru's in their viciousness, and like that of a feline beast, the canine-teeth in his jaws peered out, exceedingly white. His curling, slouching back made him seem rather short for a man, but the darkly ferocious aura emanating from his entire body removed any inclination to underestimate him for his small stature.

[???: D'know where th'hell y'came from, but y'look like'a "*stake goes through with'a brittle point*" kind o'guy]

[Subaru: Huh, wha?]

Hearing a strange idiom he had never heard before, Subaru only let out a confused moan, but his opponent, listening, must have taken it for fear, and with a dismissing laugh [Hah],

[???: Oh? Y'scared eh. But's true y'struck some bad luck. After all, th'place y'tried t'sneak into was'a *place*, an'what's more, y'ran right into ME]

The man laughed viciously, clacking his fangs as he laughed, and, putting his fists together, he lowered his stance, ready for battle. And in that posture, he looked up with a glare at his silent adversary,

[Garfiel: Meet'n up with GARFIEL was th'end of y'luck. Now GET WRECKED like'a "*PAZO-MAZO RIGHT AN'LEFT*"!]

The punk who named himself, cussing incomprehensibly, thumped his foot into the ground.

And the moment after, the overwhelming impact, as if reversing the world, struck Subaru.

Chapter 7 [The Trial Grounds]

The moment the punk pressed his foot into the ground, Subaru felt the illusion as if the world had tilted.

Of course, in reality, such a thing could not possibly happen. Even the largest human could not hope to disturb the foundations of the world with a simple stamp of the foot, and the sheer weight of the earth would not budge so easily.

So, the tilting of the world can only be Subaru's illusion.

What had actually happened, was that starting from the point where Garfiel's placed down his foot, a wave spread out in the ground, and like flipping a piece of tatami, it tossed the dragon carriage into the air as it passed.

[Subaru: Impossible――― Uwah!?]

Like on the end of a see-saw, the sensation of upward momentum reached its peak, and then, as if floating, the dragon carriage glided through the air. Along with the ground dragons Patrasche and Furufu, just about exceeding one ton in weight combined, they were all blown flying. Inside the carriage, Subaru only held Emilia close within in his embrace.

Then, just like that, the dragon carriage slammed onto the ground, the sheer force of the impact sent its entire frame, inside and out, gnashing and creaking against itself. It was a high-quality dragon carriage. Its luxury did not stop at its glamorous appearance, for its quality was evidenced both in terms of comfort and durability, and this was demonstrated perfectly by the fact that it managed to avert total destruction just now. But still, in the half rolled over dragon carriage, there was no way to immediately escape.

In other words, since escape is no longer an option, the only choice remaining is to stand and fight.

[Subaru: Damn it, what was th―――]

Shaking his head, which was still hanging out of the window to the coachman's platform, Subaru held a hand to his aching forehead. He had struck his head on the way down, but fortunately, other than the pain, there was no lesion or bleeding. Suddenly remembering, he looked down, and saw, lying in his arms, Emilia was unharmed.

A surge of relief washed over him, but this emotion was soon replaced by the anxiety of being reminded that the culprit who caused this was still outside.
Quickly lifting up his head, the dreaded sight that met Subaru's gaze was――――

[Subaru: Patrasche――――!!]

Screeching, fangs bared, the enormous jet-black ground dragon leapt toward the scrawny figure.

Making use of the loosened connection to the dragon carriage, with a twist of her body, Patrasche broke free and with rapid movements she set off against the assailant for a counter-attack.

With pointed fangs as sharp as blades, the power of her jaw can slice through human flesh and crush through bone and still have strength to spare. With speed like the wind, she aimed for Garfiel's neck, about to tear it to shred without a single question asked.

[Garfiel: Excitin' choice. Good groun'dragon…… No, yer a good girl, aren't ya. Hell, "the sound o'breaking bones' a sign o'love" astheysay]

[————!]

Lodged in her closing jaws, was the front end of an outstretched arm that should by all accounts have been completely shredded.

Garfiel had held out his right arm against Patrasche's bite. And the ground dragon, zeroing in on the target, chomped down on the wrist, ripping the forearm arm clean off, and then fell upon the torso… or at least, that was what should have happened.

But instead, Patrasche froze in place. Not only her body, but even her jaw clamping on the arm lodged inside stopped moving completely.

Was some special ability being used, or was it caused by magic?

This question turned in Subaru's mind, but soon, Garfiel's action answered his doubts. Expanding the muscles of his lodged arm, it completely overpowered the force of Patrasche's jaw, stretching it open wider and wider.

[Garfiel: G'job, you. Got goin' right away, and still not givin' up, even better. Y'passed!]

[————!]

The jet-black ground dragon lowered her body, still clenching with her mouth she twisted her waist. The strength of her jaw sealed on the man's right wrist, she swung her tail whooshing upwards to swipe him flying. Subaru took a blow from her tail once, but, watching Patrasche's movements now, it's immediately obvious how much she had been holding back that time.

Literally putting her whole body behind the blow, she directed all her hostility into striking the body that was left completely open. But even so, it was casually stopped in its tracks by Garfiel's left hand.

A dry cracking sound rang out, and after the shock dissipated, all that remained was a hand grabbing onto the end of a tail. His right hand in her jaws, his left hand holding her tail, Garfiel smiled, revealing his beast-like fangs.

[Garfiel: Won't hurt ya. Sleep tight]

Making a wide swing with his arm, like some kind of joke, the circular trajectory of its motion carried Patrasche's massive body gliding through the air. Then, all of a sudden laterally spinning

with an inconceivable sensation of weightlessness, Patrasche's eyes filled with confusion as she was gently tossed to the ground.

Her massive body barely bounced as it landed, and then silence: Patrasche had been defeated. In front of this scene, Subaru's parched throat let out a groan of disbelief,

[Subaru: H, he threw Patrasche?]

[Garfiel: Such'a loyal nature. Tossed y'out gently, shouldn't hurt. Let's finish this before ya get up!]

Disregarding the stunned Subaru, Garfiel lifted up his face and hopped onto the coachman's stand. Lying on the slanted coachman's stand was Otto, in a broken-looking posture, and he tried to stand up as the attacker leaped over.

[Otto: Guh…… but, don't underestimate me! I am a traveling merchant you know! I am totally prepared for getting mugged by thugs on the road during my business. So come on, but if you rather not fall victim to the "Suwen-Family-Ryu-Thug-Repulsion-Technique" I suggest you surrender now…… Hoowah!]

[Garfiel: Shut up, ham. What d'ya think yer doin with yer weakass skills, takin me on? Go take'a nap]

Right after striking a fighting pose, full of spirit, Otto instantly crumbled when Garfiel, suddenly coming up to him, gave him a flick in the forehead.

The flick —— or more accurately, the close-range middle finger strike, with what sounded like tremendous force, sent Otto's wiry body flying off of the coachman's platform. Holding his forehead in what looked like agony, he passed out without a word. Regardless of whether he was dead or alive, he was no longer an obstacle.

[Garfiel: Now, by th'looks of it, yer the only one left]

Snorting, the punk turned with a sharp look that could cut a man in half, murmuring.

Standing on the coachman's platform, the distance between him and Subaru was only about four paces —— but considering the way he had instantly closed his distance with Otto, there might as well be no distance between them at all.

Gasping down his breath, Subaru racked his brain but could not think of a single plan to break through. The only fighting force that might have been able to resist this man, Emilia, was still unconscious after her inexplicable collapse. But no matter what happens, he must protect her.

[Subaru: I'm……]

[Garfiel: "Flip it this way or that yer skin's still blue", I don't wanna hear it——!]

With the sound of a light tap on the floor, in the blink of an eye, Garfiel's short figure appeared in front of Subaru's face. Above, the raised arm had its five fingers spread open, and it was easy to imagine the future where the claws would swing down, ripping his stunned body apart.

And in the face of that future where his limbs would be ripped apart, there was only one thing Subaru could think to do: to prevent the damage from reaching Emilia in his arms, and to protect her with his life.

[————!]

——A few seconds passed, or perhaps it was longer.

His eyes tightly shut, shielding Emilia with his entire body, the time Subaru spent waiting for the shock to come dragged on to the point of confusion. Then, hesitantly opening his eyes, he found the five fingers spread out motionless in front of his face. Behind it, there was a perplexed look in the punk's eyes.

Keeping his gaze on Subaru, who could not help but hold his breath, he twisted his own head from side to side, making loud cracking noises with the bones in his neck.

[Garfiel: Instead of striking back y'prioritized protectin' the girl, the hell was that. After yer dead she'll be next anyway. Wasn't that a terrible decision?]

Being hit with a sound argument that he really didn't want to hear, Subaru, going through all sorts of reasons, couldn't come up with a reply. The silence making him even more displeased, Garfiel waved his sharp-clawed hand.

[Garfiel: Well, yer too slow anyway. Make a move or not, there probably wasn't much hope. You're all pretty useless either way]

[Subaru: Y, you are……]

[Garfiel: Hah?]

Remarking on their ineptitude, Garfiel gave out his merciless assessment. And as Subaru was trying to move his frozen throat, attempting to squeeze out a question, Garfiel's vicious-looking face twisted up with displeasure, and moved in even closer to Subaru's face.

[Garfiel: You're whisperin, gotta speak up. C'mon]

[Subaru: You are Garfiel…… correct? You are acquainted with Roswaal and Frederica?]

[Garfiel: ——Frederica?]

Confirming Subaru's word, for the first time, Garfiel's expression lost its aggression. Looking astounded, like a carnivorous beast that had lost the scent of blood, for an instant, he seemed almost cute and tame, but, immediately concealing it again with a bitter expression,

[Garfiel: Why d'ya know that name …… No, wait. That woman you're holdin', is the silver haired…… Half-Witch?]

[Subaru: She's a Half-Elf. Don't you dare use that name in front of her]

[Garfiel: ——Hyah. Whatsthiswhatsthis, y'got some spirit got allofasudden]

Glancing down at Emilia, Subaru suddenly exploded back at the utterance of that derogatory name. The fear of moments before all disappeared in the face of pure rage, and Garfiel, hearing this, clicked his fangs together noisily, full of glee.

[Garfiel: Say, isntshe that rumored Emilia-sama? Now, a “Half-Witch” showing up around here could only have everything to do with Roswaal]

[Subaru: Son of a……]

Ignoring Subaru’s previous words, Garfiel said “Half-Witch” again with special emphasis. Hearing this, Subaru stood up, but was immediately stopped by Garfiel’s hand.

[Garfiel: “The dumbass who bites on molten iron only gets hurt” right. You don have a chance against me. Look at the difference in strength eh? ——I don’t want you to get hurt, y’know?]

Making a fist with his outstretched hand, he cracked his knuckle-bones as a warning. Their respective strengths are obvious, without knowing his intentions, it’s better not to make things any worse by resisting. To press down his anger and wait for another chance to get his revenge, would be the wisest course of action.

That’s why,

[Subaru: …Eat shit]

[Garfiel: Hah?]

[Subaru: I don’t want to get hurt. And you’ll beat me up pretty easily I guess. But. ——I can’t stand by while you continue to say things that will make this girl sad]

Gently laying Emilia down on the luggage stand, lightly touching the hair on her forehead, Subaru stood up staring at Garfiel at a distance so close that their foreheads almost touched. A distance within each other’s breaths, a distance within each other’s reach.

[Subaru: Take back that bullshit name… and never use it again]

[Garfiel: ……You want me to do what you say? But you don’t got what it takes, do you? Your face, your gut, your shin, you want them all to get wrecked, yeah?]

[Subaru: Go ahead and try. But don’t expect me to go down for free, though… If you punch my face I’ll bite you, if you strike my gut I’ll grab you, if you hit my shin I’ll spit on you, and I will be paying you back tooth for tooth]

Responding to intimidation with intimidation, Subaru was carried up by the surge passion burning in his chest. In front of him, the hostile aura quietly emanating from Garfiel sent shivers circling all over his body. Quite literally, Subaru could be flicked away in a second if Garfiel wanted to. Judging from his offense and defense so far, this was all too obvious.

Of the strongest people Subaru had met in this Parallel World up to now, Garfiel might easily hold a place among them. Perhaps without reaching the level of Reinhardt at the pinnacle, he could, nevertheless, conceivably take on Wilhelm or Julius.

So even as Subaru's words took back a little bit of ground, the probability of him actually retaliating was really equal to zero.

But still, Subaru and Garfiel stared squarely into each other's eyes.

Even knowing he will lose, he refused to back down… because the reason he cannot back down was just behind him…

[Garfiel: ——Hihaha]

[Subaru: ——Hah?]

…It was an unexpected voice that sounded completely out of place.
In the middle of their standoff, Garfiel's laugh leaked out, cutting into the space between them. Subaru let out a confused groan, and Garfiel responded with his action,

[Garfiel: Hiyahahaha! Yer prettygood with words eh. Y'reallydiditdidntyer!]

[Subaru: Wha…… Ow! Hey, wha wait, ow, st-, ow that really hurts!]

Breaking out into a wide laugh that shook his shoulders, Garfiel heartily patted Subaru in the shoulder. But even without the slightest hint of hostility or intention to attack, and even as he was holding back, the gesture, purely seeking friendly contact, was nevertheless cutting down Subaru's health points in large chunks at a time.

[Garfiel: G'job, y'passed! Went straight through! Th'Half-Witch…… Half-Elf, though I don't like'em much, you have guts protectin her, I'll respect that]

[Subaru: It's good you came around…… But it really hurts! When are you going to stop patting me? Are you trying to kill me!?]

His enthusiasm unabated, Garfiel's arm dropped, and Subaru moved a bit further away. Seeing this, the punk tilted his neck, then crossed his powerful arms, and,

[Garfiel: So cold. All that stuff is water under th'bridge now, so c'mon and forget it already. When a man acts petty it means his thing is petty too, y'know]

[Subaru: That's the first time I heard you use an idiom that sounds familiar…… but my thing is totally none of your business! A-n-y-w-a-y!]

Garfiel shook around a little and gestured with his finger. But seeing him lift up his chin looking smug, Subaru threw his words back at him roughly.

[Subaru: You're Garfiel, and acquainted with Roswaal, right? Even though we had a fright when we came into contact all of a sudden, there's no more hostility between us now, right?!]

[Garfiel: Will ya quit making a fuss, it's getting annoying. Don't panic I won't eat ya]

[Subaru: Who do you think will believe that after that savage attitude a moment ago haaaah……?]

Sticking his fingers in his ears with irritation, Garfiel responded to Subaru's objections with a [Y'got a point I guess] as if understanding him. Even though he's incomprehensible sometimes, it's a great relief to see that they can communicate with words. And then, having escaped the dire circumstances, Subaru remembered,

[Subaru: Yeah…… Hey this is no time for that! Emilia collapsed all of a sudden, what am I doing talking normally just now]

[Garfiel: Collapsed, y'mean the Half-Elf? Oy, of course she collapsed. Where do you think this is? What you panickin' about?]

Rushing over to Emilia's side, he found her still asleep and breathing irregularly, as if in pain. As Subaru was worrying by her side, Garfiel didn't seem to think much of it, and only shrugged. Noticing his knowing expression, Subaru asked [What do you mean?], which brought an incredulous frown onto Garfiel's face,

[Garfiel: Y'already heard from Roswaal and Frederica what this place was, right? They must have…… No way, y'don't know?]

Even as he was just beginning to explain, Subaru shook his head from side to side, and Garfiel clicked his tongue in frustration. Spitting out [Th'pervert bastard……], it was easy to see who that insult was referring to.

[Garfiel: Frederica didn't say anything either? That's messed up, before y'know it her personality'll become like her owner's. Hopeless]

Shaking his head, Garfiel snorted out in irritation. Then, noticing Subaru's questioning eyes, he raised up his hand and said [Yeah I gettit I gettit], and,

[Garfiel: It looks pret'bad, but her life's in no danger. Only, if you don't want to see any more of that pain on her face, we needa get goin' right away. I'll guide you up to th'village]

[Subaru: When we move from here, her consciousness will return?]

[Garfiel: That's what I been sayin' isntit. Hurry up, we're gonna go, oy, how long are ya gonna keep sleepin? Get up]

Even though there wasn't much explanation, Garfiel didn't seem intent on explaining further. Turning around without even trying to conceal his thuggish expression, he went out and gave Otto a kick. Receiving the kick, the "still-passed-out" Otto let out a painful yelp [A-uu].

[Garfiel: Yer the driver aren't yer, son of'a. I'll set the turned'over carriage upright, and y'drive it up to the village. If yer slow I'll kick yer ass flying, yeah?]

[Otto: Say, what's with this situation!? Following what I just heard, I get the feeling I'm just on the losing end of everything!]

Hearing this unacceptable version of things, Otto boiled, suddenly standing up to voice his objection to Garfiel. Considering the beating he got just a few minutes ago, this must have

seemed tremendously courageous, and Garfiel, who appeared to share this opinion, turned to look at Subaru,

[Garfiel: Oy. This guy, is he always such an energetic bastard?]

[Otto: If you ask that guy there's no way you'll get a proper appraisal so please stop that! Can't you just make your own observation of what I am! And apologize! Please apologize!!]

[Garfiel: Hah!? The hell, son of'a bitch's healthy lively all of'a sudden, ya underestimatin' me? Yeah I beat up a guy that didn't need a beatin', get over it!]

[Subaru: Can the two of you shut up! Emilia is still in pain, hurry up and grab the reins! And you, get the dragon carriage upright!]

While the three men were making a commotion, and started cursing at each other on the coachman's stand… placed aside on the luggage bed, Emilia, who had been unconsciousness up to now, still didn't wake up. However, a faint frown was stirring up on her pretty face, irritated by the noise,

[Emilia: ……Shut up]

She murmured in a little voice, as if talking in her sleep.

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[Garfiel: Didn't introduce m'self did I? Name's Garfiel…… Ah, just Garfiel 's good. The strongest man alive. Need anything, just ask]

[Subaru: Oh, I'm Natsuki Subaru …… Eh? What was that? You said you're the strongest? Are you saying that sober?]

As the dragon carriage got moving, sitting face-to-face inside, Subaru and Garfiel exchanged their self-introductions. Seeing Subaru suddenly pull back his outstretched hand with an astonished look, Garfiel also took on an incredulous expression,

[Garfiel: Isn't that what I said? What's so strange 'bout that?]

[Subaru: No no, I just never expected to meet someone who'd straight-out say "I'm the strongest man alive". Even so, isn't saying that going a bit too far?]

[Garfiel: Y'don't think I'm fit to be the strongest?]

[Subaru: Well you're very strong I'll admit, but if you're talking about the absolute strongest, how should I say it…… No matter what, I have a guy who always comes to mind]

The form of that red-haired Knight emerged in his thoughts… compared to Garfiel in front of his eyes, Subaru's mind tried to work it out. From their previous exchange, with just his bare hands, Garfiel was a formidable fighter, and could kick a house flying if he wanted to—— No, he had flipped the carriage upright with a stamp of his foot just now. But would all this be enough to contend with the Sword Saint, after all?

Even with this in mind, Reinhard's advantage doesn't seem to disappear, and Subaru himself wasn't exactly sure why he held that Knight in such special regard.

[Garfiel: Hah, as you like. I'll correct your mistaken view sooner or later, and prove with my own hands that I'm the strongest. For now, let's just say "Th'red nosed sea-lion's afraid o'th'cold", and think of it like that]

[Subaru: I totally don't know what you just told me to think about……]

Subaru tilted his neck at that last part, and Garfiel didn't seem to be planning to explain it, and instead crossed his hands behind his head and relaxed his weight onto the back of his seat. Anyway, their conversation having come to an end, Subaru looked out the window, and brushed his fingers through Emilia's silver hair as she slept in his lap.

While Emilia has not woken up, her expression had become more restful than before. Just as Garfiel said, moving away from that place seemed to have a positive effect. So then, the next thing on his mind was,

[Subaru: Ah, I didn't get a chance to properly ask before but, you're a close acquaintance of Roswaal…… aren't you?]

[Garfiel: You must've heard my reputation, right? I'll say this one more time then, out of all the people associated with Roswaal, I'm by far the strongest]

[Subaru: That's not really the point…… But I do remember hearing you are an influential person, though]

Unless brute-force was the only reason he was considered "Influential"? Unlike what Subaru had expected, Garfiel was not much of a supporter in the political sense, but would perhaps be more of a supporter in the muscle-brained sense.

With the Sanctuary not far ahead, picking up someone who he at once needed to be cautious of, and who he could have friendly interactions with, really only added to the headache.

[Subaru: That's just more questions I'll need to ask Roswaal at the "Sanctuary" I guess. You know I'm supposed to be solving problems, but it feels like the number of questions just gets more and more as I go, what's with this?]

Hugging his own head, seeing the difficult road ahead just getting more difficult, Subaru's expression clouded over. Listening to this, Garfiel made a small click with his tongue, revealing just a small glimpse of his sharp canine teeth,

[Garfiel: "Sanctuary"——— eh]

Sensing some meaning in his murmur, Subaru's face raised up, and Garfiel gently waved his hand. Then, he stood up, facing the direction ahead, ——— that is, towards direction of the Sanctuary.

[Garfiel: It's because you're gulping down Roswaal's words whole without'a second thought, that you keep callin' it by that name. Things you don't know aside, the things he did tell you are all full of shit y'know that right?]

[Subaru: Even though I have the same opinion, it's not good to gossip behind someone's back…… Say, did he piss you off or something?]

Garfiel became visibly displeased upon hearing the word "Sanctuary". Subaru wondered if he misspoke, and waited, but the reaction was more extreme than he anticipated.

That is, Garfiel twisted his mouth into an ironic smile that did not seem to fit,

[Garfiel: Well well, it's about time the princess-sama wakes up now. Since we're pretty far from the barrier]

[Subaru: What's the barrier…… Ah, Emilia-tan?]

Just as he was about to ask his question, Subaru saw Emilia turning over in his lap and called out to her. She opened her eyes faintly, and looked around the inside of the carriage hazily. As though she wasn't completely awake yet, she stared at Subaru with her violet eyes,

[Emilia: Morning, Shubaru……] **(not a typo :3)*

[Subaru: Just waking up is suuuper cute, Emilia-tan, but maybe now's not a good time. How are you feeling, does your head hurt?]

[Emilia: Ehh, not at all? I don't feel strange or anything……!]

In the middle of her answer Emilia suddenly became wide awake, and got up so fast that Subaru had to dodge his head backward. After being an inch away from banging their heads together, Subaru looked back at Emilia, who didn't seem to have noticed how close it came,

[Emilia: A,are you alright, Subaru? I said I will protect you but I passed out……]

[Subaru: I managed it somehow, so there's no need to worry! We came to an understanding through dialogue. People form ties with each other through conversation, and we took the first step in that regard. Though I ran into some communication problems at first……]

As Emilia was shoving closer and closer, Subaru touched her shoulder to try to calm her, while observing her as he spoke. It seems she could stand and walk, and the movements of her eyes and the color of her complexion, and her words and her voice were all impeccable. Also, super cute. Just like always.

[Garfiel: Right? Just like I said, yeah?]

And, as if waiting for Subaru to settle down, Garfiel laughed. But hearing this, Emilia suddenly jumped up in surprise, protecting Subaru behind her, as if only just now noticing the existence of this new stranger in the carriage.

[Emilia: ——Who are you!? I warn you, I won't let you lay a single finger on Subaru]

[Subaru: Emilia-tan, it's alright! Also would you please stop reinforcing my role as the female-lead please! My gauge can't take much more of it!]

Pulling Emilia out of her combat mode from behind, Subaru turned to Garfiel and introduced him,

[Subaru: That's Garfiel…… Right after Emilia-tan collapsed, he atta…… I mean came to ride on the carriage. Not that he's welcome or anything, but he's coming along until we get to the "Sanctuary"]

[Emilia: ……This is Garfiel? The person Frederica mentioned?]

[Garfiel: Well I am curious what she said about me, but we can put that off till later. Look, we're coming up to th'village soon]

Hearing Emilia make the exact same comment as Subaru did earlier, Garfiel jerked up his chin without giving them time to organize the situation. He gestured, and ahead of them, the forest was opening up, and the form of the village that was their destination came into view——

[Garfiel: Be welcome, Emilia-sama and her entourage]

He addressed them with proper title —— however, his words did not contain any of the respect or favor, and had instead been served with more of a color of disdain, and a tinge of darkness.

Without realizing it, Subaru's gaze had turned severe, and confusion had emerged in Emilia's. Receiving both their gazes, Garfiel opened his arms wide, his attitude unchanged,

[Garfiel: The place Roswaal calls the "Sanctuary" or whatnot—— where half-wits are gathered to spend their days, in the impasse that is the Experimental Grounds, each to their pitiful ends]

[Subaru: Experimental Grounds……?]

[Emilia: Half-wit——]

While Subaru and Emilia are each drawn to a different part, Garfiel placed a hand over his mouth covering his canine teeth which were showing, smiling, as if to conceal a terribly complicated feeling.

[Garfiel: But we, the residents, call it "The Witch of Greed's Gravesite". Laughable, yeah? Heh…]

Echoes of laughter, as if in self-derision, quietly resounded in the car.

Low, and faint, like a curse, like a blessing, it resounded throughout.

Listening, Subaru only silently worried about the girl next to him.

If a Witch stands in front of her path again, he must be the one to put out the flames… firmly and resolutely, he told himself.

The "Sanctuary" approaches.

——To Natsuki Subaru, and to Emilia, it was to be a place that will alter their paths forever.

Chapter 8 [The Long-Awaited Reunion]

Even traveling on an unpaved road, there was hardly any turbulence within the dragon carriage. No matter how many times he experiences it, he'd always find the effects of this "Divine Protection" incredible.

If all this was just the effects of the Divine Protection of "Wind Evasion", he wondered what if he could unwind the effects of all the other Divine Protections, and whether he would be using some other word besides "incredible" to describe them then.

[Subaru: …or something, but this isn't the time to be running away from reality, is it]

Subaru poked his head out into the driver's area beside Otto, looking forward—— with the "Sanctuary" ahead, he focused his eyes on the sight.

Finally treading on earthen road that was no longer covered by grass, about a hundred something meters away, the forest was opening up. Some wooden rooftops were now visible in the distance, for they must have been the many surrounding residences the "Sanctuary". From far away, it looked rather like a run-down village, and there seemed to be nothing about it particularly worth noting.

And if one had to make a remark, perhaps it would be,

[Subaru: There's a dreary atmosphere about the place……]

Standing in the entryway to the "Sanctuary" was a tremendously old gate made of stone that only served to emphasize that desolate imagery, and the short wooden fences surrounding the village gave off an impression of a locked cell.

Inadvertently, Subaru allowed his thoughts to slip through his lips, and Garfiel, listening, smacked himself in the knee,

[Garfiel: Pret'much! Dreary place, yeah? I'll say this first, the insides're even more dreary y'know? No matter who it is, there's no liveliness inside, they're all alive but might as well be dead]

[Subaru: Sounds pretty crappy the way you described it. But the more I listen the less it sounds like a "Sanctuary". That's just…….]

Seeing Garfiel enthusiastically affirm his ironic comment, Subaru sighed, and thought back on his previous words. To Subaru and the others who were calling this place "Sanctuary", Garfiel did not hide a sense of self-deprecation as he spoke. So then——

[Emilia: "The Witch of Greed's Gravesite"… what does that mean?]

The same question that came into Subaru's mind seemed to have also arrived in Emilia's.

As she suddenly voiced this question her eyes became resolute, but down below, she was gently tugging on the hem of Subaru's clothing with her fingertips. The fact that she was relying on him

gave him a small sense of contentment, but Subaru's feelings were complicated as he sensed the source of her anxiety.

[Subaru: The Witch――So basically, as the existence referred to by the name of "Witch", the Witch of Envy is known to everyone. But the Witches bearing the names of the other Sins, there's almost nothing known about them, right?]

[Emilia: Eh, really? But, weren't they a bunch of really famous people from 400 years ago?]

[Garfiel: Emilia-sama's not'ntirely mistaken. But yeah, Subaru's got it. The Witch of Envy's just way too famous, there's no confusion'bout that. But of th'records of the other Witches eaten by the Witch of Envy, there's barely a whiff left of'em. Though there are exceptions]

[Emilia: Just like here… right?]

After answering Subaru, Garfiel pulled in his jaw at Emilia's question, smirking. As if quite affected by this, Emilia's eyes widened, but Subaru, not well-informed on the matters surrounding the Witch, only let out an [Is that so…] as if understanding.

But a sudden notion surged in his mind that blew away that casual air. Because, if there are multiple Witches…

[Subaru: T, that doesn't mean there's a Witch Cult for every Witch, does it? Just beating down one Sin Archbishop was tough enough, come on give me a break]

It was a chilling thought, and one he couldn't overlook.

Reading into the details of Petelgeuse's words, he imagined they must all have been worshippers of the Witch of Envy. Likewise, "Gluttony" and "Greed" who Subaru must one day defeat, and their followers too, must all be in the same category as well.

Yet, if there are sects that worship the other Witches――

[Otto: It's a scary thing to be saying, but there's no need to worry about that, Natsuki-san]

But the one who banished the chill running up Subaru's spine, was the one holding the reins in front, Otto. In the end, compared to Emilia, who knows almost nothing about the Witch Cult, and unlike Garfiel, who was just not quite trustworthy, Otto actually held some kind of credibility, and could provide some insight into the common understanding of things. Because the extent of Otto's knowledge… was probably exactly what an average person would know.

[Otto: The Witch Cult…… even though I don't like to say it out loud, only worships the Witch of Envy. To revere another Witch above the Witch of Envy, only a lunatic would do that]

[Subaru: Above the Witch of Envy……? What do you mean? Are they even worse than the Witch of Envy?]

[Otto: When they hear the name of another Witch other than the Witch they worship, the Witch Cultists will do some very frightening things. You heard of the city that was destroyed in the Southern Empire of Volakia, right?]

As Otto suddenly brought up the new topic, Subaru remembered having heard it before. After the battle against Petelgeuse, Wilhelm had mentioned it as he laid out the horrors of the Witch Cult. Certainly it was,

[Subaru: It was the Sin Archbishop of "Greed" who single-handedly destroyed that city in the what's-its-name Empire, wasn't it? I heard that even the nation's Champion couldn't do anything to stop him]

[Otto: I don't recall anything so fantastic, but the reason the Witch Cult did it in the first place was even more frightening. In the isolationist Volakian Empire, that was the only city where trade was prospering…… at the time there were rumors of a Witch-related artifact being unearthed there]

[Subaru: Related to the Witch, huh]

[Otto: What it was is unclear even now. Only, there were lots of collectors out there who were after it. It'd be fine if it was just for some sick sense of humor, wanting to collect something belonging to the Witch of Envy…… but in the end, the entire city perished because of it]

Perhaps it was to obtain that artifact, or to destroy it, that "Greed" made his move. The Volakian Empire had mistakenly roused the Witch Cult and received this catastrophic retribution as a result.

[Otto: After that, even things unrelated to the Witch of Envy, anything that might possibly provoke the Witch Cult is prohibited by decree…… but even so, it still didn't stop these items from circulating in shameless behind-the-scenes dealings]

[Subaru: It's rare to hear that kind of spite from you. It almost sounds you were involved?]

[Otto: ……It's nothing worth mentioning. Just back then, some of my relatives were caught up in the city when it happened. It's been more than 15 years now, I was just a child back then so it didn't have much to do with me]

After that, Otto closed his mouth and refused to go any further on the topic. Seeing his attitude, Subaru stopped asking, and turned his gaze and attention back into the carriage.

In any case, Garfiel was waiting for Subaru to finish processing everything he's learned, saying [Satisfied now?] while holding his chin in his hand.

[Garfiel: I don'know the finer points either. But Granny keep goin' on and on about how it's the "Witch of Greed's Gravesite", like how "Peromeo rots jus'from th'listenin", repeated s'many times, t'can't be wrong]

[Subaru: All you know is what the rot-guy told you? So you don't really know the details either, huh]

[Garfiel: Only thing I care'bout is me being th'strongest. If y'want to know the specifics go grab Roswaal by th'collar and ask'im yerself. N'sure if y'can do it now, though]

[Subaru: ——? What's that supposed to mea……]

[Otto: Um sorry. It seems we've arrived, do we just go in like this?]

Before he could sort out Garfiel's seemingly loaded words, Otto's voice hailed from the coachman's stand in front. Against Otto's call, Garfiel grumbled [Welp], and nimbly hopped off the carriage.

[Garfiel: If y'go in w'thout sayin'anything, they'll take ya for outside intruders an'coord'nate a mass'assault on ya, it'll be all like'a "laughin Magmarin full o'holes". I'll go in an'tell'em first, y'guys wait here]

[Subaru: Ah, we'll leave it to you then. Hey, come to think of it, I get the feeling like you're the patrol for the Sanctuary or something. Considering the way we ran into each other at first…]

On the other hand, the way he seemed to have abandoned his post in the end didn't quite fit that idea. And the fact that he was patrolling alone, too. But then again, with strength like his, perhaps moving alone was more efficient.

But to Subaru's last question, Garfiel only lightly waved his hand without answering. Unable to see through him, Subaru's brows furrowed, and, almost at the same time, Emilia let out an [Ah] in a slightly elevated voice.

Turning his eyes to Emilia, who had cried out involuntarily, he saw her pointing ahead. And, following her finger, Subaru immediately understood her surprise as he saw what she had seen. Because standing there, was,

[——You're back, Garfiel. Pretty early, isn't it]

[Garfiel: 'Cus there's no need t'circle in th'forest anymore. It's gotta be rare t'see you leave Roswaal's side though. He fin'lly dropped dead?]

[Ram: If that is so, this place, Ram will already have burned it down with her own hands in self-abandon. You have Roswaal-sama to thank that this is not the case]

[Garfiel: That'some incredible logics, I can't understand it at all!]

Dressed in the familiar maid's uniform, the girl's peach-colored hair was swaying as she faced Garfiel. Unlike Garfiel, who was happily smiling, her expression seemed cold and without emotion. Taking a long time to confirm this, Subaru's shoulders dropped as if relieved.

[Otto: Haaa, so that's the older sister I heard so much about. I see… Of course this is only natural, but she looks exactly like the young miss who's sleeping]

And having seen her for the first time, Otto let out this remark. In front of their eyes, she looked like a perfect replica of the Rem Otto had seen, but only, inside, it was a completely different person.

For this, was the long-awaited reunion with the good-for-nothing maid of the Roswaal Mansion, Ram.

[Subaru: ——Ram!]

Sticking his body out of the dragon carriage, Subaru waved to Ram. Her eyes slightly squinted as she saw him, and, quite understandably, she shrugged and shook her head.

[Ram: I humbly do not know where Barusu popped out from, but your late arrival is certainly disappointing. You should have noticed sooner that something had gone wrong and…… ah, but that's too much for Barusu's abilities, after all]

[Subaru: If you're going to use a phrase like "I humbly do not know", stick with that tone all the way and don't change it all of a sudden! And Roswaal too, I can't understand what you guys are thinking, but I'll definitely have something to say when I get a hold of him!]

Objecting, Subaru pointed a finger at the girl whose attitude had not changed at all. Seeing this reaction from Subaru, Ram dropped her shoulders, before turning to Emilia, who was standing beside him.

Relieved to see that Emilia, same as Subaru, was safe, Ram's face relaxed. And for a brief moment, in her eyes, Subaru thought there was a fleeting, almost dreamlike glimpse of sorrow. Yet, in that same instant, it had already vanished.

[Ram: Emilia-sama too, welcome. Roswaal-sama is waiting, so please come with me to the inner building. Garfiel, go find a suitable place for the dragon carriage and the driver]

[Garfiel: What's with that treatment, oy! Can't y'ask for help in a way that inspires more enthusiasm?]

[Ram: If you want to eat Ram's hand-made meal, please strive to do your best. But if you want to throw away this valuable opportunity because of your careless words, Ram won't say anything more]

[Garfiel: Alright! Alright already! Can't grab'a hold o'her at'all, though it's good like that. Oy, asshole driver. Park the ground dragons an'the carriage at the end there an'come wit me]

[Otto: It's about time I introduced myself right!? Could you please not call me with that insulting name!? Also, isn't it a bit dangerous for me to be left alone with this guy!]

As Otto voiced his objection at Garfiel, who had just been vanquished by Ram, Subaru, seeing this, shot him a thumbs-up with teeth sparkling,

[Subaru: I'll recover your bones!]

[Otto: That was definitely something said with good intentions but carries the completely wrong implications isn't it!? Really, if anything happens to me I'm going to claim for compensation!]

Leaving behind these words, Otto, having let Subaru and Emilia off of the dragon carriage, followed after Garfiel. Seeing them start off toward the interior of the village, Subaru rubbed Patrasche in the nose in a reluctant goodbye. Then, turning with a snap of his neck, saying [Now then],

[Subaru: There's a whole array of things I want to ask and talk to you about, now that we're here can we finally talk?]

[Ram: ……Ram hasn't been granted permission to convey anything to you. You can ask Roswaal-sama directly when you meet him. Though I don't know how much Garf had let slip already]

[Subaru: Garf…… ah, you mean Garfiel. That guy turned out to be a whole lot different from the impression I got from just hearing his name. Come to think of it, there's something that's been bothering me]

[Ram: What is it?]

Sharply, Ram furrowed her brows. Imagining it might be information Roswaal had given express instructions not to reveal, her gaze became serious, but, seeing this, Subaru let out a [Naah it's just], as he folded his arms,

[Subaru: That guy, does he have a crush on you? I got that feeling from the way he was talking]

[Ram: ……And here I was wondering what you were going to say]

Unable to hide her genuine astonishment, Ram sighed. Only, seeing how she didn't deny it, Subaru couldn't help but let out an out-of-place grin.

[Subaru: Well I'm not saying he has strange tastes but. You look cute…… but the fact that he still likes you after being around you for so long, I think he must have some serious resolve]

[Ram: Being gifted with both intelligence and beauty, males will inevitably be attracted to Ram, there's nothing I can do about that. But, Ram has already devoted her all to someone who she shall always stay devoted to, so I have no wish for such things]

With a sway of her shoulders, Ram responded to Subaru's sarcastic words, and, in a single stroke, she had cut down all of Garfiel's hopes with her response. Then, turning her back to Subaru and Emilia, she left the words [Come with me], as she immediately took her step forward.

Although he wasn't exactly trying to make the flowers of love bloom, her cold attitude still made Subaru feel like he was coming away empty handed. But, the fact that he could not ask what he should have asked, was, understandably, because he was afraid.

[Subaru: At a time like this, am I still too much of a coward to say Rem's name… even though I want to… even…]

He was terrified of the confirmation.
Having already heard it from Emilia and Petra that they cannot remember Rem, now, to ask her own sister whether she has forgotten her existence too?

But, having come here, the fact that she did not ask about Rem's absence, already meant that there was no point in asking anymore.

[Subaru: Can't help but cave-in to her either way. Then let's follow Ram for now, Emilia-tan. ——What's wrong?]

Subaru turned to Emilia, who had kept her silence up to now. Ever since stepping off the carriage, she had not opened her mouth, but only looked around at her surroundings anxiously. Noticing Subaru's call, she let out a [No…] slightly shaking her head.

[Emilia: It's just, I can't seem to calm down. How should I say it, there's a strange feeling…… it's not something I can put into words]

[Subaru: Can't calm down, huh. For me, a shy loner who's reluctant to even leave the house, all this is like a new world you know? Everyone gets this feeling I think…… In fact, I don't particularly hate it myself]

Looking around along with Emilia, everything looked very much like the image of a run-down village. Perhaps, compared to Arlam village, the houses appeared older, and in a greater state of disrepair, but these were merely relative, insignificant details.

Nevertheless, the place was not without a certain sense of incongruity about it. Although what that incongruity was, Subaru wasn't quite sure either.

[Subaru: But we don't have much choice even if we keep our guards up, Emilia-tan. Ram and Ros-chi are both here, so at least we shouldn't be in any danger, I think]

[Emilia: It's not that I'm keeping my guard up…… No, I'm ok now. But really, if only I could talk to Puck…]

The crystal stone at her chest——touching the green stone beneath her neck, Emilia called out anxiously to the name of the spirit sealed within. The absence of the great spirit that always stayed by her side obviously brought her anxiety to no end.
And to see her so fragile, Subaru despised himself for not being the existence that she can rely on.

[Emilia: ——Subaru?]

[Subaru: Let's go. No matter what happens, leave it to your #2 shield]

Without thinking, he grabbed the hand that was touching the crystal, and turned his face away as he said this. Then, holding her hand like this, before she could even say no, he swung out his stride. And naturally, Emilia only followed behind his forceful attitude.

Having done so without any consideration, just the thought of his embarrassing act made fire fly out of every pore of his face. But, much more than thought, he had chosen to follow his emotion, and merely hoped that this was not seen as strange.

[Emilia ——Ok]

Only, unlike Subaru's heart, which was about to jump out of his chest, Emilia slightly nodded, and did not let go of his hand.

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It was the only house in the Sanctuary that preserved some semblance of a proper shape.

Constructed out of stone, the single storey building was around the size of a single-family house of the original world. Its rooms arranged in a simple layout, one could almost imagine living an equally simple and cozy life here.

Although compared to the Roswaal Mansion and the Crusch Mansion, having grown accustomed to a certain standard of living, Subaru found it rather cramped. But, of course, in time, with a little bourgeois-spirit, he could easily grow used to living in such a place.

For this, was the impression of the place of their meeting.

So then,

[Roswaal: Yaaaa~~~, Emilia-sama and Subaru-kun. I~~ get the feeling that this is quite the long-awaited reunion, do~~n't you think hmm?]

With a carefree smile, and waving his hand at them, this was how Roswaal greeted them as they saw each other again.

After parting in the capital, this was the first time Subaru met face to face with Roswaal. And as they had not seen each other in the previous loops, it had actually been over a month. Considering all the pent-up resentment accumulated during that time, he had wanted to do nothing less than to punch him across the face at the earliest opportunity, but,

[Roswaal: Fi~~~rst of all, more than anything, it's so~ good to see you safe, Emilia-sama. Ram's already told me about the problems around the Ma~nsion. If anything should have happened to you, I would surely have lost the will to go on li~~ving]

[Subaru: If that's what you feel, you should have at least made some better preparations…… Actually, more importantly, what the hell happened to you? What is this!?]

Even as Roswaal seemed relieved to see Emilia safe, Subaru and Emilia were beside themselves with consternation. For all the countless things they had wanted to say, had all of a sudden vanished like a parting mist when they saw Roswaal.

Lying on the bed… all manner of wounds that cannot be overlooked littered his body, as blood seeped through the bandages constricting his figure into a pitifully painful posture.

At Subaru's question and Emilia's silent gaze, Roswaal used his left arm, which was relatively less injured, to gently pull up the eye-patch that was covering his left eye.

[Roswaal: Aaa~~~yaaa~~, a~~re you asking about these? I~~ am only a man, a~~fter all. Being seen in this pitiful state wounds my self-esteem, so if you could please understand my desire to re~~st a little]

[Emilia: That's not good enough, is it. What really happened, Roswaal? Getting wounded like this…… and how did you, of all people]

Not distracted by his jest, Emilia retorted as she extended a trembling finger towards him, hesitating whether to touch the body ridden with wounds. Seeing her do this, Roswaal smiled bitterly, and turned his right eye up to the ceiling, [Well then…] he whispered,

[Roswaal: Whe~~re should I~~ begin hm? We~ll, I guess you could say my injuries were sustained for something of a matter of honor, and out of regard for propriety, I had no~~ choice]

[Emilia: Stop trying to get away with these roundabout words. I am asking you seriously, Roswaal, so answer me seriously in return]

[Roswaal: ……My~ it seem Emilia-sama is in an especially bad mood. Bu~~t, considering where we are, there's no avo~iding it perhaps]

Even Subaru felt that something was out of place when he heard Emilia's relentless, inquisitive tone, and it was at the same moment, that Roswaal pointed this out. Emilia slightly angled up her eyebrows, but, realizing that what he had pointed out was true, she lightly bit her lip.

[Emilia: My head is all a mess, I can't calm down at all. What is this place? Even though it's called the "Sanctuary", I don't think that's what it is at all. Then this place is……]

[Roswaal: "A Witch's Grave", that's an easier name to acce~~pt, no?]

[——!]

The tone of Roswaal's voice dropped as he pronounced these words. The same words from Garfiel being uttered in Roswaal's mouth, the phrase suddenly took on a sense of some heavy and sonorous meaning.

Swiftly, Emilia shot her gaze toward Subaru. Seeing the complex tangle of emotions in her eyes, Subaru lowered his chin in a nod, in tune with her unease.

[Subaru: Hold on, let's get everything we want to ask in order first. If we go on like this, the conversation is only going to drift all over, and we won't get a single conclusion out of him]

[Roswaal: Ooh~ yaaa? In the short time we haven't se~en each other, you've gotten quite good at se~ttling accounts, no? Subaru-kun, just wha~t could have brought on this change in your state of mi~nd?]

[Subaru: If we're going to get into that it'll take a really long time, so I'll leave the bragging for after we've heard everything we want to know. Ah, right, there was just this one thing…]

Staring at Roswaal's mocking smile, Subaru lifted up a finger,

[Subaru: We've established the alliance with Crush-san, but you must have already heard it from Ram… you're glad you left me behind, aren't you?]

[Roswaal: ——Ve~ry glad. A~~fter all, I was right to have picked you up]

Seeing Roswaal relax the corner of his lips with satisfaction, Subaru sighed and closed his eyes. Subaru had anticipated this, but the fact remains, his actions were exactly as Roswaal planned. Even if he had already allowed himself to be used, it still wasn't fun to hear the confirmation.

Anyway, Subaru arranged his next thought,

[Subaru: Firstly then, the villagers of Arlam village. Since Ram is safe, they must be fine as well, and all evacuated safely, right?]

[Roswaal: You can rest assu~~red. Perhaps my current state doesn't give me much credibility but, I sti~~ll know my respo~nsibilities as Lord. Such thing as to risk my life to protect my subjects, I too have that resolve. I've seen to it that everyone's sheltered in the village's cathedral]

[Subaru: Cathedral… Ah, we can get back to that later, so the next thing is……]

He was relieved to confirm the villagers' safety. Since Subaru had only made the decision to evacuate along with the preparations beforehand, whether they were safe in the end was the final concern left over from the previous loops. ——Because no matter what, a part of that could no longer be redone.

Relaxing his shoulders, Subaru gave Emilia a look. And receiving it, she inclined her head, drawing back her slender chin,

[Emilia: Then, tell me about this place. You call it Sanctuary, but Garfiel calls it "The Witch of Greed's Gravesite". Just which one is true?]

[Roswaal: Both are true, Emilia-sama. This is the site of the once-Witch of Greed's ——Echidna's final resting place. And to me personally, it is a place that should called Sanctuary]

[Subaru: ——Witch]

[Emilia: Echidna……]

Hearing his answer, Subaru and Emilia's throats simultaneously clogged up.

Roswaal spoke quietly, and all of the clownish demeanor he had been using until now had vanished from his voice. Precisely because of this, for the first time, his words carried an unmistakable flavor of honesty.

Drawing in a deep breath, Emilia blinked a few times, and continued once more,

[Emilia: The Witch of Greed……was another Witch who was annihilated by the Witch of Envy, wasn't she]

[Roswaal: E~n, that is right. No matter where you look in the history of the current world, nothing remains of her name anymore. Only, except in the memories of those who knew her…]

[Subaru: Wait wait wait, but what you just said makes no sense]

Subaru interrupted Roswaal's solemn words with a quick wave of his hand. Roswaal narrowed his single eye, gazing into Subaru, who was little by little succumbing to the pressure of his aura.

[Subaru: If I remember correctly, the Witch of Greed……was defeated by the Witch of Envy 400 years ago. This place being the final resting place of a Witch from 400 years ago might be understandable…… but what you're saying is that you knew her in person, but that's just…]

[Roswaal: I~~ know this myself, but I~~'m afraid I can't say. Because this is passed down verbally through generation after generations of the Mathers family……only to the heir of Roswaal]

[Emilia: Passed down verbally…… then the head of the Mathers family of long ago was once connected to the Witch of Greed?]

[Roswaal: ——Echidna]

[Emilia: Eh?]

Suddenly, hearing the name brought up, Emilia's eyes opened wide. Roswaal turned his gaze towards her, and, as if to confirm once more, quietly whispered, [Echidna],

[Roswaal: Ple~ase, call her by name when referring to her. A title like "The Witch of Greed", no matter you how say it, carries an evil impression about it, do~~n't you think? And it's so long, too…]

[Emilia: …I see. So then, Echidna met her end in this village, and this village has then been managed by the Mathers family for generation after generation…… is that right?]

[Roswaal: E~n, that is correct. Though managing implies more hands on work tha~n there is. Echidna's influence remains thickly here, and without the proper steps, it'd be impossible to set foot in here. The fact that you were able to enter…… must have been thanks to Frederica's assistance, isn't that so?]

Receiving a nod of affirmation in return, a sense of understanding emerged in Roswaal's eyes. Seeing this, Subaru pursued the topic,

[Subaru: I understand this is Echidna's grave, and under your management. But what I don't understand is its purpose, and why you and the villagers haven't returned yet]

[Roswaal: I may have just said some strange things, bu~~t you seem to have accepted them quite rea~dily. The fact that this is a Witch's Gravesite, I~~ had really wanted to keep that a secret…]

[Subaru: Maybe if it was the Witch of Envy, but I really have no idea what the Witch named Echidna had done. Just the word "Witch" immediately gives the impression of some kind of villain. But then it's the same thing with "Half-Elf", and who could have guessed that Emilia-tan is so cute just from that word?]

[Emilia: ……D, d-don't say irrelevant things like that. Surprise-attacks are off limits you know!]

Hearing the pick-up line casually inserted into the end of that otherwise serious sentence, Emilia, whose face had turned bright red, lightly yanked at the side of Subaru's waist. Subaru smiled wryly at her totally cute retaliation, but then, he noticed Roswaal in the corner of his eyes giving off a rather annoying laugh [Oho~],

[Roswaal: In the sho~~rt time you've spent apart, you've grown quite a bit closer, ha~ven't you. After leaving with that fight in the Capital, I was wondering just what would happen, but it seems now it's even better than befo~~re]

[Subaru: That's the love received at the end of a long and arduous journey, you know! There's a mountain of things I can brag about, but let's leave that for after you've finished answering our questions. So, what is the purpose of this place, and why haven't you returned]

[Roswaal: It seems you aren't the naive child anymore, and has become quite dependable indeed. So~~ then, the re~ason the villagers and I have not returned…… simply put, we can't return even if we wa~~nted to]

[Subaru: Can't return even if you wanted to?]

Unable to understand his answer, Subaru furrowed his brows.

Roswaal nodded, and smiling at the question mark emerging on Subaru's face, said,

[Roswaal: Because right now, every o~~ne of us, and the residents of this village included, are all in a state of house-arrest. A~~~nd, from the moment you entered here, it seems you two are also in the sa~~me situation]

Chapter 9 [The Graveyard]

[Subaru: House arrest now…… that's an unsettling word……]

Facing Roswaal, who was lying on the bed, Subaru barely managed to wrench out these words while carefully analyzing the sentence which had just been spoken at him. Judging from the flow of the conversation, he might normally have laughed it off as a stupid joke, but unfortunately, in the current circumstances they appeared to be authentic. At any rate,

[Emilia: So then, does that mean the villagers here gave you these injuries?]

Emilia seemed to have arrived at the same opinion as Subaru on the general believability of his words.

Bound in bandages seeped in blood, Roswaal's body was in a pitiful state. Seeing him like this was at least proof that some of what he said was true, and was the reason why it could not simply be laughed off.

[Subaru: If there's someone in the village who could give such serious injuries to Roswaal, that means we're in a pretty serious situation……]

Touching his hand to his jaw, while tracing over the respective strengths in his mind, Subaru felt a burning sense of unease in his chest.

The existence of Roswaal L. Mathers, besides being Subaru's patron in this parallel world, was a powerful magic user at a level only very few others could hope to reach.

In fact, the strength of the man who occupied the position of Head Magician of the Royal Court of Lugunica was such that even a hundred Subarus would not have a chance of winning against it, and could easily annihilate a horde of Mabeasts while humming. To think that he would end up in this state……

[Roswaal: Ah, but it seems like you misundersto~od. My wounds weren't infli~~cted by~ anyone. There's no need to be on guard for anything strange, or plan any kind of revenge for my sake, o~k?]

[Subaru: Don't worry. You haven't saved up enough positive impressions for me to go off recklessly seeking revenge…… But more importantly, what is that supposed to mean? That's different from what you just said. Aren't you supposed to be under house arrest……]

[Roswaal: Considering that I'm injured and being restrained like this, calling it house arrest is not wro~ng, surely. It's not that I was injured in the process of being restrained, I was injured, and the~n restrained……. Though if I were to explain it in detail, it would be a li~ttle different]

In response to Roswaal's round-about manner of speaking, a question mark flew out of the top of Subaru's head. Breaking everything down, he managed to calm himself and sorted through the context of what was said, and in other words,

[Subaru: So the people of the sanctuary have nothing to do with your injuries, is that right?]

[Roswaal: Strictly speaking, one can't exactly sa~y that they're unrelated, but if you were to ask me whether they were directly responsible for my injuries then the answer is no. In other words, tha~~t's how it i~~s]

[Subaru: In other words, they're indirectly related then]

Roswaal inclined his head, and for a moment appeared to be embarrassed by Subaru's analysis. Then letting out a small sigh, [It's like watching a child grow up, I guess…], he joked.

Seeing that attitude, Subaru took it as a sign that he was coming closer to the truth. Determined not to let up his questioning, he chose his next words and prepared to throw them at Roswaal, but…

[Ram: ――Barusu, how about showing Roswaal-sama a little bit of care?]

Saying so, Ram, who had not been present until now, interjected herself into the conversation. With the hem of her skirt lightly swinging, the girl crossed the room with graceful steps, and placed the steaming set of tea she had been carrying on a tray neatly onto the table.

Its fragrance spread throughout the room, and with the stimulation of his olfactory senses, Subaru only now realized how inconsiderate he had been. For just when he was about to pursue his questioning, he suddenly noticed just how severe Roswaal's wounds actually appeared.

[Ram: Pressing Roswaal-sama so hard when he's so severely injured, digging to the bottom of everything, are you satisfied? Look at Roswaal-sama suffering, almost crying, have some sympathy]

[Subaru: Just when you've made me reflect on my actions… don't say something that ruins the mood! I mean, is this supposed to be him hurting and about to cry? Doesn't look like it to me!]

[Roswaal: Uuuuh, it hu~~rts, I'm in pa~~in. Words lacking in kindness and concern hit me right in my wooounds…]

So Subaru responded to Ram's words with a brash retort. As if mocking Subaru's remarks, Roswaal started a little performance on the bed. As Subaru's eyebrows started to twitch in annoyance, Emilia cleared her throat and pulled the room back from the turbulent atmosphere.

While drawing the eyes of all three people in the room to her, she started with an [In any case]

[Emilia: Anyone can tell that Roswaal isn't well just by looking, so let's finish this conversation quickly. You haven't had healing magic cast on you?]

[Ram: Magic that heals is outside of Ram's area of expertise, so……]

In response to Ram's expressionless, yet somehow clearly regretful answer, Emilia looked at Roswaal with eyes which held only little expectation. Seeing this, Roswaal waved his raised hand from side to side,

[Roswaal: I too, am specialized in destruction magic yo~~u see. If it's to do with destroying, harming or deceiving I can generally do pretty much anything, but I'm hopeless when it comes to spells related to healing]

[Subaru: That's a sad way to put it. Rather than just offensive spells, you should make sure to practice with some defensive spells as well, jeez…]

That said, whenever Subaru played a game in which he had to decide on his character growth, he was the type of super offense-focused player who would only pick attack-oriented skills. So he couldn't scold Roswaal too harshly.

At the same time as when Subaru reached this strange acceptance, Emilia sighed [it can't be helped], and,

[Emilia: Puck isn't here so I'm not at my best, but I'll cast the healing magic. I have to concentrate while I do it though, so we'll have to finish talking first]

[Roswaal: The Great Spirit-sama…?]

Shocked at the information Emilia had just spilled, Roswaal quickly raised his eyebrows, then narrowed his eyes. That somewhat cold expression, unlike the usually relaxed demeanor, was one which Subaru had rarely seen. He unwittingly contracted his shoulders and said [Oy oy]

[Subaru: It's rare to see you with a serious expression. Is it so surprising that Puck isn't here? I hadn't realized that you were actually a closet mofumofu fur-enthusiast……]

[Roswaal: Unfortunately, the only time I have gotten close enough to Great Spirit-sama to be able to touch it was when I respectfully offered it ma~yonna~~ise. It was really scary. ——Anyway, I~ see]

Without even ignoring Subaru's banter, Roswaal narrowed his brow in rumination. While doing this, he suddenly turned his yellow left pupil onto Emilia,

[Roswaal: Emilia-sama, you aren't feeling ill, or different from normal in a~~ny way, right?]

[Emilia: ……? Other than Puck not showing his face, not really. Puck not coming out started a little while before we reached the Sanctuary too, so… Ah, but there is one thing]

Raising a finger as if asking a question, Emilia then proceeded to quickly whip her gaze around at their surroundings ——Not only inside of the room they were in, but seeming as if she was looking over the entirety of the Sanctuary outside of it, and after doing so, she said in a lowered voice,

[Emilia: Since entering the Sanctuary… No, maybe ever since entering the forest, I feel like the responses from spirits have become dull. And just now, when we were just outside, I…… felt a strange gaze on me]

[Subaru: A strange, gaze?]

Surprised at what he heard, Subaru inclined his head, to which Emilia responded [Yes] and pulled in her chin in confirmation. After explaining that this was the reason why her expression had darkened after they parted ways with Garfiel and the others earlier, she continued,

[Emilia: It felt like I was being stared at. It felt reeaaally unpleasant… I thought it might just be me, so I didn't tell you]

[Roswaal: Neither of Emilia-sama's fe~elings are mistaken. This is a place which is unpleasant for the spirits, and further, its inhabitants harbor nothing but unple~asant fe~elings towards you]

In response to Emilia's anxious words, Roswaal poured out a stream of words devoid of any consideration. Seeing her eyes hurt and wavering, Subaru instantly turned on Roswaal and was about to open his mouth to object, but,

[Garfiel: Well, how 'bout y'leave it there. You shouldn't be so hard on'a wounded man. "Th'running spotted-beak's hot now" isn't it]

[Subaru: I guess that's true unfortunately… not that I'm understanding enough of that to say I agree. But this is just a tiny complaint, we've totally established a translatable communication between us, haven't we?]

Looking over his shoulder, Subaru shrugged as he saw Garfiel leaning against the door, baring his teeth. Seeing his reaction, Garfiel made a noise grinding his teeth, and looked around the room.

[Garfiel: Granny's home's supposed th'most spacious and proper one here, but with so many people, it gets cramped, huh. Guess I was right to leave that noisy guy behind]

[Subaru: Now that you mention it, I don't see Otto around… Did he go home? Did you eat him?]

Emilia looked shocked at Subaru's question, but Garfiel laughed out loud and slapped his knees, as if he'd just heard an amazing joke.

[Garfiel: I do have the blood of'a carnivore, but I don't think I'd eat him. Especially 'cause that guy seems like he'd get even more noisy when I'm eating him. He said something about being worried about the dragon and the cart…… Well, he pretty much jus' came up with some excuse and legged it]

With one arm swinging, and strutting over brutishly, Garfiel plunked himself down on a chair near the wall, and looked up at Ram, who was watching him sideways,

[Garfiel: Tea]

[Ram: I will go outside to collect some fallen leaves, so will you please wait for me?]

[Subaru: Even though I have a suspicion, but, what will you be doing with those fallen leaves?]

[Ram: I have no intention of wasting precious tea leaves on the sort who has no understanding of neither fragrance nor taste. That is Ram's answer]

Having stated this in cold blood, Ram then earnestly went out the building. Pointing a finger up at Ram's back, Subaru looked at Garfiel, wordlessly asking [What do you like about her?] In response to that, while chasing her back with his look,

[Garfiel: Strong-willed women are worth the chase, ain'that so? And being a male, getting strongly attracted to excellent female ain't such'a strange thing]

[Subaru: Stuff like males and females, we're not talking about telling chickens apart, so don't keep using that. In spite of everything, Ram is a proper young woman, you know. Calling her that……]

[Garfiel: Huh? What're you sayin'? I'm treatin' her as properly as any woman could ask to be treated yeah? Also, before that we……]

As Subaru offered his frank advice on his unusual way of speaking, Garfiel frowned as if he just noticed something, and raised his eyebrows. His face then took on a displeased expression, and he turned a gaze filled with swords onto Roswaal on the bed,

[Garfiel: Son of'a, y'haven't told 'em yet? If it wer' jus' you gettin' crumpled I'd brush it off as a joke, but, since that Half-Elf….. since Emilia-sama's come here, it's a whole different matter]

[Emilia: ――Eh?]

Garfiel had put his annoyance to his tongue and stamped it out. Emilia was surprised at hearing her name come out in the middle of his remark. But, with no regard for her astonishment, Garfiel snapped at Roswaal with an expression that was even more overflowing with anger than before.

[Garfiel: The moment Emilia-sama entered the Sanctuary, we got caught up in this mess y'know. Watcha gonna do about it? Ya haven't even begun to go into the main issue here yet. Son of'a, did ya'll jus come here to fool around?]

The latter half of his anger wasn't just directed at Roswaal, but at Subaru and Emilia as well, who had also gone silent. Particularly, the rage dwelling in the look he aimed at Emilia was no laughing matter, and as if to protect her, who was pulling her shoulders closer together, Subaru stepped forward.

[Subaru: Hold on. I get that you're angry, but I don't even have a clue why. You'll just get more and more angry if you keep talking to someone who hasn't got a clue, right?]

[Garfiel: But that's what pisses me off. When the person all this is about ain't even got a clue……]

[Subaru: But the one disregarding "the person all this is about" and talking over her head is you and Roswaal over there, isn't it? If you really are concerned with that problem and want to do something about it, fulfill your responsibility to explain it. Expecting us to get it without explaining anything makes you just as shameless as I was just a short while back you know]

As he was facing him, Subaru felt the pressure coming from Garfiel getting a whole level stronger. Garfiel's stature was smaller than Subaru's, and as he was currently sitting, the height difference was quite significant. In spite of this, the smallness of his stature was almost

unnoticeable. No, considering the density of the pressure emanating from him, to Subaru, Garfiel appeared to be something like a massive boulder.

Knowing that Subaru was naturally chicken-hearted, averting his eyes and taking a step back would only have been expected,

But,

[Emilia: Subaru…]

Tightly, Subaru felt a delicate finger entangle itself onto his sleeve. The sound of a voice seemingly devoid of confidence calling him slid past his earlobes, and invested his trembling knees with renewed strength.

Emilia was standing behind him. Relying on him in her uncertainty.

As if he would really let his knees buckle in front of her, could he do something as lame as that?

[Garfiel: ——Tch]

They exchanged a stare in silence, and the first to avert his gaze was Garfiel. As he clicked his tongue, and entrusted his weight to the back of his seat, he stuffed his finger into his short, golden hair, and began to scratch at it violently.

[Garfiel: Aaah! I know, I was jus' takin' it out on you. I snapped, I said I'm sorry, oy!]

[Subaru: No, you haven't really said that. But before that, didn't anyone ever tell you you have a really annoying personality?]

As quick as he was to become emotional and shortsighted, he was just as quick to take back his rationality and acknowledge his faults. Subaru thought that personality must be so rough to have, and rather than indignation he put on a wry smile.

Seeing this, Garfiel let out an unbefitting sigh [Haaa],

[Garfiel: Shut up, I'll be quiet, so get the conversation going in the meantime, 'cause if I join in, the talk ain't gonna go nowhere and it'll become annoying]

[Subaru: The fact that you've analyzed yourself this well, but then went all the way around without changing anything… I find that pretty amazing]

[Garfiel: Complimentin' me's pointless, since I don't really understand complicate things. Tuch]

Seeing Subaru go from exasperation to admiration, Garfiel snorted. Just then, Ram, returning from outside, handed him a cup of steaming tea.

[Ram: This is the definition of low-grade tea]

[Garfiel: Shouldn't you usually speak a bit more politely when giving someone something?]

Ram replied with a [Is that so], and handed the cup over with a composed expression. Garfiel received the tea, and, even though it was probably burning hot, poured it all down his throat in

one go. Although he was carnivorous, apparently he didn't have a sensitive tongue. Seeing him empty the whole cup in one gulp, Ram let out a deep sigh.

[Ram: As usual, you are a man who has no regard for tea. That doesn't suit Ram]

[Garfiel: But it just tastes like leaves. If yer want to whet yer throat, water's the same. Right?]

[Subaru: While I agree that tea tastes exactly like leaves, I can't help but have some reservations against such an extreme argument. Ram, how about letting him drink the other cup of tea?]

As Subaru pointed it out, Ram handed the other cup of tea to Garfiel. Its wavy color faintly resembled something along the lines of "Autumn Leaves", and even having noticed this from a distance, Subaru couldn't stop himself from… well, recommending it.

Its wavy color faintly resembled something along the lines of "Autumn Leaves", and even having noticed this from a distance, Subaru couldn't stop himself from… well, recommending it.

[Garfiel: Hey, you're pretty sensible after all, aren't ya. You get that just one cup isn't enough…… Pfft! Haah!? Ooy, you… isn't this one just leaf water……?]

[Ram: If it wets your throat, whether it's water, tea or leaf water it's all the same, correct? Since you've already put it on your lips, go ahead and drink the whole thing. If you leave anything… I will twist it off]

Without saying what exactly she would be twisting off, she shot a sharp glare at Garfiel's crotch. Just from that, Subaru realized that her target was the vitals, and unconsciously closed up his legs at the sense of danger. Garfiel reluctantly emptied the cup of its contents, wringing at the bitterness. And on the side, Roswaal, who had so far only been observing their conversation, suddenly spouted,

[Roswaal: Aaa~~ha. Are a~ll of you even worried about my condition and have any intention of allowing me to rest? Or is it your actual plan to make me laugh and o~pen up my wounds? If that's the case, you're certainly succee~ding]

Saying so, Roswaal lightly touched the bandage wrapped around the upper part of his head while grinning bitterly. In fact, one could see a faint red color beginning to spread across the white of the fabric. Just then, the mood of the room, which had been relaxed up until now, turned, and Ram, whose face had changed colour, approached Roswaal. She then covered his hand, which was pressing down on the wound, with her own, and

[Ram: I'm very sorry, Roswaal-sama. Even though Ram was by your side……]

[Subaru: Wasn't it your tea-jokes that made sure he would laugh?]

His disruption was silenced by a rock-shattering glare from Ram, and Subaru zipped it, and took a quick look at Roswaal's condition. At least, the bleeding didn't seem to be connected to anything serious. The wounds must have only stopped bleeding recently ——in other words, now was probably the most important time for his recovery.

[Emilia: Roswaal, I think it'd be best if I treat you after all…]

[Roswaal: No~~, that would not be necessary, Emilia-sama]

Reaching the same conclusion as Subaru, spirits emerged in the air surrounding Emilia as she stepped toward Roswaal. But, she was stopped by Roswaal himself shaking his head. The spirits, which were shining with a blue-white phosphorescence, wavered, as if affected by their mistress' uncertainty.

Watching the side of Emilia's fair cheeks, Subaru noticed.

——As the emerging spirits floated around Emilia, for reasons Subaru could not understand, Garfiel stared at her with eyes of frozen emotion.

[Roswaal: After all, right now, there's something much more important than my trifling i~njuries. It's not like my li~fe is in any danger, so please prioritize the other matter first]

[Emilia: Even if you say that, there's no way I can do that. When there is a person who's injured, to set that aside for something else would be…]

[Roswaal: Even if I tell you this is necessary in order for you to sit upon the throne?]

Emilia's usual rhythm shattered, and the scene of her about to heal him by force if necessary, froze up. Listening to Roswaal's statement, Emilia's cheeks grew stiff, and her violet eyes opened wide. The yellow left eye watching this in front sharpened as if peering into her, gleamed enigmatically,

[Roswaal: To the house of Mathers, this "Sanctuary" is just a piece of land which had been passed down through the generations, but to Emilia-sama's future, it is of profound… yes, of profou~nd significance. Therefore no matter what, I certainly intended to eventually invite you here. ——It's just, you showed up a little earlier than I had pla~nned… no?]

[Emilia: Necessary for me……? Hey, what is that supposed to mean……]

[Roswaal: The problem with this "Sanctuary", and Emilia-sama's problem are intimately tied. So perhaps, in this place, you would find it. Emilia-sama's support, that is]

[——!?]

Frozen in place, Subaru watched as Emilia's expression changed. Having prompted this change, Roswaal observed her expression, and seemed to take it in as if all was according to plan. On the other hand, Subaru, still unable to pick up the exchange of emotions between the two, was left with an itch in his teeth.

However, before that agitation could be turned into words, Roswaal pointed to the silent Garfiel.

[Roswaal: Your designation, Garfiel. Guide these two to the "Sanctuary." ——Rather, the tomb]

[Garfiel: ——Heh, that a good idea?]

Swinging his emptied porcelain cup from side to side on his finger, Garfiel let out a low laugh. In response to being questioned, Roswaal drew in his chin and gently caressed Ram's peach-colored hair as she changed the bandages around his wounds.

[Roswaal: First and foremost it is crucial to understand the situation, a~fter all. Explaining the circumstances and the other matters can come a~fter the Sun has set, but that is not the case for the tomb]

[Garfiel: Ah, that'so, the Sun's going down soon. Won't be so simple once that happens. Alright, I'll take up guiding for ya]

Standing up, Garfiel placed his cup onto the chair he'd been sitting on, and turned to face Subaru and Emilia. Looking at the two whom the talk revolved around, but had been left out entirely, he slanted his head and opened his mouth to bare his fangs,

[Garfiel: Don't look so dumb. If you don't wanna become "like the rampaging Hoikoro from yesterday" or something stupid like that, we better get going]

[Subaru: Wait, wait, wait! We're not following the conversation at all. I wasn't even done talking to Roswaal in the first place, you know. At least let me finish that before……]

[Ram: His wounds have opened. Changing his bandages and letting him rest is the priority now. Barusu should do as Roswaal-sama instructed, and head to the tomb up ahead]

Subaru tried to put up a fight against Garfiel's forcefulness, but that was intercepted by Ram's commanding voice. She faced him with her usual cold gaze, and placed a hand on the bed,

[Ram: Calm down, let us talk once night comes. Roswaal-sama isn't going to run away or anything like that. But if you don't visit the grave before sun-down, that *is* going to run away.]

[Subaru: I've never heard of such an energetic grave in my life!]

While scratching his head in resignation, Subaru felt Emilia's gaze piercing into the side of his face. Her eyes were flickering with feeble emotions, and she seemed to be leaving it up to Subaru to decide what they should do.

To stay here and finish their conversation with Roswaal, or to be swept along by his will and be led to the gravesite by Garfiel. ――The answer has been decided.

[Subaru: I understand. We'll go to that grave place. It's necessary, isn't it? We'll certainly have you properly answer our questions once we get back]

[Roswaal: So~rry, that the situation has become like this. O~nce night falls, we can discuss all sorts of things, mu~~ch more thoroughly]

Hearing Subaru's opinion, Emilia relaxed her shoulders, and Roswaal nodded with satisfaction. Garfiel and Ram also seemed to accept it, and the two of them began to move onto their respective tasks. However, before that, Subaru said [Just one thing], raising a single finger.

[Subaru: Before heading to the grave, there's something I want to ask you.]

[Roswaal: Mmm~~? I don't really mind? If it's something I can answer simply, you can go ahead and ask me a~nything]

[Subaru: Well then, I'll take you on your word. ——"Rem", have you heard that name before?]

Pretending to change the topic, Subaru pronounced the vital question. On hearing Subaru's question, the first to react was Ram. But, it was not an answer he had hoped for.

When the name entered her ears, Ram angled her head as if she had heard an entirely unfamiliar term. As Subaru's hopes dropped, Roswaal quietly mumbled the name over again in his mouth.

[Subaru: ……Well?]

[Roswaal: Omu. Sorry, but it doesn't sound too fami~liar. I get the feeling it sounds similar to Ram's name but, ma~ybe if it was mispronounced] ******fami~**liar.*** >_<

[Subaru: Is……that so. No, that's all. If you don't remember, there's nothing. Nothing you can do]

Turning his head to the side, Subaru accepted that answer.

Ram and Roswaal's reply had shattered the faint expectation in Subaru's heart. To Rem, they had been the two people whom she had spent the longest time with, for whom she would have given her life, and whom she had admired and loved. And they had forgotten her.

Taking in the reality of this fact, the air within Subaru's heart settled. And he soberly acknowledged it.

——That in this world, the only one who could remember her, was himself.

[Emilia: Subaru, are you alright?]

With a worried voice, Emilia softly touched the end of Subaru's sleeve. Savoring the gentleness of the tip of her finger, Subaru, not wanting to let her see the darkness on his face, closed his eyes, then forcibly lifted his head.

[Subaru: I'm alright. It's not like I had any special expectations. I more or less knew it would be like this. ——What I must do, one way or another, I already have that resolve]

[Emilia: En. Let's find a way. I will help too]

Emilia nodded at Subaru's determination, and pledged her unreserved support. As the heart that had been shattered recovered in her gentle regard, Subaru shrugged up his shoulders.

[Subaru: When Rem wakes up… my love won't be wholeheartedly directed at Emilia-tan anymore… won't you get jealous?]

[Emilia: Subaru's feelings for me, if it diminishes, then maybe… But it won't be like that, right? My share and Rem-san's share, you've already said you have them all properly planned out and everything…]

In response to Subaru's flirty banter, Emilia made an unexpected retaliation. Scared witless by that retort, Subaru couldn't utter another word out of his mouth, and her face only slightly blushed, and said with a soft smile,

[Emilia: Let’s go, Subaru. I want to let Ram meet Rem-san soon too]

[Subaru: A, aah, yeah. En, that’s right]

Even if Ram could not remember, it would be a reunion with her twin sister. Would that reunion call back memories, or send some shock-waves to the lost love they once had for each other.

Even such a fragile hope, he will cling onto it so long as there was still meaning.

[Ram: Barusu]

As Emilia followed Garfiel out of the room and Subaru turned to follow as well, he was stopped by a call from behind.

Looking over, it was Ram who quickly approached him. While taking into her hands the replacement bandages for Roswaal’s wounds, she came close to Subaru’s side.

[Subaru: What is it? If you’re planning on some Bandage-Play, after we leave you can have Roswaal all to yourself……]

[Ram: Only Emilia-sama is to enter the Tomb. Barusu must never enter]

Ignoring his joke, Ram’s incisive tone crushed Subaru’s attitude aside.

Ram’s voice was lowered, and had told him in a volume that even Roswaal could not hear. Seeing Subaru’s furrowed brows, just in case, she said it once more.

[Ram: ——If you do not wish to be ensnared by the deranged will of a Witch, do not, under any circumstances, enter the Tomb]

She repeated it once again.

※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※

——The air inside the Tomb was frigid and clear, and, quite literally, a cool otherworldliness accompanied the atmosphere that greeted Subaru.

A step, every step he took rang out an echo from the soles of his shoes, and, regardless of whether he had wanted to or not, asserted his presence in this place. But even so, the sound of these footsteps gave him an unexpected sense of calmness.

——Because in the darkness which did not even allow him to see a few meters ahead, in the miasma in which his very own existence was in called into doubt, even this sound had become a consolation to him.

Unaware of where he was, the walls which had been his only source of reference had long disappeared. Walking on and on, had he almost reached the end of his path? Subaru felt the illusion that he had stopped still.

But the sound of his footsteps refuted this. Within the certainty of the resonance of these footfalls was Subaru's very existence: the reality of his steps were guaranteed, and relying on just that small consolation, he continued onward.

How much time had passed, it was impossible to tell in the darkness. Even his thoughts became vague, and his throat, which had already given up on calling out, froze. Walking on like this, exhaustion did not come to him, but because of this, the sensation of his limbs began to blur as well.

Regardless, he walked on. He must walk on. He must not give up.

He forbid himself to stop. Walk, continue walking. Even crushed under the weight of his baggage, he must clench his teeth and walk on.

Otherwise, how would he ever face her――.

[???: ――I see, so that is your core. Very interesting indeed]

A sudden voice rang out, and just as abruptly ended, to be lost forever into the falling of the curtains.

The unimaginable darkness which stretched on no matter which way he turned, in an instant, became bright as day, and the narrow stone corridor transformed – to be wider than the ends of the world. The earth piled beneath his soles snuffed out the sound of his steps, and an air of filth which, above anything, brought nausea to his chest, sprawled throughout.

Completely different from the world up to now, was an ancient ruin befitting of reality―― a scene which he felt he might have seen before he entered the Tomb, panned out, and Subaru lost his words.

In front of him, someone suddenly approached. That is――

[???: Apologies for such a ludicrous welcome. I didn't intend it to be like this, but no matter what, this body is a thing of Greed, after all. The desire to know is… impossible to escape]

Pure white, like a field of the first virgin snow, was the white impression of that girl.

The long hair draping over her back shone like the reflection of snow in a daydream of pristine white, and the few patches of skin that were showing were just as translucent, and beautiful. A radiance of wisdom lighted up her eyes; she wore on her body a simple ink-black dress, and the display of the two colors adorned the polar extremes of her beauty.

Anyone who had eyes would probably be captivated by such beauty―― but instead, what gripped Subaru's entire body was an overwhelming horror that he had never felt before.

Even the sense of pressure he had felt on his first encounter with the White Whale, could not compare to this.

Before the speechless Subaru, the girl shook her white hair, and narrowed her eyes, and then, as if understanding him, nodded lightly.

[???: Excuse my rudeness. I haven't even introduced myself. It was so very rude of me, please accept my apologies. It's because I haven't interacted with anyone for a very long time, I haven't recovered my voice, it seems]

Unlike the tone of her voice, the girl's expression barely changed as she softly shook her head.

Then, looking at Subaru, who had been frightened into silence, the girl held a hand over her chest in a sign for him to calm down.

[Echidona: My name is Echidona. The one called the Witch of Greed, do you understand?]

Chapter 10 [Incarnation Of The Thirst For Knowledge]

——Since they left the house where Roswaal was recovering, about 15 minutes had passed.

[Garfiel: We're here. It's called the graveyard but it's jus' a lame ol' grave]

Saying this, Garfiel jerked up his chin to point at an old ruin on the verge of the Sanctuary. Constructed from an assembly of stones, the architectural style was primitive, and quite far from the impression of anything magical.

It is unknown just how many years had passed since it had been built, but from the cracks that littered the face of its walls, and the remarkable density of the sprawling ivy, it must have been something from over a century ago.

The entrance of the ruin was in line with the forest, and most of the building was engulfed into the trees, making it impossible to guess the true size of the structure at a glance. If this was the burial place of the "Witch of Greed", then perhaps it could be thought of similarly to a great pyramid of the original world.

[Subaru: A powerful person wanting to sleep in a large tomb; this is the same for all Ages, and in all Worlds, huh……]

Touching his chin and ruminating on these thoughts, Subaru tilted his head to the grand scale of the building.

Being someone who lives in the moment, Subaru wasn't all that interested in what people would think of him after his death. But then again, the fact that he wasn't an important enough person to leave any real trace in history, probably contributed to the development of this view.

Anyways,

[Emilia: It's good that we got to the grave, but what are we supposed to do here?]

Standing next to Subaru, Emilia looked up at the ruins, and asked Garfiel this question with a puzzled face. Subaru had the same question as well, and directed his gaze onto the back of the blonde youth guiding them here. In response to this, Garfiel clacked his canine teeth as he looked back,

[Garfiel: You can hear the details from that bastard Roswaal after you get back. So fer now, what I want Emilia-sama to do is just to get inside]

[Emilia: All I have to do is go inside? Don't I have to do something once I'm inside?]

[Garfiel: Now the Sun's still up. Even if ya get deep inside the Tomb, the "Trials" won't start. Ya got no preparations or anything, and first you gotta check out whether you have the

qualifications] (*"Trials" 試練 is the same word used by Petelgeuse in Arc 3. Some anime subtitles may have translated it as "Ordeals")*

[Subaru: Wa wa wait, wait a second! You're jumping all over the place. Trials or preparations or qualification, there's no explanations at all!]

Cutting in front of Garfiel, who might decide to forcefully push Emilia inside, Subaru called out to his responsibility to explain. But Garfiel only showed the irritated face he had already shown so many times in this last hour, and wrinkling up his nose,

[Garfiel: Yeah who cares, what's the problem? Go in, and afterwards when you get back to Roswaal you'd understand everything. If ya make me explain all that stuff, I'll make mess of it and ya' won't understand a thing]

[Subaru: It's like you're forcing us to sign a contract without reading its contents here, there's no way in hell we're going to do something like that. If you're bad at organizing words, then just answer my questions one by one properly]

[Garfiel: Uugh…… yeah, whatever. I'm stuck with ya til sunset, so make it short]

Slightly spreading out his arms, it seems Garfiel swallowed his proposal. Relieved that they were finally able to get some discussion going, Subaru wondered what he should ask first —So then,

[Subaru: This is the "Graveyard"….. meaning the grave of the "Witch of Greed", is that right?]

[Garfiel: That's what I heard. Actually, I got no idea whose bones're buried here. This place is the grave of the Witch of Greed, 'least that's what the guys at the village told me]

The rather half-assed reply gave Subaru the feeling that something was out of place, but he gulped down this sense of incongruity for now. Then, picking up on some words from his earlier remarks….

Two terms that seemed to be of particular importance were "Trials" and "Qualification".

[Subaru: The "Trials" that will start inside the Tomb, what is that? I have to admit… from my experience over these past few weeks, I don't have a positive impression of that word at all]

[Garfiel: Calm down, being tested and all that, I don't like it either. So, ah, the about the "Trials"……I don't know any details]

[Subaru: Oy]

[Garfiel: Don't get angry, I'm not playin' aroun' here. Just, I know it happens inside the Tomb. And those who can't clear those "Trials", won't be released from the impasse of the trial grounds]

[Subaru: Release……who?]

[Garfiel: The ones who possesses "Qualification". Guys who're qualified can't get out of the trial grounds. Long as the "Trials" aren't completed, the Witch's desire to possess will not let go]

It was a flimsy answer, but Garfiel didn't seem to be distorting the topic on purpose. Having digested the contents as best he could, he had said exactly what he understood. But still, if his statements didn't answer anything on-point, it's probably because his own understanding was vague in the first place.

However, connecting up the fragmented answers from just now, Subaru managed to form some kind of an understanding of the current situation in his mind. So, the answer he got from combining the scattered pieces was,

[Subaru: Only those who are qualified may enter the tomb, and if a person with qualification cannot clear the Trials, they cannot get out of the Sanctuary…… is it like that?]

[Garfiel: Ah……? Somethin' like that…… I guess?]

[Subaru: I thought I digested a lot but still it's still pretty useless……]

Twisting his neck, Garfiel, who probably still didn't understand, gave back this unreliable reply. Reserving his attitude for now, Subaru turned to Emilia beside him. Taking in Subaru's gaze, Emilia voiced her conclusion on the matter, which was

[Emilia: Earlier, when I entered the Sanctuary, my consciousness suddenly died out…… was that, what this is?]

[Subaru: That was the barrier, and when she passed across the range she fainted? Well, Otto and I were all good and healthy……]

[Garfiel: That's probably cuz you got no qualification]

Just as Subaru understood the answer to the reason behind Emilia's sudden collapse, Garfiel interrupted, pointing one finger at Subaru, and at Emilia with another,

[Garfiel: Emilia-sama, bein' a Half-Elf, has the qualification. But, Subaru, bein' a straigh' up pure-blooded human, doesn't have the qualification. So y'can go in and out freely. But, y'can't take the Trials]

[Subaru: Wait wait hold on. So then, considering those lines, is it something like this?]

Holding his breath, Subaru organized his thoughts. Then, recalling their conversation on his first meeting with Garfiel, and as he guided them to the Sanctuary, Subaru noticed it.

[Subaru: The ones who can take the Trials are Half-Elves…… or, half-bloods between humans and demi-humans. So that means the people living in the Sanctuary are all like that?]

[Garfiel —Aah, I didn't mention this yet did I]

Listening to Subaru's answer, Garfiel nodded looking satisfied, and blinked.

In the next moment, opening his eyes, his pupils had turned gold, and thin like those of a carnivorous beast. The tips of his canine teeth grew, and the nails of his raised claws sharpened like blades.

An illusion of his small body getting larger — rather, it was no illusion. His short blonde hair had grown so much that it covered his back, and the same golden hair grew on his exposed arms and legs, covering up everything.

[Garfiel: I also got a whole lot o' those blood left in me. "Atavism" 's my specialty]

[Subaru: ……Woooow. Can I snuggle in it?]

Racking his brains searching for a way to hold back his excitement, Subaru stuffed his hands into his armpits to conceal the shaking of his fingers. But that request had to be canceled seeing Garfiel had already returned to his original shape. Having witnessed Garfiel's shapeshift with her own eyes, Emilia gasped in her breath, and took a step forward,

[Emilia: So, after all, this village is a gathering of demi-human species……]

[Garfiel: More accurately speakin', it's a collection of mix-bloods between human and demi-humans. For th'love of it, all sorts of races o' people like that're gathered here. I'd say that Roswaal bastard has a "Demi-Human Fetish" or something]

[Emilia: So that's why Roswaal said something like that. That for me, this place is……]

Saying so, Emilia placed her hand on her lips and sank deep into thought.

For Subaru on the other side, this information wasn't very light to take in either. In any case, this meant that the people of this place, even though the details may vary, all had this one thing in common with Emilia. Emilia's past, of being shunned, and rejected, perhaps they could understand that pain,

To her, perhaps that may just be licking old wounds. But, if there were others who could support her in this way, what would she feel about that?

He knew her scars, and wanted to caress them, but Subaru, never having experienced the same pain, could not possibly know how to heal them without opening them up instead. All this, had haunted his mind.

[Subaru: That's an unexpected flow of things, but I understand the circumstances of the village and the qualification now. So then…… the problem is with the Trials. You said you don't know the contents, but at least know that is going to happen after sunset, right?]

[Garfiel: Yeah, that's the thing. I don't know the specifics either. Only that you're here to check if ya qualify, at least. If you came here at night, the Trials would start, and that'd be the real deal]

Pointing to the ruins with his thumb, and nudging to Emilia with his chin, Garfiel revealed their current purpose. Nodding to what he had just heard, Subaru gazed up with his mouth open, at the Tomb which was waiting.

Tangled in dense, festering ivy, the thin darkness of the sickly air beckoned, waiting for them. The term "Trials" only served to deepen this solemn impression, elevating it in his thoughts to something more than an expedition into an old ruin.

And, more than anything, that he might possibly be sending Emilia into a place of danger — this fact, was unbearable to Natsuki Subaru.

[Subaru: Sorry, Ram. Looks like I'll be going against your warning a lot sooner than I thought]

[Garfiel: Y'said somethin'?]

[Subaru: Suddenly getting Emilia-tan to venture inside gives me so much anxiety it breaks my heart. So first, for scouting and sacrificing purposes… shouldn't Garfiel rush in first?]

Lifting up a finger, Subaru made his suggestion. Garfiel looked blank for a second, and then gave a broad smile and once again slapped his laps while making a dry sound with his throat, and,

[Garfiel: Isn't that normally the place where ya say "I'll go!" to show off?]

[Subaru: I do want to say it, and I do want to show off quite a bit, but if something happens to me, the probability of me surviving is way too small, so I think you're more suitable for that. Seeing you can crush the ground with a stomp, you can probably come back alive pretty easily. You're the strongest, after all]

[Garfiel: Uh? W, well, I *am* the strongest. Don't know 'bout the Trials or anything, but no matter what kind danger falls out, I'd be like "Penipeni never yields" and all that!]

What exactly he was holding on to was unclear, but Garfiel was in a good mood, rubbing himself under the nose, and there was no need to pour cold water on that, so Subaru didn't say anything. But then, that good mood quickly evaporated, and Garfiel went on [But then]

[Garfiel: T'bad I can't go in. 'S cause of my contract or somethin']

[Subaru: ……Contract?]

[Garfiel: Yeah, it's annoying as hell. Besides, shouldn't be me doin' this]

Kicking the soil with his foot, Garfiel declared this with a click of his tongue. He didn't seem to be joking around or anything, so apparently it was a fact that he could not enter. As to what would happen if he violated the agreement— that was not a question he could ask in front of Emilia, considering how important promises were to her.

Anyways, now that the situation was blocked in every direction. Letting Emilia go alone was out of the question, but the Garfiel-scouting-plan was dead. Then, in that case, there was only one choice remaining.

[Subaru: I'll go look for Otto so can you wait for a bit?]

[Emilia: Within the time you do something like that, the sun would go down—It's alright. I will go in]

Just as Subaru was trying to get another sacrifice, it was gently rejected by Emilia. As if her mind was now prepared, she glared at the entrance of the Tomb, while lights of vigilance gleamed within her violet pupils, wary of what might arise inside.

She too, judging from the sound of “Trials” and “The Tomb of a Witch”, must have guessed what unsettling things might be taking place within.

Carrying the same concerns and anxieties as she did, yet to lack even the strength to hold her hand, wouldn’t that be far too pathetic.

[Subaru: Ok just a bit inside…… no, just near the entrance, but I’ll just go in a little bit and check, how’s that……?]

[Garfiel: I think it’s better if ya don’t? Subaru ain’t got the qualifications. If ya go in without bein invited by the Witch’s Tomb, you’ll end up just like Roswaal]

[Subaru: Like Roswaal…… You mean that guy’s injuries, are because he went in there?]

As the image of Roswaal’s bandage-covered body resurfaced in his mind, Subaru tried to press back his astonishment as he looked up at Garfiel, who crossed his arms and nodded in confirmation,

[Garfiel: Well it won’t be like that for any unqualified dumbass that wanders in there at night. It’s only cus it was that guy, tha you got somethn like that. I wouldn’t be surprised if a normal guy without qualifications went in there and got ripped in half]

[Subaru: Those injuries weren’t inflicted by anyone, so that’s what he meant……]

Roswaal’s roundabout statement finally made sense. When he said earlier that he wasn’t wounded by anyone in particular, he had been referring to something like that.

But then, another question arose. Why did Roswaal enter the Tomb?

——That he himself was unqualified, he must have known that.

[Subaru: ……I better go check inside first after all]

Leaving the doubts about Roswaal for later, Subaru lowered his head as he made this conclusion.

Hearing his answer, for an instant Emilia and Garfiel looked stunned, before,

[Garfiel: Oy oy, were you listenin to me? It’d be dangerous if a dumbass without qualification goes in. Roswaal got like that at night time, but even if it’s noon ya won’t be much safer]

[Emilia: Yeah, it’s dangerous, don’t do it Subaru? If I go, it’d be alright. I was never thankful for it, but being a Half-Elf has its uses too, I guess, so……]

[Subaru: I’m glad you’re worried about me, but]

Casting a gentle gaze on Emilia, who was tugging on the end of his sleeve, Subaru softly picked off the fingers which were holding onto him,

[Subaru: If we calm down and divide up our roles, isn’t this the natural conclusion? Going inside is dangerous, that’s the same for both of us. What we know so far just means that I might be in slightly more danger. So next we be should be looking at what each of us can do]

[Emilia: What we can do?]

[Subaru: If something bad happens inside, I won't be able to heal Emilia-tan. Unless Garfiel turns out to be that kind of insanely surprisingly guy, and happens to be an amazing healing magic user, then it'd be a different story]

[Garfiel: Wounds, mostly you can just rub spit on 'em and it'll be good, right?]

[Subaru: Judging from the suspect's testimony…… it's pretty much like that. Since either of us have the possibility of getting injured, I'd want to keep the healer Emilia-tan safe as an insurance]

Taking a sidelong glance at Garfiel, who had said those words proudly, Subaru tried to persuade Emilia.

Emilia seemed somewhat shaken by Subaru's argument, but, deciding that she could not give ground on the important part, continued with [But], shaking her head from side to side,

[Emilia: Major injuries…… or if it's a life-threatening wound, I won't be able to treat it. Puck isn't responding either, so there's a limit to what I can do. Roswaal has settled down now, but……]

[Subaru: Well, those wounds were pretty dangerous ones, huh. ……But still, try to believe in the slipperiness of my survival skills. I think I rank pretty high on the resilience index of this world, you know?]

He smiled at Emilia, who was not letting go; only, this time, his reply did not sound like he was joking.

In fact, it's rare to find someone as bad at giving up as Subaru. If he were given an infinite number of chances to keep trying, no matter how many times it takes, he would probably keep trying.

No matter how many times his heart is broken, and crushed, he will keep struggling in search of the answer he was seeking.

Because that, is Natsuki Subaru's ——.

[Subaru: Then what if I make you a promise? Then you won't have to worry anymore. I promise, I will return to Emilia-tan's side, and I will never leave you]

[Emilia: ——ok]

Holding out his pinky finger, saying it almost teasingly, he received an unexpectedly favorable reply. Like the stunned Subaru, Emilia held out her pinky as well, and slightly tilted her head,

[Emilia: Um, what do you do with this finger?]

[Subaru: Eh? Uh, we tangle up each other's pinky fingers like…… Uuuoooouu, Emilia-tan's fingers are super thin and white and cute……!]

Their fingers tangling up, Subaru was moved by the unexpected contact. Then, following the violet pupils waiting for the next prompt, he quietly cleared his throat, and

[Subaru: Pin-ky-pro-mise. Liar-turns-into-a-pin-cushion]

[Emilia: Pinky promise!]

Their pinky fingers separating at the same time, in this way, the promise between Subaru and Emilia was sealed.

This time, it was a promise made upon an understanding of how heavy promises were to Emilia. It was no longer possible to treat them like he did before, when he had taken them so carelessly.

[Subaru: So, I'll just take a quick look inside. Basically, I'll keep calling out while I'm looking around, so make sure to keep calling back to me from the outside so I don't get too lonely]

[Garfiel: Son of'a… sometimes I can't tell if yer a badass or a wimp]

[Subaru: I'm a rather careful person. But in the end, I'm breaking Ram's advice after all……]

Muttering the second half of that sentence in his mouth, Subaru apologised to the girl with peach-colored hair in his heart.

The deranged will of a Witch — what she had said was a disturbing term, and one he did not want Emilia to hear. Because surely, she would insist on going in by herself, with an even firmer attitude.

[Emilia: Subaru. If you feel there's something dangerous, you have to come back right away]

Emilia held her hands in front of her chest, and saw Subaru off with a worried gaze.

And in return, Subaru shot her an original thumbs-up with his pinky finger raised, sparkled his teeth in a smile, and took his step forward — turning toward the Tomb.

Crossing over the ivy under his legs, he concentrated his sight on the absolute darkness that lay several meters beyond the entrance. The Grave was filled with silence, and for now, there seemed to be no sign of begrudging voices, or atrocious creatures lying in ambush.

Still, on the other side of that darkness, what could be awaiting him, was truly, in every sense, unknown.

[Subaru: Ee~h, screw it. "If you don't venture into the tiger's den, you won't get the tiger's cub", right? Not that I need a baby tiger or anything!]

As a mofumofu fur-enthusiast, he did have the desire to pet a baby tiger one day, but it was not something he would take any risks over.

Anyways, Subaru, apparently influenced by Garfiel, cheered himself up with an idiom, and making up his mind, he stepped inside the Tomb.

And, the moment he stepped onto the cold surface inside——,

[Subaru: ——eh?]

There was a mysterious feeling under his foot.

Astounded, Subaru looked down and lost his words. ——The floor, had disappeared.

[Subaru: Wa, wait…… That's just way too……]

——early for the FLAG to be recalled.

The footing he had expected to step on did not exist, and there was not a single thing to support his body as he tilted forward. The hand which he quickly extended out could touch neither the wall nor the floor, and so, Subaru's body was sucked into the darkness beneath his eyes ——.

[Subaru: aaaaaaaaAAAAAH——!?]

Deeper and deeper, he fell through the endless abyss.

Now, in answer to her questions, Subaru told her everything that lead up to here.

[Subaru: So that's how, falling down after all sorts of things happened, and then walking around feeling hopeless and a little hungry, I stumbled into you. ……Satisfied?]

[Echidona: En, satisfied indeed. It seems you are a person who's even surpassed my expectations]

Covering her mouth with the back of her hand, the girl let out a quiet laugh that sounded like "ku ku ku" as she noticed Subaru watching her with a guarded look.

Sizzling energy was building up in his legs as if he was readying himself to dash out at any moment, and he opened and closed his hands as if preparing to seize her.

But naturally, Subaru's clumsy assault plan was…

[Echidona: There's no reason to be so cautious. And besides, surely you yourself can tell how little of a chance you have if you go up against me? Bravery and a fool's courage are easily mistaken for one another, and yet are quite different things]

[Subaru: Sorry, admitting defeat doesn't really suit my personality. And when you say there's no need to be so cautious…… considering I'm standing in front of a person who calls herself the Witch of Greed, is it even possible to follow that advice?]

[Echidona: I see. You really are as you say. It was my bad]

As she received Subaru's agitated reply full of rebellion, the girl ——— the one named Echidona, did not alter her attitude. Rather, with tremendous ease, or perhaps finding the powerless Subaru's dogged attitude amusing, her own attitude was one which transcended even the shifting of dimensions.

Almost like reading a Manga, it was as if she was looking down on a sketched out character with eyes of a completely different dimension. To her, Subaru had never even been standing on the same stage as herself in the first place.

It was precisely because of this, that Subaru regarded her with the greatest caution.

A person emitting an oppressive aura that surpassed even that of the White Whale. The one going by the name of the "Witch of Greed". To what extent was all this real, was an irrelevant question. What was relevant, was that she was a person who was not to be taken lightly, whose overwhelming existence could be recognized even by the likes of Subaru.

However, as cold sweat emerged all over Subaru's forehead, she sent him a playful glance,

[Echidona: Alas, to be treated so cruelly really hurts my feelings. As you can see, I am only a meek and gentle girl, you know? If a boy looks at me with those eyes, it's not like I wouldn't get any ideas]

[Subaru: You aren't talking about the girl who's got "DEATH FLAG" written in big red letters on it, are you? Just so you know, ever since I got here, my caution sensor's been acting up like crazy]

After having tasted "death" so many times since coming to this world, Subaru had acquired some sort of an ability. Even though his deaths are still piling up in spite of this ability, his constant desire to avoid that experience again is forcing Subaru to incorporate more and more vigilance into his consciousness.

And according to that, the level of danger this girl posed was no less than when he was standing in front of Petelgeuse.

Although,

[Echidona: It seems we won't be able to talk properly this way. It can't be helped. ——In that case, how about this arrangement?]

Saying this, Echidona softly raised her right hand in front of her face. Subaru gulped down a breath at this gesture, and immediately after, the girl snapped her fingers with her raised hand.

A faint sound rang out —— and the world transformed before Subaru's eyes.

The cold stone space of the bottom of a crypt vanished, and panning out in its place was a prairie of green grass swept by the wind. ——And, on top of a small hill,

[Subaru: Wha——!?]

[Echidona: Instead of playing in a place like that, how about here?]

Laughing at Subaru's amazement as he looked all around, on top of the hill, Echidona —— sitting in one of the chairs surrounding a white table, showed Subaru a seat opposite her own, and pleaded for him to come.

With no idea what just happened, Subaru hesitated as he came up to her. Neatly placed on the table were steaming cups of tea.

Seeing Subaru staring at her silently,

[Echidona: Don't worry, there's nothing dangerous inside. I could take a first sip if you like? Although, if you suspect whether a Witch can't be poisoned, then it wouldn't prove a thing]

[Subaru: ……I'm beat. Since coming in here, all my common sense just keeps getting overturned. What happened just now? You could use Spatial-Transition magic as well?]

Before this, Subaru's experience of Spatial-Transition magic had been at the hands of Beatrice.

With her hands, she had thrown Subaru out of the Forbidden Library and launched him all the way into a livestock barn in Arlam village. ******This happened right after Beatrice threw him out in the Arc 4 Chapter 3 Prelude: Arc 3 Ch71 [The Girl In The Forbidden Library] excerpt – TC*

According to Julius, this magic was a lost art, but if the person in front of his eyes was a Witch, then it would not be such a surprising thing.

[Echidona: Spatial-transition…… oh, the Dark magic. No, this is your misunderstanding. That magic has a lot of disadvantages. I'm not fond of it so it's not something I'd use. This now was just a small trick. I have some degree of freedom here. Because this is my Citadel, after all]

[Subaru: Your, Citadel……?]

Furrowing his brows at Echidona's words, Subaru looked all around once again.

The wind-swept grasslands seemed to be endless, and in all directions there appeared to be nothing beyond the horizons. In reality, whether this empty landscape actually existed was another matter, but it was truly a fantastical sight.

Noticing this, Subaru gulped down his saliva and then shrugged his shoulders with a smile on his face,

[Subaru: Unfortunately, I can't see a Castle or even a hut anywhere. What, is your Citadel being rebuilt right now or something? Or did they repossess everything except your table and chairs because you can't pay back the loan?]

[Echidona: Fffhaha. You really are funny. In front of me, there are very few people who could throw such impudent retorts, except other Witches like myself. Surely, after my death, I never thought there would be an increment in that number]

As if the number of times Echidona could remember herself laughing at a joke was something that could be counted on one's fingers, adding Subaru to that list seemed to bring her great joy.

But on the other hand, Subaru's face loured as he caught a phrase which could not be missed from her words. Just now, she surely said this. That it was "after my death".

[Subaru: If it is true that you are the Witch of Greed, then you should be dead if I remember correctly. I came here to visit your grave, after all]

[Echidona: Oh in that case I sincerely thank you. If you wish to bring me some flowers then please place it near the entrance. I am a person who is not fond of alcohol, so if you want to make an offering then something sweet would be appreciated]

[Subaru: So there's a culture of offering in this world too, huh…… Sorry, but I didn't bring any local produce and I forgot to buy the flowers. Please be satisfied with my smile]

It was a smile of flowers blooming in profusion— the poisonous types of flowers, though.

As Subaru was showcasing that, Echidona purred pleasantly. She then brought the cup resting on the table to her lips, and, taking a sip, she went on,

[Echidona: I've never had a chance to drink tea so happily even when I was alive. Just as I thought, there are things to look forward to even after death. New discoveries are inexhaustible]

[Subaru: You know, this conversation between you and me being a thing in itself is already really weird. ……Damnit, I'll drink it. I'll just drink it!]

Acting so cautious and on edge in front of a person who had no guard up started making him feel stupid, so Subaru, as if plundering it, snatched the cup from the table and gulped down its contents in a rush.

It was neither water, nor tea, nor black tea, but had an inconceivable taste. It was not unpleasant, though.

[Echidona: Drinking up something a Witch gave you, you must be quite courageous]

[Subaru: Hah. Having come all the way here, how can I be frightened now. First of all, if you wanted to kill me then in the next panel I would have already been in cinders. So I shouldn't be so cautious about a cup of tea]

Swinging his hand, he placed the emptied cup down on the table with [Thanks for the treat], and continued,

[Subaru: It was neither good or bad but, what kind of tea was this?]

[Echidona: Considering it was something formed out of my Citadel. If I put it into words, it'd be my bodily fluid]

[Subaru: What the hell did you make me drink!?]

Subaru jumped up knocking his chair away, and struggled to vomit out the liquid he just drank. But, she only softly giggled "kkuku" at Subaru's dramatic overreaction

[Echidona: That was unexpected. I didn't think my appearance was that bad]

[Subaru: However much it may be the body fluids of a beautiful girl, I don't want to drink it without being prepared first! And even if I was prepared I don't want to drink anything described as bodily fluids! I have normal fetishes, you know!?]

He had no property of being excited by saliva or sweat, at least he thought.

Although if that was Emilia's or Rem's, he thought it might not be too bad, but he quietly hid that in his heart, and went on,

[Subaru: Crap, I can't vomit this out. ——Hey, this isn't bad for my body or anything right?]

[Echidona: Don't worry. It is easily absorbed by the body without obstructions. It is bodily fluid, after all]

[Subaru: You aren't really saying something good, stop doing that face!]

Seeing Echidona's slightly bragging attitude, Subaru winced. And Echidona, to whom Subaru was voicing his vehement objection, only tilted her cup with a refreshing expression, and went on [Anyways],

[Echidona: You really are an intriguing character. The fact that you are standing in front of me normally is proof of that]

[Subaru: What, you're too much of a beautiful girl so normally other people's eyes collapse when they see you or something? I'll say this first, I feed my eyes on who I consider to be the most beautiful girls on a regular basis. So even looking at you I don't have many opportunities to think of you as a that cute of a girl]

[Echidona: No, when normal people stand in front of me they vomit. It's funny, right?]

[Subaru: What's so funny about that!?]

Right from the beginning of their conversation, there had been nothing but unsettling words popping out. Subaru took another look at the girl sitting in the chair,

Her hair and her entire body were white like snow. Her black clothes looked almost like she was in mourning dress, and a remaining hint of youthfulness gave her beauty a color of bewitching glamour. He mused in his thoughts about how a beautiful woman in funerary clothes could have a certain magical charm, but her never-disappearing aura of oppressiveness kept making him regard her existence as a menace.

[Echidona: So——]

Then, looking up at Subaru whose vigilance had not dissipated, she placed her emptied cup on the table as well, and, tracing her finger on the edge, she went on,

[Echidona: Talking on like this would be a refreshing pleasure for me but ……it wouldn't be so for you, would it? I think there must be something you want to say, or want to ask, isn't there?]

[Subaru: ……Yeah there is. That's right! Being swallowed by the atmosphere I had completely forgotten, but that's right. You are …… no, actually before that, where the heck is this? Is this really inside the Tomb?]

For Subaru, this was connected to the place he fell into not long after he stepped into the Tomb.

He would have readily believed that the gloomy place from before was the bottom of the Tomb. But now, having been invited to a prairie like this, even that felt doubtful.

To that question from Subaru, Echidona softly stroked her own white hair with her hands, and,

[Echidona: That question was half correct and half incorrect. Your body is surely inside the Tomb, but your mind is in my Citadel. To put it into words, this is inside a dream]

[Subaru: A dream……? But, I don't remember your face so much to see you in a dream]

[Echidona: You are inside a dream, I could say, but it does not have to be inside your dream. This is my Citadel——so, it is inside my dreams. A space similar to this one… don't you know it?]

To Echidona's pursuit, Subaru held his breath. He then slightly shook his head,

[Subaru: Wha, what is your basis for saying something like that……]

[Echidona: I have no assured proof. But, somehow or another, I just felt it. Your attitude looks away from something you know; I just felt like that your's resembles the behavior of a person like that]

[Subaru: ……It's true, that I don't know. But, what you're saying is not wrong either]

It was not a severe way of putting it, but to Subaru, it felt like her words were an impeachment.

Echidona's words were not mistaken, but Subaru's reply was no lie either.

When he was told that he was inside a dream, Subaru, while he was surprised, also comprehended it easily. It was as if this feeling was well-known and understood by his heart already.

Why it felt like that ——— he could not find the reason even searching through all his memories, though,

[Subaru: I'll accept that this is inside your dreams for now. So then, how do I get out of here?]

[Echidona: To wake from a dream, one either wishes to wake up, or is woken up externally. However, even if someone tries to wake me from the outside, my body is no longer present, and it is quite difficult to wake yourself from someone else's dream. So, you can't wake up until I feel like letting you go, and decide to wake up, I think]

[Subaru: ———! Then, are you actually……]

Subaru shivered at Echidona's simple words.

Her Citadel, the meaning of that word now carried a shape of vivid reality. Subaru's captured soul was now in her palms. The deranged wills of a Witch which Ram had spoken of——— the truth of those words swelled in his mind.

[Subaru: Not planning on letting me leave……?]

Even though he was exercising the greatest caution, he was throwing words which may enter him into a fatal rift with the Witch. The fact that if she revealed her true nature he would have no chance against her was well understood.

And then, to the question by Subaru, she spilled out a small sigh,

[Echidona: No, not really. I will let you go if you want to go back, you know? I was not the one who called you here, it was you who came by yourself, after all]

[Subaru: What are you doing to my nervousness? 'Mr.Serious' is not breathing, you know?]

[Echidona: Mr.Serious, unlike you, is not standing in front of me. Maybe he's vomiting under the shade of a tree somewhere?]

In front of Echidona's smoothly spewed venom, Subaru felt sapped of all his strength. In the end, what was she trying to do by coming into contact with him?

It had only been a short time, but even after their conversation he had no grasp of her character at all. Although, for a person referred to as a Witch, it was not surprising that it would not be possible to understand her so easily.

[Subaru: Anyways, then please let me go if you can let me go. There's probably a girl who's waiting and getting worried about me. If I had the time to drink your body fluids, I'd rather go back to that girl so she won't be so worried]

[Echidona: That's fine with me, but is it fine with you?]

[Subaru: Fine with what?]

[Echidona: To go back when you are right in front of me, that is. ——An opportunity to have a conversation with the Witch of Greed, it's not something that people other than yourself could get even if they tried]

This being said, it was the first time that Subaru understood the meaning of her words and taken them into his focus.

Yes. It was. He had only been focused on her menace so far, but had overlooked the most important thing. If she was the Witch of Greed, if she was really the existence which had borne this name in life, then,

[Subaru: You……know the answers to, the things I want to know?]

[Echidona: You are asking me, for the whereabouts of knowledge ——are you?]

In response to Subaru's wrenched out words, once again Echidona laughed with "ku ku ku…". Laughing, this laughter which felt like it was her happiest yet, inflicted the sense of oppression upon Subaru more strongly than ever before.

The atmosphere distorted, and the ambiance of the endless grasslands suddenly began to collapse. The sky cracked, the prairie burned up, and the world beyond the horizons started to decay.

Feeling a non-existent tremble, Subaru hastily stretched out his hands toward the surely existing table. But the moment he touched it, it scattered as if changing into sand. Then,

[Echidona: Just as I thought, you are an amusing being]

Lifting her face, the scenery around Echidona deteriorated, and a bizarre pattern started to cover over the world. A shadow was expanding, extending out arms and legs that stuck and clung onto Subaru's entire body.

In revulsion, he tried to desperately escape, but the collapse of the world had already spread very close to the two of them. The scaffold for escape did not exist. And just so, the world gradually lost out,

[Echidona: If you want to exchange questions and answers, then this space is plenty enough. To know what you want to know. Your desire for such a thing――or rather your Greed, I do approve of it]

What remained between them, was just the space between the chairs in which they were seated. It was a distance close enough to touch if he only stretched out his arm, a world in which they shall sit upon their chairs and have their talk.

The world outside of this had already disappeared. The bottom of the darkness to which his footing had been lost seemed to have no end. Probably without a joke, it would not be possible to come back if he were to fall.

As a chill ran down Subaru's spine, seated on her chair, Echidona seemed to be in a good mood.

She clapped her hands, and gazed into Subaru with her shining eyes,

[Echidona: Come now, what would you like to hear about? If it is anything I know, then I would answer to anything. Is it about the "Witch of Gluttony" Daphné, who had created beasts differing from God, to save the world from hunger? Is it about the "Witch of Lust" Carmilla, who had granted emotion even to those who are not human, to fill the world with love? Is it about the "Witch of Wrath" Minerva, who punched and healed every person, out of grief for the world filled with conflicts? Is it about the "Witch of Sloth" Sekhmet, who drove the Dragon away, beyond the Great Falls, just to bring peace? Is it about the "Witch of Pride" Typhon, who kept on judging the guilty with the innocence and ruthlessness of her youth?]

They sounded unfamiliar ―― or rather, they were the enumeration of a history which should no longer be existing in the current world.

Instilled with the massive amount of information, Subaru could not utter a sound. In front of him, Echidona was still laughing.

[Echidona: Is it about the "Witch of Greed" Echidona, the Incarnation of the Thirst for Knowledge, who remain with her regrets in the world after death, to seek any and every wisdom in the world?]

Pointing to herself with a finger, she said as if with self-ridicule, and went on with [Or…],

[Echidona: The Witch of Envy, who destroyed all of these Witches and made them her food, and turned the rest of the world into her enemy —— is it about her?]

Chapter 11 [Prideful Slothful Wrath]

In the space where even his footing was uncertain, before an emptiness where falling meant inevitable death, there was nothing to distract his attention away from there.
For in this moment, the only subject occupying Subaru's consciousness was the girl in front of his eyes ——— the Witch with white-hair and white-skin, black clothes and black eyes.

That sense of overwhelming presence, of menace, that transcendent entity was of an entirely different level than all other living things.
All of Subaru's insignificant existence, his eyes, his heart, and his soul, were being toyed and tangled upon the tips of those unseen fingers.
In the face of truly inescapable horror, people often seal-in emotions such as these.

Unable to breathe. Unable to feel his own heartbeat. Not even the breaking of a cold sweat, or even a blink, could proceed without her permission. There, was absolute isolation.

[Echidona: Oh dear, I may have overdone it with the intimidation. Even back then, whenever I take an interest in something, I'd end up running my mouth too much. A Witch's nature is a troublesome thing]

Suddenly, still seated in her chair, Echidona seemed to notice how her speech had overheated and took up some self reflection. But still, he could not recover from the traumatizing darkness emanating from the Witch in front of his eyes.
No, the sense of oppression he had intentionally ignored up to now, now that he truly recognized it, would not leave his mind again.

The friendly exchange between them had evaporated. Subaru could no longer see the girl in front of his eyes as a girl anymore. For her true nature was that of a Witch.

[Echidona: When I was alive, this sort of thing happens every once in awhile. It was just like this when the royalty of the various nations came to me, seeking to borrow my wisdom……But I suppose you can no longer look at me without being guarded now]

"My my", shaking her head as if trying to say, Echidona gazed into Subaru with her black pupils. Shaken by the sight of his own expressionless reflection in the black of her eyes, Subaru wavered, and just the same moment, she smiled.

[Echidona: In that case, maybe you'll like this idea?]

[Subaru: ————eh!?]

An abrupt change came.
Smiling, she whispered something to Subaru as he furrowed his brows to show his non-understanding. Then, watching as her smile dissolved into the darkness, Subaru gasped, and the moment he blinked———

[Little Girl: Whatcha lo~okin at~?]

[Subaru: ……haa?]

[Little Girl: Well stop sta~ring at me~]

Swinging her legs around as she said this, the little girl sitting in front of Subaru puffed up her cheeks in a pout.
With dark-green hair coming down to her shoulders, it was a little girl with apple-red cheeks. Her hazel-colored skin in her white one-piece dress matched adorably, and her childish cuteness unreservedly scattered everywhere around her. And, particularly distinctive, there was a blue flower-shaped hair clip on her hair.

No matter how you look at it, it was a harmless, innocent little girl――now sitting in the place where Echidona had just been, staring back at Subaru.

[Subaru: Ah, eh, huh? W-wait. E-Echidona……? Where the hell did she go?]

[Little Girl: Dona? Dona must somewhere around here but~ , who are you supposed to be~?]

[Subaru: M-me? My name's Natsuki Subaru. I wasn't invited here or anything, I'm just someone who got lost, drank some tea, and was heading back…… but then the owner of the house suddenly disappeared which left me in a pretty difficult situation……]

[Little Girl: Ehh~. Then~, I'll call you Baru~]

It's hard to feel hostility toward something so cute, and even though it didn't quite fit the situation, Subaru gave this frank self-introduction. Hearing this, the little girl smiled happily, which made Subaru's heart all warm inside despite the circumstances.

Regardless of how messed up things had become, the moment Echidona disappeared it was as if the pressure had been released. If he calmly considers all this, perhaps the little girl before his eyes was just like him, having been kidnapped from who knows where.
One way or another, maybe now he'd be able to escape with this little girl's help――even though he wasn't too sure how much strength she could lend him. He raised up his face and,

[Subaru: Ok, anyways let's think of a plan to get out of here while the big bad ghost isn't home. But considering there's not many places to step on… first, maybe just tell me your name, little missy……]

[Little Girl: Say, Baru~, are you a bad man~?]

[Subaru: if you could tell me that then at least……Wha?]

Reaching out his hand, intending to sparkle his teeth, Subaru furrowed his brows.
The little girl in front of him swung her legs, which weren't long enough to reach floor, and she rocked back and forth in her chair while childishly muttering [Be~cau~se~] impatiently pursing up her lips,

[Little Girl: I'm asking~ are you a bad man, or not a bad man~. So are you~?]

[Subaru: By their very nature, all humans are creatures who sacrifice other things to survive. Therefore, perhaps from the moment we are born into this world, we are sinners. But, even so,

we still live our lives. Knowing that even as we are sacrificing, something more valuable can be built upon that sacrifice…… Even though I think this kind of philosophical discussion isn't really something a little girl can understand, is that what you mean?]

[Little Girl: Um~, I heard it but I don't really understand~. Well~, ok~, if I just check~]

Toward Subaru, who looked confused, the little girl looked even more confused.
Saying this, she held tight onto Subaru's extended hand. From the small palm completely wrapped up inside Subaru's, he felt a tactile softness that was unique to the hand of a little girl.
And feeling this gave him a renewed resolve, that no matter happens, he will bring her safely out of this place.

[Subaru: Even though I've been around Petra, I'm still surprised I'm so fond of kids. I used to think they're too noisy and all but……]

[Little girl: ――onlythroughpainandsufferingcantheguiltyberedeemed]

[Subaru: Hah?]

Suddenly, the little girl quickly muttered something in a whisper.
Unable to understand, Subaru's raised up one of his brows, and felt a light impact. As if his arm had been lightly tugged, there was then a strangely liberating sensation, as if being released from a heavy burden.
Wondering what had happened, Subaru turned his head to look all around him.

Everything was just like it was before, and nothing changed in the world. The space that permitted Subaru and the little girl to sit facing each other was still without wind or sound or sensation of any kind.
Sitting in the chair in front of him, was still only the little girl swinging her legs.
Only, in her hand, she was holding a man's severed arm――

[Subaru: ――!?]

[Little Girl: Doesn't hurt so~, you're not a bad man~, I'm so relieved~]

Noticing the abnormal turn of events, Subaru looked at his own right arm――at the right side of his body where is arm should be, he saw the reality of the exposed cross-section of his shoulder where his arm had been twisted off.
Pain, blood, none of it was there before he noticed it. The bone and arteries wrapped in pink meat all exposed in the cross section reminded him of the edible meat lined up in a butcher's shop.
That is, aside from the unacceptable surreal reality that it was happening to his own right shoulder.

[Subaru: Oo, aaaAAAAAA!!!! A-arm……my arm aaaAAA!?]

[Little Girl: It doesn't hurt right~, don't yell so loud~. If you flail around too much we won't be able to put it back~]

[Subaru: Y-yo-youu!? Ripping someone's arm off, what, what the hell are you saying! G-give it back! Give it back!]

Holding the exposed cross-section of his right arm shrieking, Subaru jumped right at the snorting little girl with a demon-possessed look on his face. Yanking his right arm back from her hands, he hurriedly tried to stick it back on.
Not that a severed arm can be reattached by sticking it on, but such a thing didn't really occur to Subaru at this moment.
But,

[Little Girl:――nosinfulmisdeedshallescaperighteousjudgement]

The moment he heard something being uttered from the little girl's mouth, Subaru's posture collapsed. Rather, more accurately, the legs that were supposed to step onto the floor shattered like fine glass-craft from the knee downward.
Losing his right arm and both his knees, Subaru's body fell forward from the momentum. And receiving him, was the lap of the little girl still sitting in her chair.

The little girl gently received the falling Subaru, and like a mother holding her beloved child, she caressed the terrified Subaru in her arms.

[Little Girl: You aren't a bad man at all~, but you still think of yourself as a sinner. You are a gentle~ and good child~. Poor~ thing~, you must~ be in pain~]

[Subaru: J-just…….w-wha what……a-are you……]

His right shoulder and his shattered legs did not bring him pain. Nor were they bleeding.
Incomprehensible. An unacceptable existence. The existence of the little girl before him, the one a moment ago he had thought was a subject of protection, was now despairingly distant from that impression.
Hearing Subaru's question, the little girl tilted her head,

[Typhon: Typhon is the "Witch of Pride" you know~]

[Subaru: Pri……!?]

The impactful statement once again stopped Subaru's thoughts in their tracks.
Be it anger or horror, these concepts were completely blown away.

Just a moment ago, Subaru had been in front of the Witch of Greed Echidona. Then why was he now suddenly faced with the Witch of Pride?
Witches who should have already been annihilated, and died long ago――,

[Woman: ――Huuu. Guess it's my turn. Haaa, can't get out of it]

A languid voice came from above him, while Subaru's petrified throat was still trying its best to groan.
Subaru had only blinked his eyes. The color of the world did not change, and his arm and his legs are still missing. But even so,、

[Woman: Haaa, so heavy. Shouldn't you be a bit lighter without the arm and legs? Huuu, that's a man for you…… man or woman, wouldn't existence itself be better off as one big useless blob?]

The one Subaru's body was leaning against had changed from the little girl named Typhon to a different woman entirely.

The woman this time had strange magenta-colored hair: a beautiful girl with a lazy impression. Her skin and lips were sickly pale. Her downcast, half-closed eyes gave off a sleepy or, rather, generally unenergetic impression, and, as if even breathing was a chore, a depressing atmosphere loured around her
And although she was wearing loose black robes, obvious stains and rips littered all across the fabric as if birds had walked all over it.

Looking down at the silent Subaru, she sighed lethargically.

[Woman: Haaa, you're pretty unlucky too. Being played around by Echidona, then Typhon and me……Huuu, meeting three Witches one after another, haa, only that dummy Flugel or that stick-swinging Reid have done something like that before]

[Subaru: You're, a Witch……as well? Just like the little girl just now, and Echidona……]

[Sekhmet: Haa, I'm Sekhmet. Huuu, it's such a bother but you could call me the Witch of Sloth, or not if you don't want. Haa, not that I'm asking you to call me one way or another it's so confusing anyway. Huuuu, I get tired from talking so can I just stay quiet from now on?]

[Subaru: Oh give me a break. I'm gonna lose my mind here. If no one tells me soon, I can't even be sure of my own reality anymore. Please, just tell me what's going on right now]

Subaru used his only surviving left hand to grab hold of her robe, and raised up his head to look at Sekhmet. Sekhmet seemed to find that gaze a bit bothersome, and sighed, then turned down her eyes same as before,

[Sekhmet: Your right arm, haaa, and your knees are gone. Huuu, it was Typhon wasn't it? It's because that child doesn't understand other people's pain. Haaa, she's still that innocent and merciless child like before. Huu, the poor child. Haaaa]

[Subaru: My, arm and legs……th-they can grow back right?]

[Sekhmet: Huuu, for me that's really…… aaa, but that's alright, haa. It's pretty bothersome for me too, huu, I'll leave it for the child after me and go back to sleep. Haaa breathing's such a bother. If I could take in a lifetime's worth of air all into the lungs at once, then I won't have to breathe again for the rest of my life, don't you think? Haaa]

[Subaru: If you do that your lungs will explode and we'll die right? But compared to that, my situation here……]

Still in her languid demeanor, Sekhmet's off-beat proposition puffed Subaru's head full of smoke. As if trying to say "please take this seriously", Subaru tried to plead to her.

[Girl: ——Just now, did you say you wanted to die in front of me?]

He heard a murderous voice saying.

At this point, although it's no longer the first time Subaru had been surprised today, he still couldn't react with anything other than being stunned stiff.
Again, the person in front of his eyes changed. The Witch flaunting the full, dense head of hair had disappeared, and replacing her was,

[Subaru: ……Breasts?]

[Girl: ――Tch! W-where are you staring at, where!]

Trying to look up from the soft lap at the other person's face, Subaru's vision was blocked by large protruding breasts that were obscuring her face.
The sensation of the lap that was bearing the weight of his body, unlike Typhon's and Sekhmet's, now had a meatier feel to it, and honestly seemed to be full of the dynamism of a feminine body.

While literally experiencing this with his entire body, Subaru was suddenly lifted up by its owner's arm. ――with a single hand, Subaru's body had been easily hoisted up, even though his weight was still no less than an average adult woman's, even after losing his arm and both his legs.

[Girl: Look at the other person's eyes when you're addressing them, eyes! Really, men are always like this, unbelievable!]

Saying this as her anger was puffing out, it was a beautiful girl with swaying golden hair. Starting with a short skirt, she was wearing loosely fitting clothes over her body, and her stature while sitting down seemed on the short side. But even so, her large breast gave her a full-bodied impression, and gave the whole situation a somewhat titillating atmosphere… well, only the totally healthy kind, of course.

Then, glaring at the hoisted-up Subaru with rage-filled eyes, she brushed aside her hair in front of the frightened Subaru,

[Girl: Missing your right arm. Missing your legs from the knees down. Not bleeding or in pain…… looks like you've been punished by Typhon! That child……she did something so inconsiderate again, it's just going too far!]

Looking at Subaru's painless wounds, her blue eyes were clouded over by intense emotions. With impulsive words, and an indignant attitude, her every act was instilled with passion, and all the while she was behaving like this, there were tears pooling faintly in her eyes.

[Subaru: A-are you crying……?]

[Girl: Not crying! Just angry! That's right, I'm just angry! At Typhon who caused all these wounds and just left you here! At the world that made that child do such an outrageous thing! And at all the people fighting and harming one another making this world hell, at the senselessness of it all!]

Her furious voice cried out, with such power that it messed up her hair as she pronounced this. Then, lifting up her arm, she suddenly tossed the dangling Subaru up into the air.

[Subaru: eh?]

[Girl: So I absolutely will not permit it! Pain! Conflict! Wounds! How can I remain idle in front such things――!!]

The next moment, with a speed that broke the wind, the girl dashed out and struck her fist straight into Subaru. His face being suddenly injected with such incredible speed and power, Subaru's body was quite literally blown away like a leaf. But,

[Subaru: Pffu――!?]

Expecting to continue being blown away for quite some time, he suddenly arrived at the end of the world.
Echidona had actually trapped Subaru within a world of limited space, so after being launched flying by the power-packed punch, he had only managed to fly for a short distance. The impact against the invisible wall rolling through his entire body, having gone splat in the middle of the air, Subaru turned his eyes back around. And there,

[Girl: ――All will be well! Don't ever think of turning back!]

Leaping, as if in pursuit, the girl rained punches onto Subaru's body while it was still in the middle of its falling animation-sequence.
The endless flurry of punches striking into every inch of his body, Subaru's flesh was sandwiched between the wall and her fists. The sounds of impacts ceaselessly penetrating Subaru's body, its power went through him and into the walls, and began shaking the very world to its core.

Kneaded by the impacts, knocked up and down left and right, Subaru could no longer tell which was which as his mind turned blank. In the field of his vision, through the dance of the incoming fists, perhaps no longer wishing to conceal it, there was the face of the girl covered in a flood of tears. Droplets glimmering as they scattered through the air, just when Subaru wanted to complain "I'm the one who should be crying here…", his face was already turned away by a punch.
Not knowing when the incessant hell would end―― it suddenly ended unexpectedly.

[Girl: Let my fists revive the world! Let my anger cleanse the world! My Wrath, and my healing fists are my reply――!]

The next moment, the world shattered.
The wall that Subaru had been stuck onto, under the impacts of the girl's rain of fists―― after sensing an unbearable sensation through his clothes, Subaru felt the wall behind him shatter into dust.
In that instant, Subaru felt a sense of liberation.

When the rain of fists stopped, he felt something soft. Subaru noticed that he was lying on the ground, in the grassland of the previous world where they had their tea.

Sitting himself up, he looked all around in a stupor. Landing gallanty beside him, the girl brushed her blonde hair as she shot Subaru a stare.

[Girl: Right arm!]

[Subaru: Eh!? O-ok!]

Being suddenly called, Subaru raised up his arm, and that's when he noticed.
The arm that had been ripped off of his shoulders was now back and perfectly well, all the way to his fingertips.

[Girl: Legs!]

[Subaru: Oooo things are looking up. I can stand and walk! Look I can do a moonwalk now!]

Just to be sure, Subaru jumped up and started doing a moonwalk for good measure. Watching Subaru sliding across the grass, the girl held her elbow and nodded contently. And it was at that moment, when the swaying of her prominent bust burned itself into his memory.

[Subaru: Y-you saved me, thank you. But, considering the flow of things, you are……?]

[Minerva: I am the "Witch of Wrath" Minerva! Not that I call myself that!]

[Subaru: You called yourself that just now!]

[Minerva: Don't, that was no big deal! I will not allow anyone to be hurt in front of my eyes, nor tolerate to see a person wounded! It's not a deed to be passed on for posterity or anything!]

[Subaru: You've totally just marked your own actions as some incredible accomplishment there! You're not really hearing what other people are saying are you? It's really hard to communicate with someone like that!]

Flailing his only recently-healed arms around to demonstrate his befuddlement, seeing this, Minerva just quickly turned her back to him.

[Minerva: In any case, now that the wounds are healed, there is nothing more for me to do here! Don't get so much as a bug bite now! That's a promise with a Witch!]

[Subaru: Even if I go live in a sterilized room that's not possible is it!? And don't make promises on behalf of other people! Promise with a Witch or something, wouldn't breaking it mean some severe punishment!?]

[Minerva: It's no such thing. But if it ever comes to that……*I will heal everyone*]

[Subaru: Don't say that like you're going to go around murdering everyone, it's really scary!]

But the fact remains, Subaru's body was completely healed.
Her crude healing methods――in this case, true to the description, he actually was healed at the end of all that. Beating someone up in order to heal them, to think that a phenomenon so inconceivable could possibly exist… It's almost like in those old tv-series.

[Minerva: ――Well]

Then, the girl who was gallantly walking away turned around.
Her white hair swinging with her motion, and her black dress spreading upward charmingly, all filled into Subaru's eyes. She was tilting her head to the side, quite happily gazing back at him.

[Echidona: To prove that I'm relatively harmless, I let you meet some of the other Witches. So what do you think? If your attitude could warm up to me a bit now, then waking them up from their sleep would all be worth it]

Summing up his painful experience up to now, was the Witch Echidona.
Seeing her in front of him, Subaru drew in a deep, long breath, before lifting up his head,

[Subaru: You, really are every bit a Witch…… No human would think like that at all]

And, just uttering these words took up the last bit of his strength.

Chapter 12 [A Souvenir From The Tea Party]

[Echidona: So the space I worked so hard to prepare was destroyed. Such recklessness… it's just like Minerva. That girl can be a little… too quick to strike]

[Subaru: A little……? I think she got to it almost immediately there. That new-sensation-violent-large-breasted-healing-type-loli-tsundere. That's way too many character-tropes stuck together you know!]

Turning his perfectly healed right shoulder, Subaru started blowing this at Echidona in front of him.
The sense of pressure coming from the white-haired girl hadn't changed. But still, her arrangements had not been entirely without effect on him.

[Subaru: Well, I think I'm in the mood for a face-to-face conversation now. Compared to the other Witches, you do seem somewhat more rational…… except Witch of Sloth-san, she may be talking nonsense, but I think we can understand each other]

[Echidona: Well Sekhmet, how should I say this… of all the Witches, she is the oldest and the most rational. But if you make her angry, she won't leave anything half-way]

[Subaru: "Won't leave anything half-way"… you mean she's scary when she gets mad?]

[Echidona: Let's just say, even if we all teamed up, we'd be no match for her. Even if all the other five Witches fought together, I don't think we would be able to win against Sekhmet]

Once again sitting in her chair, Echidona explained this, as Subaru cast her a doubtful glance. The image of the lazy girl with long, reddish-purple hair flashed in his mind. With that lifeless attitude, overflowing with inertia, that person was actually the strongest of all the Witches.

[Subaru: By the way, I've been meaning to ask… I get the feeling that you've been leaving the Witch of Envy out]

[Echidona: ——Let me just give you one piece of advice when you're talking to me]

Remembering the Witch whom Echidona had never once named, Subaru asked her this question, to which Echidona only smiled and raised up a single finger.
Subaru stared at her fingertip as she slightly tilted her head,

[Echidona: I think of the other Witches as my friends, and I think they are deserving of my respect. I have a personality with many flaws myself, and having them by my side for so long is an emotional support for me, a salvation. That is why I have been gathering up their souls, without leaving a single one of them behind]

[Subaru: ……I get the feeling that I've just heard something that can't be glossed over, but please go on]

[Echidona: The one who destroyed these Witches, was the “Witch of Envy”. ——Would you yourself be able to smile at the entity that brutally murdered your closest friends?]

Her smile did not change. But its nature had turned.
A surge of fear ran up Subaru’s spine, and by the time he noticed it, he was already nodding in agreement with her words. Seeing this, she said [That is so, isn’t it?] as she pulled in her chin.

[Echidona: My, it seems like the mood has spoiled a little. How about some tea to get rid of the bad taste?]

[Subaru: ……I don’t have the kind of courage to drink that Dona-Tea again. Unless you put some actual tea in there, then I have no intentions of eating or drinking anything in this place]

[Echidona: To be invited to a Witch’s tea party… back in my day, it would’ve been a thing to be envied……. My my, I guess people do change, along with the times]

As if she had already prepared Subaru’s portion, with a look of regret, Echidona filled only her own cup, and raised it to her lips.
But if what she said was true, then that tea would actually be her own body fluids. Then basically, she would be drinking bodily fluids that she herself had produced…

[Subaru: I heard something about rabbits… they eat their own poop and keep going like a perpetual-motion machine or something]

[Echidona: It is kind of humiliating to be lumped together with them…… isn’t it? Unless, this can be taken as a roundabout way to tell me you wish to hear about the Great Rabbit?]

[Subaru: Great Rabbit?]

Subaru tilted his head. It was a word he had heard somewhere before.
Searching within his memories, he remembered where he had heard it. Indeed, it was while he was riding on the back of a galloping Patrasche, down on Lifaus Highway.

[Subaru: They are Mabeasts that line up shoulder to shoulder with the White Whale…… right? The Great Rabbit, and the Black Serpent?]

[Echidona: They’re Daphne’s bad legacy. Even she herself found them a bit too hot to handle. Setting the Black Serpent aside for now, you have heard of the White Whale and the Great Rabbit wreaking havoc all over, have you not?]

[Subaru: By the way, since we’re talking about the White Whale, thanks to my efforts it’s already been slain. Thanks to my efforts, that is]

Pointing a thumb at himself, Subaru inflated his nostrils with a boastful look on his face. And, hearing this, for the very first time, Echidona’s black eyes opened wide with a look of surprise.

[Echidona: Ehh, is that so? That is, impressive. Just by your looks, you don’t seem to have an arm for swords, or a gift for magic…… But you moved those around you quite well indeed]

[Subaru: It’s a pretty depressing feeling when you knew right away that I didn’t defeat it on my own……! How do you know I didn’t just launch at it and kill it?]

[Echidona: Whether it's the White Whale or the Great Rabbit, it's hard to imagine that there could be humans who can slay them single-handedly. In my time, the only one who could have done this was Reid]

Once again, Subaru raised his brows at the name he didn't know. Noticing this, Echidona let out a [Hmm] as she brought a finger to her narrow lips.

[Echidona: Were they not passed on to this Age? I had thought his achievements were quite remarkable. To put it lightly, he was the only one in the world who could cut down twelve fully-grown dragons all by himself]

[Subaru: No, well, it's just that my understanding of common knowledge, or actually anything related to what people normally know is kind of shallow. That guy sounds pretty incredible though]

[Echidona: ――Reid Astrea. "Sword Saint" was the title given to him, but, is it not around anymore?]

Listening to Echidona's words, Subaru's mind steadily put the pieces together.
Astrea――that was Reinhard and Wilhelm's family name, a name held by the current Sword Saint and Sword Demon, the name of that indomitable clan beloved by the Sword-God.
Then, its first generation must have been Reid Astrea.

[Subaru: Ok, I think I got it. It's still around, Sword Saints. I don't know what generation it is now, but the current Sword Saint's my bro. He's a monster who probably wouldn't lose to the ancestor-sama you knew]

[Echidona: That's quite a way to describe to a friend…… I might say that, but knowing how unconventional Reid is, I can't blame you. Anyway, now we're going to talk about the Great Rabbit, I suppose?]

[Subaru: Uhh, nah. It's not that I'm not interested in the Great Rabbit or the Black Serpent, but…]

As much it seemed that Echidona had wanted to continue talking and show off her knowledge, Subaru thought he should put a stop to that. There was a mountain of things that he wanted to know, but if he were to digest it all at the same time, his brain probably wouldn't be able to keep up.
Instead, it might be better to pick out what he really wanted to know, and pursue those topics thoroughly.
In that case, the first of the things he wanted to know was,

[Subaru: So uhh, you are Echidona, the deceased Witch of Greed. Is that right so far?]

[Echidona: I had confirmed that right at the start, hadn't I? There's no mistake about it. This place is inside my dreams, and if you wish to leave, you can just say the word]

[Subaru: I appreciate your consideration. So first off, I do have a question……]

Touching a hand to his jaw, he directed his gaze toward the girl with white hair. And being bathed in Subaru's insolent gaze, she raised her hand to her almost translucent white cheeks and said [What would that be?] as she narrowed one of her eyes.

[Subaru: I think this is something I should have confirmed with you at the very beginning but…… first off, you're dead where exactly? Aren't you frolicking about, enjoying your days and being pretty chipper?]

[Echidona: ……Ahh, I see. It's true I hadn't explained that at all. We forgot to touch on it, haven't we? You and me both]

With a clap of her hand, Echidona nodded as if understanding. As she signaled her agreement with her gesture, Subaru only scratched his head wondering what had gotten into him.
With the impact of a Witch showing up, and then the Witches' class-reunion after that, Subaru had been too shocked to ask this obvious question until now.

[Subaru: Seeing a ghost inside a Tomb, it'd be good if it was that simple. But after being meddled with so much, I don't think I can just pass it off as all being in my head]

[Echidona: A ghost, I can't really deny that. After all, I am a spiritual body that has lost its physical body. But now, as to why I'm here like this…… well. It is as a counterforce. That would be the most accurate answer, I suppose]

[Subaru: Counterforce……? What kind of…… no, actually, maybe "against what" would be a better question?]

[Echidona: You are sharp, aren't you?]

Nodding contently at Subaru's reaction, Echidona softly clapped her hands. Then, turning up to the air, she signed toward the artificial blue sky with a gesture of her hand.

[Echidona: The one who bound me to this place was Volcanica. The Divine Dragon Volcanica. You've probably at least heard of him?]

[Subaru: ……That would be the Dragon who signed the Pact with the rulers of the Kingdom of Lugnica or something, right? I heard that name in the great hall at the Royal Selection]

[Echidona: Yes, that would be the same Volcanica. By that Dragon's power, I am sealed here in this Grave. And the reason Volcanica did this was, as you correctly inferred, to serve as a counterforce against the "Witch of Envy"]

Echidona's gaze was calm and intellectual, but when the words "Witch of Envy" weaved from her lips, for an instant, a dangerous emotion flashed across her pupils.
Perhaps that, was the enormity of the chasm between her and the "Witch of Envy".

[Echidona: Even now, the "Witch of Envy" is imprisoned in the Sealing Stone, but her seal is not unbreakable. Nor is Volcanica's lifespan eternal, and there is no guarantee that the seal won't be undone if given the chance. There are also quite a few who believe, that there is no knowing whether every great change in the heavens and the earth might not be chipping away at the Sealing Stone. ――That, is why Volcanica left my existence behind]

[Subaru: As a fighting force to oppose the “Witch of Envy”, if ever she is resurrected……?]

[Echidona: But I was not the Witch that Volcanica had originally expected to leave behind, however. If anyone should have remained, it should have been Sekhmet. The problem was that Volcanica himself disputed with Sekhmet. And, it seems, after she beat him to a pulp, he grew rather wary of her]

As if casually gossiping, Echidona lightheartedly glossed over the intertwining fates between the Dragon and the Witch, but Subaru, who had been listening, did not laugh.

He didn’t really think that the grudge between a Dragon and a Witch could be summed up so simply like interpersonal relationships. And besides, he wasn’t entirely sure to what extent he should be believing a story about the “Witch of Sloth” beating the Dragon to a pulp in the first place.

Without knowing what to say, Subaru stayed silent. And in front of him, Echidona continued with an [Anyways]

[Echidona: Myself, the Witch, and the Divine Dragon Volcanica. With the Sword Saint and…… the Sage? For the time being, even if the “Witch of Envy” was resurrected, we should be able to oppose her. At least, that is Volcanica’s faint hope. So there you have it, the context behind why I am now in this disgrace, after my death]

[Subaru: So basically, the one who bound your spirit to this place is the Dragon?]

[Echidona: More accurately, it was at Volcanica’s instruction, that the magic of the Mathers bound me here. If you’ve managed to set foot in here, you must at least know of the Mathers? Or perhaps that family name is no longer around……]

[Subaru: No, the Mathers are still around. Roswaal L. Mathers is the lord of these regions where this Tomb is located. And he’s also my employer, or should I say guardian, or should I say a pervert or something……]

Amazed by the profoundness of that man’s potential involvement with the Witch, Subaru wondered just how he should describe Roswaal to her. But, putting Subaru’s uncertainty aside, Echidona’s finely shaped brows trembled. [Roswaal?], she muttered,

[Echidona: I’m sorry, did you say Roswaal just now?]

[Subaru: Oh? Ah, yeah. Roswaal. What, do you know him?]

[Echidona: It would be strange, if I knew him. After all, I am an existence from 400 years ago. If that was the same person who had existed in that same Age, then this conversation would’ve taken an odd turn indeed]

Subaru agreed with her observations, and just when the image of that clown’s face pouting up his lips was emerging in his mind, Echidona said [Now…], as she raised a finger to her lips.

[Echidona: The Roswaal you are talking about, does he happen to be a someone with long, dark-gray hair? His eyes would be…… yellow, I think, if I remember correctly]

[Subaru: ――Nah, in that case it's a different guy. The Roswaal I know has blue hair, the same color as my jeans kind of. And his eye color's different. My guy's eye colors are mismatched, one's blue and other's yellow]

Relieved that the characteristic are different, Subaru sighed, and suddenly thought of something. Roswaal had told him that the management of this land, the "Sanctuary", had been passed on for generations. So then, the Pact with Volcanica to seal Echidona here must have been passed on as well.
If this duty was inherited throughout the generations of the clan, then in that case,

[Subaru: Maybe Roswaal's name was inherited as well. Occasionally we get girls with really manly names this way, that happens a lot in Mangas at least]

[Echidona: To inherit Roswaal? If that were case, it would sound like something of a nightmare]

As if agreeing with Subaru's theory, Echidona nodded, and shrugged her shoulders, giving off an impression of fatigue. Seeing this unusual change in her attitude, Subaru furrowed his brows. It was then, she said [No…],

[Echidona: The Roswaal I knew, was a person with a bit of an overly-obsessive personality. He was the kind of man who would devote his entire life to fulfill a single purpose, I'm afraid. And if after my death, he had remained unchanged, then……]

[Subaru: Not being satisfied with his own life, he would devote even his descendant's time too?]

[Echidona: Exactly as you say. Oh my, just thinking of it is a scary thing]

Even as she said this, Echidona's lips rose into a smile.
In fact, it was exactly like the gaze of a parent who was watching over their naughty child, but surely, Subaru thought, he must be mistaken. Anyhow,

[Subaru: Well, now I understand the reason you're inside this Tomb, and who's behind it. For the actual specifics, I'll ask the modern-version of Roswaal after I wake up from this dream]

[Echidona: You are free to do so. ……So then, are there any other questions?]

[Subaru: Of course there's more. Next thing I want to ask about is, the Trials. I was told there'll be Trials taking place inside the Tomb. I'd like to know about its contents. And, if you could also tell me the right answers too please]

[Echidona: Asking for the questions and the answers straight from the examiner, how ruthless you are]

[Subaru: A little craftiness never hurt anyone. There's no reason not to use shortcuts when you can. I'm the kind of person who likes to play games while reading the walkthroughs, you know]

Because getting killed and having to do it for a second time would be a pain in the ass.
But setting Subaru's random PLAYER philosophies aside, Echidona closed her eyes as if sinking deep into thought. Then, it was five seconds later when she opened them again,

[Echidona: The Trials, is it?]

[Subaru: Ah, yeah. What kind of Trials is it anyway. If we don't pass it, a girl who's really important to me will be in trouble. She won't be able to leave the Sanctuary even if she feels homesick. And obviously, leaving her behind and going home by myself was not an option]

The Barriers that surround the "Sanctuary", if something like that was blocking her way out, then Subaru would have no wish to go outside either.
When she passes the Trials, they will go through that Barrier together.
And he will do whatever it takes to make sure that happens. For instance,

[Subaru: Even by cheating!]

[Echidona: I'm sorry to say this after you got so excited but, I know nothing about the Trials. I am not involved in them. Therefore, I don't know their contents]

[Subaru: The what!]

His momentum suddenly getting derailed, Subaru let out a yelp. Hearing this, Echidona said [Well there's nothing we can do, is there?] as she shook her head from side to side.

[Echidona: You do know what this place is, don't you? It is my Tomb, after all? In other words, this is a Tomb which would have been built after my death. And the Trials you spoke of, they take place inside the Tomb? Then the Trials within the Tomb must also have been created after I had died. So there is no way that my deceased self could possibly have had anything to do with them, now is there?]

[Subaru: There's no way I can understand that kind of rapid-fire logic!]

[Echidona: In any case, I am not the examiner. So I can't give you answers about the Trials. If anything, it's me who should ask you about these Trials. Its contents, the types of questions, the selection of its respondents, and of course, the answers to the questions… my curiosity is endless]

In her radiant eyes, the pupils of of the "Witch of Greed" shined with the thirst for knowledge. Sighing at the sight her straightforward desire, Subaru concluded that he would make no progress speaking with her on the topic of the Trials.
In that case,

[Subaru: Man, then I feel like there's not much else I want to ask you]

[Echidona: ……Eh? You're kidding, right? That's impossible. But I am the "Witch of Greed", you know? From all corners of the world people have come to me, seeking my knowledge. To be in front of me, with permission to ask anything you wish, you say you have nothing you want to ask me……?]

[Subaru: Well, because you're already dead and you don't know much about what's happened after you died, right? What I want to know is mostly in the present-progressive-tense, so there's no point in asking someone who doesn't know……]

[Echidona: Nonono, let's calm down. It is true that I'm unacquainted the present world, but in exchange, there is almost nothing I do not know about the past. Much has weathered down in

400 years, and no longer remain in anyone's memory, or history. Isn't this a chance to learn about them? Just like the conversation with the other Witches earlier. There are things that no longer survive on any record in the entire world]

[Subaru: But, I don't have much interest in Witches. Even if I learn about them, they're all already dead, and there are a lot things on my mind right now, so that kind of conversation is not really…]

[Echidona: Eeeeeehhh……]

Seeing Subaru really intending to go home, unsatisfied, Echidona, screwed her face into a scowl. It's almost like their positions were completely reversed.
But still, as far as Subaru was concerned, it was the truth. The wrongdoings or noble deeds of the Witches of the past, whatever they were… he didn't really have an interest in such things.
Other than that, what kind of useful information he could get out of Echidona, he really couldn't think of any off the top of his head…

[Subaru: Wait, now that you mention it, I just thought of one]

[Echidona:Yes yes! Very good, that's it. I knew it, there are still things. Ask anything you want. As long as it's something I can answer, I will answer it. Go ahead!]

Already to the point of agitation, Echidona was biting onto Subaru's question not-half-heartedly. Even if they're called Witches, at the root of it all, it was impossible to erase all traces of their worldly instincts. Thinking this, Subaru remembered something about the "Sanctuary",

[Subaru: The residents of the "Sanctuary" that contains this Tomb, they refer to this place as the Trial or Experimental Grounds. No matter how you look at it, "The Witch of Greed's Experimental Grounds" sounds pretty important, and then there's a barrier that doesn't allow half-bloods to escape, what kind of experiments are you running here? I was hop……]

[Echidona: I can't say]

[Subaru: ……ing I could ask you that]

However, with a single stroke, Echidona's expression vanished as she discarded the question. At that unapproachable attitude, Subaru couldn't help but fall silent. Seeing Subaru's reaction, Echidona seemed to have noticed the sharpness of her own words, and made an awkward expression with her face,

[Echidona: I apologize for being so rude. But there are also things I cannot say. I can't answer that question. It's not that I cannot say, but that I don't want to]

[Subaru: ……The term doesn't give off a good impression, Experimental Grounds. But you don't seem to be denying it]

[Echidona: I want you to stop there. I do not wish to be held in contempt]

Lowering her eyes, Echidona rejected any further pursuit of the topic.
The Witch with an overwhelming existence, shriveled her shoulders as she asked this of Subaru.

