



[WN]Re Zero - Arc 5: Stars What Make History

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Chapter 1 - It Always Starts With a Visitor



—He breaks into a sprint, launching himself forward.

Air breezes over the sweat that drips from his brow to his eyes. He blinks it away, ignoring it. His lungs ache with every breath. His innards twist into knots.

“—!”

Someone is yelling far in the distance. Their voice draws ever nearer, closing in on Subaru as he runs. With their call as his landmark, as his beacon, he sprints onward, onward—.

“—!”

The frantic voice draws him in. Heedless of the white light swamping his vision, he runs. And,

???: "Goal, in fact!"

The second he crosses the finish line clumsily drawn underfoot, the sky and the earth swap places. Small weeds poke into the crown of his head, and Subaru instantly puts his hand to the ground for a forward roll. The habitual action kills his momentum, and with two more unneeded rolls, he lands sprawled out on the ground.

Subaru: "Bhaahhh! Auhhg! Everything hurts! Everything stings! But it's over! I did it!"

Breathing breath after ragged breath, he still finds it in him to shout. He complains as he does to invigorate his faltering heart. He mustn't feel that his fatigue is simply wear, or that his effort is simply exertion. He must remember that this is not the end, and there is still more to come. Every time he tries to dictate where the finish line is, to give himself that satisfaction, Subaru puts his hand to his chest and thinks of that night.

???: "Good job, Subaru, I suppose."

A small silhouette enters Subaru's view from above. A loveable girl with long, cream hair and an extravagant outfit—Beatrice.

Her fluttering dress looks out of place in the meadow as she presents Subaru with a towel. He accepts it and vigorously towels his head dry.

Subaru: "Ah, thanks. Was looking to cool down so this's perfect."

Beatrice: "I'll tell you that Petra cooled it before you go pinning this on me, in fact. Go thank her and she'll jump for joy, I suppose."

Subaru: "Petra's really considerate that way. But man, weird to see you out here, Beako. Something putting you in a different mood than usual?"

Subaru swings his arms as he sits up and slides over to Beatrice. She puts her hand to her hip, averting her gaze.

Beatrice: "Just whimsy, in fact."

Subaru: "Oh wow so it was whimsy huh."

Beatrice: "...And I wanted to personally see what you're like when you're putting in your best, I suppose."

While keeping her gaze averted, Beatrice easily unveils her hidden intentions. She's so much more honest now. Subaru feels keenly that time has earned him her trust. Beatrice looks like she wants to say something to Subaru as he grins, but,

Beatrice: "Now, this must involve more than just gallivanting about, in fact. What comes next, I suppose?"

Subaru: "I'll have you know this gallivanting is pretty taxing on its own, mademoiselle. While I cannot say whether I'll meet your expectations, I'm tackling the obstacle course of dreams next."

Beatrice: "...Ah, right, in fact. You mean the playground that Garfiel built in the forest, I suppose. 'Obstacle...?'"

Subaru: "Obstacle course. You don't have to force yourself to memorize it. Just ignore it."

Beatrice: "But Subaru, I want to understand every word you say, in fact."

The smooth line makes Subaru's cheeks relax even further. Beatrice looks puzzled by his reaction, before she realises what she just said and her expression instantly shifts. Her cheeks are adorably pink as berries.

Beatrice: "N-no, I didn't mean it like th... it just came out that way, I suppose."

Subaru: "Nonono, no worries, I know exactly what you meant. Everything's cool, I love you too."

Beatrice: "You know exactly nothing, in fact!"

Subaru chuckles as he jumps to his feet and scoops a sour-faced Beatrice into his arms. She looks displeased in his hold, but makes no complaints about being carried.

Beatrice: "Subaru, you reek of sweat, I suppose."

Subaru: "Breathe with your mouth then. Or just drain the mana directly."

Beatrice: "I'll sap you dry if that's what you're asking, in fact."

Subaru: "You're gonna be the one crying after that."

Beatrice: "A-as if, I suppose! Cease your nonsense, in fact!"

With Beatrice in his arms, Subaru breaks into a run. His breathing returns to normal during their banter. Beatrice makes a perfect weight for running from the track in the field to the obstacle course in the forest. Since she's far lighter than she looks. Basically a feather.

Subaru soars with her in hand, so light he may have grown wings.

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Their new mansion is surrounded in just as much green as the old one. Shrubs grow in abundance throughout the verdant mountains. Subaru feels the cool breeze wash over his bangs as he launches into a run.

Subaru: "Okay! All! Right!"

The forest is so lush that it drowns everything visible in green. Here, Subaru sprints forward and lightly puts his hand to a sideways log, defeating the obstacle with only a small hop and his momentum. 'Vaulting' proves an effective means of locomotion in places strewn with obstacles, or in urban areas with copious buildings. Parkour champions the technique: a sport that Subaru often watched on

television, all while amazed at the superhuman feats of the athletes. He never anticipated once that he would be training himself in this field.

Subaru: “Hup! Hah! Okay!”

The climbing apparatus is the star of this obstacle course that Subaru got Garfiel to construct. One large post composes the central pillar, while logs are assembled together in the space around it. It is essentially a classical jungle gym but with a slight avant-garde flair.

The thing looks a mess to climb even while taking it slowly. Subaru leaps onto it with all the momentum from his sprint, using the slight contact his fingers and toes purchase to shoot himself upwards, as if scaling a vertical wall. He races quicker than the eye can catch all to the top of the jungle gym. But there still more to this stunt, and more purpose to the gym.

Subaru: “Hup! Hup! Hup!”

Subaru reaches the slight footing at the peak before hopping to the uppermost point of the structure. He gazes down. Drop looks about six meters. Obviously, nothing is laid upon the wild, mossy ground. While the earth could have been soft once, it is now well-trodden and hard. Meaning the terrifying fall is definitely going to hurt. However,

Subaru: “—Hah!”

Without any hesitation, Subaru leaps down to the hard earth. Entirely undefended as he is, this jump may appear the worst of his usual recklessness. But Subaru unhesitatingly stretches out his legs and contacts the ground. Suffering the pain of the impact, he writhes in hideous agony—or not.

Subaru “—”

Subaru bends his legs and ducks to dissolve the impact, breaking into a forward roll to further avoid damage. One more roll, and another onto his hands and knees, before he darts to his feet, sustaining no injury at all. He merely brushes himself off, wiping the dirt from his track suit.

This is another parkour stunt: the land and roll. The stunt involves a landing combined with a roll to disperse the impact. It allows one to safely fall from moderate heights. While it's no big deal for superhumans, it is a question of life or death for ordinary human Subaru. Just practicing this technique should be broadening his horizons for what he can do.

Subaru: "So that's basically it. That improve your opinion of me?"

Subaru spreads his arms wide and looks to Beatrice, who watched the whole thing. Beatrice sits calmly on the stump for spectators, her eyes widening.

Beatrice: "Honestly, I am a little surprised, in fact. It did improve my opinion somewhat, I suppose."

Subaru: "You're back in love with me?"

Beatrice: "Subaru, recently, I've been having trouble deducing what you're trying to make me say, in fact!"

Subaru: "I only want to know you love me."

Beatrice's attitude already demonstrates it more than enough. Subaru gives the red-faced, indignant Beatrice a smile before glancing behind him.

As shown by that spot of parkour, part of the forest has been repurposed into an obstacle course for Subaru. No one's going to complain about it, since it's on Roswaal's land. But Subaru has to keep his honest urge to send Garfiel occupationally into construction, having seen how easily he cleared the timber and built this, to himself.

Garfiel is surprisingly nimble-fingered and attuned to detail. Perhaps his young, reckless talent will bloom in more fields in the future.

Subaru: "Anyway, guess we're calling it here for today."

Beatrice: "Huwah, I suppose."

Subaru catches the towel that Beatrice throws to him, and wipes off his sweat as he did in the field. Then he stretches his legs, waist, so on. The old world already drove the importance of limbering up into him, but now that he's seriously exercising his body, he truly does feel the effects.

He can't do the splits, but he has grown more flexible. He puts his foot to a nearby tree-trunk and stretches his body out. When he seats himself and spreads his legs, Beatrice walks over behind him and presses him down, letting him fall forward.

Subaru: "Done stretching. Alrighty, let's get ourselves back to the mansion and blob out."

Beatrice: "Indeed, in fact."

That comment would've earned him an insult before, but Beatrice accepts it without argument. She is both accustomed to how Subaru handles her, and to responding to it. Beatrice reaches out for him. Subaru accepts, and hand-in-hand, they exit the forest.

Subaru: "Beako, are you holding back on the mana drain? It feels like you're taking less than usual."

Beatrice: "I'm at least considerate enough to take care when you're exhausted, I suppose."

Subaru: "My my, how incredibly your opinion's changed in just these two short hours. But we don't want you to suffer from this, go back to the usual."

Subaru smiles wryly at Beatrice as he lifts their linked hands. She glances aside at him and sighs. Instantly, the usual sensation hits. Beatrice is directly entering the interior of Subaru's closed gate. This is the backdoor dedicated to extracting mana from Subaru, without passing through the gateway. Only she can use this backdoor, and it is Subaru's lifeline.

Subaru's abused gate has completely stopped functioning. But the loss of his gate does not stop his od from generating slight amounts of mana. Actually it is proceeding to generate more and more mana despite the lack of an outlet. If left like this, the mana inside Subaru will frenzy, and he'll pop like an overinflated frog—is how he understands it.

But leaving aside whether he'll actually explode, Beatrice tells him it's dangerous. Since the mana exchange required to preserve their contract simultaneously resolves the issue, Subaru and Beatrice absolutely must have physical contact at least once daily. Subaru is constantly stockpiling tiny loads of mana, and Beatrice needs mana to function. Both in terms of personality and constitution, their compatibility is excellent. Although,

Subaru: "If you could mana drain people outside your contractor, we could easily keep you in mega loli mode."

Beatrice: "Don't you go mulling over that, I suppose. I thought we came to an agreement about that ages ago, in fact. And you are amassing mana, even if it is in small amounts, I suppose. Even if it is tinier than a sparrow's teardrops."

Beatrice has an idiosyncrasy where she only mana drains her contractor. She had been constantly and randomly draining mana from people in Roswaal's mansion before, but apparently that involved using the Forbidden Archive as a mediator.

Beatrice: "The Forbidden Archive was arranged to mediate my mana intake, draining it from entities inside the mansion, in fact."

Was Beatrice's explanation. So the plan to drain mana from Garfiel, who looks to abound in the stuff, or from Emilia, initially struggling with her vast pool of it, is a wash. It's like someone's silently telling him: of course it wouldn't work out that perfectly.

But, while it disappointed him at first, he's glad for it now. Touching Beatrice is now a ritual representing more than just their relationship, and he likes feeling the truth of their connection. The relationship between Subaru the spiritualist and Beatrice the spirit differs somewhat from those of normal spiritualists. They need to recognize how their partnership represents them, by doing things like this.

Beatrice: "I'm done, in fact. This is enough to fill me for today, I suppose."

Subaru: "Oh, kay, haauh... nothing, to it... haa... haa..."

Beatrice: "I've already decided not to comment when it comes to your bravado, in fact."

Done with their daily ritual, Beatrice gazes flatly at Subaru. They step off the forest trail and onto paved ground, proving that they're close to the mansion. The path resembles the one from Arlam Village times, but now that it crosses through the nearby town of Costuul, it all feels far less remote.

Beatrice: "If I were going to pick, I'd say I preferred the quiet forest, I suppose."

Subaru: "I think noisy towns and quiet forests both have their appeal. I wouldn't pick one over the other. But since the Capital's the only big city I've seen yet, Costuul feels pretty novel."

Beatrice: "Hrmpf, in fact. Subaru, your ideas are mismatched with Betty's, I suppose." Beatrice pouts in clear dissatisfaction.

Subaru pulls her onward, chiding her with a "yeah yeah" as he heads towards the path to the mansion. When,

???: "—Subaru-sama! Beatrice-chan!"

Someone shouts their names, and the two of them look up. They find a girl running towards them from the road to the mansion. Her face and voice are familiar, and her adorable expression brightens upon sighting Subaru and Beatrice. Her auburn, shoulder-length hair flutters in the wind. The catlike roundness of her eyes give her expressive face even more charm. Anyone would catch themselves smiling at her friendly, lovable attitude.

A sweet wildflower, out of anyone's reach. That would be a good descriptor for Petra Leyte.

Petra: "I was just leaving to go fetch you two. Thank goodness we didn't miss each other."

Says Petra after running up to them, out of breath with her hand to her chest. Subaru gives Petra, who had grown to his chest, a pat on the head in response.

Subaru: "What's the rush? We weren't gonna escape. Did you just get those baked tarts at the perfect temperature for us or something?"

Beatrice: "Then it's sensible that she would make haste, in fact. Since it's incredibly important, I suppose."

Petra: "No! That's so not it! You guys are being jerks!"

Petra puffs out her cheeks as Beatrice nods solemnly, and goes to remove Subaru's hand from her head. But once her hands clasp his own, she stops. She keeps that hold on Subaru's hand, cheeks flushed red as she continues,

Petra: "Leaving the tarts aside for the moment, it's something else. The mansion has received a guest. Emilia-sama said to go and fetch you, and..."

Subaru: "Wait, Petra. Just stop there. I'm getting a terrible feeling about this."

Petra: "Huh?"

Clearly wary, Subaru cuts Petra off. She looks surprised at this, but Beatrice doesn't. Well yeah. Beatrice has witnessed the same things that Subaru has, considering they've been together ever since moving to the new mansion. Quite a few things have happened between now and the day they left SANCTUARY.

Subaru: "And the conversation pattern goes exactly the same. When you show up to fetch me, or Frederica does, or sometimes Otto or Garfiel do, it always means trouble. I've learned that much."

Beatrice: "A guest suddenly appears while Subaru is out... indeed, this absolutely is the pattern bespeaking misfortune, I suppose."

Petra: "B-Beatrice-chan, you're using words that Subaru-sama does...! Subaru-sama, stop teaching her weird things!"

Subaru: "The mansion's consensus is that Beako gets to do what she wants. But anyway, the guest. Petra, me and Beatrice are absent due to stomach-ache."

Petra: “No! You! Don’t! Emilia-sama will be furious! And I have no reason to disobey her. Come on, this way!”

Petra used to be such a Subaru adherent, but living here has led her to oppose him when needed.

Her hands grab Subaru’s arm and she pulls him along, putting in her greatest effort to drag him away. As she does, Subaru glances to Beatrice, her hand in his.

Subaru: “Beako.”

Beatrice: “Enjoy your day, in fact.”

Subaru: “You’re coming too!”

Beatrice: “Ghhah, I suppose!”

It starts as a plea for help, and instantly transforms into embroilment. Beatrice quickly attempts to shake him off, but Subaru keeps a tight grip on her left hand. And her right hand is restrained by Petra, leaving her doubly without an escape. With Subaru refusing Beatrice’s escape, and Petra refusing Subaru’s escape, the trio venture along in their nonsense arrangement to the mansion.

Subaru: “I know it’s too late to kick the visitor out... but that just makes me wish we’d been told sooner.”

Petra: “You mean, to have a messenger on messengers? But then we won’t know far we need to go out to anticipate them beforehand. That much is clear.”

Subaru: “I’m just saying it’d be nice for everyone’s mental health and relations if we did something about that. Anyway, do you know who today’s visitor is, Petra?”

The one receiving the guest is going to be Petra, Frederica, or Ram. One of the three. Since Petra is out here fetching Subaru, one of the other two will be dealing with the guest.

Petra: “Umm, well, not really...”

Subaru: "You don't know? Maybe you didn't see their crest, but you'd have to've seen the messenger. And even if you didn't I'm sure they would've told you something when they told you to fetch us..."

Petra: "They were in an incredible rush, saying that the guest was extremely important. But they didn't look important."

Subaru: "You can't judge much off of people's appearances. Sometimes you get little girls with powerful drills who also command dark powers. Though they may seem a mere dress-wearing loli, in truth they preside over—"

Beatrice: "Shut it, I suppose!"

Beatrice is the one calling off the jokes, leaving Subaru silent. Petra looks at the silenced Subaru, still worried.

Petra: "I don't judge people based on their appearances anymore either."

Subaru: "That's good, Petra. Dunno what happened to change it but it was important you did."

Petra: "I thought the new nasty-eyed choresman who came to the village was a weirdo... but he really wasn't."

Subaru: "It boomeranged!"

Stricken somewhere that he didn't expect, Subaru tilts his head at Petra. Never mind her first impressions of him, the stuff she mentioned earlier is important. Petra doesn't judge people by their appearance, but she still thought this visitor was odd.

Subaru: "So what're they like?"

Petra: "I guess... a kitty?"

Subaru: "A kitty?"

The image of a grey cat spirit, long tail wagging, comes to mind at the word 'kitty'. Subaru's feelings for him are complex, and there are things they must talk about upon his eventual return.

Subaru: "Gotta ask him for his daughter."

Beatrice: "I thought of Bubby too, but Petra's surely seen him before, I suppose. So it can't be him, in fact. Petra, what kind of kitty was it, I suppose?"

Petra: "It's so cute that you're calling them a kitty too, Beatrice-chan."

Beatrice: "Pet! Ra!"

Says Beatrice indignantly to a teasing Petra. Petra gives an easy, "Sorry, sorry," and looks up in thought.

Petra: "I guess they weren't really a kitty. I haven't really seen one before, but I suppose they were a catfolk demihuman. I always think of Big Bro Garfiel when I think of demihumans though."

Subaru: "Garf's mixed race, and he doesn't have any blatantly obvious demihuman traits. Best you can manage on closer inspection is how intense his eyes are."

And I guess you could mention his sharp canines. According to Garfiel, his canines will always keep growing, much like a rodent's incisors, and he needs to chew on hard objects to maintain their length and sharpness. It's not uncommon for Ram or Frederica to flip out at him after catching him chewing on the mansion's banisters.

Subaru: "So a demihuman who looks demihuman has arrived. If they're catfolk then they're probably a beastman, and I do know a couple of those."

It's a given in the Capital, but Costuul also has many beastfolk demihumans. A long period of time has dissolved the discrimination against demihumans in the domain of Roswaal the Demihuman Fancier. Making this area a nicer region for demihumans to live in, or so says the local bunny-eared bartender. But Petra, who spends her time working in the mansion and goes to Arlam Village rather than Costuul on her days off, naturally is less familiar with them.

Petra: "I get it. Could you show me around Costuul on my next day off, then?"

Subaru: "Yeah, sure. I'm sure you'll get to go there for shopping and stuff too, and you wanna be making as many friends as you can."

Subaru gives that poorly-thought promise, and Petra pumps her fist. Beatrice only sighs and smiles wryly at Subaru.

Subaru: "Aaaand we're here. Back at our beloved abode."

The gates come into view during their conversation, and Subaru lifts his hands, linked as they are with the girls'. He ignores their protests as the gesture forces them to stretch, correcting his own posture and looking at the mansion.

This is the new mansion replacing the old, burnt one. Its exterior gives the same western feel that the previous did, and is similarly designed. There is space between the front gates and the doorway, with garden lawns flanking the gravel path. On the right side is a fountain, while the left continues into a path to the side end of the mansion, where carriages are parked, that has stables for earth dragons. The fountain comes with an installation of colorful flowers, and at a fixed time daily, it sprinkles them with water. One section of the flowerbed holds Subaru and Petra's vegetable garden, letting them harvest fresh vegetables in-season. It's quite well-praised when the crop is bountiful. The group pass through the front garden and the gravel path, leading them to large double-doors. The knocker shares the shape of the Mathers family crest, using the raptor motif, which indeed makes this feel like the primary estate of the Mathers.

Subaru: "I noticed an unfamiliar carriage over by the stables. Guess it's the visitor's."

Petra: "The carriage is a dragon carriage, but it wasn't being pulled by anything like Patrasche-chan. It wasn't a dragon, it was more like a big dog."

Subaru: "Pulled by a big dog... actually, maybe it's..."

Thinking back on his internal bestiary, Subaru gets a clue of the visitor's identity. But before he can reach a definite answer, the solution ends up finding him. Which is to say,

???: "Oh! Hullo mister, it's been foooreeeveeer! Have you been well!?"

A stupidly cheerful, high-pitched voice comes hurtling at Subaru, startling him as he opens the door. Petra gives a wry smile, and Beatrice squeezes Subaru's hand slightly. With these reactions in the corner of his eye, he looks ahead at the figure bounding toward him. They are small. They are shorter than Petra, but a little taller than Beatrice. Meaning that they're a child's height, but this may be as tall as she'll ever get. Her body is covered in short, orange fur, and her alert cat ears are adorable. Her eyes abound with curiosity and her loud mouth is curved mischievously. Her long, orange braid is very feminine, and her perfectly-fit white robe makes her all the more cute.

She's effectively a bipedal kitten, and in some sense, a cat-lover's dream. A catfolk—and one who Subaru knows.

Subaru: "Mimi! It's been ages. You're as full of energy as always!"

Mimi: "Mhm! Yup! I'm super duper full of energy! You get it, mister! And I even grew bigger and now I'm an adult. Hmhmhm!"

Mimi puts her hand to her hip, smirking boastfully as her tail sways to and fro. She just looks like a lively, energetic girl, but actually she is a vice-chair of the beastman mercenary company Iron Fang, with considerable fighting prowess and many other surprises. She once helped Subaru in fighting the White Whale and Petelgeuse, and shares his tendency to be cloyingly friendly and familiar with anyone, which perhaps makes her the best friend he unaffectedly made during the whole affair. Incidentally Iron Fang is basically the private army of Emilia's political opponent Anastasia Hoshin, so they are an enemy going by that. But being hostile towards Mimi is entirely tasteless.

Subaru: "Thanks for coming all the way. Right, introductions. This cute maid here is Petra. She's an upcoming almighty maid who works in our mansion. And this blatantly wary loli is Beatrice."

Mimi: "Okey! I got it! The maid who's Petras and your baby! Got it! I won't forget it!"

Beatrice: “I-I feel she’s remembering me by hideously improper means, in fact...!”

Beatrice is trembling, hiding behind Subaru’s back. It seems she’s scared of Mimi and how unforgivingly forward she is. Mimi mercilessly dives into her,

Mimi: “What? You’ll never be big like me if you shrink up like that! Come on, get out here, out you get!”

Beatrice: “Wh, no, wa, stop, I suppose! Betty doesn’t mind being small, and you’re too small to be saying this anyway, in fact!”

Mimi: “Hmhm! Listen to the rookie. I’m huge inside, so my outsides’re gonna catch up to me before long! The Boss said so!”

Beatrice: “It’s nonsense, I suppose!”

Mimi pulls Beatrice to the front, manhandling her entirely. Beatrice looks to Subaru for rescue, but he enjoys watching her being people-shy while also making friends, and simply watches over her with a fatherly look.

Petra: “Um, Subaru-sama. Beatrice-chan is looking to you in sheer terror.”

Subaru: “People mature by battling their weaknesses. Beako is a little too averse to new things, so it’s best she start developing that challenger’s mentality now. Let us watch her in silence, mom.”

Petra: “M-mom... y-yes, let’s.”

Subaru senses his mistake as he sees Petra blush and fall silent. But correcting it would be a mess so he decides to go with it. He turns his attention to Mimi, dancing circles around the room with a tight grip on Beatrice’ hands.

Subaru: “So if you’re here, then are the others... are your brothers or Ricardo with you? Also I’d really rather goddamn Julius not show up without booking in first.”

Anastasia's Knight, Julius Juukulius, has a very complicated relationship with Subaru. Subaru doubts he can be sincere with him even when seeing him face-to-face. Subaru knows he has some trouble dealing with Anastasia, but she's still preferable to Julius. But Mimi casts aside Subaru's worries with a shake of her head.

Mimi: "Nope. Not Hetaro or Tivey or the Boss or Julius or my Lady are here! It's just me! I'm here all on my own! Hmhm!"

Subaru: "That's impressive and all, but... what are you here for, then?"

Mimi: "Ummm, uhhh, oh right!"

Mimi tilts her head, before pouncing onto Beatrice. Heedless of Beatrice as she hurries to support her, Mimi gives a sunny smile,

Mimi: "I'm inviting you to a party! My Lady said let's all hang out! So here I am to invite you! I'm super excited! Super! Excited!"

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Chapter 2 - Pedigree of The Poseur



Subaru tilts his head, Mimi merrily waving her arms as she takes the lead. 'Party' is a pretty extravagant word, and it's coming out of nowhere.

Subaru: 「A party invite... from Anastasia-san? But that's still like, what happened? Is there something to celebrate?」

Mimi: 「Celebrate? Celebritty? Whatever! Who cares, it'll be so much fun eating food and getting drunk! So much! Fun!」

Subaru: 「You're clearly too young to be drinking.」

Mimi: 「Heeheehee. I'm an adult as of this year! The Boss says I can drink! But my Lady says I can't.」

Mimi puffs out her chest, and the belled ornaments in her hair chime. Subaru's eyes shoot open in shock,

Subaru: 「What, you're allowed to drink, then you're fully grown!? No way. How old are you!」

Mimi: 「I just turned fifteen! So I'm an adulty adult. I'm a big girl!」

Subaru: 「Big girls don't talk like they're still in grade school! But anyway...」

Having regained some composure, Subaru puts his hand to his chest as he recognizes the differences in adulthood between this world and the old one. It's essentially the same as genpuku. The age of adulthood is about fifteen in this world, and that's when it's legal to drink and smoke.

Subaru: 「...would be the right way to consider it, Petra?」

Petra: 「Yes, that's right. But going into more detail, boys leave their homes and find work at fifteen, while some girls start getting married around then. If they don't get married, it's also when they'll usually start working. Like me.」

Subaru: 「Which means you left your home pretty early. You're a feisty girl, you.」

Petra: 「Heehee, I'm feis... I don't think that was a compliment.」

Petra glares at Subaru, who heads over to an exhausted Beatrice. Mimi has released her, and her pigtails are in some disarray. She looks bitterly up at Subaru.

Beatrice: 「After participating in your training and being manhandled by this cat, Betty is exhausted, I suppose... Subaru, carry me, in fact.」

Subaru: 「Participating? All you did was watch...」

Beatrice spreads her arms out, reaching for Subaru, and he scoops her into his arms. He's more muscular than he used to be, and since she's light as a feather, the weight doesn't bother him at all. Though, he does sort of look like a dad cradling his daughter now, which is not ideal.

Mimi: 「Oooh! You're holding the baby! That's awesome! Hold me too! Me too!」

Subaru: 「Your Boss'd be another story, but I physically can't do it. Request denied.」

Mimi: 「What! That's no fair! No fair! Unfair! Unfair!」

Mimi scampers around Subaru as he holds Beatrice. For some reason Beatrice smiles victoriously. Eventually Mimi grabs onto Subaru's track suit,

Mimi: 「Okey then! I'll just climb up!」

Subaru: 「Idiot! Stop, you'll topple me over. Petra help me stop he—what're you doing?」

Petra: 「Ah, erm, I'm not jealous or anything. I'm not. But would you mind if I climbed you, Subaru-sama?」

Subaru: 「Um yes!?!」

Subaru holds a little girl, with a kitten girl and a maid girl pursuing him incessantly. The shenanigans in the foyer continue without resolution. When,

???: 「—I thought you were taking forever to return, and here you are monkeying about in the foyer.」

The frigid voice makes Subaru and Petra stand up straight. Mimi's eyes sparkle with curiosity for the new speaker, while Beatrice sighs.

The voice is coming from the stairway overlooking the foyer. Subaru glances up to find a girl standing there, where she can see the four of them. She has pink hair, and wears a short-cut maid outfit. Her cerise eyes look apathetic, and though she is cute, there is nothing cuddly about her. This is Petra's colleague, Ram, the head of the maids in the mansion.

She gazes coldly at Subaru and snorts a breathy, 「Ha.」

Ram: 「Filthy.」

Subaru: 「You're the filthy one for reaching that conclusion! Maybe you can argue about how sound this is, but it's still a heartwarming scene!」

Ram: 「You always bend reality to suit your purposes. But, Barusu, you mustn't forget. —I judge only by what I've seen.」

Subaru: 「Maybe you could take off your weird filter before you start looking please?」

Ram glances at him disinterestedly, apparently unwilling to hear him out. She ignores the stunned Subaru and looks over at Petra, who instantly starts to quake.

Ram: 「Petra. I told you to drag Barusu here by the neck if you had to. Would you like to explain why you are playing with him in the foyer?」

Petra: 「I-I'm sorry, Sister Ram.」

Ram: 「It seems you weren't listening, Petra. I believe I asked, why are you dawdling here in the foyer?」

Subaru: 「Stop acting like the sister from hell. It was just me screwing around. Petra's not to blame.」

Ram: 「Of course she's to blame. I'll pummel you, Barusu.」

Subaru: 「She's only a little to blame!」

Pleased with that concession, Ram jerks her chin to the room behind her.

Ram: 「You mustn't keep Emilia-sama waiting. Barusu, to the upstairs parlour. Petra, the dining room. Beatrice-sama, accompany Barusu.」

Beatrice: 「Of course, I suppose.」

Mimi: 「What about me? Come on, what about me?」

Petra regretfully lets go of Subaru's sleeve, but he remains caught in the energetic catgirl's firm grip. Ram brushes aside her hair, caught on her cheek.

Ram: 「I ask you accompany Barusu to the parlour, dear guest. I'm afraid that your companion is unsettled by your absence.」

Mimi: 「Hokay. Guess I gotta go back then. I done a no do.」

Even Ram is polite when receiving guests. Mimi laughs boisterously in reply, but Subaru catches something that he can't ignore.

Subaru: 「Companion? But I thought you said you were alone?」

Mimi: 「I did, and I am. Not Hetaro or Tivey or the Boss or Julius or my Lady are here. But Joshua's here. I'm alone being Joshua's boddigar, boddigar?」

Subaru: 「Bodyguard?」

Mimi: 「Yes! Boddygard!」

Mimi puffs out her chest, smirking. Subaru pats her head before looking back up at Ram.

Subaru: 「I'm sorry. I was so sure it was only Mimi. I didn't realise I was making someone wait.」

Ram: 「So it seems. It's fine, but do hurry. Emilia-sama's patience will tire before long.」

Subaru: 「Can't have that. Okay, see you later Petra. Let's go, Mimi.」

Mimi: 「Whoo!」

Who is this mysterious Joshua?

He must be someone from Anastasia's faction who Subaru doesn't know. If they're sending him as a messenger, and appointing Mimi as his bodyguard, he must have suitable rank. He could have an important post if Mimi refers to him without an honourific, but then again considering how indiscriminately friendly Mimi is, it doesn't exactly indicate much.

Petra: 「I'll bake the tarts once everything has settled down. You will taste them, won't you, Subaru-sama?」

Whispers Petra before darting out of the scene. Frederica must be waiting for her in the dining room. Subaru doesn't know whether they'll serve food in the parlour, but either way, it seems like it's going to be a while before he gets to eat Petra's tarts.

Subaru: 「Who else is in the parlour with Emilia-tan?」

Ram: 「Roswaal-sama has not returned yet, which leaves her with Otto and Garf. If the visitor is an assassin in disguise, Garf will be enough to manage them.」

Subaru: 「Doubt we need to be so worried about direct attacks. I already told Emilia-tan to use Otto as a human shield.」

Ram: 「If I ever feel in danger, that's what I'll do too.」

There are no words for how they treat Otto. Well actually no there are. Either way, if those three are the ones in the parlour, Otto must be stuck pulling more than his weight. Should they neglect to lessen the strain upon him swiftly, they are liable to lose their precious Internal Affairs Minister.

Beatrice: 「He never gets his reward, I suppose. I don't understand why he's even friends with you, in fact.」

Subaru: 「It might be invisible to others, but me and Otto are tied together with a solid bond of masculine friendship. Rock solid.」

Mimi: 「Ooh! Rocka solid!」

Ram's sigh guides the three up to the parlour: the very first room after scaling the foyer staircase. Ram knocks on the door, which then opens from inside. The face that peeks out belongs to,

Garfiel: 「There yer are, Captain. Yer were takin' so long I was thinkin' I'd haveta go'n get ya.」

Subaru: 「It would've been funny if you all said you were leaving to look for me and left Otto there on his own.」

Garfiel: 「Crap, it wouldda. Now'm imaginin' him panicking everywhere n' freakin' out.」

Garfiel, with his short blond hair, sharp fangs, and characteristic forehead scar, shares a mischievous grin with Subaru. He jerks his chin, his arms crossed, apparently keeping himself posted at the door.

Garfiel: 「Get in here. Th'guest's sayin' y'gotta be here if we're gonna talk. Otto n' Emilia-sama were tryin' t'give 'im a welcome, but it all juss looked like a comedy.」

Subaru: 「Honestly I'd want to see that.」

Ram: 「Cease this foolishness and enter the room. We're already delayed.」

Subaru: 「Guh」

Ram drives her foot into the small of Subaru's back, and he goes stumbling into the room. His odd posture as he bursts into the scene earns him stares from those in the parlour. The predominant emotions are relief, exasperation, and confusion, respectively.

Subaru suppresses his urge to make excuses to the relieved and exasperated parties about his tardiness, and turns to face the confused individual.

???: 「—」

The prim, handsome man gazes back at Subaru. A well-tailored outfit garbs his slender frame, and his long violet hair is tied in a ponytail. He exerts a scholarly air, and his monocle only supports that impression. His yellow eyes are rather sharp, and between that and his pout at he peers at Subaru's unfamiliar face, he looks displeased. Neither party makes the best first impression on the other.

Man: 「And this would be...?」

The visitor is the one to speak first. He looks away from Subaru, and to the two people seated before him. A beautiful girl, with silver hair flowing down her back, is the one to nod and answer him.

Emilia: 「Right. I apologize that he arrived late. —This is my Knight, Natsuki Subaru.」

A tingle shoots down Subaru's spine. The words 'My Knight' are simply so wonderful that they captivate him every time.

Man: 「M-May I point out that he seems, ah, enraptured...?」

Beatrice: 「Subaru. Stop making funny faces, I suppose. He's going to think... huh? Erm this feels quite forceful, in fact. No, you're, holding too tigh—Suba—Subaru! Ow! Ouch, I suppose!」

Subaru: 「—Aah! Ahh, sorry. Was tripping.」

He had almost unwittingly squeezed Beatrice to death to distract himself from his feelings. A Beako Hug or also a bear hug. That's what it was. Anyway. The guest looks on skeptically as Subaru clears his throat and puts down Beatrice.

Subaru: 「As stated a moment previously, I am Natsuki Subaru. I serve as Knight to Emilia-sama, who makes her presence before you. It pleases me to make your acquaintance.」

Man: 「—」

The track suit makes it a little slovenly, but his manners align perfectly with courtly etiquette. He used to think cynically of the pretentious attitudes of knights, but now that he's trying it himself, he finds it works surprisingly well for him. It's not a question of whether it suits him or not. It's that he feels himself being more of a knight. The pressure, knowing that one misstep will leave him a laughingstock, gives the rigid seriousness meaning. Under the tutelage of Garfiel, with his extensive knowledge as a Knight Fanatic, Subaru has fostered etiquette that disgraces him not as a knight.

Subaru glances to the door to find Garfiel watching him, satisfied. Garfiel notices Subaru's glance and flips him the bird. Subaru taught him the gesture, but he's using it wrong. While he may be a good teacher, Garfiel is a failure of a student.

Man: 「You humble me. I am... I myself am Joshua Juukulius , visiting you as an envoy on behalf of Anastasia Hoshin-sama.」

Subaru: 「Then you would be Joshua-san. What a fine name. Still, I must apologize for my poor punctuality. Allow me to—Juukulius?」

Halfway through the diplomatic fineries, Subaru finds himself tilting his head at the familiar word. Joshua nods with a, 「Yes,」 and adding onto that,

Emilia: 「That's right, Subaru. Joshua is Julius's little brother. And they're both supporting Anastasia together, it's sooo sweet.」

Laughs the girl, her chaste demeanour gone, and her speech far more casual. Her face as she looks at Subaru is her true face, naturally. Subaru sighs, staring impolitely at Joshua as he seats himself opposite him. As he seats himself beside Emilia, like it's natural.

Subaru: 「What, so he's Julius's brother. Actually now that you mention it they are pretty alike. You have that disdainful... or not, intense, gaze of his. Or that mocking... or not, elegant, smile of his. Or that hellish... or not, pretty, hair colour of his.」

Otto: 「If you need force it every time then would you care to refrain from commenting!？」

Says Otto, unable to hide his sweat. He's the Head Minister of the Emilia Faction's Internal Affairs, or more rather he's the only one capable of being said minister so that's why he has the title. But diplomacy terrifies him immensely.

Subaru: 「Did you lose weight?」

Otto: 「Life here is simply too exhilarating, yes! When things in this exact vein keep happening in constant succession, the mental fatigue leaves me too exhausted to exercise, and thus skeletal! Skeletal!」

Mimi: 「Skellytal! Skellytal!」

Cheers Mimi, unintentionally aggravating Otto further. It looks like the only thing keeping Otto quiet is the fact that Mimi is the guest's companion. She disregards him entirely as she scampers over and leaps onto the seat, beside Joshua. Beatrice also looks at the seats. But Subaru, Emilia, and Otto are fully occupying the seat opposite Joshua and Mimi. They could scooch together to open room for Beatrice, but it would look lame. And so Beatrice promptly seats herself on Subaru's lap. Subaru naturally loops his hands around Beatrice's waist, making sure she won't fall.

Subaru: 「Now, finally getting to the main topic...」

Joshua: 「P-Please wait! Who is this girl?」

And Joshua winds up too flustered to talk. He points at Beatrice, sitting on Subaru's lap, and leans forward so forcefully that his monocle slips. Apparently he lacks Julius's composure. Subaru decides that he prefers this to Julius, while Mimi instead speaks up.

Mimi: 「Geez, you're so behind, Joshua. This is Beako, she's Subaru's baby. It's so obvious. And beside him's the mommy, and beside her's the housekeeper?」

Otto: 「Honestly I am far too unconfident about what my current standing is to be hearing that I'm the housekeeper so would you please care to stop?!」

Mimi: 「Housekeeper! Housekeeper! Wow! It's like a witchbeast name!」

Otto's pleas are entirely ineffective on Mimi, the embodiment of dumb innocence. Nobody bothers to react to Otto, who slumps his shoulders. Subaru puts his hand on Beatrice's head.

Subaru: 「Sorry for not introducing her. We're just so used to sitting like this that I completely forgot to explain.」

Emilia: 「Otto-kun forgot to mention it too. And it caught me unawares as well.」

Subaru: 「Who says caught me unawares anymore?」

It's Emilia's usual phrasing, but Subaru agrees with the sentiment. And Otto must be getting so accustomed to this life that he's forgetting to interject with common sense. It's a good problem to have.

Subaru: 「This is Beatrice. Mimi's right, she's the child of myself and Emilia-sama.」

Joshua: 「What!？」

Joshua, aghast.

Emilia: 「Geez. No she's not, Subaru. Look at how you shocked Joshua. I know we kissed but you can't make babies by kissing. I've been studying.」

Subaru: 「Ah, sorry, Emilia-tan. I think some private stuff just got thrown right into the open. It was my bad so I'll just introduce her normally.」

Beatrice: 「This is what you get for using me for tomfoolery, in fact. You best regret it, I suppose.」

Subaru forces a smile at Emilia and Beatrice. Emilia's misunderstandings about making babies have only been rectified when it comes to 'making babies by kissing'. Subaru couldn't go any further into the topic, and, anticipating the shock the subject would give Emilia, the faction's women decided to wait until she's more mentally mature. Basically everyone is overprotective.

Joshua: 「Ehm... so, Miss Beatrice's true station would be...?」

Joshua fixes his monocle, overwhelmed with his initiation to Roswaal Mansion and its people. But shouldn't the unruliness of everyone here be pretty close to Anastasia's Faction, which has Iron Fang?

Subaru: 「I'm sorry that the conversation keeps slipping. Beatrice may look like an ordinary, lovable little girl, but she is actually my contracted spirit. She is a loligranny.」

Beatrice: 「Exactly, I'm a spirit, in fact. And I know that you're mocking me with that word 'loligranny', I suppose.」

Beatrice brushes Subaru's hand aside and digs her head into the underside of his chin. She has grown rather proficient in Subaruese, making verbal gaffes generally impermissible. 'Loligranny' is just a combination of 'granny' and 'loli', a word that he has already explained to her, so of course she saw through this one.

Joshua's reaction to Subaru and Beatrice's heartwarming exchange is extreme. His prudish but charming face falls frigid.

Joshua: 「—I see. She's a spirit.」

Nobody who catches his whisper can decode his sentiment. It's not that he's hiding his emotions. It's the opposite. The emotion is so convoluted and complex that it's impossible to tell what lies at its core. But everyone can see that it was not a very friendly statement.

Garfiel: 「Hey, guest. You got a problem with our Captain havin' a spirit with him?」

Garfiel has inherited Subaru's old role. Which is, practising disrespect to anyone. While everyone else deliberates on how to address the problem, he fearlessly dives right in. Joshua promptly shakes his head,

Joshua: 「No. It's nothing important. Just, it struck me that Natsuki-dono is a Spirit Knight. As I myself am sure you already know, my brother is a Spirit Knight. The title is so rare that you could call him the only holder in the nation.」

Subaru: 「Yeah, I know. When we were fighting the Witch Cult, he... um, he. He really hel... h-hel—ghk. Helped me, out a... lot, so...」

Otto: 「Are you truly so reluctant to accept that he saved you!?!」

No. But thinking back on his battles with Julius makes him feel awkward about what he's saying, and makes the old wounds from his beatdown sting.

Beatrice: 「I heard that there was another knight who uses spirits, in fact. What an odd turn of fate for it to be your brother, I suppose.」

Joshua: 「What do you mean by 'odd turn of fate'. Spirit.」

Beatrice: 「It's obvious what I mean, in fact. Precursors are destined to be excelled, I suppose. His best place is as an ornament on the glorious road that Subaru and I—nhaaha!」

Subaru: 「Don't pick fights with people we just met. And I've got nothing on Julius. I'm never gonna beat him in what he does. I don't beat people who're good at puzzles by challenging them to puzzles, I beat them by challenging them to Mario Kart.」

Subaru musses Beatrice's hair and bows his head to Joshua. While pushing Beatrice's head into a bow as well.

Subaru: 「I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to make a fool of your brother. Or really, I know that I'm less capable than him. This spirit here is just being a braggart.」

Joshua: 「An admirable, and correct judgement. When comparing yourself to my brother, it's natural to recognize your inferiority.」

Subaru: 「Uh?」

Subaru was looking to make a mature compromise, but Joshua's abrupt arrogance makes things precarious again. Heedless of Subaru as he furrows his brows in confusion, Joshua catches the light on his monocle,

Joshua: 「Yes. My brother is amazing. At the age of twenty is the second most capable of the Imperial Knights, the finest Order of Knights of the Kingdom. His service to Anastasia-sama currently distances him from his station as an Imperial Knight, but once her wishes are fulfilled he will be secured a place as Head of the Imperial Knights. He has a close, amiable relationship with the Sword Saint Reinhardt, and holds himself impeccably in both public and private contexts. He is strict on himself and others, disciplined, ambitious, always seeking improvement. His beautiful looks enrapture scores of women, and his personality is accordingly excellent. Yes. My brother is amazing. You're nothing compared to him.」

Subaru: 「...uh.」

Joshua speaks with passion, his face red as he goes on and on and on. Subaru has no reply, and Beatrice recoils too. Garfiel and Otto stay silent, unsure whether this could get deadly, and Mimi is too busy stuffing her cheeks with snacks to help him out of this. There is only one person here who can counter Joshua's screed.

Emilia: 「Heehee. Joshua, you love your brother Julius sooo much.」

In this room exists an angel who will take anything positively. Her words make Joshua realise what he just said, and his face reddens in shame rather than excitement. He clears his throat, managing to compose himself.

Joshua: 「M-My apologies. I may have fired myself up. I have some difficulty restraining myself when it comes to my family.」

Emilia: 「No, it's okay. I want to hear you talk about Julius more. I've only ever seen Julius while in the Capital here and there, so there's lots more I want to know about him.」

Joshua: 「R-Really! Well, there are several memories of me and him that—」

Subaru: 「How about we save those for another occasion, and finally get to the point!? How does that sound, Otto! Garfiel!」

Both: 「Huh!？」

Subaru cuts in, forcing the other two into the conversation while they pleadingly try to stay out of it. But they do promptly nod in agreement. Joshua then notices that the conversation has strayed incredibly far, and,

Joshua: 「T-Then, we will save the stories of my brother's magnificence for another time. I must... I myself must also fulfil my duties and reconvene with Anastasia-sama shortly.」

Emilia: 「Right. I'm sooo excited for them. So, it really took us a long time to finally get here... but what is this visit all about?」

Joshua's awkwardness lingers as he feigns calm, while Emilia easily enters Royal Selection Candidate Mode. The tone of their voices drop, bringing a tenseness to the parlour. Emilia can establish tension like this because she has come to recognize her place as a budding politician.

Joshua: 「—I speak to Emilia-sama on the behalf my master, Anastasia Hoshin-sama.」

The prickly tension makes Joshua's expression regain its former warmth. He puts his hand in his pocket, withdraws a letter, and sets it on the table. He opens it. Looks down at the letters and their black ink.

Joshua: 「Anastasia-sama wishes to invite yourself and all of your associates to the city of Pristella.」

Emilia: 「An invitation to Pristella City... Pristella is the Watergate City, yes? The big city near the border between the Kingdom of Lugnica and the Kararagi City-States.」

Joshua: 「You are correct. Anastasia-sama is presently sojourning there, rather than the Capital... and she wishes to invite you.」

Joshua quietly lowers his head. Emilia looks away from him and glances to Subaru. Obviously, this gaze means, 「what are your thoughts?」

Subaru feels similarly to Emilia about the whole thing. Everyone knows that Anastasia is staying in a mansion in the Capital's noble district while she's in Lugnica. When Mimi mentioned an invitation to a party, Subaru was certain it would be to that mansion.

Joshua: 「Pristella is a scenic place. The city is distinctive in itself, and makes for a popular tourist destination. Anastasia-sama finds herself delighted and at ease there.」

Subaru: 「It'd be great if you were just showing us a nice place, but... you're not, are you? Emilia and Anastasia aren't friends.」

If Subaru remembers this right, then Anastasia was particularly harsh on Emilia during the dialogues in the Palace. The candidates most unsparing toward Emilia were her and Priscilla. Crusch is simply not racist, and Felt is in Emilia's debt. So, while Anastasia did help during the White Whale and Witch Cult fights, Subaru's personal opinion of Anastasia is not very good.

So he doubts that this invitation is anything so kind-spirited. As if supporting Subaru's doubts, a grin etches itself over Joshua's face. And,

Joshua: 「Anastasia-sama invites you out of her beneficence. She has noticed the valuable object you are searching for in Pristella.」

Emilia: 「What I'm searching for?」

The instant that Emilia shows her interest, Otto's expression screams: He got her! This tells Subaru that Joshua snatched away predominance before they could stop it, but he still cannot see the crux of this deal.

In that delay, the opponent takes full control of the conversation. Grinning, Joshua speaks on:

Joshua: 「—In Pristella City there is a shop selling spellstones, in which slumbers the high-grade colourless stones that you desire. I believe that you are currently seeking an anchor for the Great Spirit?」

—The second that Joshua gains dominance, the Emilia Faction are fated to leave for Pristella.

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Chapter 3 - Each Gives Perspective



Emilia: 「It wasn't fair to Otto-kun that we decided so much on our own.」

After speaking with Joshua and returning to her room, Emilia speaks as she offers Subaru a seat. Subaru seats himself there and chuckles,

Subaru: 「Leaving Otto's panic aside as a legend for future generations, I basically always support your ideas, Emilia-tan. But if I'm gonna mention something to be worried about, it'd have to be the fact that they're ready and waiting for us.」

Emilia: 「I don't think Anastasia would take risks anyway, if she's sending messengers. Mimi-chan may've been there, but Joshua-kun still took control when I tried to take control.」

Subaru: 「She recognizes you as an opponent if she's sending her Knight's family as her messenger. I always wondered why in Sengoku dramas, when they send important people as messengers, they don't just kill them. But turns out there's all this background stuff. Didn't think I'd be learning that by experience.」

It's a question of trust between the parties and the people. If the people learn that the rulers acted unjustly, it harms the ruler's standing. And each faction faces too many enemies to be acting disgracefully. Otherwise, since a group faces more clandestine enemies the larger it grows, it's simple logic to be careful when challenging influential people.

—The meeting with Joshua Juukulius is over, and night has fallen upon the new Roswaal Mansion.

Since it would be awful to send them back on the same day they arrived, they offered to let Joshua and Mimi stay the night, and accepted the invitation to Pristella City. Joshua had been rather imposing when discussing the topic, but everyone saw his relief peeking through when their side accepted the invitation. His monocle was likely just a decoration to garner a certain impression from others, the earnest young lad.

Subaru: 「He's way more likeable than his brother.」

Emilia: 「You are always so insincere about Julius. Do you still have a grudge from that time in the palace?」

Emilia catches Subaru's mutter, and amusedly pokes fun at him. Just thinking about the affair used to make his face redden in shame, and his stomach burn with indignation. But how about now that some time has passed?

Subaru: 「It's still too vivid for me to laugh and smile about it. I was young back then. And I have reflected on my actions. Wish he'd do the same.」

Emilia: 「But I heard you both apologized and made up. It's so uncool to give shallow apologies and keep simmering on the inside.」

Subaru: 「Mnngh... But I'm only human!」

Emilia looks at him reproachfully, but Subaru remains stubborn. Subaru looks away. Emilia frowns at him for a moment, but ultimately can't hold back her grin.

Emilia: 「Fine. Subaru, you are just so stubborn. But you're not allowed to fight with Julius if we see him in Pristella. You're a knight now, and knights mustn't misuse their power.」

Subaru: 「Yeah yeah you've bested me my Liege.」

Subaru covers up his blushing with some jokes and rubs at his upper lip. He gazes absently around Emilia's room, before seeming to remember something,

Subaru: 「Oh yeah, Emilia-tan. I don't really know much about Pristella, is it known for anything?」

Emilia: 「Hmp, you need to study more, Subaru. Pristella is one of the five main cities of Lugnica, on the Tigracy River that marks the border with Kararagi. It's famous for being built right on a huge lake, with canals flowing through the city.」

Subaru: 「Ok so leaving aside that that's all second-hand information, it's a floating city. Well you have Venice, so may as well be possible here too.」

Venice springs to mind when it comes to aquatic cities. The town is surrounded by water on all sides, with lakes winding nonchalantly through the stone cityscape. It's one of those romantic places that everyone visits at least once, and Subaru regards it as a picturesque spot too. And so that's the impression he gets of Pristella.

Emilia: 「No, Subaru. Pristella isn't a floating city, it's a Watergate City.」

Subaru: 「Watergate?」

Emilia: 「Yes. It's in the middle of a lake, so the city floods when it rains. They built huge walls around the city to stop that, and there's gates to regulate the water levels. The gates are sooo amazing and famous that they don't call it the Floating City, they call it the Watergate City.」

Emilia's explanation flips Subaru's pretty water town into an enclosed watery jail. The concept is all so beautiful, and then they ruin it with these giant walls. Subaru tilts his head, wondering why they built this whole mechanism.

Emilia: 「I think there's lots of theories behind the city's construction. Like, they were testing the limits of their technology, or trying to conquer the floods without relying on magic or the Dragon, or trying to trap a powerful, evil witchbeast.」

Subaru: 「None of them sound sensible but they all somehow feel possible which is how you know humans did it.」

The average person wouldn't come up with the idea, but the geniuses of humanity are fundamentally liberated from the reins of common sense. And sometimes their ideas get realised. Either way.

Subaru: 「But we still don't know what they're planning. ...Doubt they're just being nice and directing us to what we're looking for.」

Emilia: 「Are you sure? Have you ever considered trusting in people more, instead of being so suspicious?」

Subaru: 「Sorry, but all the candidates have their faults. And I don't trust what they're plotting for a second.」

Crusch herself is trustworthy, but Subaru doesn't know whether she'll stay a demure lady, and he has to keep wary of Felis. That problem is solved if Wilhelm reins Felis in, but the Sword Demon puts Subaru on edge too. Knowing their circumstances, it's difficult to trust them when they're left to their own devices.

Subaru has no idea what Anastasia is thinking, or what drives her. He cannot divine her motives for sending this invitation. Julius may be the knightliest of knights, but Anastasia is ultimately in control. And

the business lives of the members of Iron Fang are unrelated to who they are as people. Subaru can't dislike them.

Reinhardt and Rom from the Felt Faction may merit trust. But Felt's thoughts are unclear to Subaru. So long as she's willing to participate in the Selection, Subaru must brace for the tricky, devious girl to be scheming something. If she seriously deploys Reinhardt, and he becomes their enemy, their chances of beating him in combat are a dream within a dream.

The Priscilla Faction is hardest to read. Subaru cannot trust either of them. Al might also be from Japan, but he is surprisingly loyal to Priscilla. So he will not stand up for Subaru, while Priscilla's capriciousness is already terrifying. She could randomly visit to decapitate him with a smile on her face. That's her breed of absurdity.

Even though a year has passed, no candidates know the motives of the others. Subaru needs to probe deeper if he wants to know more than what he learned at the Palace. Which is one reason for accepting this invitation.

Subaru: 「Honestly I am terrified of being in Anastasia's debt. How did she figure out you were looking for a colourless spellstone anyway?」

Emilia: 「Puck showed himself in the Palace, so I didn't want anyone to know he's limited. I was trying to be sooo careful... but you just can't stop people from saying things.」

Subaru: 「That's what happens. So even if we get the spellstone, it just means things are back to status quo from the other factions' perspectives. The benefits are in establishing the debt.」

That said, Puck's return will enhance Emilia's already significant combat strength. But no amount of combat power alone will secure Emilia's win in the Selection. It would just make their defeat of the Sizeable Hare more convincing, if anything.

—The defeat of the Sizeable Hare in Sanctuary.

This second achievement of the Emilia Faction, unrelated to the defeat of Sloth of the Witch Cult, is unfortunately not recognized by the public. There were no witnesses to the Hare's defeat, and it is impossible to retrieve any corpses as proof.

They threw the thing into another dimension never to return. It's the truth, but not believable. The Al Shamac spell that Beatrice used is forgotten in this era, and she lacks the mana to demonstrate the technique again.

So while they reported the Hare's defeat to the Capital, it has yet to be deemed as a legitimate achievement. And if they go into detail, they will have to describe Sanctuary in detail too, and thus reveal that Roswaal kept a hidden village in his territory. Ultimately they had to stop pressing the issue.

They were told that their claims would gain credibility if the Hare remains unseen for the next decade, but by that point it's too late to be a useful achievement. Though it doesn't bother Emilia too much, since it all happened extremely suddenly.

Subaru: 「But it's still annoying. Seriously how much pain did those fucking rabbits put me through...」

Emilia: 「But we really did beat the Sizeable Hare, even if they don't believe us. That scary witchbeast won't hurt anyone else any more. Isn't that enough?」

Subaru: 「Emilia-tan you are way too positive and kind...」

When you do something righteous, it ought to be acknowledged. Emilia speaks magnanimously, making Subaru recognize how pathetic he is. How nice would it be if he could think the way Emilia does? He will never achieve it. It just irritates him not to get recognition he deserves.

Emilia sees Subaru sulking, and her mouth relaxes into a smile. Subaru hasn't noticed that Emilia sometimes gazes at him with this tender look in her eye. Or that her expression during these moments lacks the maternal spark of a mother watching over a child, and is instead something indescribably complex.

Emilia: 「And people already know that you've achieved things, Subaru. It's formally recognized that you fought the White Whale and defeated Sloth.」

Subaru: 「For those... it really feels like I only got the scraps. People were doing a lot more than me for the White Whale, and I just happened to snag the perfect moment at the end. And I didn't have that goal in mind for Sloth.」

All he was thinking during the Petelgeuse fight was to protect Emilia. Or, no, that's not quite accurate. What Subaru felt back then was both desire to protect Emilia, and hatred for Petelgeuse personally. It's not a question of which is legitimate. Both are, and both desires are Subaru's own. It makes him uncomfortable that a fight which was basically a personal grudge is deemed as being for the sake of the world at large.