Anyone who heard this, would have had no choice but to give up on any further questioning. Then, what passed through Subaru's mind instead, was,

[Subaru: Come to think of it, your name…… I had heard it before coming here]

[Echidona: ……]

Echidona remained silent. In front of her, Subaru touched his forehead as he reflected on his memories. The name of Echidona, "The Witch of Greed". Before coming to the "Sanctuary", that name had stolen Subaru's ears several times.

[Subaru: …from Puck]

In the loops that started in the Capital, Subaru had been killed by that Great Spirit three times. His most abhorrent and bitter memory was the time the gigantic Puck killed him as he mocked him.
That time, in Petelgeuse and Puck's conversation, her name had appeared. On the verge of death, Subaru's consciousness had not understood what it meant, and he had not remembered it again until now.

Hearing Subaru's mutters as he found this memory, Echidona lifted up her face.

[Echidona: Puck……? You don't mean, the cat spirit……?]

[Subaru: ――!? Yeah, that's right. The cat spirit. Do you know Puck?]

[Echidona: It's not whether I know him…… did he come here? If that's case, just how much does he remember?]

Echidona seemed shocked to hear this unexpected name, and Subaru was just as shocked to see this reaction from her. Echidona, who had been talking non-stop up to now, suddenly fell silent. Seeing her ominous attitude, Subaru couldn't say a thing. And Echidona, as if sinking into thought again, shut her eyes in deep contemplation.

Wondering how would he continue this conversation, Subaru turned up his gaze,

[Subaru: ――Gaah!?]

All of sudden, in the bottom of his stomach, a searing heat asserting its own existence drew the entirety of his consciousness.

[Subaru: …uh, ah?]

The tremendous heat felt as if it would burn through his entrails. Groaning, Subaru held his stomach, his legs trembling feebly.
The abrupt, surging pain was beyond anything ordinary. A stomachache would be nothing compared to this mysterious anguish that made him foam at the mouth. Unable to stand, he fell to his knees, and, in the next moment, dropped to the side.

Seeing Subaru like this,

[Echidona: Ah, it's finally taken effect]

And, admiring the sight with her cold, unfeeling eyes, Echidona gazed down at him.
Slowly, she approached the writhing Subaru, bent down her knees to get closer to his face, and brushed aside the hair over Subaru's forehead,

[Echidona: When you're invited to a Witch's tea party, you shouldn't be putting everything you've been given into your mouth so carelessly. ——You've learned a lesson now, haven't you?]

[Subaru: You, di… you poison me……?]

[Echidona: Out of the question. I told you, didn't I? What you drank were my body fluids. A part of a fundamentally different existence, a part of a Witch. That, is what you consumed]

Body fluids. Subaru realized he had overlooked the significance of that term in all the conversation that came afterwards. And the consequence, was this state of his current agony.
Opening his eyes, he glared at Echidona. All the friendly attitude of before had long evaporated.
Just what did she want to achieve by doing such a thing——

[Echidona: I don't want you to misunderstand, I didn't do this out of malice or any ill-will towards you. In fact, I regard your existence quite positively. Letting you drink a part of me is proof of that]

[Subaru: Sp…eak so I can… under…stand……]

[Echidona: To put it simply, I lent you a hand so the dormant Witch Genes inside you could assimilate more easily…… or something along those lines]

[Subaru: Witch, Genes……?]

The incessant heat growing in intensity, Subaru used every last ounce of his strength to repeat that word.

——Witch Genes.
That word too, he had heard several times before.
There was Petelgeuse. And then there was Beatrice.

[Echidona: You killed an agent of the "Witch of Envy", didn't you? With that agent's death, the Witch Gene implanted itself inside you…… However,there seems to be something else inside you as well]

[Subaru: That thing, when it assimilates……what'll happen?]

[Echidona: Indeed, whatever would happen? Honestly, I am not sure myself. But, compared to carrying around a bomb that blows up who knows when, it's better to detonate it before it causes anything worse, I think. If we can settle this inside a dream, perhaps it'll make the undetonated part easier to deal with once you're outside]

Listening to that indifferent tone, Subaru felt like his consciousness was about to fade, as light and dark flashed before his eyes in sync with the surging of his pain. But even in this state, Subaru slightly raised his arm, and pointed toward Echidona,

[Subaru: Just now, I thought of something……]

[Echidona: Hm?]

[Subaru: You… the way you talk……is, just like Puck. That cat spirit too, doesn't care about the mood at all, just goes around with that careless air, goes on like there's nothing……]

Listening to Subaru's wrenched out words, for an instant, Echidona blinked in surprise.
Then, with an exaggerated expression, as though she had just heard the funniest joke, Echidona held her stomach as she burst out laughing.

[Echidona: Haha! Hahaha! Aaah, that is quite, a good one! You are fascinating. I really think so. Mmm, mha, aaahahahaha! Is that so, me and Puck? Mmmm, you're quite right. That would be only natural, of course. I'm probably the only one who'd take him as something of a role model]

[Subaru: What, are y——]

Though he wanted to continue his sentence, it was no longer something he could do.
The pain had set his entire body ablaze, yet it would not deprive him of his consciousness. It had felt as though it would continue forever, and there would be no respite from this anguish, but… the end was already nearing.
Though, it was not by overcoming the pain, but rather,

[Echidona: The time for our tryst is almost up, it seems]

Little by little, in Subaru's eyes, the outlines of the world began to blur.
The blue sky, and the little hill in the green grass-covered fields. The two of them, and the chairs surrounding a white table. All these images blended into one, and together, began to fade.

[Subaru: I thought you said it'll only end when you want it to end……]

[Echidona: We have reached the limit of the time in the real world. The "Trials" you mentioned, it seems they will begin soon. When it does begin, all the functions of this Tomb will be directed towards it. And it won't be caring about the lonely ghost anymore]

Saying this in a lighthearted voice, Echidona caressed Subaru's forehead as he lay on the ground. Watching him unable to resist, or even to react, she laughed.

[Echidona: Now, to return from a Witch's tea party. What toll would you like to pay?]

[Subaru: ……Just so you know, I'm broke as hell right now]

[Echidona: Not money. The price is……. ah yes. You are forbidden to speak of this space to anyone else, how about that? You seem to already have another contract just like it too… it is a small price to pay, is it not?]

What is that supposed to mean, there was no time to even ask that question.
Pressing her finger against Subaru's forehead, she whispered something quietly. Then, sensing a heat coming from the finger that was touching him, in an instant, it spread throughout his entire body. And, incredibly, Subaru was granted an understanding.
Of the terms of the contract, and what must not be infringed upon: thus, the one-sided agreement was sealed.

[Subaru: Doing this, without even asking first……!]

[Echidona: Our conversation, and consolidating the Witch Genes. Compared to that, I think this is a very small price to pay. Also, might as well while we're at it, I will grant you a gift]

Smiling at the indignant Subaru, another wave of heat passed from her finger to his forehead.
And, the result of this heat was――

[Echidona: I hereby grant you the qualification to participate in the Trials of this Tomb]

[Subaru: ――!?]

[Echidona: With this, you will be able to take the Trials in this Tomb tonight. Whether you wish to take part is up to you. It is fine if you choose not to. But, if you want to, you could choose to take the Trials in place of the girl who is so very important to you. ――What you do with it, you may decide as you like]

The collapse of the world had begun. And little by little, what lay beneath his feet dissolved into darkness.
This time, the true end of the world was drawing near.

Then, in the world that was coming to an end, Subaru, still lying on the ground, looked up at Echidona.
Sealing a contract he did not wish to sign, extorting from him a price he did not wish to pay, the girl who was smiling at him without a care in the world――ah, without a doubt,

[Subaru: ――you, really, are a Witch]

[Echidona: ――Oh, but of course. I'm one evil Sorceress, isn't that right?]

With that final farewell, Subaru's consciousness sprang from the dream.
Falling, and falling. Fading, and fading.

Breaking out of the dream, floating upwards,
At last, Subaru's consciousness―― was released from the Witch's dreams.

Chapter 13 [Roswaal's Intentions]

The first thing Subaru felt when he woke up was someone's fingertip against his forehead.

[Subaru: Judging from the delicate softness and the really considerate contact, it's: Emilia-tan's!]

[Emilia: ——Even though you got it right, I got a reeeeaally spooky feeling about it, maybe it's just my imagination]

Opening his eyes, Subaru's field of vision was covered by the palm which was touching him. Through the gaps between her fingers, Subaru got a peek at a fragment of her beautiful face, and he loosened his lips, smiling.

[Subaru: Well, because only Emilia-tan would go to the trouble of taking care of me at a time like this, so I got the feeling it was you. It's not like anyone could actually tell who it is just by the touch of a fingertip, you know?]

[Emilia: Oh, I see. I guess feel a bit relieved now…… your body, can you sit up on your own?]

[Subaru: One way or another…… yeah, I'm fine]

Answering with a joke as he woke, Subaru sat himself up from the bed. Briefly looking around at his surroundings, he found himself in an unfamiliar building.
The bedding he had been lying on was crudely made, and couldn't compare at all with the beds of Roswaal's Mansion that he had gotten so used to. In any case, Subaru tried to remember what had happened before he lost consciousness.

[Subaru: Up to where did reality end, and from where did the vision begin……]

The Tomb —— setting one foot in that place, and immediately being swept into a state of falling: that was the last thing he remembered about real world. Then after that, his meeting with the girl playing-innocent inside the Tomb——with the "Witch of Greed", if a Witch's words could be believed, would have all happened inside her dreams.

It was all too vague. Frustrated by his indecisive memories, Subaru held a hand to his forehead and looked toward Emilia. Beside the bed, seated in a chair, she seemed to be quietly waiting for Subaru to sort out his thoughts. Seeing her there, Subaru began with [Well then……],

[Subaru: There are loads of things I want to ask and and talk to you about…… but, first there's something I have to say]

[Emilia: En, what is it?]

Tilting her head a little, Emilia waited adorably, listening. ——but, her eyes weren't smiling. Under the light gleaming from her clear, violet pupils, Subaru shrank his shoulders,

[Subaru: I'm sorry I made you worry again. I got a bit too carried away there]

Having thought that he should, at the very least, be able to clear the path ahead of Emilia, he had somewhat overestimated his ability.
And the situation, as it turns out, was that on the first step he took he fell on his face.
Receiving Subaru's apology, Emilia let out a little sigh through her lips.

[Emilia: You know. I was really really worried. The moment you went in, you let out a shriek and passed out]

[Subaru: Putting the shriek aside for now… I passed out?]

[Emilia: The white of your eyes were turned up, and you wouldn't stop convulsing. We really didn't know what to do. There weren't any wounds and it didn't look like there had been any strange magic cast you……]

Seeing Emilia hesitating with her words, Subaru got an idea of what an embarrassing display he had made.
So that's what happened… Apparently, immediately after he stepped into the Tomb, when the floor collapsed――or by the time he sensed himself falling, he had already been summoned into the Witch of Greed's dreams.
And in reality, Subaru fell asleep the moment he walked in, and basically gave Emilia an uncalled-for amount of worry while she looked on, unable to do anything.

Scouting ahead for dangers for the sake of Emilia―― his determination back then was now looking really stupid at this point.
Thinking that, Subaru scowled up his face in self loathing, when,

[Garfiel: ――Oh? Hey, he's awake isn'he? Lookin' pretty good there, oy]

Saying this, pushing open the creaking door, the blond youth―― Garfiel walked in.
Taking a passing glance at Subaru on the bed, he then turned his gaze toward Emilia.

[Garfiel: Told ya didn'I? Nothin' wrong with his body, see?]

[Emilia: ……But still, I still couldn't help but get worried. Not knowing why and seeing him suddenly collapsing like that. Even though I've kind of gotten used to it by now, getting used to something like that really isn't a good thing, is it?]

[Garfiel: Hah, c'mon, toughen up a bit. Panicking and getting all teary-faced as soon as y'saw this little buddy go down…. Like "yer face's more blue than Aomiguro" as they say]

[Emilia: Wha――!?]

Listening to Garfiel's thoroughly boorish retort, Emilia pouted up her lips as her face turned bright red.
And as soon as he brought that last part up, Emilia jumped up from her chair with a squeal.

[Emilia: I-I wasn't teary-faced! I was worried and panicking, sure, but I wasn't……]

[Garfiel: A-ah, rightright. It's a secret, a secret. Sorry sorry. But, it's not that bad… There's no need to hide it or anything]

[Emilia: It is that bad. I'm really worried that……. if he heard I was going to cry…….]

Trailing off in the middle of her rebuttal, Emilia sneaked a side-glance at Subaru.
Up to now, Subaru had been silently observing their conversation. In front of her gaze, what would the speechless Subaru say――

[Subaru: Hn? Ah, it's good, keep going. Please, please, eheheh. Is that so, ehhh, is that so. Emilia-tan was so worried about me that she was crying… is that so, eheheh]

[Emilia: ……somehow, I got a feeling Subaru would react like that]

Emilia slumped down her shoulders dejectedly. In front of her, Subaru was still breathing heavily with enlarged nostrils. To know that the girl he has a crush on had been worried about him from the bottom of her heart, even if this was indiscreet, he couldn't hold in his glee.
Seeing Subaru's immodest indulgence and Emilia's reaction, on the side, Garfiel let out a [Ohhh so that's how it is] and then, with deep feeling, muttered,

[Garfiel: This time's my bad. Yikes, it's pretty rare. To see me ownin' up to my mistakes so straightforwardly, ain't it?]

And, in self-reflection, Garfiel admitted something he's not all too proud of.

※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※

[If properly trained, even dogs can exercise enough self-restraint to not eat before being given permission]

Chilling, it was a voice instilled with such sharpness that one might be cut in half if one were to touch it.
Echoing out slowly, there was a pause between each word, but the space in between was filled with such dreadfulness that no room for objection was permitted from the other end.

[That is to say, following an instruction the way even a dog is capable of, should have been the least you could do]

Kuts *kuts*, were the high pitched sound of footsteps striking the wooden floor.
The rhythm of the steps were constant, walking left and right, back and forth in front of him.
The evenness of the gaps between them reflected the calmness of the footsteps' owner's mind, all the while knowing full well that they were mercilessly chipping away at the mental composure of the other person.

[Now――]

The voice and the footsteps, and those eyes devoid of emotion, all shot toward Subaru――

[Ram: A creature that can't abide by instructions that even a dog can abide by, what do you even call such a thing? Barusu, do you know?]

[Subaru: I'm so sorry I didn't follow your advice――!!]

Toward the small girl standing opposite him, Subaru fell to his knees on the spot and bent his head all the way down as he cried out in apology.
However, against the wailing from the bottom of Subaru's soul, girl only slightly tilted her head.

[Ram: "I'm so sorry", did you hear me asking for an apology? Not only did you not hear the question, it seems you didn't hear anything at all so far. I think Ram's advice didn't even enter your ears in the first place, because it's not like it was something you couldn't have understood]

[Subaru: Can you please not use such a roundabout way to express your distaste!? I repent, I totally know I was wrong, but it feels like my heart is getting crushed! A straightforward scolding would've been easier on me!]

[Ram: It'd be better if you died]

[Subaru: Too straightforward!!]

Receiving the girl――Ram's merciless rebuke, Subaru hugged his head on the floor. But actually, considering his conduct, he could only receive all her abuse with resignation.
He had flat out gone against her especially delivered warning, and caused trouble for everyone around him as a result.

[Roswaal: Tha~~t's alright. Ram should forgi~ve him there. A~~fter all, Emilia-sama must have already given him the exact same lecture, no? Going over it again wo~n't do much good, except making Subaru-kun's masochist tendencies exci~ted]

[Subaru: I don't have masochist tendencies. Stepping on landmines just happens to be my natural instinct!]

It was just him not being able to read the mood very well, he was thinking.
Seeing Subaru puffing up his chest boastfully, Ram gave up in the bottom of her heart as she let out a deep sigh, and then, without a word, she turned her back to him, to face toward Roswaal.
And Roswaal, shifting his body to face everyone waiting silently by his side as he lay on the bed, continued, [Well~ then],

[Roswaal: Fir~~st of all, that you all came back safe is the most important thing. These stumbles before the Trials had sent all kinds of pla~ns into disarray. Even though Subaru-kun's action was a nothing but a simple blu~nder]

Having been tossed an all-too-meaningful smile, Subaru crossed his arms and made a small snort. And, as if with a reproachful attitude, Emilia, who was standing beside him, pinched Subaru under his ribs.

[Subaru: Ow. Hurts, Emilia-tan]

[Emilia: Even though I always defend you, today it's Subaru who's been bad…… If I had known that Ram had said something like that I would have…]

….stopped Subaru from going first, as if trying to continue like this, Emilia's words trailed off.
Smiling wryly back at her, Subaru muttered [That's why I couldn't tell you…] in his heart. If she knew about this warning beforehand, Emilia would never have allowed Subaru to take on such a

dangerous task.
But on the other hand, if it weren't for Ram's warning, Subaru wouldn't have made up his mind about trying to clear the way for Emilia in the first place. So then…

[Subaru: Your advice didn't make anyone happy, Ram]

[Ram: Saying all of this was because of Ram, only a dog would do that…… No, I should change that to lower than a dog, otherwise it would be insulting to dogs]

Seeing Subaru trying to pass off responsibility, Ram shot back with a look of ultimate contempt. He couldn't help but admire the maid's undissipating venomous attitude. And, at the same time, the other side probably held a similar opinion of Subaru as well.
Leaving the two's irrelevant sparring aside, Roswaal rearranged his legs on the bed, and,

[Roswaal: By the way, Emilia-sama…… How did you like the Tomb?]

[Emilia: ……With what happened to Subaru, I didn't get a chance look around. But, there was a terrible stench in the air and I felt this unpleasant stinging feeling on my skin]

Emilia furrowed her brows as she put her impression of the Tomb into words.
Basically, bad impressions took up most of her overall appraisal of the place. And hearing this unreservedly negative appraisal, Roswaal let out an [Is that so…], and slighty smiled.
Then, his mismatched eyes set upon a corner of the room――― toward Garfiel, who had been observing their conversation, leaning against a wall.

[Roswaal: Garfiel. Has the Qualification been confirmed?]

At the word Qualification, Subaru raised his brows, and looked toward Garfiel.
The blonde youth roughly scratched his short hair, and revealed his sharp canine fangs.

[Garfiel: I didn'go further than the front of th'entrance but……the lights in the Tomb turned on alright. Emilia-sama's got the "Qualification", there's no doubt 'bout that]

[Subaru: Lights in the Tomb?]

Hearing something he hadn't heard of before, Subaru tilted his head as Garfiel flapped his hand around irritatedly.

[Garfiel: There's a bunch of candle-things in the Tomb. While the Sun's up, if a guy with Qualification walks into the Tomb, some stuff in there'll make the fires light up. A guy who gets this welcome without any problems will be qualified to take that night's Trials]

[Roswaal: Conversely, if someone without Qualification forces his way into the Tomb, it would be ju~st like what happened to Subaru and myse~lf]

Finishing off Garfiel's words for him, Roswaal spread out his arms. It was to show off his body, which was still painfully wrapped in blood soaked bandages. ――That is, to show off the punishment for forcing one's way into the Tomb.

[Subaru: I feel like the severity of the punishment is pretty different between what you got and what I got… Compared to just going in like me, what you did must've been quite a lot worse, right?]

[Roswaal: Worse, su~ch as what?]

[Subaru: Illegally peeing beside the entrance or something. That'll really piss off the Tomb manager]

[Roswaal: If that were the ca~se, Subaru would have fallen ri~ght where my puddle had be~en, it se~ems]

His sarcasm being countered by another sarcastic reply, Subaru showed a disgusted face as he quickly patted himself off all over his clothes. Seeing Subaru's reaction, Roswaal relaxed his cheeks, and said [Bu~t], shaking his head,

[Roswaal: The fact that we suffered different damages despite being similarly rejected……I~'m impressed you noticed it. It's true, my i~njuries are quite a lot greater than Subaru's. But, the reason is very simple]

[Emilia: ……Mana …Gate rampage]

Roswaal's words were interrupted by this answer.
Turning to the voice, it was Emilia, who had been covering her lips with her fingers. She was thinking with downcast eyes, and playing with the tips of her silver hair.

[Emilia: When I entered the Tomb, I felt a reeeaally unpleasant air about the place. It felt like my Gate was being interfered with or something. Maybe because I met the requirements, it decided to let me go……but if it's someone who doesn't meet the requirement, the interference would bare its fangs]

There was a change in the certainty of her words, and little by little, her tone became imbued with strength. Emilia lifted up her face, and those violet pupils took in Roswaal's pitiful form.

[Emilia: The interference strikes at its targets through their gates……Which means, the greater the number of gates the person has, the greater the interference they will receive]

[Roswaal: Perfect answer. Wi~th someone like myself……that I didn't blow up is a mi~~racle]

Casually saying something scary again, Roswaal flashed a glance at Subaru with a single eye, and said [It's a good thing you have no talent], rather annoyingly.

[Subaru: So basically, magic users or any talented people would almost die from that. But all I got was loss of consciousness, so it's a good thing that I'm so totally inept as a magic user, huh…]

[Emilia: T-that's true but……describing yourself like that, doesn't it sting a little?]

[Subaru: I've gotten pretty used to knowing that there are things I can't do and things I can't reach. It's alright, I'll just use the things only I can do to show my love for Emilia-tan. For now, how about we start with some rustic love whisperings?]

[Emilia: After the Royal Selection's finished and everything's settled down, maybe I'll consider it]

[Subaru: At least 3 years later!?]

Even then there's no guarantee whether she will listen…
At the cruel Emilia, Subaru shriveled his shoulders. Then, with a [But,] he continued,

[Subaru: Putting the qualifications and whatnot aside, a space that kills magic users… I don't know who's behind it, but it sounds like pretty asshole thing to do… don't know how else to describe it]

[Roswaal: Considering it has been managed by generations of the Mathers family, the one who assembled the ma~gical mechanism must have been one of my a~~ncestors]

[Subaru: Ah, that's not good…… is it. But then, wait… then doesn't that mean you're a way-too-accurate impression of your ancestors? Like it's reincarnating through Ros-chi's family-line or something]

What if when one generation dies, the next generation gets possessed by the asshole consciousness of its predecessor, and so on and so on like a puppet family-line…
Just the thought of it was too frightening, and Subaru quickly shook his head to put it out of his mind. But hearing Subaru's words, Roswaal laughed as if having heard quite a joke,

[Roswaal: There are families who researched that kind of ma~gic, a~lthough, they have been defeated, and extinguished lo~ng ago…… And also, while you *could* call it a "space that kills mages", there is a more accurate name for it]

[Subaru: Which… is?]

[Roswaal: Simply put ——that place is filled with the Witch's Miasma. A nightmarish environment, that passes Mana through the trespasser's Gate, and drives him to madness. That, is what is ca~lled Miasma]

Miasma, Subaru furrowed his brows at the appearance of this word, as if searching for a memory of something he had heard before. Indeed, he had heard that word from——

[Subaru: The story of the Witch of Envy… The place where she was sealed, is covered in that Miasma, or something……]

[Roswaal: Yo~gu, you know about that, don't you. We~ll, it is a very fa~mous story. Even now, the Sealing Stone Temple where the Witch of Envy is sleeping is covered in Miasma so thick that it distorts everything in one's view. If that Miasma rejects those who do not meet her Tomb's conditions, the Miasma invades the minds of anyone it touches, annihilates their flesh, and corrupts their soul, a phenomenon of true and genuine malice. Even the faithful adherents of the Witch Cult who seek to revive the Witch of Envy, are not able to approach it, or so the sto~ry goes]

[Subaru: Even the Witch Cult guys can't go in huh……Then again, of course they can't. If they can just walk right in and plonk the seal off with everyone watching they'll win, won't they]

The Witch's resurrection――he remembered Petelgeuse, screaming that supreme objective. Even that madman, single-mindedly crying out his conceited love, could take no direct actions to actually save the Witch. It was probably out of consideration of the fact that his true form was a spirit also meant that he would be powerless in the face of the Miasma.

[Roswaal: A~nyhow, because of that, the Witch's Seal is made unapproachable by the Witch's own Miasma. And on top of that, if one wishes to approach the Temple, one would have to be sneak past the watchful eyes of the Sage Shaula in the Wa~tchtower]

[Subaru: I've heard of that name, the Sage Shaula. That's the second Sage I know of… Flugel, and then there's Shaula]

How did they come to be called by this title, Subaru wondered. Perhaps there was something about them that was different from everyone else? Seeing Subaru's doubts, Roswaal lightly smiled,

[Roswaal: Flugel, you mean, tha~t big-tree Flugel? Whi~~le it's true he's also called a Sage, comparing him with Sage Shaula wo~uld be a little harsh]

[Subaru: Why's that? They're both Sages, you shouldn't be playing Sage favourites. I owe Flugel-san quite a bit you know, so don't go insulting Flugel-san in front of me now]

No matter what, that Sage lent him a pretty big hand when they were battling the White Whale. Flugel-san probably never imagined that 400 years later the tree he planted would come in handy for defeating monsters. Whether he'd be happy about it though would be a different matter.

[Subaru: With a tree that huge, the broken off part could probably used for all sorts of things……well, there's a chance it got blown up by the time bomb though?] ****In the WN Subaru woke up in a dragon carriage on the way to the Capital, instead of a grassfield like in the Anime, so he didn't see what happened to the tree*

[Roswaal: I~ get the feeling that's not the only bro~ken thing we'll need to de~al with. Anyway……Emilia-sama]

Shifting his gaze from Subaru, who had been holding his chin in his hand, Roswaal turned to Emilia, as he this quiet call. Hearing this, Emilia lifted her face, and answered [En],

[Roswaal: To return to the topic at hand, more than anything, it is go~od that you are Qualified. That means Emilia-sama may take the Trials of the Tomb. In that case, there is just one thing I have to ask]

Solemn and low, the mischievous tone had vanished from Roswaal's voice. Taking this in, Emilia also looked back with a serious gaze, watching him in return,

[Roswaal: Simply put―― Are you willing to accept the Trials?]

As the short question fell into the room, Emilia's pressed together her lips and became silent. Of course, this was only natural. Whether she had the Qualification to take the Trials had already been confirmed. So naturally, it would be followed by this next question. But,

[Subaru: Before she answers, I just want to ask. The Trials, are they something that she absolutely must take?]

Before Emilia could voice her answer, one step ahead of her, Subaru raised his hand. Hearing this question, at Roswaal's side, a dangerous emotion settled within Ram's pupils, but Roswaal lifted a hand to stop her.

[Roswaal: I thought this was so~mething you would a~sk. Without taking the Trials, those with Qualification will not be able to leave the Sanctuary. This much, you must have already heard from Ga~rfiel?]

[Subaru: So I've heard. But, that's not really a reason Emilia-tan must take it, is it? The Gravesite of the Witch of Greed is a foul place, there's no knowing what kind of dangerous things could happen in there. Sending an important Royal Selection candidate, Emilia-tan into such a place, just what are you thinking?]

[Roswaal: O~mu. We~ll, as fair arguments go, it is a fair a~rgument. If we simply needed someone to take the Trials the~n, there are others who are qualified…… If that was all, it'd be just as well if Garfiel di~d it]

[Garfiel: Hah? Me? I'm good with that. I'd challenge the Trials and break right through, it'll be like "Barubarumoa-right-right-left" and I'm passed yeah?]

Like stirring water, Garfiel gestured toward himself with his thumb with a smile that bared his teeth. Seeing how Garfiel only seemed to have heard the second half of what was said, Subaru ignored his simple-minded remarks and tried to focus on the more reliable aspects of his statement.
Actually, it would be nice if the Trials was something anyone can beat, because then there would be no need for Emilia to do it. Then, it'd be nice if someone qualified and more dependable could challenge it.
——In the worst case, having been granted Qualification to challenge the Trials, it'd also be fine if Subaru did it.

[???: ——Nyaa, that'd be a lil problematic]

It was a sudden voice from the entrance of the house that didn't belong to anyone present.
With his back to the door, Subaru jerked around his head in surprise as he heard the unfamiliar voice. Now taking Subaru's gaze, Garfiel, who was leaning against a wall beside the door, slightly waved his hand in front of his face.

[Garfiel: Wasn' me, 's that old hag over there]

Saying so, he gestured with the hand he was waving with toward his side. Setting his sight there, Subaru saw beside Garfiel's scrawny body an even smaller shadow standing there.

[???: Who's an old hag. Never at a loss for words, what a rotten kid I've raised]

With pink, long drooping hair, a tiny little girl said with a very grown-up attitude.
With perfectly formed features, it was a little girl with a cute face. Her age seemed to be around Petra's, about 11 or 12 years old. Her pink hair had waves in them, and its soft texture gave off a

light and fluffy impression. Wearing a loose, white robe that grew larger the lower down it got, with long dangling sleeves that left no place for her hands to come out, she had an impish look about her.
Above all, judging from the way she was addressing Garfiel…

[Subaru: Even though I always thought it would show up one day, I didn't think it'd show up here, the Loli-Granny……!]

[???: Wha's that, I get the feeling I've just been called something totally against my will, or is that just me?]

[Emilia: Umm, I often hear Subaru use "Loli" on Beatrice……so it means "little", right?]

Seeing Subaru's astonishment, the little girl looked up at him with a displeased expression on her face.
Just from Emilia's mumbles, her modern day knowledge was proof of how high her experience-points in her interactions with Subaru had been. Listening to this, Subaru raised up a finger.

[Subaru: Yep, Emilia-tan's correct. More specifically though, it means little children outside of my conquest-range. Combining this Loli together with Granny, we have what looks like a little girl on the outside but containing a granny within, completing a miraculous COLLABORATION! Even though I don't really go for Lolis in the first place, I do understand the subtleties of the Gap-Moe!]

[Emilia: Gyappumoe?]

[Subaru: A girl who's usually like an awe-inspiring older sister but in some places really childish and lacking some really common knowledge or just straight-up being easy to trick would also be considered Gap-Moe!]

Listening to Subaru's string of words in rapid succession, Emilia, with [So there are girls like that……], brought a finger to her lips with an expression as if she was taking this in. While Emilia being unaware of how the characteristics were referring to herself was unbearably adorable, the other person being addressed by these words was looking annoyed,

[???: Then? I don't know what this Loli is, and what's with you keep calling me granny granny? For a first meeting, you're a guy who's even ruder than Ros-bo here] **-bo is like when an granny refers to a grandson with endearment*

[Subaru: Oooo, that was rude of me, Mademoiselle. My name is Natsuki Subaru! Currently a heart-throb Mabeast-Hunter. Well, even though it usually isn't me dealing the last-hits]

High-spiritedly announcing his name with a thumbs-up, the self-introduction tapered off a bit toward the end. And then, extending a hand toward the girl with the distrustful face, [And you are?] he prompted,

[Subaru: Now that I've told you my name I hope you can introduce yourself as well. A simple PROFILE, interests x special abilities. Mentioning some of your CHARM-POINTs as well would be great] **With words like "charm-points", Subaru is speaking English*

[Lewes: ……Lewes Meyer. In a way, I am a representative of this Sanctuary]

Listening to Subaru's jests, the Loli-Granny――the one who called herself Lewes, extended a finger through her sloppy sleeves and scratched herself on her forehead,

[Lewes: I didn't notice it when you were sleeping, but more than just rude you're a poor lil rascal. I get the feeling like I shouldn't have bothered lending you the bed]

[Subaru: The bed, the one I was sleeping on just now?]

[Emilia: Yes, that was Lewes-san's house. It was close to the Tomb, so Garfiel carried you there…… really, thank you so much for earlier]

Then, seeing Emilia lowering her head, Lewes shook her head slowly. Judging from that exchange, the two of them seemed to have already met while Subaru was unconscious. Either way, it was true that she had helped him out.

[Subaru: I didn't know it was like that, sorry for the rude things I said. The bed, lending it to me helped me a great deal. I've been late to say this, really really sorry!]

[Lewes: …….Wha was that, scared me. Gar-bo never apologizes straightforwardly like that. Natsuki……Subaru, was it? It'll be Su-bo then]

[Subaru: That sounds a bit like the beginning of a Weather Forecast, but that's ok. In turn, let me call you Lewes-san then] **ヤン坊マー坊天気予報 "Yan-bo Ma-bo Weather Forecast" was a cartoon shown before weather forecasts in Japan that ran from 1959-2014*

After he had expressed his thanks, Lewes's annoyed expression was cancelled. As they peacefully decided on what to call each other, Subaru continued with [So then…]

[Subaru: So Lewes-san, just now you said there'd be a problem, what was it? Garfiel taking the Trials would be problematic?]

[Lewes: You sure changed your tone quickly. Aah, that. It'd be a problem, quite a big one. Basically, if those who originate from the Sanctuary challenge the Trials, it would violate the Contract] ****聖域の出身者 is like "someone with a background of the Sanctuary", it's meant to be vague here*

[Subaru: Contracts again……]

With all the Contracts and Pacts popping up, restricting this and that, Subaru shot a sickened look at Roswaal. And, receiving that look, Roswaal shrugged,

[Roswaal: U~~nfortunately, this Contract has nothing to do with the Mathers family…… well I shouldn't say no~thing to do with, but we were no~t the main culprit. I~~ mean, my family had something of a suppo~rting role in it]

[Subaru: Your defense statement is all good, now cough it up. The detailed contents of the Contract, in three sentences]

[Roswaal: So stri~ct. We~ll to put it simply, the condition for the liberation of the inhabitants of the Sanctuary is to pass the Trials, but the Trials may only be challenged by someone from the o~utside who possess the Qu~alifications. Tha~t is to say, the situation right now is……]

[Emilia: I am the only one who can do it, is that right?]

Understanding at the end of Roswaal's explanation, Emilia finished off his words. Roswaal nodded in confirmation, and turned to look toward Lewes.

[Roswaal: I~n fact, this is the understanding of the inha~bitants of the Sanctuary. They expect that Emilia-sama would challenge the Trials, and hope that Emilia-sama could overco~me it]

[Emilia: I don't want you to think I am hesitating when I ask this…… but, hypothetically, if someone other than me challenges the Trials, what would happen?]

Emilia's violet pupils turned to Garfiel, and asked this hypothetical question. And, it was Lewes who replied, saying [As for that],

[Lewes: Up to now, at least for as long as I have been alive, no one has ever challenged the Trials. So there is no way to say. Residents or outsiders alike, no one has yet challenged it]

[Subaru: No one, up to now? I'm afraid to ask but, Lewes-san… how old are you?]

Judging from the common setting of Loli-Grannies, the answer to Subaru's question just now could be something really scary. But actually, Lewes said [Not like that], and then, as if looking toward something far away,

[Lewes: At least I don't know of the time when this place was first created. But at most, I think, it would be a hundred and ten-odd years]

[Subaru: Too much! At least, that's the oldest out of everyone I've met so far]

Well, if you put Spirits and the spiritual-bodied Witch aside.
Taking in that side note, Subaru turned a worried look at Emilia. But even under that gaze, the tinge of darkness in Emilia's expression did not leave her.

[Emilia: In any case, I understand now. Either way, if I don't pass the Trials I won't be able to leave the Sanctuary. So I will accept]

[Subaru: Emilia-tan's heroic look when making a resolve is super-captivating, but maybe it's better if we look into some more cautious strategies? Find some shortcuts or loopholes first, and it won't be too late to do the challenge then, I think]

[Emilia: You shouldn't pour water on someone just when they've got so pumped up and all, it's reeeaaaally inappropriate I think]

But, while Subaru was just trying to place her far away from any possibility of danger, Emilia pouted up her lips with a look of disapproval. And receiving her reproachful gaze,

[Subaru: Come to think of it, isn't there something fishy about how we got taken along for a ride like this? I can't get rid of the feeling that something's off, actually. This whole situation just

seems too well set-up, like everything along the road's been arranged and now even the traffic police is in on it]

[Emilia: I totally can't understand that. Subaru says some reeeaaally befuddling things sometimes]

[Subaru: I haven't heard anyone say befuddle in a while……]

Seeing Emilia sharpen her gaze at the customary exchange between them, Subaru hurriedly flapped his hands around saying [No no no],

[Subaru: Nevermind that part, I meant I got a really strong feeling that this whole situation has been prearranged somehow. The half-bloods not being able to leave, and then nominating Emilia-tan to step-up and all. And then to say that it's all already understood and agreed upon]

[Emilia: Prearranged, by who?]

[Subaru: Who, it could only be one person]

At Emilia's question, right then and there Subaru did a sudden spin. And at the end of the rotation his finger pointed toward…

[Subaru: You, wasn't it?]

[Garfiel: Huh? Me?]

[Subaru: Ah, wrong one, sorry, turned too far. This one this one —— You, wasn't it, Roswaal]

[Roswaal: Nothing could have been slo~ppier]

Smiling bitterly, Roswaal gave his assessment of Subaru's movements. But immediately he closed a single eye, and projected Subaru within his yellow pupil,

[Roswaal: Ho~wever, your observation is good as usual. It's true, I had ho~ped for this situation and bro~ught it about. Of course, I didn't have a hand in the sta~ge itself, though]

[Subaru: I get the feeling, I understand now]

Raising up his brows at Roswaal's words, Subaru seemed to have grasped his intentions. Kept out of the conversation, Emilia showed a confused expression, and tried to listen for what was happening behind it all.

[Subaru: First, I think it's odd that Roswaal got injured. In the first place, you must have known that you weren't Qualified for the Trials. This should be obvious considering this place is managed by the Mathers family, and that you are acquainted with Garfiel]

[Roswaal: That is……right. En, correct]

[Subaru: If that's the case, Roswaal would know what would happen to him after he is rejected from the Tomb. In spite of this, why did Roswaal go in? Was it rage against the world for no

particular reason? Or has he finally reached the limits of holding back his Masochist tendencies? Even though both of these are pretty persuasive, I don't think it was either of them]

[Roswaal: O~~ay O~~ay. Is that the kind of impre~ssion Subaru-kun ha~s of me?]

Seeing Roswaal intentionally ignoring the main point with that reaction, Subaru lifted up a finger with [In other words],

[Subaru: Getting wounded like this was in accordance with Roswaals intentions, and had some kind of significance. And that significance would probably… be connected to the Royal Selection, I think]

[……..]

[Subaru: But I was hoping to ask… The villagers of Arlam village, they are gathered in some kind of a Cathedral right now, right?]

Subaru suddenly changed the topic, and turned to Ram, who was standing beside Roswaal. Keeping her silence, she lightly drew in her chin in a nod, and then,

[Ram: En, yes. The villagers are gathered in the Cathedral….. being confined by the residents of the Sanctuary]

[Subaru: Is that so, confined. Earlier, our conversation got cut off because we had to go visit the Tomb, but…… just what kind of confinement is it. And why was it necessary for the Sanctuary guys to place Roswaal along with all the villagers under house arrest?]

The one Subaru turned to next, was Gafiel, who was still leaning against the wall. His eyes narrowed, and grew sharpened at Subaru's question, and followed it with [It's obvious ain't it]

[Garfiel: Telling ya, this here ain't us grabbin onto a way out'a troubled times. But we ain't exactly in a good mood when the Lord-sama and his tag-alongs just comes like it's fine to set our problems aside and use this place as they like y'know?]

[Subaru: By your problems you mean of course……]

[Lewes: That it is impossible for us to leave this Sanctuary for the outside world]

Continuing from Subaru's words, Lewes finished his sentence. A dark and burdened expression unbefitting of her youthful face descended, as she cast down her eyes, and continued in a thin voice,

[Lewes: As I have said before, I have been alive for a hundred and some-decades. But, never once have I gone outside this Sanctuary. Anyhow, adhering to this contract since the time of my birth, I have been bound by this land. And precisely for that reason, it was half giving up……and half refusing to let go of hope] **The first time, Lewes's age was 百十数年 meaning 110-119, and in this sentence Lewes said 百数十年 meaning 110-199. This may have been intentional, so I will keep it same as the Japanese*

[Garfiel: Granny'd like to get to see the outside world for a bit. Th'others too. Just to get chance to, it's something worth biting onto yeah? Having the weakened Lord-sama, and villagers that we could take as hostages falling into our hands, 's gotten pretty convenient]

With Lewes and Garfiel's words, the atmosphere in the room suddenly turned.
In short, they have just told Subaru the reason for the confinement――― that is, confessed the motive of their crime. The aspect that Subaru had not noticed up to now, was that the relationship between him, and them, had been that of a prisoner, and jailor. A relationship between the victim, and the perpetrator.

[Subaru: So it's, like that. You guys, are holding the villagers hostage……in order to free yourselves from the Sanctuary]

[Lewes: You can think of it any way you like. And then, the one who can fulfill that condition is……]

In an instant, Lewes's words clouded over, as she looked toward Emilia.
Taking in the meaning of that look, Emilia once again realized her position.

[Emilia: Me. ――That's what you mean isn't it?]

Understanding the flow of the situation, Emilia closed her eyes once more. And when, after several seconds, she opened them again, there were no longer any confused emotions in her eyes. There was only resolve, for she had made her decision.

[Emilia: The villagers, you haven't done anything terrible to them, have you?]

[Garfiel: 'Course not. If I treat them roughly I'd be taking my anger out on them. I'd rather die before I do something like that, sorry]

Just like that, Emilia's ability to place others before herself was beyond estimation. Even after deciding to face the unknown dangers of the Trials, she was already worrying about the villagers and the others.
It was her strength, and her fragileness, when she is like this, that made Subaru so drawn to her.

[Roswaal: That's an unsatisfied look on your face, i~~sn't it?]

[Subaru: ……That should be obvious. In the end, we still got taken along for the ride. Since we didn't notice it when we got on, now that we have noticed it we still have no choice but to keep riding]

Grinding his teeth holding in his vexation, Subaru put up a smiling look to bicker with Roswaal. But then, quietly remembering, he turned back again,

[Subaru: I forgot to mention, the reason you got wounded]

[Roswaal: En en, go on. I won't be marking you on it]

[Subaru: PERFORMANCE. Or rather, it was an opening gambit]

Seeing Subaru scratching his neck as he said this, Roswaal's expression slightly congealed. This reaction was all taken in by Subaru's single open eye.

[Subaru: Being placed in a state of confinement, the people of Arlam village probably didn't take it well. Naturally, they must have objected. So I think you had to show that something was being done. Being the Lord, it would've been great if you could just go nuts and chase Garfiel away or something…… But the people of the Sanctuary are your subject as well. So you couldn't really do that]

[Roswaal: Fumu. So, wha~t happened then?]

[Subaru: You could only swallow Garfiel and the residents' condition. That is, liberating the half-bloods of the Sanctuary. But this couldn't be done without Emilia-tan's assistance. Yet, the villagers and the residents wouldn't just accept that. So, the rest is simple――― You challenge the Trials, showing that you've accepted their requests, and that you intend to liberate them from their confinements]

[―――――]

[Subaru: I don't know how well you could have predicted how much damage you would take from the Miasma, but if you predicted it wouldn't kill you, then it's not really that much of a gamble. The greater the damage you take, the more serious it looks and the more sympathy you get. And, it sets up the expectations for the final act that will be coming after you]

So in the end, everything about Roswaal getting wounded had been a performance to further his intentions.
As their lord, the magnitude of Roswaal's power was well known to his subjects and the villagers of Arlam. If the Trials can injure a person like him so severely, what will they think of a person who then appears and overcame such a trial to save them?

[Subaru: That, was what I imagine happened judging from my impression of your malicious prejudiced opportunism, so how's that for an answer sheet?]

[Roswaal: ―――Ee~ya~~, I~'m surprised. That was actually, really, re~ally astonishing. It's only been a few days, bu~t just wh~at on earth has happened to yo~u]

Roswaal laughed from the depths of his throat at Subaru's words, showering praises at him.
And, clapping his hands, with a smile clear as day pasted over his face,

[Roswaal: I~~mpressive indeed. Almost a perfect a~nswer. I can't imagine how you could have read this far. A~fter all, I was right to have pi~cked you up]

[Subaru: The sky~~. I'm going to puke]

Seeing the thankful-looking Roswaal, as his deductions was being confirmed, Subaru looked away unable to hide the revulsion in his chest.
At Roswaal's intentions, at himself who had read into those intentions, at the fact that those intentions were for Emilia's benefit… and, the thought that, somewhere deep down, he himself approved of it, was all too revolting.

Oblivious to Subaru and Roswaal's skullduggery, Emilia was still occupied with Lewes and Garfiel and the topic about the Trials.
Watching her from behind, Subaru was determined that he would not let her hear these words, no matter what.

It would be enough if she just looked ahead.
Pristine, and noble, he would not want her to know of the dark intentions behind her.
If Subaru had to cover himself in mud so she could be showered with praise, it would be all be worth it.

In the Royal Selection, she hasn't done anything of note so far, and had no solid footing to stand on.
If her Royal Selection begins at this Sanctuary, he will do everything in his power to aid her.

With renewed determination, and firm resolve, Subaru decided.
Then, as he was clenching up his fists, behind Subaru, entrusting all his weight onto the bed,

[Roswaal: ……Almost, correct. Though that wasn't the only reason I e~ntered the Tomb]

Quietly whispering, it was in a voice that only the peach-colored haired maid beside the bed could hear, and, listening, only she alone cast down her pained gaze in reaction.

Chapter 14 [Questions And Answers]

[Roswaal: You felled the White Whale, and repelled the Witch Cult that had been targeting the Estate. Whether it was sealing an Alliance with Candidate Crusch-sama, or the aforementioned battle, your achievements have certainly grown――fu~mu]

Inadvertently laying more and more of his weight onto the bed, Roswaal touched his chin and closed is eyes. Uttering in his mouth, in this exchange with Subaru in the middle of the night, were all the various things that had occurred in his absence.

And Subaru, pressing down his bad habit of derailing the conversation, tried his best to eliminate the boasting and the tales of suffering, and had given what he thought was an objective explanation of the events. Then, looking back on his conducts once more,

[Ram: ……To put it bluntly, you seem to have done so much that it's starting to make me doubt whether your words are delusional. Since when did you become a character in an action-adventure stage play, Barusu?]

[Subaru: What you just said gave me a pretty subtle feeling I couldn't really explain, you know……though, I'm also still wondering how I did all that myself. But whether it's by my own evaluations or other people's evaluations, it was no small contribution, was it?]

It was a result that even Kong-Ming wouldn't have dared to put together. And even under Ram's cold sarcasm, it seemed that she at least acknowledged the significance of Subaru's accomplishments. So bit by bit, his spirits rose. (**Kong Ming was an ancient military genius from the Chinese Three-Kingdoms period)*

[Roswaal: A result beyond all expectations, there is no o~ther way to put it. Su~ch an achievement, even I…… or, not even anyone, could have ima~gined it]

As if he had finally finished digesting his astonishment, Roswaal spoke these words of full of praise. Then, with a serious expression so rare to him, his mismatched eyes gazed into Subaru, who was sitting in a chair in front of his bed.

[Roswaal: Fi~rst, I want to once more convey my words of gra~titude. ――For protecting my land, and the people of my realm, you have my deepest gratitude]

[Subaru: Ah, ah oh. Yeah. How should I say this uh… hearing you say it like that kinda makes me wanna to curl up in a ball. It wasn't that big of a deal or anythi……]

[Ram: It seems Barusu is a little, unable to grasp the gravity of your words of gratitude, Roswaal-sama]

As Subaru put a stop to Roswaal's courteous words of thanks, Ram took a step forward and interrupted. Her clear, unwavering eyes were looking down on him,

[Ram: Interrupting on your superior, and on top of that rejecting his words of thanks is in its essence unforgivable. Besides, as a Margrave, Roswaal-sama is someone who carries the power

of an entire wing of the Kingdom of Lugnica. ――Words of gratitude from him holds far more weight than Barusu can imagine]

[――――]

[Ram: From Roswaal-sama's position, he shouldn't even have to bother looking at someone beneath him, let alone offer words of gratitude. To have gone to such lengths, please have some consideration for its significance]

Like a slap in the face, Ram threw out these words that wiped off Subaru's over-optimistic thoughts. Listening to this, unable to come up with a single reply, Subaru hung his head. Then, saying [No~ no~], Roswaal lightly waved his hands as if to smooth things over,

[Roswaal: The way Ram said it was a bi~t too exaggerated. My words don't carry tha~t much value]

[Ram: Roswaal-sama]

Hearing Ram's concerned call, Roswaal nodded, and with [Ho~wever], he continued,

[Roswaal: Setting aside the weight of my gratitude due to my social standing for now, the weight of what Subaru-kun has accomplished is clear to anyone's eyes. As~ such, if I don't reward you appropriately, you can ea~sily imagine the disappointment and public outrage that would be directed to~wards me]

[Subaru: ……So then, what are you going to do for me?]

[Roswaal: A fitting reward. ――Subaru-kun, do you remember what happened in the Royal Selection Hall?]

Seeing Subaru's throat choking up, Roswaal narrowed his eyes.
As this gaze was piercing through him, what passed across Subaru's mind were the abominable memories that even now made his chest burn with shame and self-derision whenever he recalls them. The declaration he had made in that place, his reckless words, his lack of understanding, his lack of self-understanding… the laughable nonsense uttered by that foolish self, who had gotten even the most important thing wrong in his mind.
But still, even so――

[Subaru: I remember. It's not something I could ever forget. ……or should forget, I think]

[Roswaal: Then, as my reward for your actions, how about I make the words you said in that place into a reality. ――Rest assured, on the dawn when we leave this place, I shall appoint you as a Knight]

Lifting his head, for a moment, Subaru was unable to take in the meaning of those words. Seeing Subaru wavering, blinking, Roswaal nodded his head,

[Roswaal: Fighting alongside the Count in the battle against White Whale, and slaying a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, I cannot allow these deeds to go down in anonymity. Your name, the name of <Knight> Natsuki Subaru shall be held with honor and spoken with admiration

throughout the Kingdom. ——When that is so, no one will be able to laugh at the words you have spoken in that Hall]

Hoping to be of assistance to Emilia, they had been the barkings of an empty-handed youth. The youth who had been dreaming, and who had so many times been broken by the face of reality, having despaired, been sunk into madness, driven by vengeance into despising all things, and at last saved by love —— now, he was here.
Everything that happened in that time, surely, the "Honor" that had passed through Roswaal's lips… would be proof, that there had been some value in all of that.

——That, no longer remaining in the minds of anyone except Subaru, was the fact that they were Rem's deeds.

[Subaru: ……Thank you, I will accept. If it means it would bring some meaning to that battle we fought]

[Roswaal: It is an achievement to be proud of, and I will not allow anyone to make light of it. You now have the right to stand by Emilia-sama's side with your head held high. By your own strength, you have earned this]

[Subaru: ……It wasn't, just my own strength]

Listening to Roswaal's words, he murmured this under his breath. Watching Roswaal lightly furrowing his brows as if not understanding its meaning, Subaru closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Then, as he opened them again, he casually shrugged and,

[Subaru: That was a serious exchange, oy. Gotta be careful, after being out-of-character for so long it'll be embarrassing to go back to normal again. My face is already heating up!]

[Roswaal: ……Yo~u're quite right. Eeya~eya, that was not like me at all, even my shoulder's gotten sti~ff. With the relationship between you and me, it really isn't like us to be talking so se~riously]

As if mirroring Subaru as he broke off his serious face, Roswaal's expression relaxed as well, and the tense atmosphere of a moment ago had all but disappeared. And, watching over the conversation between Subaru and her master, Ram let out a small sigh, and with [Well], she continued the conversation,

[Ram: Then, Barusu, you have something you want to ask Roswaal-sama, don't you? That's why you placed Emilia-sama far away from our conversation, after all]

[Subaru: Your shrewdness earlier really helped getting this conversation going, much appreciated…… It's not that I'm treating Emilia-tan as a nuisance, but it seems Ros-chi's mouth will get stiff if she's here]

Ram's pointed observation made Subaru take on an awkward smile. Seeing this smile, Ram directed her gaze toward the place where Emilia had been standing, making sure once more that there was only an unpopulated empty space left over by her absence.

[Ram: I got Lewes-sama to accompany her on a tour of the Sanctuary…… But when Emilia-sama heard that Barusu will be remaining here, she seemed to have been feeling a little lonely]

[Subaru: Even though I'm glad I'm being relied on, if I think about all the things to come, I can't be rushing to every immediate desire in front of me. Most likely, she'll meet up with Otto on the way. Though I am a bit worried about having him alone with her…… that bastard Otto will probably make a move on her… aaaah what do I do? Emilia-tan is super mega adorable oh no I'm getting worried]

[Roswaal: Talking to yourself and making yourself even more worried is ba~d idea, don't you think? Anyway, you were no~t mistaken. ――The truth is, if there are things that I don't want Emilia-sama to hear, I would probably ne~ver open my mouth]

Seeing Subaru's heart fluttering about insubstantial worries, Roswaal shook his head, and laid bare his shameless secretiveness. And as Roswaal did so, Subaru closed one of his eyes, and with a [Just as I thought] put his inner thoughts to his tongue,

[Subaru: You're intentionally restricting information to Emilia-tan……Just who do you think you're trying to imitate here?] *(Puck :3)*

[Roswaal: It's necessary to be selective with the information, do~n't you think? As a Royal Selection Candidate, Emilia-sama's importance is fa~r above mine. But, right now, her body and her knowledge have not caught up to accompany her qualification and status, and are still in need of polishing. So, while she is still learning, putting too many burdens on her would be unre~asonable……]

[Subaru: Saying this like you're a guy who only meant to provide a carefree learning environment for Emilia-tan, that's a pretty way to frame it. But to leave her in the dark in a fatal situation, knowing full well but failing to tell her, that doesn't sound reasonable at all, now does it. Even for you, that can't be a good thing]

Knowing that Roswaal was trying to gloss it over with superficial words, Subaru held back his urge to argue, and continued his pursuit in a quiet voice. Seeing Subaru's calm disguise, Roswaal closed a single eye, and silently gazed back at him in return.

Intently, his single eye――the left, yellow pupil continued to stare into Subaru. Unaware of the meaning of that unsettling gaze, Subaru's body wavered. And then, as if having read into his discomfort, Roswaal laughed,

[Roswaal: We~ll, I imagined you would be pursu~ing this to the end sooner or later? That's why, this time I have prepared my reso~lve]

[Subaru: Resolve?]

[Roswaal: The resolve that I will no longer dodge Subaru-kun's questions, and will now give a~nswers. Even if I want to run, I am burdened by this wound, now is just the perfect time, do~n't you think?]

With a dry, rattling laugh, on the bed, Roswall lightly tapped himself on the thigh as he pronounced this.
For just a moment, Subaru was taken aback by how meekly he had accepted defeat.

[Subaru: …….Just what, kind of wind is blowing here]

[Roswaal: Tha~t you don't trust me up to now makes me feel a bit lo~nely. But then again, considering the relationship between you and I, I can't blame you for fe~eling this way]

[Subaru: Not that I think it's good to be so blatant with my wariness, but with everything that's happened up to now, it's only to be expected. You've always been a little on the excessively secretive side, after all…… But this time, I can trust you?]

[Roswaal: Of course]

Seeing Subaru's suspicious gaze, Roswaal nodded and lightly opened his arms.

[Roswaal: Everything that you have accomplished over these past few days have given me more than enough proof to open my heart to you. I can be at ease now. From now on, I can place my trust in you, and into the depths of my heart accept you and recognize you――as my acco~mpli~ce]

[Subaru: Hold on. Why, do I get the feeling I've just been given a few heavy crosses to bear? It's alright if you don't rip everything open like that, just letting me touch it a little is enough]

[Roswaal: Ayaaya, even when it's bursting out of me you're sti~ll so cold]

[Subaru: It's not that, but if you suddenly pull it all out like that, it's just a bit too heavy……]

As their exchange was starting to sound like a couple who had just began dating disagreeing about where to take their relationship, Subaru coughed and tried to sort out his thoughts, and began with [Anyhow],

[Subaru: Let's leave the accomplice part for another conversation, for now, just let me ask some questions I've been wanting to ask you. ――So, what's the real reason you're hiding all this information from Emilia. First, let's start from there]

[Roswaal: ―――――]

Once again, Roswaal closed one of his eyes and glared at Subaru.

How Roswaal chooses which information is shared with Emilia――the implications that can follow from this, including all the events of the previous loops, would be unfathomable.

The fact that she was a Half-Elf by birth―― if she had known that this information would incite the Witch Cult into action, then perhaps they might have been able to prepare effective countermeasures against the attack on Arlam village and the Roswaal estate.

And on the other side, it would have had an impact on Subaru's actions as he frantically dashed to and fro to salvage the situation, then, as a result, maybe what happened to Rem would have――

[Subaru: Answer me, Roswaal. If you want to make Emilia-tan the King, then surely, it would be just as inconvenient for you if she dropped out on the way. Yet even so, why are you going to such lengths to put Emilia-tan at a disadvantage by concealing information from her? It doesn't make any sense]

[Roswaal: To that question, I will answer it as such ――Everything is as you pointed out, and it is because it is exactly as you pointed out, that the information I share with Emilia-sama is restricted]

[Subaru: …….!? What's that supposed to mean. Are you trying to say that concealing information and placing Emilia at a disadvantage, is somehow necessary for her winning the Royal Selection?]

[Roswaal: Indeed it is so. You don't think there is any me~rit in that?]

Roswaal's reply throwing his thoughts into disarray, Subaru furrowed is brows and laid bare his confusion. Seeing this response from Subaru, Roswaal shifted himself on the bed, causing it to creak.

[Roswaal: Subaru-kun, could thi~s be what you wa~nted to say? That when they learn of Emilia-sama's participation in the Royal Selection, there would be a possibility that the Witch Cult would make a move. And in reality, the Witch Cult did move, and attacked my lands. Furthermore, if I had known of this possibility, then I should have been able to prepare some appropriate countermeasures]

[Subaru: Y-yeah. Exactly like that. Anyone would think that, it should be obvious. I might not have known, but the relationship between the Witch Cult and Half-Elves is common knowledge, isn't it? In fact, you must have known. If that's the case, then why didn't you prepare anything……no, even before that, why did you leave estate and seclude yourself at the Sanctuary?]

[Roswaal: I've been confined here in the Sanctuary, it wasn't as if I meant to be away from estate for so many days……]

[Subaru: Your excuses won't work anymore. How you got injured and placed into a state of house arrest was when you challenged the Tomb in order to appease the villagers from Arlam. In other words, it was a consequence of me evacuating the villagers from the Witch Cult……so before that, not returning was by your own intention]

[Roswaal: Using logic to argue against an opponent you're angry at does pay off. It re~ally is, a good habit to get into]

Hearing Subaru's rejection of his simple excuse, Roswaal casually shrugged as if he had never expected it to fool him. Displeased with this expression, Subaru took a step forward, but,

[Subaru: ……Ram]

[Ram: Roswaal-sama is burdened with wounds. But even so, to incinerate Subaru, a single fingertip would be sufficient……But Ram, will not forgive such insolent behaviour in front of her]

[Subaru: You seemed to have accepted it. Being treated like a sacrificial piece, it was the same for you as well. He knew those idiots were coming to the village, and yet he fled all alone from that powderkeg waiting to blow. How do you forgive something like that]

[Ram: It's not a matter of forgiving or not forgiving. Ram will pardon any and all action taken by Roswaal-sama. However he treats Ram, whether it's cutting me down or casting me aside, it is all the same]

[Subaru: You――!!]

In front of Ram's incomprehensible devotion, Subaru's throat filled up with rage

But even so, he could not suddenly resort to violence. Perhaps it was because of the sober judgement that he would not be a match against either of the two in front of him, or perhaps, it was because――

[Subaru: ……Even Rem, was sacrificed because of those kind of reasons I can't understand]

[Ram: ――? I don't know who you are referring to, but Ram has no relation to anyone by this name. To Ram, Roswaal-sama is everything, and everything else is insignificant]

Even Subaru's wrenched-out appeal could not bring about the slightest fragment of an echo in Ram's heart.
He had already known that. That for the girl who had forgotten Rem's existence, that plea would have been meaningless. Yet, at the same time, he also understood.

From the start, he had been aware of Ram's unusual loyalty to Roswaal.
But this perverse obstinance now, was a different kind of madness than the one carried by the Ram that Subaru had known up to now.
And there was no greater reason for this, than her having forgotten Rem's existence.

Subaru didn't know the details of what had happened in their past. But piecing together the fragments from what Rem had told him, he could get a sense of the mutual reliance the sisters had for each other.

With her sense of guilt, and her inferiority complex――swaying in between the two, Rem's complexes had made her become even more deeply dependent on her older sister. And while Ram's instability was not plain to see, when she is around her younger sister, fragments of it would show through.

Just like Rem, whose world mostly consisted of Ram, Ram's world consisted only of Rem and Roswaal. Her complexes having been brought to a resolution, when that narrow world, beginning with Subaru, took in many, various things, Rem changed. But Ram's world had remained narrow.

Having forgotten the person who had made up half of her world, now, Ram's world is comprised only of Roswaal.

It may be extreme, but that was the cause of her excessive loyalty to Roswaal.

[Roswaal: Ram do~n't excite Subaru too much. A~fter all, Subaru didn't intend to do anything outrageous aga~inst me. It was o~nly, a step forward]

[Ram: If you say so, Roswaal-sama]

[Roswaal: Yes yes. It's no~ matter. Isn't that right, Subaru-kun. You look a little angry, but you are not taken over by ra~ge. Something like losing yourself and pu~nching me, you would not choose to lose this opportunity to continue our conversation without interruptions, wo~uld you]

[Subaru: Just what, is that supposed to mean……]

[Roswaal: It's si~mple. If this was the old you, somewhere along this conversation you would have thrown a fit, shouted, and the conversation would have ended. But you didn't, and even while you pressed down your anger you hung on to the argument, without letting go…… You have grown up, I me~an to say]

As Roswaal was lightly clapping, delivering this superficial compliment, Subaru felt a burning rage in his chest that made him want to cry out. But, knowing if he gave in to that, it would be giving his opponent exactly what he wanted, he stopped himself, and taking a long, deep breath, he held back the waves of his rage.

――And in doing so, he realized that he had proved Roswaal's previous words correct, and he couldn't hold back his irritation with with himself.

[Roswaal: We~ll now, teasing the young man any more than this would not be adult-like. Since you've shown me how you have gro~wn up, I should show a bit more matu~rity on my end as well]

[Subaru: ……Then please do so. Anyways, please clearly answer my previous question. Answer without trying dodge it. Why, have you hidden the Witch Cult from Emilia. And why, when you knew that the Witch Cult was coming, did you, the greatest combat force we have, leave the estate!]

[Roswaal: I can answer both questions with a single answer. ――I behaved as such in order to avoid a confrontation with the Witch Cult]

[Subaru: Huh――?]

Hearing this calm and orderly reply, for a moment, Subaru couldn't understand.

Chewing them down, swallowing, digesting those words within his mind, and soaking in their contents,

[Subaru: I don't, understand. In order to avoid fighting the Witch Cult……but why? Don't tell me you're allergic to them, or any crap like that!? If you……. if you were there, couldn't you have taken those bastards out in one shot? Then the victims……]

[Roswaal: I see. It's tru~e, if I was there, then the ca~sualties from this disturbance would have lessened. I try to have an accurate understanding of my own strength, and I am aware that I am

among one of the few most powerful people in this country. It's safe to say, that if I was there, then the Witch Cult attack this time would have been easily repelled]

[Subaru: If you understand that, then why――!]

[Roswaal: That is, why]

Watching drops saliva flying from Subaru, Roswaal held out a finger to stop him, and then, pointing that same finger toward the ceiling,

[Roswaal: If I had done everything, it would not have Emilia-sama's achievement, nor would it have been your achievement, now would it? Even if my own reputation was improved, it would have been of no~ use]

[Subaru: ――――h]

What he was saying, Subaru could not understand it at all.

It must have been a joke. Praying, that Roswaal would follow that with some kind of jest, Subaru held his tongue and waited for Roswaal's next words.

However, looking at Subaru, who had grown silent, Roswaal only tilted his head,

[Roswaal: How could I deny it? After all, it was a disaster that I can be completely certain was going to happen. How could I possibly not use that to the fu~llest?]

[Subaru: Y-you……do you even know, what you're saying…….?]

[Roswaal: ――? I don't understand which part Subaru-kun fi~nds to be a problem. What could it be, I wonder. Was it the damage done to Arlam village, was it having had to borrow the strength of the mercenaries and Crusch-sama's private army to repulse the Witch Cult……or was it about the fact that all these damages could have been avoided?]

Subaru's voice was trembling, and, as if reading into the inner depths of his heart, Roswaal threw out those words as though it was all a matter of course.

Hearing this reply, Subaru felt a tremor trembling through every organ of his body.

Before, when he had spoken with Puck, when the spirit said in front of the sleeping Rem that "This child sacrificed herself to help Lia", Subaru had flown into a rage.
And because that happened, Subaru painfully realized that in between his and the Great Spirit's sensibilities, there was an insurmountable gap that could not be filled in with words. In other words, the rage he felt at that moment made him understand that they had always been two fundamentally different entities.

However, that was not the case for Roswaal. He understood the reason why Subaru was mad, and he knew what Subaru wanted to say――and it was while knowing all of that, that he made this cruel decision.

[Subaru: That was all hindsight, wasn't it. In a way, I understand what you're trying to say. In repulsing the Witch Cult's attack, whoever was in command would receive the credit, and that

would have no small an impact on the Royal Selection, I can understand that……and I also understand that if you took care of it yourself it would not have the same effect. But!]

Revealing his teeth, Subaru, with a wild swing of his arm,

[Subaru: How many people do you think died because you weren't there and didn't bother to say anything!? Sure, the casualties weren't catastrophic. But still, the number wasn't zero. People died. Whether it was our own people, or those bastards from the Witch Cult……]

[Roswaal: Even if I was there, the treatment of the Witch Cultists would not have changed. All of them, would just have been reduced to ash. I'll accept responsibility for the casualties on our side, but to blame me for the enemy's losses would be a bit of a stre~tch don't you think]

[Subaru: ——B-, still, couldn't there have been a more peaceful…… No, it's not about that! Every single thing you've been saying had been in hindsight! It's true it went well. Our losses were minimal, the enemies were wiped out. Emilia-tan is safe, the villagers of Arlam were all safely evacuated…..But that was, all just coincidence. Originally th——]

Originally, if Subaru didn't do anything, the villagers, everyone in the mansion, Emilia…

[Subaru: They should have been dead. This time, if everything didn't work out perfectly……everyone would have been wretchedly, cruelly, agonizingly…… tortured to death]

Covering his face, Subaru strangled back the tears within his voice.
On the other side of his closed eyelids, once again those scenes of hell that he could never forget emerged.
The village consumed by flames. The cadavers strewn about the ground. The corpses of the children. And Rem's dead body abandoned on the mansion's garden. And, at last, the frozen, ending of the World.

——All of that, would have been the indisputable World if Subaru could not overturn it by Returning by Death.

[Subaru: If you were there, none of those thing would have happened……You knew, but still watched them die. How many times, have you killed those people……]

[Roswaal: It's troubling to be so misunderstood. The ones who attacked were the Witch Cult, no~t me. Besides, the Witch Cult's attack was stopped by your hands before anything could happen, the victims you spoke of never existed. ——You are only repeating nonsense]

[Subaru: ——Is that so]

Listening to Roswaal's cold words, Subaru dropped his shoulders and replied in a quiet voice.

Nonsense ——if that's what he considered them to be, then there was nothing Subaru can say to change that. Return by Death could not be explained to him, nor could Roswaal be blamed for things that never happened in this reality.

The only one who had experienced that hell was Subaru, and the one who exonerated Roswaal of the crime of bringing about that hell, was also Subaru.

[Subaru: ……If I turned out to be still just a useless piece of trash, then what would you have done? To make Emilia King, you want that as much as I do. But the odd were just too one-sided, it's not even enough to gamble on…… it was far more likely that everything would have ended there]

[Roswaal: However, you overturned such a possibility. ——Are you unsatisfied?]

[Subaru: I am unsatisfied. You don't seem to be the kind of guy who would leave things to something so uncertain]

There are several kinds of people who gamble. There are those who don't know whether they will win or lose, and rely entirely on their luck. And there are those who do not wish to be directed by fate, and only when they have assembled the best possible hand, do they at the very last moment leave it to chance.

And then, there are those who pre-arrange everything from beginning to end, and would only run the fixed gambling match where victory was already certain.

[Subaru: You are not the kind who would gamble in the first place. So, why did you do it?]

[Roswaal: ——Because, I believe in you]

When Subaru asked a second time, Roswaal's voice dropped in pitch as he replied.

Hearing this answer, Subaru couldn't stop a snicker from leaking from his lips.

[Subaru: So you don't feel like giving me a serious answer after all]

[Roswaal: Whether you believe my story or not is a another matter, but everything I've said is true? Because here, tonight, I've decided that I will not li~e to you. The things that I cannot say, I will not say, and if there are things inappropriate for this occasion, I will not mention them. But, what I do say, I swear that they are free of falsehoods]

In response to Subaru's words that were tinged with a color of disappointment, Roswaal said this in a solemn voice. But, was this something that could be believed? Having already lost all positive impressions of Roswaal in the conversation up to now, Subaru was no longer in a position to accept everything at face value.

In front of Subaru's sharpening glare, Roswaal rolled his head,

[Roswaal: I will say it again. ——The reason I made this decision, is because I believed in you. I believed, that if you realized the danger Emilia-sama was in, you will strive to establish an alliance with Crusch-sama, and do everything in your power to repel the Witch Cult, and distinguish yourself in doing so]

[Subaru: Even if we pretend for a moment that's true, just how the hell did you decide to believe in someone like me! What do you know about me! We've only known each other for a month, what me looked like I was the kind of man that you can place that kind of faith in?]

Stomping on the floor, Subaru objected to Roswaal's shameless and flowery words. Pointing out a finger, Subaru shook his head, rejecting what he had just said,

[Subaru: But it couldn't be. When I last left you, I was absolutely, one-hundred-percent trash. It was only because of what happened afterwards, that the trash got more or less better. But what happened afterwards, no one else knows except me. ――So just what part of me did you believe in!?]

Roswaal closed a single eye, and disturbingly, with the one yellow pupil, stared into Subaru. As if to shake off that stare, Subaru kicked the floor with all his might.

[Subaru: It's absurd! Are you really trying to say that you trusted that empty-headed idiot to get everything to work out, and just left your people and everything else behind like it's some kind of a game, risking your own position and future as the wager? What am I even supposed to say to something that callous!?]

[Roswaal: ……It seems, this is the end of today's conversa~tion]

Whereas Subaru had laid his anger bare, Roswaal only whispered in a lonely voice.

Upon hearing that whisper, Subaru screamed, lending voice to his inexhaustible vexation.

[Subaru: If you don't intend speak straightforwardly, it'll be pointless whatever you say. After this conversation, I don't intend to believe anything you say anymore]

[Roswaal: It seems your impression of me has taken a dive, that is tru~ly regrettable. ……Even though I don't think there is a need to confirm it, but regarding our conversation tonight, Emilia-sama…]

[Subaru: I won't tell her. There isn't much information to begin with, plus it's all been embellished, there wouldn't be any point in telling her. You've anticipated this as well, haven't you. That's why you've been going round and round]

Regardless of Roswaal's true intentions, the Royal Selection was still ongoing, and creating any more friction between Emilia and Roswaal was not something he wanted to do. Besides, with Emilia now acting as a representative of the villagers of Arlam, Roswaal's faction needs to remain united.

It gave him spasms to think how he was going along with Roswaal's intentions, but, challenging the Trials would improve how people saw Emilia. ――And all of that, was controlled within the palms of that man's hands.

[Roswaal: You understand everything, and the anger you harbour towards me is unbearable…… yet you didn't flip over the table or anything like that. You re~ally are, just as I expected]

As Roswaal said this to Subaru, who had been grinding his teeth to hold back his vexation, Subaru lifted his head, and saw Roswaal's face twisting into a truly revolting expression.

[Roswaal: You are, without a doubt, worthy of being my accomplice――no?]

[Subaru: ……You bastard, I hope you die a worthy death]

[Roswaal: I know. Without a doubt, I will be falling into hell. That is why, before that happens, I must extend my utmost brutality over the present world, to the best of my ability]

Sending a sharp glare at Roswaal's declaration, without a word, Subaru turned around and stormed out of the room.
Any further conversation would have been pointless. If Roswaal had no plans of revealing his true intentions, if there was nothing Subaru could do to break into his thoughts, then nothing could have come of that exchange.
But,

[Subaru: ――You think everything will happen as you expect them to, and everyone will dance to your tune]

Clenching his fist tightly, walking down the street in the night, Subaru prepared his new resolve.

Tomorrow, Roswaal would have Emilia challenge the Trials, to overturn the understanding of the people of the Sanctuary and Arlam village, and their contempt for Half-Elves.

What may arise in that process, how many burdens Emilia will have to endure, were not within that man's considerations. In the end, no matter how many wounds Emilia will bear, even if her heart was worn to its core, he would only frivolously laugh at the events unfolding in accordance to his will. If that were the case,

[Subaru: I won't let it happen. That girl…… Emilia, I will protect her]

The Qualification to challenge the Trials―― if the dream he saw in the Tomb was not only a dream, then Subaru would also have been granted that Qualification.

It may have been granted on the whim of a Witch, but with it, he could thwart Roswaal's plans. All of the pain and tears that have come into existence only because that man cared nothing about those around him, Subaru will put a stop to them here.

[Subaru: ――That, is what I must accomplish in this Sanctuary]

Upwards, across from where he threw up his fist, was the floating, pale-blue moon.

As if to hold onto that far and unreachable light, he closed tight his fist, and, sketching out the form of that cute silver-haired girl within his thoughts, he determined, he will crash head-on into that clown's devious plans.

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[Ram: ――Was that, really alright?]

In the room that Subaru had stormed out of, Ram, who had been watching over their conversation, asked this quietly. Hearing this, her master shook his head as if devoid of strength.

[Roswaal: Such a reaction was o~nly to be expected. But even if it was expected, it is a depressing thing, to be gouging at a young man's heart]

[Ram: You do know there is no need to lie in front of Ram?]

[Roswaal: I'm glad you're wo~rried about me, but those were my honest thoughts. Why, in Ram's heart do I really seem like someone who enjoys doing these things?]

Answering by wordlessly averting her eyes from her master, Ram rearranged the bed sheets that had been ruffled in the earlier argument. As she did this, her fingers felt a hardness across her master's stomach, and she pulled it out of the sheets. *(Damnit Tappei!! >_<)*

[Ram: Roswaal-sama. This is…]

[Roswaal: Aah, so~rry. If Subaru-kun had seen this, thi~ngs would have gotten quite co~mplicated. But, it would have been too much punishment if I had put this under my butt. If I'm not careful…]

Receiving what she passed back as if it was very precious, Roswaal gently caressed its surface as he took it. Then, he said [No matter what], touching a finger to his chin,

[Roswaal: Emilia-sama's qualification is now confirmed, and Subaru-kun has been fired up. Tomorrow night, the Trials will begin……Ram, what do you think will ha~ppen?]

[Ram: Roswaal-sama's considerations are beyond Ram's ability to guess. ……Roswaal-sama, you know what is going to happen, then?]

[Roswaal: This thing isn't that conve~nient. Compared to the incomplete ones held by the Witch Cult, it is somewhat superior, but it is nothing more than a poor imitation, and still far from what she desired. The argument with Subaru-kun just now, how much of that do you think happened as described]

Roswaal took a deep breath as if contemplating, and seeing this, Ram slightly raised her brows and then timidly, with hesitation,

[Ram: Then, how much of what you said to Barusu was……]

[Roswaal: Even though there was some acting……most of it was according to my true fe~elings. No no, but of course I knew Subaru-kun would be angry. But while I knew it, I could also add some things that I wa~nted to say as well, isn't that so]

Roswaal waved his hands to Ram as if to explain himself, and then, with [Anyhow], he continued,

[Roswaal: To be despised by the partner of my heart, it does feel painful to be thought of this way, as if I had only been thinking of myself. Oh how childish I still am, my spi~teful friend]

Roswaal laughed as he spoke.
Wrapped within his arms, preciously, preciously, was a book with black binding.

Roswaal placed his fingertips over the binding of the book, and slowly, and slowly, he continued to trace over it.
Lovingly, and lovingly, slowly, and slowly——

Chapter 15 [Qualifications and Trials]

——On the morning of the next day, trodding on grass still adorned by the morning's dew, Subaru was looking up toward the entrance of the ruins he had visited the day before.

Yesterday, having been restricted by time, he didn't get a chance to take a good look at the exteriors. But looking at it now, it all actually seemed to have been surprisingly well maintained. Although the callously sprawling ivy had spread to cover the entire exterior of the entrance, the plants surrounding the Tomb have been neatly attended to, and he could discern on the Tomb itself signs of restorations of broken walls that had deteriorated over the ages.

[Subaru: Not really sure what kind of relationship those guys here have with the Tomb]

Touching his hand to the walls that were showing strange colors under the light of the Sun, Subaru mumbled this under his breath.
He thought back to the conversation with Garfiel and Lewes in the previous night inside the room in which Roswaal was confined. They all wanted Emilia to take the Trials, and hoped, as a result, she would be able to liberate them from their imprisonment within the Sanctuary.

[Subaru: Judging from what they said, for Garfiel and the others, the Witch is just something of a nuisance, isn't it? So why are they maintaining the Tomb like it's so important to them……]

[Otto: Maybe it's the opposite. The Tomb is the reason that the people here are all bound to this land, right? So until someone passes the Trials, they mustn't allow the Tomb to get damaged. Since if demolishing the Tomb would set them free, Garfiel would have already done it a long time ago, wouldn't he?]

The one who followed up on Subaru's deductions was Otto, who was wandering behind him, looking all around the Tomb.
Early in the morning, Otto, who had been sleeping inside the dragon carriage just as he declared he would, got woken up and was bullied by Subaru into coming along to the Tomb on a scouting mission. Naturally, Otto grumbled about it at first, but…

[Otto: Then again, it's rare to get a chance to visit something like the Tomb of the Witch of Greed….. maybe coming along would be worth it after all. There's no knowing whether we'll find some treasure belonging to the Witch of Greed along the way. We could make a fortune!]

[Subaru: If you go around announcing that you're selling some Witch-related stuff, won't the over-obsessive guys from the Witch Cult come hunt you down? Sorry I woke you up, that was my bad, gees, but don't go broadcasting it and bring a sea of flames here]

Saying this, trying to save the merchant-souled Otto from himself, Subaru turned back to the Tomb once again. Silence fell all around, and the only sounds remaining, filtering through the trees, were the chirping of insects, and the rustling of leaves caressed by the wind.
A crisp air was flowing through the Sanctuary in the dawn, it was perfect for a morning stroll.

[Otto: Say, we didn't come out here just to breathe the air and go right back, right? If you wanted to enjoy a stroll in the morning, you'd probably have brought Emilia-sama instead of me]

[Subaru: Surprisingly, Emilia-tan's no-good in the mornings. Even though Emilia-tan being groggy after just waking up is dangerously adorable…… it'll have to wait until everything's settled down. She's probably still stressed out after the conversations yesterday, I'll let her sleep for a little longer]

[Otto: So, you've got the men together for your skullduggery while the Princess is asleep. You, sir, are a wicked one]

Sensing Otto gleefully squinting his eyes at him, Subaru only shrugged. But still, Otto's reading was dead-on. The truth is, it was in order to do something he wouldn't want Emilia to see, that Subaru came to the Tomb.

[Otto: Then, what are we doing? I'm not too confident with my magic abilities, but if it's using Wind and Water magic to stifle the sound of footsteps or to suddenly hide myself in a flash…… ah, and I can also transfer my footsteps to a completely different location]

[Subaru: Your magic, sounds like it's incredibly useful for cat burglars, doesn't it?]

[Otto: Well, people usually take it the wrong way. But I wouldn't use it for stealing. I have no qualms about using it to listen-in on conversations, though]

Seeing Otto bragging this with eyes narrowed and his white teeth all showing, Subaru sighed. Then, lifting up a finger in front of the high-spirited Otto, Subaru pointed it toward the Tomb.

[Subaru: I want to take a look inside the Tomb for a bit. If my predictions are correct, the lights inside the Tomb will send me blessings for my future endeavors. If I'm wrong, then I'll probably keel over and won't get up, in that case, if you'll be so good as to pull me out…]

[Otto: What kind of person would just say "Alright, I got it" after listening to that explanation!? Keeling over and won't get up, what's that supposed to mean, please stop right there, I'm getting scared now!]

In reaction to Subaru's super-important announcement, Otto started wailing. But hearing Otto's complaint, Subaru looked over as if watching an unreasonable child, and,

[Subaru: Listen up, this is the Tomb of the Witch of Greed. Simply put, if you set one foot inside the place without the Witch's permission your consciousness will be snatched right out with its roots. I got done-in like that yesterday. So this place is dangerous, don't you be going in there]

[Otto: If it didn't work out yesterday, Natsuki-san shouldn't be going in either, right? If you know you're going to keel over why do you still want to go in, it'll only make a mess of things, let's not do that. Besides, if it really ends up that way how will I get Natsuki-san out?]

[Subaru: Always questions, questions, coming out one after another…… If you keep believing there will be an answer to everything, you'll be getting into a spoiled mentality, you know]

[Otto: Please stop trying to gloss things over with sophistries just because it's too bothersome to explain!]

Having been completely seen through, Subaru smacked his tongue and scowled. Seeing how in the short time they've known each other Otto has already grasped all the tricks in dealing with him, Subaru shook his head dejectedly,

[Subaru: Here, I borrowed some rope from the dragon carriage. I'll tie this around my waist, so if I collapse inside, you can gently, calmly, lovingly pull me out]

[Otto: No matter how gently, calmly, lovingly I pull you, you'll still be getting mud and cuts all over I think]

[Subaru: Well I can't be picky considering the circumstances. Just think of it as repaying a favor]

[Otto: You're the one who owes me a favor, right!?]

While Otto was raising his objection and putting on his grumbling-face, Subaru had already tied the rope around his own waist and handed him the other end. Unwillingly accepting it, Otto carefully inspected the loop around Subaru's waist, and yanked on it just to be sure it was safe. However much he might be complaining, he was still a conscientious person.

[Subaru: Despite being a merchant, you seem really easy to fool…… is it really alright for a guy like you to be doing business?]

[Otto: You know, you seem to have completely forgotten how I'm literally holding your life in my hands right now]

As Subaru looked at him with a motherly gaze, Otto squinted his eyes, tugged on the rope and grumbled.
With a wry smile, Subaru gave him a slight bow on the spot, and in the same breath he turned round about, toward the entrance of the Tomb.

A foul, earthy air was quietly flowing from the Tomb. The morning light of the sun, like the twilight of yesterday's, lit only several meters into the entrance before vanishing entirely. The other end of the tunnel was shrouded in absolute dark, and nothing seemed to have changed from the path that had collapsed the moment he set his foot inside.

[Subaru: Well, it wouldn't actually collapse anyway, I'd just go splat on the first step, so that'd actually make it easier to pull me out, I guess]

[Otto: Natsuki-san, you can go in whenever you're ready, just give me a signal when you're going in]

[Subaru: Alright, I'm going in!]

Subaru had no hesitations in making that decision.
In the worst case, he'd faint and get called by the Witch to another tea party. Although he wasn't especially looking forward to getting his arm ripped off, punched into healing, and drinking body fluids again――

[Subaru: But compared to all the brink-of-life-and-death stuff so far, it's not all that baaaa――d!]

Declaring this, Subaru nimbly jumped-off into the entrance of the Tomb.
The threshold――or whatever that might be called, crossing over that boundary between the sunlight and the shadow of the Tomb, Subaru gingerly opened his eyes.
Whereas yesterday, his first step had been met instantly by the torment of that weightless sensation――

[Subaru: The ground is solid. I didn't fall in]

It's an improvement from yesterday, and while it was subtle, it was nonetheless a reassuring change. Taking a deep breath, he took another step. And with his second step into the Tomb, Subaru's body was completely swallowed by the shadows of the ruins.
To Otto, waiting outside, Subaru's figure must have become obscured or perhaps even lost to sight altogether.

[Otto: Natsuki-san, are you alright? If you're going to faint, please give me a signal like "I'm gonna faint!" while you're fainting]

[Subaru: That's a bit difficult isn't it… And I wouldn't want to admit it if I'm going to faint, I'd probably shout something like "I don't wanna faint!"]

[Otto: What's with the unnecessary pride in a situation like this!]

Along with their usual exchange, they took some small comfort in confirming each other's positions through their voices. And, reassured by that sense of relief, Subaru took a third step, and then a fourth.

[Otto: ――Oh]

[Subaru: Ah…….]

The next moment, the scene spread out at once in front of Subaru's eyes.
Rather, in an instant, the shadow was banished from the ruins, and its interiors bared itself for the intruder's eyes to see.

Upon the walls on both sides of the corridor, at about the height of Subaru's shoulders, lined up in equal and even intervals, the lamps lit up, and with faint, swerving luminescence, lighted the path.
It was a corridor constructed of the same material as the exterior walls, about the width of Subaru's outstretched arms, or two people walking side by side. The height was such that he might bump his head if he jumped. Or, if that giant balding old man was here, there would probably be sparks flying from his scalp scraping against the ceiling as he walked if he doesn't bend down.

[Otto: ……There's light coming from inside. Is that some kind of condition being met?]

[Subaru: This is a welcoming for someone who's qualified to take the Trials of the night, or so they say…… I thought in the worst case I might've been just spacing out and daydreaming all of this]

Once again trying to make sure that what he saw was real, Subaru held up his palms and stared at them. Then, touching himself on the forehead, Subaru recalled the sensation of the touch he had received from her fingertip within the dream.

[Subaru: Looks like I've received your souvenir from the tea party all well and good. Even though you pretty much charged me a price for it without my permission… I wasn't planning on telling anyone for the time being anyway]

[Otto: Hey I can see inside as well, so then what'll happen if I come in with you? Can we pillage the Witch of Greed's Tomb now?]

[Subaru: All I know is that there's an evil wizard whose whole body got split open when he tried to go in and he's still recovering from his wounds. What'll happen to you though, I'm too not sure]

[Otto: Isn't that incredibly scary!?]

Listening to Otto getting frightened behind him, Subaru confirmed once more that he had achieved his objective. Although he should be able to venture deeper inside like this, there was a chance that Otto might want to follow in behind him, so Subaru had to abandon that idea for now.
Either way, all that Subaru wanted to do was to confirm that he was qualified for the Trials, and to verify that the words Echidona said to him within the dream could be believed.
In any case, if he could step into the Tomb, then the knowledge and conditions Echidona had given him, along with the payment she extracted, must all have been real. And the same, then, would go for all those Witches that Subaru had met inside that daydream.

[Subaru: If that's true, then 400 years ago, those "GOING-MY-WAY" Witches would've been going HYA-HA all over the place, wouldn't they. What must that have been like, at the end of that century…… good thing I got transported into this Age, I guess]

Just the thought of an age wrought by chaos by the Witches of Sin and the Witch of Envy, makes the present Age seem pretty reasonable in comparison. Although the atrocities of the Sin Archbishops would offset this somewhat.
Still, what a pain in the ass those Witches must have been, every last one of them.

[Subaru: Anyways, all the preparations on my end are O-K. Now it's just waiting for nightfall, and seeing how Emilia-tan's Trials turn out. Then let's maintain a high degree of flexibility, and be ready to adapt to the situation]

Although it sounded nice, that pretty much meant he had no plans whatsoever. Saying that, Subaru looked back at the Tomb's entrance once more as he left.
Returning to a worried-looking Otto, Subaru untied the rope around his waist and left it next to the entrance.

[Subaru: It might come in handy again, besides, maybe I'll need it tonight, so I'll hide it here for now. And sorry for dragging you along, Otto]

[Otto: No, that's alright, as long as you came back safe…… but more importantly, aren't we going back empty-handed? You went in the Tomb but didn't bring anything back, what did you even go in for?]

[Subaru: I'm having a really hard time figuring out which part of what you just said I should take seriously, but maybe I'll just take that as your artistic style. I'm not religious or anything, but grave robbing is still not something I'd do you know?]

It's not easy to understand why Japan, being an otherwise the irreligious country, manages to revere eight million gods without actually believing in any single one in particular. One could even say it's the homebase of the hodgepodge-approach when it comes to religion. Or, it might be just as accurate to call it a collection of cowards being overly-wary of ghosts just in case they actually exist.

[Otto: Of course all that was just joking around. But if that was all, you didn't really need me here, did you? Why'd you bring me along?]

[Subaru: Actually, it was somewhat of a gamble whether I could go in or not. So whether it was getting confused at seeing me falling on my face, or getting traumatized for life after witnessing my body exploding, it'd be best if the victim of that was you……]

[Otto: What kind of selection criteria is that!? And I got more than just a little hunch that was by the process of elimination!]

[Subaru: Dummy, you were the first person that came to mind when I thought about who to trouble. Don't make me say it out loud, it's embarrassing]

[Otto: Any human being should be embarrassed to make that kind of decision!]

Hearing Subaru's shamelessly dished-out explanation, Otto's high-pitched retort echoed outwards. Throughout the forest in the morning, reverberating against the ruins, and lingering there, like a regretful conversation with itself. Usually, one would expect the only audience, besides the people present, to be the insects and the animals hidden within the trees, but――

[???: Already so loud so early in the morning, oy. Makin' a racket right above where a Witch's sleepin, it's like "Yohororoi only crows in th'morning", y'know]

[Subaru: Such a pain in the ass, that Yohororoi. I'll give him a talking-to next time I see him]

Saying this, turning his gaze away from Tomb's entrance, Subaru saw, coming from the forest beside him, the one who had cut into their conversation―― scratching his short, golden hair, baring his white fangs, it was Garfiel.
And roughly rubbing away the sweat on his forehead,

[Garfiel: I'll say this first, runnin' into ya was a coincidence. Every morning I do a run around the outskirts of the Sanctuary so I just found you guys here. Don't gimme that leery look]

[Subaru: It's not that I'm being wary. Besides, we didn't say anything we can't let other people overhear. Right Otto? Totally, nothing that we can't let other people overhear]

To that feint, or whatever Garfiel's words were supposed to be, Subaru shurgged, and proceeded to violently pat Otto on the shoulder. As if utterly confused at being slapped around, Otto let out a [Uuuehh?]

[Otto: E-eehh, yeah that's right, nothing especially troublesome or suspicious or anything like that? Just a little rehearsal for grave-robbing later, just a little rehearsal, that sort of thing!]

[Subaru: Amazing, Otto. I've never seen a man dig his own grave this happily right in front of another grave before]

Seeing the high spirited Otto suddenly looking like he had no idea what he was saying, Subaru quickly cut him off and stole a glance at Garfiel's reaction. But, judging from Garfiel's expression, it seemed like Otto's confession-of-sorts had completely went in one ear and came out the other.

[Garfiel: What is it, comeon, I won't snitch or get angry or anything. Long as you aren't breaking stuff or doing something that's bad for the Sanctuary, I won't have to do anything]

[Subaru: Is that, so. Then I sincerely thank you for that guarantee. It's too bad even if I want to fight it out I don't think I stand any chance of winning]

[Garfiel: Eesh, I already feel sorry for ya before even fightin ya…… kinda wanna say that, but nevermind. It's the same thing whatever opponent I'm lookin at. I am the strongest, after all]

His eyes beaming, Garfiel said this full of self-satisfaction.
In reality, after having seen first-hand what he was capable of, only an idiot would raise an objection here. But, because he knew Reinhardt, whose existence was of an entirely different dimension, he still had the urge to say a word or two about it.

But swallowing back what he had wanted to say, Subaru slightly raised his hand with a [Al~~right then],

[Subaru: It should be about time Emilia-tan woke up now, I want to keep her company for her morning studies so I was just thinking of heading back. You're in the middle of your morning run too, right? So let's just……]

[Garfiel: You're heading to the Cathedral, huh. Then I'll accompany ya]

As Subaru was hurriedly trying to say goodbyes and go their separate ways, he was cut off by Garfiel's unexpected proposal. Surprised, Subaru was just about to refuse with a [Naaah], when,

[Garfiel: Frankly, you should listen to my advice. Besides, you shouldn't be wanderin around the Sanctuary with just you two guys in the first place. There's no knowin what could happen]

[Subaru: ——? What does that mean. That's an odd way to put it. You made it sound as if it's dangerous here]

[Garfiel: That's why I'm tellin ya, isn't it]

Seeing Subaru looking confused as if not understanding his words, Garfiel clacked his teeth with [What'm I gonna do with ya], and then, drawing near, he continued in a lowered voice,

[Garfiel: Pisses me off to be talking about family troubles, but the residents of the Sanctuary are not all in the same basket]

[Subaru: What's, that supposed to mean?]

[Garfiel: If we follow the village-chief granny's plan, it'd be taking Roswaal and the humans as hostages and forcing Emilia-sama to take the Trials and break the Witch's contract or somethn like that. But in reality, only about half the guys are on board with the old hag's plan……and then there's also a bunch who aren't]

Coming to this point, Garfiel lowered his tone even further.

[Garfiel: For the guys who want to stay holed up in this Sanctuary, you guys being here is a bit of a nuisance. To prevent Emilia-sama form takin the Trials, who knows what kind of trouble they'll stir up]

[Subaru: Unless you mean…… there's a chance they'll be turning their fangs on Otto and me?]

[Garfiel: There's a chance they'll even use violence on Emilia-sama, I think. Well, it's like "Even the snorting becomes rough in front of th'hole" y'know? But long as I'm with ya, I won't let them do anything to bother ya]

Even though Garfiel said this lightly, Subaru was starting to worry about leaving Emilia behind. Or rather, he was hating himself for not having thought of this possibility earlier.

There was a rift within their mutual understanding between the residents of the Sanctuary headed by Garfiel, and the villagers of Arlam. In that case, why wouldn't there be internal factions within each of the camps as well?
It's not like every single one of them would have just raised their hands in agreement with the Sanctuary's plans. The situation would never progress as one expects them to. Subaru himself was all too aware of that fact.

[Subaru: I have to get back right away…….!]

[Garfiel: Aah? I scared ya too much didn'I? There's no need to be panickin, those guys won't fight among themselves in broad daylight, besides isn't Emilia-sama in the Cathedral? Who's gonna do that kind of thing with all those humans runnin around? If they wanna get ya, it'll be picking off someone like this noisy lil'bro here who keeps straying from th'herd]

[Subaru: Mmu…… That, makes sense. If they go against the will of the majority outright they'll only be worsening their own position, won't they, so they won't do anything rashly yet]

His agitation calming down a just little, Subaru breathed a sigh of relief and tried to bring his heart rate under control.
Then, suddenly noticing something, he raised his brows once more.

[Subaru: Unless, you thought it'd be dangerous for me and Otto to come out alone, so you came along with us?]

[Garfiel: …….Aah?]

Seeing Subaru bending his neck asking this, Garfiel was stumped a moment before he could react. Then, he quickly turned his back so Subaru couldn't see his expression.

[Garfiel: There's no way it's like that. Coincidence. Told ya it was a coincidence!]

[Subaru: See, Otto? That's the proper example of Tsundere. Yesterday on our first meeting we got to see the fiery and magnificent Tsun, and now, isn't the embarrassed and adorable Dere just as captivating?]

[Otto: Enn~~, actually, having personally gotten a taste of the Tsun on my forehead yesterday, it's still a little hard to accept, but surprisingly somehow I get the feeling he isn't a very bad person, I can't deny that it feels as if my manly heart is being deceived]

[Subaru: Uwa, you're really easy to trick you know]

[Otto: I've been set up!!!]

As Otto's ludicrous wail resounded through the forest in the morning, the frightened birds spread their wings and took to the sky.
The noisy Otto on the one hand, and the really hard-to-hate Garfiel on the other. Being together with these two like this, for the first time since coming to this parallel world, Subaru felt like he's acquired some bad companions he could actually be with as equals, in the trues sense of the word.

[Subaru: Well, I'm pretty easy as well]

And, relaxing his cheeks, Subaru ever so slightly smiled.

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Awaiting the coming of night, standing in front of the entrance of the Tomb, Subaru now felt a dark wind upon his skin that was very different from the crisp wind of the morning.

[Emilia: Now that it's night, it really does feel like a Tomb. It's even more ominous than yesterday]

Staring at the tomb's entrance as she said this, her silver hair swaying in the wind, it was Emilia. Playing with the end of her three-stranded braid, she stole a glance at Subaru,

[Emilia: Do you think it's, ok to go in now?]

[Subaru: If they had stuck a sign on the entrance that said "We Open at 7-o'Clock" then it'd be easier to tell, but looks like they didn't do that… If the Trials just start roughly around nightfall, once it's dark all around that should be a good enough range I think]

[Emilia: Yeah. Alright, I'll go in then]

With a light sigh, even as she was saying this, Emilia still seemed unable to make up her mind. At her side, waiting for her to gather up her courage, Subaru turned back his head to look behind him.
There were four other people besides Subaru who came to send Emilia into the Trials. There was

Garfiel and Lewes of the Sanctuary-team, there was Roswaal's representative, Ram, and then, there's the not-quite-sure-why-he's-here, Otto. But then, if we add him to Emilia and Subaru of the Emilia faction, they would be considered the largest faction here.

[Subaru: But on the other hand, if we count the whole Sanctuary, then we're easily the smallest faction here. Come to think of it, life could be getting a lot harder from now on]

[Emilia: What are you mumbling about? It's reeeaally getting to me]

[Subaru: Oh I'm just talking to myself. Emilia-tan you just focus on getting ready for what's ahead. Although, to be honest, since I wasn't able to find out about the contents of the Trials it's getting me really worried……]

[Emilia: Not knowing the contents, it's the same for anyone who challenged the Trials so far, right? I shouldn't be sneaky and start cheating when it's my turn. Even with the same conditions, I'll try my best]

Seeing Emilia tightening her little fist, pumping herself up, Subaru quickly held up a hand in front of his eyes like he's shielding it from a radiant light. Now, the way he was trying to get a Witch to help him cheat right off the bat was really coming off as sneaky in comparison. Because, compared to himself, how pure and noble Emilia is.

[Subaru: E・M・K !(Emilia・Major・Knighto)! It's too much!]

[Emilia: Oh, it's been awhile since I heard Subaru say that]

Starting with a small giggle, Emilia's expression broke down as she heard Subaru's old catchphrase. Seeing her smile, Subaru decided that the joke was still worth keeping around after all, and nodded,

[Subaru: Anyway, I don't know what kind of things are in there, but if you sense any kind of danger just cry out. If you call my name, I will fly right over to your side]

[Emilia: If you come in, won't you go PA-TAN right away?]

[Subaru: It's been awhile since I heard someone call it going PA-TAN……](**Pa-Tan is the sound of falling over)*

Seeing Emilia pouting up her lips, just as Subaru started objecting and scratching his face, [But], Emilia continued,

[Emilia: Thank you for worrying about me. Puck still hasn't shown his face at all, so I am reeeaally getting worried. And I feel like I'm completely relying on Subaru now]

[Subaru: Then you can rest your ultra-dummy weight against me, you know. Emilia-tan is light as a feather, and if I don't touch you from time to time to make sure you're still there I'll get really worried]

[Emilia: But somehow I get the feeling that wiggly thing you're doing with your fingers is really gross]

Seeing Subaru endlessly wiggling his fingers, Emilia smiled wryly. And, with her nervousness unraveling, she did a little stretch that made herself seem a little taller.

[Emilia: Somehow, I feel like my shoulders have gotten a little lighter. Ever since the first time we met, that was what Subaru had been aiming for, wasn't it?]

[Subaru: If I had that kind of first-rate THERAPEUTIC abilities, I wouldn't be the kind of lonely boy who spends his time learning origami to such mastery as to be able to make "Rindougurumas"]

He took a certain pride in having reached the extremes of that art that flows out of ones fingertips. Although, there was really no one he could show it to other than his parents.

Listening to Subaru's drab remarks about his past, Emilia adorably tilted her head a little to show her non-understanding. But seeing her alright now, and so completely cute, Subaru crossed his arms and nodded.
And with that expression of not-understanding still on her face, Emilia turned toward the Tomb.

[Emilia: ――This time, I'm really going. So pray for my safe return]

[Subaru: I'll be praying until the Buddha's ears bleed]

Sending her off with these words, he watched Emilia's back vanishing into the Tomb. Then, beginning from the entrance, one by one the lights lit up, just as it did for Subaru when he entered in the morning.

And just like this, Emilia's footsteps trailed on, into the depths of the Tomb. It seemed that the Trials would be taking place deep within that corridor. Even further than what Subaru could have seen in the morning when he strained his eyes trying to see the end.

[Lewes: Worry's written all over your face, kiddo]

Then, walking up beside Subaru, who had worry all over his eyes, it was a little girl――or the full grown adult living inside what looked like one: Lewes, who called out to him. Unbefitting of her cute and childish features, what was adorning her face was a somehow aged and ancient smile,

[Lewes: It'll be alright, there's no need to worry. The Trials, or whatever exaggerated name you call it, is not life-threatening or anything]

[Subaru: You know about the contents of the Trials, then?]

[Lewes: I have taken part in it myself. Being half-blood and qualified, it was only natural. Although in the end, I did not pass…… see, I'm still well and kicking about]

Lewes did a little hop on the spot to show that she was still healthy. And seeing her trying to use that almost adorable gesture to wipe away his anxiety, from deep within his heart, Subaru appreciated her consideration, and,

[Subaru: Then, is that how you got to become a Loli on the outside and an acceleratedly-aged Granny on the inside? If Emilia-tan becomes loli Emilia-tan it'll be really cute too, but would Emilia-tan really like that?]

[Lewes: I must have been stupid to have taken you seriously enough to not expect a reply like that. You know, Su-bo, you're just like Gar-bo, and don't know how to respect your elders at all]

[Subaru: What gave you that idea? Actually, I feel much better now. I made you worried about me there, sorry about that]

Seeing Subaru lowering his head, Lewes sighed shaking her head [Why didn't you just say that in the first place], and pretended to wipe away non-existent tears with her long, wrist-less sleeves.
Waiting, and watching all this from the side, Garfiel crossed his arms with a grossed-out expression, then quietly turned, to gaze at the Tomb. Surprisingly, Otto and Ram seem to have struck up a conversation about something, and seem to have established a certain degree of friendly understanding.
For Subaru, who had very little experience in friendly conversation with Ram, witnessing this sight was actually an extremely big deal.

"I'll need to do something about this. I better ask Otto to teach me the specific techniques of talking to Ram without setting her off." Subaru quietly swore to himself in his heart, before turning his attention to the Tomb once again.
Without realizing it, he had found himself with his hands in front of his waist, rubbing his thumb against each other as if he was praying.

It was painful, not to be able to do anything but wait. Compared to being left behind and waiting like this, it would have been easier if he just took the Trial himself.
But just as this conceited notion flashed across his mind, along with it, a change came about before him.

[————!]

Seeing this change, in the same moment everyone present gasped.
Repeatedly blinking, like a conditioned response adjusting to the darkness after losing the only source light, in any case,

[Subaru: The Tomb's lights went out!?]

[Lewes: While the Trials are still ongoing the lights should stay on……]

[Subaru: You mean they're not supposed to go out!?]

Looking toward Lewes who was supposed to know everything, even her wise little eyes seemed confused at this. It was more than enough to tell him that the situation wasn't within their expectations.
Whether it was Garfiel, unfolding his arms and running over, Ram, who was furrowing her brows, or the panicking Otto, it seemed no one had any advice to offer.
In that case,

[Lewes: Su-bo!? You don't have the Qualification, it won't let you in……]

[Subaru: I've been paying good attention to the lectures, so I got the Qualifications too, you know. ——Now let me have look inside. No matter how Emilia-tan is, I'll pull her out!]

He will not stand by and wait.
The same moment when Subaru fearlessly stepped into the entrance, the lights of the corridor lit up once more just like when Emilia had entered.
Sensing Lewes and Garfiel gasping behind him, before they could say anything to stop him, Subaru had already dashed into the Tomb.

The corridor was still filled with dust, and a single breath was enough to bring discomfort to the lungs.
His echoing footsteps striking loudly upon the floor, Subaru charged into the depth of the corridor—— into the depths of the Tomb.

[Subaru: Damnit, I messed up. Why did I keep myself back like some trump card until something went wrong, I should have just went in together with Emilia…..aaaaaaAA]

With regret pouring out of his lips, Subaru ran.
Then, suddenly, as he saw the light reaching the end of the corridor, he had arrived inside a small room.

Sliding to halt his steps, Subaru looked around the little chamber. While it could be called a room, it was more like a grotesque rectangular space with four corners carved out. Without any furnishing, there was only a single door adorned by cyan-white lamps.
——And, on the floor in front of that door, was a silver haired girl lying there.

[Subaru: ——Emilia!!]

Crying out, Subaru dashed over to her fallen body.
Holding up her delicate form in his arms, no matter what, he will take her out of here——

{——First, you must face your past}

The next moment, a sensation of something whispering beside his ear struck his consciousness.
What could that voice be, there was no time for that thought.

Falling on his knees, unable to move, Subaru's body collapsed like a doll. Rolling onto the floor from the momentum, he sprawled out upon the ground at Emilia's side.
Then, lying beside the unconscious Emilia, Subaru's consciousness too, was dragged into oblivion——.

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——Beginning to wake from his slumber, Subaru sucked in the breath as if sticking his head out of the surface of the water. It was that sensation of emerging out of an ocean of sleep, yearning for reality like a body yearning for air——

[???: GUMMMMMOOOOO一一一一一一NINGU, SON!!]

[Subaru: WaaAAHMMURABI HO-TEN!!] *(*"Code of Hammurabi" >_<)*

This poetic morning greeting struck him with an all-destructive impact.
Tasting the pain of a weight pressing down on him and squeezing all the air out of his gut, Subaru's just-woken-up body jumped itself out of bed along with all of that weight, before descending into a vicious bout of coughing.

[???: Oyoyoy, what's this what's this. It's only the usual DIVING-PRESS-of-love to wake you up. Your carelessness is BURNING this time!]

[Subaru: Gahk, ehk, what did you expect…… from a sleeping opponent……come on]

What on earth has happened, he lifted up his face with tears in his eyes. And there, the person standing in front of Subaru's half-stuck out body turned around his head,

[Dad: What's that now. You look like you've just seen your middle-aged dad fully-naked first thing in the morning, you!]

That man, saying this while striking out a POSE, was Subaru's middle-aged father *half*-naked in the morning――Natsuki Kenichi, heartily laughing, blessing his son out of his slumber.

Chapter 16 [A Morning In The Natsuki Household]

“HA-HAHA”, listening to the deafening laugh, Subaru gave his head a light shake to cast away the last bit of his drowsiness. When it came to waking up naturally, he was always rather proud of being able to wake up in an instant, but being forced awake by an outside force was a different matter.

As though the blood still hadn’t returned to his brain, Subaru rubbed his eyelids that were slightly aching, then hazily looked around at his surroundings――― when his old familiar room flooded into his sight.
The shelves were packed full of mangas and light-novels, sloppily yanked-off jeans and jerseys were strewn all over the floor. The study-desk that hadn’t been used for its proper purpose in ages was piled up with half-read books, and there was the ancient Televideo-with-recording-functionality that was now exclusively used for gaming, whose very existence elicited sympathy from anyone who looked at it.

Lying on a futon that hadn’t been dried in the sun for ages, cracking the joints of his neck, for some reason, Subaru couldn’t help but feel a sense of incongruity in front of this familiar landscape. ――And just what could that rustling in his chest be?

[Dad: O~y oy, being ignored will even make an old guy like me wanna cry, you know? It’s a fresh and sunny morning, so get carried along by the mood and jump like ~DONG~ and you’re up!]

[Subaru: You mean welcome the morning feeling refreshed and invigorated after getting woken up by a diving-press? Stop it with the jokes, come on. It’s more like “I think I hear my bones making a noise now, I better go back to sleep and heal up”]

Turning down the attempt to wake him up, once again Subaru tugged himself back into the futon. Seeing Subar turning his back to him and leaving no room for negotiations, the one standing up beside the futon started making a displeased [W~H~A~T~I~S~T~H~I~S~~] noise,

[Dad: It’s the rebellious-stage! The rebellious-stage isn’t it!? I always knew this day will come, but I didn’t think it’d come this morning, I’m not prepared yet! Instead of preparing breakfast I should have prepared a good proper talk with my son! D~A~M~N~I~T, I hate to be so powerle……ss]

[Subaru: If you’re saying that, why’re you still grabbing onto my leg……Oy, wait, ow! OooowOWOWOW!]

[Dad: AL~~~RIGHT, I’ve decided to have a good talk you with all the way till tomorrow morning. First is body language! FIGURE-FOUR FIGURE-FOUR! There, it’s good for waking up the joints isn’t it!]

His legs being twisted into a figure-four leglock, Subaru flapped around to the other side while Kenichi dealt critical-damage to his knees and shins. And the louder Subaru wailed in agony, the more heartily Kenichi laughed, as though overwhelmed by the joys of life.

[Dad: OHO, what's this what's this. All grown up and exercising every day, aren't you embarrassed to have such a hard time against a middle aged old man? Mwahahaha…… OW, wait, ow! Hurtshurtshurtshurts!]

[Subaru: Fool! Choosing to use the easily-countered four-figure leglock as your attack, dad must be getting old! Turning my body I'll return the damage in equal force, taking vengeance on the one who got me in this figure-four leg……ow, wait, don't flip don't flip……Owow! OWOWOW!]

With arms and legs stretched out, the two grown men tangled each other up in their back and forth rumbling. Each time, the assailant and victim exchanged places to let out out their shrieks of agony, while their commotion sent books flopping off the desk and knocked the game-station falling to its side.
And just as their father and son brawl in the morning was going on in full force――

[???: ――Hold it a minute you two. Mom's getting hungry you know, I kind of wanna eat breakfast]

Hearing the sound of the leisurely voice and the off-beat knocking flying into the room, their alternating attacks on each other's joints halted in place.
Half crying from the pain, in the corner of Subaru's murky vision, he saw the person standing in the doorway of the room――it was a woman with a certain absent-minded atmosphere about her, standing there with a vicious-looking gaze. While at first sight, the sharpness of her gaze might give off the impression that she was in a bad mood, in reality, after having known her for over 17 years, Subaru knew that she wasn't actually thinking about anything in particular.

Just by their dangerous-looking eyes, it was be enough to tell that they were mother and son, for she was Subaru's mother, Natsuki Naoko.
With mom showing up, Kenichi let out a [Oh crap!], and stuck out his tongue and jumped himself up,

[Dad: My bad my bad, I got too carried away with my intimate-time with Subaru. But you could've eaten first if you want]

[Mom: ――? But families eat together in the morning, how could I eat first? Isn't it better when everyone eats together?]

Confused by Kenichi's words, Naoko tilted her head with a question mark floating above her head. It's not that she was mocking him or anything, it seemed more like she was just saying exactly what she was thinking.
Seeing his wife like that, Kenichi vigorously nodded his head,

[Dad: Aha, is that so. That's the woman I married! Alright I understand. Breakfast tastes better when everyone's eating together!]

[Mom: Breakfast lunch or dinner, I don't think that really changes the taste, does it? It's just when everyone eats together we can clean all the dishes in one go]

[Dad: Aw. You meant dishes. Sorry, I got myself all pumped up there]

Hearing that natural explanation, the face that looked like he had just said a really good line slumped down. Drooping his shoulders, Kenichi looked at Naoko with an incredulous expression, but Naoko only continued staring at Subaru, who was still lying there like that.

[Mom: You come to eat too, Subaru. I worked hard for Subaru's breakfast this morning, after all]

And then, she gave him a faint and cheerful smile, in a way that only those closest to her could understand.

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――Rubbing his sleepy eyes as he begrudgingly made his way down to the dining table on the first floor, Subaru's hazy consciousness was suddenly awoken by the impact of a certain smell.

[Subaru: Mom… Even though you said you worked hard to make this for me……]

[Mom: En. Mom worked really hard for Subaru. I've been up and about preparing this since the morning]

"Fufu", Naoko was proudly humphing from her nose for some reason. Unable to pick up any trace of a guilty conscience in that attitude, Subaru sighed.
Following behind Subaru's sigh, coming back from the bathroom and taking a look at the dining table, Kenichi let out a sort of [Oh] with an exclamation mark on top of it.

[Dad: That's cool, Subaru. You got a special-menu on your plate. It's like a green forest]

[Subaru: Thanks for pointing that out. En, it really does feel like that……What's, going on with this, exactly? How come only my plate has got a luxuriant pile of green peas plopped on it?]

Nodding at Kenichi's observation, Subaru pointed to the pile――laid in front of his usual seat, beside the rest of the breakfast, the dish that had a certain eerie atmosphere floating about it. There was giant pile of green peas hoarded there like it was trying to avenge the death of its family members, and it was unclear whether it completely buried all other food underneath so that only peas were visible, or there wasn't any other food on that plate in the first place. Just as a side-note, Subaru hated peas.

[Mom: Well, some time ago Subaru mentioned hating green peas, right? Mom thought it's not good to be picky with your food. So, I took this opportunity to let you eat looots of it so you can overcome it]

[Subaru: So you just recalled a random memory from "some time ago" and decided to fix my bad habit huh. And what opportunity……it's not a special day or anything, right?]

[Dad: Fufu, you're still green, Subaru. Alright listen up, no matter what time it is, this day, and this moment of this day can only ever be experienced here and now. You may think that there

will always be another day exactly like this one again, but by doing so you will have allowed countless “ONLY” moments to escape……]

[Subaru: That’s, enough for now]

Pushing Kenichi, who had casually danced himself into the conversation, aside, Subaru let out a deep, drawn out sigh, and got into his seat. Then, pushing the plate with the heap of peas away from himself,

[Subaru: Anyways, I appreciate the thought of especially preparing this for me, but I’ll pass on the peas. I don’t want to fill up my stomach with something I hate first thing in the morning]

[Mom: There you are with that again. Then, if there’s nothing left to eat in the world except green peas, what will you do. You’ll eat them then, won’t you]

[Subaru: In that kind of world, we’ll all die of nutritional imbalance pretty soon anyway, so it’s not like eating the peas would do much good. So I, will absolutely not eat it]

Replying to Naoko’s crummy argument with one of his own, Subaru folded his arms and pumped up his chest,

[Subaru: Even if Armageddon came down, I will absolutely not eat peas]

[Dad: Gees, you’ll lose out on life if you’re picky with food like this. Oh, mom, I’ll trade you the tomato in my salad, I don’t like’em so you eat’em for me]

[Subaru: That’s just my father……already contradicting the first half of his sentence with the second half]

Dad placed his reviled tomatoes into mom’s salad, and pilfered some of mom’s egg-pieces in return. Since it was their regular exchange, no one complained about this quiet understanding between husband and wife. Glancing to his side, Subaru turned to the rest of the breakfast besides the peas——— in front of the steaming miso soup, and the honey-toast with an extravagant amount of honey on it, Subaru clapped his hands together,

[Subaru: Come to think of it, why the East-West combination?]

[Mom: Mom had a bunch of kelp for the miso soup, and loves honey on bread]

That wasn’t really an answer. But, it was too much of a bother to point that out. Even if he does raise an objection here, he’ll probably only get Naoko tilting her head as a reply.
Subaru quietly said [Itadakimasu] as he brought the miso soup to his lips, and Kenichi and Naoko sat down into their respective seats as well———neatly opposite from Subaru’s.
The two also clapped their hands together with an [Itadakimasu], and then, with the same exact motion, they sipped at their miso soup. No one noticed it, but the three of them did it together in a perfectly synchronized pattern.

[Dad: Oooh, this miso soup……Mom, did your cooking get better while I wasn’t looking?]

[Mom: You noticed? Actually, yesterday I recorded a 3-minute cooking show, you know]

So, what about that.
Listening to Naoko's out-of-tune reply to Kenichi's all too convenient prompt, Subaru's face started twitching. Judging from how Naoko always said things exactly as they are, when she said "recorded", she probably did just that and only recorded it without actually watching it. And then, most likely, just left it there without ever watching it. In fact,

[Subaru: Considering what dad let slip earlier in the morning, the miso soup and toast was all made by dad, wasn't it]

[Dad: Oyoy, sharp-eyes, my son. So you've noticed……the contradictions in the testimony and raised your *OBJECTION!* based on the evidence?]

[Subaru: Why are you still addicted to that ancient game in this day and age! Although yes, that was totally a classic!]

He must have taken the gameboy from Subaru's table or something. It must have been great for killing time in between work… but just imagining the sight of a middle aged old man leaning in on a gameboy made Subaru's back itch.
And, chewing on the sweet toast while saying this, Subaru went on with [By the way…]

[Subaru: What time is it now, dad, why are you still so scantily clad? Sure it's almost getting warm soon, but no matter what, going around in just a running-shirt and long underpants is taking casual a bit too far, isn't it]

[Dad: Aren't you in your long underpants too? Besides, dad's just like that you know, waking up early in the morning I got a TENSION so I went down to the yard for a dry-towel rub-down or something]

[Subaru: Dry-towel rub-down, isn't that something that only helps when it's cold out?] *(* 乾布摩擦 is a "Japanese custom where one rubs a dry towel along the body to create warmth and friction, particularly in cold weather, to promote good health or ward off disease" -Wikipedia)*

[Dad: That's just a motivational problem! If you get too caught up with that kind of concerns before setting out, you'll never get where you want to go. Come on, mom, back me up here]

[Mom: That's right, Subaru. Since it's not cold out, I used a really cold gaze to stare at your dad while he's doing his rub-down, you know]

[Dad: That!? Honey, that wasn't backing me up at all!?]

[Mom: Ehh……Wasn't that backing you up? It was a really really cold stare you know]

[Dad: That's not a back-up that's a deathblow!?]

Seeing Kenichi swinging back and forth creaking his chair to demonstrate his displeasure, Naoko only made the off-beat comment [That's going to get the dust flying, I'll have to clean that up later].
Watching his parents like this, Subaru lowered his eyes and continued to eat his breakfast. Then, Subaru pushed the plate of green peas in front of Kenichi, and since Kenichi hated them too, he

pushed it in front of Naoko, and Naoko pushed it back to Subaru again, completing the vicious cycle.

[Subaru: Looks like we've got a pattern where definitely nobody is going to eat these. What're we gonna do, we got this huge pile of peas. Here, you eat these, mom, take responsibility]

[Mom: But, mom hates green peas…….]

[Subaru: Then what were you doing trying to get other people to overcome their pickiness!?]

[Mom: Ah, but don't misunderstand. Mom doesn't just hate green peas…….it's little round things in general. It's really gross to put them in my mouth]

[Subaru: What misunderstanding, that just made you sound less and less credible!]

Actually, he had never seen his mother put anything pea-shaped in her mouth before, so thinking this, he pushed the plate toward Kenichi this time.

[Subaru: Then, the wife's responsibility is the husband's to take, so dad you eat it]

[Dad: Don't say something that sounds so lonely, Subaru. We're a close and friendly family that's really rare these days, right? That means if you and mom hate it, I hate it too]

[Subaru: It's making nobody happy and is just a load of trouble, this green plate!]

They're green peas that nobody wants to put in their mouths. At last, it was Kenichi who made the decision [We could mix it into pilaf as a last resort. We attack it with so much rice and meat that it disappears, heheheh!] with a mad-scientist look on his face.
If it was mixed it into something else, then Subaru would probably find it a bit more tolerable, but Naoko still maintains that gross things are still gross whatever they're mixed into. So in the end, it was the two men who got stuck with eating the concoction.

–

[Subaru: I'm full]

[Dad: Oui, Osumatsu-san. Alright, wash your dishes really quick, time to get everything digested and get ready for the competitions at school, Subaru!] *(*Osumatsu-san おそ松さん is a cartoon character, it sounds the same as お粗末さん "Mr.Coarse")*

[Subaru: I'm already tired of hearing these fluent patterns to push me back to school. In fact, I don't remember being raised as the kind of brat who runs off as soon as he's done eating]

Placing the dishes into the sink, Kenichi turned back and sparkled his teeth. But seeing this, Subaru shrugged and got up from the dining table. And leaving behind in a quiet voice, [I'll sleep till noon], scratching at his head, he made his way toward his bedroom on the second floor——Then, his legs suddenly stopped.

[Subaru: Wha-, t's……?]

Feeling a pain running through his temples, Subaru lightly pressed his head and closed his eyes. A dazzling light was flashing behind his closed eyelids. A scalding heat was burning deep inside his throat.
Something was wrong. Something strange was happening.

Looking back, Subaru saw his parents' faces.
Kenichi's lips were pouted up, disappointed at his invitation being turned down, and Naoko was wiping the dining table with a cloth, watching Subaru with a lonely look in her eyes.

Facing his father and mother's gazes――noticing the emotions they carried, Subaru could no longer ignore the torture of the heat inside his chest. Feeling his face burning up, hastily turning his back so they could not see his expression, Subaru ran away――Rather, he ran into his own bedroom.

[Subaru: What is this? Why, why am I feeling like this?]

Holding his chest, Subaru was panting, surprised by the speed his own pulse. Dropping onto the futon like he was collapsing, he restlessly turned his eyes all around the room.
His room was the same as when woke up. Nor was it any different from the room where he fell asleep the night before. Just as it had always been, no change had befallen this room as it continued in its stagnation.
Like a perfect projection, of the stagnation of its master, Subaru.

Looking at the clock, it was 8am in the morning. School starts at 8:30, it takes about 20 minutes from his house on bike. It's not impossible to get there in time.
Nevertheless, Subaru did not move to change, but only hugged his knees on top of the futon, still staring at the movements of the clock hand. Second by second, the second-hand ticked, until quietly, the minute-hand ticked its tenth――the deadline had passed.
――He could no longer make it to school today.

[Subaru: So there's, nothing I can do. That's right, there's nothing I can do]

If there had been a little more time for him to gather his resolve, perhaps he would have went. But, reality had heartless imposed a time limit on Subaru.
Therefore, there was no longer a choice for him today. Yet even so,

[Subaru: ……Usually, I should have calmed down by now. What's going on?]

His heartbeat wouldn't settle, his ragged breathing showed no sign of steadying.
Confused by what was happening to his body, Subaru was frightened even by the sound of the his own teeth clacking.

――For Subaru, this time of every morning was the most terrifying time of the day.

[Subaru: Calm down, calm down……the time had passed. It's alright to calm down now. It's alright]

Pressing his shivering body, again and again Subaru told this to himself.
It was time that this harrowing daily ritual ended. Tomorrow morning, at the exact same time, he will be met with the exact same horror again, but at least he has overcome it for today.

No one was there to rush him, and no one was there to force him. The only person haunting him, drilling that anxiety into his heart, was no one but Subaru himself.

Whether or not to go to school——that choice alone was forcing this time of anguish upon Subaru.

Having refused to go, having been an absentee-truant for so long, unable to face up to his own weakness, now, it was only a matter of adding wrong on top of wrong.
Waiting for time to pass in the torture of his own self loathing and inferiority complex, until, confirming that the chance to go to school was already gone, he would be liberated for the remainder of the day to be spent in slothfulness.

Precisely because he had experienced this agony day after day, he knew more than anyone what the relief of the liberation felt like. Clinging onto his own weakness, he could do nothing but to continue to find excuses, however grotesque they may be.
Yet, granting absolutely all of that, the time should have already passed——

[Subaru: But why only today……]

His sense of guilt, of self loathing, his unease stuck tight onto him, refusing to disappear.
Unable to understand the source of that anxiety making him want to tear his chest open, not even his breathing can be relied on as he lay drenched in sickening sweat, writhing in agony on top of his futon.

All this time, branded into his mind, his parents' faces as he left the dining table would not leave him.
The familiar expressions, the familiar conversations, the familiar bickerings, the familiar betrayal, the familiar Sloth —— that's how it should have been.
But only today, that same familiar routine, that had already happened so many times before, was tormenting his heart to no end.

——Thinking back, ever since the moment he woke up this morning, something had felt amiss.

His father Kenichi had always been thinking up all sorts of ingenious ways to harass Subaru out of sleep. After Subaru started refusing to go to school, even after he had become a failure in every sense of the word, his father did not change the way he treated him. Indeed, even the interactions this morning were the same as they had always been for the past 17 years—— then what could be so special about this morning, that something besides the Diving-Press should now be causing this pain inside his chest?

While his mother Naoko's misdirected tenderness were almost always overwhelmingly ineffectual, she would always put Subaru first. With Subaru holed up in the house, the dedicated housewife Naoko naturally had plenty of time to spend with him. But even so, as if leaving it all to time, she continued to watch over Subaru from a distance with her constant and gentle gaze.
——In the dining areas, he would often notice that gaze without meaning to.

He could not understand why, even now, after the time to leave for school had already passed, the agitation was still burning in his body.

[Subaru: Something's wrong. What's going on? What's happened? Surely yesterday was……]

Thinking back on what he did the day before, racking his brain to think of what could have happened between then and this morning――― a numbing sensation stopped him.

As though fiery sparks were flying from the depths of his eyes, each time, a scalding heat surged up, as if to reject Subaru's attempt to touch that memory. Incredulous, Subaru tried once more to challenge the sea of memories――and once again he failed. No matter how he tried, the response was be the same.

Yesterday, or the day before, or even further before that, Subaru had passed the days without having done anything.
As for the pain in his chest this moment, this morning, he could not think of anything out of the ordinary that could explain it.
It must have been a coincidence, that he felt the guilt and pain more intensely today. Until today, he hadn't truly paid attention to his parents' faces, and that, overlapping with everything else, must have been why.

[Dad: ――Mi~nd if I come in, Subaru?]

And, as even that conclusion failed to ease Subaru's sickness in the slightest, he heard a voice coming in from the other side of the door.
Turning his eyes to the door, he saw Kenichi peeping in with half his body before smoothly gliding himself into the room. With agile footwork almost reminiscent of the King of Pop, as he completed his glide――

[Subaru: If you come in before the other person answers, what's the point of even knocking?]

[Dad: Oyoy, with the firm bond of father and son between us, there's no reason to bicker about minor details like knocking, right? ……Oh wait, there is. That's right, occasionally young men in puberty might want to do something that require holing themselves up in a room alone. OK I got it. I'll come back in ten minutes or so]

[Subaru: Don't just jump to random conclusions and then set aside realistic time-frame for them! It's alright nothing's going on!]

Shouting out the assurance that there was no need for that kind of consideration, although Subaru was snorting roughly, deep down he was relieved by the distraction. Hearing Subaru's reply, Kenichi let out a [Really?] with a suspicious-looking expression, before turning around and doing a Moon-Walk right back into the room.
And, turning to face his son, who was staring up at him, right then and there he did a POSE with his finger pointing up toward the ceiling.

[Dad: Then, Subaru. Well it's pretty self-evident I guess, but truth is I have a day-off today]

[Subaru: En, I already noticed. Still helping with housework this late on a Monday morning, even I would have noticed it. So, what about it]

[Dad: Well, don't be so eager to rush to the ending. There are just, some things I wanted to talk about, so, this is an opportunity to talk about all of them, or something, isn't it]

[Subaru: Talk about what? Like washing my own dishes after eating?]

[Dad: Well that too. Dad hates washing dishes you know. It's fun doing the preparations and cooking so I like that lot, but after that I lose my motivation]

The already wobbling Kenichi crumbled. Seeing his usually overactive father like this, Subaru furrowed his brows, and couldn't help but sense that his father was somehow hesitating about something.
Avoiding the main subject, joking around to buy enough time to gather up resolve in both of their hearts―― and not doing a very good job of it, Subaru had the exact same personality as well.
Of course, the resemblance was only natural.

[Subaru:――hurts]

The moment he thought this, the piercing pain struck Subaru's head once again.
A pain like pins planting themselves into his temples, feeling as if the bones inside of his skull were being scraped, Subaru turned down his face to hide his agonized expression.

[Subaru: So, what is it? That my unmotivated dad wants to talk to me about]

[Dad: Oh, right. Subaru, is there a girl you like?]

[Subaru: ――I'm in highschool!!]

Prompting the conversation to cover up the pain, he overreacted to the question that was so stupid that it made him forget he was in pain in the first place.
Seeing Subaru lifting up his face angrily, Kenichi waved both his arms around [Ooo~OooOO~],

[Dad: With an overreaction like that, you might as well be admitting to having a girl you like, you know]

[Subaru: What're you saying with that smug look on your face. Even if I am dumbstruck, lamenting, or sighing it still wouldn't mean a thing]

And in reality, that wasn't the case anyway.
Chasing girls was not the sort of thing Subaru was interested in right now. He didn't have one, and he couldn't get one even if he wanted to. That was what he firmly believed, at least.

[Dad: Whaaa, that's no fun. Did you try the advice dad gave you when you were little? Girls are weak to situations involving promises that span years into the future, so if you kept getting potential girls to promise themselves to you ten years later, you'd be setting up the FLAGs in advance for your conquest routes once you're in your teens]

[Subaru: Yeah and then I was naive enough to actually believe that, and really went around making pinky promises with girls all over the place, and now the whole region's got a ban on pinky promises. Apparently because there were too many cases involving this scary-faced kid forcing little girls to swallow-a-thousand-needles!]

[Dad: ……Well, it's a good thing you inherited that sweet mask from your dad. You got the short legs, your mom's eyes, your dad's TENSION, and your mom's absent-mindedness, it's like all the stat allocations when you came out of your mom's belly got screwed up]

[Subaru: You should have told me that while I was still on the umbilical cord……]

Reminiscing together on those painful memories, the tension between the father and son eased a little. And, noticing that they've gotten sidetracked, with a [So?] Subaru returned to the topic,

[Subaru: What was it you wanted to talk about. After we're done I still have the important mission of my second nap and my third nap to attend to, so please leave a message after the *BEEP* and quietly exit the room and go chat about it with mom]

[Dad: Don't boot me out with that natural-flow now… Besides, your mom wouldn't actually get it. My wife and your mom is the most un-observant lifeform in the world, you know. Although she's super cute that way]

Listening to his father's puppy-love remark, Subaru put on an annoyed-look on his face.
But seeing this, Kenichi let out an [Ennn~~], and then, looking upwards, swiping his nose like a mischievous little boy,

[Dad: You know what. The weather is really nice today—— why don't we go outside for a nice heart-to-heart, between father and son]

Chapter 17 [Love Story]

[???: Ooh, Ken-san, sure's rare seeing you wandering around in the morning. Finally got laid off?]

[Dad: Don't give me that crap, that place'll grind to halt without me. They just didn't want me to work too hard and take everyone else's jobs, so they let me rest a bit to giv'em some motivation]

Even though the owner of the neighborhood bakery passing on a bicycle was only making a friendly greeting, Kenichi threw a middle finger right back at him, cursing. They continued the rowdy conversation like this for a bit, before finally waving goodbye.

[Dad: Gees, whenever he sees someone on holiday that he hasn't seen in awhile he goes on about laid-off laid-off. I got a loving family to provide for here, how can I do something as incompetent as that. Even if I did do something that'd get me fired, it's not like I'd let'em catch me, heheh]

[Subaru: As someone you're providing for, I sincerely hope that rather than being good at hiding it, you actually hadn't done anything that'd get yourself fired for]

His hands shoved inside the pockets of his jersey, Subaru, who had been waiting at the side of the road for the conversation to finish, shrugged his shoulders. Seeing his son standing in the shade being blown by the wind, Kenichi waved both his hands with [Oyoy], shaking his head,

[Dad: A man who has forgotten the sense of adventure wouldn't grow, you know? Doing bad things is a different matter, but the view is always best from the edge of the thin line, isn't it……]

[Subaru: You're way past the age to be saying stupid things like that, you should've settle down by now. You're already over 40 and still talking about those impractical things like a little kid]

[Dad: Men are supposed to keep their childish innocence even after they've grown up. Besides, you're the one who's at an age to say those stupid lines, but you don't join in the conversations, so dad has no choice but to say them for you. What's up with that anyway]

[Subaru: Nothing's up, I just can't talk to random old guys I don't know]

[Dad: He's not a random old guy, I always buy bread from him on my way home. Also, he was my junior in highschool, he was one grade below me]

But Subaru still wouldn't know him even if he told him that.
He didn't usually pay attention to the bread packaging, and he never passed by that bakery personally.
As Subaru's silence gave off the feeling that the conversation was coming to an end, Kenichi smacked his tongue saying [It can't be helped, I guess],

[Dad: On such a sunny and refreshing morning, you with that stink face is going to piss off Mr.Sun-sama you know. You look like you're being interrogated or something]

[Subaru: If I look like I'm being interrogated, it'd be because my dad pulled me out here by force, wouldn't it…… I said no and you still pulled me out]

[Dad: You just *looked* like you were resisting, but your body followed along nicely, right? See, you still love your old man, Subaru. Rest assured, I love you too. Second only to your mom, of course!]

Swinging out his strides again, Kenichi, laughing and in a good mood, roughly patted Subaru on the back. The force made Subaru raise his brows, and somehow, he felt like something was different about Kenichi's high spirits.
Well, his father always had this kind of TENSION about him, but usually the hyper-moody Kenichi would probably have fussed for a long time about their conversation just now.
He didn't know why, but this morning his father seemed especially tolerating.

——Unlike Subaru, who was walking alongside him feeling like his chest was about to be crushed.

[Subaru: So um……]

[Dad: Yeah?]

[Subaru: So, you brought me out here because you had something to say, right? Usually you wouldn't go to so much trouble…… so what is it? It's something you couldn't say at home, isn't it]

Wondering if it was something he didn't want mom to hear, Subaru asked this.
No matter what it was, Subaru had a vaguely bad feeling about it. Either way, what else could it be except to reproach him for his anemic lifestyle?
When their daily conversations were separated by a layer of futon, he could have ignored them if he wished to, but outside, he couldn't do this. Although, he could always shout loudly and shut it all out. If he embarrassed himself like this outdoors, perhaps Kenichi would change his attitude, and maybe he'd even drop Subaru's——no, thinking up to this point, Subaru shook his head.

[Subaru: If it's my father, he'd probably get a kick out of being shamed……]

[Dad: Even though I don't know what you're imagining there, what's with that kinky remark all of a sudden? This is just a nice average everyday family conversation under the sun you know]

[Subaru: Really, it's a bit hard to believe you…… But I'll trust you for now]

[Dad: That's it that's it. By the way, Subaru, do you uh……. want a little brother or sister?]

[Subaru: It's a bit frightening to be asked this question when I'm 17 years old!!]

The change of topic that flew in slanted made Subaru shudder and raise his voice. Seeing Subaru panting with his shoulders going up and down, Kenichi bared his teeth with a smile [Joking, joking],

[Dad: Although your mom and I are still lovey-dovey, it'd be stretching it a bit to make another person at our age. So that means, all of me and mom's love are all reserved for you alone. Happy?]

[Subaru: Aah, yeah yeah, happy happy. ……You really were just joking right?]

[Dad: Oyoy, don't be like that. If you give me that face I might just get excited after all and go make a new one you know?]

Sensing they've come to a point where joking around wouldn't be enough anymore, Subaru only gazed at him silently at end of that sentence. And, wryly smiling in return, Kenichi received his meaning.

——Subaru and his father had arrived at a scenic path that was about 10 minutes away from the house.
It was a land where a river that was famous around these parts flowed through. Along the banks, were planted cherry-blossom trees that would become an attraction during the spring. But of course, the season was already over, and instead of pink cherry-blossom petals, it was luscious green grass covering the ground, bathed under the bright rays of the sun.

After breakfast, and before the end of school hours, Subaru, being tormented by the guilt and anxiety of the passage of that time, was brought here by Kenichi.
At first, when he left the house, he had been worried that he might be brought all the way to school this way.

[Dad: You know you look kinda wary whenever we turn toward the direction of the school. But it's not what you think, we just took the long way round to the river bank]

Having read through his thoughts, Kenichi sneakily dragged Subaru here.
A sweet scent of plants and grass blew over the top of the embankments, and if one merely stretched a little, one would be able to see the full view of the gentle river on the other side of the fence.

[Dad: This fence didn't use to be here in the olden days. I used to always play here in the river with buddies of mine, it was great fun. Oh, right, you remember Ikeda? One day a typhoon came, and we wanted to see how great the river had become, and that guy wound up getting carried away by the current…… That time, there just happened to be an old uncle who had just got his lifeguard license passing by, Ikeda would've been dead if it weren't for him]

[Subaru: So this fence, was dad and this Ikeda guy's fault then?]

[Dad: Nah couldn't have……no, wait a minute? Timing-wise it does seem to kinda strangely match up now that I think about it]

Leaning against the fence, gazing out toward the river, Kenichi, reminiscing about the by-gone days, tilted his head. Behind his father, Subaru, who seemed bored, only looked around him. Before noon on a working day, it was only natural that there was not many people around. Or, more accurately, there was no one else except Subaru and Kenichi. It wasn't an easy place to get to in the first place. If anyone wandered around here at this time, it could only be the custodian,

or someone who really loved this place.
Just as he thought this, Subaru heard someone's footsteps on the grass.

[???: Ooooh? I was wonderin' who it is, isn't this Ken-bo? What's this what's this, still playing by the river at this age?]

[Dad: Speak of the devil…… it's the uncle from the custodian's hut, they still didn't get someone to replace you? You'll be the one surprised though, I wore my beach-trunks today instead of my river-trunks, so I can't get in there even if I want to]

[Old Man: Don't gimme that. I don't see no difference between beach-trunks and river-trunks, that's just a load of crap from the guy who jumped in the river in his underpants. But come to think of it, it's been a long time since I seen ya]

Climbing up the banks, a short, hunching old man greeted Kenichi and shook his hand. He looked kind of like a nice grandpa, and was wearing an old green uniform. Judging from the conversation and the logo on his back, he must have been the custodian of the embankments. In fact, if he knew Kenichi back when he was still playing in the river, he must have been a veteran at that.

In their long awaited reunion, the two of them laughed and chatted, and then, the old man made a clap with his hands,

[Old Man: Oh, right, if you're here, what happened to your friend Ikeda? That guy sure gets carried away often, even my net was wearin' out from catchin' him]

[Dad: That bastard Ikeda, won big on a horse-ticket 10 years ago, and took his load of money to Thailand and haven't heard a word of him since. Just the New Years greetings, Summer greetings, Winter greetings, Christmas, Father's day and Mother's day and random letters like that]

[Subaru: That sounds like a lot of correspondence for someone who you haven't heard a word of since……]

Unable to resist the urge, Subaru had to mutter that straight-man observation. Then, hearing the quiet mutter, the old man looked over and raised his brows as if only suddenly noticing Subaru's presence there.

[Old Man: Ooooh, you got a little buddy ere……eh? Could this be your…]

[Dad: Aaah, that's right, this is my son. No, I should say my BELOVED SON]

[Old Man: Ooh, is that so! I got the feeling he looked like you when you wer little…… no, not too much though. He didn't take after ya. Took after his mother more……I'm guessin'?]

[Dad: Yeahyeah. People often say that. Especially the eyes]

The most prominent thing on that otherwise plain face was his Sanpaku eyes. His mother's eyes were so sharp it felt as though there were steel beams inside, and this part of him in particular,

was certainly his mother's influence showing through.
With that harmless remark, the old man walked up to Subaru,

[Old Man: S'that right s'that right, but it sure surprised me there. So Ken-bo already has a son this big, how the time passes quickly. Then again, I'm getting old. Even if Ikeda got himself drowned again I won't be able to save him]

[Subaru: Even for Ikeda, I doubt he'd go play in the river and get himself drowned at this age…..]

[Old Man: Sure hope not……They really were brats who wouldn't sit still though, these two. Especially your father, back then he was causin' trouble all over the place. So, what bring you wandering around town this time of day anyway?]

[Subaru: ……Eeh, well]

Subaru mumbled this reply. Hearing this, the old man looked as if he had picked something up, and frowned. Then, as he furrowed up his deep, wrinkled brows,

[Old Man: Hm? Sure is Ken-bo's son alright……but today's a Monday isn't it. Why're you still at the riverbanks with your dad?]

[Subaru: ——ke!]

Having been asked the question he most wanted to avoid, Subaru's expression stiffened painfully.
Then right after, the same sharp, piercing headache he experienced inside his room came. Involuntarily, in excruciating pain, he hugged his head and squeezed shut his eyes, wrenching out an [Excuse me!], he turned his back to the old man and ran.

[Dad: Ah, oy, hey, Subaru! Sorry, uncle-chan. I'll explain everything next time I see you]

[Old Man: Ah, oh-ooh…… maybe I said something I shouldn't have. Tell your son I'm sorry for me]

The words that followed behind him did not register in his ears at all.
In any case, Subaru was only trying to escape from the skull-crushing pain in his head, to escape somewhere where his heartbeat would settle, somewhere away from the embankments.

[Dad: There's nothing to apologize to him for. ——It's that guy's own problem anyway]

He quietly muttered under his breath.

[Dad: Here. Cool delicious cola filled with love. Shaken well for extra deliciousness…… or wanted to say that anyway, looks like that wasn't the right place for it though]

[Subaru: ..…Love-filled scenes don't come out of vending machines. But thanks]

Receiving the can, and tasting its coolness within his palms, Subaru brought a finger to the pull-tab. Then, with some consideration, he closed his eyes, pointed the can away from anyone

present, and pulled the tab with his finger―― when foam and liquid alike came exploding out of the opening with incredible force. Instantly the can in his hand lost a third of its weight.

[Dad: Oyoy, what's with that, fall for it damnit. I even especially said something about shaking it beforehand to give off the impression that I didn't shake it when in fact I did for a TWO-STEP-DECEPTION TECHNIQUE ― you know]

[Subaru: I've already seen that pattern before, how many years have we known each other, dad. Knowing there's no way you wouldn't shake it is also a kind of trust in itself. Oh, hands're sticky]

Shaking off the overflowing cola that was spilling over his hands, Subaru lightly tilted the cola to his lips. The taste of expanding carbon passed through his mouth, splashing and quenching the thirst in the depths of his throat.
If only the sickness deep within his chest could be washed away as well, but unfortunately, the heaviness still remained there.

[Dad: So, have you settled down?]

[Subaru: ……Hard to say]

Answering the question, Subaru plopped himself down on the bench, and let out a long sigh as he dropped down his shoulders. Standing in front of Subaru, also delivering cola to his lips, Kenichi closed one of his eyes as if he was thinking about something.

After having ran away from the conversation on the embankment, Subaru and his father came to a children's playground not far from the river. Of course, there was no one here either, nor were there any fathers who suddenly got plunged into long summer vacations languishing on the swings or anything like that.

[Dad: In a way, I feel like even if I ride on the swings now I wouldn't be able to laugh like I used to. What would you do, Subaru. If dad took a ride on the swings on the way back from the convenience store]

[Subaru: I'd take a photo on my phone and spread it around on Twitter. The Tweet would be "My father has been released from gravity"]

[Dad: Oooh, Twitter. Dad's on Twitter too you know. I followed and got followed by too many people though, the screen's all a mess now]

Hearing him say this happily, Subaru sent Kenichi a side glance, before spilling out a languorous sigh as he searched for a topic. Anything, as long as it was something other than what happened on the riverbank―― if he went through that again, his skull would scream.
The shorter and shorter intervals in between the headaches worried him, but just like the way he'd react to his weakness, he could only repress and ignore the feeling as obstinately as he could.

[Subaru: ……It was just buying drinks from a vending machine, what took you so long?]

[Dad: Oh? Nothing really. There was just this highschool girl who skipped school hanging out in front of the vending machine. I gave her a lecture about getting back to school, bought her a drink, swapped email addresses, and sent her off]

[Subaru: I seriously can't believe how you can get a girl's email address that fast]

Getting a highschool girl's email as casually as going to the bathroom and back, he really had no words to describe that ability. Seeing Subaru like this, Kenichi tilted his head, [Really?]

[Dad: Email addresses, they just hand them right over don't they? The number of highschool girls in my contacts list must be in the 3 digits already]

[Subaru: Even if I add all my contacts together I don't know if it'll be in the double digits, and you have 3 digits just from highschool girls, do we have different definitions for the word "digits" here or something…… and dad, you didn't do anything inappropriate to any of the highschool girls that we'd end up seeing you on the news for, right?]

[Dad: What're you talking about, you]

Kenichi held up both hands at Subaru's suspicion, and shrugged up his shoulders to demonstrate his astonishment.

[Dad: It's not like I'd get any ideas about little brats like highschool girls. The target of my love has already been determined a long time ago, my sensual passions are reserved for my family alone!]

[Subaru: If you categorize it like that I'd be a target too!]

[Dad: ……Well, 'cause I love ya. We only get to live ONE-CHANCE, no?]

[Subaru: God no! What are you even saying!!]

"HA-HAHA", Kenichi laughed as Subaru blurted this out.
Although the way he laughs was vulgar and hard on the ears, it did not give off a bad feeling. In fact, the same goes for anything Kenichi does.
His behaviors were unconventional, over-the-top, over-dramatic, the kind that makes people want to cringe, but everyone receives them favorably for some reason.

Today, walking with his father for the first time in a while, Subaru got a real sense of this.
Just walking along the street, there had been more people stopping to chat with Kenichi than could be counted on a single hand. No matter where he went, there was someone to share old reminiscences with, and even if he had only just met the other person for the very first time, they would soon get along thick-as-thieves, thanks to his easy-going air. And he didn't hide any of it, either.

Throbbing, the pain returned to his temples, and Subaru's breathing grow ragged with every breath.
The intervals in between the scathing aches were no longer shrinking, instead, it was now arriving in fits.
As if the inside of his skull was being jabbed by needles, it was no longer something that could

be cured by leaving it alone. But, it was not like the hospital would know what to do with it either.

Even if he didn't understand the reasons for his pain, he knew its cause.
What else could it be, except the emotions weighing upon his chest, and the choking, suffocating sensation accompanying it.

[Dad: You look ill, Subaru. Want me to piggyback you back to the house?]

[Subaru: I don't need to be piggybacked, or to go home…… it'd be the same even if I go back]

Rather, if he saw his mother Naoko at home, Subaru's condition would only grow worse.
He was beginning to understand what that pain was, and what was making it worse. If what he imagined was correct, then when he does return Kenichi and Naoko again, the pain will rise to its extremes. In other words,

[Subaru: Finally, even my own body is giving me a lecture]

Endlessly running away from his guilt, perhaps his body was finally screaming back at him.

The terror of the time spent holding his knees inside his room, staring at the second-hand of the clock. The unrelenting anxiety and the acute, rending aches that lingered even after the threshold had passed.
The sickening malaise, like someone raving loudly in the interior of his skull, screaming accusations at what Subaru had become.
——*Who and where did you come from, and what do you know about me, anyway.*

[Dad: So um, Subaru. ——Is there, a girl that you like?]

The silent Subaru was suddenly tossed this topic out of the blue.
It was the same question he had been asked in his room, the beginning of that same, unfunny joke. The first time, he had smiled wryly and refuted it, but now, this second time, somehow it was getting on his nerves.
Helped along by the merciless ache in his head, he irritatedly tried to return the same answer when——

{——Subaru}

Suddenly, from somewhere, he thought he heard a voice like a silver chime, sending his heart astir.

[Subaru: ——?]

Lifting up his face, he searched for the source of the whisper. But even so, his eyes could not find the owner of the voice, and the only other person in the park besides Subaru, was Kenichi, standing in front of him.
Kenichi, seeing Subaru's sudden movement, also raised his brows in surprise,

[Dad: What is it? You look like you just heard a beautiful girl who's not there suddenly call your name]

[Subaru: Even if that's the case, I don't really have an answer to that…… Just now, did anyone call my name? Dad, you didn't learn to make your voice sound like beautiful girls while I wasn't looking, did you?]

[Dad: Your dad knows all kinds of little tricks, but not that one. OK, I'll start practicing it and show it off next time, I'll let you hear it in a month or so]

[Subaru: I'm not asking you to learn that…… Gees, what's with you]

Putting a stop to his father's words, Subaru looked away, and played back that voice he heard over and over again in his mind. The voice like a silver chime was gentle, yet its sound made Subaru heat up as it struck him, and in that instant, he was allowed to forget about the throbbing pain in his head.

From a place he did not know, came that voice of salvation――like the melodious song of a Goddess, it tended to Subaru's suffering, and calmed his expression a little, his breathing grew slightly more even.

[Dad: So uh, my question from before. Is there, a girl you like?]

[Subaru: ……what's gotten into you lately. What would you do with the answer anyway. Even if there is one and I tell you her name it's not like you'd know her]

[Dad: You never know, right? There's a chance I have the email address of the girl you like in my cell phone you know?]

[Subaru: If the girl I have a crush on gave her email address to my dad, even a love of a hundred years will grow cold]

Being tossed with that statement, Kenichi pouted up his lips with a [What's that supposed to mean]. Watching the gesture that really didn't suit a middle aged man, Subaru drank up the last of his cola,

[Subaru: You don't have to be so indirect about it, you know. Why not just ask me directly. ……Like, why don't I go to school]

[Dad: Well here I am trying to be considerate for once, you really are a kid who can't read the mood]

Smiling wryly at Subaru's words, Kenichi continued with [Well,]

[Dad: I did want to ask that, so you're not wrong about that]

[Subaru: I was thinking too……I shouldn't be like this]

[Dad: Thinking isn't always necessary. The things that we think of are only empty ideas, and one way or another, there will always be something we couldn't think of, something we overlooked]

Seeing Subaru averting his eyes and making that quiet excuse, Kenichi drank up his cola as well, and sat down beside him. The wooden bench creaked, and a gust of wind flew past between

them.
And so, they both looked on toward the same direction, neither seeing each other's faces.

[Dad: I don't really know what everyone else in the world believes, but I don't think school is everything. Mostly, because I'm saying that as someone who didn't really go to school seriously in the first place. I even skipped my own high school graduation ceremony you know, my sister had to bring me my graduation certificate back for me afterwards]

[Subaru: I heard that story so many times. Auntie who's 2 years younger than dad went to the same school, so when she graduated, they just gave dad's certificate to her as well. There're octopuses growing in my ears already] *(*Japanese expression that they've heard too much of the same thing, タコ, "Octopus" is a homonym of "Callus" in Japanese -TC)*

[Dad: Well you'll keep hearing it until you get cuttlefish. So, since I was like that, I think it's alright if you don't go to school if you don't want to. But, at my age, I do feel like I lost out on something by not going to school seriously, although it's not something you could understand yet]

Kenichi looked like he was staring into some far off place as he said this. Stealing a glance at the side of his serious expression, Subaru got the feeling that his father was really unfair, after all. Usually only showing the side of him pretending to be an idiot, and then in a place like this, he suddenly makes you wonder where all that clowning had gone.

[Dad: It's alright though… isn't it? Nowadays people can live to about 80 years old on average. Out of 80 years, wasting one or two slacking around isn't that big of a deal. Getting back on track while you're young is easy too. Good thing my salary's still intact]

Circling his finger around, Kenichi made a dirty-looking smile.
Without looking at Subaru, who had not made a sound since he had begun, he crossed his arms and nodded his head,

[Dad: Being alive means that occasionally you'll get problems that you couldn't find the answers to. When I get problems like that, I'd run around like a headless chicken looking for a solution, but it's also possible to find answers by rolling around in a room, I guess. I won't blame you while you're still contemplating. But if you're beginning to give up, then I'll say a thing or two]

[Subaru: ……Why]

[Dad: Hm?]

[Subaru: Why, did you suddenly feel like telling me all this today…… There's nothing different, it's not a special day or anything. Today's just, green-peas memorial day]

[Dad: There was a lot on that plate… huh]

In insides of his mouth that had just recently drank cola was quickly drying up.
Taking gasping breaths, Subaru anxiously waited for the answer to his question. Noticing Subaru's fretfulness from the side, Kenichi gave his neck a stretch with [Hm~~m],

[Dad: I wonder why. Maybe it was because I happened to have a day off, or because I inadvertently thought of it while doing my morning dry-towel rub-down, or because the horoscopes for Aquarius this morning said “PERFECTLY TUNED”, or because the look on your face this morning seemed…… it’s just a lil’bit, but it seemed like it had become better somehow]

[Subaru: My face, got better?]

[Dad: I’m talking about the look here. The face’s still the same, it’s still that scary-face with your mom’s eyes and all]

Kenichi made a scary face by pulling up the corners of his eyes with his fingers, and then, saying [Not only that], he pointed the same fingers at Subaru,

[Dad: I don’t know what happened, but you don’t look like a guy who’s been holed up in a room. Judging from what your mom said, you didn’t go out yesterday either, so you should’ve been a guy who’s been holed up in a room, right?]

[Subaru: …….Uh, I guess so. I’ve also been surfing in the grand ocean of the internet, though]

[Dad: If people can grow up that way, the number of lostlambgirl-chans coming to confide in me on Twitter should be decreasing instead of increasing……]

[Subaru: So you’ve even been doing that kind of……]

While astonished by the extent of his father’s dealings, Subaru didn’t want to let Kenichi get away from the main subject.
On the other hand, Subaru really had no idea what Kenichi meant by that.
The truth is, just as his mother provided in her testimony, yesterday’s Subaru, same as the Subarus even earlier before that, only wasted his time in slothful indulgence.
In only the span of a single day, to say that all of a sudden today, the atmosphere about him changed…

[Subaru: Dad you must have gotten it wrong, or you just didn’t properly look at me before]

[Dad: That last part really stung! You know I’m still using that “Lovely-Devil-Smile” picture of you when you were little as my cell phone screensaver right?]

[Subaru: The lovely part aside, the devil part makes me realize how scary-looking my eyes must have been even when I was little]

Either way, there was no doubt that Kenichi got it wrong.
Yesterday was still yesterday, today was still today. Subaru still spent his time without changing anything at all.
It would be alright to be like this, he thought, and he intended it to be this way. If he just continued on like this, surely, one day, Kenichi and Naoko would realize it as well.
——What Subaru really wanted, that is.

[Subaru: ——Dddagh!]

The moment he thought this, pain struck him again like fiery sparks scattering in front of his eyes.
A shock as if someone actually punched him, like his brain was protruding out of his skull, his cranium creaked and his eyes spun, and Subaru's seated body crumbled.

The pounding of his heart once again sped up like an alarm bell, and he could hear the sound of his pulse from the blood throbbing through in his ears. His eyes grew murky, the world turned into two, then three.
The sense of nausea surged up, and deep in his chest an incomprehensible heat source asserted its presence.

Each in their own ways they tormented his very existence, like seething accusations they shrieked and wailed.

[Dad: Oyoy, it looks really serious this time. Are you alright, Subaru?]

Unable to ignore the terrible condition he was in, Kenichi placed his hand on Subaru's shoulder with a worried look on his face. Sensing that touch, Subaru finally lifted up his face, as sweat was emerging on his forehead,

[Subaru: Aah……no, it's alright. I was just a little, dizzy, that's all……]

{——It's been rough, hasn't it}

[Subaru: ——!?]

Once again, every hair of Subaru's body stood on end as the voice like the sound of silver chimes rang upon his earlobes.
Kind and tender, the voice was filled with affection and concern. His tensed heart melted at the sound, and as it tended to his suffering, the pain, the creaking, the heat and thier chorus of screams subsided.

What was this voice. Why was the pain and agony retreating from it.
It felt, like a voice he knew. Like one he had been longing for. Yearning and yearning, pursuing and pursuing, clinging onto it, losing it, then regaining it once more——

{Thank you, Subaru}

[Subaru: You're……]

The sight of her silver hair dancing in the wind branded itself into the back of his eyelids. The light of her amethyst eyes stared straight into Subaru's face, and every sound weaved from her lips filled him with love and longing.

{For helping me}

What's going on, what's going on, what's going on, what's going on, what's going on?
Who is it, who is it, who is it, who is it, who is it, who is it, who is it, who is it, who is it?

——Could she be the cause of his agony? His pain, torment, feelings so bitter that he wanted to puke, could they all be because of her?

{——Subaru}

He couldn't breathe. His throat is hot. Something was building up in the back of his eyes.

{It can't be helped, so}

The tips of his fingers trembled. There was no strength left in his legs. His throat cramped up as though his lungs were convulsing.

{Subaru always tries to cover it up like that}

Covering his face with his trembling hands, holding back the sobs from his clogged up throat, surging heat spilling from his eyes, Subaru——

{Why, did you help me?}

——The answer, was already in his heart.

The moment he saw it, all the unease swirling inside him vanished.
The creaking of his skull, the rising nausea, the dizziness turning the world vague, the frantic pounding of his heart, all came to a stop as if clearing the path for Natsuki Subaru.

Lifting up his face, he wiped away the tears that were about to fall.
Staring fixedly at his wetted sleeves, the only trace that remained of his tears, as if flinging it aside, he turned his wrist and held his hand tight into a fist. And,

[Subaru: Sorry I made you worry. I'm alright now]

[Dad: Really? Well it's good you calmed down, don't keep making people worry, gees]

[Subaru: En, my bad. So um, about the question you asked earlier]

Releasing his father's hand on his shoulder, Subaru turned to face him.
Sitting side-by-side on the bench, Subaru looked straight into his father's face. Come to think of it, after all their conversations today, this was the first time he truly looked at his father's face, he thought.
Running away even in place like this, he couldn't help but smile wryly at his own weakness inside his heart. Then, turning to his father, who now had a question mark above his head, Subaru,

[Subaru: ——There is, someone I like. So, I'm already alright now]

Sketching out the face that was burned into the back of his eyelids, Natsuki Subaru's resolve to face his past was sealed.

Chapter 18 [Parent And Child]

——He felt his head clearing up.

The chorus of agony up to now that had been ripping him apart subsided, and now, there was only one thing on Subaru's mind——the resolve to face his father in front of him.

[Subaru: I do. Have someone I like]

Once more, he repeated his answer to that question.
Putting it to his lips again, Subaru felt his heart beginning to walk forward.
In front of his eyes, hearing that confession, Kenichi blinked several times before noticing how abrupt that statement sounded,

[Dad: …….Is that so]

Speaking in a quiet voice, he listened to Subaru's words.
That attitude was like a salvation. There were people who were willing to listen, Subaru must have already known this, yet he had only ever kept it to himself.
Now, he intended to bring an end to it.

——Because there is someone behind me, pushing me on.

[Subaru: That's right. I am not the child who only curls up in a room anymore]

He didn't know exactly how much he had changed.
The no longer a child part might be stretching it a bit, for he was still aware of how childish he was.
The courage to hold his head high, the resolve to face his weakness, the determination to no longer run from unpleasant situations, it seemed he hadn't acquired any of it, after all.
He was simply someone worse than a child, finally admitting that he was a child.
And even that, he couldn't have realized by himself.

The silver visage that appeared within his mind, sent a sweetness into Subaru's heart.
It was a radiance that brought warmth to the stagnating Subaru, who had long been frozen in place.

Silver——was supposed to be a color of coldness, but to Subaru now, it was a source of endless warmth and the strength to march forward. As though mesmerized by this heat,

[Subaru: What was I so afraid of, that I had to curl up like a ball, I remember all of it now.
——No, I already knew long ago. I knew, but I pretended not to see it……The weakness that I thought only I would notice, while I pretended not to see them, there were those who……]

Who nothing could have gotten past. He knew who they were.

[Subaru: Mom, and dad, I wished you would've beaten me]

[Dad: ————]

[Subaru: I was such a hopeless, little, useless idiot, self-conceited piece of trash, I wished you two would just beat me……and give up on me]

Silently staring at Subaru, Kenichi's eyes did not move.
Subaru saw his own reflection inside those pupils that were the same color as his own. The sharp corners of his own eyes that were often mistaken for a sign of displeasure, for some reason, were now feeble, and drooping.

——How pathetic, he thought.

[Subaru: When I was little I was clever, and I could find a perfect solution to anything. Running too, and same with studying……the things my friends around me couldn't do, I could figure out almost immediately, and I was even mystified by why everyone else had so much trouble]

Perhaps it was childish conceit, or one could call it an adorable sense of omnipotence.
When Subaru was little, his athletics and learning were all ahead of other children his age. He could run faster than those around him, he was smarter than those the same age as him, and as if it were only natural, he was at the center of everything——

{He's that guy's child, after all}

Everyone gave Subaru this appraisal, adults and neighbors alike often kept it on their tongues. He knew, by "that guy", they meant his father, and the fact that he was his father's son was recognized by people all around. ——And the young Subaru took pride in those words.

Dad——Subaru's father, Natsuki Kenichi, in his son's eyes he was a person full of charisma and allure.
He laughed well, talked well, cried well, angered well, exercised well, worked well.
His father could announce his love for Subaru and his mother in public without feeling the slightest embarrassment, everywhere his father was surrounded by people who admired him, and he always saw his father standing in the center of a crowd of smiling faces.

To Subaru, such a father was more than anything he could have hoped for, to have such a father who cherished his family, Subaru and his mother, above all the world, instilled him with a sense of superiority to the point of exuberant pride.

——I want to become like father. I want to become like father.

For the young Subaru, the expanse of his father's back was the expanse of the world itself, and the world was only something to be seen from on top of his father's back.
And so every day, Subaru spent in happiness, and in search of happiness.
But,

[Subaru: When did it start I wonder…… I don't remember, but one day I lost a race, I think. Soon, I was no longer the first at everything. There were now guys who could run faster than me, guys who can solve problems faster than I can. Little by little, my first-places grew fewer and fewer, and it felt strange, I thought]

Once it had started it only grew worse, and the shining stars within Subaru's heart gradually left him.

Even if he stretched out his hand, running here and there under the sky, the stars that once shined all around him were nowhere to be found. There was only the silence of the coming, enshrouding darkness.
And in that elusive, uncertain anxiety,

{He's that guy's child, after all}

Those words became Subaru's salvation, the last hope he could hold onto.
Even if he was not the fastest or the smartest, those words continued holding up the young Subaru's confidence.

Rather than training to run faster, or devoting all his efforts to his schoolwork, he decided first and foremost to do stupid things.

Sneaking into school at night with his friends, drawing over the white lines all over town, chasing away notoriously dangerous stray dogs from their hangout spots――all so people would not grow tired of him, so he could protect the last of his dwindling stars.

[Subaru: "Studying hard is stupid. Being able to run fast is nothing to be proud of. The things I was doing were making people happy, and that's far more, far better than what anyone else could do"]

In order to sustain this mistaken Pride, he had no choice but to keep going.
He will take the lead to do what others are afraid to do, challenge what others loathe to challenge, this way, he would make sure he did not lose his carefully protected place in the world.

[Subaru: But, if I were to protect myself this way, the next time I'd have no choice but to do something even bigger. It can't be less than what I had done before. They'd think I was someone small if I did, and I couldn't let that happen]

So Subaru's actions could only become more and more extreme.
If anyone asked why he would do such things, "he's Natsuki Subaru" would be the answer.

――Yes, it could only be Natsuki Subaru.
Natsuki Subaru was braver than anyone else, wilder than anyone else, freer than anyone else, so he must continue to be the existence that everyone else longed to be.

Straining himself, stretching himself thin, he tried to hide his nervousness, so that not even he himself would have noticed it, he continued fooling himself and those around him that he could do much, much more.
Because he was Natsuki Kenichi's son, Natsuki Subaru.

[Subaru: I thought I could do anything. I made myself believe that I would do anything. And without ever bothering to think beforehand, everything I did, and every consequence of what I did became a stupid mess……]

Like a moth circling toward a flame, he singlemindedly pursued the heat without even noticing if he had caught fire.
If he really was a moth, becoming enchanted by a flame would have been the end of him.

But Subaru was not a moth, nor were the friends who surrounded him. They were only human, even more so than Subaru.

——It appeared nothing in particular had set it off.

Attracted by the mischief Subaru proclaimed, similarly scary-faced kids came gathering around him.
And like teeth breaking off of a comb, the number of companions around him began to drop.

[Subaru: A bunch of idiots, I thought. You won't find this kind of fun anywhere except sticking by my side. Those guys will regret it, but they're free to waste their boring time elsewhere. My sights are on something higher]

If he continued searching like this for the whereabouts of those stars, at least he won't lose sight of the star above his head.
Of the sea of stars that once should have painted all the sky, now, only one lone, sparkling star remained to Subaru, and so he walked on and on without letting it out of his sight——until suddenly, when he turned his eyes from the star-lit sky back to the ground,

[Subaru: There was already no one else around me]

Of course this happened.
Without minding his surroundings, continually chasing after stars that no one else could see.
His companions, who at first found it amusing, seeing the ever escalating wildness with no landing point in sight, could no longer follow him.
Paying no mind to this, only mocking at those who left as idiots, even those who remained grew uneasy and doubtful.

One, and then another, his friends disappeared from his side, until he noticed he was all alone under the starlit sky.
Feeling angry, sulking, wanting to forget, he gazed up at the sky——

[Subaru: Even the radiant star that should have been above me is nowhere to be found anymore]

When he lost sight of the light of that star, deserted by the friends around him, left alone in the dark of night, Subaru finally noticed it.

——I was never anyone special.

{He's that guy's child, after all}

They were the magical words which the young Subaru once embraced with pride, and once would have injected Subaru's heart full of vitality.
Since when, he did not know, they had turned into a curse.

[Subaru: Just going outside, wandering around town, it'll be obvious. No matter where I go, where I look, I'd find lingering traces dad left behind……it's only natural, I guess]

Subaru's small and narrow world was precisely the same as the view from on top of his father's back.

To Subaru, who aspired to reach the same heights as his father, no matter where he is, no matter where he looked in that narrow world, there was not a single place where he could not sense his father's lingering scents.

Gradually, for Subaru, the world turned into a terrifying place.
At the same time, eating away at Subaru's heart, was the painful self-awareness that he was only ordinary, and the sense of shame that made him want to hide that ordinariness from his parents and anyone who knew them.

Loved by everyone, relied upon by everyone, smiled at by everyone.
Yet that same Natsuki Kenichi's son, Natsuki Subaru, was shriveling up squeamishly under everyone's gazes, a sickly coward hugging his own head frightened by the vastness of the world, he could not bear to be thought of this way.

His own shortcomings must be nothing less than a humiliation for his father who proclaimed to love him, and perhaps, at some point, even that towering father would grow disappointed in him. That, above all, was what terrified Subaru the most.

In elementary and in middle school, Subaru single-mindedly made an effort to avoid drawing any attention to himself.
The classmates who had known him since the lower grades couldn't wrap their heads around how docile Subaru had become――the children, at their impressionable age, failed to notice even a fragment of the darkness residing in their classmate's heart, and as they each went about their lively days, they soon forgot about such trivial things.
Meanwhile, as he spent this time burying himself in anonymity, as he worked to cast off the shadows of his past, at home, Subaru skillfully continued to play the part of the unruly child.

At school almost as meek as a weed in the shade, as soon as he was home he would return to the wildness of his youth like he was a completely different person.
Coming home from school, with various accounts of his feats of heroism, he would soften the corners of his mother's lips in midst of her housework, and put a smile on his father's face when he returned exhausted from his work.

――All of these, had his parent noticed that they were lies? Even now, Subaru couldn't be certain.

This way, throughout elementary and middle school, he spent the greater part of his life on painting and fortifying these lies, and constructing the fictional character of Natsuki Subaru.
Everyone had forgotten the various mischiefs of Subaru's past, and knew him merely as an inconspicuous classmate whom they barely knew anything about beyond his name.
On top of the tinge of loneliness that accompanied this barren relationship with his peers, covering over Subaru heart was an even more intimate sense of dread. For to bear the surname, Natsuki, was to be constantly in awe of a certain force.

[Subaru: Now that I think about it, it really was a dark way to live. But doing this, I passed through elementary and middle school. Then putting that behind me, I became a high school student…..even though it's a local school, probably because of the adjusted standard deviation score, almost none of my classmates got into the same one…..]

Having gotten into the habit of thinking only of retreating, with the sudden, drastic change of environment Subaru seized at his opportunity to move forward, and assembled together every fragment of courage that still remained in him.
Wrenching out the last bit of that courage, Subaru clenched his teeth and held up his head.

Advancing into the brand new environment of high school. Building unknown relationships with unfamiliar faces.
There, even if they judged him as Natsuki Subaru, no one would see him as "Natsuki Kenichi's son". In fact, in that place――he might even see the light of that starry sky he had lost, once more.

But the way he used that courage, decisively threw Subaru stumbling off that path.

[Subaru: Even I have to admit, that was one magnificent failure of a high school debut. But of course it was. You have a guy who hadn't built any interpersonal relationships all throughout elementary and middle school, thrown into a place full of faces he doesn't know, breathing roughly through his nose unable to shake off his tension……even an idiot could see how that'd turn out]

Unable to see something even an idiot could see, thinking about it now, Subaru realized he must have been even worse than an idiot.

Without going into too much detail, the result was already easy to imagine.
In terms of building interpersonal relationships, Subaru had no other role model except his father, so when the time came to build new relationships in an entirely new environment, his only frame of reference was his father.
――But the kind of jokes that might get him a smile or two while they were still children, when used on classmates in the middle of the psychological changes of the latter stages of puberty, became nothing short of toxic.

[Subaru: Poisonously toxic. Deadly toxic. I was like the kind of poisonous mushrooms with the little red and white dots on it, the ones that have "Highly toxic, you'll die horribly if you eat it" written all over it kind of guy]

How is a guy like that supposed to fit in anywhere.
Setting out into a brand new environment, Subaru lost his footing on the very first step and fell straight to the bottom of the pit. Then, spending his time alone, becoming firmly established as that awkward, socially dense guy who can't read the mood, he suddenly thought one morning,

――Ah, I don't want to go to school today.

[Subaru: I remember that morning both mom and dad were out of the house. It felt like too much of a bother to get out of bed, so I slept way past the time when I should have gotten up…..and when I finally rushed myself out of bed, panicking, it was already noon, but when I was about get up and change]

Subaru noticed his heart, and his body, were awfully calm.
At school, while sitting alone in a seat by the window, pretending to be asleep, silently letting the time drift by, Subaru's heart had always been tormented by anxiety and fear.

Not wanting to be in this place, from the moment he set foot in school he would start thinking about going back home. No, even from the moment he woke up, he would start spending his time thinking about when he'd finally return from school.

It was not that he was bullied. It was not that he was being shunned.
Only, Subaru himself had constructed a wall. He was afraid of embracing the hope of touching another's kindness. And the thought of perhaps seeing the light of those stars again, filled him with unease.

If only he could pass a day without having to endure the agony of those hours. That sense of liberation, that sense of relief, drawn by the allure of that sense of powerlessness, little by little, Subaru's steps drifted further and further away from school.

[Subaru: Skipping once a week became once every three days, then it's just every other day…..until I stopped going altogether, even two months in a row]

There is no need to talk about the days that came after that.
No longer going to school, Subaru's heart was filled with a sense of relief. It was a sense of liberation at being far away from the school where he had been forced to spend those agonizing hours, and, above all, now ruling over Subaru's heart was a kind of acceptance, and surrender.

For no great reason, he had become the conceited, self-satisfied drop-out, Subaru.
Looking at this Subaru, no one would be thinking "He's that guy's child, after all" anymore, and above all――how disappointed his parents must be to see such a pathetic Subaru. Surely, then, even mom and dad would give up on "Loving" that Subaru.

If a son they had no love for was being considered trash, it probably wouldn't mean anything to them.
But if a son they loved was being labeled as worthless, those two would surely feel angry. And saddened, too. If people saw them like that, they would pity them, even look down on them.
It would be better if Subaru had simply faded out of their lives.

Therefore, Natsuki Subaru――

[Subaru: "I don't love you." "I disown you." "You are not……my son." I wished, you'd just say that to me, and throw me away. I wished, you'd give up on me]

Half-expecting to see the stars that could no longer exist, faintly hoping, he gazed up at the sky.
The effeminate, pathetic Subaru, the stupid creature that did not deserve to be Natsuki Kenichi's son, only wished to be set free.

――Even Subaru himself had not realized that this was the true content of his heart.

Facing his heart, exposing its interiors, for the first time, Subaru saw the ugliness of his own heart. The thought of himself, stupid and weak, unwilling to admit his faults and averting his eyes, then trying to push it all onto someone else to clean up his mess, it made him want to vomit.
Yet, in the end, the reason Subaru did not abandon himself, was because he was lent a hand by someone who would not abandon him.

{Rem, loves Subaru-kun}

Overlapping with the silver outlines in the back of his eyelids, was now an ethereal pale-blue radiance.
Like a soothing wind it blew into Subaru's heart, sending a consoling warmth through Subaru's frozen limbs.

{Let us start from here. From square one……no, from Zero!}

When Subaru was supposed to have come to an end, the girl, saying this, gave his back a push. When Subaru could no longer go on, she lifted up his face, took his hand, wrapped her arm around his back, and gave his forehead a kiss, and bestowed him with courage.

Charmed forth by the silver radiance granting him heat, and pushed from behind him by the sky-blue warmth prompting him to walk forward, Natsuki Subaru, whose story was supposed to have come to an end, once again started off from Zero.
Because he realized this, because he remembered this, because he had decided to march forth from Zero――before Zero, he must now resolve the Minus of his past.

As Subaru's long monologue came to an end, Kenichi, listening, closed his eyes as if lost in thought and fell completely silent. Seeing his father like this, Subaru tried desperately to seal in the weakness and cowardice from leaking from his throat.

Having been granted a chance to reflect, through that small change in his mental state, however little it may have been, he saw the grotesqueness of his own heart.
Whether it was now, or before, Subaru had always pushed the consequences of his actions onto others to clean up.
Because he lacked the courage to give up on himself, and because he wanted to be the tragic hero rather than the villain of his own world, without saying a word, he had silently waited for someone else to volunteer to be the villain.

He thought that if he stopped going to school, if he passed his days in slothfulness inside his room, if he continued on being his foolish self――one day Kenichi will kick down the door, and put an end to Subaru's world.
Unconsciously, in the deepest depth of his heart, he looked forward to such an ending to his slothful days.
It was while his mind was trapped in this deadlock, that he came to the Parallel World. Then even there, Subaru continued to exhibit his complacency, until――

[Dad: ――Subaru]

Kenichi, who had been deep in thought, opened his eyes, and called to Subaru's name.
The sound of that call pulled Subaru's consciousness back from the sea of contemplation and tossed it back into the reality before him――his father's face, directly in front of his eyes, and,

[Dad: FATHER―HEADBUTT!]

[Subaru: Adaghh!?]

His forehead struck by a terrible impact, Subaru yelped as sparks flew scattering all over. Holding his forehead under the devastating pain, he found Kenichi standing in front of the bench, looking down at him.

[Dad: See, Subaru. That was my love-filled FATHER HEADBUTT, a single-blow of fury]

[Subaru: You called a headbutt and then switched to an axe-kick! You even put your face up close for a masterful feint!!]

[Dad: That trick only worked 'cause you were seated and I was standing! Eech, my body's grown stiffer. Nothing like what it used to be. That's what I get for slacking on my after-shower stretches]

With a weird look on his face, Kenichi started doing some stretching routines. Watching his father while giving the part of his head that took the impact a rub, half crying from the pain, Subaru wasn't sure what to do with this completely unexpected reaction. Whatever Subaru did expect, at least it wasn't this,

[Dad: But, Subaru. You know, you……you really are a blockhead]

[Subaru: Uuooghhh]

That unsugarcoated remark cracked him in two, and Subaru couldn't help but make a gurgling sound with his throat.
Looking down at Subaru, Kenichi crossed his arms with a snort,

[Dad: Going all "nieh-nieh-nieh-nieh" and worried about everything…… Which part of me and mom did you get that kind of self-pity from? You're totally taking after your mom's younger brother, you know. The short, fat bald one with that face that looks like he's always worried about something]

[Subaru: Well that's just going too far……although yes, that uncle was definitely the reason I made it my life goal not to end up fat and bald when I grow up]

The father and son at least agreed on unreservedly burning that uncle who had absolutely anything to do with this.
While somewhere far away, under the same sky, their unsuspecting relation was given this scathing review, Kenichi continued with an aggravated look [To begin with,]

[Dad: There were all sorts of things that pissed me off, but there was one thing most of all. It just pisses me off that you thought by taking that passive attitude you can get me to stop loving you. With that shut-in-drop-out-apathy-syndrome, you think your own father is just going to go berserk and rip you a new one? ……What are you, stupid? You want me to scold you? Are you a little girl who didn't get enough physical intimacy when you were little? Wasn't all that wrestling I do with you every morning enough?]

[Subaru: The way you said that was misleading in a few places but the gist of it was right so I can't really refute it……]

[Dad: No, if you want me to give up on you, you'll have to do a lot better than that. Who's going to give up on a child who's shutting himself up in a cask? If you want me to hate you, you better go murder half of humanity or something. Then I'll hate ya]

[Subaru: We don't even see that kind of villain in Shounen Mangas anymore! Who's gonna go and do something that absurd!?]

[Dad: ——Well what you said to me was just as absurd wasn't it]

Hearing him say this out loud, Subaru was at a loss for words.
In front of him, Kenichi bent down his waist and met Subaru's eyes, [We clear?] he asked,

[Dad: Even if you are slow as a snail, too dumb to remember the multiplication tables, or go bragging on self-harm blogs to get attention……]

[Subaru: I'm not that slow or dumb or stupid……]

[Dad: Even if you are that slow and dumb and stupid, I'm not going to hate you or give up on you. Isn't that obvious? I am your dad, and you are my son]

With an exasperated sigh at the end of those words, Kenichi straightened up his back. Subaru looked up, at his father standing tall. Bathed in his son's gaze, Kenichi said,

[Dad: Still, just what kind of superman did you take me for. From what you said, it's as if I'm some SUPER transcendent-technology PERFECT-flawless-HITECH-superhero, you know]

[Subaru: That's interpreting it too much]

[Dad: You just don't know it, but I have all kinds of troubles, regrets, and failures too, I also cry and shout and get rejected……yeah, I'm nothing special at all. At least I got a nice-looking face, though. Not like you]

[Subaru: Overconfidence strike-two]

[Dad: When I was your age I wasn't all that mature either. Sure I got a little famous, but it was nothing particularly special. I could stop time a little, kinda, but that was it]

[Subaru: Should've used that when you got hit by a car last year]

Three-part joke. *(*Two mundane statements followed by a punchline. Or could also refer to three jokes told in succession. In Manzai comedy, the "straight-man" objects to the "funnyman"'s statements – TC)*
The three straight-man rallies perfectly exchanged, Kenichi held out his palm for a high-five.
But, just as their palms came into contact, one hand grabbed the other,

[Dad: Now let me twist the wrist of that dumbass blockhead pain-in-the-ass son of mine to straighten out his character a bit…..]

[Subaru: Ow! OwOW! Wa-wait, my wrist is gonna……Owwwhurts!]

[Dad: ——But I kinda get the feeling that won't be necessary, you already look pretty beaten-up as it is]

His twisted wrist being released, Subaru stood up giving his hand a shake while whining about the pain. Staring at Subaru with one eye closed, Kenichi made a small snort with his nose,

[Dad: I got that feeling this morning, but just now it's like something suddenly changed about you again. What's with that]

[Subaru: I told you, didn't I. It's, because I have someone I like]

A silver brightness, was leading Natsuki Subaru by the hand.

[Subaru: And there's also, someone who told me they loved me, even in spite of what I am]

A warm, sky-blue radiance, was tenderly pushing on Natsuki Subaru's back.

[Subaru: They, don't know I am Natsuki Kenichi's son. When I am with them, I am only Natsuki Subaru……No,]

Shaking his head, he fixed his eyes on his father standing in front of him,

[Subaru: No matter who I am in front of, I am always Natsuki Subaru. I brought it on myself to carry that strange signboard on my back, when I was actually being crushed by a weight that was never there. I finally understand it, now]

[Dad: Well that was super late. I'm the big black pillar holding this family up, here. I never asked you to be the head of the family, who gave you the idea to carry a burden like that. I should smack ya]

[Subaru: You did plenty of stuff more painful than smacking already!]

Seeing Subaru stomping on the ground in protest of the previous attacks, Kenichi laughed [My bad my bad] like he was apologizing on someone else's behalf. Then, squinting his eyes into thin lines, Kenichi continued [Compared to that,]

[Dad: You said there was someone you like, and then you said there's someone who likes you, but, what? You… are you a two-timer? With only a Subaru-rank?]

[Subaru: Don't call it a Subaru-rank! Although I totally realize it's too luxurious for my level! But so what! There can be two stars in the highest place, what's wrong with that!]

It was not just him being defiant, for those were Subaru's honest feelings at that moment.
He loved Emilia. And he loved Rem. Those two made Subaru stand up and walk forward, whether it was to stand in front of Kenichi or to face the self of his past, they gave him the strength to not run away.

All the sea of stars that once covered over Subaru's sky——all the glittering starlight he once saw gazing upwards.
Overhead now, blinding, brighter than the light of all those stars combined, was the star of those

two's radiance. And all around that brightest star, even the stars that should have vanished long ago now came to glow with a different light.

It was outside of his shut-in room, inadvertently summoned to the Parallel World, through desperation, suffering, sorrow, wailing as he cried, screaming in anger, charging in with a smile on his face, enthusiastically advancing forward, that Subaru won this starlit sky.

[Dad: Well, that's alright. Do as you like. Long as you get a perfect ending out of it without breaking the law, I won't have any objections. Looks like, you got some talent for duping girls too, huh]

[Subaru: If I had talents like that I wouldn't have failed so miserably on my first day of highschool and ended up all alone. I can't pull off miracles like you, dad]

[Dad: I don't think that's true, you know? You're my son, after all. And although you got all sorts of things wrong, that's the one thing you got most wrong]

[Subaru: That one?]

Tapping the fingers on his cross arms, Kenichi answered the confused looking Subaru with an [En], nodding,

[Dad: I may be hyperactive in front of you and mom, but dad knows how to sort out the TIME-PLACE-OCCASION for these thing, you know? I was always like this in front of you, so maybe you got the wrong idea, but if you act like dad in front of everyone, ofcourse things are gonna go pear-shaped, oy]

[Subaru: Wa, wai-wait……]

[Dad: It's obvious, isn't it? If you see a guy with this kind of TENSION on the first meeting, you'll be scared to even come near him, right? From there until you become good friends, you still have to straighten up your collar. You only get to take off a button on your shirt when it's hot out. Otherwise, it's patience from April to June]

That was the shocking truth. In reality, even his father changes his attitude depending on the target, just like a normal person.
Without knowing this, he had believed that if he only acted like his father, he would be loved by those around him just like his father was. Such was the shallowness of his mind.

[Subaru: All that time I spent stagnant……]

[Dad: Well, it wasn't all useless, I think. In fact, you got to become who you are now because of it. Those stars you found, aren't they worth the time you spent looking for them?]

Subaru, hugging his head in regret, lifted up his face as he heard those words. He could answer that question without a moment's hesitation, for he already knew the answer, beyond all doubt.

[Subaru: ――No, it was worth it. No matter how many chances I get, I would want to chase after the same stars as I am now. So, I think I like the way I am now]

[Dad: Is that so……Then, that was all great, wasn't it?]

Relieved to see Subaru resolve this in his heart, Kenichi smiled.
And facing that smile, Subaru felt the heavy lump in his chest dropping with a thud. The darkness within him cleared, as if all the feelings of gloom had been washed away.

Although it was a selfish and conceited emotion, to Subaru right now, it was salvation.
After facing his past, saying goodbye to his old self while embracing and accepting all that he had been, he was proud of this present self that was now walking forward.
And so――

[Subaru: I'm sorry, for all the times I closed myself off. I'm sorry I made you worry with all the emotion I can't sort out and refusing to go to school. I know I was wrong now. I'm really sorry]

[Dad: It's ok, you don't have to. It's my fault for not realizing how amazingly awesome you imagined me to be. I should be the one to say sorry, for being way too awesome in your eyes!]

[Subaru: Even though it's a fact, after you put it like that I totally don't want to admit it now!]

[Dad: Hahaha, no need to be embarrassed. You're my son, and you have my blood in your veins. You definitely have the potential to become someone half as awesome as me]

[Subaru: Only half? I thought new generations are supposed to overtake the old ones]

[Dad: Well you also got half of you from your mom. With my awesomeness and good looks, combined with the other part from your mom, they kinda canceled each other out, you know]

[Subaru: Sorry mom, I have no counter to that!]

Unable to say anything to exonerate his mom who wasn't there, Subaru clapped his hands together and apologized to thin air. Amused to see this gesture from him, Kenichi shook his head,

[Dad: Well then, that's a load off your shoulders, right? All the walking-in-place from before is already done, there's no point dwelling on them anymore, all that matters now is what you do from now on]

[Subaru: Yeah, en. I'm, sorry I made you worry……]

[Dad: If you want to apologize for something like that, you should take the time to properly repay our kindness. One day, you'll have to take good care of me and mom you know, my eldest son]

――As he heard those words, Subaru grew still.

[Subaru: ――――]

He had made up his mind to apologize for everything that had happened before, and he was determined to confess all the feelings of his present self.
He had accomplished it well, the years of accumulated barriers between them had melted, and he could now face his parents with a clear heart.
Everything he had wanted to say up to now――

[Subaru: ――Fr]

Then ―― the moment he was about to say “From now on”, what surged up instead through Subaru’s entire body was,

[Subaru: ……Ple… please forgive me]

[Dad: Subaru?]

[Subaru: I’m so……I’m sorry, I’m so sorry…… I’m, I’m sorry I’m sorry……I’m so sorry……]

The confused Kenichi’s voice came from in front of him. Yet Subaru could no longer make out his face.
The flood of overflowing tears had blocked up Subaru’s vision, and the shapes of the world grew blurred. Covering his face with his palms, he desperately tried to wipe away the stream of tears. But even wiping, and wiping, he could not stop the tears from flowing. They cannot be stopped, and would not be stopped.

[Subaru: Forgive me please forgive me……I, I’m……There’s only, you two……I’m sorry, I’m so sorry……]

――He had realized it.
Somewhere within his heart, Subaru had realized it long ago.

From the moment he was summoned to this Parallel World, bathed under the light of the sun, when he squinted his eyes within the blinding flash of that instant, as if it were a revelation, Subaru knew.
――That he would never return to his original world again.

Having spilled his heart to his father, having confessed the dark emotions that had accumulated inside his chest, having been granted forgiveness, having been lent the strength to walk forward, having been taught and brought up to know how,

[Subaru: Despite all of that, I…… I can’t repay you anything…… I will, never get to see you again…… I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I’m sorry……I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry]

The tears would not stop. He was about to fall to his knees.
But even so, Subaru remained standing, because stopping him from collapsing, was a hug from in front that wrapped the crying Subaru’s body within its arms.

The palms were strong and broad, they pressed his son, who was almost as tall as he was, tightly into him, yet, like consoling a weeping child, they patted and caressed his back.

[Dad: ――No matter where or when, you’re still a pain-in-the-ass son. Geez]

As he said this, he continued holding onto the sobbing Subaru, soothingly, and lovingly, and did not let go.

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[Dad: Have you calmed down?]

[Subaru: ――Yeah. Sorry. That must be, really annoying]

[Dad: No kidding. Just look at my shirt. I've got dried out tears and snot all over my chest now. I'm too embarrassed to even wander around the neighborhood like this]

"Haha", using his fingers to give Subaru, who had stopped crying, a flick to the forehead, Kenichi let out a vulgar laugh.
With a grin, he stared at Subaru's face, that was now swollen from the tears. Seeing those eyes filled with sadness and apology, Kenichi sighed,

[Dad: I don't know why you cried so hard, but that must have been kinda embarrassing for ya, so I'll keep it a secret. Try to thank me as best you can, ok?]

[Subaru: ……Aah. Thank you. Truly, from the bottom of my heart, more than anyone else in the world]

[Dad: Well I'm gonna blush if you put it like that]

Scratching his face looking embarrassed, Kenichi chuckled. Unable to stare at his father's face directly for too long, Subaru averted his eyes.
Kenichi shrugged his shoulders, and flapped his hands around like he was trying to drive away insects,

[Dad: Gees, now get yourself back home, you crybaby. Dad's in the mood for walking around a bit more, so I'll take the long way back. If I'm seen with ya while you're sobbing, people are gonna think something strange]

[Subaru: ……They'll wonder what on earth a pair of father and son our age could be doing together, huh]

[Dad: Yeah no kidding. If I go back with you like this, my friends are gonna hear about it and embarrass me with it, you know]

[Subaru: That line could be fatal depending on who you say it to, so be careful how you use it!]

Inadvertently blurting out another straight-man counter to his father's words, Subaru's heart was stabbed with the pain of nostalgia. Clenching his teeth and forcing himself to turn his face away, Subaru managed to spit out the words [So uh],
[Subaru: I'll be going on ahead, then. Try not to get questioned by the police or anything]

[Dad: Sorry to disappoint ya, but all the police officers around here know me. If they come and say hello I can't really ignore them, can I]

[Subaru: Just please don't do anything except say hello back]

That attitude from Kenichi hadn't changed at all. Once again feeling saved by it, Subaru felt disgusted by how his own powerlessness was still no better than before. No matter where he was, he still had to rely on others to protect him. He was so hopeless that way.

But more than anything, he didn't want to show his weakness in front of Kenichi anymore.
So after exhaling a sharp breath, as if he had made up his mind, Subaru turned his back to his

father and swung out his step. And with hurried steps, he tried to disappear from that place as quickly as he could.

[Dad: ――Hey, Subaru]

From behind, Kenichi's voice called to him, and his legs inadvertently stopped moving.

[Dad: You're, going through all sorts of things too, huh. So, I just say this one thing]

[Subaru: ―――]

[Dad: Give it your best. I'm counting on you, son]

The fear of being counted on, the fear of disappointing.
The worry that he would betray his father's expectations had grasped Subaru for so long, refusing to let go. It was because of it, that to Subaru, his father's expectations had turned into a symbol of fear――

[Subaru: ――Yeah, leave it to me. Dad]

Still with his back turned, Subaru stuck a finger toward the sky, and,

[Subaru: My name is Natsuki Subaru. Son of Natsuki Kenichi. ――Therefore I can accomplish anything, and will do anything it takes. Your son is really awesome, you know]

[Dad: Yeah, I know. Half of you came from me, after all!]

"HAHAHA", at the end of those words Kenichi showered a volley of laughter upon Subaru's back.
Listening to its sound, a smile came onto Subaru's lips.

With his back to his father, he swung out his strides.
His knees were no longer shaking. His heart no longer wavered. He only stared straight ahead as he walked.

――The one whose back he had always watched from behind, will be watching him from behind from now on.

Amazed, by how much strength he could draw from a fact as simple as this.
Subaru continued walking, without stopping.

Chapter 19 [Homework]

——After saying goodbye to his father, Subaru, while reorganizing the thoughts in his mind, slowly made his way through the familiar townscape, on the road leading to home.

As he walked on, a myriad of emotions had been surging through his heart.
He hadn't taken a stroll in the sun at an hour like this ever since he stopped going to school, but the feeling of sunlight on his skin was probably not the only reason why the scenery he had walked through so many times before felt different this time.

[Subaru: Well, a kid who's skipping school can't really go shamelessly prancing around under Mr.Sun-sama, after all]

It wouldn't be good if word got around the neighborhood, or if he wound up getting lectured by a police officer.
Even if Subaru had subconsciously wanted his father and mother to hate him, he wasn't exactly planning to pull the police into it.

The streets around his home were full of memories.
As if soaking it all in, and confirming it with the soles of his feet, passing through the quiet——or rather, completely unpopulated residential streets, by the time he no longer noticed the sensation of dried up tears on his cheeks, he had arrived at the front door of his house.

Taking in a deep breath, he halted.
Closing his eyes, going through the multitude of emotions in his heart, and gulping them all down,

[Subaru: ——I'm home]

Opening the door, he sent these words into the house.
Feeling a bit nervous, he waited for the reply. But the response that should have greeted him still didn't come. Sensing something strange and furrowing his brows, Subaru took off his shoes and stepped into the house. Then, looking around for his mother who should be home,

[Subaru: ……Ohaiy-]

——In front of the refrigerator, looking back at him, his mother was holding a bottle of mayonnaise in her mouth.

[Subaru: …….I'm back]

All the tenseness up to now suddenly vanishing without a trace—— Subaru dropped down his shoulders, smiling wryly, and more or less accepted that situation.

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[Subaru: There was no reply, I was starting to worry if something happened]

[Mom: What else could have happened. See, mom's mayonnaise bottle is empty. So I stole your dad's mayonnaise to slurp on and…… recently, I've been getting the feeling that Subaru's voice is becoming really similar to dad's. If you're on the phone I wouldn't even be able to tell the difference]

[Subaru: The topic kind of jumped there, but basically, you couldn't tell the difference between my voice and dad's so you tried hiding, huh. No, but, if you were trying to hide you'd want to be a bit more sneaky about it]

Facing his mother, who was sucking on the Mayo, Subaru took the caved-in bottle from her and let it expand back to its original shape, before putting it down on the table.
Staring at him, Naoko tilted her neck,

[Mom: Keep it a secret from your dad, ok? But see, slurping on your dad's mayonnaise, I get my favorite mayonnaise flavor combined with your dad's flavor at the same time, it's a great bargain isn't it?]

[Subaru: That sounds like the perverted testimony of a kid who steals a girl's recorder to lick it! Combining one favorite thing with another favorite thing to make something better, are you a kindergartener!?]

[Mom: So, what happened to your dad? Did you leave him behind? Subaru, when did you get fast enough to be able to leave your dad behind?]

[Subaru: It's not like I could win against dad in race in the first pla……but, well, maybe]

Just as he was about to immediately refute his mother's question, Subaru swallowed it back into his chest.
When was the last time he had a race with his dad? Back then, his father didn't behave like an adult at all, and would mercilessly leave Subaru way behind in the dust. Despondently watching his father's back vanishing into the distance, perhaps even at that point, a small sense of admiration had been sprouting in his heart.
But, how many years had already passed since then? If he raced with his father again, surely he wouldn't be left that far behind, or, he might even win.

That admiration only ever enlarging, Kenichi's existence inside Subaru had grown to an enormous size. All the while, having misunderstood its true essence, no one else could have saved him from it.

[Subaru: In the end, I still give up on everything half way, huh]

Saying this while leaning backwards and squeaking the back of his chair, Subaru flung out a big stretch. And, watching him do this, Naoko placed her hand over her lips and laughed,

[Subaru: What is it? Was something funny?]

[Mom: I thought, that gesture looks just like your father. Even back then, your dad likes to stretch on the back of his chair. He'd put too much force into it and throw himself right over]

[Subaru: It’s not just the voice, even our movements are similar, huh. I really can’t tell if that’s good or bad right now]

[Mom: But I think it’s a good thing. ――You’re his son, after all]

“DOKUN”, single large thump sounded in his chest, and Subaru desperately tried to stop a groan from seeping out of his throat. Seeing his expression stiffen and his eyes growing wide, Naoko blinked several times with her sharp eyes, that looked exactly like Subaru’s. Breathing in through his nose, Subaru managed to calm down the pounding of his heart, and,

[Subaru: I feel like I won’t have the strength to leave again, if I stay here for too long……]

Saying this, he stood up from his chair. With his mother’s confused gaze looking up at him, Subaru scratched his cheek, as he turned,

[Subaru: So um, there’s something I want to ask]

[Mom: En, I’m listening]

With an unconcerned air, as if pretending not to notice his reluctance and hesitation, Naoko occasionally glanced back and forth between him and the mayonnaise. The desire to hear her son continue his words, was probably as attractive as the impulse to continue slurping mayonnaise down her throat.
Taken aback at seeing his mother still not having changed a bit, Subaru’s face broke into a small smile,

[Subaru: ――Do you, remember where my school uniform is stowed away?]

――He slid his arms through the dress shirt’s perfectly ironed sleeves, and inserted his legs into the neatly folded trousers. Tightening his belt in front of the mirror, after an epic struggle he managed to tie up the dark green necktie. Then, putting on the navy blue blazer,

[Subaru: Student ・ Natsuki Subaru, complete…… It must have been about three months now]

Confirming in front of the mirror that his transformation was complete, Subaru exhaled a deep breath as if having finished a big task.
The reflection in the mirror, was of a school uniform that hadn’t been worn in a very long time. Being a blazer-styled uniform, it was a pain to have to tie the necktie every morning, as even to be stripped of a minute of precious sleeping time was extremely annoying.

Even after tying it every day for two years, it still hadn’t gotten better at all, and the knot still looked just as dopey. At the same time, there was a complicated feeling at the thought of this being his last chance to do it.

[Subaru: Should I try to get it perfect since it’s the last time, or should I do it like I always did it?]

Even while mumbling this, the answer already appeared in his heart.
Lightly flicking the swollen bulge of his necktie, leaving the awkward knot intact, Subaru turned

away from the mirror. And, looking around the room, he picked up his backpack.
No matter how you look at it, it was the image of a model student ready to go to school.

[Subaru: Too bad it's way past home-room, it's already time for the third period to start. Leaving the house after the sun's already finished rising, what kind of crap model student does that]

Scratching his head while smiling wryly, Subaru did a stretch on the spot, and headed out of the room—— but just before leaving, he turned around to take another good look at his old room.
In all his life, Subaru had never moved houses, so this had been the only place he could have called "My Room". From the time he entered middle school, for almost six years, he had been sleeping and waking inside this room. ——This would be last time he would see this place.

[Subaru: ————]

Without a word, Subaru quietly lowered his head.
Into that one gesture alone, was instilled the memories of all those six years.

With a long, long bow, he finished his farewell, and then, enthusiastically lifting up his face, Subaru turned his back to his room. With the sound of the door closing behind him, he made his way down the stairs, to find Naoko waiting in the living room, with her sharp eyes opened wide with surprise,

[Mom: Oh my. When you asked for the uniform, I thought you were going to burn it. I made all sorts of preparations too……now it's all wasted]

[Subaru: When your son asked for his uniform the first thing you thought of was pyromania? And while we're on this topic, are those taros and skewered hot dogs you prepared assuming there was going to be a fire……?]

Seeing a whole array of ingredients lined up on the table, Subaru was at a loss for words at his mother's happy-go-lucky reaction that defied all expectations. On the other hand, Naoko seemed completely unconcerned about Subaru's twitching face as she looked over his change of clothes from head to toe.

[Mom: Eun eun, looks good. They make you look like an adult, and kind of cancels out the eyes, and make you look toned-down a bit]

[Subaru: Mom you're currently robbing me of that tone-down as we speak!]

[Mom: Why are you so touchy? Want to lick some mayonnaise to calm down?]

[Subaru: I'm not really in the mood right now……]

[Mom: Is-that-so]

The bottle of mayonnaise she held out——had a giant "S" written on the cap indicating it as Subaru's personal mayonnaise. Only, Naoko seemed to have expected that reply from Subaru, and simply nodded,

[Mom: But Subaru, you don't seem to actually like mayonnaise very much]

[Subaru: ――――]

[Mom: It's because you love dad and mom, that you lick it together with us, isn't it]

Putting the mayonnaise with the Subaru-seal down on the table, spinning it round and round, Naoko said these words. And on the receiving end, Subaru's throat clogged up. Shocked, his lips trembled and his breathing stopped,

[Subaru: Wh, what gave you tha……]

[Mom: Then, Subaru, the world or mayonnaise, which do you choose?]

[Subaru: Um, the world……]

[Mom: You see?]

[Subaru: What kind of example is that!! Why do you have a triumphant look on your face! A guy who would choose mayonnaise over the world doesn't love mayonnaise, he just hates the world!]

Protesting against Naoko's considerably off-beat remark, Subaru breathed heavily while scowling at the bottle of mayonnaise on the table. Then, with a small snort,

[Subaru: ……For how long, have you been thinking that]

[Mom: Since a long time ago. Dad and mom will always get depressed without mayonnaise, like the world is coming to an end, but Subaru isn't like that]

[Subaru: The hurdle you expect of me is way too high, it's throwing me into despair, you know]

Subaru deflated at his mother's words. But his heart was not calm.
Subaru's status as a Mayo-lover was not in question. Without fail, whenever condiments are concerned, he would never leave out mayonnaise. He'd naturally dip all deep fried foods in mayonnaise. His devotion was to the point of rubbing mayonnaise on already mayonnaise-flavored snacks.
But why, had he always been so attached to mayonnaise――

[Subaru: It looked like you two were really enjoying it, so I wanted to enjoy it the same way too. Now that I think about it, I'm a Father-con and Mother-con, a total Fami-con……]*(*Famicom is another name for the NES game console -tc)*

[Mom: Without the SUPA in front?]

[Subaru: SUPER・FAMILY COMPLEX, aka, SUPA-FAMI… ugh nevermind] *(*SNES :3 -tc)*

In the middle of this completely pointless exchange, Subaru gave his head a shake and sighed. Then, slowly lifting up the mayonnaise bottle from the table,

[Mom: Ah―]

[Subaru: ――Pffhhuaa. Uuummu, so-good! After going so long without genuine mayonnaise, there's just nothing like it! The improvised mayonnaise on the other side is pretty good too, but

the unhealthy store-bought kind with the artificial-colorings are the real deals!! The ones over there are just mayo-neese]*(*It's a mayo-lover jargon I think. Mayo-lovers are real, google "マヨラー" -tc)*

Squeezing the almost-full bottle flat, he swallowed all the mayonnaise in one gulp. Savoring its sourness passing over his tongue, he let the burning sensation run down his throat and chest. This, is the true MAYO-NAZING that mayo-addicts can never stop loving.

Using the back of his hand to wipe off a white stain left on the corner of his mouth, Subaru lifted up his head in front of the surprised Naoko.

[Subaru: I may not love mayonnaise as much as you two, but I am nonetheless a true and fervent disciple of mayonnaise-love. I swear it, on the bottle caps of all the mayonnaise I have licked to this day]

On a side note, the bottle caps of every mayonnaise Subaru had personally consumed in his lifetime were being stored away inside the closet of his room. The collection had since swelled to an uncanny number of 776. With the addition of the one just now, that number became 777.

[Subaru: It's the triple-seventh. Help me put it in the closet later]

[Mom: Oooh~, three sevens is a pretty lucky number. We were so delighted too when your dad hit four sevens the other day]

[Subaru: That is literally love of an entirely different magnitude!]

His mother happily took the emptied mayonnaise bottle from him. For a moment, Subaru sulked at his sense of accomplishment being spoiled, but immediately recovering his expression again,

[Subaru: So um……I guess, it's time I should go, then]

[Mom: Ah, if you're going to the convenience store, buy some cream tarts while you're there, I suddenly want to eat them really badly]

[Subaru: Considering what I'm wearing, can you use a little imagination before saying that!?]

Spreading out both his arms, he made that appeal. Seeing Subaru do this, Naoko laughed [Just kidding just kidding],

[Mom: But, you're going to school now? Even though mom is really glad…… won't you stand out if you get there so late? Why not just go tomorrow?]

[Subaru: Don't cripple your son's fledgling motivation right from outset. I only just barely got a little willpower put together by being a little harsher on others and a little more lenient on myself]

[Mom: If Subaru was that kind of child, then your mom wouldn't have had such a hard time]

Even with Subaru sneaking that self-deprecating comment in there, Naoko still replied as if she didn't get the point. Then, squinting her eyes and standing up with a [Al-right-then],

[Mom: Just wait a minute for mom to fetch her jacket]

[Subaru: Wait……you, don't mean to come with me, right? It's not some kind of punishment game where parents personally accompany their ex-hikikomori child to school, is it!?]

[Mom: Ok, but I won't go all the way to school. I'll just go up to the convenience store and get some mayonnaise and cream puffs. You're a big boy now]

[Subaru: Wh!? Why does that sound like I begged you to come with me!?]

While Subaru was bemoaning the unacceptable flow of the conversation, his mother only casually dodged it with [Right right] while heading up to her room. And so, it was decided that she will accompany him half of the way to school.

[Subaru: Noonooo……give me a break. Gees]

As he said this, Subaru's cheeks softened with a tinge of relief.
——Even if only for a little while, the time to say goodbye to his mother had been delayed, and thinking this, Subaru grew keenly aware of how weak he really was.

[Mom: It's been a long time since I walked with Subaru like this]

[Subaru: Has it? If it's at night, we come out on shopping expeditions all the time, right?]

[Mom: Haaa. You see, the flow of the conversation just now obviously meant noon. You have to think about what's beyond the words before responding]

[Subaru: I'm just, finding observational advice coming from mom a bit hard to swallow!]

Natsuki Naoko's observational skills were probably the worst in the world, to an almost demon-possessed degree.
That was the common understanding within the Natsuki family, or between Subaru and Kenichi, at least. The truth is, up against Naoko, no matter what kind of allegory or sarcasm was thrown at her, it would be nearly impossible to explain it to her afterward.
Since she herself never seems to realize it, everything just naturally bounces right off of her, and stress will gradually build up the more one interacts with her.
Yet, in spite of that, Subaru still enjoys talking with his mother.

[Mom: I'm so glad it's warm today. What did you talk about with your father?]

[Subaru: Ooof, conversations-with-mother 101—— expect the first half and the second half to not be connected at all. Anyways, it wasn't anything in particular, it was just uhh……]

Walking side by side on the road to school, Subaru wracked his brain for an answer to his mother's question.
If he told her all the details of his conversation with Kenichi, he would be forced to mention the embarrassing inner workings of his inferiority complex, and he couldn't exactly leave out the part where he cried, either.
Even though he knew it was necessary, it was only the surge of emotions of that moment, and he

didn't know what it would become if he brought it out again now.
That's why,

[Subaru: It's no big deal……We talked about Ikeda-san for a bit, and told some stories about the past]

[Mom: Aah, Ikeda-kun. He won big on a horse-ticket and moved to Thailand, then he got swindled by his local young wife out of everything he had, and ended up being driven into hard manual labor while getting scorched all black]

[Subaru: That's the first time I heard of the miserable developments of the second half!?]

[Mom: He sent a letter to us, saying: "I couldn't get used to the dirty money after all. Right now, my body may be undergoing hardships, but my heart is fulfilled"]

[Subaru: Huh… so you went through a transformation owing to your experiences in an unknown place too, Ikeda-san……I can totally relate to that!]

The only difference was replacing "parallel world" with "foreign country", and Subaru's circumstances would have been pretty much the same as Ikeda-san's. Unexpectedly finding a fellow traveler here, Subaru quietly wished him the best of luck.
Then, seeing Subaru's reaction, his mother tilted her neck with [Nnnn~]

[Mom: So, those stories of the past made you feel like going to school?]

[Subaru: Aah, well, that's the short version of it. It was a chance for me to look back on how I've gotten myself worried over all sorts of absurd things. And so I]

[Mom: Stopped wanting to do everything exactly the same way as your dad]

[Subaru: ――――]

Originally hoping to gloss it over so he would not have to explain, Subaru suddenly found himself cornered by Naoko's words.
The smile on the side of her face did not change, nor did her sharp, and gentle eyes. In fact, perhaps that wasn't the intention behind her words, after all. But even so, Subaru felt like his heart had taken a direct hit when she pointed it out without him ever mentioning it.
Subaru fell silent, and happily walking ahead of him, Naoko was swinging her arms in wide arcs.

[Mom: It's because Subaru always tries so hard, and wants to do everything at once. And since your dad has all kinds of crazy interests, you had all sorts of opportunities too……you must be exhausted]

[Subaru: M-mom……just how much, do you know about me……]

[Mom: Well let's see, Subaru]

As if she had known it all along, hearing his true feelings that he had even been hiding from himself coming out his mother's lips, Subaru couldn't utter another word.
At the call of his name, Subaru lifted his face. Cutting in front of him, his mother stopped still, and stared straight into Subaru's eyes,

[Mom: People often say, children watch their parents more than their parents realize]

[Subaru: …….]

[Mom: But the opposite is also true. Parents also watch over their children more than their children realize. Mom has been watching Subaru more than Subaru realizes too, you know?]

Hearing this, Subaru couldn't help but fall dumb and stupefied.
All the secrets he thought he had been keeping to himself, in reality, had been just a wasted effort. Withdrawing himself, putting on an air as if no one in the world could understand his pain, how vain and thoughtless he must have been.

[Mom: And when you were little, mom had to put suppositories in your butt, so I even know what your butt hole looks like. That means mom has seen every part of Subaru's body except the internal organs, you know]

[Subaru: S-sorry. It was going well for a bit, but it didn't seem incredibly necessary to mention the last part just now]

Even twin brothers don't really get to see each other's internal organs. In fact, even Subaru himself hadn't had that many opportunities to see them. There were just the one or two times when Subaru got the chance, but that was it.
Anyways,

[Subaru: So whether it was my reason for liking mayonnaise, or being a hikikomori……]

[Mom: If there was something mom could do to help, mom would do it. But no matter what mom does, it seems it'll only make a mess of things. Still,]

With a little smile, she continued, gazing straight into Subaru's black pupils,

[Mom: It seems there was someone other than mom and dad, who did something for Subaru in the end. I think that's great. I really should thank that person]

[Subaru: ……En, yeah. There was someone who taught me how hopeless I was when I was hopeless. And there was someone who told my hopeless self that I wasn't entirely without hope. It's because of them, that I can walk forward like this now]

They made him aware of his own foolishness, and accepted him nonetheless. It was only because of them that Subaru could stand against his past――and face his parents this way.
Ah, really.

[Subaru: They're……way too good for me]

[Mom: But, you won't give them away or anything, right?]

[Subaru: Of course not. Whether or not I deserve them is one thing. But if I have to give them away I'd rather hang on to them, and try to pile up my self-worth later on]

[Mom: Eun eun――You're every bit his son, after all]

They were words that held a special significance to Subaru.
Yet his mother understood this, and surely knew what those words meant to him. To say them even while knowing that,

[Subaru: Can I really live up to it? Can I really be worthy of being his son?]

[Mom: No problem. Well, since half of Subaru came from mom, you'll meet the quota if you just become half as awesome as dad]

[Subaru: So you already knew that your part of the genes that made up my body are inferior!?]

[Mom: Well half of you is already made of your dad's coolness…… for the remaining half, why not just be Subaru?]

Seeing Subaru unmoved, Naoko gave this reply.
And upon hearing these words, Subaru only fell dumb, with his mouth open.

[Mom: You don't have to be totally-and-totally the same as your dad. Because if Subaru is exactly the same as dad, then there'll be two dads, and mom will get all confused, you know?]

[Subaru: A feminine heart wavering between husband and son, what are we, in an erotic novel!?]

[Mom: No don't, stop it, nyaaaa!]

[Subaru: GUPWAH!?]

No sooner had Subaru's finished his last word, than a fist came flying over to hide her blush.
Eating an unexpectedly powerful right-hook straight in the face, Subaru went flying backwards.
While he was almost crying from the pain, Naoko quickly turned her back and,

[Mom: So that's why, mom thinks Subaru should do his best]

[Subaru: That's a nice summary, but I'm kind of bleeding here]

[Mom: Speaking of blood, don't iron pipes taste kind of like blood when you lick them?]

[Subaru: It's kind of hard to imagine the kind of extreme situation where…… anyways, conversations-with-mother intermediate lesson, expect totally random questions after sudden loss of direction]

It'd be useless even if he painstakingly tried to explain how the iron content of blood is similar to the iron in iron pipes. If he took these kind of questions seriously here, he would only get "how come you're going off-topic now?" or something similarly aggravating and unreasonable in return,
Therefore, ignoring the context of everything,

[Subaru: I should just be myself, huh]

[Mom: Right right. While trying to be like your dad, also be Subaru]

Naoko looked satisfied at finally getting to a conclusion. Then, suddenly halting her steps in front of Subaru, Naoko pointed to the right side of the split in the road up ahead.

[Mom: Well, the convenience store is this way, so mom will only go up to here ….. Will you be ok by yourself?]

[Subaru: There's no need to worr……actually I'm seriously injured here, yeah]

Naoko wasn't excessively worried.
But if Subaru hesitated now, he'd just be way too much of a coward in his mother's eyes, wouldn't he? So, to put his mother's mind at rest,

[Subaru: It's fine. The things I have to do, and the things I want to do, are exactly the same right now. I have no reason to close myself off anymore]

[Mom: Is that so? That's good. Then, do your best]

Nodding with relief at Subaru's answer, Naoko skipped away with little steps toward the road that split off into the right. Subaru's path was to the left, so he must part with his mother here. But if they went their separate ways now, he knew, without a doubt, that their parting will be far, far longer than his mother realized――

[Subaru: Mom――!]

Unable to endure watching his mother's back disappear, Subaru called out loudly for his mother to stop.
His mother, already carried away by her quest for mayonnaise, stopped her skipping steps and turned her body around. Just the same as always, the sight of his mother's unchanged figure imprinted itself into his eyes.

[Subaru: Ah……]

Goodbye, trying to come up with some kind of goodbye, Subaru hesitated.
Right now, if he doesn't say his goodbyes here, his mother will have no idea just how long their parting will be. Subaru would lose the chance to see his mother breaking down crying, knowing they will never meet again. But if he didn't want his last memory of his mother to be her face covered in tears, it would be better if he kept his mouth shut.
Yet if he did that, it would be a lie told under the pretense that he was sparing the other person and himself,

[Subaru: ――There is, something I absolutely have to do. So this goodbye will be for very long time]

and Natsuki Subaru's heart would not allow that.

Having been told these words, Naoko didn't say a thing. And before she could react, Subaru pressed on,

[Subaru: It's somewhere a bit far away, and there's no way to communicate. There will be all sorts of, worrying things. But it's definitely not dangerous……though I can't really guarantee

that. Oh, what am I saying, honestly it's because it's a horribly dangerous place that I have to go back to save them]

Speaking quickly. Piling on the information. All the things he wanted to say spilled out.

[Subaru: Mom and dad will be worried, I think. Unlike up to yesterday, when we could always see each other, it's a place where you'll have no way to see me. But no matter where I am, I'll be thinking of you two, and I'll never forget……]

[Mom: Subaru]

[Subaru: I will never not want to be you two's child anymore, and I won't do anything that I'd hate myself for. Even though I know, after what I said, you won't be able to watch me go without worrying, but I……]

[Mom: Subaru]

No longer knowing what he was saying anymore, his mother's voice suddenly stopped him. Lifting up his face, his mother was standing right in front of him.

[Mom: Subaru ——it's alright]

[Subaru: …….it's, alright?]

[Mom: Because I understand, what Subaru is trying to say. So there's no need to try so hard to find the words]

[Subaru: You understand…….how……?]

[Mom: Because mom is Subaru's mom, after all]

——That was a, completely illogical statement, but there was no room for any counter-arguments at all.

The depth of his eyes grew hot. That feeling, was the same as what he felt only an hour ago. Just how many times will Subaru have to cry like a little child? Always shedding tears at everything like this, when will he ever grow an iron heart that doesn't waver against such things?

[Subaru: I'm still……just like a little child……it's so embarrassing……]

[Mom: If crying when you want to cry is embarrassing, then all the little babies are totally embarrassing when they're born]

[Subaru: Not……what I meant……]

[Mom: Eun eun, I know. In front of mom and dad, no matter how old Subaru becomes……you should cry whenever you want to cry]

The world was blurring beyond the overflowing tears. Hiding behind his sleeves while wiping his eyes, Subaru didn't want his mother to see his face like this. And Naoko didn't peek, out of

respect for his wish.
Only, slowly, gently, she caressed Subaru's hair while standing on tiptoes.

[Subaru: …….Sorry, mom. I, in the end I, can't do anything for you two…….]

[Mom: We didn't give birth to you expecting something in return, you know? We had you because we wanted to do something for you. It's because mom loves you, that mom gave birth to Subaru]

——The love described by those words, Subaru had already experienced them countless times before.

[Mom: If you want to do something for mom and dad, just pass that same feeling onto someone else. It could be the girl Subaru loves, and if you make a baby with her, pass it onto the baby……that would be the best way, wouldn't it?]

[Subaru: …….Yeah, it would be]

[Mom: See. Stuff mom says can never go wrong you know]

With a satisfied giggle, Naoko tickled Subaru's forelock with her finger.
Then, pushing on his chest to make him take a step back, she looked Subaru over from head to toe,

[Mom: When your face gets messy from crying, it looks more and more like mom's, it's kind of weird]

[Subaru: ……I'm, impressed you'd use your own face as an analogy]

[Mom: I draw my confidence from the fact that it's the face your dad loves. So, sharing mom's confidence, Subaru can also draw confidence from your dad's love, you know]

[Subaru: Even though it's only because of the face!]

Forcibly wiping his face with his sleeves, it had become red-hot around his eyes when the tears finally stopped.
Crying his heart out, exposing his true feelings only to be consoled, and then, seeing himself finally clearing up, how ridiculous he must be.

[Subaru: Ah really, I always end up crying it's so pathetic]

[Mom: Crying isn't a bad thing. Subaru, when you were born, you cried like crazy, you know. No matter who it is, when they first come out, they cry and cry it's so embarrassing. Crying in all kinds of places, in all kinds of situations]

[Subaru: ————]

[Mom: And after crying for a long, long time, if you're smiling at the end, then everything is alright. What's most important isn't the beginning or the middle, it's the end]

[Subaru: In other words, if the results are good, then it's all O-K?]

[Mom: That's incorrect if you interpret it like that. Then, this will be your homework from mom]

Though he would never get a chance to check the answers.
Handing out that homework assignment was another way of saying goodbye. Receiving it, Subaru stored it deep within his heart. Perhaps one day, when he finds the answer, he would just naturally come to understand it.

It wasn't exactly a clean and gallant parting scene.
But his father and mother, after hearing that their ex-hikikomori son is going to disappear into some far and unknown place, did not reproach him, but rather sent him off with smiling faces. Every bit of it, his past, his parents, his environment, he loved it all in its entirety.

[Subaru: ——I'm going, then]

[Mom: En, alright]

Giving his head a shake, at last, he forced his face into a smile.
Leaving his mother with that clumsy smile, Subaru turned his back and began to walk.

It would be the final stretch of the road to school. Following this branch of the road to the end, after going up a slope, he would find the school building waiting for him there, and——

[Mom: Ah, right. Subaru, Subaru, I almost forgot]

And, just as he got himself pumped up and ready to face what was to come, an air-headed voice came calling from behind.
Almost stumbling over from the impact of that discouragement, Subaru turned around dejectedly.

Wondered what she was going to say at the very end, he saw his mother raising up her arm,

[Mom: ——Have a safe trip]

Then, with a little wave of her hand, she said it with a smile.

——On the final night before he was summoned to the Parallel World, when he set out for the convenience store, his mother had said this to him in the exact same way. But that time, Subaru only pushed open the door in a bad mood, without saying a thing.

[Subaru: ————]

So, this would be the last chance, to erase his regret from that day——

Conversations-with-mother, advanced lesson—— no matter how many times you get sidetracked, the correct answer somehow always emerges in the end.
The moment he remembered that, his strained cheeks softened, and turned into a genuine smile.

[Subaru: ——Ok, I'm going now!]

High and crisp, Subaru's voice rang out, across the road that led to school.

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An unpopulated school building. Heading from the entryway to the shoe closets, with some trouble, he opened the doors that seemed to not have been opened or closed in a very long time. Changing from his outdoor shoes to indoor ones, knocking his toes on the floor a few times to fit his feet inside, at last, with a sigh, Subaru stepped into the hallway.
Subaru was in the 3rd year, where, out of the 8 home-classes, he was in the 6th. And in 3rd-year class 6, the student numbers were mixed between males and female students, and so Subaru's number was 22.

Being the highest year, all the 3rd year classrooms were on the first floor, just across the hallway, past the stairs.
In the dead-silent corridor, there were only the echoes of Subaru's own footsteps striking upon the linoleum floor as he made his way to his classroom.
It wasn't long before he reached it. Standing in front of the door, he took a deep breath.

[Subaru: ――――]

Placing his hand on the door, he slid it open.
In the moments that followed, there should be a crowd of reproachful eyes locking onto him, to admonish him for arriving so late to class, but――

[???: You came a lot earlier than I thought]

That was not the sight that greeted him.
On the other side of the opened doorway, he saw rows upon rows of empty desks, except only for the one seat in the center of the room.
Then, the person sitting there, turning her chair toward Subaru,

[Echidona: Welcome. ――In all that time spent facing your past, have you learned anything?]

Asked the Witch of Greed with her white hair swaying, her eyes brimming with curiosity.

Chapter 20 [Test Results]

——Seated in the center of the classroom, the white haired girl slightly tilted her head.

Receiving her gaze, Subaru quickly looked around the room to make sure there was no one else present. And then, sticking out half of his body into the hallway, he checked left and right just to be sure——Confirming once again that there was no one else, he scratched his head and let out a sigh.

[Subaru: There's just something I have to say first]

[Echidona: Sure, I'm listening. What are you feeling, what are you thinking, and what do you want to say to me. I am very interested to hear all of it]

[Subaru: You look, super good in that uniform]

Facing the Witch whose eyes were beaming with curiosity, Subaru stuck out a finger and blurted out his thoughts. And hearing this, the Witch seemed to blank out for a moment, until she couldn't hold it in anymore and burst out laughing,

[Echidona: Waha, why thank you. If you think so, then it was worth it for me to reconstruct this from your memories. In fact, this outfit seems to be the most vivid out of all your memories, and the one you've looked at the most. Is it a favourite of yours?]

Standing up from her seat, picking up the hems of her grey skirt——Echidona did a quick little spin on the spot. Her white, shoulder-length hair dancing with her movements, her playful figure looked perfectly like a youthful girl of her age.
Grey skirts, and a deep blue blazer. The red ribbon below her neck marked her as in the same year as Subaru, and in contrast underneath, her white dress-shirt shone bright and dazzling.
Only, if there was one thing that he was dissatisfied with,

[Subaru: Compared to short skirts, I prefer long skirts a little better. That way it takes longer to lift them up and there's more time to ignite one's imaginations]

[Echidona: I see. Then, to measure up to your skirt-lifting expectations, I will wear a longer skirt next time]

[Subaru: We won't get a chance for that! Also, it's not because I like it that everyone wears this uniform. It's just a rule here that we have to dress like this. Kind of like the Imperial Knights and stuff]

"Kusukusu", Echidona covered her lips and giggled. With an attitude as if she wasn't really planning to take Subaru's excuses seriously, even if he tried to exonerate himself, he won't be getting the result he wanted.
Shrugging, Subaru walked to the back of the classroom——to the seat beside the window in the second-to-last row, and pulling out his chair in that half-assed location, he plonked himself down.

The tactile sensation of the hard, wooden chair. The edges of the desk that had alphabets carved into it by some previous occupant. The desk-leg that creaked whenever he put his weight on it while falling asleep. And the festering rust on the insides of the drawer. They were all fragments of Subaru's distant, and bygone days.

[Echidona: And here I thought you'd be a little more surprised]

[Subaru: If you wanted to hide it, you'll have to put more effort into the background, you know. There wasn't even a single person walking around on my way here, that's just way too unrealistic]

Even considering that it was a weekday afternoon, it may have just been a little too unpopulated along Subaru's path. Almost as if everything irrelevant to Subaru's past had simply been cut from this world.

[Subaru: This world was just way too convenient for me. So it's your own damn fault that you didn't get to see the reaction you wanted]

[Echidona: No no no, that's a part of the fun too. Experimenting, and receiving the results are in themselves a kind of happiness for me. What the results are at this point, doesn't matter much. Unless, of course, if we are talking about how future events will be influenced by these results, then it would be a different matter]

Echidona waved her hands left and right as she said this, as if she really wasn't sour about the way things had veered outside her expectations. Seeing her without a trace of negative emotion, in his heart, Subaru secretly wanted to click his tongue.

[Subaru: So then, what is this world supposed to be? I'm sure I went in your Tomb while it was in the middle of the Trials, and then……]

[Echidona: You entered while possessing the qualifications. So naturally, you began the trials as well, correct? Didn't you hear it? "First, you must face your past"]

Confirming Subaru's thoughts with these words, Echidona placed her hands behind her back as she slowly walked toward Subaru. Her beautiful hair swaying in the cool, refreshing breeze that had blown into the classroom, without a sense of incongruity, the girl in her uniform blended seamlessly into her surroundings.
Her every casual gesture feeling like a trap set to entice his heart, Subaru consciously turned his gaze away from her. Then,

[Echidona: Anyone, would have regrets about the past. As long as they live day after day, no one is without regrets. Today they regret yesterday, yesterday they regret further before that, and when tomorrow comes, surely, you would regret something about today. ——People have the capacity to regret, after all]

[Subaru: That's a pretty pessimistic way of thinking about it. If we just replace "regret" with "self-reflection", then today we'd be reflecting on yesterday, and tomorrow we'd be reflecting on today, and, maybe, we might find some kind of breakthrough, isn't that's a human ability as well?]

[Echidona: ——Precisely!]

Clapping her hands together with an insatiable voice, Echidona shoved her face up close, making Subaru instinctively shrink back. But, undeterred, she continued leaning in, staring into his eyes with her black pupils, at a distance where they could feel each other's breaths,

[Echidona: It's a simple play on words, or, rather, a slightly different way of thinking. But depending on whether you view the past with pessimism or optimism, the answers become worlds apart. Most people look to the past pessimistically and always only see the bad memories, and so they treat the path they have walked with denial. Then, growing even more repulsed by the sight of what they have denied, they close their hearts, and try to forget]

[Subaru: Hey, your face……is kinda close……]

[Echidona: But can you blame them? Compared to today, your yesterday's self was certainly more ignorant. And compared to what you will know tomorrow, your today's self would no doubt be found lacking. The total sum of knowledge, or even just the number of memories, would always put the past at a disadvantage compared to the present and the future. That is simply the fact!]

Completely disregarding Subaru who was being pushed back by her aura, in a state of heated passion, Echidona pressed on her delivery. Suddenly turning her body away, she forcefully slammed her palms on the top of the desk,

[Echidona: And so, when people face their past, or when they actually meet their past, they become lost, confused, lamenting, suffering, anguishing, despairing, and there, they will find their answer. As long as they find their answer, no matter what kind of answer it is, I will give it my affirmation. Whether it was an answer they received by turning their backs, or by reaching their arms forward, it would be unmistakable proof that they have overcome their past]

[Subaru: That's, the purpose of this Trial?]

[Echidona: Correct. It is to face one's past, and come to some kind of answer about that past. If they are afraid of finding the answer, loathing it, or are hesitating and at their wit's end, then the Trials could never be overcome. However, if they could either accept their past, or if they could deny it completely and sever themselves from it, then I would see them off with my praises. That, is the first of the Trials]

Nodding to Subaru, who seemed to have understood, Echidona returned to her original self, and, with a slight blush on her cheeks, she quietly cleared her throat.

[Echidona: I, I seem to have gotten a little overexcited. I'm sorry I showed you something unsightly]

[Subaru: No worries. If you had bad breath though, that would've gone badly, but fortunately, yours smelled like citrus. More importantly……]

Feeling a bit sentimental over the rare chance to see Echidona embarrassed, Subaru pulled up his chair and leaned his body forward, and,

[Subaru: If those points you mentioned are the conditions for passing the Trial, can I take that to mean I've passed the Trial?]

[Echidona: Having watched everything from beginning to end……I think the results were more than satisfactory]

Placing her hand over her chest, Echidona inhaled deeply as if filling her lungs with the aroma of fragrant black-tea, and then, with a terribly satisfied look on her face,

[Echidona: Whether it was the symbol of the traumas of your past, or the representation of your past guilt, you have found your answers. For that, I send you off with my praises]

[Subaru: From beginning to end……doesn't that mean you saw me crying with snot dripping down my nose too!?]

[Echidona: I'm sowee, even I couldn't help tearing up in the eyes at those parts]

[Subaru: Shut up!! And don't you tell anyone, it's embarrassing!!]

The scene of his parting with his father where he poured out all his emotions, it wouldn't be funny at all if some pervert had been watching them all that time. Above all, it would be an insult to the emotions between Subaru and Kenichi in that moment.
"Kusukusu", regardless of whether she could understand such sentiments, Echidona bursted out laughing,

[Echidona: If there was anything I was disappointed with, it would be that you hadn't experienced the agony even deeper when you came face to face with your past]

[Subaru: Huh?]

[Echidona: I like when people reach their answers, but I think the suffering on their path to the answers is something praiseworthy in itself. I was looking forward to watching you find an answer through the anguish and struggles, but……]

Casting a side-glance at Subaru, as if peering into the depths of his black irises, she narrowed her eyes,

[Echidona: Unfortunately, this Trial seems to have started a little too late for me to enjoy such a treat. It appears you have already found the answer to the negative feelings from your past before coming here]

[Subaru: Aah……is that so. If that's the case, I really should offer my sympathies]

Somewhat able to understand Echidona's disappointment, Subaru exhaled a deep sigh through his nose.
If the Trials had gone the way she had hoped, Subaru would have returned to his parents, the source of his past trauma, and over the time spent with them, realized his own weakness, agonized over it, and reached an answer either by running away or facing it head on, and, at last, found the resolve to come here.
But Subaru had already…

[Subaru: Even when I was completely, hopelessly useless, there was a girl who told me I was a hero. So there was no need for me to face my past, I've already come to terms with the fact that I'm useless]

[Echidona: So you've arrived at a different form of resignation, I see. But to have it stray so far from my expectations, it really is an utter disappointment. The next time you meet that person outside, tell her that a Witch had some complaints to say about her]

Just as he was about to throw in a joke about that threatening remark, Subaru suddenly noticed. There was something Echidona said that he couldn't let slide.

[Subaru: A while ago you said you formed this reconstruction from on my memories……If you can peek inside my head, then shouldn't you know about the girl I spoke of?]

Or, perhaps rather than noticing it, it was him desperately clinging to a feeling that he could not let go of. Even if it meant having someone peek inside his head, if there was just someone who could remember Rem after she had been forgotten by all the world, remember her lovely features, remember that this girl still existed… But,

[Echidona: Sorry to disappoint you. But even being a thing of Greed, I can distinguish between what is right and wrong. Though I have extracted the information I needed to conduct this Trial, I have not touched anything else. If I simply stole all the knowledge out of your head, then where would be the fun in that? I am not quite ready to abandon the pleasures of simply listening to others just yet]

The only thing he got as a reply, was some kind of Witch's sense of honor that was beyond his capacity to understand.
One could even call them Echidona's convictions. However shameless that logic may be, it was not something Subaru could argue with. Still,

[Subaru: If you only pulled out parts that were relevant to the Trial…..then why did you pull out that uniform…..]

[Echidona: Obviously, I pulled it because it was a piece of information necessary for me to reconstruct this building you call "School". It definitely wasn't because after discovering a new Parallel World, I wondered what the girls here wore and whether it would maybe look nice on me or anything of that sort]

[Subaru: Are you, one of those highly intelligent idiots?]

After listening to Echidona essentially confessing the whole thing, Subaru sighed and shook his head.
So it was like that. It wasn't the answer he had hoped to hear, but at least now he knew something for certain. Which was that,

[Subaru: There's probably no need for me to ask this. But this world is……]

[Echidona: Aah, that's right. This is a fabricated world created based on your memories, meant to be an extremely faithful reconstruction of reality. Which means, of course――your real

parents still have no idea where you are or what you are doing, and must be worrying to no end about their son, who had simply disappeared]

[Subaru: ――――]

[Echidona: As for the information you didn't know before, who knows if you hadn't inadvertently brought them here…… are you so sure that you didn't know about them? The letters from your parents' old friend, can you be certain that you have never seen them? The old man who had known your father since he was a child, have you really never met him before? And have you truly never imagined an image of your father that was different from the one you knew, and never once traced it over inside your mind?]

Firing off her words in rapid succession, [Or rather,] Echidona continued,

[Echidona: Did you really think that as long you didn't know what was hidden in your heart, they would simply stay hidden? The contents your true heart that are yearning to be freed, how could you be certain that they are safely sealed away, and would not leak through along with the rest of the mundane little details? And still, can you be sure that your self-serving desire to be loved, did not beg your fictional father and mother to behave the way they did?]

Putting her face up close against the silent Subaru's, Echidona's last words fell to a bewitching whisper, teasing at the strings of his heart. And then, at a distance close enough to feel each other's breaths,

[Echidona: It was just too ideal, and too convenient――don't you think?]

[Subaru: ――――]

Tenderly gouging open Subaru's heart with her soft fingertips, Echidona smiled sweetly.
Unlike a smile that would have suited a girl her age, this one was abominable, like one belonging to a Witch out of the folklores.
His mind toyed and tormented by her penetrating words, Subaru squeezed close his eyes. In the back of his closed eyelids, in that pitch-black world, emerged his last impressions of his parents――

[Subaru: Don't belittle my parents just because you didn't get what you wanted, Witch]

[Echidona: …….what?]

[Subaru: I've already told them all of my answers. And my mom and dad both received it. I've told them everything that I was never able to say, and they told me to give it my best, and then wished me a safe journey]

Standing up from his chair, placing his hands on the desk, he pressed back his face against Echidona's so that their foreheads touched. Watching the Witch's black eyes opening wide in surprise, Subaru,

[Subaru: Their voices, their smiles, everything from those moments shattered my imaginations. ――My parents, are not some empty casks that can be filled with my fantasies. Don't you underestimate them]

[Echidona: ――――]

[Subaru: I've already told them everything I wanted to say. And after having put everything to rest, I came here.――Nothing you say can trick me]

Pulling back his forehead from her's, Subaru sat down in his chair once more. Then, leaning backwards into his chair, he rudely crossed his legs and stared at Echidona with an insolent gaze. For a moment, Echidona seemed astounded by Subaru's reaction,

[Echidona: Really……You wouldn't even let me see you questioning your answers for a minute, you really are a human who would make a Witch cry. How exceptional indeed]

[Subaru: I'm going blush if you praise me like that. I'm the kind of guy who grows when he gets praised, you know. I can feel myself getting taller as we speak!]

[Echidona: I see you're never at a loss for words…… Aah, but it's good enough. It's more than good enough. It's a delightful thing, to see such a firm answer that would not allow itself to be shaken]

As if giving up, Echidona shook her head with a smile, and then, pulling out the chair in front of Subaru, she sat down facing him,

[Echidona: The Trial is now over, in its truest sense. You have escaped the evil clutches of a Witch, it seems. As a reward……is there anything you wish to ask me before you go back?]

[Subaru: Oh, then there is one thing]

[Echidona: En, let's hear it]

Echidona nodded, as Subaru stuck out a finger pointing directly at her,

[Subaru: Before, you said you had nothing to do the Trials…… How is this nothing to do with it!? You're not just involved, you're pretty much the main culprit. What's with that blatant straight-faced lie about having no influence over the Trials!]

[Echidona: To take a Witch at her word… even naivety and gullibility should have a limit. Didn't I tell you the last time we parted? I am a wicked Witch, after all]

[Subaru: Aah, is that right. Then, I can't trust a single word from this wicked Witch, can I. In that case I have nothing else to ask. ……By the way, is the seal on the Sanctuary removed now?]

[Echidona: And here you are asking another question as if nothing happened… you really don't bother putting up appearances, do you? Unfortunately, it would be too simple if the Trials ended with this. There are a total three parts to the Trials. But since you already passed the first Trial, I don't think they would be too difficult for you]

Sidestepping Subaru's indignation, Echidona held out three fingers as she answered him. Receiving this, Subaru muttered [Three parts……] under his breath,

[Subaru: One way or another, I'll have to unseal the Sanctuary. So, once I clear the other two Trials, it will be released, right? Can I take that as a guarantee?]

[Echidona: That's why I gave you the Qualifications. So of course. If you or any qualified halfblood overcomes the Trials, the Sanctuary will be liberated with my blessings. How will you overcome the next two Trials, I wonder. I will happily look forward to the answers you will give]

Watching Echidona nodding in affirmation, Subaru responded [Is that so], and stood up.
There was nothing else he wanted to ask. So there was nothing more to gain by dawdling in this fabricated world. A certain nostalgic feeling made him almost want to stay, but he had already said all his reluctant goodbyes.
Even if, as the Witch said, they were only transient and fleeting things.

[Subaru: Hey, Echidona]

[Echidona: What is it? Perhaps you would like to punch me before you go? Well, I realize I would deserve it, considering my conduct towards you. So if you wish, I am willing to accept it without complaints. But still, I am only a young girl, after all. If you could please avoid the face if possible……]

[Subaru: Thank you]

[Echidona: ―――――]

Speechless, after going on and on trying to vindicate herself, Echidona suddenly lost her words. Seeing her like this, for the first time, Subaru felt a small sense of gratification,

[Subaru: Even if it didn't really happen, and my words didn't really reach those two, I was able to say the things I wanted to say thanks to you. Even if it was because of your crappy-gossip-deprived curiosity, I was able to see the people I thought I would never see again, and say my goodbyes]

And show them that their hopeless, small, disappointing son had become a little less hopeless, had grown a little more, and could now hold his head a little higher.

[Subaru: For that, I am grateful. So, thank you]

[Echidona: ……You're a human I can't understand at all, it's very fascinating. It's almost frightening, in fact]

Echidona wasn't joking or lying, and the look in her eyes seemed as if she was genuinely threatened by him. Seeing her like this, Subaru lifted the corners of his lips and smiled in reply,

[Subaru: Witch-sama must get frightened easily if she could be caught by a little kid like me. Oh well. So um, where's the exit?]

[Echidona: Leaving won't be difficult. Even now, this world is already beginning to fade. Nothing outside of this building is solid anymore. ――Leaving this building should return you directly to the insides of the Tomb]

[Subaru: That's pretty convenient. ――In that case, see you next Trial, I guess]

With a wave of his hand, Subaru got up from his seat and headed out of the classroom. Sensing Echidona's gaze trailing behind him, Subaru walked out without looking back.

In the world outside the window, dissolving into the encroaching vast, blue sky, the scenes in the distance began to fade. The fabricated world which had fulfilled its purpose, was vanishing into nothing.

The father who had patted on Subaru's back, and the mother who had walked with Subaru to send him off, were both fading along with the disappearance of this world. Until they were nowhere to be found.

[Subaru: ……You guys have already taught me all the most important things]

His emotions swelling up in his chest, feeling the back of his eyes growing hot, Subaru roughly wiped his eyes with his sleeves just once. And after that, lifting up his head, there was no longer any trace of tears in his eyes.
Looking straight ahead, Subaru walked toward the exit of this dying world.

In front of him, the world gradually turned to white, as far as his eyes can see, and――

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[Echidona: ――Already gone, I see. My my, he's a lot more formidable than I thought]

――In the classroom after Subaru had left,
among the rows upon rows of empty desks, Echidona, having been left behind, stuck a hand into the front of her hair, and, enjoying a moment of quiet to herself, she leaned her weight onto the desk behind her.

Little by little, the World had began to collapse.
The fleeting world reconstructed out of memories, with the loss of its source, was turning back to dust. With the sensation of the disintegration of the world upon her skin, Echidona did not pay any mind to the crumbling footings or the vanishing atmosphere around her.
Her attention was fixed on a single point―― in front of the blackboard, toward the teacher's podium. There,

[Echidona: Just what I should expect from the man you fell for, I suppose]

[???: ――*My special someone my special someone to my someone to my someone to my

[Echidona: Shut away in your own citadel, even though you meet him every so often you're still afraid of being forgotten. In such pathetic circumstances, to have the audacity to make this kind of assertion. *I*, can't understand you at all]

[???: *None of your business none of your business none of your business none of your business none of your business breathe on breathe on breathe on breathe on breathe on talk to talk to talk to talk to touch touch touch touch touch my my my my my my my LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE*]

With the other person insisting on speaking in nonsense, Echidona frowned in disgust.
Before her eyes, there was the shadow of a person standing in front of the teacher's podium——the shadow of a girl in a pitch black gown, with long, flowing, silver hair. Like a curse, everything above her chest was engulfed in darkness, making it impossible to see her face. Every word she spoke and every ounce of the insane aura emanating from her filled the imagination with unspeakable horror.

Echidona seemed to accept the fact that this existence suddenly descended after Subaru left the room, as if it was only natural. As if she already knew that it would appear here.

[Echidona: Of course, it's only natural. Without asking permission, I trespassed into your beloved's heart, after all. I didn't intend to encroach into your territories……but even so, there was no way for us to avoid each other completely, now was there?]

[???: *A fingertip a flake of skin a piece of nail a strand of hair a drop of sweat a particle of spit a single word a single breath a single fragment of emotion all of it all of it all of it

Saying this, Echidona slightly lowered her body, when the shadows that were aiming for her throat exploded from the impact.
Seeing this, the encroaching shadow halted its steps. In front of the shade with its two dangling arms, in the place where Echidona should have been,

[Sekhmet: Looks like I got called up again, haaaaa. I can't even get a good night's sleep, huuu]

Languidly huffing with her legs sprawled out on the floor, the purple haired girl ——The Witch of Sloth, Sekhmet appeared.

[Sekhmet: Haaa, it's no use]

As if struck by a devastating impact, the upper half of the shadow flew backwards.
Beaten back by the power of the strike, the rest of shadow sank into the darkness it had created.
Lightly shaking its head at this outcome, the shadow reached out its right arm toward Sekhmet.
Immediately after, the darkness that had engulfed half of the classroom attacked at once, as dark demonic claws shot out, covering over everything in sight. The impenetrable blackness sealed off every direction—— But,

[Sekhmet: Didn't I just say it's useless, huuuu]

The Maelstrom of black claws scattered in the blink of an eye, and without the least resistance or reserve, the counter-attack struck into the shadow's entire body. While the shock of impact after impact were nailing the shadow's flesh into the cracks of the wall, Sekhmet only remained crouched up on the floor without the slightest movement, lazily looking on.
But even so, Sekhmet's attacks continued to assail the shadow's entire body, until gradually, that bottomless form began to break apart.

Against the deafening sound of the impacts, and the sight of the writhing shadow, Sekhmet only scratched at her hair as she watched,

[Sekhmet: With most of your power sealed away, haaa. And being inside nasty Echidona's citadel, huu. In a state that deprives you of your full potential, haaa, you're no match against me, huu]

Trying to hold back a yawn, Sekhmet's attacks ceased, and the defeated shadow dropped to its knees——when a strike from above mercilessly nailed it into the floor.
Sinking into the pitch-black darkness, the fading Envy looked up at Sekhmet.

[???: *Why do you why do you why do you why do you why do you why do you why do you stand in between in between in between in between in between in between in between me me me me me and him and him and him and him and him and him——?*]

[Sekhmet: Haaaa. ——It'd be too much of a bother to explain]

With this bitter reply, Sekhmet made a little downward swing with her raised hand.
In that same instant, half of the school building collapsed, and along with the crumbling dirt and lumps of earth, the shadow of Envy was swallowed into the depths of the ground.
In a world that was already fading, there would be no way to return from there.

[Sekhmet: Even after I’m dead, huuu. Why do I still have to deal with this stuff, haaaa]

Her own actions havings sped up the collapse of this world, the Witch of Sloth found a relatively nicer spot in the corner of the decaying classroom, and nudged herself over on her butt. Huddling up with her back against the wall, feeling herself being drawn into the void of the dying world that had finished serving its purpose, she looked out through a shattered window at the Sun.

[Sekhmet: Nothing ever goes the way you want them to, huuu. Whether you’re a Witch――or the one ensnared by a Witch, haaaa]

With a final, languorous sigh, the world vanished into light.

Chapter 21 [A Renewed Resolve]

When he opened his eyes, the first thing Subaru felt was that something dusty had gotten into his mouth.
Mingling with the saliva that had accumulated in his mouth, he unconsciously touched it with the tip of his tongue―― tasting the flavor of soil and gravel, he spat it out as quickly as he could.
And then, jumping up,

[Subaru: Ueggh! Pftephtoo! Weird little pebbles got in my mouth……oooueeghh]

Spitting while dusting himself off, Subaru turned his head all around, straining his eyes trying to see in the darkness.
The space that had lost its source of light was filled with frigid air――there, he remembered he was inside a Tomb which tested those who entered. And at the same time,

[Subaru: Right, I took the Trial……]

After he dashed into the Tomb, he lost consciousness and was brought into a dream world. In the past known as the first Trial――although he wasn't sure if "past" would be the right word, Subaru faced his immutable origins, and said his final farewells to those he left behind, and, at last, finding out that all of it had been wrapped within a Witch's palms, he was brought back here.

One by one, recalling all that had happened after he lost consciousness, Subaru confirmed that his memories were clear. To his parents inside the dream, whom he will never meet again, he had said all his apologies, his thanks, and his goodbyes.
And, in place of his tremendous nostalgia and sorrow, they had granted him courage and resolve.

[Subaru: Don't worry. I didn't forget. I still remember everything we said to each other]

He had worried that in the worst case his memories might have been damaged from being broken into, so it was fortunate that he still remembered everything.
Having finished checking his own body, the next thing that came to Subaru's mind was,

[Subaru: Right……! The reason I came in here was, ―Emilia!]

Scolding himself for being so slow to come to his senses, Subaru turned back into the room――and found Emilia lying sideways on the floor, the same way as he had been.
Rushing over, her white skin and silver hair shone all the more prominently in the darkness, sensing that she was still breathing, he was washed with a wave of relief. But, it was only until he saw her expression.

[Emilia: …….h…….ah, no……stop……]

[Subaru: ―――――]

Emilia's face was twisted in agony, and sweat was emerging on her forehead.
But no matter how painful her expression had become, her body couldn't seem to move. Her

limbs remained rigid as if frozen still, and only her face revealed the colors of her suffering.
If she was going through the same type of Trial as Subaru, then,

[Subaru: It must be a past you don't want to see……or no, it should be a past that you need to resolve, no matter what……?]

He didn't know how much time had passed, but Emilia had entered the Tomb 30 minutes before he did. Yet even so, Subaru returned before her, which meant he could only imagine how difficult her Trial must be.
True to the literal sense of the phrase, her expression was groaning in pain.
Originally, he thought he should have faith in her, and wait for her to return safely from the Trials, but――

[Subaru: Looking at this expression, what kind of guy could say something pretty like that]

Watching the side of Emilia's face that looked like she was about to cry, Subaru extended out a finger, hoping to ease even a small fraction of her pain. But, the moment his finger touched her cheek,

[Emilia: ――――!]

Emilia's previously frozen limbs began to spasm out of control. Seeing her face that was contorted by pain turning stiff, Subaru hurriedly held out his arm to support her head, and embraced the trembling Emilia tightly into his chest, without letting go.

[Subaru: Emilia!? Hey, hold on……Emilia!]

Rubbing her back as he held her close, he desperately called the trembling Emilia's name.
The sight of her severe convulsions made his heart shrivel with horror, but, gradually, her trembling body calmed,

[Emilia: ――huu, baru?]

[Subaru: ――! Ah, aahah, yeah. Are you alright? You remember me, right? I'm the person you vowed your future life to, Natsuki Subaru]

[Emilia: I don't, remember going that far……]

Giving her memory a jolt as she woke up, Subaru confirmed that she was conscious and that her memories weren't muddled. As he let go of her body, Emilia's violet eyes slowly focused onto him.

[Emilia: Um……huh? Why, am I……]

[Subaru: Take it slow, Emilia-tan. Just put the little confusing things in the back of your mind for now and take a deep breath. Then move your arms and legs a bit, see if they're numb, and try to stand up if you think you can stand]

[Emilia: Ah, e-enn alright……]

Sensing the worry in his words as she woke, Emilia took a large deep breath as Subaru said. Then, moving her arms from her fingertips to her shoulders, she stood up with the help of Subaru's hand, and curiously looked around in the darkness,

[Emilia: In a dark place……alone with Subaru and……]

[Subaru: When you say it like that, it does kind of sound like a tantalizing situation, although the crap location's totally killing the mood here]

Seeing Emilia rushing to grasp the situation, Subaru scratched his face with a wry smile. In any case, the fact that it was the Tomb of a Witch pretty much ruined the mood for any lovers planning to sneak in.
But, hearing Subaru's words, Emilia suddenly hugged her own shoulders. Seeing this reaction, Subaru shuddered to himself [Crap I might've overdone it……!]

[Emilia: That's, right……I took the Trials, and then……]

[Subaru: Oh, aah, that's right. This is inside the Witch's Tomb. I mean, I was worried to death there. A bit after Emilia-tan went in, the lights in the Tomb suddenly went out. So I panicked and ran in after you but……]

[Emilia: a……but…..no, that, I, didn't……I didn't mean to, I didn't……]

[Subaru: Emilia?]

There didn't seem to be anything wrong with her body—— but just as Subaru wanted to continue, he noticed that Emilia's voice was trembling, and her attitude was strange.
Hugging her own shoulders as if she was cold, her teeth were clattering as she faintly shook her head.

[Emilia: I……I didn't……it's not like that…..th-that kind of……I didn't……I really didn't……I told you it's not like that……it's]

[Subaru: Emilia. Wait, Emilia? Calm down, what……]

[Emilia: ……don't…at me……with that kind of eyes……don't, don't don't……don't it's not like that……why are… leaving me all alone……please no……]

Without hearing Subaru's calls, Emilia covered her palms over her face and fell to the ground. Her voice carried tears, and her trembling sobs, clear as silver chimes, would drown its listeners in heartache and sorrow.
The sight of her collapsed upon the floor stunned Subaru into silence, unable to utter a single word. Except,

[Subaru: It's alright. It's alright. I'm here. I'm here with you. I won't leave you alone]

Only, comforting the trembling, crying girl, protecting her, cherishing her, holding her entire body in his embrace, he kept on gently caressing her back.
All the while, as if not hearing Subaru's voice at all, Emilia hid her face behind her palms.

[Emilia: ……help, daddy. Help, me…… Puck, Puck…….pu…ck……]

The name she kept on calling was not the boy at her side worrying over her, but the name of the Spirit who refused to show his face even while she was breaking down in tears.

[Ram: ――She's settled down and is resting now]

Seeing Subaru looking at her with an inquisitive gaze as she came out of the room, Ram returned a gaze as if looking at a poorly trained dog, and said this.
Without even a comment about her demeaning gaze, Subaru quietly replied [Is that so]. Seeing him this way, Ram let out a small sigh,

[Ram: That face isn't like you, Barusu. Your face is usually sloppy to begin with, but if you cast that shadow on it, it will become even less tolerable to look at]

[Subaru: Sloppy or whatever is none of your business……But, I'm sorry I got you worried]

[Ram: ……You're just a Barusu, when did you start getting so good at noticing other people's worries?]

Seeing Ram look as if she was genuinely surprised, Subaru stuck out his tongue and withheld his earlier gratitude for now. He had said the first half of that with his eyes squeezed shut just to blast back at Ram, but the second half had been his true feelings.
Taking his eyes off of Ram, Subaru looked behind her――at the door to the room Ram had just come out of. Beyond it, right now, Emilia must be sleeping.

[Subaru: Still, sorry this happened two days in a row, Lewes-san. It must have caused you trouble too]

[Lewes: There's no need to worry about causing me trouble. It was because of our selfish wish that she had to take the Trials in the first place]

Turning his head around, Lewes' even voice answered Subaru from behind.
Outside the bedroom, the room they were currently in could be considered a living room of sorts. Other than these two rooms, there was only another room for the library, and the three together made up Lewes' home.
Subaru couldn't help but feel that it was an awfully modest life for someone who was practically the village chief of the Sanctuary. But then again, looking at the little girl sipping on tea in the corner of the room, it was probably more than enough space for her to live in.
Anyways,

[Garfiel: Hah, look at'ya, granny, lookin' out for 'em. Honestly for me, all feels like "Th'presumptuous Gounzun got no place t'live"]

[Subaru: I still have absolutely no idea what feeling you're talking about……but, at least the fact that it isn't good got across]

Seated across from Lewes, also gulping down tea from a teacup, Garfiel bared his teeth as he said this. It was another incomprehensible idiom――but judging from the current situation, Subaru guessed it was probably something about disappointment. And, picking up the intention behind Garfiel's words,

[Subaru: Just so you know, if you're planning to badmouth Emilia, you'll have to make an appointment through me first. And only if I approve it, as her Manager and all]

[Garfiel: I ain't interested in badmouthin' people behind their backs. Not th'kinda prick who'd do that. If I got somethin I wanna say, I say it to their face. Or I'd just use my fists, yeah?]

Waving his other hand that wasn't holding the teacup, Garfiel brushed off Subaru's provocation with a vicious-looking smile. That attitude didn't reduce Subaru's tension in the slightest, and it was at this point when the person who had stayed silent up to now――Otto, raised his hand with a [So um…]

[Otto: In that case, can I just ask what exactly happened? I honestly don't want to get involved too much, but I would really prefer if things don't go down this perilous direction, so I think I better act as an arbiter to help move things along]

[Subaru: Oh right, my bad. In fact, you're perfect for the job. After all, you don't have any deep relationships with anyone present, you barely have anything to do with what's going on here and you're pretty much a minor comic relief character who isn't carrying out any responsibilities in particular at the moment. I'll let you take it from here]

[Otto: What's with that rock-pulverizing review!? Is that something you're supposed to say when you're letting someone else take over!?]

As Otto started shrieking at Subaru's description, Subaru held a finger to his lips in a gesture to say "Not too loud". Seeing this, Otto hurriedly closed his mouth. Still not quite settled down, he shook his head,

[Otto: Aah~, even though I'm still not ok with that, let's move on for now. First thing I want to ask you, Natsuki-san, is what happened after you went in the Tomb?]

[Subaru: Even if you ask me what happened……]

Starting off like this, Subaru brought a hand to his chin and looked up at the ceiling.
In his mind, he went over all the things that had happened inside the Tomb――The Trial, and the strange way Emilia had behaved afterward: the sight of her inconsolable crying, apologizing, as if muttering in her sleep, and calling the name of that Spirit.

[Subaru: The Trials were definitely going on inside the Tomb. After I ran in after Emilia, the same thing happened to me. Basically, I got through the Trial without any problems, but Emilia seems to have encountered some difficulties. It looked like she was in too much pain, so I called out to her……and after she woke up and regained consciousness, she became like this]

[Otto: Nonononononononono, wait a minute]

Flapping his hands up and down to stop Subaru's rapid-fire answer, Otto stared at him with a baffled expression. Subaru stared back at him with a face that seemed to say "what", when Otto started going [Nononono] again,

[Otto: I almost kept nodding when you just casually glossed over the part that totally needed an explanation…… Natsuki-san, you took the Trials as well?]

[Subaru: Ah, uh-huh, yeah, I took it. A friend signed me up, what can I do]

[Otto: But, Natsuki-san couldn't possibly have any friends, please take this more seriously]

[Subaru: There are some things that are totally not ok to say to people!]

Subaru started staring daggers at Otto as a declaration of war when an arm suddenly came in between them. Moving the two apart, Ram looked up at Subaru,

[Ram: Then, Barusu, you have passed the Trial. Is that correct?]

[Subaru: Ah, yeah. That's right. I got forcibly dragged in when I went inside. It wasn't really on a level where I could say no]

[Ram: How you started it is irrelevant. The more important question is……did Barusu already pass the Trials]

Ram placed a finger to her lips and closed her eyes in thought. Then, looking toward Lewes,

[Ram: That's what our household's scullery boy said, do you sense any changes? If the Trials really are over, the seal on the Sanctuary should be lifted]

[Lewes: ……No, my body didn't feel anything in particular. If we actually try going outside the Sanctuary, though, that might be a different story.

[Ram: Is that so. Then it should be simple. Would you please come with Ram, we could check if it's alright to leave the Sanctuary. If we can, then……]

[Subaru: Oyoyoy, don't get carried away. You're jumping to conclusions here. Yeah I didn't explain it well enough, but that kind of split-second decisions is just overdoing it here]

Just as Ram was about to pull Lewes away, Subaru quickly caught her by the shoulder, saying this. The pink haired girl's brows creased with displeasure as she turned around, and with [What is it?], she immediately recovered her expression.

[Ram: If you have successfully brought an end to the Trials, we must check whether the residents have been liberated in accordance with the Pact. If Barusu's words are true, by tomorrow, the villagers of Arlam would be able to return to the village, and Roswaal-sama's wounds could be better addressed inside the Mansion……]

[Subaru: After your true motivation slipped out at the end there I can see why you're so eager to get going……sorry I got your hopes up, but we can't leave the Sanctuary yet. The Trials still hasn't completely ended]

After being told this, Ram's eyes opened just slightly wider. Then she looked away, thinking over the meaning of Subaru's words, and as if having arrived at the only possible conclusion, she nodded,

[Ram: You lied to me, prepare to die]

[Subaru: That conclusion and sentencing was way too fast!!]

Immediately pulling out a small cane, Ram was ready to perform summary execution. Holding up both his hands to surrender, Subaru frantically shook his head,

[Subaru: Besides I wasn't lying! I did pass the first Trial! But there are still two more Trials left! There are three Trials in total, so unfortunately Lewes-san and everyone else are still not released yet]

[Ram: Even this kind of irresponsible remark should have a limit…… just how do you know this?]

[Subaru: Because, I heard it from the one who came up with the Trials, the――]

"Witch", was the word Subaru was about to say when he felt a chill running through his entire body.
Petrified, his limbs felt heavy as if they had been burdened with lead, his thoughts dulled as if his brain was being drowned in mud, and his arteries froze as if they had been injected with ice.
All the while, within Subaru's mind, there was nothing but an idiotic blank void.

The contents of the Trial, and the fact that two more Trials were awaiting him: he knew that someone had told him. That it was a Witch. But,

[Subaru: What was that person like, I can't remember at all……]

Pressing his temples, Subaru couldn't believe the gap in his memory.
He could remember all of the conversations with his parents, the heat of his tears, and the warmth of every word he had left behind on their parting.
But his memories of the Witch who tied all these other memories together were abruptly missing like a gaping hole.

Seeing Subaru closing his mouth and standing there dumbstruck, Ram, who was just about ready to dish out destruction, got out of her battle stance. Putting the cane she had pulled out back onto her hip, she shot a glance at the silenced Subaru, and sighed. And, watching her from the side,

[Garfiel: Aeh? Just when things were gettin' interestin, ain't ya gonna keep goin? After so long, was just thinkin when I'd get to see Ram violent again]

[Ram: As if the graceful and gentle Ram could possibly do such brutish things. Besides, I more or less understood based on Barusu's attitude just now, so there's no need for that]

[Subaru: Understood… what?]

Lightly brushing off Garfiel's joke, Ram didn't seem to pay him any mind. But, hearing Subaru's question, Ram slightly tilted her head.

[Ram: That Barusu wasn't lying, that's all. If we can accept your words as credible, then that's good enough for now. Barusu, go on answering Otto's questions]

[Subaru: Ah, aah…….alright but]

It was still a bit hard to wrap his head around it, but in front of Ram's forceful attitude, Subaru could only nod his head. And Otto, who had been watching their exchange, lightly cleared his throat with [In that case],

[Otto: Even though we got derailed for a bit, let's get back on topic. The details of the Trials could be set aside for now……Do you have any idea what could've made Emilia-sama so distraught?]

[Subaru: ……I do. It's probably to do with the content of the Trial. Even though the details of the Trial I took and the one Emilia took are different, I think the main theme is same]

[Otto: The contents……Um, would it be alright to ask about those?]

Otto seemed concerned, but Subaru held up a palm gesturing that it's fine. Seeing Ram and Garfiel turning their eyes towards him as well, Subaru nodded,

[Subaru: The first Trial is to face your past. Basically, it's to come face to face with your past attachments and regrets, and come to some sort of resolution]

[Otto: I, I see…… and that's why the details would be different]

Obviously, everyone had a different past.
So, depending on the person, this Trial could be difficult or simple. Subaru just happened to hit the mark, whereas Emilia had taken a critical setback――

[Subaru: No, if we take the Qualifications into account, then the contents of the Trials are obviously just plain malicious]

After all, Subaru's Qualification was specially granted, while the Half-Bloods were born with them. Even though he didn't know the true purpose of the Trials, the stories behind the Half-Bloods would have been determined by the various conditions and restraints attached to their birth.
They would have been persecuted by other races as well as their own, been terrorized and shunned, and if the Halves who would have had to endure such conditions were selected to take the Trials, then, of course, the Tomb would easily find their most painful pasts to test them.

[Subaru: To gather a bunch of guys here who would certainly have trouble passing the Trials. That really is blackhearted]

[Otto: Right now, even if we keep calling the examiner names for being mean, we won't really get anywhere. More importantly……it will be hard to bring it up to her, the reason why Emilia-sama is so distraught, that is]

Otto mumbled as he turned his eyes toward the bedroom where Emilia was sleeping. Watching him, everyone more or less understood what he was trying to say, and, deep down, Subaru appreciated Otto's unspoken consideration.

――Emilia's appearance resembled the description of the Witch of Envy in so many ways on top being a Half-Elf. From that alone one should be able to infer some sense of the baseless scorn and persecution she must have endured.

And naturally, having never actually been in her position, what Subaru and the others were able to imagine could only be barely scratching the surface.
And that is why they could not bring up this topic lightly. One could say that Otto's judgment was awfully humane, or, on the other hand, that his personality was fatally unsuited for a merchant.

[Subaru: Even though you can never, ever, become a great merchant, you have my gratitude]

[Otto: Why are you just shattering my dreams all of a sudden!?]

[Subaru: I'm usually too embarrassed to straight-up express my gratitude without spiking it with a joke, try to understand]

[Otto: How about you try to understand how deeply my heart just got wounded!!]

With Otto blasting that out while stomping on the floor, everyone else in the room put their fingers up to their lips gesturing "Not too loud!". Seeing this, Otto hurriedly blocked his own mouth, but it was too late.

At first, there was a just small sound.
In the house that fell completely silent after Otto shut himself up, the sound of small steps striking upon the floor grew louder, and louder. Everyone turned their gazes toward the direction of the sound――toward the direction of the bedroom.
And before anyone could open their mouths, the door opened, and,

[Emilia: Um……I'm sorry I, caused you guys trouble]

Saying that quiet apology, Emilia, with her silver hair flowing down her back, emerged out of the room.
Everyone breathed a sigh of relief when they saw that there was no longer any trace of distress in her words. And Subaru quickly jogged over to her side,

[Subaru: Thank god, good morning, Emilia-tan. Are you feeling better now?]

[Emilia: Ah. En, I'm fine. My body feels completely fine now. Sorry I made you worry]

[Subaru: I see, that's good. You know, since I wasn't with you when you fell down, I was really worried if maybe you bumped into something. So you see, the only way we won't have to worry about each other is if I never leave your side]

[Emilia: ――yeah, I guess you're right]

[Subaru: Yeah?]

Already preparing his posture for some kind of comeback to his joke, Subaru slightly furrowed his brows at Emilia's unexpected reply. Her eyes were lowered, and were staring at Subaru's hand. Wondering what it might be, Subaru tilted his head, and held his hand out to her.

[Subaru: What is it? Maybe you suddenly miss the feeling of my palm? If that's the case, I can hold your hand all night long if you want]

[Emilia: Eh, ah……I-I'm alright. That's not it. I'm just kind of, still half asleep]

Just before touching Subaru's outstretched palm, as if suddenly remembering something, Emilia shook her head. And as her last word fell, the girl in maid's uniform walked over,

[Ram: Emilia-sama. More than anything, it's wonderful that you've woken up safely. If possible, please don't overexert yourself, and tell me how you're really feeling]

[Subaru: Oy. You're making it sound as if Emilia's hesitating to tell me the truth or something]

[Ram: In front of someone who isn't a fellow woman, or should I say a guy who's always trying to show off, there are certain things that one might find hard to say. Please show enough consideration to notice that and get out of the room]

[Subaru: I wish I could show that kind of consideration but……]

While Ram was giving him a sharp glare, Subaru's words suddenly trailed off as he dropped down his eyes. Ram furrowed her brows at this, but soon seemed to understand when she followed Subaru's gaze downward…
…to see the tips of Emilia's white fingers――timidly wrapping onto Subaru's hand, that was dangling at his side.

[Emilia: Eh, ah!]

Late to notice Subaru and Ram' meaningful gazes, Emilia quickly let go of his hand. Her cheeks blushing bright red as if everything she did just now had been unconscious, she started panicking,

[Emilia: N-not like that. That was really weird, ok? I, really didn't mean to do that……because, I already decided I wouldn't, you know]

[Subaru: Yeah you did draw it back at first, and then grabbed my hand anyway. I liked it so I won't complain, but, are you really alright, Emilia-tan?]

Asking this question with still some lingering yearning for the fingertips that had been pulled away, he saw Emilia firmly nodding her head up and down. Her cheeks were still blushing red, but even Subaru could sense that it was no longer due to embarrassment.
However, Emilia didn't seem to notice that there was anything strange about her,

[Emilia: I'm sorry I interrupted your conversations. But, I really don't feel like there's anything wrong with my body. I was a bit half-asleep before, but I'm fully awake now and fit as a fiddle]

[Subaru: It's been a long time since I heard someone say "fit as a fiddle"]

[Emilia: Hmph, Subaru's always like that]

After their old back and forth, as always, Emilia puffed up her cheeks pouting. Seeing her behave just the same as usual, Subaru wondered if he was simply thinking too much into it, and put aside his worries for the time being. But,

[Ram: Emilia-sama. Sorry to bring this up so soon after you have woken up, but, about the Trial…..]

[Emilia: ——h]

Even though Emilia seemed to have recovered sooner than anyone expected, the moment Ram mentioned the Trial, Emilia's face tensed up. Subaru, who was watching her intently, noticed this momentary change, but by the next instant, she had already hidden it behind a smile.

[Emilia: So…..um, everyone already knows about the Trial's contents?]

[Ram: We heard it from Barusu. Of course, we didn't get into any details. Emilia-sama, we realize there must be things you would rather not be asked about]

[Emilia: I, I see, Subaru……eh? How could Subaru…? I mean, Subaru isn't Half-Blooded, how could he take the Trials……]

Surprised, Emilia looked toward Subaru, and, as if with the same question, everyone else fixed their eyes onto Subaru as well. It was only natural they would ask this, and receiving their gazes, Subaru thought for a moment about how he should answer,

[Subaru: I told you before I went in. I got the Qualifications. Who it came from is a bit hard to explain, but I could tell you where……it was, probably when I went into the Tomb the evening before]

[Garfiel: By evening, y'mean when you suddenly went fainted and I had to drag you all th'way here?]

[Subaru: Yeah, that's right. I'm not sure exactly how or why I got it……but that should've been it. Maybe when a guy without Qualifications walks in, he gets baptized or something, and afterwards he'll be allowed to go in. Wouldn't it be a surprise if Roswaal could go in too?]

[Garfiel: Let's send Roswaal in t'check, it'll be hilarious watchin' him bouncin out. Be just like checkin' if "Purinpas' blood drips the same shade o'red"]

Garfiel opened his mouth laughing, but as soon as he saw Ram's cold stare, he made a "you're no fun" face and closed his mouth. And then, although Ram still didn't seem convinced by Subaru's answer,

[Ram: In any case, it's a fact that Barusu went in and brought Emilia-sama out, and during that time, took the same kind of Trial as Emilia-sama did, and, if his words weren't entirely delusional, managed to pass it]

[Subaru: Delusional… that hurts, oy]

[Emilia: Managed to pass it…… Subaru, passed the Trial?]

While Subaru was complaining about Ram's merciless word choice, Emilia's ears didn't seem to catch the rest of that interaction. With flickering eyes, she looked at Subaru, and,

[Emilia: You really passed it, Subaru? The……past?]

[Subaru: The one I saw would've been different from Emilia-tan's. Besides I……couldn't have done it on my own]

His mother and father, who should have been the obstacles in his path, instead gave him the greatest encouragement in the end. And, more importantly, even before challenging the Trial, Subaru's heart already had the answers.
Although it was unfair to Emilia, they had gone into their Trials with very different conditions.

[Subaru: I just lucked out and got a nice test result, that's all. I'm more concerned about Emilia-tan, though. From the looks of it, I guess your Trial didn't go too well……]

[Emilia: E-en. That's right…… I tried my best, but it suddenly broke off half way through]

[Subaru: That was probably because I woke you up, I think, sorry…… But then, is re-taking the Trials even possible? Instead of continuing to the other two Trials, I just got sent back here]

Listening to Emilia's faltering words, Subaru turned to Lewes and asked this question. Sitting there quietly in the corner, the old hag who looked like a little girl touched a hand to her cheek.

[Lewes: There weren't many precedents but……you should be able to challenge multiple times. I myself did not pass beyond the first Trial, but I challenged twice. What bothers me the most, though, is Su-bo, who received the Qualifications]

[Subaru: Me?]

[Lewes: Suddenly becoming qualified out of the blue should not be possible. At least, as far as I know, having been here since the time when the Tomb was first created……it shouldn't be. But I might have a rough idea] *(***Lewes said before that she wasn't around when the Tomb was first created, but this time she is explicitly saying that she is. – TC)*

After that, Lewes fell silent. Even though he felt something was off about Lewes' words and demeanor, Subaru kept it to himself for the moment, and turned to Emilia,

[Subaru: Either way, it's officially confirmed that it's possible to re-take the Trials. So now, it's just a question of Emilia-tan]

[Emilia: M-me?]

[Subaru: Yeah, that's right. I just have to ask――Emilia-tan, do you still have the resolve to challenge the Trials again?]

[Emilia: ――――h]

At that question, Emilia's throat clogged up and her eyes opened wide.
If she became angry at her determination being called into question, or if she felt insulted and indignant, Subaru was prepared to be yelled at and to take on her reproach.
However, within her trembling, violet eyes, there was only a faint flicker of anxiety and fear.
Her heart being eaten away by these negative emotions was such that she could not give an immediate reply.

[Subaru: If you can't take the Trials, I will take them for you]

[Emilia: ――!? But Subaru, that's……]

[Subaru: At least I've already cleared the first Trial. That means breaking through the other two Trials won't be impossible either. So, if you're having any second thoughts about going back into the Trials, I will gallantly do it for you. It's the reason I am here, after all]

[Emilia: For a reason like that……for, me……?]

[Subaru: Of course]

Emilia faltered as if she was preparing to be denied, but Subaru answered her loud and clear. Watching her eyes widen as her emotions intensified, Subaru stared straight into her eyes,

[Subaru: I am here for you, and if you are scared, I will do it for you. Even if Roswaal or anyone else says that Emilia-tan has to be the one to liberate the Sanctuary, or that it has to be your achievement……Whatever I achieve, whatever praise I might receive, I devote them all to you. So I don't mind]

[Emilia: Why would you……do so much for me……]

[Subaru: Didn't I tell you before? Because I fell in love with you, because I fell super in love with you]

Emilia's breath stopped, and the faces of everyone in the room showed some kind of reaction. Subaru didn't pay them any mind, and only fixed his gaze on the shaken Emilia, and shrugged,

[Subaru: That's why, I plan to challenge the Trials. What about you, Emilia-tan? If it's really too hard, it's ok if you want to sleep in the house]

[Emilia: ――――Subaru you, blockhead]

Seeing the corners of Subaru's lips drawing upward, Emilia slightly pouted her lips.
Then, lifting up her downcast face, she forcefully wiped her eyes, and turned her lips into the shape of a smile.

[Emilia: When you say it like that, how can I just shut myself in a room and wait. You know…… you're reeaaally unfair. Reeaaally dumb. And I reeaaally…… thank you]

[Subaru: Eh? Wha? What was that last one? You reeaally love me too?]

[Emilia: Totally wrong! I was gonna say I'm really grateful and……]

[Subaru: Oh. I see. Even though I heard it this time, can I just hear it one more time please!]

[Emilia: Subaru you blockhead!!]

Getting carried away, Subaru held his ear right up to her, when Emilia shouted back at the top of her lungs.
Even if her voice was as beautiful as silver chimes, with a direct hit on his eardrums at this volume, it was nothing less than a sonic weapon. Subaru looked like he was about to pass out, but still managed to throw Emilia a smile as she huffed her shoulders up and down.

[Subaru: See, that's more like it. Alright, then let's give it our best again. I'll start on Stage 2, Emila-tan on Stage 1]

[Emilia: Hrmph. I'll catch up before you know it, then I'll just keep going, and I'll be sure to leave you way behind in the dust. Subaru's achievements or whatever, I won't leave you a single one]

[Subaru: Not a single one? But I'll need at least one for a chance to come bother Emilia-tan for a reward or two afterwards]

Seeing Subaru still not learning his lesson, Emilia pouted up her lips and poked out her tongue.
During this back and forth between them, Subaru wondered if he had managed to help just a little in getting her back on her feet.
One way or another, the real Trials are only beginning.

[Subaru: With me and Emilia-tan's Love-Love-Power, the Trials or whatever will be a piece of cake]

Clicking his fingers and sparkling his teeth, Subaru expressed his resolution by striking a thumbs-up.
Listening to his words, Emilia only stuck out her tongue, and,

[Emilia: It's more than enough with just me. Tomorrow I'll show you, I can do it on my own without Subaru looking after me]

And, this way, she kept up her strong facade in front of him.

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Watching Subaru and Emilia taunting each other and pumping each other up, Lewes brought the already cold tea up to her lips.

Tasting its faint, lingering warmth on the tip of her tongue, she fondly watched the conversation between the silver-haired Half-Elf and the black-haired youth.

[Lewes: Where will things go from here, I wonder…… Would everything really happen as Witch-sama intended?]

[Garfiel: Kheh. Who knows. No matter which way it turns, I a'ready know it'll be something that'll make me wanna puke]

Listening to Lewes' mutterings, Garfiel replied in a voice that didn't intend to hide his displeasure.
Watching the side of the youth's face, Lewes quietly sighed in a way that no one else could have noticed,

[Lewes: To force such burdens on these kind children. How egregious the sins of this ancient self must be…… We are beyond redemption. ――At least, I hope it doesn't come to that in the end]

Tilting the tea to her lips, those words fell without having reached anyone, and only stirred up a small wave on the surface of the lukewarm amber-colored tea ——— which, too, vanished without a trace.

Chapter 22 [Weakness]

——Subaru woke in the darkness and slowly sat himself up.

Pulling aside the thin blanket covering over his body, he did a light stretch while taking care not to make any noise. Pressing back a yawn and turning his neck about, he could hear a multitude of snoring around him.
Although he had been sleeping in a corner of a crowd of sleepers scattered all over the floor, Subaru appeared to be the only one who was awake. It was only natural—— the sky was still dark outside the great window of the Cathedral, and it was not yet the hour for the Sun to show its face.

Even though he couldn't tell the time without the convenience of a clock, it was clearly still middle of the night, and not an hour suitable for human activity. Usually, he'd keep sleeping even after the sun came up, but,

[Subaru: I went to bed too early and now I couldn't fall asleep, huh……. makes me miss the days when I get to slack off whenever I have time]

Roughly scratching his head, Subaru folded his blanket, and quietly pulled himself out of bed.
The masses of people sleeping around him——were the refugees from Arlam village, currently confined along with Roswaal within the Sanctuary.
Subaru had given up his place in the small residence allotted to him, and decided to pass the night here in their company. The reason, was not so complicated.

Inside the Cathedral, the people had given Subaru a spot in the corner behind the front wall. It was probably because they were looking out for him, that they gave him in such a comfortable spot. On the other hand, if there was just one downside, it would've probably been the fact that all the children were also bunched around him.
But then again, the children liked Subaru, so naturally they came snuggling next to him, and while the adults remained in a state of confinement, he thought it would be best to lighten the burden of the children as much as possible. So he had no complaints once he thought about it that way.

[Subaru: It really isn't like me to be thinking about these kinds of things, is it]

He couldn't help but smile at himself bitterly for becoming so considerate all of a sudden. After all, life's no fun if you get too hung up about such complicated things.

Being careful not to wake the children, who were noisily sleeping in full-force, Subaru passed through the mire of sleeping villagers instead on his way out of the Cathedral—— A damp wind came greeting him as he went out; the lukewarm air was neither warm nor cold, and only managed to add to his discomfort-index.
Looking up, the thick clouds that had lined up in the sky had covered over the pleasing radiance of the previous night's stars. The layers upon layers of clouds moved rapidly along with the wind. He wasn't sure if the weather would turn, but it was unlikely that it would be a clear day ahead.

[Subaru: Come to think of it, I haven't encountered a drop of rain since I got here. Going by what everyone said, I would imagine there's something like seasons here]

He seemed to remember hearing at some point that the seasons here were split into "Red-Sun, Blue-Sun, Yellow-Sun, and Green-Sun", each matching a magical element type.
If these were like the seasons of the original world, perhaps there would be a "rainy season" somewhere in there as well. The temperatures were neither too hot nor too cold right now, and the feeling of the wind precisely matched his impression of the days that preceded the summer rains.

[Subaru: During the rainy seasons, it's always a headache that the laundry wouldn't dry. The ten-thousand-year futon is in a precarious situation to begin with, if it doesn't get dried in the sun on the occasional holiday we'll be in trouble……but then again, every day was a holiday for me]

Basically, since he was always on the futon, there was no chance to actually dry the futon. Occasionally, his mother would run out of patience and roll Subaru off the futon and snatch it from him, and then offer it up to the fragrant rays of Mr.Sun-sama, as was the Natsuki-family way.

Reminiscing on those nostalgic days, Subaru loosened up the different parts of his body with the usual radio-calisthenics. The great Cathedral, true to its name, was an enormous building covering over a huge plot of land, and even with the sleepers all strewn about the floor, there was still enough room for each person to stretch their limbs. Blankets had been distributed to everyone as well, so there were no complaints in that regard.
If there was anything he was dissatisfied with, it would have been a question of luxury, as having to sleep on the hard floor had been putting pressure on several points in his body.

[Subaru: I miss my old flattened futon, or the fluffy bed in the mansion. But it's only my fourth or fifth day, just imagine what the other people must feel about having to sleep like this all this time]

Even though everyone acted like they were in high spirits in front of Subaru, it was undeniable that their faces were growing more burdened with each passing day. At mealtimes and the likes, Subaru would fool around and rouse up their smiling faces, but other than that, everyone rarely spoke, most likely because of the stress.
After an evacuation they didn't wish for, they had become imprisoned in their place of refuge. The
Lord to whom they had originally directed their discontent was already wounded on their behalf, and so, more than discontent about their present situation, the sentiment among the villagers' was closer to anxiety regarding their future.
Since Subaru was technically a part of the Lord's faction, it wouldn't have come as a surprise if the villagers blamed him for their plight, but――

[Subaru: They didn't even blame me like I expected. It's really a failure on the leadership's part to have to depend on the good sensibility of its people like this]

The truth is, the main reason the villagers didn't turn on Subaru was because they still felt a strong sense of gratitude and indebtedness toward him.
It's just that Subaru himself didn't think so highly of his own achievements, so he was still under

the impression that the refugees were just simple-minded.
But,

[Subaru: I can't get used to living off of everyone's good graces like this]

——Subaru and the others have already entered their sixth day since they arrived at the Sanctuary.

The refugees had arrived almost a week before Subaru did, so they have actually already spent nearly two weeks in captivity.
They have already heard from Subaru how the people who evacuated to the Capital had returned safely, so there wasn't too much worry about their separated family members, but having nothing to do for two weeks was beginning to take a mental toll.
Moreover, it was only a matter of time before the sympathy generated by Roswaal's yolo-self-destruct-battle-plan wore off.
When that time comes, the villagers and the locals would be on a course set to collide, and that was something he mustn't allow, if he wished to obtain the support of both sides.

[Subaru: In fact, I'm stuck. What should I do……]

[???: ——That's far'nough right there, not another step, yeah?]

While he was shaking his head worrying, he was stopped mid-step by a shout.
Subaru froze in his posture with one foot off the ground, and looked around by turning his eyes with his head still halfway through a headshake. Within his field of vision, there was nothing but trees in the vast darkness that shrouded over the forest.
Wandering not far from the vicinity of the Cathedral, the one Subaru found was,

[Garfiel: Takin' a stroll so early in th'morning? Can't tell if y'got a nice hobby or if you're just in a laid-back mood. Feels like "Mujigemujige gettin' lost between the red and green berries" here]

Muttering another one of his usual idioms that didn't sound familiar at all, above Subaru's head——the golden haired youth leapt off of a branch, and flew down.
All short hair standing on end, Garfiel landed on all four limbs upon the grass without making a sound, and closed one of his eyes as he looked up at Subaru,

[Garfiel: You don't look too surprised. Then where's the fun in scaring ya?]

[Subaru: I might have been scared if I didn't think I'd run into you, but I had a feeling I'd find you if I wandered around here. Didn't expect you to come from up in the trees though]

[Garfiel: You were lookin' for me?]

Looking skeptical, Garfiel stood up, facing against Subaru who was a half a head taller than he was. Subaru straightened up his chest rather pointlessly, and replied [Uh-huh],

[Subaru: I thought it was too early and the chances wouldn't be very good, but I'm glad I bumped into you…… Just curious though, why did you want to scare me?]

[Garfiel: It’s no big deal. Ahead from here, that side of the forest’s my huntin’ ground. If you get y’rself lost in there I might end up crunchin’ on your neck, that’s all]

[Subaru: Don’t just say that like it’s no big deal! That was totally a big deal!]

Shocked by how casually Garfiel let that frightening information slip, Subaru’s indignant protest resounded outwards…
…ripping through the silence of the forest in between the dawn and the dark of night, sending the sleeping birds and beasts scurrying in retreat.

[Garfiel: ……Tch. Oy, you just scared’em all away, what’m I gonna eat now?]

[Subaru: They’re a bunch cowards. If you eat wimpy guys like that you’ll only absorb their weakness anyway. ——is one way to think about it, so how about we just magnanimously let that slide this time]

[Garfiel: Or how ‘bout I make all the meat disappear from your plate from this day onwards to make up for it]

[Subaru: I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to! Please forgive me! Today I’ll go fishing with Otto down by the river and make it up to you!]

There wasn’t much for a merchant to do in these last few days, so Otto took up fishing, and had been heading to the river every day. Unfortunately, all his customers were about 5 centimeters long, so he had pretty much been giving away free bait for nothing, which seemed just like something Otto would do.
Hearing Otto’s name come up, Garfiel smirked up the corner of his mouth and bared his fangs,

[Garfiel: Hah, that lil’bro’s got such abysmal luck it doesn’t even make sense. Not like his head’s dumb or anything. But he’s just like how “Even the sky bewails how sensitive Denzen’s to the rain”, yeah?]

[Subaru: Well I say he’s a UNIQUE-CHARACTER that’s here to liven up the mood, something that should be a part of every household, and pretty good for bouncing jokes off of. He’s also saved my ass quite a few times…… but he’s mostly for livening up the mood, though]

If Otto was around to hear that, he would probably be protesting with tears in his eyes about the merciless review he got.
Listening to these not-exactly-flattering compliments, Garfiel scratched his ear with a finger, muttering [Livenin’ up the mood huh……],

[Garfiel: Then, how’s the livenin’ up workin’ out for ya?]

[Subaru: What d’you mean?]

[Garfiel: Don’t play dumb. It’s pretty obvious th’fellas in Cathedral’re almost at their limits. Don’t need me to tell ya this, but you and the lil’bro can’t keep’em distracted forever]

[Subaru: You got me where it hurts there…you know, you’re surprisingly observant sometimes]

Garfiel had caught on to Subaru's concerns precisely. Receiving this unexpected compliment from Subaru, Garfiel crunched up his nose,

[Garfiel: Caus'of all kinds of reasons, I got to be the one who gets to see those Cathedral guys the most. After all, the other guys includin' the granny barely would even show their face. Naturally, this's how it turned out]

[Subaru: To think you're actually the guy preparing the meals for us. The first time I saw that I thought there was something wrong with my eyes for a second]

[Garfiel: If you want the food to taste the way you want it, you gotta have t'do it yourself. Anyway, I'm not talkin' about that]

Taking a step forward, Garfiel raised up a single finger in front of Subaru's face,

[Garfiel: The hostage fellas're close to their limit. ——How long are you gonna keep up this pointless struggle for?]

[Subaru: Pointless struggle… I don't know what you mean……]

[Garfiel: Hah. Y'got some guts t'say that. What else you gonna call it besides pointless strugglin'? ——You've already been stuck in the same place for three goddamn days]

Noticing Subaru's tone weaken, Garfiel sneered back at him through the gaps between his teeth. Subaru opened his mouth wanting to refute him, but, unable to think of anything off the top of his head, no words came out.
Seeing him like this, a tinge of disappointment emerged in Garfiel's narrowed, emerald-green eyes.

[Garfiel: Cough it up. What're y'really thinkin'? Gonna wait till I cut open your gut before ya talk?]

[Subaru: Talking about cutting open guts kind of brings back some bad memories for me, so I'd prefer if you don't phrase it like that……although, judging by the atmosphere, you might not be joking]

Garfiel was slouching down his already short body. Although his attitude wasn't hostile, an unearthly aura of rage was emanating from his entire body.
While it was physical and direct, Subaru didn't feel the need to worry about its violence being directed toward him. However——

[Subaru: First, let's just be clear on this. I'm on Emilia's side. I have total faith in her, without the slightest doubt. So I believe without a doubt that even if it takes time, Emilia will break through the Trials]

[Garfiel: As if I'd believe that tall-tale at this point. Your sheltered Princess-sama—— already had to be pulled outa there crying three days in a row now, you honestly think she can do it?]

Their opinions were completely irreconcilable.
Garfiel's gaze held a sharpness that did not hide his contempt. While Subaru was at a

disadvantage, he nonetheless tried to meet it by making his sanpaku eyes as sharp as he could――his feelings for Emilia would not allow him to lose.

This was the morning of the sixth day since Subaru and the others arrived in the Sanctuary. And three days had already passed since Subaru broke through the first Trial.
If you were to ask what happened in that time, then――

[Garfiel: Never would'of thought there'd be a restriction on starting the second Trial long as someone's stuck in the first one. Thanks t' that, the Trials' not made a bit'of progress in three damn days]

[Subaru: ――――]

[Garfiel: If we knew it was gonna be like this we might as well've sent you in alone, yeah? That way, at least we won't be trippin' over the same rock y'already could'a stepped over]

Garfiel's words didn't conceal any of his bitterness―― but he was right. He had described the reality facing Subaru and Emilia exactly as it was.

Since Subaru passed the first Trial three days ago――there had been no progress made in the Trials of the Tomb. The reason was simple.
Emilia was still in the first Trial. That is, she still couldn't overcome her past.

[Subaru: The past that needs to be resolved is different for everyone. Unlike me, who got to live a carefree life, obviously she'd be weighed down by all sorts of things. So I don't think of her as a burden at all]

[Garfiel: That so? Y're just bein' gentle with the one you've got a thing for. But d'you think anyone else cares about her like you do? Honestly, my opinion of Princess-sama's been droppin down'n'down'n'down, even as we speak]

[Subaru: That's……]

[Garfiel: It's 'bout time you admitted it. If we get rid of Princess-sama, at least you can get your ass into the second Trial. That way, 'least we'd be doin' something real about freein' this place, anyone can figure out that much]

Garfiel's made it sound easy――but it was a decision that would mean trampling on Emilia's resolve.
It would mean abandoning the bulk of Roswaal's designs, and tarnishing that pristine nobility of Emilia's heart which Subaru believed in. No matter what, will not agree to it.
But, what made Subaru hesitate instead of firmly shaking his head was,

[Subaru: If only there was time, she can definitely get through it. There wouldn't be any need to rush her or hurry her. But…..]

[Garfiel: Even you can see that time's not something we have, right? Beginnin' with me, our short-tempered guys in the Sanctuary are startin' to run out'of patience, and the hostage-fellas aren't gonna take much longer of bein' caged-in. ――It's only a matter of time before th'growin' discontent bursts, don't y'think?]

——In the end, it was all a problem of limited time.

No matter what kind of "Past" Emilia must face, Subaru had no doubt that she will overcome it in the end. But it takes time to defeat such deep-rooted wounds. If Subaru could help, he'd have the spirit to challenge anything in the face of all hardships.
But the bygone "Past" existed only within her, and Subaru had no way to offer his outstretched hand. From Rem, Subaru had received the courage to face his past, and he couldn't help but wonder if somehow he could do the same for Emilia.

As long as there was time, she will be able to overcome the Trials. But right now, they didn't have the time for that.
Just as Garfiel pointed out, the two groups inside the Sanctuary were both nearing their limits while time was constantly draining away.
They mustn't wait any longer. Therefore, Subaru came to a single conclusion.

[Subaru: ——I have, a proposal]

Touching his jaw, Subaru wrenched out these words between his lips.
Seeing the change in Subaru's expression, Garfiel closed one eye and twisted his mouth into the shape of smile.

[Garfiel: I'm all ears]

[Subaru: I think we can agree that the problem for both sides is time. I have faith in Emilia to pass the Trials, but to do it she needs time. On the other hand, you guys are right on the verge of the time limit before balance collapses. No problems so far?]

[Garfiel: Nothin' wrong so far. If I just got one thing to add, I honestly doubt Princess-sama will end up passin' the Trials, or if she's even capable of it]

[Subaru: ……I think we should just reserve our own opinions on that part. Either way, if we can both agree that time will become the bottleneck, then you should be interested to hear my proposal]

Listening to Subaru's case, Garfiel touched the white scar on his forehead without saying a word. Sensing that Garfiel was beckoning him to continue, Subaru returned a nod, and,

[Subaru: Right now, the imprisoned refugees are at the end of their ropes. It won't be long before someone breaks, and in the worst case, there could be a clash between the factions inside the Sanctuary]

[Garfiel: Won't really worry to me if that happens? Even if there's a mob of a hundred or two villagers, I'll just be flippin'em all back, not much to it]

[Subaru: There's forty two……and it's not a matter of what you'll do. I'm talking about an undesirable conflict, and the damage it would cause. I'm sure even you don't want to use violence on the people you've been making meals for every day, do you?]

[Garfiel: Well, y'got a point]

Turning his gaze away, Garfiel clicked his tongue somewhat awkwardly. From his reaction, Subaru could sense that Garfiel had some goodness inside, and secretly nodded in his heart.

[Subaru: So, to avoid such a conflict, I would like to request the release of the prisoners. As it is, I don't think they have any more value as hostages. What do you say?]

[Garfiel: Oyoy, hold it. This'n that're two different stories, aren't they? First tell me what y'mean they're no good as hostages?]

[Subaru: In the first place, the reason you imprisoned them was to lure us…… or rather, lure Emilia here, wasn't it? We already entered the Sanctuary as you intended, and began the Trials in accordance with your conditions. The food and care, and the need to watch over the hostages aren't free, and you don't have unlimited supply. In fact, the fact that you are diligently out here hunting at a time somewhere between night and dawn couldn't have nothing to do with it]

From what Subaru can see, the Sanctuary was a vast territory when including the forests, but only an extremely small portion of that was being used―― in fact, the number of Half-Bloods living in the Sanctuary was probably about the same as the number of refugees from Arlam village.
To put it simply, the food consumption within the Sanctuary would have been doubled from what it was before. Due to the special characteristics of the land, it was obviously unlikely that they'd be able to purchase any food from travelling traders, so their food could only be coming primarily from hunting and local produce. ――Therefore,

[Subaru: There's no need to keep holding onto hostages that'll only be a burden on your supplies. Even without the hostages, we already have no way to leave, now that we're half-way through the Trials]

[Garfiel: 'S that so. Either way, immediately upon entering the Sanctuary, the Half-…… Princess-sama would already've been bound by the curse of the land. If Princess-sama wants to leave, one way or another, the Trials will have to be overcome…… Ah, so that's how it is]

Saying this while digesting the meaning of Subaru's proposal, Garfiel nodded several times as his cheeks twisted into a cruel smile. Seeing him like this, Subaru understood that he certainly wasn't slow in the head at all. Aside from his usual attitudes, if it was purely a matter of making decisions based on the facts, then,

[Garfiel: If we release the hostages, whether it's food supplies or th'internal rifts, we'll get t' avoid these unavoidable problems. That's the idea, yeah? In fact, looks like the only thing standin' in between the hostages and and outside world is ME, ain' it?]

[Subaru: If everything had been going along with your plans so far, wouldn't you prefer to let it carry on to the end? After all, your goal is to be released from the Sanctuary, not mutual destruction]

[Garfiel: Guess that's what it'd be if we respect the Granny's opinions…… Well, it's just details anyway]

With a wave of his hand, Garfiel took in Subaru's opinion for the time being.
Then, touching his jaw, he sank deep into thought,

[Garfiel: But why on earth'd you come talkin' to me? The head'of this place is Granny, not me? If you wanted someone to approve your idea, you coulda done better talkin' to Granny. Odd havin' t'say it myself, but, you do realize talkin' to me could just be makin' things more complicated?]

[Subaru: It's to keep things from getting complicated that I'm talking to you. If I properly explain all the pros and cons to Lewes-san, I think I could convince her. But if I do that, I still wouldn't know how you'd react]

If it was the rational and pragmatic Lewes, she would probably accept Subaru's proposal without any issues. In fact, Subaru was confident that he could convince her.
But when it came time to face Garfiel after concluding the high-level talks, then,

[Subaru: One way or another, convincing you is the hard part. Unfortunately, according to my self-assessments, I'll be totally helpless if you decide to use force. So I figured I should sort out the unpredictable factors first, so that I won't have to worry about them later]

[Garfiel: Ain't that a pretty clever way'of thinkin', oy. That's it, yeah? If you bring your proposal to Granny, I'll come screwin' it up, that it? You got somethin' you wanna say t'me? Wanna say it with my fist in your face, huh?]

[Subaru: We were just having a civilized conversation a few second ago, how did it suddenly go tumbling in that direction……]

[Garfiel: I only get t'use my head for talkin' for three minutes, tops. You already gone over th'time limit, no point sayin' anythin' now]

[Subaru: Why are you saying that looking so smug!]

Garfiel held up his fists, and Subaru held up his hands to surrender. Of course, Garfiel wasn't being serious, and only sighed as if he was bored, and,

[Garfiel: Hah, gettin' hit with this stuff first thing in th'mornin'. Yeah, sure, do what y'want. If you can convince Granny, I won't say nothin'. They're a damn nuisance anyway. Do it however you like, long as you get rid of'em]

[Subaru: Is that so, then I'll take you up on that and……]

[Garfiel: ――But, I got one condition]

Just as Subaru thought he had passed over the most unpredictable hurdle and was about to breathe a sigh of relief, Garfiel's words came down like a bucket of cold water. Seeing Subaru furrow his brows, Garfiel stuck out a single finger,

[Garfiel: Whether I accept your proposal is one thing. But if you don't accept mine, there's nothin' we got to talk about]

[Subaru: ……But this benefits on your end as well. There's food supplies, and you'll be avoiding infighting]

[Garfiel: Y'think either of those matters t'me? If we run out'a food for the hostages, we could always start cull'n the herd. If some'of the guys lose it and start gettin' violent, I'm more'n enough to handle it m'self. We aren't on equal footings here, y'understand?]

[Subaru: ……what's, your condition]

Hearing Subaru wrench out these words while gritting his teeth, Garfiel tossed back [Should'a said that in the first place] and clacked his canine fangs. Then, looking over Subaru from head to toe,

[Garfiel: My……no, the Sanctuary's conditions're simple. You'll be the one to take the Trials. Do that, n'the rest is easy]

[Subaru: ——! Wait, that can't be right. If I do that then the whole point of……]

It's true that this option had went through Subaru's mind many times before.
But, it was only the last resort, the one he must try to avoid if he could. More importantly, if he did so, then all of Emilia's efforts up to now would be——

[Garfiel: You might be misunderstandin' something, so let me tell y'now……me or Granny or th'others, long as we get released from the Sanctuary, we don't really care who does it]

[Subaru: ————]

[Garfiel: If you want Princess-sama to do it and get some compliments from the hostages or Granny or others, that's just your thing. It's none'of my business what happened in your pasts or why you're wantin' to get over'em. All'n all, it's just your own problems, ain't it?]

There was no way to argue with that.
Garfiel was absolutely right, and Subaru, having completely overlooked their side of the story, had no right to insist on such things. Just as he said, whether it was wanting Emilia to take the Trials, or wanting her to be the one to overcome it, they were all just Subaru's own problems. And even more than that, he,

[Garfiel: ——Besides, 's it really so important t'overcome the Past?]

[Subaru: Eh?]

[Garfiel: It's been three days. Three. We had t'watch Princess-sama goin' into the Trials every day n'pull her out cryin'. Honestly, I can't stand watchin' anymore]

[Subaru: Can't stand… watching……]

[Garfiel: Her gettin' pumped up for nothin' only t'get all hurt? Gettin' ahead of herself like "I have to do it no matter what", and comin' back wimperin' and apologizin' sorry she couldn't do it. So why in the hell're y'still makin' Princess-sama take th'Trials?]

Garfiel's words accurately summed up what happened to Emilia over past three days.
The next night after the beginning of the Trials, Emilia challenged the first Trial for the second time, and again she failed to overcome her Past. But more importantly, Subaru, who had gone in with her, was not sent into a Trial at all.
At first, Subaru couldn't understand why the Tomb had left him out, but Emilia answered him when she returned halfway through the Trial—— someone in the Trial had told her the reason why Subaru couldn't begin the next Trial. It was very simple:

The second Trial takes place in the room beyond the first Trial.