Emilia: 「But that's the same for the Sizeable Hare. You defeated two of the witchbeasts that had been tormenting the world for four hundred years in such a short timespan... I know I'm not one to say this, but it's like you're doing sooo much more than you should.」

Subaru: 「Yeah. And there I am involved in both. Honestly, I think what I've done's excessive. Let's just hope the last one doesn't show up.」

Emilia: 「—Yes.」

Subaru trusts in the power of words and prays to never encounter the Blacksnake. But Emilia's response is rather wooden. It's almost as if she has some personal thoughts on the Blacksnake.

Emilia: 「So anyway, about Pristella.」

But before he can address the shift in her attitude, she changes the topic. Obviously she doesn't want to talk about it. And, having grown somewhat wiser, Subaru decides not to force an explanation out of her. Though sometimes he forgets to pay attention to things like that and acts exactly how he used to.

Emilia: 「We know we're going, but do we really want to go with the same people? I kind of wanted to talk with Roswaal about it, too.」

Subaru: 「I think we're fine. You're going, so naturally your Knight, that is me, and my partner Beako will be coming too. But being serious, we bring Garf for combat and Otto too since he's so insistent to go. I'd really like for Petra or Frederica to come too so all your needs are addressed, but...」

Emilia: 「It's too bad. Roswaal's busy with the Meeting of the Western Lords. We've known forever that Petra needs to join him for her maid training. Though she's sooo angry about it.」

Subaru: 「Because she completely hates Roswaal after the Sanctuary thing. Roswaal enjoys it, which keeps Ram quiet, but

Petra is maturing justly and brilliantly as a maid, but her core is still dangerously childish. Her harshness on her master Roswaal is particularly striking, and she conceivably would wring the water from her washcloth into his tea. But since Subaru is on Petra's side, he's ready to overlook it even should he hypothetically witness it.

Only time will mend broken trust. But it seems that a year was not enough for Petra to start listening to Roswaal.

Subaru: 「Which means Frederica should go with them as a restraint and a model of proper etiquette, which leaves Ram in the mansion. Hold on this is dicey.」

Emilia: 「Really? Anne will be going to the meeting too, so Clind-san will be there. I'm sure he'll be friendly with Petra, so maybe Frederica doesn't need to go.」

Subaru: 「Clind-san... I don't really get him.」

Subaru thinks back on the powerful butler of the Milord Mansion, where the group stayed while their mansion was being prepared. He works with such incredible refinement that the eye can't catch it. It's a mess of a compliment, but it's what describes him.

Subaru's training in parkour also began with Clind, who taught him the basics. He coached Subaru, who cannot exceed the physical limits of the ordinary man, when he was trying to figure out how to move without disregarding his boundaries. Anne-Rose and Clind have visited the new mansion multiple times

to hang out. Subaru had Clind watch him practice his parkour, but then Clind defeated Garfiel's obstacle course without breaking a sweat and without ruffling his clothes. He's inhuman.

Subaru: 「But leaving aside who's staying in the mansion, we shouldn't worry about it. And anyway I should be the one more concerned about being careful. Goes for you too, Emilia-tan.」

Emilia: 「Mm. I do feel bad about agreeing without discussing it. I'll have to apologize to Otto-kun.」

Subaru: 「He doesn't care about his dignity, but he does hold onto things for ages. I'll tell him that I told you off so hard you cried.」

Emilia: 「Heehee, thank you.」

Subaru fires an uppercut into the air, and Emilia smiles. She puts her hand to her chest and touches the blue crystal pendant hanging there. Even now, the Great Spirit Puck sleeps in that crystal.

Never mind his true power, this gem isn't even strong enough for him to communicate. If he even twitches, the jewel will break and he will be unleashed—or so Emilia and Beatrice say. Once he is free, Puck will inadvertently bring great destruction on the environment, eventually run out of mana, and disappear back to where he came.

Emilia is constantly supplying the crystal with mana so that this doesn't happen, and preserving Puck. Now they just need to make a good crystal from colourless spellstone and they should be able to restore him. Anastasia is saying she has seen spellstones that can withstand this wear.

Emilia: 「Once I can talk with Puck again... there are so many things I want to ask him. So—」

Emilia closes her eyes, saying nothing more. Her long eyelashes quiver, and Subaru quietly scratches his head. He can only vaguely figure what Emilia is thinking.

Subaru: 「You better get back here, cat spirit. I got a mountain of complaints for you.」

And, as her knight should, he agrees with her alongside his insults.

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Otto: 「You know! I'm saying this with everyone's best interests in mind!」

Otto Suwen slams his glass to the table, clearly in a bad mood. After his conversation with Emilia and dinner, Subaru decided to see Otto before his nightly routine, and has been listening to him drunkenly complain for the past while.

Garfiel: 「'S been like this th'whole time. My amazin' ears're sick'a it.」

Says Garfiel in exasperation, sitting beside Subaru as he listens to Otto complain. He sticks his pinky in his ear and scratches his head, his sharp fangs clicking as he laps at his glass of milk.

Subaru is insisting that they not give alcohol to minors like him. Frederica and Ram agree, and he is trying to establish twenty as the drinking age in Roswaal Mansion. Also one time naughty Otto encouraged Garfiel to take a sip of alcohol and it turns out he can't hold his liquor at all. Now just seeing a bottle of the stuff is enough to make him grimace.

Subaru isn't going to break the laws from the old world, so the only drinkers in the mansion are Roswaal, Otto, Ram, and Frederica. Which means that the only drinker in the room is Otto.

Subaru: 「Don't sulk. Emilia's sorry about deciding everything on her own. She knows she should've discussed it. Don't think it would've changed anything though.」

Otto: 「But there is more to things than their outcome. The process is important. You often get conversations where the conclusion is apparent from the very beginning, but the course you follow to get there is essential. Especially when we're unguardedly accepting their offer... you mustn't play into the opponent's hands!」

Subaru attempts to smooth things over, but Otto snaps at him. He's completely correct so Subaru can't rebut him, but,

Subaru: 「What the hell, you sound like an actual internal affairs guy. After how hard you resisted it in the beginning? Guess you weren't so reluctant about it after all.」

Garfiel: 「We're juss acceptin' a damn invitation, it ain't that complicated, Otto.」

Otto: 「It's almost invigorating how little you two have changed!」

Subaru and Garfiel dig into Otto in concert and high-five. The three friends are around the same age, and often hang out together. It is beautiful how naturally their conversations fall into this exact pattern.

Who cares about what Otto thinks. He makes a wonderful internal affairs minister. He was well-educated as a merchant's son, learned the ways of the world as a travelling merchant, and he's both smart and calculating. This has to be a better fate for him than somehow getting swindled into slavery. Though, he still tilts his head, wondering how this even happened to him as he chips through mountains of paperwork. Guy's stubborn.

Since he's seen Roswaal's confidential paperwork, is accustomed to his post as Emilia's helper, and is neck-deep in managing the territory of Margrave Mathers, he has no hope of escape.

Otto: 「What is that, that pitying look. It's like you're gazing at a chicken seconds before strangling it.」

Subaru: 「It's more like I'm gazing at a battery hen that only gets to live for its eggs.」

Otto: 「Even worse!」

Garfiel: 「Yer be quiet now. 'N stop teasin' him so much, Captain. Rules're t'keep it t'ten Ottos a day.」

Otto: 「How much is that!? How much is ten Ottos a day!?!」

Yells Otto, his face red, but neither Subaru or Garfiel respond. This is what it's like when he's drunk. He's working a stressful job, so they give him his drinking time, but it might actually just encourage even more stress.

Subaru: 「Otto vents best by yelling anyway.」

Otto: 「Clearly not!」

Garfiel: 「Yeah yeah now quiet down ‘n pour yerself another drink. Anyway, Captain, got somethin’ I wanna check with ya.」

Subaru: 「Oh? Don’t get that often. Go ahead.」

Otto grumbles as he refills his glass and quietly sips at it. Garfiel glances away from him, his mouth white with milk.

Garfiel: 「‘S ‘bout what the enemy’s doin’, obviously. The candidates ain’t never got any scuffles goin’ before, ‘n now she’s up in our face lookin’ fer a fight. She gotta be up t’somethin’, yeh?」

Subaru: 「You mean, you think she just challenged us to a duel?」

Garfiel: 「‘Course I goddamn do. ‘S what she’s thinkin’. Forget that weedy Joshua prick, you see the cat kid who was with ‘im?」

—The cat kid is the same age as you. The comment is too tasteless for Subaru to actually say it. But what’s his problem with Mimi? Far as Subaru could tell she was acting the same as usual, just reaching for her tea and biscuits. And she did the same thing through dinner too.

Garfiel: 「That girl’s damn tough. N’ she was starin’ at my ‘mazin’ self, not juss durin’ the talk, but all through fuckin’ dinner. She musta figured out ‘m th’strongest guy in the place.」

Subaru: 「Are you sure...? No, I mean, Mimi is strong, and she is kind of a battle junkie, but...」

She doesn’t seem marginally smart enough to have ulterior motives. Subaru can only see her as transparent, or actually just airheaded.

Garfiel: 「Either way, sh’s keepin’ n’ eye on my amazin’ self while she’s here. Best we make sure you and Emilia-sama ain’t caught on yer own while we’re over there, Captain. Otto’s one thing, but we ain’t ever recoverin’ if we lose you.」

Otto: 「You do realise that this fief will be an absolute mess if I’m gone!? I wish that you would take that into consideration sometimes!」

Garfiel isn't trying to belittle Otto as he urges caution. It's just that he needs to make the comparison if he's going to get his point across to Subaru. Though he doesn't pass up the opportunity to play with Otto.

Subaru: 「Yeah, I'm definitely relying on you for that. Don't want to draw it out so this'll be short but, I'm counting on you, Garfiel.」

Garfiel: 「Yeah, make sure ya do. Count on The Strongest of Shields, aka The Legendary Guardian, Garfiel Tinsel!」

Garfiel proudly points at himself with his thumb. Subaru nods at him. He takes a sip from his own glass of milk, regretting how awesome Garfiel's titles are. He'll probably get even more titles once his might and valour resound all through the Kingdom. Will Subaru's imagination be strong enough to provide for Garfiel then?

Subaru: 「I wonder if I'll ever have a stroke of genius like Invisible Providence again... only Fortune herself knows when she'll smile upon me.」

Garfiel: 「Yer mullin' over somethin' again. You ain't gotta trouble yerself. Y'get things done when it matters. I got faith in that.」

Emilia's the same, but the trust in Garfiel's gaze is incredibly convincing. It instantly makes Subaru feel that he must match up to it. He's trying not to mistake the self-improvement needed to meet that trust with blind, headless sprinting.

Subaru: 「If we've got Garfiel then we don't have to worry about our combat strength. Emilia-tan's a pretty strong fighter on her own too, and I'm decent enough with Beako. The problem here's Otto... are you seriously coming with us?」

Otto: 「Of course I am! I don't want to know what insane arrangement you and Emilia-sama will land yourselves in if I don't go!」

It's also electrifying how little they trust Subaru when it comes to negotiations. Emilia is as honest and pure as she appears, and while Subaru is devious he's also inexperienced. So naturally they look like sitting ducks to Otto.

Otto: 「Also, Pristella is the birthplace of Hoshin of the Wastes, the founder of Kararagi. It has contact with Kararagi since it's on the border, making it a highly significant place for merchants. I find myself duty-stricken to visit it too.」

Subaru: 「I thought you washed your hands of being a merchant ages ago. The hell are you doing.」

Otto: 「You are mistaken if you think that I will resign myself to being an Internal Affairs Minister forever! My ultimate goal is still to be a successful merchant with his own shop! This is a necessary road to get there, a necessary road on the path to my goal!」

Garfiel: 「Possible that th'road leads ter yer death.」

That stuff about trapping him here is honestly pretty shallow, and if he yearns to go and can help them as Internal Affairs Minister, it makes sense that Otto should join them. Everyone in the mansion knows, for all their banter, that they can't function without Otto. And Otto knows it, too, which is why he can't leave.

Subaru: 「Or you could just be a masochist but we'll disregard that.」

Otto: 「Did you just agree at me in an incredibly impolite way or am I only imagining it!?!」

Subaru: 「It's not important. Anastasia's going to be there, and we don't know what terms she'll hit us with. We're counting on you. You're on bureaucracy, Garfiel's on military. And I'm there to make things fun.」

Otto: 「Do more!」

Subaru could try his absolute best, but he will never be stronger than Garfiel. He could study his absolute best, but he wouldn't have time to eclipse Otto as a bureaucrat.

Subaru: 「Just gotta do what I can do. One of those positive steps to self-improvement that I've mulled over with Beako.」

Garfiel: 「Yer gonna be fine if Emilia-sama 'n Beatrice're with ya. Meanin' my amazin' self gotta cover for Otto. Watch yer back for me, yeh?」

Otto: 「Why does it feel like I'm the greatest burden here... I can't say that I agree with it.」

Subaru gets serious, and Garfiel accepts his post of babysitter. Otto grumbles and takes another sip of his liquor. The night grows darker, the mood pleasant.

Subaru: 「Now, we're gonna be busy tomorrow, so I'm calling it about here. What about you, Garfiel?」

Garfiel: 「I'll stay'n drink some more with Otto. Gettin' pretty close t'beatin' him at Shatranj. Might pull it off now that he's drunk.」

Garfiel disregards Subaru and grabs a game board and pieces from the back of the room. The game is called Shatranj, with rules similar to Shogi or Chess. Subaru finds himself impressed that every world has these games. Otto is apparently quite good at them, and though Garfiel has been trying his hardest, he has suffered losses upon losses. Also Subaru is outrageously good at Othello, but struggles at Shogi and Chess.

Subaru: 「Don't stay up too late. It'll stunt your growth.」

Garfiel: 「Yer said that before n' so that's what I been doin' but yer sure this fuckin' works? Don't feel I grew at all this year.」

Subaru: 「Frederica absorbed some of the growth so your case is complicated.」

Garfiel: 「Fuck you Sis!」

Roars Garfiel, baring his fangs as he slams the Shatranj board on the table. Then he hunches over and starts meticulously arranging the tiny pieces. While watching Garfiel go at it, Subaru waves to a red-faced Otto.

Subaru: 「Don't you get too drunk either. If you wind up hungover and useless, Petra will think even less of you.」

Otto: 「I feel like she's been rather harsh with me lately, but perhaps it's just me. Could you have a word with her?」

Subaru: 「You mean tell her to try harder?」

Otto: 「I was clearly asking you to tell her to be nicer to me!」

Subaru answers with a bitter smile, telling Otto that it's impossible, and leaves the two to play Shatranj as he exits the room. The crystalights in the hallway tell Subaru that it's almost past midnight. Usually he would be in bed by this hour, but,

Subaru: 「Wound up running late today.」

With that excuse, Subaru ignores the staircase to his room on the third floor of the eastern wing, and heads for the women's bedrooms in the western wing. Where,

Subaru: 「—Mind if I come in?」

Subaru always knocks on the door. He knows that no one will reply. So does he say it because he has hope? Or perhaps he confirms that there is no reply, so that he doesn't forget.

—So that he doesn't forget the inferno, always blazing in his chest?

Subaru: 「—」

Subaru opens the door. A pitch dark room welcomes him. It's a simple room. Its layout is identical to the countless other guest rooms in the mansion, but it plainly lacks in furniture. Just a bed in the middle of

the room, windows, their curtains, a small table, and a vase with flowers. Subaru knows that no one will complain, but he still dislikes the austerity.

Call it sentimental, but he wishes that the place had some human warmth. Perhaps the day will never come where he manages to disregard that wish as weakness.

Emilia: <If you could rationalize things that way, I don't think we ever would've found common ground to our arguments. I like you sooo much just the way you are.>

Beatrice: <It is a vice to want beyond your means, in fact. Subaru, you are reckless on your own, I suppose. ...But you're not alone any more, so I'll manage something for you even if you're being greedy, in fact.>

Subaru: 「They're coddling me. And Emilia-tan is tantalizing me with those provocative statements.」

Subaru wishes she would be more careful about saying 'I like you' or 'you're so cool'. He has told her how he feels, but Emilia is too immature for it. Their relationship still has yet to go anywhere romantic. But even supposing it did suddenly go somewhere romantic, Subaru is not mentally ready for it either. Give him two more years, no three—or even more if it's possible. That's the kind of loser he is.

Subaru: 「God it's so rude of me to go on about Emilia or Beatrice while I'm here. Petra'd beat me up if she heard this.」

Petra might have the best grasp of romance and its subtleties out of anyone in the mansion. Somehow everyone is terrible at relationships. Roswaal leads the charge with his toxic obsession, with the others all having their foibles too. Garfiel's feelings for Ram are still a middle school crush, though Subaru has no place to talk. Ram's ideas about extreme loyalty dictating love are perplexing, and Frederica's love life is a complete unknown. Otto sometimes mentions while drunk things about being raked through the mud for philandering, but the consensus is that these claims are lies and pretense. It's a disgrace to these adults that a thirteen year old girl is beating them.

Subaru: 「So how does that stand. I don't think that tendency will change much, even after you wake up. Either because I'm a loser, or because you respect me.」

Subaru pulls a chair over and seats himself beside the bed. Moonlight slips in through the crack in the curtains, illuminating her face as she sleeps.

The light of the moon spills over her pale face, pink lips. She is a sleeping beauty with short blue hair, her curvy body garbed in thin negligee, her chest rising and falling in time with her breathing. —She has slept for over a year now.

Subaru: 「Got lots of things to tell you today. Since some guests showed up uninvited, and with this crazy offer. I started my day with my usual—」

Subaru speaks calmly to her as she sleeps. He uses his same comedic phrasing as always, but his tone is incredibly gentle. He speaks as though lulling a child to sleep as he cheerily tells her about his day.

She doesn't respond. Even so. These trysts unfold every night. Tonight is rife with things to discuss. Until the moon sits low in the sky, the tale goes on between Subaru and the Sleeping Beauty.

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Chapter 4 – On The Road



It takes them three days before they set out for Pristella.

Roswaal: 「I respect Emilia-sama's decision, aaaaaaand there's nothing urgent for her to do here, sooooo I'm amenable to it. Though it iiiiiiiis worrying that their intentions are uuuuuunreadable.」

The Meeting of the Western Lords—a conference between Margrave Roswaal and the other lords under that banner—will be taking place in the mansion of the most neutral lord among them. The lords are

generally compliant to Roswaal's beat, but some definitely do voice objection and unease about his support for Emilia.

Most of the lords are copacetic to Roswaal's policy of demihuman favouritism, or really, equality for demihumans, but half-elves are not commonly regarded as demihuman. Over the past year, they have succeeded in getting some lords to superficially support her through discussions and deals. This conference is, in part, to establish a podium for her to speak with the lords who still stubbornly refuse her. Roswaal is leaving the mansion empty to set up that groundwork.

Emilia: 「I'm sorry. I honestly wanted to attend the meeting too, but...」

Roswaal: 「Iiiiiiiit would backfire. The purpose of this meeting is so that you may speak with them later, meaning that it would be foul play to reveal you at this stage. ..Hoooooowever, if you could calm the confusion and silence the rebelling lords with some masterful piece of oration, that woooooould be nice.」

Emilia: 「...I don't think I can manage that yet. Okay. I'll behave.」

Emilia purses her lips and casts her gaze down in frustration. Roswaal nods at her, satisfied. Subaru does want to object to Roswaal's somewhat sarcastic tone, but at least it means the guy is speaking with her more sincerely. It's infinitely better than last year, when Roswaal blatantly kept Emilia the Accessory away from the political issues—or so Emilia divulged to Subaru after he complained about it.

Roswaal makes a far more dependable supporter now that he's being proactive. But since his motives are questionable, it's only half as beneficial as it initially seems.

Subaru: 「Assuming that Petra's definitely going to the meeting... who's left in the mansion?」

Roswaal: 「Anne-Rose and her associates wiiiiiiill be attending. I doubt there will be any issues if Clind-kun is present, coooooonsidering his favouritism for Petra. I was intending to leave Frederica here, since she gets along poorly with him... what about you, Ram?」

Ram: 「I shall accompany you as you desire, Roswaal-sama.」

Subaru: 「You say ‘as you desire’ but it’s totally your desires talking…」

Ram is still an advocate for Roswaal, but is less hesitant to insist upon her own desires now. Roswaal seems to be accepting it without thinking it strange. Their relationship of one-sided dependency looks to have changed. The dependant atmosphere around them is gone, and it feels like they actually understand each other now. Though it’s unclear whether it’s beneficial to have someone around who empathises with Roswaal.

Ram: 「What are you staring at. Say anything thoughtless and I’ll mash your eyes to paste, Barusu.」

Subaru: 「Sister, in your mind, just how incessant am I exactly?」

Ram: 「…」

Ram makes an extremely complicated expression. It’s not because it’s a tricky question. It’s just the expression she makes whenever Subaru calls her ‘Sister’. She doesn’t dislike it, but it doesn’t feel legitimate. Since she has yet to recover her memories of Rem, those years of being worshipped by her little sister are still lost to the void.

Roswaal: 「It would worry me were it only Emilia-sama and yourself leaving, buuuuuuuut I’m sure that you’ll be fine with Garfiel and Otto-kun accompanying you. Otto-kun will keep you from bumbling into any horrendously awful agreements, and Garfiel resolves the worst of problems by pulverising them while you flee.」

Emilia: 「But I think that’d cause sooo many problems too… I’ll do my best to keep it from coming to that.」

Subaru: 「Leave pressuring them to me, Emilia-tan. I’ll be right on them whether it’s Anastasia-san or Julius. There’s this chatty witch I know who’s taught me all about people dodging important topics in conversation.」

Emilia: 「I’m not sure if that’s something to brag about…」

Subaru shoots Emilia a thumbs up and grins, teeth sparkling. Naturally, Emilia knows that Subaru is joking around to relax her. They have build enough trust over the last year for that much understanding, at least.

Roswaal: 「Nooooooooooooow, Beatrice. I can trust that yooooooooou'll look after them?」

Beatrice: 「Of course, in fact. You can't rest easy about any of these people were Betty not with them, I suppose.」

Beatrice's pigtails bob as she puffs out her chest. Her adorable attitude puts a smile on everyone's face. Though she herself just looks displeased.

—Regardless, with this conversation over, they determine to leave for Pristella.

Joshua: 「Ask for the Seasyolph Lodge once you arrive. That is where Anastasia-sama awaits you.」

Mimi: 「Don't keep her waiting!」

On that note, Anastasia's subordinates leave the Roswaal Manor. They leave for Pristella first to tell Anastasia that the invitation has been accepted.

Garfiel: 「Yeh, take care.」

Mimi: 「You take care too, Garf! I'm gonna be super on edge waiting, so you better come!」

Garfiel: 「Hell about you's on edge. But I get ya. These guys ain't got a hope without my amazin' self. We'll settle this there. Get yer neck ready fer th'rope.」

Mimi: 「Huh? Okay! I'll get it super ready!」

This cute little exchange between Mimi and Garfiel was particularly notable. Garfiel had been so wary of the two during their stay, but going by Mimi's attitude, feels like his fears were misplaced. Or rather, feels like Mimi is extremely affectionate when making friends. She started calling him 'Garf' out of nowhere, so perhaps Anastasia's invitation really isn't hostile.

Joshua: 「You may have won Mimi over, but I... I myself shall not yield so easily.」

Says Joshua, trying to stay stoic while following his cheerful bodyguard. Mimi keeps a tight grip on his arm, yanking him down and forward as she bounds ahead. His expression is dead serious during all of this, which is kind of comical. But even Subaru has fostered enough kindness over this year to not inform him of the fact.

Emilia: 「Joshua-kun, will you be okay? You have such a lovely outfit, but the sleeve's seconds from coming off...」

Joshua: 「P-Please don't worry. There's no need for concern!」

While Subaru can understand the poor boy's feelings, the attending angel cannot. Emilia speaks with sincere concern for Joshua, who musn't raise his voice and instead tries to pry Mimi off, looking miserable. But Mimi is expectedly stronger than Joshua and his efforts come to nothing.

Joshua: 「My brother may call you his friend, but I believe he is being far too kind. Which is one of his virtues. I believe it my job as his younger brother to compensate for that, so you best not expect any mercy from the Juukulius family.」

Subaru: 「What, you already stopped with the 'I myself' thing?」

Joshua: 「P-Please pay attention to what I'm saying! Trying to make a fool of me! Not a very pleasant man, are you!」

Subaru: 「I'm more worried about you and how you're forgetting your place as your master's servant. If you deride people in public, it'd probably wind up as a black mark on the Juukulius family.」

Joshua: 「—!」

Joshua's face pales, but Subaru isn't trying just to criticize him. And Subaru's at far higher risk for insulting people in public anyway. Not that Joshua would know that, and Natsuki Subaru being Natsuki Subaru has reason not to tell him.

Emilia: 「Subaru, stop bullying younger kids. I'm so sorry, Joshua-kun. Subaru's... he can be like that.」

Joshua: 「—, N-no... I was truly being impolite. I apologize.」

Subaru: 「Just 'I'? Ow! Ow, that hurts, Emilia-tan!」

Subaru immediately starts criticizing Joshua again, when Emilia grabs his ear and yanks it. Joshua sees tears rise in Subaru's eyes, and, satisfied, decides to leave the conversation there.

With a deep breath, Joshua files into his dragon carriage. But since ligers are pulling the vehicle rather than dragons it's really a dog carriage, which he files into. Perhaps dog races are a thing here?

Subaru: 「Might be worth it to introduce some forms of entertainment, like horse racing and stuff...」

Subaru's ideas that use his Unique Knowledge From The 21st Century never graduate from his imagination. But maybe he should more seriously consider utilizing his knowledge. First he needs to judge what the pros and cons of popularizing horse racing would be, and,

Emilia: 「What's up, Subaru. You look like you're thinking of something sooo devious.」

Subaru: 「Got a rare flood of ideas from my Unique Knowledge From The 21st Century. Like a burst of Subaruisms.」

Emilia: 「Oh, you thought of another new topping? I liked the mayonnaise, and I liked the tartar sauce too.」

Subaru: 「This time I'm thinking unique in a way that the populace would never conceive.」

Incidentally the Roswaal Mansion carries a stockpile of tartar sauce, just like it does mayonnaise. Basically everyone here likes it, but it doesn't entirely satisfy Subaru. While all this chitchat is going on, Joshua and Mimi get ready to leave and their carriage begins to move. They aren't sitting on the coachman's seat to drive, Mimi just mounts one of the two ligers and controls their course directly. Her white robe flutters as she smiles cheerfully.

Mimi: 「Okay! See you two and Garf later!」

They pleasantly see Mimi off, and wave goodbye to a wary Joshua through the window too. Two days after seeing them off, Subaru and the others leave for Pristella.

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Otto: 「It will take us over ten days to get there, even if we hurry. We have no real need to hurry, either, so let's relax and take our time.」

Nobody has any objection to Otto's plan. He is the one most accustomed to traveling among them, and he probably holds the median value in their group for physical resilience. If they travel at a pace that puts no strain on him, then everyone should enjoy a safe journey.

Otto: 「Considering the carriage's load, we will have Frufoo and Patrasche-chan pull the carriage. And since we plan not to camp anywhere, we should be fine with only the bare minimum of emergency supplies.」

Garfiel: 「S no good fer th'body t'just sit there in a carriage th'whole time, Otto.」

Otto: 「If that's what you think, you're always free to leave the carriage and run.」

Garfiel: 「Yup, that's what'll do.」

Emilia: 「That's what you'll do?」

With this little scene where Garfiel and Otto's usual banter shocks Emilia, the journey to Pristella begins.

But, having said that, the journey itself proceeds without issue. They have some trouble when they cross borders into non-Mathers territory, or when passing through other lords' gates, but the issue is more or less resolved by flashing the Mathers family crest or showing Emilia's presence. This itself is liable to stir up trouble too, but they come across no one plotting anything nefarious because of this journey.

When wild dogs or witchbeasts appear on the road, foolishly trying to attack the carriage,

Garfiel: 「Perfect. Been wantin' t'smack some critters around.」

Garfiel violently tears through the group, scaring away the instigating animals. His perfect work as a bodyguard actually makes the poor witchbeasts sympathetic. But even terrifying Garfiel has to kill downtime by chewing on a knife he brought, giving him a trace of gap moe. Also it's always unnerving to see him chew the hard steel to bits.

Beatrice: 「Mm. This dragon isn't bad, in fact. I'll concede that much, I suppose.」

Says Beatrice, seated next to Subaru, who holds the reigns. Perhaps it's a surprise, but Otto isn't the only one tasked with driving. It took a year of trying, and a dragon that knows Subaru's idiosyncrasies, but he can drive a carriage now. Is one thing you could say, but this is Patrasche and Otto's dragon Frufoo. Though, the only other dragons that the Roswaal Mansion keeps are Rascal and Peter. Of course Subaru's familiar enough with them to name them.

Subaru: 「How about less condescension, and more helping me with the reigns? Patrasche is abounding in maternal spirit, I'm sure she'll be nice to you too, Beako.」

Beatrice: 「I'd rather not, in fact. Actually, that dragon is quite plainly glaring at me, I suppose. She doesn't consider me a friend, in fact. What are these horrendous lies about maternal spirit, I suppose.」

Subaru: 「Hey, there'll be no badmouthing Patrasche. I'll never let anyone insult Emilia-tan, Rem, you, or Patrasche.」

Beatrice: 「You include me in your list, but still won't let me, I suppose?」

Subaru: 「When it's someone on the list, they're being naughty!」

Beatrice tries to escape, but it's impossible on the narrow driver's platform. Subaru grabs her by the scruff of the neck and draws her near, setting her on his lap as she struggles. He attempts to sentence her to tickle torture, when a strand of her hair brushes across his nose, making him sneeze dramatically—and the carriage swerves.

Otto: 「Natsuki-san! Don't let them do anything odd! If they exit the Windbreaker Blessing, we're all going to have a terrible time with the motion sickness!」

Subaru: 「Sorry! Beako was being so much fun that I just...」

Beatrice: 「Don't you try to make this Betty's fault, in fact! Subaru just went and... stop tickling me, I suppose! Sto—pffweheehee!」

Otto sighs at the two as they play. Emilia giggles,

Emilia: 「They really get along so well. Not too long ago, I never would've imagined that Subaru and Beatrice would be so close.」

Otto: 「Personally, I can't believe that they were ever apart. It's almost sickly how sweet Beatrice- chan is and how doting Natsuki-san is.」

Emilia smiles solemnly, looking something like a mother or older sister to Otto's eyes. But Otto isn't tasteless enough to point it out, or to encourage Subaru's antics.

Otto: 「We'll leave them to their merriment while we discuss something more important. That is, we will discuss the goals of Anastasia's faction, and how we will respond to them.」

Emilia: 「They're not trying to just put us in their debt.」

Otto: 「The first of the three years in the selection has passed, making this the final opportunity to establish definite groundwork. Once we establish our footing here, we will secure our support base at the Meeting of the Western Lords. If you ignore that the other factions had that issue resolved from the beginning, we should be about equal to them in our progress.」

Emilia: 「Where is Anastasia sitting right now?」

Emilia has been estranged from the exact movements of the other factions for a while. Because they needed to train Emilia from scratch on how to be a politician, and let her acquire the skills she needs, rather than panic her with unneeded information. Roswaal and Otto, the internal affairs duo, understood

that as her reasoning for focusing her attention elsewhere, and also understand that it ought to be safe to remove some of those restrictions on this journey.

So Otto nods to Emilia and begins mentally organizing the facts.

Otto: 「First we will discuss the support for the candidates as of the present. Initially, Duchess Crusch Karsten and Anastasia Hoshin were generally understood as the sure winner and the competition. The other three factions, including yours... if you'd allow me to be blunt, they're somewhat seen as space-fillers.」

Emilia: 「...Mm, I can't deny that. But from what you're saying...」

Otto: 「Exactly. Common opinion has changed over this last year. Because the other three factions, starting with yours, have made notable achievements.」

The most conspicuous achievements from the Emilia Faction, predictably, are the defeat of Sloth and the White Whale. Crusch's Faction was the one leading the offensive against the Whale, but Crusch herself has publicly stated the greatness of Sir Natsuki Subaru's contribution to the effort. Though the other factions were helping, Subaru headed the Sloth offensive. Both achievements instantly drew public attention to the previously-disregarded Emilia. Emilia also stands out negatively due to her heritage. For better or for worse, Emilia is widely acknowledged as the topic of much gossip and rumour.

The other unknown candidates, Felt and Priscilla, have also been given similar benefits.

Priscilla Barielle has done remarkable work. After inheriting land from her deceased husband, Leip Barielle, she used Lugnica's unfortunate position as a nation bordering the long-hostile Vollachian Empire to her advantage, and instantly made allies of the neighbouring territories in the confusion. Almost like magic, she pacified Vollachia and made allies of the lords. Then she revitalized lands that had been ruined by war. In this short time frame, she has definitely shown good prospects. She also has her overwhelming attitude and her looks going for her. Southern Lugnica grows more and more supportive of her by the day.

Meanwhile, Felt has Reinhardt Van Astrea and the territories of the Astrea family: relative to the other candidates, she is stuck in the shadow of her knight. The title of 'Sword Saint', as overwhelmingly famous as it is, is not especially useful when choosing a new Ruler. The attitudes of the local lords, including those in the Astrea domain, veer closer to distrust than caution.

But Felt overcame this poor situation quite unexpectedly. Rather than consult the powerful nobles who could stymie the other candidates, she assembled those who had resigned from office and commoners on the streets. Felt is stupidly good at picking out those with hidden aspirations, or talented people who were never given a chance. Never mind the rumours about her having royal blood, she can identify people's talents and assign them to a post, which is perhaps the most important quality in a leader. From that small trigger, the Astrea household and its surrounding territories burst into activity, while the onlooking lords began to slowly change their tune. It's still just a small spark, but she is definitely carving herself a place in history. Nobody important in this nation is ignoring her.

Otto: 「...is where each faction is now. Our faction is quite notable for its achievements, but the other two parties have a more stable foundation. Though, I believe that we could disregard that if the Sizeable Hare offensive were officially acknowledged.」

Emilia: 「Otto-kun, you're saying the same things as Subaru. But maybe this means it's safe to take a narcissistic view, and say that we're about in the middle.」

Otto: 「For now. Yes. But... there have been some changes on Duchess Karsten's front. Ones that are to our benefit.」

Emilia: 「To our benefit?」

Otto: 「Yes. Duchess Crusch Karsten, as if she's a different person, has lost some of her lustre over this year. She used to be stern in both public and private affairs, someone that the supporters of the previous Duke Karsten couldn't help but accept.」

Something has changed in her politics and policies. She has become less decisive, and plainly gives a soft impression. Rumours have spread that she attempted her best to serve the unwomanly role of Duchess, but finally her true colours have come through.

She's apparently busy dealing with unsatisfied subjects and lords, even calling upon the previous, retired Duke's assistance.

Otto: 「People were certain that she'd win the Selection, being that she secured the first achievement with the White Whale offensive... but, it's unclear what exactly led to her downfall. Emilia-sama, be sure to keep vigilant.」

Emilia: 「—I see.」

Emilia lowers her eyes, full of gloom. She can't help but feel sympathetic for her rivals, but Otto finds that stance dangerous and fragile. They're eventually going to oppose each other. It's disadvantageous to be unduly supportive. This last year has taught Otto that the truism applies in both commerce and politics.

Otto: 「Try not to brood on it. More conversations like this will have to happen in the future.」

Emilia: 「Mm. Thank you. I know you're just looking out for me.」

Otto: 「Excellent. Now, let's finally get onto the topic of Anastasia's faction. They have nowhere to call their base in Lugnica, but have the backing of important merchants in Kararagi. Stores that had originally been considering the idea are now springing up across Lugnica, all with Hoshin Enterprises's backing.」

Emilia: 「But what does that mean? Maybe there are lots of new stores, but that doesn't mean lots of new support... oh, there's more people who know her, so she's more visible?」

Otto: 「That would be a side-effect, I think. Her goal is more simple than that. —She can use far much more money. And since money is so simple, it works on anyone. There is no creature of society out there who lives in peace after economic downfall.」

Making allies of merchants means making more friends in the world of business. And being that economics supports society, holding economic power means she can attack and defend that society.

She's making allies all over the place, making it nigh impossible to counter her, a businesswoman who prioritises her economic strength.

Otto: 「I believe that Anastasia's faction is the one we must be most cautious of. And then we get an invitation from them... and it all feels like we're going to wind up in their debt. Do you understand how immeasurably troubled I am?」

Emilia: 「...It's finally sunken in sooo deep. I'm sorry for acting so rashly.」

Otto: 「Nothing to worry, just as long as you understand. You'll never do anything careless again I'm sure... I'm sure... because I'm sure that you understand!」

Emilia bows her head, and Otto shakes his in submission, then sighs.

Otto's clear explanation of matters makes it very easy to understand. Emilia nods over and over.

Indeed. The world of politics is complex and tricky. She already knew that her thoughts of 'I'll do my best' and 'Let's do our best' wouldn't secure her the victory, but it dizzies her to think that she has to pay mind to what the others are doing. She's glad that he's revealed these secrets to her, but it also makes her far more uneasy.

Otto: 「You don't have to agonize over it alone.」

Says Otto, imagining how Emilia must feel. Emilia looks up. Otto fiddles with his grey hair.

Otto: 「You may be the central figure, but that doesn't mean that you have to do everything yourself. You have this whole carriage with you.」

Emilia: 「This whole carriage?」

Otto: 「Natsuki-san is at the reigns. Beatrice-chan is on guard to make sure he doesn't slack off. Garfiel is keeping lookout atop the carriage, and I am the one who planned our itinerary. What you do is thank all of us for our work, and we'll bumble our way to Pristella.」

Emilia's eyes widen, comprehending what Otto means. And it's funny, because this indirect phrasing reminds her of someone else.

Emilia: 「Otto-kun. You sound sooo much like Subaru.」

Otto: 「What!? Truly!? Oh no... he must've infected me over all this time spent with him... n-no, please no, this terrifying thought just—」

Subaru: 「Hey, Otto! What are you talking so cheerily about with Emilia-tan? Emilia-tan smiles are my diet, so you better not steal any!」

Otto's shoulders hitch up as the person in question butts into the conversation. Otto's reaction makes Emilia smile, and Otto smiles back, looking defeated.

Subaru: 「Come on! What's so interesting!? This isn't fair! Beatrice, take the reigns. I'm busting in.」

Beatrice: 「Auh! No, in fact! Stop, I suppose! I can't... I-it'll flip over! It's going to flip over, in fact! Look, she's going to flip it over, I suppose!」

Hearing the yells from the driver's seat, Otto resignedly gets to his feet. A certain impatient knight must be hitting his limit. Time to swap places and visit the dragons.

Emilia: 「Otto-kun.」

When Emilia calls Otto from behind as he prepares to move to the driver's seat. He glances back at her, and his breath catches. Emilia's trusting smile stabs him through the chest.

Emilia: 「I know I'll cause some problems, but I'll still do my best. I'm counting on you.」

Otto: 「—Yes, please do. I'll take my own enjoyment in the scraps.」

Emilia: 「That also sounded kind of like Subaru.」

With a bitter smile, Otto steps over to the driver's platform. Subaru and Emilia are both devious. For Otto, stricken with an illness where he must answer to the expectations upon him, they're a lethal combination.

While all this banter unfolds, twelve days pass from their departure. Emilia's group safely arrives at the Watergate City, Pristella.

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Chapter 5 – The Watergate City Pristella



—Upon their arrival, Subaru and the others are greeted by towering, grand walls. Subaru: “Yeah, this looks exactly like the prison I expected it to...”

Mutters Subaru as he pokes his head out of the carriage window, Otto at the reigns. Beatrice captures Subaru’s muttering, her head also out the window beneath Subaru.

Beatrice: “Joshua said it was a sightseeing spot, but Betty doubts that, in fact. It looks far more depressing than relaxing, I suppose.”

Subaru: "Agreed. I mean, I guess the bridge and gates and stuff are kinda cool." Subaru nods in agreement to Beatrice and looks down.

Their carriage is travelling across the massive, stone Tigracy Bridge, which leads to the front gates of Pristella.

Subaru stretches slightly and looks over to the horizon, where he sees sunlight glinting on the water. To him it looks like an ocean, but since oceans don't exist in this world, it has to be a lake or a river.

Beatrice: "Pristella is a city built upon a lake, in fact. The land inside those walls becomes so flat that it forms a basin in the centre, I suppose. If you envision the city as an old trap, then of course you'd expect the centre to easily flood, in fact."

Subaru: "You mean that thing 'bout it being a trap for some nasty witchbeast. Emilia mentioned that too. Is it actually true though?"

Beatrice: "This is my first time seeing this place, and I don't know what the specific purpose of it was either, I suppose. But I suspect it is true, now that I've seen it, in fact."

Beatrice's bluish eyes gaze at the city's gates beyond the bridge.

The walls keep her from peering inside, but she must be imagining what the city looks like. It's unclear how precisely the books in the Forbidden Archive spoke of the world, but Beatrice's extensive knowledge has helped on more than a few occasions.

Beatrice: "...Why are you stroking Betty's head, I suppose."

Subaru: "Because it's there. I wanna spend all the time patting you that I'm able."

Beatrice: "Utter nonsense, and patronising, undesired nonsense at that, in fact!"

Nevertheless Beatrice neglects to swat Subaru's hand away and he proceeds to pat her more while gazing past the bridge-railing, at the lake. The pristine waters give him a clear view to the bottom of the lake, with not a single piece of litter or pollution in sight.

If the whole lake is like this, it's an example of incredible ethics.

Subaru: "Actually I didn't notice any litter or illegally dumped industrial waste on the road either. Probably 'cause people don't have much stuff but still it's nice."

Otto: "Pristella is particularly strict on littering since it has to preserve its landscape. There will be a simple border check once we enter the gates, please don't get weirdly assertive and reject the binding paperwork they give you."

Warns Otto, having caught Subaru's muttering. Subaru tilts his head.

Subaru: "Paperwork?"

Emilia: "I think you're usually exempted from it if you have a crest on your carriage when you're going to the Capital, but absolutely everyone has to fill out paperwork to enter Pristella."

Subaru nods, impressed, and more or less accepts it as a passport and customs check. But once again he tilts his head at the words 'binding paperwork'.

Subaru: "Is it written on paper that makes you geass yourself? Like it does something to your od once you sign, and the second you break the terms your gate stops working or something..."

Emilia: "Eek, that'd be sooo scary... there shouldn't be anything that forceful. The paperwork is just a statement that you won't do anything bad. But it means your conscience will be keeping a close eye on you."

Subaru: "...We'd have world peace if everyone were as strict on themselves as you, Emilia-tan."

Subaru smiles wryly, aware of his own scummy personality, at Emilia's idealism.

Either way, he understands that there is paperwork, and that it is not actually binding.

Otto: "There are national laws that must be upheld, but the Mayor and Lord who manage the city have rather extensive authority there. There are many things about Pristella that simply differ from

national law. The paperwork will surely mention what they are, so please refrain from mocking it and actually read it.”

Garfiel: “‘S a goddamn pain. How ‘bout you read it n’ tell us what it said when yer done.”

Otto: “You’ll never mature with that attitude. It’s necessary for you to learn how to at least skim paperwork, what with your social position. You can’t just stockpile bizarre trivia from the books you like.”

Garfiel: “It ain’t b’zarre trivia, ‘s a man’s lust fer th’dramatic. Yeh, Captain?” Subaru: “You got it.”

Garfiel balances precariously on the carriage roof as he peeks his head over and down. Subaru nods firmly in reply, Otto sighs, and Emilia watches happily. Beatrice shakes her head in lamentation.

Beatrice: “You two children are just impossible, in fact.” Otto: “They are a nightmare to herd.”

Who could guess how Beatrice’s statement resounded with him.

Unfortunately for him, no one else in the carriage is capable of empathising with his grief and exhaustion.

—Patrasche roars, and everyone directs their attention to the front. The gates of Pristella stand directly before them.

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The border inspection ends with underwhelming ease.

Emilia and Otto were right. The paperwork described the terms they would have to follow to enter the city, and the rules by which they needed to abide once inside.

That said, every term was practically impossible to accidentally violate, so there’s no need to pay that much conscious attention to them.

All you have to do to enter the city is read the paper, sign your name, and get the officer's approval. The officers did panic a little once Emilia introduced herself, but being that Anastasia passed through here too, they probably figure that something is going on.

Subaru: "Guess it is pretty big news to have two girls with the right to the Throne in one place."

Emilia: "There wasn't too much fuss, so I think Anastasia let them know beforehand. Or maybe it was Joshua-kun or Mimi-chan."

Subaru: "Joshua feels possible if you ignore his clumsiness, but I seriously doubt it was Mimi."

It doesn't feel like the catgirl has that kind of sensibility.

But not because she's selfish or anything. How to describe it?

Subaru: "'Cause she's cute."

Emilia: "Yes, because she's cute."

And it's so mysteriously persuasive that it makes Emilia nod. Subaru crosses his arms, finding that no other word fits. Also for some reason Beatrice stomps on his foot.

Subaru kills his time by placating a displeased Beatrice, until Otto and Garfiel finally finish their drawn-out inspection and join the others beyond the gates.

Subaru: "Hey guys. What held you up?"

Otto: "Garfiel did. I've been constantly, constantly telling him to practice his writing, and still..."

Subaru: "Garfiel, you can't write?"

Garfiel: "I can. 'S just, eh, puttin' it how you would yer'd call it avant garde or, eh, whatever."

Meaning his handwriting is so horrendous that the officers couldn't read it.

The officers must have offered to write for their illiterate client, but Garfiel's pride would not allow it.

Subaru: "I won't say anything against you, but you better study if you don't want this to happen again. I know you write letters to Lewes-san, and those ones have to be legible."

Garfiel: "Ha, now there's a joke, Captain. Me n' granny go way back. My nanna can read anythin' my amazin' self writes, even if it's with my left hand."

Subaru: "You aren't thinking to improve at all are you."

Says Subaru, sighing in exhaustion, to a proud Garfiel.

Garfiel's grandmother Lewes is not living with him in Roswaal's mansion. She and the twenty-four duplicates have been tasked with duties in various forests in Roswaal's domain.

Emilia and Garfiel still hold the command right for the doubles, and their orders still reach the doubles from a distance. The team is trying to utilize this and have the girls serve as middlemen for communicating orders.

Subaru proposed the idea, and Lewes carries the responsibility for the work. Garfiel opposed it all at first, but generally agrees with it now.

And so Lewes and the doubles are living in Arlam Village. The plan is to go girl-by-girl, teaching them everything they need to know, and sending them to towns and villages once they're ready.

Subaru: "It's like a huge spy operation, which kinda makes it sound bad..."

But he loathes to simply leave them there, hanging around without any role or purpose. Perhaps Subaru's guilt from discarding them in a previous loop is what spurred the idea.

Emilia: "Subaru? They finished the bag check for the carriage, let's go?"

Emilia calls Subaru out of his reverie, and he hurriedly glances up. He gives a strained smile as she looks curiously on, and grabs Pastasche's reigns.

As if sensing Subaru's unease, the smart black dragon nuzzles her snout against the back of his neck. It mystifies Subaru how relaxing the rough sensation is.

Subaru: "...Thank you, for everything."

Subaru replies to her silent compassion by stroking her hard scales. Patrasche responds with her snout, and Subaru finally tugs the reigns to set off for Pristella proper.

They exit the front gate to find a river flowing between the exterior gates and the city. They cross the stone bridge over the river, the inner gates open, and Pristella reveals itself.

Subaru: "Woah..."

Subaru sighs in admiration at the sight unfolding before him.

And he isn't the only one reacting like this. Emilia and Beatrice, seated on either side of him, also express their wonder.

He must apologize for using the word 'jail' on this aquatic city.

When Subaru first heard about Pristella, he envisioned something like the old world's Venice. He was correct to do so.

The city is circular, enclosed in turn by the circular walls.

Ignoring the fact that its size is that of a city, its shape is essentially that of a sports arena. The outer rim is the most elevated, elevation dropping the closer you get to the centre.

Dense rows of stone buildings line the tiers of the city, the most western-seeming architecture that Subaru has seen yet.

Large canals run through the town, with notably massive canals—rather, waterways—dividing the circular city into four even sections. Subaru sees several gondolas paddling on the water, and a tingle shoots down his spine at the thought: gondoliers.

The Blue City, The City of Water, The Watergate City Pristella. Each one rings true. The sight brings nothing but wonder.

Subaru: "Amazing..."

He says, and no one can deny him.

The guardsmen at the gates smile in satisfaction at the group's astonishment. Most likely, everyone who passes through these gates reacts exactly the same way.

That reaction both fulfils the guardsmen's office-bound obligations, and is the greatest of rewards to them. Definitely is. Right into their trap.

Garfiel: "Yeah, this's stunnin'. So Otto wasn't just spoutin' bullcrap."

Garfiel recovers from the shock first and rubs the tip of his nose. But his excitement has not faded, for his cheeks remain slightly red.

His masculine passion for the dramatic must have been set alight by this amazing place (which falls under the heading of 'things that are gigantic').

Otto: "I've always wished to visit this place, connected as it is to the God of Merchants, Hoshin, but this is stupendous. It was worth visiting regardless of Hoshin."

Otto fidgets with his hands, looking incredibly emotional.

The mention of Hoshin reminds Subaru of the name: Hoshin of the Wastes.

Subaru: "Hoshin's that guy. That one merchant guy from ages ago who made crazy riches from a burnt wasteland."

Otto: "You're a little off, but overall correct. Four hundred years ago, Hoshin travelled the yet- untamed lands of Kararagi unaided, transformed it into an economic infrastructure using solely his own wits, and made a fortune. The man is a paragon."

Solely because it's about a merchant, Otto's eyes blaze with passion as he tells the story of Hoshin. If he built the foundations for one of the four great countries, the Kararagi City State, then Subaru can agree with the legend being passed down.

Subaru: "Anastasia calls herself Hoshin after him too."

Otto: "It's very bold of her. I doubt there is any way to more plainly state her enthusiasm and goals, but everyone alive is going to be sceptical. Though I do presently think she has achieved enough to warrant the name."

Subaru: "If she's seriously doing something to warrant the name, then... well, snagging Lugnica's throne works. Just marching toward her goal."

Sincerely impressed, Subaru manages to pry himself from the beautiful scenery.

He strokes Beatrice's head and tugs Emilia's sleeve to pull them away from the mesmerising city.

Subaru: "So, Anastasia's waiting for us at the Seasyolph Lodge. Dunno where it is, but considering who she is, doubt it's someplace cheap."

Emilia: "Mm, right. I think she told the gate officers about the visit too, so it's going to be a nice place. I think Otto-kun investigated more into that..."

Otto nods and hops onto the coachman's platform. He jerks his chin, gesturing to the carriage.

Otto: "I've supposed the route, so allow me to lead. We won't be able to rush since boats have higher priority than carriages in this town. Which I note because I suspect Natsuki-san still struggles with leisurely carriage rides."

Subaru: "Oh yeah? If it was just Patrasche, I wouldn't even have to say anything just stare at her in my trembling boots, and she'd have the carriage doing whatever I want. Right?"

Subaru boldly gazes at Patrasche and winks. Patrasche looks away. Somehow, it feels like she just sighed at him.

The unexpected reaction dejects Subaru. Emilia consolingly pats his back, while Beatrice takes his hand and files him into the carriage.

Garfiel: "N' we're off!"

Announces Garfiel from his new, dedicated perch on the carriage's roof. Otto smiles wryly as he whips the reins, and the carriage rolls into motion.

Their pace is truly slow, so sluggish that the drop in speed from the uphill inclines cannot feasibly explain it.

Subaru: "But going off what I'm seeing out the windows, there really aren't many carriages."

Emilia: "There aren't. And look how all the roads wide enough for carriages aren't straight, they're windy, because the canals have higher priority than streets."

Subaru: "Ah, you're right."

Emilia is right. Footpaths and carriage roads make winding detours around the canals, which cross through the city. It is inconvenient, but stops feeling that way once Subaru watches the canals alongside the carriage, and the gondolas passing by.

Subaru: "Carriages have the Windbreaker Blessing, but do boats have anything? Like a Blessing of No Capsizing, or a Seabreeze Blessing, something."

Emilia: "I don't really know, but I don't think the boats themselves have blessings. But maybe the boatmen have a Blessing of Lakes or Blessing of Ferrying."

Beatrice: "Though this knowledge isn't particularly widespread, water dragons have blessings, in fact. One that protects them from the effects of water, much like those of earth dragons, I suppose."

Subaru: "Water dragons. Wouldn't mind seeing one. And just one."

Beatrice: "I'm sure there's bound to be some in this city, in fact."

Though she answers Subaru's question, Beatrice's reply is not proactive, what with her dislike of animals. Her strange awkwardness does not end merely with Patrasche, but apparently extends to water dragons.

Subaru: "I don't think hugging, say, a liger'd be that unpleasant."

Beatrice: "It doesn't kill me not to touch animals, I suppose. Betty is cuter than them, in fact."

Subaru: "Doubt fighting an animal in a match of cuteness'd go anywhere... actually you might lose a few points if you fought on the same terms?"

To Subaru's eyes, even Patrasche looks a combination of cool and cute. But a different kind of cute to Emilia, Rem, and Beatrice's cute of course.

Beatrice looks on suspiciously, while Emilia jumps excitedly on the word 'liger' and gazes at Subaru.

Emilia: "Me too! Do you think they'd let me touch them if I asked?"

Subaru: "You could've asked when Mimi was at the mansion. You get weirdly considerate about things like that."

Emilia: "They're their riding dogs, I can't just do whatever I want with them. I've been missing the feeling of fur, since Puck hasn't been around."

It seems that even Emilia, who loves Puck like family, has been enchanted by his fur. Subaru agrees to ask about it and Emilia starts humming happily. While hideously tone-deaf.

Listening to her shoddy humming, Subaru puts his hand to his cheek and leans on his elbow as he gazes at the cityscape. He leans on the windowframe. Beatrice gazes out the window's glass, kneeling on her seat. Subaru deliberates whether to tell her that it's bad manners to do that, when,

Beatrice: "Oh, Subaru. Here's your chance, in fact."

Subaru: "Hm? Wh—woah!"

Subaru looks over to see a giant spray of water from the canal as a passing fish—or no, it's not a fish. The creature has a long, serpentine body, alongside stubby but present limbs. It's a water dragon. Its blue, slippery skin evokes images of snakes, but its head is clearly a dragon's.

Sharp fangs crowd its mouth, and catfish whiskers extend from its snout. The earth dragon looks like a bipedal lizard, while the water dragon is more oriental. Subaru almost wants to call it Shenlong.

Subaru: "But it looks kinda stuck up, or unfriendly."

Beatrice: "That's what it looks like to humans, I suppose. Water dragons are much more bothersome to domesticate than earth dragons, in fact. You must raise it from hatchling to adult before it recognizes you as its master, I suppose."

Subaru: "So they take time. Me and Patrasche bonded the second our eyes met."

Beatrice: "It baffles me how she's so attached to you, in fact."

It baffles Subaru too.

Though she is originally from Crusch's faction, she grew extremely attached to Subaru from the moment he picked her for the White Whale offensive. Subaru believes his choice back then, picking the highly assertive Patrasche, was the correct one.

There are so many times where he would have failed without her.

Subaru: "Hmpf. The visage of our Patrasche abounds in refinement far the superior."

Emilia: "Subaru. How come you're suddenly talking like Anne?"

A strange rebellion against the water dragon, dancing through the canal, overtakes Subaru. And though the dragon couldn't have noticed his gaze, it turns to glance at him. The dragon pokes its head out of the water and screeches. For some reason Subaru hears the "Eyes off, interlopers," loud and clear.

Subaru: "I think this asshole just insulted us. Which means it's time for..."

Dragon: "—ᳵ!"

As revenge, Subaru decides to mimic the roars of the giant black witchbeast he saw when the mansion was burning down.

When a sharp, dignified roar cuts through to the water. Patrasche's roar.

She perceived her master's belligerence toward the dragon and got him revenge. Subaru doesn't know what she meant with that bellow, but her voice and glare terrify the water dragon, which squeaks and slinks back underwater. Then it speeds up and carts its boat swiftly away. The boatsman panics at the sudden speed while Subaru watches on, dazed.

Subaru: "Wh-what just happened?"

Otto: "—Natsuki-san, please keep Patrasche-chan from doing anything too strange. I'd truly prefer that we didn't make a scene so shortly after entering the city."