Inside the Tomb, in the back of the room where the first Trial took place, there was a sealed rectangular door. Subaru originally thought it would only open after all three Trials had been passed—— but in fact, it was the second Trial waiting on the other side. Only someone who had passed the first Trial would be qualified to proceed.
In other words, if Subaru wasn't alone, he would not be able to challenge the second Trial. And the reason he didn't go alone even after he knew this was——

[Subaru: Emilia, will definitely overcome the Trials. So we……]

[Garfiel: That expectation's just a bit too heavy, isn't it. You don't see Princess-sama sufferin' enough as it is? Makin' her force herself to face those memories, hurtin' and makin' her end up lookin' like that, is that what you people wanted? Is that what Princess-sama wants? My head's too dumb to understand it]

[Subaru: What Emilia……wants……]

Garfiel said those words while scratching at his head—— but to Subaru, it was like the jolt of being woken up from having ice water poured over his face.
Up until now, Subaru had respected Emilia's resolve to take on the Trials, and had devoted all his efforts to support her. Even knowing that it will be an arduous path, as long as she doesn't give up, he would continue to lend her his hand.
And, even as she continued to stand back up time and time again, it never once occurred to him to find out what she really wanted.

Come to think of it, Subaru didn't even know why Emilia wanted to be King.
The declaration she made in the Royal Selection Hall, about her intention to bring equality to all, could not possibly have been her reason to want to become the King.
From the unfair treatment and prejudice she continued to receive, one could imagine what must have accompanied Emilia all throughout her life. What were her thoughts as she lived through that, what were her feelings, her beliefs—— that made her decide to aim for the Throne?
Even in spite of his unrelenting desire to be at her side and to become her support, Subaru had neglected to ask the questions he should have asked at the start.

How did Emilia and Roswaal meet in the first place? Why would Roswaal help a Half-Elf become King? Her qualification to be King——to be the High Priestess of the Dragon was proven by the Gem on the Insignia, but how did Roswaal get the chance to let the Insignia touch her hand? What kind of common interests did Emilia and Roswaal have that made them form this cooperative relationship—— Subaru didn't know a single one those answers.
He had managed to come this far, without knowing a thing.

[Garfiel: Oy, don't know what kind'a shock y're busy experiencin', but if y'got nothin' else t'say I'm gonna go. I'm still in th'middle of huntin'…… n'bout that proposal, if y'agree t'my condition, go ahead and tell Granny about it. I won't be botherin' with the rest of it]

After giving Subaru who remained in suspended animation a shrug, Garfiel's figure disappeared into the dawn-lit forest.
Before he noticed it, the morning sun had already chased away the shroud of night, and the dense tangle of the shade-befallen forest had given way to the quiet peace of morning――― with dewdrops resting upon sprouting leaves, it was that kind of hour.

Left behind, Subaru looked up at the sky.
Above, between the gaps of trees and through the towering clouds, he caught a glimpse of the emerging Sun――― which, soon hiding behind the clouds once more, vanished along with the momentary radiance it brought upon the world.
Squinting his eyes at that momentary light, Subaru started to walk.

[Subaru: All I saw was myself facing my past, finding closure, and feeling glad that I did. But, for Emilia……]

Subaru had been convinced that it was something anyone could resolve and walk away from.
Because he had been healed by the warmth of those memories he received, he was convinced that saying farewell to the past was the only way forward.
Being so smothered by the kindness of those around him, Subaru got the impression that the Past was something that ought to be looked back on.
Yet, Subaru's thoughts―――

[Emilia: ―――su… baru?]

For that silver haired girl hugging her knees in the corner of the room, how heavily they must have been weighing down on her.

Inside the house assigned to her, sitting on the ice-cold floor beside her bed, Emilia was quietly, quietly, waiting for time to pass.
She was usually no good in the mornings, but it didn't come as surprise to find her awake so early. Her eyes as they turned to him were bloodshot, and across her beautiful, majestic face were dark streaks left behind by tears――― The fact that she hadn't slept for a second was as clear as day.

Noticing Subaru's arrival, she turned her face away so he would not see that she had been crying.

[Emilia: Ah, s……sorry. I-is it time? It's time already? It's, sooner than I thought…… but, I must. I must do my best…… it's, time for the Trials, isn't it?]

[Subaru: Emilia-tan]

[Emilia: I-it's alright. Today for sure, this time, for sure, I……enn, I will definitely pass. I, I'm already figuring out more or less what is going to, happen in the Trial. See, it's the same pa…tterns. Subaru said, enn, that, yeah, see, I know…… enn, so, I, I'm alright……]

[Subaru: Emilia-tan, it's fine. It's not nighttime yet, last night hasn't even ended. It's morning now. It's still, a long time away]

[Emilia: I, I'll be able to tell if you try to dupe me. Because, look……it's, dark outside. Mornings, should be brighter……ah, but, my, conversation with the micro-spirits today……]

Looking up at Subaru, mumbling this under her breath, Emilia's eyes were shuddering. Inside them, were the shock and anger at herself for having failed to abide by her contract, and she looked as if she was about to sever their bond just to punish herself or her own neglect.

[Subaru: Emilia!]

[Emilia: ah……]

Grabbing her hand mid-air, Subaru entwined his fingers with hers.
Seeing their hands tied together, Emilia was stunned into silence, and, gradually, she saw her own reflection inside Subaru's black eyes.

[Emilia: I, I……]

[Subaru: I'm the only one here right now. So no matter how weak you want to be, it's alright. There's no need to rush, or push yourself too hard. I will always stay by your side. No matter what]

[Emilia: su..baru……]

Clinging onto his outstretched hand, Emilia quietly whispered his name as she let her head drop to the side. Just like this, letting her hold onto his arm, Subaru sat down beside her.
With his free hand, he slowly patted her silver hair as her body slowly lost its strength, until, after a little while, he could hear her soundly asleep.

She must have been exhausted. But even so, she couldn't pass the night alone, and had to lean on Subaru in the end.
Taking a glance at the sleeping Emilia, quietly breathing beside him, Subaru lightly traced his finger over her adorable cheeks, and confirmed the traces of her tears.

——This was as far as she will go, he decided.

Chapter 23 [A Step Forward]

[Subaru: Alright, I'll just be gone for a bit. We should be back by tomorrow and…… I know I said this a few times already, but, there's no need to push yourself by taking the Trials anymore. Just rest a little]

[Emilia: I know~ I get it already. Gees Subaru, you don't have to look so worried. I'll be good and take the day off, just like you told me to]

Emilia pouted her lips as she said this, looking up at Subaru aboard the carriage.
Subaru wryly smiled in front of her adorable antics, and made an effort to hide the pain inside his heart.

The time was a little before noon on the same day as his conversation with Garfiel, and several hours had passed since he visited Emilia in her room.

[Otto: Natsuki-san, we're all set here. You can just say the word]

[Subaru: Oooh, that was quick. The speed at which you must be able to skip town after committing some heinous deed is truly impressive. From now on, shall I call you "Otto the Night-Skipper"?]

[Otto: I've no idea what the term "Night-Skipper" means, but I'm almost definitely certain it's something disreputable and so I'm afraid I'll have to firmly decline]

Otto curled his lip into a scowl and started shooting Subaru a stink look, to which Subaru only shot an unreservedly-wry smile in return. Looking past Otto, one could see the dragon carriages of Subaru's party lined up along the road.
Numbering six in total—— they would accommodate 42 people in all. Which would be the total number of refugees and hired merchants from Arlam village, if you didn't count the one extra traveling merchant who happened to be tagging along. This meant that,

[Subaru: Really, it's almost disappointing how easily they went along with the idea…… Honestly, I was preparing for a little more resistance]

[Ram: That's because Barusu cleverly went behind everyone's back to negotiate with Garf beforehand, isn't it? You figured Lewes-sama can be reasoned with, so as long as Garf didn't interrupt your negotiations, there won't be any problems]

While Subaru was busy scratching his neck, Ram, dressed in her usual maid's uniform, threw these words at him from the base of the carriage. From beneath her peach colored hair, she was looking up at him with her usual expression of disdain.

[Ram: Ram would have liked to lodge a complaint about how you didn't obtain freedom for Roswaal-sama as well, but…]

[Subaru: Being the HOSTAGE OF ALL HOSTAGES, he's a bit more suited to stay behind, I think. Even if you wanted me negotiate for him, I wouldn't know what to say to them. All things

considered, it was already a pretty big accomplishment getting them to let the villagers go, so please understand!]

[Ram: …you did well, for a Barusu, that's all I have to say. Now show some gratitude to Ram]

[Subaru: Why do I get the feeling that if I thanked you here I'd be losing out somehow?]

Just as all of Heaven and Earth shuddered at Ram's acknowledgement of Subaru's success, Subaru turned his eyes back on Emilia, who was fidgeting beside her.
There was anxiety and gloom within her violet eyes, but when she noticed Subaru's gaze turning towards her, she quickly chased those sentiments away.

[Emilia: Thank you…. You know, if you hadn't gone ahead and said anything, I, don't think I would've even noticed what was going on]

[Subaru: Emilia-tan already has an important enough role as Emilia-tan. All the things that are going on around you, you can just leave that stuff to us. You've only got one big task to focus on. And we'll handle everything else, so don't worry]

Watching Subaru forcefully slap a hand onto his chest, Emilia covered her mouth, but couldn't stop a giggle from leaking out. Then, wiping away the tears that had welled up in her eyes, she nodded with an [Enn], and,

[Emilia: I understand. Then I'll leave it to you, Subaru. And…..]

[Subaru: I know, I know. Don't worry, as soon as I get everyone to the village, I'll come back to you right away. Of course, I could also take the opportunity to bring back any precious stuffed animals that you may have forgotten at the Mansion?]

[Emilia: I outgrew that stuff a long time ago. Also, I'm not asking you to come back quickly. But of course, I would be happier if you did come back quickly……]

[Subaru: Then, what're you trying to say?]

[Emilia: ……come back safe. Of course, the sooner you come back the better, but, I'd be even happier if you came back safe]

[Subaru: AAGH, my heart!]

Wriggling around for a second, overwhelmed by the pain of LOVE in his chest, Subaru covered his love-sick heart with both hands and stumbled backwards. Emilia tilted her head in confusion, but Subaru, still busy hyperventilating, extended his palm towards her.

[Subaru: OK OK, I got it already. Quickly, and safely, I promise I will come back to your side. Unless you want me to pinky-promise too?]

[Emilia: That thing you did with Petra about what happens if you lie? ……Sure, ok. Let's do it]

[Subaru: Ouuuggghh, so straightforward]

Emilia took a step forward, and Subaru bent his knees to meet her. Just like this, Subaru, from up on the carriage, and Emilia, standing below, tangled their pinkies together. And then, chanting out the traditional spell, they sealed their promise as their fingers parted.
For a moment, Emilia continued to stare at her finger that had separated from Subaru's, and then, she took him into her violet eyes,

[Emilia: Subaru. To a spirit-arts user, promises are……]

[Subaru: Super important, right? I've learned my lesson, and I've become painfully aware of that. So I'll never break another promise with Emilia-tan again. Also, I'll try to keep my promises with other people too, if possible. I hope you can accept that]

[Emilia: Hmm, I suppose I'll have to]

A smile emerged on Emilia's face. And, after making sure of this, Subaru straightened up his legs, did a big stretch, turned around, looked up, and raising both his hands up into the air,

[Subaru: Al-right, let's get this show on the road! Destination: Arlam village! Total travelers: 44! This is a great migration we're doing here, I'll be counting on all of you from here on!]

A series of cheers went up in response to Subaru's shouting, and, just like this, the great migration got underway.
――After the hard-won victory at the negotiations, the released hostages embarked upon the road leading back home.

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After he concluded his conversation with Garfiel, while watching over the stricken Emilia in her sleep, Subaru came to the decision―― that he would accept Garfiel's condition, and negotiate to release the hostages from the Sanctuary.

Once he had put Emilia to bed, Subaru waited for everyone to wake before gathering all the key players into Lewes's house, where he planned to put forth his proposal.
Given the battle of words he had with Garfiel, he had expected a fair amount of resistance.
――But, in reality, Lewes did nothing but agree with him the whole time. Rather than oppose him, she had even offered several additional concessions. The result was that everything had gone exactly as he envisioned, but still, he couldn't quite shake the feeling that it was different from what he expected.

Later, when Emilia woke up, he explained to her everything that had happened, and then gave the same explanation to the refugees inside the Cathedral. The villagers were surprised and skeptical at first, but when they understood that they would be allowed to return home safely, Subaru was happy to see them overjoyed.
Although Subaru was the reason they ended up in this situation in the first place, once he announced they would be allowed to leave, all the villagers showered their gratitude upon him, which was rather embarrassing. And after all of that, it was finally time to put the plan into action.

[Otto: But I have to say, this was pretty unexpected]

The one who said this was Otto, who was holding the reins beside Subaru.
Just like on the way to the Sanctuary, their dragon carriage was drawn by the ground dragons, Patrasche and Furufu, only, this time, Subaru was sitting next to Otto on the driver's bench.

[Subaru: Nnnuh?]

[Otto: You were asleep just now, weren't you?]

[Subaru: I was just deep in thought, and don't say that like I was hiding something or anything. Anyway, I was only half unconscious so I didn't hear what you said. So what were you saying?]

[Otto: If you're going to cover things up, at least have the courtesy to see it through to the end…… At any rate, I was trying to say this current development was pretty unexpected]

As usual, the back and forth between Subaru and Otto was all over the place. Perhaps because Otto had already gotten used to Subaru's antics, he didn't react as dramatically as before, but merely gave a perfunctory nudge at their surroundings to indicate what he was talking about.

[Otto: I didn't think they'd let them go this easily. We merchants have a saying, "You should keep hold of all the weaknesses you can in case you have use for them later"]

[Subaru: Is that really a merchant's expression? You sure that didn't come from some corrupt Edo-period magistrate? My impression of your profession just became way way way way shadier. What do you have to say for yourself?]

Thinking back, Subaru had very few memories of Otto ever acting like a merchant. There was only the one time when he made the unsubstantiated claim that he had bought too much oil, when in fact, it was entirely possible he was just a pyromaniac. Even now, the background of this so-called merchant was quite suspect.

[Otto: What's with those eyes looking at me like I'm someone suspicious?]

[Subaru: That's because I *am* looking at someone totally suspicious here. Are you really a merchant? I don't think I've ever seen you do anything merchant-y in front of me]

[Otto: Weren't you the one who forced me, against my will, to file those documents and ledgers loaded to the brim with confidential information!? Are you suffering from amnesia!?]

[Subaru: No, that could simply be your clever attempt to convince someone who thought you were a spy that you really are a merchant. Thinking about it that way, you're far more likely to be an enemy agent……]

[Otto: With that kind of ridiculous logic, it'd be easier for me to become a God than try to convince you of my innocence, Natsuki-san]

[Subaru: Hey, Patrasche, did you hear that? This guy sitting next to me just said he thinks he can become a God…… I'm a bit worried about my safety]

[Otto: Huh? Dammit! Why did you have to…… aaah! Now even Patrasche-chan is looking at me with a look of pity! Please stop it already!]

Responding to Subaru's voice, Patrasche made a short cry. Hearing this, Otto fell into despair and hugged his head with his hands. That seemed to have been Patrasche offering her own input about Otto. In times like these, one might prefer not to have the Divine Protection of "Anima-Whispering". It was then, that,

[Garfiel: Y'fools don't change no matter where y'go do'ya?]

Garfiel, who was running alongside their dragon carriage, interjected himself into the conversation.
The dragon carriages were traveling down an animal path through the middle of the forest, so they weren't at top speeds. Even if Subaru had been sprinting with all his strength, he wouldn't have managed to keep up with their current pace, but Garfiel was easily able to catch up, and accompany the winding carriages of refugees.
Not even short of breath, Garfiel was kicking off the ground and leaping great distances with each stride.

[Garfiel: Y'know, y'got the charm o' someone straight outta "The Tale of th'End of Bakimu the Horse Wrangler"]

[Subaru: Aren't idioms supposed to be short and clear ways to express your meaning to whoever you're talking to? ……It doesn't even feel like we're having the same conversation here]

[Garfiel: Huh? What ya try'n to say, y'bastard?]

Garfiel crimpled up his nose in annoyance, and Subaru simply shrugged at that carnivorous expression, saying [Come to think of it],

[Subaru: You volunteered to guide us out, but I don't see you doing much guiding. Aren't you kinda shirking on your duties?]

[Garfie: Didn't want it t'be like this. But y'fella's ground dragons're pretty smart, aren' they? They only walked this road once but they're remeberin' it perfectly]

[Subaru: Well, that's only to be expected of my girl Patrasche. This is just beginner stuff for her. Stuff like leaping through a hoop of fire, balancing on a ball, or even riding a unicyc-…… hey wait, Patrasche-san, why're you swerving around!?]

In response to Subaru's outrageous claims about her acrobatic abilities, Patrasche began expressing her displeasure by running in zig-zags. Subaru, gluing himself to his seat, started making a scene aboard the carriage. Observing this display, Garfiel snorted [What in th'hell are you doin'?], and then, looking toward Otto who was trying to hang onto the reins,

[Garfiel: Lil'bro here said somethin' interestin' just now. Somethin' 'bout bein' "Profitable t'be grabin' yer opponents where he's weak"?]

[Otto: Yeah, I do think it's true. Not that I personally believe it's a good way of thinking, but……for instance, the more hostages you have at your disposal, the more options you give yourself for how to use them, right? Like, if you want to create a sense of danger, the more hostages you have, the more options you'll have to……]

[Subaru: Oyoyoy! There's some serious doubt whether this "little bro" is legitimately a merchant here. He's definitely the kind of guy who's committed some horrible atrocities and was forced to flee a country somewhere!]

[Otto: Why are you so convinced I'm some kind of criminal!?]

"I wonder why Otto always manages to fall right into those", Subaru tilted his head, thinking. Then, to get the conversation back on track, [Anyhow], he started again,

[Subaru: For the time being, basically, it's because I already talked it over with Garfiel beforehand, and decided to accept his condition……. that's why the rest of it went so smoothly]

[Otto: Accept…… your condition?]

Since Subaru didn't seem to want to talk about it, Otto raised the question to Garfiel instead. Garfiel grinned with his canine fangs, before opening his mouth to speak,

[Garfiel: Simple, ain't it? Instead of the crybaby Princess-sama, our boy Subaru'll be finishin' the rest'of the Trials and liberate the Sanctuary right'n quick]

[Otto: That's……]

Otto widened his eyes at Gafiel's words, before shooting a sidelong glance at Subaru. Then, after opening and closing his mouth a few times, mumbling incoherently,

[Otto: Are you sure that's alright, Natsuki-san?]

[Subaru: What do you mean "alright"?]

[Otto: You're already taking the Trials, so that's not the issue…… but I suppose what I mean to ask is if it's alright to just take away Emilia-sama's part in the whole thing]

That was Subaru's dilemma as well. Although Otto had struggled to get the words out, he had cut to the heart of the matter. Subaru frowned, but Otto continued to push the issue,

[Otto: Of course, I have no idea what the Trials would entail, and I understand Emilia-sama's isn't doing very well. But, if Emilia is to win the Royal Selection, she needs the support from the people of the Sanctuary and the Roswaal domain, right? This is her chance to get both at once, and I don't know if throwing that away so soon is……]

[Subaru: It's time…… we don't know how long it will take. If, in the meantime, her base collapses from underneath her, that would be the perfect definition of putting the cart before the horse. More important than that is Emilia herself……]

[Otto: You think she's at her limit, then? I would disagree. I've only known her a short time, but I think Emilia-sama's made of some tough stuff. Sure, right after she came out of the first trial, she was pretty out of sorts, but other than that she's been able to keep herself together pretty well, don't you think?]

Upon hearing Otto's perspective, Subaru bit down hard on his lip.
It's true that from Otto's point of view, it must look like that Subaru was selling her short.

——But, what Otto didn't see, was that she had been putting all her effort into just keeping up appearances whenever there was anyone besides Subaru around her.

Just like when she was sending him off at the start of their present journey. Whenever a third party was involved, she seemed to be able to maintain the same calm demeanor as always.
On the other hand, when it was just her and Subaru alone, the facade would fall away, and she would return to the miserable state Subaru had found her in that morning.
She depended on Subaru—— and her true state was not something anyone else could see.

Seeing Subaru holding his tongue, Otto wanted to continue speaking. But it was someone else who interrupted him,

[Garfiel: That's 'nuff. We're 'bout to pass through the Barrier o' the Sanctuary. I can't go no further than that]

[Subaru: …….Just out of curiosity, but, what would happen if you tried to force yourself through the Barrier?]

[Garfiel: Haven't tried it so I wouldn't know, but I imagin' it'd be similar to when your Princess-sama lost consciousness. But it doesn't matter either way]

Glad that the topic changed, Subaru jumped right on it, while Garfiel turned his head, and leaped into the air. Without a sound, he nimbly landed on the luggage compartment of Subaru's dragon carriage, and pointed a finger at the two on the driver's bench who were looking back over their shoulders.

[Garfiel: Accordin' to the condition, after you drop 'em off, you just turn right around and get your asses back here….. Ah, well, that lil'bro next to ya don't matter though]

[Otto: Stop joking around, of course I'm coming back. After all, I still haven't even gotten an audience with Margrave Mathers yet!]

[Subaru: Oh? Really? You still haven't introduced yourself?]

[Otto: That's right! I've been asking for a week, but no matter what time I come Ram-san tells me "Your timing is inconvenient" or "He's resting"…… and keeps chasing me away!]

Angrily breathing out his nostrils with his shoulders huffing up and down, maybe Otto truly had divinely bad luck when it came to timing, but——

[Subaru: Well, that was probably on purpose. Ever since the Trials started, they've been giving me some half-assed excuses to not let me see him too]

Subaru mumbled his own guess under his breath.
After they had begun the Trials, Subaru had barely seen Roswaal at all. Always standing in between them, Ram had been rebuffing Subaru exactly as she had rebuffed Otto. On the surface, it was all for Roswaal's recuperation, but that was obviously just a pretense.

In fact, it seemed that ever since Subaru first told him that he had taken the Trial, Roswaal stopped taking any visitors.

Subaru couldn't forget the change in Roswaal's expression when he heard that Subaru had passed and Emilia had failed. At least, it was the first time he had ever seen such an expression from him before.
For just a brief moment, that care-free look on that painted clown-face fell away, and beneath it ——— was an emotion that was neither fury nor sorrow, but something more complicated altogether.

[Garfiel: Don't put t'much thought into it, yeah? Anyway, when yer comin' back just use the same road. This time I'll pay 'ttention so I don't attack ya, but don't forget the password]

[Subaru: Password?]

[Garfiel: Long as ya say the words when crossin' th' barrier, nobody will be assailin' ya, got it? The password is "Baira Baira below th'Grimoire"]

[Subaru: Huh, what? "Baibai to the grime"?]

That was the worst password ever, using a completely incomprehensible idiom.
Subaru scowled. It was immediately obvious who came up with this password.

Garfiel just stood there looking smug as it was all natural, while Otto was bewilderedly writing down the passphrase on a memo. Leaving the task of remembering important things to Otto, Subaru gave a long sigh, and,

[Subaru: Anyway, long as we say it we can come back in, no questions asked, right?]

[Garfiel: I ain't the only one who's on patrol, y'know. There're others more hot blooded than I am. From their point o' view, that migh' be the perfect time to take ya out and stop ya from completin' the Trials]

[Subaru: ……I do remember you saying something like that]

Lewes was at the head of the faction that wanted to be liberated from the Sanctuary. But there was also the other opposing faction that wanted to stay.
Garfiel's warning, then, was telling them not to let their guard down and give the other faction a chance to take advantage of their carelessness.

[Subaru: Ok, gotcha. Thanks for all the ways you've been looking out for us…… I guess there's no reason to say goodbyes, since we'll be seeing each other again in half a day or so. But, thanks anyway]

[Garfiel: Jus' followin' orders from the old hag, I don't care one way or the other. More import'ntly, well uh…]

When Subaru thanked him, Garfiel waved his hand to dismiss him, but his words trailed off toward the end. Seeing something quite uncharacteristic from him, which Subaru furrowed his brows. And then, Garfiel finally continued [Uuuh],

[Garfiel: When y'get back to the mansion, is that Frederica girl gonna be there?]

[Subaru: Yeah, she should be. Speaking of which, its sounds like you know her somehow. What's up with that?]

[Garfiel: We've got a complicated relationship, that's all. Nothing I really wanna talk about, it's just……]

[Subaru: I'll tell her that you're totally thinking about her. Maybe she'll even have a message for you too]

[Garfiel: ……I ain't askin' you t'…]

Suddenly averting his eyes, as if to get away from Subaru's smirk, Garfiel jumped right off the carriage. And, as he landed on the ground, the train of dragon carriages passed through the Barrier between the Sanctuary and the Forest. Putting both of his hands on his waist, Garfiel sent them off, shouting,

[Garfiel: Don't even think'of runnin' away, Subaru! Y'better keep your promise even if it kills ya! That was my one condition for lettin' you outta here!]

[Subaru: Yeah, no worries on that count. My promise-keeping POWERS' been super buffed lately!]

Letting these words of farewell resound throughout the forest, with a smile, Subaru raised up a fist at the distant figure. And Garfiel matched it by pumping up his own fist in response.

Watching as the caravan vanished into the shadows of the forest, Garfiel continued standing there with his fist raised up in the air.

――After passing through the Barrier and coming out of the forest, they didn't encounter any problems on the rest of the road.

If nothing got in the way, it should be about eight hours journey from the Sanctuary to the Mansion. They stopped twice to rest, but since the villagers were eager to return to their homes, they kept their breaks short and forced themselves to continue.
So, all in all, it was only eight hours later when the refugees returned to Arlam Village. Having departed early in the afternoon, when they arrived, it was already several hours after the shroud of night covered over the world.

[Subaru: My butt hurts from all that sitting……but that wasn't too bad]

Getting off from the dragon carriage, and giving his waist a twist, Subaru breathed a sigh of relief.
All around the village in the night, voices of rejoicing and reunion sprung up, and there were even a few shedding tears of joy in their midst. Considering the calamities that had assailed this village, Subaru decided that it was not an overreaction after all, and that no one could really ridicule them for that.
For the first time in several days, with the return of the rest of the villagers, Arlam village came to life in spite of the night. The villagers who had mostly wallowed in gloom inside the Sanctuary now all showed the same smiles on their faces.

And the other half who had waited for them in the village, were finally relieved to see their family safely returned to them.

[Otto: Natsuki-san, are we heading back right away?]

While Subaru watched over the bustling crowd from a distance, Otto scampered over after looking around for him.
Allowing Otto to catch his breath, Subaru shook his head with a [Nah],

[Subaru: There's no rush, we can take a little break before heading back. Besides, I should stop by the Mansion to explain everything to Frederica and Petra]

[Otto: Aah, that's right. I mean, I also have some things I need to discuss with my fellow merchants]

[Subaru: Discuss what with your fellow merchants?]

Otto pointed to the owners of the six dragon carriages standing at the side.
They had been hired to evacuate the villagers, but wound up with the misfortune of getting imprisoned in the Sanctuary along with them. Now that they were freed, they were, above all, relieved, but their gazes toward Subaru were,

[Subaru: I must be imagining this, but, isn't this supposed to be a Parallel World? Why do I get the feeling their eyes all have Dollar signs in them?]

[Otto: Back when we were hired, the condition was the purchase of our goods as well as additional compensation to be negotiated later. So I'd like to come to a consensus on how much compensation we'll actually demand. I won't be proposing anything outrageous, of course, but seeing that they've been burdened with the hostage situation……it might get a little pricey, so be prepared]

[Subaru: Well, it's not like it'll be my wallet getting plundered. As long as you use appropriate discretion, it wouldn't be too bad to see Ros-chi's face go pale every once in a while?]

[Otto: That's my Natsuki-san! You understand!]

Clapping his hands, Otto happily strutted over to his fellow merchants.
Hearing the good news brought by Otto's triumphant return, the merchants' cheers resounded through the village in the night. Somehow, Subaru got the feeling their celebrations sounded even happier than the villagers having their reunions, but he decided to consciously put it out of his mind, and straightened himself up.
In any case, there shouldn't be any problems in the village for now. Otto will take care of the merchants' demands, and Roswaal will end up dealing with it. Somewhat looking forward to see what expression will come on Roswaal's face when he gets hit with the bill, Subaru headed towards the Mansion.

After walking fifteen minutes from Arlam village―― at the end of his path stood the lonely Roswaal Mansion.
In the dark of night, only the Mansion's lights asserted their existence within its shadowy contours, lending the place an eerie aura from the distance, in the hours after sunset.

Subaru remarked on this as he stood before the front gates, absentmindedly staring at the Mansion. Naturally, the majority of the Mansion's lights were out, and there were only light flowing out of the entry hall and the servant's rooms. As well as a room on the highest floor——which, surely, must be Roswaal's office.

[Subaru: Otto sorted all the paperworks, but over the week it must have piled up again]

Frederica, being the all-powerful-maid that she is, wouldn't have lost to Otto when it came to managing paperworks, but that wasn't the only task she had to take care of. Even with Petra's assistance, maintaining the entire Mansion required a considerable amount of effort.
From the fact that she was still working away in the office in the middle of the night, one could imagine the immensity of her duties.

[Subaru: One way or another, I'll pull that Otto even deeper into this and work him like a mule as the Emilia-faction-paperwork-machine. I'll make him the official office robot]

While thinking of plots to trap that young man in the village with loose cheeks and dreams of big money, Subaru pushed open the gates and entered the Mansion grounds.
Heading to the entryway, he struck the door with the falcon-shaped knocker,

[Subaru: Apologies for the late night visit. I'm here from the Fire Departme~nt]

Sending sharp knocks ringing throughout the night, Subaru shouted out an appropriate call as usual.
Speaking of which, how do the people in this world handle fires and disasters, anyway? Subaru tilted his head, wondering about this pointless question. But,

[Subaru: There's no reply]

And here he thought Frederica would swoop in to respond, swift like the wind, but seeing that was not the case, Subaru dropped down his shoulders.
After a little while longer, Subaru decided that no one was coming and abandoned waiting. Then, grandly pushing open the door,

[Subaru: Oooo~oy, I'm ho~~me. Food! Bath! Bed!]

And, shouting these three orders like he owned the place, Subaru struck out a pose. But there was still no reply.
Tasting the nostalgic sensation of sliding along the floor in awkward silence all by himself, Subaru headed up the stairs——to the servant quarters to look for Petra.

[Subaru: Frederica's probably in the office. I'll go find Petra first……then, I'll have to look for Beako too]

One by one, the three people who remained behind in the Mansion surfaced in Subaru's mind. Regardless of the precocious Petra or the politely insolent Frederica, the reunion Subaru had to prepare for was the one with that Drill-Haired Loli.
Last time, the way they parted was indeed a way to part.

Without giving him a single answer to his vital questions, she had chased him out, sobbing, with an expression full of sadness.

[Subaru: I'll have to apologize…… but it'll be kind of weird. I feel like I didn't really do anything wrong……]

Even so, Subaru got the feeling that something would be different if he met her again and talked. Besides, he'd like to think that he must have advanced a little by saying farewell to his past. With his current state of mind, perhaps he would be able to face her a little differently than last time. And so,

[Subaru: The first time was only a skirmish……well that's one way of thinking about it]

Subaru gave the door a knock, and immediately swung it open as if to surprise the person inside, but he dropped his shoulders once again.
Walking in on a delightfully-embarrassing-clothe-changing-time――was not something he was hoping for considering the target was a little girl, but no such thing happened, since there was no one in the room.
It was a room decorated to Petra's tastes, adorned with cute little items, and kept tidy and organized―― but its owner was nowhere to be found.
Inside the room lighted by the crystal lamps, Subaru tilted his head,

[Subaru: Going out without turning off the lights doesn't seem like something a dependable girl like Petra would do……if she isn't here, maybe she's in the office studying?]

It was possible, if the spartan Frederica was involved.
In addition to the chores, she might be teaching Petra office work as well to turn her into another all-powerful maid. It would be a great help, but since Petra was already overtaking Subaru in the domestic duties, if she overtook him in office work as well, Subaru will have no hole to crawl into.

[Subaru: Nonono, she can't even do all her arithmetics yet, I still have the advantage! Don't you underestimate the modern Japanese compulsory education!]

Muttering this while flying up the stairs, heading to the highest floor――he arrived at a double door in the dead center of the hallway, and, clearing his throat again, he knocked.
The heavy sound echoed outward, and surely it was sent into the room. But there was no reply.

[Subaru: ―――――]

It was all too strange. Subaru's accumulated wariness so far was now raised to a whole different level. Trying to cover up that feeling with some lighthearted humor, Subaru swept his gaze down the hallway from end to end, and then, at the office door itself. He leaned his ear against the door to listen to what was inside, but no sound came through the thick, heavy door. There was nothing else he could gather if he continued to stay outside.

――Petra's room showed no sign of being disturbed. It was neatly arranged, and her bed had been made as if she was just getting ready to sleep.
It was the same for the Mansion, at least on the surface, and there seemed to be nothing out of

place. Cleaned and organized with a thoroughness that could only belong to Frederica, there was not a speck of dust left on the window sills.
So Subaru's wariness was only elevated because he hadn't seen either of the girls.

[Subaru: ――――hu]

He lightly pushed on the doors, and they opened without a sound.
The next moment, light flooded out from the room into the hallway, and relying on that light, Subaru scanned the room's interiors. There was an ebony desk, and a leather chair. From the direction of the bookshelves on the wall, a wind came blowing through―― The windows were closed. But he could feel a cold wind was blowing. Intuitively, he knew that something was strange.

Sliding over the floor as he sneaked into the room, Subaru followed the direction of the wind――and saw it.
The bookshelf in the back of the room had been shifted sideways, revealing a usually-hidden door installed into the wall. Beyond it, was a spiral staircase that extended downwards, far, far beyond sight――

[Subaru: Right. There was a hidden passage here. I remember, I remember]

It was in the previous loop.
Despairing after the villagers of Arlam had been slaughtered at the Witch Cult's hands, and after finding Rem and Ram's corpses in the Estate, when his mind was an inch away from shattering, Subaru arrived here.
Then, passing through this hidden passage into the undergrounds, there――

[Subaru: I was frozen by Puck, I think]

There was no way to be sure. But he clearly remembered the frozen bodies of the Witch Cultists who must have pursued Emilia into the same passage, as well as his own similar end, and the Return by Death that followed.
After that, without placing much importance on this detail, he had forgotten to even verify the existence of this underground passage,

[Subaru: But why is it now……]

If it was being used, at least it meant there was a need to evacuate.
As for who might have used it, it could only someone within the Mansion who knew of this passage's existence――probably Frederica. If she and Petra escaped through this passage, that would be the simplest explanation. But the question is,

[Subaru: What, were they running from?]

As intelligent as Frederica is, she must have had considerable reasons to make this decision. Since there was no sign of an attack inside the Mansion, she must have detected the imminent danger beforehand. Thinking to this point, the words "Witch Cult" flashed across Subaru's mind, but he immediately shook his head and drove off that thought,

[Subaru: If that were the case, it'd be too unnatural for Frederica to not leave a single note. Besides, the villagers in Arlam didn't notice anything either……if it was something as dangerous as the Witch Cult, she would have done something to prevent the villagers from getting caught up in it]

At least, Frederica's support for the Roswaal-backed Emilia was not in question. If so, then she would have done her best to take the optimum measures to handle this situation. If the villagers didn't know about this, then it couldn't have been the Witch Cult.
In any case,

[Subaru: Frederica and Petra probably already left the Mansion……then, I'll]

For a moment, Subaru was about to enter the passage to meet up with Frederica and Petra, but what stopped in his tracks was the girl whose name hadn't occurred to him of up to now.
If Frederica had judged beforehand that they must leave the Mansion, surely, they would have taken Rem along as well.
On the other hand, there was also,

[Subaru: As far as I know, Beatrice isn't the kind of kid who can read the mood]

There was also that impudent Drill-Haired Loli, who certainly would have refused Frederica's proposal.
She would have shut herself off inside the Forbidden Library, and made a fuss insisting that she will be fine no matter what, and kicked aside all their worries and concerns, and, at last, without a doubt, she would have sat there alone with a lonely expression on her face. Because he knew this without a doubt,

[Subaru: I'll pull her out……!]

If nobody else could bring her out, then Subaru will do it himself.
It doesn't matter how firmly she believes in the safety of her own fortress.
Knowing that danger was closing in on this place, there was no way he could leave a little girl behind.

[Subaru: And since I've made up my mind about that――!]

Turning his back to the hidden passage, Subaru took a sharp breath, and dashed out of the office.
The most sure-fire way to find Beatrice would have been to open every single door in the Mansion from end to end, but, for Subaru, somewhere along the way, he'd just somehow get the feeling that this door would be the one. And sure enough, he would see her on the other side.
So, starting from the doors on the uppermost floor――

[Subaru: T-tt?]

The foot he just swung out in his stride tangled onto something, and Subaru rolled onto the floor.
A rather embarrassing start, was the first thing that came to mind. Stumbling over right after acting cool was not quite what he was aiming for.
Pushing his hands onto the hallway carpet, Subaru turned around to see what he tripped on. And he saw, a little in front of the door to the office, something had dropped on the floor.

It was pink, and very long, and stretched on for several steps all the way to Subaru's feet. Following on from there, if you asked just where it would end, it wouldn't be very difficult to guess.
――It was something that had spilled out the side of Subaru's opened belly.

[Subaru: ――ha?]

The left side of his jacket had been cleanly sliced through, and his pink entrails were spilling out from the gap.
They trailed all the way from the door to Subaru's feet, tangling them up. In other words, somewhere along the way, his stomach had been cut open without him realizing it, or something along those lines.

[Subaru: ……oughbh]

The moment he took this in, chunks of clotting blood rose up choking in his throat, as his vision became painted with red.
He tried using his fingers to push the organs that spilled out due to his abdominal pressure back into the gap that was pushing it out, but, running out of strength, his knees collapsed from under him. Unable to hold up his body, he sprawled onto the floor.

He couldn't understand what had happened to him. Surely, he had just started running…

[???: ――Didn't I tell you? Didn't we promise?]

Suddenly, he heard a voice.
In front, above the fallen Subaru's head, someone was speaking.

He lacked the strength to raise his head. His consciousness was desperately trying to pull back the overflowing intestines, the gushing blood, and the world that was drawing away.
His body heat was rapidly dropping. With every cough, the blood clots jamming in his throat splashed onto his face, and, with eyes that were starting to blur, Subaru desperately tried to hold onto this world.

"This is the end", his intuition told him.
Somewhere in his heart, he understood this, but "Subaru cannot end like this", he scolded back. If he didn't learn anything, he cannot let it end. Just one thing, anything, don't let it end until you've learned *something*. Something, something something something something something.

The footsteps sent out ripples. A black shadow was standing in the center of the corridor stained red by chunks of his blood.
Black clothes. Slender. Black hair. Looking down on him lovingly, with those lustful eyes.
Running these through his mind, and remembering the tactile sensation of "Belly Sliced Open", Subaru understood.

It wasn't the Witch Cult, but a genuine threat, nonetheless. It was――

[Elsa: That until the next time we meet, you should take good care of your bowels?]

A deviant declaration of love.
Subaru certainly caught it――as his consciousness began to fade.

Fading, fading, fading, darkening, darkening, until,
Everything vanished in the end――and started over again.

――The curtain has risen on the Fourth Death-Loop.

Chapter 24 [False Start]

The very first sensation that cut into Subaru's consciousness was one of discomfort.

[Subaru: Uech! Oueh! Upuegch!]

Feeling the strange foreign-body-sensation of chewing on gravel accompanied by a bitter earthy-taste dancing around on his tongue, Subaru immediately went into a coughing fit trying to spit the stuff out, when he opened his eyes.
He could see only darkness, and felt as if a cold touch was running across his entire body. Judging from the hard tactile sensation, and the direction in which gravity was pulling him, he determined that he was lying sideways on the ground. Then, slowly looking around with eyes that were just growing accustomed to the dark—— he realized that he was inside the old ruins he had seen many times before.

[Subaru: I'm, inside the Tomb?]

As if to make sure, he gave his mouth a swirl. The taste left over from spitting out gravel was still fresh in his memory.
Last time, too, he remembered waking up with pebbles in his mouth. In other words, the point in time must be,

[Subaru: Just after First Trial, then……? So I came back here…… no, more importantly……]

If this was really right after returning from the first Trial where he had made peace with his past, then Subaru wouldn't be the only one who had collapsed here,

[Subaru: ——Emilia!]

Right away, in the darkness, he found the silver-haired girl collapsed beside him.
Approaching her, and seeing the same agonized expression as last time, just as he was about to extend his finger to touch her sleeping cheeks, Subaru hesitated.
Having already accompanied and watched over Emilia several times as she took the Trials, Subaru knew. That if she was touched in her sleeping state, regardless of what was happening in the Trial, it would be interrupted and she would be returned here.
As such, it's even possible that she could be woken up right when she was about to pass the Trial. Therefore, he had to be very careful about touching her while inside the Tomb. But,

[Subaru: I already know this attempt doesn't end well……]

Shaking his head, Subaru crushed his hesitation, and burned her sleeping face into his eyes as he took her body gently into his arms. Her pained expression quickly receded, and she immediately began to wake——

[Emilia: su… baru……?]

[Subaru: Yeah, that's right. It's me, Emilia-tan. Are you alright?]

Opening her eyes, Emilia called his name as if still half asleep. Subaru answered her with a reassuring smile, and waited for her to regain her bearings.
Just like this, he waited. For her to remember where she was, to take in the results of the Trial, and to begin crying like a child.

Even knowing full well that she will be breaking down in tears, there was nothing he could do, for such was his powerlessness.
Whereas, in spite of it all, the girl would will herself to stand up, for such was her noble purity.

All he could do was to gently cradle her to keep her from shattering, and, until she calmed, he would hold her firmly in his arms, and will not let go.

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It was after carrying the crying Emilia to Lewes' house, and making sure that Ram had put her to bed, that Subaru settled down and began to put everything, and his Return By Death, in order.

Ram, Otto, and the others inside all wanted to inquire about what had happened, but Subaru cut them off, saying [First, let's wait until Emilia wakes up], and so now he was alone.

Having withdrawn himself from the rest who still wanted to talk, he gazed up at the night sky outside of Lewes' house, allowing the wind to wash over him, while within Subaru's heart, complex calculations were taking place.

[Subaru: Still..…happened again, huh…]

Touching the left side of his waist, he felt for the wound that should have been there.
A deep wound had been gouged out by a blade, where his intestines had spilled out. An opportunity to see one's own organs isn't something that happens to most people, he thought, and in that regard, he had probably surpassed most people in experience points.

[Subaru: Whether or not I'm happy about it is a different story. I don't have some kind of deviant fetish where I'd get excited at the idea of seeing my own organs..…although someone I know might]

Coming to this point, the words flashed across Subaru's mind.

[——Didn't I tell you? Didn't we promise?]

He guessed it was that glamorous woman's voice. The blood-drenched, immorally glamorous voice, the voice of an abnormal person reaching ecstasy at the sight of life draining away.
Subaru abhorred that voice, that promise, and that perversion down to his very bones.

On top of that, it was not the first time he had his belly torn open this way.

[Subaru: So here's where the "Bowel Hunter" makes her re-entry……give me a break……]

Putting his hand on his forehead, Subaru turned up to the sky and sighed.
In the back of his eyes, he saw that beautiful woman with long jet-black hair which was the same color as his own. That murderer, wielding wicked blades, who had already ended Subaru's life

twice before. The menace who had driven Subaru into a corner in the First Loop, whom he had only driven away with Reinhardt's aid―― Elsa Granhiert.

[Subaru: I couldn't actually see her, but that was definitely Elsa. Or maybe I just don't want to believe there could be anyone else like that. Let's just stick with it being Elsa]

It felt like it had already been two months since their encounter, but in real time, it had only been less than a month. The wounds she had sustained back then were not light, but the aftereffects didn't seem to be enough to stop her from killing Subaru.
Was it because he was too easy, or perhaps she had completely healed?

[Subaru: It'll be safer to assume that she's healed. Come to think of it, the healing magic in this world seems to be able to heal pretty much anything besides death itself. Can't say how many times I would've died if…… Well, I actually did die, but]

Being almost dead and then coming out alive, and being almost dead and then actually dying had both happened to him so many times that, from his standpoint, it was a bit hard to grasp exactly where he stands on this.
But either way, Subaru had concluded that it was Elsa who had attacked the Mansion. With that settled, the next question would be――

[Subaru: Why was Elsa in the Mansion, and what happened to Frederica and Petra?]

When Subaru arrived at the Mansion, there were still some signs of regular life left behind, such as the lamps in Petra's bedroom, and the lighting in the entrance hall. Not counting the office that led to the escape tunnel, the fact that the lights were on in the other two places meant that,

[Subaru: At least we know that nothing happened before that night…… right?]

He considered whether he had come to that conclusion too hastily.
There was also the possibility that those lights were simply left on all day and that Subaru was mistaken in his conclusion that nothing had occurred until that night. However, the key to rejecting that possibility lay in the amount of time the lamps could stay on.

[Subaru: Unlike Lagmite ore, the crystal lamps need to be charged up by absorbing mana from the atmosphere during the day. I know from personal experience that if you just leave them on, they won't last half the day.]

One night, while in the middle of learning the alphabets in the Mansion, the crystal lamp he had forgotten to turn off during the day suddenly went out. Subaru thought there was some paranormal phenomenon at works and made a huge fuss, and Ram would have blown him away if Rem hadn't gently caught him, and all the while, Emilia made herself small in a corner and started trembling. Subaru still couldn't help but smile thinking of that memory. But now was not the time to be nostalgic. So, just picking out the important part,

[Subaru: If the lights had been on during the day, it would be very odd for them to still be on at night. Thus, it should be alright to eliminate the possibility that the house was empty before that day. That means my time limit is…..the sixth night. This is the night of the second day, so there are four days left. No, three and a half days]

In terms of time, Subaru had about 84 hours remaining.
Within that limited time, the task imposed upon him this time was:

[Subaru: Defend the Mansion from the Bowel Hunter, or at least keep the people there safe]

There was no way to be sure whether or not the girls had been able to escape before that serpent-and-spider-esque killer arrived. He didn't know where the escape passage led, but if Frederica had escaped, they would most likely try to meet up with the master of the house, Roswaal, at the Sanctuary.

[Subaru: It could be the case that the escape passage is stupidly long and leads out to the middle of nowhere, and they escaped safely. Or……]

He didn't want to think about it, but there was also the possibility that they hadn't been able to escape.
Considering the gap in fighting strength between the two sides, the possibility that Subaru didn't want to think about was more likely.
He furrowed his brows at the thought. But the fact is, from what Subaru had seen, Elsa's combat ability was certainly that high. Within his limited experience of this Parallel World, he had already met some very powerful people here. If that murderer were to be judged solely on her fighting ability alone, then……

[Subaru: Stronger than Julius, but weaker than Wilhelm-san…… or thereabouts. And it pretty much goes without saying… not an opponent I can beat even if I try really hard]

Even under the best circumstances, Subaru's base-stats were too weak. If one were to compare them, it would not be an exaggeration to say that their difference in strength was like comparing a cat and a tiger. The chance of him winning alone was effectively zero.
During their last exchange, in the end, it was only a massive coincidence that saved him.

[Subaru: It would be great if the invincible Reinhart could just happen to pass on by right about now, but…… no matter how much of a contrived, overpowered, handsome main character he is, for him to suddenly show up at a time like this is asking a bit too much]

If this was a story Subaru was reading and the author tried to pull a stunt like that, Subaru would throw the book across the room. But since this was really happening, he would gladly welcome such an absurd development with open arms.
After giving in to the urge to entertain that escapist fantasy for a moment, Subaru chased it away with a single, quiet sigh.

[Subaru: Elsa's reason for coming to the mansion…… is most likely the same as last time, to disrupt the Royal Selection. After all, she's been hired by someone to get in Emilia's way]

In the capital, Emilia's Insignia was stolen by Felt. While Elsa was the one who hired Felt, the real mastermind was the one who had hired Elsa. By following the clues as to who would steal an Insignia from Emilia that qualified her for the Royal Selection, Subaru had once believed that it must be one of the other factions, but,

[Subaru: After seeing the other candidates……I don't think I can be so sure]

First, looking at it from the angle of someone dispatching an assassin to steal an Insignia:
Right from the start, Crusch could be taken out as a suspect. Having witnessed her heroic character first-hand, Subaru could guarantee that without a second thought. She was not the kind of person who would do such a thing.
Felt was naturally not a suspect either, so that leaves only Priscilla and Anastasia, but――

[Subaru: Priscilla……would that haughty young lady really have a thing for cloak-and-dagger stuff? I could be mistaken, but she seems to be the kind of person who believes the whole world revolves around her. I don't think she'd go out of her way to do something like this. Then that just leaves Anastasia……]

The purple haired merchant girl came to mind.
Underneath her gentle appearances, was the sheen of a sharp-nosed hunter, and an awareness of her surroundings that would allow her to turn any situation to her advantage. ――In fact, Subaru had made good use of that characteristic of hers.
If it really was her doing, perhaps she would have been choosing the most logical method to remove the opposition. Happily letting her imagination run wild and hiring a third party with gold to carry out some clandestine operation seemed to be her strong suit too. Only, if there was one factor that refuted that argument, it would be,

[Subaru: I just, don't think that Julius guy would overlook something like that. No no, it's not like I'm singling him out or anything. Right, yeah, just a gut feeling, that's all]

Or, perhaps she had managed to hide it from "The Greatest Knight". But the question remains, would she really risk creating an irreparable fissure within their otherwise perfect master-servant relationship?
In the end, the theory of Anastasia's faction's involvement must also be rejected.

[Subaru: That accounts for all the suspects among the candidates. But even so, there is still more to think about. If we consider how people treat Emilia…]

If the culprit wasn't another Royal Selection candidate, then it could be someone from a faction that simply wanted to exclude Emilia from the Royal Selection. It would make sense if someone who despised the Half-Elf Emilia had chosen this as the most simplistic method.
But would anyone really go that far? Subaru must be naive to even entertain such a question. The hatred for her Half-Elf lineage was certainly that deep.

[Subaru: But if that's true, then there's virtually no chance of figuring out who her employer is. Unless Elsa herself spits it out]

And he didn't have the power to make her――so he was right back where he started.
In the end, the only possible way to deal with Elsa's attack would be,

[Subaru: It's kind of disturbing how weak our faction is. I'm completely useless. Otto doesn't even count. Emilia and Puck could put up a fight if only they were both around, and Ram's stamina becomes worrisome if we ever get into a drawn-out fight. Roswaal is injured, but it's not like he could be counted on anyways. I have no idea how strong Frederica is, but, unless maybe Petra has some kind of secret power and suddenly develops into a CHEAT CHARACTER……that's not gonna happen. So basically,]

Subaru could think of two viable plans.

The first was to go back to the Mansion, get Frederica, Petra, Rem, and Beatrice and escape to the Sanctuary to avoid Elsa's attack.
The other option was,

[Garfiel: ――What're ya wastin' yer time out here fer?]

Coming out of the house, Garfiel looked down at Subaru, who was sitting on the ground leaning his back against the wall. Since he was so short, it was quite rare to see Garfiel looking down at him. Savoring the new experience, Subaru let out a [No], and shook his head,

[Subaru: I'm just putting my thoughts in order, thinking through some stuff. How's Emilia?]

[Garfiel: Princess-sama's still sleepin' like a log. She's sleepin' like "Mororoku nappin' for a whole day an' night"]

[Subaru: I don't know who that is, but sounds like Mororoku sleeps too much.]

Responding to the usual incomprehensible idiom, Subaru stood up and turned to face Garfiel. Half a head shorter than Subaru, he had a head of short blond hair. Between his sharp eyes, there was a white scar on his forehead. His pointed canine teeth and his ferocious beast-like body gave off an otherworldly aura――and there was a confidence in himself which only the strong possessed.
Of the two plans that had come to mind for dealing with Elsa, the second one was this youth.

If they passed the Trials and released the Sanctuary, Subaru would be able to take him out of this place. Then, if he was as strong as he claimed to be, he would hopefully have enough strength to defeat Elsa. Rather than fleeing as a temporary measure, it would be better to repulse or even subjugate Elsa and remove the threat altogether.

[Subaru: Hey, Garfiel]

[Garfiel: The hell y'want?]

[Subaru: You're the strongest, aren't you? You're confident you'll never lose to anyone, right?]

[Garfiel: Haa? Yer damn right. Don't matter who it is. I'll crush'em, send'em flyin', kill'em dead and come out on top]

Although a bit annoyed by Subaru's question, Garfiel's confidence didn't waver for a bit. Encouraged by that response, Subaru nodded,

[Subaru: Once we get you out of the Sanctuary, there's something that'll require that strength of yours really soon. When that time comes, we're gonna have to rely on you to be the strongest]

[Garifel: What ya talkin' 'bout?]

[Subaru: Prove to me what you told me just now, ok? I'll be counting on you]

Patting the confused-looking Garfiel on the shoulder, Subaru headed back into Lewes' house. When he opened the door and stepped in, the three people inside――Ram, Otto, and Lewes, all focused their sights onto Subaru. With their gazes washing over him, Subaru turned his steps toward the room where Emilia was sleeping.

[Ram: Barusu, Emilia-sama is still…]

[Subaru: Hmm, I think she's woken up by now. ――Emilia-tan, I know you probably don't want to come out, but we need to talk. Everyone's waiting for you]

After calling through the door, he heard the faint sound of breathing coming from the other side. Here was a brief hesitation. Then, after a few seconds had passed, the doorknob gently turned, and the door opened, revealing Emilia timidly standing behind it with her head slumped down.

[Emilia: Um…….Sorry I'm always causing you trouble. In the Tomb, and now as well……]

[Subaru: Being troubled by Emilia-tan is no trouble at all. I want to do it, so it's fine. More importantly, are you feeling heavy or hurt anywhere? If you feel strange anywhere, I'll gently rub it for you and make it all better]

[Emilia: Mm. When I fell down I think I hit my waist or something so it aches a little bit……]

[Subaru: Understood. I'll start to carefully…… Ram-san? Ram-san? The pointy end of your cane is jamming into my liver area!?]

While Subaru was busy cracking a joke bordering on sexual harassment, Ram snuck up behind him, pulled out her cane, and jabbed him with it. When he pointed that out to her, she made no reply and only jabbed him harder, until Subaru yelped like a puppy and jumped out of the way.

[Ram: Emilia-sama, how are you feeling? Please forget Barusu's insolent remarks, and tell Ram everything about your physical condition]

[Subaru: What you're not even going to give a comment on what you did!? Look, I'm seriously kinda bleeding here. It even went through all these layers of clothes, just how much strength were you putting in?]

Subaru protested while rubbing at the jolting pain left over in his lower back. Ram only sent him a sidelong glance as if she was looking at an insect, and snorted [Hah]. Then, turning back to Emilia,

[Ram: Then you are alright, Emilia-sama? If there are no problems with your health, then……]

[Emilia: A-ahuh, I'm fine. We have to……talk about what happened during the Trial, don't we?]

Having guessed what Ram was going to say, Emilia nodded and stepped forward into the middle of the room. Garfiel soon came in as well, and so all the usual faces now circled around Emilia.

Then, under the gazes of everyone around her, Emilia stammered out an explanation of the Trial and its outcome, just as she did last time. If there was just one difference…..

[Otto: So then, how come Natsuki-san is alright after going inside?]

Otto raised his hand a little, and asked on behalf of everyone.
Until that question was raised, Subaru hadn't explained any of the information from his side. Part of it was because he wanted to hear Emilia's thoughts about the Trial, but also,

[Subaru: I told you, didn't I? I got the Qualifications, so I can go inside. If you ask me where I got it from, it was probably when I went inside the Tomb yesterday afternoon. And as for what happened when I went inside…… I took the same kind of Trial Emilia-tan did. But it kinda looks like I passed mine]

Subaru's announcement ignited an uproar throughout the room.
Emilia, who had taken the same Trial and failed, was even more shocked than everyone else. She stared at Subaru in silence, with a baffled look in her violet eyes.
Subaru nodded to her, and,

[Subaru: Just to get this out of the way, the reason I passed the Trial wasn't because I was better or anything. The Trial was about facing your past. I've already made peace with mine beforehand, so it was basically just a BONUS STAGE for me]

[Lewes: I don't know what a "bo-nas" is, but if Su-bo passed the Trial……hmph, that's a surprise]

[Ram: However, based on what Emilia-sama said, the Trial doesn't end with just one stage, correct? Since the word "first" was mentioned, one would expect there to be more]

Ram said this as Lewes seemed to accept it as it is. While nodding at them both, Subaru stole a glance at Emilia. She still kept her silence, and there were waves of complicated emotions carried within her eyes.
Subaru tried to imagine what she might be feeling inside her heart, but he soon shook away this naive notion.
There was the time limit imposed upon him on the one hand, and the difficulty of Emilia's Trial caused by her Past on the other. Having to balance the two at once, there weren't many options left to him. Therefore,

[Subaru: I heard something when I passed the Trial…… Apparently, if two challengers go in at the same time, the next Trial won't start. Then we'll have to wait for a different day to go in again]

[Ram: ……Hmm, which means?]

[Subaru: If Emilia-tan and I enter the Tomb together, Emilia-tan's Trial will start while my Trial…… basically, I won't be able to start the second Trial]

[Otto: W-wa-wait a minute, Natsuki-san]

Just as Subaru finished his sentence, Otto immediately cut himself in. Seeing Subaru pretending not to notice his unsettled gaze, he stuck his hand into his light-greyish hair, and,

[Otto: By the sound of what you just said, Natski-san, you're planning to challenge the Trials as well? But wasn't this whole thing supposed to set up an achievement for Emilia-sama so that…..]

[Subaru: Otto, you dumbass]

Subaru tried to stop Otto from blurting it all out, but it was too late. And Otto, realizing that he had just said something he shouldn't have, quickly covered his own mouth. But everyone else——— including Emilia, had already heard what he was trying to say.
Otto awkwardly held his breath, and Subaru stared at him with eyes of disdain. And Emilia, looking at them both from a distance,

[Emilia: What did you mean, just now?]

[Subaru: Emilia-tan, let's calm down. That was uh……]

[Emilia: Don't try to dupe me, tell me properly. ———Please, Subaru]

Emilia's eyes clung onto Subaru, pleading.
No boy would have had the heart to refuse a beautiful girl's tearfully-voiced plea, and he would not be Natsuki Subaru if he could refuse such a plea from Emilia. He wished he had the willpower to say no, but Subaru dropped his shoulders and abandoned his hesitation,

[Subaru: If Emilia-tan passes the Trials, the villagers of Arlam will be freed from being hostages, and the residents of the Sanctuary will be released from their bondage to this land. If you could overcome the Trials, you will gain the support of both of these two camps…… that was the real plan behind all this]

[Emilia: ……Is, that so. So you knew, Subaru?]

[Subaru: No no, I didn't notice anything at all until someone told me]

Seeing Emilia clearly shaken before him, Subaru held up his chest and brazenly lied. In front of Subaru's shameless lie, Ram and Otto looked at him as if they were chewing on something bitter, but Subaru hinted to them to keep quiet by shooting them both a glance.
Then, turning back to Emilia,

[Subaru: All of it was Roswaal's plan. Honestly, I'm even suspecting whether his injuries are just a part of the performance]

[Emilia: Even Roswaal wouldn't go that….. why can't I finish that sentence. Looking at the situation now, it does seem like something he would do]

[Subaru: I'd hate to let everything go along with that guy's intentions…… I would be joking if I told you that was my main motivation, but that's definitely a part of it. But more than that……]

Emilia looked confused, and lowered her head. Subaru bent down beside her to look up at her face from below, and saw her long eyelashes trembling with surprise.

[Subaru: I want to become your strength. I don't know what you saw when you faced your past, but if it brings you so much pain, so much heartache, and so many tears…… then I want to offer you my hand]

[Emilia: ……Subaru]

[Subaru: If the goal is to take the Trials and liberate the Sanctuary, then it's fine if I do it. If an achievement is needed, then you can have all of mine. My achievements are your achievements. No matter who it is, everyone has a past…… but nothing good comes out of believing that all of them have to be resolved]

Last time, in the World before his death, those were the words Garfiel had said to him.
In front of Subaru, who had wanted Emilia to continue challenging the Trial even knowing the pain that facing her past would cause her, Garfiel had said this about the need to overcome the past.
That new perspective had struck Subaru like a thunder on a clear day.

Emilia widened her eyes in surprise, and bit her lips with an expression like she was sinking into thought.
Subaru understood why she would be conflicted. The truth is, deep down, she must be frightened of facing her past. But because she is so pure and noble, she wouldn't possibly consider pushing this burden onto someone else. And it was for this reason that she was so conflicted.

There was no way to say for sure that the remaining Trials wouldn't wound Subaru's heart just like her Past had wounded hers.

[Subaru: It's alright if you have to think about it. I understand it's not something you can decide right away. ――But if it's alright, I hope you can at least let me have one day tomorrow]

[Emilia: One day, tomorrow……?]

[Subaru: Either way, I can't be the kind of devilish-instructor who drags an exhausted Emilia-tan into the Tomb like "Go take the Trials!" Since I still have plenty of energy left, I should be the one to go next, even if it's just to do a practice-run into the second Trial. And if I end up passing the Trial, that's even better, isn't it?]

If he could gain a single day, and then gain another day after that, then by passing the Trials as soon as he could, he could liberate the Sanctuary on the day after tomorrow.
He would relieve Emilia's burden, accomplish his goal, and have enough time left over to save everyone at the Mansion. That would be the most ideal result.

Subaru knew that Emilia would be shaken by his proposal.
It bothered him to be deceiving her at a time when she was most vulnerable, but it's a technique in negotiation to throw down a large issue first before following it up with the smaller and more vital ones.
Since her mind was still not at ease, after hesitating to accept the first one, she would not be able to bring herself to deny his proposed concessions.

Tomorrow and the day after, Subaru will pass the Trials. There will surely be another opportunity to give Emilia the time to stand back up.
But that time isn't now. There isn't enough time, and the uncaring hand of Fate had――

[Garfiel: Y'expectin' us to just listen quietly while y'move the conversation along any way y'like?]

Just as Subaru's improvised tactic was about to succeed, a voice stopped him from behind.
The golden-haired obstructor narrowed his fierce emerald-green eyes, and, clacking his sharp canine fangs, took a step forward――

[Garfiel: I say, other than Princess…… Emilia-sama, I ain't agreein' t'anyone else takin' the Trials. At least, I defin'tly defin'tly defin'tly, ain't gonna let you be th'one to free us]

[Subaru: Wha――!?]

Those were words he never expected to hear.
Subaru tried to make sense of the words that had been thrown at him, but unable to connect the speaker to the content of what was spoken, Subaru only groaned in confusion.
Watching as Subaru's eyes wavered, as if slamming down reality in front of someone who could not understand it,

[Garfiel: Y'listenin'? Do I have t'say it again? I ain't gonna approve of anyone other than Emilia-sama takin' the Trials. Get that into yer head, think of it as my condition, and not even the Granny's gonna change that]

Just like this, Garfiel crumpled up the skin of his nose, and spat this out with his displeasure in full display.

Chapter 25 [The Ice Forest]

[Garfiel: Lookin' like yer gonna cry ain't gonna change a thing. I've already made up my mind. And once I do I don't budge. It'd be like "Donmorakin gettin' stuck when y'push him"]

Watching Subaru' eyes open wide with astonishment, Garfiel continued.
The condition he spoke of――hearing it, threw Subaru's heart into a state of shock and disarray. Because,

[Subaru: Of all people, why are you the one saying this……?]

[Garfiel: Huh? 'Sit so surprisin' I disagree? Just how naive are ya? All we did was talk a couple times, I'd be pretty pissed if y'think y'understand me]

At Subaru's words, Garfiel twisted the corners of his lips with displeasure, and Subaru did the same in return.
After all, what Garfiel had just rejected was based on something that Garfiel had suggested in the first place.

In the previous world, when Garfiel could no longer stand watching Emilia getting worn down from challenging the Trials over and over, he tossed up the idea that Subaru should take the Trials in her place. Subaru, who had obstinately believed that Emilia must be the one to overcome the Trials, was shaken to his core, and, after seeing sense in that idea, he had adopted it for himself. But now,

[Subaru: I've got all kinds of emotions swirling inside that I can't keep down but…… I'll forget them for now. But more importantly, why are you against it? Increasing the chances of liberating the Sanctuary can't possibly be bad for you?]

[Garfiel: Well, so yer sayin' if I'm fully on board with Granny's plans, then I should know yer idea's more efficient, that it? —But still, I just absolutely don't like it]

[Subaru: Why are you saying that like some snot-nosed brat……!]

Crossing his arms, Garfiel turned his face away. There was no logic to what he was saying, and the fact that he was going purely on his feelings only complicated the conversation even further. From their interactions up to now, Subaru understood that Garfiel was emotional――or, more accurately, that his priorities are primarily based on what he feels like at the moment. If appealing to common-sense was useless, then Subaru didn't know what else he could do would be effective.

[Subaru: Lewes-san……]

Since there was no point in talking to Garfiel, who had no intention of agreeing with him, Subaru called to the elderly woman in the body of a young girl who had been quietly watching their exchange. But seeing Subaru turn to her, Lewes only waved through her long sleeves that hid her hands underneath,

[Lewes: When Gar-bo's like this, there's nothing I can say to make him budge. It's unfortunate, but no matter how hard you try, there's nothing in the Sanctuary that can force him to listen. Does Su-bo want to try?]

[Subaru: I don't have the kind of suicidal tendencies that'll make me want to challenge a guy who can throw a dragon carriage…… Damnit, what's with you guys?]

She wasn't approving of Garfiel's words, but since she didn't actively rebuke him, it probably meant that deep down she agreed with him. Chances are, Lewes also believed that Emilia should be the one to overcome the Trials. He didn't know how much she respected Roswaal, but it seemed safe to assume that Lewes agreed with Roswaal on the most fundamental parts. Nevertheless, Subaru couldn't help but wonder what would happen if Garfiel was on his side.

[Emilia: ……Subaru]

Calling him with a worried voice, Emilia looked up at Subaru who seemed to be overwhelmed by feelings he couldn't explain. Reflecting the side of Subaru's face within her violet eyes,

[Emilia: I-I'll try my best, so it's fine, you don't have to push yourself. It was a bit…… yeah, just a bit sudden, so I was surprised, but now that I know what is going to happen……]

[Subaru: No, Emilia-tan, you're the one who shouldn't push yourself. I'll convince this stubborn bastard somehow. And once I do that, the Trials……]

[Emilia: Subaru y——]

Emilia seemed like she was about to give in to Garfiel's words. Seeing her rally herself from her weakness, Subaru started churning in his head to think of some way to make them see reason. But, just as Subaru's mental preparation was getting underway, Emilia,

[Emilia: Subaru…… even you, don't believe I can do it?]

[Subaru: …….Huh?]

[Emilia: I-I know I let you see my useless side, so now you're thinking that…… you can't leave the Trials to me, so instead]

[Subaru: You're wrong. It's not like that]

[Emilia: Well, I know you're worried, Subaru. Subaru passed the Trial while I didn't even come close…… I don't even have the resolve to face…… the Trial, and my Past]

Even though Subaru was denying it, Emilia shook her head from side to side, refusing to accept his denial.
Negative emotions surfaced in her eyes, and her lips shivered as her face went pale. From her unsettled speech, Subaru knew this was because she was recalling the Trial and the so-called Past.
——In other words, she was at a point where she could very easily crumble.

[Subaru: You don't have to think about it——!]

[Emilia: But unless I face it I'll never overcome the Trials! Yes, that's right…… I have to overcome the Trials, I have to overcome my Past….. or I will never become King. And the villagers and the people of the Sanctuary will never be able to leave……]

Taking her by the shoulders, Subaru desperately called out to her, but Emilia shook her head and did not seem to hear him. Or rather, the more he tried to stop her, the more obstinate her will seemed to become,

[Emilia: I can't let you babysit me forever, Subaru. I can't. Just not long ago, Subaru got hurt so badly because of me…… I, don't want to make you carry my burden anym……]

[Subaru: It's fine that way. This might be a bad way of putting it, but you're already helping me as much as I'm helping you. It's all about putting the right materials to the right uses, right? I'm the one who has better the affinity when it comes to Trials. That's all there is to it, and nothing else. It just seems like something I can do, and something I can actually do faster. I don't find things I'm good at very often. There'll be plenty of opportunities for Emilia-tan to do your best later on]

[Emilia: Isn't this one of those huge opportunities now? If I always look away from unpleasant things, and keep running away…… then what will I become?]

——If only he could've screamed "What's wrong about running away."
If running away from things you don't like, shying your eyes away from painful things, and turning your back to difficulties could allow you to live in peace, then that's not such a bad way to live. Subaru himself had lived this way, trying to distance himself from hardships to the best of his ability.
So he knew—— that even though it's a cowardly way to live, there was no reason to condemn it.

But still, now. Right now, when Subaru should have understood and approved of the weakness facing up against Emilia's stubborn heart——

[Subaru: ————]

Why couldn't he utter a single word of what he was thinking?
In front of Subaru's silence, Emilia closed her eyes and turned down her face. His hands that were still on her shoulders could feel her body temperature rising as if she was having a fever, but Subaru didn't know what he could do.
And, watching their exchange,

[Garfiel: Hah. Yer free to fight it out as y'like, but listenin' from the side, sounds to me like Emilia-sama's got'a point? Fact is, the Trial's been prepared to be challenged by Emilia-sama. Suddenly stickin' yerself in's just……]

[Subaru: You shut up! You…… you don't know anything yet……!]

[Garfiel: Huh?]

Subaru exploded at Garfiel, who made it sound so easy without realizing what kind of feeling that was going through him. Faced with Subaru's rage, a dangerous aura began to emanate from

Garfiel.
But once again, Subaru ignored his threat and glared at him fearlessly.

[Subaru: Do you have any idea what will happen if you keep pushing this on her? Do you think I can just calmly watch as she gets hurt, worn down, and falls apart? ……What would I be if I…]

[Garfiel: ……I don't get where you're coming up with this stuff all of'a sudden]

[Subaru: You're thinking in terms of conditions and merits, but did you think about Emilia herself even once? I know if she overcomes the Trials, the payoff will be huge. But, you're not counting the wounds she'll get or the tears she'll shed to get there…… or what she herself wants]

In the previous world, even though he had seen, closer than anyone, how thin Emilia had been worn, how weakened she had become, Subaru never uttered a word to stop her.
If it's her, if it's Emilia, then she will be able to do it. They had cornered her, pushed her beyond her limits, and only then had they realized it. There was no point trying to explain this feeling to someone who had not experienced it.
That was the curse of Return by Death that stabbed at Subaru this moment.

His situation was that only he knew the truth of what happened in the last world. Since neither his knowledge nor his words would suffice, the only thing he could do was to speak from emotions,

[Emilia: What…… do you know, Subaru?]

[Subaru: Emilia?]

Feeling a tug on his sleeve, Subaru lifted up his head and saw Emilia's eyes opened wide, staring at him. Emotions were swirling within her violet pupils, which were drowned in surging tear drops that would fall and disappear.
With tiny movements, Emilia shook her head from side to side, muttering [No, no……] as if rejecting something.

[Emilia: Do you know? Subaru, do y……do you know… about my Past?]

[Subaru: Wait, calm down. Take a deep breath. The conversation's just taken a bad turn, so…]

[Emilia: Wrong, you're wrong…… I didn't, mean to…… I, just…… just]

Once again, Emilia returned to the state she had been in within the Tomb, immediately after the Trial.
Confused, disoriented, beginning to ramble incoherently, her violet eyes that were wet with tears reflected Subaru within them, without seeing him at all.
She reached out her fingers and clenched onto Subaru's sleeve as if she was going to tear it off,

[Emilia: I, Everyone…… even Mother, I…… but no, you're wrong. It's not true. It really isn't. At the time I…… really…… I]

[Subaru: Emilia, what are y……]

Holding tight onto Subaru, Emilia desperately rambled on. Unable to understand the meaning behind her frantic words, Subaru could only pray that his sincere, meaningless consolation could get through to her.
When, in front of the helpless Subaru, a shadow suddenly moved. It was,

[Subaru: ——Ram]

Without stopping to respond to his call, Ram slid herself behind Emilia. Reaching out her hand, she gently covered Emilia's mouth. As the silver-haired girl's eyes widened in astonishment, Ram quietly uttered [Forgive me],

[Emilia: ……ah]

And suddenly, Emilia's body began to powerlessly collapse to the floor.
Immediately reaching out to Emilia who was falling right in front of him, Subaru breathed a sigh of relief as he managed to wrap her within in his arms. Then, looking up at Ram,

[Subaru: What did you do!?]

[Ram: Only a quicker way to calm her down. Did that make Barusu mad?]

[Subaru: I wanted to say it was too forceful…… but I guess it was for the best. Sorry for all the trouble]

[Ram: It's strange that Barusu would be apologizing on Emilia-sama's behalf. Since when did you take over the Great Spirit-sama's position as Emilia-sama's protector?]

[Subaru: It's not like I was……]

"Trying to", was what he was about to say. But Subaru realized that it would have been an unconvincing rebuttal.
Since for one reason or another Puck was refusing to show his face, it was true that Subaru was looking out for Emilia even more than usual. And now, knowing that challenging the Trials was wearing her down, that feeling had only increased.
And for Emilia, now that the Great Spirit who had always protected her was no longer at her side, she was relying on Subaru more than ever before.
In any case,

[Garfiel: If she's gotta be taken care of, the talk ends here]

Watching Subaru cradling Emilia, who had been forced asleep by Ram, Garfiel snorted and spat this out.
Subaru was about to raise his voice to object, but, feeling Emilia's small movements in his arms, he unwittingly shut his mouth. And so, having lost his chance, he did nothing more except watch as Garfiel turned his back to leave.

[Garfiel: Today's Trial's the exception. From t'morrow onwards, th' one t'take the Trials'll be Emilia-sama. I won't accept ya takin' em]

Baring his fangs, Garfiel spoke his part and left Lewes' house. And, the tiny shadow behind him――― Lewes, continued,

[Lewes: Sorry, Su-bo. But I'm of the same opinion. The earlier the Sanctuary is liberated the better, but….. it would be more convenient to stick to Ros-bo's intentions]

[Subaru: What do you mean, it would be more convenient……]

[Lewes: Even if the Sanctuary is liberated, it doesn't change the fact that we will continue to be Ros-bo's subjects, under his protection. So, it would be in our best interest to avoid going against him if possible. ……I hope you do not think badly of me, it was not my intention to be selfish]

Realizing that Lewes' words must have represented the true thoughts of the residents of the Sanctuary, Subaru lost all room to object. After Garfiel and Lewes of the Sanctuary-camp left the room, the only ones remaining were the odd-bunch members of Roswaal's Mansion, plus one extra.

[Subaru: So, plus-one-extra Otto, what do you think of this situation?]

[Otto: I got the worst feeling about where this is going and I intend to keep quiet and let this pass, so would you mind not dragging me into this? ……But, if I were to give my honest opinion after listening to that conversation, I think Garfiel is right]

Otto lifted up a finger as he said this, nodding several times while watching Subaru kneel down,

[Otto: It would make more sense, whether it's for the Margrave's aims, or for Emilia-sama's as a Royal Selection candidate. I'm sure if Natsuki-san takes the Trials in her place, it could be made to become Emilia-sama's achievement, but……. regardless of how other people hear about it in the future, will the people who are currently stuck in the Sanctuary really think of it this way? And will it really win her their support?]

[Subaru: ……I understand that too. No matter which way I think about it, letting Emilia be the one to liberate the Sanctuary will be most beneficial, but……]

[Ram: ……but Emilia-sama is incapable of overcoming the Trials?]

Ram's words kicked right through Subaru's indecisive muttering. Yet, in front of her refreshingly blunt attitude, Subaru grew calm.

[Subaru: As far as I can tell, I think it'd be too much to expect quick results. I don't know what exactly happened in Emilia's past…… but I'm sure you both understand that we don't have that kind of time, don't you?]

[Ram: At the very least, I would like to see this end within three years before the Royal Selection is decided]

[Subaru: That's being way too patient about this!]

That was probably some kind of joke, and since she said it with a straight face, he could pretty much rule out the possibility that she was being serious. As if understanding Subaru's meaning, she nodded,

[Ram: There is also the burden of the refugees, and the matter of food supplies. Looking at this in the long term, it's unrealistic to keep sustaining this many people]

[Subaru: Well, that's the gist of it. They're already stressed out as it is after being suddenly forced to evacuate. If they stop receiving enough food on top of that, their discontent will explode. And for the Sanctuary guys, there'll be no point in keeping the hostages if their own living standards start dropping because of it ——at least, there'll be no point in keeping all of them]

[Ram: You think Garf will start culling the villagers?]

Ram's voice became slightly more animated as she asked this.
Subaru raised his brows at her rather unexpected reaction, and even she herself seemed to be surprised about her own attitude. But, stroking her forelocks in order to distract away from it,

[Ram: I would rather not think about it, but with Garf's personality, it is possible. If it really comes down to it, he won't hesitate to follow his own priorities]

[Subaru: He's kinda like you in that. My opinion's the same. ……So, I'd like to suggest that we free the hostages from the Sanctuary before that happens]

Last time, that proposal was accepted on the secret condition that Subaru would take the Trials. Since that won't work this time, he could expect it to be far more difficult to negotiate the same terms. But even so, he was sure that he could win some concessions in the end,

[Subaru: In any case, if the Sanctuary guys are going to push Emilia into taking the Trials no matter what, hopefully I can do something to make things easier for both sides]

[Ram: ……I'm surprised. I thought Barusu would be more opposed to it and behave like an unreasonable little child]

Seeing Subaru apparently put away his worries about Emilia taking the Trials, Ram made this brief comment. Subaru nodded, and started off again with [Well],

[Subaru: It's regrettable and unfortunate…… but it makes the most sense to go along with Roswaal's plans. Yeah, that's right. If I can overlook the fact that Emilia will be hurt, then it's definitely for the best if we do it this way]

[Ram: Even knowing that she'll be hurt, you'll let her go on with it? What a demon you are]

[Subaru: To have real demon tell me that, I must really have changed. Except……no, nevermind]

He was about to say something, but Subaru closed his mouth again and shook his head. Seeing that he wasn't going to continue, Ram furrowed her brows, but didn't bother commenting on it.
Gently, being careful not to wake her, Subaru lifted up Emilia in his arms.
She was light. People were supposed to be heavier when they are unconscious, but she was still as light as a feather.
Just how much must she be carrying within this small, delicate body, he wondered.

[Subaru: Ram. After I set Emilia down in the bedroom, I want to talk to Roswaal. Is that alright with you?]

[Ram: Roswaal-sama is resting. No one may enter his room for the time b……]

[Subaru: I want to talk to him about the Trial. We won't get anywhere if we low-ranking guys just keep talking amongst ourselves. I need the mastermind's opinion on this]

If he used the Trials as bait, then even Roswaal will have to take down the "Do Not Disturb" sign on his door and meet him face to face. Subaru already had experience of this from the previous world.
Ram closed her eyes for a moment to scrutinize Subaru's words, until, looking as if she was very tired, she spilled out a sigh,

[Ram: I will wait at Roswaal-sama's side. Barusu, please take Emilia-sama to her bed……without doing anything suspicious]

[Subaru: What are you saying to SERIOUS MODE me over here? I wasn't even thinking anything until you went and said that, and now that I am acutely aware of the soft DIRECT CONTACT sensation with Emilia-tan, my knees are shaking out of control! How are you going to take responsibility??]

[Ram: Otto, keep an eye on him]

[Otto: Yes ma'am!]

Ignoring Subaru's jape, Ram left a simple order for Otto and exited the house. Now the only ones left were two guys and one pretty girl. Under such circumstances, Otto kept up his saluting pose and stared at Subaru closely.

[Otto: Go on, please take Emilia-sama to the bed. Unless you need any help?]

[Subaru: Before that, what's with this obedient attitude you're taking toward Ram……]

[Otto: Well, see, Ram-san's a direct subordinate of the Margrave, right? With that in mind, unlike Natsuki-san singlemindedly sticking to Emilia-sama, if I suck up to Ram-san instead, I'll have a better hope of getting close to the Margrave, won't I? Heheh]

[Subaru: Your initial impression as a skilled merchant is slowly shifting into a sly minor-villain, you know! Aren't you going to do something to salvage it? Will I have to treat you like an obstacle from now on and quietly kill you off in the shadows?]

Complaining about Otto's identity shift, Subaru sighed, and carried Emilia into the bedroom. He lightly smoothed out the messy bedsheet with his palm, and slowly laid her down. When,

[Subaru: Ah……]

After drawing the bedsheets to her shoulders, just as he was about to leave, Subaru noticed Emilia's fingers clutching to the hem of his shirt. Sensing the reliance conveyed through the touch of her fingertips, taking in her adorableness, Subaru gently picked her fingers away. Then, wrapping them up within his hands,

[Subaru: Wait for me, Emilia]

[Emilia: ――――]

[Subaru: Somehow, I'll find a way. So that you will no longer have to cry, or be hurt anymore. I promise]

Saying this oath, Subaru released Emilia's hand.
Standing up, and turning around, he headed for the house's exit. ――And to Roswaal.

Because there were far too many things he must hear from the devil himself.

[Roswaal: ――I see, I think I mo~re or less understand the situa~tion now]

Touching a hand to his jaw, after quietly listening to Subaru's long speech, Roswaal nodded his head.
The location was in a room of the private residence where Roswaal was resting, and the only two people inside were Subaru and Roswaal. Lying on the bed, Roswaal lifted his upper body to get a better look at Subaru. And Subaru, shooting him a stern gaze in return,

[Subaru: That why, if we incorporate the Sanctuary side's interests as much as possible, I think this would be the best starting point to launch the negotiations]

[Roswaal: A~~hah, it is true, that from the moment Emilia-sama entered within the Barriers of the Sanctuary, Garfiel and the others' plans might as well have alre~ady been realized. Emilia-sama herself cannot le~~ave the Sanctuary until she overcomes the Trials. So if the hostages they have taken for insurance simply become useless baggage draining their food supply, then there is reason to let them go…… that is the idea?]

[Subaru: I think it's a sensible argument. Of course, we won't be throwing away or putting off the Sanctuary's problems. This is just to take the unnecessary components out of the equation]

[Roswaal: Sounds almost too go~od to be true. Deep down, you have such doubts too, no? If the liberation of the Sanctuary ever becomes far beyond reach, or, if Emilia-sama falters, and her heart could no longer withstand the Trials, then the hostages can be used as a resource to coerce Emilia-sama. Perhaps that is why you thought you'd eliminate that possibility beforehand…… or something along those lines?]

With one eye closed, Roswaal looked at Subaru through his single yellow pupil. Subaru crossed his arms as he took in the contents of those words, and then, nodding,

[Subaru: Sorry, but, I didn't really think that far. Or actually, the fact that you managed to immediately come up with that terrifying idea kinda makes me want to recoil a bit]

[Roswaal: A~~ah it di~~d? Was I thinking too much into it? Sorry. Bu~~t still, that is another way to thi~nk about it, no?]

Roswaal smiled as if to cover up the fact that he had surprised even himself with his pessimism. Seeing that smile, Subaru only looked at him wryly in return, and wondered whether Garfiel was really capable of going that far.

No matter how stubborn or inflexible he was, and even if there were times when words can't get through to him, he wasn't the kind of person who would stain his hands with something truly irrational or immoral.
Subaru had only known him for a few days, but that was his assessment of Garfiel.
In any case,

[Roswaal: So? What would you ha~ve me do, Subaru-kun?]

[Subaru: If possible, instead of me, I want you to be the one to propose these terms. This time, it looks like…… things won't end well if I do it]

[Roswaal: And wh~~y is that?]

[Subaru: I have a feeling that bastard Garfiel's got a thing against me. It's not that I've given up on convincing him, but it's going to get rough if I go talk to him today or tomorrow]

Subaru could still remember the sharpness of the gaze Garfiel had given him when they parted. Filled with hostility and disdain, it was as if those eyes were looking at someone who killed his parents――― though Subaru had no clue why he would look at him this way. Had he done something that Garfiel deemed impermissible, or had he mistakenly said something that trampled on his beliefs? Either way,

[Subaru: Now that he's gotten emotional, he'll probably reject my ideas no matter what it is. And on top of that, if Garfiel objects, it seems Lewes-san will passively go along with him as well. I can already see that happening, so I hope we can avoid that possibility]

[Roswaal: So that's where I come in, is tha~t correct? Well, alright. I will speak to granny-Lewes-sama and Garfiel. Although, it seems Garfiel dislikes me as well, so even I'm not sure if I could convi~nce him]

Upon receiving Subaru's proposal, Roswaal lightheartedly accepted the task.
Hearing that encouraging reply, Subaru breathed a sigh of relief. Anyways, one of his worries had been resolved for now. Then, the remaining problem would be…

[Roswaal: Well~ then. Is that all the business you ha~ve with me?]

[Subaru: No, not yet. ―――I haven't brought up the most vital issue yet]

The most important conversation that was the reason he came here hadn't even begun.
Roswaal tilted his head, and, closing a single eye, he brushed his long, flowing hair behind his back. Subaru wasn't sure if it had become a habit, but he would inadvertently straighten his back whenever he was stared at by that yellow eye.
Then,

[Subaru: The Trial inside the Tomb showed Emilia her Past. Do you have any idea what that Past might be, that was so painful for her to look back on?]

Subaru asked this question about the past that Emilia was desperately trying to hide.
And, receiving this question, Roswaal closed his yellow eye, and slightly inclined his head as

though sinking into thought. Just like this, the room fell into silence, and the only sound Subaru could hear in that muted world was the sound of his own anxiety as he waited. Then,

[Roswaal: Don't you think that asking me, instead of asking Emilia-sama directly, is a rather co~~wardly way to do it?]

[Subaru: You can call me an underhanded coward a much as you like. And I would certainly rather hear everything from Emilia herself if I could. But…]

The secret that she was trying to hide even with all the tears and all the pain, how could Subaru bring himself to ask her?
But even if he could understand why she wanted keep it secret, just as he himself wanted to hide his pain about his parents, he mustn't hesitate.

[Subaru: It's because I want to know about her, and because I have to know. And if there is anything I can use, I will grasp at any straws I can]

[Roswaal: I've had people call me all sorts of things, but to be treated like stra~~w certainly is a new experience for me…… Alri~~ght, then]

After letting out a small laugh, Roswaal's expression disappeared.
He exhaled a short breath, and then stopped breathing altogether as he took in Subaru through both of his mismatched pupils. Placing him under the gazes of those different-colored eyes, Roswaal touched his raised hand to his forehead, and,

[Roswaal: Emilia-sama is a Half-Elf. A~nd due to the Witch of Envy, the Half-Elves are looked upon with discrimination. Thi~s much, even yo~u must already know, isn't tha~t right?]

[Subaru: ……Yeah. I can tell how unfairly Emilia must have been treated from the way she acted in the Capital. And when I met those assholes as well]

The images of those abominable Witch Cultists came to mind. Watching Subaru trying to shake that out of his head, Roswaal continued with [Howe~~ver],

[Roswaal: While it's true that Half-Elves are the targets of particularly severe pe~~rsecution…… it does not end there…… By the way, Subaru-kun, did you ever see an Elf while you were in the Ca~pital?]

[Subaru: Elf? Not just Half-Elf? ……No, I don't think I've ever seen one]

Holding his chin, Subaru mobilized his memory to look through the different worlds he had seen. But never once, within all those worlds, had an Elf—— or the fair, long-eared features of the popular impression of that race ever crossed into his memories.
Hearing Subaru's reply, Roswaal simply remarked [Right],

[Roswaal: The Half-Elves aren't the only ones being harshly persecuted throughout all pa~rts of the world. The Elves, for being, in part, the sires of Half-Elves, are also at the end of the spear]

[Subaru: ……! But, that's way too indiscriminate no matter how you look at it. If you follow that logic, then……]

[Roswaal: Humans would also have to be eradicated? Unfo~~rtunately, in this world, Humans are fa~r more numerous than the Demihumans, and their nations are far more powerful. It was only owing to the sheer magnitude of the ever expanding rift between the Humans and the Demihumans, that the "Demihuman War" had dra~gged on for so long. But that has little to do with the topic at hand]

[Subaru: So then, what does the history of persecution against Elves have to do with this?]

The Demihuman War was a phrase he had never heard before. Although he was intrigued, Subaru decided to get back to the original topic before they ran off on a tangent. Roswaal drew in his chin and with [In o~ther wo~rds], he shook his head and continued,

[Roswaal: Naturally, it would be difficult for Half-Elves to show their faces in a place like the Capital, and the Elves, being their parent race, shared the sa~me difficulty. That would be why you have not seen any Elves insi~de the Capital]

[Subaru: That part….. I get already. But, how is that connected to this?]

Roswaal appeared unconcerned about Subaru's request for an explanation. Leaning his back against a pillow, and, feeling its softness pushing against his back, he slightly lifted his head, looking up,

[Roswaal: As an extension of the prejudice against Half-Elves, the Elves are also met with repression where~ver they go. In that case, just whe~re should the Elves live?]

[Subaru: If they're Elves…… I get the feeling they'd live in a camp inside a forest or something. Keep to some part of the forest that's inaccessible to people, and quietly hunt and stuff]

[Roswaal: I don't know where you got all that information, but it is roughly along those li~~nes. The Elves were chased away from the towns, and so they could only live secretly in the depths of the fo~rests. ——The Great Forest of Elior, was once one of these homes to the Elves]

All of a sudden, Subaru noticed a change in Roswaal's voice, and couldn't keep himself from shuddering.
It felt as though the temperature of the room had suddenly dropped, but, naturally, it was only an illusion. And the real reason must have been Roswaal in front of him, and the indescribable power carried within his words.
As for the name of that place, Subaru had a feeling that he had heard it before.

——The Great Forest of Elior. That name had come up several times over the course of negotiations in Crusch's mansion. They had mentioned that it is a territory within Roswaal's domains rich in magical minerals. And that,

[Subaru: It's now frozen in ice, and no one could go near it……]

[Roswaal: The beginning of the freezing of the Great Forest of Elior, and its subsequent spread, is recorded as an event that happened over ninety years ago. All was frozen, and all living things were sealed in ice, in a world of absolute zero. ——And she lived in that world, all alone]

As if confirming Subaru's fears, the usual strange intonations disappeared from Roswaal's voice. Ninety years. An exceeding long time. And who was that person? From the flow of the conversation up to now, only one answer appeared in his mind.
And, seeing Subaru at loss for words, Roswaal plainly told him.

[Roswaal: ——In the depths of the Great Elior Forest, the village and the villagers of the Elven tribe that resided there remain frozen in ice even to this day, stopped in time]

[Subaru: ————]

[Roswaal: All except one, all except the Half-Elf girl who committed this mistake……]

Chapter 26 [Impaction]

——He never should have asked.

Feeling a cold sweat rolling from his forehead to his jaw, Subaru once again recognized the extent of his own stupidity.
A distant-sounding ring was reverberating inside his skull, and his thumping heart groaned in pain.

[Roswaal: After hearing all of this, you are starting to regret it…… ar~~en't you?]

Watching Subaru sink into silence, on the bed, Roswaal tilted his head.
Being asked this question by the clown playing with his long blue hair, Subaru couldn't immediately come up with a reply. All he could do was to breathe quietly to calm himself down, and,

[Subaru: I was just, surprised, that's all. How should I say it…… Emilia is, a bit older than I thought]

[Roswaal: Oya, didn't you know? Emilia-sama, being Half-Elf, is a member of a race blessed with long life, though it would not be as long as the Elves. As for the Elves, you could say that unless they are killed, they would pretty much ne~~ver die]

Going along with Subaru's evasive reply, Roswaal gave a similarly half-hearted explanation.
The characteristics of the Elves as Roswaal described them did seem to match the subculture-understanding of Elves in the original world. Subaru wasn't sure how much the "Half" part came into, but, at least on the point of Emilia's true age, assuming Roswaal's words could be believed——

[Subaru: There's at least a 60-year gap …… Even with my older-sister-complex, I'm a bit lacking in experience points when it comes to that kind of a age gap in a potential conquest target]

[Roswaal: This is unrelated, but……. from the way you said that, it sound as if you've had contact with other long-lifed races besides Emilia-sama befo~~re?]

[Subaru: Well, immortals and vampires are pretty common character tropes in GAL-GAMES, you know. Loli-Granny Lewes-san's a type as well…… such are the sins of past life]

Although, Non-Humans and Loli-Granny-types weren't really a part of Subaru's undertakings.
Subaru's STRIKE-ZONE was usually situated around older sisters and senpais at school.
That's why, when he learned that there was actually a 60-year age gap, he more or less had some thoughts about it,

[Subaru: But since she's cute, I'm OK with it. NO-PROBLEM. Emilia-tan is still the brightest star in my heart!]

Besides, since long-living races live for a long time, they probably grow at a slower rate, and so they probably mentally mature at a different rate as well. He's seen that pretty often in these kind of character setups.
Kind of like how dog age is different from human age, 20 years old in human age is probably like 200 years old in Elf years. Then――

[Subaru: If I think of it that way, 90 years old Emilia-tan is still young, just a little girl…… no, from the Elves' point of view, she's might actually be a Loli. Oyoy, if such a sexy beautiful girl is only a Loli…… that's a whole new genre isn't it!]

[Roswaal: Even though indulging in various kind of fantastical delu~~sions is a good thing, the reality is ha~~rsher than you imagined. With the passage of time, people will grow. Even the minds of Elves would not mature any slower a~~t all]

[Subaru: You… I'm desperately trying to convince myself Emilia-tan is a little girl here, why do you have to immediately disprove me……]

Even though it was just wishful thinking, it was still annoying to have his last hope pulverized right off the bat. Under Subaru's resentful leer, with [Besides], Roswaal continued,

[Roswaal: E~~~ven I can't just stand by while watching you cover your o~~wn eyes and pretend nothing ha~~ppened. Ri~~ght, Subaru-kun?]

[Subaru: ――――]

[Roswaal: Having heard from me what you sho~~uldn't have heard, do you regret it so much?]

[Subaru: ……You, really are an annoying guy]

Despite Subaru trying to gloss it over, just as he was about to bury it away, Roswaal just had to dig it all up again. After tossing back this limp retort, Subaru cursed at himself one more time.

That heavy cross borne upon Emilia's delicate shoulders―― he had dishonestly heard it from someone other than herself.

[Subaru: ……In the Trial I saw my past. I'm sure Emilia saw hers too. In that case, the past she saw must have been……]

[Roswaal: If it is the past one least wishes to look back upon…… then the one Emilia-sama saw was no doubt the day when the Great Elior Forest fro~ze]

Roswaal confirmed Subaru's fears.
Carrying on from this train of thought, Subaru came to realize just what horror he had been forcing Emilia to go through.
There is much to gain from finding closure, and overcoming one's past――but…

[Subaru: Then, all that time, I've been making her face the past where she froze everyone in ice……?]

Between Emilia and Subaru, the magnitude of the guilt attached to their forsaken pasts were worlds apart.

Of course, it was difficult for Subaru to come to terms with the fact that he was cut off from his parents by an entire world between them. And he would not forgive himself if he cheapened that experience, or saw it as anything less than it was.

But on the other hand, what about Emilia's problem?
Whereas Subaru was loved by his parents, received a push on his back, and was forgiven, would the past that Emilia had to face grant her this affirmation, and forgive her for her mistake? Would she receive this, and move on from her past?

[Subaru: Emilia freezing the forest…… and the Elven village inside, is all of this certain? It sounds as if there's no room for debate, but something feels off……]

[Roswaal: It's true that we can't be sure what really ha~ppened. Bu~~t, this was told to me directly by Emilia-sama herself. It was Emilia-sama herself who confessed to be the one who sealed the forest in ice. That much, shouldn't leave room for any further contention?]

[Subaru: So if you aren't sure what really happened, it could just be a misunderstanding…… To begin with, Emilia-tan isn't the kind of person who could do such a thing……]

[Roswaal: No no~, you misundersta~~nd, that won't do~, Subaru-kun]

While Subaru was trying to search for some excuse, Roswaal held him back with three drawn-out calls. Having been cut off this way, Subaru shot him a sharp and perilous glare. But Roswaal only waved his hand, pretending not to notice it,

[Roswaal: The fact of what actually happened, is no~~t the issue here. The real issue is the fact that Emilia-sama is firmly convinced of the idea, "I am the one who froze the forest"]

[Subaru: ――――]

[Roswaal: To Emilia-sama, this is the truth of what happened. Consequently, the Trial which Emilia-sama must face is also based upon this version of the truth. ――In tha~~~t case, just what do you think we should do?]

[Subaru: You……. what are you even thinking?]

Asking this question as if they were playing some lighthearted game, it was impossible to fathom what was going through Roswaal's mind. As if he couldn't take it anymore, Subaru wrenched out these words.
Just how… how could this man keep smiling in a situation like this?

[Subaru: I don't expect you to sympathize with Emilia's past, or feel for her or anything of the sort, but…… if you know full well the weight of that burden, and know what pain must be going through her heart, then what the hell are you doing having so much fun while she is sent in to challenge the impossible Trials?]

[Roswaal: Fu~~~mu]

[Subaru: What is wrong with you!? You…… don't you want Emilia to be King? You are the one who is going to make her King, aren't you? I know what you are trying to do. You think letting

Emilia liberate the Sanctuary will win her the support of both Arlam village and the Sanctuary…… that I understand……]

But,

[Subaru: On the other hand, when it comes down to the critical moment you're just leaving Emilia to her own devices. If she cannot liberate the Sanctuary, then the whole game falls apart…… how can you just sit around as if there's nothing to worry about when the situation has come to this deadlock!]

[Roswaal: ……]

[Subaru: I've said it before. I won't rest until I've made Emilia King. And I intend to make that true…… As for you, do you really intend to make her King?]

[Roswaal: ——Without a doubt]

Roaring, his shoulders trembling, Subaru asked Roswaal this heartfelt question. But, at the end of his last question, Roswaal's answer came down like a bucket of cold water on his seething face. In front of his eyes, Roswaal didn't move an inch—— with steady eyes, his gaze was fixed dead upon Subaru. Then, he,

[Roswaal: Do I intend to make her the King? Certainly, I do. ——Other than myself, there is no one else who would wish more for her to be King. Not even Emilia-sama herself, or a man like you, can match my desire for this, or the reason for my conviction]

[Subaru: Ros……waal?]

[Roswaal: That you would hound me like this, and doubt my motivations, is truly laughable. Absolutely, laughable. ——Are we still not there yet, after all?]

There was rage in his quiet words, and it was the first time Subaru ever sensed this from Roswaal.
But, halfway through, the heat vanished from his impassioned words, until, at last, it fell to a whisper and scattered like mist. In the end, with a final profound musing, he brought his speech to a close, and,

[Roswaal: Subaru-kun. Unfo~~tunately, this will be all for tonight. I a~~m still recovering from my wo~unds. At least, I hope you'd grant me a little re~st]

[Subaru: We're…… no, nevermind]

Subaru reached out his hand, trying to hold Roswaal back from one-sidedly ending the conversation, but he realized it would be futile, and drew it back again.
Ending their talk in a lighthearted tone, Roswaal plainly refused any further discussion. Since he had already been rejected this way, even though the person was still lying in the bed right in front of him, it was already too late to ask anything more.

Shaking his head, holding back his disappointment, Subaru turned his back to the bed.
He had already said what he came here to say. Whether or not the situation of the villagers of

Arlam would change for the better is still unknown, but Lewes will probably not refuse Roswaal's request.
If that much can be done, then the stagnating circumstances will at least move forward. Even though, for Subaru, there were still many more hurdles to come.

[Roswaal: ——Subaru-kun]

Just as he was about to leave the room, Roswaal's call stopped him. Halting his legs, and looking back, he saw that Roswaal had already laid his head down on the pillow, and was not looking at him.

[Roswaal: The Qualification… you've received it?]

[Subaru: Ah. Yeah, haven't I mentioned it yet? Yeah. I took the Trial too. Actually, if going inside is like getting baptized with that stuff, then maybe you could……]

[Roswaal: ——No~ no, that will not be possible. I'm afraid the Tomb will not accept me. The fact that I carry these scars of rejection should make that clear enough]

Having glossed over the part about the Qualification, and recalling their conversation from the previous world, Subaru raised his brows in astonishment. In the previous world, when he told Roswaal that he had challenged the Trials, he could remember Roswaal's expression turning terribly dark.
But this time, there was only a tinge of loneliness that didn't seem noteworthy at all.

[Roswaal: ……Choose what is best, Subaru-kun]

[Subaru: What?]

[Roswaal: In this place, you are the one person who could move most freely. You are completely unbound by the Sanctuary. Nor are you constrained by any obligation to the Royal Selection]

[Subaru: ————]

[Roswaal: Go on being guided by your desires, go on struggling, until you hold everything within your hands. To agonize, and to be lost, and only then can you obtain it…… Even if it would not satisfy you, even if you could not understand it, see it through to the end]

Roswaal said this without showing his face. Without the usual clownish intonations, Subaru was stunned by these uncharacteristically cynical remarks, and could only stand there stupidly on the spot.
Until, after a little while had passed, he suddenly realized that Roswaal had been saying those words to himself.

[Subaru: Hey…… that's, not like you at all. What's wrong, Ros-chi?]

[Roswaal: Sometimes I want to try something different, tha~~t's all. ——I suppose, it seems I didn't ma~ke it]

There was no way he could understand that open-ended sentence. But, just as he was about to ask, Roswaal waved his hand on the bed, urging Subaru to leave.

Seeing this, standing in front of Roswaal, who had turned away from him, Subaru let out a long, drawn out sigh through his nostrils,

[Subaru: Good night]

And, leaving this behind, he stepped out of the room.

[Ram: ……You didn't impose any burdens on Roswaal-sama, I hope?]

The first thing that greeted Subaru as he came out of the bedroom were these words of interrogation and Ram's sharpened stare.
The pink-haired girl was about half a head shorter than Subaru, but on matters that concerned Roswaal, her intimidating presence would make her body appear twice as big as it actually is. In any case, Subaru started shriveling under the immense pressure.

[Subaru: We just calmly talked about some stuff, that's all. There were no collar-grabs or wrestling throws or anything, don't worry]

[Ram: What an optimistic Barusu. Setting foot inside the Tomb, only to be rejected, do you realize how cruel that was to Roswaal-sama…… You don't even understand that much, and have the audacity to be a smartass about it?]

Ram didn't conceal her displeasure as she blasted back at Subaru for his response. Seeing her priorities clearly laid out, Subaru couldn't help but smile wryly, and,

[Subaru: Well he was gonna go to sleep, so I kinda got kicked out…… I already said what I had to say, so it's fine]

[Ram: Is it. ……At least, if Roswaal-sama makes the request, I think Lewes-sama will probably accept. But as for Garf…… I don't know how he will react]

[Subaru: If he's gonna grumble, then we'll have to rely on your seduction skills. You just have to strike a cute pose and…… you know how to do that, right?]

[Ram: Isn't Ram cute already?]

[Subaru: No I mean, well, if it's just the outer appearance then it's pretty cute……]

After all, aside from the hair color, she looked exactly like Rem. Very very cute. The only problem was that the cuteness and Ram's fresh-personality kind of managed to cancel each other out.

[Subaru: But to go after you, Garfel sure has some bizarre tastes. No, or, maybe it's just hard to tell from the appearance…… kind of like the puffer fish, you kn-OWOWOW!]

[Ram: I am pretty sure that wasn't a compliment, so this is how I am responding, Barusu]

Stomping on Subaru's toes with her heel to her heart's content while watching tears jerking out of his eyes, Ram huffed through her nose. Then, she stood in front of the door to Roswaal's bedroom, and,

[Ram: Ram will change Roswaal-sama's bandages, and then rest for the night. I suppose Barusu will sleep in the Cathedral like yesterday? Even a Barusu should be able to remember a simple location, I assume?]

[Subaru: My sense of direction's surprisingly good, you know. Besides, it's the biggest building here. Although having no street lights is kind of a pain]

The Sanctuary was an undeveloped area that relied on starlight to light the way at night. But still, on clear nights, the light descending from a star-filled sky was often enough to keep the darkness at bay. Unfortunately, it's cloudy today.
Looking out the window, aside from the sprinkles of glimmering lights from the village houses, all the rest was completely dark.
He felt just a little, tiny unease about the road back home.

[Subaru: Getting lost and wandering into the forest and getting a random encounter with a BEAST and then going into BADEND―― probably won't happen, right? It's ok, it's ok]

[Ram: The possibility of that happening was very low to begin with, but after you said that out loud it seems to have slightly increased. Alright. Barusu, the Cathedral is directly to the right hand side after you leave the building]

[Subaru: O~k got it! So it's the chopstick-hand side, right? Although there doesn't seem to be a chopstick-culture in this world]

Since the dining culture here mainly consists of silverwares like knives and forks and spoons, Subaru's remark just now obviously made no sense to Ram. Anyways, thinking about whether he should try shaving down some trees and start mass producing chopsticks here if he ever gets the chance,

[Subaru: Anyways, I'll head back to the Cathedral…… since it's still uncertain whether they can return to the village, just so we don't get their hopes up, maybe it'd be best if we don't mention that we're negotiating for their release yet?]

[Ram: Agreed. If we hold the talks tomorrow…… it would still be at least the day after tomorrow before they could leave. In the meantime, how to deal with Echidona's Tomb is what we need to think about]

[Subaru: ―――――]

Inadvertently, just as he was about to say some last words on his way out of the house, Subaru suddenly froze in place. The abrupt halt sent a surprised look onto Ram's face, but Subaru, who had turned around to look at her, seemed even more confused than she was. Then,

[Subaru: ……what did you say just now?]

He asked in a raspy voice. Hearing Subaru's question, Ram, still not any less surprised, tried to remember what she just said, and,

[Ram: The Tomb is what we need to think about?]

[Subaru: No, before that]

[Ram: Isn't Ram cute already?]

[Subaru: Went back too far! ……You said Echidona's Tomb, right?]

Feeling stupid after missing the right answer twice in a row, Subaru gave up and answered the question himself. Seeing Ram nodding reluctantly, Subaru pressed his hand against his forehead. ——With terrifying speed, the memories flooded back into his consciousness.

"Echidona"

It was the name of the Witch of Greed, that white-haired girl in funerary dress, the self-proclaimed Incarnation of the Thirst for Knowledge, and the most important Bokukko-stereotype in this Parallel World. And above all,

[Subaru: What the hell were you trying to do…… messing with other people's memories……]

The entity who had done her work on Subaru's memories so that no one else could learn of her secrets.
At the end of the tea party, before the impending Trials, she had forcibly extracted an oath from Subaru. But if that was the price he had to pay to receive the Qualifications, then he would willingly accept it.

[Subaru: Whether it was bugged or that was how it's supposed to work…… either way, the restriction's lifted!]

The restriction that Echidona was supposed to have placed on Subaru was lifted, and his memories were unbound.
Within his mind, the encounter with the Witches, the tea party, and his meeting with Echidona in school-uniform in his old classroom in the Original World, all of them, one by one, returned to him. And, having remembered, Subaru's thoughts arrived on a possible a way to break open the deadlock on the Sanctuary. It would be akin to a forbidden move, but,

[Subaru: If the Cathedral's on the chopstick-hand side, then the Tomb's on the bowl-hand side——!]

[Ram: Barusu——?]

[Subaru: I better not keep you up too late! It won't be good to put too much strain on a guy who just recovered from a major illness!]

Waving up his hand in response to Ram's call from behind, Subaru charged out of the building and into the night. Not to the bed inside the Cathedral, but to the Tomb he had left only two hours ago.
Timewise, even if he went to the Tomb, there was very little chance that he'd be able to confirm his idea. But while the chance may be low, he couldn't resist trying it out. At least, if it couldn't be done on this night, he'd know.

[Subaru: After taking the first Trial, all sorts of annoying things just popped one after another. So invite me to another tea party, Witch…… no, Echidona!]

Flying down the streets of the Sanctuary, lit only by the dim natural lights of the night, Subaru ran on.
The icy wind, the muddy ground, the sweat on his brow, and his panting breaths――― all these sensations pressed his exhausted body onward. And, when he arrived,

[Garfiel: Yo…… thought you'd be comin']

Blocking Subaru's path was the youth with short blonde hair――― Garfiel, standing guard in front of the Tomb.

[Garfiel: Impressive, out runnin' so late at night. Born a man aft'r all, we're obliged t'make an effort n'get strong. "Th'Winbrook's the warrior's qualifications", yeah?]

Garfiel spread out his arms standing in middle of the night's path, gradually baring his fangs as he spoke, barring Subaru's way ahead. Seeing him do this, all the hairs on Subaru's skin stood on end.

[Subaru: Ohh, sorry but I really wasn't pretending to be jogging or anything like that. Too bad I can't stay and chat. It's not that I have a deadline, but, it doesn't hurt to do it early……]

[Garfiel: Yer'not gettin' it, oy]

A sharp noise――― it was the cracking-sound of Garfiel's foot stomping into the ground faster than the eyes could see.
Soil flew up in all directions, and stamped into the hard surface of the path was a boot-shaped impression. Seeing Subaru's eyes widen, Garfiel clacked his teeth,

[Garfiel: If I see ya comin' back here again with this late night runnin' bullshit, can't guarantee what I'll do]

[Subaru: It's only been a short amount of time, but why does it already sound like we can't understand each other…… am I left out of the loop about something here?]

[Garfiel: Who knows. But you're blind to what's happenin' around ya, think least that's for sure]

Subaru said this, trying to relax the tension in the atmosphere, but it didn't seem to reach Garfiel, whose gleaming eyes continued to harbor the same hostility.
Garfiel, touching the white scar on his forehead,

[Garfiel: All that's ahead from here's the Tomb. You ain't gonna go all the way there t'take a piss, are ya?]

[Subaru: What, you wanna go together? Peeing on a Witch's grave or whatever, I actually never thought of this kind of revenge tactic before]

From what Subaru knows about Echidona, maybe she won't even be angry about it, and might even find it amusing. But anyways, without lowering his guard about Subaru, Garfiel seemed to want to continue the conversation,

[Garfiel: It couldn't be that yer tryin' to challenge another Trial on the same night y'passed the first one, could it? That'd be a bit greedy, ain't it?]

[Subaru: No way I'm considering something that crazy. I was just, planning another approach]

[Garfiel: Conniving, aren't ya]

[Subaru: Conniving?]

Tricks, forbidden hands, data-disk of inconceivable tactics or whatever you want to call it.
Faced with absolute darkness, blind within that pitch-black world where he could only feel his way forward, he must clench tight onto any small hope of light, suck out its marrows, and swallow it to the last drop.

[Subaru: So get out of the way, Garfiel. I need to go into the Tomb. Perhaps there'll be a way to solve all of our problems……]

[Garfiel: S'rry, but absolutely not. Yer absolutely. Not. Gettin' into this Tomb]

Against Subaru's determination, Garfiel had no intention of backing down.
Met with Garfiel's stubborn refusal, Subaru's confusion was giving way to anger.
Just why, why, of all people, must this man be the one standing in his way.

[Subaru: You probably feel the same way about me, don't you. That's why you're standing here in front of me like this. But even so…….]

[Garfiel: Didn't I tell ya not to give me that bullshit? Once I decided, I ain't gonna bend. You ain't gettin' through, for the Sanctuary or not]

[Subaru: Why do you hate me so much all of a sudden…… Just what the hell do you have against me!!]

Compared to the first day, and the last iteration, Garfiel's attitude could not have been more different. Faced with this unreasonable treatment, Subaru screamed, demanding Garfiel's true intentions.
Hearing that question, Garfiel scrunched up his nose, twisting his face into an expression not unlike a wild beast, and spoke.

[Garfiel: ——Yer stench]

[Subaru: ——Huh?]

Without meaning to, Subaru groaned stupidly.
In front of him, Garfiel covered his own nose with his palm,

[Garfiel: Ever since y'came outta the Tomb, the stench of the Witch's Miasma's just been fumin' out'a yer body. ——Y'expect me t'trust a guy stinkin' of the Witch rollin' with a Half-Witch!? The fuck y'take me for!?]

Jolting up his arms, exposing his fangs, Garfiel laid bare his rage,

[Garfiel: THIS IS THE SANCTUARY! The Experimental Grounds of the Witch of Greed! The cesspool of half-wits who have no place to go, a fuckin' PILE OF IMPACTED SHIT!!]

Chapter 27 [Whisper]

——For Subaru, it was a sound of rage that invoked a strong sense of Deja-vu.

[Subaru: The Witch's… scent……]

This would be the second time Subaru had been treated as an enemy because of it.
Having picked up a scent that Subaru himself couldn't smell, the hatred within Garfiel's eyes seemed as if they were glaring at the very murderer of his parents.
Subaru already knew the sharpness of that gaze, and that same torrent of hostility.

The Witch's stench. The Criminal's lingering scent. And a man ensnared by the Witch.

Those were the words she once lashed upon him right before she took his life, so far had their relationship deteriorated.

[Garfiel: What y'lookin' all stupid for? Got hit where it hurts and forgot how t'talk?]

In front of a shocked Subaru shaken into speechlessness, Garfiel had put his inexhaustible rage into words. Even after limply dropping his arms, Garfiel did not lower his guard.
Watching Subaru's every move, even the small sense of familiarity that was supposedly between them—— was already nowhere to be found.

[Subaru: Um, about the Witch's stench……]

[Garfiel: Huh?]

[Subaru: The stench that's floating around my body, it was after I came out of the Tomb—— after the Trial, that it started floating around, right?]

[Garfiel: ……Yeah. Didn't even mind it before that, but soon as y'came back from the Trial it's suddenly reekin' up the place. I don't know what y'did inside, but I ain't a nice enough guy to trust a bastard smellin' like that]

Seeing Garfiel nodding in affirmation to his question, Subaru let out a short sigh and closed his eyes.
Then it's confirmed—— the Witch's stench clinging onto Subaru becomes stronger immediately after Return by Death.
He had suspected it before, but he had always subconsciously avoided this conclusion. Only now, did Subaru finally accept that piece of the answer.

——The one returning Natsuki Subaru from death, was the Witch.

He didn't know why. There shouldn't be any connection. But, incredibly, he could understand it, and accept it.
It was like the sensation of hesitating to place down the one final piece that would complete the puzzle, and then, finally doing so, seeing the complete picture at last.

[Subaru: Just what, do you have to do with me…… Until I came to this world, I hadn't even encountered a single paranormal phenomenon in my life. And after I got here I never even got a

chance to meet the Witch-sama that everyone keeps talking about…… In fact, I died within six hours of being summoned here]

Subaru was given the special characteristic of "Return by Death" upon being invited to this world.
If that was connected to the Witch, then the summoning itself must have been connected to the Witch as well. Up to this point, he had never once asked why, but――

[Subaru: In the end, I can't ignore it anymore, huh……]

[Garfiel: What're y'mutterin' about? I ain't got the time t'worry about this crap, so go straight back to sleepin' in the Cathedral. Don't come botherin' me with this bullshit again]

[Subaru: ……You're letting me go? Going by what you said, I'm a suspicious bastard with the Witch's stench floating all over me, right? It's the middle of the night, and there's just us here… sounds just like the perfect situation for either a late night tryst or quietly killing someone off, doesn't it?]

[Garfiel: Hah. I ain't a patient guy and it's not that I didn't think about it…… Right now chewin' yer head to shreds' easy, but then what? When the Half-Witch find out yer dead there'll be even more trouble, even I can see that much]

Seeing Subaru tilting his head, unable to understand his intentions, Garfiel continued [But],

[Garfiel: I wouldn't want you goin' near the Tomb and get yerself stinkin' even more. Right now only I got a sharp enough nose to notice it…… but who knows when the old hag and others'in this shithole'll start noticin' it too? And there're the even more troublin' guys]

[Subaru: Even more troubling……]

[Garfiel: Y'have an idea or two who, don't ya? Y'didn't just start reekin'of that stench today. When they smell that stench, those assholes will wanna come]

Listening to Garfiel clacking his fangs saying this, Subaru held his breath as a flood of thoughts came racing through his mind.
Seeing that reaction, Garfiel snorted, and, with a wave of his arm as if swatting away an insect,

[Garfiel: So get outta here. I won't do anythin' this time. Tomorrow onwards, you stay nice and quiet and I won't have to do nothin' either. But don't let me find you comin' near the Tomb or gettin' involved with me or Granny. Won't be a nice experience for either of us'if that happens]

[Subaru: Mutual non-interference, huh. I don't bother you and you won't bother me. That's pretty generous]

[Garfiel: "Makin' it out alive after steppin' on Gringham's tale", yeah? Now get th'hell outta my sight before I change my mind. I rather not make Ram hate me if I can]

Uttering the name of the girl he liked, Garfiel announced this as though he was prepared to do the worst. The menacing hostility emanating from within him was only barely held in check by

self restraint, that much was clear.
Though Subaru still wanted to argue, and continue this debate,

——*It'd be best to retreat for now.*

Coming to this conclusion, he exhaled and dropped his shoulders, and took a step back.
Seeing Subaru no longer intent on going any further, Garfiel's own posture noticeably shifted as well. Closing one eye, and exhaling a deep breath from his nostrils, he sat himself down in the middle of the path to the Tomb. Crossing his arms, he looked up at Subaru,

[Garfiel: Good. Don't do anythin' unnecessary now. ——I'll be here from today 'til the end of the Trials. Tomorrow, the day after, or the one a'fer that, day and noon and night, I got no intention of lettin' you in. I'll leave it at that, so remember it good]

[Subaru: If you don't want Ram to hate you, you might wanna go back for a bath from time to time]

[Garfiel: Before I start stinkin' as bad as you, you better do everythin' you can to get Emilia-sama to pass the Trials. ——Now get outta my sight]

Garfel closed his eyes, and it seemed he was serious about spending the night here.
At first glance, there appeared to be openings all over. If he withdrew from here, and circled around through another part of the forest, perhaps it's not impossible to sneak into the Tomb, but,

[Subaru: Better not…]

Garfiel's probably guarded against that as well.
As long as Subaru stayed within sight, Garfiel will only restrain him with words. But if Subaru did something to trample on this consideration, Garfiel will no longer be so lenient.
Right now, Subaru would have no chance against an opponent who could throw Patrasche along with the carriage, nor was there a way to get past his beast-like sense of smell.

[Subaru: This is the tea-party coming back to haunt me, isn't it……]

Putting a hand against his forehead, he regretted the way he handled the good fortune of having a Witch in front of him to chat with. Although, he couldn't have asked her about any of this at the time, so he couldn't blame himself too much.

[Subaru: At least, there's nothing else I can do tonight. I must find some other way……]

Without getting past Garfiel, there was no way to reach the Tomb. If Subaru cannot reach the Tomb, then there will be no other option except to have Emilia take the Trials.
As far as Subaru can tell, it would be impossible for her to pass the Trials in three days. And if he cannot take any action within three days, then,

[Subaru: Elsa will attack the Mansion. And the chance to repel her will slip away]

Even if it meant seeking help from a Witch, Subaru had hoped to find some kind of sidepath by speaking to Echidona. But Garfiel had blocked that.

The alternative, of attempting to take the Trials without seeking Echidona's advice, was also blocked.
Coming to this point, Subaru realized that the situation had come to dead end.

[Subaru: Oy, oy, oy…….isn't this situation just plain bad?]

Lacking the strength to force his way through Garfiel, Subaru will need to be crafty as well as articulate in order to reach the Trials, or otherwise, he must find some other way to move Garfiel away from this place. But it would be impossible to do this alone.

[Subaru: And even if I try to recruit allies…… neither Ram or Otto are on my side on this one]

Considering its significance to the Royal Selection, those two had judged that it would be best to let Emilia take the Trials. Of course, if only they saw how much Emilia would be worn out over the next two days, perhaps their opinions would change, but,

[Subaru: Then we won't make it back in time for the attack. Isn't there something…… anything I can do?]

The time difference, between the time needed to make everyone see the difficulty of having Emilia pass the Trials and the timing of the imminent danger only Subaru knew about, was far too great. And if Subaru continued to insist on taking the Trials himself, it would only be interpreted as his lack of confidence in Emilia.
It gouged at his heart to think what Emilia might feel about this. It was not that he didn't believe in her. Rather, if time permitted it, Subaru believed beyond a doubt that she will accomplish the task that was given to her. Yet,

——*Even knowing that her task is too heavy for her to bear, how can you still think so?*

[Subaru: ————]

Deep down, a low, dark whisper made Subaru halt his steps.
Occasionally, he'd hear whispers like this. An obscure, dark part of himself mocking, laughing at him from behind for foolishly reaching for such hopes.

[Subaru: The Trials will keep eating away at her. And even so, for the sake of the expectations of those around her and to fulfill her own wish, she will carry on, no matter how much it hurts her. That's how it will be]

——*Disregard her wounds and move forward until it is overcome, is that really what you want?*

She will hold in her pain, her tears, and her sobs, and keep on walking, and in the end, the path will surely open, and her wish will come true. Was that what he believed?

——*There are wounds that don't need to be opened, memories that don't need to be faced, and pasts that don't need to be atoned for.*

[Subaru: She believes she had done something wrong, and that she must do something to make it right. That's why she is facing her past, and why she is suffering, isn't it……]

——*But why must that time be now? Isn't this the worst possible timing?*

Is it truly necessary to face one's past?
Must all committed sins be atoned for? And is redemption something that can be forced?
The past she didn't want anyone else to know, if it wasn't for the Trials, Subaru would never have forced her to reveal it.

One day, with time, perhaps she will come to terms with it, and then there will be a chance to overcome that past.
But did it have to be now? Was this really the right time for that?

Would an answer she found through the obsessive notion that she must do something to atone truly carry a significance which she could be proud of?

[Subaru: At least, I think I'm glad I faced my past. I managed to pass, and even though I know it's just self-satisfaction, the way I am standing here now is an answer to that question]

——*But that's because you were already prepared to face your past, wasn't it?*

Even while he hated himself, there was a girl who loved him and accepted him.
It was because she was there, because of what she did for him, that Subaru was able to reveal that unsightly side of himself to his parents, peel open that ugliness inside him, and at last lift up his face to say his farewells.

——*Right now, is Emilia prepared for that?*

Having touched only a fragment of the weight of her past, just how much strength had Subaru's words and actions lent her up to now?
A shallow worldview, some insignificant efforts, and his empty proclamations of love. Just how much support could they have truly given her?

[Subaru: ……Just what… can I even do for you?]

He liked Emilia. He fell in love with her. He wanted to go on being in love with her, he thought. He wanted her to like him. He wanted her to fall in love with him. And he wanted her to go on being in love with him, he thought, too.

That's why, he wanted to make her happy. To become her strength. And to take all the pain, and bitterness, and sorrow in her stead.
Even if he could not bear it, even if she would not let him, he wanted to be her support.

——Like the girl who brought him back and made him stand, Subaru wanted to do for Emilia what Rem had done for him.

Like Rem, who loved him with the entirety of her being, in the same way, Subaru wanted to become Emilia's support.
Only this way, could Subaru truly fulfill the first promise he made to Rem. And so, right now, what Subaru must do was,

[Subaru: The time you need to stand, and the resolve to carry it through, all that I could do for you…… leave them to me, alright?]

Rolling his hand into a fist, Subaru straightened out exactly what he must do, and, letting out a small sigh, he edged up his lips into a smile.

Wait, what he was going to do hadn't changed at all.

[Subaru: I will do everything I can for her―― after all that headache it just comes down to those few words, huh. Well, you gotta have some self-awareness about what you're gonna do, right?]

For now, the question was how to solve the unavoidable problems at hand and overcome obstacles that accompanied them. And, after clearing them, concoct some shocking, ingenious plan to open this whole situation up.
Time waits for no one. And the limit was drawing near. But he couldn't afford to jump to the wrong conclusions now. He had already made that mistake too many times before.

[Subaru: Nothing will get better if I just turn my head down when things are bad. At least everything will only get worse as time goes by. I know that all too well, unfortunately]

Leaving it all to time and hoping it will solve itself was absolutely out of the question.
For Subaru, this is the unforgiving way of the world, and it was for this very reason that all his struggling, writhing, and resisting had meaning.

[Subaru: The situation is at its worst. Time is running out. And there's still a mountain of things I don't understand, but]

That's nothing special, it is same for anyone, but even so, the fact that he had been granted the chance to do it all over again makes all the difference.

[Subaru: Don't doubt it for a second. Natsuki Subaru's courage will save you, Emilia――!]

One way or another, let's power through this with all we've got.

Chapter 28 [A Conversation Over Tea]

Feeling the first light of dawn burning onto his eyelids, Subaru sat himself up in the darkness. It seemed he had fallen asleep while thinking. But since he sank into the sea of thought so late in the night, he had only managed two or three hours of sleep.

[Subaru: This would've been unthinkable back in the old world. Sunrises are supposed to be when I fall asleep, you know]

Saying this while giving his body a few turns, Subaru took a quick look around at the others who were beginning to wake in the Cathedral. When they noticed Subaru's gaze upon them, one by one they waved at him, and he did the same in return. Then, standing up, he headed for the Cathedral's door.
The crisp morning air greeted him as he went outside, where it seemed the residents of the Sanctuary and some of the refugees were working together to prepare breakfast.

[Woman: Aya, you're already up, Subaru-sama]

[Subaru: He-yo, good morning. Another fresh morning today?]

[Woman: Sure is. The wind's a bit chilly though…… looks like you managed to get a good night's sleep as well, Subaru-sama]

With a smile, the woman with a familiar face called out to him and touched a finger to her cheek. Seeing this, Subaru touched his cheek in the same spot and felt something sticky there―― and noticed there was a trail of saliva drooling down the side of his face.

[Subaru: Wah, no, embarrassing!]

Why was it that short periods of sleep make people wake up even sloppier, anyway? Like when you wake up looking abnormally messy after only a little nap, there must be some kind of rule to this.
Chuckling, and watching Subaru ponder about this unproductive question, another woman―― with short dog-ears on her head, offered him a wet towel. Subaru briefly thanked her, and quickly took the towel and wiped up his mouth.

"Off now?" he looked at them, and both women affirmed that it was. Subaru borrowed the towel so he could wash his face by the pond, and waved them good-day.

Watching the both of them as he left, within the interaction between them he didn't see a single trace of unease or misunderstanding. There was only natural communication between members of two different races.

Over the past few days―― which, if you include the time rewound by Return by Death, would have been a week, there had been no noticeable conflicts between the refugees and the residents of the Sanctuary.
The refugees were in high spirits, and although he'd hate to admit it, the fact that their Lord Roswaal remained with them must have brought them a considerable sense of reassurance. In

reality, the villagers' faith in Subaru, who ate and slept with them, also played no small part in this. But Subaru, with his low evaluation of his own influence, didn't take this into account. Quite contrary to the ominous atmosphere of this place, the residents of the Sanctuary, beginning with the beast-eared woman just now, had grown more and more talkative. At the very least, Subaru felt that it was to the point where the divide between human and half-bloods no longer existed anywhere beyond their thoughts.

[Subaru: The only real thing dividing them was the Barrier, wasn't it…… I don't know what might've been going through the mind of whoever put up that thing, but that was a pretty asshole thing to do]

If Garfiel's words could be believed, this place would be the Experimental Grounds of the Witch of Greed. In that case, the one who erected the Barrier to prevent the half-bloods from escaping might have been the Witch herself.

[Subaru: Echidona……huh. At the end of the day, I still can't figure out what that Witch is up to]

White-haired and white-skined, a monochrome girl wrapped in something of a funerary dress. Lost her life 400 years ago, yet still bound to the present world, not unlike a ghost. Contrary to her proclamation of not interfering with the real world, she had met with Subaru within the Trial grounds and offered her detailed commentary on his actions.
Then, she hid all the memories inside Subaru's mind relating to herself, only to allow it to be remembered again through some careless coincidence――― none of it made any sense.
Perhaps, there was some profound reason behind it, he thought.

[Subaru: Or if she just enjoys screwing with people to see what happens, then there's seriously nothing I can do. Come to think of it, what are you supposed to think of a lady who makes people she just met drink her bodily fluids for no reason, anyway……]

Unpleasant memories of drinking Dona-Tea resurfaced in his mind. But since it was something that was supposed to have happened in the Spiritual world, he really wanted to believe that his actual body hadn't really absorbed any of the Dona bits.
Anyways, regardless of her intentions, the Sanctuary remained surrounded by the Barrier, and its inhabitants remained trapped within it.

[Subaru: When it comes down to it, the greatest obstacle at the moment is…… Garfiel, isn't it]

Whether it was to negotiate with Echidona directly or to personally challenge the Trials, the bottleneck was how to deal with Garfiel, whose hostility towards Subaru had jumped up.
If the change in his opinion of Subaru was truly due to the Witch's stench――― the side-effect of Return by Death, then improving Garfiel's attitude towards him could prove a near-impossible task.
Whether it was the Wolgarms, or the battle against the White Whale, Subaru had managed to turn the stench to his advantage and create breakthroughs in the situation, but,

[Subaru: I can make it smell stinkier, but I don't know how to make it go away……. Don't imagine deodorants would do anything to it. Actually, what am I saying. Stinky or not stinky, what am I, garbage?]

At least, there was a way to intentionally intensify his stench by telling someone about Return by Death. And judging from everything that had happened so far, the intensified odor doesn't seem to last forever.
It seems, just like any ordinary smell, it will gradually fade over time. But on the other hand, it would also mean that there was no other method to make it go away.

[Subaru: I definitely can't count on Garfiel's attitude softening. And though I'd rather not think about it…… if I mess up and Return by Death again…..]

If he dies again, and starts over inside the Tomb, the lingering scent clinging onto Subaru now will be compounded over again with the stench of the Witch. If that happens, it would be terrifying to imagine what Garfiel's reaction will be.

Facing the worst possible case of losing his life, by starting over, Subaru could alter the result. And salvage everything――― yet, in spite of Subaru's greed, the fact is, he hadn't managed to fulfill everything. And there were still things he could not bring back.
But even so, given the opportunity to do it all over again, Subaru intends to use it to choose a better future than the world that came before. It's difficult to appreciate a thing like Return by Death, but without that ability, he would have had to continue on through one of those countless abysmal futures.
Yet,

[Subaru: Even if I can repeat it indefinitely…… with every return my relationships will worsen. The difficulty will increase along with the number of times I respawn…… that's a first, alright]

At this point, it was still possible to establish rational communication with Garfiel. But next time, when the stench is compounded over again, he couldn't be certain whether he will still be granted an opportunity to speak.
At least, recalling the memory of Rem stealing away his life with her morning star when she could no longer trust him as a result of the stench still left him a lonely sense of emptiness on the left side of his body.

Remembering those he left in the Mansion――― especially remembering the sleeping Rem, the next thought that came into Subaru's mind was the assassin in black. The reappearance of that happy murderer with her lethal blade, who currently tops the high-score chart of this world for the Subaru-Kill-Count.
Incidentally, also sharing first place was the gray cat-shaped spirit, while the whole flock of people sharing second-place with the kill-count of one was just too many to keep track of.

[Subaru: Now that I think about it, it's kinda like an inverted kill-counter. Or I guess a "getting-killed-counter" would be more appropriate here? ……Anyways, I need to find a countermeasure against Elsa. If it comes down to a brawl there's no way I can win, so the only practical fighting strength we have would be a pick between Roswaal or Garfiel]

Roswaal, even with his magical abilities, was still hindered by his injuries. So in the end, the best solution would still be to convert Garfiel into an ally.
And in order to have Garfiel fight off Elsa when she attacks the Mansion, Subaru must break the Barrier surrounding the Sanctuary. And so, the most important steps would be,

[Subaru: Pass through the Trials and liberate the Sanctuary before the attack on the Mansion, reconcile with Garfiel and bring him to the Mansion to repel Elsa to get to the HAPPY END…… or something like that?]

Saying it over to himself, Subaru saw the mutually-contradictory problem and furrowed his brows.
In order to make peace with Garfiel, he must liberate the Sanctuary.
And in order to liberate the Sanctuary, he must get past Garfiel so he could challenge the Trials.

Neither of these conflicting points can be satisfied without the other.
Perhaps there was still the possibility of resolving this through words, but looking back on their conversations last night and his experience of their interactions up to now, the slimness of that possibility made him want to clutch at his head.
For better or for worse, interactions with Garfiel are straight-forward, but it also means that once he's set his mind on something, it would be very difficult to change it again.
Therefore, if there was any chance left for Subaru, it would be,

[Subaru: Aim for an opportunity to sneak into the Tomb and get in touch with Echidona, or sneak into the Tomb at the time to challenge the Trials, and break through the remainder of the Trials]

Finishing up washing his face at the pond, Subaru arrived at this conclusion, and turned his steps towards a direction quite different from the cooking grounds.
Wiping his face with the squeezed-dry towel, he set his destination toward a sparsely populated end of the Sanctuary. Heading there, passing a small hill, and continuing down a single road――

[Subaru: ……right, I was expecting too much with my opportunism, wasn't I]

In the middle of the clearly visible path leading straight to the Tomb, seated in the same posture as the previous night, Garfiel was waiting.
――Head to the Tomb first thing in the morning and sneak past Garfiel when he isn't looking.

He thought he'd pull a free one first thing in the morning, but looks like that's been instantly foiled.

[Subaru: You look energetic this morning]

[Garfiel: I should be th'one sayin' that. The hell are ya doin' showin' up here first thing in the mornin? Y'tryin' to piss me off? Oy!]

Subaru raised his hand a little to say hi, and Garfiel, looking annoyed, opened one of his eyes and spat this back. Seeing that expected reaction, Subaru dropped down his hand again, and turned to the petite figure―― Lewes, standing beside the cross-legged Garfiel.

[Subaru: I figured Garfiel would be here, but I didn't expect to find Lewes-san here as well. Good morning]

[Lewes: Mnn, it is a nice morning. Is Su-bo out for a stroll too?]

[Subaru: I guess you can call it that, but it's not as pleasant as it sounds. I came here full of hopes, you know, but also to annoy Garfiel]

[Garfiel: You……]

Seeing blue veins pop up on Garfiel's forehead, and Subaru just pretending not to notice his reaction, Lewes tilted her head. Then,

[Subaru: You said "too" just now, does that mean Lewes-san's out for a stroll too?]

[Lewes: The stroll's just an added bonus for me. Last night I heard Gar-bo hadn't come home and was just going to sit out here on the ground…… So I wanted to see how he's doing]

Lewes said this while playing with her long, pink wavy hair with a finger. In her other hand, she was holding a little package, which, judging from its size and shape, must be packing some simple food inside. Most likely, that was the stubborn not-gonna-move Garfel's breakfast.
Suddenly, Subaru touched a hand to his chin and looked at the two in turn,

[Subaru: Then, Garfiel and Lewes-san, have you guys known each other for a long time?]

[Lewes: Ever since Gar-bo was little, at least…… Well, he's still little]

[Garfiel: Oy, Granny. I've already way overtaken your height here]

[Lewes: And you still haven't grown any taller like you're supposed to. Anyways, we've been together since he was a lot smaller than he is now. I've even found myself growing used to these exchanges]

Even with Garfiel's protests, Lewes seemed to accept them without paying them much mind.
Underneath what seemed to be a little girl was indeed an old woman inside. A total Loli-Granny in every sense of the word.
However, having noticed something from what she said just now, Subaru raised up his brows,

[Subaru: From the way you said that…… was Garfiel not born inside the Sanctuary?]

[Garfiel: ……Don't go pryin' where y'don't need to. Y'wanna be like "Sneak attackin' the black Botokku only t'get killed instead"?]

[Subaru: Yeah that didn't really communicate at all so there's not much stopping power there. So, Lewes-san, tell me the answer, if you please!]

Seeing Subaru intent on completely ignoring last night's warning, Garfiel ground his teeth so hard that they were almost starting to make a noise. But Subaru ignored that too and kept trying to get to the bottom of it.
Looking back and forth at what was going on between the two men, Lewes spilled out a tired sigh, and,

[Lewes: It was ten and something years ago when Gar-bo came to the Sanctuary. Back then, Gar-bo was still a lil'baby that couldn't even walk yet. Ros-bo brought him along and……]

[Garfiel: ——Granny, don't say anythin' unnecessary beyond that]

Narrowing his eyes, Garfiel pressed down his voice as he said this.
Hearing this sent a chill into Subaru's chest, and for a moment, he was afraid that he may have carelessly stepped on something he shouldn't have. But,

[Lewes: Who're you talking to with that kind of mouth, you dumbass!]

[Garfiel: Hurts!]

Striding forward impressively, Lewes reached out her hand and smacked the golden spiky-haired Garfiel right in the head. Under the little girl's arms that didn't seem all that strong, Garfiel hugged his head as if thunderbolts were dropping down on him, and, looking up at her like this,

[Garfiel: G-Granny what're y'doin' all of'a sudden……]

[Lewes: I should be asking you, after raising you up myself is that how you're gonna speak to me? Just, shameful, embarrassing, so sad it makes me wanna cry. Take this! This! This!]

[Garfiel: Sto-, hurts, aow, watchin', there's someone watchin'!]

With "pok pok pok" sound effects, Lewes kept swinging her arm while Garfiel, looking like he wanted to crawl into a hole, tried to block her blows with his hand.
While watching those two going at it, Subaru almost couldn't stop himself from laughing,

[Subaru: I think I've got a pretty good estimate of how long and deep your relationship is now……. Garfiel, do you really plan to keep sitting here?]

[Garfiel: Unless there's somethin' else I need to do, I'm here t'stay. I wouldn't want someone sneakin' in while I'm away, now do I?]

Guarding against anyone sneaking in, even with Subaru trying to get him to let his guard down, Garfiel would not budge. Since Subaru wasn't expecting too much, he wasn't entirely discouraged. Rather, the fact that Garfiel had overturned his own words from only half a day ago meant there was probably a need for Subaru to revise his understanding of Garfiel.
But in any case, the fact that his stubbornness remained difficult to move hadn't changed.

[Subaru: Come to think of it, doesn't the Trial only take place at night? There's no point for me to sneak in during the day anyway. Isn't it kinda pointless to keep sitting here like this?]

[Garfiel: Yer wastin' yer breath if y'think I'm gonna move. Wanna sneak in durin' the day and wait for th'night, bankin' on me not bein' able to go in and then yer all set, yeah? Y'think I ain't ready for a long fight? What, y'underestimatin' me?]

[Subaru: Tch, I've been found out?]

Subaru held up both hands over his head to surrender, and, seeing him do this, Garfiel snorted, before looking up at Lewes,

[Garfiel: So, I can't be movin' from here for a while. Granny, food]

[Lewes: Is that the kind of attitude you take toward someone who went to all the trouble of bringing you food? Lamentable. Here]

Despite her complaints, Lewes handed him the parcel. And, taking it, Garfiel unwrapped the parcel and started filling himself up with the dumpling-like contents inside.
With Lewes helping him like this, it would seem the battle of wills could be a long one.

[Subaru: Looks like it'll be hard to do anything for the moment……huh. Oh well, I'll come back next time]

[Garfiel: Y'don't have to come back y'know. I ain't lettin' ya through anyway. Y'might as well go sit quietly in a corner somewhere, yeah?]

Having finished eating, Garfiel licked his fingers and called out to Subaru, who was turning to leave. Subaru waved him goodbye without turning around, and Lewes followed along beside him.

[Lewes: Now that I'm done feedin' Gar-bo, I want to talk to Su-bo for a bit]

[Subaru: What a coincidence. I have something I want to ask Lewes-san too. Though I really want to go see Emilia-tan's face first, but……]

Looking up at the sky, he found that the Sun had only just risen.
He could still remember that on the first day after the beginning of the Trials, the exhausted Emilia will wake up around noon. He would have liked to follow his desires and go to see her face while she slept, but he should probably move forward with the other activities here instead.

Subaru cast a glance towards Lewes, observing the elderly little girl with pink wavy hair who was walking along beside him.
Her face seemed a little sleepy, and with wobbling little steps, she managed to keep up with his pace. Even knowing full well that she's a Loli-Granny, there was still something that tickled the insides of his heart.

[Subaru: Want me to give you a piggyback ride?]

[Lewes: ……And here I was wondering why you were suddenly looking at me like that. Su-bo, you don't happen to be attracted to little girls, do you? That'd be even more hopeless than Ros-bo]

[Subaru: Please don't mistake me for a Loli-con! When I buy GALGAMES I'd use all my OPTION-POINTS to conquer Senpai or Older-Sister type characters! And even right now, I'm desperately working my ass off for an older sister type, you know…… although I just recently found out she's quite a lot older than me BUT MY HEART HAS NOT CHANGED! That's the kinda guy I am, you know?]

[Lewes: What kind of guy is that…… I almost wanted to ask, but nevermind. No, I don't need a piggyback. If I don't walk around a bit my old legs and hips will go weak]

[Subaru: Another incredible statement demonstrating the appearance-gap!]

Once again, it seriously hit him that underneath the appearance of a little girl was really an elderly lady. There was also the possibility that while her skin was young, all her organs inside were creaking. Being a Loli-Granny must be surprisingly tough.

[Lewes: What is that, you look like you're thinking of something stupid again]

[Subaru: Ehhh? No way, really? I was totally making a poker face just now and being careful not to reveal my inner thoughts, you know]

[Lewes: Your face looks just like Gar-bo's when he's chompin' on stolen pastries. No matter which child it is, children are always up to the same things]

[Subaru: This granny just keeps dishing out her old granny antics one after another, huh]

Setting the endless reminders of Lewes' age aside, Subaru, walking alongside her, suddenly began looking around him, [Huh?]

[Subaru: It's good that…… we got a chance to talk, but, where are we going? Actually, it's pretty late for me to ask this now, but after you lent your bed to Emilia-tan, where has Lewes-san been sleeping? In the wild?]

[Lewes: So I just lent out my home and you're immediately treating me like I'm homeless…… The fact that you'd say that tells me you might've forgotten that I am still the head of this place. I still know a few people who'd let me stay over for a few days]

[Subaru: Yeah, that's right. It's only been a few days, but the people here are all unexpectedly nice people]

Recalling the scene at the cooking grounds, and the various occasions when he got to interact with the Sanctuary's residents, Subaru furrowed his brows, and couldn't help but wonder if the brewing conflict Garfiel had warned about hadn't just been an exaggeration.
Stealing a glance at Subaru, who had grown silent, Lewes nodded, [Hm],

[Lewes: Something doesn't sit well with you?]

[Subaru: No, not if you say it like that…… How should I say this, it's a bit different from what I imagined. Judging from the way Emilia was treated at the Capital, half-bloods couldn't have been treated much better. So I thought maybe the half-bloods would be harboring some complicated feelings toward the pure-bloods]

At least, despite being trapped in a Sanctuary referred to as the Experimental Grounds, the faces of the residents didn't seem to be showing particularly dark emotions. Of course, there must be those who didn't find this amusing, but Subaru hadn't caught any glimpse of such negative feelings here so far.
If Garfiel, who didn't mince words nor emotions, was any indication, his personal emotions seemed closer to indignation than anger. An anger on behalf of others, rather than himself.
Despite their unpleasant surroundings, the morale of the residents was exceedingly high. More than incredible, it was almost to the point of being inconceivable.

In front of Subaru's doubts, Lewes' eyes widened in surprise,

[Lewes: What, Su-bo, you may not look like it, but you have more ideas than you let on]

[Subaru: I don't look like it… that part's pretty unnecessary, isn't it…… I mean, I'm confident that I look more intellectual than Garfiel, at least. But, well, I guess I'm pretty thoughtless when it comes to all sort of things]

[Lewes: It's quite a virtue to be aware of your own shortcomings. You can only begin to improve once you've realized where you are deficient…… Ah, we're here]

Coming to a split in the path, Lewes led the way for the lost-looking Subaru. Instead of heading in the direction of the Cathedral and Roswaal's residence, they turned towards the other end of the village outskirts, opposite from the Tomb――― and there, they arrived at Lewes' isolated temporary lodging.
Unlike the sparsely placed houses scattered over the outskirts, for some reason, this house stood alone, far apart from all the others. A word naturally came to Subaru's mind,

[Subaru: It's too lonely, isn't it. Why are you staying in a place like this?]

[Lewes: It can't be helped. Right now, this is the only building inside the Sanctuary with no one living in it. It may be far away from the center of the village, but it's spacious, and I quite like it here]

[Subaru: Didn't you say you know people who'd let you stay over? Why did you choose to live alone? Even though I know quite a few Loli-Grannies in my life it's still way too sad for me to see a Loli-Granny die alone]

[Lewes: I honestly can't tell if you're concerned for me or if I'm being made fun of. Here, come in. I'll brew you some tea. Though Ram certainly brews it better]

[Subaru: No matter what kind of leaves you put in it there, it'll still just taste like leaves, so no worries]

[Lewes: You should be more careful about the kinds of things you say]

With a sigh, Lewes invited Subaru into the house through the opened door. It was a large building, about half the size of Roswaal's temporary residence. In fact, divided into three rooms, it seemed perhaps too large for just one person to live in.
Finding a chair to sit down in and looking all around the room, he saw that the interior of the small room was simple and well maintained. Lewes had said that no one else lived here, but,

[Subaru: For a house that's not been lived in, it sure feels like someone often comes here. Even for me, being a top-notch bed-maker myself, I'd have to grant the fluffiness of that bed a passing grade…… there's no way Lewes-san did that]

[Lewes: What's with that face you're making as if I enjoy being alone so I come here whenever something happens and just kill time here and wait for things to cool off?]

[Subaru: That must be an awfully specific facial expression I got!]

Still, there was something sad about the possibility that the reason she came up with this rapid-fire explanation was that it was something she had thought about before. He was joking just now when he mentioned dying alone, but it can't be denied that something about her matched his

impression of a solitary old lady.
Silently turning away and occupying herself with brewing tea, her back seemed almost lonely. Seeing this, Subaru looked around trying to find some way to change the topic.

The room was clean and neatly organized. There was a slightly dulled mirror above a dresser. A flower vase without flowers, and two metal shields hanging on the wall. ——Shields?

[Subaru: Why are there shields here? And two of them?]

[Lewes: They're Gar-bo's. That kid's using this place like it's a storage house]

[Subaru: So he hangs around here too, huh. It does kinda look like a good hangout spot for delinquents now that I think about it…… But, he couldn't be the one carefully tidying up this place, could he?]

That'd be way too out-of-character, Subaru murmured under his breath as he looked at Garfiel's shields.
He often saw crossed swords adorning the walls of noblemen's houses in Mangas, and these shields were slightly tilted in a fashion similar to that as well. But, unlike something that ought to be used as ornaments, these shields were riddled with scratches and dents, and were certainly not mere antiques that have not seen a day of battle.

[Subaru: Then again, what kind of battle can you fight with just shields?]

[Lewes: Back in the day, they would always fight bouts with these shields in the fields outside this house. Each one would hold a shield, and round and round they'd go, bumping into each other]

[Subaru: That sounds a bit dangerous for just playing around…… Mind if I ask who it was that Garfiel played with?]

Over the time he spent in the Sanctuary, he hadn't met anyone who could have been so intimate with Garfiel. Of course, being an important person in these lands, it was apparent that Garfiel had good relations with the residents at the cooking grounds. But, other than that, did he have anyone he was truly close with? Subaru couldn't think of any particular names.
If he had to name someone, it would have been Lewes. But just picturing Lewes holding a shield and charging against Garfiel felt incredibly dangerous.

For a while, Lewes stayed silent in front of Subaru's question. She brought over two cups of steaming tea set on a tray, and handed Subaru one of them as she sat down on the bed. Receiving it, Subaru took a sip while it was still hot, and moistened his throat.

[Subaru: Right, tastes just like leaves]

[Lewes: Tea's just wasted on you, huh. Well, I already anticipated that so I used the cheaper leaves. ……Even tea leaves are considered precious here, you know]

About once a month, Roswaal would send over precious items and luxury goods here. Subaru, adapting to the situation, did his best to pretend to appreciate the tea, as they sat wordlessly

tilting their cups for a while.
Then, after some time had passed in silence,

[Subaru: ――Frederica]

Hearing Subaru's abrupt whisper, Lewes' shoulder jumped a little.
Lifting her gaze from her teacup, she looked at Subaru. And, seeing something wavering in her expression, Subaru asked again,

[Subaru: The name of the person bumping shields with Garfiel, is Frederica, isn't it?]