Scolds Otto from the driver's seat. Subaru waves at him dismissively and whistles through his fingers so that Patrasche can hear him. They can't exactly communicate by whistling, but hopefully it lets her know that he's grateful.

Subaru: "Water dragons are pretty cool, but Patrasche is the coolest."

Beatrice: "...Ours is better than that undignified water dragon, in fact."

Beatrice begrudgingly agrees with Subaru, perhaps because he spoke so happily.

While they cross a canal by bridge, Subaru thinks of the panoramic view of the city he saw from the gates.

Subaru: "Feels like these canals split the city into four or something."

Emilia: "They do. The giant waterways in the middle of Pristella divide it into districts. Going clockwise from the main gates, they're District One, District Two, District Three, and District Four."

Subaru hums.

Subaru: "Pretty uncreative naming scheme. They could've gone for something more like East Blue. Don't you agree?"

Garfiel: "That I do, Captain."

Beatrice: "No one cares about your tastes, I suppose."

Says Beatrice icily at the happy pair. Emilia smiles as she watches on and raises her finger, speaking as if she has read this in a book,

Emilia: "The numbered districts all have different stores and occupations, and the residential areas are concentrated in districts Two and Three, which are farthest from the gates. The Seasyolph Lodge must have lots of visiting travellers, so it'll be in District One."

Subaru: "Which means we should be hitting it soon... or now."

The slow carriage comes to a stop during their conversation. Apparently they've reached the inn. Otto loops around from the driver's seat and into the carriage.

Otto: "We've arrived. I'll speak with the employees to have Frufoo and Patrasche-chan moved to the stables, so feel free to... no, actually, please wait by the entrance."

Subaru: "What changed your mind? Is it really that bad for us to go in first!?"

Otto: "It is. We don't want you to encounter Anastasia-san, and for me to come back and find she's hooked you."

Subaru frowns at Otto's lack of trust, but nobody can refute him considering their track record. They take their hand luggage and leave the carriage while an employee escorts Otto behind the establishment, out of sight.

Subaru watches them go, stretches, and finally directs his gaze to the Seasyolph Lodge.

Subaru: "Now, just what kind of lodgings have we... we."

Subaru's jaw drops. Emilia puts her finger to her cheek, tilting her head.

Emilia: "The building looks sooo funny. I don't think I've seen one like it."

Garfiel and Beatrice share Emilia's candid thoughts. But Subaru gets a different impression from the place. Of course he would. After all,

Subaru: "An inn? ...This is a ryokan."

Built of smooth wood, with sliding glass doors.

And hedges, and a gravel path from the gates to the entrance, and a tiled roof, leaving no room for doubt.

Right there in the middle of such a western city, and entirely out-of-place piece of architecture. This is the day that Natsuki Subaru meets the wafuu structure called the Seasyolph Lodge.

???: "Look at the surprise on you. Was a good choice I made, hand-picking this hotel." When a calm, cheerful voice cuts into his stupefaction.

Still stunned, Subaru slowly redirects his gaze—beyond the hedges, to where someone peers over at their group.

She has a white fur dress and an eye-catching fox scarf. The cold season has already gone, and the dress has fabric thin enough to call in season, but the scarf could be important since it's exactly the same as ever.

A slight frame and long, wavy violet hair. A pleasant smile on her charming face, and an indecipherable glint in her aquamarine eyes.

No doubt about it. This is the one who invited them here. A direct, face-to-face welcome from Anastasia Hoshin. And,

Anastasia: "Been some time since I last seen you. Many thanks to you for coming all the way. Figures to me the journey's worn you out. How says we spend time relaxing inside, then chat?"

Before Otto can return, she easily takes the lead.

—Everyone present can see so.

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Chapter 6 - Spirit Knights, Two Greedy Merchants, and One Selfless Angel



Contrary to everyone's expectations, Anastasia seemed to be striking a preemptive blow. The atmosphere in the Water Plume Pavilion tensed.

Emilia: "—Thanks for welcoming us in person, it really makes me feel at ease."

Coming out to meet Emilia was certainly calculated. While Subaru was lost in thought, a slightly confused Emilia voiced a reply, grabbing his attention.

Anastasia cast a frown at Subaru, probably pondering the origins of Garfiel, who was standing next to him, and Beatrice, who was clinging to his sleeve. Subaru, having spent many days frolicking with them in the mansion, was steadied by their presence.

Anastasia: “—The same face as always.” (*she has a kansai dialect)

Her gaze left Subaru for Emilia as she murmured to herself, her light green eyes bearing a hint of ridicule. Her relationship with Emilia had changed little in the year past; a small conflict between them wasn't unexpected.

Subaru: “Well, she's just as cute as... no, she's even cuter than before.”

Emilia: “Subaru, don't kid around with such a serious expression.”

Hearing her response, Subaru rubbed his nose with an air of awkwardness, noting that Beatrice was paying close attention to the proceedings. The corners of Anastasia's mouth lifted in a faint smile.

Anastasia: “Natsuki-kun, I heard that after the subjugation of the White Whale things went a bit awry. Are Roswaal's border territories doing well?”

Subaru: “Sorry you had to catch such unpleasant news. Thanks to your troops, we survived the aftermath. As companions, we'll mutually support each other, right?”

Anastasia: “Is that so? I'm glad you think so, too. The two of us were glad you could come. It's been a while since you've seen Julius, yes?”

Anastasia clapped her hands together, taking an opportunity to tease Subaru, who immediately caught on and frowned. Emilia and Anastasia laughed simultaneously, as Subaru grew uncomfortable, thinking that neither of them understood his complex relationship with Julius. He'd tried to explain it over and over to Emilia, but each attempt inevitably ended in failure.

Garfiel: “Ah... 's bit strange. Guess the woman's one of Emilia-sama's enemies?”

The previously silent Garfiel voiced a question, making no attempt to conceal his hostility. Subaru scratched his head in helpless embarrassment, and Anastasia's round eyes grew rounder.

Emilia: “Garfiel, you’re not wrong, but you’re putting it in a pretty extreme way. After all, weren’t we invited here?”

Garfiel: “Yah but still, won’t ya hav’t stab each other in the back one day? Th’s gonna sting after acting all buddy-buddy.”

Emilia: “That’s true. Garfiel’s a gentle person, so I’m worried about that...” Garfiel: “—hk! Who’s gentle! What’re ya talkin’ bout, Emilia-sama!”

As expected of him, Garfiel hurriedly tried to deflect Emilia’s words. Anastasia eyed him curiously, wondering why he seemed so embarrassed, when,

???: “Ah! Garf is here! Miss, why didn’t you tell me!?”

The wooden door of the inn was flung open with a bang. The racket was caused by Mimi, a catgirl whose lovely face shone brightly as she saw her audience. She flew into the room and surprised everyone by firmly grasping Garfiel’s arm.

Mimi: “Welcome! You’re tired, you’re tired, so Mimi will guide you to your room! That’s where you’ll be staying! Hey, you’re not budging at all!”

Garfiel: “O, Oi, wait, wait! My amazin’ self hasn’t agreed... you’re strong! What!?” Mimi: “This way! That way! Hurry!”

The petite Mimi clung to Garfiel’s arm and, though he should have been strong enough to break free, he was dragged along helplessly, nonetheless. Perhaps she was using a secret technique, but it’s more likely that Garfiel didn’t want to distance Mimi by shaking her off. After all, despite appearances, they were supposed to be the same age.

Anastasia: “Er...”

Garfiel allowed himself to be dragged away with little resistance and Anastasia had a rare troubled look on her face, as did Emilia.

Anastasia: “Hah, Mimi has always been lively, but even so, I was a bit surprised just now.”

Emilia: “Ah, that’s right. That’s good. I thought you might have felt she left you alone.”

Anastasia: “Not at all, that wouldn’t be a problem. However—”

After their exchange, Anastasia’s briefly softened gaze sharpened into a freezing calmness, and Subaru unconsciously moved to stand in front of Emilia.

Anastasia: “I’d like you to tell me what kind of a child he is, the one who has attracted Mimi’s attention.”

The dangerous question was loaded with the quiet, burning rage a woman would hold toward pests who surrounded her cute daughter or little sister. It subtly conveyed that Mimi was loved, and, although they’d arrived early, the thought of dealing with this left Subaru exhausted.

???: “...why is it, Natsuki-san, that you suddenly have such a tired face?”

At that moment, Otto, who had returned from securing the ground dragons and their carriage, found Subaru in an exhausted state and joined their gathering.

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Pristella’s famed hotel, the Water Plumage Pavilion, was tiled with wooden floor boards resembling tatami mats. This place was clearly geared toward exhausted pedestrians like Subaru, who immediately seated himself on a cushion. Beatrice calmly took a seat next to him, but Emilia and others seemed puzzled at the notion of sitting directly on the floor. The long wooden desk and the large hall were all reminiscent of a Japanese style inn, excluding the lack of an actual tatami floor.

However, a true expert like Subaru found places to detract points.

Subaru: “For example, this place lacks a sliding door and a paper door, and, unfortunately, the employees are not dressed kimonos. It’s poor taste to outwardly resemble a ryokan when the atmosphere is not faithfully reproduced.”

Ultimately, Subaru can't shake away the uncomfortable feeling that the setting is straight out of a fantasy in spite of the employees' clothing and hospitality.

Subaru: "So, my grade totals to seventy points. This place is barely acceptable, but what is good is good, is how I would grade it. I hope you will work hard to improve in the future."

Beatrice: "What are you talking about, in fact?"

Subaru: "It's a kind cheap, spirited, and light-hearted kind of fun that relieves my frustration... so I'll be fine even if you let go of my hand."

Beatrice: "...just to be sure, I'll hold it for a little while longer, I suppose."

The grip on Subaru's left hand slightly strengthens, and he said no more, instead turning to face Emilia on his right. Emilia, who had been examining the strange surroundings, noticed his gaze.

Emilia: "It's so amazing, isn't it? It's only a little strange from the outside, but as soon as I enter it I feel sooo odd, sitting on the floor and taking off my shoes..."

Subaru: "I didn't have a bed in my bedroom, I had a futon on the floor. I'd be surprised if this place doesn't have any... would the employees let me have one?"

Otto: "What an unusual and unnecessary proposition... or, rather, is Natsuki-san familiar with Kararagi-style customs?"

Otto, sitting opposite Beatrice, joins the conversation. The phrase 'Kararagi-style' caught Subaru's attention.

Subaru: "'Kararagi-style'? Is this building a product of it?"

Otto: "That's right, these Wafu architectural styles are designs taken from Kararagi, although their use isn't widespread here. In Kararagi itself, designs similar to the Water Plumage Pavilion's are considered traditional."

Subaru: “So why is this hotel in that style? Is it a diplomacy thing?”

This building was doubtlessly of Japanese design. Subaru wanted to confirm his suspicions on why that was.

As if to supplement Subaru’s thoughts, Otto raised a finger and spoke.

Otto: “That would be because of Pristella’s history itself. Hoshin of the Wastes was responsible for its construction. I trust you’ve heard of him?”

Subaru: “Really, I’ve heard a bit about this Hoshin of the Wastes.”

Otto: “Despite being born in such a dark age, he managed so many achievements. Even calling him a Sage wouldn’t be a stretch. However, it was due to how dazzling he was that disputes ended up happening.”

Otto’s story took place just over a hundred years ago, when Pristella was split between Lugunican and Kararagian cultures. Pristella was geographically Lugunican, but its founder Hoshin considered himself and was considered Kararagian. Lugunica disliked the cultural influence of Kararagi and tried to eradicate all traces of its culture, but the locals took offense and protested, which led to several territorial disputes between Lugunica and Kararagi. Eventually, diplomatic relations deteriorated to the point where both countries were on the verge of cutting off their relationship.

Otto: “Fortunately, this didn’t last. Gradually, regulations became more relaxed, and Lugunica and Kararagi mended their relations. During that period, the import of the customs of Kararagi slowed. It was probably due to that that Lugunica felt secure in letting its security measures become more lax.”

Subaru: “In any case, it’s good the problem was solved. So Kararagi customs can be traced back to Hoshin?”

Otto: “It seems so. Hoshin was a person with innovative ideas from the start. His influences on ideology, technology, and legislation were immense.”

Subaru: “—I see.”

Subaru had received his answer. Otto's story confirmed that Kararagi's founder, Hoshin of the Wastes, had the same identity as Subaru and Al, a person summoned from a different world.

Subaru now knew of three people who had been summonsed at various times; Hoshin from 400 years ago, Al from 20 years ago, and himself from one year ago.

Subaru didn't understand the time gap, or why he was chosen, and it was meaningless for him to speculate wildly. But he certainly wasn't alone. Just knowing that granted Subaru's heart some small salvation.

Anastasia: "—It would appear that everyone's enjoying the inn."

A thin sliding door made of wood slid open quietly, and Anastasia, entering with perfect timing, stood at the other side with a smile.

And, standing next to her,

???: "Long time no see, Emilia-sama. I sincerely apologize for being late. I should have been the first to welcome you."

A man with an apologetic face and a sweet, soft spoken voice. Just from hearing it, many women would assume it to be the voice of an angel. An amusing pipe dream, but the voice did have the necessary color, beauty, and strength. This was the voice of the Knight of Knights, Julius Juukulus, which existed solely to vex. At least, that was how it felt to Subaru.

Emilia: "Mm, it's been a while, Julius. You look like you're doing well."

Julius: "I am grateful for your consideration. Likewise, Emilia sama's kindness and beauty are ever the more polished. It's as if the shade of your gaze alone strengthens this kingdom, while the rest of the world suffers a loss."

Subaru found his speech, as always, pretentious and disgusting. Julius turned his gaze to him.

Julius: "It's been a while since we've met face to face. You seem lively as always, Natsuki Subaru-dono."

Subaru: "...Stop with your phony attitude, it sends shivers down my spine. Subaru-dono my ass, you're so transparent."

Julius: "It's a well-known fact that you were recognized as Emilia-sama's knight. Your former disrespect of the position should now be disregarded by both of us. First and foremost, as a knight, are you trying to behave accordingly?"

Watching Julius's virtuous attitude, Subaru scowled.

Subaru: "Yeah, I'm her knight now. No one thought I could do it, but here I am."

Julius: "I see. Although your position has changed, your attitude has not. —In that case, I will make due without the courtesy."

Julius dropped his formal attitude and gave a slight smile before approaching and looking down towards Subaru who was sitting on the floor.

Julius: "Then, once again... long time no see, Natsuki Subaru. Do you work hard every day to be an honorable knight?"

Subaru: "Do you even need to ask? After all, I was beaten horribly by someone who thought I was dishonorable, or whatever."

Julius: "It seems my reputation is being attacked. I recall it being an honorable duel." Subaru: "Don't oversimplify, you bastard..."

However, the one at fault was Subaru, and even if he tried to say otherwise it would only make himself look worse. So Subaru, rather than futilely defend himself, insulted Julius in a light exchange of banter. Seeing this, Julius narrowed his eyes as if to say "hmm",

Julius: “It seems that your shortcomings have been rectified somewhat. If you learn to see things with a knight’s perspective, you would go far. Emilia-sama and Roswaal-sama have an eye for potential, it seems. Even so...”

Julius: “—?”

After appraising Subaru, Julius’s looked around until his yellow eyes stopped on Beatrice, who met his gaze steadily with her own pale blue eyes.

Beatrice: “What is it? You shouldn’t stare too hard at a lady, I suppose.”

Julius: “That was terribly rude of me. I did not expect that a high-level spirit like you would be present here.”

Beatrice: “Because Betty is Subaru’s partner, it is natural I appear here. I am on a completely different level than the quasi spirits who you have brought in. I wonder if you are afraid of me, in fact.”

Beatrice stands with her hands on Subaru’s shoulders and her chest puffed up. That grumpy attitude is based on Julius’s attitude toward Subaru, who is inferior to Julius in every way except one. Both are spirit knights, but Subaru’s contracted spirit is of a higher grade.

Julius was accompanied by his six quasi-spirits corresponding to the six attributes. Greater spirits were stronger than quasi spirits, who were stronger than lesser spirits. Taking that into consideration, it could be said that Subaru and Beatrice were the stronger team.

—However,

Subaru: “If you’re comparing actual ability, we have so many faults and are such a waste of potential that we can’t even compare to his quasi spirits.”

Beatrice: “Hmph. If he does not stop disrespecting Subaru... I will tell you what will happen if you disdain Betty’s partner, even if you are a handsome man who causes Betty’s heart to waver, I suppose!”

Subaru: “A handsome man who causes your heart to waver!?”

That was hardly what Subaru wanted to hear, but it was Julius himself, the cause of the crack in their relationship, who caught the reason for it.

Julis: “Do not misunderstand, your spirit is not going to betray you. Her instinct is merely being shaken by my divine protection.”

Subaru: “Your protection...? Seriously, you also have one? What kind of protection?”

Julius: “The protection I have is the Blessing of Gathering Spirits. Simply speaking, it is a kind of blessing that garners the favor of spirits. I also have a contract with quasi-spirits of six attributes. Only with the power of that protection am I able to maintain them.”

Beatrice: “Betty will not lose! Subaru is better than you... I suppose!” Subaru: “Thank you! Please, don’t hurt me any further!”

Although the bond of trust between Subaru and Beatrice was unbreakable, he was still disappointed at his lack of a firm response. Whenever Subaru faced Julius he would, without fail, become worked up over any of his own shortcomings. That was the main reason for his former hatred of Julius.

Anastasia: “As usual, our knight is attentive to Natsuki-kun.”

Julius: “Not at all. I am merely discussing the attitude of a knight as his senior. The knights of the kingdom of Lugunica may be judged from his behavior.”

Anastasia: “Well, Natsuki-kun already has a reputation as a knight, doesn’t he? That Julius really is dishonest.”

In response to Anastasia’s teasing, Julius lowers his head and nods silently. Anastasia probably would have won anyway, only to be smug about it later. Their motions had that air of familiarity.

—Beatrice patted Subaru’s left shoulder, while Emilia his right.

Beatrice: "Don't be too worried, in fact. Looks aren't everything, I suppose."

Emilia: "I'm glad that Subaru and Julius are getting along, I'd be happy if you two became good friends."

How would other people view this? All Subaru could receive from them was unhelpful comfort. He scratched his cheek with frustration as Anastasia took a seat across from him.

Subaru: "Come to think of it, why are only the two of you here? Mimi and Garfiel... are probably on a date, but..."

Anastasia: "It's like you said, Mimi is with the blond child right now. Hetaro adores his sister and is probably keeping an eye on them, and Tivey is probably keeping an eye on Hetaro.

That's why they're not with me at the moment."

Subaru: "Did Ricardo not come? I know that the kitten triplets are pretty strong, but isn't it comforting to have a full grown knight around?"

It was odd that the triplets were here, but Ricardo, who usually handled their antics, was missing, as was Julius's brother Joshua.

Julius: "Unfortunately, we're not just in Pristella for fun. Ricardo and my brother Joshua have business elsewhere. You should have met him by now, yes?"

Subaru: "Yeah... and he's a lot like you. If his frame were a little steadier, he could play you perfectly. Actually, he should do that anyway. You can leave now."

Julius: "I'll keep your interesting opinion in mind, but that would be difficult for Joshua. He's not a child well suited for excessive travel. Frustratingly, I hold several concerns about him, as his older brother."

To Subaru's annoyance, Julius took him seriously and began worrying about Joshua. Otto interrupted Subaru's awkward silence by clearing his throat.

Otto: “Ehm — I don’t mind this casual atmosphere, but now that almost everyone’s here, could we all give introductions?”

Anastasia: “I’d like introductions too, since the only people here I really know are Emilia-san and Natsuki-kun. I especially want to hear more about this competent seeming officer and the powerful great spirit-chan.”

Otto: “Oioi, it’s really not like you to be lacking information, Anastasia-sama. Is something amiss in your reports?”

Anastasia: “I can imagine why you would have that impression, but I think it would be best if we don’t get into whose information is accurate!”

Dodging a question by the competent seeming officer, she gives a nod to Julius.

Julius: “Allow me to reintroduce myself. I am Julius Juukulius of the Knights of the Kingdom of Lugunica, although presently I am only serving as Anastasia-sama’s knight.”

Julius gave Otto a slight bow, who nodded in response to his elegant gesture. Julius then moved on to an introduction of his master, Anastasia.

Julius: “I present one the candidates for king of the Kingdom of Lugunica, Anastasia Hoshin, the gifted businesswoman who runs Kararagi’s Hoshin Company.”

Otto: “Right... right, yes!”

Subaru: “Don’t bow to just an introduction!”

Otto: “—hk! It was a mistake, the momentum was overwhelming!”

Subaru gave the back of Otto’s head a whack, as Anastasia watched, pleased with Julius’s introduction.

Subaru: “Don’t be intimidated by titles! Our Emilia-tan is a wonderful candidate for the same throne, and she won’t lose to Anastasia!”

Emilia: "Mm, that's right. I'm also a candidate, so I'll do my best." Subaru: "Ahhhh, you're so cute. I can't help but say EMT!" Emilia: "I'm somewhat troubled that I find your antics calming..."

Seeing their typical, pointless, banter, Otto regains his composure and faces the opposing camp.

Otto: "Thank you for your detailed introduction. I'm slightly late in saying this, but I'm Otto Suwen, Emilia-sama's Minister of Internal Affairs... Yes, thanks to a certain circumstances caused by a certain someone, a Minister of Internal Affairs is indeed what I am."

Subaru: "There seems to be bitterness about that decision."

Otto: "Originally I was going to be a simple merchant, but now what has become of me..."

Although his voice echoed with lament, Subaru stood firm, refusing to give Otto the opportunity to escape. Anastasia stuck her tongue out, in a show of sympathy for Otto.

Next, everyone turned to Beatrice. Seeing their gazes, she presented her small frame openly and squarely then declared,

Beatrice: "Betty is the great spirit Beatrice, I suppose. I am Subaru's contract spirit, I suppose. As you can see, I rank highly both as a spirit and in cuteness, in fact. I would appreciate some delicious tea and a sweet snack, I suppose."

Subaru: "Maintain dignity until the end!"

It would always be in Beatrice's nature to be a mascot character.

Subaru pulled her into his lap and began stroking her hair while she glared, displeased.

Subaru: "Well, that's why she's in a contract with me."

Julius: "I did believe you had a good compatibility with your spirit, and I wouldn't call this unexpected, but I didn't imagine a contract with a great spirit like Beatrice-sama would resemble this."

Subaru: "Don't praise my Beako too much. She's just like her family, anything nice will just go to her head."

Beatrice: "Hmph. I'm declaring my displeasure with that hasty treatment, in fact."

Beatrice gave him a look suggesting that she barely accepted him, and Subaru patted her cheek in response. Now that things had calmed down,

Otto: "Well, introductions are over and the atmosphere seems to have calmed down for time being. So, let's talk business, yes?"

As Emilia's Minister of Internal Affairs, it was Otto's role to take the lead in conversations like this and prevent them from being derailed. Anastasia answered while fiddling with her white fox fur scarf.

Anastasia: "Eh...? Well, it is our job as the hosts to entertain our guests. If you like." Otto: "Well then. First of all, what are your reasons for inviting us to Pristella?"

Anastasia: "Don't worry, you don't need to be so on guard. I'm not planning anything. A year has passed since the king's election started, and we haven't had opportunities to see each other recently, so I thought I'd just set one up."

Most people would be easily misled by her gentle demeanor, but Otto was a veteran at negotiating. The conversation had turned into a battle between merchants.

Otto: "Taking our situation into consideration, we're here because you lured us with bait. It's only natural that we would be cautious."

Ana: "Well, we did invite you here for a reason. There are souvenirs in Pristella that you would want, aren't there? Think of this as a gift."

Subaru: "...how did you know which gift we would want?"

Ana: "It's sort of company secret, Natsuki-kun. We'll just say that I'm an inquisitive gal and leave it at that."

Anastasia covered her mouth while laughing. It would be a stretch to say she was making fun of Subaru's frustration, but that was how it felt. Aware of his angst, Beatrice could not help but sigh, while Subaru wondered how Anastasia learned of their circumstances.

Emilia: "It's not something I was hiding, so it was inevitable for that information to leak."

Emilia's frank admission assuaged a part of Subaru's worries, and Anastasia blinked in Emilia's direction, who responded by tilting her head.

Emilia: "From this point onwards, I think that it would be better if everyone would appreciate what Anastasia's done, instead of being suspicious of her."

Anastasia: "...to respond to your enemy in such a well intentioned way. Besides, I'm not helping you purely for your benefit, Emilia-san."

Emilia: "But, thanks to you, I have a way to find what I've been looking for. Thank you. I don't know how I can repay you, but I truly do thank you."

Anastasia: "————"

Anastasia's eyes widened at Emilia's smiling response. To her surprise, Julius, seated next to her, softened his gaze, earning himself a glare.

Anastasia: "Is something strange, Julius?"

Julius: "No, it's merely that your surprised expression is so rare. I think that it is just as beautiful as your natural, unaffected face."

Anastasia: "Trying to escape with flattery... well, I still appreciate those sweet words."

With the help of Julius's words, Anastasia shook off her surprise and regained her usual tone. Then she fixed a sharpened gaze on a curious Emilia.

Anastasia: “Emilia-san, it’s been a year and you still have a disadvantage that you need to work around.”

Emilia: “Mm, I’m lacking in many areas and causing everyone so much trouble, so I’m trying hard to catch up as soon as I...”

Anastasia: “One correction; your greatest disadvantage isn’t that. It’s that you resemble a the terrifying witch from the stories.”

Anastasia exhales deeply and smiles, causing Emilia to stiffen in shock at her sudden change in attitude. Disregarding her, Anastasia turned to Subaru and Otto.

Anastasia: “What about you two? Will you continue to support her? If you do, her reputation will affect your own.”

Subaru: “I will, and I’ll do my best to, because it’s my policy to praise and support her no matter what!”

Otto: “Because of that, most of the burden lands on me. Funnily enough, I have no way out either...”

Subaru throwing a thumbs up, Otto glaring with a bitter gaze. Seeing their conflicting attitudes, Anastasia readjusted her scarf.

Anastasia: “Well, it’s fine. You surely understand the value of gratitude, after all.”

Otto: “Gratitude, huh? Gratitude is great. You don’t have to keep it in the inventory, and there’s no deadline attached to it.”

Anastasia: “Yep, isn’t that right? And most importantly—”

Otto’s words matched Anastasia’s as the two each revealed the face of a merchant.

Anastasia and Otto: “—You don’t have to put a price tag on it.”

They spoke unanimously.

Anastasia clapped her hands as Otto drooped his shoulders. It seemed that this was an established saying. Their perspectives on gratitude were chillingly identical.

Anastasia: “Now, back to what Emilia-san needs... a colorless magical ore, one of the highest possible grade of purity.”

Emilia: “Yes, that’s right, can you tell me what you know?”

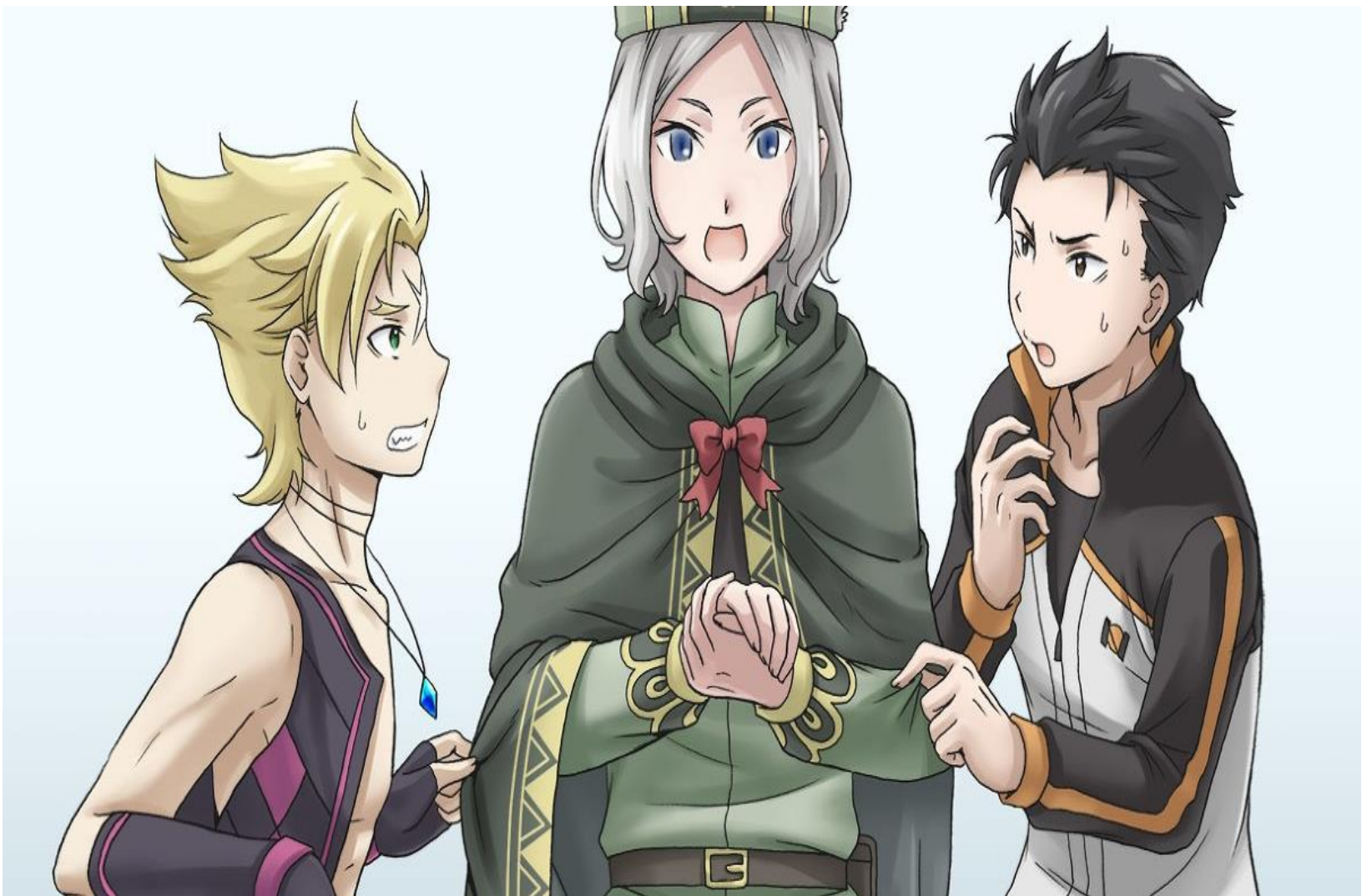
On the way to Pristella, Emilia, having consciously realized that she had been acting out of selfishness, had felt guilty and hadn’t wanted to involve Subaru and Otto and the others.

Nevertheless, with the opportunity right in front of her, she of course needed to act. She was closer than ever to seeing her precious family again.

Ana: “The best supplier of high density ore is Muse Company. The person responsible for it currently resides in this town, Kiritaka Muse—a man whose heart was stolen by a songstress.”

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Chapter 7 - The Sinful Man Sets Sail



Subaru: "His heart was stolen by a Songstress... is that a nickname? It doesn't sound cool at all, but he's using it as if it is."

Upon hearing Subaru's response, Anastasia laughs before playing with the tips of her soft hair.

Anastasia: "You're right, it sounds more like a nickname than a title. But, that's what he claims. 'My heart was stolen by a Songstress.'"

Subaru: "Eh, what does that even mean?"

Anastasia: “His heart was stolen by a woman, and he proudly and publicly announces it— doesn’t that remind you of what happened during the Royal Selection in the capital?”

Subaru: “Leave that dark, embarrassing history out of this.”

Subaru’s face twists just thinking of the humiliation at Julius’s hands. It made him want to grab his head and roll on the floor. Even though he still believed he was in the right, his way of expressing his thoughts left much to be desired. Anyway,

Subaru: “I see what you mean though. Although I regret to admit it, I can actually relate. Then, what’s he like?”

Anastasia: “The nickname is rather excessive, but the man himself is both responsible and flexible. Being named heir to Muse Company takes more than just being the eldest son. There’s no need to doubt him as a businessman.”

Otto: “I can also guarantee that, Natsuki-san. The young master of Muse Company... Kiritaka Muse, is famous indeed. His skill is astounding, even without Muse Company’s already famous reputation for dealing with magical ore.”

As a merchant, Otto also knew of Kiritaka. However, after agreeing with her appraisal, he cast a sharp glare at Anastasia.

Otto: “Indeed, Emilia-sama needs pure magical stones from a professional supplier, and we sent inquiry to Muse Company... but they weren’t open to negotiation. It does make one wonder how and why Anastasia-sama is securing their aid.”

Anastasia: “Perhaps it is a matter of trust? Maybe it is a matter of sincerity. Whatever the case, one side must be willing to approach the other in order to establish a working relationship, don’t you agree?”

Otto: “...I guess you could say that.”

Otto gave up on challenging the impassive Anastasia, who had been feigning a poor understanding of the situation. He moved on to discuss the magical stones themselves.

Otto: "First of all, do they actually have the rare magical stone we're looking for?"

Anastasia: "I can understand your suspicions, but I'm sure you realize it would be obvious if we were simply lying about a prominent trader."

Otto: "I see. Then, are there any other conditions, or is it alright for us to negotiate with him?"

Anastasia: "You're quite worried, but it's fine. Remember, I was simply aware of the location of the magical ore that Emilia-san's faction was looking for, and I've already explained why I gave you that information."

As Anastasia had said, gratitude required no price tag.

Otto, understanding this, relented his questioning of Anastasia. Seeing their conversation draw to a close, Emilia raised a nervous hand.

Emilia: "Um, is it okay if I ask something?"

Anastasia: "Please, go ahead. Anything involving our business and personal relationships are a matter of trust. Clearing doubts will give us peace of mind."

Emilia: "It seems this doesn't have much to do with money, does it..."

Anastasia: "This is more than just a matter of hourly wages, after all. Well, that's to be expected. Don't you agree, Natsuki-kun?"

Anastasia smiled at Subaru, who gave an indifferent shrug in response. Emilia continued to ask her questions,

Emilia: "You've told us a little about Kiritaka-san, but I'm still curious about the Songstress you mentioned. Is she someone famous?"

Although it was a simple question, Subaru also wanted an answer. As far as he knew, Kiritaka's surname, Muse, was something like a Goddess of Song in his world's mythology. It was an odd coincidence, but it could simply have been his fate to fall for a songstress.

Subaru: "I wonder if she's supposed to be some kind of mythical figure. Of course, she's not as influential as Hoshin of the Wastes. Actually, if Hoshin had fallen for someone mythical, it would have probably been a disaster."

Julius: "Rest assured, the Songstress Liliana-san is very real and currently remains in Pristella. Having been taken in by Kiritaka-san... that's what her position is like right now."

Subaru: "Currently... is that different from her normal situation?"

Julius: "I heard that she was originally a poetic bard who sang and travelled. Kiritaka-san saw one of her concerts, and the situation became what it is now."

Listening to Julius' answer, Subaru pictured a bird caught in a birdcage. Birds were animals who could live freely until they caught the eye of a master who would entrap them. Was that what Liliana's situation was like? Did Kiritaka's paranoid affection keep Liliana trapped?

Subaru: "That's an unpleasant story. Her singing shouldn't be meant for just one person, she should do it freely."

Julius: "I do agree with that, but there may be a misunderstanding here. Although, given Kiritaka-san's obsession with Liliana, it may be an inevitable conclusion."

Subaru: "My opinion of this Kiritaka guy just lowered somewhat. Will the negotiation really be fine? It's hard to imagine communicating with someone like that."

A greedy and disgusting rich man comes to mind, one who was gluttonous and lustful. As Otto had mentioned earlier, it was strange of him to turn a blind eye to Emilia's seemingly innocent search for magical ore. Subaru's impression of the man was poor indeed.

Subaru: "I'm not looking forward to showing my pretty Emilia-tan to such a person."

Julius: “Him seeing Emilia-sama shouldn’t be a problem. Kiritaka-san is a little difficult to handle, but he wouldn’t be so indiscreet. However...”

Julius broke off, as if unsure how to continue, leaving Subaru puzzled at his rare hesitation. Finally, Julius sighed quietly and shifted his gaze from Emilia to Subaru.

Julius: “It might be best not to bring Beatrice-sama with you.” Subaru: “What’s that supposed to mean!?”

Anastasia: “Well, Kiritaka-san and I are on good terms, so I’ve spoken with him enough to imagine what he would think.”

Julius’s and Anastasia’s words.

They lead to only one conclusion. Subaru stands up and,

Subaru: “... He’s a lolicon!?”

Julius: “It’s something that people can only speculate on. In other words, it’s an unconfirmed rumor. In any case, his tastes don’t change how charming Anastasia-sama is.”

Anastasia: “Your words lack elegance.”

Elegant or not, Anastasia didn’t seem to mind what Julius said. Subaru’s theory wasn’t refuted and he accepted that it was true. Even so, he thought to himself, are you serious.

Subaru: “More annoying lolicons, as if Clind-san weren’t enough trouble...”

Recalling the universally competent butler, Subaru wanted to bury his head in his hands. However, there was definitely a difference between Clind and Kiritaka’s tastes. Clind would probably show no interest in Anastasia. What Clind sought was inner youth and it was reflected by his attitude toward Emilia. He saw her inner immaturity and respected her as a loli in spirit.

—On the other hand, Kiritaka was a person who places emphasis on external appearances. Anastasia was probably around the same age as Subaru, but she looked significantly younger. Since her body

has little potential for further development, she could be considered a legal loli. Kiritaka's inclination to like her was obvious. And Beatrice...

Subaru: "Our Beako is a versatile loli that can accommodate the tastes of both Clind and Kiritaka..."

Beatrice: "I did not quite understand that, but I feel like it was a very rude comment, in fact."

Subaru: "Idiot! Ugh. I'm worried about you! You... you have have a dangerous appeal. You'll make me worry if you're not more aware!"

Beatrice: "I-, ah, mm... i-if you're that worried, then I suppose you're not doing anything wrong. Hehehe."

Although she didn't share Subaru's panic, Beatrice happily grabbed on to the hem of Subaru's sleeve. For the time being, Subaru was going to hold onto her tightly. As long as they were in this city, it would be a good idea to keep an eye on her.

Emilia: "So, um, does he just like short people?"

Anastasia: "Such an innocent response. No, it's more like he's the type of person who likes eating fresh, immature fruits..."

Subaru: "STOOOOOOP!! Don't say such dirty things to my angel! I understand now! No more is needed! Yes? Stop, stop!"

Subaru guarded Beatrice with his left hand and Emilia with his right. Anastasia laughed at Subaru's overprotectiveness while Julius showed a wry smile.

Otto: "Setting aside Natsuki-san's attitude, we accept your conditions. If possible, I would like to meet Kiritaka-san. Would I find him in Pristella's Chamber of Commerce?"

Anastasia: "That's right. Well, Kiritaka-san is pretty busy, seeing as he has to run many of the city's functions. I wonder which building you would find him in."

Anastasia responded to Otto's serious question with light teasing, who could only helplessly accept her answer. Otto brings his hand to his chin, then turns to Subaru.

Otto: "As expected, even the first step will be difficult. I would like to set up a safe place to calmly talk things through beforehand, but... where should we go?"

Subaru: "That's right... well, to be honest, I have no idea where anything is. So I was planning to just wander around."

From the main gate, Pristella didn't appear too large, but as an outsider, navigating the unfamiliar townscape would be a nightmare. Subaru is confident in his sense of direction, but how useful was that confidence in a town where travel was conducted by waterway?

Otto: "Perhaps, there are people giving tours along the waterway—after all, many tourists come here, and there are probably people who are giving tours to capitalize on that."

Subaru: "That wouldn't work, I'd definitely get seasick. Once in elementary school, I got so seasick crossing a lake on a field trip that people made fun of me for being drunk."

Beatrice: "I don't quite understand what that means, but you look like you have bad memories of it, in fact."

Looking at a reminiscing Subaru, Beatrice voiced her pity. In any case, Otto's suggestion was probably the best, so Subaru would have to accept it. When,

Julius: "Forgive me for interrupting your discussion, but that worry is needless." Emilia: "What do you mean, Julius?"

Emilia turned to look at Julius, who smiled faintly.

Julius: "It's simple. We've already sent messengers to correspond with Kiritaka-san."

Emilia: "Messengers?"

Julius: "My younger brother Joshua, of course. Ricardo is accompanying him."

Subaru was glad to finally know where those two were, but he was also somewhat annoyed. Although they were addressing a natural obligation,

Subaru: "It would have been nice if they were here to welcome us."

Julius: "Since we invited you, it's our duty to handle these arrangements. You don't need to be worried about the finer subtleties. They're not worth mentioning."

Subaru: "Don't bring them up then!"

Their banter was the same as always. On one hand, Subaru's respect for Julius's faction grew, but on the other, he was deeply troubled by his own faction's lack preparation. Anyway,

Anastasia: "In that case, you're probably all anxious, but we should probably wait for the two of them to come back. Speaking of which, my personal bodyguard hasn't returned."

Subaru: "Oh, right."

Subaru assumes a more relaxed posture and sits down. He prepares himself to answer questions about the absent Garfiel. Anastasia immediately follows that lead,

Anastasia: "As you can see, Mimi is absent—what's she doing? That child accompanying her... the one named Garfiel. Tell me about him."

Subaru: "His name is Garfiel Tinsel. He's 15 years old, the age where kids dream too much. He's in the habit of biting things and snoring loudly. But, other than that, he's an honest, straightforward kid. Even if his feelings are battered, his naive way of looking at things won't change. He's that kind of pure youth."

Anastasia: "That's likely true."

'I don't want my cute little sister stolen from me,' seemed to be what Anastasia is desperately, but sweetly, thinking. Even without considering his potential relationship with Mimi, Subaru thought of Garfiel as a cute little brother, and believed in making his value known.

Emilia: "I wonder what Songstress-san's famous voice sounds like. I feel sooo anxious. I wonder if she'd perform for me if I gave her a request."

Julius: "Don't worry, Liliana is someone well-versed in social customs. So if she's present at your meeting with Kiritaka-san, I'm sure she'd be eager to perform."

Emilia: "Wa, that's right. It sounds fun."

—Meanwhile, Julius's words seemed to further Emilia's interest in the Songstress. Otto, seeing the dialogue between the two groups, sighed.

Otto: "Since we're in opposing factions, I thought relationships would be more tense... did I overthink things?"

Beatrice: "You don't need to be discouraged, in fact. You're not thinking too much, Subaru and Emilia aren't thinking enough, I suppose."

Beatrice's rare show of sympathy confirmed Otto's suspicions that he will be mentally and physically overtaxed during his stay in Pristella.

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Joshua had returned, while Garfiel was soon to arrive as well.

Joshua: "Kiritaka-san is usually busy, but rather than being at the city hall today, he'll be at the his office in the Muse Company Headquarters, so this is an ideal time to visit him."

Anastasia: "That's that, then. Mm, you did well, Joshua."

Joshua, upon returning to his older brother and his lady, makes his report. After Anastasia nodded, satisfied, Joshua turned his gaze to Subaru.

Joshua: "...thank you for coming such a long way. I'm sure you've heard the story from Anastasia-sama by now, but we've established contact with Kiritaka-san."

Subaru: "Oh, thanks a lot. That saves us loads of time."

Joshua: "I do not enjoy helping you, I'm just following Anastasia-sama's orders. I really wanted to avoid having my brother meet you."

Subaru: "You're honest, as usual."

Julius's eyes widened at Joshua's frank speech. He was apparently unaware of the animosity Joshua held toward Subaru.

Julius: "Joshua. Everyone present, including him, are here under Anastasia-sama's invitation. Being rude to our guests will hurt Anastasia-sama's reputation, so please refrain from doing so."

Joshua: "...my sincere apologies, brother." (uses –sama honorific)

Julius sighs at Joshua, whose gaze had turned sulky. He then turned to Subaru and said apologetically,

Julius: "Apologies. From both of us. Usually, my brother does not engage in this kind of behavior... it seems that it's being caused by the unfamiliar environment."

Subaru: "I don't mind if you guys do it separately, but being picked on by both brothers together in this environment is kind of scary for me, too."

Julius: "Heh. We'll keep that in mind."

Julius responded to Subaru's words with a mixture of humor and irony. Joshua looked unsatisfied, but when Subaru caught his eye, he turned away. Was the reason intense jealousy?

Emilia: “Well, thanks to your favor, we can go visit Kiritaka-san now. Can we consider the inn a place to stay afterward?”

Anastasia: “Feel free to do so. The Water Plumage Pavilion is a lodging with a great track record, both in atmosphere and comfort. Please look forward to dinner.”

Emilia: “That’s true. In that case, we’ll look forward to it.”

Emilia smiled at the confident Anastasia, running a hand through her long silver hair.

Emilia: “We’ll be sure to speak properly with Kiritaka-san first so that we can enjoy a delicious dinner without any worries.”

As Emilia finished talking, she stood up to leave the inn. Subaru followed behind her as they made their way toward the the ship that Joshua had secured for them, when,

???: “Oi, Captain! Wait there! I’m tellin’ ya!”

Garfiel hurriedly leapt in front of the inn to intercept them. His shining blonde hair and clothes were slightly dirtied, and his expression was tired.

Garfiel: “Ah...h... foun’ya. Not fer th’ dog faced guy, don’t think I’d ‘f survived.”

Subaru: “By dog faced guy, do you mean Ricardo? Were you on a sweet date with Mimi, before her big, scary uncle interrupted?”

Garfiel: “A date? It’s no joke! Soon’s that midget dragged me ‘way, ‘nother midget same’s her attacked me ‘n nearly killed me. If I fought back, they’d prob’ly start cryin’, so instead I jus’ spent t’day runnin’ away...”

From Garfiel’s story, Subaru surmised that it had been Ricardo who had prevented that tragedy. Mimi, of course, had two twin brothers who could have caused it. Perhaps it was Tivey, whose calm disposition could have been hiding a sharper side. Or perhaps Hetaro, fearing that his sister would be

taken away, had displayed his siskon tendencies for the first time. Whoever it had been, the situation seemed fine now.

Garfiel: "So, seein's I didn' want'b excluded'm yer plans, I rushed over here, Captain."

Subaru: "Ah, my bad. We were planning on meeting the guy who's selling the magical ore. Thinking on it, I guess we should've waited for our bodyguard."

Garfiel: "Th's obvious, ya?"

Subaru added the relieved Garfiel to his party and made way for the docks. The boat that Subaru's group was going to ride on had already been prepared. All of the boats were fairly small with only enough room for eight people, including the boat's sailor.

Sailor: "There's a city law about boat size. If the boats are too large, the waterways get clogged, and it's unsafe if boats get too close together."

The dark-skinned sailor steering their boat was happy to answer Subaru's questions. Dragon carriages on wide highways weren't much of a problem, but on waterways, traffic rules needed to be set.

Sailor: "If a collision happens and a ship sinks, that's usually regarded as the fault of the sailor's lack of technique. Besides, a lot of these ships have been passed down from generation to generation, so losing one would mean losing your reputation as well."

Subaru: "Of course. Regarding the ships water dragons... are there any conflicts between them?"

Sailor: "The water dragons live here and, in a way, they manage to be polite with one another.

Like land dragons, they have good instincts and can be trusted to handle a smaller boat. "You should try one out if you have the chance", Subaru remembered the way he felt the first time he saw a land dragon and was excited by the sailor's recommendation. Maybe his first ride with a water dragon would evoke the same sense of wonder.

Emilia: "This is my first time crossing water with a ship. I'm soooo excited." Subaru: "Is that so? Well, this does feel different than the sea."

Emilia: "What is the 'sea'?"

Subaru: "Imagine an endless pool of water. My hometown was right next to it." Emilia: "Hmmm... but, that would be nice when you felt thirsty."

Subaru laughs in response to Emilia's childlike answer. Unfortunately, drinking sea water when you're thirsty would lead to death. Regardless, he couldn't mention that sea water is saltwater without it raising more questions.

Otto: "Where there's a river there's usually a bridge, but if you need to smuggle without crossing a bridge, your only other option is going by boat."

Subaru: "Sure sounds like you're talking from experience."

Otto: "I-It's not like I've ever done anything like that! I-It's just, second hand knowledge! Stop casting such strange suspicions on me, really!"

Garfiel: "Otto-nii, ya really sweatin' over there."

As if ignoring Otto's suspiciously specific denial, the boat followed the sailor's movements as it turned to join the main waterway ahead. Incredibly, the current was flowing against the direction of the boats.

Subaru: "What, how is the water flowing like this?"

Emilia: "Hehehe. I actually know the answer to that. Look, see the city walls."

She lightly patted Subaru's shoulder and pointed into the distance with her free hand. Subaru cast his gaze in that direction and saw the great stone towers stationed on the city's walls. There were four of these towers, oriented north, south, east, and west of the city.

Emilia: “Those towers control the flow of water in the town. It uses a sophisticated magical mechanism that operates with the power of a magical water stone. It seems that the big floodgates in the city are also controlled by it.”

Subaru: “Wow, that is incredible. This is even cooler than the travel laws.”

Thanks to Emilia’s explanation, Subaru more or less understood the mysterious mechanism behind the flowing water. Sure enough, the Watergate City Pristella was very different from the others, and Subaru still had much he needed to learn about it, including the city’s laws.

Subaru: “The laws here are closely related to the operation of the city, right?”

Emilia: “Is this about Kiritaka-san? Like I said. I wonder what kind of a person he is... it would be great if he gave us the magical ore upon hearing our story.”

Touching the pendant hanging on her chest, Emilia murmured her hopes uncertainly. While listening to her murmurs, Subaru placed his hands on his chin and closed his eyes. Then, he swayed his head along with the movement of the boat and whispered,

Subaru: “_____.”

Beatrice: “...I didn’t catch what you said just now, I suppose.”

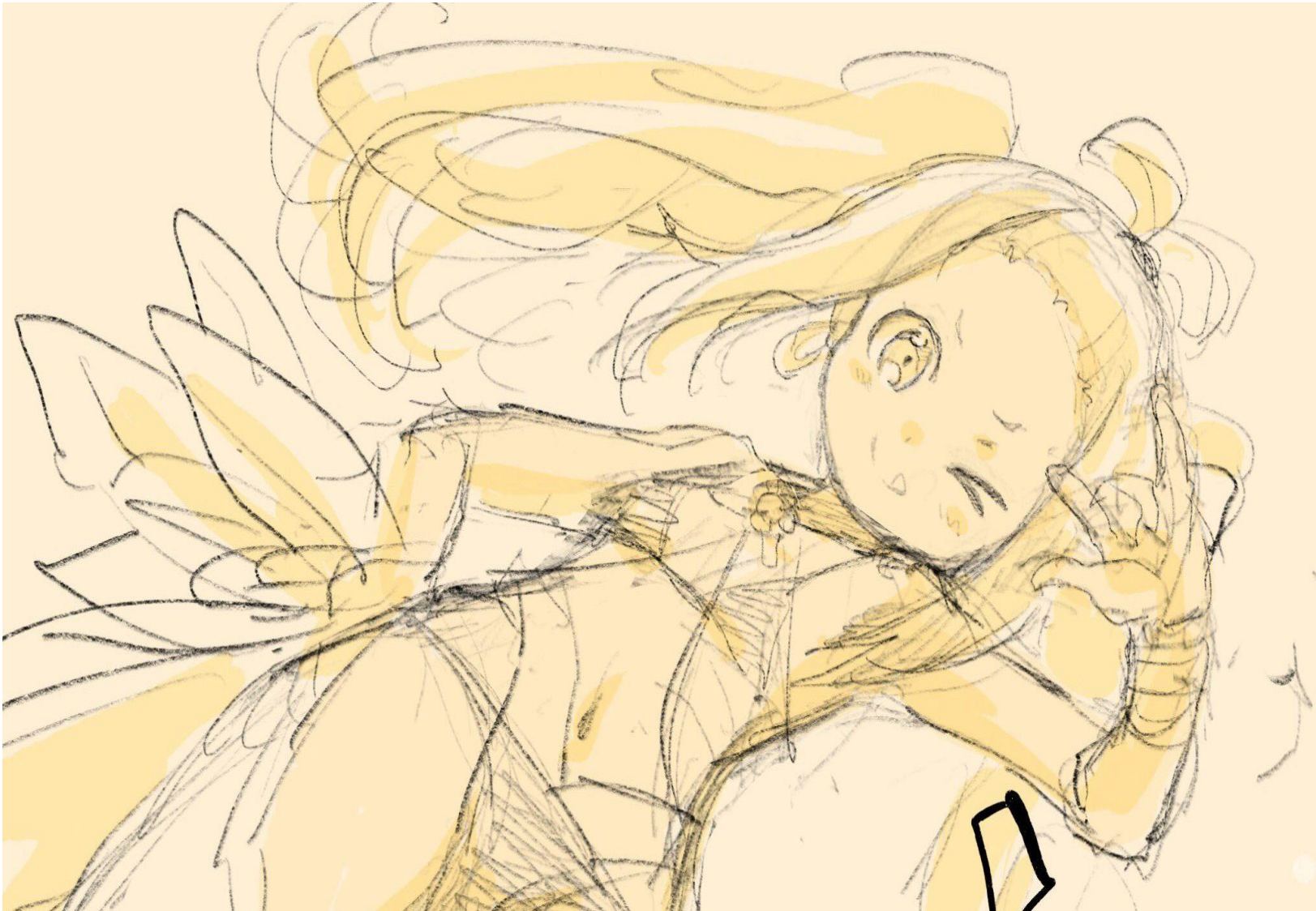
Beatrice was probably the only one who could hear him. Upon hearing her loud voice, everyone turned to stare at him. Feeling their gazes fixed on him, Subaru smiled and said,

Subaru: “Crap, I’m gonna puke.”

—In that moment, a fuss was created.

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Chapter 8 - Traveling With Seasickness



Beatrice: "You should be better now, I suppose."

Subaru: "No, wait a little more. Wow, this is terrible, the world is still shaking. I'm still shaking. Even death can't cure this sickness..."

On a street facing a large aqueduct, Subaru and Beatrice sat side by side, their feet dangling over the side of the waterway. Together, they admired the flow of the clear water. Passerbys smiled faintly upon seeing them. Perhaps they assumed they were siblings, or perhaps they thought they were tourists who had never seen such structures.

Subaru: “Neither of those assumptions are entirely wrong... but it’s sad that they don’t really know what our relationship is. Ueh.”

Beatrice: “You should focus on recovering rather than pointlessly worrying, in fact. I wonder why you think Betty is here, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Were you worried that I’d be lonely? Beako is so kind.”

Beatrice: “...that’s irrelevant, in fact. Just hurry up and get better, I suppose.”

In order to accommodate the weight of Subaru leaning against her, Beatrice strained her small frame. Seeing this, Subaru’s love for her increased exponentially. Could it ever stop growing?

About fifteen minutes ago, Subaru had been forced to continue his journey on foot after the fuss he had created with his seasickness. Emilia, Otto, Garfiel remained on the boat to head for the negotiations with the Muse Company and Kiritaka.

Originally, Emilia had also wanted to accompany Subaru on foot, but Otto had said, “The longer we keep the other party waiting, the worse our impression will be”.

Heeding his advice, she left Subaru behind. It was most likely the right decision.

Subaru: “Well, even if Anastasia had told us to be careful... in broad daylight, most people probably aren’t going to try anything.”

Certainly, there was anxiety in being left alone in an unfamiliar city after being invited there by a political opponent, but there was an escort named Garfiel to deal with that.

However, the currently alone Subaru was important enough to Emilia Camp that an attack on him wasn’t completely inconceivable.

Even so, if Anastasia had malicious intent, she was too savvy to orchestrate an attack on him in the middle of the day. In addition, Subaru trusted that Julius wouldn’t condone any type of ambush.

Subaru: “As he had said, a knight must remain chivalrous at all times...”

Beatrice: “Subaru. It’s rather annoying when you laugh to yourself, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Wait, I totally wasn’t laughing! Well, I’d never think of that guy and laugh! Anyway, let’s go.”

Subaru stood up and took a deep breath, rubbing his arms and neck lightly. Although they still felt a little heavy, the seasickness was mostly gone. He could more or less move around normally again.

Beatrice: “Well, Betty will help if needed, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Ohh, I’m counting on you. Even so, I doubt anything will happen. Only an idiot would attack us in broad daylight with so many people around.”

All of the king candidates needed to keep an eye on their reputation. In public, they needed to appear both pleasant and authentic. Emilia, who was a naturally honest and kind girl, did not need to worry herself about pretenses.

Subaru: “In other words, Emilia’s real advantage over the other candidates is her angelic innocence...!”

Beatrice: “Your thoughts are going in an unpleasant direction, in fact. —Subaru, Subaru, look, let’s go that way, I suppose. Follow me.”

In the past year, Beatrice had become entirely accustomed to putting up with the easily distracted Subaru. She had been navigating through the unfamiliar cityscape with ease while leading him by hand. Muse Company’s headquarters was apparently located at the boundary between the first and second districts. Subaru, having been seasick, had only dimly registered the directions, but Beatrice had memorized them all. If they had one problem, it would be the complexity of Pristella’s pathways.

Although they had arrived by following the main canal, they had to take detours around the several small waterways feeding into the main one. Sometimes there were bridges, but on several occasions Subaru needed to jump over a narrow waterway while carrying Beatrice.

Beatrice: "Subaru, that is a splendid fountain, I suppose." Subaru: "You're right... Beako, how did we get to the park?"

The fountain which had caught Beatrice's attention stood in the center of a park. It was surrounded by well maintained flowerbeds and children playing games. This was indeed a peaceful and relaxing sight. The only issue was,

Subaru: "Is this where we're suppose to be going? This is the last place I'd picture finding the heir of a large company. If businessmen made deals here, then all of their money would get wet."

Beatrice: "I wonder if seasickness makes you cynical, I suppose. That's the first thing you think of upon seeing this beautiful scenery... Betty feels sorry for you, in fact."

Subaru: "The old you would have blushed and tried to hide this mistake, but now you're becoming rather fresh... you're breaking your father's heart."

Beatrice: "Y-You're four hundred years too early to be calling yourself Betty's father! Subaru lacks consciousness in discussing such matters, in fact!"

Subaru was unsure why Beatrice had overreacted to the latter half of his sentence, but didn't pursue the issue. Their problem right now was figuring out how they arrived at the park.

Subaru: "Beako. Since you were leading me so confidently, I thought you knew the way?"

Beatrice: "I know the destination, in fact. However, the roads were complicated, I suppose. In order to avoid getting lost, I used the 'left-hand method' that I'd read about before. It didn't work, I suppose."

Subaru: "The 'left hand method'?"

Beatrice: "Holding out your left hand and following the wall, in fact." Subaru: "Isn't that for mazes!?"

Beatrice's method was the a well known tactic in conquering a maze. Subaru recognized its effectiveness, but there were a number of drawbacks, too. Namely,

Subaru: "If you start using the left hand method in the middle of a maze, you might end up touching the inside wall and never be able to leave! Furthermore, we're not in a maze, we're in a city!"

Beatrice: "Hmph! It's just like Subaru to disregard tried and tested wisdom, I suppose. Betty was a librarian managing a forbidden archive. She pities any fool who disregards the wisdom of history, in fact."

Subaru: "I'm not a fool, you're a fool for assuming you understand everything!"

She was old enough to be self-righteous (400 years) but it took her long enough to enter the outside world (400 years) that there was a big enough gap (400 years) between her logic and common sense. And so, she was a surprisingly unreliable loli.

Beatrice: "I wonder if Subaru has a better idea, in fact. Let's see you try, I suppose." She put her hands on her waist, fixating on Subaru with a disagreeable glare.

—On the other hand, Subaru had just suffered the embarrassment of letting Beatrice see his seasickness and wanted to make up for it by appearing reliable.

Subaru: "Ha ha. You correctly decided that this place is like a labyrinth, but you were wrong to think that it was a perfect maze and to use the left hand rule. I have some less flawed, no, flawless tactics."

Beatrice: "Ho ho, you're pretty confident, I suppose. Go ahead and tell me your plan, in fact."

Subaru: "Hee, I'll tell you. Its name is the Caged Method."

Beatrice: "——?"

Beatrice tilted her head, a question mark floating above it. The name didn't convey the actual content of his plan, so Subaru cleared his throat and started to explain thoroughly.

Subaru: "Okay. First of all, we'll call our current position the starting point. If we proceed, we'll eventually come to a fork. We'll continue until we hit a dead end. Then, we'll go back to our first fork."

Beatrice: "...mm, continue, I suppose."

Subaru: "Then, we'll map that branch and choose another one. Using the same method as the first branch, we'll walk until we hit a dead end. Eventually, we'll have every branch and every path of the dungeon mapped out."

Beatrice: "That would take far too long, in fact! I wonder if we would even arrive before nightfall, I suppose!"

Subaru: "I-Idiot! What's wrong with taking the certain path!? How many people do you think safely survived a dungeon with this method? I'm doing just as you said, relying on the wisdom of history!"

Beatrice: "Losing sight of your goal by relying on wisdom is a bad habit, in fact!"

Certainly, it hurt that Beatrice trampled on his idea, but even Subaru had to admit his plan had too many faults. It was a time consuming tactic, and besides, they had no pen or paper with which to draw a map.

Subaru: "Then there's only one other method..."

Beatrice: "What is it, in fact? Betty's trust in you is significantly lower now, I suppose."

Although this method was reliable, it wasn't going to improve Subaru's image. Acting in good faith doesn't make you reliable.

Subaru: "Okay, we'll have to work together here." Beatrice: "On what?"

Subaru: "Let's humbly ask for directions."

Beatrice: "That's fine, in fact..."

Subaru had accepted that he couldn't solve the problem on his own. He thought Beatrice's pride would be the only problem, but she seemed okay with it as well. Fortunately, Kiritaka Muse was both a famous merchant and heavily involved in urban planning. Everyone would know where his office was. With that in mind, Subaru looked around, hoping to find someone to ask. But,

Subaru: “Even though this is a park, there’s nobody here.”

Beatrice: “The timing is bad, in fact. It’s late afternoon, the perfect time for naps, I suppose.”

Subaru definitely agreed with Beatrice and the temptation to nap in the shade rose. He decided to head back to the direction of the main canal, where there were more people, when,

Subaru: “—Do you hear something?”

The faint sound of wind and water. No, it was the sound of a singing human voice?

“_____”

Subaru could hear it only intermittently, but he was drawn toward it, looking for the source. Beside him, Beatrice also seemed to be moving toward the sound.

Upon arriving at the scene, they stood, overwhelmed, forgetting to even breathe.

—A lone girl stood in front of a monument at the back of the park, her voice raised in song.

She was a small girl with dark skin, large round eyes, and a vibrant face. Her crisp yellow twintails were decorated with small, strange ornaments. In her hands, she held an instrument between the size of a guitar and an ukulele. She played and sang simultaneously.

The energy contained in the song could only be described as overwhelming.

Subaru, listening to her sing, felt a nonexistent squall by his face and a nonexistent earthquake under his feet. The clarity, the volume, of her song was overwhelming. Her voice, singing a balladic tune, was the only sound in existence.

“_____”

That lone girl, using only her voice and fingertips, created an energy comparable to that of an orchestra.

Subaru was far from the only one who had been utterly captivated by her. There was an audience of around twenty people, all holding their breaths, completely unaware of Subaru. Likewise, Subaru had only noticed the singing girl, whose presence entirely dominated the space.

As Subaru's entire body trembled, the girl's song came to its climax and the audience's enthusiasm came to its peak—

Girl: “—Without money, without a future, without hope, with only vanity. What can I see but the darkness? And beyond that darkness, nothing. The end, the end, the end is approach—”

Subaru: “How is this song so exciting even after calming down, Oi?!”

Girl: “Huh!?”

The song which even dreams couldn't create was unexpectedly interrupted by Subaru.

As soon as he had surprised her, the girl had stopped singing and dropped her instruments. Of course, the music had also stopped. —Immediately, the intense atmosphere surrounding the girl vanished.

Subaru realized that he had messed up.

Subaru: “Oh no, I didn't read the mood. Sorry, I didn't mean—that hurts! —hk! —ow! —eh!?”

Beatrice: “Subaru you idiot, it's ruined, in fact. What a waste of a rare and lovely mood, in fact. You just had to thoughtlessly ruin it, I suppose. You've gone too far, in fact.”

Before he could apologize, a sharp pain pierced his toes. Looking down, he saw an indignant Beatrice stomping on his foot with her heel. Beatrice seemed to return to reality when the song was interrupted, and considered that interruption unforgivable. Then,

“Oh... what was that song?” “This is a park ... just a little while ago, I was in the darkness.” “No, I couldn't help it at the time, but...”

The audience who had been swallowed by the song slowly tumbled back into the reality. Everyone turned to the criminal who had ruined the song. That was Natsuki Subaru—a man who had a reputation for failing to read the mood.

“—Don’t do thoughtless things!”

Everyone loudly and angrily cursed Subaru.

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Beatrice: “Thank you everyone, I suppose. Actually, I enjoyed it.”

Subaru: “Don’t sound so happy. Take a look at my feet, are they still the same size? Are my feet okay?”

Beatrice: “I wouldn’t care, in fact. For now, don’t consider Betty your companion, I suppose.”

Beatrice turned her face away and stubbornly denied Subaru, so he checked on his own. His right foot had almost doubled in size.

Subaru had poured water on the concert, so their reaction wasn’t entirely unexpected.

One by one, the audience had thanked the girl who sang and shook hands with her, and about half of them had stepped on Subaru’s foot before leaving. Subaru had been unable to say anything, and Beatrice had tolerated it, leaving Subaru a public enemy. Subaru prepared himself for both external and internal bleeding in his feet.

Subaru: “Don’t you think you should let me rely on your healing magic?”

Beatrice: “It would be a waste of my slowly accumulating mana, in fact. Wait for it to heal naturally, or ask Emilia, I suppose.”

Subaru: “You and Emilia’ve been taking care of me for a long time, huh.”

Since he’d come to this world, he’d sustained a steadily increasing amount of injuries, but they rarely lasted. Even injuries from his daily parkour, such as bruises, abrasions, and sprains, would be promptly healed by Emilia or Beatrice. His fear of pain hadn’t diminished, but there was a relief in knowing that his injuries all had a cure.

Subaru: "Well, I'll just treat the pain as a lesson this time."

That said, Subaru caressed Beatrice's head, who was still turned away. Beatrice gave him her gentle hands.

Beatrice: "Well... well, I suppose it's fine, in fact. As long as you reflect on it and learn your lesson, I suppose."

Subaru: "Yep, I'll do just that. Sorry, I was wrong..."

Subaru and Beatrice finished their talk, and turned to the girl. Because he'd been troublesome for her, Subaru would try to apologize. The girl, who had been watching the entire time, said,

Girl: "An inspiration!" Subaru: "Eh?"

Girl: "Listen. —I don't know the difference between our years."

Leaving a staggering Subaru behind, the girl strings her the instrument and instantly finds a rhythm. She timed herself, breathed in a small breath, and started to sing.

Girl: "My love, do you see it, do you feel it? The difference between our ages. Even though our surroundings may change, I wouldn't care one bit. All I care about is our height difference. Wait, my love. Please wait a moment. A little bit, a little bit, just a little bit more. If I stand on the tips of my toes, I can reach you. If the two of us stay so close together, the difference in our ages is irrelevant. So please, only two years, please wait that long. The distance between our love is sweetly melting away."

Subaru: "As the distance in our love shrinks, it turns into a quiet, burning love. Eventually, two cranes will deliver to us two children, and our future will be a bright love story."

Beatrice: "Eeeehhhhh!?"

At the end of the girl's song, Subaru suddenly joined in with a rap. Beatrice raised her voice with astonishment, demanding an explanation.

Beatrice: "Wait a minute! Why... why is Subaru suddenly part of the song, I suppose? Why did you just accept his addition, in fact?"

Subaru: "Oioi, what are you talking about, Beako... does the song cross a line?"

Liliana: "Well said, Liliana's heart is trembling with excitement!"

Beatrice: "Y-Your attitude that Betty is the wrong is unacceptable, I suppose..."

Subaru, feeling bad for Beatrice who had no one on her side, turned to the dark skinned girl.

Subaru: "Let me mention that Beako and I aren't in the kind of relationship that you're thinking of. Even if she grew two more years, she still wouldn't be in my target range."

Liliana: "Eh? She'll only be thirteen or fourteen by then? Despite how I look, I'm good at guessing ages. Well, I guess this is a skill gained from life experience."

Subaru: "She'll be roughly 402 years old."

Liliana: "Oh please. There's no need to be this stubborn just because I hit the mark."

She dismissed Subaru's words as an excuse and ignored them. Subaru also thought that correcting her would lead to too much trouble. Anyway, the topic had changed too much.

Subaru: "Back to the original topic, was the inspiration you mentioned earlier the song?"

Liliana: "Yeah, that's right. Despite how I may look, I'm easily moved. Once I saw your interactions, I felt like I needed to immortalize them in song. Be proud!"

The girl, speaking quickly and fluently, raised her hands or her mouth.

Liliana: "Ah, but, what I did wasn't enough. Big brother helped by adding the bit at the end. That was the first time I'd gotten such a reaction, I was very happy."

Subaru: "That was because the god of rap blessed me, I certainly couldn't do it again. I don't have the skill or experience."

Liliana: “—One single, shining moment...”

Seeing the mutual understanding without words between the two drained the patience of the little girl who had been left out.

Beatrice: “Subaru.”

Subaru: “Mm, what is it... Beako!?”

Beatrice yanked his sleeve down and shockwaves sent Subaru flying. The momentum wouldn't kill him, but he still bounced all over the lawn of the park.

—Meanwhile, Beatrice turned to the dark skinned girl.

Beatrice: “It's no good for you to take inspiration from us anymore, in fact. Betty is putting an end to it, I suppose. If you resist you'll end up like him, in fact.”

Liliana: “Ha...a...a, um, do...”

Beatrice: “Be quiet, I suppose. Only think about promptly responding to Betty, in fact. The reason nothing is happening to you right now is because your song was lovely, I suppose. But who knows how long this mercy will last, in fact.”

Even seeing her trembling, Beatrice's voice held no mercy. Seeing her hurried nod, Beatrice sighed. The girl was too scared to form words. Then,

Beatrice: “Muse Company, take Betty to where Kiritaka Muse is, I suppose.” Liliana: “—Eh?”

Beatrice: “I'll not say it again, in fact. Lead the way or be subjected to Betty's anger, I suppose.”

Liliana: “I-I'll lead you there! I will!”

When pressed with the choice, the girl instantly raised her white flag. Beatrice nodded, satisfied, as Subaru walked back toward them.

Beatrice: "Tell me if you have any complaints, in fact."

Subaru: "Is it acceptable to use your mana like this for educational purposes?"

Beatrice: "It depends on the time and place, I suppose."

Subaru: "What a kind consideration, Beako. Was it okay to threaten someone to guide us?"

Subaru scratched his face and looked down. Beatrice looked at him with a sullen gaze. Subaru continued,

Subaru: "That child is probably the famous songstress who knows Kiritaka. Maybe we shouldn't make a bad impression on her."

She'd mentioned that her name was Liliana earlier, and there was no mistaking that singing ability, even if her personality wasn't what he had imagined.

Liliana: "I'll do anything you want me to. E-Eh, whether it be guiding you or licking your shoes... all I humbly ask... is that you spare my life...". There was a girl on the ground desperately begging for her life. Correction, that girl was the songstress Liliana. Although, looking at her, no trace of the graceful Songstress could be seen.

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Chapter 9 - The Value of A Songstress



Liliana: “Then, let me introduce myself once again. Although I’m no longer a travelling minstrel, I’m still a free spirited bard who goes wherever the wind blows me. My name is Liliana, please continue to advise me in the future—hk”

Beatrice: “You bit yourself, in fact.”

One hand holding her instrument gracefully, Liliana smiled as blood flowed freely from her mouth.

Beatrice gently wiped it away for her. It seemed her tongue had been wounded rather seriously.

Beatrice: "It's rude to bite your tongue like that."

Subaru: "Have you heard of—Ah, are you the famous Songstress? I know you introduced yourself with her name, but it's probably kinda rare to just meet her on the street."

Liliana: "Ah, um, I'm not fond of that title since I'm only a fledgling musician. It sounds so sophisticated. I'm so far from reaching my peak that if people thought I called myself the Songstress they'd say I'm too conceited."

Wiping at the bloodied lower half of her face, Liliana's expression seemed almost coy, leading Subaru to hesitate over his interrogation of her. He decided that rather than interrogate, he'd try to casually converse with her. Even so, considering the words she'd just said, she seemed to have a very high sense of professionalism.

Subaru: "Although I can see where you're coming from, I think you can accept some praise. That being said, I also sort of admire your attitude about it."

Liliana: "No, no, it's nothing so grand. Focusing on getting through each day is fine. So, please."

Subaru: "——?"

Liliana stretched out a hand to a confused Subaru. Since it was empty, Subaru had no idea what she wanted and tilted his head at her smiling face.

Liliana: "Now that you've heard the voice of the Songstress, please give me something in return. Did you think listening was free? If so then your attitude troubles me."

Subaru: "Then give me back the emotions you made me feel! And take back your song!"

Liliana: "What are you saying!? How do you think a bard makes a living!? Are you saying I should be giving out feelings for free!? I don't think so!"

Liliana stomped angrily on the ground. What she said wasn't wrong, but Subaru's impression of the Songstress had been significantly lowered. Judging from how cold Beatrice's large eyes were, he assumed she felt something similar.

Subaru: "Alright. Let's discuss a tip. How much do you want?"

Liliana: "No, no, the tip should be for the customer to decide based on what his heart feels. Although the more the better."

Subaru: "For crying out loud."

Taking advantage of Liliana's laughing, which showed her bloodstained teeth, Subaru pinched her chin with his cold hands.

Her face was small so it was incredibly easy to pinch, and Liliana had to run several laps around Subaru before he let her go. Stepping away dizzily, she muttered "it was just a joke" over and over to herself.

Liliana: "If you're looking for the Chamber of Commerce, aren't you Kiritaka-san's guests? I wonder if you should be acting this way."

Subaru: "You know, I don't know you very well but my impression is only getting worse. I think it's about time we got going."

The more he talked to Liliana, the closer Subaru came to reaching the limits of his patience.

When they'd found out they were lost, they were very close to being late, and if they delayed any longer they would very likely miss a critical negotiation. After negotiations there would be more challenges and Subaru didn't want to lose face by missing the critical first step.

Shaking her head, and her hair with it, Liliana ceremoniously announced "I understand" and began to lead the way.

Liliana: "So why does the honored guest want to see Kiritaka-san?"

Beatrice: "You don't understand your position here, I suppose. Stop nosing into matters that you are unrelated to and quietly take us to our destination, in fact."

Liliana: “Eep!”

Faced with Beatrice’s intimidating tone, Liliana gave a cry resembling that of a small bird’s. Subaru pulled on one of Beatrice’s spiraled twintails.

Subaru: “You don’t have to be so fierce. Then again, we can’t reveal everything, so a simple, clear explanation would be difficult to make.”

Liliana: “But, I’m Kiritaka-san’s confidant. Isn’t it just a matter of time before I find out?”

Subaru: “Well, if it’s really only a matter of time, then there should be no harm in me taking precautions.”

Liliana: “If you say so... you’re not a person with very good character, huh.”

Subaru: “You’re pretty straightforward, aren’t you. If you didn’t have talent for singing then you’d be in serious trouble.”

—There’s a saying that geniuses were often strange people and Liliana was probably an example. Singing came easily to her but her social graces were lacking.

Liliana: “But really, I am a little worried. I’ve been out for a long time, so I’ll probably be scolded when I get back.”

Subaru: “When we’re discussing negotiations, please take care not to speak up. Alright?”

Liliana: “I got it.”

Subaru: “Huh, really?! That was unexpected.”

Seeing Beatrice and Subaru’s satisfied expressions, for some reason, Liliana puffed out her cheeks in a pout. She raised the instrument in her hands, and began to play.

Liliana: “Inspiration just hit me. —Big Waves, Large Waves, Waves of the World!”

Subaru: "No thanks, we're good."

Before the solo could start, Subaru hurriedly snatched Liliana's instrument out of her hands. Liliana made an "ahh" sound and she stretched to reach it, but her tiny body couldn't reach Subaru's hands.

Subaru: "It's not a human hostage, it's a musical instrument. If you lead us to the Chamber of Commerce, I'll give it back to you."

Liliana: "You're terrible! Evil! Barbaric! Depraved!"

Subaru: "Hahaha, is that so!"

Having just been denounced as the world's most wicked person, Subaru plucked a string on the instrument. The sound it made was similar to that of an acoustic guitar.

Subaru, who had a lot of free time at home, practiced until he'd become fairly skilled. He could play and sing to an 80's folk song without much difficulty. If he introduced that music here, maybe it would take off and the music industry would be revolutionized.

Subaru: "Well, maybe it'll be like it was with mayonnaise."

Even though he hadn't considered the implementation of the plan at all, the idea had taken root. In original world, finding an application for a good idea was often taken for granted. In fact, Subaru had no idea how to begin with it, just like he had no idea how to mass produce and market mayonnaise.

Subaru: "Playing guitar and telling stories to village kids are both within my skill range. Listen."

Liliana: "Wait, wait, please stop! I can't let a layman play my instrument! If you break it, I can't make a living anymore... huh!? You're pretty good! And I've never heard the song before! Eh, what is this?!"

As he walked, Subaru surprised Liliana with his folk songs. Like this, they began the walk to the Chamber of Commerce.

Beatrice: "Good grief, I suppose..."

An exhausted Beatrice trailed after the two, setting her pace to Subaru's melody.

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The door of to the Muse Chamber of Commerce was not particular from the buildings surrounding it. 1st Street and 2nd Street separate the residents of Pristella from tourists and the Chamber of Commerce was located directly between the two.

This position was meant to indicate the power of the owner of this building. It was both the innermost and the outermost building, highlighting its uniqueness in an almost exaggerated way.

Liliana: "This is it, the long awaited Muse Chamber of Commerce."

Springing over with a dance-like motion, Liliana indicated the building in front of her. Although there were taller buildings surrounding it, the four-story Chamber of Commerce seemed to stand incredibly tall. That said, Subaru felt a little regretful.

Subaru: "I knew it wouldn't look as grand as it had appeared from the entrance of Pristella, but I'm still a little disappointed... it didn't steal my heart the way the Water Plumage Pavilion did."

Liliana: "The Water Plumage Pavilion, that weirdly shaped place on 1st Street? If you use that as your basis, even Kiritaka-san will look kind of poor. But, that aside..."

Liliana swung her body up and down in exaggerated motions and reached out the palms of her hands.

Liliana: "Weeell, now that I've fulfilled our agreement, can you give my lovely instrument back to me? If I don't have it back by tomorrow then I'm not sure how I'll survive."

Subaru: "Ah, right, right. Here you go."

Subaru had become tired of singing and playing the back-scratcher-shaped instrument halfway to their destination. Liliana hurriedly took it from him, breathing as if in a panic, and checked it for scratches, then began to rub her face against it and gave it a kiss.

Liliana: “Ahhhh, it’s good to have you back. I’ll never let you go again!”

Subaru: “It’s impressive that your attitude can annoy me this much. I think this is the most annoyed I’ve been at someone’s attitude since Petelgeuse.”

Liliana: “Hooo, I don’t know who he is, but he sounds similar to me. Tell me about him! If I ever meet this Petelgeuse-san one day, I can’t promise he wouldn’t be my enemy!”

Subaru: “He’s a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult.”

Liliana: “Here he goes again! Stop being such a kidder! That should be your new name!”

Liliana showered Subaru with an overreaction, but tilted her head at his cold response, and gradually began to assume a serious expression.

Liliana: “Wait, were you serious?”

Subaru: “Exactly. You probably won’t have many other opportunities to compare yourself to someone who’s dead and gone, so make what you will of it.”

Liliana: “Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait a minute!”

At Subaru’s words, Liliana objected with amazing momentum. Her reaction surprised Subaru, who wondered if she was angry at being compared to a Sin Archbishop. Her next words threw Subaru off even more. They were,

Liliana: “What you said just now, why did it sound like you met a Sin Archbishop?”

Subaru: “...and if I did?”

He didn’t know what she’d meant to ask, but it was definitely something important. He hadn’t expected such a reaction after telling her Petelgeuse’s identity as an Archbishop. Although, it wasn’t impossible that she encountered the poisonous, insect-like Witch Cult before, since they seemed to appear everywhere.

Subaru stiffened up, alert, and Beatrice also paid close attention to the situation, ready to act immediately if need be. One slow reaction, and it would be too late for them.

An oppressive feeling atmosphere, With two people looking to see how she would react, Liliana spoke. She said,

Liliana: “Are you perhaps the... Lolimancer, Natsuki Subaru-sama?” (幼女使い “Little Girl User”)

Subaru: “Ugh.”

Beatrice: “Ugh, I suppose.”

Under Liliana’s shining gaze, Subaru and Beatrice replied at the same time.

Subaru’s official title was Emilia’s knight, but that was the one he was known by the least. People often called him the witch’s knight, one of the many enigmatic characters she was surrounded with.

—The knight of the half elf is a mysterious person who always has a little girl with him.

Liliana: “You were indispensable in slaying one of the Three Great Witchbeasts, the White Whale, alongside Duchess Crusch Karsten, with the Sword Demon Wilhelm calling you his benefactor! And then with help from the famous businesswoman Anastasia-san and the Duchess Crusch, you defeated the Witch Cult’s Archbishop of Sloth! And there are unconfirmed rumors that you are also the hero who defeated the Sizable Hare, which has been plaguing the world for four hundred years!”

Subaru: “Itchy, itchy, itchy, itchy, itchy!”

Liliana: “What a terrifying reputation!”

Liliana, with two hands raised, wore the expression of a girl who’d found her dreams as she listed Subaru’s merits. Some were accurate, and a few were exaggerated, but he could find no real error in her list.

Even so, her words embarrassed him enough for his entire body to itch, while Beatrice wore a seemingly dissatisfied but happy expression.

Liliana: “And the one who has a little girl who is legendarily skilled in magic following him loyally, you’re that Subaru-sama! Aren’t you?!”

Beatrice: “Haha. Betty’s Subaru will surpass even the most outstanding figures in history, in fact. He will become the brightest star known to man, I suppose! You should respect him more, in fact!”

Subaru: “H-Hey!”

Beatrice, sticking her nose out proudly, and Liliana, bowing down. The two caused more headaches than any troublemaker, and it seemed like their show at the entrance of the Chamber of Commerce had attracted attention of the staff there. Upon seeing them and finding the kneeling Liliana, they promptly all returned to their work.

Subaru: “You, do you always act so exaggeratedly? Everyone here has a strange ‘oh, it’s Liliana, as always’ type expression on their face!”

Liliana: “Ah, please stop. Seeing a legend in front of me, my heart is racing! I’m glad to have a chance to witness you in person. Hehe.”

Subaru’s previous unease had all but disappeared, but Liliana grew more and more frantic, saliva even dripping from her mouth.

Liliana: “Well, could—could the people you’re meeting with in the Chamber of Commerce really be who I’m thinking of!?”

Subaru: “...who are you thinking of?”

Liliana: “No, it’s just that I’ve made a lot of songs based on the famous Emilia-tan. I know she’s a real person, but in my mind she’s always been a fictional character! If it’s who I think it is, it’s Emilia-tan! Oh, hehe!”

Disregarding Subaru completely, Liliana flew into the Chamber of Commerce. After falling still for one shocked moment, a dumbfounded Subaru could only chase her into the building.

Beatrice: "Subaru! That girl, she even dropped her instrument, in fact!"

Subaru: "Should she really be treating her lifeline like this!?"

Hurriedly grabbing the lute-lyre from Beatrice, Subaru ran into Chamber of Commerce. Seeing the reception staff gawking at the upper floor, he deduced that Liliana had just run up the stairs.

Receptionist: "Y-You are...?"

Subaru: "We're with Emilia-sama, who should be with Kiritaka-san right now. They told you we would be late, right?"

Receptionist: "Yes, they're there right now... but Liliana-sama..." Subaru: "I know the way, can I go up?"

Seeing the receptionist's stiff nod, Subaru hurried after Liliana. There was no real reason to be in a rush, but the thought of Liliana and Emilia meeting face to face made him uneasy. Or, rather, perhaps it would be better to say that their meeting could bring about a troublesome atmosphere.

Even more frightening was that Liliana's exceedingly strange personality would clash with Emilia's, and Emilia's experience and skill in interaction were overwhelmingly inadequate.

Beatrice: "Liliana was acting strange, I wonder if she will stay like that!"

Subaru: "I really don't want to think about what will happen if we don't stop her."

Registering Beatrice's words, Subaru sped to the third floor. Although he hadn't caught her, he'd saw the back of Liliana's clothing. Now he just had to aim for his goal! Time to show off his parkour skills!

Subaru: "Come on!"

Flying up the stairs, Subaru began to skip steps entirely, using his hand to do an elegant horizontal rotation, drawing ever closer to Liliana, before finally catching her in front of a room near the staircase.

Subaru: "Liliana, WAIT!" Liliana: "Waah!?"

Liliana, who was still salivating, yelled in surprise as Subaru reeled back, gasping for breath.

Liliana: "Oh, you caught up, but I'm not quitting so easily. I'm not giving up!"

Subaru: "If you want to meet Emilia no matter what, I'll ask her for a private meeting, but she's in the middle of a very important meeting right now."

Liliana: "Uh... well. I guess I got a little carried away."

Hearing Subaru's serious tone seemed to cool Liliana off a little. She relaxed her shoulders, and Subaru shook his head and handed her the instrument.

Liliana: "Ah, thanks."

Subaru: "The tool you make a living off of is incredibly important. Don't just throw it away and run. It wouldn't have been surprising if the instrument used by the Songstress had been taken and pawned off."

Liliana: "Don't worry, Kiritaka-san gave it to me. He likes to shop around." Subaru: "Your sponsor is really not ordinary!"

Speaking to Subaru with a bitter smile, Liliana held her cherished instrument to her chest. Her expression was one of sincerity and disbelief at being able to abandon it so easily. Since she'd thrown it down for her ambition earlier, Subaru didn't know if he could believe her smile.

Liliana: "Well, I'm fine with saving my meeting with Emilia-sama until later... but first, can I discuss something with Subaru-sama?"

Subaru: "Drop that bothersome honorific! Well, what do you want to talk about?"

Liliana: “There’s so much! I want to know how accurate the stories are. Not just so I can hear them but so I can sing about them, too. I can write so many songs from that inspiration, maybe even a heroic one that will be passed down for generations! Just thinking about it makes my heart race!”

Holding out her clenched hand, Liliana’s eyes shone with energy.

While this puzzling scene was happening, Beatrice finally caught up and stumbled upon Subaru and Liliana’s proximity.

Beatrice: “Ah, you, strange girl. Don’t stand so close to Subaru, in fact. Move away, I suppose.”

Liliana: “Don’t worry, it’s not that big of a deal. Speaking of which, I also have some questions for the young girl who follows Lolimancer-san!”

Beatrice: “Betty is not a young girl, I suppose! She is a proper lady, in fact!”

Subaru: “You two are so rude, always arguing like that! Shush! Emilia-tan is doing negotiations inside...”

Beatrice, who was in an awful mood, and Liliana, who didn’t realize that she was the cause. Subaru was caught in the middle of their argument, and, in his frustration, inadvertently raised his voice. And, at that moment,

Emilia: “—Subaru?”

The door opened unexpectedly and Subaru’s name was called from the inside.

Looking through the open door, Subaru saw what looked like a reception room, where everyone was sitting on a long backed chair, looking at him with surprised expressions.

Emilia, Otto and Garfiel. Sitting opposite of them was a lean statured young man who was wearing fine-looking clothes. The one who had opened the door was a middle-aged man who was probably with him.

Subaru: “A-ah... Emilia-tan. What a coincidence.”

Emilia: “A coincidence? Why were you being so loud.... Uh, Kiritaka-san?”

Seeing Subaru making an embarrassed gesture, Emilia wore a look of confusion as she turned to the young man sitting opposite of her, who stood and grabbed something from the table. Then he turned where Subaru was standing.

Kiritaka: “Do-, do, do, do, do, DON’T TOUCH MY LILIANA!!”

Suddenly raising his voice, the young man hurled a glowing blue piece of magic ore.

Concentrated pure energy exploded in front of Subaru, whose vision was momentarily engulfed in blue. Seeing it, he faintly registered a thought of “wow, how beautiful,” before the impact swallowed him.

—Like that, the first day of formal negotiations broke down.

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Chapter 10 - The Way to the City of Water



Negotiations between Emilia and Kiritaka Muse had proceeded unexpectedly smoothly. Kiritaka, as a businessman, had likely been trying not to show favor to a single royal election candidate. However, Emilia had approached him directly, meaning that this meeting was a rather major event for him.

Of course, Emilia, who was taking casual sips of the complimentary tea, had not been thinking of her actions in such a way. Garfiel, who was growly steadily addicted to the accompanying desserts, had also not been considering the political ramifications of their actions.

It could be said that, in the reception room of Muse Company, the only one who could read Kiritaka was Otto.

Kiritaka: "I understand that you have come a long way. Please excuse me for being unable to meet you at your convenience. Although I understand that it is disrespectful, due to my position, it is unwise for me to travel freely... in addition, I have become quite attached to this place."

Otto: "Not at all, that's a very reasonable way to think. We're the ones who should be sorry for intruding in your busy schedule."

Kiritaka: "I will treat whatever you need from me with the utmost priority and care."

While exchanging polite greetings, Otto scrutinized the man facing him. The famed Kiritaka Muse was well known even beyond Pristella. His behavior revealed a majestic and stylish image.

He was still fairly young, probably somewhere between twenty-five and thirty. His tall, thin body was clad in finely made clothes, and his pale golden hair was meticulously combed to the back of his head. His rather uncomfortable looking ornaments showed fine taste, and his introverted and concise nature revealed that he was probably highly educated.

Otto, as Emilia Camp's Head of Internal Affairs, alongside Roswaal, had unknowingly accumulated a rather impressive amount of experience in negotiations. So he immediately judged Kiritaka's attitude to be almost unmatchable.

Speaking frankly, Emilia was incredibly fortunate to have Otto with her.

If Otto had let Emilia face Kiritaka alone, she would surely be swayed by his skilled rhetoric, and would have ended up overspending on expensive but ultimately useless things.

From the past year, this was the impression Otto had drawn of Emilia.

Kiritaka: "May I inquire as to what you need from me? According to Anastasia-san's messenger, what you want is stocked by our company."

Otto: "It may be too soon to say so. Actually..."

Interrupting Kiritaka, who had begun to address the main topic, Otto looked to Emilia.

Emilia was content to leave the negotiations to Otto. Garfiel, similarly, maintained his usual attitude, eating desserts while fixing a sharp gaze on one corner of the room, staring at a leisurely looking figure who was dressed from head to toe in white.

In Kiritaka's words, the man in white was present to protect the staff from excessively assertive visitors. 'Recently, the world has not been in a peaceful state, so I hope that he can join us.'

Otto knew of the man in white.

It was said that Pristella's Muse Company had a mercenary force known as the Scales of the White Dragon, a group which was well-known even in Lugunica. This man was probably one of its members.

Rumors claimed that their group was one that operated locally, but, a few years ago, they formed close ties with Muse Company. If those rumors were true, then Kiritaka was the one who had formed an allegiance with them.

Otto: "We have a special request. That is, we are looking for a rare type of stone, even by Muse Company's standards. We are searching for colorless magic ore with outstanding purity. I hope that this is something we can buy from you."

Keeping in mind his evaluation that Kiritaka was not someone he could afford to be careless around, Otto stated his request. Playing around with vague terms would be meaningless. After all, Kiritaka had more than likely seen through the true reason for their visit as soon as it had been prepared.

And Kiritaka also understood that he could not refuse a direct request from Emilia.

Kiritaka: "I see. We do indeed stock magic ore... and we do indeed have some magic ore with a higher grade of quality than those stocked by regular merchants. Emilia-sama, no matter how much colorless ore you want, we are also willing to prepare..."

Otto: “Kiritaka-san. Please be straightforward with us. We have made our request; colorless magic ore of the highest purity. That is all we need.”

Kiritaka: “...this is rather discourteous.”

Kiritaka was not simply lacking in straightforwardness. He was merely using a negotiation technique. Despite perfectly understanding Otto’s intentions, he casually dropped the names of other goods that he believed would appeal to Emilia. To him, the goods had been marked as sold long before the negotiation had even started. The only remaining question was the matter of the price.

Otto: “We are indeed requesting something that may be troublesome for you, so to satisfy the price, we have prepared something that you will find beneficial. Mining rights to magic ore in Elier Forest, part of the Mathers territory which is supporting Emilia-sama.”

Kiritaka: “Please do not turn this into the kind of fraud that muddles prices. We are the only formal company that trades raw magical ore, so we cannot consider this proposal. In our line of work, credit is everything to us. I’m sure you would understand, Otto-sama?”

Otto gave a silent sigh. It seemed that Kiritaka knew of his origins.

The Suwen family’s business was nowhere nearly as famous as the Muse family’s, but it was hardly unknown. The main players supporting each of the candidates were sure to be heavily investigated along with the candidates themselves.

That said, many questions were left unanswered by these investigations, such as Emilia’s own origins. Her mysterious background did not win her too many favors.

Garfiel had lived in Sanctuary his whole life, and Emilia had spent a century frozen in Elier Forest. Both the Lolimancer and his contract spirit were of unknown origin. Thus, Otto, whose identity had easily been discovered, would certainly have it used against him frequently.

Kiritaka: “Otto-sama? Your complexion seems to have changed. Are you okay?”

Otto: “Of course, please don’t worry about me. I just thought of something disconcerting and it made me a little uncomfortable, that’s all.”

Shaking his head at Kiritaka’s words, Otto decided to save that unproductive line of thought for later. Once again, he urged that Kiritaka provide a straight answer to his question. Kiritaka took on a meditative attitude.

Kiritaka: “Of course, we won’t refuse to let go of our commodities no matter how much you plead, and of course we are going to follow Emilia-sama’s request.”

Otto: “Then...”

Kiritaka: “However, the magical ore you are requesting is special. In truth, on the occasion when I was first sent to Muse Company in Pristella, the president—that is, my father—gave it to me as a gift. Rather than treating it as a commodity, I prefer to think of its sentimental value.”

Otto: “——”

Regardless of whether the story was true or false, Kiritaka had made a cunning move. Hearing Kiritaka’s words, Otto bit his lip.

As Kiritaka had said, the extremely rare magic ore they were requesting was more than a mere trading commodity. Taking into account the magnitude of Muse Company’s transactions, this was too good of an opportunity not to seek an extra profit.

So how could the additional value be compensated? Not with commodities, but with sentiment. Since the ore was important that meant it needed to be exchanged for something important.

Emilia: “I see... I didn’t realize it was something so important to you.”

Emilia’s expression reflected that Kiritaka’s story seemed to have touched her deeply. Otto could only conclude that Kiritaka wasn’t cut out to be an actor, considering how guilty he looked.

It takes both action and effort to get your desired result. Otto thought this to himself as he cleared his throat.

Otto: "I appreciate your kindness. Even so, we still hope to find what we came here for."

Kiritaka: "I understand. I am a merchant who sells magical ore, and I know that it is better to have it shine in the hands of someone who needs it than to have it sit as a decoration at my home. I am willing to give it to you. There are only a few conditions."

Otto: "—Conditions. Let me hear them."

Having established that there would be an additional price tag, Kiritaka commenced the real negotiation. After Otto agreed to hear them, Kiritaka held up three fingers.

What unreasonable conditions would there be? Even thinking about them gave Otto a light stomach pain.

Kiritaka: "First of all. Muse Company knew that Emilia-sama was seeking this very magical stone. However, in order to keep it out of the hands of malicious people, we have hidden our possession of it. I hope you understand this."

Otto: "...that is only natural. That you tell us this without attempting to hide anything removes all of my suspicion."

At first, Kiritaka had denied any past knowledge of the affairs of Emilia Camp. But in order to bring this deal to a successful conclusion, he gave up this knowledge.

Kiritaka: "Then the second one. After the deal has been signed on the line, I want to inform Hoshin Company of our transaction and confirm its legitimacy."

Otto: "I understand... that is no problem."

It seemed there was also a deal between Muse Company and Hoshin Company. It seemed to be intended to semi-publically reveal that Emilia owed Anastasia a debt.

Although it was slightly uncomfortable, it was a legitimate request, so Otto could not refuse.

So far, none of the requests would be considered deal-breakers. So, the third request—as soon as he said it, Kiritaka’s true intentions would become clear.

Otto held back a sigh as Kiritaka waved the third finger in front of him.

Kiritaka: “Third. —Avoid all contact with the Songstress named Liliana who is currently residing in this city.”

Otto: “—Huh?”

Hearing a name suddenly appear of nowhere, Otto froze.

Of course, Emilia and Garfiel, who were accompanying him, had the same reaction—no, nevermind, those two had remained unchanged since the negotiations started. Emilia sipped her tea and Garfiel stared at the figure in white. Although they had left all the negotiations to Otto, seeing their blatant lack of participation irked him.

Otto: “I’m sorry, but I think I may have misheard you. Did you just say to avoid contact with the Songstress...?”

Kiritaka: “No, there was no misunderstanding there. These conditions are all we ask. If you have any questions, please ask them, and please consider the deal carefully...”

Otto: “If you don’t mind, can I ask for the reason? At this point, I can’t recall our deal having anything to do with the Songstress.”

Kiritaka: “...it’s not something that necessarily needs to be said. Can you agree to that promise?”

His tone sinking, for the first time Kiritaka exposed his emotional side. Otto, who could not understand the condition, was lost on what to do.

Put simply, the third request passed the horizons of his imagination. Accepting posed no future obstacles to Emilia, although she may regret not being able to meet the Songstress she had discussed

with Anastasia, it was hardly important enough to scrap this deal for.

That they had so effortlessly come to an agreement was surprising.

Otto had not dared to expect that negotiations could have gone so smoothly (although Kiritaka could, at this point, still change his mind). Subaru, who'd been lost halfway, would be here soon, and would certainly turn that matter into something troublesome. Before he arrived, Otto wanted to tie the deal up.

Otto: "Emilia-sama, is this alright with you?"

Emilia: "Mm. I'm a little disappointed, but I guess it can't be helped."

Having earned a confirmation from Emilia, Otto agreed to the deal. Kiritaka was satisfied to accept this commitment, and the most stressful part of the negotiation came to an end. Now, they could discuss the actual monetary price, and maybe pick up a few small items.

Kiritaka: "There are a few other quality goods that you may be interested in... would you like to see?"

Kiritaka stood to retrieve a wooden chest from a shelf. The chest, having been placed on the table, emitted a glow as it opened, dazzling Otto and Emilia.

Inside of it were all sorts of magical stones, carefully arranged on cushions, the most radiant of which was the colorless, transparent one.

This was the colorless stone that Emilia had been pursuing. Kiritaka: "Would you like to inspect it?"

At Kiritaka's words, Emilia raised her head.

She nodded, then stretched her nervous fingers toward the stone. But, at that moment,

Garfiel: "Emilia-sama."

Man in White: "Young Master."

Simultaneously, the two guards called to their respective master. They turned to look at each other, and then to face their surprised master.

Garfiel: "Ths'a two loud'n annoyin' somethin' comin'."

Man in White: "There seems to be the sound of footsteps coming from downstairs. Allow me to go investigate."

He strode soundlessly toward the door as Garfiel tensed his body. The sound of the disturbances drew closer, until they seemed to be right in front of the door—

???: "You two are so rude, always arguing like that! Shush! Emilia-tan is inside, doing serious negotiations..."

The voice was an incredibly familiar one. As this thought was shared by three people in the room, the man in white opened the door of the reception room, revealing a familiar scary face. With a petite girl on either side of him, this man, Subaru, was truly worthy of the title of Lolimancer.

Emilia: "—Subaru?"

Hearing Emilia's call, a pale Subaru finally noticed the presence of everyone else. At that moment, Otto wanted to complain, but he decided to observe everyone else's reactions first and held back.

And so, Subaru held up his hands and smiled weakly. Subaru: "A-ah... Emilia-tan. What a coincidence."

Emilia: "A coincidence? Why were you being so loud.... Uh, Kiritaka-san?" Hearing Emilia's surprise, Otto's own reaction was also delayed.

Kiritaka reached a hand into the wooden chest of magic stones and glared at Subaru with a gaze bordering on frantic. He clutched a blue pure magical stone, and,

Kiritaka: "Do-, do, do, do, do, DON'T TOUCH MY LILIANA!!"

Accompanying his frantic cry was a thrown magical stone. Without anyone to stop him, the stone arched toward Subaru and knocked his body away in a blue explosion.

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Man in White: “My apologies for that embarrassing spectacle. The Young Master is usually calm, but if matters involve Liliana-san, he quickly flies into a rage... I will try to calm him down, but, for today, let's end negotiations here.”

After the commotion died down, the the middle-aged man in white acted as the mediator who had to calm down both sides. He bowed his head with an apology.

Kiritaka's frantic voice could still be heard from the closed door behind him. That scene was unsuitable for outsiders, so the members of Emilia Camp had been ushered out of the room.

Liliana: “Kiritaka-san is really troublesome, even taking away my chance to speak to Emilia-sama and Subaru-sama! Ugh, I'm so annoyed, ugh!”

Liliana's anger, on the other hand, was also endless. Speaking in an angry huff, she announced that she'd come up with a new song titled The Avant-Garde Master of Life and Death, causing Beatrice to furrow her brow.

Man in White: “Liliana-chan, please forgive the Young Master.”

Liliana: “.....I understand.”

Although it took a long of time to understand, Liliana had finally been talked down. Subaru's interference had rendered a smooth sailing negotiation utterly fruitless.

Subaru: “In other words, Liliana is a rabid fangirl, and is obsessed with us. Kiritaka knew and wanted to keep us from stealing her. That was the point of the third condition?”

Otto: “And just as I was about to have the deal tied down, Natsuki-san had to come ruin everything. I finally understand now. Does having you around do any good for anyone!?”

Subaru: "I acknowledge that this was my fault, but who would have thought that after getting seasick things would turn out like this... that's hardly something I had any control over."

Otto could not hide his dissatisfaction at the result of the negotiations.

Subaru spoke lightly, but he was also hardly satisfied, having taken a blow from Kiritaka's magical stone, and realizing that negotiations tomorrow would be incredibly difficult based on Kiritaka's angry tone.

Emilia: "Ora, ora, please don't be so angry, Otto-kun. Subaru didn't do this on purpose, these things just happen sometimes."

Subaru: "That's right. Keep going, Emilia-tan."

Emilia: "Subaru, I also have something to say to you. You shouldn't have been so loud with Liliana-san today. We were the guests there, so we definitely troubled them a lot."

Subaru: "Yes, I'm sorry."

Subaru bowed his head in an apology, and Emilia nodded a 'very good'. Otto gave a helpless sigh as he watched his master's hopeless attitude.

Otto: "Anyway, today's negotiations have ended here, so we should be getting back to the Water Plumage Pavilion.... however, I have something to attend to first. So, I'll meet back with everyone later."

Subaru: "Something to attend to?"

At his unexpected words, everyone turned to Otto, who gestured in the general direction of Muse Company's headquarters.

Otto: "We've gone out of our way to come to the faraway Pristella, so I'd like to take the time to improve relationships here. Although, as for today, it is only necessary for me to go. There may come

a day when Emilia-sama may need to come. If that ever happens, I'll have to trouble you, Emilia-sama."

Emilia: "Yeah, I understand. But, why am I not needed today?"

Otto: "If you show up unannounced, they may be unable to sufficiently welcome you. We need to be considerate about where you go."

Emilia: "Yes. I understand. I'll keep it in mind."

After hearing the Emilia's reply, Otto gave a "Please go home promptly", as if speaking to a group of children, then disappeared into the depths of 2nd Street. As for Garfiel, although he wanted to accompany Otto, he was rejected with "Please prioritize Emilia-sama".

Emilia: "So, Subaru, what were you talking about with Liliana-san?"

Subaru: "Oh? Is Emilia-tan concerned about me talking to other girls? I wonder. I'm glad to see this subtle change."

Emilia: "No. Don't worry, I just want to see what kind of a person the Songstress is. It's okay even if you misunderstand, though."

Subaru: "Is it better for me to misunderstand, here!?"

Emilia, as always, naturally and mercilessly cut into Subaru's heart. But, in any case, she gave Subaru a reason to chat with her, so he began to recount his earlier experience.

Subaru: "At first, when we encountered her in the park, I thought her song was super powerful. It was an astounding performance, even as the Songstress. Right, Beako?"

Beatrice: "I won't deny this point, in fact. I don't deny it, I suppose. "

Emilia: "Beatrice looks so distressed, what happened?"

Subaru: “—Talent in one area comes at the price of competence in others. Liliana perfectly showcased the meaning of that.”

Subaru could fully understand Beatrice’s distress. Liliana poured her heart and soul into music, and became a rather pitiful girl.

Subaru: “In short, rather than striving to be an extremely talented person in one area, you should strive to be a mildly successful person all around.”

Garfiel: “Ooh, th’s pretty philosophical, Captain. Sayin’ her singin’d make people think that, mus’ve been amazin’.”

Subaru: “I won’t deny it. Speaking of which, meeting Liliana was worth coming up with that conclusion.”

Everyone decided to return to the inn by foot. If they were to take the waterways again then Subaru would become seasick again which would mean leaving him behind.

Emilia: “Like Otto-kun said, it wasn’t easy for us to come here, so I want to take a walk and appreciate these beautiful streets.”

Rather than having Subaru feel guilty that they were walking for his benefit, Emilia phrased her reasoning as a cute request. Subaru had no complaints, and Garfiel and Beatrice did not object.

Subaru: “If I hadn’t been able to accompany Emilia-tan back to the inn, I would have gone mad with worry.”

Beatrice: “You don’t need to worry, in fact. If we get into trouble then Betty will place her left hand on a wall, I suppose.”

Subaru: “I think I’ve already told you about the defects of that method.”

Garfiel: “Y’two don’t need t’worry, you’ve got my amazin’ self’s nose. Whether’s the smell’f the inn or th’smell’f that midget devil, my amazin’ self remembers it.”

Subaru: “—Heh.”

Noticing that Garfiel used Mimi’s scent as an example, Subaru unconsciously gave a malicious chuckle. The little kitten’s reaction to Garfiel, though surprising and puzzling, was probably nothing other than goodwill. Plus, they were of similar age. Subaru thought they made a rather good match.

Incidentally, Garfiel was still the same, wanting to dedicate himself to Ram. And Ram just regarded Garfiel as a little brother, nothing more.

Subaru: “In any case, Garfiel. You’re my little bro, so as a big brother I’m praying for your success in love.”

Garfiel: “Ahh? Wh’ya j’say some’all touchy-feely, Captain? Well, y’makin’ m’feel sick.”

Subaru wore an expression of ‘I understand’ as he patted Garfiel on the shoulder. Garfiel cocked his head and laughed, exposing his sharp-toothed grin. Subaru hoped from the bottom of his heart that the kind, well-intentioned Garfiel would find happiness.

Emilia: “This is really a nice city. Everything seems so fresh and the people here look so happy. I can’t help but feel excited.”

Their surroundings seemed to delight Emilia, and, seeing her expression, Subaru felt happy as well. She did have a point, though. The architecture in the city must have taken a great effort to design, and everything functional seemed to serve as artwork. The icing on the cake was, of course, Pristella’s beautiful waterways which doubled as transportation.

Subaru: “Although the city was built like this, the origins of the design are unknown.”

Emilia: “Apparently its construction pushed the limits of technology at the time, because it had something to do with keeping dangerous beasts trapped inside the city. But that doesn’t change its beauty, right?”

Emilia stopped at a bridge overlooking the waterway and smiled.

Subaru, overtaken by the mood, nodded as if to declare, “Yeah”.

For whatever reason, Subaru had arrived here, at this point. The results that he'd earned, and the results he was reaching for, as long as they could be reached, nothing else mattered.

Because the most important part of anything was not the beginning, but the end.

Subaru: "That's what you said, Mom."

Subaru: "You mean, if the results're good then everything's okay?"

Emilia: "Just now, what did you say?"

Subaru: "I just remembered the magical words that the woman I respect most in the world said to me."

The days of those memories were long gone, but even so, Subaru had gained so much courage from them.

It would be impossible to forget them, because the lesson he'd learned from them was something that could not be forgotten. Natsuki Subaru, today, lived with those memories inside him.

Seeing Subaru and Emilia's shared laughter, Garfiel and Beatrice waited on the side.

Those two were occupied in their own world, and no one could interrupt them. Even Beatrice recognized this point.

Beatrice: "He has such a foolish expression on that face of his, in fact."

Garfiel: "When's a man share'n such a good mood w'the woman he like, s'course he'll act that way. My amazin' self's relieved. Looks'f the Captain's a man."

Beatrice: "I wonder what that means, I suppose."

Garfiel: "No, 's j'st that th'Captain surrounds'm self with girls too small'n too many men... Suppose'n he weren't s'close w'Emilia-sama, sa'misunderstandin' might happen."

Beatrice: "Subaru is a masculine man, in fact! He's both a man and a pervert, I suppose! He's always willing to randomly touch Betty and Petra, I suppose!"

Garfiel: "Ths'not really nice way't vouch fer'm, ya?"

The two talked at length about Subaru's preferences, and about his reputation of touching girls younger than him. Subaru and Emilia, satisfied with their view of the city of water, did not even hear the irrational dialogue taking place behind them.

Emilia: "Well then, it's about time to go back. Plus, I kinda want to admire the inn again. Its shape was soooo odd but interesting."

Subaru: "Wafu-style architecture. I also want to see it again, although for different, less charitable reasons than Emilia-tan."(Wafu is ワフー)

Emilia: "Is that so? Haha, then, we should hurry."

Emilia withdrew her hand from the railing, and took a few steps backward with an an excited smile. Because she was feeling a bit impatient, she didn't take the time to confirm that there was no one behind her.

Emilia: "Ah"

???: "Whoops."

She backed right into a man with a hood who had passing them by. She stumbled slightly, and the man reached out to steady her.

Emilia: "I-I'm sorry. I, I wasn't looking behind me..."

Subaru: "Sorry from me too. This child, she's so troublesome. I'll be sure to scold her."

A flustered Emilia apologized to the man wearing in the hood. Subaru joined her side and bowed his head to the man. He took care not to call Emilia's name, taking the precaution of keeping people from

realizing who she was and causing a commotion in the streets. Of course, the hood that Emilia wore was one that hindered recognition.

So, if they made only slight contact with someone, it wouldn't develop into a huge problem. This time included.

???: "This time, I was the careless one. After all, I was a little distracted by you." Subaru: "Distracted?"

???: "The miss that I just bumped into has the silver hair of a beautiful girl, doesn't she. A girl I once wanted to marry had that same hair. Remembering that hair, I didn't avoid you in time."

His remark should have seemed urgent, but his voice sounded rather slow and intoxicated. Judging from his voice, the man, dressed in a long robe of the man sounded fairly young. Hearing him mention marriage, Subaru froze, and immediately judged him as a man who he didn't want near Emilia.

Subaru: "Well, we can consider this a fault from both parties. Since we've conveyed our apologies, we can both move on now."

Emilia: "Wait, Subaru. That was a kind of an insincere and apathetic apology..."

Subaru: "That's fine, no?" Emilia: "——"

Subaru wanted Emilia to leave, and Emilia herself seemed lost for words. Seeing their behavior, the man in the hood slowly shook his head.

???: "I don't mind. I don't place any anger or blame on you. If you want to leave, feel free to leave. If we are to meet again, fate will provide us with another opportunity."

Subaru: "Ahh, that's very true. Well then, maybe fate will guide us to a future meeting."

Accepting the man's poetic farewell, Subaru responded similarly and left with Emilia's hand in his. Subaru stole a quick glance at her. In that moment, for reasons unknown to him, Emilia wore a meaningful expression as she glanced over her shoulder at the man they'd just left.

Subaru: "Sure, my attitude wasn't great, but I wanted protect my Emilia-tan and get her away from that strange guy."

Emilia: "Hm? Ah, right. I genuinely didn't think Subaru's attitude was very nice, since it was my mistake, but, that wasn't what I was thinking about..."

Stopping here, Emilia's eyes reflected her confusion. However, with a meditative expression and quivering lips, she continued,

Emilia: "That person just now, I feel like I've met him before... that's how I felt, but, since his face was hidden, I couldn't be sure..."