[Lewes: ……did you hear that from Gar-bo?]

[Subaru: Nah. I pieced it together from some fragmented conversations and got a feeling about it somehow. At least, I just knew that there must've been something complicated between Garfiel and Frederica]

At Roswaal's Mansion, Frederica had warned him to beware of a man named Garfiel.
And when Garfiel heard Frederica's name, his expression changed, and he wanted to know how she was. It would be hard not to suspect that there was something between them.
And, most of all,

[Subaru: Their fangs are way too similar. If they're still unrelated, even Buddha wouldn't allow that]

[Lewes: ……Ahh, quite so. Even I can't think of a way to deny that]

Faced with this decisive fact, Lewes let out a sigh as if giving up.
In terms of similarities between Garfiel and Frederica, just their vicious fang-filled smiles alone would have been enough. At least, it would be enough to tell that they were not in a romantic relationship or anything like that.
If he had to guess, then their relationship must be――

[Subaru: Brother and sister…… Actually, more like older sister and younger brother. If I were to guess who's older, Frederica seems more like the older sister type]

[Lewes: Goodness…… I'm impressed that you'd be able to tell all that just from intuition]

Hearing Subaru point this out, Lewes could only show her amazement.
Then, nodding her head thoughtfully, and placing the remainder of her tea back on the tray, she corrected her posture, and,

[Lewes: Just as Su-bo imagined, the owner of these two shields are the siblings Frederica and Garfiel. Frederica Baumann, who had left the Sanctuary, and Garfiel Tinsel, are family bound by blood]

Confirming Subaru's speculation, Lewes nonetheless spilled a melancholic sigh.

[Lewes: ――And now, owing to their mutual misunderstandings, they have each wound up on diverging paths]

Chapter 29 [An Omnivorous Man]

Closing in on the core of what he wanted to know, Subaru tilted his teacup.
Letting the hot tea pass down his throat, he swallowed it along with his doubts for now and settled them into his stomach. Then, seriously considering what he should say next,

[Subaru: To what extent… are you willing to answer my questions?]

[Lewes: ……you may have already noticed my reluctance, but don't expect too much from me. Because of my contract, there is not much information I can give Su-bo. As for the Trials, I am under strict orders not to allow any outside interference with the Tomb]

[Subaru: The way you said that already gave me a few clues…… strict orders, huh]

[Lewes: ―――――]

Faced with Subaru's repeated questions, Lewes grew silent.
Judging by her words and behaviors so far, there weren't many contenders for someone capable of bending her to their will. More than likely, those were Roswaal's orders, but,

[Subaru: In that case, that guy's objectives just becomes less and less comprehensible. Does he want me…… want us to pass the Trials? Or doesn't he? I can't even be sure whether he's planning to help us or not]

[Lewes: I guess he was hoping you would find the answer to that yourselves, or something along those lines. Even back in the day, Ros-bo was a naughty little child who loved to do things in these obscure and roundabout ways. He may have gotten taller, but deep down, he hasn't changed a bit]

Perhaps it was because they've known each other for so long, that Lewes could lightheartedly say this of the young Roswaal.
"Hasn't changed a bit." Having only gotten to know Roswaal's perverted side, Subaru couldn't help but shudder at the thought of what Roswaal might've been like back when his limbs were still stubby.

[Subaru: Well, there must still be some cuteness left in there, mnnyeah, probably maybe]

[Lewes: Ros-bo's childhood…… hm, since they pertain to the secrets of the Mathers family, I'm afraid I cannot divulge anything further]

[Subaru: Uuuogh, but I'm interested…… no, wait, am I interested? I don't really mind not knowing too much about that guy's personality, actually]

Crossing his arms and tilting his head, Subaru started to question why he wanted to know in the first place, and,

[Subaru: Alright, let's toss that one out. I just need to know what that guy's planning, there's no need to understand him]

[Lewes: You sure came to that conclusion easily]

[Subaru: There's no need to worry about things that're pointless to worry about. Ultimately, humans can't understand everything from zero to a hundred anyway. But even so, we still want to understand some things, and I guess that's what love is. I'll always love Emilia-tan, but I don't love Roswaal all that much!]

In front of that clear-cut declaration tossing Roswaal aside, Lewes gave an impressed nod, and continuing [In that case], she touched her hand to her chin,

[Lewes: It seems, there is no other topic I can talk to you about……]

[Subaru: Naah, as long as we don't touch on anything forbidden by Lewes-san's contracts, my QUESTION-TIME is still ongoing, isn't it? Nevermind Roswaal's personality for now, but I still want to ask a few more things from the Sanctuary's all-knowledgeable granny Lewes-san]

[Lewes: H…mm. Well, if you just wanna ask, that's fine, go ahead and ask. But, the dire consequences of violating my contract are not limited to myself alone. By no means forget this, understood?]

Bending forward, the little girl glared up threateningly at Subaru.
Honestly, it looked so adorable that it gave off no sense of pressure at all, but Subaru nonetheless hugged his own shoulders pretending to shudder in reaction, and whimpered out [So scary] with tears puddling up in his eyes,

[Subaru: Alright, now that we have the scary aggressor and the frightened victim properly mapped out, it's question-time now?]

[Lewes: I'm finding it a bit hard to accept the way you made me the villain just now]

[Subaru: As a man once said, that's that and this is this. So, question now―― You said that Frederica and Garfiel are siblings, and Frederica had stayed inside the Sanctuary, right?]

While Lewes was still a bit unable to accept her treatment, with a feigned smile, Subaru cut directly into the main topic. Seeing her expression change upon hearing his question, Subaru waved a finger,

[Subaru: Frederica, who was supposed to be in the Sanctuary, is now dressed in a maid's uniform and serving in Roswaal's Mansion. But, from what I've gathered, this situation sounds a bit odd]

[Lewes: Hmm, odd how?]

[Subaru: If Frederica is Garfiel's sister, then she must be half-blooded as well. Then, being a half-blood, she shouldn't have been able to leave the Sanctuary for as long as the Barrier is still intact]

The Barrier of the Sanctuary that reacts to the blood of the half-bloods, barring their escape:
It was the thing that struck Emilia unconscious on the way in, that kept Garfiel and Lewes trapped in this place indefinitely, and it was the wall that was currently one of the greatest obstacles standing in Subaru's path.

After agonizingly trying to find a way to surmount it, there was now an exception who had passed beyond that wall. In other words,

[Subaru: There must be some kind of secret path to leave the Barrier. Or maybe, even the Barrier's existence is a lie]

[Lewes: A lie…… that would be a bit upsetting. The truth is, in my life up to now, I have never once set foot into the outside world. All this is owing to the existence of the Barrier]

[Subaru: Or, maybe you are being deceived by the contract you've been bound to…… such a malicious possibility isn't entirely out of the question? It could also be that since there's too much risk involved in actually testing the reality of the Barrier, it just so happens that no one thought to verify it. But then…]

The possibility that all the residents of the Sanctuary had been deceived about the existence of the Barrier.
The Trials inside the Tomb certainly exist, so this should be highly unlikely. Yet Subaru couldn't completely rule out the possibility that this was some overly elaborate plan to trap the refugees of Arlam and win Emilia renown.

[Subaru: Considering the kind of uproar there'd be if they found out about the truth, it's just a bit too unrealistic. So the second possibility should be automatically ruled out…… which only leaves us with the first one]

[Lewes: A secret path…… is it. But, what will you do once you have found out the answer?]

[Subaru: If there is a secret path that anyone could use, then we can just move everyone in the Sanctuary outside the Barrier, and there'll be no need to take the Trials]

Hearing Subaru's outrageous proposal, Lewes dropped her jaw. Seeing her like this, Subaru waved his hands from side to side, [Right?]

[Subaru: Sure there are benefits to taking the Trials as well. Honestly, having benefitted quite a bit from it myself, I won't deny that. But, the Trials―― or in this case, the past… it'd be ok to put it off for now, right? There are times when people shouldn't be forced to face their pasts, don't you think?]

[Lewes: You are talking about Emilia-sama? But hardships will not choose the right time to pay their visit. Running away now in the face of calamities would only be……]

[Subaru: I don't mean running away forever. Just retreating in order to better prepare for the fight. That's what they call a tactical retreat. There are times when we have to fight on unfavorable ground, but moving to more favorable grounds when possible is a good thing for both the person herself and those around her, isn't it?]

Cutting off Lewes just as she tried to say something, Subaru continued stacking on justifications for running away, insisting that it isn't always shameful to turn one's back.

[Subaru: Even if she doesn't face it now, one day Emilia will face it, no matter what. It may be ironic, but that Trial made her remember. So she must now choose to either forget or to accept it. And all I can do is to somehow make it less painful for her when she decides]

[Lewes: ……You speak of distancing her from suffering, yet you would not let her run away from the single most painful part]

[Subaru: Whether to run away from that part is her choice as well. But I believe that she…… Emilia will not do such a thing]

[Lewes: And what makes you trust her so? At least, it's impossible for me. To see the way she came out of the Tomb, and still have such expectations of her]

[Subaru: Well, that's because I love Emilia-tan to death, you know]

As Lewes continued to deny Emilia, Subaru casually said this as if it were nothing.
And though Lewes had already found herself speechless several times throughout this conversation, these last words left her the most awestruck up to this point.
Watching Lewes' astonished face, Subaru smiled awkwardly, and scratched at his neck.

[Subaru: I love Emilia, and I think she's super cute. So, I believe that this super-cute girl I fell for is the kind of girl who will overcome anything, no matter how hard or painful it may be. I expect and expect and expect this of her, and I believe that she will meet my expectations]

[Lewes: Th…… that isn't an answer at all. No matter how much you like someone, there is nothing you can do about what is inside the other person's heart. Su-bo, surely you know this……]

[Subaru: I do understand. Emilia is a girl. Not all parts of her are strong, and there are super small parts of her that are weak, and there might even be a chance that there's a super super impossibly small ugly part in there as well]

[Lewes: Are you admitting there is or not……]

[Subaru: If I believe… that in spite of all her weak parts, it will be her strong parts that will shine through in the end… then that's what devotion is, isn't it?]

Inscribed into Subaru's heart, was the belief that devotion was the strongest expression of love. And he had tasted the happiness of being on the receiving end of someone devoting her entire being to him as well. Therefore,

[Subaru: I will do anything for Emilia. I believe she will overcome her weak parts and find the strength to lift up her head, and I will work hard for that future where I get to rub it in everyone's faces that I was right to believe in her]

[Lewes: ……But even so, she is the one who will be facing the most painful part of her heart, alone]

[Subaru: But that's obvious, isn't it? I can't be at Emilia's side when she faces her past. If I existed in her past, I'd take her hand while she's sitting on the ground crying and pull her back

up, and do everything I can to cheer her up. But I'm not there. What happened in her past had nothing to do with me. As much as I want to reach out my hand, it's like someone watching a drama having no way to interfere with what's happening on TV]

That was the truth. The past was the past, and no one could touch it.
Even the past that Subaru had faced and overcome, was only a fiction. He hadn't conveyed a single thing to his real parents, and all he had gained was some sense of self-satisfaction.
But,

[Subaru: Compared to getting no bonus at all, it's definitely better to get at least a little bonus. I can't help her face her past while I'm stuck in the real world. But, her present-self can lend her own insufficient past-self a hand, couldn't it? Lending yourself a hand isn't against the rules, is it?]

[Lewes: ――――]

[Subaru: Even if I can't help her directly, I'll use my words and actions and affection and…… well I'd be really happy if I could have the highest place in Emilia's heart, but she's received all sorts of things from other people as well. At least, she has more now than the Emilia of the past. The more weapons she has at her disposal, the more she will be able to help her imperfect past. That's how we can beat this Trial. The Trial's difficulty was set based upon this premise, wasn't it]

Having experienced this first-hand, Subaru could say this again no matter how many times he was asked.

[Subaru: I will help Emilia. I will do everything in my power to help her present-self overcome her past. And in order to achieve that goal, even if it means taking side paths or throwing caution out the window or cheating or paying real money for in-game credits, I will do it. That's how I intend to help her]

[Lewes: Really…… that sure is a self-centered way to love someone]

[Subaru: I'm no herbivore or carnivore, you can just call me an omnivorous guy――!]

Snapping his fingers and sparkling his teeth with a wink, Subaru stuck up his thumb and struck out a pose.
Watching Subaru abruptly ending his speech like this, Lewes exhaled a long, long sigh as if giving up altogether.

[Lewes: That sure was a lot of pretty words for making an excuse for doing something sneaky]

[Subaru: Heheh]

[Lewes: Gobbledygook. …..I'm sorry, but I cannot tell you the details of the side path. However, I can tell you that it's impossible to rely on it alone. The way Frederica left the Sanctuary was an exception. The others cannot do the same]

Lewes shook her head and turned down Subaru's hopes. Subaru's heart dropping at her words, his shoulders slumping and his knees falling to the floor―― didn't really happen. Instead,

[Subaru: Oh. Can't do it huh. I was thinking it'd be a great deal if that could work, but I guess it's ok. Then, onto the next question……]

[Lewes: This might be a bit funny coming from me, but, you sure don't like to give up, Su-bo]

[Subaru: If I gave up that easily, who knows how many times I would've had to sit in the Whale's stomach by now. It's a bit funny for me to say this too, but never giving up and the DEPTH OF MY LOVE are pretty much the only weapons I have, you know]

Subaru came out and announced his uselessness, and once again, Lewes only stood there stumped just as she had been many times already in the past hour. Subaru had to clap his hands with [Snap out'of it],

[Subaru: Even though I have all sorts of problems with this, I still realize that having Emilia reveal her true powers and smash right through the Trials would be the most epic-heroic way to do it. So, does the VETERAN-TRIALS-CHALLENGER-Lewes-san have some insider advice?]

[Lewes: Why do I get the feeling I've just been called something I'd rather not be called… And even if you ask me, I could only tell you that I don't know. I've never taken the Trials, after all, so I couldn't possibly know the answer to that]

[Subaru: Wuh?]

Tilting his head, Subaru let out a stupid groan in front of Lewes' reply. But surely, just now, he had heard something he couldn't let slide. After all,

[Subaru: Just now, might you perhaps have just enlightened me with the revelation that you have never taken the Trials?]

[Lewes: What's with that polite-speak all of a sudden. It's obvious, isn't it? I am not allowed to challenge the Trials meant for those from outside the Sanctuary. It's the same for the others too. At least, in the seventy years I have spent here, I have no knowledge of anyone attempting the Trials. Su-bo was the first]

[Subaru: Nonononoweirdweirdweird. Hold on, pause, wait, something's weird all the information's messed up. Please just gimme some time to balance the books in my head for a moment]

[Lewes: You got five minutes]

Gratefully nodding to Lewes' unexpected patience, Subaru held his fingers to his temples and began desperately calling back his memories.
From the day before yesterday in the previous loop, up to the point when he first came back after passing the Trials, chewing over every minutest detail within his memory over that time,

[Subaru: ——Wha?]

In those memories, the "Inconsistencies" that shouldn't have been there, he hadn't noticed them until now.
His face contorting as he realized this fact, Subaru tried hard to contain the doubtful mutterings

under his breath. [What's going on?] But once the emerging suspicion had sprouted, there was nothing to stop it from taking root and flowering atop its stems.

In Subaru's memories, Lewes said on the night before the Trials,
——No one had ever taken the Trials up to now. In the span of her entire life up to this point, there had never been a challenger.

In Subaru's memories, immediately before the Trials, and immediately after, Lewes said,
——She had taken the Trials, failed to pass, but was still kicking around safe and sound, offering it as proof that there was no harm in challenging the Trials.

In the span of a single day, her statements had completely turned on its head.
It'd be a different matter if this was purely in emotional terms, but the contradicting contents pertained to life experiences and reality itself. Such a drastic directional change in information could only be pointing to perjury, or otherwise, a precalculated lie.

Still maintaining his thinking posture, Subaru turned his gaze up toward Lewes, who was playing with her pink hair, waiting. Watching her sitting on the bed, swinging her legs that weren't long enough to touch the floor, looking as though she was searching for something to distract herself from boredom, one could almost forget that she was a granny at heart and mistake her for a genuine little girl.
Looking back on their interactions up to now, he really didn't want to believe that she had been maliciously toying with him, but,

[Subaru: Even if some part of it was true, which ones can I believe?]

Usually, when faced with conflicting information, Subaru would just trust the words of those he wanted to trust, but he couldn't make this judgment so lightly when it was Emilia's fate resting on his decision. And much less so, considering this was a matter of life and death in the literal sense of the words. He must be cautious.

This was now the third time he and Lewes had discussed the topic of the Trials.
Once, she claimed to have challenged it, and twice, she denied any knowledge of anyone ever having taken it. Though this wasn't something that could be decided by majority, her statements claiming that she knew nothing of the Trials seemed to be more believable.
Following from that assumption, she may have lied about the Trials to the worried Subaru out of consideration, just to put his mind at ease. But if that was the case, then she should have simply explained that it was a lie——

[Subaru: Unless there was some reason she didn't do this…… maybe she's starting to go senile……]

[Lewes: Just now, you seem to have arrived at some rather rude conclusions about me?]

[Subaru: If you could keep in mind my consistent past efforts to demonstrate my good intentions, and let that counterbalance my recent transgression, Subaru will be most grateful. Said Subaru with a stern expression on his face]

Watching Subaru mix his apologizing and clowning together, Lewes sighed, and, muttering [Ayeayeaye…], she tiredly shook her head,

[Lewes: So, did you get any answers out of that conversation with your heart?]

[Subaru: Answers or not, it's more like I've arrived at a conclusion. Um, Lewes-san, did you happen to be worried about me? Like back outside the Tomb?]

[Lewes: Worried?]

Seeing Lewes merely repeating his word like a parrot, Subaru nodded [yeah] and effeminately touched his fingertips together like a girl, and,

[Subaru*(girly voice)*: Y-you once said that you never took the Trials, but outside the Tomb you told me how you took the Trials and failed but it was no big deal, right? B-but you probably just said that because you were worried about me or unless it's not like that and it's just me but I just noticed it just now that's all……]

[Lewes: ――Ahh, so it's about that]

With a voice carrying an emotion as if having understood, Lewes interjected into Subaru's cringe-worthy rapid-fire delivery. And, seeing Subaru furrow his brows in astonishment upon hearing the sound of her voice, she smiled, and,

[Lewes: Su-bo, I'll let you in on something good. Consider it special]

[Subaru: Something good?]

[Lewes: Owing to my contract, I am forbidden to "Lie". And so, whenever I am asked an inappropriate question, I could only choose to answer with silence. Without exceptions, this could not be changed for anyone's sake. Lying is forbidden. And this is true for myself, as well as every single one of the residents of the Sanctuary]

[Subaru: You cannot… lie……?]

In front of her sudden confession, Subaru's only impulse was confusion.
Because, if what Lewes said was true, then the premise of everything Subaru had considered so far would be turned on its head. Or rather, even before that, if what she said was true, then the whole situation that brought about his suspicions in the first place would have been completely self-contradictory.

――If she was incapable of lying, then how was it that she had created a situation that couldn't have come about unless she lied?

[Subaru: Tha……]

[Lewes: Just now, I have already told the utmost limit of what I could tell you. I cannot answer any questions beyond that. Misery would befall us both if we violate the contract. If you wish to know more, instead of asking this ancient self who had stopped in her tracks, you should ask one of those who had ventured ahead]

Having been preemptively denied, Subaru could only close his opened mouth and fall back into silence.
Subaru had only been able to carry on this conversation by relying on Lewes' goodwill, so once she had rejected him like this, there was nothing he could do. But she had also given him a hint as well.
By picking up that fact alone, Subaru keenly sensed that she had not been lying about her desire to be liberated from this place.

[Subaru: Understood, I won't ask any more than that. Let's change the topic… to something else]

[Lewes: You sure're an odd one. You already know you can't get anything else important out of me, and you still wish to drink tea and chat with an old-timer like me?]

[Subaru: I've already missed breakfast time, and there's not much for me to do until Emilia-tan wakes up. I get pissed off just looking at Roswaal, Garfiel bares his fangs at me, and bantering with Otto's way too exhausting, so I'll just deepen my precious friendship with my Loli-Granny]

Standing up, Subaru collected the two cups of now thoroughly-cold tea and headed to the kitchen, followed by Lewes' gaze,

[Subaru: Don't worry. For a time, even though it was kinda short-term, I made a living as a servant in Roswaal's Mansion, you know. They've taught me a thing or two about brewing tea, at least]

[Lewes: Hm. Then allow me to wait with expectations]

[Subaru: Uwa, PURESSHA一]

Saying this as he poured the tea into the teacups, he handed one to Lewes and returned to his seat. Facing each other, they sipped down the new tea, and,

[Lewes: Not too bad at all]

[Subaru: Even when I brew it myself I still just taste leaves. Now, for the new topic]

[Lewes: I won't be listening if you want to continue the topic from before. But otherwise…… well, I would still respond to any other topics as earnestly as I could]

[Subaru: Alright, I'll hold you to your words then]

Seeing a tinge of guilt forming on Lewes' little face, Subaru's lips twisted into a mischievous smile.

[Subaru: Do you know anything that bastard Garfiel's scared of, or any stuff he hates? Like something that'll make him faint soon as he sees them?]

[Lewes: Su-bo… have you ever noticed the way you try so hard is a little crooked?]

And, with that, he managed to put onto Lewes' face the single most peculiar expression of the entire past hour.

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After their conversation over tea came to an end, having cleaned up the cups, Subaru left the lonely Loli-Granny who claimed she wanted to be alone and came out of the house.
About an hour had passed, or perhaps a little longer, he thought. But, seeing that the sun that was supposed to have only just risen now hanging high up in the sky, and feeling that the temperature had grown warmer as well, it could easily have been longer than that.
Judging from bodily sensations alone, it was probably a little after 10am.

[Subaru: It's a perfect sunny day for drying out a futon too, what a waste…… why do I get the feeling I've completely shed being a hikikomori with that thought just now!]

To think, that bathed under the light of the Sun, the first thing that came to his mind was doing laundry. As an archetype of the unhealthy slackers, this was utterly inconceivable. But, setting aside such sentiments for now,

[Subaru: It's about time, Emilia should be waking up soon. She's probably still scared from last night… I better take the chance to imprint some of my sense of presence while she's weak]

Even while muttering this rather devious declaration, deep down, he genuinely worried about Emilia as he sped up his steps.
As soon as he could, and for as long as he could, he will stay at her side and comfort her.
Because, one way or another――

[Subaru: Tomorrow, I'll have no choice but to leave her side]

This afternoon, Roswaal will formally put forth the proposal to free the refugees of Arlam. Then, if they begin preparations right away, they would be able to depart from the Sanctuary tomorrow. Subaru will accompany them once again, for there was something he'd have to take care of at the Mansion.

[Subaru: If I want to know more, instead of asking someone who had halted their steps, I should be asking someone who had ventured ahead…… geez, that sure was a roundabout way to say it]

Of course, without saying it in this roundabout way, she wouldn't have been able to convey what she wanted to convey.
Somewhat pitying her for having to go through all this trouble, Subaru let out a sigh, and sped up his steps once more,

[Subaru: I'll be eagerly waiting to hear your stories about your good-for-nothing little brother and your troublesome hometown, Frederica!]

Chapter 30 [Incongruities On The Road Back Home]

Roswaal's proposal——To release the refugees of Arlam.
Like the last time, the proposal itself passed without much resistance. Seeing no point in keeping the refugees in the Sanctuary any longer, it was only natural. But of course, unlike last time, there was no accompanying condition that Subaru should challenge the Trials.

[Subaru: This time I'm totally getting hated on by the guy who came up with that condition, after all……]

[Emilia: What's wrong, Subaru?]

[Subaru: Nnno, it's nothing. Speaking of which, is Emilia-tan feeling better? Have you calmed down a bit? If I'm too much of a nuisance in the room I could go outside if you want?]

Flapping his hand with an awkward smile, Subaru said this to the girl beside him—— Emilia.
They were in the bedroom that Lewes lent to Emilia, sitting on the side of the bed, and passing the time without talking about anything particularly interesting.

The time was dusk, approaching the fall of night.

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After waking up a little before noon, Emilia had some late breakfast before they went to settle the negotiations between Roswaal and Lewes on the matter of the refugees. The discussion proceeded without any problems, and they agreed on releasing the refugees the following day, and dissolved their meeting there——

[Garfiel: So, t'state the obvious…… Emilia-sama'll be challengin' the Trials t'night, yeah?]

As if laying down a warning, Garfiel's words didn't leave much room for interpretation.
Pressing down the urge to click his tongue, Subaru stole a glance at Emilia, and, although it was only for a brief moment, he saw on the side of her face a fleeting trace of fear and grief. In fact, he was almost certain that Emilia will fail the Trial tonight.

Unlike Subaru, who had passed the Trial owing to his memories, Emilia's condition ultimately hadn't changed at all. In order for Emilia to pass the Trial, Subaru will have to take actions to create some drastic changes in the environment around her.
Yet, in this loop, Subaru couldn't see a single way to change her environment in such a short period of time. ——If she challenges the Trial tonight, it will only be wearing her down.

[Subaru: But she wouldn't breathe a word of complaint or even think of giving up… that's just like Emilia-tan]

In front of Garfiel's provocative question, Emilia hid away that momentary emotion within her eyes, and firmly answered, [Of course I will].

Garfiel narrowed his eyes as if impressed by her reply, and Roswaal quietly whistled, which only added to Subaru's irritation.
But in the end, there was no way to stop this. There were only a few hours left before the start of the Trial tonight.

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After ending their talks there, she ate lunch not long after her breakfast, and it was about three hours later when they got back to the house. In that time, following by her side, Subaru had been constantly talking to Emilia―― but as the hour of the Trials neared, he noticed she was speaking less and less.
By now, her words have become almost exclusively reacting to Subaru's. But――

[Emilia: Umn…… I'd prefer if you… don't go]

[Subaru: AaAHHH, UNDERSTOOD. NO PROBLEM. Until Emilia-tan's settles down, I will just keep focusing on savoring the air Emilia-tan breathes out, so don't worry]

[Emilia: I reeaaally don't like the sound of that. ……but, stay here]

Faced with the complexities of a young girl's heart, Subaru shrugged his shoulders and stayed like she asked.
Although they were sitting right next to each other, he was still too useless to find the courage to take her hand. But still, he was honestly glad to be needed. By none other than Emilia, after all. Even if, to her, it must have only been filling the void of losing the one whom she relied on the most.

Ever since coming to the Sanctuary―― or more accurately, ever since Puck stopped responding to her calls after they returned to the Mansion, Emilia's attitude toward Subaru had consistently softened.
A part of him was overjoyed to be given a place within her heart, but there was another part of Subaru that was quietly concerned about this development.
That part of him wondered what could be the dangers of Emilia losing her strongest anchor.

[Emilia: ……Hmm?]

[Subaru: Nothing at all? I was just thinking Emilia-tan's eyelashes are so long and cute, I kinda wanna eat them]

[Emilia: Subaru, you keep saying you want to eat my hair, eat my eyelashes, or lick my cheeks…… are you, into that sort of thing?]

[Subaru: Where I come from, that's the greatest possible expression of love, you know~]

Seeing Emilia relaxing slightly and sulking at his comments, Subaru scratched at his cheeks.
Although Subaru would consider making licking-noises to be the utmost confession of love, actually doing so would have been extremely creepy. This was especially true in a world that didn't understand these sorts of things. So he should pay attention to what he says. Although it was too late now.

Occasionally, Subaru would try to take Emilia's mind off of things by talking about random stuff like this. He now knew some fragments of Emilia's past. And if he mentions this to her, perhaps something dramatically different from last time might happen,

——But no matter how he thought about it, he felt it wouldn't be a change for the better.

No matter what the situation becomes, in the end, what he needed was time.
He needed time to help Emilia come to terms with her past and find the resolve within her own heart. And he also needed time to mention the fragments of her past to her, and ask her for the truth of what happened. Time, time, time. There wasn't nearly enough time.

[Subaru: Just why do I have to always rush from one thing to another all the time. Ever since coming to this World, was there even a time when I got to properly relax a bit?]

Searching through his memories, if there was a time he managed to spend relatively quietly, it would've been the few weeks after he settled the problem with the Wolgarms in the forest. Before and after that, it was just continuous turmoil without a moment's rest. It was a miracle that he didn't die of overwork.
And, as he was thinking about these unnutritious thoughts,

[Emilia: ——Subaru]

He was a little slow to react to her abrupt call. Turning toward the direction of the voice——Subaru saw Emilia's wet, violet eyes very close to him, staring at him.
He was so enchanted in that moment by those tear-drenched eyes that his heart thumped so loudly he was afraid it was going to stop. Subaru gasped. And, seeing him do this, a wavering resolve and hesitation appeared within Emilia's eyes. Perhaps she was trying to decide whether to tell Subaru something before the Trial.

[Subaru: What is it?]

Subaru tried to say this as gently as he could, being careful not to rush her. If she could make up her mind here, then he mustn't disturb her.
However, hearing Subaru's reply, Emilia only turned down her gaze,

[Emilia: ah…… mn, sorry. It's nothing. I just, wanted to call you]

[Subaru: ——oh, is that right. J-JUST WANTED TO CALL ME!? Why do I get the feeling that's something couples say when they're already in a relationship!]

[Emilia: I… guess I have to go soon……]

Her resolve was gone. Subaru regretted having missed the opportunity, but he pretended not to notice and puffed up his chest nonetheless. Emilia stood up while listening to his voice, and looked outside the window at the Sun that was beginning to set.

[Emilia: ——I have to head to the Tomb. Subaru will only accompany me halfway, right?]

[Subaru: Even if I beg Garfiel to let me see you off to the Entrance, I don't think I can persuade him. ……Emilia, although I know there's no point in me saying this, but…]

[Emilia: ――It's alright. You don't need to say it, Subaru]

……"Don't push yourself too hard." Emilia already knew what he was going to say, and stopped him before he could say it.
In front of Subaru's quivering lips, a courageous smile emerged on Emilia's cheeks, and she held up a finger in front of her lips,

[Emilia: I'm fine, although everyone might not think so after how flustered I was yesterday, I'll do my best. I want to do my best. And I have to do my best, I think]

Suddenly clenching the hand in front of her face into a fist, [That's why], she continued,

[Emilia: If you want to say something to me, don't say "It's alright to give up". You should say "Do your best", and cheer me on instead. As long as I know there's one person who still believes in me, I'm sure I can find the strength do it]

[Subaru: Believe in you… of course I believe in you, Emilia-tan. The only guy in existence who might possibly expect as much from you as I do is probably that daddy-cat, you know. ――So, do your best]

[Emilia: Mn, I'll do my best]

For the first time today, Emilia smiled without the hint of putting up a facade. Relieved to see her smile, Subaru stood up as well and followed her out of the building.
In the Sanctuary after nightfall, a chilling wind was blowing.

Caressed by the wind, Emilia's silver hair danced and glittered as she made her way forward. Like a silver river flowing under the moonlight, Subaru watched from behind as she forged on with her stalwart steps,

――Although he knew that she will fail tonight.

The objective of bringing the refugees back to Roswaal's estate was achieved two days earlier than last time.
Aside from the date, there was not much difference compared to the previous loop. The refugees boarded the dragon carriages in an orderly manner, and the hired travelling-merchants were released from the Sanctuary along with them. Subaru and Otto accompanied them as well.
If there was any difference, it would be,

[Subaru: I did ask for a guide, but I'm pretty surprised it's Lewes-san. Normally, this kind of thing could just be done by an underling…… or something like that, right?]

[Lewes: What, you don't like that it's me? After we've already drank tea and talked together, Su-bo is still so cold towards me, my heart is devastated]

Saying this, the Loli-Granny looked like she was actually going to cry. Squeezing her tiny body onto the tightly-packed driver's bench, she self-righteously claimed a spot in the middle, right next to Subaru. The driver's bench was originally meant for two people, and with the little girl Lewes added to it, the situation became considerably more difficult.

[Otto: Mnmn, I feel the same way. Natsuki-san sure doesn't know how to be modest or considerate of others at all, he probably left all his subtleties back in his mother's womb, you know]

[Lewes: Hey, Su-bo. Who's that unfamiliar looking fella on the driver's bench?]

[Otto: Is that how low my standing is in your mind!?]

Just when Otto thought he had found another fellow victim of Subaru's, he was immediately thrown under the bus. Despite holding the reins that were literally the lifelines of everyone on the carriage, he was still completely overlooked.
A shadow descended on his unexpectedly neat-looking features, and,

[Otto: Aaahhh…… I get the feeling that ever since coming here I didn't manage to leave a single impression except as the guy who keeps shouting all the time. Did I really not make any impression on Margrave Mathers?]

[Subaru: You managed to show him your usual relaxed self, and he laughed so hard he burst the wounds on his belly… that was a pretty deep impression, I'd say?]

[Otto: There are good impressions and bad impressions in this world, and which kind would you call an impression about bursting someone's belly?]

[Subaru: And this is what he says after bursting someone's belly…… hopeless, this guy]

[Otto: If I'm hopeless then you're a hundred-and-twenty percent hopeless!]

Otto's reason for coming to the Sanctuary, his introduction to Roswaal, was completed without much delay. Everything proceeded the same way as last time, and in fact, bursting out laughing when he saw Otto's demeanor, Roswaal's evaluation of him couldn't have been low.
Although, one gets the feeling that Roswaal didn't exactly see him as a merchant.

[Subaru: Well, long as you've got me looking out for you, you'll be sticking around for a long time. Either way, you've already seen the top secret documents of the Mathers domain so there's no way you can run away]

[Otto: You know, meeting you was the end of my luck, Natsuki-san…… but, I've already resigned myself to my fate in a way, so nevermind]

As expected, still not disheartened after encountering misfortune on the road, Otto indeed had the fundamental qualities of a travelling merchant at heart. Even if he wasn't destined for greatness at the end of the road he had taken, he wouldn't regret the choice he had made.
Deep down, Subaru did feel a sense of friendship for the guy who stayed with him for a reason like this.

[Subaru: I'll be looking forward to working you like a horse from now on! Otto!]

[Otto: What's he saying with that refreshing expression, this guy!]

Otto wailed as Subaru patted him on the shoulder and shot him a thumbs-up.
Seeing Lewes, squished between them, plugging her ears, Subaru looked down from the dragon carriage ready for departure, and,

[Subaru: ――Then, we're off, Emilia-tan]

[Emilia: Mn, be careful]

Lifting her hand in front of her chest with a little wave, Emilia replied while timidly seeing them off.

――Last night, Subaru accompanied her to challenge the Trials. The result, as he already knew, was that she failed. Since Subaru was not allowed to follow her into the Tomb, the Trial was not interrupted halfway through, and in the end, as if in a daze, Emilia had to crawl herself out of the Tomb, her eyes trembling, before collapsing into Subaru's arms and losing consciousness.

Staying by her side the whole night as she slept, Subaru could not remember how many times he had to wipe away her tears from her sleeping face.
To see her worn down like this, it would be a lie to say that he wasn't worried to leave her here. He wanted to stay beside her for as long as he could, and hold up her trembling body, but,

[Subaru: I'll be back in a day or two, so don't push yourself. Now that the villagers are gone, there's no need to rush. Slowly and surely, we can take our time and conquer the Trials]

[Emilia: That's……right. Mn, if you say so, Subaru……]

Without any of the returning strength he had seen in her smile the night before, her smile now was weak, and felt like no more than a fleeting facade. In fact, she was already forcing herself just by standing here, seeing them off. Or perhaps, she was distracting herself so she could forget the things that were weighing on her heart.

[Subaru: Ram, I don't mean to remind you, but…]

[Ram: Ram is finding it doubtful what that could be other than a reminder. ……But don't worry. As much as I hate to say this, I share Barusu's opinion. This should be seen as a long-term matter. Unless there are orders from Roswaal-sama, I'll keep Garf in check]

[Subaru: I'm in your debt…… although that sounds super-scary. I'll repay you some other way]

[Ram: Tch. Barusu is unexpectedly perceptive for a change]

[Subaru: Just now, I think I've inadvertently avoided another DEATH FLAG there――!]

Clicking her tongue, Ram politely bowed without fail as she saw them off. She took a step back, and Subaru sat up straight on the driver's bench, ready to depart―― when he saw, at the back of the group of people sending them off, a golden-haired youth crossing his arms, staring at him.

The same time Subaru noticed Garfiel, Garfiel noticed him as well as their gazes met.
Over their crossing gazes, neither could tell what emotions the other must be feeling, and after what happened to Emilia last night, there was even less ground for reconciliation between them.

[Subaru: Ugh. I gotta find some clues to get through to him somehow……]

[Otto: Natsuki-san? It's about time to head out, shall we go?]

[Subaru: Yeah, let's go. Lewes-san, we're counting on you]

[Lewes: Leave it to me]

Lewes nodded with a spirited reply, and Otto, holding the reins, gave the signal to Patrasche and Furufu. The dragon carriages started to move, and the great migration of the refugees was underway.
Far from reaching full speed, the dragon carriages proceeded at a crawling pace. This was inevitable, considering the passengers were primarily women, children and the elderly.

[Subaru: Even so, it seems everyone's faces have lighted up because they know they're going home]

[Lewes: Home, it does hold that kind of power. No matter how unremarkable, how banal it is, in the end, there is where people's hearts will remain]

Lewes followed on Subaru's whisper as he watched the long procession behind him. Hearing her remarks, Subaru crossed his arms and tilted his head [Is that right?],

[Subaru: Lewes-san, do you also feel attached to the Sanctuary, after all?]

[Lewes: ……Well, who knows. In my case, I'm in a special situation where I know nothing except that place. And just the thought of another place terrifies me, I often find]

[Subaru: Terrifies you?]

[Lewes: To set foot into a completely unknown place is a terrifying thing, Su-bo. For me, this ancient self who had passed her years in vain, this is especially so]

With an aged smile emerging on her face, Lewes turned her eyes to the distance. But, since she looked like a little girl, no matter how serious she tried to be, he found it extremely difficult to see her as anything except a little girl stretching up her back pretending she's older.
And, intermittently exchanging this casual conversation, the procession of dragon carriages continued its way through the forest. It would be about an eight-hour one-way journey to get there. The Divine Protection of Wind Evasion ensured that the journey would feel like sitting on a royal-class seat, but that also made time appear to pass slower.

[Lewes: Such a clever ground dragon. She's barely made any mistakes even without me guiding the way]

[Subaru: Yeah, she's my kawaii-little-pride-and-joy, you know. It might be strange for me to be the one saying this, but all the characters around me are pretty HIGH-LEVEL, aren't they?]

Beginning with the members of Roswaal's Mansion, and then with the start of the Royal Selection, all the people he encountered were at the top of their respective fields. It was miserable how much his mediocrity stood out while mingling with them, although now, he was looking on the bright side.

Already behind by a lap at the starting point, he had nonetheless started running. To catch up to them, the only thing he had to do was to keep running――― and he had already been given the strength to do so.

[Subaru: Now that I think about it, while I'm grateful and all that you've come all this way to guide us, how will Lewes-san get back? If all the dragon carriages are heading to Arlam village, you won't have any transportation, right?]

[Lewes: No need to worry, I'll just walk back on my own two legs like a normal person. Just so you know, these legs of mine aren't about to lose to the youngsters, you know?]

Pat Pat, Lewes gave her short tiny legs swept along by the motion of the carriage a pat. In other words, it was completely unpersuasive, but Subaru didn't have the heart to shatter the little girl's confidence,

[Subaru: I got it I got it…… Oy, Otto. Think you got the strength of will to carry a loli back to the Sanctuary?]

[Otto: Since I don't know what the intention behind that question is, do you mind if I refuse to answer that?]

[Subaru: You hear that, Lewes san? Looks like we can't even count on this guy to carry a little girl back home through a dark and scary forest. A little girl or two, he couldn't care less]

[Lewes: That's terrible, how desolate people's hearts have become]

[Otto: You two have totally teamed up against me, haven't you!?]

As usual, Otto's wail shattered through the silence of the forest. Lewes and Subaru looked at each other and smiled, then she turned up her face, and,

[Lewes: Almost there]

Hearing Lewes' whisper, Subaru furrowed his brows. But that very same moment, Lewes' body abruptly leaned towards him. Softly catching her tiny body, [Huh?] Subaru slightly raised his voice,

[Subaru: Otto, stop. Lewes-san's looking a little strange]

[Otto: Should we, go back to the village?]

At Subaru's short call, Otto pulled on the reins and brought the dragon carriage to a stop. Giving the same instruction to the rest of the line behind them, one by one, he heard the ground dragons' cries as they halted.
Then, in his arms, Lewes raised her little hand,

[Lewes: ……Sorry, there's no need to go back. It's only the effect of coming so close to the Barrier. If I advance any further into the forest, I can't guarantee that I will stay conscious]

[Subaru: The Barrier…… the same thing happened to Emilia when she entered the Sanctuary]

In Subaru's time, it was already a week ago when he first arrived at the Sanctuary.
Like in the shaking dragon carriage just now, Emilia lost consciousness, and then they were greeted by Garfiel's rude welcoming.
Lewes's expression looked just like Emilia's back then, and if the dragon carriage continued any further, her consciousness might be ripped out just like Emilia's was.

[Subaru: Say, this Barrier really knows how to tell us apart. Whether it's the sensitive-skinned me, or the insensitive-skinned Otto, neither of us can feel a thing]

[Otto: Insensitive-skinned, what's that supposed to mean? My skin doesn't feel particularly sensitive or insensitive here]

[Subaru: That's what happens when young people don't take care of their skin, once you gradually start getting SPOTS & FRECKLES in your late twenties, you'll regret your ignorance earlier on in life]

[Otto: I seriously have no idea what you're saying anymore, but, getting back on topic, this is where we say goodbye to Lewes-san…… isn't it?]

Disregarding Subaru's random commentary, Otto turned to Lewes. And, on the receiving end, Lewes nodded with a pained expression on her face,

[Lewes: Well, yes. This is as far as I go. Those born inside the Sanctuary have terrible compatibility with the Barrier. It has been a long time since I came this far…… Well, there was nothing special]

[Subaru: Unless, was testing the Barrier part of why you came along?]

[Lewes: It seems I was too optimistic with that thought. The result is as you see. ……It's not possible, after all. The Sanctuary can only be liberated by completing the Trials. That much is clear, Su-bo]

Under the little girl's gaze, Subaru realized that she had come all this way to personally confirm that they were truly imprisoned within the Sanctuary. And he could see how much she wanted to be outside the Sanctuary, and that it was all too natural that she would want this.

[Subaru: Emilia would probably feel the same thing if she came this far]

[Lewes: Since she has already come inside, it would be so. Not all residents of the Sanctuary were born and raised here. Ros-bo would occasionally come to bring in those with similar circumstances from the outside. Those children too, become properties of the Witch from the moment they enter the Sanctuary. Emilia-sama is no exception]

[Subaru: ……there it is again, kinda feels like I've just heard some information I can't let slide…]

Roswaal brought new residents into the Sanctuary from the outside――if they were people who are affected by the Barrier, it would mean they were half-bloods as well.

[Subaru: Then he's bringing them in and shutting them in here? Oyoy, the hell's he thinking?]

[Lewes: As for his true intentions……I cannot rightly say. When you get back, you should ask Ros-bo this yourself, Su-bo]

Lewes powerlessly shook her head, and pulled herself out of the frowning Subaru's arms. As she lightly jumped her tiny body down from the coachman's stand, Patrasche extended her head over to her, and Lewes patted her on the neck,

[Lewes: Good ground dragon. Become your master's strength, now]

Patrasche nudged her nose on Lewes in reply, acknowledging her words. In fact. without coming off as boasting, this was the first time Subaru had seen Patrasche being so intimate with anyone except him. Even Otto had eaten quite a few head-butts while trying to have conversations with her.

[Subaru: There are all sorts of things I still need to do in the Sanctuary, so once I've asked all I want to ask from Frederica, I'll come right back]

[Lewes: That would be best. ……This is only my intuition, but without you here, I don't think anything will be moving forward inside the Sanctuary]

[Subaru: That's another huge over-evaluation to dump on me…… even if it's just intuition]

[Lewes: It's the intuition of a woman who has lived over a hundred years, you know?]

[Subaru: The way to see that depends on whether we look at its good side or not, I guess]

Replying to Lewes this way, Subaru politely bowed from atop the coachman's stand. Watching her back away from the carriage, Otto quietly spilled [We're going],

[Subaru: Yeah, see you again, Lewes-san. Take care on your way back]

[Lewes: Mmm. You'll get out of the forest if you go straight ahead from here. Keep going until you hit the road, and then the ground dragons can take it from there. Take care]

Waving her little hand, Lewes bid them farewell. Otto waved the signal flag and the line of dragon carriages resumed its march.
After watching them leave, Lewes turned her back and headed into the depths of the forest. Watching her little figure disappear into the gaps between the trees, praying that she would get back safely―― Subaru felt a lump inside his chest that he couldn't put into words.

[Subaru: ……Something just, feels off]

He had felt a sense of incongruity in their previous conversation. But, unable to quite put his finger on what it was, Subaru relinquished his weight onto the rocking of the dragon carriage.
Coming out of the forest, into the radiant light of the sun, the road broadened out before them―― they had crossed the Barrier, and left the Sanctuary.
From here, there was still a long, long road ahead.

There were things he must do, and things he must say.
With these weighing down like mountains, Subaru continued on in the swaying dragon carriage.

Chapter 31 [Maid・Maid・Maid]

——For Subaru, this would be the second time returning to Roswaal's Mansion from the Sanctuary.

[Subaru: Although it was just a painful experience the first time……]

Subaru scratched his cheeks mumbling this, and jumped down from Patrasche's back outside the gate.
After bidding farewell to Lewes, Subaru and the refugees returned to Arlam village safe and sound. Although, since they had already done so in the last loop, and having his trusted Patrasche to guide the way, there was nothing he had to worry about.

[Subaru: The villagers are rejoicing, and Otto's staying behind in the village like last time. I was originally hoping to bring Otto along as a meat shield though……]

Actually, Subaru hesitated about dragging Otto along to the mansion. After all, there was a good chance it could get genuinely dangerous, and bringing Otto, who doesn't last well in intense situations, along probably wasn't a good idea.
In terms of a straight-up brawl, Subaru couldn't win against Otto, but Otto wasn't exactly a god-like martial artist. Subaru wasn't particularly looking forward to seeing his organs in front of the Bowel Hunter.

[Subaru: I hope nothing happened……]

Last time, Subaru returned to the Mansion six days after the beginning of the Trials. This time, it was three. ——Compared to before, he still had three days of leeway.
Presumably, the Mansion was attacked on the same night Subaru was killed. Taking all the factors into consideration, that much should be certain. The problem was,

[Subaru: Three days left…… in other words, I'd have to get the information out of Frederica and head back to the Sanctuary, fix the problems in the Sanctuary, and then force march back to the Mansion with Garfiel. Just looking at time alone, it's not impossible, but……]

There were tremendous hurdles to overcome before he could turn these empty theories to reality. It takes 8 hours just to clear the one-way route from the Sanctuary to the Mansion. Going back and forth once would already take up almost a day in travel time. Counting the loss of time in between as well, the amount of usable time available to Subaru becomes all the more severe.

[Subaru: There are backup plans for solving the problem as well…… If I choose the optimal plan, it will be an arduous route even in the most optimistic cases……]

Knowing ahead of time when Elsa will attack, the optimal solution for Subaru would be to repel the assassin. This way, they wouldn't need to be constantly looking over their shoulders and be frightened by every shadow. In other words, he was hoping for complete victory, if possible.
To accomplish this, they must exceed Elsa in combat strength, which would require having either Roswaal or Garfiel. But at the moment, the likelihood of bringing either of them back to the Mansion was not looking high.

[Subaru: So in the end, there's no choice but to go for the second-best option…… huh]

While Subaru was muttering this despondently and scratching at his head, Patrasche brought her nose over. Smiling awkwardly at the face of the ground dragon that was nudging against his shoulder, Subaru rubbed his palm over her hard scaly skin, and patted her on the head,

[Subaru: The rewards match the risks, but we aren't ready to bring nearly enough winning chances to counterbalance the risk. Which pretty much just leaves us with the turn tail and run and scatter like a bunch of baby spiders battle-plan]

At the time of his battle with the Witch Cult, this was a conclusion that had crossed his mind. But while this was possible due to the number of pieces he had last time, this time, there weren't as many hands he could play. Even with prior knowledge of the incoming attack, he would be more than satisfied if they could just manage to escape.
But, there were problems with that as well.

[Subaru: Everyone in the Mansion. Rem, Petra, Frederica…… and Beako, I don't know if they'll all cooperate with evacuation. Honestly, if I just piggyback Rem and hold Petra's hand I'll be able to bring them along, but I'll probably break a few bones before I could convince the other two]

Of course, if it ever comes down to it, he would drag everyone into the dragon carriage by force and abduct them away if he had to. He didn't think he'd be able to beat them in a fight, but if he kept yanking on their arms and wouldn't let go, he might just manage it somehow. No, he definitely will.

[Subaru: ——Huu]

Exhaling a small sigh, Subaru felt the weight of the responsibility on his shoulders.
How many people's fates were resting on his words, his actions, and his resolve. On the night before the battle with the White Whale, he had felt this way as well.

[Subaru: It won't do any good to procrastinate outside the gates forever. I still don't know if anything happened inside. Better make sure everyone's fine first……]

[???: And after that?]

[Subaru: After that, I'll think about how to persuade them. Oh yeah, I got it, since they won't know anyway, I'll just lie and tell them that it's Roswaal's instructions or something……]

[???: Woaa. You're so bad~, Subaru]

[Subaru: Just call me DIRTYWILD, I'm still at an age to aspire towards this kind of bad-boy image, you know…… wh]

In the middle of his sentence, Subaru heard the sound of giggling coming from behind and turned around. And, in the Mansion's front gardens on the other side of the gate, there was a little maid—— the familiar little girl, Petra, standing there.
In front of the surprised-looking Subaru raising his brows, she shook her chestnut-colored hair and adorably tilted her head,

[Petra: Welcome back, Subaru-sama. Your return has come earlier than I thought]

[Subaru: Yeah, I'm back…… looks like I just caught a glimpse of the results of Frederica's education for the gifted. Thanks for the reception]

At the sight of Petra picking up the hems of her skirt in a curtsy, Subaru loosened his cheeks in relief, before softly pushing open the gate and stepping inside. As he went on leading Patrasche toward the ground dragon stables, Subaru looked down at Petra walking alongside him.

[Petra: ――?]

Seeing Subaru looking at her, she made a strange expression and hurriedly turned her back and began cleaning up her hair and smoothing out her dress. After she seemed satisfied with all that, [O-K], she turned back to Subaru with a nod,

[Petra: What is it, Subaru-sama?]

And, with a smile even more radiant than before, she showed him her adorable smile.
Merging the cuteness of a little girl, and a promise of future beauty, it was a smile that, in spite of its youth, carried a fiendish power to abduct the hearts of the opposite sex.
It was a perfect smile calculated with a complete understanding of how it would be perceived by others. Presented with such a smile, Subaru had to suck in a bit of air,

[Subaru: Aaaahhh, that! Isn't that just way too adorable, youuu!]

[Petra: Wa, waaah!?]

Completely oblivious to her underlying intentions, Subaru wrapped the little girl in a hug as if that was the reaction she requested and started affectionately rubbing her head with a variety of complex petting techniques without any regard for restraint. Petra squeaked out a confused cry at the sudden action, but,

[Subaru: You don't even know half of what I'm feeling right now. Youuu, youuu! Aaahhh, damn I'm so happy to see you again!!]

[Petra: Wha what, what's going on!? Wah, wait, Subaru…… it's too early for me to……]

[Subaru: Really, I'm so glad……]

[Petra: ――Subaru?]

Her face all blushing, struggling in his arms, Petra's expression changed. She settled in his arms, and looked up at Subaru who had lowered his voice, and, gradually, the at-once embarrassed and delighted expression disappeared from her face.

[Petra: Are you, hurting somewhere……?]

Worried, she extended out a finger and touched his trembling cheeks. Then, a palm pressed against her fingers, and with [I'm alright], Subaru shook his head.
He inhaled a deep breath through his nostrils, and paused for a second. And then, opening his eyes once more,

[Subaru: I'm just seriously, from the bottom of my heart, relieved. ――I'm home, Petra]

――After returning Patrasche to the stables, Subaru returned to the Mansion holding Petra's hand since she wanted to hold hands with him. Fortunately, according to Petra, no noteworthy changes had taken place since Subaru left the Mansion.

[Petra: Right now, big-sister-sama Frederica is away inspecting the Boundaries in the mountains, so she'll be back after a little while…… maybe]

As Petra informed him of the Head Maid's absence, Subaru recalled the Boundaries in the mountains―― that is, the magical crystals that sealed out the Wolgarms. Though the Wolgarms in the mountains were supposed to have been eradicated, the Boundaries remained in service even now.
It seems, aside from the Wolgarms, there were other dangerous Mabeasts that needed to be kept out by the Boundaries, and, as the managers of Arlam village, the task of maintaining them fell to the subjects of the Roswaal camp.

[Petra: Once everyone in the village comes back, they can check for breaks in the Boundaries themselves, but since everyone hasn't come back yet, big-sister-sama Frederica is doing it]

[Subaru: Now that you're calling her big-sister-sama, it sounds like you two have gotten closer while I was away, kinda makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. Also, the villagers are all back now, you know]

[Petra: Really?]

When he pointed in the direction of the village, Petra's eyes lighted up and she squeaked out an excited cry.
Her family was among those who evacuated to the Capital, so both her parents had already been safely returned to the village. But even so, she was still separated from neighbors and friends. Now that she knew they were safe, Petra happily clapped her hands.

[Subaru: Yeah, you should go see them later. I'm sure they'll be excited to see you in your maid's uniform]

[Petra: Yeah. Once I get permission from big-sister-sama Frederica, I'll go change!]

[Subaru: No, there's no need to change…… You look cute in it, you should let everyone see……]

[Petra: Ehehee, cute? I'm cute?]

[Subaru: Yeah you're cute, you're cute. So everyone sh……]

[Petra: Yeah! I'll change and go see them!]

It pretty much turned into a situation where no matter how many times he tried saying [No it's fine], his voice kept getting canceled out by her peals of thunder.
Seeing that she was definitely not planning to change her mind about this, Subaru gave up making any further proposals.

Cracking the bones of his neck, […ah], Subaru exhaled a deep breath and stopped.
They were on the Mansion's second floor―― rubbing his soles on the carpet, he had lifted up his face and was staring at a door. Petra, feeling a little lonely, let go of his fingers. She was a smart girl who could read the mood.

[Subaru: I'm sorry, Petra. Let me be alone with her, for a little while]

[Petra: Mn, I understand. I'll go finish cleaning up the west wing, please call me if you need anything]

As though she knew even before Subaru spoke, Petra put away her young girl's demeanors and returned to the role of a maid, and, with a slight bow, she left him there.
Receiving this gesture of consideration from her, despite there being a mountain of pressing matters closing in on him, Subaru lightly poked himself in the head.
Poking, and――

[Subaru: I asked myself what I should give priority to…… and I wound up coming here]

Pushing open the door, Subaru slowly stepped into the room.
A room where time had stopped. In that plain and simple room, there was a bed―― and on it, a young girl was sleeping. The girl was no longer wearing her familiar servant's dress, but was now wrapped in a light blue nightgown.
Her eyes were closed, and not even her faint breathing could be heard. Only, the silent rise and fall of her chest gave proof that she still lives.

[Subaru: ……Rem]

Lending voice to that name, who could understand the vortex of emotions carried within that single word. That unstoppable torrent of emotion, meant for only one person in the world.
He had resolved to be strong, to turn his heart to steel, to not waver in the face of all difficulties. Resolved to no longer depend on others, and to hold his head high.

――But, in front of her, all this determination scattered into mist.

The Subaru who told Emilia to leave it to him, who took her hand and told her he will find a way, the Subaru who once did so with so much strength. The facade of that resolve fell apart the moment he stood before her.

[Subaru: I'm pathetic…… I'm so… weak]

As soon as he was in front of Rem, Subaru returned to the weak Natsuki Subaru he once was. Returned to the time before Rem's devotion had affirmed him, to the time before he first stood up.

Slowly, he reached out to her sleeping face and gently swept aside the hair on her forehead. Asleep, her expression did not change, and he had not found a single clue to restoring her eaten self.

But if he did nothing and let her go on sleeping like this, it would be certain that even her vessel will be lost as well.

[Subaru: Maybe you didn't mean to, but because of you, my resolve has been hardened]

Weak and fragile, the surface of his heart that would break off at the touch was slowly covered over with steel.
The fact that Rem's sleeping figure and the certain beating of her heart still existed allowed Natsuki Subaru to return to that instant. To the emotions of that moment when he was reborn.

[Subaru: Because you told me that it's alright even if I am weak, you told me that you will help me become stronger…… I will find a way, no matter what it takes, and stand up no matter how many times I fall]

No matter what pain, what suffering, what hardship or unpleasantness awaited him, the love of her entire soul healed Subaru, and sent the desire into his heart to move forward in return.

[Subaru: You, and Petra and everyone else…… I will bring you all out safely]

He gently stroked her sleeping forehead, and suppressed his feeling that wanted to touch her more. A gust of wind had blown into the room, while he sat silently in the chair at her bedside. That portion of the limited time he had, the meager, precious time that he needed to conserve, he gave it all to her. At this point, this was the best that Subaru could do to offer her his heart.

For how long had time passed in this stillness.
Suddenly, Subaru's consciousness that was vacantly staring at Rem in a daze was pulled back to reality by the sound of a knock on the door. Lifting his face, and turning to the door, [Yes], he answered, and,

[????: Apologies for the intrusion. ――I am glad you've returned safely, Subaru-sama]

Quietly pushing open the door, a tall woman entered the room.
With her golden hair swaying, and her posture impeccable and refined―― it was Frederica.
Seeing Subaru at the sleeping Rem's side, she slightly lowered her head, and,

[Frederica: There are a variety of questions I wish to ask you…… and I am sure Subaru-sama feels the same. Let us change the location. Although she is asleep, I doubt these are things that she would especially like to hear]

[Subaru: That sure helped speed things along. ……The things I want to ask you, do you already have some idea what they are?]

[Frederica: Possibly]

Hearing that modest response, Subaru spilled out a small sigh and stood up from his chair. He touched Rem's sleeping cheeks one last time, and, as if to sever his reluctance, he clenched tight his fist,

[Subaru: Your rowdy, foul-mouthed little brother, that Gap-Moe who looks like a Loli but is a Granny on the inside. The Sanctuary that is the Experimental Grounds, and Roswaal's true intentions. Let me look forward to seeing how much of that you can answer]

[Frederica: Since the Master hasn't returned, it would seem that the Trials haven't ended yet?]

After leaving Rem's bedroom, the two of them moved to the drawing room.
Placing a steaming cup of amber-colored tea in front of Subaru, Frederica sat down across from him and opened with these words. Receiving the cup, Subaru nodded [Yeah] as he stirred his tea with a spoon,

[Subaru: You sure got straight to the point. ——So, don't you feel a little guilty about knowing all that inside information and yet giving us so little when you sent us off?]

[Frederica: I won't make excuses. After all, it is true that I did not tell you everything about the Sanctuary and the Trials and that no-good little brother of mine]

Frederica's detached tone did not seem to be carrying any sense of guilt about that fact.
However, he couldn't say for certain that she was entirely without remorse. Perhaps, she was merely suppressing such feelings and pretending to be without emotions so as not to reveal the contents of her heart.
It was the same with Ram—— but considering the lengths of time he had gotten to know them, it was far more difficult to tell with Frederica.

[Subaru: As I said back in the room, there're all sorts of things I want to ask you…… Can I expect to get answers to all of them?]

[Frederica: ……I don't imagine I would be able to meet such expectations. Since the Sanctuary is not yet liberated, I am still bound by my contract to the Master. As long as I must abide by that contract, there is a limit to what facts I can convey to Subaru-sama]

[Subaru: Contracts again…… it's the same with everybody here]

Subaru pressed a hand to his forehead and felt an especially bitter sense of disappointment.
As much as he wanted to raise his voice and scream that contracts could be interpreted more freely, when he remembered his promise to Emilia, he realized he couldn't bring himself to force anyone else to break theirs.

[Subaru: What if I were to ask you about the details of your contract?]

[Frederica: I'm sorry. As long as the contract exists between Roswaal-sama and myself, the information I can reveal is limited. ——I'm afraid that is all I could say on that subject]

[Subaru: There's no new information at all. Damn it, that asshole always has to do these baffling things. Looks like this time I'll have no choice but to treat him as an enemy from now on]

Clicking his tongue at the culprit responsible for this disappointing reality, Subaru tried to pull himself together by taking a sip of his tea. He could still only taste leaves, but after drinking them over and over, Subaru could already distinguish the expensive leaves from those that are not. ——And his tongue told him that these were expensive leaves.

[Subaru: This may not be the right occasion, but…… Frederica, you originally came from the Sanctuary, and you're Garfiel's older sister, right? Or you can't even tell me that much?]

[Frederica: No, that is not a problem. What you said is…… correct. Although, more accurately, I am not from the Sanctuary, but only grew up there. However, since I have lived in the Sanctuary from as early as I could remember, it would not be incorrect to put it that way]

[Subaru: Not from the Sanctuary…… that's what Lewes-san said as well. Sounds like Roswaal likes to bring half-bloods to live there, huh?]

In the dragon carriage on the road home, Lewes, who tagged along, had mentioned this.
Back then, because of Lewes' refusal, he didn't manage to get to the true intentions behind Roswaal's actions, but,

[Subaru: Half-bloods can't pass through the Barrier, so bringing them in is basically the same as imprisoning them there, isn't it? Then why would he do such a thing…… and the people there, despite knowing that they're being imprisoned, they……]

They didn't seem to be particularly upset and instead appeared to be living peaceful lives there.
At least, they didn't seem to be people who had been forcefully dragged in and trapped, nor were there any signs of outrage at their treatment in the course of their daily lives.
In other words, it was as though they had accepted their lives within the Sanctuary. ――Could there be some significance to that?

[Frederica: Subaru-sama, do you know about the Demihuman War?]

[Subaru: ……Demihuman War. If it's just the word, I feel like I've heard it somewhere before]

If he sieved through his memories to the very beginning, he must have heard that word two or three times before. Subaru remembered being struck with the impression that that name more or less conveyed the basics of what had occurred.
Hearing Subaru's vague answer, Federica gently brushed her fingers through her golden hair, before lightly covering her razor-sharp fangs that were peeking through the corner of her lips,

[Frederica: If you wish to unravel the purpose of the Sanctuary's existence and Roswaal-sama's considerations, we would first have to talk a bit about the Demihuman War]

Saying this, she stood up and walked to the back of the drawing room. Sensing Subaru's gaze trailing behind her, Frederica picked up a box from the table in the back of the room, and,

[Frederica: Don't be so alarmed, I am merely getting some confectionaries]

Revealing a slight smile on the corners of her lips, she returned and set down the box in front of Subaru.
Laid out inside, were assorted sweets unique to this world which he had only tasted on extremely rare occasions in Roswaal's Mansion.
While Subaru looked back and forth between the treats and the face of the girl who presented them,

[Frederica: Since it will be a long and tiresome story, please enjoy, and bear with me].

Chapter 32 [1/4]

Tilting the steaming teacup to his lips and taking a sip, Subaru opened his ears to Frederica's words.

[Frederica: The Demihuman War―― To begin with, would Subaru-sama know what kind of dispute this was?]

[Subaru: Like I said, I don't know the details. Just…… I can kinda imagine what might've happened just from the name and the historical background]

[Frederica: My, that's interesting. May I ask what you imagined it to be?]

Hearing this reply from Subaru, Frederica covered the corner of her lips and smiled.
Covering her mouthful of fangs while smiling seemed to be a deeply ingrained habit of her's, and Subaru often saw her this way.
It would seem that although she loved to smile, she didn't want others to see it.

Closing his eyes and scratching at his cheeks, with [Right], Subaru began,

[Subaru: I don't know how long ago that war took place, but I can imagine it couldn't have had nothing to do with the Witch of Envy. I've seen how Emilia was treated like a tumor in the Capital, and I know that Half-Elves are despised by all sorts of people]

Recorded even in picture-books, the Witch of Envy was universally known as the unparalleled symbol of absolute evil. Being a silver-haired Half-Elf, for having only this one point in common with the Witch, Emilia was treated with this unjust prejudice. So, in the wake of the Witch of Envy―― Subaru could imagine the kind of conflict that might have arisen from even the most insignificant details.

[Subaru: A Half-Elf, would be a child between a Human and an Elf, right? Carrying on from their hatred of Half-Elves…… it's not too far-fetched that some would believe that Half-Bloods born between humans and other races are also heresy deserving of persecution]

[Frederica: ……Please, do go on]

[Subaru: I'm just pulling this from imagination, but since the persecution of Half-Elves led to the persecution of Half-Bloods by association, if we take this to the extreme, the very existence of the Demihumans who begot the Half-Bloods would also be a threat as well…… that's probably what some of those guys are thinking]

To the extent of Subaru's knowledge, the humans are by far the most numerous race in this world. He knew of the existence of Elves, and Beastmen like Anastasia's triplets, but just based on his observations over the days he spent at the Capital, the absolute number of Demihumans were indeed far fewer than the humans.
And so, solely owing to their majority, they came to believe that they had justice on their side.

[Subaru: I doubt absolutely everyone would've taken up this way of thinking, but the loud and obnoxious types are probably the same anywhere. So, compared to hatred of Demihumans…… it's probably closer to fear, isn't it. And when that frustration eventually boils over…]

[Frederica: The tension between Humans and Demihumans erupted. The smoldering kindling caught fire, and with ever-gathering momentum, its flames engulfed the whole of Lugnica]

Spilling this in a melancholic voice, Frederica continued on from Subaru's words.
Closing one of his eyes, Subaru gazed at her downcast expression. And Frederica, with a single nod, turned up her face.

[Frederica: There is almost no need to supplement your conjectures, nor are there any grounds for dispute. ……Have you truly never heard any detailed accounts of the war?]

[Subaru: Nah. If that was essentially correct, it's just thanks to my power of imagination. Or reading experience…… this kind of stuff shows up in light novels a lot, you know, antagonism between races and stuff]

Although, of course, Subaru never actually paid much mind to these problems in reality.
Even in his Original World, so-called racial discrimination existed. But, to Subaru, they might as well have been taking place a world away. Like problems existing in some Parallel World.
He was himself, and the others were others, he had held this coldly apathetic outlook. And while this was true in a way, in reality, he was only averting his eyes.

[Subaru: It's just, even if I can imagine how things got the way they are, I'd still have no idea how to fix it. But since you're saying this in the past-tense, at least that means the Demihuman War had already run its course, right?]

[Frederica: In a sense, yes. But the scars of the war run deep, and the sprouts of prejudice against the offsprings between Humans and Demihumans remain deeply rooted even now]

Perhaps because she herself was born as a target of such prejudice, Frederica's words carried a certain heaviness that could not have been understood by someone merely listening from the outside.
Subaru wanted to ask what happened next, but hesitated before he could throw these words at her. And, sensing this on his mind, Frederica sighed,

[Frederica: My apologies for making you worried. Let us continue the story]

[Subaru: I kinda wanna say "don't force yourself", but these things directly tie into what I need to ask so I can't really say that. So, do force yourself, please]

[Frederica: My my. You certainly are adept at spurring people on, Subaru-sama]

Favorably interpreting Subaru's rather selfish remark, Frederica lifted her own cup and let a sip roll over her tongue,

[Frederica: The Demihuman War began approximately fifty years ago. From there, it went on for nearly ten years…… and it was recorded to have concluded forty years ago]

[Subaru: Ten years…… that's a long time. Although, back home, I think we've got a Hundred Years' War and a Thirty Years' War or something in our history as well]

Subaru wasn't so well read when it came to historical novels, so his knowledge of these events didn't go past glancing over their names in textbooks. But, with names like that, he could more or less guess how long those wars lasted at least.
Thirty years, and a hundred years. It's a frightening thought, how anyone could hate another person enough to carry on a war for so long.
Even Subaru had only spent about two months in the Parallel world.

[Subaru: That's just way too exhausting, who can keep on playing Bokosuka Wars for more than ten years?]

[Frederica: Regardless, the war first originated from a dispute between the humans and a Demihuman settlement. Originally, it would only have been a local dispute contained within a small area…… but because of the incident that followed, in a single stroke, the heat of war flared up. And the horrific conflict, in which blood upon blood washed over every corner of the land, began]

[Subaru: The incident that followed?]

[Frederica: Not long after conflict first broke out, the King of Lugnica at the time saw the seriousness of the situation and dispatched his close attendant as an envoy for peace. On the Demihuman side, the chiefs of various races gathered to welcome the envoy and to negotiate for a resolution, but……]

Hearing Frederica's words trail off, Subaru silently tilted his head, prompting her to continue. Seeing his gesture, Frederica closed her eyes,

[Frederica: Those who attended that conference――― the envoys from the Palace and the Demihuman chiefs alike, were all indiscriminately slaughtered on the spot]

[Subaru: Indiscriminately slaughtered……? But by who, and for what?]

[Frederica: The culprit remains unknown even to this day. But, at the time, both the Humans and the Demihumans were convinced that the other was responsible. And consequently, a small ember became a great devouring fire, and would not be put out for all ten years…… as it so happened]

[Subaru: What were they doing? If they just properly talked it through…… but that's too idealistic, isn't it]

Given the emotions of the people at the time, this might be too much of a god-like perspective to take.
The envoy dispatched by the Palace was the King's personal attendant. Considering the prestige of the envoy murdered at the scene of negotiation, to withdraw the matter without bringing the culprit to justice would have been beneath the dignity of a Kingdom. And, from the Demihumans' perspective, the fact was that their chiefs had been gathered in one place and massacred. Although it'd be demeaning to count lives this way, in purely numerical terms, the

Demihuman side lost more.
Adding to that, was the existence of the Witch of Envy that first laid the foundations of the strife between their races.
It would be difficult enough to even begin to mend their relations, and in this standstill, there was no time to deal with the problems that followed――― further and further behind, unable to stem the tide, it wouldn't be hard to imagine how this invited the tragedy that resulted.

[Frederica: In the end――― the Demihuman War concluded with the surrender of the Demihumans. Even then, the Demihumans refused to take responsibility for the massacre at the conference, and only acknowledged that it would be senseless to continue the war any further]

[Subaru: Personally, stuck in this kind of quagmire, I think the side that stepped back first was actually the smarter one. Also, this was like a civil war, wasn't it? There's no benefit to the country at all]

[Frederica: The truth was precisely that. Lugnica's power greatly declined over the course of the Demihuman War. It was fortunate that at the time, all the neighboring nations were also dealing with turmoil of their own, otherwise, Lugnica may very well have been replaced by some other kingdom]

It must have been fortune in midst of misfortune that the other three nations were also occupied with internal strife, thus narrowly saving Lugnica from a final deathblow.
Yet, a crisis no less perilous than that era was facing this Kingdom even now.

[Subaru: But, well, it's still pretty amazing that they managed to put an end to a war that lasted so long. It must've taken a whole lot of courage, and the resistance from the hardliners couldn't have been easy to overcome]

[Frederica: ……It was because humanity had one overwhelming presence among them who bent the pro-war faction's will. For it was to the unrivaled swordsmanship of the then-Current Generation Sword Saint, Thearesia Van Astrea-sama, that all the Demihumans bowed their heads…… is something the matter?]

[Subaru: No, I was just surprised to hear a name that I know… It's a small world]

Having heard that name before, Subaru remembered that Wilhelm's wife was named Thearesia. The Sword Saint of that era, she must have been the Generation before Reinhard. Hearing that a single woman had put an end to a war that had raged on for ten years, Subaru felt a true sense of the unorthodoxy of the existence that was the Sword Saint.

[Subaru: Well, I have a general idea how the Demihuman War went now. And I can more or less imagine the kind of problems might've sprung up from it]

[Frederica: The reality was almost exactly as Subaru-sama surmised. It would seem that your mind is sharper than I thought. I'm surprised to find that I've misjudged you]

[Subaru: I'll just… pretend that was a compliment for now. So, moving along, although the Demihuman War has ended, the prejudice against the Demihumans couldn't have been dispelled so easily. Of course, people wouldn't blatantly flaunt their hostility under the public eye, but]

Even in the Capital, along the streets lined by fruit-stalls, Humans and Demihumans seemed to be living in normal, peaceful coexistence. But who knows how much pain and struggle had to pass before such a scene could become part of normal life. And, contrary to places like these, there must also have been places where peace had not become normal occurrence, and there will always be places where light does not reach.

[Subaru: Places like closed-off villages with small populations, isolated from the outside world…… if one guy stands out as a problem, I get the feeling the whole place would set on him]

[Frederica: You could say that my little brother and I had lived through precisely this kind of environment]

Furrowing her brows at some painful reminiscences, for the first time in this conversation, Frederica directly referred to her little brother―― Garfiel. Then, turning her eyes somewhere far away,

[Frederica: My brother is my sibling by a different father. Our surnames are different because of this…… I took my father's surname, while my little brother took the surname of our mother]

[Subaru: Your full name is Frederica…… Baumann, right?]

[Frederica: Yes. And my brother's last name would be Tinsel. Our mother was a…… clumsy person, and also an unlucky person]

It was as if Frederica tried to find the right word, but failed to find it in the end. Hearing her say this, Subaru showed an expression of non-understanding, when she started again with [It's embarrassing to say this, but]

[Frederica: It seems, our mother was in the process of being sold off because of her debt, when the slavers were set upon by a group of Demihuman bandits and she was captured…… That's where she met my father]

[Subaru: Wha!? Wa-wai-wait! I get the feeling I have to prepare my heart before I can hear this!]

[Frederica: But that father died soon after, and my mother carried me as an infant as she wandered without a home, when she was captured by another Demihuman band. That's where she met Garfiel's father……]

[Subaru: Waitwaitwait, I was wrong! I never thought it was going to get this heavy!]

[Frederica: And so, I won't dwell on these things. In any case, Garfiel was born, but once again, we were unable to stay with Garfiel's father. So our mother, carrying the two of us, wandered once more, and, when we were at the end of our ropes, we were taken in by the House of Mathers]

Briefly laying bare her heavy past, a certain nostalgia emerged in Frederica's eyes as she sighed. Then, stroking the handle of her chair with a palm,

[Frederica: At the time, still in his early teens, the Master…… Roswaal-sama, had already inherited his title as the head of the House of Mathers. To my brother and I, the Master is our savior in the truest sense of the word. And I consider it to be an honor to be able to serve at his side this way]

[Subaru: So the two of you were brought into the Sanctuary, and lived there, huh…… by the way, it's a bit hard to bring this up but, what happened to your mother?]

From what he could gather from her story so far, their mother must have been a pure blooded Human. Which meant that she would have been able to enter and exit the Sanctuary at will. But whether it was at the Sanctuary or the Mansion, Subaru had never seen anyone who could have been her.
Yet just as Subaru was imagining the worst, Frederica shook her head,

[Frederica: It seems I've made you worried, but please rest assured. After leaving my brother and I with Roswaal-sama, our mother left the Mansion without leaving word of where she was going. Nor have we heard from her since. But she must be safe and still living somewhere, I believe]

[Subaru: ――――]

Listening to Frederica lightly saying this, Subaru couldn't utter another word and only remained in silence. Although the worst Subaru had prepared for was their being separated by death, the crueler reality was that she had abandoned them.
But hearing this created even more questions,

[Subaru: Even though your mother left like this, Garfiel is still using her surname, while you're using your father's. Why is that?]

[Frederica: Because there were no records of her left behind, our memories of our mother were told to us by others…… and in these unreliable circumstances, I took my father's surname. As for the reason why my little brother took our mother's surname…… it was because that child didn't know about our mother. As much as he pretends to be meaner than he is, he is stubbornly sentimental at heart]

[Subaru: Stubbornly sentimental……]

Reviewing his impression of Garfiel in his mind, that description would explain many things. Although he would be quicker to take action than to think things through, and despite being foul-mouthed and rude, Garfiel was nonetheless sensible and understanding. He considered himself dumb, but he was not entirely unthoughtful, nor would he act completely without reason. Everything about him was reminiscent of a juvenile-delinquent punk from the good old days. In terms of sensibilities alone, Subaru couldn't deny that Garfiel was upstanding and noble-minded in his own way.

[Frederica: Subaru-sama. ――Would you happen to know how the Sanctuary's Barrier distinguishes its targets?]

While Subaru occupied his mind with such thoughts, Frederica threw him this rather abrupt question.

Unable to understand the meaning behind it, Subaru was a little slow to react. He looked back at Frederica without much confidence, and with [Umm],

[Subaru: Honestly, no. While there's no doubt the Barrier certainly exists, I can't feel it at all. It's probably using some kind of magic to check everyone that passes, I guess……]

[Frederica: The Barrier does so by verifying the blood inside the veins of those who passes through. If it can clearly distinguish both Human and Demihuman blood, that person will be repelled. In essence, that is the nature of the Barrier]

[Subaru: ……What are you trying to say?]

Unsure why she was suddenly revealing the Barrier's conditions to him, Subaru only quietly asked her this in return. Receiving this response, Frederica lightly nodded,

[Frederica: Do you perhaps now understand how I was able to pass through the Barrier and exit the Sanctuary?]

[Subaru: ……I don't. I feel like I understand even less now after you told me the Barrier's conditions. On the road back, I saw Lewes-san almost collapse when she came close to the Barrier, so I'm sure the Barrier's effects are real. And it was the same when we entered the Sanctuary as well]

Right before Garfiel's dramatic introduction, Emilia had collapsed from passing through the Barrier. Having witnessed its immense power, only a fool would have any doubts about its existence――

[Subaru: ――Huh? How come……]

That moment, a shock flashed across Subaru's mind.
On the road back home, he was accompanied by Lewes. After saying goodbye to Lewes, as they cleared the forest and passed through the Barrier, he had felt a sense of incongruity.
Now he had the answer to that unease. Subaru had already noticed this when he saw Lewes' reaction as they came close to the Barrier.

[Subaru: They were the under the same conditions……. but how come when he was that close to the Barrier, that bastard Garfiel was still fine and kicking around?]

Ambushing them as soon as they passed through the Barrier, Garfiel threw Patrasche and the dragon carriage into the air as if they were nothing.
He certainly didn't use his full strength that time, but compared to Emilia, who fainted as she passed through the Barrier, and Lewes, who almost collapsed just by going near it, Garfiel's behavior was completely different.

――It was as though his body wasn't affected by the Barrier at all.

[Frederica: Owing to his special characteristic, Atavism, at first glance, my brother might appear to have more Demihuman lineage, but in fact, that is not the case. ――The same is true with me]

[Subaru: If detection of blood is the Barrier's criteria for distinguishing humans from Half-Bloods…… to bypass this criteria, one side of the blood would just have to be too thin to detect?]

[Frederica: Although my brother and I have different fathers, neither of them were pure-blooded Demihumans. Both were Half-Blooded, and combined with our Human mother, we were born having inherited only one ¼ of Demihuman blood, having been twice diluted this way]

[Subaru: One-quarter…… so that's why you're not repulsed by the Barrier]

The Barrier that repels Half-Bloods does not repel Quarter-Bloods. It sounded almost farcical, but his existing suspicions told him that it was the truth.
On the subject of why Frederica was able to cross the Barrier, Lewes had only given the ambiguous explanation that she was an exception. But now, Subaru could understand her answer. But then, this would give rise to next question,

[Subaru: Wait. Then does that mean Garfiel can also freely exit the Sanctuary? If he wants to, that guy can just come out regardless of whether the Trials are completed?]

If that was true, then it would be surprising and welcome news.
If he could bring him out without the Barrier blocking the way, there would now be a possibility of using his strength to repel Elsa when she attacks the Mansion.
Originally, Subaru had already abandoned his hopes of repulsing Elsa in this loop and was preparing to evacuate everyone from the Mansion, but now――

[Subaru: If that guy can come out, then……]

[Frederica: It's true, that same as myself, my brother can also venture outside the Sanctuary. When it came time for me to leave the Sanctuary, he was supposed to have come with me, and he had come along as far as the edge of the Barrier. But……]

Cutting off her words there, Frederica looked at Subaru, who seemed to have found some glimmer of hope. But her eyes were filled with an emotion so deep and somber that Subaru felt his hopes cool off at once. Seeing him this way, she went on,

[Frederica: My little brother chose to stay behind. And as long as the Sanctuary is not liberated, I don't think Garfiel will ever set foot outside it. He is a kind and stubbornly sentimental child]

[Subaru: Sentimental…… you don't mean…]

Seeing Subaru raise his brows as his thoughts arrived at that point, as if confirming his astonishment, Frederica gave a single nod as she covered the corner of her lips with her sleeve,

[Frederica: That child could not leave the residents of the Sanctuary behind while he ventures out alone. He is neither good, nor bad, only a straightforward…… and troublesome little brother]

Chapter 33 [The Pathway Of The Wind]

Casting down her eyes, Frederica said this of her younger brother.
Instilled within those words was something at once affectionate and terribly complicated.
Perhaps, this was only a common sentiment to have towards close family members.

[Subaru: He can physically pass through the Barrier, but he won't do it because of his mental issues…… is that essentially what you're saying?]

[Frederica: The fact is that he refused when I, his older sister, requested this of him. He had followed me all the way to the edge of the Barrier, but in the end, he chose to stay inside to be with Grandmother rather than to go with me]

[Subaru: Grandmother…… you mean Lewes-san?]

[Frederica: That child may be rude and foul-mouthed, but he genuinely adores Grandmother. As long as her long-cherished dream has not been fulfilled, he will never leave the Sanctuary]

Even though he kept calling her "Old Hag" and "Granny", Garfiel obviously held an extraordinarily deep affection toward Lewes. Subaru once called him a tsundere, and that description was quite accurate in a way.
In any case, this knowledge wouldn't help the situation very much.

[Subaru: In the end, it still doesn't change the fact that passing the Trials and liberating the Sanctuary are the key conditions. It's about as disappointing as disappointing gets]

[Frederica: I'm sorry I could not meet your expectations……. If there is anything else you wish to ask…]

[Subaru: As long as it's within your ability to answer, right?]

[Frederica: My apologies]

At Frederica's concise affirmation, Subaru sighed through his nose and lined up the questions in his mind. But, considering the flow of the conversation so far, most likely,

[Subaru: Would Roswaal's true intentions be an alright topic to ask?]

[Frederica: The Master intends to support Emilia-sama and make her the next King of Lugnica. That much I can assert without any doubt on the matter]

[Subaru: I was asking for his true intentions. I'm sure even you would agree that many of Roswaal's actions are going against what you just said?]

[Frederica: His methods are indirect and mysterious. I think neither I nor Ram would deny this]

Saying this with the implication that she and Ram had shared this opinion of Roswaal's actions between them, Frederica's face took on a pained expression.
Although she had accepted Subaru's doubts as only natural, she was nonetheless forbidden to provide him with the key to resolving them. In the end,

[Subaru: You can't tell me more without permission from Roswaal himself, huh]

[Frederica: I am truly sorry. But only know this…… the Master is Emilia-sama and Subaru-sama's ally. As long as the two of you possess the intention to prevail in the Royal Selection, that much is assured]

[Subaru: It totally bothers me how you worded that……but it's fine. Nevermind about Roswaal for now. So far, I feel like I can trust you, Frederica. But if it ever turns out you've fallen head over heels for Roswaal like Ram, I'll have to seriously rethink our relationship]

Subaru liked Ram as an individual, but that did not mean he could place absolute trust in her. It was a complicated relationship. At least, Subaru knew that Roswaal held an unshakable, highest place in her heart, and, since Subaru cannot completely trust Roswaal, at the moment, he had no choice but to withhold his judgment of Ram as well.

[Subaru: If you can't tell me Roswaal's true intentions…… can you tell me what it means when they call the Sanctuary the Experimental Grounds? I heard Garfiel calling it that]

[Frederica: Experimental Grounds――is it]

[Subaru: Also a pile of impacted shit for those who have nowhere to go, he called it that too. After our talk about the Demihumans, I can kind of imagine the part about nowhere to go. So Roswaal has a Demihuman fetish or whatever you call that and he's gathering Half-Bloods who have nowhere to go to live there. But…]

Just the words "Experimental Grounds" gave off a sense of unease, and it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the gathered Half-Bloods had been kidnapped in a way. Who knows why Roswaal was doing this? In other words, Emilia may have allied herself with someone she shouldn't have allied with.

[Subaru: To begin with, even if it's not the Witch of Envy, if people found out his family was in charge of a facility related to a Witch, the consequences could be huge. I heard that there are no surviving records of this, but the fact is, the Tomb is still right there]

[Frederica: The meaning of the word "Witch" has since taken on an ominous connotation. Even the Master's contractual relationship with the Witch of Greed would certainly not be deemed appropriate by those around him. This concern is precisely in line with Subaru-sama's considerations, I believe]

[Subaru: I'm glad we can agree that the Sanctuary's existence is problematic. Now, wouldn't a title like the "Experimental Grounds" just make that problem even worse?]

[Frederica:……Originally, that place was a hidden village where Half-Bloods are gathered so the Witch of Greed may conduct a certain experiment. It is unclear what negotiations took place at the time between the Witch and the owner of the land, the House of Mathers, but because of that contract, succeeding generations of the House of Mathers have managed and maintained the Sanctuary]

Nodding his head, Subaru took in the contents of Frederica's words and sorted the information in his mind. He had already gathered as much from connecting the pieces of information implied by the various people in the Sanctuary. Then, the question would be,

[Subaru: What kind of experiments was the Witch running with Half-Bloods, and why is Roswaal continuing to keep the contract even after the Witch's death……?]

[Frederica: The reason for the latter should be simple. The contract most likely contains the clause: "Until the time of the release of the Sanctuary, to adhere to the Oath to the Witch". Unless people are periodically brought into the Sanctuary, the preconditions for the contract's fulfillment would not exist]

[Subaru: So then, he's now turning that around to create a hidden refuge for Half-Bloods? By the sound of that, one might even get the impression that Roswaal was running some kind of charity project]

Since discrimination against Half-Bloods was still a fact, it was necessary to ensure that there was a place where they could live in peace. If Roswaal was indeed fulfilling that role, then Subaru may have to revise his evaluation of him. But,

[Subaru: It doesn't seem like all of the Half-Bloods want to stay there. In fact, the ones following Lewes-san who want the Sanctuary to be liberated are in the majority, aren't they?]

[Frederica:……The general prejudice against Demihumans has indeed greatly faded. Compared to our blood, the reason my brother and I entered the Sanctuary was more because we simply had nowhere else to live. One day, the Sanctuary will be released. ――That is why, I…]

Firmly closing her eyes, Frederica cut off her words. Watching her, Subaru fell silent, and only after some time had passed, did he hesitatingly speak again,

[Subaru: I might just be imagining this…..but, was the reason why Frederica left the Sanctuary because of your concerns about what comes after the Sanctuary is released?]

[Frederica: ……What makes you think so?]

[Subaru: If you ask me why… your face always seems a little saddened when you talk about the Sanctuary. But you left your home in spite of this, whether it was for yourself or for others. Then…]

Scratching his cheek, Subaru saw in the back of his mind the tough facade of the golden short haired youth. Like the kindhearted girl in front of his eyes, that man was all words and wouldn't reveal his true feelings at all.

[Subaru: If you're anything like your little brother when it comes to hiding your true feelings, I wouldn't be surprised if there's some embarrassing reason behind why you left. I'm guessing you…… probably left to create some place for the people to go once the Sanctuary is liberated, somewhere they wouldn't have to be afraid, am I right? Of course, you're working here to repay your debt of gratitude to Roswaal, but that's not all, is it? ……That's kinda what I'm guessing]

Realizing that he was taking huge leaps of logic in his rapid-fire speculation, Subaru held back his embarrassment and stole a glance at Frederica. If she laughed it off, then it would've just been Subaru getting way ahead of himself, but,

[Frederica: When the time comes for the New World to open its doors to them……I hope to be the one to guide them through it]

Muttering this quietly, a smile rose onto Frederica's face.
It was not a mocking smile at an outlandish guess, but a smile of a sense of liberation of having unburdened her heart to another after having seen clearly into herself.

[Frederica: I was raised by that place, but now I want to forge an environment that will foster a desire in the others to leave that place. If I can help even just a little in creating such an environment, then my…… undesired birth must have had meaning]

[Subaru: Undesired, that's…]

[Frederica: There is no need to console me. It is as it is. I cannot imagine that my mother grew heavy with me while desiring to do so. The fact is, mother abandoned my little brother and me in the Sanctuary and left. That was her answer……but I do not wish my story to end with only that answer, and that is the reason I am here now]

It was a question to which Frederica had already reached an answer.
Having only glimpsed the surface, Subaru could not possibly affect her with his sympathy.
Embracing the answer she had arrived at herself, she would face the endless choices to come with only that answer as her guide.
——"She is strong", he sincerely thought. It was a conviction strong enough to be admired.

[Subaru:……Does Garfiel know how you truly feel? If he knows and still didn't come with you, then…]

[Frederica: My little brother is the only person to whom I have told everything. But even so, he would not come with me……for that was the choice he had made. Rather than leaving to procure something difficult to obtain, my little brother chose to remain to protect something easy to lose. We siblings have each chosen a separate path… the story is simply that]

[Subaru: Protect……protect, huh. Just by his outer appearance, I'd never have guessed he was the kind of character who'd make that choice. Well, it's not like people's hearts can be understood by just looking from the outside anyway]

Rubbing his jaw, Subaru tilted his cup and drank down all the tea inside in a single gulp before holding back a hiccup. Wiping his lips with the back of his hand, he began again with [Come to think of it],

[Subaru: We seem to have wandered off-topic, so let's get back to it. About the name "Experimental Grounds". Can you talk about what kind of experiments they were running?……Or, do you know its contents?]

[Frederica: Unfortunately, I know neither their contents nor their purpose. In fact, from the moment the Witch of Greed died, the continuation of the experiments became impossible. Only the facility remains, and the House of Mathers merely maintains it]

[Subaru: That's even more incomprehensible. I personally understand now how important it is to keep promises, but what's even the point of continuing to keep it when the other side has already been dead for 400 years?]

[Frederica: At least, if it weren't for the Master's family upholding that promise, I doubt my brother and I would have passed our childhoods in peace]

[Subaru: Ah……that's…… I didn't think of that. Sorry]

Seeing Subaru sincerely apologizing, Frederica couldn't hold in her giggle.
Then, she emptied her cup as well and collected the finished cup from Subaru before standing up from her seat,

[Frederica: We have gone on talking for quite a long while now. Let us save the rest for another time. What do you plan to do next, Subaru-sama?]

[Subaru: I only tagged along to bring the villagers back home in the first place. Now that I've asked what I wanted to ask, I should be heading back…… That said, it would be a bit difficult to do that today, so I'll head back tomorrow morning, I guess]

[Frederica: Is that so. In that case, I imagine Petra will be in high spirits tonight and tomorrow morning. But considering how distracted she will get, it's difficult to tell whether that would be a good thing or not]

[Subaru: More than anything, it's nice to see Petra's education progressing nicely… Now, where is Petra, anyway?]

[Frederica: Right now, I believe she would be back in the village greeting everyone that's returned. I instructed her to do so]

As expected, Frederica must have seen through her intentions before she even asked.
Watching her back as she carried off the clattering teacups, Subaru stood up from his chair as well, and counted on his fingers all the remaining things he had to do.

What he managed to hear from Frederica had been only half of what he wanted to hear. But even so, it had given him enough to move forward with his speculations.
All that was left now, was to find the final person who might still know more.

[Subaru: It'll probably take a while, but it's time to try combing through this Mansion for now……]

At the thought of the heavy labor ahead of him, Subaru slumped his shoulders.
Catching a brief glimpse of Subaru's back as she left the room, Frederica whispered in a quiet voice,

[Frederica: I know neither their contents nor their purpose…… but, I do know the result of the Experimental Grounds. When you find out, when you come to understand…… what would you think then, I wonder?]

But the contents of her whisper did not reach Subaru, who was now deep in thought.

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Everyone in the Mansion knew that Beatrice's "Door Crossing" was a pain to deal with, but Subaru only truly got a sense of this after returning from the Capital.

His natural intuitive ability to pick from a multitude of choices—— or, more accurately, his ability to go with his gut, was one of the few things about himself that Subaru was rather proud of.
Subaru's special characteristic of managing to select the right option without any hints and for no particular reason was, in a way, just as annoying as his other special characteristic "Can't read the mood," and had made no small contribution to his chances of encountering Beatrice.
Ever since coming back from the Capital, that intuition hadn't been working properly.

[Subaru: That's odd. That should've been every door in the Mansion……]

That was the last one. Closing the final bathroom door where he had placed all his hopes, Subaru expressed his disappointment at the result by tilting his head with a sigh.
Since returning from the Capital, he had just been consistently failing at the "Guess where Beako is" quiz. Considering how his hit-rate was almost 100% before, he couldn't exactly blame this on a bad streak. At this point, Subaru had to admit that there was nothing else he could do.

[Subaru: Gees, she must be seriously trying to avoid me]

If Beatrice really put her mind to it, no one could bypass her "Door Crossing," Ram once told him this. Yet somehow, Subaru had always managed to defy this common sense. And after a while, Subaru had developed a sense of superiority over Beatrice—— In this case, it was not so much that he was able to bypass her "Door Crossing," but that he had a greater advantage over Beatrice than anyone else in the Mansion.

[Subaru: Even though we parted ways like that, I didn't think you'd go full-Hikikomori because of it…… If you won't even show me your face, I can't bicker or apologize or anything]

Subaru had no idea what he might've said that would make her so adamantly refuse to see him. He had no idea, and if he continued being physically cut off like this, he would go on having no idea. And he hated that.
Regardless of what he wanted to learn from her, and regardless of all the pressing issues tying him down, all Subaru wanted now was to see her and talk to her.
It'd be alright even if it meant getting scolded, or being looked down upon like a small idiot. But those carefree days are lost. And, only now realizing this, Subaru found he couldn't bear it at all. Although he knew this was a selfish thought.

[Subaru: Puck and Beako, they won't even let out a peep when it comes down to the critical moment]

Whether it was Puck, still hiding out somewhere, or Beatrice, withdrawing into her own space, they both went missing when Emilia and Subaru needed them most.
Can't be counted on at all when there's trouble, they were almost as bad as the Kami-samas up in the sky.

But the situation was far too urgent to be soaking in hurt feelings. Knowing that Elsa was closing in on the Mansion, but having no means of repelling her, his highest priority now was to evacuate everyone in the Mansion.
No matter how he thought about it, Elsa probably had no reason to extend her murdering blades to the unrelated Arlam village. So protecting the lives of those in the Mansion was the most important task at hand.

Bringing Rem and Petra out wouldn't be difficult. If he appealed to Frederica's sense of professionalism, he should be able to persuade her. The problem was Beatrice who wouldn't see him.
Before, in the loops starting inside the Capital, Subaru had already failed to get her to leave the Mansion. That time, he gave up trying to convince her to abandon the Mansion because he knew that the Witch Cult's target wasn't the Mansion.
But this time was different. Elsa will be invading the Mansion, and will not hesitate to put everyone to the blade. Even if her target, Emilia, was missing, she would probably set her mind to opening every bowel in the Mansion.

Although he had no idea what Beatrice's actual combat strength was, Elsa had been able to hold her own in a pitched battle against the strength of Puck and Emilia combined, and Subaru imagined that she might even be able to match the strength of Wilhelm.
If Beatrice and Elsa ever came into direct contact, Subaru couldn't envision Beatrice winning against her.

[Subaru: Maybe I'm just being way too over-cautious when it comes to Elsa……But after getting killed by someone three times it should be pretty natural to feel this way. ――Oh]

Rubbing at the phantom pain in his stomach while walking along the hallway, Subaru's legs suddenly stopped. His eyes were fixed on a conspicuously expensive-looking door, to the room at the center of the uppermost floor of the Mansion―― Roswaal's office.
Subaru was aware that it'd be bad manners to set foot into the Master's room while the Master was away, but,

[Subaru: Right, there was something in this room that I needed to check out]

Saying this, he opened the door and entered without much pomp.
Naturally, the scene that opened before him as he stepped into the office was no different from when he was opening every door in the Mansion. Since Roswaal himself hadn't returned, the room still maintained the same orderliness from the time Subaru made Otto organize it.
The original mess of documents and bookshelves had all been neatly arranged by Otto, and there was now a pristine impression to the room as if it had just been thoroughly cleaned. Subaru looked it over before walking to the back of the room, where two bookshelves stood side by side beside the ebony desk.

[Subaru: Behind this bookshelf… is a hidden passage, huh]

Twice, he had already confirmed the existence of this hidden passage——— it was probably serving as an escape path in case of emergencies, but as for how to activate it and where the passageway led to, these were all unknown to Subaru.

[Subaru: It was activated when Elsa attacked, so I think it definitely lets you escape somewhere…… although the last time I went in I froze to death]

That memory ended as he was frozen into an ice sculpture alongside the Witch Cultists who had gotten on the wrong side of Puck. He remembered his fingers breaking off and his limbs shattering, and dying almost painlessly, but so much about it was hazy that recalling it did not bring him anything more than a shudder. But death was still death. He had no intention of taking it lightly. In any case,

[Subaru: Unless I find out where this escape route leads, I won't know what to do if worse comes to worst. It might even come out somewhere in the Mansion…… Though I'm guessing that's probably not the case]

If ensuring safety was the highest priority, confirming the escape route would be an indispensable step. Most likely, it led somewhere into the mountains behind the Mansion. And, considering how escape tunnels usually work, if there are some emergency provisions on the way that'd be even better.

[Subaru: Just to be sure, I'll take a quick look…… but, as much as I want to…]

Where's the gimmick that activates this thing, anyway?
In the meantime, he tried dragging on the bookshelf with all his might to get it to move, but the solidly packed bookshelf wouldn't budge at all from the strength of Subaru's arm. Maybe if he took out all the books and left just the shelf he might be able to move it a little then, but,

[Subaru: No way there's time for that in a real emergency… there must be a switch to activate it somewhere]

On that thought, Subaru started fishing into the back of the bookshelves, but didn't find any secret mechanisms. Although, when Subaru pulled out the second-to-last drawer, he was stunned for a second by the hoard of gemstones stuffed inside.

[Subaru: Time to give up, huh…… unless, maybe it's not even in the room?]

[???: What's not in the room?]

[Subaru: Well naturally, it'd be a hidden switch-thingey or something. I wanna see the hidden passage on the other side of the bookshelves but there's no way to do that unless I find it]

[???: Oh, the escape path. That's this statue here]

Petra tugged on the downcast Subaru's sleeves, and Subaru, looking towards the direction she was pointing at, nodded his head up and down with [Ehhhh],

[Subaru: Placed in the corner of the room, looks like nothing but a normal statue…… could this be the gimmick?]

It was a little statue of a person seated in a chair, small enough to be placed on a table. To see something like this in an otherwise unadorned room was indeed somewhat peculiar, but Petra bravely walked up to it without any signs of fear, and,

“Tykh”

With a small sound, the statue’s head twisted.
Like it was going to be detached, the statue’s head turned a hundred and eighty degrees.
Watching the man’s neckbone being brutally snapped, Subaru winced his brows. And, the next moment,

“Ooo, ooo, ooo――”

The sound of a heavy object sliding across the floor reverberated throughout the room. Turning around, Subaru saw the bookshelves parting, revealing a pitch black entrance wide enough for a single person to pass through.
Seeing the mission-objective escape path making its appearance at last, Subaru lightly balled up his fists and struck out a victory pose.

[Subaru: That’s it that’s it that’s it! That’s what I’m looking for! I’m saved!]

[Petra: Huhuu~, I helped, didn’t I~. Big-sister-sama Frederica told me about this before, it’s an escape path in case of emergencies, told me to remember it and all]

[Subaru: Oho, thank you thank you. Now I’ll just…… Petra, when did you get here!?]

[Petra: You just noticed now!?]

Petra blended into the flow of things so perfectly that it took a while before the contemplative Subaru noticed that she was there. At Subaru’s unacceptable response, Petra pouted up her lips,

[Petra: After I ran all the way back, and even helped you out……Subaru-sama, I think that was kinda mean]

[Subaru: No no, I only noticed halfway through that I was talking with someone when I’m supposed to be alone. And then I was too excited to see the OBJECTIVE COMPLETE and that’s why I was a bit late to notice you. Sorrysorry]

The little girl turned her face away as if stating that she was still angry, and Subaru lightly patted her head while apologizing. Then, turning his eyes to the escape passage again,

[Subaru: By the way, Petra, did Frederica ever tell you where this thing leads?]

[Petra: Yep. Big-sister-sama Frederica said it leads to a small cabin in the mountains in the back. There’s another barrier there that’s different from the Boundaries against the Mabeasts, so it can’t be found from the outside]

[Subaru: I see. So it’s a hidden passage after all. But I better go check it out with my own eyes]

Then it was confirmed that the passageway came out in the mountains, but that would also mean that the tunnel could serve as both an escape route and an invasion route. Subaru rolled up his

sleeves, and, pumping himself full of spirit, stepped towards the entrance. And Petra's quiet footsteps followed behind him.

[Subaru: Oh, you're coming too, Petra?]

[Petra: Can't I?]

[Subaru: It's not that you can't, but there's probably not going to be anything interesting, you know. I'm only going in since I'm curious where it leads to, and after that I'll be coming right back]

[Petra: It's my break time right now, so I'm free to do what I want. So you won't mind if I come?]

Tugging on the hems of his shirt, Petra looked up at Subaru with puppy-like eyes. Not having the heart to leave her behind like this, Subaru sighed and gave out a wry smile, and,

[Subaru: We really are just going there and coming right back, you know. You sure are curious, Petra]

[Petra: If I wasn't curious I wouldn't be here, so…… I'm glad I'm curious]

Hearing Petra's reply, he wasn't really sure what she was trying to say. Nonetheless, smoothing it over with a smile, Subaru took her outstretched hand and stepped into the passageway.
The dark hidden-passage gave way to a spiraling staircase, while the materials of the walls themselves glowed with a pale blue light. Although they wouldn't be losing sight of the path downstairs, seeing that the tunnel was leading underground, Subaru looked back,

[Subaru: This stairway is pretty long and dark, be careful not to slip]

[Petra: If I slip will you save me?]

[Subaru: I'll have to hug you while tumbling all the way down the stairs, you know…… if I end up in a coma and can never walk again that'll be a way too miserable sight]

[Petra: If that happens, I'll take care of Subaru-sama for the rest of your whole life]

[Subaru: I'm glad, but the process is way too terrifying!]

With this exchange, Subaru took the lead as the two of them began heading down the stairs. A cold wind swept up from below, sending thoughts of a non-existent Puck into Subaru's mind as a chill ran up his spine.
It was not that he was afraid of the non-existent future of a frozen death, but,

[Subaru: It's no fun being so quiet while going down, and Petra might be getting scared, so let's talk about something]

[Petra: Subaru-sama, you know your palm is getting kind of sweaty?]

[Subaru: Petra must be getting scared so let's talk about something! How was everyone at the village!?]

Seeing Subaru intent on sticking to the concerned-for-a-little-girl narrative, Petra cast him a compassionate gaze and went along with it. And so, carrying on the miscellaneous conversation this way to keep the silence at bay, they continued down the stairs for several more minutes――when the staircase ended, and they arrived at the familiar narrow passage.
Further down the passage, there will be a door, and beyond that door would be an un-experienced zone to Subaru.

[Subaru: Just by the feels of it, we should still be right underneath the Mansion. If this path leads all the way to the back mountains, it must be a quite a long tunnel]

[Petra: Escape route, escape path, tunnel, can't we call it one thing?]

[Subaru: You're right… Then, since the wind might as well be coming all the way from Mexico, let's call it SANTUNNEL]

[Petra: Ah, careful don't trip, there's a bump there]

Just like this, Petra beautifully ignored Subaru's random comment. Seeing her Anti-Subaru capabilities improve so much in such a short period of time, Subaru felt both pleased and a little lonely.
Maintaining this nostalgic sentiment as they continued through the passageway, they soon arrived at a slightly wider area. Straight ahead, a door emerged out of the darkness, confirming that this was the room. Back then, it was here that the frozen figures of the Witch Cultists lined up in this claustrophobic space, but naturally, there was no trace of that this time. Confirming this, Subaru spilled a quiet sigh of relief.

[Subaru: This should go without saying, but, it's good that no TRAUMA SWITCHES got triggered, huh. Anyways, so far we should be about a third of the way to the mountain cabin, right?]

[Petra: The wind's so cold…… it must be from the other side of the door]

While Subaru was busy feeling relieved, beside him, Petra was eagerly waiting with anticipation for the NEW STAGE on the opposite side of the door. With [Yeah], Subaru nodded in agreement,

[Subaru: Last time I touched the door I got an instant GAME OVER. So everything after that point is still completely unknown…… well, guess we'll make it up as we go]

Having made up this resolve, Subaru unceremoniously placed his hand on the door.
And then, pushing it open, he felt an icy wind washing over his face, flooding into the small room――

[Subaru: ――ah?]

Simultaneous with that quiet sound, Subaru noticed that something had struck his belly.
Looking down, he stared at the left side of his waist that had taken the impact. Some kind of skewer was sticking out of it, and to prove that this had happened recently, the butt-end of it was still quivering.

——Watching, as little by little blood seeped into his clothes, Subaru's throat froze.

[Petra: Yyaa——h!?]

In place of the choked-up Subaru, Petra, who noticed the same wound, shrieked at the top of her voice. Its high-pitched sound echoed through the corridor, lashing upon Subaru's eardrums.
In the instant the pain caught up, still not understanding what had happened, Subaru's mind swam with all its might, trying to think of something to do.

Petra's shriek trailed off. The echoing corridor was deprived of sound, until only *her* noise could be heard. In a world where he should not be hearing anything, Subaru heard that sound.

Of footsteps, and a knife being pulled out of its sheath——

[Elsa: Now, let's fulfill that promise——]

Licking her lips with a red tongue, it was the voice of a murdering monster trembling at the premonition of slaughter.

Chapter 34 [The World That Was Ending]

He sensed the portents of incoming pain.
It was an unpleasant sensation, but ever since coming to this world, there had been no shortage of life-threatening injuries in his life. That sensation told him: these next few seconds will decide victory or defeat.

While Petra's shriek echoed down the narrow passage, Subaru reached out his hand towards the two skewer-like things sticking out of the left side of his waist. He knew that the instant he touches them, it will begin. And so, before that, Subaru forced his mind to turn at an incredible rate.

Two darts, not fatal wounds. There were still a few seconds before the pain catches up. Petra was frozen in place. Where did the attack come from? His hand was still touching the door. The high-pitched echo went on. And, in its midst, a murderous voice had snuck into Subaru's ears.

——Elsa's.

Before his eyes, he saw a shadow lurking in the unlighted void. Its posture was low, almost crawling, as if poising itself to strike. It was Elsa.
The projectile that skewered him through the waist was thrown from the other end of the passage. That disgustingly accurate control, aimed directly at the bowels as a matter of doctrine. He almost wanted to applaud.

A stupid thought, a frivolous idea. Why was Elsa here now? There was supposed to be a grace period. Why was she hiding in a hidden passage that no one was supposed to know about? And how did she know? All that can wait. Questions can come later. At this moment just focus on survival and force all brain cells to fire——!

[Subaru: ——SHAMAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAC!!]

No weapons, no means to intercept, horrendously unprepared and unready.
Faced with this split-second situation, there was only one thing Subaru could do——or rather, he had already decided in his heart that he would take that one action the moment he encountered Elsa, regardless of appearances.

Answering Subaru's call, his damaged Gate rallied his body's Mana at his chant. Black smoke spouted out from the tip of Subaru's extended right hand—— covering the passage in darkness. A pitch-blackness darker than light-given shadows engulfed the narrow space, instantly dividing Subaru and the immediate threat before him. The expelled smoke had no effect of restricting actual movement. Charge forward, and it will give way like brittle mist. But,

[Subaru: WALL OF INCOMPREHENSION, IF YOU THINK YOU CAN SCALE IT I'D LIKE TO SEE YOU TR——Gaaaaaagghhhh!!]

Before he could finish his taunt, the delayed attack of excruciating pain assaulted Subaru. Beginning with his left hip, the searing heat coursed throughout his body, and his scream sounded out as though the roots of his brain and his lower waist were being pierced by red-hot

spits. On top of this were the consequences of spellcasting in his damaged state. Drawing more Mana than his body could afford, he felt the strength of his body sucked dry, and, overcome with exhaustion and fatigue, he fell to his knees.
Yet, it was then that something pulled him from the verge of collapse,

[Petra: Subaru――!]

A small and soft sensation was gripping onto his lifeless hand. He looked, and saw Petra worrying over him, her long lashes trembling and on the brink of tears.
Within her eyes, was fear of circumstances that were beyond her comprehension, as well as rejection of the existence of the preposterous threat closing in before her. But most of all, they held the deep colors of worry for Subaru's safety.

The moment he recognized it, the wrenching pain of his mangled nerves and the soul-rending sense of loss were all forgotten in an instant. And before that effect could fade, he squeezed back on Petra's hand.

[Subaru: Anyways, let's go up――!]

Since they couldn't go forward, their only escape was to go back the same way they came. Even Subaru himself wasn't sure how long Shamac would last. So far, the only improvement was that his body didn't faint after blowing out all his Mana since his body must have grown accustomed after so many uses.
Regardless, he mustn't allow the opportunity granted by the cover of the black mist to slip away――

[Subaru: Gukh……. aagahhh!?]

The moment he stepped forward to run, again he was struck by the pain of something sharp gouging into his flesh.
Turning his eyes to the source of the pain, he found four more metal darts nailed into his back from his right shoulder to the base of his neck. Fortunately, the piercing wounds weren't deep, but the pain of having multiple darts as thick as his pinky fingers burrowed into his flesh was only intensified by the sight.

[Subaru: She can see……!?]

She could see through Shamac's smoke? For an instant, Subaru thought this, but he immediately realized that could not be so. Then, intuitively, he understood what Elsa must have done from the other side of the fog.
Having judged the black smoke to be a threat and deciding that diving in would be dangerous, Elsa had blindly thrown her darts through the mist without aiming at anything in particular.

The passage was narrow enough to be filled with three Subarus side-by-side. If she had the control to aim at the very center of the passage, there was a high probability of hitting somewhere on his back.
The moment he realized this, Subaru yanked on Petra's arm and embraced her against his chest. [Hya!] she squeaked, and just as she got out of the way, the same metal darts as the ones sticking

to Subaru's body whizzed past.
If he hadn't pulled her away, the darts would have lined up precisely with her head.

[Subaru: Fuck my life……!]

Spitting out saliva laced with blood, Subaru shook his head as he sprinted down the passage towards the Mansion, pulling on the lagging Petra's arm to force her onward.
His vision was flickering in pain. The world was flashing black and red. A thin blue light was glowing from the dim passageway. That, and the alternating red and black blended into one as the world grew indistinct.

Only a single moment of attack and defense had completely depleted Subaru's energy and stamina.
Even if he returned to the Mansion like this, he would have no immediate means of breaking out of this situation. And, relying only on the hope in front of his eyes, he clenched his jaw and continued to run.

The terror coursing up his neck in that instant was perhaps the sensation of impending death, which was only perceptible due to his countless experiences with "Dying".

[Subaru: ――――!]

With that terrible fear guiding his neck to turn, his black pupils saw the tracks of death.
"Slicing through the air" would be too simplistic of a description, for the incoming blade was slaying through the air. The curved blade that was the greatest and vilest weapon in Elsa's arsenal――the Kukri knife, bearing down with its own momentum, was spinning vertically with tremendous speed towards Subaru and Petra's backs.

A velocity that made reaction impossible. Sheer power that made parrying unthinkable.
Faced with such a thing, the fact that Subaru could make this sudden motion with his arm was nothing short of miraculous.

He reached out his right hand to catch the tip of the knife with his fingers, and indeed managed to pinch it between his index and middle finger――but without reducing even a fraction of the blade's velocity or power, the middle, ring and pinky fingers on Subaru's right hand scattered into the air.
The knife went on to cut vertically through Subaru's arm straight from the wrist to the elbow, splitting it in two. The chopped off outer flap of the arm slammed into the wall, as the spraying mist of blood dyed the passage and Subaru in dots of red. Screaming. Shrieking. Creating a noise that made one wonder if his throat will break, rip and crack.
His vision filled with red, and his molars fractured under the force of his clenching jaws. He lifted his half-sheared arm. It was red. Only red. He saw something white. But it was instantly turned red. He couldn't think of this thing as belonging to him anymore. It was only an unnecessary object, giving off pain.

Cut it off. Go away. I have no use for an organ that only gives off pain. I don't want you. Go away, begone, fuck off. Fuck you! Just die! die! die!―― *a touch*.
There was the touch of a hand holding onto his. Opposite the limb of nothing but pain, there was still a warmth here. The moment he felt it, his scream stopped. His throat was broken. The

neurons in his brain, having gone far beyond their capacity for feeling pain, bursted. He forgot the pain. But not that warmth.

Drawing in his arm, he swung out his steps, and shaking his throat that had lost its voice, Subaru ran through the passage painted with blood. Legs. So heavy. Arms. So heavy. Was he pulling them, or were they pulling him? He didn't even know. Didn't know. Didn't know. And didn't want to know.

End of the passage. Back to the staircase. Run up the spiralling stairs and he will be in the Mansion. What will he do once he's in the Mansion? Who will, who could, who can help him there, Emilia, Rem――?

[Subaru: i… wi..ll……!]

Not let it end here. It is not over yet. It cannot end yet.
He couldn't see a way. He didn't find anything. He tried to reach, but hadn't grasped a thing. But how could he throw everything away here?

He looked up. It was a long way to the top of the spiralling stairs. His legs were tangled. His tongue was numb. Life was draining through the blood dripping from his arm. Eroding, fading, he drew up the warmth of his left hand. And,

[???: ――baru-sama!!]

The call of a wild beast. And the sound of a heavy object landing from above. On the steps in front of Subaru's eyes, he saw a broad back. Shrouded within the smoke and dust, was an expensive black apron-dress. Her long golden hair swaying in the icy wind, she rose up from her crouched landing.
Seeping through the stern face that turned around―― was a familiar emotion of worry,

[Subaru: fre…deric……]

[Frederica: Don't talk! That wound is…… too serious]

Just as he recognized her and tried calling her name, Frederica's face turned pale at the sight of Subaru's wounds. She looked painfully at Subaru's half-sheared-off right arm, and then, trailing her eyes over the blood that covered half of his body,

[Frederica: a……]

With a gasp so quiet as to disappear, she swallowed her breath. That was probably how shocking Subaru's dreadful state was. By now, owing to the endogenous anesthetics flooding through his brain, Subaru himself had already lost sensitivity to the pain. Breathing raggedly, there was saliva endlessly dripping down the corner of his mouth. Spitting out the overflowing bloody foam in his mouth, Subaru was trying to tell Frederica something,

[Subaru: auuoAgh――!]

[Frederica: ――Careful!!]

From across the darkness, the Kukri knife came slashing once more.
The revolving blade pregnant with death was aimed directly at Frederica's head. Seeing the shimmer of steel, Subaru raised his voice, and Frederica reacted by drawing something from her waist. With a flash—— the darkness of the passageway was scattered by sparks, and the curved blade was deflected with a high-pitched ring. What had achieved this was,

[Frederica: It seems we have an intruder]

Crossing her arms as she said this—— there were now clawed gauntlets attached to Frederica's hands. From that self-possessed reaction, it would seem that she was facing a familiar prey.
In a way, that rugged equipment was all too fitting for someone like Frederica. Ripping the air as she readied her arms before her, Frederica looked back at Subaru,

[Frederica: Get to the Mansion. Signal when you're at the top. Then I'll disengage]

[Subaru: bu…t……]

[Frederica: With your injuries you'll only get in the way. ——Please take care of Petra]

Though he wanted to stay, Frederica's final pleading words pushed Subaru from behind.
Swallowing the rest of what he was about to say, Subaru pulled Petra's tiny body close. Compared to dragging her by the arm as he ran, he could be faster if he held her. Petra entered his arm without resistance, and Subaru backed away towards the stairs,

[Subaru: d…on't die……]

[Frederica: Of course not. ——I'm not halfway through yet]

Dragging his legs, reluctant to leave, Subaru dashed up the stairs with his sights set on the top.
Making his way up the spiral, the sounds of blade clashing on blade followed him from below. The narrow space robbed Elsa of her mobility, so in a direct confrontation it would be a match of raw power. In that case, Frederica may even have a chance of winning—— at least, that was the hope he wished to cling to.

Spitting out his crushed molars, Subaru cursed at his useless legs. Faster, defter, every second he spent climbing the stairs brought Frederica a second closer to her fate. Faster faster, to the top, to the top, to the top——

[Subaru: I…m……here!!]

Reaching the top, panting with ragged breaths, his knees dropped onto the carpet. Crawling in that collapsed state, he stuck his head into the passage and shouted down the stairs.

[Subaru: fre, derica! Now——!!]

He could seal the passage to cut Elsa off as soon as Frederica reaches the top of the stairs.
Realizing this as he shouted, Subaru turned and tumbled toward the statue-switch that controlled the door. Taking its head in his hand, he waited for Frederica to fly out of the gap. But——

[Subaru: ——wh]

The overwhelming crashing roar of a tremendous impact and collapse lashed onto Subaru's ears. Falling building materials breaking into each other spewed up a swirling plume of smoke as it sent tremors through the entire Mansion.
What happened… Subaru left the statue's side and returned to the passage. Then, peering inside――― he saw that the winding, spiraling stairs had collapsed as if having vanished into thin air.

[Subaru: This…… a]

This destruction was not the consequence of shoddy architecture. Breaking off so cleanly without causing the slightest damage to the passage itself, it was nothing like an unanticipated collapse. It was by design that the stairwell collapsed on its own when some mechanism was activated. Perhaps it was meant for covering one's tracks after escaping, or, like now, to guard against the passage from being used as an invasion route, though he couldn't be sure which it was. The only thing that was certain was that,

――At this point, Frederica could no longer come back up.

The possibility of Elsa coming up the stairs had been eliminated, yet it also meant that Frederica had doomed herself. Maybe she could defeat Elsa through pure combat strength and come back around the mountains, but Subaru knew, deep down, that this was impossible.

The moment Subaru thought this, his forgotten wounds twinged with pain as he spat out clots of blood. The darts that burrowed within his neck, shoulder, and waist began to eat at his flesh. He tried to pull them out, but his fingers kept slipping, and the fear of mass bleeding made his fingers tremble unresponsively.

[Subaru: no..w's not… the time to be doing this…….idiot, I'm……]

There was no time to stop his feet or his thoughts. Whether Frederica's survival was doomed still depended on Subaru's next actions.
Enduring the pain and propping himself on his knees, Subaru tried to stand himself up. But suddenly, he remembered Petra who should still be in his arms. He was holding her when he fled into the office, but where had she―――

[Subaru: Pe, tra……?]

Turning his head around, Subaru found her on the opposite end of the room――― Petra was near the statue. She was lying on her side as if sleeping. He must have inadvertently dropped her in the chaos.
Perhaps she lost consciousness from exhaustion, and would not respond to Subaru's calls. Most likely, in a state of extreme fear and fatigue, she had fainted.

As much as he was worried about Frederica's safety, he must follow her instruction and keep Petra safe. Forcing his trembling knees to stand, Subaru dragged his legs to where Petra had fallen. And, picking up the little girl from the floor,

――He saw the curved blade sticking out from the back of the fallen girl's head to the base of her neck.

Large volumes of blood had seeped from the wound, and a part of her brain had spilled from the fracture in the back of her head. Her soft, chestnut colored hair had been dyed the deep shade of blood, and her gentle, warm palm will never move again.
He held up his right hand. A miserable clump of flesh missing three of its fingers. When he reached out to stop the curved blade, it had passed right through his arm and struck Petra. Even offering up this much, he hadn't protected anything.

[Subaru: ――――aaaaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!!!!]

From his shattered throat, he howled out that bloody wail.

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Limping across the Mansion's carpet, Subaru headed toward the West Wing with the expression of a ghost. Cradled within his arms was Petra's corpse. He had covered her with a white sheet, so that no one would see the sight of her death.

The look of surprise was still frozen on her lifeless face, which proved the sole consolation that her death was instantaneous. It would have been too cruel if she had to experience the same pain as Subaru on top of losing her life. But he couldn't save her. There was no consolation to be found anywhere.

[Subaru: iIii……]

Didn't he come back so that he could save everyone in the Mansion? Didn't he resolve to do everything in his power to help them?
Once again, he had allowed Petra to be caught in this spiral of death. This was already the third time Subaru had seen Petra die―― all of those times, he could have done something to prevent the way they ended.

But unlike last time, when everything was initiated by the Witch Cult, this time, there was a decisive difference.
If Subaru didn't want Petra to be caught in this spiral, he could have opposed Frederica's decision to take Petra as an apprentice.
He should have known the danger of being at his and Emilia's sides.

[Subaru: if i… if only…… there's no end to them]

If he were to talk about what he should or could have done, it would go on forever. Subaru knew this. And yet, although he knew, Subaru's weakness was such that he could not bear but to think about them.

In accordance to those broken thoughts, his steps dragged on heavily. The unstoppable flow of blood left a trail of dark-red spots on the carpet, and every single step sent wrenching pain grinding at his nerves.
One step, and then another, the sound of his flesh and spirit shaving away, pain. Even receiving

this punishment was a grace. If Subaru had sinned, then Subaru deserved to be punished.
So that the girl in his arms, the woman who stayed so Subaru could escape, and――

[Subaru: rem……]

At the end of his path, the girl who went on sleeping ――no calamity must be permitted to touch her.

The West Wing. At last, he had reached the servant's quarters. Despite choosing the shortest path from the office on the highest floor, it felt like it took a lifetime to drag his wounded body here.
The room he was trying to reach was opposite the stairs, at the furthest end of the hallway.
What he would do once he got there was not on his mind even now. His only objective was to get there. His only objective was to touch the girl lying there ――for he had already lost the will to live.

He had lost too much blood, and carried away with that flow of blood, his determination and resolve had already drained from his body. This time he had lost too much. Shrouded in this sense of loss, he didn't seem to be even capable of raising his head as he walked.
So, at least, let it end by her side.
By the side of the only girl in this world whom Subaru could reveal his weakness to.

Dragging a trail of blood behind him, half leaning on the wall, turning that meager intent into obsession, Subaru's body arrived in front of his destined room―― in front of Rem's bedroom.
Setting the cradled Petra down against the wall, he pulled aside the sheets and closed her eyelids.
It was the only thing he could do to dress up her appearance in death. Touching her cheek, and lightly tracing his finger on her lip, he lowered his head at her cold empty vessel,

[Subaru: Sorry…… i'm so sorry…… I'm a stupid… useless……h]

There should have been a way, but Subaru's own stupidity didn't allow him to see it. The result was Petra being the sacrifice, and his words of apology could no longer reach her.
His falling tears landing on Petra's knees, Subaru shook his head, and lifted the sheets over Petra's lifeless face once more. Then, standing up, he turned around.

[Elsa: ――I think it was rather mean to leave me there like that]

On the other end of the hallway, stepping on the same stairs Subaru had just limped down from, was a gorgeous black haired woman. Playing with the ends of her long black braid with the fingers of one hand, she dangled her blood drenched Kukri knife from the other .
A black mantle over a black bodysuit. She was wearing the same combination as when he saw her in the Capital. She was supposed to have been fighting Frederica, but there was not a single trace of battle visible. Whether it was in terms of wounds, or fatigue.

The fact that she appeared here―― and the way she appeared, undeniably proved what must have happened to Frederica.
Adding one more to the list of people his apologies could not reach, all Subaru could do was look up to the ceiling, cursing his own incompetence.

[Elsa: You managed to walk this way with those wounds. I'm very impressed]

[Subaru: is… there a prize for that? your life would do fine……]

[Elsa: Can I take that as a profession of love? That my life is your heart's desire?]

[Subaru: i'll trample it to mush… hand it over……]

Wanting to vomit at Elsa's non-sequitur reply, Subaru glared at the murderer as he stood himself up against the wall. Turning up his gaze, he locked Elsa's face in his sights. Her eyes were looking up and down Subaru's torn-up body,

[Elsa: The aroma of blood, the scent of rage, the fragrance of Death…… ahh, you are exquisite in every sense. Your intestines are exactly to my liking too, I'm all too pleased to say]

[Subaru: abnormal bitch…… what're you going on about……]

Embracing herself, with an expression of ecstasy on her face, Elsa looked at Subaru with a gaze that could not contain its arousal. Even though she was a beautiful woman, those deranged, abnormal eyes injected only disgust and horror into Subaru.
Seeing an emotion of rejection surfacing on Subaru's face, Elsa retained that debauched glamour on her cheeks,

[Elsa: It's nice to talk to you, but…… I wouldn't want to be scolded for losing sight of my objective. That spirit and the Half-Witch girl I met in the Capital, do they happen to be home?]

[Subaru: You should've phoned in before coming, would've saved you the trouble. We would've hired some mercenaries and put on a grand big welcome]

[Elsa: You're not going to answer. Then, I better ask your bowels]

Opening her red lips, sensuously wetting it with her peach-colored tongue, she lifted up her knife, and smiled in ecstasy as she licked the drops of blood off the side of its blade.
Then, lowering her posture, she made the blade scream as she dashed forward like a spider. Too fast. Can't imagine intercepting at all. But,

[Subaru: Like hell am I gonna die at your hands……!]

Saying this, Subaru pushed open the door to Rem's bedroom.
Elsa furrowed her brows at Subaru's action, unable to understand, and he felt just the slightest satisfaction to see that reaction.

He had already resigned himself to the fact that there was no way out. His wounds were deep, and he could not stop his life from seeping sway. The fate of this loop was like a candle flame in the wind. In that case, at least he will not give Elsa the satisfaction.
He had no wish to die by those blades. If he will fall into Elsa's hands, he would rather die first. But before that, he will not allow *her* to be violated.
It would be a euphemism to call it "the bitter choice", but it would mean nothing more than a one-sided lovers' suicide.

If the alternative was the way Petra and Frederica fell under Elsa's blade,
Then, in this world that was ending, he will at least dispatch her with his own hands――

[Subaru: and follow you right after……]

She will go on ahead, and he will follow behind. With this resolve, he turned into Rem's bedroom――

[Subaru: ――huh?]

――Lined with bookshelves, row on row, the Forbidden Library welcomed Subaru as he was preparing for the end.

Chapter 35 [The Young Girl's Gospel]

Enclosed on all sides, the room was filled with the choking scent of old books.
Stepping through the opened door, stricken by this sight and smell, Subaru's mouth gaped open wordlessly as he realized, half a second too late, that he had stepped onto a floor that did not belong to the place he was hoping for—
——and that this delay in his awareness proved fatal.

[Subaru: The Forbidden Library!?]

He had reached the place which he couldn't find while searching all throughout the Mansion. The undesired timing and the unforeseen opportunity created a vacuum in Subaru's heart, robbing him of the time before the door slammed shut behind him.

[Subaru: ——!]

As though shoved forth by a wind from the outside, Subaru's body was sucked into the Library. With the same momentum, the door clamped shut, sending a small breeze tickling the back of Subaru's neck.
Turning around at the violent sound, confirming that the room had been separated from the hallway, he understood.
Why the Forbidden Library opened to him here, and why it had shut its doors.

[Subaru: O-Open it——!!]

Reaching for the doorknob, he noticed the state of his right arm and reached out the left one as well. His blood-drenched fingers wrenched violently at the knob, sending loud clatters into the air, but although the knob was turning, it conveyed none of his intentions to the door. The screech of the knob's futile rotation only served to compound Subaru's agitation.

[Beatrice: ——No matter how much you struggle to get out, it's no use, you know]

A voice flew to Subaru's ears from behind while he was desperately wrestling with the door. Swinging around, and leaning his back against the door flap——he saw the girl in the depths of the Library, staring directly at him with a cold and indifferent gaze.
Long, cream-colored curls and an extravagant dress. A small body, and cute, yet peevish features. She was every bit the same girl that Subaru knew.

[Subaru: Beatrice……]

[Beatrice: You look quite terrible, I suppose. You'll dirty the Library's floor, so don't move around so much……]

[Subaru: Open the door! NOW! LET ME OUT, NOW!!]

Seeing her coldly staring at his wounds, Subaru screamed, ignoring everything Beatrice said. Not hearing her instruction to "stop bleeding everywhere", Subaru flailed his wretched, profusely bleeding right arm,

[Subaru: Why, why did you show up now!? Why! WHY NOW!? LET ME GO BACK! HURRY! NOW! RIGHT NOW!!]

[Beatrice: ……And what will you do once you go back, I suppose? Even if you go back with these unsightly wounds, Betty has no idea what you could possibly do]

[Subaru: I know better than anyone that I can't do anything!! But it doesn't matter!!]

He did not want to go back in order to face Elsa, but to enter the room where he was supposed to be, to go to that sleeping girl's side, and――

[Subaru: If I'm in the Library, and Door Crossing is lifted…… then that murderer would, the room……]

When she realizes that Subaru had vanished, that lunatic would probably find herself tilting her head. Before searching the Mansion for the disappeared Subaru, she would find the lonely girl sleeping inside. What that wanton murderer would do when she finds her, defenseless in her sleep―― did not warrant a second thought.

[Subaru: THAT'S WHY――!]

[Beatrice: It's already too late, you know]

Subaru, roaring at the top of his lungs as if to shake off this surging apprehension, was instantly washed over by Beatrice's abrupt and poignant whisper.
Seeing her cast down her eyes and shake her head, for a moment, Subaru froze. His brain chewed over the meaning of her words, and his thoughts came to a halt.

――What did this girl say just now?

[Subaru: Too late…… what do you…… mean?]

[Beatrice: The reason why you think you want to go back to that room… is already gone, I suppose]

[Subaru: ―――――]

In front of Subaru's disjointed question, Beatrice gave this dispassionate reply.
His throat choked up, his eyes opened to their limits, and, by the time he realized it, he had fallen to his knees. His shoulders dropped, his head faced downwards, and a terrible ring echoed within his skull.
Pain, pain, the forgotten pain revived as noise eroded Subaru's consciousness. It would be alright if only everything could be drowned in that noise and be swept away, he honestly thought. He didn't want to understand any of it. He didn't want to realize it. Nonetheless,

[Beatrice: Your wounds, let me see them, I suppose. They're too miserable, I can't stand looking at them]

Walking up to Subaru, who had collapsed onto the floor, Beatrice folded her knees and looked over the wounds on his right arm, left waist and right shoulder, casting him a frown of reproach.
A faint light covered over her hand, which she pressed against his most severely wounded right

arm ——replacing the heat of pain, something of an itch coursed through his arm. And, along with the sound of splashing water, the fabric of his flesh began to mend.
The bleeding stopped, and slowly, and slowly, answering to the light, a membrane spread over the open wound as the sheared off area was repopulated with cells spurring to recovery.
Although,

[Beatrice: It will take time to return to its original width, and your missing fingers won't be coming back, I suppose. ……The wounds on your hip and shoulder—]

[Subaru: ……what the hell are you doing]

A voice devoid of emotion leaked from Subaru's lips.
Intent on healing his wounds, Beatrice furrowed her brows and held out her palm, emanating with healing energy, in front of Subaru's eyes,

[Beatrice: I don't like this either. But I have no choice, so I'm treating your wounds. Betty is the only one in the Mansion who can heal such extensive wounds, I suppose. You should thank me you know]

[Subaru: heal…… my wounds……? what for……?]

[Beatrice: These wounds would be life-threatening if left alone, I suppose. And though I don't particularly care whether you live or die, I would rather you not die here]

Closing one eye, perhaps disregarding Subaru's words as delirium from his injuries, Beatrice uttered this cold reply as she prepared to continue healing. But,

[Subaru: ————gh]

[Beatrice: Ah]

Sensing the healing waves burying away his wounds, Subaru swung his injured arm aside, prompting a small sound of surprise from Beatrice.
He taxed his trembling knees and rolled onto his side, painting large swathes of the Forbidden Library's floor in red as he distanced himself from her, all the while keeping his ghastly stare fixed upon her face.

Panting with ragged breaths, his frantic movements dislodged the darts buried in his hip. Shrill clatters rang out as they landed on the floor, followed by the sound of free-flowing liquid that was blood flowing from his wounds. Streaming down his thighs, and spreading out from his knees, it flooded over the floor in a river of blood.
Beatrice's breath stopped at this sight, while Subaru bared his teeth,

[Subaru: I don't need any healing……! IF YOU DON'T CARE WHETHER I LIVE OR DIE…… WHY DID YOU BOTHER SAVING ME!?]

[Beatrice: That's because…… you were too unsightly. I couldn't bear to look……]

[Subaru: Why…… why me!? If you wanted to save someone, why didn't you save Petra….. or Frederica!? If we had your help, even if we didn't fight, we could've just ran away……anything would have been better……!]

If they had Door Crossing to separate them from the outside world, they would have been able to stay beyond the reach of Elsa's relentless pursuit. If used the correct way, there is no better ability specialized for escape. Whether it was Petra, who didn't run away until it was too late, or Frederica, who stayed behind to cover their escape, or Rem, sound asleep in her bed――!

[Subaru: You could've saved all of them……! I'm weak, I'm stupid…… but you could have done it…… so why didn't you……?]

[Beatrice: Why would Betty…… there was no reason for Betty to help those people you spoke of, I suppose. No reason that I know of. It was none of my business]

[Subaru: In that case……! You had no reason to save me either, did you!?]

Watching Beatrice reluctantly shaking her head at his plea, Subaru slammed the floor with his right arm that was still in the process of healing.

[Subaru: Why did you help me!? Why did you save me!? Was it all just on a whim? What made me any different from the rest of them!? Rem was always a good girl, there were things Frederica still wanted to do…… and Petra was still so small…… they were all far more worth saving than me! Didn't their lives also have meaning…… have value!?]

[Beatrice: Value? Meaning? Why should Betty respect such conceited inventions, I suppose. Your arrogance is beyond intolerable, Human!]

[Subaru: Where the hell is the logic in that!? First you wouldn't see me when I was looking all over for you, then you choose a critical time like this to show up! If you didn't see any value in me or those girls…… you should've just kept minding your own business and stayed shut up in this room!!]

Why did she have to appear now, after everything was already too late?
She could have stayed hidden so that even Elsa couldn't have detected her, but now, once Elsa realizes where Subaru had gone, Beatrice's existence could very well have been exposed.
In that case, there was a chance that even this girl wouldn't be able to escape the murderer's blade. So why did she take such risks to let a half-dead Subaru in?
Why did she save him now, when he had already lost the will to live, and wanted only death?

[Subaru: I don't care if you did this on a whim, but…… if you want to save me…… if you still have even a shred of desire to help me…… then kill me… now……]

[Beatrice: What…… are you saying, I suppose……]

[Subaru: NOW! ME! KILL ME NOW! Before everything is written down, before everything becomes irreversible! Kill me! KILL! KILL ME!]

Spewing up blood mixed with spit, clawing at the floor with both his maimed right hand and his remaining left hand, Subaru shrieked out his appeal.

Before his reason to live becomes entirely lost, before his inaction leads him to an unrecoverable future.

He shrieked for this useless, powerless, incompetent mass to be extinguished from this world.

But Beatrice did not accept his plea that was carried within the shrieking of his very soul.
She shook her head, and with a look confusion and displeasure emerging on her face,

[Beatrice: I don't understand, I don't understand at all. I can't understand you Humans, I suppose. Why are you…… why would you say such a thing now, when you still have your life?]

[Subaru: You aren't saving me by saving my life! Right now this life is nothing but agony! It shouldn't be here, I shouldn't be here…… If you're saying you won't save me……]

If he can't depend on others, then he will just put an end to this miserable existence himself――

Seeing Subaru's breath pause with this resolve, Beatrice let slip a small sound.

[Beatrice: ah]

And, as her voice entered his ears, without hesitation, Subaru stuck out his tongue, and,

[Subaru: ――――!]

Biting down with all his force, he committed to this suicidal act.

Excruciating pain. Pain of an entirely different magnitude from the pain of his right arm. No matter how much he experiences it, he can never develop tolerance to this. No matter how the injury was incurred, no matter which part of his body it came from, it was always new, excruciating, intolerable pain that he could never grow used to. Regardless of where or when, all pain is equal in that sense.

Blood pouring from his mouth, Subaru turned up the whites of his eyes and fainted on the spot. Falling over, his eyes swam as his limbs began to spasm. Agonizing pain. Unable to breathe. His near-severed tongue lodged itself in his throat, suffocating him from within.

[Beatrice: ――what're you doing!?]

It was not the kind of injury that resulted in immediate death. The acute, dull pain pulsated, shocking his brain in fits. His limbs shook uncontrollably as streams of bloody tears ran across his cheeks, conveying his unbearable agony. The half-severed tip of his tongue dangled from the edge of his lips, indicative of Subaru's insufficient resolve at the final moment of his act to end his life.

Since coming to this Parallel World, this was the third time that Subaru had chosen to commit suicide.
The first was during the loop in the Mansion, when he killed himself with the resolve to bring back what was irretrievable.
The second was at the end of the loop that began within the Capital, where he killed himself when he realized that Rem's existence had been wiped from this world. He had stabbed a knife into his throat, but nothing was changed.

And the third time he killed himself—— although he had no guarantee that he would be able to return, he simply could no longer endure living on in this world. It was too heavy, and too unreasonable a burden. And so, staking everything on this slightest hope, in order to retrieve what he had lost——

[Beatrice: ……no.. don't leave me all alone……]

A trembling voice called to him from the world that was growing distant.
The voice grew further, and further, until it disappeared entirely——

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——When he woke, the first thing that struck Subaru's nostrils was the scent of dust.

[Subaru: huh……?]

Waiting for his consciousness to catch up, turning his neck with his eyes still closed, Subaru realized that he had awoken.
Lying sideways on the ground, feeling the coldness of the surface seeping into his body, it went without saying that the restart point was still inside the Tomb.

Then, sitting his body up, he opened his eyes to look over his dark surroundings. His vision, obscured by tears, was still unreliable so soon after waking, and could not make out what he was searching for.
Nevertheless, he was relieved to have returned from death once more. If the place he returned to was the Tomb, then the restart point hadn't changed.

Inside the Tomb, the time would be immediately after Subaru passed the first Trial. Emilia would be collapsed at his side, and he should start by waking her up.

[Subaru: head, hurts……]

Rubbing himself between the brows, lightly shaking his head, Subaru's mind worked to organize his current circumstances.
There were already countless things for him to consider without the events of the previous loop added on top. Still, he hadn't found a single solution. Even the light he was supposed to have seen now felt like a moth lamp luring him into another trap.
As though circumventing one pitfall had only led him to another.

[Subaru: It's like that free gift you get from that shady fellow on Kenzan……]

"Deadly" would be an appropriate description here.
The Sanctuary and the Trials. His relationship with Garfiel. The attack on the Mansion. The inexplicable disappearance of the grace period, his vengeance against Elsa—— and how to save Rem and the others.
They were all problems that would turn his brain to mush, but he was already fortunate enough to have been granted the chance to continue worrying over them.
Otherwise, it could have all ended there, and he was not entirely without some sense of resignation to that possibility. But as long as that much can be overcome, he will be able to save everything——

[Subaru: It'll be painful to have to pretend not knowing anything in front of Emilia again, but――]

Mumbling this, Subaru felt his hazy vision beginning to clear. Snorting the dust out of his nose, he decided he should first look for Emilia.
With that thought, he lifted his right hand to his forehead like a visor, when he finally noticed it.

――His right hand was missing three of its fingers.

[Subaru: N――!? Aah!?]

Seeing the wound that should not be there, the scars that could not possibly be carried over, Subaru's throat groaned in shock. Struck by the fact that he had taken a far too optimistic view of the world, he cast his trembling eyes over his surroundings.

Cold floor, dry stone walls. The smell of mold. The space that Subaru had hoped for was the Tomb. But the reality in front of his eyes was a corner of the Library lined with packed-full bookshelves, a room drifting with the unique fragrance of vellum enduring the passage of time,

[Subaru: The Forbidden Library…… how, d.....]

Inexplicably, his physical body was still in the place he should already have bid farewell to. His thoughts turning to the worst, Subaru began checking over his body.
The worst possibility―― was that the moment he set foot into the Forbidden Library, the checkpoint of the world had been set.

Unable to hide his consternation, Subaru stared at the right arm he was holding up to his face. Three fingers were missing, and a third of its width was lost. However, the wounds of the arm had already been sealed, and the contorted, discolored flesh was in the process of regeneration. His waist and right shoulder that had been pierced by darts showed no apparent injuries, and there was only an intermittent sense of discomfort and a strained sensation on his skin.
At the very least, this could not have been the moment he stepped into the Forbidden Library. Then, by the process of elimination, there could only be one possibility.

[Beatrice: ――You're finally awake, I suppose]

For Subaru, who had realized that fact, this was the voice he least wanted to hear.
That careless attitude, that bored-with-the-world intonation, obviously worried but trying her hardest to suppress it, that voice in soprano that was deep down desiring some connection.

Without moving from his seat on the floor, Subaru turned his head.
Even now, he did not abandon the faint hope that he would see the silver-haired girl behind him. But instead, shattering that fantasy, was a young girl in a dress, seated on a wooden stepladder. Appearing no different than before he lost consciousness, it was Beatrice, looking down at Subaru, holding a book in her hands.

Seeing an inadvertent sigh leaking from Subaru's mouth, she slammed her book shut, and slowly stepped down from her stepladder,

[Beatrice: All because of your stupid actions, I had to really struggle, you know. The injuries on your arm, shoulder, hip, and tongue should all be healed now. There shouldn't be any discomfort]

[Subaru: ……]

[Beatrice: You just picked up your life and you have nothing to say, I suppose? Well, hopefully this taught you a lesson to not do anything stupid anymore……]

[Subaru: you…… do you have any idea what you've done?]

[Beatrice: w……?]

Saying these as if asking to be thanked, Beatrice approached the silent Subaru only to be met by these wrenched out words. And, the moment her face frowned up,

[Subaru: ――――!]

Subaru suddenly stood up from the ground, and, shooting out his left arm, he grabbed Beatrice by her extravagant dress. [Ah!], her mouth opened in surprise as he pulled her close, bringing her face up against his,

[Subaru: ――WHO THE HELL ASKED YOU TO SAVE ME!!??]

[Beatrice:――――a]

[Subaru: Do you realize what you've done!? Because of you, it was all for nothing! Everything, everything that I could have fixed is put at risk because of you! Why didn't you just let me die!? I'm still alive, but what good is that…… WHAT GOOD IS THAT!? WHAT!?]

By acting without regard for his life, Subaru should have earned the right to start over.
But he was held back by the girl in front of him, and his wish was not granted. And all that remained to Subaru now was an indescribable sense of loss and endless rage directed towards Beatrice.

[Subaru: Saving me on a whim, healing my injuries…… are you satisfied now? You want me to thank you? Ah, yeah, thank you! Thank you for saving my life! Even though everything else is already lost, at least MY LIFE'S BEEN SAVED!]

[Beatrice: B-Betty was only…… only……]

[Subaru: You came for me at the very last moment, how can I thank you enough!? Of course, as usual, there you are looking down on me with that carefree expression like there's not a hurry in the world. You're good at it, aren't you? You like that, don't you? Looking down and sneering at the little Human beings and―― a]

Reaching the extreme limits of hatred, his face contorted with a grotesque smile, Subaru pulled Beatrice close and showered these insults upon her. With this heartless act, he tried to bury all his dejection, disappointment and loss. And yet, his words abruptly ended――

[Beatrice: ――kh]

[Subaru: Ah……]

——When he saw large droplets of tears falling from the eyes of the girl he was holding up-close.
Seeing them, the blood that was rushing to his head instantly fell, and the ugly vindictiveness he had just let slip now became more terrifying than he could bear.
With the unraveling of his spite, his fingers loosened from Beatrice's body. Suddenly freed from his grasp, the young girl's body leaned backwards into the bookshelf behind her, and dropped to her knees.

A fierce nausea rose up in his chest. Becoming aware of what he had just done, he could not stand the hideousness of his own heart.
Ugly. Twisted. What was it except lashing out? To Beatrice, who knew nothing about his "Return by Death", she was merely healing his wounds when he was on the verge of death.
Instead of thanking the person who had saved his life, he had abused her for no reason at all.
He understood this logically. But his emotions did not accept it. Tossed around from within by the two polar extremes of his heart, searching for something to say, he lifted his eyes towards the fallen Beatrice,

[Subaru: No…… I-I'm sorry. I didn't mean to…… it wasn't… your fault……]

If it was anyone's fault, it was undoubtedly Subaru's.
Knowing what would happen, without doing anything to guard against it, he had walked directly into the tiger's den and stepped on its tail. Once again, it was those around him who paid the price. And now, to blame everyone but himself ——was beyond the limits of Pride.

Emotionally, he wanted to blame everything on this uninformed girl. And he still couldn't swallow his emotions of the fact that she had hidden herself from him only to show up in that instant.
Nevertheless, they could do nothing to pardon him for the reproaches he shouted at that girl.

[Subaru: I'm sorry. My wounds… thank you for healing them. But now, I must……]

At least, he should go somewhere away from her, and choose a different place to kill himself.
There was no longer any reason for Subaru to continue on in this world. Too much had been lost.
And Subaru was not strong enough to live in a world without what he couldn't bear to lose.
So, with these concise words of gratitude, Subaru averted his eyes and prepared to leave the Forbidden Library——

[Subaru: ————]

——When he noticed, dropped at the collapsed Beatrice's side, there was a tome bound all in black.

Plain cover. Thick structure. It was the size of a large dictionary, and appeared heavy enough to be unwieldy. In any case, there was a certain familiarity that Subaru could not pull his eyes away from.
Why here, why is it here now?

[Subaru: The Gospel… is in the dragon carriage…… it shouldn't…. be here in the Library……]

The Witch Cult's Gospel that once belonged to Petelgeuse, taken from him after his death, was now in Subaru's possession. But, having decided that it was not a book that belonged in a Library, he had kept it himself while taking extreme cautions of the unknown functions it may have served. So how could it be here?
Shaking his head at the incomprehensible situation, Subaru reached out his hand to the Gospel that had dropped on the floor, hoping that checking its contents would dispel this unease. But,

[Beatrice: ——No!]

Before Subaru's hand could reach it, the Gospel was snatched away.
Messing up the hems of her dress, with panting breaths, Beatrice clasped the Gospel in her arms as she backed away from Subaru. Keeping distance between them, holding back her sobs, she looked down towards the Gospel in her arms, and appeared to breathe a sigh of relief as she traced her fingers over its covers.
Seeing that gesture as though she was caressing something dear, an ominous dread crept up in Subaru's heart,

[Subaru: Why are you… treating that thing like it's something important to you?]

[Beatrice: …….]

[Subaru: That's the book those Witch Cultists have…… isn't it? It isn't, is it? It just looks really similar, but they're completely different things, right? You just didn't want me to misunderstand, and that's why you backed away from me, right? Yeah, I know I have a bad habit of jumping to conclusions, and I can get really stubborn when ideas get stuck in my head, and I said mean things to you and my eyes are scary-looking and my personality is all twisted but……]

[Beatrice: ……]

[Subaru: Hey—— you'll deny it, won't you?]

While Subaru rambled on and on, trying to make excuses on her behalf, Beatrice only kept her silence. Until, he could only beg.
Seeing him this way, Beatrice let slip a small sigh, and held out the book in her hands so that Subaru could see it,

[Beatrice: It's exactly as you imagined. ……This is a Gospel. As you said, it is the same as the ones in the Witch Cultists' possession. The guide to happiness. The foundation of life. And the only, singular truth, I suppose]

[Subaru: W-Why…… do you have it? Do they sell it somewhere? A L-LUCKY ITEM that tells your future or something? Some kind of real-life walkthrough that totally breaks the game balance or……ahh, come on]

[Beatrice: ……Betty… hasn't been instructed to answer that question, I suppose]

To Subaru's trembling voice, Beatrice flipped quickly through the pages and gave him this cold reply. Seeing the girl's eyes focused on the contents of her book, Subaru felt a numbness encroaching on his tongue,

[Subaru: You won't do anything… unless the book tells you to?]