Subaru: "Someone Emilia-tan knows? Well, I should probably know them as well."

Emilia: "Mm... but, I don't know. Who was he?"

Probably because it was still bothering her, Emilia turned around once more. But the figure had disappeared, and she had no idea where he'd gone.

Garfiel: "Yo, Captain. Why're y'lookin' s'nervous clingin' t'Emilia-sama's hand? Was ya afraid th'someone gonna steal her?"

Seeing Subaru and Emilia emerging from the bridge, Garfiel approached them, and Subaru stuck his tongue out at him.

Subaru: "Idiot, this is no time for games. If there's some strange guy hanging around, you have to show up to help. If it's an opponent that I can't handle then Emilia-tan would be in danger."

Garfiel: "Suppose'f that happened, then you'd protect'r with ya life. Th's w'makes th'Captain a man."

Subaru: "If I acted as a shield then maybe I could take one hit. Then if the enemy kept going, we'd be in trouble. I have no confidence in my endurance. Both physically and mentally."

Hearing Subaru's humble evaluation of himself, Garfiel laughed. He doubtlessly believed that Subaru was just humble, but, to Subaru, it was indeed a proper evaluation. It was perhaps better to say that Garfiel overestimated Subaru.

Garfiel: "No cause't worry. If my amazin' self think's'th some bastard's tryin' t'attack ya, they'll be sent flyin', s'no doubt about't. 'Sides, th'guy did'n move like h'knew how t'fight. Was jus'n regular guy, one'wh did'n know no martial arts."

Subaru: "You can tell that?"

Garfiel: "Jus'by lookin'. C'n also tell'th Captain likes't swing swords 'round. My amazin' self could tell 'soon as y'moved yer wrists."

Subaru: "Really? That sounds like some kind of magic trick."

Subaru had never told Garfiel of his high school experience with kendo. Subaru had already realized that his so called skill would be of no use in this world. But his exercise bore traces, which the knowledgeable practitioners of this world could apparently see.

Subaru: "Having said that, are you still worried, Emilia-tan?"

Subaru put this thoughts to one side and spoke to Emilia, who was still gazing around, before giving up with a shake of her head.

Emilia: "Mm, it's okay. Sorry to trouble you. Let's go back."

Subaru: "Well, when we get back, make sure to hug Mimi for a while to make you feel better. Oops, I'll be hugging you though, Beako, so there's no need to be worried."

Beatrice: "Betty hasn't said anything yet, I suppose!"

Hearing Beatrice's complaints and Subaru's proud expression, Emilia laughed. Then, covering her mouth, she replied,

Emilia: "That's true, holding Mimi does seem to be very comforting. I'll be sure to do that."

As Emilia spoke, she checked her surroundings once again, then dropped her uneasy gaze in exchange for a smile.

???: "—I see. Now I understand the meaning."

A man spoke into the cuff of his coat, the man in the hood from earlier. Recalling the girl he'd just come in contact with, his mouth curled into a smile, a smile that gave of a miserable feeling.

???: "I went out of my way to come here. If it had been for nothing then I couldn't let it go as if nothing had happened. Since this is a special reward, this is another matter."

The words themselves were mild, but the voice which had announced them was feverishly sticky. It was as though the feeling had been cooked in a sticky pot, and then had been left out under the sun and the moon. The feeling held that kind of unpleasantness.

???: "I will never let go of anything I own, and I want what I own to be perfectly suited for me. Since I am perfect, I have to be continually satisfied. So, feeling a vacancy would, of course, be unsatisfying."

The man spoke as he raised his head. At that moment, his hood fell, revealing white hair. With the wind swaying his white hair, the slightly unhappy man announced,

???: "I must make her my 79th wife, to satisfy that vacancy."

In the city of water, the white haired devil spoke in a voice full of derision.

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Chapter 11 - A Surprising Reunion, A Fated Reunion, and an Unintended Reunion



After the meeting with the strange man in the hood, the journey proceeded with no further incidents.

Occasionally, Emilia would glance into the water, deep in thought, but she covered her discomfort with a smile before anyone could question her about it.

The only distinct feature of the man they'd encountered was his hood, but he seemed to have some kind of connection to Emilia. From Emilia's perspective, his behavior would have been fairly courteous. He may have been a little extreme in describing her hair but, more importantly, Emilia's silver hair rarely made a good impression like it had on him.

Subaru: "Speaking of which, the recognition hindering cloak..."

Subaru suddenly noticed that the effects of Emilia's magical cloak, the one she always wore to keep her identity hidden, did not affect the man just now. If the cloak had been operating at its normal effectiveness, the man would only have been able to notice Emilia's presence. However, he had apparently seen Emilia's silver hair.

Meaning that the man could resist the cloak's spell.

Subaru: "Beako."

Beatrice: "So you've noticed it, in fact. Emilia and Garfiel haven't and are walking around oblivious, I suppose. Careless children, in fact."

Beatrice, walking by Subaru's side, knew exactly what he was worried about.

As she led Subaru away from Emilia, Subaru brought his hand to his chin and frowned.

Subaru: "I don't think he used any trick, but that guy was just suspicious. The cloak's cognitive obstruction shouldn't be easily resisted."

Beatrice: "So he's either proficient in magic, or he has some blessing ... anyway, he's not just an ordinary man, I suppose. What a bother, in fact."

Subaru: "Should we say something to Emilia?"

Beatrice: "That's not necessary, in fact. If he were acting with malice then Emilia probably would have noticed it, I suppose. We don't need to over scrutinize this, in fact."

Hearing Beatrice's assertion, Subaru replied with a "I see" and accepted it.

Beatrice had spoken what she believed to be correct. Since she often spent time observing humans, and had been paying close attention to Emilia's attitude, Subaru listened to her. There was no need to unnecessarily provoke unease.

Even so, Subaru and Beatrice must at least remain alert.

In this vast city, meeting the man again by chance was unlikely. But there was a chance that he sought to actively contact them, so they needed to be wary.

Garfiel: "Hurry up, Captain. If ya g'slow's Beatrice then'd be sundown by'time we get back." Beatrice: "Stop saying unnecessary things, I suppose. Smelly, annoying creature."

Garfiel turned back at them and was laughing happily in response to Beatrice's rude insults.

Suddenly, his expression changed. His ears moved back and forth, and his nose twitched.

Subaru: "What's wrong?"

Garfiel: "Nah's just, near t'hotel... c'sorta hear'n argument."

They turned the corner as Garfiel finished talking and Subaru also heard the commotion. Indeed, it sounded like someone was furious.

Subaru: "It sounds like it'll turn into a fight, what a mess."

Garfiel: "Seen's th'Captain caused a fuss during th'negotiation, ya really have a right say's a mess? If I weren't at th'Chamber of Commerce, y'would've been taken by th'guards."

Subaru: "That's just my irresistible charm... Emilia-tan?"

Subaru suddenly found Emilia, who had just caught up, running past him and called out to her, but she paid him no attention.

Emilia: "That voice, it sounds really familiar... actually, I think that's Joshua's voice."

Subaru: "Ah, you're right. That does sound like the voice of that weak bastard."

Emilia: "I'd be worried if he was in trouble. Let's go."

Leaving the less tense Garfiel behind, Subaru raced after Emilia. Turning another corner, he could finally see the Water Plumage Pavilion, where,

???: “Alright asshole, how many times are you going to make me say this!? Stop being stuck up and call your master here already!”

Joshua: “You’re so barbaric that I wouldn’t even call my brother here, much less my master! Please leave while I’m still capable of speaking calmly!”

???: “Can you really not understand what I’m saying, oi? Let’s go, bastard!”

A young man with purple hair—Joshua stood with his arms spread in front of the hotel, quarrelling with another man. Although he was facing away from Subaru, his physique was clearly quite burly. Judging from his attitude, a brawl with Joshua would be inevitable.

Emilia: “That’s enough!”

In the time it took Subaru to judge the two men’s difference in combat prowess, Emilia had already rushed over and separated them. Having been jerked away, Joshua wore an expression of abject shock.

Joshua: “E-Emilia-sama!?”

Emilia: “I was on my way back from my business when I heard you two. Arguing in front of the inn like this. What’s the reason for your quarrel? Calm down and tell me about it.”

She spoke as if mediating an argument between two children. In that moment things settled down.

—Garfiel sighed disappointedly, as if to say “Aww, no fight?”, as he caught up with them.

Joshua: “Everyone is arriving one after another... my apologies for troubling you.”

Emilia: “It’s no problem. Now, please tell me about your argument.”

Joshua: "How could I trouble Emilia-sama with such a petty thing..."

Joshua stubbornly refused Emilia's intervention in the matter, as if worried that Emilia would use this opportunity to her advantage. If that was the case, then he was being paranoid. Even in a hundred years, Emilia wouldn't be able to come up with such a cunning idea.

???: "There ain't much to what happened. I was sent here, but this guy wouldn't let me in. So, I was gonna have to fight him."

In that tense moment, the man arguing with Joshua spoke up. His sharp eyes glared at Joshua with malice, and his voice was dangerous as he complained about his reception.

Joshua: "How many times are you going to make me say it? If you're going to disguise your identity at least do an appropriate amount of preparation. Even wearing your neat clothing, you can't hide your true nature. You can only push a lie so far!"

???: "Oh well excuse me! Hey, I don't like dressing up like this. I'm running someone else's errand! Ah, fucking understand what I'm saying!"

The man scratched his head, frustrated, as Joshua refused to accept his claims. Even with Emilia's interference, the two were still stuck of argument.

Emilia: "Really, how can we set things straight like this? Subaru, how should... Subaru?"

The two stubborn men and a confused Emilia all turned to Subaru, who stood with his hand on his chin, frowning thoughtfully. His gaze rested on the man who had been arguing with Joshua.

Emilia: "What's the matter, Subaru?"

Subaru: "No, I might be mistaken... but I think I've seen him somewhere before..."

???: "Huh? What, oi. Are you picking a fight with... hk!?"

Hearing the dialogue between the Subaru and Emilia, the man's sharp gaze turned in their direction. But after seeing Subaru, he immediately stiffened.

His lips trembling, he pointed at Subaru.

???: "Y-You... that time with Reinhardt...!"

Subaru: "That time with Reinhardt is really specific... ah" 'That time with Reinhardt' was Subaru's main clue.

And then Subaru realized who he was. He was more well dressed than before, and his demeanor was slightly different, but his malicious eyes hadn't changed.

Subaru: "Chin! Chin, right!? Wow, long time no see. Why are you here?"

Chin: "Don't act like we know each other! Who is this 'Chin'!? My name is Larkins!"

Subaru: "So it's Chin after all!"

Larkins: "Shut up!"

Subaru dropped a hand onto Chin's shoulder, and Chin — Larkins, hurriedly shrugged it off. Subaru pouted at his cold attitude.

Emilia: "Do you know him?"

Subaru: "Ah. Well, he's a familiar face that reminds me of when I first met Emilia-tan in an alley. That was when she rescued me from a robbery."

Emilia: "Eh, that's ri... uh, a robbery?"

Subaru: "The next time was when you were called to the King Candidate Conference and I got stuck in an alley with Priscilla and he got his friends to attack us. Yeah, he's a great guy."

Beatrice: "To a lady like Betty he sounds like scum, in fact."

Hearing Subaru's words, Emilia and Beatrice reacted thus. Garfiel, who'd been hanging back, cracked his knuckles loudly, and Joshua's expression became even more serious.

As the situation became more sinister, Larkins's already pale face turned white.

Larkins: "W-Wait, wait. So maybe that did happen a long time ago, but let me explain why I'm here and let's forgive and forget. Yeah?"

Subaru: "Garfiel. What do you think?"

Garfiel: "Th's gonna be no pity from my amazin' self, yeh?" Larkins: "W-Wait, wait a minute! Really, wait! Waaaiitt!"

Larkins felt Garfiel's aura and immediately realized that he had no chance of winning. You could say that being able to realize this was a skill that Larkins developed just this past year. He fell onto his knees, begging with his hands over his head, then pointed at the hotel.

Larkins: "It's the truth! I was summoned here... no, my employer was summoned here! But she said that she'd take a few laps around the city first, so I was sent to the inn to notify them. I'm not lying!"

Garfiel: "Ahh, I gotcha, I gotcha.... but hey, why don't y'try explain' more slowly?"

Garfiel's threatening attitude didn't change as he approached Larkins. Although Subaru felt bad for Larkins, he found no reason to think better of him. His dress had improved, but his character hadn't, and so he had no way to make a good impression. It was inevitable that Joshua deny him entry into the hotel. Honestly, Subaru could empathize with him.

Garfiel: "Hey, th's unlucky, bastard. Pickin' th'hotel my amazin' self's at was tough I—hk!"

Garfiel was backing Larkins into a corner with a clenched hand.

However, Garfiel's movements were suddenly interrupted when he immediately swung to face the other direction. His eyes widened for a moment, before narrowing into thin, wary lines. His hair stood on end, as his teeth, claws and muscles all reacted as if entering into a war zone.

An abrupt and immediate reaction.

Garfiel's primal fighting instincts were awakened, and thus Subaru was also infected by a sense of urgency. He turned to follow Garfiel's gaze, and,

???: "Larkins, I was worried you wouldn't return. Was there a disturbance here?"

In that moment, Subaru saw an illusion of fire standing in front of him.

The flames were shining red, taking a human form. No, not just a human form—they were human. Hair the color of fire, eyes with the color of a clear blue sky. His slender body was clothed in white and his neatly arranged face was one that could never be forgotten.

His aura, slamming into everyone nearby, was the aura one would feel upon seeing a hero. That was exactly what the situation was.

There was no mistake. This man's name was,

Subaru: "—Reinhardt."

Upon hearing Subaru's hoarse voice, the young man in question smiled gently. The smile was a soft one, intended to calm others down.

With just that smile, Subaru felt as if he had been taken into the arms of a guardian of peace. Everyone else seemed to relax as well.

Reinhardt: "It's been a while, Subaru. I didn't expect to see you here. Although our meeting is thanks to Julius, who called me here."

Subaru: "O-Oh. Long time no see. Wait, are you saying that you were also called by Julius?"

Reinhardt: "Technically, it was Felt-sama accepting Anastasia-sama's invitation. I'm just here as her knight, and I didn't expect to see you here."

As always, Reinhardt's presence dwarfed everyone else's. Although Subaru had experienced this before, it had never affected him to this degree, and he found it almost difficult to carry a casual conversation.

That Subaru could feel Reinhardt's aura, which he was previously unaware of, attested to Subaru's own growth. The more Subaru trained, the more he came to understand the difference between them.

Reinhardt: "I see. It's been a year, hasn't it? You seem much better than you were when we last parted ways. That makes me glad."

Subaru: "Don't say it like that, you sound like you're making fun of me. I was a little proud of my growth but seeing you makes me feel like it's nothing."

Reinhardt: "I didn't intend any such thing. In terms of my growth, I'm rather disappointed. I haven't changed much in the past year, it's honesty rather embarrassing."

That was probably because he'd already maxed his level and hit a growth limit. Seeing a man who was obviously already so strong but still wanted to be stronger, Subaru couldn't help but feel intimidated.

Reinhardt: "By the way, Subaru." Subaru: "Oh, uh, what is it?"

Reinhardt: "The one who's been staring at me this whole time, is he your friend? If so, I would be glad if asked him to relax a little."

Reinhardt smiled wryly in Garfiel's direction. Garfiel himself was incredibly tense, looking as if he was ready to rush forward with his teeth and claws to attack prey.

Those were weapons that Subaru relied on countless times last year. However, Subaru doubted that Garfiel was capable of harming the young Reinhardt that stood before him.

Subaru: "Garfiel, stop it. This is Reinhardt. He's my... friend. He's not going to hurt you, I wouldn't allow it."

Subaru hesitated briefly before saying 'friend'.

He was once personally saved by the Sword Saint and his last parting with Reinhardt had been after Subaru's humiliation at the knights' training field. When Reinhardt had reached a hand out toward him, Subaru had turned it aside.

However, while Subaru considered all of this, Reinhardt nodded with ease.

Reinhardt: "Now, I've been introduced by Subaru. I am his friend, Reinhardt van Astrea. I would be grateful if you would tell me your name."

Garfiel: "—It's Garfiel Tinsel."

Reinhardt: "A fine name. You're well trained. Being so young, it's amazing." Subaru was struck by how accurate Reinhardt's assessments were.

In the year after Garfiel had left Sanctuary, Garfiel learned much about the outside world and gained a calmer temperament. If he were to calm his demeanor and the manner in which he speaks, then Garfiel would look roughly twenty years old, when in fact he was only fifteen.

Reinhardt's remarks indicated that he'd easily seen through this.

Reinhardt: "I've heard some of the rumors about Emilia-sama's guards. The Strongest of Shields, Garfiel Tinsel, and the Half-Elf's Knight, Natsuki Subaru. It brings me pride to call you my friend."

Subaru: "I'm glad to be called by my proper title, for once."

Reinhardt: "I've heard some of the other titles, but they are a little less pleasant. Speaking of which, is the spirit from the title The Spirit Knight that little girl over there?"

Reinhardt's attention turned to Beatrice, who shrank down next to Subaru. At some point, she'd taken his hand. Reinhardt knelt down to look into her eyes.

Reinhardt: "I can tell that you are a revered and great spirit. It honors me to be able to speak with you like this."

Beatrice: "...Betty is Subaru's contract spirit, Beatrice, in fact. I don't dislike your admiration, I suppose. Just, you should keep your distance, in fact. I'm sure you understand why, I suppose."

Reinhardt: "I understand completely. I'm sorry to trouble you."

Unlike Garfiel, she revealed no obvious weariness. However, she clung to Subaru's hand with an unusual tightness, and couldn't conceal its slight shaking.

However, it wasn't because she was afraid. This was something else.

And Reinhardt, with his respectful, humble words, turned ceremoniously to Emilia.

Reinhardt: "Emilia-sama, it's been a long time. Even in my own territory, I have heard about your achievements many times over."

Emilia: "Yeah, long time no see, Reinhardt. It's really been a year since the castle. We've also heard about your achievements, too."

Reinhardt: "We've done far less than Emilia-sama has. I've been able to do little to help my master. Compared to all that Subaru has done, I can only feel frustrated."

Emilia: "Hahaha. Yeah, Subaru is amazing. I'm proud of my knight."

Emilia's chest swelled with pride after hearing Reinhardt's flattery. Although she'd obviously missed the social rhetoric in Reinhardt's words, listening to what Emilia said made Subaru happy, even if the situation was equally embarrassing.

Anyway,

Subaru: "Looks like we've done enough greetings, but did you call Larkins's name earlier?"

Emilia: "Ah, that's right. Do you know him, Reinhardt?"

Reinhardt: "Yeah, I do. He's currently working under Felt-sama's employ. Although finding places for him to be useful is difficult, Felt-sama has placed high hopes in him."

Subaru: "That guy, Felt hired him!?"

At this piece of unexpected information, Subaru stared in shock. Reinhardt turned to Subaru and frowned apologetically at his reaction.

Reinhardt: "My apologies for failing to consider your feelings, especially since I was present in the alley where you two had an encounter. Afterward, a lot of things happened... when I told Felt-sama, she demanded on the spot that I invite him over."

Subaru: "Ah, well, if you say so then I'll believe it, but... seriously, what kind of a coincidence is that? That guy, though... is it just him?"

Reinhardt: "Felt-sama has hired three men, including him. Those three are indeed the ones who tried to rob you in the alley."

Subaru: "That trio gets to work together!?"

Facing this cruel, mischievous fate, Subaru couldn't help but cry to the heavens.

Immediately after being summoned to this world, Subaru had been attacked over and over by the same trio. He hadn't quite forgotten about them, but he had hardly expected to encounter them here, either.

Emilia: "Well, setting Subaru's surprise aside... Larkins is under your care, and the employ of Felt-chan, correct?"

Reinhardt. "That's right. Felt-sama wanted to walk around the city and sent him to notify the inn of her arrival. I came since he had yet to return."

Reinhardt repeated what Larkins had said, and Larkins nodded rigorously.

Larkins: "T-That's right! I kept saying the same thing over and over. Everybody doubted me for no reason. I demand an apology, ora!"

Reinhardt: "Larkins. I have said this many times, but your words as a messenger lack mindfulness. Although people can grasp the general situation, believing you is difficult."

Larkins: "Bastard, whose side are you on!?"

Reinhardt: "I'm on the side of justice. And, in this case, I think it was inevitable that my friend's brother would misunderstand."

Turning away from a fuming Larkins, Reinhardt smiled Joshua, who returned him with a rather embarrassed one.

Joshua: "Long time no see, Reinhardt-sama. This time, it seems that my blunder has caused your messenger to..."

Reinhardt: "The fault is ours, Joshua. Also, that honorific is so annoying. I know it's been a long time, but acting so distant makes me feel a bit lonely."

Joshua: "Although my honorable elder brother and Reinhardt-sama are friends, right now they are also political opponents." (nii-sama)

Reinhardt: "You haven't changed. You don't have to always imitate Julius in that regard."

Reinhardt gave a wry smile, while Joshua seemed to clenched his teeth.

—Anyway, the commotion had died down safely. Although the temporary problem was gone, it was replaced by the emergence of other questions. That was,

Subaru: “Even so, if both of us were called here then what’s Anastasia planning to do?”

Reinhardt: “The invitation sent to us said that she wanted to exchange a useful piece of information in return for something. Although we thought that Anastasia-sama may have been up to something, we didn’t expect that Emilia-sama and you have been invited as well.”

Subaru: “Are you saying that we should be prepared for something even more shocking?”

Reinhardt: “That’s a possibility. What about it, Joshua?”

One of the masterminds of the appointment, the young man shifted his monocle and said, “I guess we’ll see”, to deflect the topic.

With his usual pleasant demeanor, Reinhardt turned back to the hotel.

Reinhardt: “This is a pretty rare structure, the Water Plumage Pavilion. I’ve heard that this style of architecture only exists in Kararagi.”

Subaru: “Ehh, that’s surprising. You haven’t seen it before either. You’ve never been Kararagi?”

Reinhardt: “Yeah. I’m banned from going abroad because of fear of a breach of the treaty between each country. I even have avoid the borders. We’re close enough to Kararagi as is, so Pristella is pretty much the limit of where I can go.”

Emilia and Subaru were stunned at Reinhardt’s prohibition on travel. Maybe it was a joke, but the lightly laughing Reinhardt didn’t indicate that it was.

Asking about it would feel a little uneasy, so they pushed that line of questioning back.

Subaru: “We’ve been here for a while, and it’s kind of tiring to just linger near the entrance for so long. How about we go inside, since Felt isn’t here yet?”

Reinhardt: “Sure, I’m not supervising her right now. Sometimes she runs off to play around. It’s nice to relax once in a while.”

Larkins: "...sometimes? Isn't she always just playing around?"

Reinhardt: "Larkins, did you say something?"

Larkins: "Nope, nothing. So, can I go already? This is fun and all but let's hurry this shit up."

Larkins muttered a curse under his breath after requesting permission to leave. Reinhardt couldn't help a sigh.

Reinhardt: "Join Camberly and Gaston in guarding Felt-sama. Although there should be no danger, Rom-dono didn't accompany us, and if Felt-sama takes any dangerous action, you have to be there to stop her."

Larkins: "Ya I got it. What are you gonna do?"

Reinhardt: "I'll stay with Emilia-sama at the inn. If anything happens, send me a signal with fire magic, and I'll be there in five seconds."

Larkins: "You ain't kiddin', are ya, oi."

Finished, Larkins squeezed past Subaru. Halfway past, he gave a Joshua a hard glare, still wary of Reinhardt. He was really the model of petty evils.

Subaru: "Well, let's go inside. We'll say hello to Anastasia-san and tell her that Reinhardt's here."

Reinhardt: "I believe Joshua's in charge of that. Well, let's get going."

Joshua: "...yes, I am. I apologize for the inconvenience."

Joshua looked slightly lost. Was it because the situation had played out strangely? In order to comfort him, Subaru, Reinhardt, Emilia, Garfiel, and finally even Beatrice dutifully followed him into the inn.

Subaru: "I'll feel bad if I shove everything onto him." Reinhardt: "I'll join Subaru in accompanying him."

Emilia: "Ah, the two of them are going, I will too."

Garfiel: “If th’Captain’n Emilia-sama are doin’ it, my amazin’ self’s gonna too.”

Beatrice: “Betty doesn’t want to be the only one excluded from it, in fact... but it wouldn’t bother me too much even if I were, I suppose.”

Subaru/Emilia: “Yes, you’re adorable.” (Hai, kawaii kawaii はい、可愛い可愛い)

Subaru and Emilia, walking to her left and right, both petted her gently. Beatrice swatted their hands away, annoyed, then obediently grabbed their sleeves.

Joshua: “In here. Anastasia-sama is entertaining guests right now.”

They were at a different room than the original dining hall. Subaru eyed Joshua wearily. Subaru: “Guests? Did she invite even more people?”

Joshua: “...you’re about to find out, whether or not you look at me with that menacing gaze.” Subaru: “Come on, my eyes aren’t that scary!”

Joshua: “I can understand you even if you don’t raise your voice like a witchbeast.”

Subaru: “That’s pretty harsh, and what kind of witchbeast? Dog, rabbit, or whale? Pick one.”

These were Subaru’s top three most annoying witchbeasts. Although, to him, the others all seemed to be some lion-faced beast, so they made no extreme impression on him.”

While Subaru was sorting through his memories, Reinhardt gently whispered “Whale”, interrupting Subaru’s train of thought.

Reinhardt: “Whale, you’re talking about the White Whale, right, Subaru?”

Subaru: “...yeah, that’s right. That’s the worst whale. There were so many times where I thought it was dying and it just refused to die. Thinking back on it, it was such a miracle.”

In fact, the increase in the number of white whales honestly did make their victory a miracle.

That witchbeast was such an amazing creature, and the disaster it wrought was also extraordinary. It had caused so much suffering that even now, Subaru's chest tightened in pain at the thought.

Reinhardt: "The subjugation of the White Whale, would you mind telling me about it in more detail later? I'm not a man who's completely unrelated to that monster. Although, that would be a be a long story to tell."

Subaru: "—Of course. As for your story, if it's hard to tell then you don't need to."

Subaru was only vaguely aware of Reinhardt's experiences with the White Whale. To Subaru, the battle with the White Whale was the fruit of an old swordsman's decade-long obsession with vengeance. And Subaru also knew of the Sword Demon's origin, and of his relationship to the red-haired youth. As to what had happened between them, Subaru had no way of knowing.

—This wasn't a topic that Subaru could pursue out of curiosity, was how he judged it.

Reinhardt: "Thank you."

Thus, Reinhardt responded briefly to the Subaru's thoughtfulness.

Subaru sought nothing other than that.

Seeing Reinhardt's lowered gaze, Subaru gave a long sigh. Emilia and Beatrice looked at him, worried, and Subaru gave them an "I'm alright" smile.

Joshua: "We've arrived. Please wait in this tea room until their meeting ends."

Joshua, who'd finally led them to their destination, gestured to a cross-style door. Hanging on the door was a paper scroll. Subaru, although delighted, felt that his Japanese soul had become quite a bit strange.

But, his optimistic thoughts could only exist for a brief while.

Joshua: "Excuse me. Would you mind being with other guests?"

He directed the question at the guests already occupying the tea room. Someone inside, who shifted slightly, responded.

???: “—Sure. We don’t have much to do right now.”

That calm voice gave Subaru a start. It was impossibly familiar. Not only that, Subaru had only just been thinking about its owner.

No one aside from Subaru seemed to notice it; that is, no one but Reinhardt. His face became stiff, his blue eyes swaying with hesitation.

Joshua, having not noticed, opened the door. There was a quiet sound of wood on wood, as the occupants of the tea room came into sight.

Then, the occupants, seated on mats of cloth, looked over to the new guests.

Reinhardt: “—Honored Grandfather.” (ojisama)

Wilhelm: “Is that, Reinhardt?”

The voices of the grandfather and the grandson overlapped.

This was the unintended reunion between Reinhardt Van Astrea and Wilhelm Van Astrea.

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Chapter 12 - Crushing Atmosphere of the Tea Room



Every one currently gathered in the tea room was someone who was exceptionally important.

Emilia: “Even so, it’s surprising that Reinhardt and Wilhelm are related. It’s no wonder that they’re both skilled swordsmen.”

Subaru: “It’s natural that we didn’t know, we had no reason to. If families were based on similarities then they’d be too big, Emilia-tan.”

The wooden floor beneath the long table was covered with mats, in the style of a traditional Japanese living room. Emilia and Subaru were seated next to each other, holding a whispered conversation without discussing anything too significant. They were chatting to calm their nerves.

Beatrice: "Betty is already alert and won't let anyone try anything, in fact. Subaru can stop staring at everyone so warily, I suppose."

Subaru: "You know I born with a mean look, I'm not staring at anyone warily. Besides, I know what it's like to be glared at with cold eyes."

Beatrice was also sitting near Emilia, keeping a vigilant watch. Emilia sat with her legs folded underneath her, and Subaru had his legs crossed, while Beatrice sat with a rigid posture. It was a position she'd taken for Subaru's sake, although she couldn't resist fidgeting a little.

Subaru: "In any event, Garfiel's here if something were to happen. And besides, no one here would act so rashly."

Subaru's gaze left Beatrice, whose knees were shaking, and directed his attention toward the corner of the tea room, where Garfiel was sitting. Although he noticed Subaru and wanted to wave at him, his hand was too busy being caught by Mimi.

Right now, several key figures in the Royal Election were gathered at the table, while the others were keeping an eye on the situation from the corners of room. In other words, Garfiel and Mimi were sitting together. Hetaro and Tibby were also present, glaring at Garfiel with dark malice.

Joshua was also seated in the tea room, looking extremely uncomfortable.

Reinhardt: "I am very grateful for this hospitality. Felt-sama may be a little late in arriving since she's out in Pristella, but she should be here shortly."

Anastasia: "You don't have to be so formal, especially since you accepted my invitation on such short notice. Oh, but it's a strange coincidence that you all arrived so close together."

Anastasia took a gentle approach to meet the etiquette conscious Reinhardt. Reinhardt raised his head and looked at Julius, who was standing by Anastasia's side.

Reinhardt: "It's been a while, Julius. We last met face to face at the Chamber of Commerce."

Julius: "Ah, that's right. I'm sorry for asking everyone to come in such little time. But, it gives me peace of mind to know that you've all kept safe."

After greeting his friend, Reinhardt returned to his seat. If seating at the table reflected the positions of the factions, then Reinhardt was seated at the bottom. Sitting at the head was the host, Anastasia. Next to Anastasia was Emilia and her faction, who Reinhardt, representing Felt's faction, was seated next to. Across from Anastasia was,

???: "It feels like it's been a long time since everyone has gathered like this." The speaker, who wore a dignified smile, was a beautiful woman with green hair.

Amber eyes which seemed to contain the very picture of harmony, dressed in a feminine navy blue dress, giving off an air of nobility. Although, if you'd known what she was like before, it would be hard to see her as the same person.

Emilia: "We haven't seen you in a while either, Crusch-sama. You seem to be doing well."

Crusch: "Yes, that's right. I previously caused you a lot of trouble, so let me offer my thanks. I've also heard of quite a few of the deeds that you were involved in. When I received the news, I thought that they were things only you could do."

Crusch replied to Emilia in a soft tone. Her old decisive self seemed to have disappeared along with her memory, and she had yet to recover it. She was no longer a savvy, brave politician, but merely a beautiful aristocratic lady.

If the aforementioned events that Emilia was involved in were to happen to Crusch's current self, they would surely ended in tragedy.

Ferris: “Really, hearing people talk about nyon like that was surprising. Eradicating the Sizable Hare and becoming a spiritual arts user, who would have expected that out of Subaru-kyun?”

Next to Crusch, a feminine young man with cat ears and a coy manner spoke up. He was Ferris, both Crusch’s knight and the best healer of Lugunica.

Unlike his incredibly different master, Ferris hadn’t changed in the slightest. It was reassuring, but, at the same time, he remained difficult to understand.

Subaru: “Well, becoming someone who people rely on has always been of the biggest goals in my life. As for my contract with Beako, well, it probably annoys you, but my life was in danger at the time so I had no choice but to make it.”

Ferris: “Even though I gave nyon such a solemn warning? Subaru-kyun will eventually collapse due to his excessive use of his gate. Without Beatrice-chan, it’ll crack open with a bang, so you’ll have be especially careful.”

Subaru: “I know. And there’s no other guy who can make Beako this happy.”

Although they both spoke in a relaxed tone, Ferris’s warning was meant as serious, heartfelt advice, so Subaru also responded with an equally serious attitude. Dropping a hand on Beatrice’s shoulder, he considered this the tuition.

Subaru: “Even so... I didn’t expect Crusch-san and her faction to also have been invited. I was already surprised to encounter Reinhardt outside, but now I’m about to spray nosebleeds.”

Ferris: “Agh. That would be overdramatic. But, it is quite a surprise that we’d all coincidentally arrive nyon the same day, though.”

Wilhelm: “Since no specific date and time was established for the meeting, that we arrived together was the result of estimates. —It’s rare for us all to have a chance to gather together, so this is our good fortune.”

This was the last member of Crusch camp. Sitting next to Crusch was Ferris, who was seated in a woman's pose. Next to him was the old swordsmen, Wilhelm, sipping his tea. He was dressed in the same butler outfit as always, but it suited his tea-drinking-look well.

Due to the seating arrangements, Reinhardt and Wilhelm had ended up seated next to one another. Anyone who knew of their story, however, would feel uneasy.

Subaru: "They haven't even met eyes yet..."

Subaru whispered his observation to Emilia, who quietly agreed.

Wilhelm and Reinhardt were, as grandfather and grandson, direct relatives, but, aside from offering mutual pleasantries, they had yet to acknowledge each other.

The tea room was dominated by silence, and Subaru took time to think their situation over. The members of Emilia's faction were, whether due their attitude, nature, or childishness, all largely unskilled at reading the mood.

It was also hard to forget how Joshua, who had returned after being summoned away, had given a scared "Whaa" when he saw the situation.

House Astrea. The name was so well known that even Subaru knew a little of their family history. Sword Saint was a title that was passed from generation to generation, and the lineage of Sword Saints meant that the Astraa family probably had the history of greatest combat strength throughout of all of Lugunica.

Wilhelm's obsession with the White Whale obviously came from the defeat of his wife, the previous Sword Saint. Connecting these facts would lead to one question.

—Why did Wilhelm choose to borrow the power of Crusch's faction, rather than the power of his own house?

Taking the question further, why had Reinhardt not participated in the fight against White Whale?

Wilhelm had said that he'd started chasing the White Whale about fourteen years ago. If the Royal Election had been ongoing, then Wilhelm could not cooperate with Reinhardt, who was a member of the an enemy faction. That made sense.

But, when Wilhelm had begun his hunt for the White Whale, House Astrea had nothing to do with the Royal Election. Of course, then Reinhardt would still have been a child, and would have lacked the ability to defeat the White Whale. But, considering his later growth, why had Reinhardt never sought out the White Whale?

Wilhelm's sentiments and Reinhardt's thoughts, Subaru had no insight into either.

—If they were ever willing to discuss it, he'd love to listen.

However, asking directly would be like unscrupulously cutting an old wound and rubbing salt on the scars.

And although Natsuki Subaru was incredibly curious, he'd grown quite a bit in the past year. He'd come to understand that if he pressed the topic, people would find him annoying.

Reinhardt and Wilhelm, though they were in hostile factions, were both valuable, talented people who Subaru had a stable relationship with. That single curiosity aside, the level of trust that they placed in him was hardly low.

So, all he could do was hope that someone else would bring it up.

Emilia: "By the way, Anastasia-san, why did you gather everyone here? I think you had some purpose... right?"

Unaware of Subaru's preoccupation, Emilia directed a question at Anastasia, who tilted her head with a smile.

Anastasia: "Of course, I have something that I'd like to discuss with each of you, but, to answer Emilia-san's question, I had to think pretty hard to come up with something that would entice each of you here."

Emilia: "We came for the magic stones, but what about the others?"

Anastasia: "Everyone has their own wants and needs. Using just those to gather everyone would have been fairly easy... but there are those odd groups whose wants are mysterious."

Emilia: "I don't understand...?"

Emilia frowned and crossed her arms as she considered the issue, although the problem wasn't a difficult one. Just observing who was currently not present would pinpoint the faction that refused to be communicative.

Emilia: "Were Priscilla-sama and Al-dono not invited?"

Anastasia: "Those two are completely set on their own path and I wouldn't know where to start finding out what they want. To be honest, even Felt-san treats land and money like they're completely irrelevant."

Reinhardt: "Regarding that, Felt-sama actually volunteered to come on a whim. That said, I do wish she'd care a little more about those matters."

Anastasia and Reinhardt spoke of the matter plainly and expressed the same opinion. Upon hearing their words, Emilia, who could only agree with them, raised her hand.

Emilia: "I'd also like to know more about everyone's circumstances. Although I've worked hard to learn, it's difficult to understand everyone's positions."

Subaru: "Then let's not talk about what happened today..."

Emilia: "Hmph, Subaru you meanie."

Emilia's cheek was being pinched by his right hand. His left hand still rested on Beatrice's shoulder, where, either as reward or punishment, it had sat for a little too long.

At any rate, the positions of Priscilla's faction and Felt's faction were clear. Then all that was left was the reason, perhaps the weakness, that lead Crusch here.

Crusch: "As to why we came to Pristella, it was because Anastasia-sama seems to have some information regarding Gluttony."

Subaru: "_____"

As if reading Subaru's thoughts, Crusch replied.

Crusch's words struck Subaru like a bullet, and it was something that he could not overlook. Meanwhile, Anastasia caressed her scarf with a wry smile.

Anastasia: "I wasn't keeping anything from Natsuki-kun, but, there is a matter of priorities. Under these circumstances, solving Crusch's problems should take precedence. Isn't that right?"

Subaru: "Gah, gr... shu-, fu-. F-Fine, that's fine." Julius: "I see you've grown up a little."

Subaru: "Shut up! I'm already on the verge of exploding."

Selling to the highest bidder was the basis of decision making in business.

Subaru managed to put the brakes on his fury at Anastasia's explanation, which was fortunate, since Julius had begun to look uneasy.

Subaru: "Who are you, my parents? On that topic, my dad could beat me up ten times better than you ever could!"

Ferris: "Eh... Ferri-chan is scared..."

Subaru: "Don't be shaken so easily! Are you scared of your own family!?"

Subaru snapped at Ferris, who had snuggled into Crusch, but he was joking rather than scolding. On that note, his words about his father, Kenichi were certainly true.

Anastasia's reason was acceptable. However, it would be another matter entirely if the information were to be given to only Crusch and not Subaru. Information on Gluttony was crucial to restoring Rem, who was still sleeping in Roswaal's mansion.

Even though he'd accepted the reason, he wouldn't be so easily swayed.

Anastasia: "Even though you're making such a scary face, you'll feel more at ease after you've heard the full story."

Subaru: "Then.... it's true?"

Anastasia: "It's not a lie, and I'm sure that Crusch's faction has no intention of keeping it to themselves."

Subaru turned to Crusch, who seemed to have some difficulty maintaining a composed expression.

Crusch: "It's only natural. Of course, in order to retrieve my memory, I want the information on Gluttony. However, I also know that Subaru is also determined to defeat Gluttony for that young girl's sake. Under such circumstances, I have no desire to monopolize the information."

Subaru: "Crusch-san..."

Crusch: "In addition, the more comrades I find who share my goal, the better. The more people there are working against sinners like the Witch Cult, the more likely we are to win."

Crusch, who spoke in a light tone, gave Subaru peace of mind.

Her true desire was, of course, to restore her memories and improve her flaws. But that didn't interfere with her goodwill toward Subaru.

Holding an honorable nature which had not been dimmed at all by her amnesia was this woman named Crusch Karsten.

Subaru: "I'm grateful. Thank you, Crusch-san. I will cherish the opportunity that you've handed me. Definitely."

Crusch: "That said, the information is our priority. We won't concede that."

In response to Subaru's determination, Crusch straightened her back and met his gaze.

Of course. They shared a heated competition. But her benevolent smile was out of place for this occasion, so she and Subaru laughed together.

The one who interrupted the moment was Crusch's knight.

Ferris: "Nyau. Seeing Subaru and Crusch-sama like this is really annoying, stop it. Subaru's such a greedy man. Are the two girls at your side not enough? Really nyow!"

Crusch: "Ferris, that's not a very courteous thing to say. Subaru isn't someone who'd be swayed by temptations like that."

Subaru: "Yeah, don't say that. Certainly, Crusch-san is beautiful and very cute but I have a loyal heart... although it is split in two right now, but—owowowowow!?"

Beatrice: "That's not a very loyal heart, in fact. You should just stay quiet and reflect on what you just said, I suppose."

Subaru, who'd been trying to agree with Crusch, had his ear caught in Beatrice's tight grip. His eyes watered in protest, but before he could complain, he noticed that she was pointing at Crusch.

Following Beatrice's finger, Subaru saw that Crusch was wearing a bright blush. Thinking back, what odd words had he spoken?

Subaru: "Oh no, Emilia-tan, did I say something strange?"

Emilia: "Huh? Hmm, I'm not sure. Subaru, you just talked the way you usually talk to me..."

Subaru: "That's right. Then what did I do? Holding Emilia-tan's hand lets me think better, may I?"

Emilia: "Yes yes. Try your hardest."

Subaru tapped his forehead with the hand that held Emilia's, as he cast a gloomy look. Meanwhile, Ferris took the opportunity to whisper to Crusch,

Ferris: "See, it's like that. Subaru-kyun is unconsciously excessively friendly to everyone he meets and always tries to play a cool and handsome act. It's like he's messed up in the head. Don't pay it any attention."

Crusch: "Yes, I'll be careful. Ha, I was a little shocked." Crusch placed a hand on her chest with a sigh of relief.

Subaru found this feminine action incredibly cute. Crusch and Ferris, who were unaware of his thoughts, held hands as if making a promise to each other. Anyone who stumbled across this scene would have assumed that they were girlfriends.

Now, everyone had revealed their reasons for coming to Pristella.

???: "Ehh, everyone's here already. Originally I heard that I was supposed to just meet with the lady from Kararagi."

The paper door was thrown open, revealing the girl standing behind it.

She was an agile, pretty blonde girl with large chestnut-red eyes and a crooked smile. Her small face was full of naughty charm and her slim but agile physique seemed a touch more feminine. Just as before, she was dressed in a outfit focused on enhancing movement speed, one that also happened to leave her navel and legs exposed.

Felt: "What, surprised that I still look this way? It's only been a year, you know." Reinhardt: "Felt-sama."

Everyone slumped their shoulders upon seeing her, and Felt caught their disappointment. Reinhardt, however, stood up to welcome his master as she approached.

Reinhardt: "I was sure I left a change of clothes on the dragon carriage, what happened?"

Felt: "Bah! I wanted to go sightseeing in something comfortable. Saying that, you wanted me get changed in the hotel, but who would wear something that looks so itchy? You should know that about me by now!"

Reinhardt: "That's really just like you..."

Reinhardt placed a hand on his forehead, speaking in a helpless tone. Felt, who was dragging the kingdom's strongest hero around like a plaything, looked happy to enter the room.

Felt: "Right, and here I am. —I'm grateful for your hospitality today and I hope that our discussions will go well. There, all done with greetings."

For a moment, Felt resembled a noble's daughter. She gave a naughty smile and mimed a curtsy without a skirt, and immediately reverted to her usual self.

Subaru was quite self-aware of his own disagreement with the aristocratic community, but Felt's attitude toward them seemed to have worsened notably in the past year.

Felt: "Man, this is a really bizarre building. I've never seen one like it before, so I got curious and explored a little before coming here."

Felt sat down on the mat originally occupied by Reinhardt, who moved another one over and sat earnestly next to her.

By chance, Felt was now next to Wilhelm, separating grandfather and grandson.

Emilia: "Well, long time no see, Felt-chan. How have you been?"

Felt: "It's weird to have -chan added to my name. Well anyway, I've been well. You, sister, have been... a little too lively, no? I've heard a lot of rumors about really scary things." (she calls Emilia 'Nēchan')

Emilia: "It's Subaru who's been lively, not me. As for me, I've just been lucky to be saved Subaru's hard work."

Felt: "Ah! That's right!"

Upon hearing Emilia's reply, Felt leapt to her feet with a clap of her hands, her eyes fixed straight at Subaru.

Felt: "I've heard a ton of ridiculous rumors about you, brother. I've just got to know, how many of those rumors are actually true?"

Subaru: "It seems like you've decided that they were all fake before even asking me. Your level of faith in disappointingly low."

Felt: "Because they're so wild! I heard that you cut the White Whale in half by yourself, you crushed a sin archbishops skull to bits with you own two hands, and even the Sizable Hare was roasted and eat—"

Subaru: "I was really involved in all of those, but the rumors have been blown hundreds of times out of proportion!"

If Subaru really had done as the rumors said, then he'd be hailed the kingdom's hero and would probably even have been put on the throne. With that authority, he'd have made Emilia queen and they'd be ruling together.

Julius & Wilhelm: "—Heh."

Subaru's reaction had drawn a small laugh from the audience. There two sources of laughter were from people sitting on opposite sides of the room, Julius and Wilhelm.

The two, both of whom seemed to have felt embarrassed at their unconscious reaction, sought each other out and relaxed when they found someone who'd given a similar response. Felt, whose eyes had been darting back and forth in confusion, asked,

Felt: "Why did the old man and the knight laugh? Me, did I say something strange?"

Subaru: "Everything you said was strange! You gave me too much credit. If I did that much then I'd deserve a Nobel Peace Prize!"

Although Subaru didn't fully understand what he had earned, he knew that it was meant to be a symbol of honor. When he was presented with the medal he hadn't fully understood its actual and symbolic value, so he'd never personally felt the merit associated with it.

In fact, the medal that he'd received was quite valuable in the kingdom.

Wilhelm: "Subaru-dono was indispensable during the battle with the White Whale. If he were not there, I have no doubt that we all would have perished. It sounds like an exaggeration, but it is no laughing matter."

Julius: "The same is true of the battle with the Witch Cult. The one who developed our tactics against them was him. Were he not there, myself and the others who had helped would not have been able to bring down the Sin Archbishop."

Subaru: "_____"

Overwhelming faith from Wilhelm and Julius.

Their straightforward support for him struck Subaru speechless. The lively atmosphere left his entire body burning with embarrassment. His face was red from ear to ear, and blood was liable to spray from his eyes at any moment.

Subaru: "N-No, stop it! Don't praise me so much! The higher you raise me, the more my ego is stoked, shouldn't you all be clear on that!?"

Julius: “No, not at all. Although it is true that you made a fool of yourself at the start of the Royal Election, you’ve proven your worth time and time again. You have more than made up for that disgrace. You absolutely deserve to be so commended.”

Wilhelm: “There is absolutely no need for humility. You’ve had a hand in accomplishing great things. Those successes would never have happened had you not been present. I will be proud to have shared a battlefield with you until the end of my days.”

Subaru: “—Ah, um.”

So far, Subaru had died in a number of painful, gruesome ways.

However, this would be by the most horrifying. Being pelted with compliments.

Subaru, embarrassed to the verge of death, looked to Emilia and Beatrice, pleading for help. However, they merely smiled sweetly.

Emilia: “That’s right. Subaru has worked sooo hard. I’m truly proud to have him as my knight.”

Beatrice: “W-Well, since he’s Betty’s partner, it’s only natural that he’s so successful, in fact. He’s only going to be more and more amazing, I suppose. So it’s a good habit to get used to praising him, in fact!”

The situation having gone in an entirely unexpected direction, Subaru was stricken with panic. Then, everyone took turns speaking.

Reinhardt: “Amazing, Subaru. Everyone praises you for doing something amazing, something no one else could have done. I’m glad to call you my friend.”

Crusch: “I would have lost so many loyal men without Subaru-sama’s help, even Wilhelm, who has been supporting me to this day. Allow me to thank you again.”

Ferris: “Although you don’t have any combat ability, you never lost heart during the battle with the White Whale. It allowed Crusch-sama to make the speech that changed the tide of the battle. In short, thank nyou very much.”

Anastasia: “Thanks to Natsuki-kun’s information, myself and countless other businessmen are no longer plagued by the White Whale’s fog. You have my gratitude.”

Mimi: “Oohh! Are we taking turns complimenting big brother? He’s very strong! He’s very handsome! The only thing he’s missing is Mimi! Your turn, Garf!”

Garfiel: “Ya, I dunno w’happen, but deservin’ th’praise, that’s th’Captain. Th’s my amazin’ bro. Th’s a, Fame comes with the right way and where in.”

People were taking advantage of the momentum and piling flattering remarks on Subaru, who was blushing from all the warm encouragement. Felt treated him with a laugh.

Felt: “It sounds like they were true, but... it looks like brother’s nature is hasn’t changed. That’s a relief!”

Subaru: “You guys, stop it! Everyone’s ganging up on me!!”

After Felt summarized the farce taking place, Subaru could no longer withstand it and exploded. The tension which had originally cloaked the tea melted away with the sound of laughter.

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Subaru: “Ah, damn, really I’m about to disintegrate and die...”

After the fun in the tea room had dissipated, an exhausted Subaru had left for his room.

Everyone had inexplicably showered Subaru with praise, before occupying themselves with cross faction conversations, as if forgetting about their opposition.

Of course, it couldn't be said that no one had any intent of trying to delve into the secrets of the other factions, but most of the conversations were just idle, fun chatter.

Although the candidates could at any moment end up in a confrontation, from another point of view, they were all women of a similar age, so conversation on topics other than the state of the kingdom came quite naturally to them.

In fact, Emilia had been very much looking forward to having an opportunity to talk with other girls her age.

Subaru: "Well, it could be said that a conversation between Emilia-tan and Beako would be just like that..."

Beatrice: "Don't bring up her real age, in fact. Do you want to start a war, I suppose?" Beatrice reprimanded the imprudent Subaru with a sharp voice.

Turning to see the source of the sound showed Beatrice sitting on a quilted pile of blankets in his room, desperately trying to ease her numb feet.

Subaru: "Even though you're a spirit your feet fell asleep. Aren't spirits supposed to not have circulation, though?"

Beatrice: "I have circulation, Betty's body is designed to imitate an actual human body as closely as possible, in fact. Betty will feel the pain that humans can feel, I suppose. If I dive underwater for too long, I'll lose consciousness, in fact."

Subaru: "So you breathe, too?"

Beatrice: "Of course I do... hey, don't try to sniff Betty's breath, I suppose!"

As Subaru's nose approached her, a somewhat embarrassed Beatrice pulled the quilts around herself. Subaru took the opportunity to flick her numb foot, which felt like it had sprung back to life. Beatrice's eyes watered.

Beatrice: "That hurts, in fact... I'm about to cry, I suppose... Subaru's a bully, in fact..." Subaru: "Okay, okay, my bad, my bad. Come here, come here."

He patted his knees with a wry smile as he sat down, and Beatrice moved from the quilts to his lap. Caressing Beatrice's twintailed head, Subaru said to himself, "but then again..."

Subaru: "The interior decor make it a nice room, and it looks like the staff did their best to match the rest of the hotel... but here are some subtle deficiencies."

It was probably caused by woodworking technology developing differently here than it had in his original world.

The design of Water Plumage Pavilion felt quite similar to the design of a hotel from Subaru's original world, but in spite of the presence wooden beams and paper doors, there was a certain something that felt off.

The beds probably took many painstaking attempts to figure out before the designers had decided on laying animal skins on a wooden bed.

The feeling wasn't bad, it was just a slight deviation from what Subaru was used to.

Subaru: "I really can't agree with not sleeping on the floor just because social norms dictate that blankets have to go on beds."

Beatrice: "Putting a blanket directly on the floor is poverty, in fact. Betty can't condone her partner becoming a man with no earnings, I suppose."

Subaru: "I'm always working you so hard."

Beatrice: "What's that supposed to mean, in fact?"

Garfiel: "What're y'two chatterin' on about?"

Beatrice, who had been engaging in coordinated banter with Subaru, jumped up at the sudden appearance of a third voice. However, her feet were still numb so she lost her balance and fell into the bundle of quilts on the floor. Subaru quickly reached over and righted her.

Subaru: "Garfiel? Is your adventure over?"

Garfiel: "Th'midget finally let'm go free after an spendin' th'entire day. Beatrice's, why'r ya actin' crazy?"

Subaru: "She's never been so far away from home before, so she's super excited! She even had trouble sleeping, isn't she cute?"

Standing at the entrance to the room, Garfiel laughed hard enough to reveal his sharp teeth.

Because the guest room also had a paper door, Beatrice hadn't heard it open and was scared at the sudden intrusion. Subaru, on the other hand, was sitting facing the entrance, so he'd seen Garfiel immediately.

Subaru: "So, what's up? Dinner?"

Garfiel: "Nah, dinner prob' won't be 'till later. Th's nothing for me t'do alone in m'room, Captain, and 'sides, Otto-nii still hasn't come back yet."

Subaru: "Well, Otto isn't a kid, so you don't have to worry too much about him. Even if we incur some debt here, I doubt he'd give us any extra trouble in solving it."

Garfiel: "Right."

Otto had left a few hours ago to go settle a debt. Garfiel has no objection to this, since, after all, he knew what Otto was like.

Of course, when it came to asking him for help, there was something incredibly reliable about him.

Subaru: "But those are different things." Garfiel: "What're y'talkin' about now?"

Of course, Garfiel was used to Subaru's frequent mutters to himself. Garfiel gestured toward the corridor with his chin.

Garfiel: "If y'don't have anythin' goin' on, can the Captain tag 'long with me for a bit?"

Subaru: "Tag along with you? Oh, a bath? A bath, right? You mean a bath? Open air bathing is too good to pass up on. I was looking around earlier and I found bathrobes, the thought of seeing Emilia-tan in a bathrobe is enough to raise my spirits! They've been raised already!"

Tatami and the architectural style were very difficult to reproduce, but the bathrobe appeared to have been commercialized. Subaru gave a mental tribute here to those in Kararagi who had been responsible for it.

However, standing before such an excited Subaru, Garfield wore a serious expression, one that was somber enough that even Subaru couldn't continue to joke around. A worried look came to his face.

Subaru: "Garfiel. What's wrong? Is there something you want to do?"

Garfiel: "No, 's not really th'big 'f a deal, but..."

Touching the white scar on his forehead forehead white scars, Garfield fell silent for a moment. Then he stared straight at Subaru.

Garfiel: "I jus' wanted t'know exactly how strong th'world greatest hero is."

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Chapter 13 - Peaceful Diner



The Water Plumage Pavilion's rustic courtyard, paved in gravel, was full of Japanese hospitality.

Although expecting an extravagant pond would be too much, the bamboo-like plants on the sides of the stone road were a nice touch.

Subaru: "Even so, Wilhelm-san didn't join us."

Subaru sat in a corridor facing the courtyard, picking at the gravel with his toes.

He thought of the white-haired old man who had indifferently declined Subaru's invitation with an apologetic expression. What was Wilhelm up to?

Alone in his room, he would certainly feel bored until dinnertime.

Subaru: "That said, he doesn't seem like the kind of person who'd be concerned with how others spend their time."

Julius: "Saying it like that makes it sound like we're spying, even though we were invited here."

Subaru: "It's not like I'm here because I wanted to be... even though I am here..."

Subaru replied to Julius with sarcasm, who sat next to him in the hallway with his legs crossed gracefully. Julius nodded with a smile, as if to say "Truly". However, the man sitting on the other side of Subaru didn't want to admit it as frankly.

Ferris: "Oh, please. Hah, do you think Ferri-chan's is here because he wanted to see it? Subaru-kyun just dragged me here and he was just so annoying that I didn't want to protest."

Subaru: "Well, I'm sorry I guess. You should be here in case anything bad happens. Although, it seems that isn't going to be necessary."

Subaru squinted at Ferris, who was shaking his cat ears in agitation, then looked past him to the fast-paced battle that was taking place in the courtyard.

Frankly, the battle moved so quickly that Subaru's eyes could barely keep up. Even so, he could plainly assert,

Subaru: "Really, Reinhardt is a damn monster."

Julius: "Although it's hard to deny, I don't like using such a word to describe a friend."

Ferris: "It would be hard enough to deny it under normal circumstances."

—The sight that was unfolding before them affirmed their conclusions.

In the courtyard paved with gravel, a fierce match was being staged between a roaring blond teenager and the red-haired hero defending against him.

The challenger, Garfiel, burned through an endless flow of motivation as he struck at Reinhardt from every possible angle. However, whether using claws, fangs, legs, elbows, or knees, each of his attacks were seen through and evaded with ease.

Not to mention,

Subaru: “That guy, is he really just standing there without moving?”

Julius: “It was the original condition, after all. Reinhardt would never violate it. Nevertheless, failing to force him to do so is probably humiliating for Garfiel.”

Garfiel kept launching attacks at Reinhardt from different directions, trying to take those opportunities to expose an Achilles heel. But no matter how much he tried, Garfiel wasn’t going to find a weakness that didn’t exist. Not only that, Reinhardt was dodging without much effort.

Reinhardt had been standing in the same place since the start of this rash challenge, having never conceded an inch.

As Garfiel rushed at him repeatedly, Reinhardt’s two feet remained fixed in place.

—At first, when Garfiel visited Reinhardt’s room to challenge him, Subaru had summed it up as a reckless move.

Thinking back, that Reinhardt even agreed to Garfiel’s challenge was unexpected.

Frankly, the match was solely a product of Garfiel’s desire. Accepting the challenge wouldn’t have provided Reinhardt with any benefit. If you consider the difference of strength between the two then Reinhardt presumably wouldn’t have a childish sense of masculinity to flaunt.

If you consider the complicated relationship between Reinhardt, the royal knights, and his political opponents, then fighting Garfiel is in some respects an unnecessary danger. Even if he'd believed that no one had set up any tricks or traps, accepting the challenge was still unnecessary.

Considering this, the match was unlikely to ever happen and Subaru had certainly considered dismissing the idea entirely.

However, from the bottom of his heart, Subaru wanted to witness its fulfillment.

The one who took the responsibility of serving as the fighting power of Emilia's faction was, without any doubt, Garfiel Tinsel. However, outside conditions could often influence the outcome of a conflict, so achieving victory solely through battle was plainly impossible. Furthermore, Garfiel's flaws weren't few in number, either.

Emilia's faction had gained much fame throughout the past year and much attention was directed toward Garfiel.

Because everyone within Emilia's faction recognized and praised his strength, Garfiel himself was quite arrogant. He had always been able to live up to those expectations with results and achievements.

However, this one-sided consideration of Garfiel also posed a troubling fact. Garfiel had yet to face enough opponents as strong as him since leaving Sanctuary.

The only person who had fought him on equal footing was the homicidal demon Elsa, during the battle in Roswaal's old mansion, and it had ended in Garfiel's victory. Since then, he hadn't experienced any hard-fought battles that would have compelled him to show off his full strength.

Although Garfiel had indeed once lost to Subaru, Otto, and Ram, the conditions of that victory could be entirely attributed to their dirty tricks.

In terms of a proper, clean battle, Garfiel Tinsel was a man who had never experienced defeat since birth.

—Therefore, even knowing that it was cruel, Subaru longed for a battle between Reinhardt and Garfiel to happen.

To continue without losses, and to remain unaware of his limits. That wasn't an impossible path.

However, if he remained ignorant of his own limits and merely relied on the luck of continuously facing weaker opponents, then Garfiel would never be certain of exactly where his own strength lay.

Reinhardt van Astrea, the hero whom Subaru had only seen in action once. Subaru chose to trust in his power.

Subaru: "I trusted his power... but I didn't think the difference would be this great."

The situation had proceeded in the exact direction that Subaru had hoped it would. However, he wasn't as surprised as he was astonished, to the point where overreactions would have been superfluous.

Having brought an excited Garfiel to Reinhardt's room, Subaru made the blunt request and Reinhardt readily consented to it. Subaru had been so surprised he'd almost fallen over.

Afterward, in response to Garfiel's suggestion of going out of the city to avoid casualties, Reinhardt had responded with a smile, "The yard is spacious enough, although we should mention to the manager that we won't be damaging his land."

Reinhardt probably hadn't intended for his words to carry any malice but they served as more than enough provocation for Garfiel.

Garfiel had accepted Reinhardt's proposal, exuding an aura of anger so intense that Subaru, who was standing beside Garfiel at the time, barely retained his composure when he felt his rage all but stab into Reinhardt.

They had then proceeded down towards the hotel courtyard where a few rules were set. Weapons were not allowed, nor were dangerous blessings. Wounding the other party was also prohibited.

During that time, Subaru had called Ferris in case of any injuries. Subaru also invited Julius and Wilhelm as commentators on the battle itself. Unfortunately, Wilhelm had declined, so it ended up being just Julius and Ferris who watched the battle with him. On that note, Otto still had yet to return.

Subaru: "By the way, I didn't mention this to the women or Mimi's brothers."

Julius: "I think that's wise. If Anastasia-sama learned of this then she would no doubt turn it into a performance. If it reaches Hetaro or Tivey, then Mimi would surely be upset."

Julius agreed with Subaru as they surveyed the courtyard. Of course, when there was such an exciting battle happening, people would inevitably become excited.

A handful of spectators gathering was something that Garfiel surely had considered from the very beginning of the match. Rather than regret a poor performance for being unable to go all out, he wanted the fight to be taken somewhere where real skill was all that mattered.

The hotel courtyard was spacious, and the scenery could be appreciated, but if it were to serve as the setting for a fierce battle then it wasn't spacious enough. And Reinhardt had also raised the condition of "no damage to the environment".

The setting was meant to push Garfiel to either be considerate or to regret being overtaken by anger, as a boy naturally would.

What would come of this?

Subaru: "Hey, Julius, can I ask you one question?"

Julius: "You can ask me more than one if you like but whether or not I'll answer is another story."

Subaru: "Don't say such ambiguous things. This is why I hate you."

Subaru dropped his face onto one hand, and began speaking in a serious tone.

Subaru: "In your opinion, how is Garfiel?"

Julius: “—He’s strong. According to the rumors, he is the shield guarding Emilia-sama. It is a well deserved reputation. Although, knowing of his association with you, my expectations were psychologically lowered.”

Subaru: “I’m going to beat you up.”

Julius: “He is strong. His talent is certainly real. In terms of combat alone, I don’t know whether or not I could beat him. And he has plenty of room for growth.”

Julius’s powerful assertion revealed that he was excited to see that possibility and that the potential sleeping within Garfiel was quite genuine.

He also seemed to embrace his envious admiration of Garfiel’s talent. This was no surprise. Julius was also a man of battle.

Ferris: “Buutt, even if there is a bright future awaiting him, it’s sad that right nyow he’s just being toyed with.”

Ferris spoke a cruel truth.

However, no one could say nothing to deny it. Everyone could see that. Garfiel himself could see it more clearly than anyone else.

Perhaps Garfiel would one day walk amongst the strongest. Perhaps he’d be the strongest.

But, right now, facing off against the strongest man in the world, what he was going through would surely best be described as being toyed with.

Garfiel: “——tch.”

Reinhardt: “That’s a shame. Too hasty.”

The Sword Saint reaches out forward, catching Garfiel’s arm. With a giant swing, he throws him mercilessly down to the hard gravel.

A cloud of dust surrounds him, knocking the wind out of Garfiel. He quickly attempts to get back on his feet only to find Reinhardt's hand on his forehead, leaving Garfiel motionless before drawing a sigh,

Garfiel: "I lost."

Even being scrutinized by others, he admitted defeat.

The ability to make that admission most likely indicated that Garfiel was still maintaining his sense of self-esteem, even if barely.

Subaru hoped that would serve as some small comfort to him, at the very least.

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— Garfiel didn't appear for dinner that night.

Anastasia: "Why'd you go off by yourselves and hide such an interesting thing from us?" Anastasia glared at the men as she voiced her bitter complaints.

Rather than being dressed in her usual white fur, she was wearing a bathrobe, her purple hair dripping with water. Her white skin was silhouetted against the yukata, her childlike charm still evident.

Julius: "I think things are different from the way you're phrasing it, but I specifically didn't invite Anastasia-sama since you seemed to be having intimate conversations with the other candidates."

Julius met her straightforward words with a wry smile and a bow. The men had finished cleaning the courtyard after the contest and had only just returned.

Hearing that remark, a mischievous smile appeared on Anastasia's lovely face.

Anastasia: "Ahh. My knight seems to be speaking some rather sophisticated sophistry. We can't connect everything to money, can we? But, my Kararagi spirit, who likes fun and turmoil, is still a little upset."

Subaru: "The spirit of our strongest shield hurts more, so let's not bring it up again. Ah, he'll be fine after a night of hanging his head in sorrow, but until then, please let him recover in peace."

Following what Anastasia had said, Subaru made this request out of concern for his emotionally troubled honorary little brother. Everyone present nodded in assent. However,

Felt: "Anyway, is that what happened? This merciless knight here doesn't know how to be nice to opponents and the like. Sorry about that, brother."

After hearing about the incident, Felt gave Subaru a crooked-toothed laugh as she fiercely pounded Reinhardt's shoulders, the red-haired knight sitting next to her with a wry smile.

Reinhardt: "Felt-sama, speaking like that will lead to misunderstandings. I didn't exert any undue pressure in the battle just now, and I myself was at risk several times. Both my body and mind were enriched from that experience."

Felt: "That's not at all convincing considering how scared Larkins and the others are of you. Did you really have to freak them out so much when you first met?"

Reinhardt: "No matter who I face, I can not afford to be arrogant. If I become too trusting in my ability, it will result in my failure."

Faced with Reinhardt's resolute determination, Felt gave a disinterested sigh.

Although their dialogue reflected the nature of their transition to proper master and subordinate status, Reinhardt's words were of greater concern to Subaru.

Having witnessed the battles in the courtyard, he saw clearly the root of Garfiel's concern. In a brief epiphany, he realized that Reinhardt's words contained no irony or hypocrisy.

Reinhardt was merely saying what he believed to be truth. Although this speech may sound unpleasant, the authenticity of his words seemed to prevent anyone from thinking so.

Perhaps that was his most dangerous ability.

Reinhardt: "Speaking of which, Felt-sama. About that outfit."

Felt: "What is it, are you complaining? I was taking a bath with others, and everyone changed into this, so I did too. 'It's embarrassing, it's disappointing', is that what you want to tell me?"

Reinhardt: "Not at all, I just wanted to tell you that it suits you well."

Felt: "Annoying!"

Those sweet words from the respected, revered, and most powerful knight.

Countless women would be incredibly envious of the beautiful bouquet of words that Felt had swatted away with the expression of frustration. The way she wore her bathrobe also suggested that she was someone who was a little rough around the edges.

—As Anastasia had said earlier, the women were in the bath house while the match outside between Garfiel and Reinhardt had been going on.

For that reason, all of the women attending dinner were in yukatas.

Not only Anastasia and Felt, but also Mimi, Crusch, Emilia, and even Beatrice were all dressed in bathrobes.

Subaru: "Beako, you unexpectedly took a bath..."

Beatrice: "After Subaru left Betty alone in the hotel I was captured by Emilia, in fact. She forced Betty to go, I suppose."

Unexpectedly wearing a pale blue bathrobe, the cute Beatrice seemed to be having difficulty figuring out how to correctly don the yukata. Strangely, Beatrice's wet hair retained its usual drill-tailed form. If he yanked on her curly hair then they would probably bounce more crisply than usual.

Subaru: "So, that's Beako's testimony, but what's the truth?"

Emilia: "Hm? Beatrice looked so lonely when she told me that Subaru left her, and since I'd just been invited to go bathing, I took her with me. I thought she looked happy about it, though..."

Beatrice: "T-That's a lie, in fact! Don't fabricate the truth, I suppose! Betty or Emilia, who does Subaru believe more, I suppose!"

Subaru: "I'll take that as your confession."

Combine Beatrice's unflattering claim with Emilia's assertive judgment, Subaru arrived at the natural conclusion.

Seeing Beatrice unwilling to yield, Emilia gave a happy smile. She also wore a bathrobe, her freshly washed silver hair gathered in the back. Subaru quietly delighted in seeing the whiteness of her neck.

Emilia: "Subaru, you're breathing heavily. Do you have a fever?"

Subaru: "It's merely the heat of love. Emilia-tan, can I braid your hair?"

Emilia: "Sure, but food will be served soon. Afterwards?"

Emilia pointed toward the table, and Subaru reluctantly retracted the hand that had been stroking her hair. The people around them seemed to be looking at them strangely.

Subaru tilted his head at the person opposite of him, who happened to be Felt.

Subaru: "What's so weird?"

Felt: "I don't know too much about you brother, or you, sister, but I still get a sense of distance between you two. This kind of interaction doesn't have the slightest bit of an erotic atmosphere. Seems your relationship hasn't changed at all since our last meeting."

Subaru: "It's not like erotic flirting happens these days! And there's no need to bring up what happened in the capital, and my chest hurts so please stop!"

Subaru reacted to Felt in such a manner. Throughout the past year, serving as Emilia's knight, Subaru's self-awareness had increased to a sufficient point, and he was aware of the state of the relationship between them as man and woman.

In all honestly, their romantic relationship was probably at a lower point than it had been before Subaru had become her knight.

This was largely in part due to Emilia's mental age. Emilia's emotional maturity had yet to grow to a degree where she could accept Subaru's romantic advances on her. So her getting along with him was nothing too significant.

His love had not faded, but the intent behind his interactions with her had changed. As long as there was no change in Emilia's emotional awareness of him, their relationship would persist like this, intact.

At the least, Subaru understood that even if he took the first step, nothing would come of it.

Subaru: "Put it this way, this feeling might be something close to what Crusch-san's relationship is going through."

Crusch: "My relationship, what?"

Subaru sighed absentmindedly and his hand rubbed against his jaw. Crusch looked over at him, wearing an incredulous expression.

Of course, she'd been bathing with the women, so she was also dressed in a bathrobe. The chest that her former men's clothing had hidden was emphasized by the thinness of the bathrobe.

Without her inspiring aura, Crusch's face had been both beautiful and innocent as she'd obeyed Ferris's guidance while putting on her yukata.

Crusch glanced to the side, as Subaru rubbed his nose with his fingers.

Subaru: "Yeah. Although Ferris is always clinging to Crusch-san, it could be said that they don't see each other as man and woman, right? And the starting point between you two is only a little bit before us, so maybe we go about treating the people we like the same way."

Crusch: "Well, it's a bit embarrassing when you say it like that. Haha. Right, Ferris?"

Ferris: "Ferri-chan is devoted, even if Crusch-sama rejects my heart."

Crusch: "——"

For a moment, the room was frozen by what Ferris said.

Crusch's smile became stiff, and Ferris welcomed her response with a smile.

Incidentally, Ferris was dressed in a bathrobe as well, as if he was competing with the girls. Anyway, now wasn't the time to dwell on that.

Subaru: "I'm so sorry for revealing the secret that I dug up. Alright, I guess it's time to eat."

Crusch: "Don't run away after digging up a bomb like that!"

Subaru tried to redirect the topic toward food, an idea which was immediately rejected by Crusch's cry.

This was really a problem, and Subaru wasn't expecting to have to encounter it. Hmm, what do to. He cast an uncertain gaze around.

Wilhelm: "Ferris. Take care to not scare Crusch-sama. Your lively and dangerous side feels more prominent than before."

Before the silence could become awkward, Wilhelm interjected, and the mood shifted again.

The elderly man was the only man present in a bathrobe. It seemed that he'd been to the baths right after the women had left. Both his posture and yukata played their part in restoring the harmonious atmosphere from the its previous tenseness.

(Ferris is also a man though... uh?)

If he had a sword by his side, his image would have been perfect.

Ferris: "What, why would Wil-jii say that?"

Wilhelm: "A respectful love, a treasured love, a romantic love. Love is often taken for granted. Incurring confusion for the purpose of hiding your feelings is unpleasant for innocent hearts. Should I not speak harshly about this?"

Ferris: "Ha nyah. Don't say it like that, that's a bit much."

Listening to Wilhelm's heavy sermons, Ferris muttered in a low voice and snuggled up against Crusch's shoulder.

Ferris: "It's okay. It was a obviously joke, so don't be so nyon edge. If Ferri-chan were to really upset Crusch-sama, it'd be a huge problem."

Crusch: "T-That's right, isn't it? Phew, I was a little scared since I was unused to it, but I appear to have misunderstood Ferris's thoughts."

Ferris: "—Not at all."

Crusch sighed in relief, and a fleeting emotion flashed through Ferris's eyes as he watched her, leaving Subaru feeling unsure.

That complex emotion was something that he could not easily reveal.

During this year, Ferris was the one who had to deal with his master's amnesia.

During that time, he must have tried his best but still felt anxious and guilty, just like Subaru. Even so, his master, lacking the foundation of her memory, had needed to rely on him, and so he could not show any confusion.

Joshua: "The preparations for dinner have been completed. It will be served, does anyone mind?"

As the conversation came to an end, the timing on behalf of the hotel's staff was perfect. Joshua, who had been sitting without presence in a corner until then, had a steady flow of food brought up by the manager.

Everyone watched as their meal was arranged on the long table, their gazes colored with wonder. However, Subaru had a different reason to be surprised than everyone else.

Emilia and others were surprised by the variety of dishes, many of which they'd never seen before, while Subaru was surprised by the sight of familiar dishes.

Since there was no sea in this world, it had been nearly impossible to find such a dish, but Subaru immediately fixed his attention on the sashimi dish before him.

Subaru: "This, may I eat it as is?"

Anastasia: "I guess you're not accustomed to it, since you'd never experience this kind of dish without living close to water. The Water Plume Pavilion is actually famed for this."

Sashimi wasn't the only thing Subaru recognized. There was a variety of Japanese dishes placed together on the table. In the midst of all the confusion, Anastasia began to bring food to her mouth, and Subaru took that as a cue to start.

He immediately went for the fancy sashimi and soy sauce. Emilia and Beatrice, seated beside him, both issued an "ah!". Concerns about a species of parasite arose as he swallowed, but, taking into account the class of hotel and the host, it was hardly a plausible worry.

Instead, Subaru simply focused on enjoying the tastes.

Subaru: "Delicious! Ah, it's been so long since I've had sashimi!"

Emilia: "It's delicious?"

Subaru: "It's not even a matter of delicious or not, since this is simply a proper delicacy. It's probably due to its freshness, but this probably makes the top of my list. If there's any sushi vinegar and rice here, I could show you guys how proper sushi is made."

Emilia: "Sorry. I don't understand what you're saying. But, I'm glad it's good."

Partially listening to Subaru's train-like speech, Emilia imitated him and dipped the sashimi into the soy sauce. As she tasted it, her amethyst eyes widened as she gripped her hands excitedly, exclaiming, "Mmmm!".

Looking at the reaction of the master and servant, the others also began to taste the food.

Anastasia, who disappointedly drew away, relaxed her gaze as she watched Subaru and Emilia, muttering to herself "Ahh, it's hopeless".

Despite some people having missed the dinner, the participants were able to enjoy themselves amidst their restlessness.

—On this night, with its bright moon, the compassionate and forgiving world allowed for this peace.

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Chapter 14 - The Sword Demon Under The Moon



The dinner party had been one where everyone had forgotten their hostilities.

After dinner, Subaru had retired to his room, where the staff had already made his bed. Looking at the two sets of quilts, placed side by side, Subaru felt his admiration for the hotel increase. It followed the Japanese custom where towels, blankets, quilts, and the like were all arranged when the resident had vacated their room.

Although, he'd always thought that such a practice left people feeling rather defenseless.

Beatrice: “Subaru. It looks like while we weren’t here, people succeeded in sneaking into our room, in fact—!”

Subaru: “Ah. It looks like the quilts and towels you messed up were rearranged or replaced.”

Beatrice: “That...! Yes, it’s definitely a trap to tempt Betty, I suppose. They’re hiding under a guise of thoughtfulness, in fact.”

Subaru: “Sometimes people just have good intentions. Though, this service isn’t free.”

Beatrice carried herself with an unnecessary alertness and diligence even though she could barely keep her eyes open. Subaru quickly ushered her to bed.

Since officially forming their contract, Subaru and Beatrice had slept in the same bed. Although Anastasia had offered Beatrice her own room, she would just have left for Subaru’s room anyway, so they’d respectfully declined.

That wasn’t to say that Beatrice was a child who couldn’t sleep alone. Rather, Beatrice used their nighttime contact with Subaru to sap the excess mana from his defective gate.

Beatrice: “So, Betty isn’t here because she wants to be near Subaru, in fact. Don’t misunderstand, I suppose.”

Beatrice, who’d originally devised the terms of the contract, had spoken thusly.

But where her intent was no longer mattered. Subaru had long since become accustomed to falling asleep to the sound of someone else’s breathing.

Beatrice: “...that green stuff was toxic, in fact. It’s unforgivable, I suppose...”

Happy and tired, Beatrice buried herself in the quilts and promptly fell asleep thinking of the wasabi that had traumatized her at dinner.

Touching Beatrice's frowning forehead, Subaru took in her cute sleeping face until he was satisfied, then climbed to his feet.

Subaru: "Now then. I'm going to take a bath, too. Have a good rest."

Next to Subaru's pillow lay an unused bathrobe. If he hadn't known how to wear it, he could easily just ask a staff member. Of course, Subaru has worn yukatas in his original world and had no issue figuring out the garment.

Subaru: "If Ferris and Anastasia aren't there, I could also go decorate one of the women's bathrobes."

He of course wanted to seek out Emilia's bathrobe. The other Royal Election candidates were all lovely maidens, but if Subaru could tailor Emilia's clothing and dress her up then he could ensure she'd never be inferior to them in the slightest.

Subaru: "Well, it can't be helped. I guess I'll be satisfied that I got to do Emilia's three braids after dinner."

Although she'd let her hair down before bed, they'd launched a "three braids wave!" as they came undone, just as Subaru had planned. Naturally long hair that fell in waves, like Anastasia's, was also beautiful, but Subaru considered Emilia's long silver hair the most eye-catching.

Subaru: "The three braids and three braid wave are lovely. Emilia is definitely a shrewd woman. I could never do such a thing with Beatrice."

Beatrice's hair inexplicably never left its twintailed drills.

It was probably because she was an artificial spirit. Changing her hairstyle was possible, but it always reverted to its original form as soon Subaru's hands left her hair. It was so fascinating that he'd played with it a number of times.

While looking forward to the next morning, Subaru collected his bathrobe and made for the baths, treading carefully in order to not wake Beatrice. Thinking of the people whom he shared the hotel with,

Subaru didn't feel the need to be alert. He rather pitied anyone who would dare to launch any type of scheme.

Reinhardt: "Although I doubt that anything will happen, I will know if anything is amiss. I hope that everyone can spend the night peacefully."

Those were Reinhardt's reassuring words as they'd left the dining room. The sense of safety wasn't just limited to the hotel, it extended to the entire region. Knowing Reinhardt, even feeling safe in the entire city wouldn't be a stretch.

So, for now, Subaru could wander the hotel without taking any precautions. Although it was regrettable that the hotel lacked an open-air bath, Subaru was still excited because he found bathing the most enjoyable part of any hotel stay.

Subaru: "——"

Subaru came to a stop, his relaxed expression shifting as he looked through a corridor into the courtyard, where Reinhardt and Garfiel's battle had taken place. In the evening, its atmosphere was different, and rather pleasing.

A round moon floated in the dark sky, blanketed by thick clouds which gave the scene a glamorous charm. A cool wind blew through the garden, where a lone figure stood.

Subaru: "—Wilhelm-san?"

A sturdy back, and long white hair.

At a glance, Subaru could tell that the yukata-clad figure was elderly, and there was only one man he knew who fit the profile.

Wilhelm: "Subaru-dono, did I surprise you?"

Probably having been long aware of the movement behind him, Wilhelm turned to greet Subaru, a soft look in his eyes.

He stood with his hands tucked in the sleeves of the bathrobe. His posture, combined with the Japanese style garden. Why was the image so perfectly natural?

Wilhelm: "Are you going to the baths next?"

Subaru: "Yes, that's what I was planning on doing. By the way, I came here to see the garden in the evening, not because I got lost since I'm unfamiliar with the hotel."

Wilhelm: "That wouldn't happen to Subaru-dono. I also came to indulge in the beauty of the garden, so I believe that I can understand Subaru-dono's mood."

Subaru: "...it's still embarrassing to be spoken of so highly."

Subaru turned away, embarrassed, as Wilhelm, without any trace of exaggeration, spoke of him with unflinching trust.

Wilhelm was the person who Subaru had grown to respect the most since coming to this world. There were people who he wanted to stand alongside, and people who he wanted to compete with, but the only person who Subaru looked at with nothing but respect was Wilhelm.

Both as a person and as a man, Wilhelm was Subaru's ideal.

Wilhelm: "Subaru-dono probably came here searching for the peace and solemnity of the garden at night. My presence here must be very frustrating."

Subaru: "Not at all. Rather, seeing the Sword Demon in this windy garden is so perfect that I want to forever engrave this image in my heart. I like seeing people who shine in the moonlight."

As far as Subaru was concerned, Emilia's beauty was undoubtedly the most commensurate with that of the moonlit night.

Her long silver hair was different from the glow of the sun. Emilia's beauty was like the illusory of the moonlight, and Subaru wanted to be the stars hovering around the moon.

So, seeing the Sword Demon standing under a moonlit night was a sight that Subaru had been longing to see.

Wilhelm: "...Subaru-dono shouldn't waste such heartfelt words on an old man like me. If you whispered them to the woman you love, you would surely capture her attention."

Subaru: "Putting on those airs would just be an insecticide to all the lovely butterflies I've attracted. And anyway, the one I want to say those words to wouldn't understand them."

Wilhelm: "Trying to bring out her flawless smile, searching for the perfect words... that anxious feeling is one of the pleasures of love, Subaru-dono."

Hearing Wilhelm's light tone, Subaru gave a relaxed shrug of his shoulders.

Subaru: "Oh? You seem to be referencing your faraway love story. Did you ever go through that, Wilhelm-san?"

Wilhelm: "Would you like to hear it?"

Subaru: "Be sure to tell me every detail."

Subaru gave a ceremonious, respectful bow, and Wilhelm's "it can't be helped" attitude was tinged with a look of joy.

Wilhelm: "When I was a young man, I was just as terrible with words as I am now. I never wanted to discuss anything other than swords, since I had no interests aside from swordplay. I must have bored my wife to no end when we first met."

Subaru: "But, your wife didn't dislike talking to that Wilhelm-san, right?"

Wilhelm: "She was an open-minded woman. Whether it be the loss of a heavy responsibility which burdened a heart, or escaping a duty, neglecting the thoughts of others, we never discussed any of those in our chats. She was born a gentle, warm person."

Wilhelm closed his eyes with a wistful smile.

Subaru bent silently over the corridor, listening to the old man's memories.

Wilhelm: "Because I was such an unsociable person, my wife always supplied the topics during our conversations. On top of that, I initially failed to notice how drawn I was to her. Whenever I spoke with her, I avoided facing the agitation in my heart."

Subaru: "Wilhelm-san was really bad at talking to women, huh."

Wilhelm: "Really, I gave everything to the sword. When I gripped my sword, I forgot about everything else, as if merely swinging my sword would give me a way of survival. —The one who reminded me of the reason I took it up was my wife."

Subaru: "Is that when you realized you loved her?"

Wilhelm: "...you seem to have seen through me, Subaru-dono."

Wilhelm fell silent, and Subaru followed suit.

Wilhelm was surely unaware of the expression he currently wore. Subaru, however, felt a strong wave of pride wash over him as he saw it.

The look in Wilhelm's eyes, the wrinkles on his face, the tone of his voice, were all legendary. The wife he loved just as strongly now as he had then, Thearesia van Astrea.

The old man's expression, attitude, and very existence all generously sang of the love he held for his wife.

No matter who, anyone who saw him would, without doubt, instantly see that he was in love.

Even if everything in the world were to wither and fade, not a single person would fail to understand the depth of that emotion.

This was the depth of Wilhelm's love, clearly something that should be worn with pride. Subaru: "——
——"

As Subaru gazed upon Wilhelm's face, his eyes unconsciously welled with tears.

Unbearable feelings arose spontaneously, and gathered as heat in his eyes. He didn't know it had touched him so much. Why did his heart feel so warm upon seeing someone in love?

Crying in such a situation would only serve to bother Wilhelm.

Wilhelm: "Like Subaru-dono said, that was when I realized my feelings for my wife."

Subaru lowered his face, pretending to scratch his head as he hid his tears. Although he should have noticed that Subaru had started crying, Wilhelm continued talking.

Was he just immersed in the past, or was he pretending not to notice Subaru's reaction? Subaru had no way of knowing, so he kept silent and continued to listen.

Wilhelm: "The sword was everything to me, but it was only one part of who I was. It was my wife who made me realize this obvious truth, and so every time I swing my sword, I'm reminded of her."

Subaru: "Is that, true even now?"

Wilhelm: "—That is truer now than it ever was."

Wilhelm took a moment to formulate a response.

Finally, turning his back to the moonlight, Wilhelm turned to face Subaru. The feelings flashing across the old man's face were so complex that Subaru couldn't quite read them all.

Pride. Remorse. Hesitation. Enthusiasm. Shame. Courage.

—But those all stemmed from his love.

Wilhelm: "I try my best to keep holding my sword, so that I will continue to be reminded of my wife. Even death could not take her from my memory, and, when my time comes, I want to die with a sword in hand. I would be with her forever."

Subaru: "——"

This was Wilhelm's awkward, straightforward way of expressing the love that he couldn't otherwise.

Subaru swallowed, repeatedly taking deep breaths to loosen the pressure in his heart and the numbness in his tongue, until he finally judged himself as being able to speak again.

Subaru: "When I die and whatnot, please don't talk about such things that have no sign whatsoever of happening. Wilhelm-san is definitely surely completely absolutely totally entirely even younger than super young, and so even thinking about your retirement is certainly going to trouble people."

Wilhelm: "Subaru-dono?"

Subaru: "Crusch and Ferris both are very dependent on Wilhelm-san. Crusch's memory loss is a very serious issue, and Ferris who is supporting her hasn't expressed this, but I'm sure he's completely spent himself. So they'll be a mess if Wilhelm-san doesn't help! And, I too!"

Wilhelm: "——"

Subaru: "I also have many, many things I'd like to consult with Wilhelm-san. We're obviously in hostile factions, so maybe that's just naivete, but, I..."

Subaru truly liked Wilhelm.

Wilhelm, who had buried in his heart of hearts his love for his wife, and sought vengeance for her, was someone who Subaru truly respected. Even if that hadn't happened, even if their relationship had remained just a ten-day mentorship, then Subaru would still have deeply respected Wilhelm's strength and fortitude.

Hearing the Wilhelm that he respected so much speak of "death" was terrifying to Subaru.

Subaru was far more sensitive to the notion of the people he cared about dying. This was due both to his contract with Roswaal and to Subaru's own views on Return by Death shifting.

There was also a part of him who was always secretly worried about Emilia and Beatrice.

Wilhelm: "...I am the just same as before, truly terrible with words."

Upon hearing Subaru's stubborn, desperate words, Wilhelm smiled.

The old man direct a warm look at Subaru, whose breaths were still shallow, and spoke.

Wilhelm: "It was terrible of me to have you worry so much. Despite my earlier words, I'm not always thinking of death. Although it's an inevitable truth, I've struggled through the hardest challenge already."

Subaru: "...Ah."

Subaru relaxed slightly as he came to a realization. Wilhelm was speaking of the White Whale.

Wilhelm had faced no small sacrifice in the battle against his fated enemy. At that time, he was surely aware of the possibility of his death. But, in the end, he had prevailed, and—

Wilhelm: "I think I'm in good condition. I fulfilled my dearest wish and survived, and now I can live free of shame."

Subaru: "Wilhelm-san..."

Wilhelm: "I did what I needed to do, and I think there is nothing more honorable than that. Then and now, aside from merely swinging my sword, my chest is shaking with the pursuit of a happiness. I have people who I've pledged my support to, and I've visited my wife's grave. I've received so many blessings."

Yes, that was it.

That was right. Wilhelm would not do anything unreasonable.

The old man's steady, calm smile. Subaru, as someone who was young and superficial, had no way of seeing through it. But that smile was by no means a fake or ironic one.

Wilhelm was not unreasonable. And even in the unlikely event that this was the case, he wouldn't have spilled a long-held burden to Subaru.

However, from the beginning, weren't Subaru's attempts to have Wilhelm reveal his thoughts just arrogance?

Wilhelm: "Subaru-dono. —This is a virtue, but also a weakness."

Subaru: "....."

Looking at the troubled Subaru, Wilhelm spoke quietly.

There was no smile in the voice, but there was no criticism either. Rather, the way he spoke was reminiscent of how an older person would caution a younger one.

Speaking more frankly, it was the tone a grandfather would take with his grandson.

Wilhelm: "My wife did this too, the bad habit of neglecting and shoving aside your own feelings as you focusing on those of the people around you."

Subaru: "Bad habit, is it... No, I'm hardly such a good person. I don't want anything like everyone's happiness. I just want the people I'm close to to be happy."

Wilhelm: "The range of the people who you consider close to you is also a problem. While it wasn't what my wife desired, for a woman, she held a great amount of power, and could affect far more people than she ever wanted to."

Wilhelm's wife, Thereasia, was the previous Sword Saint.

Despite lacking common knowledge, Subaru had heard plenty about her in the past year. The civil unrest that took place in the kingdom of Lugunica, which came to be known as the Demi-Human War, had been single handedly ended by the Sword Saint.

What she had accomplished with her undue strength was the salvation of the country's stability. Natsuki Subaru would never be able to compare with such a hero.

Subaru: "I understand, about your wife, but I can't match up to her in any way."

Wilhelm: "My wife was just an ordinary woman who admired flowers. Even if she's a hero of legend, she didn't always act as such. And Subaru-dono, your reputation is good, and your influence is wide. In the future, your range will surely increase, and you will be able to do more and more."

Subaru: "This kind of thing..."

Wilhelm: "I am convinced that anything Subaru-dono cannot achieve alone, he will work together with others to do, and will become a great, accomplished person."

Subaru: "——"

Speechless.

Wilhelm had overestimated him by so much, and that had struck Subaru speechless. That he was someone who could do great things, could Subaru really believe this?

He was fragile and weak, his intellect was lacking, and his ideas were often poor and baseless. Because he was a person who could not do anything by himself, all he could ever do was rely on others to solve his problems.

That method was surely flawed. For now, he was barely struggling along, but eventually he could certainly face failure.

When that time inevitably arrived, Subaru had so many people to disappoint.

Wilhelm: "I apologize for bringing up the same things. It must trouble you to hear them over and over relentlessly."

Subaru: "Wilhelm-san, I..."

Wilhelm: "There may not be many people conscious of it, but it's something that everyone will come to understand one day."

Subaru: "I'm just an immature little child who is clumsy at everything I do."

Wilhelm: "Well, this immature little child who is clumsy at everything he does is one who I'm very fond of."

After a moment, Wilhelm nodded in satisfaction.

Wilhelm: "And the people who think like this will surely increase from now on."

As if deeply touched by Wilhelm's words, Subaru again fell silent.

Part of him was overwhelmed, and wanted to cast the notion from his mind. However, because the idea had come from none other than Wilhelm, Subaru could not give it up so easily.

In the depths of his heart, he couldn't believe in himself to that extent. But he also couldn't discard Wilhelm's belief in him.

Subaru decided to keep the feelings he'd felt with him, until he'd worked through them.

He was very conscious of his own deficits. So any feelings, encouragement, or words, he'd decided to carry with him.

And that was how he decided to treat Wilhelm's words.

Subaru, who was desperately sorting his feelings out, failed to notice Wilhelm's tender gaze.

Wilhelm: "I spoke too much and kept you here for a long time, my apologies."

Estimating that Subaru was done grappling with himself, Wilhelm spoke up. Accepting it, Subaru judged that tonight's scene would end soon.

Subaru: "Me too, I'm sorry for asking so much, but I really wanted to hear your love story with your wife."

Wilhelm: "No, it's been a long time since I've had the pleasure of talking about my wife. Lately, both Crusch-sama and Felix have been busy."

Subaru: "In addition to hearing a love story, I've also gotten insight into how another faction operates!"

Wilhelm: "It's a little bit excessively sentimental. Hearing an old man's long ramble is incredibly boring."

Wilhelm's blue eyes lit with affection as he smiled lightly. Subaru didn't notice the fleeting emotion and instead focused on what was just happening.

Initially, Wilhelm had stood alone in the garden.

He'd told Subaru that he'd come to appreciate the garden at night.

The best location for enjoying the view of the garden was the corridor where Subaru was currently standing.

In fact, standing where Wilhelm was meant that much of the garden's moonlit landscape would be hidden.

Of course, Subaru may very well have been overthinking. But, if there were something else that would bring Wilhelm to the garden, then it would be,

Subaru: "...there, that's where Reinhardt stood." Wilhelm: "——"

Wilhelm's location, where he'd been standing all along, was the area that Reinhardt and Garfiel had fought in.

That patch of gravel was where the handsome red-haired swordsman had stood, the very picture of unflinching immobility.

That Wilhelm had felt that sense of disturbance and had gone to confirm it would have been perfectly natural. However, only Wilhelm knew the reason that he had yet to leave that spot.

Subaru: "Wilhelm-san. I don't want to nose into another family's affairs, and I've graduated from being the lively character who insists on hearing everything that's happened just to satisfy my own curiosity, but..."

Wilhelm: "Ah, feel free to ask."

Subaru: "Do you not get along with Reinhardt? Even though you're obviously family?"

The grandfather and grandson, and the complex relationships in the Astrea family.

Even understanding that he may have been undermining the trust that had built up between him and Wilhelm, Subaru still breached the subject.

He might have chosen not to do so had he not just spoken with Wilhelm in the garden. He watched Wilhelm's profile, which overlooked his grandson's footsteps.

After their exchange, how could he refrain from asking?

Wilhelm: "While speaking with Subaru-dono, I thought of it."

Subaru: "....."

Wilhelm: "Why am I unable to speak these words to my own grandson?"

Those distressed words came straight from Wilhelm's heart.

Wilhelm's face fell flat. He was expressionless, certainly not emotionless. He was suppressing his feelings to hide his lament behind a hard shell.

What Wilhelm now possessed was pure regret.

Wilhelm: "I am a man with a lot of remorse, but there are three in particular that I can do nothing about. One of them is the distance between me and my grandson."

Subaru: "But, doesn't Wilhelm-san regret it?"

Wilhelm: "Even regretting shouldn't be allowed. The criticisms I spoke to my grandson... to Reinhardt, were so harsh. It's something unforgivable, and stupid, that can't be fixed anymore."

Wilhelm, who was still hiding his feelings under a guise of expressionlessness, seemed to be burning with an emotion, a flame, that had consumed Wilhelm for years. It was one of both anger and regret, one that he had always clung to.

Wilhelm: "I used my crusade against my wife's murderer as an excuse to avoid facing that remorse, and, after successfully crushing the enemy, I recognize that I should begin to search for a way to reconcile."

Subaru: "But you lack the courage?"

Wilhelm: "I'm honestly so shameful. My grandson certainly resents me now. Thinking of this, I cannot take a step forward."

Wilhelm issued a deep sigh of disappointment, seeming to shrink in on himself. Subaru was dumbstruck, and, finally inadvertently managed a laugh.

Wilhelm: "Subaru-dono?"

Subaru: "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to laugh, that was inappropriate."

Wilhelm cast a disbelieving look at Subaru. Really, this old man, how many times would he surprise Subaru in one night?

Subaru: "Wilhelm-san seems to be thinking that he's unqualified to be Reinhardt's grandfather..."

Wilhelm: "Well, yes. Compared to my grandson, I came to a standstill after realizing my mistakes. He's too kind to the cowardly person that I am..."

Subaru: "If you put it that way, then I can only see a grandfather who's afraid of being rejected by his grandson."

Wilhelm: "...huh?"

Wilhelm shook off his gloom and looked Subaru in the face. Subaru waved his hand, still fighting an impulse to laugh.

Subaru: "I don't fully understand the reasons for the poor relationship between Wilhelm-san and Reinhardt, so I might be misunderstanding. But in the eyes of an outsider, Wilhelm-san wants to reconcile with Reinhardt and looks like he really wants to apologize, so making an apology would be a good idea."

Wilhelm: "But Reinhardt will not forgive me."

Subaru: "If he doesn't forgive you at first, keep apologizing until he does. You're not apologizing to be forgiven, you're apologizing to apologize, right? The person making the apology has nothing to worry about, because they're not a bad person."

Wilhelm: "——"

This time, it was Wilhelm's turn to fall speechless at Subaru's extreme words.

Of course, Subaru knew that his were very headstrong. Even so, he believed it was necessary to keep insisting.

In order to motivate Wilhelm. In order to let him face Reinhardt.

Of course, after being alienated for so many years, a sudden apology would initially be thought of as “what’s going on with this guy?”. However, if many apologies were made, then “what’s going on with this guy?” would give way to either “there’s no helping it, then” or “ugh, this guy’s too annoying”.

Wilhelm: “I think things would deteriorate.”

Subaru: “But at least they’ll change. Don’t you think that any change is better than being stuck in the worst-case scenario your situation seems to be in?”

It was universally acknowledged that Subaru had made an awful initial impression. Breaking through interpersonal barriers was nothing to Subaru.

Subaru: “After a few years, if you give him some pocket money, you could immediately soften his attitude toward you. Although the impression of you may be poor, if you do something nice for him, won’t he come to think of you as a nice person? Reinhardt is incredible to deal with, and even I unexpectedly became his friend right away.”

Wilhelm: “But... it won’t be that simple with Reinhardt...”

Subaru: “—Reinhardt said he wanted to hear about the battle with the White Whale.”

Subaru spoke in a humorous tone, and, bit by bit, Wilhelm seemed to relax.

Subaru told Wilhelm of what Reinhardt had said outside of the tea room. After listening to his story, Wilhelm suddenly opened his blue eyes.

Subaru: “I don’t know if the White Whale is related to your poor relationship, but if it is, then Reinhardt’s definitely concerned about it. Of course, he’s certainly heard of how Wilhelm-san crushed the White Whale, and I’m sure he wants to know about how you avenged his grandmother after ten years.”

Wilhelm: “——”

Subaru: "That guy is surely also looking forward to changing your stiff relationship right now."

Subaru had no way of knowing Reinhardt's intentions.

Subaru had always seen Reinhardt as a man who was ridiculously perfect beyond perfect, and had never associated him with powerlessness or ignorance before.

But those were flawed ideas. Reinhardt was also human. He had worries just like anyone else.

Even the man Subaru had regarded as superhuman, Wilhelm, was, beneath the surface, an ordinary man and ordinary grandfather, filled with ordinary troubles and shortcomings.

It would be no surprise if the same held true for Reinhardt.

Subaru's words just now had surprised Wilhelm, who closed his eyes as if he were meditating on them. Time seemed to be flowing by with the still wind.

Then, after a moment of silence between the two, Wilhelm reopened his eyes.

Wilhelm: "My grandson... Reinhardt would listen to me."

Subaru: "Annoy him with a hello first and bounce back if he rejects you. That's happened to me with every girl I've met aside from Emilia."

Wilhelm: "Really—"

After hearing Subaru's reply, Wilhelm shook his head.

Then, the old man looked up, leaning his head back and fixing his eyes on the moon hanging in the sky.

Wilhelm: "Subaru-dono is invincible."

The words were spoken with the hint of a smile.

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Chapter 15 - A Deafening Silence

The next morning, a bleary-eyed Subaru stood in the sunlit courtyard. Feeling the hard gravel and sand through his shoes, he took a deep breath of the cool morning air.

Emilia directed a smile at the pleased Subaru as he gave a relaxed, “mmm!”.

Emilia: “What is it? Subaru seems happy today, did something nice happen?”

Subaru: “Many nice things happened. An important event happened last night, Emilia’s charming braid was an unexpected treat, and the baths were spacious and comfortable.”

Emilia: “Ah, I can say the same. I also took a very comfortable bath yesterday. The bathhouse in the Roswaal Mansion is great, but the bath surrounded by stones here is so fresh.”

Last night, the beauty of Emilia’s melodiously flowing silver hair, as the braid Subaru had made swayed, had been breathtaking. Although her usual long straight hair also showed her frosty, snow-like beauty, seeing an unusual hairstyle on her had its own sense of privilege.

Anyway, Emilia, whatever she looked like, was always equally appealing.

With that in mind, Subaru turned his attention back to the present as Emilia spoke again.

Although indoors, the bath went as far as it could to resemble an open-air bath, and the decorations evoked a natural image of the outdoors. Cobblestone covered the ledges along the bath’s wall. If it had been marble instead, the bath would have lost much of its uniqueness.

Emilia: “Since I saw this type of bath for the first time, I ended up having a lot of fun frolicking with Crusch-san and Felt-chan.”

Subaru: “That’s a prime fanservice scene from a galgame. It’s a CG that’s absolutely necessary to collect.”

Emilia: “C... G?”

Subaru: "It's nothing, I was just teasing you. You seem happy, are you?"

Emilia: "Mm, very."

Emilia, whose happiness was shared with Subaru, also seemed at a glance, joyful, and this feeling alleviated the initial anxiety and suspicion that had accompanied their trip to Pristella. The issue was—

Subaru: "Those two over there have such unhappy, gloomy looking faces."

Beatrice: "...it's nothing, in fact."

Otto: "Please don't mind me... hic. I just had a little, hic, too much to drink."

Standing where Subaru was pointing was a loli with a frosty expression on her face, and a man whose usually elegant features were pale.

Needless to say, these two were Beatrice and Otto. After some careful consideration, Subaru decided to say hello to the almost transparent Otto.

Subaru: "Otto. You were a no-show at dinner yesterday, where'd you go?"

Otto: "Like I said when we parted ways, hic, it's rare for me to have a chance to come to Pristella, and while, hic, we're here, I wanted to establish some connections."

Subaru: "What's up with you? You're even more drunk than you were when we first met."

Otto: "...? My memory might be messed up, but, hic, my first meeting with Natsuki-san didn't seem to involve alcohol..."

Subaru: "Well, it's your own memory, so think what you will."

Otto, who was reproached for an unknown reason, wore a helpless expression, although Subaru's comments were all moot.

From Subaru's perspective, he had numerous first meetings with Otto, but his first one was with a frustrated Otto in a tavern, who had been as equally pale as the current one. Shortly afterwards, however, Subaru had returned from death. Therefore, from Otto's point view, their first meeting had been the embarrassing one in which Subaru had been responsible for saving him from the Witch Cult.

Of course, it was futile to argue, since both would be wrong.

Subaru: "Don't do things that would give Beako bad habits. Well, I can understand that you were in a rush to help our faction."

Otto: "I did this all of my own volition. —Even though I have no idea why I did this to myself."

Otto, whose head seemed to be feeling rather heavy, was unable to respond to Subaru. After a moment he looked up at the courtyard, changing the course of the conversation with an "actually...",

Otto: "What happened to Garfiel? It's rare to not see him up at this time. Isn't it convention for him to get up earlier than anyone earlier so he can find the highest location to yell from?"

Subaru: "There's probably not anywhere high up here, but that isn't why he's not here. Though, that would be his own juvenile secret. Please be gentle with him the next time you meet."

Otto: "To someone who has no idea whatsoever as to what happened, aren't those words too misleading!? ...ahh, my head still hurts."

Subaru: "You're certainly self-destructive."

Watching a night-comatose Otto collapse onto the floor, Subaru smiled. He then turned around and looked at Beatrice, who had been silent since the beginning of their exchange.

Subaru: "So, what about, Beako? Yesterday, you were so lively, but now you're all gloomy. That's so uncute."

Beatrice: "Don't just assume things, I suppose. I'm not feeling gloomy, in fact. Betty just suddenly remembered a few things, which she has to carefully scrutinize, I suppose."

Subaru: "What's the matter? If you have any trouble, spit it out. If it's something dangerous, one person might not know how to handle it."

Surprised at what Beatrice had said, Subaru narrowed his eyes slightly and gave a gesture indicating his readiness. Emilia also nodded as if she were listening carefully.

Beatrice bit her lips, revealing a rare hesitation, before choosing her words with a pompous air.

Beatrice: "It started yesterday, after Subaru abandoned me to play with Garfiel, in fact."

Subaru: "A questionable interpretation, but go on."

Beatrice: "Betty had gone to look for Emilia to kill time with, I suppose. On the way to her room, I ran into an employee, who I made a little bit of small talk with, in fact."

Subaru: "Beako... making small talk...!?"

Learning that Beatrice's ability to communicate had improved somewhat left Subaru speechless. He turned to Emilia, shocked, and she gave an eager nod.

Incredible! The notion of Beatrice initiating conversations with strangers was entirely unexpected. Maybe the freshness of travel had let Beatrice experience an unexpected growth.

After returning home, he needed to update the "Beako's Growth Diary" with this development as soon as possible.

The diary, which recorded the Beako's daily growth, had already reached three volumes. Thanks to this journey, he could add a new page.

Unaware that her daily activities were being recorded, Beatrice found Subaru and Emilia's attention annoying, and always reacted with a dissatisfied "You're exaggerating, I suppose!".

Beatrice: "I'll keep talking, in fact. When the waiter saw Betty, he said he had news and put on a very mysterious expression, I suppose. He told me, 'At night, something scary will haunt this hotel', in fact."

Subaru “.....”

Beatrice: “Honestly, when Betty heard she hesitated to tell anyone so as not to create unnecessary confusion, I suppose. Although, I still decided to do some preparation last night as a precaution, in fact...”

Beatrice’s voice rose as she became worked up, and she didn’t notice how Subaru had fallen silent. Then, she dropped her voice to a whisper, as ceremoniously as if she were spreading a little known secret.

Beatrice: “In the middle of the night, Betty heard something strange, I suppose. I didn’t want to wake up Subaru, who had a stupid expression on his face as he slept, so I quietly left our sleeping quarters alone to investigate, in fact.”

Subaru: “You shouldn’t stare at someone else’s sleeping face.”

Beatrice: “O-Of course I didn’t stare, I suppose! I just gave a glance, as a lady’s etiquette dictates, in fact!”

She might not have looked at the sleeping Subaru at all, but it was so cute that Subaru put the matter aside for time being.

Beako took Subaru’s acquiescence as a sign to continue, and her mysterious expression reappeared.

Beatrice: “Betty found an unusual presence hovering near the hotel, so I tracked it, I suppose. After a while, I finally found its source on the front porch...”

Subaru: “You found it?”

Beatrice: “Well, there was a dangerous pale face slowly emerging from the darkness, I suppose. It seemed to be besieging Betty, so she confronted it, in fact.”

Beatrice's petite forehead shone faintly with sweat, as if she were fully immersed in the grim situation she'd been in last night. Although Subaru didn't understand how a spirit's sweat glands worked, it made the atmosphere rather tense, so he chose to not comment on it.

Beatrice: "Shortly after, probably due to its fear of Betty's power, the figure slowly melted back into the darkness, I suppose. After repeatedly confirming that there would be no trouble later, Betty returned to the room, in fact. Then I stepped over the idiotically sleeping Subaru to return to bed, I suppose."

Subaru: "Don't peep on someone sleeping, it's indecent."

Beatrice: "I only confirmed that you were okay, I suppose! Absolutely no such thing like touching your forehead or eyebrows happened, in fact!"

This was certainly a self-admission, but because it was so cute, Subaru again neglected to mention it.

All in all, that seemed to be the end of Beatrice's horror story. Subaru held his chin and nodded slightly as he began to consider what she had said.

A strange event had happened at the inn.

The incredible, strange things in this world were hardly few in number. Actually, after spending a year in the parallel world, he could navigate its strangeness fairly well. For example, using common sense, he could conclude that no ghosts existed in this place.

As far as common sense goes, even calling this a haunting seemed to be a poor assertion.

Even so, that kind of weird rumor still existed here, and that the hotel had even inherited a story about Japanese-style spirits was really rather incredible.

Subaru heartily admired this phenomenon, as he took a conclusive breath.

Subaru: "So, what happened last night, Otto?"

Otto: “Ah, I remember now. As I lay on the porch, still on the verge of vomiting, I noticed that Beatrice-chan was staring at me, but I was unable to speak at the time. Finally, I couldn’t hold back and went to vomit in the bushes, and once I’d come back, she’d vanished.”

Subaru: “That would be it, then.”

Beatrice: “...how is this, how is it possible, in fact?”

It was almost too much for Beatrice to handle.

It was, at this point, incredibly obvious that the true face of the so-called specter was actually a drunk Otto, and she had no idea what to say.

What she’d been certain she’d seen was relentlessly denied, and Beatrice looked as if her ability to reason had vanished. Subaru stroked her as though comforting her, but in his heart he concluded that Beatrice was bad at sleeping in unfamiliar surroundings.

The waiter, who described the specter to Beatrice, had surely seen that Beatrice was the epitome of someone who was gullible, and would take any kind of prank too seriously.

Her red face, full of remorse and dissatisfaction, was so adorable that Subaru gave it the highest level of praise.

Felt: “Yo, everyone’s gathered here already.”

A light female cut into the crowd of laughter.

Looking to the source of the sound, Subaru spotted a figure in the corridor; a girl shaking out her short, golden hair, Felt.

She had replaced the bathrobe with her usual light attire, swinging her slender arms with ease, looking more or less like a girl from the streets.

Subaru: “Morning. You’re dressed so casually, I can just feel Reinhardt’s lament.”

Felt: “Don’t preach about it, that guy annoys me with it so much, and even Rom-jii is on his side. It’s such a bother.”

Voicing her dissatisfaction, an impatient Felt leapt from the corridor and landed beside Otto, who wasn’t paying much attention to what was going on. She then turned towards Subaru and crooked her head to ask,

Felt: “Having said that, there’s a thing that I’ve been curious about.”

Subaru: “What is it?”

Felt: “Ah, that is to say, why have you all been doing this weird dance together?”

Felt wore a curious expression as she watched Subaru’s strange dance — his radio gymnastics.

Whether before starting a long journey, or taking a few steps on the road, everyone would start their morning with radio gymnastics.

This scene had long appeared every morning in not only the Roswaal Mansion, but across the entirety of the Mathers territories.

Subaru: “Oh, it’s just the secret to health and longevity. Performed by everyone, from the children to the elderly, the age of the popular ‘radio gymnastics’ of healthiness will reign. After Emilia-tan becomes the king, our radio gymnastics will become a government mandated morning activity!”

Emilia: “Yeah, I’d be happy if everyone could do it together.”

Felt: “That’s... I can’t help but feel that if such a thing becomes reality, the king’s reputation will be ruined...”

Scrutinizing their movement, Felt muttered her cynical thoughts.

It was saddening to see, but sooner or later, even those who hadn’t wanted to follow along were drawn into it after realizing the benefits of this easily performed activity.

The popularity of this movement after it has spread to the various villages was indeed high.

Subaru: “Beako and Otto were also reluctant from the very beginning, but now they even participate despite having suffered through a lonely night of fear, or a morning of a hangover!”

Beatrice: “Betty was dragged into this by Subaru, in fact.”

Otto: “I obviously just wanted to sleep off my headache, but then I heard the claps and saw the dancing...”

Beatrice: “Even if I’ve become sick of this, I’m addicted.”

Otto: “Utterly fascinating.”

Beatrice and Otto gave a somewhat weak explanation, while Subaru and Emilia stood proud. Felt scratched her white neck as she pondered the two distinctly different sets of responses.

Felt: “Indeed, I often hear of popular, strange activities happening in sister’s vicinity. Strange dances, hollowed out pumpkins, women carefully baking food for their beloved as a gift. Ah, it’s like that.”

Subaru: “Although now they’re only unique occurrences in the border territories, I know that one day it will be turned into a nationwide popularization project. Considering this, we could try using Anastasia-san in our schemes.”

Valentine’s Day would revolutionize the snack industry, and the markets would broaden. If the topic of large economical shift came up, Anastasia would immediately find a way to capitalize on it.

If it wasn’t too late, Subaru considered catching Anastasia when she was free to discuss those opportunities with her.

Felt: “Has brother always given off that kind of feeling?”

Emilia: “Well, Subaru has always been that way. It seems like he’s teasing, but he really wants to improve things, even if he pretends he’s always joking.”

Felt: "Yeah but, you don't even know if he's joking or not until the dust settles ..."

Emilia's answer slightly flustered Felt.

Occasionally this kind of thing would happen due to Emilia's spiritual age. For her, seeing eye to eye with Felt was like a child trying to look an animal in the eyes.

Felt, who struggled and crawled her way up in slums, also had her unique way of living.