[Beatrice: That question was not written in the book]

[Subaru: What about healing my wounds? And sheltering me in the Forbidden Library when I was going to be killed?]

[Beatrice: Those questions were not written in the book, I suppose]

[Subaru: And what about talking with me just now? And saving me… when I was trying to die……?]

[Beatrice: ——I don't know]

Casting down her eyes, Beatrice only returned this emotionless reply.
To see her like a doll, devoid of all emotions, Subaru's lungs convulsed in horror. With light flickering in his eyes such that he forgot how to breathe, he shouted at the top of his voice,

[Subaru: SO YOU CAN'T DO A SINGLE THING UNLESS THE BOOK TELLS YOU SO!?]

[Beatrice: ……Yes, I suppose. That is so. Everything of everything is in accordance with the Gospel's guidance. That is the meaning of Betty's life, and the purpose for which Betty exists]

[Subaru: So……helping me was just written in that book as well!? Saving me when I was dying from the Mabeasts in the forest! And saving me when my heart was worn to its core! Our jokes, our arguments, all that time we had fun playing around like idiots…… none of it was your free will…… IS THAT WHAT YOU'RE TELLING ME?]

[Beatrice: That's…… THAT'S WHAT I'M TRYING TO TELL YOU, I SUPPOSE!!]

Covering over the last part of Subaru's scathing words, Beatrice shouted back, her face flushing in anger. Taking one step forward, she pointed a single finger at Subaru,

[Beatrice: Everything that Betty has done, and seen, and said up to now is written in here, I suppose. You…… something like you will never move Betty's heart. There should be a limit to your arrogance I suppose, Human]

[Subaru: ————]

[Beatrice: Betty will do what is expected of Betty, and fulfill the meaning of my existence. This life, this span of time, and all that I have sacrificed is for this purpose…… AND I WILL NOT DENY IT FOR THE LIKES OF YOU……!!]

[Subaru: Bea……]

Emotions flooded from Beatrice like a broken dam. And although he tried to speak in that instant, he was silenced by an abrupt, overwhelming pressure from the front.

Feeling the sensation of being forced back by a wind, unable to resist, Subaru realized that his body was being pushed towards the door. ——And, just like that, he was flung off of his feet.

[Subaru: Sto…… Beatrice!]

[Beatrice: Betty's everything is for Mother! And Mother is the only one Betty needs! I don't care about you…… I don't care……]

[Subaru: ————]

[Beatrice: I don't care. I hate you. I hate you. ——I HATE YOU!]

Shaking her head and hiding the tears streaming down her cheeks, the girl screamed to Subaru as he was flung through the air.
The door opened. The space of the Forbidden Library was driving Subaru out. Before he passed through the door, he clasped onto the doorframe with his right hand. But, with fewer than three fingers, it was not nearly enough. Only his index finger held on, but even that only gave him a few seconds of respite.
Lifting his face, Subaru tried to shout to the crying girl——

[Subaru: Beatri——!]

[Beatrice: ……u-sama]*

Drowned out by her quiet voice, Subaru's call did not reach her.
Blown away. Wiped out. Space distorted as Subaru's physical body was expelled into a place that shouldn't exist.

[Beatrice:————]

The door thundered shut, the gushing wind halted with the sound, and silence descended on the Library once more.
The girl who was left alone, with an expression as if holding back her sobs, slowly walked into the depths of the room—— stepping onto her usual stepladder and quietly sitting down, she hugged her knees and opened the Gospel with her trembling fingertips. Then,

[Beatrice: Why…… couldn't Betty… ever……]

In front of the wordless, blank pages, only her sobs resounded pointlessly throughout the silence of the room.

Chapter 36 [At The End Of Incomprehension]

——The moment he was ejected from the door, Subaru felt a sense of weightlessness as though the sky and the earth had been reversed.

[Subaru: ——Oooguaah!?]

The pain of his back striking the solid ground wrenched out all the air from his lungs and left his throat gasping for breath. Carried on by the momentum, he went tumbling across the floor and was only stopped by smashing into a wall. Shaking his head to cast off the ejected sensation, still dazzled from the pain, Subaru lifted his face and opened his eyes.

[Subaru: Beatrice…… hg]

Giving voice to the name of the girl whose name he failed to call at their parting, it was already too late for it to reach her.
The moment Door Crossing was activated, an insurmountable gap had been opened between them. Her rejection was so fierce and deep that Subaru's voice could no longer touch her.

[Subaru: Why do I…… always……!]

Was there really no way for him to realize his own mistakes except by failing and picking the worst possible choice?
All he wanted was to take the optimal actions leading to the best possible future, but why was he always too weak, foolish and insufficient?

[Subaru: What are you doing with a Gospel…… just, what's with you……!?]

The existence of the black-bound book in her hands——the Gospel decisively opened a distance between them.
Until this point, Subaru had been convinced that despite the short amount of time he and Beatrice had spent together, there was certainly *"Something"* that existed between them.
Even though they were always taunting each other, expressing their mutual displeasure at seeing each other, Subaru nonetheless believed that as long as there was that *something*, things could never come to an end between them.

But that was only presumption. Conceit. Misaligned understanding in the extreme.
Subaru's conviction was nothing more than the product of his self-satisfaction, and Beatrice never held any sentiments towards him except the literal meanings of her words. She was merely following the Gospel's orders, and was only putting up with Subaru in order to fulfill her purpose. All the while, in her heart, she was indifferent, or even despised him.

[Subaru: ……is that really how it is?]

The bond he thought was there was declared to be nonexistent, and his attempts to deny it were cut off by Beatrice's angered cries.

As Subaru imagined, their connection was confirmed to be counterfeit. She had never been moved in the slightest by Subaru's existence, and there was only ever the sense of necessity behind her actions.

[Subaru: All those times you smiled, got mad, or protected me…… were they all just some lies written in a script……?]

How is that possible, Subaru's brittle heart still denied it. In that final moment, Beatrice's tearful voice at their parting had drawn a mist over the veracity of her words.
No matter what, it was still too early for him to come to that conclusion.

[Subaru: Who cares if it's written inside some book, all I remember is that you saved me…… nothing can change that fact. It's a debt that only I remember]

In the loops beginning in the Mansion, more than once, Subaru had been saved by Beatrice. There were all those times when he loitered in the Forbidden Library to gather his thoughts after Return by Death, and when she more literally saved his life when he was littered with the Mabeasts' curses. And, in that lost world where he had allowed Rem to die, when he was hounded by Ram and Roswaal, she went so far as to twist the meaning of their offhand verbal contract in order to protect him.
Even if that great debt no longer existed anywhere in this world, it still remained within Subaru's heart.

[Subaru: That time…… I was glad]

Even when he was convinced that there was no one left on his side, she saved him nonetheless. When he thought Rem and Ram were his enemies, when he couldn't fathom Roswaal's intentions, and when he was worn to his core when even Emilia couldn't completely trust him, Beatrice alone had saved him.
Just how much that temporary, transient contract had saved him was beyond what words could convey, and a kindness he could never fully repay.

[Subaru: I'll repay that debt. I still don't know whether you loaned it to me of your own free will, or if you were following that book's wishes…… but I'll find out]

Obviously, he could no longer ask her now after she had so firmly rejected him. So, since Subaru's resolve no longer held any meaning in this world, it will just have to be carried over to the next one.

He held up his right arm. Hand missing three of its fingers. Shoulder and hip twinging. Head banged up. And tongue slightly shortened. Every last one dealt him pain impossible to forget. He saw Rem beneath his closed eyelids. And Petra. And Frederica. And Beatrice, with her back turned to him. And, at last, there was Emilia.

——Everything that Subaru had failed to grasp because of his mistakes in this world.

In order to retrieve what was lost, he will commit himself to do what he must. To continue what Beatrice had interrupted, and once again dive into that spiral,

[Subaru: ————]

Subaru held out his shortened tongue and gathered the resolve to bite into it once more.
But, just the thought of his botched suicide resurrected his anguish, and seized him with fear once more. Hesitation surfaced, and his legs began to tremble. Word games like resolve are worthless when faced with the end.
Holding back such counterproductive emotions, overcoming the unsurpassable dread of impending death and praying to be returned to a time when he could still fix everything, Subaru shut his eyes for the final moment――

[Subaru: ……where… is this place?]

He realized that the room where Door Crossing had dumped him was a place he had never seen before.

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To Subaru, this was an unknown space completely different from the familiar Roswaal Mansion.
Damp stone slabs, and grimy walls covered in sprawling ivy. Randomly arranged tables with rusted metal tools scattered over them that evoked unease by sight.
And above all,

[Subaru: Uu――!?]

A dense, putrid stench, which, once noticed, could no longer be severed from his mind.
It was different from the rotten stench of organic waste, but there was no other way to describe it but as a horrid rotting stench that injected him with the urge to vomit. Quickly covering his mouth, Subaru's empty stomach retched out all of its fluids.
Seeing the yellow stomach bile splashing onto the floor, panting, Subaru glared through his surroundings. The more he looked, the stranger the unknown space appeared.

A dark room covered by stone slabs, its space was about twice the area of the drawing room in Roswaal's Mansion. It wasn't large enough to be considered spacious, but it couldn't be called cramped either.
Strewn about one corner of the room were tables with mysterious instruments scattered on top, and opposite the tables―― littering the vast majority of the room, were,

[Subaru: Broken tables and… crystals……? Crystals or, fragments of magic minerals? And then this hole……]

Looking at the ground before him, there were carcasses of broken tables and deactivated magic crystals scattered across the floor, and even further ahead, was a wide, gaping hole about four meters in diameter. In the absence of sufficient lighting, it was all the more impossible to gauge the true depth of the pitfall.

If he turned up his head, he would see pale blue light emanating from glowing moss on the walls. Like the ones growing freely in the forests, they absorb mana from the atmosphere to fuel their light. The forests surrounding the Mansion were spared from absolute darkness by the light of

these very same moss along with the light of the stars.
Feeling his way across the floor with the aid of moss-light, enduring the unpleasant sensation of moisture soaking into his pants and the slime sticking to his palms, he peeked into the depths of the hole.

A quiet, cold wind swept up from below, carrying a nose-turning——— or rather, nose-demolishing stench along with it.

[Subaru: Uu…… pugh. Not having the courage to look inside would've been the correct choice, huh…… what is that smell?]

If it had been a stench characteristic of something harboring life, then Subaru's imagination might have turned to the worst. But this rising stench was something different from that of rotting flesh, and was closer to a strong chemical smell.
Like the sensation of sniffing some stringent medicine, a painful shock jolted his nose. The stench rising from the dark bottom of this pit was wholly unlike the scent of any living organism.

[Subaru: ———something else]

Both physically and mentally unwilling to check the bottom of the pit again, Subaru wiped off his nose and consciously breathed through his mouth as he looked around the room.
The first thing his eyes landed on were the scattered carcasses of tables and expended magic crystals. The metal tables seemed to have been crushed by some tremendous impact, and the magic crystals appeared to have been stacked on the tables before that. Slowly flipping over one of the mangled tables, he noticed some sort of pattern engraved on its surface.

[Subaru: Looks like…… some kind of magic circle……]

Magic circles like this show up quite a lot in Alternate-World Fantasy genres, but Subaru couldn't recall seeing anything similar since coming to this world. Basically, the magic in this world passes through living bodies to interfere with the outside world, and aside from magic lamps and Metias, Subaru had yet to find any exceptions.
So he was quite surprised to find a magic circle here, but,

[Subaru: Actually, does it even do anything? If it does, then…… why would they leave the circle in a place like this……]

Could it be that the magic couldn't be activated here directly, and was instead meant to serve some remote functionality? Or perhaps it was some kind of system to run the spell continuously without the caster being present?

[Subaru: If that was the case, it'd explain why there're so many used up magic crystals next to it]

After the magic crystals serving as its energy source were depleted, the magic circle lost its power——— that would be the most plausible explanation. But, despite reaching this conclusion, what Subaru still did not understand was the true purpose of the hole and the broken tables. Nor could he completely rule out the possibility that the room had been purposely designed to explode in the event that the spell was interrupted.
Regardless,

[Subaru: In the end… I still have no idea where I am]

A dark hole seemingly going down forever. A magic circle used for some kind of spell, surrounded by magic crystals. Looking over the rotting, putrid room, he saw another tipped-over table in the corner—— and picked up one of the rusted metal tools beside it.
Resembling a plier or nipper, it was the kind of utensil one might use when crafting plastic models. It was covered in the same slime that was smeared across the floor, and, more importantly, perhaps due to the passage of time in which it had spent in disuse, it disintegrated into dust at the touch of Subaru's hand.

Not only the tools, but the table was in the same condition. After years upon years of exposure, its bent legs had deteriorated to the brink of dust, and when he nudged it with his foot with the slightest force, it lost its shape and transformed into powdered iron.
There was no other information to be gained beyond that. But if there was just one point he could not get out of his mind, it would be,

[Subaru: The way this was destroyed, and its timing, was drastically different from the table in front of the hole……]

Unlike the one which had become brittle from the passage of time before welcoming its collapse, the table beside the hole was obviously crushed by some destructive force. And, judging from the state of the ground beneath it, its destruction came extremely recently—— probably within the last few days.

[Subaru: A room destroyed…… by whom, and why……]

Muttering this question, Subaru suddenly realized that his thinking was somewhat ridiculous. What was the point of asking this? It was not the kind of question that could be answered by thinking alone, and more importantly, the problems that Subaru had to deal with were already more than his arms could hold.
He mustn't allow himself to be weighed down by small matters in between the large, which would only serve to hasten his collapse. Above all, the very act of distracting his attention away was nothing more than desperately dragging out the unbearable agony of the time before his impending suicide.

But, even recognizing this unopposable sense of "Shame", Subaru could not pull himself away from the strangeness of this room. At this point, there was something very important right in front of him——

[Subaru: ————]

Guided by an inexplicable certainty, Subaru felt his way forward, turning his head about, searching for the room's exit. Since he was brought here by "Door Crossing, this room must have a closeable door that tossed him out.
At last, Subaru found the door that had so rudely dropped him off—— a small flap installed on the upper part of the wall, perhaps used for ventilation or the likes.

Other than that, he could see nothing else that could be considered an exit. The official door might be on the other side of the collapsed pit—— in the opposite, unreachable end of the room.

When this fact finally sank in, Subaru had to give up on the notion of leaving in any conventional way. Wiping off the sweat and the unknown slime stuck to his palms onto his pants, he held his breath as he reached his fingers towards the flap.

The flap was at a height he had to stretch up on his tiptoes to reach, and its size would be closest to a garbage disposal chute. Although it wasn't too narrow for a person to pass through, it wasn't so luxurious that Subaru could fit through easily.
After some struggling owing to his maimed right hand, the rusted flap creaked open, and the effort to maneuver his body into the narrow tunnel began. The tunnel was the width of a ventilation pipe. In the worst case, he imagined it'd be a paradise for insect and rats, but it turned out to be surprisingly clean——— or, not exactly, but at least the fact that the dusty passage was free of living critters was a saving grace.

It took about three minutes before he passed through the tunnel. He got used to the crawling about halfway through, and just as his movements started getting smooth, he found himself at the finishing line. Popping out in the room connected by the ventilation tunnel, Subaru jumped down in the same manner, and started looking over his surroundings. He took the greatest caution to make sure there wasn't another pit here, but,

[Subaru: It's got a different vibe from the previous one. Compared to the one that looked like a lab this one's more like a waiting room]

Only about a half of a half of the size of the previous room, it appeared to be a room whose sole purpose was to be passed through. Other than two walk-though-on-the-ground type of doors, there was nothing else in the room. Certainly, it was a waiting room-esque room.
It'd be perfect if there was a coffee table with some magazines stacked on it———

[Subaru: Judging by the direction I came from, the other side of this door would be…… yeah]

Turning the knob and pushing open the door, he was greeted by the collapsed pit in front of his eyes. Seeing this death-trap situation, Subaru spilled a small sigh and closed the door again for the sake of his mental health. ———And, smelling the putrid stench seeping into this room, he kicked himself for not being quicker with his decision.
Then, quietly turning around, this time he faced the opposite door. Behind that door, would be a space completely unknown to Subaru———

[Subaru: ……hg]

The sweat on his palm that was supposed to have been wiped off and the cold sweat dripping down his back became unbearable.
Since he didn't know what was beyond that door, he could only imagine and prepare for the worst.

[Subaru: If…… this is inside the Mansion, then……]

Although it could just be another room he had never seen before, it was also possible that the moment he opened this door, he would find Elsa on the other side. If he did come face to face with that murderer, Subaru was not so confident that he'd be able to stay calm.

Even the impulse of “You Need To Die Immediately” insisting on his suicide could not help but transform into teeth-shattering hatred at that reminder.

Just the thought that the deviant whose blade killed Petra, Frederica――― and Rem, might be there tormented Subaru’s mind with rage surging to a boil.
Like a curse, a part of him wished that she was there, while a pathetic craving for life hoped that she was not. Wavering between the two extremes, Subaru’s mouth contorted into a wicked grin,

[Subaru:――――――]

Whether she’s there, or not there, this deranged emotion would not be betrayed.
At the end of his thoughts’ departure from sanity, faced with the world that opened before him,

[Subaru: ――――――ah]

Witnessing a sight that should not be there, Subaru lost himself in that moment.

――Subaru’s mind had actually already reached an answer about where this unfamiliar space was.

In the first place, there was barely a single room in Roswaal’s Mansion where Subaru hadn’t set foot in, and he even had free access to the Forbidden Library in a sense――― so all that was left was the door which he had only touched twice, but never got to see the other side of. That is, the door inside the “Escape Passage”.
The first time, he was hindered by a spirit with gray fur, and the second time, he was chased away by a murdering maniac. So Subaru was never able to pass beyond that point.
And that was why, despite harboring a certain sense of distrust towards whatever was waiting beyond this room, he did not have any doubts that it would be a part of Roswaal’s Mansion, but,

[Subaru: Where is…… this?]

Stumped, he muttered this question stupidly at no one in particular.
Beyond the opened door, what panned out directly in front of Subaru was a cold, dark underground passage――― or not. Rather, it was a luscious green forest in the midst of vibrant nature, and what was even stranger, was that,

[Subaru: It’s, morning……?]

Gazing up towards the sky through the gaps between the trees, he saw the rising sun. Seeing the height of the sun, and the sensation of the morning wind blowing against his skin, Subaru’s mind was further racked by doubt.
By the time Subaru returned to the Mansion, it was already right before dusk. Counting the time spent in his conversation with Frederica, along with Elsa’s attack, Subaru would have been wounded just before midnight――― which would mean that, at this point, half a day had already passed.

[Subaru: While I was unconscious……!?]

As soon as he bit down on his tongue to commit suicide, Subaru fell unconscious. When he woke again, his wounds had been healed and he was so preoccupied with his failure to kill himself that

he had forgotten to consider how much time had passed. Just how long had Subaru spent unconscious in the Library?
He remembered Beatrice calling it “A Place Detached From The Passage Of Time”. And while Subaru wasn’t sure just how literal that was meant to be,

[Subaru: If the savepoint gets overwritten because of this……!]

That would be an unthinkable situation.
Before his worst fear comes to pass and the state of reality is overwritten, he must immediately end his own life. And yet, another feeling was asserting its existence in direct conflict with this anxiety. That feeling was screaming:

——You must find out where this place is.

He didn’t know what would be the purpose of doing so. Considering all that had happened so far, and the malicious nature of Return By Death, he knew he should kill himself now.
But there was a horrifying calmness within Subaru that insisted this, despite fully understanding the circumstances he found himself in.

[Subaru: ——Kh, damnit!]

Kicking his foot into the ground and sending spit flying, Subaru sprinted into the forest ahead of him. Dashing through the gaps between the trees, his conversation with Petra in the escape tunnel surfaced in his mind.
The escape passage leads deep into the mountains behind the Mansion to a small cabin, where one might pick up emergency supplies and the like.
If that information can be relied on, then this should be that cabin in the mountains just now, and he would be running through the back mountains which he had already trekked though so many times before. But,

[Subaru: Was that the cabin? Where were the supply bags? And, in the first place…… looking like it’s been abandoned for ages, what kind of disaster relief infrastructure is that…… !?]

That strange place that Subaru saw contained more than enough evidence to support his sense of foreboding. There were too few similarities that actually matched Petra’s description. More importantly, if Frederica and Rem had been periodically maintaining it, there would be no explanation for the horrendous state of disrepair. This was something Subaru could say with confidence, knowing the work ethics of those two maids.

Passing through the forest, there was now another question, which would be the lack of a slope. The cabin was supposed to be in the mountains, but was it built somewhere without the slightest change in elevation for a hundred meters or more? Losing track of where he was, Subaru was racked by frustration for failing to see what he was trying to see.
Then, when his frustration and doubt had reached their limits, they were quickly and unexpectedly shattered.

Where the trees opened up, suddenly clearing his line of sight, Subaru skidded to a stop. The pavement, if it could still be called pavement in spite of the ragged condition it was in, was evidence that there were people frequently passing through here. And, more importantly, the

rows of houses visible in the distance further indicated that there were people living on this land. Taking this into his eyes, Subaru's thoughts were taken hostage by shock in the truest sense of the phrase.
Because the scenery he saw was――

[Subaru: The, S-Sanctuary!?]

The place he had bid farewell to only half a day ago, and which by his estimation would require a whole day to return to.
He lifted his right hand in accordance with his horror. His fingers were still missing. Lost. Return by Death had not been activated. And yet, he was now standing in a place he did not belong.

[Subaru: Why…… am I here? Was it… Door Crossing……?]

There could be no other answer.
After being kicked out of the Mansion's Forbidden Library by Beatrice, Subaru had been sent to a corner of the Sanctuary through Door Crossing. But how did this happen?

[Subaru: Is distance…… irrelevant? Yes, that one time I got transported from the Mansion to an animal stall in the village, but……]

Thinking in terms of distance, even that was still within permissible range. But considering the distance from the Mansion to the Sanctuary, this kind of long distance transportation was, to put it simply, beyond imagination and common sense.
Yet, considering the overabundance of supernatural powers he had witnessed so far, Subaru didn't have much choice except to scratch his head and swallow it down.

[Subaru: Screw it! If I'm back in the Sanctuary then……ROSWAAL!!]

Sprint forth to that clown's location and make him spit out every single one of his intentions. Roswaal had always treated Beatrice cordially at the Mansion. That sorcerer must certainly know her origins and how she came to possess a Gospel.
If he knows but tries to toy with the ignorant Subaru, that will be fine as well. Even if he has to punch his nose in, burn him, rip him apart, and bite out his throat, he'd do it until that clown spills everything.

[Subaru: ――――!]

At this moment, completely forgetting the need to kill himself, Subaru started to run. His thoughts dyed red with the pure color of rage, he dashed to the edge of the forest, to the residence where Roswaal would be sleeping.
Transforming into an incarnation of Wrath, Subaru sped through the Sanctuary, forgetting his exhaustion and agony, drawn only towards his destination.
Kicking the door open with the same momentum, Subaru pushed into the house, baring his teeth,

[Subaru: ROSWAAL! SHOW YOUR FACE! THERE'S A MOUNTAIN OF THINGS I WANNA ASK YOU!]

Plunging forward violently in a way that would normally earn him a scolding from a maid, Subaru barked out his demands. Hearing no reply coming from the room, Subaru stomped forward with deafening steps and wrung the final door open,

[Subaru: No more playing dumb and no more lies. Start spilling everything you've been hiding and……]

As he was about to go on, Subaru's voice trailed off.
Because, not only was the target of his condensed dissatisfaction absent, there was no one in the room to listen.

Gone. This fact only sent more boiling rage churning through Subaru's mind. Kicking the bed as hard as he could, the pain on his toes only escalated his anger further as he stormed out of the house.
In that case, Roswaal must be at Lewes' house―― meeting with Emilia, or perhaps discussing something with Lewes and Garfiel. Either way, becoming so active the moment Subaru was out of the picture, he certainly had the audacity. His timing to get up and running was so perfect, one might even suspect whether he had been faking it all this time.

As soon as suspicion was set on its course, negativity spiraled without interruption. With this completely dominating his thoughts, Subaru glared with sharpened eyes into the Sanctuary―― and, once again, realized too late.

[Subaru: ……Ah?]

It was early morning. As far as Subaru knew, that should be when the residents of the Sanctuary would begin preparing breakfast and washing themselves. Now that the refugees were gone, there was no need to cook mass meals, but each of the families would still need to cook.
They should, but there were no signs of such daily activities in sight. Rather, even before that,

[Subaru: It's not just Roswaal…… where did everyone else go?]

Looking left and right, there was not a single person in sight.
Come to think of it, from the moment he left the forest and returned to the Sanctuary, he couldn't recall having run into, or seen anyone on the way.
Even if he considered how there weren't that many residents in the Sanctuary, to not bump into a single person in the dead center of the village was too improbable to ignore.

[Subaru: There's no way……]

Shaking his head and trying to cast aside the nauseating sense of foreboding, Subaru knocked on the door of the nearest residence. He knocked, but confirming that there was no reply, he opened the door and peeked inside. ――No one.
In this house, there were supposed to be two beast-eared sisters living here.

One after another, Subaru looked inside every recognizable house, and every time his hope was betrayed, his disappointment mounted.
Everyone was missing, and there was no one here. The people of the Sanctuary had simply vanished.

[Subaru: Somebody! Anybody!? Where'd you all go!?]

The nauseating premonition accumulated.
He felt an anxiety and an inexplicable sense of loss.

During his showdown with the Witch Cult, the tragic memories of the Arlam village that welcomed Subaru, who had returned too late, resurfaced—— contorted, overlapping corpses, and innumerable faces of death in anguish and despair. Familiar faces drained of color, and Petra who would never move again.

[Subaru: ————Aaaaagh!]

With terror coursing up Subaru's back, the endless unease pushed him into a dash. A sound like a shriek escaped from his throat as he sped towards one singular place.
A one-of-a-kind building at the edge of the Sanctuary, a symbol of respect towards the matriarch of the village, and a place now lent to a single girl for her to place her bed.

[Subaru: ——Emilia!!]

Sprinting in while calling the name of the lovely girl, Subaru scanned the room.
A silver-haired girl with sleepy eyes looking back at Subaru, blinking several times with a surprised expression, saying [Good morning, Subaru] with a smile that made his chest ache——

[Subaru:————]

In the place where she should be looking back at him, there was no one at all.

Running over to the bed, he touched his fingers to the disheveled sheets. There was no warmth, and whoever slept here had already left for a considerable amount of time.
Having made sure of this, Subaru dashed out of the house and directed his legs towards the final place he could go. The only place that could grant him an answer to this absurd, unreasonable senselessness.

[Subaru: Hahh……hahh……!]

Out of breath. Tasting blood in the back of his throat, Subaru arrived at the very end of the Sanctuary, at the Tomb in which the Witch of Greed, Echidona, was sleeping.
There was no Garfiel, sitting in the middle of the road, obstructing him. Nor was he in front of the Tomb, waiting for him. Was that a blessing, or would he rather have been blocked just so he could see a familiar face——?

[Subaru: No…… how could I even face him……]

As the one who couldn't save his only sister, how could he bring himself to see him as though nothing had happened?
The relief Subaru felt at his absence, in spite of the unbearable anxiety of being unable to find anyone, and the way he was glossing over his own weakness, was truly grotesque.

Shaking his head to cast off such sentiments, Subaru stepped towards the Tomb before anything could interfere.

It was not time to initiate the Trial, but perhaps some action would be taken on the Witch's side. Hoping this, and clinging to this hope, Subaru sought the Witch who might give answers to his questions――

[Subaru: ――Kh, hhu]

The moment he stepped forward, Subaru received a feeling as though something had passed through his body.
He slowly looked down. Under his chest, and above his lower abdomen, in the dead center of his torso―― there was a round, gaping hole the size of a fist.

[Subaru: Fff……ehh?]

Reaching out his hand, he tried to cover over the hole. A loud noise accompanied the massive volume of blood exploding out from the gap. Despite stuffing his palm over the opening, the hole penetrated all the way through his body and was still open on the back side. Unable to plug both sides at once, and having lost so much blood, his body could not even maintain its current posture and toppled to the ground.

――No, pain. Can't, understand. What, happened?

Death. Dying. Going to die. At least, it's certain that death was coming.
How, why, why here? Elsa? She tracked him this far? The distance between the Mansion and the Sanctuary… Beatrice, impossible. Gospel? Her, why? Rem… Who was it. Dying. Scared. What. Who. Emilia. Witch. Witch. Witc――

[Subaru: ――――a]

His vision began to haze. The end was approaching.
His anticipated death came in an unanticipated form. Subaru felt no relief that he was finally dying. Only, just briefly, he was afraid of death.
Even if he claimed to have resolved to die, death came to him in a different way than he had envisioned. His heart was thrown into disarray, his pathetic desire for life screamed, while his soul refused to be peeled away from this world―― yet, "Death" was slowly eroding Subaru,

[Subaru: ――so…weak]

His own powerlessness streaming down his useless cheeks, Subaru's heart stopped beating.
His long-awaited death having arrived in this unexpected form, his lifeless face contorted in anguish and horror. The wretchedness of this death would be disputed by no one.

[???: ――――Kch]

With that sound, he was chewed.

Chapter 37 [The Initial Impulse To Kill]

He heard a sound like the torrent of a rushing stream.
A furious sound of water. A foaming waterfall coursing downwards, pulled along by gravity and current.
Reverberating in his ears, or perhaps within his skull, the thunderous roar rumbled at Subaru's brain as his consciousness was guided from loss into wakefulness.
He saw a light, and――

[Subaru: ――ah, khu]

Sensing something clogging his throat, the rhythm of Subaru's breaths grew bewildered as he gagged for air.
Inhale, exhale, the regular intervals between his breaths turned vague. His oxygen-deprived body spasmed and shook, saliva drooled from his mouth as Subaru wrung open his eyes.

[Subaru: Khu, aghk!]

His face was pressed against the ground. Pushing himself off the surface and onto his elbows and knees, Subaru grasped his chest, panting, and tried to calm his aching lungs.
The pain fell away, and he spat out the saliva that had nowhere else to go. With his body settling as oxygen resaturated his brain, he took a breath. ――And began to remember.

[Subaru: uuUUAAH, AAAAAH!?]

Recalling the gaping hole that had been opened in his chest, he felt the sense of emptiness of all the contents of his body flooding out.
Quickly pressing his palm over his stomach, he confirmed the absence of the gap that was the source of that emptiness, and the tension of his body began to soften.
Tasting a numbing shock through his limbs, Subaru scraped his forehead against the ground as the friction and the abrasive pain affirmed the reality of his existence.

[Subaru: What was, that…… at the end……]

Face-down on the ground, blood draining from his body, the sensation of his soul being sucked out from that very same gap certainly existed. But that wasn't the source of the sense of loss eroding at Subaru's flesh. The true horror came afterwards, near the end, among the lingering embers of life being guided into death.
His consciousness was vague and his memories were blurred, but this alone he remembered clearly.
――Something, something unknown, was "Devouring" him.

[Subaru: C-cut down, beaten to death, frozen, falling to death, I've died all sorts of ways now…… b-but this is still the first time I've been ea…… eaten in the end……]

Recounting the conscious experience of what happened to his body in the end, Subaru was once more gripped by terror.
The direct cause of death was the loss of blood spilling from the gap, and he had no intentions of

making light of “Death” itself, but he had nonetheless experienced first hand a fragment of the possibility that “Death” was not the end.
Who knew that the sensation of his body being eaten would be accompanied by such intense sense of loss? Subaru had lost fingers and legs before, but this sickening sensation was far beyond all of them――

[Subaru: fingers……!?]

Coming to that thought, Subaru suddenly wanted to kick himself for being so slow to remember. Considering the unsurvivable wound he sustained and the unmistakable sensation of “Death”, there was no doubt that Return by Death had been activated. There was no entity in this world that had more profound knowledge of death than Natsuki Subaru. He died, and he returned, that much was certain.
What was not certain, was where on the timeline Subaru returned to.

If his restart point had been moved to an unsalvageable point in time, where would Subaru’s resolve and oaths lead him then――

[Subaru: ah……]

Scanning his bloodshot eyes over his surroundings, Subaru desperately tried to confirm the time and his current location. But what calmed this desperate panic was the sensation on his forehead while his fingers wiped the sweat off his brows. ――The three missing fingers on his right hand were definitely still there.

[Subaru: Fingers…… are still there, which means]

As if to make sure, he held up his right arm and ran his gaze from his fingers to his elbow. Fingers and wrist, all the way to the elbow, nothing was missing, nor were there any signs of scarring. The white scars left over from the disturbance of the Wolgarms were still there, but that’s a different story.
Having confirmed that his arm was fine, Subaru moved on to his shoulder and hip―― the spots where Elsa’s darts had dug into. Sensing no stiffness in his skin, Subaru almost collapsed from sheer relief, finally convinced that he had returned to a time before his encounter with Elsa.

[Subaru: Th…… then, for now…]

It was fortune in midst of misfortune that he wasn’t given anything worse than death.
Feeling relieved and drained, Subaru dropped his eyes and thanked his bad luck. And it was then when he turned his gaze to the side, and noticed.

――That in the corner of the dark room, there was Emilia, writhing in pain.

[Subaru: Emili……a]

Instantly rushing over to her side, Subaru realized that they were alone in a dark and musty vault. He had only one experience of being alone with her like this, so there was only one possible explanation. That is,

[Subaru: The restart point… hasn’t changed……!]

Inside the Tomb, directly after passing the Trial——— was where Subaru returned to after death. In exchange for nothing being gained, nothing was lost either. Time to try again.

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——There must be something he could do to fix everything.

Having confirmed where he had returned to, the thought that passed through Subaru's mind was so positive that it was hard to believe it could have come from a person who had just been trembling in his final moments.
It was now the second night after his arrival in the Sanctuary. With the information gained from the first loop and second loop, Subaru reorganized the circumstances and events in his mind as he set about searching for the solution.
By now, the bloody content was already nothing out of the ordinary. Whether it was the initial cluelessness, or becoming hopelessly stuck with no choice but to hug his own head, it was just the same thing all over again.

[Subaru: Although… the usual methods won't be working this time]

No matter what, Subaru still wasn't able to grasp the full story of this loop. And even against the clear and obvious threats, he couldn't see any effective countermeasures.
Currently, there was no way to oppose the combat strength of the obvious threat, Elsa. With no exploitable weaknesses, the degree of danger she posed may have surpassed even Petelgeuse. Countering her attack on the Mansion remained the foremost priority. However, it would seem the problems didn't end there,

[Subaru: Last time, near the end…… why was the Sanctuary empty……?]

He couldn't understand why Beatrice would transport him all the way to the Sanctuary, but the fact that everyone there had vanished was all the more incomprehensible. He recalled running all around, shouting, only to receive no reply in return.
And then, there was the final calamity which befell Subaru when he tried to seek the answers inside the Tomb.

With a hole opened in his chest, Subaru died without the slightest idea of what could have given him that wound. The memory of that still-vivid injury brought back nothing but pain and horror, without a single clue or answer.

Back there, what on earth happened in the Sanctuary? What happened to Subaru? What was Beatrice thinking? And Emilia———

[Subaru: ……impossible]

Coming to that point, suddenly struck by the contradiction between his thoughts and his behavior, Subaru's face stiffened.

It was important to organize the situation. It was also important to set goals for the future and draw up plans to realize them. And it was a priority to collect the scattered information and shape them into something useful for obtaining that longed-for future, but,

[Subaru: ――――]

Did that give him an excuse to forget Emilia, currently struggling against a nightmare right in front of his eyes?

[Subaru: I-I…]

Emilia was still inside the Trial, tormented by agony. Her body and soul, assaulted by her past, being chipped away by the excruciating pain of the weight of the cross she had to bear. Long lasting pain without the slightest consolation at its end.

Subaru knew: How much sorrow this was bringing her, how much it was wearing her down, and how much it was weakening her heart.
It was because he couldn't bear to see her like this that he had resolved to complete the Trial in her place, to clear away all obstacles, and open the way for her to pass.

That was how it should have been, so why was Subaru so relieved to see her suffering?
"Thank god he returned to a point in time where she was suffering." Despite knowing what will become of her pain, he had cruelly put his thoughts before her.

The moment he understood this, Subaru saw the hideous existence he had descended into.
Even knowing that the girl in front of his eyes, the person most important to him in this world, was gasping in unbearable agony, he was averting his eyes from her distress, fully absorbed in his self-centered foolishness.
To Subaru, such weakness was abhorrent and grotesque.

[Subaru: Either way……]

There was no time to be tormented by guilt and the contradictions of his heart. He must wake Emilia up right away, and bring her out of this place.
He could take the time to gather his thoughts once they're outside. There was no reason to prolong her suffering. And――

[Subaru: Right now, there's a guy I need to get some answers out of]

It was starting to piss him off how lenient he was before. How is it that all this time, he had allowed the central character at the core of everything to get away with his ambiguities?
The result was the tragedy that befell the Mansion, and his incomprehensible death at the Sanctuary.
If that was the future that came from Subaru's cowardice, then――

[Subaru: I will do everything differently this time]

As these words rolled off of his tongue, Subaru reached out his hand to wake Emilia.
In that moment, not even Subaru himself was aware that his face was being contorted by unsuppressible fury.

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[Subaru: ――Just how much do you know, Roswaal?]

That was the first thing that came out of Subaru's mouth as he swung open the door. Lying on the bed, Roswaal narrowed his eyes. And Subaru, seeing himself reflected in those mismatched pupils, barged into the room and slammed the door shut behind him in a display of his present emotion.

――After finally calming Emilia and bringing her out of the Tomb, Subaru headed to Lewes' house and put her to bed. There, he left Emilia in Ram's care, and, so as to not waste the interval before she wakes again, he immediately set out for the building where Roswaal was recuperating.
Garfiel's silent glare all that time he was in the house gave him cause for concern, but fortunately, Subaru didn't encounter any resistance on the way and managed to get there without any problems.
However, the instant he took Roswaal into his sights, all that caution scattered like a mist.

[Roswaal: Fu~~mu]

Looking up at the restless Subaru, Roswaal let out a deep and meaningful sigh. And then, he held up a single finger and lightly wagged it in front of Subaru.

[Roswaal: M~~y you certainly seem much more a~~ngry than last I saw you. Tha~~t's a good sign]

[Subaru: Don't try to be funny. I'm not in the mood for pranks or jokes right now. I'm prepared to use force if I have to]

Snarling this at the carefree Roswaal, Subaru advanced to the side of the bed and pressed his palms onto the sheets. And, glaring down at the clown at extreme close-range,

[Subaru: I just came back from taking the Trial. ――And I have a mountain of things to ask you]

[Roswaal: ……Is that, so. You have taken the Trial. I see. I see. I~~ see~~]

Whereas in Subaru's time, several days had already passed since the Trial where he bid farewell to his parents, in real time, it would only have been less than an hour ago. And, it was now the third time he had seen Roswaal's inexplicable reactions to being told about the Trial.

The first time, there seemed to be a flash of violent emotion so brief it was as if it was never there. The second time, he appeared to have somewhat calmly accepted the fact. But even so, it was laced with a certain uncharacteristic tinge of melancholy.
And this third time, what was that reaction supposed to be? Personally, Subaru had hoped for a flash of anger like the first time, believing that if Roswaal could be incited into a rage, he might

just let his mouth slip.
But, completely contrary to Subaru's hopes, Roswaal's lips instead curved into a smile,

[Roswaal: I~~n that case, allow me to ask you a question]

[Subaru: Huh? What are you talking about? You? Ask questions? ……If you keep playing around I'm going to seriously flip, you bastard]

[Roswaal: I can understand that you have re~~ason to be angry. And I am asking with that in mind. If we are of the same opinion…… I don't see why you would decli~~ne to coo~~perate]

[Subaru: If I answer your question…… no, wait]

While Subaru was trying to press down his anger, Roswaal raised this proposal. For a moment, Subaru almost accepted. But he instantly severed that thought when he realized that accepting would have meant being swept along by the atmosphere created by Roswaal, just like all those times before.
Unless he made an effort to resist, the result will be just as miserable. So in order to change the outcome, he must change his behavior from this point onward.

[Subaru: I'm not answering your questions. I'm the one who has questions. I go first]

[Roswaal: ……Aya, bu~~t isn't that aw~~fully rude?]

[Subaru: I'm not saying I won't answer any questions, but I have the feeling we won't get anywhere if I just go along with whatever you say. So let's nip that in the bud first]

Seeing Subaru's obstinate attitude, Roswaal closed a single eye and lightly sighed. Then, holding out both palms, he made an [A~~lright] gesture,

[Roswaal: Ask whatever you li~~ke. Indeed, it doesn't always have to be me managing the pa~~ce of the conversation]

[Subaru: Even though it's actually kinda creepy when you're so reasonable…… well, no point getting hung up on that. So, question: ――What kind of contract have you sealed with Beatrice?]

[Roswaal: ―――――]

Suddenly silent, it seemed as though Roswaal was caught off guard by that query.
Seeing his cheeks stiffen, albeit slightly, Subaru was convinced that he had struck a critical question.

The previous loop had brought about newly-discovered facts and unexplained events, and Subaru must set about finding the answers to these mysteries. Foremost among them―― were the questions surrounding Beatrice, and whether it was at the Sanctuary or the Mansion, the only person he could ask was Roswaal.
More than anything, their conversation at their parting and the Gospel in her hands were all burned into his mind, impossible to forget.

It was a question he must not take lightly. One which will decide how he will interact with that girl from now on.

――How he will face Beatrice at their unavoidable meeting in this loop.

[Subaru: Answer me, Roswaal. Don't give me any of that "You won't answer mine so I won't answer yours" crap. Answer the question]

Growing impatient with Roswaal's prolonged silence, Subaru repeated his demand for a response.
Asserting its presence within his chest was the frustration that was the manifestation of his desire to overturn that revolting sense of foreboding.
Every second of silence felt like minutes as he waited for the reply. Until, at last, Roswaal opened his mouth,

[Roswaal: ――The fact that you are asking this question here, does that mean you've remembered?]

But, instead of an answer as Subaru had hoped, Roswaal replied with a question of his own. Clicking his tongue in frustration at his attitude, [Shut up!], Subaru swung his arm in front of Roswaal,

[Subaru: Why are you replying with another question? Even if I take a hundred steps back and let you ask, you will answer mine first. I'm not giving up my turn]

[Roswaal: Is that so. Then, let's proceed by taking turns. Your question was about "The contract between Beatrice and myself", wa~~s it not? There is no contract sealed between Beatrice and myself. That is the answer]

[Subaru: Wh――!?]

Caught off guard by that sudden turn, Subaru found himself speechless. Reaching out a hand to Subaru, who had inadvertently lost his words, [No~~w], Roswaal went on,

[Roswaal: This time it's your turn to answer m~~y question. ――Have you remembered?]

[Subaru: ……Remember, what. Just so you know, our relationship isn't deep enough that we can communicate by telepathy here. Don't go assuming I can put together your sentences without a subject]

[Roswaal: That reply, already gave me the answer to my question. ……Unfortunate]

Although Subaru had hoped to get some kind of revenge, it would seem he was no match for Roswaal after all. With a certain shade of sadness, Roswaal turned down his eyes, and,

[Roswaal: It seems, I didn't make it]

[Subaru: ……what]

[Roswaal: It's your turn to ask. Do be~~tter this time, and ask me a question I ca~~nnot dodge]

Covering over Subaru's confounded voice, Roswaal's self-awareness about his question dodging didn't make it any less infuriating. Subaru took a deep breath to control his emotions, and pressed a finger to his temple and began to think,

[Subaru: You said you have no contractual relationship with Beatrice, right? Then, why is Beatrice living in your Mansion? I can't understand what your relationship with Beatrice is supposed to be]

[Roswaal: That's two questions now. You've been inquiring about Beatrice e~~ver since you got here, whe~re does that leave Emilia-sama? Or, could it be that you prefer those who look like young children?]

[Subaru: I'm not attracted to little kids and I have no intention of going the romantic conquest route with her. But I do intend to shake up the status quo a bit, so I'll be choosing her route in that sense]

It was true, that whenever he thought about Beatrice, Subaru would feel a certain aching in his heart.
But this was different from the aching he'd feel when he thought of Emilia or Rem, and Subaru quite couldn't understand what it meant.
Except, even after seeing the Gospel in Beatrice's hands, he still felt this.

——And he didn't want to believe that the relationship between him and Beatrice was just something counterfeit written in some strange book.

[Subaru: That's why I need to find out more about her. And it seems the only person who's deeply associated with her is you. So I can only ask you]

[Roswaal: You try to collect everything that ca~~tches your eye, but it will only become an obstacle when the time comes to choose what is truly impo~~rtant. Such naivete only hinders you from seeing the thing that is most important to your heart, I thi~nk]

[Subaru: I realize my hands are already full. So now I'm just trying to grab her with my mouth. Got a problem with that?]

[Roswaal: How could I po~~ssibly? Although I get the feeling you are just saying that for appearances sake, there is nothing wrong with that. ——In fact, I do wonder how you will answer when the time comes]

Acknowledging Subaru's words, Roswaal's voice trailed to an indiscernible whisper towards the end. Subaru's gaze sharpened at those words, and, receiving that gaze, Roswaal continued, [In tha~~t case],

[Roswaal: The reason why Beatrice resides in the Mansion, wa~~s it? She resides in my Mansion due to her ties with the House of Mathers. If you must know, it was by the favor of the head of the House of Mathers many generations ago that she became the Keeper of the Forbidden Library. It has been so through the generations, and remains the same, now it that had passed to me]

[Subaru: Employed as its Keeper? ……Then, how is that any different from a contract?]

[Roswaal: The questioning format seems to be a bit different from what we've agreed? ……We~~ll, no matter. There i~~s already little meaning in asking any more questions from my side. You are already aware of Beatrice's identity as a spirit, I assu~~me?]

Subaru nodded in affirmation to Roswaal's question. Although he never actually got to see Beatrice's spirit-form, her self proclamation and her intimidating presence both confirmed this fact.
Seeing Subaru's nod, Roswaal lifted up a finger,

[Roswaal: To spirits, a contract with a human carries tremendous significance. The relationship between Emilia-sama and the Great Spirit-sama is exa~ctly that]

[Subaru: ……Yeah, Emilia's been struggling with all the annoying conditions too. But the Great Spirit-sama hasn't been showing his face lately, has he]

Having been killed by Puck three times, and after their clash of perspectives over the sleeping Rem, there was an insurmountable gap between them. And since he mysteriously went into hiding before that gap could be resolved, Subaru's feelings towards that little cat was still rather hard to define.

[Roswaal: The Great Spirit-sama's whims aside, Beatrice is no exception. That child and I are in a cooperating rela~~tionship, to a certain extent. But it is nothing more than a sort of mutual noninterference while our interests are aligned. It would be unlikely for her to help me achie~~ve my goals, and the same is true vice versa]

[Subaru: I can see how you can appear to be on good terms with Beako while actually being indifferent, but that has nothing to do with the terms of her contract]

[Roswaal: Ooh my, you must excuse me. But contractual relationships are something else entirely. Beatrice, being a spirit, takes contracts extremely seriously. To speak to her on the topic of contracts would be a different, and quite la~~rger, issue. After all, that child is still bound by a contract from four hundred years ago]

Picking up something he could not let slide, Subaru suddenly leaned himself up to Roswaal shouting [That's it!]

[Subaru: That contract from four hundred years ago, I want to know the details]

[Roswaal: Spirits' mouths don't open so easily when it comes to the contents of their co~ntracts. No involved parties from that time could possibly still remain, so unless Beatrice herself speaks, there is no one else who knows of the co~~ntents of her contract]

[Subaru: Damn it, that's useless! If I could just find out what's in that contract……]

Then he would know why that girl was hiding herself in a room all alone, wouldn't he?

[Roswaal: However, there is one thing worth mentioning]

[Subaru: ——?]

[Roswaal: Since Beatrice is bound by the contract from four hundred years ago, to seal any new contract which overlaps with the original would be impo~~ssible. So, if you wish to bring her out of that place, then you must find a way to break the exi~sting contract]

[Subaru: Break….. the contract?]

[Roswaal: Fulfilling it, would a~lso work. But since there is good chance that the other party to the contract is already gone, bre~~aking the contract would be the smarter course, don't you thi~~nk?]

It was nothing short of miraculous that Roswaal would be offering constructive opinions for a change. Initially caught off guard by his words, Subaru's expression abruptly changed as though a veil was suddenly lifted from his eyes,

[Subaru: ――When did I ever say I wanted to bring Beatrice outside?]

Subaru, saying this quietly, fixed sharpened eyes on Roswaal, mere inches away.
Placing his hands on the bed, his fingers began knocking on the sheets like the second-hand of a clock. Dropping his gaze to look at this gesture, Roswaal closed a single eye, before reflecting Subaru within his sole yellow pupil,

[Roswaal: You really―― are a man who likes to notice things people do~~n't want you to notice]

[Subaru: What do you……]

[Roswaal: Either way, this time is already me~~aningless to me. Perhaps, we should e~nd this conversation here?]

[Subaru: Are―― are you fucking kidding me!?]

Different from before, within Roswaal's eyes, there emerged a color of disappointment. With that strange expression, Roswaal spilled out a sigh from a face seemingly drained of all liveliness.

[Roswaal: No matter what you say now, it could no longer move me…… so you may do whate~ver you like]

[Subaru: You've got to be joking!? This is important…… we are getting to something important and you start acting like that!? There are still things I need to ask you……]

[Roswaal: If you wish to ask, you are fre~e to ask. But whether I answer them seriously or not, would depend comple~~tely on whether I feel like it]

The more agitated Subaru became, the more deprived of the tremors of emotion Roswaal seemed to become. In front of Subaru, whose face had turned red with rage, Roswaal merely combed his fingers through his deep blue hair, and tilted his head,

[Roswaal: You have, no more qu~estions?]

[Subaru: ――Tch. Alright, I know that Beatrice is bound by a contract and is living inside the Mansion. We can leave the details for now. There's something else I want to ask. About that black book she has…… I want you to tell me what that is]

[Roswaal: E~~hh, you saw it? Any thoughts? What do you thi~nk it is?]

[Subaru: Don't reply with another question. ――But I think it's… something similar… to the books the Witch Cultists have, or, at least, I'm guessing]

Subaru's stuttered reply was like a plea for the words to be refuted. But, hearing this, Roswaal showed an expression as if he couldn't hold back a yawn,

[Roswaal: The Gospels in the Witch Cultists' possession are mediums of the Witch's will, and describe the path leading to their owners' desired future. We~ll, aside from vague directions, they are rather labor-intensive to follow as far as prophetic books go]

[Subaru: ――! You know?]

[Roswaal: There is no need to be too~ surprised. There are Witch Cultists here as well, considering this is a facility belonging to a Witch different from the Witch they worship. Being the manager of the Sanctuary, it wasn't just once or twice that I've had to exchange blows with the li~kes of them]

[Subaru: Th-then, they can really see the future……?]

If they could see the future without dying, that would be an ability far more powerful than Subaru's Return by Death. It was not that he was jealous of such an ability, but if all the members of the Witch Cult were equipped with this overpowered item, that would be nothing to scoff at.
But, seeing Subaru's shudder, Roswaal shook his head,

[Roswaal: It's not that convenient of an item. First of all, the number of entries themselves vary from Cultist to Cultist. The contents are vague and subject to interpretation. More importantly, no one except the owner of the Gospel can read it. To anyone else, its contents will only appear to be indecipherable nonsense. And so, they are only incomplete maps of the future]

[Subaru: Incomplete……]

Subaru couldn't hide his relief to hear this. But then again, if the Gospels were truly prophetic books with the power to describe the future, Subaru would never have been able to win against Petelgeuse. In that sense, it's obvious that even the Sin Archbishops' Gospels couldn't have reached that level. However,

[Subaru: That'd be a completely different topic. Then, what about Beatrice's book……]

[Roswaal: If you're asking whether it is the same as the ones in the Witch Cultists' possession, then the answer is that it is, and it isn't]

[Subaru: Stop playing around! This is important!]

[Roswaal: I am doing no~~ such thing. Although what Beatrice has is a Gospel, it is of a different origin from the Witch Cultists'. For the Witch Cultists' Gospels are incomplete, whereas the one belonging to Beatrice is complete]

[Subaru: Complete……?]

[Roswaal: Yes, it is complete. Unlike the defective items that fluctuate between uncertain futures, wavering in their recorded contents]

Seeing Subaru confused, Roswaal's face only brightened.
His expression and tone were as if he was basking in pride. Subaru didn't know what to say in front of this sudden transformation, but what made him lose his words in the truest sense of the phrase, was what came afterwards,

[Subaru: ——!?]

Roswaal reached behind with his right hand and produced a book with black binding.
There was no mistaking it at such a close distance that it was, without a doubt, a Gospel.

[Roswaal: This is one of the only two complete Gospels in existence. Myself, and Beatrice, are the only two people who possess one…… tha~t is]

[Subaru: ————]

Before Subaru's eyes, Roswaal waved the book left and right in his hand. However, Subaru had no mental capacity to care about such gestures now.
The fact that Roswaal was holding a Gospel same as the ones in the hands of the Witch Cult was indeed shocking. The fact that the one in Beatrice's hand was also a Gospel, and the fact that the words she said to him at their parting were confirmed, was also shocking.
——But they were not what dominated Subaru's mind in that moment,

[Subaru: That's…… a Gospel that records the future?]

[Roswaal: Wi~~thout a doubt. This is the genuine Gospel]

[Subaru: You know…… the future? Right now, everything that is happening now… is in that book……?]

[Roswaal: It i~s written. Although you won't be able to read it]

Who cares about that.
At this moment, whether Subaru could read it is irrelevant. There was only one significance. Only one single thing he had to ask. That is,

[Subaru: The future, what will happen…… is written… in that book?]

[Roswaal: It doesn't describe the enti~rety of the world, but it does reveal a portion of the owner's fu~ture]

[Subaru: That things will become the way they are now…… you knew that beforehand?]

[Roswaal: It took quite a lot of effort to produce the same situ~ation as described, you know? I was rather hoping for a little praise for all my efforts behind the sce~nes]

Subaru could not stop his voice from trembling.
At the source of that trembling, was the seeping of some violent emotion. Just what that emotion was, and at whom it was directed, was immediately obvious—— that is,

[Subaru: If you knew… everything that was going to happen……]

[Roswaal: ——Fuumu]

[Subaru: ——You, knowingly left Rem to die?]

[Roswaal: Rem, who~ would you be refe~rring to?]

[Subaru: ——I'll KILL YOU!! ROSWAAAAAAAAAAL!!]

In that instant, uncontrollable rage propelled Subaru's body to move.
Flying forward onto the bed, his hands clenched tight onto the bedridden Roswaal's neck. With unnatural strength never seen before, Subaru's grip dug into the slender neck, carving an expression of agony onto the clown's blue and white face.

[Subaru: YOU KNEW EVERYTHING AND YOU——!!]

If he knew, if he already knew, if he could have prevented the tragedies—— and what happened to Rem from ever happening—

[Subaru: THE REASON I LEFT REM TO DIE—— WAS YOU!!?]

Consumed by overflowing fury, he blew out his regrets, and all his impulses were directed to the intent to kill this man before his eyes. His actions forgot all reason as emotions and love transmuted into force.
And, just like this, unable to utter a sound, Roswaal silently waited for Subaru's hands to snap his neck——

[???: ——I SEE "THE GUISE CAN'T COVER THE ULGARMS STENCH"!!]

——Impact.

Sensing a solid, sharp tactile sensation striking him from the side, Subaru felt the right half of his face destroyed as he was sent flying into the air.
His body slammed into an immovable wall, and fell head first onto the ground. His thoughts went blank at the sudden blow, and his body couldn't move at all.

Blood flowed from his ear and nose, and the right side of his vision was dyed absolute black. His eye may have been completely crushed.

[???: ——Ever since y'came outta the Tomb yer stench's shot up. Didn't believe it so I thought I'd watch ya, but AIN'T THIS 'XACTLY AS I THOUGHT!?]

Footsteps. The uncouth sound crept up to his side. His body would not even permit him to crawl. Immobile, front and back, Subaru's head was pulled up,

[Garfiel: Reekin' o' the stench of the Witch, the fuck y'think yer doin'? Should I ask yer body? Oy? This place still needs that bastard. The fuck're ya try'n ta pull, YEAH!?]

A blond youth. Garfiel. Or something. Assailed by that voice full of fury and murder, Subaru's consciousness grew distant.
Half his head, though there was no way to confirm it, seemed to have been crushed. He'll die, probably. If he died like this, that'd be about the most pathetic way to go.

If he Returned by Death while clinging onto this sordid thought, would he really still have the desire to save this place?

[Subaru: I don't, know……Rem]

With the end of that final syllable, Subaru's consciousness descended into darkness.

Chapter 38 [Caterpillar]

——The first thing that drew on his consciousness was the continuous sound of dripping water.

Falling at equal intervals, the droplets carved out a constant rhythm, and with every beat sent into the silence of the room, Subaru's submerged consciousness was guided little by little into wakefulness.
His slumbering brain resumed its activity, and his rebooted nerves sensed the circulation of blood through his veins. Twisting his body, he tried to rise up with a groan—— but couldn't.

Dropping back onto the ground, his limbs would not listen to his commands, and he could do nothing more than to scrape his face against the cold surface of the floor. At the same time, trying to tax his recovering senses to survey his surroundings, he found that his vision was completely painted over with darkness.

——Both my eyes are blind!?

That was the immediate answer he arrived at as he confirmed his situation, but before fear could overtake him, he noticed the tight pressure binding his eyelids and abandoned that conclusion.
He determined that he had been blindfolded, before realizing the strangeness of the situation. Instead of his eyes being blinded, they had both been covered. In addition, the fact that his body couldn't move was for the same reason, because his hands and feet had been firmly tied behind his back.
There was the sensation of a slender rope wrapped around his wrists and ankles. With his hands behind his back, even if he struggled, it would be no easy task to break free.

[Subaru: Wh, what is this……!?]

Fortunately, he wasn't gagged, so he could still use his voice normally. But with his hands and feet literally tied, his mouth was all he had left. Truth is, whoever put Subaru in this situation probably wouldn't be amicable enough to be satisfied by small talk.
Fear began to emerge from the inexplicable situation and the absence of information on his surroundings. In midst of these interwoven emotions, Subaru held his breath and forced his thoughts to move.

Organize the current circumstances: His eyes were blindfolded. His hands and feet were bound, impossible to break loose. He still had his voice. Should he yell for help? That would only draw his captor. Was there something nearby he could use to free himself from his restraints? It would be difficult to crawl around searching like this. The right side of his head was hurting, and, the moment he placed his consciousness on it, it began to assert its existence with throbbing pain.

[Subaru: Head, hurts……]

Becoming aware of the pain on the side of his head, Subaru remembered what had happened to him right before losing consciousness.
After Returning by Death and leaving the Tomb, Subaru confronted Roswaal with the new facts and speculations, and when he flew into a rage at Roswaal's unforgivable statements, Subaru was knocked down by Garfiel, who had been watching him.

Or rather, “knocked down” would be too much of an understatement for the overwhelming force that had crushed him. Just a restraining strike from Garfiel had broken through his skull, and it wouldn’t have been surprising if he had died just like that.

[Subaru: If I died, this would be after Return by Death, but……]

If that really was the case, Subaru’s restart point should be in the Tomb right after the Trial. His soul should have been spirited to the room inside the Tomb, barely an hour before he headed to Roswaal’s bedroom, as per the rules of Return by Death.
At least, Subaru’s experience of being tied up and confined was only limited to that one time he flipped over the coffee table while imitating some anime, completely pissing off his father who threw him into the storehouse as punishment.

That was a memory from way back, even before he entered elementary school, and Return by Death couldn’t have returned him that far. Then, assuming the restart point hadn’t changed, the next conclusion would be that he was tied up immediately after Return by Death, but that should be impossible as well. So that only left him with one conclusion――

[Subaru: I failed.. to die……?]

Whether it was the lingering pain in his head or his current situation, it would explain all of it. He had committed an act of unsurpassable violence against Roswaal. With that in mind, his treatment was only morally right, even if it was not something he could emotionally accept.

[???: ――Y’sure got a grasp of yer situation quickly, yeah?]

As though he had been waiting for Subaru to come to terms with his situation, a voice descended from above. Lifting his face, even though he couldn’t see a thing, Subaru turned towards the direction of the voice. If he were to guess who the other person was just from the intonation of that voice,

[Subaru: Garfiel, is it?]

[Garfiel: Got that right too. Looks like yer head’s still workin’, that’s a relief. Guess I smacked ya a bit too hard, my’bad my’bad]

Hearing his name being called, Garfiel apologized to the blindfolded Subaru. Even though the tone of his voice didn’t exactly match its apologetic content, he went on with [Who would’a thought],

[Garfiel: I was just givin’ y’a lil’ pat, didn’t think you’d almost die from that. Heard yer Emilia-sama’s Knight so I thought you’d have a bit more goin’ there, but guess I overestimated ya, huh]

[Subaru: Sorry to disappoint you. My character’s more of the brainy type than the physical type…… So where are we, anyway?]

Replying with a scornful quip, Subaru cut directly to the chase. Hearing this, Garfiel let out a short sigh through his nose, and,

[Garfiel: Don't worry, yer still in th'Sanctuary. But this ain't the Cathedral or th'Tomb, or one of them houses we're lendin' to the guests]

[Subaru: You've got a bondage room prepared? They say it's good to be prepared, but if you've even got this kind of facility set up…… honestly I'm kinda creeped out]

[Garfiel: Go complain to the creep who made it if y'think it's bad taste. In fact, y'get to speak to her directly, don't ya?]

Garfiel made plain his discontent, or rather a sincere sense of discomfort. As though having caught something within his words, Subaru's face frowned up,

[Subaru: Directly… what do you mean……?]

[Garfiel: With the Witch's stench all o'er ya, don't go playin' dumb now. Y'met her inside the Tomb, didn't ya? Why else y'suddenly smell like this?]

[Subaru: Met inside the Tomb……?]

Something in Garfiel's words was tugging at him.
The Tomb. The Trial. The person he encountered there. It was all a blank. After bidding farewell to his parents in the Trial, at the end, he went into the empty school building, and there――

[Subaru: The Witch……!]

――He encountered the Witch of Greed, Echidona.

With the sense of incongruity that came with the filling of the void, the existence of Echidona was restored to Subaru's brain. He had already experienced this in the previous loop, so why had he forgotten it again?
Unless, it was the result of the "Condition" imposed upon him at the end of their first meeting? But the fact that Return by Death could not overcome this effect was truly astounding.

Return by Death allowed him to carry over his memories, yet he would have no countermeasures against this direct interference. In other words, every time Subaru Returns by Death, he will have forgotten Echidona, and will only begin to remember when he is reminded again.

[Subaru: Then, was this the thing that Roswaal mentioned I've forgotten……?]

Only now, with the existence of the Witch restored, did Subaru realize this, but it was still a bit too early to draw such a conclusion. After all, despite being able to remember Echidona, he could find nothing in their conversations that would help him break through the present situation. The way Roswaal said it, it was as though he wanted Subaru to remember "Something" which, in and of itself, would reveal Roswaal's incomprehensible intentions.
Then again, this would only make sense if he was indeed in possession of a complete Gospel.

[Garfiel: Since yer quiet all'of a sudden, should I take that as yer feelin' guilty?]

[Subaru: I'm not some highschool girl who'll die if she stops talking, so I'm just quietly thinking over a thing or two. Although a thing or two probably isn't enough at this point]

There were so many things to figure out that there wouldn't be enough cells in Subaru's brain to do it.
There was Emilia. Rem. Beatrice. ――Pretty much for every name in the female lineup, Subaru will have to dig himself out of the situation . And on top of that, there was the Sanctuary, Elsa, Roswaal's true intentions, and the Gospels. And then,

[Subaru: There's Garfiel… too]

To convince him and gain his support was an indispensable element of Subaru's blueprint of the plan to save the Mansion. When it comes to repelling Elsa, there was no one else Subaru could draw on with greater combat capability. The fact that his strength could be counted on to match Elsa's was something Subaru had both witnessed with his eyes and personally experienced with his head.

[Subaru: ……If I'm not mistaken, I'm pretty sure I got punched or kicked until my head was crushed, but what happened to that?]

[Garfiel: Hah. Took long enough for that topic t'come up. Yer head wasn't crushed, but it sure was cavin' in a bit. It'd be a nuisance if I just let ya die like that, so y'got a bit of healin']

[Subaru: Healing…… by whom?]

[Garfiel: Well who else was there t'do it 'cept me?]

Picking up some reverberations of pride in Garfiel's voice, Subaru was at a loss for words.
Who would have thought that the rough-and-brutish looking Garfiel would have studied healing magic. Still tied up, Subaru squirmed a little with his body.

[Subaru: My… head's still got it's original shape and isn't a box or pyramid, right?]

[Garfiel: Next time it gets cracked I could make it into that shape if y'want]

With a stupid sigh, having received this answer, Subaru shrinked up his shoulders and confirmed that at least his body was out of the near-death situation.
In that case, the next question would be Garfiel's intentions.

[Subaru: Since you're the one who crushed it, it'd feel kinda weird to be thanking you for healing it, but…… what was your aim in all this?]

[Garfiel: What. What kinda aim y'think I have?]

[Subaru: Considering the circumstances, from your standpoint, you made the right judgement to knock me down, so I won't complain. I completely lost my head and it was a good thing that you stopped me. That's just one of the mountain of things I don't want to say but couldn't help but want to say… if you catch my drift]

[Garfiel: That's a pretty damn complicated feelin'. It's not that I don't understand wantin' to bash that smug bastard's face in, but that'd be trouble for Granny and the others if y'do that]

It seemed that Garfiel shared Subaru's wonderful opinion of Roswaal. But since they both relied on Roswaal's existence in no small part, neither of them could put that feeling into practice.

To Subaru, Roswaal was the guarantor of his livelihood in this world, and to Garfiel and the others, he was a necessary existence as the manager of the Sanctuary.

But seeing that the first reason Garfiel mentioned was Lewes—— he must have been thinking more about the lives of the residents of the Sanctuary than about himself.
This only supported Frederica's assessment of her brother in the previous loop, that in fact, the reason he chose to remain in the Sanctuary instead of leaving with his sister was probably out of consideration for the feelings of the residents who stayed behind.

[Subaru: Because Lewes and the others are important to you, Roswaal's existence as their protector is indispensable. Without him and his Demihuman fetish, the residents trapped in the Sanctuary won't be able to continue living as they are now, huh]

[Garfiel: Don't give me that embarrassing crap like y'understand everything. Who the hell y'think would stay here for sentimental reasons? I'm here cus I can't leave the place, so……]

[Subaru: You can't leave, even though your blood sibling Frederica could, Garf?]

It was information he had just gained from the previous loop. Playing this card, Subaru listened for any change in Garfiel's demeanor. But the intensity of the reaction far surpassed Subaru's imaginations.

[Subaru: ——t!]

There was a whistling of wind, and the next instant, a tremendous cracking boom rolled into the side of Subaru's head. The sound of air breaking apart reverberated through space, and with a stomp of his foot faster than the mind could process, the floor gave way, shattering, as the shape of the entire room contorted.

The ground bent upwards, and with a whimper, Subaru was tossed by the shockwave into the air. Unable to even brace himself, he tumbled across the solid floor, and was only forcefully stopped when he smashed into a wall ahead.
The impact on his back wrenched out all the contents of his lungs as the back of his head screamed with pain. Coughing, saliva drooled from the corner of Subaru's mouth. And, seeing this,

[Garfiel: Who th'fuck told you that, y'piece of shit? Was it Frederica runnin' her mouth about these unnecessary……no, no way she said this. We already severed our bond as siblings when we parted ways]

[Subaru: That kind of thing's just a figure of speech, there's no way to actually sever the blood in your……]

[Garfiel: This here, now, bringin' that up's just even more weird, ain't it. If y'wanted to use it, y'coulda found plenty o'better places to bring it up, couldn't ya?]

Hearing Subaru's winded response, Garfiel worked his disgustingly sharp intuition. The way he said it was as though while Subaru wasn't paying attention, he had picked up on facts that even Subaru failed to notice.
Although Garfiel's guess wasn't far from the truth— in fact, it was almost spot on— the thought

process he used to get there was far too direct.
It was as though he possessed some extraordinary perceptiveness, or, rather, possessed something “Impossible to Ignore”.

[Subaru: No way……you……too?]

——The moment the possibility struck him, Subaru could not conceal the tremors in his voice.

[Garfiel: ————]

Subaru’s subjectless question received only an eerie silence in return.
In terms of time, only a few seconds had passed in that silence, but to Subaru, it was equivalent to an eternity.

No reply. Why wasn’t he talking. Was it because Subaru’s question was too vague? If he just plainly said that he doesn’t understand, or even gave him a kick, it would be better than this. The only hope Subaru could cling to was some short-circuited reaction like that.
But,

[Garfiel: Me too……y’say]

High pitched footsteps. The sound of Garfiel’s soles striking upon the stone-tiled floor drew closer, and Subaru could tell that he squatted down beside him. Raising his head off the floor, he could feel Garfiel’s face drawing close to his, baring its fangs,

[Garfiel: And what make y’think that, huh, oy?]

[Subaru: Stop talking in a way that just stirs up even more bad feelings. I just said something that made no sense, right? It’d be alright if you could just straight up deny it…… couldn’t you?]

[Garfiel: What’re y’sayin like yer about t’cry?]

Ignoring Subaru’s pleading request, Garfiel replied in that same ambiguous voice. The indeterminate response only inflamed Subaru’s anxiety, his inner heart already a jumbled mess.

He wanted Garfiel to deny it, say it was some lucky guess. But the pregnant replies only deepened the sense of foreboding in Subaru’s heart.
Beatrice and Roswaal, both of whom he considered to be allies, were, one after the other, revealed to be owners of Gospels. For Subaru now, it would not be so strange if a third person was revealed.

[Subaru: Then……! That means you know too, don’t you……!?]

[Garfiel: ——Ah, so that’s what this’s about. Wonder where y’noticed]

[Subaru: ——!?]

His throat frozen by shock, Subaru traced the image of Garfiel within his blindfolded eyes.
The intonation of his voice, the listless sigh. None of it was like the Garfiel Subaru knew. But even as he relinquished these half-revealing words, the distance between them hadn’t changed,

[Garfiel: Y'look surprised, but it can't be that strange. I've been livin' in the Sanctuary forever, and we've known each other for a very long time. So the opportunities weren't just once or twice]

[Subaru: B…ut……you… aren't you supposed to hate the Witch? So much that you'd overreact like that……and yet…]

[Garfiel: Yeah, I do. I hate the Witch, I don't trust yer stinkin' like the Witch, and I don't got no affections for that Half-Witch Emilia-sama, either. But then again, I can't say what that thing says's wrong. At least, it defin'ly knows what I wanted to know]

[Subaru: What you wanted… to know……]

[Garfiel: ——I got no reason t'tell ya anything. But why don't y'try askin'? Y'might not get another chance]

After Garfiel spat out these words, Subaru could sense him standing up. Then, he drew away from Subaru, apparently making his way to the exit of the prison room—— and placed his hand on the door.
Hearing the wooden door creak, [Hey!], Subaru shouted to the departing Garfiel.

[Subaru: Wait! ……Wh-What'll happen to me. Or I mean what's happening right now?]

[Garfiel: For tryin' to assassinate that Roswaal bastard, yer sure gettin' off light. For now, you'll just stay restrained and confined till the results come out]

Confined, that was the word that came up just yesterday. From Roswaal's own mouth, no less. The fact that his self-professed status was now passed onto Subaru for enacting violence against him was nothing short of ironic.
In front of Subaru, who did not make another sound, Garfiel snorted through his nose,

[Garfiel: You'll be gettin' meals every mornin' and evenin'. Don't try anythin' funny. I'll be lookin' after ya]

[Subaru: As if…… that's the kind of thing I'd be worried about right now! Results? You said results? What results? What are you waiting for……?]

[Garfiel: What results, ain't that obvious?]

This time, Garfiel replied as though he had just heard a most foolish question,

[Garfiel: ——The results of Emilia-sama's Trials. After she heard what y'did, she's gotten terribly enthusiastic, almost like she's tryin' to atone for what you've done]

——After Garfiel left the room, Subaru, alone in his prison, sank deep into the sea of thought.

He could not get the words Garfiel left behind at their parting out of his mind.
In order to clear Subaru's name, Emilia had rallied herself to challenge the Trials. Perhaps she thought that if the Sanctuary could be liberated, her achievement would be enough to absolve Subaru of his crime.
It was just like Emilia, to not doubt Subaru at all.

[Subaru: But, in that moment, I……]

Despite being overtaken by rage, in the end, Subaru genuinely wanted to strangle Roswaal.
With his hands wrapped around that person's neck, he had used his tightening grip to seal off his airway, relentlessly building up strength as if to snap his neck, or otherwise suffocate him.

Although he could not move his hands, bound behind his back, Subaru could tell that his fingers were trembling.
Forgetting the passion of that moment, all that remained in his hands was a dark remnant of the heat that nearly took another person's life. Inside his empty stomach, a sense of nausea began to build.
Even more so, considering the target of that murderous intent was someone close to him.

[Subaru: I just… don't know anymore……]

Who to trust, what to think, and what to do, none of it made sense anymore.

What was Beatrice's position? Why did she have a Gospel? And what were those days they spent together?
What was Roswaal thinking? Why would that guy have a completed Gospel? What did he want Subaru to remember? And what was the true meaning of his inexplicable role in all this?
How could he help Emilia pass the Trials? Or rather, was it right to push her towards the Trials in the first place? He couldn't even begin to answer that question.
What was Garfiel's intention, and did he really have a Gospel? It will be impossible to defeat Elsa without his help. Yet, with their relationship deteriorating after every Return by Death, how could he get him to the Mansion?
What should he do about Elsa's attack, should he repel or evacuate? And why was there a difference between the timings of the first and second attacks? Why did that murderer know about the escape passage no one was supposed to know about? Who was Elsa's employer? What will he have to do to defeat her? Regardless, he could never forgive her.

And why was the Sanctuary created? What was the outline of the remaining Trials, and why did the Trials exist in the first place? What was the goal of Echidona, sleeping in her Tomb, and how can he meet with her again? And, at the end of the last loop, what happened to the depopulated Sanctuary?
In that final moment, what was it that killed and devoured Subaru?

[Subaru: I can't…… answer… a single one]

Round and round and round, these questions without answers endlessly circled in his head.
With his eyelids painfully bound and his vision completely sealed, deprived of information about the world around him, there was nowhere his questions could turn except inside himself.
His insides packed with nothing but mysteries and doubts, he had come to a deadlock.
What tormented Subaru was not only his unanswered doubts, but also anxiety at the time that he was passing in vain, submerged in these fruitless thoughts.

Since his eyes were covered, he could not say for certain, but Subaru's feelings told him that most likely a day had already passed since the night he strangled Roswaal.
It was dark, so he was probably confined inside a hidden building in the forest. The chilliness of

the room was conspicuous even considering the fact that not the slightest light could slip through.

Compared to the daytime temperatures he had experienced so far, he couldn't help but notice the drastic temperature-drop here. So perhaps, it would be more constructive to consider that it was already night after sunset. If he followed the assumption that it was night, then it was clear that at least a whole day had passed.

Ever since being summoned to this Parallel World, Natsuki Subaru had sustained a fair number of injuries both light and severe. And his body still carried memories of being healed of wounds of all the various degrees.
So, judging from experience, having half his head crushed and his skull cracked open was clearly supposed to be a fatal wound. The fact that he came out of it alive without Ferris was honestly nothing short of a miracle, which only served to show how skilled Garfiel must be.

Basically, in this world, as long as the person doesn't die, almost all injuries can be healed, depending on the abilities of the healer. But naturally, the more severe the wound, the heavier the burden it would be to heal them.
Bodily fatigue can only be restored with stamina, and in the same way, Subaru's recent wounds could not have recovered to such an extent in a matter of a few hours, or even the same night.
More than likely, a night had passed. But even more convincing was the fact that,

[Subaru: I'm… hungry……]

His empty stomach, which hadn't received anything in all that time he spent sleeping, was aching and groaning endlessly, asserting its existence.

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The passage of time and the indistinct hours gradually wore at Subaru's mind.

He couldn't tell how much time had passed since then, and his restraints remained unchanged.
Just like this, Subaru was left inside the prison room as time went by.

[Subaru: ――――]

He tried counting the seconds to keep track of time inside the void, but after counting for an hour when he felt like he was about to go mad, he finally abandoned the idea.
Besides, what difference would it make at this point, even if he knew the time? After all,

[Subaru: It's… probably too late……]

Meals had been brought to Subaru six times. If they followed the schedule of once every morning and night, it would mean that three days had already passed. Three days after Subaru woke inside the Tomb―― would make this the fifth day since arriving in the Sanctuary.
Even if he left for the Mansion this morning, he would only barely make it in time for the

assumed timing of Elsa's attack. The moment he passed that point in time, he had already missed the deadline.

In fact, Subaru had made the mistake from the very first moments of this loop.
No amount of regret was enough for allowing himself to be consumed by rage and throwing himself at Roswaal. If he hadn't lost control of his emotions, he would have been able to confirm far more information from Roswaal, and, above all, his relationship with Garfiel wouldn't have worsened to the point where he'd be imprisoning him.

The consequence of abandoning himself to that boiling heat of emotion, was this current caterpillar-like state.
He hadn't done any of the things he was supposed to do, and didn't even get to see the faces of those he wanted to protect. Instead, he was here in this unsightly form, cowering in fear of the approaching time.
That is, Subaru had already given up on this loop.

[Subaru: ――I really… fucked this up……]

Because of that momentary lapse, he had lost the chance to prevent the tragedy that was about to befall the Mansion. Which, in turn, meant that the survival of the four girls inside the Mansion had become hopeless.
Rem, Petra, Frederica, Beatrice, Subaru was knowingly leaving them to die. After he had just screamed, denouncing Roswaal, for doing the very same thing.

[Subaru: ……Damnit, I. Why didn't I die?]

He just wanted to die. If the restart point hadn't changed, if he could really start over again, then Subaru would return to that night and face against his odds once more. Although he would still be stumbling blind, at a loss about where to begin, at least it would be better than this unsightly state. Surely, he could do better than this. He must do better than this.

[Subaru: Otherwise, what's the point of……]

Was he prepared to accept this resignation, and bite down on his lips and bear witness to the end of this world?

Having judged that saving the Mansion was no longer possible, and that "Death" in this loop was inevitable, Subaru immediately committed suicide and Returned by Death―― was not what happened.
It was certainly the worst possible situation, and awaiting Subaru in this life was only an empty future devoid of meaning. He should gamble on Return by Death and reverse the world, and strive towards the best possible future. But,

[Subaru: If I return without learning anything, I'll just be right back where I started]

At least, Subaru needed to find out what happened in the Sanctuary after he was gone.
Just what happened on the sixth day? That alone needed to be confirmed. And it was for this reason alone that, no matter how much Subaru wanted to scream his throat hoarse and clench his

teeth until they cracked, he swallowed down his regrets towards the Mansion, and resigned himself to this loop.

If now was the fifth day, something should happen tomorrow.

Over the last three days, only Garfiel and someone else tasked with taking care of Subaru visited the prison. The caretaker always stayed silent, probably following Garfiel's instructions, so Subaru couldn't tell who it was. But from the way she wiped Subaru's restrained body, and her motions as she fed Subaru by hand, he determined she was most likely a woman.
In an environment where his every move was being watched, there was no opportunity to investigate further, and so the real identity of Garfiel's assistant remained unknown.

However, this must be a place where Emilia, who had rallied herself to save Subaru, couldn't find.
Most likely, it was a secret location known only to Garfiel and his assistant, where Subaru could not hope to be discovered, and much less call for help.
In fact, if Garfiel and Roswaal had both decided to confine him here, then it would be pointless to escape anyway.

[Subaru: If Emilia could pass the Trials to save me, that'd be amazing, but……]

If the situation was reversed, Subaru was confident he would pass the Trials for Emilia's sake. But Subaru had never imagined that Emilia would try to overcome the Trials for him. And he never thought he meant so much to her that he would be her motivating force. That was just how much Subaru undervalued himself in his mind.
But in reality, the fact that no good news came after three days probably meant that, just like the loops before this, Emilia couldn't pass the Trial no matter how many times she challenged it.

In other words, the situation at the Mansion, at the Sanctuary, with Subaru, and Emilia, had all come to an impacted deadlock. Exactly like what Garfiel had once shouted to him.

[Subaru: After all, I……]

——Have to do something.

For Emilia, the Mansion, the Sanctuary, every single problem that came up, he must overcome with his own two hands, and with the only weapon at his disposal.

A quiet resolve. Never good at giving up, it was the only reason Subaru went on living.
After thinking for a long, long time, he came to the same conclusion he had already reached so many times before. Seeing it was more than his fingers could count, Subaru nodded to his heart, and waited for time to pass.

——When something finally happened, was when he felt something shaking his body as it was drifting into sleep.

[Subaru: ——mn?]

Someone was grasping his shoulders, shaking him awake as Subaru returned from his shallow slumber into reality.

He noticed saliva drooling down the corner of his lips, and since he couldn't use his hands, he nudged over his shoulder to try to wipe it. It was a strenuous activity, but, apparently having gotten used to using his upper body, he managed to wipe it off,

[Subaru: Who……is it?]

His voice was still hoarse from having just woken up, in addition to the recent screaming.
He had promised himself not to scream like that again or his throat will break apart, and by now, he was already more or less desensitized to the pain that felt like he was going to spew blood. Although, it was nothing to be happy about.

Hearing Subaru's response, the person who woke him let out a short sigh. And,

[???: Sorry to do this in the middle of your nap… but can you move, Natsuki-san?]

[Subaru: Aauh?]

Hearing the voice belonging to someone he never imagined would be here, Subaru couldn't help but let out a stupid sound.
Perhaps mistaking Subaru's surprise for drowsiness, the person mumbled [Oh, come on] in a quiet voice and gave Subaru a light slap on the face,

[???: I'm also taking quite a risk coming here to help you, you know, so can you please liven up a bit? I'm pretty sure we'll both be sorry if things ended here]

Saying this, he cut the ropes binding Subaru's hands and feet with a blade. Regaining the long lost freedom of his limbs, Subaru reaffirmed this sensation and brusquely pulled off his blindfold,

[Subaru: Augh… hands, feet… even my eyes are hurting]

In the center of Subaru's thin, still-crooked vision, he made out the shape of a man who looked like he really didn't want to be here.

A character who was here for no discernable reason, Otto Sewen made his unexpected entry onto the stage.

Chapter 39 [Friendt]

[Otto: What, what's with that bewildered face like you just saw something mind-bogglingly unbelievable at the end of a dream and now your brain's melting]

[Subaru: ……That's, an exaggerated way of putting it but there's no need to correct anything so let's just say it's something like that]

Otto sighed, resting both his hands on his hips, and Subaru, turning his wrists confirming that his hands were free, dropped onto the floor looking back up at Otto.

After all, having been tied up for over three days, just moving his body made it creak and ache. Since it was so difficult to turn over in that tied up position, he had only been periodically flipped at mealtimes. But, it was more than just a problem with blood circulation, as he was starting to notice other defects. Namely,

[Subaru: Otto, this might just be because I just took the blindfold off, but…… my right eye's not seeing too well. Or, rather than not well… it's more like it can't see at all. What's up with that?]

[Otto: What is up with it… if you ask me, I'm a bit hesitant to say as well…… I could put it more elegantly and sugarcoat it… or I could put it bluntly and say exactly what it is. Which would you prefer?]

[Subaru: Sugarcoat it so I don't get shocked and tell me bluntly so I know what's actually happening]

[Otto: That's awfully greedy…… Uhhh, on the starboard-side of Natsuki-san's auspicious visage, your vision had been inevitably shrouded in darkness, forever closed to light…]

[Subaru: Uh. I wasn't asking for something that edgy but I think I get the point]

Hearing Otto's dressed-up description of Subaru's malaise, Subaru held out his hand and stopped the explanation halfway through. Then, putting his extended hand on his right eye, he carefully felt around to confirm it.
——The right side of his vision had felt as though it had been completely cut off, and no image was coming through. And once he touched it, Subaru understood why this organ was slacking on its job.
Or, rather than slacking, it was more like it had packed its bags and went home. Because all that was left where his right eye used to be, was an empty hole.

[Subaru: I thought…… he said I was healed]

[Otto: The bleeding was stopped and the broken bones were pieced together. But healing magic depends on the healer, and it isn't omnipotent. ……Bringing dead parts back to life would be a bit…]

Otto mumbled, looking at Subaru with sympathy. Seeing that look, Subaru slackened his lips powerlessly and muttered [No helping it, I guess],

[Subaru: People usually die when their heads get crushed. So I think I'm ok with just losing one eye…… but if both my eyes died I think I'll probably lose the will to live]

[Otto: That's pretty optimistic… you aren't going into despair, are you? Please don't, I don't know if we can go on without you, Natsuki-san]

For someone who had just lost an important organ like the right eye, Subaru was awfully calm, in a way that even surprised himself. Maybe the shock just hadn't kicked in yet, or perhaps it was because, unlike losing the greater part of an arm during Elsa's attack, this one wasn't accompanied by gore and pain.
Even though Garfiel lied, it was still mostly true. He had halted the blood, sealed the wounds, and stopped the pain. It'd be expecting too much to think healing magic can heal anything, and he did save Subaru from an otherwise fatal wound just like he said he did.

[Subaru: Was he… upholding some kind of principle or what? I just can't understand him, that guy]

He struck Subaru down when he was attacking Roswaal, but afterwards also healed him. And then he thought to imprison Subaru until the end of the Trials to guarantee Emilia's cooperation. He healed him so he wouldn't die, and even took up the role of caretaker to see it through to the end. Though he loathed the Witch's stench drifting from Subaru's body, it didn't stop him from coming back here. And even though he didn't stop coming, he hadn't asked Subaru a single vital question.
It was almost as though he knew Subaru wouldn't say anything, or as if he already knew everything he needed to know, and so had no interest in what Subaru had to say.

[Subaru: If he does know, does that mean he has a Gospel……? How come everyone is…… or actually, seeing this is the Witch's Experimental Ground, maybe it's only natural]

If every key person possesses a book that tells the future and acts in accordance with its instructions, then shouldn't this world progress in a way that's much simpler for Subaru?
With everyone who is anyone working toward the same outcome, marching towards the same HAPPY END, for once, couldn't things just play out in a single cozy path?

If there was truly a way to know the future, then it should have saved Subaru a long time ago from having to manually die and repeat and feel his way forward, shouldn't it?

[Subaru: ……Complaining isn't going to move things forward at all, and no one's gonna come help me, damnit]

[Otto: That's a depressing thing to say, Natsuki-san. Well, I can't blame you, considering what you just went through…… but I am a bit offended by that "no one's gonna help me" part. What did you think I'm doing here?]

Overhearing Subaru mutterings, Otto offered this sympathetic comment before rejecting what Subaru's said at the end.
Seeing Otto's smug-looking expression up close, Subaru's face looked blank for a moment,

[Subaru: Ah, come to think of it, what are you doing here? I mean, really, for the last three or four days I've had time to think about loads of things, and I'm not exaggerating, but you were basically the only person who never crossed my mind]

[Otto: You're unbelievable, you know that!! To think I'd still be surprised you'd say something like that at this point!!]

[Subaru: Honestly though, I'm the one surprised at how your existence just vanished from my head. The moment I saw you I wasn't even sure if you were Otto or the appa-seller-uncle, you know]

[Otto: Who's the appa-seller-uncle!?]

[Subaru: He was kind of a starting point for me. We could also call him MR.SAVEPOINT]

To date, in terms of Return by Death respawn points, Kadomon was probably the one who showed up the most.
Joking around as he remembered that scar-faced uncle, Subaru put an end to the sense of loss for his right eye and set his mind to analyze the abrupt change in the situation.
First, he better get some answers from Otto. And find out his true intentions.

[Subaru: Jokes and all that aside…… there're some things I wanna to ask you]

[Otto: Well, that's only to be expected. I'm also pretty interested to know what Natsuki-san did to get locked up in here]

[Subaru: ――? You mean, all this wasn't on Roswaal's orders?]

According to Garfiel, Subaru was supposed to be imprisoned for his act of violence against Roswaal. At the same time, his imprisonment was to be used as leverage to compel Emilia to take the Trials. But,

[Otto: I don't know how much the Margrave is involved in all this. All I know is that right now a terrible rift is dividing the Sanctuary]

[Subaru: A rift? What do you mean?]

[Otto: It's exactly what it sounds like. There's Lewes-sama's faction, which wants to free the refugees from the village along with Natsuki-san, and there's the other faction firmly opposed to that. Ever since Natsuki-san got imprisoned by Garfiel, the debate has really gotten out of hand]

Otto gave a brief summary of what happened over the last few days with an exhausted expression on his face.
Just as Subaru feared, the friction between the refugees and the Sanctuary's residents deepened, and the mounting displeasure had exploded into small-scaled conflicts. It seemed that the originally small cracks within the Sanctuary had split its population into factions, and the Sanctuary was now in a fractured state.
Swallowing a deep breath at the frightening situation, Subaru followed with [But],

[Subaru: Why did this happen so suddenly? From what I've seen…… I mean, I expected…]

In the first world, Subaru was here for over five days without seeing any of this kind of factionalism. In fact, Subaru's proposal to release the refugees passed easily, and on the morning of the sixth day the agreement was realized.
But this time, the situation was deteriorating way too quickly. Seeing Subaru make this judgement, Otto shook his head and raised a finger, [Well, you see],

[Otto: It wasn't sudden at all. In fact, Natsuki-san is one of the main reasons this happened, so if even you think it's sudden then we're really in trouble]

[Subaru: I'm… one of the reasons?]

[Otto: I don't know what kind of relationship Natsuki-san has with the villagers of Arlam……but it must be a good one. Ever since you got attacked by Garfiel and went missing, the atmosphere in the Sanctuary has become the worst it's ever been]

[Subaru:――――]

[Otto: To the villagers, Ram-san and the Margrave are in a position where they'd hesitate to voice their concerns to, but because they trust you, that makes you the ideal channel to pass their voices to the top. I'm not saying it's the only reason, but I think it's clear how furious everyone is]

Listening to Otto's explanation, Subaru opened his mouth without uttering a word.
Certainly, when it comes to the differences in the situation in the Sanctuary between this loop and the previous one, Subaru's well-being was definitely one of them. But Subaru never once imagined that his presence would have this kind of effect on the Arlam villagers' feelings, much less trigger a rift inside the Sanctuary.
Suspiciously squinting his left eye at Otto, Subaru tried to check if he was joking or exaggerating, but Otto just furrowed his brows without showing any notable reaction in particular. In other words, he was probably being serious. Then, the only point of contention would be whether there was something wrong with Otto's observational skills, but,

[Subaru: I don't wanna bother piling up arguments to get the answer to that one, so]

[Otto: Why do I get the feeling I'm being treated improperly somehow. Ah, nevermind. Anyway, Natsuki-san, the reason I came here is related to that rift]

[Subaru: Related to the rift…… so, since things got messed up without me, you're saying it'll all return to normal once I go back? Well that's just, kinda, expecting too much of me and putting way too much PRESSURE on me you know and……]

Bogged down by his own overly low self-esteem, Subaru still couldn't take Otto's words seriously. The truth is, even if Subaru had a powerful influence on calming the villager's hearts, now that everything had already exploded, he doubted there was anything he could do.
In fact, if Subaru showed up now, missing a right eye, he'll probably just be pouring oil onto the fire.
Seeing Subaru shaking his head with a difficult expression, Otto rejected his denial all over again with [No no],

[Otto: Of course I don't think Natsuki-san has that kind of influence. That'd just be way too optimistic, you know]

[Subaru: We agree there so I won't protest, but you didn't have to be so blunt about it. ……So then, why're you getting me out?]

[Otto: I'm sure both the refugees and the residents of the Sanctuary want to avoid a large-scale conflict. So that's why, I've been wondering if Natsuki-san would be willing to play a part in the escape from the Sanctuary]

[Subaru: Play a part… in the escape?]

Subaru narrowed his left eye at the perilous word that flew out, and repeated it under his breath as he ruminated. Then, it suddenly occurred to him what Otto must be thinking.
Subaru looked up at Otto and, [Unless], he licked his lips,

[Subaru: You want to have the villagers to escape while the Sanctuary is in a state of chaos, and you want my help in that escape, is that it?]

[Otto: Precisely, I'm glad the conversation got moving quickly. We're a bit pressed for time, so I hope Natsuki-san can agree to help without any conditions attached]

[Subaru: ……Take me through the process first. Even I'm not going to agree to go in without a plan. I need to make sure we got a chance, since we won't have any excuses once we get caught]

Above all, if they roused up the faction opposing the Sanctuary's liberation, it would mean placing Emilia, Roswaal and all the hostages in danger. Not that he really cared what would happen to Roswaal, but Subaru wanted to keep Emilia, Ram, and Patrasche from getting hurt.

[Otto: I would like it if you could add my name to the list of people you don't want to get hurt as well]

[Subaru: It's natural for men to endure pain in the gambling halls. Maybe I'm just that old-fashioned kind of guy. Good men stay out of the house, you know]

[Otto: That's the first time I heard that phrase, but I'm already almost completely sure that's not where it's supposed to be used]

Subaru made a face at Otto's correct guess, and then, clearing his throat, he brought the conversation back on topic,

[Subaru: If it's not just some haphazard desperate gamble, then tell me your plan. After that I'll decide whether to assist you or sell you out]

[Otto: It's pretty scary that selling me out is even on the table…… but the plan is straightforward. We've already talked with the moderate faction of the Sanctuary, so while they keep the extremists busy, we'll try to break through the Barrier in our dragon carriages. Then, all that's left is to say goodbye]

[Subaru: Isn't that just plain reckless? And who else are you working with……?]

[Otto: That's something I'll tell you once you've agreed to help. But the task we want to leave to Natsuki-san would be persuading the villagers and dealing with the unpredictable Garfiel. After all, if it's between the Natsuki-san and the villagers, he'll probably bite onto Natsuki-san]

[Subaru: My body is pretty good bait, huh. Well, I can't really deny that]

Otto was right. If it was a choice between Subaru and the refugees, no doubt Garfiel will dive straight for Subaru's blood. But, as one would expect, that would mean considerable hardship for Subaru,

[Subaru: So after all that, we still have no idea where Garfiel stands in this, do we? That guy's like family to Lewes-san, so he should be with the moderates, but…]

[Otto: Originally, that was how I'd count him as well, but considering his approach to Natsuki-san and Emilia-sama, it's pretty hard to tell. So, even if we don't consider him an active enemy, we have to treat him as a passive enemy. That's the consensus we've come to]

[Subaru: Sounds like your accomplice has a pretty good grasp of the situation……You can count me in. But, just out of curiosity, what would you've done if I refused to help?]

[Otto: We'll go around announcing that you've escaped, and then we won't have to worry about any potential threat from Garfiel for a while]

[Subaru: That's just perfect, you bastards. The moment my hands and feet are freed, you've already got me going against Garfiel! God damnit, I've been played]

Scratching his head, Subaru could only accept that he was thoroughly in the palms of Otto and his accomplice's hands. From the moment he was put into this situation, Subaru had no choice but to dance to their will.
However, Subaru wasn't as upset he claimed.

Because now, by taking part in Otto's plan to free the refugees from the Sanctuary, Subaru might just find the answer to why everyone had vanished from the Sanctuary.
If the plan succeeded, it would at least explain how the refugees could have disappeared from the Sanctuary without Subaru's interference. But that still wouldn't solve the rest of the mystery.

[Subaru: It still wouldn't explain how all the residents trapped in the Sanctuary went missing……]

Subaru could accept the conclusion that those who could leave might have left. But that wouldn't explain how the people who supposedly couldn't leave went missing as well. Either way, he would have to leave this place in order to find out what happened.
By following along with Otto's plan, seeing this loop to the end wouldn't be so pointless after all.

[Subaru: Come to think of it, I'm pretty impressed how you managed to find me. Since this place is probably like a secret hideout in the Sanctuary or something]

He had already more or less pieced together the details of the interior of the room from Garfiel's words and the excessive free time. After looking around the place, Subaru clicked the bones in

his neck.
Dim crystal lamps served as the only light source inside the room, which had no windows to allow any outside light to enter. Built out of wood, its shoddy construction showed signs of rain leaking through. That was probably the source of the sound of dripping water that had gradually worn at the blindfolded Subaru's nerves. A painful thought.

[Otto: Well, it certainly wouldn't be easy to find his place using any conventional methods. And I'd say it feels more like a secret base than a hideout]

[Subaru: Looking around again, I'm getting that impression too. It doesn't seem to be the handiwork of a pro. It's more like an amateur with too much energy threw a building together based on whatever he felt like]

The rundown little cabin was quite far from Subaru's original impressions of his prison. It was just a narrow, ordinary little shed.
While Subaru was busy going through such sentiments, with [Leaving that aside], Otto gestured to move on with the topic,

[Otto: Finding you was all thanks to me, you know. I believe this is where you give me your most sincere praises, so, what do you think, Natsuki-san?]

[Subaru: I'm honestly impressed, and you really helped me. So how did you find me?]

[Otto: Fufufuu~, do you really want to know? You want to know, right? You want to know]

[Subaru: Yeah, I wanna know. You must've used your Divine Protection of Anima Whipering to talk to the bugs and lizards and plants in the forest to gather information to find me here, huh]

[Otto: Yes but can you please give me back my sense of superiority!?]

Otto lamented being destroyed. All the while, having originally intended it as a joke, Subaru couldn't hide his internal astonishment that it was confirmed.
Even though he knew Otto had the Divine Protection of Anima Whispering, he never thought it would have this kind of practical power.
Before, Subaru had followed this Divine Protection while driving Patrasche to save Emilia from danger. That time too, Otto had listened to the bugs and foliage to take one shortcut after another to close the otherwise impossible distance between them.

[Subaru: Really is handy, your Protection]

[Otto: ……It's, honestly not that great of a thing]

In front of Subaru's sigh of admiration, Otto's response suddenly became low-spirited. Subaru furrowed his brows at this reaction, but Otto only clenched his fists and did not follow up on it, [Anyway],

[Otto: Emilia-sama's Trial will begin soon. Garfiel will be at the Tomb during that time and away from here. Which means now's our chance]

[Subaru: The prep-time before executing the plan is way too short, isn't it…… If you didn't manage to find me in time, wouldn't your ass be burning with a schedule like that?]

Whining about how Otto was rushing him, Subaru, who had already agreed to help, gave his body a twist to confirm his physical condition. Although it was nothing to be satisfied with, he had food delivered to his mouth, and his poop cleaned up for him without fail. Thinking about it now, it was rather embarrassing to not even know who had been doing this for him, which kind of reminded him of that time when he was hospitalized for breaking a leg.
Anyway, aside from the creaking, there seemed to be nothing else wrong with his body. Giving Otto, who was watching him, a nod, he set out his step, and――

[Subaru: Uh, can I just ask one last thing?]

[Otto: ……What is it now, geez. This is really the last one, ok? If we take too long, the plan will move to the next stage and we'll just look like a bunch of idiots]

[Subaru: My bad my bad…… But, why did you take such a risk to help me?]

[Otto: ――――]

As if a bucket of cold water was just splashed on him, Otto's expression suddenly vanished when he heard Subaru's question.
That was actually the first thing Subaru had wanted to ask. No doubt, resolving the conflict between the residents and the refugees would be beneficial to both parties. It was what Subaru wanted too, and would also support Emilia and Roswaal. But,

[Subaru: I don't see how you'd benefit from all this. I might just be too dumb to see it, but…… it really irks me when I don't know]

He didn't want to doubt Otto, but it was true that there was something about this that didn't feel right. The fact was, Otto had been caught up in the Sanctuary's problems for no reasons of his own. He was never supposed to be here, nor did he have anything to do with the Royal Selection. The moment felt these entangled circumstances to be too troublesome, he could have abandoned any involvement and left by himself. Even if he wanted to strike up a relationship with the Margrave and took that as his goal, the current situation was just "Way too poor to bet on".

Even if it was not as bad as Subaru, surely, Otto wasn't seeing any light at the end of the tunnel. That was why Subaru couldn't understand what would make Otto brave such dangers to stand by his side. Just as he said, in the three days he spent in thought, Subaru really had forgotten about Otto's existence. Subaru had found no cause to doubt him. And so, in a sense, one could even say he trusted him.
But now, with the weight all the negative conditions piling up, the only way Subaru could truly trust him was if he could understand "What" Otto was doing it for.

So, at the risk of overturning that trust, Subaru needed to know Otto's true intentions.
If even Otto had a side to him that Subaru could not trust, then that would just have to――

[Subaru: Please answer me, Otto. Why are you going to such lengths to do this?]

He asked quietly. It was a small, but definite watershed.
Stopping his breath, Subaru waited for Otto's answer. And, taking in Subaru's question, Otto gazed back at Subaru in turn, as he chose his words,

[Otto: What kind of person do you think I am, Natsuki-san?]

[Subaru: Someone who'd reach for a penny in front of him while he drops all his belongings on the other hand…… I think that's the kind of dopey character I have in mind]

[Otto: That's a terrible way to think of me! Even though I admit I've done something like that before it's still irritating to be thought of like that!!]

That really was Subaru's impression of Otto――or, rather, it was the impression Subaru wanted to believe.
Protesting against that unacceptable evaluation, [Just, really], Otto gave a tired shake of his head,

[Otto: You know, Natsuki-san]

[Subaru: ……Yeah?]

[Otto: ――If I just wanted to help a friend, would that really be so strange?]

――For a moment, unable to understand what he just heard, Subaru's time stopped.

It was several seconds later when time began to move again. But even as it moved, Subaru still couldn't comprehend the meaning of those words. What did Otto say, just now?

Friendt? Who's Friendt? Was there someone with that name around here?

[Otto: Wh-what's with that face frozen in surprise all of a sudden!?]

[Subaru: No, I just suddenly heard the name of someone I didn't know so I lost track of what you were saying. Who's this Friendt-san supposed to be?]

[Otto: I don't know what kind of conclusion you just reached but it's completely wrong from head to tail! Not Friendt, friend! Like good friends!]

[Subaru: Good friends!? Who and who!?]

[Otto: Me! And Natsuki-san!]

Subaru's eyes opened wide, staring at the out-of-breath Otto in disbelief. And Otto, stomping noisily on the floor, flapped his hands up and down, [Are you even listening?],

[Otto: When I was captured by the Witch Cult and my life was in danger, it was Natsuki-san who saved me. And there were all those things you said and did to help me after that. I may have come here in order to meet the Margrave, but that doesn't mean my relationship with Natsuki-san is just one of convenience]

[Subaru: ―――――]

[Otto: At the end of the day even without these troublesome things, I still think of Natuski-san as a friend. There may be all sorts of complaints I'd like to raise about my usual treatment, but don't say such unreasonable, stupid things like we don't know each other! So—]

Suddenly feeling embarrassed halfway through, Otto quickly scratched his nose and looked away. Subaru remained silent while listening to Otto's words. And Otto, having reached the end of his speech, stared quizzically at Subaru's lack of reaction.
There was a visible unease on his face, probably because Subaru hadn't said anything to confirm what he said just now. It felt like a situation where someone just opened the door to a friendship sales-pitch.

Able to imagine what must be going through Otto's mind, a certain emotion began to swell up in Subaru's heart. And, the reaction brought about by that emotion was——

[Subaru: ——Pffff]

[Otto: Yes?]

[Subaru: Whuahahahaha! Fr-friends? We're good friends! Aaah, is that'right is that'right. Otto, you, you want to be my friend!?]

[Otto: Whaa!?]

Unable to keep his laughter from blowing out, Subaru boorishly slapped the red-faced Otto on the shoulders. Still couldn't stop himself, Subaru kept hugging his belly while stomping the floor.

[Subaru: Pffuahahaa, friends. Aaah, damn it. Otto, you bastard, you!]

[Otto: Ow! Ow! What're you doing!? Yeah, I was stupid for saying it! I get it, Natsuki-san doesn't see it that way. But even so, I'm pretty sure it's not something that laughable!]

[Subaru: Nononono, I can't stop laughing! I'm not laughing at you……my stupidity is too damn much I can't help but laugh at myself]

Using his left hand to wipe away the tears from the explosive laughter, Subaru finally managed to get his urge to laugh under control and regained his composure. Then, he looked at Otto before him.
Otto looked like he painfully regretted mentioning the word "Friend". But at this point, the only thing inside Subaru's heart was appreciation, and inexpressible gratitude.

——What was Otto's motivation? What could be hidden behind his mask?. What could be believed, and what couldn't be?

Otto called Subaru his friend, and came to help him out of concern. And when he came, Subaru's first thought was to doubt him rather than believe him, that was just how foolish he was.
Thinking that there must be something in it for him, "Something" malicious at play, that was just how petty Subaru was.
Having been tossed around by his circumstances, Subaru had lost sight of the feelings of the

people around him, and, believing only in the existence of malice while forgetting the existence unconditional kindness, he had even forgotten what gratitude was.

――Did Natsuki Subaru know so much about the world, that he could just give up and throw it away?

After only these few loops of repeating the world through death, did he imagine that he was now enlightened? All the while, he didn't even notice he had a true friend at his side.

Unaware of Subaru's self-admonishment and deprecation, even more confusion floated onto Otto's face. Seeing this, Subaru managed to form a smile, and suddenly drew in a cheerful breath,

[Subaru: I'm sorry. You are my friend, Otto. ――Thank you, for saving me]

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The building where Garfiel had imprisoned him was secluded deep within the forest, far from the village where the people of the Sanctuary resided. If Otto wasn't there to guide him, Subaru would have long lost way in the interwoven paths.

[Subaru: Thinking of it that way, we'd be pretty screwed without your Divine Protection, huh]

[Otto: Please keep your voice down. I don't know the way either, so I'm trying to rely on the flowers and frogs and lizards right now. If we offend them, they could trick us or guide us off a cliff]

[Subaru: Nature's creatures are scary!]

Otto carefully listened as he cautiously chose the path. While Subaru, following behind, ran perilously through the gaps between the trees, trying to get used to seeing with only one eye. Natually, it was painful to lose his depth perception and the right half of his vision. The full-on feeling of loss would probably hit him later, on but it was doing its job hindering his movements rather effectively right now.

However, Subaru didn't feel any resentment towards Garfiel for these injuries.
Considering what he himself had done, Subaru was aware that he had brought it upon himself. Besides, there was always something incomprehensible and contradictory about Garfiel. But Subaru wasn't ready to settle with that reasoning.
If he just gave his imagination a little more to work with, perhaps he would be able to form an idea of Garfiel.

[Subaru: There's still too much I don't know, including whether he has a Gospel or not…]

But he had to shelve that question for now.
While he was reluctant to let it go, Subaru made a small sound when a branch grazed his right ear as he struggled to step over the roots. Then,

[Otto: I see it. We'll come out at the village soon]

Hearing Otto's call, Subaru strained his narrow vision to focus ahead. Between the gaps of the trees, through the dark and green, he saw the lights of the village.
Coming out of the forest, at once, the light of the moon and stars shone down from above their heads, as Subaru's dark field of vision cleared up.

Catching his breath, Subaru looked over his surroundings and confirmed that they had returned to the village of the Sanctuary. Since the time was already night after moonrise, by now, Emilia would have probably started her Trial at the Tomb.
A desire surged up within him, to run there so he could be at her side. But pushing down that emotion once more, Subaru turned back to Otto, and,

[Subaru: If the Trial is happening right now, then this is time to escape. So what are the arrangements, and where are we meeting with our accomplice?]

[Otto: Well, our accomplice――]

Looking up at Subaru's rapid-fire question, Otto started to point his hand towards the direction of the village. But that movement was interrupted halfway through. And the reason, was a voice.

[???: ――There's no need to worry, I'm already here]

Cutting into their conversation, a person stepped out with the sound of a footstep.
An extravagant, black maid's dress. Its white apron, gleaming under the starlight, adorning the lovely girl who still carried some remnants of childishness, like something out of a dream.

[Ram: For now…… well, I'll just congratulate you on your safe return, Barusu]

With her peach-colored hair swaying, Otto's accomplice―― Ram, greeted Subaru with her usual refreshing expression, spewing venom.

Chapter 40 [Accomplice]

A whole variety of words flashed through Subaru's mind at this sudden, abrupt and unexpected meeting, but――

[Subaru: Is looking like this what you call a "safe return"!?]

Sticking a finger at his right eye――the destroyed organ, Subaru indignantly pointed this out to Ram.
Currently, the whole area around Subaru's right eye was bandaged with cloth ripped from his sleeve, creating something that might be rather popular with junior high-schoolers. If this Date Masamune look was just for fashion, it might be something to laugh about later, but since Ram should know what kind of awful state Subaru was in, that reaction was utterly inappropriate.

Hearing Subaru's objection, Ram slightly tilted her head and gently brushed her peach-colored hair that was swaying with her motion.

[Ram: Sorry, I didn't pay proper attention to what you usually look like so I can't tell the difference]

[Subaru: Well thanks for that devastating remark, but did you know that humanoid lifeforms usually have two eyes, two ears, and two nostrils?]

[Ram: In other words, Barusu is currently not a humanoid lifeform, but instead some random unintelligible lifeform?]

[Subaru: You turned that on its head!?]

Having this usual exchange with Ram, Subaru scanned over his surroundings with his left field of vision. While checking whether there was anyone else lurking in the shadows besides Ram, he was also searching for possible escape routes. Must buy some time and determine where to run.

[Subaru: Otto, on one-two-three we split and run. Your job'll be shouting and drawing the pursuers' attention. My job'll be keeping quiet and slinking away. Any objections?]

[Otto: Yes, lots, but before that, why're you so wary all of a sudden, Natsuki-san?]

[Subaru: What're you, stupid? They're onto us. Just look at that Ram's eyes. She wants to kill us. No mistake about it. I see those eyes every day at the Mansion, trust me]

[Otto: What is there to trust about a man who's looked on daily with murderous disdain!?]

Subaru anxiously whispered his escape plan and task-assignments to Otto, but Otto didn't seem to get the point. "Crap." Subaru briefly considered leaving Otto to die and escaping alone, but, remembering their talk about friendship earlier, he couldn't help but hesitate on the matter.

[Subaru: Damn it, just when I thought I was freed from my cuffs, I got tied down by the fetters of friendship! What d'you want with me……!?]

[Otto: You're the one who should explain yourself! If you don't express yourself more clearly, there's no way for conversation to take place! Also since the potential for misunderstanding here is incredible, I want you to please do something about that!]

[Ram: If you two could please wrap up your comedy skit, can we move things along? In fact, things are already moving along. We don't have time for this. This is a waste of time, in other words, a waste of life]

Faced with the two men trying to push responsibility onto each other, Ram shot them a look of contempt, before taking a step forward and cutting into the main subject. However, Subaru wasn't entirely joking. In fact, he was quite earnest in trying to drag on the conversation while looking for an escape route. Because,

[Subaru: Honestly, I thought the moment you saw my face you'd try to kill me no questions asked]

[Ram: If we had met directly after you laid your violence upon Roswaal-sama, it might have turned out that way. But the passage of time has tempered my anger somewhat. ……Be grateful to Garf]

[Subaru: Even though it's thanks to Garfiel that I'm not dead right now, I can't just change my opinion of someone who did this to my face so easily…]

Still not letting down his guard, Subaru scratched his neck as he replied to Ram. On the other hand, watching him, Ram seemed quite relaxed and without any sense of hostility.
At least, she didn't look like she was going to literally attack him no questions asked. Then the next question on Subaru's mind would be,

[Subaru: Otto said we're supposed to meet with someone here, but……]

[Ram: Yes, I know]

[Otto: Natsuki-san. I know it might be difficult to believe, but the fact is exactly what you see]

Seeing his roundabout question answered with a nod, Subaru turned to Otto, who gave an identical answer. Crossing his arms and bending his lips, Subaru made a [Hmmmmm],

[Subaru: If I accept what I see, since you are the one who showed up here, you would be Otto's accomplice…… the person helping the people of Arlam village escape?]

[Ram: You're not wrong there. Both Garf and Lewes-sama are presently occupied with Emilia-sama's Trial. With all the major players gathered at the Tomb, now is our only chance]

Emphasizing that they don't have much time, Ram laid on the pressure to hurry. But Subaru still couldn't shake the sense of incongruity. Seeing him hold up his hand to stop her, Ram shot him a silent glare. And, pulling himself together so as not to get crushed by that sharpened gaze, Subaru went on with [Tell me],

[Subaru: Why would you be helping with the villagers' escape? Even if we take a hundred steps back and assume you're just doing this out of good will, it still makes no sense getting me

involved. And just since when did you become the kind of person who gives up on screwing with me once your anger cools off? The questions are endless]

[Ram: That is indeed a lot of questions. Verbosity does not make men popular, Barusu]

[Subaru: That doesn't sound very convincing when you've got a crush on a man even chattier than I am. ……Answer me, Ram. I can't imagine a situation where you'd be able to put your grudges aside and work with me. And yet here you are, which could only mean this is…]

Taking a deep breath, Subaru himself was afraid of what he was about to say.
If things were really as Subaru imagined, then his actions here would be――

Firmly closing his eye, he clenched his teeth so as to not let out any noise from his weakness.
Don't be afraid. Don't be frightened. Don't show weakness. Steel your heart and do not waver.
――Right now, it will be fine if he just held back his emotions, didn't show that he was wavering, and turned himself to steel.

[Subaru: ……all on Roswaal's instructions. That's the only plausible explanation. But after the violent way I acted towards him, why would he help me? ……You probably know more about that than I do]

[Ram: ……]

Confronted with Subaru's reasoning, Ram became silent.
But the only image within Subaru's mind was Roswaal with his Gospel. If he had been in possession of that book of prophecies all this time, then his loyal, devoted confidant, Ram, must have surely known about it.
Of course, she would not know the details. If she really did know all its contents, then that would mean Ram had allowed a future where Rem was left to die.

[Subaru: ――――]

But that is an impossible supposition. Subaru knew it was nothing more than supposition. When she lost Rem, before there was any special circumstance where she had forgotten Rem's existence, Subaru saw first hand the older Oni sister's reaction at the loss of her younger sister. For that reason alone, Subaru was convinced that Ram could not have known of any prophecies where Rem would be left to die.

But then again, just how much was she involved in Roswaal's plots? Roswaal had yet to reveal the full extent of his plans. And Ram, being his closest confidant, just how much did she――

[Subaru: Answer me, Ram. Why are you helping us? If all this is following that bastard Roswaal's scripts, then sorry, Otto and I can take it from here. You won't be needed]

[Otto: W-, Natsuki-san――!?]

[Subaru: Quiet, Otto. There's no time to explain the details, and I won't be able to guarantee your safety if you knew so I won't tell you, but frankly, this time I am crazy pissed. At least I know I can't hear Roswaal's name and still keep a clear head!]

Touching the bandage over his throbbing right eye, Subaru stomped on the ground as he shouted at Otto for trying to stop him.
The sensation of flying at Roswaal and strangling his slender throat lingered in Subaru's palms. The sensation of the impulse to take another person's life, and of acting upon that impulse, remained present and tactile.
It was accompanied by a raw and grotesque vividness, and now that he had regained his senses, recalling it only brought out the urge to vomit, along with the piercing ringing in his ears and aching of his skull like the memory of a nightmare.
Subaru had no desire to ever repeat that scene again. But,

[Subaru: I know what I did was wrong, but whether I regret it is a different story. He trampled on something I must not permit to be trampled on. And for that I dealt him pain]

[Ram: ……By that logic, I doubt Barusu could protest if I chose to exact revenge upon you?]

[Subaru: That's why I got ready to turn ass and run the moment I saw you. But that ended up in failure because Otto's a klutz]

[Otto: Why was I needlessly defamed just now!? And I'll have you know, if I really turned ass and ran, I'd have disappeared so fast that even Natsuki-san's ass couldn't catch up!]

[Subaru: Enough with the ass ass, is potty humor all you've got? Pottymouth]

[Otto: I don't know what that means but I get the feeling I've just been horribly slandered! It feels like it!]

Seeing Subaru and Otto descending into their usual banter, Ram cleared her throat and put a stop to that. Subaru resumed narrowing his eye, glaring at her, and, receiving that gaze, Ram spilled out a sigh,

[Ram: ……You can relax. This act, at least, is not related to Roswaal-sama's will]

[Subaru: Not related…… to Roswaal? No, but that means……]

Hearing Ram deny Roswaal's involvement, Subaru could not conceal his shock.
In that case, it would mean Ram had independently chose to help with the escape. But that wasn't the only problem.

[Subaru: If Roswaal isn't involved, then this wasn't written in the Gospel……? Wait, in that case, just how much is written in the Gospel in the first place?]

Because Subaru flew into a rage immediately after they came to the topic of the Gospel, he hadn't managed to learn more about the book itself.
However, if this so-called complete "Gospel" was truly an omnipotent prophetic book capable of describing the entirety of the future, then――

[Subaru: How detailed are the texts recorded inside, and how large does its volume get……?]

If its scope was the entirety of the world, and detailed everything that happened and will ever happen, then the sheer volume of information would surely not fit inside a single book. Besides,

the human mind is far too small to comprehend every single event that will happen in this world. Therefore, Subaru judged that the Gospel would have picked and chose which information about the future it would record in its pages such that it would be within range of what its owner could comprehend.

[Subaru: The contents of Petel-kun's incomplete Gospel were appended one after another……it seems. But I haven't actually seen it happen so I can't be sure]

That fanatic's Gospel, with its latter half blank, seemed to have text appended to the empty pages every time there was a new prophecy.
At least, Subaru was certain that the number of pages had changed from when he first acquired it after defeating Petelgeuse. Later, he had tried to investigate it further, but was incapable of reading the words. Moreover, due to its sinister nature, he had hoped to investigate it in Roswaal's presence, but that was no longer possible under the present situation.
And so, even if Subaru wanted to take this any further, with so little information to sample from, it remained nothing more than empty conjecture. Nonetheless, Subaru did have his doubts about just how reliable and precise the completed Gospel could be.

Seeing this, Ram placed a hand over her lips, as if in thought,

[Ram: ……I am not authorized to speak on this matter. And although my presence here is not due to Roswaal-sama's will, the fact that Ram's heart is wholly devoted to him remains unchanged]

[Subaru: That's some head-over-heels overload, get a room, damn it]

[Ram: However……]

Cursing, Subaru lamented that his route for gathering information had been closed off. But, inserting that word, Ram watched Subaru's face rise in surprise, and in a quiet voice,

[Ram: What is certain is that this situation was not written. And it is precisely because it was not written that I am able to be here]

[Subaru: ……I don't understand what that means. In the end, what are you trying to do? To help us? And even if you want to help, is that by your own volition?]

[Ram: I will help the evacuation. That is Ram's own intention. Roswaal-sama… now that it has become like this… will not do anything to stop us]

[Subaru: Now that it has become like this?]

Those words bothered Subaru more than just a little, but despite his doubtful prompt, Ram didn't seem to have any intention of answering him. Most likely, the answer was also outside of what she was allowed to say.
Ultimately, Subaru still couldn't find out the precision and nature of Roswaal's Gospel. And all he picked up was the suspicion that perhaps even the complete Gospel could not foresee everything in the future.

[Subaru: Well, even just knowing that might give me some advantage next time I interrogate Roswaal]

Shelving that question for now, Subaru muttered as he forced himself to wrap up the current situation. But even he didn't have any idea what his statement actually meant.

[Subaru: There's still some room for debate whether or not I could believe Ram from the bottom of my heart, but we can worry about that later. I want to check our arrangements first. So, what actually happened?]

[Ram: From the day after Barusu behaved like an idiot, we have been preparing towards today's evacuation. But since the villagers refuse to move without first confirming Barusu's safety, we wound up having to waste time searching for an ambiguously alive Barusu]

[Subaru: Well sorry for not dying in clear black and white… actually who're you calling an idiot? Anyway, the day after I acted violently……]

There was something strange about the date that tugged at Subaru, but he couldn't quite put it into words. And, just like this, Ram and Otto gave Subaru a rough explanation of the escape plan. In short, it would be,

[Subaru: Ram has gotten the moderates to open up an escape route, so we'll escape under the cover of night in the dragon carriages. Otto will lead the way, and my job will be to be the MASCOT who unites the villagers and gets them to leave the Sanctuary without any worries――is that right?]

[Otto: I don't know what a "MASCOT" is, but none of us can evacuate without knowing that Natsuki-san is safe. Well, in the end, I guess Ram-san and I couldn't gain their trust to lead the evacuation just by ourselves]

[Subaru: So at a time like this, my fame from the Mabeast attack actually came in handy, huh. Guess you never know when you'll be repaid for the things you do, better make sure to set up opportunities to risk my life more often]

[Otto: As far as I know, somehow Natsuki-san's been constantly walking the fine line between life and death with the White Whale and the Witch Cult and all, is that actually because you keep looking for that kind of close-call situations?]

Otto muttered in bafflement at Subaru's remark. And with [Nonono], Subaru shook his head back and forth in reply,

[Subaru: I have no idea why I get so many opportunities to be exposed to the world's malice either. Oh by the way, I've also walked a thin line with death with an assassin lady who loves opening people's stomachs and throwing intestine-parties, you know]

[Otto: Even though there are people who boast about their painful experiences, hearing this from someone who's passed through this many painful and terrifying situations, it really puts all the other tall-tales to shame]

Seeing Subaru shoot him a thumbs up, Otto only powerlessly smiled as he gave him a thumbs-up back.
With this, Subaru's conversation came to an end, and,

[Subaru: Alright then, let's get to it. Time-wise, how much leeway do you think we have?]

[Ram: If nothing deviates from usual, it will be approximately two hours before Emilia-sama gives up and comes out of the Tomb. She has probably only just entered the Trial, so conservatively, there should still be about an hour and a half. Even if it takes thirty minutes before departure, we will still have an hour of leeway]

[Subaru: An hour, huh. If we have that, we can at least get beyond the Sanctuary's Barrier]

If they could just get beyond the Barrier, that would at least eliminate any obstructions from the Sanctuary's side.
They would be out of reach of the extremists who don't want the Sanctuary to be liberated, but there was still something else about the Barrier that could not be overlooked.
Subaru raised his head, holding a hand to his chin, and, [Ram], he called to the peach-colored-haired girl ,

[Subaru: About the Barrier, there's still a problem. Once we're through, the extremists won't be able to follow us, but……]

[Ram: Garf, right?]

[Subaru: ……you already knew?]

[Ram: He is Frederica's little brother, so I haven't known him for as long as she has. But, although I hate to say this, he is something of an old friend since Roswaal-sama took Ram into his charge seven years ago]

A piece of the information he gathered from the last loop was revealed just like that.
Although he couldn't help but feel somewhat disappointed, Subaru was nonetheless relieved that his understanding was corroborated by a second source. Facing Ram's deadpan expression, he continued, [So what do we do],

[Subaru: When he finds out I've escaped from prison, Garfiel will definitely come after us. He's already found me suspicious, and now that I've escaped, I doubt he'll go easy on me this time. Although whether he crosses the Barrier will still depend on whether he feels like it]

[Ram: Why are you so sure Garf will pursue us? At least, he respects Lewes-sama's will, so he should be counted as one of the moderates. ……Even after he imprisoned Barusu, it would at most indicate that he owes no allegiance to either side]

[Subaru: The reason that guy's after me…… is uh…]

There was a reason why Garfiel hated Subaru to the point of hostility.
No doubt, that reason was the Witch's lingering scent emanating from Subaru's body.
Picking up this scent, compounding after each Return by Death, Garfiel regarded Subaru with the utmost caution and hostility. And the result of him baring his fangs and acting on that hostility

was the current situation. And yet, the fact that Garfiel nevertheless healed and kept the dying Subaru alive only served to show a glimpse of the rational side to his simplicity.

Having reached this conclusion in his head, Subaru wasn't sure whether he should say it out loud.
It felt like a long time ago by now, but the first person to mention the Witch's lingering scent on Subaru was Rem. From those fragments of Rem's words, Subaru could sense her strong hatred for the Witch Cult, and that somehow, Ram had something to do with it as well.
In other words, whatever happened with the Witch Cult was not irrelevant to Ram. Just hearing the words "Witch Cult" had made Rem lose her composure. So then just what would this fact mean to Ram?

[Ram: ――Barusu?]

[Subaru: Oh, uuhh]

[Ram: You suddenly went quiet, what's wrong? Your face is unsightly to begin with, but if you add that oafish incompetence on top of it, there truly is not a single part left worth looking at]

[Subaru: What's with that merciless ruthlessness while making that refreshing expression, you! And the reason Garfiel is after me…… well, it's because I attacked Roswaal]

Looking away, Subaru avoided mentioning the Witch's scent. Instead, he cited his scuffle, or, more accurately, his one-sided assault on Roswaal.

[Subaru: If something happens to Roswaal, the functioning of the whole Sanctuary will be affected. I doubt he'll let me get away after I tried pulling something like that]

[Ram: ……Frankly, that is an overwhelmingly boring excuse, but nevermind. Considering Ram also has matters which I cannot speak of, despite Barusu's impudence, it would be unfair if I forced you to speak your thoughts]

[Subaru: You just can't talk to me without taking a bite out of me, huh? Am I right, Otto?]

[Otto: Uh, I feel like I really can't accept the fact that Natsuki-san is asking me for validation on this]

Subaru said this seeking agreement, but Otto only returned a grudging gaze. Pretending not to understand what it meant, Subaru responded with a shrug. Turning her back to the pair's unnutritious banter, Ram looked up to the sky and narrowed her eyes against the moonlight,

[Ram: ――A pale moon, a crazed moon. That night, was also a moonlit night like this]

She whispered in a voice so quiet that it was inaudible.

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——Once it got underway, everything moved along swiftly.

In the first place, even without Subaru, the plans for the evacuation have already been set in motion, and only the final stage required Subaru to act as the trigger.
While the dragon carriages were being prepared, the villagers boarded quickly, and from the assignment of passengers to the cooperation between the drivers, everything proceeded with such smooth coordination that the thirty minute it was supposed to take before departure only took fifteen. Although, Subaru wasn't sighing with admiration at the result.

[Subaru: Actually, instead of fifteen minutes, it could've been even shorter. Probably five, if……]

With the villagers' high spirits, it certainly could have been. But what ended up putting a damper on that was none other than Subaru himself.
Returning to the villagers, Subaru had hoped to begin preparations for the evacuation right away, but with him just waltzing in like that, everyone instantly noticed his missing right eye.
The villagers looked like they were about to scream revenge for Subaru's lost eye, but Subaru barely managed to calm them by telling them that the eye wasn't gone but only healing—— a lie which they somehow accepted, and only then did the evacuation begin.

[Subaru: Still… it's not a bad feeling to be worried about]

Subaru never thought there would be this many people shocked by his injury, and even after seeing it for himself, he still couldn't quite believe it.
Natsuki Subaru was supposed to be an isolated, alone-to-the-end, insignificant existence incapable of making anyone feel anything. That was what he believed. And yet, before he knew it, there was suddenly so many people willing to feel outrage for his sake.

He was just bragging earlier about his achievements from the trouble with the Mabeasts, but Subaru hadn't actually done all that much.
It was Rem who saved the children in the forest, and it was also Rem who hunted down most of the Mabeasts afterwards. Roswaal was the one who annihilated them in the end, and there didn't seem to be a single instant where Subaru did anything of note.

[Subaru: ……ah. So that's why]

Coming to this point, he realized the truth that he had kept bottled up thus far.
The Authority of Gluttony had consumed all memories of Rem within this world. Aside from Subaru's memories, where she still remained, only her empty vessel was left in this world. Aside from that, every trace, evidence, and memory of her had been lost.

So then, what happened to the events that occurred as a consequence of her actions?
——Most likely, all her actions had been attributed to other people, and all the scenes she ever appeared in had been rationalized and rewritten within the memories of those who knew her in the least implausible way.

[Subaru: And everyone Rem had saved… are now turning their gratitude towards her at me]

Come to think of it, Petra's unconditional attachment towards Subaru was probably because, to her, Subaru was the one who risked his life to carry her out of the forest. That must be what the incomplete world had forcibly inscribed into her memories.
Otherwise, how could she possibly have such faith in a suspicious-looking stranger of unknown origins after having spent only a few days together?

In other words, although unconsciously, Subaru had time and again reaped the rewards of Rem's actions, as if it were only natural.

[Subaru: ……makes me want to vomit… this idiotic trash I am]

Spitting out these thoughts, Subaru realized that all the blessings showered upon him were from that sleeping girl's accomplishments.
That lovely blue-haired girl remained a warmth within his chest even now. Even forgotten by all the world, perhaps her devotion to Subaru still persisted.
Although, that may just be Subaru's sentimental and convenient delusion.

[Patrasche: ――――]

[Subaru: Hm, ahh, don't worry. I'm fine. ……You're also… another good girl wasted on me]

Patrasche looked back with a worried glance. Taking care not to disturb her mounted master's thoughts, her movements maintained its fluidity in spite of its speed. Regardless of her Divine Protection of Wind Evasion, she was galloping with this high awareness in mind.

Subaru hadn't ridden Patrasche alone like this without a carriage since the battles with the White Whale and the Witch Cult, already a week ago.
Perhaps a bit dissatisfied with pulling heavy loads, now released from the burden, Patrasche's gait seemed especially light while carrying Subaru.
Nevertheless, she was worried when she first saw the one-eyed Subaru, and had used her rough tongue to lick all over his face as though to console him.

While reminiscing on his reunion with Patrasche, Subaru glanced behind him.
It was a secret evacuation of six dragon carriages. Actually, since the creaking of the carriages and commotion of their movements were unconcealable, the situation was far from secret. But they still proceeded at the slowest possible speed in order to avoid discovery as best as they could.

Most of the drivers were the merchants hired earlier to evacuate the villagers from the Witch Cult on the promise of payment, who had no business getting mixed up in all this. Subaru had worried that there would be considerable dissatisfaction among them, but seeing them tensely gripping their reins, Subaru realized that his worries were unnecessary.
At least, they were not the kind of people who would let emotion get in the way at critical junctures.
――It was then,

[???: Natsuki-san, Natsuki-san]

Deep in thought, Subaru suddenly heard a voice calling to him from the leading carriage. Turning towards that voice, he saw Otto, leading the line of carriages, managing his favorite dragon Furufu while gesturing Subaru over.

[Subaru: What is it? The evacuation is going well, I think]

[Otto: Mnn, it's almost going too well. But, we've got a problem]

Lowering his voice, Otto leaned towards Subaru who was riding parallel to his carriage. He covered a hand over his mouth so the dragon carriages behind wouldn't see,

[Otto: Natsuki-san, please listen carefully]

[Subaru: Hm?]

[Otto: ——The forest is chattering. Something "Outrageous" is coming]

Hearing this overly vague statement, Subaru could make no other reaction except furrow his brows. But, Otto's expression was dead serious as he said this, and the atmosphere was certainly not one to be laughed off.
Subaru gulped down a breath, and looked back and forth between Otto and the train of carriages behind him.

[Subaru: That something "Outrageous", is it coming up to us?]

[Otto: Much of what the trees say are vague and inexact, so I can't be sure. But it might catch up to us at our current speed. So at least we should consider speeding up a bit……]

Otto proposed this with cold sweat appearing on his forehead. Sensing from his ghastly expression that there was definitely something, Subaru decided to signal Patrasche and gave the order for the carriage train to accelerate. At this distance, if they sprinted full-speed towards Barrier, then——

[???: ——Oy. This many people out for'a stroll in th'middle of th'night n'didn't even think t'invite me. Sure feels left'out]

Shot out of the air like an arrow, ripping through the silence of the forest, the voice reverberated upon Subaru's eardrums.
Patrasche's feet dug into the ground as she skidded to a stop. The black ground dragon lowered her head and bared her fangs, and once more, she directed her hostility towards her one-time adversary.

Seeing the ground dragon poised for battle, the golden-haired youth amusedly twisted his lips into a smile,

[Garfiel: Ha. Still ain't afraid after gettin' that thrashin? Yer a good girl indeed. Like how "Fingers clutch tighter th'more th'shiny stone sparkles," yeah?]

Making this proclamation while flashing his bleach-white fangs, the Guardian of the Sanctuary obstructed the path.
As if flaunting the threat of something "Outrageous".

Chapter 41 [Tiger]

Presenting a defenseless posture, Garfiel stood there with his arms dangling at his side.
Seeing him blocking the road, Subaru warily scanned his gaze over his surroundings. There could be others lying in ambush.
But still, part of him already knew that if his opponent was Garfiel, no amount of caution would do any good. ――If he personally came, then he must have come alone.

Sure enough, Subaru couldn't sense anyone else in the vicinity. Confirming that his caution had been unnecessary, Subaru finally let out a sigh and patted the back of the still-wary Patrasche's neck,

[Subaru: I don't care if you wanna suddenly show up out of nowhere, but you mind not flirting with other people's partners right off the bat?]

[Garfiel: I ain't one for lies or pretty words. Just'sayin' whatever comes to mind. I always get scolded by Granny and Ram for that too]

Hearing the jokes stalling for time, Garfiel clacked his fangs and looked up as his smile gradually disappeared. Receiving that gaze with his single eye, Subaru raised up one finger,

[Subaru: It seems kinda unnatural for you to be here, mind explaining a bit?]

[Garfiel: Ain't no big story behind it. I'm the Fangs of th'Sanctuary, and I ain't gonna let y'run away from the Eyes of th'Sanctuary like that. There y'go. Well, so much for a consolation prize, yeah?]

Seeing Garfiel say this with a light wave of his hand, Subaru furrowed his brows.
If, as Subaru imagined, "Eyes" was a codename for something similar to "Grass", then the "Eyes" Garfiel mentioned probably meant something along the lines of sentinels. But,

[Subaru: I never heard Ram mention there being anything like that in the Sanctuary……]

[Garfiel: Y'think outsiders would know everything there's t'know about the Sanctuary? There's a mountain of things even that Roswaal bastard doesn't know. This is just one of'em, yeah? ……Be damned if you knew about'em]

Seeing Subaru confused by his murky statement, Garfiel relentlessly laid this down. And as Subaru fell speechless, Garfiel snorted and turned his eyes to the line of dragon carriages behind,

[Garfiel: Those there would be all the refugees, yeah?]

[Subaru: Ah, uhh, yeah. Say, Garfiel. I know it was our bad for trying to quietly sneak away and all, but can you just please let us go? After all, it wouldn't be a bad thing for you either, right?]

[Garfiel: Hah?]

While being stared down by his intimidating gaze, Subaru unconcernedly gestured to the carriages behind him,

[Subaru: Right now, letting the hostages leave is also in order to avoid the possibility of any further conflict, isn't it? I heard there's already small skirmishes sparking up, so before things get out of hand, isn't it better to deal with it first, once and for all?]

[Garfiel: ――――]

[Subaru: You and Lewes-san both want the Sanctuary to be liberated, right? Nothing good can come from leaving this dangerous spark inside. So, it's a lot more advantageous to let us leave, isn't it?]

Quiet and composed, Subaru tried to use all of his skills of persuasion on Garfiel. Besides, what Subaru said wasn't entirely out of convenience. In fact, from Garfiel's standpoint, letting the refugees leave was indeed the more advantageous choice.
Aside from the secrecy of the operation――

[Subaru: I'm not asking you to personally be ok with it, but, considering the circumstances……]

[Garfiel: Oy, it seems there's somethin' yer misunderstandin']

[Subaru: Misunderstanding?]

[Garfiel: Yer so convinced I'm buttin' in here to stop ya. But it's like y'said, I got no reason to stop th'evacuation. So there's no need wastin' yer breath with all these excuses]

Cutting Subaru off, Garfiel snorted at his presumption. And hearing this reply, Subaru closed his mouth once more. Owing to the bad premonition that preceded Garfiel's appearance, Subaru had indeed let himself run ahead of the conversation. In fact, on a rational level, what Garfiel said was right. But still,

[Subaru: If that's the case, then why're you here……?]

[Garfiel: Just came t'see y'off. If y'guys wanna leave that's yer thing. But leavin' without a representative from the Sanctuary's no different from escapin', ain't it? If I'm here t'watch, th'other guys can't say much 'bout it]

[Subaru: ……You've been thinking a lot more than I expected, huh]

Although Garfiel's display of sensibility and intellect was more than a little surprising, Subaru nevertheless accepted his argument. Garfiel, on the other hand, folded his arms and nodded at Subaru's rather impolite comment,

[Garfiel: That's obvious, ain't it? I ain't just strong, I think through all sortsa things…… I'm the strongest, after'all]

[Subaru: Ah, I feel a little relieved to hear that. By the way, there's no need to mention my right eye or anything, you know]

[Garfiel: Hah? Ah, 's that right. Y'took off th'blinfold n' found out, huh. Just had to do all th'unnecessary things, y'bastard. Wait, OY!]

Listening to Garfiel's boasting, Subaru stuck a finger at his right eye. And while dealing the issue of Subaru's missing eye, Garfiel suddenly turned his attention to Otto, who had rescued Subaru. Sitting behind them on the driver's platform of the dragon carriage, Otto shrunk in his neck and slightly tried to hide himself from the razor sharp glare.
Seeing that wimpy reaction, Garfiel clicked his neck with [Speakin'of which], and continued,

[Garfiel: Yer pretty calm for someone who's just lost an eye, ain't ya? Honestly, I was prepared for some complaints or revenge from ya]

[Subaru: It'll take me till next morning to finish saying all the complaints and we're a bit short on time. And if I try to get revenge I'll probably just lose my left eye too. So I'll just let sleeping dogs lie]

[Garfiel: What's that supposed t'mean? ——Kinda pissin' me off, oy]

Garfiel was a bit dissatisfied with Subaru's reply, but Subaru, sensing no need to continue down this topic, only lightly rubbed his right eye with his palm, and,

[Subaru: So you'll just stand by like this and let everyone return to their village?]

[Garfiel: It's pretty rude to leave without sayin' goodbye, but that's taken care of since I'm here. So do what y'like]

[Subaru: Then, we'll just go ahead and……]

[Garfiel: ——Except]

Just as the line of dragon carriages were about to move, Garfiel's voice cut through the air. Slouching down his upper body, Garfiel casted a slanted gaze towards Patrasche and Subaru,

[Garfiel: Not you, you stay. The hostages can go. The noisy lil'bro can go. Ram…… well she can go too if she wants. But not you]

[Subaru: ……and why's that?]

[Garfiel: There's Emilia-sama's motivation as well, but most important's to do with you yerself. A bastard stinkin of th'Witch like you, y'think I'd let y'leave just like that?]

[Subaru: That again……]

Giving his nose a flick, the golden-haired youth threatened. Although Subaru was already getting tired of this complaint, he nonetheless nodded,

[Subaru: So the condition is that I stay in the Sanctuary. Can we agree there?]

[Garfiel: Good yer gettin' it straight off the bat. If it dragged on too long my head's not gonna bother rememberin' all that]

[Subaru: You really just say whatever comes to mind, huh…… alright, I understand. I'll just go convey this to everyone, wait here]

Arriving at the main issue, the negotiation came to an end. Although there wasn't actually much negotiating involved. Subaru simply accepted the terms before turning back to his companions—— to relay the information to the drivers, Otto, and Ram.

[Subaru: Basically, as long as I stay behind, he'll let everyone pass through safely. There's no point in whining here, so I think we should just accept the proposal……]

[Otto: As much as I want to say that is indeed a very good condition if he can let us go peacefully, would those behind us really be ok with it? In the first place, they would've stubbornly refused to escape without Natsuki-san]

[Subaru: Aahh, that's right, it'll take quite a bit of effort to convince everyone…… But since we're already on the move, everyone's probably eager to return to the village. I don't think me leaving the group partway through will win out against their eagerness to go home]

In response to Otto's concerns, Subaru held a hand to his jaw in thought.
In fact, the refugees should be very eager to return home to their village. While Subaru was glad that they would put his safety on the same scale as their desire to go home, at this point, there was no choice but to break that balance.

[Otto: Natsuki-san……]

[Subaru: Well, considering this sentiment, I don't think it'll be too difficult to convince them. But it could turn out badly unless I do all the talking. So, I'll be right back, everyone please get the dragon carriages ready to set out while……]

[Ram: I don't like it]

Subaru's prompt instruction was cut off by Ram's abrupt interruption.
Slapped by this along with Otto's concerned gaze, Subaru gave Ram an awkward look, and with [Um…] scratching his head,

[Subaru: Garfiel just said something similar too, but it's not a good habit to always say these things that shave away at people's motivation, you know……]

[Ram: Barusu, don't you realize it yourself? What you said just now]

[Subaru: What I said?]

Subaru tilted his head at Ram's words, and couldn't think of any noteworthy details. Unsure what exactly she was referring to, he furrowed his brows looking confused.
Seeing this, Ram let out a disappointed sigh,

[Ram: If you don't know, then nevermind. It's just as Roswaal-sama said. Now that it had become like this, no matter what Ram does, it is futile]

[Subaru: Wait, what the hell are you saying? So you know too, don't you? You knew, that it would turn out like this……]

[Ram: That is meaningless to Barusu now. Only a waste of time]

[Subaru: You……]

Subaru ground his teeth watching Ram say this with her head held high with an all-knowing air. And sensing the dangerous atmosphere brewing between the two, with [Wait wait wait!] Otto stepped between them,

[Otto: Can you two stop arguing? Like Ram-san said, this is a waste of time. Wasting time is the same as wasting the chance to make money. So can you guys calm down? For me? That's it, it's decided, ok!]

[Subaru: Tch. Anyway, I'll go explain it to everyone]

[Ram: Tch. Ram has nothing more to say]

[Otto: Can you two please not click your tongues at me while you speak!?]

As always, Otto dejectedly protested his treatment, but since that was his job, there was not much he could do about it. Nevertheless, it was thanks to Otto's efforts that things did not break between them. Subaru passed by the dragon carriages one by one, and explained Garfiel's terms. The Arlam villagers all showed a bitter expression when they heard that Subaru would stay behind, but seeing that Subaru himself was fine with it, and because they had lived as refugees for so long that their desire to return home was overwhelming, they had no choice but to reluctantly accept.

While he was grateful for their reluctance to leave him behind, Subaru finally managed to convince everyone. After returning to tell Ram and Otto, he rode on atop Patrasche to face Garfiel,

[Subaru: We've finished our talks. Your condition is fine. So let everyone through]

[Garfiel: Except you, yeah? They get goin' then. This ground dragon, she stayin'?]

[Subaru: It'll be a bit rough on my stamina to have to walk back alone. So I guess Patrasche will have to stay cooped up for a little while longer]

He placed his hand on his partner, who had to be stuck with the likes of him, and Patrasche gave her body a shake as if saying [You know I don't mind, geez], and turned her head away. Interpreting her movement this way, Subaru lined up beside Garfiel and watched the dragon carriages set out along the path out of the Sanctuary. Seeing the faces of the villagers looking back at him through the dragon carriage windows, Subaru wryly smiled and waved to them in return.

[Subaru: Otto, after you get back to the village, do not go to the Mansion. Come back immediately if you can]

[Otto: ……? I don't understand… but, why? I was thinking we'd have to report in to Frederica to let her know, right?]

[Subaru: Never…mind. It'll probably be tomorrow morning by the time you return to the village…… but just in case, at least don't go there until the afternoon]

Otto showed a confused expression at Subaru's instructions. But Subaru, unable to answer his doubts, only gestured with his chin, signaling him to [Go on ahead].

Tonight was the fifth night—— the threshold of fate that was the final deadline when Elsa would attack the Mansion. If things progressed the same way as the first loop, then at this point, no doubt Elsa had already begun her attack.

But no matter how depraved Elsa may be—— it was still unlikely that she would descend on the village and massacre its inhabitants. So as long as Otto didn't enter the Mansion, he shouldn't be touched by the danger.

Of course, doing this would be none other than abandoning those in the Mansion: Frederica, and Petra. And Beatrice, and Rem.

[Subaru: …….This time, I'll use everything to find out what happened in the Sanctuary. That's… already decided. If I try to be greedy, I'll only end up with nothing. That's the reason I have stand by and watch, isn't it?]

Emerging in his chest, was the guilt of watching while allowing the worst to happen.
Suppressing that guilt with the sense of mission and duty, Subaru spurred on the cruelty of his heart.
Steel. Turn his heart to steel. In order to reach that perfect future, he will use every method at his disposal. Permit, and accept sacrifices along the way, no matter how much it wore down his heart.

[Subaru: As long as we are smiling at the end, I'll……we'll have won]

And so, in the face of sacrifices, all he could do was to hold down the wavering of his heart.
He must not hesitate to pave the way so that he would retrieve everything in the end. Regrets were not something that should concern him now.

[Subaru: ————]

Having watched all the dragon carriages pass before him and vanish into the forest, Subaru let out a sigh.
Now, there were only the Sanctuary's residents and people associated with Roswaal's Mansion left behind. All that remained was simply to wait for the dawn and bear witness to whatever was about to happen to the Sanctuary. If he could do that, then this loop's objective would have been accomplished.

[Subaru: Staying here forever and getting our faces eaten by bugs isn't the way to go, so how about we go back? It's starting to get kinda unpleasant with you staring at me like that]

[Garfiel: Don't try'ta tell me what to do…… Say, y'haven't asked a peep about Emilia-sama's Trial tonight]

[Subaru: The fact that you're here already answered that, I figured. I'd be lying if I told you I didn't expect a bleak result this time]

At least, transforming her worry for Subaru and the hostages into motivation wasn't going to work. If Emilia was to prevail against the Trials, something fundamental would have to change. Otherwise, chances are that none of the Sanctuary's problems could be resolved in these rushed circumstances.

[Subaru: That's why I have to see this through to the end. I can't just wait for Emilia to pass her Trials without finding out what'll happen next]

So that he will not repeat his mistake, Subaru will take the risk of staying on in this third world. The highest number of times Subaru has died in a single series of loops was four. If he intended to break through in the fifth world, he had only one more death after this.

[Subaru: There's still a mountain of things I need to confirm……]

――He was already thinking of his own "Death" as a foothold to reach that breakthrough.
Not even Subaru himself noticed just how twisted his own statement was. He signaled to Patrasche to return to the Sanctuary, and Garfiel, watching him from behind, muttered,

[Garfiel: ……Talkin' like y'understand everythin'. Just the fuck y'think y'know?]

[Subaru: Garfiel?]

Unable to hear that whispered question, Subaru turned around on his saddle. And abruptly, in front of his eyes――

Garfiel leapt towards Subaru atop Patrasche's back, his palm slashing towards Subaru's neck like a blade.

The sight of fingers shredding through the air burning into the back of his eyes, Subaru's voice died in astonishment at the unreal and sudden approach of "Death."
It was not that he never considered the possibility of Garfiel's attack, but he never thought it would come so directly in this place.

[Subaru: ――――!]

The shrill whistle of a swinging blade was followed by the pain of tearing flesh striking Subaru accompanied by the spray of blood. Reflexively holding his shrieking throat with his hand, he felt a thin crevice beneath his voice box that had been gouged out by the claw.
Pressing with his palm while feeling the blood seeping through his fingers, Subaru hurriedly grasped the reins and signaled Patrasche,

[Subaru: Garfiel! What're y……!]

[Garfiel: Y're gonna get in the way? What y'think yer doing, huh?]

While Subaru screamed from Patrasche's back at the sudden attack, Garfiel, landing on the ground, directed his rage and bloodied fingers at an entirely different direction.
Subaru, his face contorted in pain, turned to look in the direction Garfiel was pointing, and saw a single girl standing with a wand in her hand―― Ram, with her peach-colored hair swaying, and her stern gaze fixed on Garfiel.

[Subaru: Ram!?]

[Ram: I had a bad feeling so I stayed, and it turned out exactly as I thought. Barusu, you better thank me that your head is still connected to your torso]

[Garfiel: Without that wind screwin' up the aim, it would've lopped that head flyin']

Hearing the uninvited Ram's remark, Garfiel shook his head in acknowledgement. Speechless at their exchange, the pain of the wound only further inflamed Subaru's thoughts,

[Subaru: What the… hell are you doing, Garfiel!? Were you trying to kill me just now!?]