Emilia: "Why is Felt-chan all alone, isn't Reinhardt worried when you're not together?"

Felt: "I'm not some kid who needs to be taken care of, and besides, that guy is just annoying when he's near me, so I just told him to go off somewhere, since sister and everyone else would be here. It's so annoying, as soon as anything happens, that guy arrives in the blink of an eye."

Emilia: "Right. Then I feel at ease."

Emilia carelessly chuckled at Felt's complaint. Receiving a response which didn't match her expectations, Felt gave an anxious sigh and began playing roughly with her blonde hair.

Emilia: "Felt-chan, you have such beautiful hair, you shouldn't play with it so crudely. I've been taught by Subaru and Frederica-san to respect hair."

Felt: "Damn, you're so bossy... let me mind my own hair, and didn't I say to stop adding '-chan' to my name? It gives me goosebumps!"

Emilia: "Even if you say so, I can't drop this habit all at once. I'll try my best, but if I can't hold back, I'll be very sorry. Is that fine?"

Felt: "It's not fine in the slightest!"

Because Emilia didn't hold any maliciousness, Felt could only give a low, cat-like growl to vent her irritation.

Simply on the surface level, people hearing their conversation would smile, as their exchange resembled a secret language between best friends.

Subaru: "Well, our radio gymnastics are done, so feel free to go to bed. Or you could take a bath, they're nice and refreshing."

Otto: "I'd already taken a bath... but, sadly, the smell of alcohol didn't seem to wash away."

Subaru: "Before Garfiel shows up to yell at you, you'd best hurry up and wash it away. In my hometown, there's a saying that any issue can be solved with a few hot baths."

Subaru reached out a hand to the weak Otto as he finished speaking.

Otto: "It would be a catastrophe if he saw me like this... since you gave me your advice, I'll follow it while I still have my life..."

Subaru lifted Otto to his feet and gave his weak shoulder a pat. Otto sighed, still despondent, as Subaru gazed up at the sky.

A sky full of smiles. Thin clouds hung in the early morning sky, reflecting the calm weather. Just as Subaru came to note this,

???: "Good morning, citizens of Pristella."

Subaru: "Huh!?"

A loud sound seemingly appeared out of thin air, echoing in everyone's ears, surprising the unprepared Subaru.

It wasn't an illusion; as Subaru looked around in panic, he saw Emilia, Felt, and Beatrice also glancing around, alarmed.

Subaru: "Hey, what's this? It's a really loud voice."

Felt: "It's not some kind of fantasy, it's just a loud voice in the streets..."

Felt whispered softly to herself, while Subaru also made his own commentary, while suspecting that this wasn't unrelated to magic.

Speaking of magic that could send sound to an entire group of people, Subaru recalled the chain magic that Julius used to connect everyone's consciousness.

Ultimately, however, it was simply a way of connecting people mentally in a limited range, and couldn't deliver sound directly to the ears.

Pondering this, Subaru thought that he'd found a suitable answer. That was,

Subaru: "Something like a loudspeaker?"

Felt and Subaru had provided similar comments on the phenomenon.

Resounding the sky, the noise was loud enough that the entire city could probably hear it, in a very similar way to announcements made from a loudspeaker.

The only problem was that in this world, there had yet to be any sign of such a scientific and technological development.

Otto: "Ah, you didn't know? This radio functions with the help of a mana-powered instrument in Pristella's Metropolitan Government Hall."

Subaru: "Mana... so it's magic!"

Otto answered Subaru's question, nodding as if to say, "yes".

Otto: "What I heard yesterday, when I was drinking with a great variety of people, was that every morning the city hall's magically amplified radio would make an announcement to the citizens of Pristella."

Subaru: "Huh, that's such a strange daily routine."

Otto: "Information that needs to be conveyed to all of the city's areas can be heard immediately and conveniently. In the event of an emergency, evacuations or directions can be given easily. In order to keep such a stressful time from being too chaotic, doing this every morning allows the citizens to get used to the speaker."

Subaru: "Oh... I wouldn't have thought of that."

Using a magical device to prepare for emergencies.

Small villages were trouble enough, but if an accident took place in the city, handling it would quickly become a pandemonium. The preemptive countermeasure that had been taken to prevent this also had practical use.

It was unusual and fairly innovative for someone to take the time to ensure that the citizens would be well prepared for it.

Subaru: "It looks like a pretty smart guy is responsible for this, maybe the mayor?"

Otto: "No, since the device runs on mana, it requires mana stones to fuel, so Kiritaka is most likely responsible for the radio."

Subaru: "Oh..."

His admiration was suddenly interrupted by that impact.

Kiritaka was most likely the one who'd yelled "Don't touch my Liliana!" yesterday. Scenes of the negotiation flashed through Subaru's mind. The screaming. The flash of the magical stone. The elegant man who'd cried for Liliana afterward.

Subaru: "No, no."

Beatrice: "No way, in fact."

Emilia: "That seems a little..."

At Subaru, Beatrice, and Emilia's perfect synchronization, Otto smiled wryly.

Otto: "I thought that you'd reply like this, but the one who manages the radio is in fact Kiritaka. Listen, isn't that voice familiar?"

Kiritaka: "This is a magical device which can transmit my voice throughout the entire city. If I startled anyone unfamiliar with this, I offer my apologies. You're very lucky to be hearing this broadcast today."

Subaru: "Who's that?"

Despite Otto's follow up, Subaru still had difficulty associating this voice with his impression of Kiritaka. He was so serious that it didn't sound like a lolicon at all.

Subaru: "No, wait. Clind-san also doesn't seem like a degenerate... could it be that lolicons are clever at disguising themselves? Lolicons with social status are terrifying."

Subaru again recalled the omnipotent butler.

He had overwhelming intelligence and ability, but it was mixed with that kind of irrational nature. Although it wouldn't be quite right to call Clind a representative of all lolicons, it wasn't impossible that there would be case of a high-class lolicon who resembled him.

Subaru: "Well, this Kiritaka guy is still very suspicious, and impressions from voices aren't the most reliable..."

Kiritaka: "And to those who are listening, allow me to deliver, filled with my feelings... no! Filled with your feelings, a world of blessings! The morning has finally come... this is the Songstress Liliana, please be sure to listen!"

Liliana: "Ah, it's me."

In the midst of this mess, the man of Subaru's memories and the man making the broadcast finally aligned.

This bother had decided to plague Subaru even in the early morning. He heard the shuffling sound of people changing locations, and then a slight cough which seemed to contain a smile.

Liliana: "Well~, hello everybody, this is Liliana, who was just introduced. Doing this every morning makes me feel the weight of expectation, but I still want to do my best to sing and play to create joy. Please oblige me."

Subaru immediately recognized Liliana's characteristic way of speaking, and felt as if he could see her odd behavior even through the magical device,

Curiously, unlike Kiritaka's voice, which intermittently faded through the magic radio, not a trace of Liliana's voice was lost.

Subaru didn't know if there was such a concept as magical device affinity, but if there were such a thing, it would suit the girl whose voice shared the name Goddess of Song to be able to sing clearly through the static.

Liliana: "Well, I'm eager to sing. Please listen — "The Sword Demon's Love Song, Act Two"!"

Liliana inhaled gently as she prepared instrument for playing.

The song's title stole Subaru's attention from Liliana's speech. If the song was indeed the tale of what he thought it was, then—

The song about to be played was the touching tragic love story about a demon, a woman, and a sword.

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The Songstress Liliana's act of terrorism ended with her song, and Subaru returned to the living room for an early breakfast.

To be honest, the existence of the “The Sword Demon’s Love Song” had struck Subaru like an unexpected bolt of lightning.

He should have realized long ago. No matter in which world, at any time, any heroic deeds would be preserved for future generations.

They could be documented in a number of ways, such as in writing or paintings.

It wasn’t inconceivable that the heroine who had ended a civil war and the Sword Demon who took that heroine as his wife were immortalized in song.

Of course, even if Subaru is aware of this possibility, he couldn’t have done anything about what happened this morning. He hadn’t even known about the magic device, and he couldn’t have known to tell Liliana to think about her actions.

Now, he could only curse the Songstress who’d chosen her song at the most inopportune time without any regard for the situation.

His already poor impression of the Songstress had somehow plummeted even further at her inexplicably poorly timed enthusiasm. Liliana was an idiot, Kiritaka was a fool.

Subaru: “Has Wilhelm-san... come here yet?”

The earliest to arrive in the living room were the previous occupants of the courtyard, with the exception of Felt, who had parted with them after leaving. She’d probably come later together with Reinhardt.

Thinking of the song he’d just heard, recalling Wilhelm’s thoughts on his wife and grandson, and picturing the old man’s smile, Subaru was unable to suppress the feelings that sprung up in his chest.

As for the words to say upon seeing him, Subaru had no idea how to find them. Even so, as long as there as there was communication, Subaru would be glad. Still, he seriously hoped that Wilhelm had somehow missed the song.

Subaru: "That group of overly serious people, it's impossible that all of them would be sleeping in on the same day."

The three main members of Crusch's faction, even Ferris, worked and rested on a balanced schedule. Even having lived with them only a few days, Subaru was well aware of this.

On a journey to an unfamiliar place, they'd probably be nervous and maintain their schedule even more rigorously, so it was impossible that they would have missed the broadcast.

Emilia: "Subaru, you look awful, what's wrong?"

Emilia leveled her gaze at Subaru, who sat on a cushion, rapidly tapping his feet in anxiety.

After the broadcast had ended, Subaru had immediately proposed that their faction should go to the tea room. After confirming that the tea room was empty, he claimed its undisturbed peace.

Emilia and the others simply savored the tragic lyrics of "The Sword Demon's Love Song" and indulged in Liliana's voice. They were unaware that the Sword Demon in the song was Wilhelm, or of any of the origins of the Sword Demon.

Therefore, Subaru was reluctant to have them share his anxiety.

Even more frightening was that Liliana's song had even captured Subaru.

Subaru, who'd been plagued with a sense of trepidation upon hearing the song's title, couldn't bring himself to leave courtyard while listening to it. Or, rather, that kind of thought hadn't even surfaced.

Liliana's singing had to have contained magic. Because of this, even after recovering, Subaru couldn't shake off a sense of anxiety when thinking of that hasty brunette.

Subaru: "...it's nothing... nothing, nothing, just, I'm a little hungry... you see, even though the inn's food is delicious, isn't it a little lacking in quantity? My body wants me to pilfer snacks so I can eat them and grow..."

Emilia: “Subaru, I don’t believe you.”

The usually gullible Emilia saw right through Subaru’s bluff at this critical moment. Was he so easy to read? Subaru’s confidence vanished.

Otto: “Really, Natsuki-san. Although I don’t know what you’re anxious about, we’re discussing our plans for the afternoon. You should be paying attention.”

Subaru: “This afternoon’s plan, oh yeah, the second negotiation with Kiritaka. Hmm... we could take Liliana hostage so we can exchange her with the magic stone we want?”

Otto: “Why in the world would you propose such a forceful plan!?”

Otto, amazed by Subaru’s words, raised his voice as his face adopted a gloomy expression. Seeing that, Subaru tilted his head with an “eh”.

Perhaps it was due to his still burning the anger toward Liliana, but it probably wouldn’t serve to raise the plan’s success rate.

Otto: “In any case, this afternoon, we’ll be attempting negotiations with Kiritaka-san again, and the one we should try to win the trust of is that member of The Scales of the White Dragon, who is the mostly likely to be able to persuade Kiritaka-san.

Subaru: “The Scales of the White Dragon, that’s such a cool name. Was he at the meeting yesterday?”

Otto: “Yes, the Scales of the White Dragon is a well-known mercenary group in this area. Although they were established a long time ago, they were recently hired as a private force by Kiritaka-san. That man was their representative.”

Subaru: “Of the people who were there... ah, he’s probably the best person to talk to.”

While they hadn’t been there to observe the room the negotiation had taken place in, Subaru had a vague recollection of the presence of a middle-aged man in white before the magic stone’s light had engulfed him.

Kiritaka was mad for Liliana who was often in a state of madness herself. Subaru was certainly eager to talk to someone more rational than the two.

Otto: "Judging by this morning's broadcast, Kiritaka-san's anger should have calmed down somewhat, and he should be willing to listen to us, but if Natsuki-san is going to be present, then he would mostly likely be significantly less reasonable."

Subaru: "I know my scary eyes put people off the first time they see me, but I didn't expect such an aggressive reaction. That kinda hurt."

Emilia: "That doesn't matter, Subaru. I don't dislike fierce looking eyes. My mother also had very fierce eyes, but she was such a gentle person."

Beatrice: "Subaru's face isn't that bad, in fact... actually, I was mistaken, I suppose."

Subaru: "No comfort is preferable, actually. Don't make me face the truth."

Subtle bore the gentle and stern words before urging Otto to continue. Otto went on saying, "So,"

Otto: "During today's negotiations, I think Natsuki-san shouldn't accompany us. Is that okay?"

Subaru: "No matter what, I don't have a choice but to agree, but if you succeed, then what's the point of my being here?"

Otto: "Between just Natsuki-san having come for nothing and all of us having come for nothing, we're choosing the smaller loss of just Natsuki-san, who only runs around playing with Beatrice-chan."

Beatrice: "I feel like you're underestimating Betty, in fact! It's annoying, I suppose!"

Beatrice's anger was dismissed and their plan of action was finalized. Nevertheless, Subaru had also considered what Otto was likely thinking.

Subaru: "This afternoon I'll go with Emilia to take a walk with Beako."

Emilia: “Ehh? I won’t be going to see Kiritaka-san with Otto-kun?”

Otto: “They’ve surely anticipated that we would likely come to negotiate again, and if we were to take Emilia-sama, we would be making an unannounced sudden visit, and we will fail just as we did yesterday... Natsuki-san, I’m glad you realize this, but I can’t help but think that you’re up to something.”

Otto glared Subaru, who responded with an innocent whistle.

He had told Otto about meeting Liliana yesterday, but he’d neglected to mention where they’d met. Kiritaka had wanted to keep Emilia’s faction from meeting Liliana, so he’d probably sent her out, and she’d chosen a nice scenic park to find refuge in.

Subaru: “I found a nice park, and I’d like Emilia to accompany me there. We could take stroll with Beatrice holding our hands between us.”

Emilia: “Wow, that sounds like fun. But, I wonder if it’s okay for us to be relaxing like that. Well, Otto-kun?”

Otto: “I can’t refuse if you stare at me with those eyes. Well, Natsuki-san and Emilia-sama both can’t go due to a variety of circumstances, so I’ll go with Garfiel. Please don’t cause any trouble.

In affirmation of Otto’s words, Emilia and Subaru nodded earnestly. But Subaru also stuck his tongue out at Otto’s back as an apology.

Liliana would almost certainly not be present at the Muse Chamber of Commerce today. In that case, Subaru could only assume that she would go to the same park as yesterday.

If she wasn’t there, Subaru would accept that there was nothing he could do, but he still wanted to establish a relationship with her if he could.

If Kiritaka truly loved Liliana from the bottom of his heart, there was quite a large possibility that he’d agree to a direct request from her.

Of course, he couldn't just think of using Liliana. If he abused her good intentions, Emilia would oppose it, and Subaru's own conscience wouldn't let him walk free. Thus, Subaru decided to tell Liliana his story without any reservations.

Subaru hoped that the result would be honest, even if it strayed from the heroic biography that she'd been expecting and disappointed her.

Immortalized in history as a hero by a song. Just the thought gave Subaru goosebumps, but if he had to add fuel to the fire, he wanted to leave an honest impression.

At the very least, Subaru's famed so-called heroic deeds would also be disillusioned when his audience learned of his miserable mistakes along the way.

Anastasia: "—Good morning. You're all up early."

Just as Emilia's faction decided on their internal and external plans of action, the door of the tearoom was opened, revealing the figure of Anastasia. Today's Anastasia wore her usual fox scarf coupled with a kimono.

It was indeed a surprise to suddenly see a kimono, and Subaru was excited. Emilia's eyes gleamed for a different reason, she was delighted to see the clothing. Anastasia gazed at them with pride.

Anastasia: "Very nice, very nice. I'm glad to be shocking people so early in the morning."

Emilia: "Anastasia-san, that dress is so beautiful. Is that what you were talking about yesterday?"

Anastasia: "Yep. This is the kimono I mentioned at bath yesterday. Although it looks a lot like a bathrobe, it takes a lot of preparation to wear."

Anastasia turned delightedly, showing off her blue-dyed clothing, which was charmingly patterned with floating, scattered petals.

—Kararagi apparently shared much of Subaru's familiarity with Japanese culture.

Subaru: "That type of clothing, has it been handed down since the days of Hoshin?"

Anastasia: "Well, you're quite knowledgeable, Natsuki-kun. This type of clothing did seem to appear more frequently since the beginning of the Hoshin's era. Although, that method of production was lost, and only reproductions are currently made."

Subaru: "Hoshin's era."

This man, "Hoshin of the Wastelands", appeared once again. Now, Subaru had no choice but to suspect that Hoshin, like Subaru and Al, had been summoned.

Only, unlike Subaru and Al, Hoshin had been from four hundred years ago.

Subaru: "The priority is figuring the current situation out, but afterward I might want to take a good look at this Hoshin..."

On the matter of his summoning, Subaru did not intend to start digging for knowledge at this point.

Although he knew the structure of the summons, the purpose of the summoner was completely unknown. However, this call is just a one-way, for him to come here. There was no such convenience that would allow him to go back home.

On this matter, just considering it would be like fishing for the moon in a puddle; there was no solution. What Subaru wanted to know was what predecessors he had had, what kind of footprints they'd left in this world, and where they'd ended up. Nothing more.

Reinhardt: "Good morning, Subaru. Did you sleep well last night? You were a great help in reminding Felt-sama to return to her room this morning."

Felt: "How annoying. It wasn't my intention to go back to there."

After Anastasia, Reinhardt strode into the tea room with Felt in tow. He deposited her on a cushion, giving no indication of whether or not he'd heard the song that morning.

He certainly must have known that the “The Sword Demon’s Love Song” was referring to his own grandfather.

Reinhardt: “Anastasia-sama, you look more beautiful with each passing morning. I had been a little concerned about your modesty, but now it seems unfounded.”

Anastasia: “Hehehe, this is my treasured possession. I can’t go into Pristella unless I prepare myself. On that note, I still to have to show off to Julius.”

After that, Julius also joined them, and Anastasia showed off her garb to her knight. After she had received her due flattery, Anastasia tilted her head at him.

Anastasia: “Didn’t the others accompany you?”

Julius: “Ricardo said he had something to do and went out to the city last night, but Mimi and her brothers... they seem to be follow Emilia faction’s Garfiel.”

Emilia: “They’re following Garfiel?”

Emilia looked up when she heard the name of one of her servants. Julius nodded.

Julius: “Mimi found Garfiel leaving the hotel, and immediately gave chase. Then Hetaro went after her, and Tivey, who cleans up their messes, said that he’d handle it, so they all left Joshua.”

Anastasia descended upon Joshua with her hands on her hips, who hid behind the tall Julius. The handsome young man bowed his head to his master as he stepped forward timidly, looking extremely pale and concerned.

Joshua: “I am deeply, extremely sorry... I desperately tried to stop them, but Mimi and Hetaro weren’t listening at all. Tivey said to please leave everything to him.”

Anastasia: “Well, if Tivey’s there, they shouldn’t cause any problems. Let’s put it aside, we’re the hosts, but we’re making quite a spectacle of ourselves in front of our guests.

Patiently patting the the ashamed Joshua's shoulders in a sign of forgiveness, Anastasia turned to face everyone present with a gracious smile. She shook her supple hair, her fingers playing with her scarf.

Anastasia: "As you've just witnessed, this embarrassing fiasco is happening, I hope you'll excuse it... our lovely deputy captain, seemingly distracted by her first love, is having a hard time fighting her impulses."

Mimi was obsessed with Garfiel and wanted to cling to his side, everyone present could see this. Everyone, with two exceptions. Emilia had tilted her head in confusion, and Joshua issued a sigh of "so that's what it was".

Subaru: "By the way, Felt, I didn't see that Tonchinkan trio at all. Are they all staying here?"

Felt: "You mean Gaston and the others? Well, having them living here would be a waste and a joke, and they're so unused to places like this that they'd feel awkward. They're living somewhere cheaper in the city, but..."

As she answered Subaru's question, Felt grinned.

Felt: "Hey, that Tonchinkan nickname isn't bad, since their names are Gaston, Larkins, and Camberley. It's not confusing at all, and they don't seem to mind it."

Subaru: "I also think it's a great nickname, I want to praise the me from a year ago. When I first heard their real names, I'd thought a miracle had happened."

The Tonchinkan trio was what they had started as, and the Tonchinkan trio was where they had ended up.

Crusch: "—We're late, it looks like we're the last ones here."

Finally arriving in the tea room was Crusch's faction. Today, she work her long green hair up, and fitting of her new self, wore a gorgeous ladylike-like floral hairpin.

She took a brief walk into the room, followed by Ferris and Wilhelm, who was, as always, solemnly dressed, his back upright. Looking at the old man's posture, Subaru couldn't help but shake his shoulders. He swallowed, trying to steal a glance at the old man's face, and Wilhelm caught Subaru's gaze.

Wilhelm: "——"

He showed a faint smile, giving a slight bow.

Witnessing this action, Subaru received the message contained in the earlier smile: "You don't have anything to worry about".

Subaru's heart began to beat faster, until he saw Ferris, sitting at Crusch's side, winking and giving a peace sign.

—No worries, we've taken care of it.

That was the message Subaru received from Ferris.

Perhaps Ferris noticed Subaru's attention. He ceased making his movements and began to cling to Crusch's side as he always did.

Subaru was conscious of what it was like to be useless and was afraid of appearing nosy.

Crusch and Ferris certainly knew more than Subaru about the connection between Wilhelm and those songs. They were more sensitive and had greater proximity with Wilhelm.

That was natural, because they were his companions. Subaru didn't need to have worried. Subaru: "Better to say that it is our negligence that we couldn't help Garfiel."

This is not to say that he shouldn't care about others. Rather, it is better to first do something for your own faction, which would leave you free to help others.

However, the turbulent depression in Garfiel's body was something that could only be overcome by Garfiel's own efforts, so that line of thought would solve nothing.

Anastasia: "Well, there's still a few people who haven't shown up, but in all likelihood they won't be coming."

Although the number of occupants was less than that of last night's attendees, the number was still impressive. After all, among what happened last night, eating itself was also very exciting.

What to put on this morning — with a short pause of anticipation, Anastasia smiled and said,
Anastasia: "Bring it in."

At her orders, the hotel staff opened the door, and, immediately afterward, a large heated block of iron was carried in.

Anastasia: "Today's treat is a traditional Karargi breakfast — the daisukiyaki pancake!" Anastasia rolled her sleeves up slightly, raising her voice.

In front of a silent crowd, the inn's staff coated the iron with a layer of oil and carried in an assortment of ingredients one by one into the room.

The daisukiyaki pancake — from the name, the iron plate, and the assortment of ingredients, Subaru saw something incredibly familiar. Something called,

Subaru: "A Japanese... okonomiyaki...!?"

As something that had been passed down for generations, the Japanese okonomiyaki pancake arrived on stage.

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Emilia: "Subaru, Subaru, look at my masterpiece!"

Beatrice: "Subaru, this is the best pancake made by Betty, I suppose. You can have it, in fact."

Emilia smile earnestly, and Beako's face was a little flushed. Each placed their best pancake in front of him.

To Subaru, they were just charred blocks of black. The two, however, were completely unaware of their lack of skill.

Subaru: "Try it yourself before you taste it."

With this sensible suggestion, Subaru held back a look of pain as the two obediently started on their pancakes and turned his attention to the other factions.

Reinhardt: "Finished, Felt-sama."

Felt: "Oh, it's good, make me some more. I'm always grateful for your food delicious cooking."

Reinhardt: "If you count on me for anything else, I'll be living up to my honor as a knight."

This was Felt's faction. Reinhardt made pancakes at an impossible pace, and Felt gobbled them up just as fast.

Hidden somewhere in Felt's slim figure was King of Stomachs. Or she was just gluttonous. Either way, she ate far more than her share.

All in all, Reinhardt had yet to eat, while Felt had already polished off ten.

By the way, Emilia's faction was faring awfully. As had just been demonstrated, Emilia and Beatrice didn't pull their weight, and the only useful members were Otto and Subaru.

Otto: "Look, Emilia-sama and Beatrice-chan. Oh, eat this... Ah! Emilia-sama! Self reflection is good, but don't eat them raw! Beatrice-chan, that's too much sauce!"

Of the other factions, the person that stood out the most was Anastasia.

This was the surprise breakfast that she had planned herself. She had both a deep self- confidence and love for the daisukiyaki.

Anastasia: "Watch carefully! This is the real daisukiyaki!"

She flipped the pancakes neatly and smoothly and had put beautifully made pancakes onto Julius's plate.

Julius: "I am unworthy of eating Anastasia-sama's food, but I think they would be better if they were cooked for a shorter amount of time. Of course, I don't mean to bother Anastasia-sama."

Anastasia: "Of course, of course, they need to be less charred. Even though Julius is a man, he says so like a tender maiden."

Unlike Subaru, who redirected his offerings and told his gifters to reflect on themselves, Julius not only ate the pancakes, but kept a straight face and gave Anastasia pointers to improve.

That person was a role model as a knight. Subaru absolutely didn't want to imitate him, and lacked the ability to do so anyway.

Sitting at their side, eating sticky raw pancakes, was a pitiful looking Joshua. His monocle seemed to be fogging over, preventing him from seeing properly, and he desperately tried to hide his struggle. He'd feel mortified if the Subaru whom he hated noticed this embarrassing spectacle, so he didn't greet him.

After seeing the difference in elegance between the brothers, Subaru could only conclude that the most stable faction was Crusch's.

Ferris: "Oh, Crusch-sama, Ferri-chan made really beautiful pancakes, take a look!"

Crusch: "Hmm, you certainly have, but I won't lose to you."

Like a passionate competition between two women, Crusch and Ferris conversed. Their confidence was supported by their results; the pancakes they'd made were perfect. Ferris had even added cat ears to his.

Ferris: "Please enjoy my pancakes, they're filled with Ferri-chan's love. Crusch-sama, open wide!"

Crusch: "Hey, hey... that, um..."

Although, the happy scene did feel a little off putting. That may have been because Subaru knew they were man and woman, or because he knew of how Crusch's temperament had changed after her memory loss.

Anyway, master and servant appeared to have no problems. The last member of their faction, sitting next to the peach colored space, and focusing on his own pancake was Wilhelm.

Wilhelm: "Hmmm..."

Wilhelm, who'd been trying to turn the dough over, closed his eyes and sighed.

It seemed that his pancake had been torn apart after Wilhelm had left it on the iron for too long, causing it to stick.

He'd unexpectedly seen Wilhelm's clumsy side.

Subaru: "I feel like I saw something I shouldn't have, but in that case..."

Feeling that he should help Wilhelm, Subaru climbed to his feet, then sat back down, reconsidering.

Subaru: "Wilhelm-san."

Wilhelm: "...Subaru-dono?"

Hearing his name, Wilhelm lifted his head. Noticing that Subaru had seen his clumsiness, his brow furrowed in shame.

Subaru gave him an encouraging nod, and gently pointed with his jaw. Wilhelm, who understood his meaning, swallowed quietly.

Wilhelm: “——”

Moving to the place indicated by Subaru, Wilhelm took a seat next to Reinhardt. He obediently followed each of Felt’s instructions, producing pancakes without halt and failing to notice the exchange between Subaru and Wilhelm.

Although, Subaru had already communicated everything he’d wanted to say to Wilhelm.

Consternation, confusion, hesitation, doubt, all wavered in Wilhelm’s eyes. He took a long time to reach a decision. Finally,

Wilhelm: “—Reinhardt.”

Reinhardt: “——”

Reinhardt froze as Wilhelm forced himself to call his grandson’s name.

His spatula hovered in midair as his hands stopped moving, and Felt plated the pancake with a perfect catch.

That act was inelegant, but Reinhardt took no notice of it.

The red-haired youth faced Wilhelm with wide eyes. Wilhelm met his gaze head on, without so much as drawing a breath.

Wilhelm: “——”

Reinhardt: “——”

Abruptly, silence fell.

Not just between the two, but also between the people around them who had noticed.

The entire room stilled, and the only remaining sounds were those of spatulas meeting the iron.

Time seemed to stagnate as everyone held their collective breaths.

Wilhelm: "I, um, that is..."

Reinhardt: "What is it, honored grandfather?"

Wilhelm: "I... I'm not so good at this, so, you, if you know any kind of trick to make it easier, could... you teach it me?"

Those were Wilhelm's clumsy, stuttering words.

Only Crusch, Ferris, and Subaru widened their eyes, understanding what kind of resolve Wilhelm had needed to choke those words out.

Wilhelm himself seem to sag with exhaustion after posing the question.

Wordlessly, Reinhardt swallowed as he considered how to answer. His fair features stilled as an unfamiliar emotion washed over his blue eyes.

Reinhardt closed his eyes and buried that emotion into a soft sigh. Then,

Reinhardt: "Yes, I understand, honored grandfather."

The corners of his mouth turned up as he closed his eyes. That expression could only be described as a smile.

It wasn't the reassuring smile that he usually wore to give others a sense of security. This may have been the only time anyone had seen the young man named Reinhardt step out of his role as the Sword Saint and show a genuine smile.

Wilhelm's dumbstruck expression slowly reclaimed its composure.

He lowered his face, closing his eyes as if he were enduring something. He probably had difficulty processing that reaction immediately.

However, the real genuine feeling was there. Once delivered, it only needed to be accepted.

The long divide between the two, grandfather and grandson, could only be offset by a corresponding amount of time.

Subaru, seeing such a possibility play out in front of him, clenched his fist with a plethora of emotions.

From the bottom of his heart, he wanted to greet Wilhelm with joy. And,

???: “— It isn't so easy, honored father. Don't think that your relationship will be fixed with just that.”

Suddenly, a red-haired figure threw open the door of the tea room.

The face of the red-haired man who'd spoken those words carried so much malice that everyone froze on the spot, forgetting the flow of time.

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Chapter 16 - Uninvited Guests



That touching moment was spoiled in the worst way.

The red-haired man's behavior and attitude all betrayed an ugly nature. A rather repulsive smile spread across his unshaven face. He looked to be in his forties and carried the unpleasant scent of alcohol about him.

Although his actions and appearance all evoked a sense of disgust which seemed to reflect his character, the man underneath the poor grooming was quite handsome.

The beautiful characteristics — their desired form, are contaminated by completely different things. Something about the slender man's posture exuded an aura of repulsiveness.

Subaru: "...who are you?"

???: "Ahh?"

The first to break the shocked silence that had fallen across the room was none other than Subaru, who reached behind him and gripped the handle of the weapon at his waist.

Having lost his cool, Subaru's spinning head drove him to act impulsively.

There was nothing that could have angered him more than the interruption of the reconciliation between the clumsy, awkward duo of grandfather and grandson.

Only Subaru knew why he was in such a frenzied rage.

It wasn't just a reconciliation between a friend and someone he respected that had been interrupted.

It was reconciliation between family. The beginning of a family looking for a connection. To dare to treat it like that,

Subaru: "Answer me. Who the hell are you?"

???: "...you're really casting a hostile look at me, kid. As a knight, you do know who you're trying to provoke, right?"

Subaru: "Don't make me laugh, mister. The one being provocative is you. I'm just asking you exactly what you're doing here."

His patience reaching a breaking point, Subaru stood from the banquet.

Beatrice, who was sitting next to him, saw the feelings fueling his reaction and shifted her position so that she could take his hand at any time. His reliable partner had accurately sensed flames of anger residing in Subaru's heart.

Glancing at Subaru with an unpleasant expression, the man scratched his head with a rude gesture.

???: "You're so annoying, kid. Hey, Sword Saint. Or Juukulius too, or even Argyle. Cut down this rude kid for me."

Subaru: "—hk!"

With the hand he'd been scratching his head with pointing at Subaru, the insolent man casually gave an order to three people in the hall, Reinhardt among them.

Seeing that humiliation to his comrades, Subaru wanted to strike at that grin with his whip. Julius: "Please watch your words."

But he was interrupted by Julius's words before he could move.

Julius, who had stood up at some point, gently placed a hand on Subaru's shoulder from behind. Julius nodded slightly at the frozen Subaru, then turned to face the man.

Julius. "Ferris is present, and Reinhardt as well. We three are on temporary leave from our normal duties due to serving our specific masters. Therefore, even the deputy head should not hold the right to command us."

Ferris: "Yep. Ferri-chan is now an obedient servant to the the venerable Crusch-sama~. Therefore, I have nyo obligation to comply with the order."

Keeping his sitting posture, Ferris held Crusch's arm as he offered an immediate follow-up to Julius's words. Although Crusch, whose arm had just been taken, appeared a little surprised, she still filled her eyes with her strong will as she turned toward the red-haired man.

The expression on everyone else's faces were similar; no one hid their hostility toward the man. That was natural; they had just shared a pleasant atmosphere, which had been torn apart by the man.

However,

???: "Oh~ oh~, how scary. Is it not obvious that I was just kidding around? It's not like I don't know the gravity of my orders as the deputy commander."

Subaru: "The... deputy commander?"

The alcoholic man seemed to find something funny, slapping his legs in laughter at Julius and Ferris's reactions. During their exchange, a word slipped past to Subaru.

After hearing his testimony, the man once again leveled his gaze in Subaru's direction.

???: "Just so. That's my delectable adornment. Deputy Commander of the Knights of the Kingdom of Lugunica, Heinkel, that's me.

Subaru: "Don't give me such a righteous look."

Heinkel: "Hahaha, this kid's voice is really harsh. It hurts, hurts, hurts me... so shut your worthless mouth, you dog."

Subaru: "—hk!"

The darkness twinkling in the man's narrowed eyes sent a shuddering chill down Subaru's back. It was different from the overwhelming presence of something like the White Whale or a Witch. It was something more unspeakable.

That something was familiar to Subaru, and yet it was impossible to recall exactly what it was. There was nowhere to escape that sense, and Subaru felt a ringing in his ears.

Julius: "Calm down, Subaru. Don't let the deputy commander's atmosphere swallow you."

Julius, who stood by his side, spoke to the dizzy Subaru.

Hearing him, that man — Heinkel, faced Julius with a dark smile.

Heinkel: “Ha! A worthy reply. An exemplary, polite answer. To show that respect as a knight, you truly are the Knight of Knights.”

Julius: “Allow me to accept the compliment, Deputy Commander Heinkel... If I may ask, what is the reason for your visit? If my memory serves correctly, your duty as deputy commander should be guarding the capital.”

Heinkel: “Drop those sarcastic words. Just how great of an influence on the vigilant defense of the capital can the absence of one man make? Marcus-sama can handle it perfectly alone, far better than I could... ah, although, a royal family who could suffer disaster is missing.”

Wilhelm: “Heinkel!”

Considering his position, Heinkel’s speech was incredibly disrespectful. Upon hearing it, Wilhelm roared his name in fury.

The Sword Demon, shaking with anger directed a sharp glare at Heinkel, who merely shrugged his shoulders.

Wilhelm: “Heinkel...”

Heinkel: “Just calling me once is fine. I’ve yet to lose my hearing from old age. Well, treat that as nonsense and ignore it. More importantly—”

Heinkel responded to Wilhelm’s bitter voice by sticking a finger into his ear as he closed his blue eyes. Then, he opened them to look at Wilhelm.

Heinkel: “This isn’t a very nice feeling. Obviously, I want to offer my congratulations to you for your defeat of the White Whale, but you’ve been avoiding me. This is a feat that took fourteen long years to

accomplish, after all. I'd think that I also have the right to join the joyful celebrations. Isn't that the case, father?"

Wilhelm: "Heinkel, I..."

Heinkel: "Reinhardt, what about you?"

Reinhardt: "—"

Heinkel viciously stabbed his words into Wilhelm's chest.

Although the old man's face showed the pain of being cut by a blade, Heinkel showed no sign of caring. Instead, he directed his malice at a new target.

Reinhardt, who had silently observed the situation until just now, slowly looked toward Heinkel when he heard his name.

Heinkel: "Shouldn't you also be congratulating father on the burden that's been lifted off of his shoulders? Since he's carried out a wife, a mother, a grandmother's vengeance. At least offer him some nice words. That said..."

Reinhardt: "—"

Heinkel: "—With this, father has finally avenged the previous Sword Saint who you'd murdered, isn't that right?"

— Subaru withdrew his original assertion.

Saying that Heinkel wore a malicious look on his face was a mistake.

Rather, he was the face of malice itself.

Heinkel's words, expression, attitude, tone, behavior, and gaze; all of these were manifestations of his intent, one that could only be described by the term malice.

Indeed, every bit of Heinkel's demeanor contained nothing but pure malice.

Subaru: "...previous Sword Saint, murdered...?"

Subaru quietly blurted out those impressionable words.

In his consciousness, there were other questions swimming about, but Subaru could not reasonably sort through them.

However, malice would always spring on such an opportunity.

Heinkel. "Yeah, the murdered previous Sword Saint. Although I don't know exactly how ignorant you are, you have to be familiar with the title of Sword Saint, right? Our current Sword Saint is the most powerful hero of our day... but that was something he got from murdering his predecessor, his own grandmother. Although that fact was immediately hidden from public knowledge."

Wilhelm: "Silence, Heinkel! You... just how far are you intending to go?"

Heinkel: "If you want to say something that sounds nice, then please stop, father. The reason is nothing other than that you simply don't have the right to disagree with me. After all, when the last Sword Saint died, the first to condemn Reinhardt was none other than you."

Wilhelm: "—hk"

Heinkel's words contained a dense, noxious poison of abhorrence. And the contents of his speech were no more than vulgar curses. Reinhardt had murdered his predecessor? Inconceivable.

Wilhelm had bitterly condemned that Reinhardt? Inconceivable. After all, to Reinhardt, his predecessor had been...

And to Wilhelm, Reinhardt was...

So obviously, that couldn't have been possible. Reinhardt & Wilhelm: "—"

Neither Reinhardt nor Wilhelm would deny it.

Why? If either of them would deny it, would even say a simple “no”, then Subaru would instantly believe it.

A comrade and a beloved mentor. A malicious man covered with the scent of alcohol. There was absolutely no question as to who Subaru would believe.

Therefore, he wanted one of them to deny those words.

Heinkel: “Is it hard to communicate now? Of course it is. It’s been this way for fourteen years. Neither you nor my father have changed at all. Without change, it’s impossible for you to reconcile. Would Thearesia van Astrea forgive such a selfish affair?”

In silence, only Heinkel’s profane words echoed.

The previous Sword Saint. She had been Wilhelm’s wife, as well as Reinhardt’s grandmother. And, to Heinkel,

Heinkel: “My dead mother is cursing us. Three generations, and none of us have been forgiven.”
Reinhardt’s father. Wilhelm’s son.

Considering Heinkel’s words and deeds, Subaru correctly deduced his origin.

Subaru: “Heinkel van Astrea...”

Testing the name out, he found that it echoed with an air of rightness.

The man in front of him was undoubtedly attached to the Astrea family. Even if his nature as a human was completely different from the upstanding Astreas that Subaru knew.

Heinkel: “Don’t attach the ‘van’ to my name, kid. I haven’t been given that honor. It’s just Heinkel Astrea.”

Subaru: "...?"

Hearing Subaru's questioning breath, Heinkel clicked his tongue and looked away.

For the first time since arriving here, bitterness flashed over his half-visible face. His eyes, which had contained only sadistic glee as he'd insulted his family, seemed to carry a look of pain.

—As soon as he'd begun to ponder what had happened, Subaru was interrupted.

Emilia: "So... what did you come here for?"

Subaru: "Emilia?"

Everyone had been shuddering at Heinkel's unforgivable attitude. However, it was Emilia who first stood up and questioned him.

Her silver hair floating behind her, she stood next to Subaru, who could feel a wave of anger emanating from her.

To Emilia, not feeling anger over the ruined atmosphere of or such an impolite manner was impossible.

She only ever became seriously angry when the situation concerned the feelings of others. And even she was aware of how Reinhardt and Wilhelm had been hurt.

Emilia: "We were originally dining happily. To deliberately spoil such a peaceful moment, what exactly did you intend?"

Heinkel: "...oh, this is unexpected. Are you not Emilia-sama? I've heard the rumors. A poor half-witch girl who stands no fighting chance but struggles along anyway."

Emilia: "Although I'd like to one day talk to you and ask how you think of me, right now I only want to hear one answer from you. Why did you come here?"

Heinkel: “—”

Was he attempting to throw Emilia off with insults? Subaru saw through him, and the surprised Heinkel felt disappointed. The members of the other factions also seemed surprised at Emilia's calm demeanor.

It was a surprising difference from the innocence Emilia had shown yesterday. To say that she was pretending to be innocent would be a lie, however. This was Emilia being true to herself.

Emilia: “The reason why we all gathered here, was because we were invited by Anastasia-san. It's very rare that we are all gathered in the same place, so I don't think you would have randomly targeted such an opportunity, even if you are someone important to the knights. Please tell me exactly what you want.”

Heinkel: “Tch. Not the same as the rumors...”

Emilia: “Answer me.”

Heinkel, who had been again scratching his head, was shaken by Emilia's momentum.

Although Emilia was angry, she was by no means preparing an attack. The pressure emanating from her had nothing to do with magic. It was merely the strength of her feelings.

Felt: “You marched in with confidence, just to back down when a girl glares at you. Mister, that's pretty embarrassing.”

Anastasia: “That's right. Just when I was looking forward to sharing a fun story, too. Songstress-san is apparently quite the whimsical character, isn't that interesting?”

Crusch: “Well, is that so? Then, I'd appreciate it if this puzzling man would leave, since I'd love to discuss these rumors about Songstress-san with everyone here.”

Heinkel: “—hk”

Following Emilia, Felt, Anastasia, and Crusch spoke up as well.

Like Emilia, the three joined their domineering forces in opposition to Heinkel. Facing the pressure of all four of them, Heinkel's face couldn't help but twitch.

They were on completely different levels. Considering his title, his position was rather lacking.

Julius: "I'm sorry, deputy head. If there's nothing else for time being then I think, for the benefit of all parties involved, that you should take your leave."

Heinkel's reaction, and the attitude of the royal candidates.

Julius calculated that this would be the right time to bail Heinkel out. Subaru would have preferred to crush Heinkel on the spot, but changed his mind after seeing Reinhardt and Wilhelm.

He didn't fully grasp the situation, and so he couldn't make hasty judgements.

Heinkel: "Grr..."

Julius: "Deputy commander. Please make a decision. Once you do, please..."

???: "—There's no need for that, commoner."

That voice shined with self-assurance.

The owner of that confident voice, which could shake the will of its listeners, seemed able to impose their own superiority wherever they went.

Capable of dismissing common sense and establishing a new set of rules, ones which allowed no protest or objection.

All of the members of the tea room looked at the sliding door near Heinkel.

Everyone was fully aware that someone was about to stride in from the corridor. Heinkel had long since ceased to exist in anyone's mind.

The sun's burning scowl lit the corridor.

???: "So, all of the trivial people have arrived? You've prepared a stage for mine debut. You deserve praise for your behavior."

A boldly exposed chest hugged by a blood-red dress, a mouth coquettishly covered by a fan. Her arms were crossed under her ample chest, pushing it up in the glamorous act of showing off her white skin without reservation.

Her bright red eyes resembling the licks of a flame, an enchantment capable of mesmerizing all the men in the world.

Even seeing her once would scorch her violent beauty into one's memory forever. Excessive beauty will become violent. Her existence proved this.

A teenaged girl named Priscilla Barielle.

The uninvited fifth candidate of the Royal Election.

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Priscilla: "So is this it? Frozen faces in a lifeless environment. Do you like this stale air so much? Or is it that every time we meet, such an atmosphere forms? If so, that's incredibly pitiful."

Priscilla frowned as she looked throughout the room and spoke in a provocative tone while fanning her face.

Due to her abrupt debut, no one was able to rebut her insults.

Priscilla: "What a poor reception. I deliberately graced this place with mine presence. Placing your forehead on the floor and treating me with admiration and praise is what the correct reaction would be."

Subaru: "...that's how people would treat a deity. It wouldn't happen unless you actually become the king."

Priscilla: "Hmm?"

Subaru couldn't help but comment on Priscilla's arrogance. Hearing his mutter, Priscilla turned to look at him, trapping Subaru with her bright gaze.

Subaru: "What?"

Priscilla: "...who are you? I had heard that this would be a gathering of fools who know not their place and would compete for the throne. Of course, they would also bring fools who support them. But why is a vulgar commoner like yourself present?"

Subaru: "Are you for real?"

Subaru was halted by the hostility facing him.

Priscilla's words were neither joking nor mocking. That is to say, she was being genuine. Priscilla had honestly completely forgotten about Subaru's existence.

Although they'd gone for a year without seeing each other, Subaru's idiocy in the capitol shouldn't have been so easily forgotten.

Although it would be correct to say that this was a very Priscilla-like attitude, it wasn't an attitude that was particularly appreciated.

???: "Princess, that's a bit much, isn't it? Although I don't know how much he's worth to you, to me he's almost like a brother. He's a very interesting opponent, yeah?"

A thin voice cut across the heavy atmosphere.

That voice was a little hesitant, and was accompanied by the sound of metal. A man with a single arm spoke soothing words as he entered from the corridor to join Priscilla's side.

His face was entirely covered by a helmet, and his solid, broad physique gave the impression that he was a strong man. He was both a servant to Priscilla and, like Subaru, a summoned man from another world.

And, of course, he had accompanied his master here. He inserted himself between Priscilla and Subaru.

Al: "Hey, you remember, right? It'd be hard to forget when a guy appears in the castle and does something dumb to embarrass himself in front of so many people. This is that guy. Princess even clutched her stomach when she had a good laugh about it."

Priscilla: "I've no impression whatsoever. By the way, Al. I would never laugh so hard that I'd need to clutch mine stomach. Do not belittle such an honorable presence as a casual commoner. Even though it's you, I won't be tolerant next time. I'll cut off your head."

Al: "You see, brother? Sorry I couldn't do anything. Maybe if you work hard to become better."

Subaru: "Give me a little more credit for the things I've done in the past year!"

Al soon gave up trying to jog his master's memory and instead turned to apologize to Subaru, his head bowed in apology. Subaru sighed, feeling like Al hadn't changed at all this past year.

Although, for the middle aged Al, undergoing a noticeable change would be fairly impossible.

Heinkel: "You're a little late, Priscilla-sama. How long were you going to make me act alone? I'd heard that you were supposed to be coming earlier..."

Priscilla: "Silence, commoner. You will dance as ordered to. Until I give the order to stop, you are expected to dance until you die. Those who misunderstand their duties or attempt to correct a mistake they believe I made are condemned to death."

Heinkel: "Urp..."

On the other hand, Heinkel, realizing that the atmosphere in the room had changed, immediately turned to Priscilla, who was standing behind him. However, any type of argumentative attitude taken toward Priscilla would be entirely futile.

Although Hankel was embarrassed by the uncompromising Priscilla, Subaru raised his gaze after listening to their conversation.

Subaru: "Priscilla. Did you bring that guy?"

Priscilla: "Listen, commoner. Just who allowed you to dare to speak to me without the proper honorific? Even the compassionate and generous I, when faced with such a helpless person, have a limit to my patience.

Al: "Princess."

Al called briefly to her as he saw the brutal look lodged in her eyes as she glared at Subaru. Then, Priscilla closed one eye and gave a slight breath.

Priscilla: "I don't know why, but my servant seems to have taken a liking to you. Al, who spared your life... no, there is no need to thank Al. Worship mine forgiveness. If you do so, I'll spare you."

Subaru: "...thanks for your generosity and consideration. Then, the answer to my question is..."

Priscilla: "If you're thinking that I brought this commoner here, then you would be correct. He is present at mine calling."

Subaru: "For what!"

Subaru raised his voice at the assertive Priscilla and questioned her purpose.

Uninvited guests upon uninvited guests had arrived. What kind of a plot was brewing here, Subaru needed to know.

However, in the face of Subaru's question, Priscilla merely tilted her head, and,

Priscilla: "Perhaps because I thought that it would make an interesting sight."

Subaru: "...an interesting sight?"

Priscilla: "That's right. Distorted family disputes, or the joy and sadness that comes from relationships. Such ugly performances are so very exciting. In fact, do you see? The Sword Saint and the Sword Demon acted rather human. Such a sight is very rare."

Subaru: "PRISCILLAA!"

That twisted, crooked perspective enraged Subaru.

As Priscilla said, Reinhardt's family dispute was hardly seen. And that sea of bitterness was hardly something that needed to be known.

If Heinkel hadn't appeared, such a dark history would never have come to light. Even so, the grandfather and grandson had been trying to restore their relationship.

To have torn that—

Al: "Stop, brother. There's no meaning to a fight happening here. Princess's poor character isn't a thing that's been here for a day or two. Think of it as bad luck... the stars made a mistake."

Subaru: "If you know your master has a poor character then you should be trying to lead her onto the right path. Just indulging her is irresponsible."

Al reached for Subaru with his single arm, slowly shaking his head.

Since his hand was grabbing Subaru's wrist, if anything happened, he wouldn't be able to draw his sword on such short notice.

In other words, he was indicating that he had no wish whatsoever to fight.

Noticing this, Subaru took a long breath. He looked around and found that he was the only one who had acted on his impulsive anger.

Outsiders aside, even Julius and Ferris didn't want to start anything.

Of course. This was a gathering for the throne candidates. No one wanted to entertain the possibility of anyone getting hurt here.

Subaru: "But, even in this case, no matter how much their hearts suffer...!"

Emilia: "Subaru..."

Emilia's wavering eyes called to Subaru, who had been submerged in his fury. Feeling a tug on his sleeve, Subaru also knew that Beatrice was granting him her support.

Feeling the support of the two, Subaru was unable to bow his head.

Anastasia: "The vicious hound's fury seems to have subsided. I'm wondering something... even though I didn't send you an invite, how did you come to learn of this meeting?"

Priscilla seemed ready to take her leave and carry on her agenda. However, Anastasia took an opportunity to halt her.

Although Anastasia's tone was soft, she was quite alert.

Anastasia: "After all, a child running their mouth shouldn't be allowed to run free."

Priscilla: "Don't talk to me with that affectation, mine ears are decaying. I am more than capable of keeping up with a quick-thinking fox."

Anastasia: “Oh my. Could it be that you’re neglecting to mock me as a ‘commoner’?”

Priscilla: “If you haven’t seen what you should have, then that level of ignorance places you in the same category as all of those other fools. Could it be that you are foolish enough as to want me to overlook you?”

The two were engaged in a battle of words — however, Priscilla may or may not have been deliberately provoking Anastasia’s natural business focused rhetoric.

Anastasia leisurely caressed the scarf on her neck.

Anastasia: “Leaked information is quite worrying, you know.”

Priscilla: “Anything that reaches someone else’s ear has been leaked from a mouth lacking caution. And the more that’s learned, the more holes that can be found. You’re not the only one who observes and listens to others. It’s just that kind of thing.”

Anastasia: “Ah, but you see, I’d thought of you as someone who wouldn’t engage in espionage to deal with the likes of us.”

Priscilla: “A flying insect buzzes near mine ear. But what can I do without knowing its location? I would have to catch the insect using my eyes and ears which is precisely what I have done. Of course, the same holds true for you.”

Priscilla’s implication was that, similarly to dealing with flying insects, there was no need to miss any little piece of information.

Subaru held the same opinion with Anastasia. It was inconceivable that Priscilla had actually adopted the appropriate tactics and put them into practice against her enemy factions.

And the result of that negligence brought about the awful conditions today.

Felt: “That mister is Reinhardt’s father, yeah?”

Ignoring the conversation so far, a frivolous voice shifted the topic.

Her gaze sweeping across the room, the still eating Felt, her mouth soiled with sauces, she found Priscilla's gaze.

Felt: "After all, I've had some experiences at the capitol, so I caught what was going on from the conversation. I'm not really interested in this guy's family relations. Only, if Reinhardt and the mister are together, that's different."

Priscilla: "...hhoo. If it isn't the little girl from the ghetto."

Felt: "Although I don't really care about him, I'm not unrelated to him. House Astrea's lands are in fact a lifeline for us. Except this guy hasn't actually given Reinhardt the lands. The power of the family is still in the hands of that mister."

Next to Felt, Reinhardt's cheeks stiffened slightly. Subaru caught on to Felt's concern.

As an orphan, Felt had nothing to her name, and was currently using Reinhardt's lands as her base, where, bit by bit, she accumulated support.

However, those lands were not Felt's own. They were the assets of the Astrea family, and were on loan to her.

However, those weren't Reinhardt's own territories. Even he had borrowed them.

Heinkel: "Heh. Looks like you've finally realized the seriousness of the situation, idiot."

Interjecting in their conversation was Heinkel, who wore an expression of pride and laughed with an, "as I expected". He looked as if he had been waiting for the topic to return to Reinhardt and Felt.

Heinkel: "That's it. The Head of the Astrea family is still me. I haven't passed the position on to Reinhardt, nor do I intend to pass it to him. After all, the cumbersome affairs of politics shouldn't burden our busy Sword Saint."

Felt: “As family head, you should be ashamed. When we went to the Astrea territories, only a handful of civil servants and maids with bloodshot eyes were maintaining it. Now that we’ve been restoring it, you actually dare to return to rule it?”

Heinkel: “Even if only in name, even if I’m irresponsible, the crown of family head is still mine. What’s more, haven’t my lands begun to improve? The people should be crying out in support of their lord now. I’m so loved by my people, I’m moved to the point of tears.”

Heinkel relentlessly mocked Felt, who tried to swallow her rage.

At those vile and poisonous words, Subaru’s vision turned white with rage. The room was filled with anger at the disgusting sight.

It was clear now. This man was completely abnormal.

Heinkel: “Your sense of crisis is right, Reinhardt’s master. The Astrea territories are mine. However, I’ll never support you. You can clearly see who I’m supporting!”

Heinkel stood as if on a stage, expecting applause. He gestured toward Priscilla, a clear declaration that he would support a different candidate than his son and father.

Heinkel: “I’ve heard about your achievements in the past year, in the place of me, the lord. In addition to agreeing that is a great achievement, I will also say — it is time for you to take your leave of them now. If you understand it, hurry and hand it to me...”

Priscilla: “Hey, commoner.”

Heinkel: “—Ahh? What is it, Priscilla-sama? I’m doing something very important right now.”

Priscilla: “Shut up.”

The ensuing violence had to be seen to be believed.

Shortly after she'd finished speaking, Priscilla thrust her fan at Heinkel, who had widened his eyes. Following the unfolding fan was a terrifying gust that slammed Heinkel's slender body toward the ground with powerful momentum.

Heinkel's eyes rolled back in his head, having lost his consciousness after the impact. But, Priscilla's attack went one step further.

She kicked him into the air with a swipe of her foot, and swiftly reached her hand up to meet his body.

Al: "Princess, end your anger here. Otherwise, he's going to die."

Priscilla: "——"

Priscilla was stopped before she could deliver the final blow with her arm by Al, who had predicted her outrage. Priscilla then turned to her helmeted servant.

A crimson sword had appeared in her grabbed wrist. It had a Western style curve and narrow blade, but it was engraved with wave-like flames. Even at a glance, it was an unusual sword, having instantly materialized in, and disappearing from, Priscilla's hand.

Witnessing that, Al slowly released Priscilla's wrist.

Al: "Really, spare me. You even drew your Yang Sword, that's really not good for my hear—tgah!"

Priscilla: "That was very rude, Al. From whom did you receive permission to dare to touch mine flawless skin? You won my favor on a whim, so to defile mine body is a mere dream which lies at the end of a dream."

Priscilla forcefully slapped her freed hand on Al's stomach. She exhaled loudly from her nose, then looked down at the pitiful Heinkel who was writhing on the ground.

After witnessing the brutal look in his eyes, he certainly deserved this. However, what Al said was also true.

Priscilla: "However, there is some truth to what you said. It would be excessive to kill him."

Al: "If you think so... then I hope you'll be more gentle with me in the future, gah."

Priscilla: "Quiet. I am not a demon. I will allow you to lick mine feet later as a reward."

Al: "Don't put it like I get turned on by that!? It'll lead to misunderstandings!"