[Garfiel: That, and failed. If yer askin' what I was tryin' to do, dunno know how else t'answer ya]

Garfiel plainly confirmed his intention to kill. Hearing this, Subaru's single eye opened wide as his lips trembled at the incomprehensible act. Since,

[Subaru: If that's the case, couldn't you have killed me anytime you wanted? When I was imprisoned, no, even before that, if you just didn't heal me wouldn't I have already died!?]

[Garfiel: If I did that, the hostages would've exploded. Now that they've left, everythin's in order for me t'kill ya, ain't it?]

[Subaru: That's……!]

Feeling his thoughts being dyed pure red, Subaru was struck dumb by Garfiel's words.
All along, Garfiel had him in his sights and was looking a way to dispose of him without the problems that came with it, and sending away the hostages played right into his lap. Yet, there was still something else that felt unnatural. That is——

[Subaru: If you kill me here, what happens to Emilia's Trials? Not trying to be narcissistic here, but if I'm her primary motivation, when I'm dead, doesn't that mean the Trials will never end?]

For Lewes' faction, which hoped to liberate the Sanctuary, there could be no situation worse than this.
Even if Garfiel suspected Subaru because of the Witch's stench, there was no way he could have overlooked such a major factor.
Although his actions could perhaps be attributed to blind rage, seeing him conversing just now, none of his calm and rational demeanor fit the description of someone who had lost themselves to rage.

In other words, Garfiel's attack just now was the result of cold calculation. Just what did it mean——

[Garfiel: I……]

[Ram: No point listening to excuses, and it'll be meaningless trying to persuade him, Barusu]

But, just as Garfiel began to speak, Ram sharply cut herself between them. Turning her wand towards Garfiel, who clicked his tongue,

[Ram: You should stop trying to hide your true intentions with logic, Garf. It isn't like you]

[Subaru: O, oy, Ram]

[Ram: Stand down, I'm speaking. ――Either way, Garf has already made up his mind to kill you, Barusu]

Hearing Ram confirm Garfiel's murderous intent, Subaru could only close his mouth.
Ram slowly approached Subaru while keeping her vigilant glare fixed on Garfiel, and, holding out her hand, she softly traced her fingers over the underside of Patrasche's neck.

[Ram: Good girl. Do what you have to do now. That master of yours on your back… is incredibly dull, both to himself and to others]

[Patrasche: ――――]

Calmly, and somewhat gently, Ram said this to Patrasche, who replied without words. Patrasche extended out her tongue and licked Ram's fingers in response, before lowering her head and setting out her steps in the direction of the woods, regardless of Subaru's commands,

[Subaru: W-wait. You two, what're you……]

[Ram: Don't let go of the reins. As long as you do that, your ground dragon will do everything in her power to protect you, Barusu. You are as fortunate as a man can be]

[Subaru: Listen to me! No, tell me why! What do you know that's making you do this!?]

[Ram: There's no time to explain, and explaining is futile. Do as I say, Barusu. ――Ram can buy you about a minute, use that time to get however far you can. This is the only resistance Ram could offer for you]

He couldn't understand the meaning of the last part of Ram's reply, but there was already no time to ask.
After hearing her last syllable, Patrasche speeded away with a small neigh. And, shaking around on the ground dragon's back, Subaru felt the Divine Protection of Wind Evasion coming into effect as they were swallowed up by the flock of trees.

[Subaru: Ram――!]

He screamed. But there was no answer.
As his vision became obscured by the forest, all Subaru could do was to bite his lip and be carried along on his involuntary flight.

After Subaru and Patrasche sped into the forest, the two were left facing each other without anything to stand between them.

Seeing Ram holding her wand readied and unflinching, Garfiel stuck a finger towards the forest where Subaru had vanished, and,

[Garfiel: Y'just had t'say those unnecessary things. Gonna be a pain in the ass chasin' him now]

[Ram: You think I will let you leave?]

[Garfiel: Y'think y'can stop me? Be a huge mistake if y'think th'balance between us hasn't changed since the old days. And don't think I'll go easy just because I like ya]

Cracking his knuckles, Garfiel threatened once more. But he knew full well that this was not a girl who could be intimidated. In fact, Ram didn't seem affected at all. Garfiel roughly scratched at his spiky blond hair,

[Garfiel: Ram, what're y'doin'? What's th'point? If there's a point I ain't heard about it. Y'doin this on Roswaal's orders?]

[Ram: ……Sorry, Garf. It is Ram's own will to be here. It has nothing to do with Roswaal-sama's orders. At least, I see no need to ask Roswaal-sama's instructions at this point]

Hearing Ram say this resolutely, Garfiel, who was beginning to have the same doubts that Subaru had earlier, furrowed his brows with the exact same confusion at her answer.
Looking at her with an increasingly bitter expression,

[Garfiel: I don't get it, Ram. I'm gettin' it even less now that it ain't on Roswaal's orders, I can't think of a single reason why y'be doin' this]

[Ram: Really?]

[Garfiel: Uh――?]

[Ram: Do you really not understand…… why Ram is doing this, Garf?]

Asking calmly, Ram's expression and tone were no different than usual. But, listening, Garfiel's expression changed under her gaze.
Confusion. Doubt. Shock. And wrath.

[Garfiel: You……]

Taking one step forward, Garfiel's heel ravaged the ground beneath it. Gnawing his fangs in an expression of unbearable rage, he narrowed his eyes towards Ram,

[Garfiel: I don't fuck'n believe it. You'd do somethin' like this……]

[Ram: ――For Frederica, and for you, Garf]

[Garfiel: DON'T YOU BRING UP THE NAME OF THAT TRAITOR!!]

Roaring, Garfiel stamped down his foot sending the ground caving in, and, with a boom, the surface shattered beneath his foot.
Plumes of smoke billowed out as the nearby trees tilted from the force. The forest cowered in fear, and the air was silenced in terror of his rage.
Yet, in the face of that wrath, Ram's expression remained cool and unfazed,

[Ram: Do you think anyone will agree with you when you throw tantrums like an obstinate child? Garf, how long are you going to keep running in circles in this narrow forest?]

[Garfiel: Don’t y’talk like y’know everything! You…… you n’Frederica, you who abandoned the Sanctuary what could y’know, ahh!?]

Ram’s words, like she was chiding a small child, did not reach the enraged Garfiel in the end. But unlike the way he stomped into the ground before, this time, he only kicked at the earth without force.

[Garfiel: For me? It’s for me? You…… that’s exactly what I can’t believe. Now it’s already come t’this, how dare y’tell me that……?]

[Ram: Garf……]

[Garfiel: Did I ask for yer sympathy? Don’t look down at me all high n’mighty. Me, Granny, or the others, we never asked for your pity]

Covering his face with his palm, his breathing ragged, Garfiel wrenched out these words.
A figure that seemed almost tragic, and slouching made its stature appear even smaller than it was.
Taking deep breath after deep breath, Garfiel took his hand off of his face, and,

[Garfiel: Enough. I ain’t listenin’ no more. Turn back to th’Sanctuary now. Do it and I’ll forget this. I still gotta go chase down that bastard]

[Ram: I refuse, Garf. If anyone should concede, it is you. Even if I go back, the approaching ruin is unavoidable. You understand this as well, don’t you?]

[Garfiel: Just go back. I ain’t askin’ again. Go back and stay there till the Trials’ over]

[Ram: No, I will not return or wait. Nothing can come from standing idle. By stagnating in this place, the only thing that will remain in your palms will be ashes of what you hoped to achieve. For something so weak and vague, why do y……]

[Garfiel: Even so! It’s a lot better than having nothing left!]

Cutting Ram off, Garfiel looked up and barked. Etched into his expression was at once rage, jealousy, and sorrow.

[Garfiel: Ruin? So what? Long as I’m here I’ll take care of’it. This time, all of it, I’ll take care of all of it……]

[Ram: Garf, haven’t I always told you? ——That’s nothing more than compensatory behavior]

In the face of Garfiel’s detonated emotions, Ram still responded with single-minded calmness.
In direct opposition and impossible to converge, neither were willing to concede, and no compromise was coming.
Perhaps realizing this, Garfiel looked down and closed his eyes,

[Garfiel: Go back, Ram. This is… my final request. With all the feelings I have ever expressed for you, please. So……]

[Ram: Then, Garf. ——Will you abandon everything except for Ram?]

[Garfiel: ————]

To Garfiel's final, grief-filled plea, Ram's reply was concise and crisp. Although, carried within it was something excruciating that pressed on the hearts of anyone who heard it.

Standing opposite her, Garfiel's expression stiffened and his lips trembled.
Seeing this, Ram lightly cast down her eyes,

[Ram: Choose Ram over all the things in this world, see only Ram, love only Ram, do everything only for Ram, be loved only by Ram, forgive only Ram, and devote your entire being to Ram—— can you do this?]

[Garfiel: I-I……]

[Ram: Ram, can do this]

Placing a hand on her chest, Ram proclaimed to the stuttering Garfiel.
A quiet and unwavering will, alone filled her words as she lifted her face,

[Ram: ——Ram, can do this]

And that, was Ram's final ultimatum to Garfiel.

Perhaps understanding this, for only an instant, all dominance vanished from Garfiel's face. Only Ram was there to witness just what expression adorned his face in that instant.
Then, quickly shaking his head, and stowing all his exposed weakness deep within himself, he bared his fangs,

[Garfiel: I've always known… just how stubborn y'are]

[Ram: I could say the same to you. ——If I cannot truly be the most important thing to you, then Ram will not yield to you, Garf. Ram will not belong to anyone]

[Garfiel: Is that, so]

Facing each other, their gazes met.
Conclusions drawn, they acknowledged that neither would back down. Then, both, in a quiet voice,

[Ram: Goodbye, Garf]

[Garfiel: Farewell, Ram]

They exchanged these final words between them, full of affection.

——The forest trembled.
And a roar echoed out.

※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※

[Subaru: Patrasche! Stop! I'm telling you to stop!]

Desperately pulling on the reins, Subaru frantically screamed to Patrasche as they galloped through the forest.
But the ground dragon had no intention of listening to her rider, and only single-mindedly sprinted along the rugged road, distancing them from the firing-line behind them.

Although Subaru had heard of panicked horses that would refuse to listen to their rider's commands, this didn't seem to be the case with Patrasche.
The ground dragon seemed no different from usual, and was consciously ignoring his commands.
In other words, she must have deemed Subaru's commands unworthy of her obedience.

[Subaru: You are ignoring me… for my own good, aren't you?]

[Patrasche: ――――]

While she would not listen to his commands, she did not simply throw her master off like she was pissed off, either. Every bit of Patrasche's behavior had been overflowing with concern for Subaru, and Subaru, being tossed around on her back, was close to tears in gratitude and shame.
It was not simply because his ground dragon refused to obey him. He was disgusted with his own stupidity for failing to notice that even his ground dragon was worried about him.
And, alongside this, the matter that was still fueling Subaru's self-despair in present continuous tense, was that,

[Subaru: But Ram's in danger! I don't want to believe that Garfiel will really do anything to hurt her…… but now…!]

Garfiel had made up his mind to kill Subaru. It was outside of his calculations that Ram would stand in his way, but now, just how would he rectify this miscalculation―― was too frightening to imagine.

Unable to save those at the Mansion, Subaru had already more or less come to terms with their sacrifice in this loop. But those terms did not include Ram. Completely unprepared to allow a further loss beyond his permitted range, it tore Subaru's heart to pieces, resulting in this miserable state.

[Subaru: I hate……getting hurt too, but I can recover. So……!]

Pleading, his voice was almost crying. But Patrasche still ignored him.
With speed like the wind, the ground dragon did not slow down, and had no intention of listening to Subaru's appeals. Ram and Garfiel were now far behind them. A tragedy unfolding in a place he could not reach.
The thought battered at Subaru's heart. Why was his heart so weak, and why could it never be strong?

——And, this way, with his sights directed only into himself, repeating mistake after mistake, Subaru was bound to repeat the same failure.

[Subaru: ——Eh?]

Suddenly, his line of sight expanded as Patrasche broke through the tangled woods. Clinging tight onto her as they cleared the obstacled path, Subaru's jaw dropped at the scene that opened before him.

[Otto: Wh-what happened, Natsuki-san? You're back in such a hurry?]

The one who asked was Otto, looking just as stumped as Subaru.
It was the train of refugees that was supposed to have gone ahead. Somehow, Subaru had bumped right into the side of their column. He thought they had just been fleeing aimlessly through the forest, but Patrasche's behavior certainly exceeded his expectations.

[Otto: I thought he didn't let you leave? What happened to Garfiel?]

[Subaru: I-I don't really know either…… but Ram and Patrasche……]

Trying to control his ragged breathing so he could speak to Otto, Subaru wiped the sweat from his brows with the back of his hand.
——In the next instant, an atrocious roar shook through the forest.

[Subaru: Wh——!?]
[Otto: Huh!?]

Throats frozen, eyes widened in shock, Subaru and Otto simultaneously startled and turned to the direction of the voice.
The thunderous roar shook the atmosphere and the hearts of men alike, and even the ground dragons showed signs of panic at its overwhelming force.
If there was a single creature unshaken by this scene, it was Patrasche, bearing Subaru on her back.

Thus, she was the first to judge the situation and react.

[Otto: Ah, Natsuki-san!?]

[Subaru: Hey, Patrasche!]

Immediately turning her head to the front of the line of carriages, Patrasche broke into a run. She headed towards the leading carriage—— and then further beyond that, sprinting without hesitation towards the Sanctuary's exit, at end of the road ahead.
Leaving Otto's call behind, Subaru felt the Divine Protection activate once again. He didn't know the reason behind her action, but just as he was about to raise his voice to stop her,

[————!!]

An impact shook the ground, and Subaru heard a shriek coming from behind.
Involuntarily holding his breath and turning back his head, he gazed in the direction of Otto and the others.

In the left half of his vision, Subaru saw the scene that unraveled in the darkness of the forest.

Carriages sent flying. Ground dragons swallowed along in the impact, and passengers scattering into the air in screams and blood, dying the forest sky red.

[Subaru: ——a]

Witnessing this devastation, Subaru saw, under the airborne carcasses of the dragon carriages, a beast.

——Its whole body covered in golden fur, a gigantic tiger emerged in Subaru's sight.

Chapter 42 [The Value Of A Life]

——The fierce, golden tiger stooped low, and glowered over its surroundings with its razor sharp gaze.

The great tiger was about four meters in length, a four-legged beast boasting a body over twice the size of the lions and tigers Subaru knew.
With lumbering legs and its mouth unable to close in its long, protruding fangs, the beast flaunted its blood-drenched daggers to and fro.

[Subaru: Wh, at……]

……is that? But before he could finish the question, the airborne carriages crashed to the ground.
The sound of destruction echoed, splinters of wood scattered, and shrieks saturated the air.
The passengers swallowed by the impact were thrown to the ground, those conscious wailing in pain, while those unconscious lay motionless in their own puddling blood.

——That instant, Subaru was struck with the thought: *I have to help the wounded.*

But before he could turn that thought into action, an intense movement swept Subaru along.
Swinging around, ignoring Subaru's astonished cry, Patrasche scraped her foot into the ground and dashed away from the beast, aiming straight for the forest.

[Subaru: Wai——! Hey, Patrasche!?]

Subaru shouted to the dragon that was ignoring her rider, but, just like on the way here, Patrasche showed no intention of obeying his will.
Leaving behind Otto and the others, who had been stunned into motionlessness, Patrasche accelerated, bearing Subaru on her back. But,

[Beast: ————**WRR!!**]

With a thunderous bellow, as if slicing through the forest, the beast hounded Subaru's trail.
A torrent of bestial rage and hostility pierced down the road such that as much as Patrasche tried to get away, her instincts froze her still.
The petrifying sensation of a mighty existence possessing life-threatening power making him the focal point of its hostility. Taking in this feeling he had felt many times before, terror and dread coursed up Subaru's spine. And precisely because he knew this feeling well, he could not blame the frozen Patrasche for stopping her steps in such a time and place. He could not blame her, but the consequence was clear.

[Subaru: ——a]

Turning around, the devastation at the root of his terror flowed into his sight.

From light swings of the beast's paws, dragon carriages were sent tumbling like toy boxes as their contents scattered and struck upon the trees of the forest. Perhaps, if one amplified the sound of chopsticks snapping by a hundredfold, it would be something resembling this sound of wood and human bones shattering against one another.

Faced with a literal monster, despite knowing that inaction was the same as waiting for death, no one moved from their spot.
Perhaps, they were afraid that any movement might excite the great beast to turn its claws, its fangs, and its wrath towards them.

Although, they instinctively knew that doing so would only be shifting around the order of their doom.

[Subaru: Is that thing…… the reason why there was no one in the Sanctuary……?]

Trembling from the roots of his teeth on the petrified dragon's back, Subaru burned the murdering beast into the back of his eye with the resolve of certain death.
Coated in beautiful golden fur, its face possessed at once savagery and dauntless dignity. Its keen eyes were brilliant with hostility and rage, and its rattling fangs were too sharp to be likened to mere blades. ――This could very well be the thing that attacked the Sanctuary.

[Subaru: ――Huh?]

Intently watching without missing a single gesture, expression, or movement, Subaru noticed something out of place about the beast that was slowly approaching. Squinting his single eye in search of the cause of that incongruity, he noticed it:

――Something was sticking out of the left side of the great tiger's back.

To the enormous beast with seemingly limitless physical strength, the damage must have been trifling. From its movements as it walked, it didn't seem to be even aware of the wound, and must have considered it no more than a scratch.
Yet for Subaru, it possessed great meaning. Not the wound itself, but the familiar-looking object that inflicted it.

――It was Ram's favourite wand that should still be in her hand.

The small casting-wand that Ram used for chanting magic. At least, Subaru had never seen her use any other medium for spellcasting. Just now, she was wielding it in her hand in her stand-off against Garfiel. There was no mistaking it.
There was no way he could be mistaken. But why was it jutting out of the great tiger's back? The answer――

[Subaru: Atav…ism……]

Suddenly, a scene from before flashed across Subaru's mind.
It was the day Garfiel showed him a fragment of his lineage, the special quality of his physical body. That time, he had only fully beastified a section of his arm as a demonstration of the demihuman part of his lineage, but,

[Subaru: If he's that were-tiger, then……]

If that murderous beast was the fully beastified Garfiel……
…..then that would explain why Ram, who had stayed behind to delay him, drove her wand into

the tiger's body. Yet, at the same time, it also meant that——
——Ram, having lost her wand, failed to stop the tiger-morphed Garfiel in the end.

[Subaru: Garfiel, you……. what did you do to Ram?]

[Beast: ————]

[Subaru: ANSWER ME! AY! WHAT DID YOU DO TO RAM!? GARFIEL!!]

The monster's face scowled at Subaru's call, without answering.
Only, as if irritated by Subaru's voice, it shook its lumbering head and waved up its paw, revealing the tip of its claw. At the end of its claw, there dangled a strip of a familiar-looking black fabric. Seeing this alone, Subaru understood the fate of that peach-color haired girl.

[Subaru: GARFIIEEEELLLLLLLLLL!!!!]

Screaming, abandoned to rage, Subaru let go of the reins and flew down from Patrasche's back. Landing miserably, he rolled to the ground, and, climbing onto all fours, he glared in front of him.
Both on all four limbs, man and beast faced one another at a distance. The gap in strength was obvious, and without a single hair's chance of victory, there was already no room for negotiation between them.

[Subaru: You, despise me that much……?]

[Beast: ————]

[Subaru: You, hate me that much……?]

[Beast: ————]

[Subaru: IF YOU REALLY! WANTED! TO KILL ME! YOU ONLY HAD TO TARGET ME!!]

[Beast: ————**WRRR!!**]

Answering Subaru's enraged scream, the beast roared into the sky.
The atmosphere pulsated, the forest recoiled, the leaves shuddered and all living things cowered, overtaken by dread. But Subaru alone, unfazed, bared his teeth.

[Subaru: You'd even lay hands on the girl you loved… What "Fangs of the Sanctuary", DON'T MAKE ME FUCKING LAUGH!!]

[Beast: ————**WRRRR!!**]

The next moment, in answer to Subaru's insult, the enormous tiger charged.
With overwhelming momentum, the wreckages of dragon carriages between them were blown into the air as the beast advanced through the mist of splinters and blood.

Incredible velocity, and enormous mass. Direct impact would be akin to being struck by a large truck: instant death without even the time to gasp.

Imminent death was before him. Sensing its inevitability, Subaru's mind turned with unprecedented speed. Tapping into rage, his brain cells ignited in an explosion of emotion.
A certain darkness loomed within his chest, and following the flow of blood it coursed throughout his body. Hot, black, dark, faint, murky, and immaterial, that something horrible――can be grasped.

His single eye flying open, Subaru felt the sensation of having grasped onto something within himself.
He looked in front of him. At a distance close enough to feel each other's breaths, the beast's fangs were upon him. With reflex transcending the physical limits of his body, Subaru saw, at the back of the beast's opened mouth, its red and black esophagus that was the entryway into death. In that instant, Subaru raised up his arm and placed it between the fangs and his chest.

[Beast: ――――――!?]

Suddenly, with a swirl of wind, the body of the great beast vanished before Subaru's eyes.
No, more accurately, it was not that it vanished. But, from sheer momentum, with its head as the pivot, the great tiger was flung into a 180 degree arc into the air. Just like this, it landed with its back crashing to the ground, barking in pain and incomprehension as its enormous mass bounced off the surface, rocking the earth with its impact as it tumbled.

[Subaru: Wh……!?]

Turning around, Subaru watched in disbelief as the fierce tiger rolled across the ground. Just now, Subaru was certain that he would lose his life.
The beast seemed just as shocked. Lying sideways on the ground, its face told of utter confusion as it slowly pushed itself off the surface, but owing to the impact to its semicircular canals, it collapsed to the ground once more.

Neither understanding what had happened, they looked at each other, panting. But Subaru, feeling a sudden fatigue surging through his body, fell to the ground, while the great tiger stood up with a frustrated shake of his head.
Once again, which side had the advantage was as clear as day. Even now, Subaru had no idea what had happened, but――

[Subaru: If it responded to my taunt like this…… there's no doubt it's Garfiel]

Forcing his trembling arms to push his body upright, Subaru sank his teeth into his lip to keep himself conscious. In front of him, the giant beast cautiously shifted its body left and right, most likely trying to fathom the incomprehensible phenomenon behind that momentary exchange.
Still, Subaru wasn't sure if he could bring that mysterious sensation out again, even if he tried.

He managed to land one on him, but none of it had felt real.
His opponent's caution was almost comical, but, without any grounds to laugh, Subaru himself was just as ridiculous.

Step by step, the giant beast approached warily, still half-doubtful of Subaru's inaction, but then, it abruptly stopped, and――

[Beast: ————**WRRR!!**]

[Subaru: a]

A roar.
Feeling the illusion of being bathed in a great stormwind, Subaru covered his face and his body instinctively contracted. Cutting through the gaps of his petrified nerves, was the sound of steps stamping into the earth.

Shattering the ground, the beast's body leaped into the air, throwing itself directly at Subaru.
Its mass, its claws, neither was avoidable. This time, the sensation from before did not emerge on the tips of his fingers. *It's the end. The end is coming.*
And,

[Subaru: ————!!]

[Beast: ————***WR!?***]

Thrusting in from the side, Patrasche rammed her head into the great beast's stomach.

The great tiger let out a painful wail as the impact bent its body into a V, choking the air from its lungs. Then, swinging her body, Patrasche slammed her tail into the tiger's eyes, temporarily robbing it of its vision.
Immediately turning around, Patrasche picked up Subaru with her mouth and attempted once more to escape into the wind——

[Subaru: Patra——]

His call was interrupted by a sound of tearing flesh.
Dangling by his waist from Patrasche's mouth, Subaru was suddenly thrown into the ground ahead. When he looked back, Subaru saw that Patrasche's tail was caught in the great beast's fangs. Her body which weighed over 400 kilograms was being flailed about like a paper toy.
Patrasche screeched in pain. Her flesh ripped as blood sprayed out, and the instant her tail was severed from its root, blood spouted down, dyeing half of Subaru in red.

Helplessly tossed into the air, Patrasche tumbled to the ground. Witnessing her wretched state, with panting breaths, Subaru turned and glared at the giant tiger.
Harboring utmost hatred in his single eye, Subaru faced down the enemy whom he once might have called friend,

[Subaru: Ga……rfiiiieeEEELLLLLLL……!]

With only single-minded hostility, he called to that name.
There was no answer. Perhaps beastification had robbed it of its human vocal organ. For within the mighty tiger's throat as it extended out its paw, there was no hatred, or murder, or any words, for that matter.
There was only instinct transformed into action.

——To snap his neck, or to crush his head in its jaw.

No matter what kind of pain, or how wretched his end, Subaru was ready to accept “Death”.
He would swallow down all the suffering, make it his food, and turn it into his reason to obtain that perfect future.

[Subaru: You think you’ll be around in that future……?]

With his gaze fixed on the steadily approaching claw, Subaru conveyed his hateful final words.
And then, closing his left eye, he shut his sight into darkness.

Left with only the regret of Patrasche’s sacrifice, and his inability to save her――

[Subaru: ――――?]

Although Subaru was ready to accept the coming end, its visit did not come. Surprised, he furrowed his brows as irritation began to rise at the tardiness of the arrival of “Death”. Finally, he opened his eye,

[Subaru: Ah?]

In front of him, behind the sharp claw that was supposed to have ripped Subaru to shreds, he saw the expression on the beast’s face. The reason Subaru’s throat let out a stupid groan, was because the beast’s face, the face that was supposed to be pouring all its bloodlust onto Subaru, was instead turned towards a completely different direction.
The great beast had taken its gaze off of Subaru, and was instead looking towards something to Subaru’s left. Turning to follow its gaze, Subaru saw something fly over and bounce off the beast before rolling onto the ground. ――A rock.
Completely ordinary, it was just a rock about the size that would fit in the palm of a hand.
Tracing back the course of the projectile, he saw the silhouette of a person standing at the edge of the treeline.

With short hair, a skinny face, and scrawny limbs, it was a man with no distinctive or noteworthy qualities whatsoever, but Subaru knew him.
He was one of the Arlam villagers, a member of the youth militia, one of the refugees who had taken refuge in the Sanctuary, someone who was aboard one of the toppled carriages, and now, he was there, staggering with blood flowing down his forehead.
Sluggishly, he bent down, picked up the nearest rock, and with feeble movements, he threw it at the beast. Of course, the force was next to nothing. But,

[Youth: Get.. away from Su..baru-sama. You… monster……]

Wrenching out his voice in midst groans of pain, he nonetheless asserted his will.
The moment those words struck him, Subaru suddenly felt a quiver running through his body.
Losing his voice as it reached the tips of his fingers, not knowing what to say, Subaru watched in silence.

[Subaru: ――――]

Then, came rocks, boards, sticks, and shoes, thrown at the monster’s body from all directions.
What he was seeing was the people who should have been broken under the overwhelming pressure emanating from the beast putting up a clumsy, weak, and almost surreal resistance.

[Subaru: he…y…….]

What are they doing? Subaru thought, astounded.
What is the point of doing something like that? Did they think they could do something to the beast? Would it penetrate its fur and hide, and do any damage to the flesh beneath? That's not even possible. It won't even leave a scratch. It's only futile resistance.

[Subaru: Stop……]

Hugging their heads and running away should have been the wisest choice.
They should have all boarded any still-functional dragon carriages and immediately fled this place. Either escape into the Sanctuary, or break through the forest. They should have taken an action that left them at least a small chance of staying alive. And yet, why were they――

[Subaru: Everyone, what're you doing!? Hurry, run away……]

[Old Man: Subaru-sama! You won't convince us just like that!]

Subaru waved his arms, desperately trying to convey his intentions, but his words were cut short. The one who shouted back was an old man with limbs like dried twigs, who, swinging up one arm with all his might, threw a branch that struck directly on the beast's snout. Then, panting, he looked over to Subaru,

[Old Man: If we ran for our lives and abandoned our benefactor, how could we ever show our face in front of our kids again? Besides, you came here in order to help us……]

[Subaru: That's……]

[Old Man: If you die here, then we'll die here as well. That's the least we'll be willing to accept, and that's what everyone's already agreed on]

Stunned, Subaru's face stiffened.
Seeing Subaru's astonished expression, for some reason, a gentle smile rose up on the man's face. It was just way too out of place, a bright smile that almost made one forget about the threat that was before them.

The attack resumed. Everyone struck at once at the murderous beast――Garfiel, with a hail of stones. But its power was just as weak as before. Far from causing him to flinch, it wasn't even enough to scratch an itch.
Slowly raising his massive body, Garfiel began to move. Ignoring Subaru at the forest's edge, who was only waiting to be torn apart―― it turned to the youth who had thrown the first stone.

[Youth: ――――]

The beast and the youth faced one another. In front of the overwhelming pressure, the youth lost his voice, but, with only the act of drawing his short sword from its sheath on his hip, he asserted his will,

[Youth: Then, eat this――!]

Placing all his force behind the thrust, the youth drove it between Garfiel's brows——and, in the next instant, with a shrill sound, the blade snapped in two.
Perhaps because the golden fur possessed considerable resilience, the crudely made blade failed to penetrate it.
Then, as the youth completed his final defiance, the beast raised its paw,

[Subaru: Stop——!!]

Subaru screamed. But even so, in the face of the inevitable, it was nothing but empty noise.

Accompanied by the sound of crushing flesh, the youth's scrawny body was crushed from head to toe into a pulp under the force of the impact. Blood sprayed like a fountain from the gaps of Garfiel's claws, and when he lifted the paw once more, left in its wake was nothing but a swirling, dark red puddle of gore.

[Subaru: ————]

This time, a scream of pure wrath rose in his throat.
With a screech that could slice through metal, Subaru scrambled off the ground and threw himself directly at the monster's back. But the attack was snuffed out by a light rise of the beast's hind-paw. His momentum was met by the paw, and, just like that, Subaru's was kicked into the air like a rubber ball, sending his back crashing into the trunk of a large tree——his entire body cracked in the sound of shattering bones.

[Subaru: GA, AAAagh——!?]

Rolling onto the ground, giant clots of blood surging up his aching throat spilled from his mouth. His body was unresponsive. His right arm, beginning from the shoulder, was twisted into a strange angle. His spine, having sustained that impact, completely lost its shape. Weak, and frail, nothing had changed at all.

[Beast: ————!!]

[Villagers: aaaah——!!]

The beast, barking, leaped into the fray of refugees around him, flaunting fangs and claws. Blood danced, shrieks resounded, and Subaru knew that lives were being extinguished in a place he could not see.
Someone was screaming. A bestial scream. Bestial, and yet in the voice of a human. Confusion ran through the beast. Whose scream was it? What was it roaring for? Trapped within his own failures, Subaru did not know the answer.

[O??o: ——Natsuki-san! Please stay alive!]

His name was called. It was the voice of someone he knew, but his mind's attempt to match the voice to a name was obstructed by the pain. His thoughts flashed and dimmed, the world grew out of focus, and even his own emotions were vague. He could no longer tell what was a dream and what was real. Hatred and pain scattered all else into the wind.
He mustn't fall asleep here. He must stand up. *Stand up, stand up, if anyone is going to die, you have to be the one to die first.*

[Subaru: …don..’t die……ev..ryone……just me, dying…… is more than enough……!]

Spewing blood while wrenching out these words, Subaru desperately tried to push himself off the ground. His right arm already useless, he frantically crawled with his left. A red curtain had been drawn over his left field of vision, and Subaru knew that it was the blood flowing from his forehead. Roughly scraping his eyelids against his shoulder, he clenched his teeth as if to crush his molars, and turned up his face.

[Subaru: ――――]

The carnage spanned out before him.

Every swing of the beast’s arm sent men flying, blood spraying, extinguishing the flames of life. No matter how courageous and desperate their resolve, their resistance fell uselessly against the beast. Its golden fur was stained only with their blood, and their deaths had no meaning at all. Mere defiance, only to be blown away like dust. Not the slightest meaning at all.
If there was only a single “Death” that could be meaningful, it was Subaru’s.

[Subaru: Stop it, stop it, stop it stop it stop it…… please, stop……!]

If you are going to kill, kill me first.
He was the target to begin with. There was no reason to hurt those brave, kind people, no reason to take their lives.
Or, rather, wasn’t their deaths just another consequence of Subaru’s stupidity? If so, then isn’t it just too――

[Subaru: ――ug, ah!?]

Subaru felt his body being picked up, as his face dropped down towards the ground.
Dangling helplessly from his back, Subaru was lifted off the ground by Patrasche, who was bleeding profusely from her wounds. Despite only barely clinging onto life after Garfiel’s merciless strike, she had crawled to Subaru’s side.
Witnessing her pitiful state, Subaru could not hold back what was welling up in the back of his eye from flowing out,

[Subaru: No, it’s alright…… that’s enough. You’ve done enough, Patrasche……]

Softly calling to her, Subaru reached out his hand to Patrasche’s blood-soaked jaw. But she shook her head at Subaru’s voice, as if trying to say [It’s not over yet, you know]. Then, tugging her muzzle under Subaru’s stomach, she lifted the helpless Subaru onto her back.
Subaru groaned in surprise. And with this, Patrasche set out her steps. The steadiness of her strides made one wonder just how she still had strength left within her.
No doubt, she was using up the last strengths of her life.

[Subaru: ――――]

But even with the last ounce of life force she could muster, straining herself to the end, her speed was nothing compared to what she was usually capable of. And so, it was far from enough to escape the pursuing fangs.

The beast's teeth sank into Patrasche's hind leg as she shrieked with pain. Once again, Subaru was thrown into the air. But, floating weightlessly through space, just as he was prepared to crash to the ground, Patrasche reached out her neck and caught him in her jaw.
And, in the same motion, with all her might, she used her head to throw him as far as she could into the depths of the trees.

[Subaru: ――――!]

Subaru knew that it was all Patrasche could have done to put him as far from harm's way as she could.
At the same time, he realized it. Why, after parting with Ram, she had taken the shortcuts through the forest to rejoin with the train of refugees.

――Patrasche had sensed the existence of the beast.

And because she sensed it, in order to increase the chance of Subaru's survival, if only by a little, she fled towards the place where there were the largest number of other preys. All to protect Subaru.

Slamming onto the ground, Subaru's body bounced once, then twice. And after wailing at the third bounce―― weightlessness overtook his body once again.

[Subaru: ――a]

A steep slope opened into a ravine, and Subaru's body rolled straight downward. Without even the strength to cry out, scraped by branches and gravel, tossed from bounce to bounce, Subaru's body tumbled and fell,

[Subaru: ――――]

Sliding in somersaults, his vision swirling and swaying, Subaru caught a glimpse of what was above him.
There, he witnessed a sight he had no wish to see.

[Subaru: ――――patrasche]

The great tiger held Patrasche's body in its jaws, and clenched down with unimaginable force. Its fangs tore into her flesh, and in a mass of spraying blood, her body was crushed in two.
Unable to even cry out in death, the loyal dragon sacrificed her last for Subaru.

[Subaru: ――――]

His throat burned. His throat was tearing. Rage was boiling his brain and it felt like his blood was catching fire.
Bouncing, tumbling, sliding, rolling, scraping, Subaru went on falling.

――Rebounding high into the air, he felt weightless once again.

Crashing to the ground, his consciousness was swallowed into the impact.
His body did not stop falling. But all awareness had already separated from his flesh.

——Only a resentful voice, which refused to disappear, swirled and churned within his chest.

Chapter 43 [And Then Everyone Was--]

——What woke him was the feeling of water drops dripping onto his face.

The steady rhythm of cold droplets splashing on his cheek pulled his consciousness upward. And alongside the awakening of his consciousness, an acute sense of being alive slowly permeated throughout his body.
Simply put, it was that primal and intense sensation which required no words to convey——
Pain.

[Subaru: ……dgah]

As if to welcome Subaru's awakening, agonizing pain embraced him with open arms. Once the initial shock was felt, there was no way to avoid the rest of the onslaught.
His cracked forehead, his mangled right arm, and his spine that was marred by the extreme impact all shrieked with pain. But, far exceeding all of them, was,

[Subaru: this's b..ad……]

Directing his gaze towards the source of the razor-sharp pain, Subaru found that a branch as thick as two fingers had skewered him through the area under his right collarbone. Its point was slick with blood, and as much as Subaru rallied his resolve to pull it out it in spite of the pain, it refused to budge an inch.
Fortunately, the branch was broken on the way down, so, as long as Subaru ignored it visually, it wouldn't do much to impede his movements.

[Subaru: way too eccentric…… this fashion……]

Somehow managing to get his unresponsive body to move and sitting himself up, Subaru leaned into a nearby rock-face to catch his breath. Looking over his surroundings, he found himself at the entrance of a small cave. Apparently, the water dripping onto his face was the morning dew falling from the top of the cave's mouth. ——But morning dew would mean,

[Subaru: it's morning……!?]

As Subaru understood the heartless passage of time, intense pain coursed up his trembling body as though the back of his eye was painted red and his entire body was pierced by needles. A tear rose in his single eye as his thoughts slowly caught up.
What happened to him before he lost consciousness? Recalling it,

[Subaru: ——a]

Subaru remembered what senseless tragedy his existence had brought.
Timidly gazing upwards, he saw the daylight penetrating between the gaps of the trees and into the forest. Bathed in that light, Subaru looked up towards the slope from which he fell——
wondering what kind of scene was awaiting him there.

[Subaru: ——ng]

Gulping down a breath, tormented by the guilt of not dying straight away, Subaru crawled at a caterpillar's pace, heading towards the other side of the slope.
Although his movements were hindered by the branch jutting from his chest, slowly but surely, he drew closer with time.
If this was the old Subaru, just imagining the scene that was awaiting him would have gripped him with horror, and he would probably have run away, refusing to look. But the current Subaru would not permit that.

He must see it to the end, swallow it down, and make it his food.
Because this was the duty of Natsuki Subaru, having failed to die when he should have.

[Subaru: hha……hhaa]

With one crawl, and then another, he dragged himself up the slope with only his upper body off the ground. His breath panting, sweat soaking the dried wounds on his forehead, blood seeped out once more. He rudely wiped at it with his sleeve, soiling his face with mud and blood as he crawled.
Crawling past a totaled carriage, passing around a large toppled tree, Subaru's fingers reached the destined rim of the slope—— the spot from which Patrasche threw him in her sacrifice.

[Subaru: ————]

For a moment, there was hesitation.
By raising his head and extending his neck to peek over, Subaru would be faced with the inescapable reality. He will no longer be able to escape into his imagination and indulge in the fantasy that some miracle might have occurred after he was driven away and that the majority of the refugees had managed to escape.

[Subaru: What am I, stupid? ……no, I am stupid]

Without a doubt, in his one sided vision, Subaru had witnessed the moment Patrasche was crushed under the beast's jaw. After offering her all for Subaru, the instant of that loyal dragon's death was still branded into the back of Subaru's eyelids. To pretend that it was a dream or to escape into some convenient fantasy was nothing less than to insult her, who had sacrificed the very last embers of her life for Subaru.

Igniting the flame of conviction in his heart, Subaru wrenched out what little willpower he had left and opened his eye. Pushing himself up on his stomach, through the thick branches obstructing his vision and beyond the opening forest, in the scene of the tragedy——

[Subaru: ————h?]

There was nothing.

Nothing at all.

[Subaru: how is that…… pos…ble?]

With his face still twisted from imagining the carnage that was supposed to have panned out before him, Subaru's eye bulged in disbelief, unable to accept the scene that dawned on his sight.

There were scattered wrecks of carriages and several uprooted trees. Claw marks were still gouged deep into the ground, and there were signs of destruction and resistance all over.

And yet, the most heartbreaking sight was not there.
The remnants of the slaughter. The corpses of the villagers who, in the truest sense of the words, gave their lives so Subaru could escape. The corpse of the ground dragon who was torn in two for her loyalty.
They were all nowhere to be found.

[Subaru: ――――]

The beast and the battle could not have been a dream. The scattered wreckages proved this. Only, the consequence of the tragedy was missing.

With great effort, Subaru used a nearby tree to pull himself up. Fortunately, after the initial shock had passed, the wounds in his leg and hips were no more than superficial scrapes and bruises. He stood up, holding his right arm steady with his left to stop it from hurting from the motion of dangling. And, looking over his surroundings,

[Subaru: Ho..w? Where's Patrasche…… everyone…… Otto?]

He didn't want to see their corpses.
Honestly, he would like nothing more than if everyone survived. But there was no way for that kind of pipe dream to be true. Subaru, of all people, knew this in his very cells
After all, before Subaru lost consciousness, he had already witnessed several lives being extinguished by the beast's claws.

The scrawny youth fought to the end, but without leaving even a single scratch, he was crushed. There was the woman who lost her life when she was tossed out from the dragon carriage that was sent flying. And the old man was snapped like a dried twig by a single swing of the beast's claw, leaving nothing but a miserable corpse behind.
With every remembered death, pain and regret shaved away at Subaru's heart. Yet, even so, those deaths that he supposedly witnessed here had somehow been stolen from this place.

[Subaru: Patrasche…… Patrasche……?]

Thinking of the lives that were lost, Subaru feebly and despairingly called his partner's name. The moment her body was torn in two, and the pain of her final gasp, Subaru had certainly seen and heard it, so he had no fleeting hopes that she could still be alive.
Nevertheless, he had wanted to find her soul-departed remains, and apologize. It was something only Subaru could do.

His steps dragged, and his body was near exhaustion. The search was slow and feeble, and it took all of two hours just to explore the surrounding area.
But despite spending all this time, all Subaru found was,

[Subaru: Luggage mixed with the wreckages, scraps of clothes, and……]

Massive amounts of blood.
Just as Subaru imagined with near-certainty, everything carved by the beast's claws was

accompanied by mass volumes of blood. He had expected there to be the choking stench of blood drifting about the scene, but perhaps because the blood clotting up Subaru's nose canal had deprived him of his olfactory senses, he didn't smell a thing.

He had already assembled enough evidence that the fact could not be denied. Yet the only piece he could not find was the conclusive proof itself, and how it came to be lost was enshrouded in mystery.
Even more importantly, it was while searching through the surroundings, that the extremely belated question finally burned into his mind. That is――

[Subaru: Why wasn't I.. killed……?]

He didn't finish Subaru off―― although Subaru surviving all those wounds may have been difficult to believe, it would still have been far too careless to have gone back without at least inspecting the body. After all, Subaru was Garfiel's target to begin with.
Even though he still couldn't understand why Garfiel would turn his claws to the refugees, he might have done it to teach Subaru a lesson.

But if that were the case, there would be even less reason for the bodies to disappear.

[Subaru: Even if… they were carried away……]

There were 42 refugees in total. Even if everyone turned into a corpse, it would still be too unrealistic to tow them all away, not to mention Patrasche and the other ground dragons as well.

[Subaru: But still……]

He didn't want to imagine it, but if they were swallowed into the great beast's belly―― yet, for the same numerical problem, it wasn't a realistic theory. At least, while it was conceivable how they could be carried away, what was inconceivable was how they could afford the labor required to hide the bodies from sight.
In the end, before even considering whether the tiger would do such a roundabout thing, the crucial question was why it didn't make an effort to finish the wounded Subaru off.

[Subaru: ――――]

Suddenly, it occurred to him just how much this scene resembled the depopulated Sanctuary. Although the conditions leading up to it were different, the results had many points in common. All the signs of the surrounding destruction were from the great tiger's rampage, and unrelated to the tiger and the refugee's disappearance. If one looked past the this most striking aspect of the scene, the two were eerily similar in that there were no bodies in sight.
In other words,

[Subaru: Th-the Sanctuary would be in the same state as last time too……?]

His breath growing ragged as he came to that conclusion, Subaru once again used up all his strength to stand. Then, looking over his surroundings, he deduced the direction of the Sanctuary.
――This was the morning of the sixth day.

Last night was probably the deadline for the Mansion. Although he could not say for certain, if Elsa's attack took place, then it was already too late to prevent the tragedy.
On the Sanctuary's side, something must have happened that made the tiger-morphed Garfiel abandon the thought of dealing Subaru the final blow. That something must have also been the reason why everyone here disappeared. But why the same thing didn't happen to Subaru remained completely unknown.

[Subaru: ――――]

Which way to go? Subaru hesitated for only a moment.
A warmth passing through his chest sent a faint ache across his heart. It was the inseverable sensation of guilt and remorse for the girl, still in her slumber, and all those he left in the Mansion.
Clenching his teeth, Subaru shook off these emotions and turned his steps to the Sanctuary.

With slow, dragging steps, in order to find out what had happened, Subaru made his way towards the Sanctuary.
What was waiting for him ahead? So that he could burn something worthy of the lives that were lost into his memories, he intended to spend this life for that redemption, even if only for the smallest hint to increase his chances of prevailing in the end.

――On the way to the Sanctuary, he passed through the place where Ram and Garfiel had fought.

There were scars left by wind-blades on the trunks of the nearby trees, as well as familiar claw-marks carved into the earth and the rocks, brutally gouged out by whole chunks at a time.
He briefly searched the area for any signs of Ram―― or, most likely, Ram's body. But, unsurprisingly, he did not find her.

If the enormous tiger really was Garfiel, then, to him, she should have been his long-time crush. Subaru might even have believed it if their feelings grew into something deeper, but,

[Subaru: To go to the point of killing each other just to say "I like you"…… I must've read too many light novels]

Because neither of them would back down, it did not end until one had killed the other.
Just how much could that love or longing have helped to stem the tide? If it truly could have stopped the violence, it would have stopped it before it even began.
The moment they had cast it aside, there was already nothing that could have stopped them.

[Subaru: ……I'm, sorry]

She was nowhere in sight, but Subaru nevertheless offered his apology to the girl who did her best to save him.
Her fight would also become meaningless, and her thought would have been in vain once Subaru returned to the Sanctuary. For ahead of his path was something Subaru needed, now that he intended to die.

Despite his mounting regrets, Subaru doggedly walked towards the Sanctuary. The road on which he had begun walking before noon was only a distance of about ten minutes on Patrasche's back.
Defying his wounds, and advancing at a caterpillar's pace, it was already evening by the time Subaru drew close to the Sanctuary.

[Subaru: took half a day……fin..ally……]

He was back.
Almost collapsing on the spot of relief, there wasn't the slightest sense of accomplishment. Instead, the flame consuming Subaru's insides was the sense of powerlessness and anger at himself. And far surpassing his self-hatred, was something black and shimmering,

[Subaru: You fucking back yet…… huh, Garfiel……?]

Don't think about it, don't think about it, he told himself in his heart to stem the overpowering hatred and rage towards that golden-haired piece of shit.

There were three primary reasons he returned to the Sanctuary.
The first was to get to the bottom of the mystery of how everyone had disappeared. It was essential for the future to grasp at least a part of that answer.
The second was to confirm that Emilia, who had remained in the Sanctuary, was safe. If everyone had disappeared, she would probably be no exception. So he intended to make sure.
And the third―― far greater than the previous two reasons combined, was that furious flame charring the depths of Subaru's heart.

The impulse to tear that bloody tiger apart.

He took a step into the Sanctuary. Two moss ridden pillars stood in place of an entrance. Passing between them and entering the Sanctuary, Subaru quietly lowered the sound of his breathing as he looked around him.
Silence had fallen on the Sanctuary, as one would expect of a place devoid of people. But even before that, Subaru had not heard a single insect in the forest on his whole walk here.

It wasn't just the residents of the Sanctuary that had disappeared. It was as though the activity of every living thing in the region had been halted into silence.

[Subaru: ―――――]

Even his own breathing felt too noisy in this silence. Subaru painfully pushed his throat to the limit to not make a sound. Taking short, careful breaths and dragging steps, Subaru headed to the depths of the Sanctuary―― to the house where Emilia should be.

――In the hours before nightfall, Emilia would be passing the time leading up to the Trials curled up and hugging her knees. This usually became particularly striking after the third day, and especially this time, when Subaru was not at her side. Most likely, isolation and frustration had been shaving down her heart more acutely than in any of the loops before this.

[Subaru: not here, huh……]

Pushing open the door and looking inside, Subaru saw no one in the room and sighed.
Although Emilia was absent, her unoccupied bed was messy, and a chair was left knocked over by the bed. He could not be sure if this happened while she was resisting whatever caused the disappearance, or if Emilia, worn to her limit, had done this out of impulse.
Only, all the way along the road, Subaru hadn't encountered a single person.

[Subaru: Should I stop by Roswaal's place……?]

Accepting that Emilia was no longer here, Subaru's heart was calm as he considered the next course of action.
Although decisiveness in carrying out his plan was necessary, part of himself already knew that he would find nothing even if he went there.

Just as he feared, there was no one in the Sanctuary. The moment Emilia was gone, Subaru should no longer have any attachment to this place.
Emilia, who was supposed to be the subject of his attachments, had disappeared. But, as Subaru noticed, even this had barely caused a stir in his heart.

Was it because he finally had acquired that unshakable, dauntless, dazzling heart of steel?

No, Subaru immediately shook his head.
This sense of loss, of being deprived of the harbor of his emotions, was far too different from that heart of steel he had strived for. This, was but the result of excessive rage at the end of incomprehension, having worn everything else away, leaving only a fractured heart behind.
It was not unshakable, but only drained of all its contents.

——He had already lost the will to live.

Of course, it was only natural.
The current Subaru wasn't living for the sake of living. He had failed to die when he was supposed to, and so, he couldn't die until he had found something to justify his prolonged life.
In other words, it was not the will to live, but the resolve to die where all his consciousness was focused.

What was there to live for in a world like this?
Emilia was gone. Rem was gone. Patrasche was dead, and most likely Ram and Petra, too. And there was no question whether Otto had survived or not.
There was no one. There was no one left. Because Subaru wasn't smart enough, because Subaru wasn't strong enough, because Subaru didn't try hard enough, because Subaru didn't want it enough, he failed to save everyone. He didn't save anyone. Even though it was something only Subaru could do.

[Subaru: So…… I……]

Have to take it all back. See it to the end. And set everything on the correct path.
It was something only Subaru could do. And it was something Subaru had to do.

All the sacrifices made for its sake, Subaru must always keep in his heart.
All that which was lost, Subaru must always keep in his thoughts.
All the price that must be paid, Subaru must always continue to pay.

To pay whatever price. Pile on the sacrifices. And take it all back in the end.

[Subaru: ――――]

Limping and staggering, Subaru came out of the building.
His steps did not turn towards the residence where Roswaal was recuperating, but to the very depths of the Sanctuary―― the Tomb. Last time, wandering through the depopulated Sanctuary, it was there where he was killed by “Something”. This time, he was heading to the exact same spot.

What for? To be killed, of course.

If the conditions were the same as last time, then Subaru should be killed there in the exact same manner.
But, knowing that the attack would come, Subaru judged that he should be able to dodge at least one fatal strike.
Even if he was killed by the second blow, as long as he could catch a glimpse of the enemy’s true form, it would be enough.

Having prepared the resolve to die, step by step, Subaru steadily approached his destination.
The place where his stomach was gouged through from behind―― although he couldn’t remember the exact spot, he was certain it was only inches from the entrance of the Tomb.

Spotting the tip of the Tomb’s structure in the distance, Subaru’s heart rate grew frantic as the blood pulsing through his body flashed between hot and cold. Was it heating up or cooling down? Even that, he couldn’t tell.

His body was hot, his hands and feet were numb. But his fingers were stiff, cold, as if pressed against frozen lead, and his head was cool enough to objectively see his situation.

A foolish existence heading to its death, knowing that it would die.
He was supposed to have made the oath in his heart to wager his life in exchange for results, but his expression was far from that resolute will. His brows were downcast, he bit his lips, and his limbs trembled uncontrollably.

All pretense fell away in the final moments, as he loathed himself for revealing that weakness underneath. Pushing that sentiment aside, Subaru went on without slowing his steps.
Even though he couldn’t change the fact that he was weak, frail and stupid, he nonetheless wanted to have the courage to move forward from that self, and become the self he had always wanted.

Just like how a negative and a negative makes a positive, his crooked optimism was banking on weakness and weakness producing something good. And with this, Subaru steadily treaded along the path to the Tomb, and to Death.
The Tomb drew closer. His heartbeats thumped, and he could clearly hear the sound of blood

pulsing through his scalp. The bile retching up from his empty stomach burned in his throat. His trembling knees were on the verge of collapsing to the ground, and his left field of vision was drenched by sweat, blurring everything in sight.
Roughly raising his left arm to wipe his eye, he faced forward once again. And it was then, he noticed it.

[Subaru: ——a?]

Just as he lifted his leg towards the Tomb, Subaru saw that a change had taken place before his eyes.
Without even the chatter of insects audible, there was only the chorus of the occasional rustling of leaves stirred up by the wind. But suddenly, cutting into it, there was the sound of a small, intermittent chirp.

At first, Subaru thought it was a small, white furball being blown over by the wind.
But the furball stopped just a few paces in front of Subaru, and made a little twitch. Incredulous, Subaru furrowed his brows as he saw two long ears rise up.

[Subaru: a, rabbit?]

A little animal with two long ears and white, fluffy fur. With two characteristic red eyes, its mouth jittered as it looked about its surroundings. Then, looking up at Subaru, it tilted its little head, and let out a high-pitched squeal.
A small, teeny-tiny rabbit. It was about the size of Subaru's fist and, at a glance, it was not that far from the size of a hamster. But since its ears were as big as the rest of its body, the term "fits in your hand" might be slightly misleading.

In a place where bugs, humans, and dragons all vanished without a trace, there was suddenly a rabbit.
Although it could be just one of the critters that lived in the forest, considering how Subaru hadn't encountered a single living creature up to this point, seeing it here was exceedingly strange.

[Subaru: Why is there a rabbit here…… it.. is a rabbit.. right?]

With endless questions, Subaru looked over his surroundings, confused, trying to see if there were other animals besides this rabbit that had wandered back into the Sanctuary. And, with no particular intention, he reached out his hand towards the rabbit, hoping to confirm what it was, or perhaps just wanting to pet its fur——

[Subaru: ————]

The next moment, Subaru's entire left hand was detached from his wrist upwards.

Blood sprayed out from the ragged, sloppy wound, and green-blue veins dangled from the stump. Were the thin, white strings tendons or nerves? Either way, it's always something grotesque when human body parts are destroyed—— and those, were his few seconds of escape from reality.

Pain of an entirely other dimension trashed at Subaru's brain, and, suffocating from the agony, his body collapsed to the ground. The branch that pierced his collarbone snapped in half upon impact, transforming into shattering pain. *Pain, pain, pain.*

[Subaru: Ggha!? Aa,uaghaa! Aaauu, uuuuaaAAAA,AAAAAAAGHAAAAAAAAA!!]

His thoughts turned white-hot.
It hurts. Every cell of his body was dominated by this emotion of pain and there was already no way to register the reality of the agony as the thought occurred to him why it had to hurt so much and where it came from and why was it happening to him and why it hurt so much and *it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts*——

Suffocating from sheer agony, blood gushed from Subaru's wrist as he drove it into the ground, and, for some reason, he bit into the earth, inexplicably gnawing at the puddle of mud. The bitter, asphyxiating soil brought back a moment of mental clarity, and his eyes dashed as if searching for the cause, when he saw the white furball at his feet—— the little animal's white fur was speckled with dots of red, and its tiny mouth was busy working away. Under its black nose, its cheeks were puffed up, twitching. And, sticking out of its mouth, Subaru saw his left pinky finger.

Understood. Gotcha. What happened here? He got eaten. He got eaten. He just got eaten.

[Subaru: Gu, ghhfffuuaaaAAAAAA!!]

Comprehension and pain drove him into a scream bordering insanity, Subaru turned to face the rabbit. His right arm was broken and immobile, and his left wrist was in the rabbit's belly. There was nothing he could do, but if he could just confirm its true form——

He felt something burning into his thigh. With the unamusing shock of sharp, merciless blades scraping his flesh to the bone, he turned up the whites of his eyes as white foam gushed from the back of his throat. If only he could lay down his head and faint, but the intensity of the agony had no intention of releasing his consciousness.

Bubbling blood spilled from the corner of his lips, and he writhed like a fish on land. The fact that his ears could still hear, must be both a miracle and a joke by a cruel God.

Like the rustle of lapping waves, the sound captured Subaru's eardrums.
Little hops. Small, tiny bodies. The chain of overlapping chirps expanded to enormity, and even if his vision were still present, he had no desire to count them.
And, in a moment, he was sincerely glad that the only thing left to him was his ears.

Simultaneously feeling the bites of feeding teeth over all of his body, now, through the tactile and unmistakable pain, Subaru understood that he was being devoured by threats numbering in the hundreds.
He shrieked. And a surge pushed him onto his back as his throat trembled. Immediately, furry creatures dived into his opened mouth. His tongue was torn to shreds, sharp teeth flashed across the depths of his throat, ravaging everything from his esophagus to his stomach.
Inside, they collided with the others that had invaded from his rectum, and, as if descending into a competition, they devoured his organs left and right, turning Natsuki Subaru into minced feed.

It was the unmistakable sensation of being alive while living creatures shredded him from within.
Fear had already left him. There was barely any more pain. He couldn't understand why he was still conscious.
He was being eaten. He was being eaten. His left eye was gouged out. His ears were no longer there. His organs had already been consumed, and now the skin of his face was being peeled off. A hole opened in his skull, and teeth sank into his exposed, bulging brain——

——

————

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——————————

——————————————————————————————*ah*—.

Chapter 44 [Forbidden]

——His body was formed anew.

His devoured flesh, his peeled skin, his gnawed bones, his chewed nerves, his slurped up blood, and his soul, trampled and ravaged with the utmost gluttonous relish—— returned to their original shapes.

A sensation came from his fingertips, and with this as the starting point, his whole body began to jolt and convulse.
Kicking up dust, writhing on the cold, hard ground, he groaned as white foam flowed from the corner of his mouth.
There was no pain. Nor sense of loss. His four limbs were still attached to his torso, and no physical damage had been incurred by his head and body. Yet his thoughts were vague as though he had just woken from sleep, and instead of clearing in a matter of seconds, Subaru's body and mind continued to reject the homecoming of reality.
Such was the horror of the events preceding his Return.

Could anyone say that they've experienced being invaded through the mouth and having their intestines shredded and devoured from inside? Or ever had the feeling of having their skins peeled off like it were a competition, exposing their dark red flesh and allowing their pink fat to be licked away by unruly tongues?
His brain refused to feel that pain, and as though it was happening to someone else's body and not his own, he objectively recognized the truth that he was being "Eaten", like in a waking nightmare.

[Subaru: Bgh, bgh, bgh……]

A nauseating sensation rushed up, and only yellow bile was retched from his dried-up stomach.
The foam blowing from his mouth mixed with the acidic liquid, as Subaru continued to convulse, collapsed on his side.
Like a person having a seizure, or a fish flopping on land, the rejection of reality was not by Subaru's own volition, but by the choice of his very soul.
For who would gladly assent to their own existence being devoured and eaten? And who could blame Subaru for interpreting the reality of his being devoured in such a way?

What had he done to deserve it, whose will was behind it, and was there no alternative to that wretched end?

[Subaru: ————]

His consciousness flashed and flickered.
Were his eyes open or shut? No control over his body returned to him.
His very soul refused to live in reality. Far from allowing him to choose awareness, his soul did not even present him with the choice.
Only, overwhelmed by the "Loss of its own existence", Subaru's body continued to drown in that sense of despair.

——*Why.*

If there was a single definite word within Subaru's mind, it would be that one.

——*Why.*

What the hell happened? What was that? Why did that happen? Why did that have to happen? What was happening to him now? Was there something that must happen to him now? What was he supposed to do now?

——*Why, why, why, why, why.*

Presented with no answers, while even the question itself was uncertain, there was only the shrieking of his soul.

——*Why! Why! Why!*

He continued to throw out the question which was without an answer, an unsightly figure who doesn't know when to give up.
Drowning in reality, tormented by a nightmare, one who had lost sight of the path of life, a figure asking "Why".
And, it was then——

{You have once again acquired the qualifications}

A voice whispered in the ears of the shivering Subaru.
High, and exalted. A voice which, even if the present Subaru heard it, he could not decipher its meaning. Nonetheless, the terrible voice echoed into Subaru's interior——

{You are invited——to the Witch's tea party}

In the next instant, Subaru's only-just-returned consciousness once again lost all reality.

A refreshing wind reminiscent of summer blew across the small hill of lush, green grass.

The cool breeze caressed Subaru's bangs, swaying the tall, green grass behind him, then, passing the hill and through the plains, it made its way towards the distant blue sky where white clouds were dancing.
Lightly touching his fingertips to his bangs that were being tickled by the invisible wind, Subaru squinted his eyes at the dazzling sunlight before slowly lowering his gaze to look directly in front of him.

Without knowing how or when, he found himself seated in a swaying armchair. And across a small white table, sitting with her legs crossed in the same type of chair, with an impression of pure white hair and pure white skin that was only overturned by her funerary dress, was a girl—— or not, for that might not have been the appropriate word.

[Subaru: After all, it's a Witch-sama who's been idling here for more than four hundred years……]

[Echidona: Well, that's an awful thing to say to a girl. In my case, I died when I was nineteen, you know. Shouldn't I look like a pretty young girl who's quite a perfect match for you?]

[Subaru: That "Died when I was nineteen" part was pretty heavy-sobering… Also, please don't use that kind of weird statement to try to get close to me. A perfect match for me… that's gonna send snot flying out my nose, you know]

[Echidona: Aya, my, my…… have I just been dumped?]

[Subaru: Not at all. I'm just telling you not to say stuff that'll make your value plummet, you know. I'm quite aware of what a lowlife bottomfeeder-scum I am. Calling yourself a perfect match for me is only gonna drag you down instead of pulling me up. I mean I… haven't done anything to make me deserve anything like that]

His fists resting on his knees opened and clenched as Subaru spilled these words, looking up to the sky with a bitter expression.
Hearing this, the Witch―― Echidona rested her elbows on the white table and her cheeks in her hands, inspecting Subaru up and down with her gaze.

[Echidona: You sure seem to have a low opinion of yourself]

[Subaru: When you're surrounded by epic characters all the time, it's only natural you'd get into the habit of turning up your head every time you talk. Even though I thought I was supposed to have gotten over that inferiority complex already…]

Looking back on everything he had done up to this point, Subaru tightly clenched his fists.
The force of his grip sent his knuckles clicking as he took a single, deep breath,

[Subaru: So…… what made you send me this tea party invite?]

[Echidona: It's nothing complicated. I am the "Witch of Greed", the Incarnation of the Thirst for Knowledge. The thirst, and the desiring heart are pleasures to me, and to have something to yearn to know, to moan and sigh asking "Why" is indeed the greatest of all pleasures]

Saying this, Echidona brought her teacup to her lips.
With the sound of its contents passing down her throat, she lightly smiled,

[Echidona: If I must give a reason, I hope you can understand that it is because you yourself expressed the wish to enter my Citadel, in a location closely connected to this place]

[Subaru: Don't give me that convoluted…… well, anyway, we can leave why you invited me here for now. More importantly, there's something I want to ask]

Dismissing Echidona's words by waving his hand, Subaru leaned forward. Locking his gaze onto her beautiful, white features,

[Subaru: What.. happened to me?]

[Echidona: Isn't that something you should know yourself?]

[Subaru: Knowing and comprehending are different things. I can kind of objectively understand the situation I was in, but that understanding doesn't fit my current situation at all]

[Echidona: How so?]

[Subaru: My head was going insane, and I was drowning on land in my own foam, but here, I'm presentable and my head is at least functioning well enough to carry on a conversation. So it's pretty natural that I'd figure you had something to do with this]

Although he was carrying on the exchange somewhat mockingly, Subaru's mind was in overdrive trying to come to some understanding of his present situation.
At the very least, being invited to this so-called tea party inside Echidona's dream world had granted his heart a room to breathe.
Having been given the space to calm his thoughts and search his mind, Subaru remembered the dire circumstances his body was facing in the real world before entering this dream. He did feel a certain sense of unease about leaving behind a body that was going through a state of shock to come here with his spirit, but,

[Subaru: Last time I attended your tea party, I woke up in bed with no idea how I got there, so I don't know how the passage of time works in this place. I mean, in the actual world outside……]

Thinking to this point, it suddenly occurred to him that this was no time to be relaxing and sipping tea.

——Since he was overtaken by convulsions in his state of shock, Subaru still had no idea what point in time he had returned to.

Much less was he able to confirm the location where he lay writhing and foaming at the mouth.
Burning with regret at this late reaction, Subaru stood up, toppling the chair he was sitting in,

[Subaru: Echidona! Let me out of here now!]

[Echidona: I am appalled, to think you'd leave a Witch's tea party without drinking a single sip of tea. You really should stop to consider just what kind of an existence is sitting before you——]

[Subaru: I don't have time to chat with you! Let me out now! While we're dawdling here like this, outside……]

[Echidona: You have already failed before by taking nothing away, do you still wish to go empty-handed? ……Could it be that you actually want to relive that same loss and pain?]

Unable to hold back his anxiety, Subaru raised his voice at Echidona's unhurried remarks. But, as if plunging that impatience into an icy bath, Echidona asked this in a voice that froze all emotions.

[Subaru: ……a]

[Echidona: To go on challenging in order to obtain the results is something worthy of my praises. Whether it is the result you most desired, or the one you least desired, I find there is a certain

beauty in the process of trial and error on the road to that result. The fact that you continue to challenge without losing heart is most admirable, I feel. However,]

Raising a finger in front of the silenced Subaru, Echidona went on, narrowing her eyes,

[Echidona: If you do not heed the results of your previous attempts, and instead choose to follow the exact same paths to the exact same ends…… your actions are a desecration to the accumulation of knowledge, and for one who would commit such acts, I hold nothing but contempt, and could not wait to be rid of you]

[Subaru: You……]

[Echidona: Incidentally, to answer your question…… the current time outside is immediately after you passed the first Trial of the Tomb. Fortunately, the flow of time here is different from the outside world. I am sure you won't lose too much time just by having a cup of tea with me]

What Subaru wanted to know, along with his every concern, Echidona checked off one by one.
If what she said could be believed, the time outside would be directly after the first Trial――
that is to say, the restart point of Return by Death hadn't changed.
And, left out of the tea party, his physical body would be in the room inside the Tomb, abandoned at Emilia's side as she continued to battle her Trial.

Although he couldn't just swallow everything Echidona said, at least, having this fact confirmed by a third party injected relief into Subaru's anxious veins.
With the leeway granted by his calming heart, at last, the question arose――

[Subaru: Echidona…… how much do you know?]

[Echidona: If you ask me how much I know, I only know as much as I know. But as for how much I want to know, I want to know everything in this world]

[Subaru: Stop joking around, this is important. For instance……yes, you just said this is immediately after the first Trial…]

The first Trial―― that phrase felt so distant now.
After saying farewell to his parents in the dream world, Subaru met Echidona in an empty school. And following a brief exchange of question and answers, Subaru returned to reality.
And after that, on the way up to this temporary calm, too much had happened to be put into mere words――

[Subaru: I mean, aside from that, this reunion would be right after we parted……]

[Echidona: Indeed. Certainly, in objective time, this would be true, and even in uncertain, subjective time, it has not been long since you and I parted. It must have only been a couple of minutes before we saw each other again]

"Just how much are you yearning for me?" Echidona seemed to suggest with her smile. But, seeing the joke wash off of an expressionless Subaru, she gave a disappointed shrug.

[Echidona: It seems you just never give me the reactions I want. Not getting what I expected is both some parts frustrating and some parts delightful, quite a complicated feeling, really]

[Subaru: I'll be sure to arrange a nice leisurely date with that complicated girl's heart of yours when I have the time. But for now……]

[Echidona: Oh, I was so eager to celebrate our early reunion that I seem to have let my mouth run. Well, I guess there's no helping it that I'd feel a little flustered. After all—]

Here, Echidona paused.
In the void created by the catching of a breath, within that moment, her dark, black pupils cast Subaru an alluring glance. What was that glimpse of emotion flashing through her eyes in that instant? Even now, Subaru could not be certain.
Only, as if welcoming Subaru's confusion, Echidona returned a lovely, enchanting smile,

[Echidona: Unlike me, who parted with you only minutes ago, to you, it must have seemed like hours, or rather days, since we last met—— isn't that so?]

Repeating Echidona's words in his head, Subaru chewed over the contents that could have only one interpretation.

From what she just said, and her meaningful gaze and smile, there was no way he could be mistaken.
She——the Witch knew. The burden weighing on Subaru's soul, the residues of his failed futures, the piece of knowledge that should be left nowhere in this world.

[Subaru: How……!?]

[Echidona: Let me answer your question this way. This is my Citadel, and I am the Witch of Greed. I haven't shown it to you yet, have I?]

To Subaru's wrenched-out question, Echidona tilted her head and held out her right hand. Dancing lights descended onto her palm, eventually taking form—— until there appeared a single book bound in pure white.
There was no title inscribed on its cover, and it was about the size of a dictionary. Aside from the fact that its color was blinding white, for Subaru, the sight of the book brought back nothing but reviled memories.

[Subaru: That couldn't be……a Gospel, could it?]

[Echidona: Oh my, you just made an expression I could understand without even having to look inside this book. It's as if your face is trying to say "You too!?" Just from that, I think I could already guess what you must've encountered in the outside world……]

Having read into Subaru's inner heart from just the look on his face, Echidona opened the white-bound book in her hand. And, running her eyes over its contents, [Mmhmmhm], she nodded time and again as she followed along its texts,

[Echidona: I see, I think I more or less understand. Although there are still parts I don't entirely follow, I should be able to fill them in just by looking at you. ……Mnn, it's wonderful indeed.

The feeling of missing pieces falling into place, the indescribable anticipation as the answer draws near. The fact that such feeling exists is precisely what makes life worth living……!]

[Subaru: ……but, aren't you already dead?]

Being pushed into the back of his seat by the pressure of Echidona's incensed fervor, Subaru somehow managed to get a jab in. Hearing this, Echidona fiddled with her white hair, sulking,

[Echidona: When you rain on people's parades like that, even when it's true, it's still really demoralizing, you know. Anyway, then let me ease your worries. ……This book is not the same as the "Gospels" in your memories. Recorded in this book is neither the future nor the optimal solutions. Only truth]

[Subaru: Truth……?]

[Echidona: If the Gospel could be called a book of prophecies, then this book in my hands would be a book of histories. This book is not bound by its shape, and its manifestation is as vague and as vast as the oceans. It is not any book, and yet it could be any book that was, or indeed any book that could be…… its blank pages record only truth, and four hundred years ago, people of this world called it "The Book of Wisdom". But, I like to call it…]

[Subaru: ――――]

[Echidona: ――The Memories of the World]

An outlandish name―― for an equally outlandish power.
If what she said was true, then no matter who the person was, no matter what that person had done, as long as it belonged in the past and in history, it could be read from this book. In terms of gathering information, this would be nothing less than a game-breaking cheat.

[Echidona: But to tell you the truth, I don't really like to rely on it. After all, only things witnessed with my own eyes can be truly burned into my memories. A magical book that skips the step of "Acquiring" and directly leads to "Acquired"―― as much as I love to learn, it is difficult for me to judge the value of a book that bypasses the process of discovery]

[Subaru: If you don't want it you could give it to me. I'll have plenty of uses for it. In fact, if I had that, finding the openings to my problems would be……]

[Echidona: You should abandon that idea if you don't want to be a cripple]

Echidona cut off Subaru's smooth proposition straight off the bat, and held out the white-bound "Memories of the World" in front of him,

[Echidona: It may look harmless, but it's still the instrument of a Witch. The volume of information that it'd burn into the reader's mind would be enough to completely incinerate the brain of a common man. It'd be best not to read it if you wish to stay safe]

[Subaru: Then don't shove it in people's faces! That's super scary!]

Learning that his breakthrough plan was out of his reach, Subaru's spirits nosedived.
Seeing him shove the magical book right back, Echidona, with another wave of her hand,

transformed it back into particles of light. Leaving aside the convenience of a book that could be stored away without a bookshelf, Subaru finally grasped the true extent of her knowledge.
By possessing this magical book, there was indeed almost "Nothing she does not know". But to avoid using it just because of personal preference, perhaps only a Witch would think this way.

[Subaru: But if you already know, then that should make things easier. Say, Echidona. You know that I can…… Return b……]

"Return by Death." Just as he was about to pronounce those words, Subaru's throat froze.
But it was not due to the same non-negotiable penalty that visited every time he tried to utter the forbidden words.
In front of the frozen Subaru, Echidona was merely waiting for his next words, her white hair swaying in the wind, silently waiting.

Sitting there, she looked nothing like a Witch. There was something almost resembling warmth and sympathy, and the more he felt this way, the faster his heart pounded and the heavier his tongue became.

What froze Subaru's voice, was the most primal of emotions——— fear.

[Subaru: Haa……haa……]

Subaru already had several opportunities to utter the forbidden words in the past.
To utter the name of the Authority, "Return by Death", residing in his body.
While it would be difficult to say whether it'd be correct to call it an "Authority", whenever he tried to tell anyone else, a force prevented him from doing so. A direct pain would grip his heart leaving no room for resistance, a force unbearable and merciless.
And there was once when its venomous fangs did not fall on Subaru, but on Emilia, to whom he had tried to lay bare his heart. The grief and pain of loss of that moment, Subaru could never forget.

There were very few occasions when Subaru so sincerely desired to die, and to simply disappear.
It was not the only time that the bitter, indescribable regret of his own stupidity had weighed so heavily upon him. But in spite of misery and regret——— his heart, gripped by terror, still lacked the courage to take even a single step.

It was not that he was afraid of the pain that would be dealt to his heart. Of course, pain was frightening, but if it was the necessary price on the path to the desired future, then he would grit his teeth and endure it.
However, what Subaru feared was that if he uttered the forbidden words, the dark fingers would turn on someone other than himself.

No. Subaru shook his head.
In the battle against the White Whale, and in the final showdowns with Petelgeuse, Subaru had managed to utter the forbidden words when no one else was present.
Otherwise, he would always be forcibly stopped before he could reveal the secret to others, and his words would simply be discarded from the world in which time stood still. Because of that, he was never questioned further.

And the black hand of the Witch never made a sacrifice of anyone who wished to hear the continuation of those words.

——Except Emilia.

[Subaru: ————]

The memories returned, of the silver-haired girl lying lightly in his arms.
If he were to taste that sense of loss again, this time, it would surely be unbearable.

It was a good thing he didn't go insane back then, he thought. After killing Emilia, wandering aimlessly, holding her lifeless corpse in his arms, it was a good thing he didn't go insane back then.

So unforgivable was his sin. And so terrible his crime.

And so, gripped by fear, Subaru hesitated to say the words.
Before him was the Witch Echidona. Frankly, she was no comparison to Emilia, so shallow was her acquaintance to Subaru.
Even if her heart was crushed, he probably wouldn't feel the same loss and despair of that moment. That, was his hideous prediction.

But still, Subaru couldn't move. Because while he was entertaining that naive train of thought, he realized that the conditions were far too different, and the results far too unpredictable.

When mentioning "Return by Death" to an unknowing listener, the forbidden words dealt pain to Subaru's heart.
And when Subaru mentioned "Return by Death" to someone precious to him, the forbidden words crushed that precious person's heart.

But what would happen if Subaru were to reveal "Return by Death" to someone who had already found out through some other means?
Would the suffering end with Subaru, or would the demonic hand extend to the one in front of him——

[Echidona: Why don't you try it and see?]

[Subaru: ————!?]

[Echidona: Taking action to procure the results one desires, is deserving of my respect. I am not going to veer from that opinion. In fact, I believe it is precisely such actions that make life worth living]

Was she unaware of the cause of Subaru's indecision, or was it because she didn't know that she herself could become the target—— no, that would be impossible.

Most likely, the Witch had already seen through all of Subaru's doubts.
Even though he himself could not reach a conclusion, the Witch understood. Yet, in spite of this, she urged him to go on for no other reason than a conviction from the depths of her heart.

[Subaru: You might not have time to regret it, you know……?]

[Echidona: Then, let me wait with eager expectations for you to break down crying beside my corpse]

Seeing Subaru trying to delay the choice to the last minute, Echidona cheerfully answered.
That attitude was probably to remove any remaining concerns hindering him from making his decision.

Rather than doing so out of consideration for Subaru, it was probably her desire to see the outcome――that was the basis of the sincerity of her words.

Without expectations, and without hoping for one or the other.
There was merely possibility. And for only the desire of the possibility of an answer, she pushed on Subaru's back.

She must be living without the slightest doubt of the reason of her existence.
Even though he knew there was no way to live on that alone, he nonetheless felt saved by that strength.

[Subaru: Echidona. I can use Return by Death t――]

The forbidden words escaped his lips――
And, in that instant, the world――

Chapter 45 [Conditions For The Tea Party]

[Subaru: ――to]

Eyes tightly shut, Subaru clenched his teeth in anticipation of the impending fingers of shocking pain.
But this anguished determination was,

[Subaru: ……huh?]

Despite pronouncing the words, none of the changes came to Subaru's body.

[Subaru: ……hm]

Lifting his head, Subaru quickly felt his chest to confirm that nothing was out of the ordinary. Directly in front of him, Echidona was still sitting with her legs crossed just as she was a few seconds ago, and only her eyebrows slightly twitched on her perfect features.
Frantically looking her over, he saw that nothing had changed about the girl who was looking back at him. Her breathing, her demeanor: everything was the same as before. But, expecting the worst, his eyes locked onto the center of her chest, shrouded in her funerary dress,

[Echidona: Although I don't know if they live up to your expectations, personally I'm not very confident in my chest size, you know. I guess if they were the size of Sekhmet's or Minerva's, they'd probably be a huge burden on my back and shoulders…… but from a curiosity standpoint, I still find it regrettable]

[Subaru: ……That's totally not the reason why I'm ogling! No, more importantly…]

Hearing Echidona's statement like it was a matter-of-course, Subaru shot back as if his brain went blank. Then, holding a palm to his mouth, desperately trying to stifle the emotions in his trembling voice,

[Subaru: When…… when I die, I rewind time, and do the world over again. I can Return by Death]

[Echidona: I heard you. And before I heard, I read it too. I see, it's quite a rare situation indeed]

Carefree as ever, as if having completely accepted the facts of Subaru's statement, Echidona nodded.
But, to Subaru, this attitude was nothing short of thunder striking on a clear day.

――At the end of his last syllable as he pronounced the words, no matter how much he reminded his heart to stay strong, his determination would easily have been destroyed under the unrelenting punishment of the Witch's hand.

The pain that would result whenever he trespassed on the forbidden, either to Subaru's heart or the heart of the person he was confessing to, had always been the unshakable trauma binding his heart.
That was why, to Subaru, even the act of "Attempting" was out of the question. If not for

Echidona's push on his back, Subaru would not have possessed the final resolve to follow through.
He had done so with such momentous determination. And yet, it was so easily――

[Subaru: Why didn't the hand come out……?]

[Echidona: You sound almost disappointed that it didn't. In that case, could it be that you regret having missed an opportunity to kill me? I'm hurt]

[Subaru: I obviously wasn't banking on that sort of……!]

[Echidona: Yes, I know. Are you feeling so cornered that you can't even take a little joke?]

Ignoring Subaru's emotions wavering under the shock, Echidona simply went on at her own pace. Unable to hold back his frustration, Subaru clicked his tongue and shot her a sharp glare,

[Subaru: Then answer me clearly. You… heard me say "Return by Death" several times now, and the hand that was supposed to…… the Witch's hand won't be coming? Am I right in thinking that?]

[Echidona: So you already understand that hand belongs to the Witch. ……Yes, that is correct. This is my dream, and my Citadel. A fantasy seen in my death. No one may enter here without my permission]

[Subaru: You're sure of that?]

[Echidona: You certainly are cautious. ――Yes, I'm sure. The only Witches whose existences are permitted here are Greed, Gluttony, Lust, Pride, Wrath, and Sloth. There is no place for Envy here]

Seeing Subaru insisting on making sure, Echidona replied.
Hearing this, for a moment Subaru forgot to breathe. A short while passed as he sat silently in his chair, limp and powerless. His shoulders dropped, his face stooped, and he let out a long, long sigh,

[Subaru: is that, so…….that so…… is, that so……]

[Echidona: ――――]

Covering his face with his palm, Subaru repeated the same words under his breath. Over, and over.
As if just to make sure. As if unwilling to let it go. As if clinging onto it.

After all, whether it was being freed from the Witch's fingers or finally spilling the forbidden words stowed deep inside his chest, all of it was a first since he arrived in this Parallel World.

[Echidona: That is certainly a profound expression you're making]

Watching Subaru being tossed by waves of emotions, Echidona's delicate lips softened as she spoke. Passing her fingers through her pure white hair,

[Echidona: Was that how much it has been tormenting you? Then again, having this kind of obsessive love directed at you, I guess it's only inevitable]

[Subaru: Sorry… I got a bit carried away there. I'm fine now. …….Yeah, I'm fine now. I'm fine now, so let's keep going. There's still a mountain of things I want to talk to you about]

The constraint on speaking of "Return by Death" did not activate.
It took a considerable amount time just to come to terms with that fact, but even now that he had accepted it, his heart was still no less turbulent.
The burden he had carried up to now, the burden he was still carrying, the sense of liberation of finally being able to say it out loud―― was like a light of hope injected into this stifling deadlock. But,

[Echidona: There's something you seem to be misunderstanding]

[Subaru: ――?]

[Echidona: It is true that the Witch's hand cannot intervene inside my Citadel. So I do understand your heart's jubilation at finally being able to reveal the secret that you were barred from revealing up to now. But…… as to whether I should listen to your problems and just so conveniently offer my help and advice, that would be a separate question entirely, wouldn't it?]

[Subaru: gh……]

Subaru's excitement was instantly doused like he was splashed by a bucket of cold water.
In front of the silenced Subaru, Echidona made an expression as if her statement was only a matter of course. Faced with this unexpected response, Subaru couldn't hide the confusion and discouragement on his face
His gaze wavered as unintelligible sounds of [a] and [u] leaked from his mouth.

Just when he thought he saw the light and felt the sense of liberation in anticipation of breaking through the impasse, he let it slip right through his fingers. What should he do now? He had no idea at this point,

[Echidona: If you keep making that face like an abandoned child, I'll feel troubled, you know. Besides, I wasn't going to ask for anything too difficult of you]

Saying this, she tilted her head with a troubled look and lightly tapped three taps on the white table with her extended finger. Drawn by the sound, Subaru's gaze landed on the place where her tapping finger was pointing. ――It was the cup he hadn't touched since he got here.

[Echidona: You were invited to a Witch's tea party. If you intend to carry on a lively conversation over tea, shouldn't you show that you've accepted my invitation first?]

[Subaru: …….I…'m not sure what you're]

[Echidona: I thought it couldn't be any clearer than that? I even pointed this out at the beginning, you know]

With that reminder, Subaru remembered that Echidona did voice her complaint about Subaru not getting into the mood of the tea party and refusing to even look at his tea.
Realizing that this was her revenge, Subaru sustained major damage to his heart, and,

[Subaru: Damn it! Understood!]

Snatching up the cup from the table, he drank down the swirling amber-colored liquid in a single gulp. Despite having been left there for quite some time, its warmth was still just right. Perhaps, that was only to be expected of the offerings of a Witch's tea party.
Having gulped it down faster than he could taste it, Subaru roughly wiped his dripping mouth with his sleeve,

[Subaru: There! I drank it! Now do you feel like accepting me as a member of the tea party?]

[Echidona: You drank up my bodily fluid with such vigour…… OH, I'm going to blush]

[Subaru: UueGHhh I forgot――!!]

And Subaru was caught on the same Dona-Tea trap he had stepped on at their first tea party.
Cheerfully watching Subaru as he held his hand to his mouth trying not to vomit, a delicate, lovely smile was inscribed onto Echidona's cheeks, as if to say [You are accepted],

[Echidona: For your inquiry of "Why", you are qualified, and the doors of this tea party are open to you. And, by drinking the tea offered by a Witch, you are accepted as an honored guest. As the host of this tea party, I am obliged to welcome you. ――Now, you may ask away]

Echidona lightly clapped, with brimming curiosity blazing radiantly in her eyes.

[Echidona: After all, to agonize the mind in search of an answer is the greatest of bliss to me]

――With this, the tea party, or rather the question and answer session, began.

The Witch Echidona possessed tremendous knowledge in the form of a book she called the "Memories of the World".
He hadn't been able to even mention Return by Death to anyone up to now. But to suddenly be able to speak of the information gained from this ability without constraints was simply the utmost blessing Subaru could have hoped for.
In front of her, all the countless belated questions pent up inside him flooded to the surface. But the first that came to his lips was,

[Subaru: The one who allows me to Return by Death…… is the Witch of Envy, isn't it?]

[Echidona: More or less, you're not wrong in that understanding. But as for the mechanisms behind Return by Death, I wouldn't know unless I have personally observed your death. But, since you cannot lose your life in my Citadel, that condition could never be fulfilled]

[Subaru: As long as I'm here, I can't die?]

[Echidona: This is only a fleeting dream, a temporary perch of the soul. If you died inside a dream, do you believe your real body would die as well?]

[Subaru: Well, if the dream got really bad, it's possible I might die of shock or something……]

Tropes like deaths in dreams being reflected in real life shows up quite a lot in fictional works. With all those stories as examples, Subaru got the feeling that it wouldn't be all that strange if dying in a Witch's mental realm could cause his real body to die as well.

[Subaru: Well, it would be kinda weird to keep insisting on dying when I'm already told that I can't. Anyways, so basically I won't have to worry about dying no matter what kind of stupid stuff I do here?]

[Echidona: If your mind was pulverized and scattered to dust before you return to your physical body, you might still end up a cripple]

[Subaru: If I become a living corpse I might as well be dead…… if I can't Return by Death from that, that's even worse, isn't it!]

Subaru once came to the verge of mental collapse during the loops inside the Capital. Perhaps it was a self-defense mechanism, or an unconscious act to prevent himself from truly shattering. He didn't know what it was that swept him along at that time, but, in the end, it was only through rage that he had been able to regain himself.
Nevertheless, Subaru somehow instinctively knew that if his mind were shattered here, no sort of shock therapy would be able to cure him.

[Subaru: If I can't even choose the timing of my own death, there'd really be nothing worse than that. ……Although honestly, not dying would still be the preferred option]

[Echidona: I can't judge the virtue of a mindset which would think of "Death" as a tool to procure victory. For not even I have experienced my own death and admitted it to the stores of my knowledge]

[Subaru: ……? But, you died and got turned into a ghost. You don't remember your own death?]

She was dead and without a physical body, that was what she herself had explained to him. Only the soul of the deceased Echidona was sealed and confined here by the Divine Dragon Volcanica.

[Echidona: It wasn't quite like that. Indeed, my physical body, the vessel of my soul is dead and gone. But, my soul was sealed by Volcanica before it could meet its death]

[Subaru: ……So then, your body died and your soul didn't. And since your essence didn't die, it's slightly different from actually experiencing death?]

[Echidona: Precisely. So while it may be a selfish thought, I am actually quite jealous of your situation. To be able to observe your own "Death", and not only once, but to taste it many times over, no one would ever have permitted me such an opportunity]

[Subaru: ……That sounds awfully masochistic depending on how you hear it. And it's not like I just went around happily welcoming death, you know, not even once]

She probably didn't mean anything by it, but Subaru nonetheless cringed at Echidona's morbid curiosity.
For Subaru, "Death" at the end of his actions only ever proved his failure to achieve his objectives.
His aversion to Death had never diminished, and this sentiment had not changed since the first time he experienced it. Although, Subaru couldn't deny that he had grown somewhat accustomed to that sensation, and was becoming more capable of facing it.

In front of Subaru's sentiment, Echidona only let slip a little laugh, [That's a terrible way to put it],

[Echidona: Your condition which allows you to retry after Death, or rather, the power which denies you the peace of Death, is no doubt a thing of Envy. When did you notice it?]

[Subaru: From all the things everyone's told me, it's pretty much implied that the Witch had something to do with it. Although I honestly don't remember ever meeting the envious Witch-sama herself…… seeing how her name keeps popping up whenever something happens, I can only imagine maybe she's the hand model who shows up now and then]

Two arms, and a black shadow forming the vague outline of a body was all he had ever seen.
A contradictory existence which at once tormented Subaru with pain and showered him with such love whenever he spoke the forbidden words. Tormenting, and loving, a deranged sadistic delusion which Subaru had never considered to be a blessing.

[Subaru: Why would she care so much about someone she's never met before, I can't understand it at all…… can you?]

[Echidona: Well, who knows. It's not just me, I doubt anyone would be able to understand her mentality. In fact, even if I could, I wouldn't wish to]

[Subaru: For someone who wants to know everything in this world, you seem awfully bitter when it comes to the Witch of Envy. Actually, considering what she's done to you, I guess it's only natural]

In Subaru's mind, Echidona was something transcendent, and in fact, she had reached heights no humans could have ever hoped to reach.
She had created a whole other world, preserved her likeness even after death, and possessed the knowledge to answer any question Subaru could possibly ask.
All of which were proof of the transcendental nature of the girl who was the Witch of Greed.

But even this transcendental existence could not escape the emotions of love and hatred. It was not something Subaru could change, and he couldn't help but feel powerless in that sense.

[Echidona: You seem to have overestimated me. I may be a Witch, but I was a human first. I am not free from pleasure and rage, sadness and joy, nor the love and hatred of things, nor whether I can get along with a person or not. Compared to the other Witches, however, I do pride myself in the fact that I am far more tolerant]

[Subaru: Well you said it yourself that your curiosity about others is endless, guess there's no way to satisfy that curiosity by being too picky about people]

[Echidona: Precisely. And so, I can tolerate the existence of most things. No matter how unseemly or vulgar the existence, I'd still believe there is reason to endeavor to understand its mind to a certain degree. To satisfy my desire to know all things. However,]

Pausing her words there, Echidona's expression suddenly darkened.
The Witch, who always carried an easy smile as she watched him with her unforgettable gaze, for the first time, he saw the corners of her lips twisted with clear displeasure——and brooding rage,

[Echidona: The Witch of Envy is the exception. Only her, I cannot forgive, nor will I endeavor to do so. Whether it was in the time before my death or the time after my death or out of all the Memories of the World, I have never met an existence so unforgivable]

[Subaru: ……It's not just because she killed you… is it. This kind of rage…]

[Echidona: "Death" doesn't mean so much to me. Well, considering how I am still here. But beyond that, she did something far more intolerable to me. Even though I consider any action taken to be an effort to obtain a conclusion…… this alone, I absolutely will never accept]

Expelling this bitter sentiment, Echidona closed her eyes and shook her head.
With this one gesture, all traces of passionate rage dissipated and vanished from her face.
Emerging in its stead, was once again the familiar, perceptive smile,

[Echidona: Let's put aside the topic of that Witch for now. I do have some hypotheses regarding the underlying principles of your Return by Death, but I don't have conclusive proof. And even if we could understand it, it would have no impact on your actual "Deaths" at all. So, do you have any question for me other than its origins?]

[Subaru: Other than its origins……]

Having the root of Return by Death so easily confirmed actually forced Subaru's mind to deliberate. Setting the intentions of its originator aside, Subaru was aware that in exchange for the pain, he was making good use of this powerful Authority residing within him, if he wasn't being used by it.
As much as he hated to admit it, without this power, there would be so many outcomes that he could never have achieved.
And, most likely, he would have no choice but to continue relying on its power in the future. If that much was given, then,

[Subaru: ——My Return by Death… do you think there's a limit to how many times it can be used?]

[Echidona: Hmm……I see. Knowing that you could retry after "Death", that would be the natural question to ask]

As far as Subaru could remember, he had already died sixteen times in this world.

Every single Death had been accompanied by agony and loss, but, savoring that pain, he would try again in the world he returned to.
Yet, even while it allowed him to reach for the outcomes he needed, every visit of Death was accompanied by the natural terror――― that this might be last time.

[Subaru: It's only natural… isn't it]

After all, "Death" was supposed to happen only once in the first place, and he had already defied it so many times over.
Precisely because this was a world he could not overcome without that power, he couldn't help but imagine how unbearably powerless he would feel if he were to ever lose it.
Until the instant Return by Death hit, Subaru couldn't know whether it would truly be the end.
The despair of having failed partway to his goal, which he had tasted so many times before――― would all cease and give way to this. So terrible was the dread of Death.

[Echidona: What I am about to say is purely my conjecture, so let me put this out there first. I do have some vague ideas regarding the principles behind your Return by Death, so I hope you'd allow me to proceed from these assumptions]

[Subaru: ……yeah, let's hear it]

[Echidona: Your "Return by Death", while we can assume that it comes with limits and conditions, in terms of a limit on the number of uses――]

Subaru held his breath.
Looking directly into Echidona's eyes just as they were gazing into his, to Subaru, the small pause in between those words felt like an eternity.
And to this anxiety to reach the answer――

[Echidona: ――there most likely, isn't one]

[Subaru: ……]

[Echidona: To you, "Death" is not the end. No matter how many times you die, or how many times you decay, your soul is sent back in time and you are granted the chance to retry until the fate of "Death" is broken. Regardless of how brutally you are killed, and no matter how shattered your heart may be, it seems]

Hearing Echidona's conclusion, for a moment, Subaru's mind was replaced by a complete blank.
As if his mind was wiped clean by that blankness, the next thought that began to fill his emptied head was,

[Subaru: ――is that, so]

Quietly taking in the fact he had just been told, he desperately tried to keep his whole body from trembling.

Covering a hand over his mouth, Subaru lowered his head and closed his eyes.
He did not seem to be distraught, but neither was he calmed by the knowledge that there was no

limit to his Return by Death.
Seeing this, Echidona furrowed her brows with some traces of doubt,

[Echidona: You don't look as surprised as I thought]

[Subaru: ……]

[Echidona: I had thought that for you…… or indeed, for anyone, overturning the absolute finality of death should have been something exceedingly significant. Especially when you yourself are powerless, while countless obstacles and dangers stand ahead of your path. I really thought there would've been a bigger reaction than that]

[Subaru: Sorry the BAD REACTION didn't live up to your expectations…… but…]

The possibility of unlimited retries——— had always been one of Subaru's rather optimistic theories about Return by Death. So when someone else gave it their affirmation, it did not come as a complete surprise. But even so,

[Subaru: It's not like I'm just gonna take that in and immediately think: "IT'S ALRIGHT TO DIE AS MANY TIMES AS I WANT, THIS PARALLEL WORLD IS TOTALLY JUST A GAME" or anything idiotic like that]

[Echidona: So you've already guessed what the answer would be? You are a cleverer human than I thought. For better or for worse]

[Subaru: Every time I Return by Death…… and every time I try to tell anyone about it, I can feel the Witch's presence, like a black shadow is drawing closer]

The first time he spoke the forbidden words, all Subaru could see of the shadow was an arm touching his heart.
But the more he violated the forbidden, the more vivid the shadow's faint outlines became, and now, he could already faintly see the shape of its entire body.
And when the shape of that shadow becomes clear, what would happen then?

[Subaru: When it becomes completely formed, that's when I'll have reached the limit of Return by Death. When that shadow becomes real, I don't think I will be able to reject it]

[Echidona: Hm, and what is your basis for this?]

[Subaru: A hunch]

Hearing these two words, Echidona's eyes opened wide.
Subaru rested his elbow on the table and his cheek in his palm, looking up at Echidona's face,

[Subaru: In fact, it's a feeling which only someone who's seen that shadow can understand. Beside me, the only other guy who's seen that thing was……]

The only other person who shared in this pain, was probably that madman who had his heart broken in half when he did.

Subaru felt an emotional twinge in his chest. And seeing this, Echidona narrowed her eyes as if peering into the depths of his heart, but then, she immediately shrugged,

[Echidona: The fact that I can't understand this feeling of yours is all itching me up inside, but that's largely confirmed my speculations. There is no limit to your Return by Death. However, it is subject to certain conditions]

[Subaru: Certain… conditions]

[Echidona: What enables you to Return by Death, is the deranged will of the Witch. Unless the source of that delusion is severed, you will not be allowed to meet your end]

[Subaru: What do you mean sever…… the source of the delusion…]

[Echidona: By killing the Witch who has so fallen for you, or having the Witch's love for you run dry…… although, as I see it, both of these tasks seem to be difficult to the extreme]

To kill the Witch of Envy―― was, four hundred years ago, the universal wish which even the combined strengths of the Dragon, the Sage, and the Sword Saint had failed to accomplish. Unable to kill her, they had only managed to seal the Witch of Envy who had covered half the world in shadow. Yet, what Subaru had to do would have to surpass even this monumental feat.

[Subaru: Feels like I'll have a much easier time having her fall out of love with me……]

[Echidona: But that is absolutely impossible to accomplish. Surely, you must be able to see this?]

[Subaru: ……]

[Echidona: Perhaps only you could understand the sensation of directly interacting with the Witch's shadow, but I, having known that thing in its former existence, cannot help but think so]

There was bitterness in Echidona's expression. Although he didn't know what kind of conflict arose between these two Witches four hundred years ago, it certainly wasn't something that faded with time. In fact, the passage of time seemed to have only deepened the rift.

Unable to refute her words, Subaru only exhaled through his nose and leaned into the back of his chair.
Just as Echidona said, the likelihood of the Witch of Envy giving up on Subaru―― was as hopeless as it could be.

Subaru never imagined he would be loved so blindly by someone whose face he didn't even know. Someone who literally destroyed half the world.

[Echidona: You sure accepted it easily]

[Subaru: ――Huh?]

[Echidona: It might be strange to say this, but everything I've said up to now had only been the sum of my conjectures. I cannot support it with proof, nor is there nearly enough material to make it convincing]

Echidona closed a single eye, apparently perplexed by why Subaru so readily accepted her opinions.
In fact, Subaru felt the same way.

Subaru hadn't known her for all that long, and not to mention that the other person was a Witch. With that in mind, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that there wasn't a single reason to trust her.
But,

[Subaru: That's also my hunch, I guess]

[Echidona: ……hunch]

Subaru realized that, for some reason, he just naturally felt inclined to believe whatever came out of this girl's mouth.
Perhaps it was her respect for knowledge, and her openness with what she knew in the brief conversations he has had with her, that made him so inclined to believe her.
Out of her excessive thirst for knowledge, he had seen her do such impulsive or even outlandish things, and yet――

[Subaru: If I overlook those parts, you probably wouldn't lie to me―― I think]

[Echidona: ……is that also a hunch of yours?]

[Subaru: Yeah. A hunch. But then, the fact that you're hearing this from a guy who's died sixteen times pretty much discredits it right off the bat, huh]

Hoping to lighten the mood, Subaru threw out that self-deprecating quip and scratched his head.
Hearing this, for a moment, Echidona held her breath. Then, she reached for the cup on the table, brought it to her lips, and allowed the liquid to pass across her tongue,

[Echidona: You might just have a talent for flirting with Witches, you know]

And, for the first time, a completely different smile was carved into the corners of her lips.

Chapter 46 [Locusts]

Seeing the smile that was directed at him, for the very first time, Subaru genuinely thought that Echidona was pretty cute.

In her softened, smiling lips, there was no irony or calculation, but only a pure expression of good will towards Subaru.
There was no doubt that she was attractive, and to be treated so warmly by a girl like that should be enough to open the hearts of any boy alive.
Though of course, the most important space inside Subaru's heart was occupied by two other girls already.

[Subaru: Still, there really was some heart flutter going on there……]

[Echidona: Did you say something?]

[Subaru: Even if I have talent for flirting with Witches I still got loads of problems you know. And having someone I don't even remember flirting with attached to me……Ah, but then, if you six Witches can give me some help outside without causing too much trouble I'd be pretty happy with that]

Turning his face away and trying to change the subject, Subaru muttered this convenient pipe dream.
While he had only witnessed a part of what Typhon and Minerva could do, that part alone should already be more than enough to have the damage-dealer and healer roles covered.
Although, one moment getting his arm lopped off and the other getting beaten into health was still something to think about.

[Echidona: Unfortunately, regardless of what I was when I was alive, I cannot interfere with the real world after death. So, inviting you into my dream is already quite an exception]

[Subaru: I know I know. I just thought I should try anyway. Honestly, just having you to listen to me is already more than enough of a salvation for me]

At the very least, having finally let go of the secret he had been holding inside for so long, he was feeling a little further away from mental collapse. On top of that, he had managed to clear up some of his suspicions about the Witch of Envy as well.
As for the parts that were still mysteries, he decided not to think about them for now.
Instead,

[Subaru: Can I ask some other questions about Return by Death?]

[Echidona: I could only answer with speculations from the extent of my knowledge. If you are fine with that, then sure]

Resuming a pretentious air, Echidona said this as a preface.
The expression on her face was almost reminiscent of some big-shot figure, but deep down, she must be thoroughly enjoying these questions and answers seeing she was impatiently tapping her feet on the grass in anticipation of Subaru's words while fiddling her fingers in her own hair.

For someone who was supposed to be the Incarnation of the Thirst for Knowledge, she was really quite predictable. Is it really alright for someone like that to be a Witch? Subaru thought in a corner of his head.

[Subaru: Occasionally when I Return by Death, the place where I revive at would be changed. So far, there's been…… six places, I think? I've been revived at different location and their respective times. So… I want to know about the conditions for the SAVEPOINTS to change]

[Echidona: "Save points"…… you mean the change in the places where you revive?]

[Subaru: Basically, once it changes, I can't go back to the previous point. If two days ago was a savepoint, then once it changes to yesterday I can't go back to the day before anymore. Do you know what's the mechanism behind this?]

To Subaru, this question was just as vital as the limit on the number of returns, if not more so. The changes in the savepoints――was an unknown aspect of Return by Death for which Subaru couldn't find a single relevant condition.

[Subaru: I can die and come back…… but it's not like I intend to naively go around thinking I can die as much I want. But while I don't intend to…… when it's the only thing I can rely on, I'll rely on it without hesitation. But…]

What would Subaru do when he falls into a situation which even his death couldn't salvage?

The image of the unconscious Rem lying in her bed flickered across Subaru's mind.
After parting at the end of the battle with the White Whale, she was supposed to join him again once he had defeated Petelgeuse, and yet, Subaru couldn't save her even through Return by Death.
He could never forget the instant he thrust a knife into his own throat at the sleeping girl's side.

Even now, he couldn't believe that he had had the will to act on that short-circuited impulse to take his own life, crushed by despair. Or, perhaps, it was precisely because he had lost the will to go on that he took his own life.
With blood leaking from the hole in his throat, in pain and suffocation, Subaru died.

And when he opened his eyes, he found himself returned to only a few minutes before he pierced his throat.
He had never hated a savepoint update as much as he did then.

If it meant not losing Rem, Subaru would have challenged the White Whale and the madman as many times as he must.
No matter how many times he would have to die, how many times he would be crushed, he would have challenged again.

[Echidona: The circumstances of those "save point" changes, could you tell me in a little more detail?]

[Subaru: Ah, aah…… right. I'll start with the first savepoint then…]

Recalling the memories of what he was being asked, Subaru gave a brief explanation of each of his Return by Deaths, along with the times and places he returned to.
That is to say, the majority of the experience of his life in the Parallel World up to now.
Even though it was the shortened version, getting through the story of the eventful two months still took up what felt like an hour.

[Subaru: So now, it's inside the Tomb…… fixed right after the end of the first Trial. Going by what you said earlier, this time was the same as well]

[Echidona: ……]

[Subaru: Did that give you anything? One time, I was pretty convinced of a crazy theory that old uncles are savepoints, you know]

For whatever reason, Kadomon, the scar faced uncle in the fruit shop in the Capital, was twice selected to be Subaru's savepoint in this world.
But then again, one could count it as being twice in front of Rem as well.

[Subaru: I get the feeling that whether it's people, things or time, none of it has anything to do with the savepoint changes. In terms of time, the number of days in between are all over the place, and in terms of people or events I can't see anything in common at all. The conditions are just totally obscure]

[Echidona: Indeed, I don't see any consistency in the conditions you mentioned either. In that case, perhaps it is necessary for us to approach it from a different angle]

[Subaru: A different angle?]

[Echidona: What is the reason you returned to where you did…… might not be a question that would lead us to the answer. Instead, why don't we consider a reason why it would be moved forward?]

[Subaru: Why it would be moved forward……?]

[Echidona: The "save point", instead of a "Place of Return", could alternatively be considered a "Wall of Return". Until it can be moved forward, you would always be pulled back to that wall through "Death". You could also think of it as the bottom of a pit]

Subaru furrowed his brows at Echidona's words, and began to think on their meaning.
A wall, or a pit. By returning to the respawn point through Return by Death, Subaru had managed to change situations that would otherwise have been impossible to break through.
Rather, without Return by Death, he would not have surmounted anything, and those situations would have ended as they were.
So, the locations of the Return by Death savepoints changed with the situation.
In other words,

[Subaru: Return by Death shifts when I change something that I couldn't change before……?]

[Echidona: In this case, Return by Death is merely a means to an end. As for what intention is behind this means, we would have to consider the being responsible for its existence]

[Subaru: The being responsible……]

Echidona nodded, seeing that Subaru had lost his words, as her lips bent into a resentful frown,

[Echidona: The Witch of Envy. The Witch who gifted you with Return by Death did so in hopes that you would change the circumstances which could only be overcome through “Death”. When you succeed in overcoming those circumstances, the “save point” will change]

[Subaru: B, but then…… that, doesn’t make sen……se. Because, then…… what about Rem? I failed to save her, didn’t I? If Return by Death is a force to change the circumstances, then why did I return to a time where I couldn’t save Rem……]

By overwriting the savepoint, it was Return by Death itself that had denied him the chance to save Rem.
It was precisely because of this, that Subaru so urgently need to know if the update to the savepoint could be reverted.
But, to Subaru’s question, Echidona continued with [Unfortunately],

[Echidona: This person “Rem” you speak of, is probably not someone who is within the Witch of Envy’s considerations]

[Subaru: ……h]

[Echidona: What the Witch of Envy desires is for you to escape from the confounding fates of inescapable dead ends. Return by Death is only a means to fulfill that purpose, and whatever fate anyone else suffers is beyond the scope of that intention. Wishing to use that power to save anyone else, is nothing more than your own personal desires. It has nothing to do with the Witch]

[Subaru: a……]

[Echidona: So, let me make this clear]

In front of Subaru who was stunned into silence, Echidona reiterated her words.
With a feeble gaze in his eyes, Subaru looked up at the Witch of white. And, Echidona closed her eyes only once, as if bearing the pain, before her black pupils pierced into Subaru’s,

[Echidona: As long as you fail to break through the obstacles standing in your path and die without changing the future, your soul will surely be returned to my Tomb. But if you allowed far too many sacrifices, and yet managed to change the future……]

[Subaru: ——Then I’ll never get a chance to regain what’s been sacrificed]

[Echidona: ……Precisely]

In the end, the only one within the Witch of Envy’s considerations was Subaru himself.
As long as Subaru could overcome the fate of Death, everything else was trivial. She believed that no matter how hopeless the situation became, given infinite retries, Subaru would find a way to survive. Or rather, even if it was hopeless, Subaru would not be allowed to give up.
Because all the conditions of Return by Death were held in the Witch of Envy’s hands.

[Subaru: Alright…… if you got such a thing for me, then I’ve made up my mind as well]

[Echidona: ……]

[Subaru: This gift of Return by Death you've given me…… I'll use it to the end. And at the end, I'll meet you without having lost a single thing dear to me. Yeah, it's decided. Already decided. I'll make sure of it. I'm the greatest in the world at betraying people's expectations, you know]

If Return by Death was subject to the Witch's will, then Subaru's will would decide how it was to be used.
So, he will pile it up, overcome it, and move forward while holding onto everything.

If the Witch's love would only save Subaru, then Subaru would save everything else.
Only with this, could Natsuki Subaru take a first shot back at the Witch.

[Subaru: Changing the circumstances…… means to break through the problems of the Sanctuary and the problems at the Mansion. If all those are cleared, then regardless of how many victims are sacrificed, the return point of Return by Death will be updated. In other words, holding onto everything while overcoming the problems is the absolute condition]

[Echidona: It may be strange for me to say this, but isn't that quite an arduous task to take on? You certainly seem to have accepted it easily]

[Subaru: I was just saying something I've already been vaguely thinking about out loud. Rather than break me, it's got my motivation all fired up. My rebellious heart's all ablaze, you know]

Hearing Subaru's declaration, Echidona fell speechless.
Taking some small satisfaction in seeing the Witch at a loss for words, Subaru clicked the bones in his neck, and,

[Subaru: There's nothing else I wanted to ask about Return by Death. Anyways, I'll keep that in mind, thanks]

[Echidona: ……I've also sated my curiosity through a valuable conversation. So let's call it even. Besides, as opposed to flaunting my knowledge, this was more of me voicing my speculations]

[Subaru: Then, this next one should be properly relying on that knowledge of yours]

Since her knowledge didn't extend to the topic of Return by Death, there were still many ambiguities involved. But this would not be the case for Subaru's next question.
This one, he must hear it loud and clear from her own mouth.

[Subaru: This time I Returned by Death…… do you know how I died?]

[Echidona: I haven't read that part, so no, I don't. And while I am incredibly interested in discussing the experiences of your various deaths…… you don't seem to be in the mood right now]

[Subaru: It's kind of hard to be boasting of wounds and deaths and heroic feats without some alcohol. But since all we got here is Dona-tea, that hope's pretty much out the window]

[Echidona: That is unfortunate. ……From the looks of your body outside, your death must have been accompanied by considerable mental and physical anguish…… in the end]

It was probably considerate of her to have avoided describing how he died.
Sensing that consideration, Subaru somewhat relaxed his cheeks, before immediately stiffening again with [Aah yeah], nodding,

[Subaru: Just remembering it gives me the shivers…… this time, I was eaten alive]

[Echidona: ……]

[Subaru: And it was by these stupid, tiny little palm-sized rabbits. Omnivores and hungry, apparently. They… ate up my whole body without leaving a scrap]

Although he was understating it with his phrasing, there was no way to properly describe that miserable end with words.
The memory of his whole body being devoured, of his flesh, bones and blood being violated by pointed teeth still insisted on pain in the depths of Subaru's mind.
Forcibly pushing this down, Subaru somehow managed to keep himself calm. Seeing this, Echidona pressed the back of her hand against her lips,

[Echidona: …….So you encountered the Great Rabbit, I see]

[Subaru: Great Rabbit?]

[Echidona: "Great" not as in "Size", but in "Multitude". That meaning was lost in communication over the ages. It is one of the Witch of Gluttony, Daphne's, inauspicious legacies―― one of three]

[Subaru: The Great Rabbit is……]

Once, he had heard it from Julius. And here, the name of the Mabeast was uttered again by Echidona.
White Whale, Black Serpent, and Great Rabbit. Each and every one were Mabeasts that threatened the world since 400 years ago and subjects of the Witch of Gluttony, Daphne.

[Subaru: Just when I thought I got the White Whale down the Great Rabbit shows up, give me a break…..]

[Echidona: If your adversary is the Great Rabbit, then you are up against a terrible enemy]

In front of Subaru, who was holding his head, Echidona's expression darkened at the knowledge of the threat which he was facing. Subaru was beginning to feel some apprehension at the sight of her expression,

[Subaru: I felt the same anxiety when I was facing the White Whale…… so which one is worse?]

[Echidona: In terms of pure combat strength, the White Whale is by far the greater of the two. But in terms of which one is harder to destroy, then it is without doubt the Great Rabbit]

[Subaru: Hard to destroy……]

Subaru thought that, just like with the White Whale, there must be a way to slay it. But seeing this reaction from Subaru, Echidona raised up a single finger [Are you listening?],

[Echidona: You may think that it is no different from a regular Mabeast, or that it is simply a little more troublesome]

[Subaru: No, I mean, I've at least figured out that they're not the cute little bastards they look like……]

[Echidona: More accurately, the existence of the Great Rabbit is closer to that of a natural disaster. Always acting as a drove, they move for none other than the instinct of their insatiable appetite. All living creatures are their food, and they set out to do nothing except to devour every last morsel of their feed. Where the Great Rabbit passes, only unpopulated fields remain. Crops and fruits are untouched. The only things they devour are the living]

Listening to Echidona's description of the Great Rabbit, Subaru gasped and swallowed back a breath.
Watching her stern expression, Subaru realized that she was not exaggerating.

A Sanctuary devoid of people, and the sea of little rabbits that devoured him.
If that was the Great Rabbit, then the fact that the Sanctuary was empty could only be because they had all been eaten by the Mabeast.
Emilia, Ram, Lewes, Roswaal, and even Garfiel who had transformed into a giant tiger.

Locusts――― the word suddenly surfaced in Subaru's mind.
The phenomenon where a mass outbreak of locusts appears. More specifically, a mass of grasshoppers morphing into locusts, devouring fields of crops into nothing, leaving devastation and famine in its wake.

The Great Rabbit's behavior was very close to the locusts Subaru knew.
Although, unlike locusts, the Great Rabbit ate living creatures, and so their inexhaustible hunger threatened life far more directly than the locusts.

[Subaru: Can't we find a way to defeat them?]

[Echidona: Individually, their strengths are not significant, but do not forget that they move in droves. Killing any number of single individuals is completely meaningless, and as soon as they catch sight of prey, they will not stop until it is dead and devoured. They are "Hunger" itself]

[Subaru: Wait wait wait. Yeah but……if the rabbits move in droves, shouldn't there be a BOSS leading it or something? If we just kill the boss, won't the whole thing collapse?]

According to the general rules of the human world, killing the leader is usually enough to make a group scatter. Although, in terms of the animal world, the second in command might just take over when that happens.
Then again, Subaru didn't know much about the natural behavior of Mabeasts, so all he could do was rely on the one who was knowledgeable in this field, Echidona. But there, she shook her head,

[Echidona: You seem to have misunderstood something. The Great Rabbit has no concept of "Bosses". They are driven only by the instinct of "Hunger". They consume other life to sate their own hunger, and know no other structure. They reproduce by dividing, and when there is no prey, they cannibalize each other to endure their hunger. There is no sense of companionship between them]

[Subaru: Cannibalize…… wh, why on earth were these monsters created in the first place!?]

[Echidona: Why, that is something only the person who created them would know. At least, Daphne herself isn't as insistent on her appetite as her rabbits are]

Subaru couldn't help but shiver at the dreadful nature of those rabbits.
Certainly, by instinct, it is the natural order of all living organisms to consume other life to sustain their own. On this point, there is no difference between humans or animals, or Mabeasts, for that matter.
But, to multiply by dividing themselves without mating or raising their young, and even worse, rather than just dividing to increase their number, the fact that they sate their hunger by consuming individuals spawned from themselves was unnatural to the extreme.

It may just be that the Great Rabbit was the organism to end all living organisms.

[Subaru: Hypothetically…… uh, if I had to destroy the Great Rabbit, what do you think I should do?]

[Echidona: To be honest, I think that question is like asking "How do you evaporate all the raindrops in a pouring rain?"]

"It's impossible to accomplish," must be what she meant.
Hearing Echidona's answer, Subaru held a hand to his forehead, dizzied by the enormity of the hurdle of defeating the Great Rabbit.

[Subaru: If we can kill all of them, then the Great Rabbit will be destroyed, right?]

[Echidona: Yet, that would be far too reckless of a thing to attempt. As far as I know, the only people capable of doing this were Reid Astrea and Sekhmet. Reid could use his overwhelming swordsmanship to slay it to the last one. As for Sekhmet…… with the issue of their affinity, she could destroy them in a second]

[Subaru: I heard they were real monsters… those two……]

Last time, the memory of Sekhmet sitting there hugging her knees surfaced in his mind.
At least, from what Subaru had seen, his impression of her was someone who found everything to be a bother, a Witch entirely appropriate for the title of "Sloth".

[Subaru: Wait…]

Recalling his encounter with Sekhmet, a light lit up in Subaru's head.
Although it was faint, and fleeting, it was enough to light the way out of the dead-end he was in.
More importantly, this was something he absolutely couldn't do without Echidona's help.

[Subaru: Echidona]

[Echidona: What is it? Such a serious expression. ……No, we mustn't. You are living, and I am dead. This crossing of our fates is only a transitory fantasy, a fleeting dream. So even if you stare at me with such passionate eyes, I……]

[Subaru: No no sorry to put it to you when you're all worked up but that's totally not what I was thinking! Seriously, totally not at all!]

Staggering a bit at seeing Echidona looking somewhat disappointed, Subaru quickly veered the conversation back on topic. That is,

[Subaru: Echidona, I want to meet the Witch of Gluttony——Daphne]

[Echidona: ……]

[Subaru: Last time on your tea party, I met the Witches of Pride, Wrath, and Sloth. But that time you did say you kept the fragments of the five other Witches safe]

[Echidona: ……collected them, yes. The traces of who they were in life are indeed kept within me. If I release them from this vessel I am, then it would be possible for them to manifest. It is possible, but…]

Hearing Subaru's proposal, Echidona furrowed her brows, looking troubled.
Her gaze wandered and even her words grew indistinct, until she looked to Subaru once again,

[Echidona: I really think it would be best if you abandon the idea of meeting Daphne]

[Subaru: Why is that? I know Witches can be a handful, I've already gotten a pretty intimate taste of that so I think I'm prepared for it. No matter what happens, I won't complain or anything]

[Echidona: Before we get to complaints, in my opinion, I think your affinity with Daphne would be extremely terrible. You could even say that it is the worst there can be. Even if you meet her, chances are, you wouldn't be able to discuss anything useful……]

[Subaru: Won't know until I try. Trial and error, as you like to say, right?]

Actions in pursuit of answers. Echidona always said she approved of such endeavors.
Hearing Subaru's words, with an [u…] Echidona showed an expression as if she had just been stabbed in a sore spot. Seeing this from her, Subaru went on, [Besides], scratching his head,

[Subaru: You're the one who said I don't have to worry for my life while I'm in here. Not that I'm being optimistic, but, at least, if I don't have to worry about dying, I figured there's no harm in taking on the challenge]

[Echidona: Well I never said your mind won't break and you won't end up a cripple]

[Subaru: I'll trust you to pull me back before that happens. So please, Echidona? I'm number one in the world when it comes to relying on others, you know?]

Throwing out a joke along with words of trust, Subaru sparkled his teeth and shot her a thumbs-up.
Seeing Subaru's frivolous-to-the-end attitude, the colors of resistance gradually faded from Echidona's eyes,

[Echidona: ……alright. I will let you meet Daphne]

[Subaru: Ohoo, thankyouthankyou]

[Echidona: But, I must warn you. Do not, under any circumstances, undo her bondage. And you are forbidden to make contact with her body. In fact, please avoid making eye contact if possible]

[Subaru: What kind of a creep am I to have to be told to follow all that!]

Besides, there were some words mixed in there that just couldn't be ignored.
But just as Subaru was about to ask―― Echidona had already completed her preparations.

Just as last time, Echidona had summoned a Witch without any preliminary motion or foreshadowing.
When he blinked and opened his eyes, there was already someone else occupying the space where she had been.

It was all just like last time.
Except――

[Subaru: Oy oy……isn't this just……]

Faced with what had appeared before his eyes, Subaru whispered as his cheeks stiffened.

In front of his eyes, was the Witch of Gluttony, Daphne.

――Set inside a coffin, her entire body restrained by bondage and her eyes sealed behind a thick black blindfold, was the girl who was a Witch.

Chapter 47 [Partners With Bad Affinity]

[Subaru: If I have bad affinity with this, what kind of asshole would have good affinity with this!?]

In front of the girl in complete bondage, Subaru blurted this out in protest.

The Witch of Gluttony——— was what they called the person who appeared before him.

Settled inside the slightly tilted coffin was a girl about 150cm in height. Her shoulder-length grayish hair was woven into two pigtails. White and splendid, with small breasts——— in fact, she looked no more than 13 or 14 years old.

[Subaru: But all tied up in restraints, and eyes blindfolded…… it's hard to believe she's the age she looks like]

Girls her age should normally be fantasizing about having "Superpowers that normal people don't have" or "Secret latent abilities that can pose a threat to other people" or stuff like that.

Thinking back on his middle-school days, Subaru was fantasizing about being a master of concealed weapons at the time and hid a bunch of sewing needles in his school uniform.

[Subaru: Well, I wound up falling over, got stabbed by needles everywhere and couldn't stop crying…]

Reminiscing on his cringe-worthy history to no one in particular, Subaru couldn't quite make up his mind on what to do with the Witch in front of him.

After all, every other Witch up to now had taken the initiative to one-sidedly made the FIRST ATTACK before Subaru could do anything.

[Subaru: ――――――]

Directly facing him, the girl inside the coffin still lay silently without showing any reaction.

Since first impressions are crucial, the silence was beginning to weigh on Subaru, who was finding himself uncharacteristically indecisive about how to break the ice. He at least needed to

know if his partner was friendly or not before he could decide whether to be all buddy-buddy or act like a sarcastic twit.

[Subaru: ……]

Both waiting for the other to move, silence continued to dominate the tea party atop the small hill.

While this situation persisted, the overwhelming pressure from the Witch in front of him gradually ate away at Subaru. Even with her body immobilized, and her eyes sealed behind blindfolds, the threat emanating from her tiny body was truly befitting of a Witch.

Echidona had so happily introduced him to the Witches of Pride, Wrath and Sloth, yet she hesitated when it came to this one.

Perhaps the Witch of Gluttony, Daphne, was just so decisively different from the others.

[Daphne: ……unn]

[Subaru: ――――!?]

Sweat gathered on Subaru's forehead from the tension, and just as he was about to wipe it with the back of his hand to keep them from dripping into his eyes, a sudden movement from Daphne's direction gave Subaru a start.

Inside the coffin, the girl wrapped in restraints slightly turned her head, while the sound of her respiration reached Subaru. In anticipation of what she might do, Subaru's entire body assumed a state of caution.

And then,

[Daphne: ……zzuuu, mnya]

[Subaru: ――You were sleeping!!??]

[Daphne: ――FUNYA!?]

The moment he heard what sounded like snoring, Subaru jumped forward protesting.

A loud stomp went out over the grassy hill, and, startled by the sudden sound, the Witch inside the coffin jolted, squeaking.

Unable to see with her eyes blindfolded, she turned her head left and right,

[Daphne: Wha, what is it? Somewone was tryying to sleeep here……]

She drooled out that complaint with an exceptionally sloppy tone.

It was unclear whether she was talking like that because she was half asleep or if that was just the way she talked, but at least the overwhelming pressure from earlier had vanished.

“Was I just overthinking it…?” Subaru couldn’t hide this deflated sensation.

[Subaru: Uh, y-yeah, my bad. I got a little hot-headed there. Didn’t mean to yell like that]

[Daphne: Ehhh~? But getting startled by stuff like that, Daphne would feel troubled…]

[Subaru: Guh…… please forgive me. Cheer up, ok? Please don’t get mad]

[Daphne: But I wawsn’t getting mad? If I get mad, I’ll get all huungry. But anyway, who are you?]

Rejecting his apology, Daphne immediately went on at her own pace to ask her own question.

With just two or three sentences exchanged between them, the rhythm of the conversation had already been all messed up, and Subaru was starting to get an idea of what Echidona meant earlier.

——This Witch’s pace of conversation couldn’t match up with Subaru’s at all.

Letting out a sigh at the unsettling road ahead of him, Subaru lightly shook his head to get rid of the off-put expression on his face, and, replacing it with an ultra friendly smile,

[Subaru: My name’s Natsuki Subaru. For some reason I got invited by Echidona to her Witch’s tea party…… uhh, well, basically a tea-drinking friend. Yeah, something like that]

[Daphne: Heeee~~? Dona-Dona has friends? Subaruun too, you should be more careful with your choice of friends, you know? If they hear you're friends with a Witch… your real friends and family might.. hate.. you… youknow……?]

Hearing Subaru's self introduction, Daphne threw in an extra piece of advice. The fact that the latter half of her sentence started trailing off was probably because she was falling back to sleep.

Seeing her blatant exhaustion, with her shoulders heaving up and down inside the coffin, with [Oy oy], Subaru tried to snap her out of it,

[Subaru: Why're you so tired out? Does that coffin drain the lifeforce out of whoever's inside or something?]

[Daphne: Nooo, it doesn't? Daphne's just, tired, that's all, and my stomach's empty and going all guu~guu~ and I have no energyy……is there, anything, to, eat…… haa, haa…]

[Subaru: Panting just from talking is like the epitome of childhood-sickly-constitution you know…… In terms of food, we only got some Dona-tea and some cookies on the table]

In fact, they were some cookie-ish mystery treats to go with the tea. But, knowing that the tea was Echidona's bodily fluids, the cookies might very well be made of Echidona's body cells or something.

Since he couldn't gulp it all down at once like the tea, Subaru made a point of not touching it. But, hearing that there was food, the reaction [COOKIES!?] from Daphne was pretty clear,

[Daphne: Th, th, th, that would do. That would doo, Daphne, put it in Daphne's mouth please. Hurry, aaeee, hurryy……]

[Subaru: If we take it out of context that request can be totally misunderstood so can you please be more careful with that!? But well… I guess I'm not enough of a sadist to keep someone who wants it so badly waiting]

Subaru picked up the plate of sweets and approached Daphne's coffin, intending to place the cookies in her mouth. But, before he could do so,

[Daphne: Ah, but but, wait Subaruun, can you wait a momennt?]

[Subaru: Hn? What. Just so you know, we only got one flavor here. There's no chocolate in there so it's probably just plain flavored. If you tell me you don't like it, I won't force you to eat it all up and not leave anything behind or anything like that]

[Daphne: That's not it…… it's just, I don't want Subaruun to come too close when you feed Daphne]

[Subaru: That's a pretty difficult request when you're asking me to feed you, isn't it!?]

His approach having been rejected, Subaru stood there holding the plate of cookies, at a loss about what to do.

All the while, the girl in the coffin slightly pushed herself up,

[Daphne: Please don't misunderstand though… it's not because I hate you or feel biologically repulsed by you or just can't stand you at all or anything like that you know…]

[Subaru: Those reassurances totally just made you sound less credible! Reason! Tell me a reason!]

[Daphne: Subaruun's smell, if you get too close to Daphne, it'll be like pooison]

[Subaru: My body odor's like poison!?]

Hearing that even more hurtful comment, Subaru quickly raised up his arm to smell himself. But there was nothing particularly striking, although, humans are usually slow to notice their own odors.

Subaru looked himself up and down, but,

[Subaru: I smell? I really smell? I took a proper bath after coming to the Sanctuary though? I didn't have soap like back at the Mansion, but considering I'll be around Emilia, I did ensure the minimal level of personal hygiene…… No, I mean, this is the spirit world isn't it? Would the harsh surface conditions really carry over in here?]

[Daphne: Noooo, it's~not~like~thaat. Uuuum, shouldn't, you understaand, Subaruun?]

[Subaru: Not at all! That just sounds like it's all my fault here! How am I supposed to just understand? Tch!]

While Subaru was flailing his arms around shouting this, Daphne shook her head left and right, slightly rocking her coffin. With the sound of creaking wood, [How should I saay this…] she continued at her own unique tempo,

[Daphne: If I smell Subaruun's smell, Daphne will want to eat Subaruun more than the cookie, and that'll make Daphne feel all troubled you know…]

[Subaru: ……Eh? Sorry, I didn't quite understand that]

[Daphne: Compared to vegetables, Daphne likes meat more, and hard meat is better than soft meat, that kind of thing, you know…]

Suddenly, Subaru felt a chill shooting up the back of his spine.

Holding his breath as he stared at Daphne, there had been no change in her appearance since the beginning. Still bound inside her coffin, her bondage prevented any movement from her body, and her eyes, still sealed behind her blindfolds, never once looked upon Subaru.

If those restraints were not for fashion, then what were they for——

[Daphne: From what I can smell, Subaruun's meat is so muscled and sinewy, and the bones are thick too, must be reaally…… just what Daphne likes. So, if you get too close, you'll smell so nice that I'll want to eat you]

[Subaru: E-eat me…… in the sexy sense?]

[Daphne: In the eating-raw sense……]

Hearing the slightly different interpretation, Subaru gulped down a breath.

Then, quickly putting some distance between himself and the girl, Subaru grabbed a cookie from the plate once he made sure that he was at a safe enough distance.

[Subaru: I-I'll try to throw it to you from here, but sorry if I miss your mouth, ok?]

[Daphne: That's okay, Subaruun. Just try to toss it so it hits the coffin. Then I can pick it up myself]

[Subaru: That sounds incredibly disconcerting, but uh….. alright, here goes!]

With a small swing of his arm, Subaru lightly tossed the cookie toward Daphne's mouth.

The cookie that was the size of a 500-Yen coin traced out a surprisingly perfect trajectory, and flew neatly into Daphne's mouth. This unprecedented degree of control was just the result of Subaru's extreme concentration.

With the precision of threading a needle, he had managed to shoot it right into Daphne's mouth. Catching it on her tongue, Daphne ate it up in an instant,

[Daphne: Omnyuomnyu….. nnnn~, soooo tasty~. Dona-Dona's flavor…]

[Subaru: I don't know if that means she made it herself or if she used dark magic to infuse some of her own body parts into the cookies…… I'm throwing the next one!]

[Daphne: Oooo, I can't waait. Ooommn…… hey, gimme more……]

[Subaru: That's gonna throw off my aim can you please keep quiet!?]

Trying to shut down Daphne's erotically provocative encouragements, Subaru continued throwing cookie after cookie. It was an almost infuriating scene of two people playing with food, but then, seeing the serious look on Subaru's face, one might feel discouraged from reproaching him.

Although Daphne had to occasionally move her head, the cookies landed in her mouth in the end. And, just as Subaru was starting to feel relieved that they could clear all the cookies on the plate this way,

[Subaru: ——ah]

A strong wind swept across the small hill, blowing the nimbly tossed out cookie off-course. Flying far out of the way of its target, it headed over the table and for the side of the hill. Falling like this, it might as well be food for the ants—— or so Subaru thought, when,

[Daphne: NoooOooo…… such a waaaste]

With her extraordinary sense of smell, Daphne realized that the cookie was flying away. She followed the cookie's demise with her sightless vision, and, in the next moment, Subaru saw it.

[Subaru: ――――!?]

A violent sound rang out, as a sharp claw gouged destruction into the earth.

Rolling up a cloud of soil and dust, the assault of the unceasing sound expanded as it reached the falling cookie,

[Daphne: Aa, mwu]

Daphne stuck out her neck, caught the cookie between her red lips and happily slipped it into her mouth. After chewing with an almost indiscernible noise, she licked her lips and let out a sensual [Hohh],

Having witnessed the whole thing, Subaru fell speechless.

Noticing Subaru's silence, Daphne gave a little sniff,

[Daphne: Subaruun…… isn't there, still two left? Don't be mean……]

The girl with flushed cheeks and quivering lips, like a baby bird waiting to be fed, was definitely adorable.

If one could overlook the blindfolded eyes and the full body restraints binding her inside the black coffin――

[Subaru: ……No, there's definitely no way to be unfazed by this]

And the crab-like legs that emerged from the sides of the coffin, carrying its host in this bizarrely unconventional sight.

[Subaru: So uh…… mind if I ask what that is?]

Still not recovered from the initial shock, Subaru threw the two remaining cookies to Daphne as requested. Both of which also missed due to his trembling fingertips, but, with the deft footwork of her coffin, Daphne easily caught them in her mouth.

Looking like she was enjoying their sweetness to her heart's content, Daphne let out a [Uuunn~] as Subaru somehow squeezed out his question.

[Daphne: What that is… even if you ask Daphne, Daphne couldn't see so Daphne wouldn't know…]

[Subaru: I mean the uh…… super shiny awesome-looking mobile coffin you got there. In my narrow, shallow knowledge, coffins usually don't come with legs and don't make high-speed insect-like movements like that]

Making GICHI-GICHI noises, the coffin slowly clambered back to its original position with Daphne in tow. The base of the coffin plunked onto the grass with a thud, and the crab-like legs withdrew into the sides once more. The movement was not unlike a turtle pulling its legs into its shell.

As if picking up Subaru's sentiment, Daphne laughed [Aahaa],

[Daphne: You mean Centipede Coffinn? It's because Daphne can't move freelyy, so I made this child to make up for it… He's usually a good, quiet child you know?]

[Subaru: Made it….. it's a, living creature……?]

Even though it was making organic movements with organic-looking organs, Subaru wasn't so sure if he could group that thing with living organisms. Though of course, it was definitely not mechanical.

[Daphne: It doesn't need to eat… or drink… but Centipede Coffin stays alive by absorbing Mana, you know? So it won't feel hungry… which makes me kinda jealous]

[Subaru: It eats Mana…… nevermind, we can leave that for another time. More importantly, you said you made it? You can, make living things?]

[Daphne: Instead of living things…… it's more like Mabeasts… Daphne takes some intentions and feelings and stuff and whooshwhoosh it around, and a creature comes out]

Daphne squirmed around a bit inside the coffin. None of the words that came out of her mouth gave any concrete idea of what that actually entailed, but, even from that vague explanation, Subaru got the sense that she was capable of something outrageous.

——To create living things, is surely the work of Gods.

While, in his original world, there was genetic engineering and forbidden sciences like cloning, to create new life out of nothing was certainly something only Gods could accomplish.

But, whether that should be considered blasphemy against life or attainment of inconceivable powers would depend on who you ask.

[Subaru: Unless…… "Daphne's inauspicious legacy"…… and creating the Mabeasts, meant exactly what it sounded like?]

[Daphne: Eun~ eun~?]

[Subaru: White Whale, Black Serpent, Great Rabbit…… are all of them like that crab coffin of yours? Just things you created……?]

[Daphne: Mnn~mhuu~……. Uuunn, such nostalgic names… Yeah. The Whaale, Snaake, Raabbit, they're all children Daphne made]

[Subaru: Why!!?]

Baring his teeth as he heard her words of affirmation, Subaru closed the distance between them, shouting, sending spit flying.

His face red with anger, he thrusted his finger towards Daphne,

[Subaru: Why the hell would you create monsters like that? Do you realize, for the 400 years after you died, what kind of havoc they've been wreaking in the world outside!? How many tens of hundreds of people at a time fell victim to their……!]

The fierce battle on Lifaus Highway resurfaced in his mind.

Wilhelm's obsession and screams for the memories of his murdered wife, and the cries of rage from the lines of knights――― were all for the tragedies brought about by the White Whale and by the Witch who birthed him.

As for the Great Rabbit that attacked the Sanctuary, if Subaru's subsequent efforts fail to bear fruit, then Emilia, alongside everyone else in the Sanctuary, would be devoured.

If this cycle of natural disasters that is the Great Rabbit was also a consequence of the Witch before his eyes, then,

[Subaru: Why did you do it!? Tell me! Why did you create monsters that are the cause of so many people's suffering!!?]

[Daphne: ……? But, bigger animals means more food to eat, riight?]

[Subaru: ―――a, uh, huh?]

Daphne replied to Subaru's impassioned words, looking confused.

Thrown into an unexpected train of thought by her answer, Subaru groaned stupidly before his tongue could catch up.

Seeing him like this, a mystified expression came onto Daphne's face,

[Daphne: The White Whale, it's huuge, right? If we eat that child, don't you think lots and lots of people's stomachs would be filled?]

[Subaru: What..'re you……]

[Daphne: Great Rabbit too, it'll keep on multiplying all the time. Soo, as long as we have that child, we can just leave it to become more and more and no one will never have to worry about food, right?]

[Subaru: Multi……ply?]

Though he was hearing Daphne's words, his mind couldn't understand them at all.

If those shocking words really meant exactly what they sounded like, then Subaru would have absolutely no idea what this Witch in front of him was talking about.

Honestly, from the bottom of his heart, he had no idea what she meant――

[Subaru: Wh..a……what? You created the Mabeasts… to solve the food problems? The White Whale and the Great Rabbit were supposed to feed people stricken by hunger? Even though, thanks to your thoughtfulness, all those people were eaten instead!?]

[Daphne: ……? But, if you want to eat the other without considering the possibility of being eaten yourself, don't you think that'd be super selfiish?]

[Subaru: ……]

[Daphne: Besiides, don't you think there are already too many Humans and Demihumans for this world? If those children can lower the number a bit and put things right again, Daphne thinks that'd be pretty good tooo]

[Subaru: Th-then why does the White Whale spit fog that erases people's existences, and the Great Rabbit eat up whole villages to its heart's content……?]

[Daphne: I don't know much about how they hunt… how they grew up, how much they eat, where they eat…… even if I knew, it still wouldn't fill Daphne's hungry belly…]

Seeing Daphne's smile as she said this, Subaru finally understood.

The meaning of Echidona's words, he finally understood it.

She had warned him that his affinity with Daphne was the worst it could get.

At first, Subaru thought it was referring to her off-beat tempo that clashed his impatience, and had so optimistically thought that it was merely a mismatch of personality.

――But the mismatch between Subaru and Daphne was in their very systems of values.

Rather, it was not only with Subaru. Her value system probably wouldn't align with any human being at all.

Her perspective was of a completely different dimension than that of Humans and Demihumans. And it was not just because she was biased towards the Mabeasts she herself had created.

The strong makes food of the weak――this was the only principle within her considerations. To acknowledge the existence of food, to increase its volume, and to consume it. All else was trivial.

He had nothing to say to that. The very structure of their minds were fundamentally different.

Of all the Witches Subaru encountered up to now, in spite of their quirks and misunderstandings, he felt that he was nonetheless able to hold conversations with them.

But, in the end, all these girls were Witches. They were Witches. The only seven in this world, Witches in the truest sense of the word.

[Daphne: Subaruun too…… everyone thinks way too little of Gluttony, don't they?]

[Subaru: ……]

[Daphne: In the first place, as long as you're alive, isn't the desire to eat the most important desire there is? After all, if you don't satisfy it, you can't go on living…]

[Subaru: ……]

[Daphne: Even if you have no peace, no one to love you, no one you could tell your feelings to, no way to maintain your sense of self, or obtain the things you wanted, or even if you have nothing at all to aspire to… none of these would kill you, would they? But……]

[Subaru: ……]

[Daphne: If you don't eat, you'll die, you know?]

Of the Seven Deadly Sins, only Gluttony is directly related to life and death.

In the proper sense, Gluttony should be the desire to eat beyond what is necessary. But what Daphne was referring to was desiring to eat in order to survive.

In that regard, Subaru couldn't deny it. What she said was true, one of the truths of life itself. But it would be a mistake to disregard all else in favor of that alone.

[Subaru: Part of what you said is right…… but that kind of thinking……]

[Daphne: Then why don't Subaruun try it… what it feels like to be starved to your limits? Once you do…… I'm sure you'll understand what Daphne's saying]

That was just something a Witch would suggest.

Slowly, Daphne raised her body inside the coffin. With the sound of ripping paper, Daphne easily released the intersecting chains. Pushing aside the loose white bondage with her arm, Daphne hopped out of the coffin and landed barefoot onto the grass.

The tiny figure gave her arms and legs a shake, checking over her stiffened body,

[Daphne: I hate being on my own feet… belly feels so empty when I do…really does…you know……]

Doing this little warm up, Daphne was already out of breath.

But, facing her, Subaru couldn't move an inch. Even his breathing was sealed.

The immense pressure emanating from this little Witch's body held Subaru firmly within its grasp. It was as if his whole body was being gripped by a gigantic palm.

[Daphne: It would be nice if I could just eat Subaruun like this, but Dona-Dona and Met-Met would get angry…… Uuuunn~, just the left eye should be alright]

Saying this, Daphne placed a hand on the blindfolds over her eyes.

"Don't release her bondage, don't touch her body, and don't make eye contact"——all of these, Echidona had warned him of before she summoned Daphne.

But Daphne herself had unfastened her restraints, and though he hadn't touched her, his body was immobilized by her pressure. And, as for the last warning,

[Subaru: ————]

Her left eye was golden.

Nothing out of the ordinary, only the round pupil of a little girl.

Lifting the blindfold over her left eye, Daphne stared at Subaru.

As if being penetrated by her golden pupil, Subaru remained frozen still. And then, she blinked a few times,

[Daphne: That.. should be enough…]

Saying this, with the same beleaguered movements, she made her way back to her coffin. And, just as she looked like she was about to collapse, the mobile coffin gently caught her inside.

Stirring her body around, Daphne found the most comfortable position. All the while, immobilized on the spot, Subaru quietly chewed something in his mouth as he watched her,

Daphne yawned and placed the blindfold back over her eyes. The fabric in the interior of the coffin slowly peeled open and wrapped her tiny body snugly inside, binding her in its grasp.

Like it wasn't even there, her bondage operated entirely on her will.

[Subaru: What just happened…… also, why… do you……]

[Daphne: You still haven't noticed it yet…?]

Just as Subaru was about to ask her why she would restrain herself, Daphne interrupted his question, while giving her body a wriggle inside the coffin as if to make sure the restraints were properly fastened.

The moment her words entered his ears, Subaru furrowed his brows as though he noticed something.

[Subaru: Ah, ugh……?]

Pain. It was Pain.

Rising in Subaru's waist was a pain that gave the illusion that a hole had been opened there, forcing his body to bend.

His guts wrenched as sensations of thirst and hunger protested with overwhelming starvation. Groaning, writhing in the unbearable pain, Subaru's knees collapsed onto the grass.

Saliva drooled from the edge of his lips as he desperately tried to endure the pain. Hunger,*hunger, hunger hunger hunger

Hearing Daphne's words, Subaru noticed it——— the pinky and ring fingers on his right hand were missing.

Where did the missing fingers go? There was no need to look. He was chewing on the fragments of his pinky finger right this moment.

Profuse blood seeped from the torn-off stumps, dyeing the green grassfields red.

Watching the droplets fall, Subaru's mind went blank.

With the passing of the seconds, something slowly came to fill that blankness. An emotion, of,

———*Ahh, spilling blood is such a waste.*

Simply a desire to quench his thirsting throat, and the disappointment of his unsated hunger.

Chapter 48 [A Price For the Tea Party]

He heard a roar.

Compelled by hunger to extend his tongue to catch the blood dripping from his right hand, Subaru heard the roar in the distance. Rage, it was full of rage. Furious. Someone was enraged. Someone was furious. A voice of someone enraged to the point of madness.

——It didn't matter. For now, he just wanted to sate his hunger.

Chew, chew, chew, but it wasn't enough.

What was two fingers supposed to sate? And how much of this thirst could some dripping blood quench?

Not enough. Not enough. Not nearly enough.

Even if he devoured his entire right hand, then devoured his left hand as well, even if he devoured his whole body, it still wouldn't be enough. There was no limit to this hunger. He simply craved what he craved. And so——

[???: ——HNNGYAAAaa!!]

[Subaru: ————WHAT THE F!?]

Laying sideways on the grass, the devastating strike came from directly above his head, sending his body bouncing up from the shockwave before slamming back into the ground. The sheer force warped the earth, leaving a crater in the small hill with Subaru in the center.

Then, the assailant, whose fist was still stuck to the back of Subaru's head, took a ragged breath, and,

[???: That's enough! Why does everyone always have to fight……? Resorting to violence is the worst……the worst……hg]

The voice, half in tears, descended from above, while, savoring the taste of mud, consciousness limped back into Subaru. At the same time, he felt a drop of water landing on the back of his head, guiding him to look up.

There was the vague outline of a young, blonde girl, slowly disappearing, and in tears.

——What just happened to him? Pushing himself off the ground, Subaru understood when he noticed that his right hand had been restored.

Quickly, he turned to the disappearing girl,

[Subaru: Th-thank you for healing me……!]

[Minerva: ……Hmpf]

The Witch turned her face away, sulking as she faded.

But, just before she vanished completely, Subaru caught a glimpse of a blush on her cheeks, and a smile which she didn't manage to hide.

Once the blonde girl―― the Witch of Wrath vanished from the scene, she was replaced by the graceless coffin once again,

[Daphne: Neru-Neru's such a meddler, gees… Say, did you learn anything at least? Diid you? Subaruu~un?]

Hearing these nonchalant words coming from inside the coffin, Subaru jumped to his feet and instantly scuttled away from the crater while shooting Daphne a look of caution.

Seeing this, Daphne gave her nose a snort,

[Daphne: Right~right, you should be careful… After all, eat or be eaten is the only relationship in this world…]

[Subaru: I don't wanna think of it as that kind of bloodthirsty place……! Anyway what just happened!? It was only for a short while, but…… I actually went insane]

[Daphne: That was the maddening hunger… Extreme hunger can turn people into something worse than beasts. If you looked into my right eye too, it would've been even more interesting, you know?]

[Subaru: ……you're kidding]

A magical eye, or something of the sort.

Although Ram's clairvoyance would also count as an eye-power, her ability didn't really have much offensive potential, so Daphne's was definitely way scarier.

Perhaps it could be called the "Eye of Hunger" or the "Eye of Starvation". The moment Subaru looked into her left eye, he ate his own fingers for a hunger he wasn't even aware of.

He was so famished that he forgot the existence of pain, and everything in sight was food to sate his insatiable hunger. In other words――

[Subaru: Is that… how the Great Rabbit sees the world……?]

[Daphne: Those children were born when Daphne was reeaaaaally starving, so they took after me…… they really understand what it feels like to want to eat each other, you know?]

[Subaru: How can you say that so lightly…… don't you feel sad to have given birth to creatures like that? Since you're lecturing me all high and mighty, then you probably know what that hunger feels like. Having your own children…… children… go through that……]

[Daphne: ――? But, even if Great Rabbit's belly goes hungry, it doesn't mean Daphne's belly has to go hungry too?]

[Subaru: ……I was an idiot for asking]

Like parallel lines. No matter how far they stretch, there was no way he could ever understand this Witch.

The Mabeasts she claimed to be her children, were really just emergency foods she could pick up and eat when she felt hungry.

Birthed from her own body and eaten by herself, it was the ultimate form of self-sufficiency.

[Subaru: If you don't bother anyone and go hole up in some other dimension to be self-sufficient there, I guess no one would be too hung up about that, huh]

[Daphne: Say, Subaruun, what is it that you actually want to ask Daphne? If all you want to do is take hits at Daphne, then I'm already getting hungry from staying awake so long… and would rather take a nap now…]

Turning her face away inside the coffin, all the strength drained from Daphne's body, as if ready to fall asleep.

He finally understood why she kept herself in her mobile coffin, all bound in restraints. Keeping her threat contained for the sake of the outside world―― was not the reason.

Instead, it was only to reduce the calories burned from the movements of her limbs so she wouldn't feel as hungry.

This may not be the case for her blindfolds, but that was probably to prevent her magic eyes from draining her stamina.

This girl's existence was complete entirely in herself.

A pure mass of "The Desire to Eat"―― all quite fitting for the name, "Witch of Gluttony".

[Subaru: Honestly, I'm pretty sure it's pointless to ask this, but……. how do I destroy the Great Rabbit?]

[Daphne: Eeeehhh~? You want to destroy Great Rabbit? But that child's so weak and easy to eat, and keeps on multiplying too. He's one of Daphne's greatest masterpieces, you know?]

[Subaru: Eat or be eaten… if you go by that kind of philosophy, then what about killing your enemies to stay alive? I was hoping you'd approve of a survival instinct besides appetite]

Subaru decided to strike from the same baseline as Daphne's own warped morality.

Honestly, he had already half given up on getting any information out of Daphne. After all, he couldn't seem to get her to say anything useful, and couldn't even see himself establishing a proper conversation with her.

At first glance, their game of conversational catch-ball may seem to be going smoothly, but the reality was that she was chewing up every ball Subaru was throwing, begging him to throw more, without ever tossing back anything of her own.

However,

[Daphne: Since I eat in order to live, I also have to permit killing in order to live…… Uuu~unn, that's, nnn, that's also right, isn't it]

[Subaru: ——Eh? That worked?]

[Daphne: If Daphne thinks something is right, then Daphne will accept it. Subaruun too, what did you take Daphne for?]

"This is the Witchiest Witch I've ever seen," Subaru sincerely thought. But if he used that as his answer, there'd be no end to it, so he decided to keep it to himself.

Oblivious to that silence, Daphne pouted her lips with [Huu~uuuu],

[Daphne: If you want to destroy Great Rabbit-chan, Met-Met, Dona-Dona, and Milla-Milla can all do it easily]

[Subaru: Wait, whose nickname was that you just called? Dona-Dona…… is Echidona, right? Met-Met… must be Sekhmet. But who's Milla-Milla?]

[Daphne: Carmilla…… she's Lust. But she doesn't seem to want to meet you, Subaruun]

[Subaru: Even though it's somewhat depressing to hear that the one in charge of sexy things hates me… your suggestion is not gonna work. The Witches can't leave this place, so you guys can't help me]

[Daphne: …….Huuuuu, can't do it huh…?]

For Subaru, who's used to relying on others, such an offer would have been more than he could have hoped for. If they could go out and help him, they would be more than enough to deal with the Great Rabbit and Elsa, but,

[Subaru: Even if you could go outside……would you be satisfied with just destroying and eating the Great Rabbit and coming back here?]

[Daphne: Daphne's stomach has never been satisfied in my entire life, you know…]

[Subaru: So, even if there's a way to get you guys outside, I can't let you guys go]

Sticking out his tongue at Daphne's unsurprising reply, Subaru ruled out her proposal. Inside the coffin, Daphne made an [Uunnn~], and,

[Daphne: If that won't work, then you'll just have to do your best to eat all of them to the last one, I think. Those kids won't be able to multiply from zero……haa~ha……]

[Subaru: Nevermind eating… so we have to kill all of them, huh…… and if we leave just one alive, the whole thing will revive… They move in a group, right? But are they always all together?]

[Daphne: Yeah… Even though there are many of them, their consciousness is singular. Like, one consciousness, shared by the whole group. They don't really have the intelligence to split up]

[Subaru: Is that……so. In that case, we shouldn't run into a problem where we leave some stragglers alive to multiply…… and then find out "THERE WILL BE MORE PANIC AND HORROR" or whatever, right?]

It happens quite alot in horror movies where after exterminating the bloody monsters, you find out that some of them survived underground to reproduce and you wind up with a "THE PREDICAMENT IS NOT OVER!" ending.

But, at least, it seems the Rabbits aren't smart enough to pull a stunt like that.

[Subaru: Oh by the way… about how many rabbits are there on average? If they eat each other, then I'm thinking they must have some system for keeping their numbers in range, or…]

[Daphne: ……who knows? Would you be able to count the numbers of droplets in a fog, Subaruun…?]

[Subaru: It's that level……? No no, I already know I can't take your word for it. So I'll just go see for myself]

Just counting the number of rabbits that swarmed him, there must have been more than a hundred. But, considering how they devoured everyone in the Sanctuary, their number must be closer to the tens of thousands.

In order to kill them all, he'd have to think of a better way.

While Subaru sank into thought, Daphne gave a big yawn to indicate her boredom. And then, making quiet chewing motions in front of the silent Subaru,

[Daphne: Subaruun… if you're busy pondering, could Daphne disappear now? After all, I get hungrier when I exist…]

[Subaru: Preferring not to exist just so you could be less hungry is seriously a mind-blowing statement… But yeah, regardless of how we got here, that was a lot of help. Thanks. ——Also]

Throwing out those half-assed words of thanks, Subaru appended an "Also" at the end.

Seeing Daphne cast him a puzzled expression, he went on with the most scornful voice he could muster,

[Subaru: I'll annihilate that asshole Rabbit. And I've already killed your White Whale. I hope you don't mind, Mommy-sama]

[Daphne: ……]

[Subaru: Four hundred years, that's how long those bastards born from your good intentions preyed on the world outside. That's long enough. ——It's time I erase them without leaving a trace]

[Daphne: You are merely Human]

In front of Subaru's declaration of war, Daphne made a reaction which he had never seen before.

Stretching her lips wide, for the first time, her expression revealed something other than "Hunger".

[Daphne: Try it if you can]

With her red tongue extended from a mouth lined with razor-sharp fangs, the Witch of Gluttony smiled.

A great gust of wind swept up, forcing Subaru to lift his arm to cover his eyes.

The abrupt wind made waves in the grassfields at his feet, sending green blades swirling and scattering into the air. Inadvertently following it with his gaze and letting his eyes be drawn up into the sky, when he looked back again,

[Subaru: Sorry for putting you through the trouble, Echidona]

[Echidona: I just knew it would turn out like that… that's why I tried to stop you]

[Subaru: It's not like it can be helped… She kinda released her bondage and flipped up her blindfold herself. You should actually praise me a bit for not touching her, you know]

[Echidona: Right. If you did touch Daphne, it wouldn't have ended so easily. Her left eye alone is not as much of a threat. But the horror of Daphne lies in her right eye, and it only truly begins once you've been "Eaten"]

Subaru couldn't help but recoil a bit at that terrifying statement.

Frankly, the part about "Not as much of a threat" was already enough to set off some alarms.

[Subaru: What's the point of showing me my opponent's STATS after the battle's already over? Gees. Although, I might want to hear it out in case I run into another monster with a similar setup…]

[Echidona: Monster, you say?]

Still not quite able to shake off his negative impression of Daphne, Subaru realized he might have misspoken when he heard Echidona's disappointed mutter.

To her, Daphne was someone she could call her friend. Although one must admit that only a Witch could be friends with someone like that, this was this and that was that. No matter how you look at it, to call a Witch a monster in front of another Witch was,

[Subaru: Ahh, I wasn't thinking just now. Sorry. Got carried away. I have absolutely no comment about that friend of yours. That's all I have to say]

[Echidona: Huhuhu, there's no need to be so considerate for a Witch's feelings. We are quite used to those words of ostracism]

[Subaru: ……I can't be so sure about what words to use for Daphne, but I don't think you're a monster. That much I should clarify, you know]

Hearing this, Echidona's eyes widened in surprise.

And, seeing her reaction, Subaru quickly looked away, chiding himself for his self-serving thoughts.

What he said just now was clearly to get on her good side. Of course, half of it was sincere, but that didn't change the fact that he was trying to avoid making a bad impression on the helpful Witch.

Then again, considerations of this caliber must surely have been seen through by this seasoned Witch.

[Echidona: No, it won't work! Even if you try to dupe me with those pleasing words, I won't let myself be duped! Want some more tea or cookies?]

[Subaru: Saying that while looking so cheerful isn't convincing at all! What's with your route being so easy? This is like desperate-lonely-girl-level!]

If she fell for such obvious flattery, then he'd have some serious worries about her future.

But, as much as he knew she didn't—— it still left an ache inside his chest.

[Subaru: I think I'll pass on the body fluids and the who-knows-what's-in-there cookies]

[Echidona: I didn't put my hair or anything in them?]

[Subaru: How can I not doubt every statement you make at this point!]

Subaru had already decided that he would never eat anything from here again.

Seeing Subaru shoot her a suspicious look, Echidona gave a wry smile. Then, she returned his gaze with her all-seeing eyes. Sometimes, for some reason, he just found those eyes really disconcerting.

[Subaru: I don't like that look that feels like it can see right through me]

[Echidona: If I could see through all of you just by looking, then I wouldn't mind staring at you until you are burned to a char…… But anyway, are you aware of it, or not, I wonder?]

[Subaru: Aware or not of what?]

[Echidona: Well, in my narrow, clumsy imagination, what you went through just now should be considered a rather shocking experience to most humans. Surely, being compelled by hunger into eating your own body isn't a common occurrence?]

Listening to Echidona's understated delivery, Subaru was reminded of just how hideous his situation had been. Holding up his right hand, he confirmed that all five fingers were still there, all thanks to a certain Witch's hit-and-run healing.

While Subaru quietly thanked her in his mind, Echidona closed one of her eyes,

[Echidona: Minerva just ignored my calls and jumped out. When she catches sight of a wound, she'll charge out regardless of appearances…… it's hard to live a long life with a personality like that. In fact, she was the first of us to be killed]

[Subaru: The end of the Witches…… huh. I heard you were all eaten by the Witch of Envy, but is it alright for me to ask about that?]

[Echidona: To ask the dead about how they died, is that too crude a thing to do, I wonder? It is certainly unprecedented. And as for how I feel about it…… hmm, let me see. I don't think I should relay that story. It involves the other five's reputations, after all]

Seeing Echidona unwilling to discuss the details of their deaths, Subaru could only accept that it can't be helped.

Subaru himself had died many times before, and knew full well that it was not a topic for lighthearted conversation. After all, "Death" is an awfully heavy thing.

[Subaru: In that sense, I guess you guys are some of the few people who could share that feeling with me]

[Echidona: ……no, I wouldn't be so sure. Indeed, we have died once, but I don't know if we could think of it the same way you do]

Just when he thought he had found some common ground, Subaru's words were rejected.

But, just as he was about to object to Echidona's curtness, all of that emotion evaporated when he noticed the grave expression on her face. She was looking directly at him, her brows furrowed with a tinge of sadness,

[Echidona: This is also related to the matter of awareness…… have you noticed that your current state is crooked?]

[Subaru: Crooked……?]

[Echidona: It is no doubt a consequence of the special circumstances of "Return by Death". And so, while it pains me to recognize that as the reason, it pains me even more to see that you yourself are not aware of it]

[Subaru: I'm not sure I understand… So, what're you trying to tell……]

[Echidona: Do you think it's normal for someone who just ate their own fingers, even if they are healed, to carry on a casual conversation as though nothing had happened?]

[Subaru: ————]

For a moment, Subaru stopped breathing.

With steady eyes, Echidona watched the frozen Subaru. And then, to that Subaru who had forgotten how to breathe,

[Echidona: You weren't entirely unaware, it seems]

[Subaru: ……It's a matter of how I look at it, I guess. Honestly, I'm aware that the way I'm thinking right now isn't normal. But for the sake of what's most important to me… I feel it's alright to cut off the rest of it]

[Echidona: The rest of it, such as?]

[Subaru: Well, my primary goal right now is to break through this deadlock. The problems at the Mansion, the problems at the Sanctuary, and most of all, the problems facing Emilia. I'm still as stuck as ever, and still have no idea where to begin, but……]

Breathing in through his nose, Subaru looked up to the sky.

Blue and vast, with white, drifting clouds, and a somehow soothing breeze. Letting it all soak into his sight, immersed in this scenery detached from the tedium of reality,

[Subaru: I've already decided that I'll use the hell out of everything I can get my hands on]

[Echidona: ……So you've accepted "Return by Death", then?]

[Subaru: It's not that I've accepted it… Only, I'm a bit short on tools to begin with, so it's just about all I have. ……Don't misunderstand though, I really don't like using it at all]

In front of Echidona, who must have already picked up on his thoughts, Subaru nonetheless tacked on this unnecessary clarification.

[Subaru: In order to reach that desired future, even if I have to pay with my life, I will do it. For now, I've at least been assured that I can keep Returning by Death for as long as I can keep my sanity. In that case, I'll just have to muster as much backbone as this boneless self can muster]

[Echidona: To pile on the "Deaths", in order to bring it within your reach. ——That is not a resolve any ordinary person would be capable of]

[Subaru: I've died too many times, I guess. ……Before I knew it, my head must've gotten messed up]

He wasn't making light of "Death". It was just that the accumulation of the experiences of "Death" in Subaru had strengthened his conviction into something irreversible, and terrifying. Without a doubt, Subaru now feared "Death" more than ever before.

But, in spite of this, Subaru nonetheless intended to make full use of “Death”. It was as simple as that.

After piling on his deaths, and having witnessed the ends of worlds, what he found far more unbearable than his own death, were the deaths of the people close to him.

If it meant saving them from the inescapable fate of “Death”, then he would expend as many of his replaceable “Lives” as necessary.

Swallow down all the pain, agony, and horror, and die in order to survive.

——That, was the basis of Natsuki Subaru’s so-called crooked resolve.

[Subaru: If the only thing I have to sacrifice is my own heartbreaks, then I will gladly do it. “Return by Death” is just the perfect ability for this powerless brainless always-relying-on-others self, isn’t it?]

[Echidona: ……]

[Subaru: I was hoping you’d console me with “Don’t think so little of yourself!” or something!?]

[Echidona: Considering the obstacles that await you in every direction, I can’t say it so lightly. In fact, if you wish to take control of this current situation, there is no way not to use it. Although personally, I would be quite displeased to have no choice but to rely on Envy]

The fact that Echidona refrained from offering easy consolations just meant that she was the type to be mindful of the circumstances.

Although it wasn’t much for encouragement, he was still grateful for having someone to kick him awake like this.

After all, knowing that the road ahead will leave him full of wounds and scratches only made it all the more worth taking.

[Subaru: In the end, all I can do is spam Return by Death and keep going over my options, huh. I’d hate to imagine how many painful experiences I’m gonna be facing up ahead]

[Echidona: ……]

[Subaru: One of the mysteries I gotta solve though, is what kind of experiments were you running in this Experimental Grounds of the Sanctuary…… you probably don’t feel like telling me, do you?]

[Echidona: …….No, I don’t. I already told you before. I wouldn’t want you to despise me]

Echidona shook her head at Subaru's question, and denied his request.

Receiving this reply, [I have no choice, then], Subaru went on with a click of his neck,

[Subaru: If you won't tell me, then there's no other choice. I'll just have to go ahead and rip open all the secrets you wanted to hide. You won't try to stop me, will you?]

[Echidona: ……If you want to rip it open, there's nothing I can do. If you want to overpower my secrets you despise so much and forcibly expose them under the sun, then my only choice is to silently endure it]

[Subaru: You're making it sound like I'm planning to do something awful can you not please say it like that!?]

Echidona's cheeks blushed and quickly looked away from Subaru.

He seriously wasn't sure if she was doing that on purpose or if that just happened to be her personality. Just from what he had seen over the course of the tea party, she really might actually be that airheaded… Witches are scary.

Then, just when he was about to resume the conversation,

[Subaru: Nnh――]

Suddenly, still seated in his chair, a dizziness struck him. Something almost like the dazzled feeling from standing up too fast continued to sway Subaru's consciousness. That is,

[Echidona: It seems your body is close to waking up]

[Subaru: The tea party is coming to an end, huh…… it's been pretty meaningful, I guess]

[Echidona: Well, that's because you surprised me last time, telling me there was nothing you wanted to ask. This time, I wonder if I've lived up to my reputation as the Witch of Greed?]

With all the discussing, teaching and chatting, this tea party must have been a great satisfaction for this Witch. Subaru was somewhat reluctant to leave, seeing her unbridled joy and her visible regret to see him go, but he quickly shook his head and severed that sentiment.

It was strange how this Witch managed to pull on his heartstrings, but it wouldn't be good to become too attached to her. She was a Witch, and more than that, she was dead. Though it's unclear which part was actually worse here.

[Subaru: What should I do when I want to come back here?]

[Echidona: You mean how to be invited to the tea party? Oh no no no, we mustn't, you mustn't become too dependent on me. It's true that you have no one you could confess your Return by Death to in the outside world, and I know how much you long for me as the only person you could open your heart to, but I am dead and you are living…… no, it can never be, between us]

[Subaru: When you wriggle around looking strangely happy while saying that it's not convincing at all!]

What was he supposed to do when Echidona suddenly behaves like an overenthusiastic eel-restaurant owner who saw his first customer in years?

Seeing the way Echidona was looking at him with her hand on her cheek, Subaru wasn't sure just how to react. Then, with [Huhuhhu], she placed her hand over her lips, smiling,

[Echidona: Don't look so troubled. I am a girl, after all, and sometimes I want to have lighthearted conversations like this too. That is all. I am still well aware of the gap between Witch and Human]

[Subaru: ……Echidona]

[Echidona: The condition to being invited to the tea party is to scream from the depths of your heart, "I want to know", inside my Tomb. The first time, you are invited no questions asked, but the second time onwards will not be so simple. The third time…… might be quite difficult, I think. Merely superficial screams won't be able to reach me]

Hearing her quickly explain this, Subaru recalled what had happened immediately before being invited.

He had just Returned by Death after being eaten alive by the rabbits. His body was drowning in the lingering agony of death, and his consciousness was endlessly screaming "What had happened?"

That was when he heard Echidona's invitation. But next time, things would have to be even more desperate than that.

[Subaru: I really… would rather not……]

[Echidona: Precisely. So… this may very well be the last time we meet. Though of course, this would not be the last if you challenge the Trials again]

Same as in the first Trial, it seems she would be waiting for him in the second and the third Trials as well. As long as Subaru challenges the Trials in Emilia's place, their reunion will be assured.

In other words,

[Subaru: I'll see you at the next Trial, then? Guess there won't be any tea there]

[Echidona: If you really want a drink, I wouldn't mind brewing you some on the scene……]

[Subaru: No no, I get the feeling that if I see the manufacturing process I'll want to drink it even less]

Seeing him holding up his palms to say no, Echidona made her most dejected expression yet.

He didn't know why she wanted to push her body fluids on other people so much. Maybe she gets off on having a part of herself become a part of someone else, or some kind of fetish like that…*The sin is deep.*

[Subaru: Well, I guess I'll be disappearing soon…… thanks for your hospitality, Echidona. Till we meet again……]

[Echidona: Before that, would you mind?]

Sensing that his body was fading, Subaru tried to say farewell to Echidona. But it was Echidona herself who stopped him.

She stood up from her seat, and, with her funerary dress swaying, she walked to Subaru's side,

[Echidona: You have joined me in my tea party, and acquired some portion of my knowledge…… but, aren't you forgetting something?]

[Subaru: Forgetting something?]

[Echidona: My compensation, that is]

Echidona narrowed her eyes, and poked out her tongue at Subaru's tilted head.

Subaru's eyes widened at her words, repeating [compensation……] under his breath. And with, [Yes, compensation], Echidona nodded,

[Echidona: I charged a toll for our last meeting as well? Dealing with a Witch always comes with a price. The last payment was for last time, so what should I take this time, I wonder?]

[Subaru: C-can't you wait till I'm better off in life? I don't really have much cash on me, and the stuff you charge can be a little too rough on me you know]

[Echidona: Your skills for negotiating with Witches might be a little lacking]

Seeing Subaru pressed into the back of his chair, a sadistic smile emerged on Echidona's lovely face. She looked him up and down, wondering just what to take.

A Witch's compensation——— last time, it was forgetting Echidona's existence after returning to reality. If the same happened this time, then all the information he gained from the tea party, along with any hope of breakthrough, would be lost. Only, he wasn't sure what other price he would be able to afford,

[Echidona: Alright, I've decided]

What's going to happen? Subaru shriveled back, as Echidona leaned her body forward and placed her face up against his. While Subaru was busy being shaken by the closeness of her lips to his, she leaned down even further——— and reached into the inside of his jacket.

Her soft, white hair brushing against his skin smelled of the faint scent of flowers. Having no immunity to pretty girls, Subaru's brain froze like a brick.

But, not minding Subaru's mental issues, she touched him on his chest,

[Echidona: Then, I'll take this]

[Subaru: ……Oo, eh?]

Pulling her hand out of the confounded Subaru's chest——— Echidona's white fingers drew out a small handkerchief, fluttering in the wind.

White, with gold linings, on its back was an embroidery of the gray Great Spirit,

[Subaru: The handkerchief Petra gave me when I left for the Sanctuary…….?]

[Echidona: You should thank the person who gave you this gift. It is imbued with only the pure and powerful emotion of concern for your safety. Every passing of the needle and thread instilled this magic into this object. I am quite fascinated indeed by the power residing here]

[Subaru: ……Petra…did that?]

[Echidona: Someone is very fond of you, it seems. While I must apologize to the child who offered you these thoughts, I will be taking this]

Echidona's cheeks softened at the embroidered Puck on the back, before stowing the handkerchief away into her chest. Then, leaving Subaru's side,

[Echidona: The price for the tea party has been paid. From the bottom of my heart, I look forward to your next visit]

In an almost joking gesture, Echidona picked up the edges of her dress and performed an impeccable curtsy.

Perhaps, she wanted to give him a lighthearted send-off――― noting that it wasn't like her at all, Subaru stood up from his chair,

[Subaru: Thank you for the treat… and for everything. ――Until we meet again]

In the same way, Subaru picked up the hems of his jersey and did a curtsy of his own, prompting a wry smile onto Echidona's face.

Then, as a white light enveloped the scene――― Subaru left the tea party.

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――The first thing Subaru felt as his consciousness returned from the tea party was the cold, hard floor, and the unpleasant taste of dirt in his mouth.

[Subaru: Uegh! Ghpphph! Does that have to happen every time now……!?]

Spitting out the foreign objects in his mouth, Subaru sat up and shook his head, pushing his mind to wake up.

First thing, was to confirm his body's condition, and recall what had happened before he woke. When he Returned by Death after being devoured by the Great Rabbit, he was immediately summoned to Echidona's tea party. There, he got mangled by Daphne's eye, proceeded to strengthen his resolve, and was at last saved by Petra's thoughts.

None of it was missing from his memories. And, relieved by this fact,

[Subaru: Looks like Echidona kept her word. The tea party didn't get erased from my memories this time]

This time, the white-haired Witch still remained vivid in his memories.

Even though she had no lack of Witch-iness, she did at least keep her promises. In fact, judging from their interactions so far, she might even be among one of the few people he could call an ally.

Though it was too bad there wouldn't be many opportunities he could rely on her help,

[Subaru: Can't say I got everything I needed this time…… but at least it's something]

Placing his hand over his chest, Subaru thought back to the events of the tea party――― to his confession of his "Return by Death", and clenched down onto that feeling of salvation.

There, even though it was limited to Echidona and the other Witches, being able to say it out loud and share that burden was already more than he could have hoped for.

And having the chance to hear someone more knowledgeable about this Parallel World give her thoughts on “Return by Death” was just another one of the things he gained.

The Witch of Envy was the one who put everything into motion, and when the day comes when he will have to face her, he will be ready.

[Subaru: With that renewed feeling, Natsuki Subaru is reborn! So let me make good use of that Witch’s power for now. No matter how many times it takes, I’ll spend my life to do it]

If it could get him closer to the answer, he would ask for nothing more.

[Subaru: My sense of time must be off thanks to the tea party, but this is right after the first Trial, isn’t it?]

The location of his Return by Death hadn’t changed, that was what Echidona told him. Turning his head about to look over his surroundings, he was definitely inside the Tomb.

Having verified this, and deciding that he should start carrying Emilia out of this place, Subaru proceeded to search for her.

[Subaru: Considering this is immediately after Return by Death, and the third time at that, I better think about how to deal with Garfiel. ……Though I’m pretty sure he won’t just try to kill me all of a sudden]

But still, Garfiel was prone to impulsive actions. And it’d be impossible to predict what he will do.

Thinking back to their last encounter and his subsequent death, even though the Great Rabbit was his immediate cause of death, recalling the scene of the slaughter of the villagers made a dark emotion boil within Subaru, beyond his control.

Repel the Great Rabbit, repel Elsa’s attack, solve the Sanctuary’s mysteries, and settle his debt with Garfiel.

Even if none of it had happened in this world, Subaru was not going to forgive him. One way or another, he will exact his revenge on Garfiel.

Brooding over these thoughts, Subaru’s negative feelings towards Garfiel surged ever higher, seeping to the surface. But all these thoughts came to an abrupt end, when,

[Subaru: ……Where’s Emilia?]

——She was nowhere to be found.

The sense of incongruity made Subaru furrow his brows, desperately trying to peer through the darkness of the Tomb. But he couldn't find Emilia's body anywhere in the narrow room where their Trials took place.

This had never happened before.

[Subaru: Immediately after my Trial, Emilia should still be in the middle of her's……]

Emilia, unable to pass her first Trial, should still be tangled by her past, suffering at Subaru's side.

And yet, she was not in the Tomb. The place and time he returned to was no doubt inside the Tomb immediately after his first Trial, but,

[Subaru: ……]

He had a bad feeling about this.

Emilia's absence meant deviating from all the conditions so far.

It shouldn't be possible, not unless Subaru had changed the future. But what could an unconscious Subaru have done to have this kind of influence?

Stirred by unease, Subaru ran out of the Trial room and into the corridor. Then, carrying his reverberating footsteps through the corridor, he came out of the Tomb.

Underneath the moonlight, stepping out of the Tomb, what Subaru saw was――

Chapter 49 [LOVELOVELOVELOVELOVELOVEYOU~]

——With the dry clasps of footsteps striking upon his eardrums, Subaru felt a sense of unease inside his very skin.

The cold wind flowing into the Tomb was accompanied by an unpleasant stickiness. As if the ground was clinging to his feet as he ran, every step drained him of strength.

Feeling sharp, electrifying sensations all over his exposed skin, it was like his body was being pummeled by objects protruding from the air. Essentially, it was a feeling that made him hesitate to go forward.

——Subaru already knew a feeling very similar to this.

But, urged on by his sense of foreboding, Subaru swept aside the tangling discomfort as he sprinted towards the entrance of the Tomb.

Passing through the moon-lit corridor and the ivy-ridden entrance, with a sensation of breaking through a membrane of air, Subaru came out of the Tomb.

And there, he saw it.

[Subaru: ……You gotta be kidding me, oy]

Subaru's feet gouged into the earth as he skidded to a stop.

Almost toppling over from the momentum, flooding into Subaru's sight was something in the realm of inconceivable.

So detached from common sense was the scene before his eyes.

[Subaru: A shadow……?]

The mutter that spilled from his lips—— summed up just about all of it.

Shadow—— was the only way to describe what he was seeing.

The Sanctuary, which was supposed to be visible from the entrance of the Tomb, was nowhere within sight. While it was true that the inhabited area was located quite far away from the Tomb, as far as Subaru was concerned, there was no way he couldn't see a single building from here.

Above all, the full moon was still clear in the sky, pouring its silver glow over all the earth. Yet the world he was seeing was far too dark, as if it was submerged under a shadow.

[Subaru: ————]

Gulping down his breath, Subaru made up his mind to set out towards the darkness-befallen Sanctuary. Lifting his soles off the stone slabs, he stepped onto the soil and grass. ——Or, that should be what it was.

He did feel the sensation of stepping onto a bed of overgrown grass, but his vision, swallowed by the darkness, couldn't actually verify that fact. The sticky sensation on his skin didn't change, either.

[Subaru: E-Emilia——!]

Unable to endure these surreal surroundings, Subaru called out to the first name that appeared in his mind. After calling to the girl most certain in his memories, his thoughts resumed their motion, as the names and faces flashed across his mind,

[Subaru: Ram! Lewes-san! And-incidentally-Otto! Are you there!? Please come out!]

If this was immediately after the Trial, they should still be outside the Tomb waiting for Emilia's results. Ignoring their calls to stop him, Subaru had rushed into the Tomb and wound up becoming another participant in the Trials. That had always been what preceded his Returns.

Afterwards, when he carried Emilia out of the Tomb, he was always greeted by those usual faces.

This time shouldn't have been any different.

[Subaru: They're not here…… but it's not only that… What's with the gloomy atmosphere? Even paddy roads in the countryside aren't this dark…]

Without artificial lighting, the paddy field roads in the night would sink into true darkness in the absence of starlight.

But the Sanctuary's situation was different from that "instant-dark". The moon was gleaming overhead, and that gleam was at least falling on Subaru's body.

And yet, that light somehow dissipated before reaching the ground, setting the scene for this vague and uncertain night. ——It was as if a spotlight was shining on him alone.

The only thing visible in this darkness was himself. Turning to look behind him, even the Tomb he had just come out of had been swallowed into darkness and could no longer be seen.

Memories of walking through the White Whale's fog came back to him.

Having lost the girl he relied on, thrown off the dragon carriage, unsure whether the White Whale's jaws were closing in behind him, and having lost both sense of direction and any reason to go on living, he remembered walking on.

In the end, eventually wandering out of that fog, he was picked up by Otto's favorite dragon, Furufu.

So this time, if he kept on walking through the darkness, perhaps he would be rescued as well?

[Subaru: What am I, an idiot? ……No, I am an idiot. What's with this deadbeat, loser-dog thinking? If I have no idea what happened, no idea what'll happen, don't even know where everyone is and here I am worrying about myself, idiot]

Hadn't he just confirmed his resolve at Echidona's tea party?

No matter what happens, no matter how much he must suffer, if Subaru could just pay with his life to solve everything in the end, he would consider it a bargain.

Compared to losing the people most important to him and proceeding into an irreparable future, how fortunate it is to be able to exchange his life for the chance to try again.

So, dawdling around embattled by fear in front of an incomprehensible situation, going in circles before meeting a pathetic end to his life was not what Subaru needed to do.

Rather, he should be boldly challenging his incomprehensible circumstances, and even if he fails to reach an answer, he should grasp every clue he could for vengeance in the next life before welcoming a meaningful death.

[Subaru: In any case, what I have to confirm now is……]

Where Emilia, Ram, and everyone else had gone.

When he first saw that Emilia was not in the Tomb, for a moment, Subaru thought that she had passed the Trial, woke up, and left on her own. But he immediately ruled out that possibility. Because if Emilia passed the Trial and woke up safely, there was no reason for her to not wake Subaru.

Subaru knew from experience with Emilia that when someone inside a Trial is touched or called, the Trial would be interrupted.

Although more accurately, Subaru's consciousness was inside Echidona's tea party rather than the Trial, so that premise might not apply here.

[Subaru: But still, it's not like Emilia to leave me and head out by herself]

She would have tried to pull the unconscious Subaru out of this place, or at least rested him against a wall. He couldn't imagine that she would just leave without doing anything.

And then, there was also the rather mean conclusion——— Subaru didn't think Emilia was capable of passing the first Trial on the first try.

Knowing that since day one, Emilia had been stuck on the same Trial in every loop, Subaru was skeptical of the idea that she could have cleared it on her own to begin with.

Therefore, Subaru decided that Emilia's disappearance was probably not according to her own will. Either someone carried her out, or———

[Subaru: Maybe she came back from the Trial completely dazed, and went out without even noticing that I was here…… that's not entirely inconceivable]

But that still wouldn't explain how the world outside was plunged into darkness.

Even if Subaru could accept that as the explanation for Emilia's disappearance, he still couldn't begin to imagine what the cause and reason of this scene might be.

At least, in Subaru's experience, the Sanctuary never once became like this while a Trial was taking place.

As for the absence of the people waiting outside, Subaru's heart shuddered at the possibility that the ferocious white rabbits might be behind it. But he quickly shook his head and denied that hasty conclusion.

According to his calculations, the attack of the Great Rabbit should take place on the night of the sixth day——— five days from now. Even if it arrived ahead of schedule, he'd still like to believe that it couldn't have come on the very first day.

———Although, he was intentionally ignoring the fact that the timing of Elsa's attack on the Mansion had mysteriously changed as well.

That was just another one of the mysteries Subaru had no answers to. But if the date of the Great Rabbit's attack could randomly change like Elsa's, then that would leave no room for Subaru to even begin to unravel these circumstances.

Aside from having faith that there was no situation Return by Death couldn't avert, there was not much Subaru could do.

[Subaru: All I can do now…… is call out to Emilia and the others while looking around and head to the Cathedral to check on the villagers, I guess…]

Straining his eyes trying to see ahead, it dawned on Subaru just how unfeasible his plan was. Although he had the layout of the Sanctuary more or less memorized, it wasn't to the point of being able to navigate it with his eyes closed.

At this point, even just wandering around this area would require that level of memory power.

Needless to say, getting to his destination safely would be exceedingly difficult. And he couldn't just unconditionally accept the plan of calling out while searching for the others, either.

[Subaru: If this pitch-darkness was somebody's doing…… can't really guarantee whoever I run into will be friendly]

Burning up with anxiety, Subaru continued agonizing over what his best course of action would be.

If he wanted to rendezvous quickly, he should raise his voice and call out. That would be the best way to find out if Emilia and the others were safe. But he was quite aware of the folly of acting blindly from his miserable past experiences. Just how many times had he died in this world because of that?

[Subaru: ……Damnit. If I don't at least figure out what's going on, I'll be screwed if I get killed before that]

At the end of his deliberations, Subaru decided to take the cautious approach.

Suppressing his voice and holding down the sound of his breathing, he focused his eyes into the darkness and followed the map in his mind towards the populated area of the Sanctuary.

Only the sensation beneath his feet was certain. It was the only proof of the existence of the reality outside the Tomb and his only reliance in the world painted in darkness. Despite having fallen into pitch darkness, the Sanctuary should still be the same as before――

[Subaru: ――――U?]

Slowly but surely, Subaru carefully landed each step on the grass. But after only a few steps, he stopped.

The reason, was the wind.

[Subaru: ――――?]

Lifting his face, Subaru somewhat pointlessly looked around in the darkness, hoping to find the source of the ominous breeze.

He felt it. There was something unique about the wind that swept by just now.

It was neither the refreshing breeze passing a field of grass, nor the dusty wind blowing inside the Tomb, nor a wind infused with the blood-soaked scent of a scene of carnage. Instead, it was an air carrying the unmistakable warmth of having touched a living thing.

[Subaru: Wh——]

Unsure of where the wind was blowing from, Subaru looked back in search of the answer.

The Tomb should be directly behind him, but having walked only a few steps away, it was already impossible to see its outlines.

——No, there was a reason other than the darkness why he couldn't see the Tomb.

[Subaru: ————a?]

[???: ————]

At a distance close enough to feel each other's breaths, in the world of true dark, someone was standing right before his eyes.

The reason he couldn't see the entrance of the Tomb, was because that person was blocking his view.

How did he not notice when someone had gotten so close to him? And why did that person not utter a sound when they approached him? In that instant, those questions stormed within Subaru's mind.

But that storm of questions was soon answered.

It couldn't have been any clearer than that.

{???: ——I love you}

The shadow said to Subaru with a voice so overflowing with affection that it sounded like it was about to melt.

It was a murky voice.

A sound so indistinct that Subaru couldn't tell whether it was a man or a woman's.

Compared to a voice passing through a voice changer or one muffled by a cloth, it was more ambiguous and opaque, as if obscured by some invisible power operating on his perceptions.

But even so, the instant Subaru heard those words—— those whispers of love, he instinctively understood who the shadow before him was. And shuddered.

Thinking back, Subaru had already vaguely sensed it before coming out of the Tomb.

The feeling of the thick Miasma stinging his skin. The sight of the Sanctuary submerged in shadows. The stifling pressure engulfing his surroundings. And the world that fundamentally lost its life.

It was every bit a reenactment of the time-stopped reality brought about by the uttering of the forbidden words, where Subaru met the Witch.

That is to say, the one standing before him was,

[Subaru: Wh..y……!?]

[???: ――――]

There was no answer. But there was also no doubt that it was right in front of him.

Subaru twitched his fingers, checked that he was still breathing, and confirmed that time hadn't stopped. The second-hand of the world was definitely ticking as it should. And yet the Witch was standing right before him.

Faced with a threat beyond his imaginations, Subaru's mind was painted over with complete white.

The oath which he had sworn only moments before, to uncover the details no matter what happens without letting a single second go to waste, all vanished in the face of that shock.

So unexpected was Subaru's encounter with the Witch at this point in time.

His throat rapidly drying up, Subaru's body stiffened as he forgot how to breathe. Bound by the overwhelming pressure, Subaru turned as rigid as a frog being stared down by a snake.

Becoming immobile now would certainly only make the situation worse. But, even understanding this, Subaru's limbs gave no indication of obeying the blaring alarms.

It was a matter far beyond what Subaru's heart and mind could handle.

Subaru's heart did not falter, and his mind was burning with the need to do something, but his body and the deep-rooted faculties governing it only calmly looked on.

Because――regardless of whether he moved or not, the result would be exactly the same.

[???: ――――]

There was no hostility emanating from the shadow before his eyes. Nor did it seem to have any intention to hurt him.

But that is not to say that it was uninterested in Subaru.

Quite the opposite.

[???: ――――]

The entity before him was instilling him with so much interest that it was sending chills running down his spine.

It was blind, obsessive passion, overwhelming to the point of making him wonder why, binding him so tightly as if to never let him escape.

――The shadow had no interest in anything other than Subaru.

In that shadow, there was only Subaru. Only Subaru. Only Subaru *only Subaru only Subaru only Subaru only Subaru only Subaru only Subaru only Subaru only Subaru only Subaru only Subaru――*

{???: ――I love you I love you I love you}

That voice echoed, spiraling in his mind.

His thoughts were thrown into chaos, unable to even recognize what he was seeing in front of him. Was he standing, or sitting? Was he breathing? Was he conscious? Was he alive? Or was he dead? He wasn't sure. He wasn't sure. He was becoming less and less sure.

A fingertip reached for him.

The surrounding shadows rose, expanding to envelop Subaru's body from all directions.

He had no strength left to oppose it. No reason to oppose it. Resist, don't resist, let himself be swallowed, what will happen then? It was too tiresome to think about. And――

{???: I love you I love you I love you――}

[????: Quit fuckin' around KkkrrraaAAAHHH――!!]

――The next instant, terrifying destruction descended on the space between Subaru and the shadow.

Inches from his eyes, the impact crashed into the shadow, shattering the invisible ground in a swirl of darkness as it sent Subaru flying backwards.

[Subaru: uUoOOaa――!?]

Tumbling while being bumped by hard objects all over, Subaru finally came to a stop when his whole body was soaked in shadow. Giving his head a shake, his rigid body and thoughts simultaneously broke free.

With the noise filling his mind somewhat clearing up, and despite the lingering heaviness that felt like his head was stuffed with sand, the weight had considerably lightened.

Spitting out the mud in his mouth while looking back towards the direction he tumbled from, Subaru's eyes widened at the sight.

[Garfiel: Can't get much worse than this, oy. Can y'move or not?]

With his back to Subaru, the person facing against the shadow snapped impatiently.

His stature was rather small for a man. With short, golden hair, and a rude way of speaking. He kept his posture low, readied for combat, with his legs drawn back and his fangs bared in caution.

[Subaru: Why……would y…me… Garfiel……]

[Garfiel: Hah? Ain't time t'be jokin' around, can't y'see what's happenin' right now?]

Answering Subaru's voice that was still trembling in shock, Garfiel sounded somewhat annoyed. While keeping his eyes fixed on the shadow in front of him, bit by bit, Garfiel edged closer to Subaru,

[Garfiel: I'm gonna grab yer collar 'n jump. Might break yer neck, so pull up some backbone n' bear it]

[Subaru: I don't have the kind of special characteristic where I can use backbone to increase health-points in my neck――uwa!?]

Right in the middle of his rebuttal, Garfiel dived down with incredible speed, and, true to his word, hoisted Subaru up by the collar, prompting a strangled [Uegh!]. But, before Subaru could complain,

[Subaru: ――――!]

――The ground swelled up, and the shadow exploded.

Waves rolled out from the detonated shadow, lunging towards Subaru and Garfiel, threatening to crush them. In an instant, the surrounding shadows joined into the wave, prompting Garfiel to click his tongue as his feet sank into the black mire while trying to back away.

[Garfiel: Agh, fuck! Divine Protection o' Earth Spirits can't work when the ground's like this――!]

[Subaru: Garfiel, my legs are sinking too!]

[Garfiel: The whole damn place's like this! T's what they meant by "If yer bad the Witch gonna be comin'" ain't it!!]

Being dragged along, the parts of Subaru's limbs that were touching the ground were beginning to be swallowed by the shadow. It was an entirely different sensation from sinking into water or mud.

Warm, tender, and smooth, it was like silk trying to wrap around him and enshroud his body within. In a more peaceful setting, he might even have thought that it'd be rather nice to be embraced by that feeling.

But in these terrifying circumstances, he'd have to reject that idea.

[Garfiel: Tch, don't bite yer tongue!!]

With a snort, Garfiel scanned over his surroundings and shouted.

He bent his knees, and lightly leaped his sinking body off the ground. With the shadow tangling to his feet, the jump only managed a few meters, but, extending his legs the instant they touched the ground, he leaped again, and again, and again,

[Garfiel: There, we, are――!]

In a world concealed by night, Garfiel beautifully leaped his way to an area populated by buildings. Literally kicking his foot into a wall, he leaped up once again, and, landing on a roof, he tossed Subaru down with a sigh.

Being tossed like that, Subaru quickly grabbed onto some shingles so he wouldn't slide off, before glancing up at the side of the panting Garfiel's face―― faintly obscured by the darkness,

[Subaru: Th-thanks for saving me……!]

[Garfiel: Huh? Is that the face of someone feelin' thankful? Y'got a problem with me? Oy!]

[Subaru: Just something I haven't gotten over yet…… and.. I never thought you'd come to save me]

[Garfiel: How heartless did y'think I am? If y'got a problem with me savin' ya, feel free to jump right back into that shadow if y'want]

Subaru tersely replied [No thank you] to Garfiel's retort, and sighed.

Garfiel looked away, and Subaru, watching him from behind, felt a flood of complex emotions flowing through his chest.

There was the incomprehensible situation as well, but the biggest reason for this was why did Garfiel choose to save him. Before this, Subaru had considered him the greatest obstacle in the Sanctuary and a target of his resentment on par with Roswaal himself.

Although he was aware that the change in situation must have caused this change in behavior, the complete reversal nonetheless left Subaru unsure how to react.

But, paying no attention to Subaru's internal confusion, Garfiel only gazed down towards the ground with a bitter expression. Clicking his sharp canine teeth, [This 's bad……], he muttered under his breath,

[Garfiel: This goes without sayin', but, doesn't look like it's gonna let us off]

Sliding down to Garfiel's side, Subaru timidly peeked off of the roof.

Witnessing the sight before his eyes, an [u……] inadvertently slipped from his lips. The Sanctuary had transformed into a sea of shadow, with its majority swallowed by the pitch blackness, depriving him of all sense of height and perspective.

But even within that darkness, there was an even darker, writhing figure lurking at the center of the whirling shadows, inching closer at a crawling pace.

It was the one who just tried to swallow Subaru and Garfiel into the shadows, the one who flooded the Sanctuary under a sea of shade. It was――

[Subaru: Garfiel… You have any idea what that is?]

[Garfiel: I got "It's exactly what it looks like", "Ain't no chance it ain't what I think it is", and "It'd be goddamn wishful thinkin' t'say that ain't what that is". Which one y'wanna go with?]

[Subaru: Does which one even matter? They're pretty much the same thing… Oy, you're being way calmer in front of this thing than I th……]

Before he could finish his sentence, Subaru stopped when he saw the expression on the side of Garfiel's face.

Honestly, despite harboring some complicated feelings about how Garfiel saved him, Subaru was nonetheless calmly organizing the situation in his head.

Among them, was why Garfiel, who showed such displeasure at the scent of the Witch——and had turned hostile towards Subaru just because he picked up the scent from his body, was not losing his composure when the source of the scent was right before him.

And that was why, just when he was about to ask—— Subaru dropped the subject when he caught a glimpse of his face.

[Garfiel: What'd y'just say?]

Garfiel uttered, gazing down with his bloodshot eyes. Subaru might just be imagining this, but Garfiel's fangs seemed to be growing longer.

Anger. Rage. Wrath. Fury. His pupils had turned into slits, and one could see the pure-red emotions churning within. How could anyone call that calm?

At the same time, Subaru remembered that there was something he had to ask.

[Subaru: ——Garfiel. Th……Ram and the others, what happened to them?]

[Garfiel: ……]

[Subaru: When I came out of the Tomb, the Sanctuary was already submerged in the shadow. You seem to be alright and lively… so what about the others……?]

[Garfiel: ……in the shadow]

Subaru's repeated attempts at denial only received this cruel reply.

Hearing Subaru gulp down his breath, Garfiel grunted with a tinge of remorse,

[Garfiel: When we noticed somethin' was off, the ground's already turned into th'shade. If Ram hadn't blown me away with her wind, I woulda been swallowed too]

[Subaru: ……and Ram's swallowed just like that? And Lewes, and Otto?]

[Garfiel: Aah, yeah. Granny 'n the noisy lil'bro, all'n one go]

Looking down at the strange writhing of the undulating shadow, Subaru's thoughts couldn't help but take a pessimistic turn in regards to their chances of survival after being swallowed.

If they were being imprisoned in some alternate dimension, then there might still be hope. But, judging from the sensation of touching that shadow, it would be a far too optimistic possibility.

[Subaru: Wh-what is this, seriously, this…… why would that thing suddenly…….!]

Elsa, Great Rabbit, Garfiel.

He had only just sealed his resolve to repulse the threats facing the Sanctuary and the Mansion, to face down all obstacles and obtain the perfect future no matter the cost.

And yet, just when that resolve was sealed, this incomprehensible thing washed it all away.

Why on earth did this thing burst out all of a sudden?

[Subaru: Garfiel…… what happened to Emilia?]

[Garfiel: ――――]

[Subaru: I couldn't find Emilia in the Tomb. ……Was she, swallowed, too?]

[Garfiel: ――――]

Noticing that something was wrong when she woke, Emilia must have ran out of the Tomb.

After all, if she saw the Sanctuary being swallowed by shadow, there was no way she would just stand by and watch. She would have jumped in to save anyone she could with no regard for her own safety, and――

[Subaru: If the shadow…… then, she……!]

[Garfiel: After swallowin' Ram 'n the others, the shadow went into the Sanctuary and drank everythin' up. I chased after it and landed a few blows but it all did jack shit. Then the thing turned back all o' a sudden, I followed it, and there's that]

And that led to what happened just now, it seems.

The shadow was ravaging the Sanctuary, but when it sensed Subaru coming out of the Tomb, it immediately turned around. Then the shadow's objective was Subaru, after all.

An all-devouring shadow. Bearing whispers of love. And overwhelming power.

Its identity went without saying. But,

[Subaru: Why the hell is the Witch of Envy here……!!]

[Garfiel: Ain't the time to be askin' that, oy]

While Subaru wrenched out these words, beside him, a battle-hungry smile emerged on Garfiel's face. Taking care not to lose his balance, Subaru stood up as well, clenching his teeth as he locked his gaze onto the same thing as Garfiel.

A great mass of whirling shadow surrounded the building they were using as their foothold.

Everything caught in the cyclone's range was swallowed. Earth and structure alike were stripped away and forced into its swirling orbit.

[Subaru: Uu, ooOOAAAHH――!]

It was like a great tsunami or a large-scale flood carrying houses along with its current.

Experiencing the bizarre sensation of supposedly massless shadows uprooting the building beneath his feet, Subaru did all he could not to be flung off of the roof.

He tried, but that didn't solve the fundamental problem at all.

[Garfiel: Tch, I'm jumpin' again, grab on!]

[Subaru: ――――!]

Quickly grabbing onto the crouching Garfiel, they escaped the floating rooftop along with Garfiel's leap. Shooting out like a bullet without regards for target, they plunged right into a flock of trees, snapping branches on the way before slamming into a trunk.

[Garfiel: Ghagh――!]

Punching his arm into the trunk, with that inelegant gesture, Garfiel managed to stop himself from falling into the shadows. Subaru, who was clinging to his shirt, took hold of a branch and shifted himself over, maintaining his posture that way.

And just when they were finally allowed to catch their breath, they heard the loud crack of splintering wood behind them.

Quickly turning to look, they saw the building they had just been standing on being pulled into the center of the vortex, and crushed into thin, tiny pieces.

With the collapse of the building's structure, the shadowy vortex swallowed it into the true body of the shade―― into the heart of the writhing shadow, further enlarging its mass.

[Subaru: ――――]

Witnessing the devastating destruction left both Subaru and Garfiel at a loss for words.

Passing several seconds in that silence, the shadow's contours began to blur. And the next moment―― Subaru was certain that his eyes met the eyes of the murky, all-encompassing shadow.

{???: ——I love you}

[Subaru: Uu, a……]

{???: I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you}

[Subaru: ————]

*{???: I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you

Chapter 50 [A Distant Roar]

Billowing waves of shadows bearing pitch-black affection pressed towards Subaru.

Dangling against the trunk of a large tree, barely holding onto a branch, Subaru had no means of escape. He glanced over to Garfiel beside him, only to see that,

[Subaru: GARFIEL!?]

Garfiel let go of the branches, releasing himself into a freefall before landing on the ground. The shadow-infused surface rushed to pull at his feet, but Garfiel, not minding it, swung down his arms as if to pierce into the ground, placing all four limbs in contact with the earth,

[Garfiel: Like hell am I waitin' around t'get swallowed! WwwwrraaAAHHH——!!]

Roaring, Garfiel flung up the arms he had stabbed into the ground.
And along with his motion, the shadowy surface of the earth heaved upwards like a table-flip of massive proportions—— rising to meet the dark, surging wave only inches away from engulfing them.

With clods of soil hurtling into the air alongside the sound of a violent crack, the upturned earth crashed into the shadow. But the impact against the supposedly massless shadow only lasted for an instant, before the storm of earth was swallowed just like the building before it.
The shadowy wave rose higher, its breadth widened, and its hue deepened. The more it swallowed the more vicious it grew—— but the maneuver had bought them just the smallest delay.

[Garfiel: If y'don't get yer ass down I'm leavin' ya behind!]

[Subaru: Uuuoowa——!]

While gazing, dumbstruck, at the unfolding sight before him, a sudden impact knocked Subaru off the branch, sending him plummeting to the ground. But just before he could crash into the earth, Garfiel struck out his arm and nabbed him by the waist, bringing him to an abrupt stop. With his eyes rolled back, beginning to understand what happened,

[Subaru: Y-you didn't have to kick me down!?]

[Garfiel: Yer bein' too slow decidin'. I think that thing's got a crush on ya. Nevermind me, if y'get caught yer gettin' swallowed up in a second]

Still holding Subaru in his grip, Garfiel nudged his chin at the ever enlarging shadow with a feral grin. Following his gaze to the root of the shadow—— Subaru could see the faint outline of a person, singlemindedly reaching out its hand to him.

{???: I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you——}

Despite the distance separating them, he could hear that murky voice as though it was being whispered into his ears.

Defying the laws of physics, as if their distance meant nothing, the abnormality of this voice sickened him to the core.
Watching that shadow directing its dark, immense passion towards him, unbearable disgust and revulsion surged up Subaru's chest.

It was the reason he could Return by Death, and in a sense, he was in its debt.
But it was impossible. It was impossible to accept it. Biologically, and from his very soul, he was rejecting it.
In fact, he would rather jump into the mouth of the White Whale than be embraced by that shadow.

[Subaru: Garfiel, what do we do……!]

[Garfiel: Backin' off's all we got! Even that bastard Roswaal can't be counted on here. Ram 'n Granny…… and th'others didn't stand a chance against that thing]

Garfiel gnawed his fangs and ruefully growled under his breath.
Unlike Subaru, he had seen that shadow swallow Ram and Lewes with his own eyes. So it wasn't hard to imagine what he must be feeling.
But since Subaru still harbored such hateful memories of Garfiel, it only became all the more complicated to now see him in grief.

[Subaru: ————!]

If the writhing shadow could be compared to a giant palm, then its fingers suddenly lunged out towards Subaru and Garfiel. At the last second, gripping Subaru tightly, Garfiel back-stepped out of the way. By treading on ground that was less saturated by shadow, if he could just widen their distance from the heart of the shade, they should at least be able to avoid plummeting into the bog.

[Subaru: Even if we keep running, things won't get any better…… what happened to your attacks?]

[Garfiel: I can't break through th'shadow's dress. Might be a different story if I get a full-powered attack in, but can't make th'opportunity t'do it]

Taking a large leap backwards, Subaru and Garfiel exchanged their thoughts while flying through the gaps between the trees. Their speed should have easily left the shadow on the other side of the forest, but somehow, they just couldn't seem to shake the darkness, slowly inching closer.
Perhaps, this inescapable closeness was just the shadow's Authority. But that was not the only abnormality.

[Garfiel: ……Shit]

Spitting, Garfiel grunted in irritation.
His shoulders were heaving with ragged breathing. Profuse amounts of sweat was emerging on his forehead, and every movement carried a sense of incongruity that Subaru had never seen from him before.

It didn't appear to be fatigue from carrying Subaru's weight.
Seeing this, Subaru furrowed his brows. And, noticing Subaru's reaction, [Tch], Garfiel clicked his tongue,

[Garfiel: My body's gettin' unusually heavy. ——Th'fuckin' shadow's sucking all the lifeforce around it]

[Subaru: You mean the shadow beneath us!?]

Panicking at Garfiel's answer, Subaru squirmed himself away from the shadow even though his feet weren't actually touching the ground—— shivering at the endless darkness covering over all the grass. And only then, did the true threat of the shadow finally dawn on him.

[Subaru: Oy, no way——]

——The forest was falling.

The trees of the forest surrounding the Sanctuary were tall, boasting a canopy thick enough to conceal the moon and stars. But now, the forest sky was filling clearly into his eyes.
It wasn't because the trees were cut down, or that the leaves were burned away. The rows of green treetops were still there, their leaves rustling in the wind.

——But the forest had fallen so low that Subaru's head would pop out if he jumped.

[Subaru: The forest is sinking——!?]

[Garfiel: Same'll happen t' us if we don't keep movin'. I'm guessin' that thing gets more powerful the more it eats——!]

Having spread to the ends of the Sanctuary, the shadow's power grew, and was now swallowing the entire forest into darkness.
Front back left right, the shadow spanned as far as Subaru's eyes could see. Even if they crossed the Barrier or left the forest, there would still be no end to this despair.

Subaru had been so distracted by the unprecedented development and the long-overdue appearance of the Witch of Envy that he had misjudged the threat his enemy posed.
This was the Witch of Envy——the one who once swallowed half the world, whose marks still gripped the present world in terror, the utmost of calamities.

[Subaru: That thing won't actually end up covering half the world, will it……?]

[Garfiel: Story goes that it swallowed countries whole. Might wanna know that before shruggin' it off]

Garfiel sneered, confirming Subaru's fears.
The visible exhaustion on his face must be due to the Witch's influence, and as the rate of the shadow's encroachment accelerated, the sensation of sinking into the earth grew stronger.
Every step seemed to sink deeper than the last, and the effort behind each stride exponentially rose.
The truth is, if Garfiel was alone, he could probably escape——

[Subaru: Garfiel, that thing is after me. So……]

[Garfiel: If yer fuckin' tellin' me t'drop ya, I'm gonna bite yer fingers off one by one, oy!]

Being turned down before he could even voice his proposal, Subaru fell silent. But, quickly shaking off his dejection, Subaru resumed glaring into the side of Garfiel's sweat-drenched face,

[Subaru: This isn't the time to be saying that! We're both going to be eaten like this! If I face that thing, I should at least be able to buy us some time. Meanwhile you……]

[Garfiel: I should run? Or y'sayin' I should go get that bastard Roswaal? First thing that shadow did was head for the center of th'village…… th'villagers and refugees, 'n Roswaal…… they're all eaten already]

[Subaru: ——gh. Y-you're absolutely sure?]

[Garfiel: Y'didn't see, but the whole Sanctuary was swallowed. Long as they didn't all go on a spontaneous moon-watchin' trip into th'forest, I'm sure]

Plainly conveying this, there was no emotion in Garfiel's words. In contrast to his usual over-emotional attitude, it only showed that he was telling the truth.
Not just the defenseless refugees or the peaceful residents of the Sanctuary, but even Roswaal was eaten. If that was the case, then the situation was nothing short of hopeless.

For Garfiel, who specializes in close quarter combat, the long-reaching attacks of the Witch of Envy could be said to be his worst matchup.
If only they had Roswaal or Ram here, perhaps they would still have stood a chance with a coordination of close and long-range attacks.

[Subaru: But that just means without you, there'll be no way left to oppose it……]

[Garfiel: Granny! Ram! And everyone else! They've all already been eaten……!]

[Subaru: ————!]

[Garfiel: On top of that, y'want me t'abandon you too? Y'want me t'shame myself……? Never, never, never gonna do that. Fuckin' "Pararagurara's scars don't fade!" I ain't gonna be satisfied 'till I bash that thing up!!]

Garfiel bared his fangs, barking. His expression was of boundless rage towards the shadow—— perhaps, there was something else as well, or was Subaru just overthinking it?
Having had everyone precious stolen from him, barks of rage couldn't be the only thing dominating his heart—— if he, Garfiel, was that kind of person,

[Subaru: Then why did you do that to everyone……]

Why was he so cruel to tear the defiant villagers to pieces?
Garfiel should know the pain of having someone taken from him, and know the anguish of loss. If he did, then he should be capable of empathy.
Then why did he take his cruelty so far?

Garfiel probably had no idea what Subaru's wrenched out question was asking.
He only wordlessly tightened his grip on Subaru, showing no intention of letting him go. He ran, same as before, or rather, as the encroaching shadow accelerated, Garfiel was putting more and more force into his steps to escape, leaping forward, and forward, flying out of the sinking forest.

Torn between Garfiel's obstinance and the threat behind them, the sudden expansion of his visual field made Subaru lift his face in surprise.
Shooting out of the sinking forest, the two flew out into a clearing. At last, it was an area where the shadow's influence was still weak. He could see naked earth, and short, stunted flowers, but, most shocking of all,

[Subaru: ——Eh!?]

The moment it entered his eyes, Subaru's body was tossed onto the turf.
Grunting in shock as he rolled on the ground, he clutched the soil to stop himself, then shook his head.
But, more than the desire to express his indignation at being thrown, was the need to ask about what he was seeing. That is,

[Subaru: Why is Lewes-san here——?]

Standing in front of Subaru's trembling voice was a little girl with long, pink hair—— or so she appeared, despite the ancient person inside. Lewes.

Seeing the girl standing there at the back of the clearing, watching him with her vast, boundless gaze, Subaru wavered.
Surely, Garfiel had just told him that she was swallowed by the shadow.

But that was clearly at odds with what he was seeing.
If he had to choose which one to believe in, he could only choose to believe the reality in front of his eyes. In that case, was all their previous conversation just a lie?

[Subaru: Garfiel, what is this……]

[Garfiel: ……Don't go jumpin' t'conclusions. I know what y'wanna say 'n ask, but we ain't got time for that, now that we lured that thing here]

Dismissing Subaru with a wave of his hand, Garfiel cast his gaze over his surroundings. Then, lifting his chin and drawing in a deep breath,

[Garfiel: ————*ooooorrrrrrrrRRRRR!*]

Although its volume fell short of covering the entire expanse of the forest, like a distant howl, the call pierced through the wondrously silent air.
Hearing it, for a moment, the rather out-of-place thought occurred to Subaru, *"That guy's super good at making animal noises"*, but it soon gave way when he saw the answer to that howl.

[Subaru: ————!?]

Accompanied by the sound of rustling, one after another, small silhouettes stepped out of the foliage and into the clearing.
Short in stature, their long, pink hair was almost dragging on the ground. Their skins were translucent-white, and their eyes devoid of emotion. The robes they wore seemed unfitting for their size, with sleeves dangling way past the tip their hands. They didn't seem to be wearing any other garment underneath, and, peeking between the gaps, he could see that they were barefoot.

The number of figures stepping out of the treeline must have totaled about twenty or so.
Lining up to fill almost half of the clearing, they all bore the exact same face. Not just the same expression—— but the same face.

[Subaru: What kind of, joke is……]

[Garfiel: Woulda preferred if I didn't have t'show ya]

Garfiel's pained mutter failed to enter Subaru's stricken ears. Or rather, despite entering his ears, they failed to register any proper meaning in his brain.

Seeing the girls with identical faces lined up before his eyes—— all looking exactly like Lewes, gave Subaru the illusion that he might be dreaming.

Truth is, Subaru had these kinds of nightmares before, and he had hoped that this was just another one of them. But,

[Subaru: The scratches from the branches hurt… and my heart too…… this is real, isn't it]

Checking the blood seeping from his arms, and pressing against the sharp pounding of his heart, Subaru took a deep breath. And then, having resolved to accept this scene as reality, he scanned his eyes over the girls once more.

They all looked exactly the same as Lewes, and even their expressions were identical. That is to say, they were all emotionless, unmoving, and doll-like.
Even though Subaru knew that Lewes was never an especially lively person, she was always abundant in emotion, and, more importantly, her every action resembled that of a living human being.

[Subaru: ————]

But that characteristic feeling of living human beings was entirely absent from these girls.
They were like dolls. There could be no description more accurate than that. One could even say they *were* dolls.
Despite breathing and carrying life, they were no more than moving dolls—— such, was the abnormality of seeing twenty identical faces arranged in a row.

[Subaru: Clones…… this world can't have that kind of technology. Is it some kind of replication magic……? But then why make so many Lewes-sans……]

When the term "Somatic Cell Cloning" flashed across his mind, Subaru suddenly realized it.
Why the Sanctuary was called the Experimental Grounds, and why its master, Echidona, was so reluctant to talk about it. And then, there was also why Garfiel repeatedly cursed this place as a deadlock.

[Subaru: Unless, this is the result of the Sanctuary's experiments……? Replicating Lewes-san? No… but, what's the point of doing something like that……]

[Garfiel: Sorry t'do this when yer busy ponderin', but looks like it's about time]

While Subaru's mind was turning at an incredible speed, beside him, Garfiel's arms began to expand.
His arms, covered over with golden hair, swelled to rip through his clothing as muscles bulged to three times their original width.
Atavism—— if the giant tiger was Garfiel's true form, then this partial transformation was merely the first stage of his trump card.

[Garfiel: Surround it n' crush it. Simple, but with e'ryone else eaten, this is all that's left]

[Subaru: ……I can understand what your plan is, but they're…]

[Garfiel: Don't worry. They ain't like Granny, their insides're empty. But they can follow orders at least. If they can just create an openin', we're set]

Whether it was the details of his strategy, or about Lewes' replicants, there were still too many questions Subaru wanted to ask. But there was no time for that, or for carrying on a peaceful conversation, for that matter.

With a swipe of his massive arm, Garfiel pushed Subaru to the very back of the clearing. Then, at Garfiel's brutish signal, the Lewes-formation pressed forward to shield Subaru behind them.
Garfiel stood himself in the dead center of the clearing. Behind him, were the Lewes-clones, and at the tail end, was Subaru. All the while, swallowing the trees of the forest, on the opposite end of Garfiel's glare,

***{???: ——I love you I love you I love you

Unable to withstand his expanding body, his clothes burst into slithers of rags dangling from his golden fur. Held up by lumbering limbs, his body grew to exceed four meters in length, as dagger-like fangs lined inside his jaw.
This was none other than the manifestation of the great tiger that had once conferred on Subaru such fury and despair.

[Garfiel: ————WWRRRRR!!]

Roaring, the beast's body tore through the wind, lunging for the shadow.
Causing the foothold to cave in beneath its paws, the mighty beast leaped with astounding speed, in defiance of its enormous mass.
And, just as it flung open its jaws, threatening to crush the shadow's slender waist with fangs that could shear through steel——

[???: ————]

——fingers of shadows reached out from beneath the leaping beast and wound it within its grasp.
Intercepted like this, the great tiger stopped mid-air. And, the moment after, a throat-rending shriek rang out.
A mist of blood burst from the tiger's constricted limbs, practically announcing the shadow's intent to crush them in its grip. Arms as thick as Subaru's waist began producing the sound of ripping flesh.
Subaru watched the great tiger, shrieking and immobilized mid-air, but couldn't tear his eyes away. And from there, the shadow mercilessly snapped the beast's body into an explosion of organs and blood——

[Subaru: ——ah—]

——was not what happened.
While Subaru watched on in a daze, two Lewes replicants leaped into the fray between the tiger and the Witch.
The little girls shot forward, panting pointlessly with open mouths. With incredible speed, they passed through the shadow, and, landing on the ground, they darted towards the Witch whose gaze was transfixed on the tiger held high in her grip.

[Lewes-clones: u—]

[Subaru: ————]

Spreading their arms, they threw themselves at the Witch as if to hug her. But the Witch, having noticed their approach, easily skewered them in place with an outstretched shadow.
The sharp, spear-tipped shadow, with the motion of a whip slinging to their prey, severed the two Lewes-clone's legs from under them before skewering them through the waist. Then, it brought them next to the shrieking Garfiel, as if to show him.

A far too abominable sight, but that laxness was the Witch's mistake.

[Garfiel: ——wwWWWRRRRRRRRRRR!]

When he saw the replicants' mutilated bodies brought before him, Garfiel's tremoring throat, already tearing from shrieks of agony, let out a roar of an entirely different hue that forced Subaru's brows to furrow.

Confused as to the meaning of that change in tone, before Subaru eyes, he saw the hanging bodies of the Lewes-clones rapidly engulfed by an abounding, pale-blue light——

[Subaru: ————!?]

[???: ————]

The next instant, the bodies exploded with a blinding flash.
There were no blood or organs, or any gory indications that a living organism had exploded. Their flesh merely transformed into particles of light, blasting clear the surrounding shadows and returning a brief moment of life to the world. Blown and scattered—— but unlike any ordinary death by explosion.

Blinded by the flash of light, Subaru violently rubbed at his eyes. And, hurriedly regaining his vision, his eyes opened in time to see the wall of Lewes-clones that was shielding him rushing towards the shadow just as the first two had done before them.

Dispersing in all directions, with impeccable coordination, the eighteen Lewes-clones surrounded the Witch. Apparently having no other means of attack, their only aim was to stick themselves onto the Witch as they closed in their encirclement with their arms spread wide.

But, even with their coordinated advance, the replicants' movements were still constrained by human limits. Not to mention that their adversary was the primal calamity of the Witch of Envy.
Just when Subaru thought it was about to be swamped by the Lewes-clones, the tip of the up-surging shadow split into eighteen strands. Each becoming a blade, as if mocking the Leweses' efforts to evade them, the whips sliced through their skulls, torsos, abdomens, piercing and slashing, rending them to shreds.

Despite spacing out their attacks, the Lewes-clones were annihilated, and, after the passing of a single beat, all the Leweses exploded in a pulse of white light—— temporarily expelling all darkness from the clearing, and stripping away the vortex of shadow that surrounded the Witch.

[Garfiel: ——WRRRRRRRRRRAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!]

There was no way the wound-ridden tiger could allow this opportunity to slip away.

Using the opening created by the Lewes-clones' charge to free himself from bondage, the moment after the replicants exploded, with a roar that surpassed all that came before, the giant beast lunged for the shadow's head.

The Witch erected a wall of shade to meet the giant tiger rushing towards her, but the tiger, holding the silhouette of a person on the tip of his claw—— a Lewes-replicant which it had hidden for this very purpose, slammed it into the wall, blasting it apart. Through the pale-blue flash of light, his fangs and claws fell upon the heart of the shadow.

——It was so perfect that even Subaru was convinced that he had it.

An inhumane tactic that unhesitatingly sacrificed twenty-one Lewes-replicants.
If the tiger-morphed Garfiel could land a single direct strike with its claw, surely, even a Witch couldn't hope to survive——

{???: ——I love you}

Or at least, that was what Subaru implored in his heart,

{???: ——Subaru-kun}

The shadow called sweetly, as Garfiel's burst-open corpse shattered into dust.

Chapter 51 [LOVELOVELOVELOVELOVELOVELOVELOVELOVELOVELOVELOVELOVELOVELOVELOVEME~]

Subaru only watched in silence as the golden tiger, Garfiel, burst apart.

The force of the beast's claws should have been enough to swipe the Witch's head flying along with the upper half of her body. No doubt even a Witch would have been torn to shreds by the power of that direct impact. ――But the strike never hit.

Using the last Lewes-clone as a stepping stone, Garfiel carried out his decisive strike. But when his claws came within an inch of the Witch, Subaru saw his wounds, previously gouged by the shadow, beginning to squirm.
Squirming wounds―― caused by none other than the shadows at the Witch's feet that had crawled onto Garfiel's limbs. The tips of the supposedly massless shadows slid themselves into the openings of the great tiger's wounds and scattered into wanton destruction, rending flesh and sending blood spouting out.
And just like that, unable to withstand the mounting pressure inside, Garfiel's massive, infiltrated body exploded.

He couldn't even put up the most basic resistance against this ruthless method of trampling a life. In the course of an instant, the thing that was once Garfiel splattered throughout the clearing into small piles of dark-red slivers of flesh. Only the golden fur sticking to some of the scattered clots still proved that he once existed in this world.

[Subaru: ――――]

He couldn't utter a word.
Until not long ago, there were more than twenty lives in this clearing including the Lewes-dolls. And several seconds later, there was now only two.
Actually, if one counted from the beginning, there would have been over a hundred lives in the Sanctuary.
Considering that they were all pulled in by that shadow, the weight of that shadow's crimes was simply far too great. Beyond unforgivable.

Blood resumed coursing through Subaru's numbed senses once again, and every cell of his body rallied into that most fitting response.
That is, the primal emotion directed at the Witch before his eyes―― rage.

{???: I love you}

[Subaru: Shut up]

{???: I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you}

[Subaru: I said shut up……]

The shadow's outline was so vague that even its height could not be distinguished.
Its voice was still murky as though passing through a voice changer, impossible to tell whether it was a man or a woman's.
Yet, in spite of its indefinite voice, the sticky affection imbued within was clear to the point of revulsion.

With the same, unwavering love, after drinking the Sanctuary dry and brutally murdering Garfiel, she still directed her interest, her care, and her love wholeheartedly towards Subaru.
It was so abhorrent and twisted it made Subaru want to vomit.

He could feel his sanity being whittled away by the Witch. An emotion bordering on madness surged up, while hatred and revulsion boiled within his chest.

{???: I love you I love you I love you my love I love you I love you I love you}

Standing there, unmoving, the Witch continued to whisper her love to Subaru like a curse.
Instilling it with such warmth it was as if she was about to melt, her inability to read the mood must have been even worse than Subaru's.
Oblivious to the blatant discomfort on the face of the target of her love, she went on pushing her obstinate, one-sided affection.

This love was entirely repulsive.
And what enraged Subaru more than anything, was――

{???: I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you}

[Subaru: ……]

{???: I love you I love you I love you I love you――Subaru-kun}

[Subaru: ――Don't call me that!!]

Hearing that tender suffix, Subaru screamed back, overtaken by rage.
Every ounce of that doting voice, gesture, and address offended Subaru's very senses.

[Subaru: Who gave you permission to call me that… Don't make me laugh. Don't fucking make me laugh! Don't you fucking make me laugh!!]

Her closeness at his side.
The affection instilled in that call.
That loveliness at a distance close enough to touch.
There was only one person in the world who was permitted to address him this way.

――And it was certainly not this Witch standing before him.

[Subaru: You're just a filthy Witch, so don't make me laugh. There is only one person that right belongs to. And I won't let anyone else have it. No… Even if it's one strand of hair, one fragment of a cell, or just a speck of dirt under my nails I won't fucking waste it on you――!]

[???: ――――]

Furious, abandoned to rage, Subaru spewed out the emotions spiraling inside him.
His shoulders heaved with ragged breaths as he glared at the Witch in front of him.

An enemy he had no chance of winning against.
A monster who ate half the world. Who had just disposed of Garfiel without breaking a sweat. A Witch among Witches.
The utmost calamity plunging all life into shadow, with no other interest besides continuously whispering her deranged love for one single person.

The fact that he dared to face such a monster surprised even himself.
It must be his brain short-circuiting in a state of self-abandon, he thought.
If the Witch felt like it, she could easily pull Subaru into the shadowy mire in the blink of an eye.
Or otherwise skewer him through with the tips of her shadows and use him to fertilize the forest in a gory firework-show like with Garfiel.
Yet, despite knowing this, why wasn't his heart faltering as he faced her? Perhaps it was because, deep down, Subaru subconsciously harbored a certain confidence in the Witch.
That is――

[???: ――――]

[Subaru: ……not, moving?]

Recovering from the emotional outburst, Subaru found himself at a loss when none of the expected reactions came from the Witch.
Before he knew it, the curse-like whispers of love―― that endless outpour of affection that persisted even as Garfiel was burst open, had stopped. Halted.

The shadow's erosion of the clearing seemed to have stalled―― or rather, stopped completely.
Distancing himself from the unpleasant sensation of the shadow beneath his feet, Subaru picked a less shadowy spot and moved himself over.
He kept his gaze fixed on the Witch as he did so, but saw no reaction.

The Witch only stood there with her arms dangling, her body shrouded as always in a shade dense enough to bend light, hiding her expression from sight.
She seemed to be so covered with openings that if he just went over and punched her, she would probably fall.

[Subaru: Why're you suddenly so…… unless, was it what I said?]

"Impossible", he thought, while frowning at his inability to deny it.
It was hard to believe that Subaru's words could have had such an effect, but considering the point where the Witch's speech and movements stopped, there was just no other explanation.
Though that did not make the possibility any easier to accept.

[Subaru: If my rejection threw you off that much……]

Then if he had just screamed it out earlier, Garfiel and others may not have died.
Now that Emilia, Ram, Lewes, Otto, and even Garfiel, who was trying to protect him, all lost their lives to the Witch, there was already nothing left in this world for Subaru to live for.
Echidona had just assured him that there was no limit to Return by Death. And, though he wasn't aware of it himself, he was beginning to become complacent with "Life".

That was why he withdrew his plan to be the bait immediately after Garfiel rejected it, wasn't it? Seeing that the Witch was so obsessed with him, Subaru should have known that such an action from him would provoke a reaction like this.

[Subaru: I don't know why, but…… that means I'm the Witch's weak point, doesn't it……?]

If all this was due to her unwavering obsession with Subaru, then that might just be the case. The problem is, even after knowing this, would he really have an opportunity to use it?
After all, the circumstance of every Sanctuary loop so far had been different. They had Subaru scrambling to find the solutions without a single clue in sight―― but in comparison, the difference in this loop was truly in the Dreadnaught-Tier.

Elsa, Garfiel, and the Great Rabbit were already unmanageable enough to begin with, but if the Witch of Envy were to be added to the fray, it would be nothing short of impossible. Just the thought of figuring out the pattern behind their appearances was enough to send his motivation into retreat.
Such was the overwhelming threat of the grotesque existence of the Witch.
Even formulating plans to resist felt ridiculous. Managing to cripple his will to fight before the fight had even begun, compared to the gargantuan White Whale, the Witch's small figure was infinitely more frightening.

[???: ―――――]

Even though the Witch only stood there motionlessly, Subaru could feel his heart withering away.
The Witch made no effort to move. Nor did she seem to mind the turmoil of Subaru's thoughts. She simply stood there, immersed in her own world.

Time passed in this state of indecision.
His breathing, the irritatingly loud beating of his heart, and the sensation of profuse, lukewarm sweat rolling down his forehead all informed him of the passage of time.

Even if they continued staring at one another, no resolution would come. And just when Subaru drew in a deep breath, intending to take action――
A thought flashed across his mind. That is,

[Subaru: ――Could it be… because of Echidona's tea party?]

[???: ―――――]

[Subaru: I ran my mouth on all the forbidden information while I was in her Citadel… I thought if the penalty didn't come then I was allowed to do it there, but……]

――What if he wasn't?

What if the Witch never gave Subaru the permission to reveal his Return by Death? What if she saw him so carelessly spilling the words and had tried to inflict punishment as always in the world frozen in time?
What if, unable to manifest in the Witch's tea party to interfere, she instead chose to deal him a different punishment.
――What if that was the truth of the disaster that befell the Sanctuary?

[Subaru: Just how…… selfish are you……?]

Was this massacre just because she couldn't exact punishment on Subaru?
Did she think that she had the right? With this flagrant show of force, who was she trying to show off to?

{???: I love you}

At that point, Subaru's thoughts seemed to have arrived on a corner of the truth.
The Witch, who had been as still as a silhouette, suddenly resumed her revolting activity. She turned her eyes and what seemed to be her head to Subaru, and continued her curse-like murmur.

As if the loving whispers ratified the movements of the shadow, darkness once again began to erode the surface of the clearing. Feeling his soles sinking into the mire, Subaru quickly jumped off that patch of ground.

[Subaru: What's with you…… soon as I mention another girl's name you get lively all of a sudden, oy!]

{???: I love you I love you I love you I love you}

[Subaru: No matter how many times you mutter that, I'm not going to love you! My heart's number One and Two places have already been filled. There's absolutely no room for a Witch to come in!]

Exchange blow for blow―― even if the only words coming from the Witch's mouth were monotone repetitions of love.
But, when he sensed a definite twinge of emotion in response to his provocations, Subaru's cheeks twisted into a wicked grin. Getting on other people's nerves was precisely his strong suit, and it was time to test whether it worked on Witches.

[Subaru: If you keep on repeating "I love you" so lightly, they'll just get cheapened]

{???: I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you}

[Subaru: The first real "I love you" I got in this world…… had the power to make a piece of no-good human garbage aspire to become a hero, you know!]

Enough to make the broken, twisted coward who only knew how to flee face his challenge head-on for a future he was on the verge of giving up on, and provide him with the strength to do so not only once, but time and time again.
Such was the strength, nobility, and greatness of genuine love.

[Subaru: So all your whispers of love can't reach my ears at all. Especially when you committed such atrocities for some jealous fit. There isn't a single thing I like about you]

{???: I love you I love you I love you}

[Subaru: If I had to love a Witch like you……]

{???: I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you――}

What was the one thing he should say to hurt this Witch the most? Unrivaled in his ability to piss other people off, Subaru knew exactly what.
And so, with a cruel smile, and eyes filled with disdain,

[Subaru: If I had to love a Witch, Echidona and the other Witches are way more lovable than you――]

[???: ――――]

The moment he said those words, the Witch's curses ceased.
And――

[Subaru: ――――a]

Subaru's vision, and the world, were instantly swallowed into darkness.

The shadows shot forth with tremendous mass and momentum as Subaru helplessly watched on.

The black arms extending from the Witch's feet looked terribly similar to Petelgeuse's Unseen Hands. But they differed in that while Subaru could easily avoid the Unseen Hands once he saw them, the Witch's hands rushed with a speed nearly impossible to avoid.

And so, in the matter of an instant, Subaru's eyes saw himself being enveloped by shadow and lifted high over the treetops, before being pulled back down in front of the Witch at a speed faster than freefall.
The whole course of the attack happened faster than his consciousness could process, and the upheaval of his organs from the sudden lurch sent vomit spouting from his lips.

[Subaru: Ough, hu……gh]

Unable to keep his consciousness straight, his vision spun round and round.
His feet were off the ground, and his entire body felt like it was wrapped in something soft and cloth-like. Although his bondage wasn't tight, his movements were completely sealed, and he couldn't find a single point where he could apply force to break out.

He tried struggling from the tips of his fingers to his toes, but only the part above his neck responded to his commands, while the rest all yielded to the enshrouding shadow.
At last, with his vision clearing, Subaru's throat froze as he caught the vast, shadowy mass within his sight.

――Before his eyes, as in right up against his eyes, the Witch stood so close that he could almost feel her breathing.

Having caught him in her shadowy shroud, she was observing him at an extremely close range with undeviating eyes as if they were boring into his skin.
His head was held in place so that he couldn't escape that gaze. Perhaps he could shut it out if he just closed his eyes, but somehow, even that was forbidden when his eyes met the Witch of Envy's.

{???: I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you}

Syllable by syllable, same as before, the Witch continued her profession of love.
Hearing those words, despite having been overwhelmed into silence, the spirit of rebellion flared

up in Subaru once again.
Injecting strength into his immobile limbs, he widened his eyes, glaring back at the Witch. Then, opening his mouth to resume the barrage of insults,

[Subaru: It's not a matter of distance. It's that you don't mean anything in my heart at all――]

{???: I love you. I love you. ――Love me}

Hearing his answer, there was a pause in the Witch's voice.
Subaru furrowed his brows and blinked, wondering if he had misheard it. And seeing Subaru's reaction, the Witch slightly lifted her head,

***{???: Love me. Love me. Love me. Love me. Love me love me love me

So why in the world would she be so madly in love with him?
He had no idea. There was no logic to it at all. It'd be easy to say that love was never something to be measured by common sense, but the Witch's love had taken that to an entirely different level.

{???: ——Love me love me love me love me love me love me love me love me}

The Witch was mistaking superficial love for the genuine one.
Chances were, if Subaru just said the words, the Witch would have released him from his bondage.
If this was the usual sly, crafty, pragmatic Subaru, he might have even replied with some cringeworthy, grandiloquent response to her professions of love.
But,

[Subaru: ——I hate you]

[???: ————]

[Subaru: I am never, going to love you]

Pronouncing this rejection from his very soul, Subaru refused the Witch of Envy's request.

[???: ————]

Hearing this answer, the Witch fell silent once again.
Not many humans could claim to have dashed a Witch's hopes so many times like this. Subaru derived a small, pointless gratification from this fact. And then, his altitude slowly began to drop.

Wrapped in his shadowy shroud, Subaru's body that was held in the air was slowly lowered to the ground. But it was not in order to release him.
Still restrained, starting from the tips of his toes, he was being dragged beneath the Witch's feet——little by little, swallowed into the center of the vortex.

Realizing that she couldn't obtain his heart, the Witch had decided to consume him instead. A rather short-circuited and overly materialistic idea.
There, while everything below his knees was swallowed into the shadow, with his mind tormented by the terror of the gradual loss of sensation, a sudden doubt struck him.

If he was swallowed like this, Subaru would no doubt lose his life.
So in a sense, it might be good to give up here. Embracing "Death" would be his last, half-ditched resistance against the Witch. So maybe it'd be alright if he just let himself be swallowed.
But,

——All of his "Deaths" so far had been reversed by the powers of the Witch, but if the Witch herself killed him, would he really be able to come back?

[Subaru: ————!]

The moment he realized this, Subaru began his belated resistance. With the lower half of his body already swallowed into the shadow, such efforts were only naive and futile. Yet he had no choice but to try.
Come to think of it, even before the question of whether he could return, he wasn't even sure if

being swallowed by the Witch would actually kill him. What if he becomes a part of the Witch after being pulled into that shadow, and ends up spending eternity without being granted the permission to die?
Over that long, long timespan, all his current resolve and determination would whittle away, and then, would he bend to the Witch in the end? Subaru wasn't confident enough to say that he wouldn't. Therefore he mustn't allow himself to be swallowed.

In the worst case, he would commit suicide by biting off his tongue before he could fall into the Witch's hands—— but,

[Subaru: ——uu, huh?]

That resolve was prematurely cut off by a scalding sensation on his chest.

Feeling a rising heat burning the left side of his chest, Subaru looked down to see what was happening. And there, he saw a light coming from the heat, seeping through the darkness that was enshrouding his body.
What was even more surprising was that beginning from the source of that light, the Witch's shadow was slowly vanishing as if melting away.

[Subaru: If this……!]

Before his mind could even process what this abrupt burst of light may be, Subaru twisted his body, using the light to slice through the shroud of shadows. The range of his movements widened as he shredded through the shroud, and, confirming that his arms were free, he immediately reached for the source of that light.
Grasping it between his fingertips, what he retrieved from his chest was a napkin, fluttering in the wind—— with a grey cat embroidered on top. It was Petra's handkerchief.

[Subaru: Why would this……nevermind!!]

Putting off his thoughts for later, Subaru swung his arm with the handkerchief in hand. Obeying Subaru's will, the supposedly soft fabric took on an astounding resilience, and, with the sharpness of a razor it severed the bond between the Witch and the ground.

[???: ————]

[Subaru: Woah! If this thing……alright!!]

Subaru stabbed the handkerchief-blade into the mass of darkness that swallowed the lower half of his body.
Burying the tip of the shining handkerchief into the shade, for a moment, the shadows rushed to envelop the light, but, without a sound, they burst apart in an instant.
With the shadows scattered away, all that remained were Subaru's two feet landing on the ground.

Immediately stumbling backwards, he confirmed that both his legs were still there. Then, readying the handkerchief at his hips, Subaru ran his eyes over the shining piece of cloth.
Petra's embroidered handkerchief. It was hard to imagine that her feelings for Subaru could have such miraculous qualities. But there, Subaru's mind turned to the one who must have done something to this handkerchief.

[Subaru: That Echidona…… did she already know this was going to happen?]

“Just for insurance, insurance” he could almost hear the white-haired Witch saying.
In the dreamworld, at the closing of the tea party, Echidona had taken this handkerchief as her payment. He had never actually considered what would happen if a real world object was given away in a dream——but if this was the result of her tampering, then it really is possible to influence reality from within a dream.
In any case,

[Subaru: Guess I better say thanks… for giving me something to fight the Witch with]

[???: ————]

Faced with the fact that her shadows had been destroyed, the Witch only stood there, stupefied.
Seeing this opening, Subaru drew in a short breath and lunged to the Witch’s side——

[Subaru: Careless to a fault!]

——and thrust the handkerchief towards the frozen Witch’s flank. The Witch didn’t move an inch. But the shadows at her feet shot out in self-defense, activating the protective “dress”, as Garfiel called it.

[Subaru: ——RuuaaaaAAAAGH!]

Yet it did nothing to stop the handkerchief’s light.
Like a sharpened dagger, the handkerchief pierced through the shadowy dress, thrusting straight for the side of the Witch’s face——and struck true.

[Subaru: Got her——!]

The unmistakable sensation in his hand prompted him to cry out in joy, as Subaru turned, reining the same momentum into another backslash against the Witch——

[Subaru: ——Eh?]

But he stopped, when he saw it.
The Witch stood there, unmoving, looking at Subaru. The shining thrust to the side of her face had indeed landed, and had peeled away the vast, shadowy veil, revealing her face.

It was a familiar, silver-haired girl with eyes of frozen emotion staring back at Subaru.

[Subaru: Emilia……?]

She did not respond to his call. But everything else set off into massive motion.
The shadowy shroud returned. The previously-eradicated darkness beneath his feet wound around Subaru’s body once more, and this time, it constricted him without mercy, causing him to shriek.

Starting from the right side of his ribs to the entire left half of his body, the shadow restrained him tightly in its grasp. Only his right arm, still holding onto the handkerchief, could still move, albeit barely, being denied the full range of its motions.
And, just like this, the immobilized Subaru was steadily pulled beneath the sea of shadows.
Without a trace of hesitation, it was far faster than the last time.

First, was his lower body, and then his left shoulder submerged as well, until only his head and the right portion of his chest were still above ground.
Desperately lifting his head, resisting with his sinking body,

[Subaru: Emilia! Emilia!? Wh, how did this.. why!?]

When he saw her missing from the Tomb and the Sanctuary engulfed by shadows, Subaru had thought that she was swallowed by the Witch.
At least then, his resistance against the Witch of Envy up to now would have had some meaning.

——But why was she the one wearing that shadow, attacking the Sanctuary?

He didn't have an answer. Nor would she answer him. She didn't see Subaru at all. A never-before-seen coldness gleamed in her violet eyes, and Subaru couldn't be sure if her consciousness was still there.
There wasn't even enough time to find out.

[Subaru: Gh, u, ah……]

His body was dragged deeper and deeper into the shadow.
He couldn't feel a thing in his swallowed body. It wouldn't be so bad if it was only a lack of sensation, but the fact that even the sense of existence was lost forced him to reassess the danger of being swallowed here.

Confirming that the handkerchief was still in his right hand, the only part of his body he could still move, his resolve was settled.
The white-haired Witch flashed across his mind once more.
He would like to amend his previous statement, and instead raise a complaint to that Witch.

[Subaru: Did that bastard Echidona seriously know it'll turn out like this……?]

If that were the case, he'd be so moved by her scrupulous consideration that his eyes would tear up.
With tears of blood, that is——

——Closing his eyes, when he opened them again, Subaru stabbed the handkerchief into his own throat.
The sharpened point pierced into his flesh, and bore open a hole in the vital regions of his throat.
Blood flooded down his windpipe and into his lungs, drowning his consciousness in red.

Suicide. The Witch of Greed had equipped him for precisely this opportunity.
It wasn't to resist the Witch of Envy. She knew that their conversation in the Citadel would set her off. And here, she exacted her toll.

{???: ——————!}

Seeing Subaru commit suicide, for the first time, an emotion other than love detonated in the Witch of Envy.
But, drowning in his own blood, Subaru's already-detached consciousness wasn't aware of this.

Only, seeing the girl's familiar face twisted in grief, regardless of what was residing inside her, it still pained his heart all the same to see her like this——

His throat was filled with blood, making it difficult to formulate speech. But even so, Subaru spoke, not to the counterfeit residing in her vessel, but to the girl.

[Subaru: I, will——]

——Definitely save you.

The next instant, Natsuki Subaru died.

Chapter 52 [Subtle Changes]

The first thing Subaru confirmed upon waking up was whether this was reality or not.
After crossing between dream and reality so many times, the boundaries can get a little blurry. Especially since Return by Death usually returns him with his brain still half asleep, like he had just gotten out of bed.

[Subaru: ――uu, ough]

With the return of his consciousness, the first thing Subaru felt was the taste of dirt in his mouth. Spitting out the unpleasant flavor along with his saliva, Subaru sat himself up and looked around. A dark room, moist, frigid air, and an unsettling silence――he was inside the Tomb.

[Subaru: I'm back, huh……]

Opening and closing his fists, Subaru confirmed the tactile sensation of his body.
At the same time, he remembered how he died immediately before Returning by Death.

[Subaru: Was kinda curious what would happen if I got swallowed…… but, guess suicide worked out]

Recalling the acute pain of his throat being punctured, Subaru rubbed at the phantom gash on his neck and breathed a sigh of relief.
The pain of overflowing blood clogging his throat, drowning his lungs from within, and the sense of loss, of his consciousness pulling further and further away: despite experiencing it countless times, the vividness of "Death" did not fade.
No matter how many times he went through it, "Death" always imparted fresh suffering on Subaru. But even so,

[Subaru: It still beats not coming back…… and having everything broken beyond repair]

Briefly congratulating himself for managing to return after unhesitatingly choosing death, Subaru decided to set it aside for now.
It was still early to tell whether he had actually safely returned or not.

[Subaru: This is no time to be celebrating. Anyway, better sort out what to do next, what needs to be done, and……]

And review his own resolve.
Closing his eyes, Subaru drew in a deep breath. When he opened them again, there was no longer any doubt within, and only what he must do.

Standing up and patting off the dust on his body, he looked around the room and found the girl lying on her side not far away.
It was Emilia. Most likely, the pained expression on her face was due to the past she was presently facing in her Trial.

Subaru ran over and reached out his hand to wake her. He would bring her out, meet up with Ram and Otto outside the Tomb, and then figure out what to do after that.
But there, just before his hand could touch her, Subaru noticed that his fingers were shaking.

[Subaru: ……what?]

His eyes widened at his trembling fingertips as he held his hand in front of his face. His mind commanded the shaking to stop, but, still shaking of their own accord, his fingers ignored his commands. And then, Subaru noticed it.
His teeth were clattering as well, unable to close.

[Subaru: Hands and teeth are shaking……what is this……]

Although surprised by his body's anomaly, deep down, Subaru knew why it was happening.
The cause was none other than the image that flashed across his mind the moment he was about to touch her.

——Of Emilia's frozen, emotionless face gazing down at him on the verge of his death.

Surely, the Witch of Envy paid a visit to the Sanctuary, and, for whatever reason, enshrouded Emilia's body within its shadow. In his final moments, Subaru had seen this with his own eyes.

Most likely, the Witch had possessed Emilia's body while she lay unconscious in the Tomb. Subaru had seen Petelgeuse's ability to possess other people's bodies, so it wasn't hard to accept that possibility.
Besides, the reason the Witch chose Emilia's body was simple.

Subaru had revealed too much forbidden information at the tea party. Though the Witch manifested to punish him, she was barred from setting foot in that place. So instead, she turned her attention to the unconscious Emilia at Subaru's side.
Then the Witch took over her body, covered the Sanctuary in shadow, killed Garfiel, and swallowed Subaru—— and that should just about sum up the events of the previous loop.

[Subaru: Knowing all that……why is my body still shaking……?]

Even though he could calmly recall the facts of what happened, his feeble heart could not forget the terror of being faced with that abomination.
If Subaru's speculation was correct, then the root of that disaster was certainly the tea party he was invited to after Returning by Death. Which means, since he didn't attend the tea party this time, he didn't step on that landmine.
——So he was 90% sure that the Witch wasn't currently inside Emilia.

The fact that Subaru's body was still instinctively voicing its objection was basically due to cowardice.
But still, he couldn't rule out the worst-case scenario.

That is—— would the Witch of Envy really give up her pursuit just because he passed through Return by Death?

[Subaru: ――――]

It was the Witch of Envy who allowed Subaru to Return by Death in the first place.
Subaru himself had come to this conclusion and Echidona had affirmed it. The Witch's appearances in the past and the ending of the previous loop should have pushed it beyond reasonable doubt.
For whatever reason, the Witch didn't want Subaru's "Death" to be the end. For that, he was grateful. And only for that.

The question was, would such an obsessively envious, overwhelmingly powerful Witch, obstinate to the point of intruding into reality, really let Subaru go?

[Subaru: ――――]

If the Witch of Envy had the ability to rewind time, then it'd be far too optimistic to think that she would let Subaru use it without being able to use it herself.
If Subaru could rewind the world through "Death", then how could he know that the Witch wouldn't turn back time to pursue him?

His cowering heart couldn't answer that question――though the answer was right in front of him.

[Subaru: ……]

Everything would be clear if he just touched Emilia and woke her from her Trial.
If she woke, and called Subaru's name in her usual voice like the ringing of a silver chime, Subaru would be freed from these grips of fear.
But what if that was not the case?

[Subaru: ……It'll be all over, then]

If the Witch shows up every time he returns, then there will truly be nothing he can do. The Witch of Envy's power was absolute, and he could not envision a scenario where they could prevail against a being with the power to plunge the Sanctuary into shadow.
Against a nightmare that so effortlessly sent Garfiel to his grave, what countermeasures could there possibly be?
In other words, this was a watershed.

[Subaru: First I wasn't sure if I'd return after death…… now I can't be sure that Emilia is really Emilia? What am I……an idiot?]

Taking hold of his situation once again, Subaru let out a small sigh.
The shaking of his fingers and the clattering of his teeth vanished. Returning to his senses, he realized it.

All this vague, indeterminate uncertainty――

[Subaru: It's just the same thing that happens to anyone, isn't it?]

Not knowing the future, worrying about what will happen in the next second, are all just natural facts of life.
Even if there is the small possibility of foreseeing what's to come, what's there to be afraid of? Such idiotic fear would be equivalent to being afraid of life itself,

[Emilia: ……h, no……]

Compared to the girl being crushed by her past right before his eyes, how petty and ludicrous his hesitation seemed to be.

[Subaru: ――Emilia]

Calling her name, Subaru touched the girl's cheeks with the tips of his no longer trembling fingers.
White and fair. The smooth touch of her skin transferred a warmth enough to dissolve the flesh of his fingertips. There was a small tremor in her closed eyelids as her long lashes stirred, and underneath them, a faint light glimmered from her violet eyes.

Pulled back to reality, Emilia blinked several times and noticed Subaru in front of her,

[Emilia: ……suba…ru?]

Her trembling irises caught onto Subaru, and as he came into focus, she called out his name.
Her voice, her bearing, and the color of her eyes, all belonged to the Emilia he knew.

[Subaru: ――Yeah, it's me]

All the shadows of doubt weighing on him, tangling over his body, vanished in a single motion.
Finally hearing her reply, Subaru let out a long, long sigh, and, propping her up with his hand behind her back, he felt his body drained of strength.

In contrast, Emilia righted herself and quickly looked over her surroundings. After confirming where she was, perhaps because her head was still a little heavy, Emilia held her hand against her head, and whispered, [So……],

[Emilia: Just now…… I was……]

Confused by the pain she was feeling, Emilia closed her eyes and tried to recall her memories from before she fell asleep――and what happened while she was sleeping.
As the memories flooded back, Emilia opened her eyes and turned to Subaru with her quivering, peach-colored lips.

Waves of emotion churned in her violet pupils. Her mind was probably in turmoil over the reminders of her past. But Subaru already knew that Emilia would fall to pieces after waking from her Trial. That was why he could so calmly watch her when she was on the brink of falling apart.
All that was left was to gently hold her, trembling in his arms, and find words to console her and tell her that it was alright――

[Emilia: ……Subaru?]

But just as Subaru was about to do this, Emilia reacted in a way completely different from what he had imagined.
Her unsettled eyes had calmed, and her quivering lips were stilled by an even more powerful emotion. Then, Emilia softly extended her hand towards Subaru,

[Emilia: Why… do you look like you're about to cry?]

[Subaru: ……eh?]

Emilia's fingertips brushed against Subaru's forehead and made their way to the side of his widened eyes. The pale-white finger softly brushing the corner of his eye caught a drop of tear on the verge of falling. And only then, did Subaru realize that he was close to crying.
But there was no time to ask himself why.

[Subaru: a.. u.. eh?]

A tremor came without warning.
An uncontrollable tremor of a different dimension than the shudders of his fingers and teeth.

His whole body was shaking, robbing him of all the strength inside him. Kneeling at Emilia's side, Subaru could only curl up, hugging his own trembling body.
Then his grips began to loosen when he understood why.

If the tremor he felt before he touched Emilia was because he was afraid that she might have been replaced by the Witch――

[Emilia: It's alright, Subaru. It's alright, it'll be alright. Because I'm right here with you――]

Saying this, Emilia embraced Subaru's trembling body from the side.
Through the thin fabric of their clothing, they could feel each other's warmth. The quiet heartbeat, and the warmth transferred from her body filled his heart to the brim.

――When the fear of that possibility passed, when he knew that possibility was gone, Subaru was overwhelmed by the sense of relief.

Even though his heart wanted him to be strong, his body wouldn't obey at all.
After all, he had neither a heart of steel nor a body with the strength to protect it.

Feeling Emilia's warmth, her heartbeat, and her gentle embrace, no matter how much he despised his pathetic weakness, he couldn't help but feel relieved.

Quietly, quietly, quietly, the two went on holding each other inside the Tomb.

[Emilia: Calmed down now?]

[Subaru: Ah, y-yeah……um, sorry. Don't know what's gotten into me]

Their embrace went on until Subaru stopped trembling.
Emilia's question at the end made Subaru apologize with his face all red. Hearing this, Emilia shook her head with [That's ok],

[Emilia: It's good. Recently I've been feeling like I'm always relying on Subaru. If you show me your weak side once in a while too…… I'll feel a little more relieved]

[Subaru: I got no counter to that…… but I'd rather not show this side to Emilia if I can help it]

[Emilia: Why's that?]

[Subaru: Because I only want Emilia-tan to see my strong and flashy side. I don't want you to know what a weak, pathetic, hopeless guy I actually am]

[Emilia: Even if I see a little of Subaru's weak side, I won't think of you like that, you know?]

Emilia's words were gentle, but Subaru's pride did not allow him to accept them.
"She's not like that", or *"she'll be disappointed to see that kind of weakness"* weren't at the heart of the problem.
It was simply Subaru's——a boy's matter.

[Subaru: Not hiding their weaknesses, always exposing their true selves to others……I'm not too fond of those tear-jerking types]

[Emilia: Tear-jerking…… types?]

[Subaru: It's a thing from back home. So I only want to show Emilia-tan my strong side. That's a man's conviction, you know]

As the unnutritious topic swept away the awkwardness from moments ago, Subaru smiled wryly at Emilia, who was tilting her head. But soon, his expression became rigid once more,

[Subaru: So then… I wanted to ask about the Trial……]

[Emilia: ——ok]

Hearing Subaru's timid question, Emilia paused a beat before nodding in reply.
Seeing her reaction, for a moment, Subaru was almost caught off guard. Because her reaction to the word "Trial" was different from all the times before.
Most likely, it was because, after waking up, just when she was about to be stricken by the impact of having failed the Trial—— Subaru's unintentionally pathetic sideshow got in the way.

Their embrace was brief, but it had given Emilia time to recover from the shock of her failure. That was probably part of the reason why she could remain so calm right now.

[Subaru: Never thought my wimpiness would come in handy……]

[Emilia: But, Subaru, why are you here? I thought I was the only one who could come in here……]

[Subaru: No, I……]

Before he could give her the honest answer, Subaru cut himself off.
And then, he began to think. ——Just what would be the right answer here?

Truth is, he could easily tell her that he received the Qualification and passed the Trial. But Subaru got the feeling that if he did this, Emilia would only blame herself for failing the Trial and feel a sense of inferiority towards him.
Then inferiority would turn into anxiety, and Emilia would be trapped between the pain of guilt and self-loathing. If that happens, her present ability to remain calm would all mean nothing.

If there was a chance for Emilia to face the Trials in a different way, then Subaru should respect that possibility.
Although, whether Emilia could overcome her "Past" in the end was a different question.

——*It's worth a try*, Subaru decided.

[Subaru: I got worried when Emilia-tan didn't come out and couldn't help it. At first I managed to stay conscious……but once I got here, it was like what happened during the day all over again]

[Emilia: I see…… sorry I made you worry]

[Subaru: Nah, actually, come to think of it, I plopped right down after I ran in as well, so I guess the people outside must be worried to death right now]

Not hearing a peep after watching Subaru run inside must be making the others just as anxious. Realizing this, Emilia turned up her face with an [Ah],

[Emilia: A-anyway if we don't get back to everyone soon……they'll get really worried about Subaru too, right?]

[Subaru: My life or death or whatever doesn't matter that much, but we better get the message out that Emilia-tan's safe otherwise some bad things could happen]

[Emilia: ……how could you say that]

Hearing Subaru's exaggeration, Emilia shot him a reproachful gaze. Being looked at like that, Subaru said [Sorry], lightly shrugging, as the two of them began walking out of the Tomb.
On the way, Subaru continued, [So then],

[Subaru: Can you tell me about it? The um, about the Trial]

[Emilia: ……Sorry. I.. seem to have failed it]

[Subaru: Is that right……mn, guess I kinda figured it out from your reaction]

Emilia looked away, apologizing, and, seeing her like this, Subaru pretended to have just found out.
Although it stuck him with pangs of guilt, he only shook his head and stifled back his indecision,

[Subaru: So does that mean…… it's over now?]

[Emilia: I don't think we can say that yet…… You're allowed to challenge as many times as you want. I don't know why, but I just know that. Well…]

Echidona had explicitly revealed the nature of the Trials. But while Subaru already knew this, Emilia seemed to only be subconsciously aware of it.
Emilia's words trailed off towards the end, and, after a brief hesitation,

[Emilia: Nevermind, it's nothing. I guess it's done for today, I'll try again tomorrow]

[Subaru: Are you sure? If it's too much, it'll be alright to wait a few days……that way we can find more patterns and countermeasures to raise our chances]

[Emilia: Thank you……but, I know that won't solve the problem. I know it won't]

[Subaru: ……You might feel better if you talk about it… not that I actually know what I'm talking about]

He took a glance at Emilia as he spoke, and saw her lift up her eyes to meet his gaze, with her lips quivering. But just as her tangled emotions were on the brink of pouring out, Emilia closed her eyes, as if abandoning the idea,

[Emilia: ——I'm sorry. I… can't let Subaru see what I'm feeling right now]

[Subaru: No matter which part of Emilia-tan I see, I'll never dislike Emilia-tan because of it, you know]

[Emilia: It's not that I'm afraid of what Subaru will think. No, maybe a little……but I'm afraid of something more than that]

Emilia became silent. But even so, Subaru could see that the strength within her violet pupils had not wavered, confirming that his prodding was successful.
As long as he keeps supporting her like this, Emilia will eventually give in and reveal her weakness to him. But those were not the kinds of thoughts he should be thinking.

Acting like he knows everything, playing Emilia's heart in the palm of his hand, such a revolting self made him want to vomit. ——Even though, knowing that it was necessary, there shouldn't be any reason to feel this way.

[???: ——Emilia-sama!]

Pressing down his self-loathing as he continued his steps forward, what pulled him back to reality was the dazzling light of the moon, along with a voice calling to the girl beside him.
The pale blue moonlight shining into the Tomb's entrance, accompanied by a cool, refreshing wind, greeted them as they stepped out of the Tomb. Looking down, he could see relieved expressions appearing on the faces of the party waiting for Emilia's return.

It looked like the first to call out to Emilia was Ram. After confirming that Emilia was safe, Ram breathed a rare sigh of relief before turning to Subaru, standing beside Emilia,

[Ram: And Barusu, good work]

[Subaru: OOooohhh…… I didn't expect you to say something nice like that, I'm surprised. What's with the admirable attitude, it's not like you at all?]

[Ram: If you occasionally perform a good task, I will compliment you like this. At least you brought Emilia-sama back safely, so I will give you the appropriate evaluation. Roswaal-sama would be pleased too]

Although being able to report to her master seemed to be her primary reason for feeling relieved, it was still a fresh new joy for Subaru to receive such a straightforward compliment from her.
While smiling like an idiot, Subaru nonchalantly drifted his gaze to the person next to Ram――the golden-haired youth among the welcoming party, standing a bit farther away.

Garfiel, who had been leaning against the trunk of a tree, uncrossed his arms and walked over with leisurely steps. Subaru couldn't sense anything suspicious about his attitude or movements, but then again, Garfiel could close their distance in an instant if he wanted to.
Coming out of the Tomb after Returning by Death twice in a row, there was more than enough reason to be worried. Although he couldn't gauge the current strength of his own "Stench", just the thought of it made Subaru put up his maximum caution.
Then, when Garfiel arrived in front of the stiffened Subaru, the first thing out of his mouth was,

[Garfiel: Was wonderin' what'd happen when y'ran in like an idiot there. Good t'see y'back safe. All that time I was thinkin' "Gafugaron nuts don't fall from winds", but sure kept me on edge]

[Subaru: Ow! Oy, st-, ow! Hurts!]

Saying that with a smile, Garfiel violently and repeatedly slapped Subaru on his shoulder.
Under those bone-numbing impacts, for a moment, Subaru thought *"Is Garfiel attempting an accidental assassination!?"*, but, seeing the way he was flashing his teeth smiling, Subaru just couldn't sense that kind of malice from him.
It really just looked like he was welcoming their safe return. Facing yet another unexpected reaction, Subaru couldn't hide his disbelief any longer,

[Subaru: That's……it?]

[Garfiel: Hah? What. Y'want me t'pat ya on the head for a job well done as well?]

[Subaru: If it's Emilia then it's one thing, but who'd want to be patted by you? No, I mean……]

Subaru was just about to ask why everything was turned on its head, but stopped himself when he realized that there was no need to poke the bear on purpose. Regardless of what Garfiel's true feelings were, it was fortunate he wasn't in the mood to attack on sight.
In any case, Subaru was starting to get an idea of which conditions make Garfiel bare his fangs. If he could just sidestep the worst conditions that make Garfiel turn hostile no-questions-asked, he should be fine.

[Subaru: You know, it's kind of a headache trying to decide how to deal with you]

[Garfiel: The hell's that supposed to mean, oy?]

[Subaru: It's a thing from back home. Anyways, let's get back before going into the details. I want to let Emilia get some rest first. We can discuss the plan after that as well]

No one objected to Subaru's proposal.
Emilia apologized to everyone with [I'm sorry], then Ram took her by the hand and led the party back towards the Sanctuary――opting to settle down in Lewes' house once again.

Emilia didn't fall to pieces. And Garfiel remained friendly despite Subaru's Return by Death.
Facing conditions entirely different from before, Subaru's mind scrambled to find of the best course of action, as well as how best to approach "Death" from here on.

There were too many things he needed to know, too many he needed to test.
Just how many sacrifices will he have to make in order to grasp the best possible future in the end?

Setting about his calculations, Subaru didn't notice how he neglected to enter his own life into the equation.

[Lewes: ――――]

Nor did he notice the way Lewes was staring at him from behind.
And walked on without ever noticing.

Chapter 53 [Mounting Questions]

After leaving the Tomb and returning to the Sanctuary, their discussion continued in Lewes' house.
In terms of content, there was almost no difference from the previous loops: Emilia announced that she had failed her Trial and that she intended to keep trying.

Beyond that, Emilia didn't give any more details, and, noticing this, Ram dismissed the meeting on account of Emilia's health.
Going through the night's events in their minds, they each left for their respective lodgings, until the only ones left in the room were Emilia, Subaru, and Ram.

[Ram: Ram will now help Emilia-sama retire for the night, but it seems a Barusu hasn't realized that he's overstayed his welcome]

[Subaru: Thanks for the non-roundabout way of telling me. Considering Emilia's condition, I guess I should leave you to it…… but, I just want to have a minute. Can I be alone with Emilia for a bit?]

[Ram: Disgraceful]

[Subaru: You're the one who immediately thought of it like that!]

He vehemently objected to Ram's look of disdain, but the pink-haired maid only pretended not to hear anything. Then, she looked to Emilia, who was sitting on the bed,

[Ram: What do you think, Emilia-sama? If you do not wish to hear Barusu's rubbish, Ram will dispose of him straight away]

[Subaru: What do you know? How can the gentle, kind-hearted Emilia-tan possibly reject me, right?]

[Emilia: I'm reeeaally tired tonight, if Subaru wants to chat about all sorts of voluminous topics like usual, then we'd better not……]

[Subaru: Haven't heard anyone say "voluminous" in a while. ……Besides, I'm not in the mood for that either. I'll leave seducing Emilia-tan for another time. I just wanted to talk about the Tomb for a bit]

Despite this usual exchange between them, Emilia still looked uneasy. But, hearing Subaru bring up the topic of the Trials, Emilia closed her eyes for a moment before turning her violet pupils to Ram with [Sorry], signaling her to leave the room.
Silently obeying her instruction, Ram bowed and headed for the door. And as she passed by Subaru's side, she quietly whispered――

[Ram: Please refrain from any topics that might overburden Emilia-sama]

——Issuing this severe command lest he should forget.
With the sound of the bedroom door closing, only Subaru and Emilia were left in the room.
On the bed, Emilia looked up at Subaru with an earnest gaze in her eyes, and Subaru lightly shrugged,

[Subaru: I barely had a chance to check while inside the Tomb, but are you really feeling alright? Considering the way I found you, I'm still really worried]

[Emilia: It's, alright. Mn, thanks. But really, I don't feel anything strange with my body or mind. Besides, if there's anything to worry about, I should be more worried about Subaru, you know?]

[Subaru: W-why's that?]

[Emilia: There's no "w-why" anything. Subaru.. even though I'm glad you came to find me in the Tomb when I didn't come back, something also happened to you in there, right? Ram said it had been almost thirty minutes after you went in when you came out with me again]

In front of Emilia's reproachful gaze, Subaru poked out his tongue in his mind.
Despite trying to throw her off the scent inside the Tomb, it seemed that Emilia still noticed something was off from Ram's superfluous remarks. ——Imagining what might have happened over the unaccounted timespan from when he entered the Tomb to when they came out again, Emilia's face stiffened.

Naturally, the events of the Trial resurfaced in her mind.
For the first Trial, she had to face her own past, and in the initial loop, just the thought that Subaru might know what happened within that Trial distressed Emilia to no end.
Even though she had remained calm in this loop so far, it wouldn't be hard to imagine that she'd lose her current composure when she reaches that same conclusion. So,

[Emilia: Subaru, could it be…… Subaru took the Trial as well……?]

[Subaru: Nono, nothing like that. I mean, it's not like they'd let anyone take the Trials. Besides, I was only in there for so long because I was trying to wake Emilia up]

[Emilia: Because of me?]

[Subaru: Yeah. It looked like you were having a nightmare so I was frantically trying to wake you up, but you were sound asleep, like you were trapped inside the dream. I thought about carrying you out just like that, but I got a feeling that something crazy bad might happen if I did]

He said, with exaggerated movements to cover his deception.
Emilia didn't say anything to refute him. Naturally, she had no way to verify whether he was telling the truth. Since Subaru said so, even if she had doubts in her mind, there was no way to prove them.

[Emilia: I…… see. Sorry, for having that weird thought]

[Subaru: No, don't be. Although, if only I could take the Trials too, maybe I'd be able to be at Emilia's side and we could beat the Trials together]

[Emilia: ……I don’t know. Subaru and I might not see the same things……]

Emilia’s words grew weak towards the end, but she didn’t probe any further into Subaru’s lies. She didn’t want anyone to know the truth of the past she failed to overcome, and her mental state probably made her want to believe Subaru when he claimed to know nothing about its contents. Even now, Subaru was playing Emilia’s heart in the palm of his hand.

[Emilia: So then, what was it that you wanted to talk about? That wasn’t the main subject just now, right?]

[Subaru: Yeah. That wasn’t the main subject. There’s something else I wanted to ask]

[Emilia: Something you wanted to ask?]

Emilia tilted her head.
Watching the cascade of silver hair falling from her shoulders, Subaru went on, [Yeah, something I wanted to ask],

[Subaru: Lately, I haven’t seen Puck around…… is he still not responding?]

[Emilia: Uh, mn…… yeah. Puck still hasn’t responded. I keep calling him, but it’s like he’s asleep inside the crystal]

Suddenly hearing that name brought up, Emilia cast down her eyes and answered.
Her white fingers reached to her chest, and grasped onto the green, beautifully glistening crystal. But the crystal that housed the Great Spirit Puck seemed to have all but lost its radiance.

[Subaru: ……Any idea why?]

[Emilia: Even though there were times like this before when my calls couldn’t reach him, he’d always be back after two or three days. But this time it’s been almost a week…… I’m starting to get worried too]

It was the same little grey cat who once proclaimed that it will protect Emilia.
As that tiny figure emerged in Subaru’s mind, his thoughts turned to the calamities that befell the Sanctuary, and to Emilia, caught up within it.

When the so-called Great Rabbit attacked the Sanctuary, most likely everyone present became its food——that was what Subaru imagined, at least.
Garfiel, Ram, Roswaal and the others would have all been among the victims. And naturally, Emilia would have been one of them.

The sensation of being shredded, devoured, having their own existence become slivers of meat in another organism’s belly——the thought of what Emilia and the others must have experienced filled Subaru’s lungs with boiling rage and grief.
But, setting this fury aside, Subaru’s thoughts landed on the useless spirit who sat idly by while harm was allowed to come to Emilia.

It was the same in the last loop when Emilia’s body was possessed by the Witch.
The flood of shadows was covering over all the world, and Emilia was wrapped in that eerie

shroud. Her body was taken over by the Witch's will while the tall-talking Great Spirit did nothing.
All talk and no action, hollow words in the extreme.

[Subaru: All this time, the only big contributions from that guy were the fight with Elsa and those Sapporo Snow Festivals I got caught up in…… Can't help but think that he's totally unreliable at this point]

While holding his chin, showering complaints about Puck, Subaru forced his mind to think. Calamities were about to befall the Sanctuary, which meant that Emilia would be in danger. Since Garfiel and Roswaal could not repel them, Subaru would have to find something to even the odds, and Puck was precisely what he needed.

[Subaru: You don't happen to know any other way to reach Puck, do you? If he's here, all sorts of topics could suddenly move forward]

[Emilia: ――――I don't… know of any… I think]

Subaru didn't expect much from this question, and Emilia gave the expected reply. It was just that there was something about the brief moment of hesitation before her answer that tugged at Subaru. But, before he could ask about it,

[Emilia: Was there something you wanted to ask Puck?]

[Subaru: Hm? Ah, yeah, since it's a Witch's Tomb, and it's been there for over 400 years, I figured we should ask a guy who was around back then. Maybe we could make a few breakthroughs that way]

Hearing Subaru's prepared excuse, Emilia nodded in agreement. Then, as if earnestly considering his proposal,

[Emilia: That's… right. Puck might, just know something…… mn, I got it. I'll try even harder than usual to call him]

[Subaru: O-K. I'll look forward to Emilia-tan's success, then]

Emilia was determined to beat the Trials. She was unaware that Subaru had taken the Trial as well. And, so far, her motivation hadn't waned.
Puck was still holed up in his crystal, unwilling to come out, so probably couldn't be expected to make an appearance in this loop. Considering how he wouldn't offer any help to make things easier for Subaru, and how they left things at the end of their last conversation, Subaru's opinion of Puck was only continuously worsening.

[Subaru: Well, I shouldn't stay too long. Ram will get some weird suspicions and that'll give her even more reasons to bully me, so I better get going. Although, if Emilia-tan wants someone to sleep with, I wouldn't mind……]

[Emilia: I don't want someone to sleep with though?]

[Subaru: Oooog. So straightforward……got nothing to say to that…]

Giving the confused-looking Emilia a wry smile, Subaru headed for the door.
In any case, this was as far as their conversation would go tonight. He had no way to delve any deeper into Emilia's personal problems right now.
All Subaru could do was create an environment where Emilia could focus on her Trials while he would try to break through the dire circumstances surrounding them.

Emilia will challenge the Tomb, and Subaru will challenge the Sanctuary.
Meanwhile, he mustn't let Emilia know of his efforts behind the scenes. To her, that would only be another burden.

[Subaru: Well, good night, Emilia-tan. If you get nightmares, you're always welcome to come fleeing to my side]

[Emilia: If I go all the way to bother Subaru, the villagers will be pretty shocked, right? ……Hey, Subaru]

[Subaru: Hm?]

Just as he was about to leave with that joke, he was stopped by Emilia's call.
Turning around with his hand on the door, he saw that Emilia's lips were trembling and there was hesitation in her eyes,

[Emilia: No, it's nothing. Good night. Stay safe]

[Subaru: No kidding about that last part… G'night]

With a wave of his hand, Subaru burned Emilia's smile into his mind as he left the room.

Closing the bedroom door behind him, Subaru looked up and saw Ram sitting in a chair in the adjacent living room, sipping from a cup of steaming black tea.
Even though the house was vacated out of its owner Lewes' hospitality, that didn't seem to deter the maid from her usual insolence. Seeing this, Subaru let out a wry smile.

[Subaru: I should say sorry to have kept you waiting…… but, seeing your lackadaisical attitude, I kinda don't want to anymore]

[Ram: Ram was rather expecting some sort of compliment for not touching the sweets. ——You didn't do anything improper to Emilia-sama, I hope?]

[Subaru: You know I always put Emilia above everything else, so what kind of question is that? You're the one who should be careful not to give Emilia anything weird to worry about……although I guess I can trust you there]

Her attitude towards Subaru was definitely ≠ her attitude towards Emilia.
Ram's conduct could be considered vicious depending on who you ask, but it was precisely because of her refreshingly blatant discrimination that Subaru deemed her worthy of trust.
Hearing Subaru's snortle, Ram finished the remaining contents of her cup and stood up. Then, watching her walk towards the bedroom,

[Subaru: By the way, you got a minute?]

[Ram: Disgraceful]

[Subaru: What kind of indiscriminate beast do you think I am!?]

Hugging her own body, Ram quickly placed some distance between herself and Subaru. Naturally, Subaru knew that she wasn't being serious, but, deep down, it still hurt to see a girl react like this.

[Subaru: Don't know why I have to say this, but, I've never looked at you in any sexy kind of way, you know]

[Ram: The fact that you said it with such bestial lust has completely destroyed your credibility. Besides, I've been sensing something strange in Barusu's gaze ever since you arrived in the Sanctuary]

[Subaru: What's that supposed to mean? That kind of baseless accusation is totally unheard of, you know! You sure you're not just being overly self-conscious?]

[Ram: You are unaware of it, then. Somehow, your gaze seems to be strange and distant whenever you look at me. I don't know who, but it's as if you're looking at someone else through Ram]

——What she said was true, and that Subaru himself had failed to realize it only made it all the more shocking.

As if having just taken a blow to the head, Subaru could sense his thoughts freeze still. His face stiffened and his eyes swam. But, resenting the fact that he was reacting this way, he quickly recovered himself and shrugged,

[Subaru: I-I have no idea what you're talking about]

[Ram: It really is strange that you'd only realize it after I pointed it out. But that gaze wasn't entirely unpleasant… that's why I didn't say anything until now]

Watching the shaken Subaru, Ram softly sighed.
Her attitude was different from the way she was always teasing him, almost like she was being considerate of his pain.
Their appearances were nearly identical, but inside, they were completely different. Even though he should have known this, whenever Ram behaves so gently towards him, it'd almost feel as though she and the sleeping girl were beginning to overlap.
What Ram pointed out was true. She wasn't mistaken. Through Ram, Subaru was seeing the girl who looked almost exactly like her. And he couldn't help it.
It was also Ram who made him realize this.

[Ram: ……So, was there something you wanted to ask me?]

[Subaru: Uegh?]

[Ram: It wasn't my intention to depress Barusu. In fact, making Barusu depressed is quite low on my priorities list. Right now, Ram intends to wait on Emilia-sama and return to Roswaal-sama's side. So if you don't start talking, you wouldn't mind if I start ignoring you?]

[Subaru: No wait…… uuh, right. I wanted to ask about Garfiel]

Imposing on Ram's rare display of patience, Subaru wrenched out the question he had wanted to ask.
Hearing this, Ram's brows lifted in surprise, breaking her apathetic expression,

[Ram: Did something happen between you and Garf?]

[Subaru: Nothing yet, but can't guarantee what might happen later on. I'll have a lot more opportunities to run into that guy, and you seem to have known him for a while, so I figured I should try asking you]

[Ram: Is that so…… well, I'll take your word for it]

Saying this as if having seen through Subaru's mind, Ram touched her hand to her chin.

[Ram: So, what did you want to ask about Garf?]

[Subaru: Well, I already know that guy's ridiculously overpowered, but, uh…… what do you think will get Garfiel to leave the Sanctuary?]

[Ram: ……That's, certainly a strange question]

[Subaru: I figured there's no point beating around the bush here. Guess it doesn't matter whether you think I'm strange or not at this point]

Unlike Emilia, whom he wanted to hide his underhanded dealings from, it'd be alright if Ram was let in on some of his secret activities. In fact, whether it was the upcoming release of the refugees or the inevitable events that will be unfolding outside the Sanctuary, it would be more convenient if Ram knew about them beforehand.

[Ram: I don't know what you're plotting, and I'm not interested, but if you want to get Garfiel out of the Sanctuary…… well, it's not entirely impossible if Ram implored him]

[Subaru: Love's his weak spot, huh. I thought of it too, but it's kinda hard to say the words]

No doubt Ram would be far more persuasive than Subaru if she was the one to raise the issue with Garfiel. But then Subaru remembered what happened after Garfiel morphed into a giant tiger to chase him as he tried to leave.
There, Garfiel even turned his claws on Ram, the person he supposedly loved, just so he could continue hunting Subaru. Ultimately, the Sanctuary was more important to him than Ram.

[Subaru: But, Ram… That's probably……]

[Ram: Right. It's probably useless]

While Subaru was agonizing over how to respond without sounding like he already knew, Ram casually affirmed his thoughts.
Seeing Subaru's eyes widen, Ram brushed her hand through her peach-colored hair,

[Ram: While Garf is certainly enraptured by Ram, he has already decided on the priorities in his heart. Just like what Roswaal-sama is to Ram]

[Subaru: So there's something else even more important to Garfiel……? Do you know what that is?]

[Ram: I know. But I won't tell you]

Suddenly averting her eyes, Ram did not answer his question. Subaru continued staring at her, as if requesting that she answer him, but, unfazed, Ram only sighed,

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

[Subaru: Hey which one of us is the living definition of conceited here? ……And did you know about Roswaal's book?]

[Ram: ……Where did you hear about that?]

Just like this, they traded blows, tit for tat.
Although he knew that Ram was right, Subaru's rebellious spirit still pushed him to object. Ram reacted fiercely to this unexpected question, narrowing her eyes as if to pierce through Subaru with her gaze,

[Ram: Depending on what you say next, I may soon need to hurt you]

[Subaru: And that would be disobeying Roswaal's wishes, wouldn't it? Drop the act, Ram. You can't do anything of the sort]

At least, Ram had never harmed Subaru since they arrived in the Sanctuary. Not only that, one time she had even proclaimed her intention to help him without Roswaal's express orders.
It was with this in mind that Subaru provoked her, having seen through the fact that she would not physically attack him. Hearing this, Ram's expression darkened,

[Ram: Your eyes have become sickening, Barusu]

[Subaru: Huh?]

[Ram: I don't know what you saw in the Tomb, but it mustn't have been anything good. This current Barusu is so sickening that I have no desire to speak to you anymore]

[Subaru: ……What I saw in the Tomb.. was a kind of hope for me. Don't just go labeling it as nothing good]

Recalling his encounter with the white-haired Witch——Echidona, Subaru curled his lips at Ram's implicit rejection of their meeting.

Although his discussion with Echidona had lead to the tragedy of the previous loop, Subaru nonetheless believed that he had received more than what he had paid. Just having someone he could confess Return by Death to was already plenty enough compensation.

[Subaru: ――――]

For a moment, Subaru and Ram's eyes met.
Just what could be residing within the depths of those faintly wavering eyes? Subaru strained his awareness to see it, but, before the image could take shape, it dispersed as she looked away.

[Ram: You should leave now. It wouldn't do to make Emilia-sama wait much longer]

[Subaru: ……Sorry to have kept you. I know… that what you've said wasn't wrong]

At last, he apologized for his brashness, and Ram, accepting his apology, turned away and headed for the bedroom.
Watching her maid's dress disappear behind the closing door, Subaru exhaled a long, deep sigh, and left Lewes' house.

The breeze sweeping through the Sanctuary brushed against Subaru's hair as he came out of the building. Breathing in the scent of grass carried in the night's wind, Subaru stepped out into the night-befallen Sanctuary and headed for his bed in the Cathedral.

Walking across the grass, and following along the trail by the light of the moon, Subaru began to think on how he should make use of his time in this loop.
Having been assured that there is no limit to Return by Death, Subaru was now able to do something he had never done before―― that is, to sacrifice an entire loop solely for the purpose of gathering information.
Since he was already determined to throw in his life, there would be no other, more efficient way to take advantage of Return by Death.

[Subaru: If I just try something different each loop, the solutions to all the obstacles are bound to start appearing one by one……]

And then, all he would need to do would be to link them together and fulfill them all in a single loop.
To break through the obstacles that stand in his way, and beautifully hold onto everyone's futures: that, would be his perfect victory.
Although, just who would be included in that perfect victory was something to consider in and of itself.

[Subaru: ――――]

Suddenly, Subaru stopped――
――when he smelled something in the wind other than the grass beneath his feet.

Subaru looked up. And in front of his field of vision, was a youth standing in the middle of the star-lit path.

With his arms crossed and his spiky golden hair fluttering in the wind, Garfiel gave his fangs a click.

[Subaru: You sure are a timely bastard]

[Garfiel: What's that, y'don't seem surprised t'see me. Well, that's kinda odd, but does help move th'conversation along]

Just after he was talking about him with Ram, Garfiel showed up here. Subaru couldn't help but scratch his cheeks and remark on the timing.
Then, Garfiel gestured with his head, as if signalling something to Subaru.

The small figure took a few steps, went off the path, and headed towards the forest.
Watching the figure go further and further away, venturing into the thick undergrowth of the forest, Subaru did a light stretch and turned to the Cathedral――

[Garfiel: Wasn't I tellin ya t'follow me with that nudge just now!? Oy!!]

Garfiel came running over shouting abuse at Subaru, who was trying to walk away, and Subaru held up his arms and shrugged,

[Subaru: Just a little joke. I didn't miss the point, don't worry]

[Garfiel: Kinda pissin' me off here. Y'keep up or I eat ya]

[Subaru: Normally, wouldn't saying something like "I won't eat ya" have a more calming effect here?]

Roughly swinging out his strides again, Garfiel didn't respond to Subaru's comment. Subaru had a bad feeling about how Garfiel sounded like he wanted to say something but didn't, but all there was to do now was to follow in small quick steps behind him.

Leaving the main road and entering the forest, after walking a short distance, Garfiel snorted.
They've arrived in a small clearing amidst the rows of trees, about the size of a round table enough to seat 4 or 5 people. There, Garfiel turned around,

[Garfiel: So…… th'hell did y'bastard see in th'Tomb?]

[Subaru: ……you too?]

After Emilia and Ram, he was the third person to ask him that.
Unlike with the previous two, Subaru would have to be cautious what answer he gives to Garfiel, since he probably wouldn't give up asking until he's gotten to the bottom of it.

Not minding the thoughts going through Subaru's head, Garfiel spat out [Me too, huh?], and clicked his fangs, as his golden irises narrowed into slits,

[Garfiel: I don't know who said what t'ya where, but I ain't gettin' ignored so easily. "Suspicious Berube extends th'same t'his family", as they say]

[Subaru: Sorry, I took a bit of time trying to wake Emilia in the Tomb. Whatever you think I saw in there is just your imagination, you know]

[Garfiel: Y'got some nerve givin' me that. Yer whole body's reekin' of the Witch's stench, y'think y'can fool me with that? Ah?]

[Subaru: ――――]

Wrinkling his nose as he said this, Garfiel's words were full of hostility.
Hearing this, Subaru couldn't say a thing. Yet, at the same time, he also sensed that something was out of place.

The reason for Garfiel's hostility――was the Witch's lingering scent.
That had been Subaru's conclusion in all the loops so far, and what Garfiel just said also verified this. The problem was, the timing of when he brought this up in this loop was strange.

Subaru had been terribly nervous as he came out of the Tomb, expecting some sort of attack from Garfiel.
Subaru had just Returned by Death, after dying right in front of the Witch, no less. So the Witch's lingering scent must have been far thicker back then than now.

But, unexpectedly, Garfiel did not take any actions to attack him. Instead, he even seemed to be expressing genuine relief for Subaru and Emilia's return.
All throughout their meeting in Lewes' house, and as he watched Garfiel leave the room, this very point had been bothering him.

Up until their parting, everything had been normal, and yet when they met again after only 10 or so minutes, Garfiel's attitude had drastically changed, and Subaru couldn't imagine why.
Could it be that the stench was so pungent that his nose lost all sense of smell, and it only managed to recover after some time had passed?

Subaru lifted his arm to smell himself, but could only smell the fatigue that had accumulated over the course of the day. Resolving to wash himself as soon as he gets the chance, he turned to Garfiel.

[Subaru: About that Witch's lingering scent… I've had quite a few people point that out to me before]

[Garfiel: ……Heh, that so? Those guys must have been pretty accommodatin' t'not do anythin' about it, oy. Such a revolting smell too, why would they, I wonder]

[Subaru: They probably decided to overlook how I smelled and judge me based on my actions instead. It'd be a great help if you could do that too. At least, you let me go when I just came out of the Tomb, right?]

[Garfiel: ――――]

[Subaru: My loyalty to Emilia is beyond question, and I don't intend to do anything to harm the Sanctuary. I hope you can believe that much. So, if you could just quietly let me off that'd be a huge help]

From a conveniently optimistic standpoint, the fact that Garfiel didn't attack the moment Subaru opened his mouth at least showed that he was still rational. So it should be possible to reach a compromise through words.
In fact, Subaru could almost see a slight waver in Garfiel's eyes. After all, Garfiel wasn't the kind of person who would thoughtlessly eliminate Subaru just because he could sense the Witch's scent on him. It was only when that stench was combined with some other condition that he began to take action.
Whatever it may be, in this loop, it didn't seem to have triggered yet. So it was up to Subaru to find out just what that trigger is in the meantime.

[Garfiel: ……Y'haven't answered my first question]

[Subaru: Mm?]

[Garfiel: What did y'bastard see. In the Tomb. Whether I let y'go or not will depend on th'answer y'give me]

Glaring at Subaru, Garfiel asked again, though the force in his voice had somewhat diminished from before.
There were only two kinds of answers Subaru could give him——the truth, or the same lies he told to Emilia. Which one was the right solution? There was a need to make sure of that,

[Subaru: In that case, let me ask you a question as well]

[Garfiel: Don't get yer situation wrong here. I ask, y'answer. Y'want me t'eat ya?]

[Subaru: Don't be mad. Allow your shoulders to relax, and just take it easy and answer]

Garfiel bared his fangs, while Subaru slightly wiggled his shoulders and drew in a deep breath. Keeping the question lodged in his throat, he locked his eyes onto Garfiel, and,

——Here's the moment of truth.

He encouraged himself with that thought,

[Subaru: ——I saw a bunch of kids who looked exactly like Lewes-san, you know anything about that?]

Chapter 54 [To Know Of Hell]

As the fatal question escaped his lips, Subaru realized exactly where he stood.

The words came out, landing safely in Garfiel's ears—— and the golden-haired youth's expression changed. Witnessing this, for a moment, Subaru's thoughts froze still.
It was the same Garfiel who had always kept up his guard around Subaru, sustaining the tough facade with his razor-sharp leer, determined not to show any sign of weakness.
But now, that expression was being twisted into something else.

It was almost like the expression of a child on the verge of tears after his most precious secret had been revealed.

[Garfiel: You…… th'hell did y'just say?]

But that fleeting, transient expression only lasted for an instant.
As if eradicating that lapse of weakness, Garfiel squeezed shut his eyes, grit his teeth, and glared back at Subaru like a man possessed.

The silence that permeated the forest and the almost-lonely stillness was abruptly turned, as goosebumps crawled across Subaru's skin on the receiving end of that stare.
It was his body reacting to the threat of impending danger. An exaggerated reflex to——

[Subaru: You look like you're going to kill someone]

Touching on "that topic" must have been the last thing Garfiel wanted. His reaction made Subaru quite certain of that.

Without uttering a sound, the coldness of Garfiel's glare only intensified with Subaru's mutter. The fleeting trace of weakness was gone, and, in its place, there was now only dagger-like malice directed at the target of his glare.
Pierced by that gaze, instincts warning of danger pulsed throughout Subaru's body. But, consciously ignoring this, Subaru kept up his undaunted facade,

[Subaru: Do I have to say it again? I saw some kids who looked exactly like Lewes-san wandering around the Sanctuary. And I'm pretty sure they weren't Lewes-san]

[Garfiel: ……I don't know what y'mean. So y'saw Granny takin' a walk? It'd be another question if she's strollin' around in th'middle of th'night, but that ain't anythin…]

[Subaru: ——Two of them]

[Garfiel: Hah?]

Just as Garfiel tried to rationalize what Subaru described, his desperate excuses shattered as Subaru held up two fingers on his outstretched hand,

[Subaru: I saw two kids looking exactly like Lewes-san walking around at the same time. Maybe one of them was Lewes-san, but then……who would the other one be——]

——The moment he finished his sentence, all sense of up and down blurred into one.

[Subaru: ——Ghua!]

He felt his back slamming into something hard, wrenching all the air out of his lungs.
His spine had crashed into something large and uneven—— the trunk of a tree, and was being pinned there by an enormous force as he dangled sideways, unable to escape.
Suspending Subaru in mid-air with his hand pinning his stomach against the tree, Garfiel stared straight into Subaru's eyes,

[Garfiel: ——And where th'hell did y'see that, oy]

[Subaru: Nowhere too weird…… just… in the forest……]

[Garfiel: No… that ain't possible. We took too much fuckin' care t'make sure that wouldn't happen or it would've been found out by y'nosy bastards a long time ago]

Garfiel's palm pressed harder as he spoke, sending stomach fluids spilling from Subaru's lips.
Regardless of Subaru's struggling and kicking, the arm wouldn't budge an inch.
Like an insect pinned up for display. He shuddered at the thought.

[Garfiel: Yer belly's gonna touch yer back if we keep doin' this? How 'bout y'start tellin' the truth before that happens?]

Twisting his lips into a sadistic grin, Garfiel amped up the pressure against Subaru's body.
As if Garfiel was proving that he wasn't joking, Subaru could feel his bones and organs beginning to creak. Gasping, heaving painful breaths,

[Subaru: Th……at'll, depend on your atti……tude]

[Garfiel: Now ain't that funny. Y'still think y'can negotiate with me on equal footin'? I thought I taught ya t'get rid of those conceited ideas?]

[Subaru: You could just…… finish me off here without getting any answers, but that won't solve anything]

[Garfiel: ……]

Uttering those fragmented words, Subaru could sense that Garfiel was listening.

——Subaru had half-expected this furious reaction from Garfiel up to now.

The only time Subaru actually saw the Lewes-clones was during their final showdown with the Witch in the previous loop.
Before that, he had never even imagined their existence, much less spotted any of them in the Sanctuary. But, thinking back on it now, there were actually quite a few peculiarities that hinted at their existence, though there's no need to get into that here.
Regardless, that was just how well the clones were hidden in the Sanctuary.
It's hard to imagine Garfiel keeping the existence of more than 20 replicants a secret, so it was

probably something known among the residents of the Sanctuary.
If anyone on this side knew about it, it would be Roswaal, and possibly Ram.

Either way, just mentioning it was enough to put Garfiel on edge, that much was the expected half.
As for the unexpected half――

[Garfiel: ……Y’re fucked up]

Spitting this out, Garfiel released Subaru’s body.
Without any warning, Subaru dropped to the ground with a surprised [Uwa]. Rolling, tasting grass and soil in his mouth, he spat out the dirt and stood himself up. Then, looking back at Garfiel,

[Subaru: D-don’t just let go all of a sudden, scared me there]

[Garfiel: Shut up, freak. Quit fuckin’ around. Y’fuckin’ testin me?]

[Subaru: Testing?]

Seeing Subaru tilt his head, playing dumb, Garfiel clicked his tongue, leering,

[Garfiel: Y’thought I was gonna kill ya when y’said that, didn’t ya]

[Subaru: ……]

――The half that Subaru didn’t expect was that Garfiel chose not to immediately kill him.
Even when provoked like this, Garfiel was still giving him a chance to explain himself.
Realizing that Subaru had said those words knowing they might result in his death, Garfiel violently kicked his foot into the ground,

[Garfiel: Quit fuckin’ around… Y’think yer gonna stake yer fuckin’ life and act like nothin’s happenin’? Y’fuckin nutcase. Y’make me sick]

[Subaru: Kinda hurts when you put it like that…… and it’s not like I don’t care or anything]

Subaru smiled weakly at Garfiel and scratched his own head.
While doing so, he noticed that his fingers were actually shaking.

Although Garfiel had stopped inflicting pain on Subaru, his hostility did not seem to diminish in the slightest.
And even now, Subaru’s physical body was screaming with primal terror as though his organs were being wrenched and twisted.

It was only natural, considering the intentionally-provoked Garfiel was standing right in front of him.
That is to say, Subaru more or less understood that he was facing down the same giant golden tiger who rampaged through the forest in the night, slaughtering the villagers.

Just the memory of its ravaging fangs and claws froze his heart with terror.
But still――

[Subaru: If just my life is enough to fix everything, then that's a pretty fair trade]

If whittling down at Subaru's heart was the only price to pay, then it'd be quite a bargain.
It's not every day that you can get a HAPPY END so cheaply.

Even though Subaru's resolve could break at any moment――the meager foundation supporting it was firm and unbreakable.
Garfiel must have understood this as well. Crunching up his nose into a disgusted grimace,

[Garfiel: I got no good impressions of a bastard with eyes like that. Normally, I'd crush ya on th'spot, but……]

[Subaru: I'd be pretty bummed out if you did that… I'd still prefer if you could magnanimously overlook this. And it really sounds like we're speaking the same language here……so]

[Garfiel: ……]

[Subaru: Any chance you feel like answering my question?]

Patting off the dirt on his body, Subaru asked once again.
Garfiel's face soured at the return of the forcefully interrupted topic, and, turning his eyes away,

[Garfiel: Don't wanna]

[Subaru: Is that right. Oh well, no helping it]

Getting a reply that sounded like something from a stubborn child, Subaru shrugged and casually dropped the topic.
In return, an expression of complete bafflement came onto Garfiel's face.

[Garfiel: Y'…… aren't y'gonna……]

[Subaru: But you don't want to talk, right? And I don't have the power or the persuasive skills to make you. Well I mean, I could keep bugging you to tell me, but the rewards aren't really worth the risk, so maybe another time]

[Garfiel: ……what]

[Subaru: Oh don't make that confounded face, Garfiel. No matter how much you want to keep your secrets hidden, I'll be sure to expose it. I kind of have to, you know]

Garfiel's head sprang back up at those words, and Subaru returned his gaze head on.
Their eyes met, but there was no longer the same tension as before. The spirit in Garfiel's pupils seem to have faded, while Subaru's steeled their resolve.

[Subaru: Garfiel. I'll be sure…… to expose all the Sanctuary's secrets you people are trying to hide. I know I have no other choice, so I'll absolutely make sure of it]

[Garfiel: ……Shut up. Y'realize if I stuff yer fuckin' mouth right now there ain't gonna be no "absolutely" or "sure of" t'speak of, oy]

[Subaru: Sorry, but I'm absolutely sure. As long as I haven't given up, I know I'll uncover everything there is to uncover. If there's anyone to blame for that, blame your own sloppiness]

Not understanding Subaru's words, Garfiel's eyes wavered with confusion.
Naturally, he couldn't have known what his "Sloppiness" was referring to. After all, it was a mistake he hadn't yet made.

[Subaru: ……Guess there's no point even if we keep talking]

Watching the silenced Garfiel, Subaru decided to end the conversation here.
He had raised Garfiel's caution to its utmost limit, and after this bluff, there was already no way he could disarm him in this loop.
Although Subaru never had much hope of success in this loop, seeing it completely fall apart like this was still somewhat hard to bear.

[Subaru: But…]

——But he must endure it nonetheless.

Since he had resolved to wager his life, this wouldn't be the last time where he'd have to bear this sense of loss.
He would probably never get used to, or manage to forget that pain.
Surely, if he ever got used to the endless cycle of "Deaths", only to find that he could no longer truly desire the future ahead of him, Subaru's heart would be swallowed by darkness, never to return. Somehow, he just knew this.

[Subaru: You still want to stop me, don't you, Garfiel?]

[Garfiel: ……]

[Subaru: If you do, that'll only draw things out longer. So it'd help if you didn't]

Even if Garfiel killed him now, Subaru would just be returned to the Tomb, a few hours ago.
Everything after that would feel like a throwaway match, and if Garfiel pulled him aside again, he should be fine if he just chose some safer responses.
Though of course, it'd be better if he could avoid Returning by Death altogether.

Garfiel didn't respond to Subaru's prodding.
Seeing this, Subaru turned his back, and began walking out of the forest towards the Sanctuary.
He would need to begin planning tomorrow's actions, and organize all the things that must be confirmed.
Although he has as many chances as his strength of will would allow, that didn't mean he should waste them.

[Garfiel: You……]

Watching Subaru walk further and further away, Garfiel called to him with a voice of stifled emotion.
Subaru stopped, but did not turn around. Staring at his back, Garfiel muttered,

[Garfiel: Just what…… are y'tryin' to do in th'Sanctuary? What do y'plan t'do with us, ah? Oy]

[Subaru: I've already told you. I intend to save Emilia. I don't plan to do any harm to the Sanctuary……or to you, for that matter]

He knew of the disaster that was going to befall the Sanctuary, and intended to rescue its residents from their fate. Naturally, Garfiel would be counted among them.
But that would only be the final result,

[Subaru: I'm sure I'll make you despise me many times over before we get there. I'll apologize for that in advance. ……Sorry]

[Garfiel: ……I've got no idea what yer sayin'. Everythin' y'said……yer soundin' exactly like 'em]

Garfiel spoke as if he was speaking to something frightening and incomprehensible, and Subaru could only resign to the fact that it was inevitable.
As much as he wanted to be understood, he knew that Garfiel couldn't possibly understand.

[Subaru: I don't want to fight you. From tomorrow onwards, just act normal…… it's alright if you can't, but don't get in my way. Go back to a warm bed and get some early sleep for tonight. Oversleep, shirk your duties, or wake and go right back to bed for all I care——]

Tossing out these last words before leaving, Subaru suddenly stopped mid-sentence.
Just now, he had noticed something in what he just said.
And from there, an idea had taken shape in his mind——

[Subaru: Might be worth trying]

[Garfiel: ……Hah?]

[Subaru: Anyways, that's it for tonight, Garfiel. Whatever your worries and concerns are, I'll take care of everything. So just be patient and wait until then]

[Garfiel: ——! You……!]

Listening to Subaru speak in future tense from beginning to end, Garfiel's head shot up.
His face flushed with anger, he bared his teeth, spitting,

[Garfiel: Don't give me that condescending bullshit…..! Who, who th'fuck asked ya t'take care'of anything? Don't go meddlin' in what's none'of yer business! Granny, th'others…… anything! Y'don't fuckin' know anything……!]

[Subaru: I don't know, so I have to find out. That's why I have to do this]

[Garfiel: Yer only seein' th'fuckin' surface, how can y'possibly understand!? Smirkin' like an idiot, prattlin' outta dreams, muddlin' things with fuckin' pretty words y'fuckin' con-artist piece'of shit!]

[Subaru: ――――]

[Garfiel: Y'don't know pain, don't know what sufferin' feels like, so don't fuckin' talk like y'know everything――!!]

Garfiel screamed back, raving at Subaru's arrogant facade.
The shouts dissolved into the night's forest sky, and faded into nothing.

Condescending, speaking like he knew everything, meddling in what was none of his business despite not understanding a thing.
――Indeed, all this was true, and there was not the slightest ground to dispute it.

However,

[Subaru: ……I do know]

[Garfiel: ――――]

[Subaru: I know what Hell is. ――So many times, I've seen it]

If there was Hell in this world, it'd be all the worlds that Subaru had seen.
At the end of countless worlds, burning those scenes of Hell into the back of his eyes, certainly, he knew it well.
And that was why――

[Subaru: It's enough that I'm the only one who has to know that Hell. That is the reason I'm here]

――He sincerely believed this in that moment.

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After leaving Garfiel whimpering and clutching his heart, Subaru did not return to his bed inside the Cathedral.
He would have headed to bed and set about slowly figuring out his strategy for the near future. In fact, until recently that had been his intention.
But there was a reason he chose to discard that plan and head somewhere else instead.

[Subaru: …….It should be this way if I remember correctly]

Peeling aside the sprawling ivy, Subaru muttered to himself while making his way down the unmarked path.
Visibility was poor under the forest canopy that obscured the moonlight. The dense, knee-high

weeds didn't help, either. There was no consistency to the uneven ground, and he was forced to slow his pace to keep himself from stumbling.

[Subaru: While I'm usually pretty confident about my sense of direction, the memory's too hazy, huh… But it's not like I had time to calmly look around the place, so guess there's no helping it]

Making lame excuses for himself, Subaru felt his way forward through the foliage.
This was the forest outside the Sanctuary——but quite far away from where he and Garfiel last spoke. Subaru had first gone back to the Sanctuary before entering the forest again.
As for why he did that——

[Subaru: Pretty sure this was where he showed up back then…]

Before this series of loops began—— on the morning of the first Trial, Subaru had visited the Tomb with Otto to confirm his qualification.
In the end, the Tomb accepted Subaru, and he was granted the chance to challenge his past in the Trial that night—— but there was something else before that.

That morning, while bantering with Otto on the way back, they were confronted by Garfiel who had emerged from the forest. At the time, he said he was patrolling the Sanctuary.

[Subaru: But the timing was too good to be a coincidence, and why did he come from that direction?]

It was almost like the timing of his appearance had been staged, and there was the problem of where he appeared from.
Recalling how Garfiel emerged from the bushes beside the Tomb, Subaru felt a sense of deja-vu. Sifting through the peculiarities in his memories, he realized something.

——It was the mysterious facility where Beatrice had teleported him from the Mansion.

Having been returned to the Sanctuary, coming out of that facility, he had a feeling that it was terribly close to where Garfiel had emerged back then.
And so, hoping to find something there, he was now trawling through the forest in the dead of night, searching for the path to that facility.

[Subaru: A trodden path……that means]

Seeing the vegetation give way to patches of exposed earth, Subaru deduced that someone must have been regularly passing through here. Following this trail deeper into the forest, carried along by the exhilaration and speeding up his steps——at last, his field of vision brightened,

[Subaru: ……Found it]

It was a crumbling stone building. An ancient structure on the verge of collapse in the depths of the forest with its back against the cliff face.
Approaching the structure, as he made out its contours obscured by the darkness, Subaru tilted his head.

[Subaru: Huh…? Pretty sure last time I saw it, it was more destroyed than this……]

The building was certainly showing its years, but Subaru got the feeling that its state of deterioration was less severe than he remembered. Simply put, what Subaru saw last time was a ruin, whereas the building before him still retained some semblance of its original architecture. That is to say,

[Subaru: If my memory's correct, then sometime between now and the sixth day, something destructive will happen to this building…… right?]

Drawing from the sum of his memories, that would be the only conclusion.
If that were the case, then, just as he imagined, this place was not entirely unrelated to what was going to happen to the Sanctuary.

Holding his breath, and stifling anything that might give away his presence, Subaru carefully turned the handle on the door.
It opened with surprising silence, and a putrid stench greeted him as he stepped inside.

Same as last time, scattered instruments littered the otherwise barren and desolate entryway. Passing through a corridor reminiscent of a waiting room, Subaru headed towards the destined chamber.
He reached the door at the end of the hallway——— and beyond it, would be the room with the bottomless pit where Beatrice had transported him.

He might just walk into the pit if he wasn't careful. So, with that in mind, Subaru slowly pushed open the door and peeked his head inside,

[Subaru: ……Oy oy]

As the scene panned out before his eyes, Subaru couldn't help but let slip this sound under his breath.

A pale, refracted light lit up his face. Narrowing his eyes at the dazzling brightness, Subaru dumbly turned his gaze to the source of that light.
And there, in that destined chamber at the very back of the facility, was———

[Subaru: Lewes-san……?]

———A small female figure encased in the center of a massive crystal, faintly glowing with a pale-blue luminescence.

Chapter 55 [The Girl In The Crystal]

…Not Available…

…Not Available…