Al, who had fallen to his knees after receiving a blow, desperately defended himself, but did not receive Priscilla's attention. She gazed at Heinkel with her blood-red eyes, having calmed down for the time being, and snapped her fingers.

Priscilla: "Schultz. Move the commoner out of here. Although dull, he is seemingly a worthwhile recruit. Considering what that took, giving him up would be a shame."

Schultz: "Yes, Priscilla-sama."

In response to her call, another figure emerged from the hall.

It appeared that a child who was many years from being fully grown had been waiting in the corridor.

He had pink fluffy curls, a slim, feminine figure, a fair face, and a high voice which indicated that he had yet to reach puberty. Seeing an undeveloped child dressed in a butler's uniform felt unethical.

A young boy who, if going solely by appearances, looked to be around Beatrice's age.

Schultz: "I apologize, Heinkel-sama."

To the unconscious Heinkel, Schultz took Heinkel's feet and began to struggle to pull him outside. Of course, it was very unreasonable to expect a child to carry Heinkel out. However, Schultz made no complaint about Priscilla's order, and at the same time he treated Heinkel with an attitude of respect.

Al: "Schultz-kun always tries to be brave and strong, no matter what kind of an order he receives. Princess needs to remember to praise him later."

Priscilla: "That's only natural. He is under mine employ and serves me wholeheartedly. That undefined status isn't simply a foolish and reckless loyalty. Later, I'll allow him to lick mine feet."

Al: "Schultz-kun wouldn't realize that you're joking and would tearfully do exactly as you request. Please give him a more normal reward."

Priscilla: "Hmm. Then perhaps I'll give him the honor of being held by mine body as I sleep."

Al: "...well, that shouldn't be a problem. But now I want to take his place."

That was the listless dialogue between Priscilla and Al as they watched Schultz and Heinkel leave.

Finally, all of the outsiders had been removed. Now, only the members of the Royal Election's factions remained.

Felt: "So, what's going to happen with that guy? You seriously want to drive us away from the Astrea territory to weaken us?"

Priscilla: "You do not have to treat that commoner's words with such gravity. Weren't you responsible for the revitalization of that territory? If the lord returns to his house intending to drive you away then who will follow him? Although the people are foolish and ignorant, they are not heartless fools who forget their grace. If you make a large wave, a correspondingly large wave will return to you. He won't be able to summon any waves."

Felt: "...then, why was that guy invited?"

Priscilla: "It's already been said, hasn't it? I found the situation interesting. Sooner or later, all I want will be in mine hands. That is an established fact. In that case, only mine route will vary. And that route is precisely decided by me. To the end, I brought him in as a toy to kill time."

No matter what happens the outcome can not be changed.

The absolute confidence Priscilla held transcended common sense and unreasonably imposed her will upon the world. The only way to deal with it would be to give up and bow down, or to fight it with a similar attitude. And so,

Candidates: “_____”

Here, four candidates met her gaze without hesitation in an expression of confrontation. Accept those glares, Priscilla gave a hearty, delighted laugh.

Priscilla: “Excellent. The outcome has been decided but mine journey will naturally have its share of happy excitement. Mine self has decided that you are all a cut above the commoners. And, once you have become worthy of being mine opponent... then, mine self will of course welcome you with my full capabilities.”

You are not yet worthy of being my enemies, was the judgement Priscilla had just made.

No, she had said so long ago. She still treated Emilia as an insect. She didn't think of them as enemies at all.

Then,

Felt: “I'll be sure to make you cry and regret that arrogance.”

Felt's declaration was exactly the will of all the occupants of the room.

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Chapter 17 - That Ever Present Armor



—Fully recovering the meal’s original atmosphere was now impossible.

After hearing Felt’s sharp words, a satisfied Priscilla had left the hotel with AI in tow. It could probably be said that she was delighted at having achieved all of her goals there.

Considering the damage she’d wrought, she really was selfish.

Everyone had soon returned to their meals, unable to chat as happily as they had before.

The impact she'd left was incredibly hurtful to everyone present. In particular, the feelings of both Reinhardt and Wilhelm must have been unimaginable to outsiders.

Even so, the fortitude of those two men was strong enough that neither would allow any of their anxiety to show in their expressions.

Of course, the imminent reconciliation of grandfather and grandson could only be postponed. Just that was enough for a hard knot to take root in Subaru's heart.

Otto: "We're incredibly lucky that Garfiel wasn't present."

Those were the words left by Otto as he'd departed for the Muse Chamber of Commerce following the meal.

As he'd said, it would have been a serious matter if Garfiel or someone else who was prone to rage had been at the meal. It wasn't difficult to imagine Garfiel flying at Heinkel in a rage and causing a violent tragedy.

Everyone at the breakfast had, for the most part, calm and rational natures. Maybe Priscilla had even factored that into her satisfaction.

Subaru: "...how could that be? That's really a coincidence among coincidences."

The luck which Priscilla arrogantly prided herself on was next to impossible.

It had only brought them the worst of results. Although irrefutable, it was painful to admit. Emilia and Beatrice's worry surely hurt more than any indignation Subaru had felt.

Even Felt had been acting reasonably, leaving Subaru the only one who let his emotions get the better of him. To both foe and friend, Subaru wanted to give apologies for his lack of consideration.

Emilia and Beatrice had returned to their rooms for a short break before accompanying Subaru on their walk.

Subaru took the time to try to walk off his frustration, his footsteps harder than usual.

The inside of his shoe pressing against his foot felt rather like a reflection of his frustration.

Landing on that train of thought, Subaru began to apply more and more pressure in his steps, trying to relieve his feelings, until,

Julius: “Don’t step so hard on the floor, Subaru. You’ll cause trouble for inn’s staff.”

Subaru, who had been gazing down at his feet, turned his head toward the sound.

He had apparently unknowingly walked into the corridor facing the courtyard. Standing in the courtyard was Julius, who was bathing in the wind.

His hand swept his purple hair back in a practiced gesture, and it withstood the cool breeze with a dramatic image.

Julius’s handsome face, as always, inspired envy in Subaru, who clicked his tongue at the other young man before taking a seat next to him in the corridor.

Julius: “Emilia-sama and Beatrice-sama are not with you, correct?”

Subaru: “That’d be the case. Neither of them are children. They’re at the age when they want some me-time, and I have the delicacy to respect that right. I’ve set up a time and place for a date later.”

Julius: “Although I’m unfamiliar with some of the phrases you’ve used, it seems that even you have learned to better understand the thoughts of others.”

Subaru: “Ugh, you...!”

In a breach of convention, Julius was the one who spoke the first instigatory words of a quarrel. However, after seeing Julius’s expression, Subaru’s annoyance dissipated.

Julius shook his head slightly,

Julius: "Apologies. If you were truly one who was incapable of being considerate of others, you wouldn't have been able to so loudly denounce the deputy commander in front of everyone... I should offer you my gratitude."

Subaru: "That sounds like a thanks, so please don't give me one. That guy just rubbed me the wrong way. Compared to everyone else who maintained their cool, I must have looked awful."

Julius: "No such thing happened. It was precisely because of your rash manner that others could calm down, even myself included. Your impulsive reactions were helpful, it seems."

Subaru: "You, you weren't planning to praise me from the start, were you?"

Subaru frowned at Julius's genuine tone.

Julius was always subtly taunting when he spoke to Subaru, although it came from both sides, so Julius wasn't solely at fault. In any case, it was nigh impossible for the two to speak to each other honestly.

Subaru: "I know. I should be more calm and collected to be like a knight. Even holding the position of knight, I still can't consciously keep a cool head, even though all would be outlined in a schoolboy's book of manners."

Julius: "That's right. Indeed, from a knightly perspective, your behavior was by no means commendable. However."

Facing the uncomfortable Subaru, Julius fell silent. His next action led Subaru's eyes to widen in surprise.

Subaru: "What are you doing?"

Julius: "It's as you can see."

Subaru: "All I can see is you bowing at me."

Julius bent down and inclined his head to Subaru.

This was not a knight's courtesy. Nor was it a ceremonious ritual. There was no formal inspiration of his motion at all. This was completely unlike Julius.

Julius: "Thanks. Thank you. Thank you for showing the indignation that I could not."

Subaru: "...I have utterly no idea what you're talking about."

Julius: "Valuing a knight's honor means that, no matter the occasion, you must act with virtue. Even if your own friend is being disdained, even if your own friend is treated with inhumane words, you cannot indulge in behaving according to your own feelings. But you are not like that."

Maintaining his posture, Julius repeatedly gave Subaru his share of thanks. Subaru could only feel puzzled at the unexpected reaction.

Julius: "Caught between my knighthood and my emotions, I quickly repressed my anger. However, seeing your passionate rebuttals, I felt ashamed of myself. So I want to thank you."

Subaru: "Instead of venting your anger, huh..."

Julius: "——"

Subaru uttered a sound of understanding, and Julius finally looked up.

With just one sentence, Julius had finally revealed his genuine feelings, which were reflected in his gaze. Seeing him, Subaru could only give him a snarl.

Subaru: "What a stupid thing to say. Really, stop kidding around."

Julius: "...stop kidding around, huh."

Subaru: "Of course. Why should I be angry in your place? I was angry purely because I'd personally been ticked off, not because there was someone else who wanted to snap at that bearded guy. I could never do something as clever as express someone else's anger."

As if misunderstanding the matter, Subaru spoke these genuine thoughts to Julius.

Subaru didn't consider his anger some kind of noble indignation. After all, only Reinhardt and Wilhelm could understand their own feelings.

Subaru was an outsider who had simply been angry that such an atmosphere had been defiled. His anger was purely for his own sake.

Subaru: "If you were angry, why didn't you say something? I couldn't have calmly dealt with the old man alone but if you'd been backing me up then we might have fazed him."

Julius: "No matter what, he's still the deputy commander of the knights. It'd be fairly troublesome if I made an enemy of a commanding officer."

Subaru: "This doesn't have to do with your rank. Not to mention, you just blurted 'no matter what', don't be so narrow minded. You're constantly thinking about behaving like a knight, or acting with a knight's demeanor, or whatever. Is even your heart coated in a knight's armor?"

Julius: "——"

Facing a silent Julius, Subaru rested his elbows on his knees and with his cheeks in his palms, gave an exaggerated sigh.

What a stupid quarrel! Subaru had not only rejected Julius's gratitude, but had also been enraged by him.

Thinking of the cause of the incident, including Heinkel, made him more angry.

Julius: "Even my heart is coated in a knight's armor... ah, that's pretty harsh."

Subaru: "Although I think my wording was pretty artistic, just ignore it. I was only kidding."

Julius: "No, I'll keep it in mind. I'm glad that I'm learning a lesson from you. This is something that I never would have thought possible a year ago."

Subaru: "That uncomfortable stuff might be over with, but I still have nightmares about it."

He still sometimes had dreams set in the knights' training field, about his confrontation with Julius and his subsequent brutal beating.

Although the physical suffering he'd experienced at the time was painful to recall, what he'd gone through mentally and emotionally hurt far more to remember. The memory of his own incompetence had been clearly imprinted into his mind, where, from time to time, it played like a movie.

Although, of course, his nightmares weren't merely filled with his duel with Julius, but it was something that could rival the memories of so many deaths.

Julius: "If you can help it, I'd rather that this didn't continue. Thinking of meeting with you in your dreams every night is unpleasant."

Subaru: "That's rich, coming from the culprit. Don't you think I'd rather share my dreams in intimacy with Emilia-tan?"

Julius: "So your pursuit of her has been reduced to relying on dreams, rather than your own ability. That suits your style."

Subaru: "You bastard, don't treat me like trash after praising me. And take a look at yourself!"

Julius: "Anastasia-sama is a lovely woman. There is no greater honor than being able to serve her in at a distance. Naturally, I think I should be very happy with my place."

At Julius's calm response, Subaru gave a cat-like growl.

The uncomfortable atmosphere vanished along with his bow as Julius recovered his usual image. Subaru frowned in relief, coughed, and changed the flow of the conversation.

Subaru: "About that bearded old man... he said he was the deputy commander or whatever, is that true?"

Julius: "It's understandable that you're doubtful, but that is indeed true. That man was the Deputy Commander of the Knights of the Kingdom of Lugunica, Heinkel Astrea himself."

Subaru: "Are they blind? Or deaf? Or messed up in the head?"

Julius: "You truly do question everything. Of course, none of the senior knights or squires can question the deputy commander's qualifications. In fact, the title of deputy commander serves more like a decoration, and no one has seen him perform his duties as of yet."

Julius answered with a shake of his head, and Subaru's imagination swam with the mental image of a senior official.

To be given incredible rewards while shirking any truly important responsibilities — that was exactly how Subaru envisioned the majority of senior government officials, and that was indeed Heinkel's situation.

On top of that, the people around him even understood his incompetence and knew of his demeanor.

Subaru: "Could it be that he's taking advantage of his status as the Sword Saint's father?"

Julius: "...that isn't... the entire case. Taking the role of the deputy commander isn't something that would escape the attention of his son, Reinhardt. Although Reinhardt's fairness is universally acknowledged, how can we judge it if it concerns his family? Not everyone would trust him."

Subaru: "I don't think that Reinhardt would be willing to bend his moral code for his father."

Julius: "Even so, he is still Reinhardt's father. No matter what others think, to Reinhardt, he is undoubtedly a family member who shares his blood. No one can know what he himself thinks."

Julius spoke calmly to appease the heated Subaru. Grinding his teeth, Subaru voiced a groan.

As Julius said. No matter how mediocre he is, as long as he was Reinhardt's father, then only Reinhardt's own heart would know whether or not he should renounce their relationship.

As a knight who values fairness and civility, he should not be deceived by paternity. But it wouldn't be easy for Reinhardt himself to freely cut off such a relationship.

Obviously, outsiders could hold a firm stance on what Reinhardt should or shouldn't do, but to do so would be incredibly arrogant.

Subaru: "Isn't the entire case', you said, so are their other reasons? What else could there..."

Julius: "He's also the head of House Astrea, and Wilhelm-sama's son. To put it bluntly, he's related to the kingdom's best knight and the previous Sword Saint. The possibility that not gifting him a high-ranking position would lead to treason cannot be overlooked."

This was Julius's brief, emotionless reply.

Hearing it, Subaru only needed a few seconds to understand the implication behind it.

Subaru: "This country! Whether it's Reinhardt! Or Wilhelm! I'd never believe that! If Heinkel resented the country then the Sword Saint's family would turn against it...! Treating them so cautiously, as if they were a time bomb, if that's how it is...!"

If so, wasn't that an insult to Reinhardt and Wilhelm?

Their honor was so obvious, yet the country still believed them capable of treason.

The anger that Subaru now felt matched the intensity that it had been when he was facing Heinkel. Julius shook his head and pressed a hand to Subaru's shoulder.

Julius: "Your anger is expected. However, the kingdom has to deal with every possibility."

Subaru: “Something impossible isn’t a possibility! That kind of thing would clearly, obviously never happen!”

Julius: “...Wilhelm-sama was the former commander of Lugunica’s knights.”

Subaru: “Huh!?”

Subaru, who’d been trying to escape Julius’s grip, unconsciously stopped moving at those words.

Julius: “Fourteen years ago, a member of the royal family had been abducted in the capitol. At that time, Wilhelm-sama had headed the guards, and was placed in charge of the search.”

Subaru: “So, what about it? Even I know about famous events like this.”

Felt was the member of the royal family who had been abducted in childhood — this was a story that had become widespread. Subaru, who’d already dismissed the story, didn’t catch the meaning of Julius’s words.

Subaru: “I know the royal child was never found. So what then? Wilhelm-san took responsibility, and then resigned as a knight, so he has a reason to hate the kingdom? But then...”

Julius: “At that time, the former Sword Saint was sent on an expedition to subjugate the White Whale — that is, during the days when Wilhelm-sama had been searching for the abductor.”

Subaru: “_____”

Pondering Julius’s words, Subaru fell into a void of thought. Something Wilhelm had once said seemed to fill that blank in.

Wilhelm had said that he hadn’t been at his wife’s side when she’d died.

Subaru: “...he said he couldn’t be with his wife when she died, and since the investigation was what kept him from it, then, Wilhelm-san would end up hating the kingdom, or something...”

Julius: "I don't know what Wilhelm-sama's true intent was. However, it's true that after the search for the abducted princess ended and the great conquest ended in failure, Wilhelm-sama withdrew from the guards. After that, that branch of the knights would have collapsed if it weren't for the steps Marcus-sama took to reorganize them."

Subaru: "I don't give a damn about that! I'm trying to talk about Wilhelm-san! You... is that what you think? That Wilhelm-san would resent everyone because of his wife? That... that's...!"

Raising a banner of rebellion toward the kingdom due to his own resentment.

Was that really how Wilhelm van Astrea appeared? Why, after seeing someone who was so deeply in love, and willing to give up everything for his love, could anyone think that? Had they never looked him in the eye, or gazed at his steady back?

Had they never seen the Sword Demon's frank, honest blade?

Subaru: "That person would never do such a thing, why does nobody understand!"

Julius: "——"

This time, Subaru indeed threw off the hand on his shoulder, and shoved at Julius's chest. He stood and backed up, losing his momentum.

The yellow eyes looking back at him seemed to almost admire Subaru's anger. He understood. He knew that this degree of anger was inappropriate.

What Julius had said to Subaru had not reflected his own views. Julius's own attitude was apparent.

After all, one year ago, Julius had comforted Wilhelm after he'd slain the White Whale. He'd comforted Wilhelm, who had spent fourteen long years trying to avenge his wife.

There was no doubt that he would never have suspected that Wilhelm would ever hold a revolt against the kingdom.

Subaru: "...sorry. I was being an idiot."

Julius: "No, don't apologize. You're in the right. I'm the one in the wrong —If anyone should apologize, it's me."

Dropping their gazes, they both closed their eyes. They both felt an unbearable weight.

Their helplessness in doing anything to change the country's doubt in Wilhelm. Subaru and Julius both, even if they vented their feelings, were still ultimately powerless.

Subaru: "So is Reinhardt also like that?"

Julius: "...by the same logic, Reinhardt would resent the kingdom for sending his grandmother to her death and in turn killing his predecessor, but that isn't the case."

Subaru: "Then..."

Julius: "However, the kingdom doesn't doubt that Reinhardt has no intent in holding a rebellion. Rather, that suspicion goes to Heinkel-sama."

At the appearance of Reinhardt's father's name, Subaru's eyes widened.

Even though it was a name he didn't want to hear, he couldn't just plug his ears at the topic. Any conversation involving that name wouldn't be pleasant.

Subaru: "How's Reinhardt's relationship with his father? Aside from the obvious blood one."

Julius: "There was a period of time when Reinhardt gave Heinkel-sama his complete, utmost obedience. That might seem natural since they're father and son, but... that time exceeded the bounds of what it should have been."

Julius averted his eyes from Subaru's, as if speaking regretfully.

The relationship that he'd said "exceeded the bounds" of a typical parent-child relationship. His words were vague enough that it was difficult to know what he'd meant. However, Julius didn't look eager to elaborate, and returned his gaze to Subaru.

Julius: "As Reinhardt grew to be more self-reliant, that attitude should have disappeared. But, without decisively knowing whether or not Reinhardt would still listen to Heinkel-sama's words, those doubts cannot dissipate."

Subaru: "...so, to keep Heinkel from giving Reinhardt an order to turn against the kingdom, Heinkel was shown favor, right?"

Julius: "Perhaps it's even worse. Although this is still a rumor that is considered hearsay, I'll tell you, since you're also Reinhardt's friend, and you felt anger for his sake."

With that troubling opening remark, Julius looked over their surroundings with a sweep. Confirming that there were no eavesdroppers, he stood close to Subaru's side.

Then,

Julius: "The deputy commander was a suspect in the investigation of the abduction of the princess fourteen years ago."

Subaru: "——!?"

Julius: "There is no conclusive evidence. However, he has been repeatedly questioned about his suspected involvement."

Subaru: "If that's true, then, the abduction was..."

Julius: "The truth of that is no longer relevant. Such a suspicious character holding one of the kingdom's highest positions of power, that's the crux of the problem now."

The glorious blessing following the title of Sword Saint.

However, as more and more of the situation came to light, Subaru began to think that the title was more curse than blessing.

Subaru: “However, if he really was related to the abduction, then Heinkel is the reason why his father and mother couldn’t meet face to face one last time.”

Julius: “...that’s not all. I’ve also heard that it was Heinkel-sama who recommended that Thearesia-sama, who’d already set her blade aside, be the one to take his place against the White Whale.”

Subaru: “He actually sent his mother to the battle with the White Whale!?”

Julius: “There is an accurate record of this. The deputy commander refused to battle with the White Whale and instead recommended that his mother do it.”

Utterly speechless. —Subaru could not find it in himself to formulate a response.

Unlike the unfounded rumor before, what Julius had just said was backed up by real evidence. Records and witnesses meant that this was fact.

Heinkel sent his own mother as his replacement to the battle with the White Whale.

That is to say, his mother subsequently died in battle, and his father took up the blade of revenge when he could not be with his mother in her last moments. However, rather than face any punishment, he used his son’s talent as a shield which protected his comfortable and stable life.

How could it be? How could there be a human who was capable of this?

Subaru: “There has to be a mistake somewhere, right...?”

He didn’t want to believe it.

It wasn’t about wanting to believe in Heinkel’s humanity. Subaru had already accepted him as the worst kind of person, and anyone who spoke to him could instantly tell.

However, he was reluctant to admit that such evil beyond evil, such immorality, such depravity even existed.

He hoped to believe in ethics, or honor, human nature, and had thought there was a limit to how much evil human nature could permit.

However, things that would be a sin even in imagination could happen in reality.

Julius: "...sorry. That's not something I should have told someone who hadn't fully prepared themselves."

Julius whispered to the speechless Subaru, his voice shrouded in gloom.

Subaru could fully empathize with the feelings which Julius's tone had given away, something which was entirely unlike the always calm Julius.

Subaru: "It's... it's not your fault, I was the one who wanted to hear. Although it would be a little easier if I could blame you."

Julius: "I'm not in a position to accept your words. Obviously, what I relayed to you were just rumors about another family's business, but I still spoke of them as if I'd witnessed them myself. No matter how you look at it, I spoke without thinking of the gravity of those rumors. As a knight, I really should be ashamed."

Subaru: "But you witnessed it, didn't you? Since you're Reinhardt's friend."

Subaru replied to Julius's self-deprecation.

Julius again lifted his head toward Subaru, who nodded back at him.

Subaru: "Although I don't know the specifics of your friendship with Reinhardt, I can still see that you're worried about him. So I won't condemn your anger or call it too aggressive. I don't think it's right to just step out of something like that solely because it's not your business."

Julius: "...then, what would you do?"

Subaru: "Is it wrong to interfere if you hear others around you crying? If I saw my friend feeling hopeless, I'd certainly call to him. If you care about Reinhardt, doing so would be completely natural. Especially since your feelings aren't like mine."

If Julius were to interfere for nothing other than his curiosity, Subaru would regard him with contempt.

However, Julius's feelings, as proven by both his attitude and his words in their exchange, were nothing so shameful.

Subaru: "Didn't I just tell you? There's no need to adhere so rigidly to you knightly honor or whatever. Even if there were, occasionally taking off your armor and becoming 'Juli' wouldn't be so bad. Who's to say that acting casually wouldn't lead to a better situation?"

"Juli" was the pseudonym Julius had given during the battle with the Witch Cult.

Due to his position, Julius was unable to join any mercenary group, so he'd elegantly hidden his identity with a slight falsehood. It was a name that everyone had eventually given up on using, even Julius himself. However, that Julius was the one who'd been least like a knight.

Julius: "Juli, huh... that name really came from out of the blue!"

Subaru: "It was from so long ago, and it was only used once. I'm pretty impressed with myself for remembering it."

Julius: "Don't adhere so rigidly to your knightly honor or whatever.' You've really said some difficult things. I'm sure you know what they all call me."

Subaru: "It's because they've been calling you the greatest and what not that you've become so physically and mentally stiff. You should shed that armor when you bathe, and do some stretches with me before putting it back on."

Subdued bent over, affixing his palms to the ground as if showing off his newfound flexibility. Although his body had been quite stiff before he'd started learning parkour, he'd learned to move with more softness and pliability.

Then, to the Subaru who was showing off his flexibility,

Julius: "If you're trying to show me up, I really can't do anything but sigh."

Subaru: "Oh!?"

As he spoke, Julius spread his legs apart and reached toward the ground. Subaru couldn't help but admire his control over his slender legs and the suppleness of his hips as he lowered himself to the ground.

Was that to say that Julius could easily surpass Subaru in any area?

Subaru: "Gah... but, but! If it were playing a lute-lyre, or sewing, I'd definitely win...!"

Julius: "Although I can't see the merit in triumphing in hobbies, I've also taken up playing musical instruments. Although I'd have to say that tailoring is fairly difficult."

Subaru: "Grrr! You said it! Hobbies! A hobby held by a guy like you can't be anything but superficial. I'll never form a band with you. My lead singer role will be taken away!"

Julius unwound his feet and stood with a flourish.

He suddenly flicked his bangs at Subaru, then smiled at the sky as if boasting a victory.

Julius: "I see. As 'Juli', gazing at the sky and bathing in the wind feels like this."

Subaru: "Eh?"

Julius: "In retrospect, the sky I saw back then was also somewhat different from how it usually was. So this would be the reason, then."

Subaru: "You keep getting more and more unreasonable. You fake bastard."

Subaru shrugged his shoulders in annoyance and flopped onto the floor of the corridor. Julius narrowed his eyes at him as if still dazzled by the sun.

At last, the uncomfortable air surrounding their conversation had dispersed.

Of course, what they'd discussed was still lodged in their memories, and knots still remained in their chests. But, even so, they could at least work through their frustration together.

—Looking at only that image, those two seemed like a pair of ordinary friends.

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Chapter 18 - A Time for Song and Dance



Subaru finished his simultaneously important and trivial conversation with Julius and left the Water Plume Pavilion with Emilia and Beatrice.

Emilia: "In the courtyard, you were chatting in a friendly way with Julius for once. What were you talking about?"

Subaru: "First of all, thinking that I was being friendly with that guy was a mistake, but what do you think we were talking about?"

Emilia: "Where should we go play next time?' Something like that."

Subaru: "Are we school friends!?"

Even if Emilia's casual assumption about their relationship was right, even assuming that Julius and Subaru went to the same school, they would be in entirely different social groups. Schools, just like society, ran on a hierarchy.

In a sense, didn't something similar to a division between classes exist universally?

Subaru: "Whether in this world or another world, those hardships are the same..."

Emilia: "Hey, hey, what did you talk about?"

Subaru: "I was anxious to ask about those hostile recent events. What exactly happened earlier? What preceded that? What's going to happen next? Those kinds of topics."

Emilia: "Isn't that being friendly?"

Emilia tilted her head in question. Subaru followed suit with a sigh.

Looking at only their trivial words at the end of their conversation, maybe they did look like friends. But it was himself and Julius, so that wasn't possible. He wasn't a friend, he was something infinitely more annoying.

Although it was impossible to say exactly what that was.

Subaru: "Well, he's definitely not a friend. There's no doubt about it."

Emilia: "Honestly..."

Emilia turned around to look to Beatrice, who wordlessly sighed in response. Subaru felt somewhat annoyed by the air of mutual understanding between the two.

In any case, his conversation with Julius in the courtyard had concerned Reinhardt, Wilhelm, and their relationship with Heinkel Astrea.

So if he truthfully conveyed the contents of their conversation to Emilia then Subaru would feel rather guilty.

In addition to hesitating to reveal the private affairs of the Astrea family, Subaru didn't want to cause unnecessary stress for Emilia.

After all, this was a helpless, tricky situation.

The history of the Astrea family wasn't something that outsiders could easily approach.

Julius had been involved in the history himself and, acknowledging Subaru's concern, had relayed everything to him.

—And still, Subaru felt a nauseous itch in his stomach.

Emilia: "So, Subaru. Although it's a pleasure to take a walk like this, what are you planning?"

Subaru: "——"

While Subaru wrestled with his inner anxiety, Emilia suddenly smiled and uttered such a remark.

Subaru, taken by surprise, was momentarily lost for words. He hurriedly blinked and shrugged.

Subaru: "That's harsh to hear, Emilia-tan. I just had a pure wish to wander the beautiful Watergate City with Emilia-tan. At most, I have only a trace of a temptation to lure you too close to a fountain and appreciate your appearance when soaked with water."

Emilia: "Huu~, Subaru, to say such a thing. You really are a stubborn person. Even I know that something so trivial isn't your real intent."

Beatrice: "....."

Emilia raised her pouting cheeks, and Subaru pressed an uncomfortable hand to his forehead. He looked to Beatrice for aid, however, the young girl walking between Emilia and Subaru gazed up at Subaru with the same expression Emilia wore.

Without any support, Subaru quickly raised his hands in surrender.

Subaru: "Okay, I surrender. I'm sorry. I won't splash Emilia-tan."

Emilia: "Su-ba-ru."

When his name was called out in anger, Subaru dropped his raised hands and surrendered for real this time.

Emilia: "Subaru, you naughty."

Subaru: "You saw through me, Emilia-tan. Although, I was your mentor, so I should be rewarded... right, right, I'll be serious now."

Emilia: "Honestly."

In response to Emilia, who'd raised her hand in an "I'll hit you" gesture, Subaru could only smile.

Subaru: "I wasn't trying to hide anything, I just wanted to give you a little surprise. Right now, we're headed to Pristella's city park, where yesterday I had unexpectedly met the Songstress."

Emilia: "Wow, Songstress-san? Um, then, will she be there today?"

Subaru: "Your shining eyes are adorable. Yeah, I have the famed Songstress's contact information. Although I have faith in Otto's ability to negotiate, I also have faith that his bad luck will probably cost us this opportunity. So this is insurance."

Emilia: "I see. And if we're on good terms with Songstress-san, then asking Kiritaka-san to trade us the ore would be like a personal favor."

Subaru: "That's it. Well done."

Subaru gestured his arms over his head in the shape of a circle. Emilia was so innocent.

In fact, although the transaction would hardly be as simple and straightforward as Emilia had said, there was no need to point out her mistake.

Emilia was only purely looking forward to getting along with Liliana. Subaru could handle all of the other stuff in secret.

Subaru: "I can't help but feel that the likes of Emilia-tan and Liliana will have some kind of a chemical reaction..."

Emilia: "Chemical reaction?"

Subaru: "From the looks of it, I think Emilia-tan and Liliana will get along well."

Emilia: "Will we? Haha, I hope so."

Although somewhat apologetic to Emilia, who was just looking forward to meeting, Subaru had already been somewhat beset by the fatigue that would surely follow any meeting with Liliana.

Even while hoping that Liliana would be in the park to fulfill his goals, Subaru prayed that he wouldn't have to see her again.

Of course, if she wasn't there, the afternoon would just be a date with Emilia — although he wanted to avoid that, Subaru couldn't deny that he would enjoy it.

Subaru: "Emilia-tan, don't you want to go water cruising with me? I think that'd be fun, and it would strengthen our bonds."

Emilia: "I'm not sure what cruising is, but I think Subaru would get seasick if we did. That would tire you out, so we should avoid it."

Beatrice: "Not to mention, the park is right in front of us, in fact. Now isn't the time to give up, I suppose."

Beatrice pulled on an uncomfortable Subaru's wrist, and led him onwards as she continued to walk forward.

They arrived at the destination without any hesitation, and Subaru gave up any resistance after seeing the entrance to the park.

The fountain located at the center of city's park showed an unexpected spectacle. The audience gathered in the park was larger than yesterday's.

Subaru: "Since we came here earlier, I was prepared for the possibility that Liliana wouldn't be here..."

Seeing the crowd gathered, however, that thought turned out to be just a mere worry.

Today's performance seemed upbeat, with both rallies and applause from fanatical listeners, an atmosphere which dominated the park.

Subaru: "Clapping and yelling?"

Beatrice: "Today looks quite a bit more lively than yesterday, in fact."

Met with the same confusion as Subaru, Beatrice tilted her head to the side.

Although it had been delivered by this morning's magic device, Liliana's singing typically peacefully, quietly drew its audience away from reality. It was precisely because of that nature that the presence of this frenzied crowd seemed off.

The expected situation had been mixed with something unexpected.

Emilia: "Everyone seems to be enjoying themselves. She really deserves to be Songstress-san."

Although Emilia was eager to push through the hustle and bustle to have a good look, Subaru had a bad feeling about the entire situation.

As they approached the front of the crowded audience, Subaru began to feel an uneasy sense of regret.

Subaru: “——”

However, he couldn’t quite vocalize that feeling, and so Subaru had no excuse to stop.

Not to mention that Emilia was looking forward to the seeing the commotion for herself. After all, Subaru could not betray those amethyst eyes which sparkled with expectation.

Soon after, the fanaticism of the masses turned into a thunderous round of applause as they continued to push through the crowd.

That is to say, the cause of that commotion was coming to an end. The place where the crowd’s excited sight was concentrated became visible.

There,

Liliana: “That was a really amazing dance! After seeing this extraordinary dance I started to lose myself!”

Priscilla: “Not at all, your performance and singing were what captured mine attention so completely. Just as it deserved to. It has been a long time since I’ve seen such a display of skill.”

There, talking and shaking hands tightly with each other, were the Songstress and a woman of crimson.

Subaru’s intuition had been right.

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Today, Subaru again bore witness to an audience shedding tears to Liliana's playing and singing.

If something today were different from yesterday, it would be the presence of Priscilla, who stood beside Liliana, also being showered with "your dance was too powerful", "so touching", "I'll definitely come again". The recipient of all this generous praise, Priscilla, fanned herself and spread her arms wide in response.

After that rough interaction with their fans, the only people left were Subaru, Emilia, and Beatrice. Noticing their obtrusively idleness, Liliana's twintails bounced once more.

Liliana: "Oh, hey! If it isn't Natsuki-sama and Emilia-sama! And Natsuki-sama's little girl-sama! What are you all up to?"

Beatrice: "I wouldn't know who this girl-sama is, I suppose. Subaru, explain it to me, in fact."

Subaru: "Why don't we let the one who came up with the name explain it? Here, I'll give you some tasty candy, so behave."

Beatrice: "You won't mmm... fool me like this, I suppose mmm...."

Setting aside Beatrice, who was busy sucking on the sweet in the mouth, Subaru turned to Liliana, whose twin ponytails bounced eagerly like dog tails. Although Emilia exaggeratedly widened her eyes in response, Liliana's presentation of her odd behavior was only just beginning.

Subaru: "Although it's only been a day, here you are, staging another grand performance. Were you kicked out by Kiritaka again?"

Liliana: "Eeeh! Well~, that would be right. The one who loved me gave me such an earnest plea, so I complied. Isn't that the mark of an excellent woman? I think it is."

Subaru: "So, even after being booted out, you thought that holding a performance would be perfectly fine..."

Liliana straightened her thin chest and stroked a nonexistent moustache. Next to her, Priscilla stood with arms crossed across her ample chest. Catching sight of Subaru, she snorted at him with contempt.

Priscilla: "What have you been doing? Even if you were taken in by mine allure, resting your gaze upon me like that is incredibly rude. Men who are obsessed with mine beauty are at most allowed to inhale my scent to fuel their sweet dreams."

Subaru: "I didn't see your dance, but even if I had I wouldn't have been too excited. I only like delicate type girls like Emilia-tan, so your alluring body doesn't do much for me."

Priscilla: "Preferring a half-witch over me is a mark of utter helplessness. Of course, I am not so narrow minded as to accept strange tastes. Moreover, if you can not understand true beauty, then your gaze can only be dismissed as hopelessly short-sighted."

Subaru sensed a certain futility in attempting to argue with her.

Their values were too different. Subaru couldn't direct common sense at Priscilla, who genuinely believed that the world itself belonged to her.

Anyway,

Emilia: "An amazing dance', that is to say, Priscilla was dancing?"

Priscilla: "Feel regret that you missed it. Dancing is not something I do lightly. That is to say, the this artist's song had something to offer."

Priscilla presented Liliana to the stunned Emilia.

Subaru was shocked by her answer, while Liliana rolled her eyes at him. Ignoring Liliana, who began to pretend she was blowing bubbles, Subaru stared straight at Priscilla.

Subaru: "You danced for people? That's completely unexpected."

Priscilla: “Then, how would you regard the frenzy of that crowd of fools just now? Although that artist’s song did have magic in it, without the presence of mine dance, the audience would have merely fallen into a stupor and become puppets who could only listen. Although that could be said to be a form of enjoyment, I am not fond of it. Fools will remain fools, and the ignorant will remain ignorant. Why not have color added to both mine and their day?”

Subaru: “...in other words, fools indulging in foolishness will be happier?”

Priscilla: “Ho. You’re obviously a commoner, but you’re quite adept at comprehension.”

Feeling grateful at Priscilla’s praise would be impossible.

Not to mention that Priscilla showed no sign that she’d remembered that she’d completely forgotten about his existence in the inn. He’d just settle for being fine with Priscilla remembering about Emilia.

Liliana: “But, but, Priscilla-sama and Emilia-sama. So many exciting people are assembled here, I really appreciate it.”

Liliana had withstood the sinister atmosphere and offered that reaction.

She had picked up on the rivalry between the two and had designated herself as the mediator, rather than the awkward Subaru doing so. Maybe her odd quirks and airheadedness were just a mask.

Liliana: “Ehehe. Was my song so beautiful? Honestly, that just embarrasses me. Hehehehe.”

Subaru: “Nope, this is her real nature.”

Liliana was blinded by her own praise and fell into a fidgeting embarrassment. Subaru realized he’d overestimated her and slumped his shoulders disappointedly. Then, he suddenly noticed that there was no one around Priscilla.

Subaru: “Are you alone? No Al, or that damn bastard, or the cute butler?”

Priscilla: "I allowed Schultz to go for a walk, but he seems to have gotten lost. He tries very hard, but is a good for nothing at everything he does, that's the cute kind of child he is. Since Al's constant nagging is annoying, I sent him out to look for Schultz. As for the damn bastard, I am unsure. Perhaps he's at a tavern somewhere."

Subaru: "So 'damn bastard' is actually a common language between us..."

Subaru was thrown off by the unexpectedly serious reply. It seemed that Heinkel was poorly received even by his own faction.

Although he fully understood why Heinkel was treated that way, why had Priscilla bothered to invite sometime like that to her faction?

Subaru: "She'd definitely say something like 'because having him nearby would interesting', though..."

Priscilla: "You seem to understand quite well. Well, I collected him for some rather small reasons. Those who approach me and attempt to market themselves will be welcomed so long as I can find them a purpose for mine amusement. If they become an obstacle, they can be discarded at any time. That man is, at best, this kind of person."

Subaru: "No, how do I say this... he doesn't seem like he'd live up to your expectations in any way whatsoever."

It seemed as if it was precisely because her expectations had not been met that Priscilla had flown into a violent rage. But perhaps Priscilla had even already long forgotten that event.

Subaru: "But don't you feel like this is dangerous? At this point in time, I'd never let Emilia-tan go out alone."

Priscilla: "Mine attendants are absent, and were I to be in danger, then I would be at a disadvantage. Such a line of thought is only fitting for those who can only gaze at mine back."

Subaru: "Ah, is that it?"

That was quite a disdainful judgment of Al's capabilities. However, after seeing Priscilla in action, that perspective was understandable.

At the earlier meal, the ability that Priscilla had demonstrated was superior to humankind. Subaru: "Speaking of which, I've also been kicked in the jaw before."

During the loops that had happened in the capitol, Subaru had once displeased Priscilla enough to have been kicked in the face. His body had flown so high it had hit the ceiling, and he'd landed in the adjacent room.

That severe pain had felt like a broken jaw.

Subaru: "So, you threw Al aside and came to see Liliana?"

Priscilla: "This mere urban landscape has done well to soothe mine boredom. Unlike the narrow structure of the capitol, the city has many a place worth viewing. As I explored, a lovely river of song flowed to me."

Liliana: "Yeah~, at first when the dancing created a frenzy I really had no clue what would happen. Sometimes there are people who recklessly join my performance and change the mood. Although most of the time my song hits them and they change their minds."

Subaru: "You really don't act like the Songstress should at all..."

To just invade a song like that was too bold of a move.

And, indeed, it was rather a shock that Priscilla had joined in with a dance. That the audience had been so taken with it meant that her dancing was on par with the song itself.

Priscilla: "Although it would be a stretch to say you could win hearts and minds like I can, there is in fact a certain value in your voice. How about it? Come to mine side. Let mine influence give you status, and allow me to offer you the honor of playing for mine mansion."

Liliana: "——"

In other words, Priscilla rather appreciated Liliana's song and gave her an unreasonable demand. Although the idea painted Liliana as Priscilla's personal musician, darker implications behind Priscilla's words were present as well.

If her anger at being unable to win Liliana reached the same level as her appreciation for Liliana's music, what would she do? It was that terrible implication.

Then, Liliana replied,

Liliana: "Thank you very much! That's such an uplifting evaluation, and it makes me really happy! But! but! but! Please allow me to refuse..."

She didn't know about Priscilla's terrible anger, nor was she capable of reading the mood.

With that horrifying ignorance, she rejected Priscilla's proposal with casual enthusiasm. Priscilla: "Ho, you refuse. Why?"

Sure enough, Priscilla's voice lowered, and her gaze darkened.

Shivering. Subaru, who was completely unrelated to the situation between them, felt a blade of cold brush his back.

In one sentence, the atmosphere was about to turn deadly.

In her own world, free of tension, Liliana stroked the box which held her instrument.

Liliana: "I am Liliana, a traveling bard. Although it is true that I am being asked to stay in the city like this, I am a traveler who will return to wandering with the wind sooner or later. Not bound by the land, not bound by others, that is how I serve my profession — such a way of survival that has long been decided."

Priscilla: "Therefore mine invitation was refused."

Liliana: “Whether my mother, or her mother, or her mother’s mother, my family has always walked that path. We are all people who have chosen to forsake everything that is material so we may live on through song in the hearts of others. No one can capture the wind, just as no one can stop a song. Therefore,”

Priscilla: “——”

Liliana: “Although I am very happy about your invitation, please allow me to refuse. After all, even I can not know where my song will travel, because every decision has been entrusted to the wind.”

Lifting her instrument, speaking proudly, Liliana’s expression bore no trace of hesitation.

Her usual tricky expression was gone, as was her deliberately affected atmosphere that existed to provokes the nerves of others.

There was just a bard — the Songstress who wanted to preserve her stories in song.

After listening to Liliana’s reply, Priscilla held one hand aloft and closed one eye. With her other eye, she trained a scorching crimson gaze at Liliana.

Then, at Liliana’s unwavering expression, Priscilla suddenly gave a sigh.

Priscilla: “— Excellent. That determination is also pleasing. I will allow it. The vulgar one here seems to have been I.”

Liliana: “No, no, not at all. I am very, deeply sorry.”

Toward Priscilla, whose mouth was on the verge of blooming into a smile, Liliana offered a heartfelt response.

Really, the interaction between the two left Subaru dumbstruck. Squinting at his frozen expression, Priscilla frowned as if displeased.

Priscilla: “What is it, commoner? You seem bothered.”

Subaru: "It's really nothing other than shock. I thought you were going to bisect Liliana after she rejected you and I started to shiver..."

Priscilla: "That's a rather ridiculous worry."

No such thing would happen, was what Priscilla's "hmph" indicated.

However, before she had heard Liliana's reasoning, Priscilla had no doubt intended to kill her. Before that decision had been consciously reached, however, Liliana's opportune words had the balance to tilt in a lucky direction. At least, that was how Subaru saw it.

Emilia: "But, I was also a little surprised. Since Priscilla-san seems like a 'I'll take whatever I want' kind of person."

The landmine that Subaru had taken pains to avoid was unexpectedly triggered by Emilia.

Emilia bluntly blurted out her impression of Priscilla. Subaru involuntarily straightened his back and spun around to face Priscilla. But, Priscilla merely closed her eyes, and,

Priscilla: "What foolish words, half-witch. How could your clouded eyes ever judge mine character? There is a limit how many impolite insults I will stand for."

Beatrice: "What an unforgivable girl, in fact. If you have time to muse on the helplessness of others, then you should reflect on yourself and your own demeanor, I suppose. Betty thinks that would be more meaningful to both parties, in fact."

Emilia: "Beatrice..."

As she listened to Priscilla's relentless derision, Beatrice gripped the confused Emilia's hand. Priscilla, however, raised her eyebrows, looking at Beatrice as if noticing her for the first time.

Priscilla: "Such a little girl dares to speak like that. Mine magnanimity is not determined by age. If you hold the incorrect notion that your youth will spare you mine wrath, you'd best change your attitude right now."

Beatrice: “Your meddling really is unnecessary, I suppose. Watch who you call little girl, in fact. Taking Betty’s appearance at face value cost you dearly.”

A flame burst into existence between Priscilla and Beatrice.

The two girls dressed in elaborate dresses both looked to be terribly angry.

Although Subaru never doubted for a second that Beatrice would win, he knew that these conflicts were inevitable when the royal candidates met. This was just the type of relationship they had.

Subaru: “Don’t be so stubborn, Beako. Priscilla’s just volatile like this, and arguing with her is pointless.”

Beatrice: “Subaru, do not stop Betty, in fact. Aren’t you angry that Emilia is being belittled, I suppose? Show me your masculinity, in fact.”

Subaru: “Could you not say such terrible things!? Not to mention...”

Subaru was shocked that Beatrice, who rarely showed concern toward people who weren’t him, was angry for Emilia’s sake.

Even Emilia, the recipient of that concern, was surprised.

Emilia: “Beatrice, I’m fine.”

Moving Beatrice’s hand out of the way, Emilia gently touched the girl’s head. For a second, a tearful expression appeared on Beatrice’s face.

But it only lasted for a moment. Beatrice adopted her usual expression as she turned back to Priscilla.

Beatrice: “Be grateful that you’ve been spared, I suppose.”

Priscilla: “That’s how you should feel. Thank your own cute face.”

Both Beatrice and Priscilla snorted slightly.

Although at the end Priscilla had ended up praising Beatrice's appearance, the infuriated Beatrice was completely unaware. Anyway, 'I'll let you go because you're cute' — that was an odd explanation. Subaru didn't understand at all.

Subaru: "You really are an irrational woman..."

Priscilla: "Of course. Are you so proud that you believe yourself capable of seeing through any woman, let alone I?"

Subaru: "Are you saying it's my fault...? What really started this incident was you telling Liliana 'I want you'."

Priscilla's reasoning for allowing Liliana to escape the palm of her hand remained a mystery. Subaru directed a curious gaze at her. Unexpectedly, Priscilla covered her mouth with her fan.

Priscilla: "Everything in this world is already mine. As such, there is no necessity to hold all that is beautiful and lofty in mine palm. Those things just need to exist. As long as they continue to exist, then there is no problem."

Subaru: "....."

Priscilla: "This world is already mine courtyard, that is to say, where a songbird sings is unimportant. Placing her into the cage? Vulgar. Guarding her from an outside enemy's hands? Vulgar. In fact, those are all rather troublesome actions."

Priscilla's views drove any of Subaru's presumptions into the ground. Her alienation from even alienation left Subaru speechless.

That wasn't to say that Subaru couldn't understand what she was saying. However, what she saw was just too different from what Subaru saw.

Therefore, Subaru would never understand her for as long as he lived.

Frankly, he thought it was horrible. But maybe it could be seen in another light. This terrible feeling, perhaps, might also inspire admiration or longing in others. Maybe that was exactly why Al chose to follow Priscilla.

Liliana: “Hey, hey, hey! Now that everyone’s calmed down, let me serve as an ambassador and show off goodwill as I show off my voice! Yeah, I’ll do just that!”

In this way, slicing through the atmosphere, Liliana abruptly made her own proposal. She took her lute-lyre and played a quick chord on its strings, before concentrating on swaying her own body along.

Liliana: “Only this time, Priscilla-sama doesn’t need to join in with a dance, just enjoying the song is fine. I will open fire with the full passion of the Songstress! Please listen carefully!”

Priscilla: “Ho?”

Liliana’s words brought an expression of interest to Priscilla’s face.

Liliana: “Emilia-sama seemed to have first arrived as my first song ended. I hope that instead of seeing me as a singer whose selling point is her cuteness, you’ll come to see me as poet who has earned a little bit of money with performance skill.”

Emilia: “Wow, really?”

Liliana: “Although I’m not the most qualified of musicians, I hope you’ll be satisfied.”

Regardless of Liliana’s assertion, Emilia was undoubtedly interested in her performance and singing. That was why Emilia, who had been taken in by their previous interaction, looked forward to Liliana’s proposal.

Taking note of the subtle sense of distance between Emilia and Priscilla, Liliana appeared to enter a state of preparation. She discreetly waved Subaru over and said in a quiet voice,

Liliana: “Natsuki-sama, Natsuki-sama. Although this is just my personal opinion, are Emilia-sama and Priscilla-sama on poor terms?”

Subaru: "That's hardly a matter of opinion, it's obvious from their exchanges. Besides, Priscilla doesn't get along with anyone, of course there's tension with Emilia."

Liliana: "This is huge!"

Liliana seemed shocked, and her hair jumped like an alert dog's tail. Were her nerves linked to her hair? He really wanted to reach out and grab it.

Liliana: "So, so, let me come here and cut that tension away, and unite the two in a world of charm and song. Ah! Just now, did your imagination just annoyingly turn somewhere dangerous when I said 'cut'? That's no good!"

Subaru: "It's exhausting when you say both inspiring and uninspiring things in one sentence, so don't do that anymore."

Subaru marveled at Liliana, who seemed like a madman, yet was capable of caring for others. Sweeping away the bad air with a song, something simple and straightforward.

Both were companions in shared interest to Liliana's singing. Even Priscilla wouldn't act cynically toward Emilia as she listened to the Songstress she so admired.

Liliana: "After the song ends and they chat again, shouldn't we prepare food and drinks for them? Indulging in sweet snacks will certainly create a mood that will close the distance between them, don't you think so?"

Subaru: "No, I don't think so."

Liliana: "After the song ends and they chat again, shouldn't we prepare food and drinks for them? Indulging in sweet snacks will certainly create a mood that will close the distance between them, don't you think so?"

Subaru: "Is this a parody where I can't advance unless I say yes?"

Liliana presented that false choice with the same inflection and tone, and Subaru had no choice but to give up and choose “yes”. Liliana’s expression suddenly became open again.

The high degree of difficulty in communication between the human species and the Liliana species had yet to be considered properly.

Subaru: “Alright, I’ll buy some snacks while Liliana sings. Emilia-tan, I’ll be right back, so don’t argue with anyone and wait here quietly, okay?”

Emilia: “Really. You don’t need to worry so much, and besides it wouldn’t happen anyway. I don’t want to fight with Priscilla-san.”

Subaru had cautioned Emilia just to be sure, but she wore a large smile. Although he didn’t doubt Emilia, even if she does not initiate an argument, the presence of Priscilla made the likelihood of one rather high.

Subaru: “Beatrice. If something happens with Emilia-tan, I’ll leave it up to you.”

Beatrice: “I know, in fact. That girl, if she tries to talk again, I’ll turn her into ash, I suppose.”

Subaru: “You won’t argue either, right?”

Committing that task to Beatrice, who was much more volatile than Emilia, Subaru prepared to leave the park. But, before that,

Subaru: “Priscilla, is there anything you won’t eat?”

Priscilla: “How unexpected. A commoner like you is actually showing consideration. Well, in that case, prepare something interesting. If you find something boring, I’ll lift you up by your head and slam you down again.”

Subaru: “Guessing what you’d like would be like playing rock-paper-scissors, why’d you have to impose that cruel condition!?”

Subaru thought about giving her the first delicacy he could find. Priscilla being Priscilla frowned at his answer.

Priscilla: “Rock, paper... scissors?” She tilted her head to the side.

Since she’d once forgotten Subaru, maybe she’d forgotten the condition she’d imposed. Already,

Subaru had no idea what to say. She truly was impossible to deal with in every sense of the word.

Emilia: “Subaru, be careful.”

Beatrice: “If anything happens, call for Betty, in fact.”

Sent off by Emilia and Beatrice’s gazes, Subaru waved his hand. Afterwards, he waved his hand and winked at Liliana as if flirting, then ran from the park.

Soon afterwards, Liliana’s light melody came.

Hearing it, Subaru thought of returning to the park as soon as possible. If he didn’t join her solo at all, it wouldn’t work. He injected more power into his running stride.

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It had been ten minutes since Subaru left the park.

Subaru: “I’m so worthless, really.”

After leaving the store, Subaru looked at the contents of his bag and sighed.

In order to procure proper desserts, the errand boy Subaru went for the first suitable store he found and completed his shopping as soon as possible. Although he was intrigued by Pristella’s famous delicacy, a rare product called Gina Jelly, he didn’t have the courage to bring it back to Priscilla.

Although phrasing it as fearing the of deterioration the relationship between the two factions sounded nice, what Subaru in fact feared was Priscilla herself.

Subaru: “But, I wonder if this tastes the same as Unagi Jelly. Although I do feel ashamed about lacking the courage to confirm it for myself, I don’t quite hate myself.”

Subaru whistled at his complicated self-examination, running along the road to the park at a brisk pace.

He’d counted the ten minutes since he’d left, and there had been no change in his contract link with Beatrice.

Even so, his masculine pride bid him to return as soon as possible, but,

Subaru: “Gah, sorry.”

Turning quickly around a corner, he nearly collided with someone. Although he’d hurriedly avoided them, Subaru turned his head to make sure.

Subaru: “Sorry. I don’t think I hit you, but are you good?”

???: “Hey, brother. Are you apologizing? Then you should show me more sincerity!”

The man who Subaru had almost collided with replied in a rough voice, his expression changing as he saw Subaru.

At the same time, Subaru himself was also stunned.

Subaru: “Whoa, is it Chin? You were even hired by Felt, why are you still doing the same foolish things?”

Larkins: “You’re so damn annoying! I’ve told you that it’s not Chin! And what are you even doing here!?”

The man who angrily spat those words was yesterday's messenger who'd made a mess of delivering his message. According to what Felt had said, he had supposedly been instructed to spend the night at another hotel in the city.

Subaru: "You're all alone, and not with Ton and Kan? That's really curious."

Larkins: "Curious or whatever, what do you even know about me? There's nothing between us, so why do you keep trying to start something? You're so annoying, goddamn move already."

Subaru: "You're so cold, even though we have a relationship of life and death."

Larkins: "I don't remember that kind of thing!?"

Larkins, who was unfamiliar with Subaru, made an irritated face as he tried to avoid him.

Even Subaru himself had trouble understanding why he felt such a kinship. Perhaps the sensors in Subaru's heart treated Tonchinkan as mortal associates.

So many of the people in this world were ridiculously strong, so facing them would have Subaru breathe a sigh of relief.

Even though they'd obviously once killed him. He was really getting bolder.

Larkins: "Anyway! Don't bother me! I'm working right now!"

Subaru: "The you who used to screw around and mess with people is now doing proper work... I'm so happy for you."

Larkins: "Who is this!"

As Subaru pretended to weep, Larkins escaped from him and headed for the crowd. Having received a cold reaction, Subaru scratched his head in self-reflection.

If you had the bad habit of not taking the initiative to talk to people, there would also be a lingering sense of distance.

Watching Larkins disappear into the sea of people, Subaru turned toward the park again. And then his feet suddenly stopped.

Subaru: “Hmm?”

Subaru turns his head and begins to feel suspicious.

Before his eyes, in that subtle moment, is the reason that Subaru stopped — there were people who had stopped.

The crowd that Larkins had headed toward were all frozen in their tracks, and Subaru inadvertently followed suit. Larkins curled his lip and pushed his way out of the crowd.

Larkins: “This guy, that guy, and this guy too! What’re you all looking at!?”

Filled with irritated insults, Larkins also aligned his gaze with the gaze of the masses, which pointed above the roof of a towering building.

An exceptionally tall building, inlaid with a mosaic of crystal engravings, a building that held a bell. In any metropolis or town, this building would be taken for granted. Each city or town would have several of these clock towers.

In the city of Pristella, there were also a number of clock towers scattered about. The clock tower here was merely one of many.

However,

???: “— Gosh, honestly. Please excuse me, I’m very sorry.”

There, a figure stood, staring out from the open window of the clock tower, dangerously close to its edge.

The figure's attire drew the attention of everyone nearby, and its voice trembled as if bathing in the weight of all that attention.

???: "Thank you. I really only need just a little bit of it, so please let me borrow your time."

It spoke words of apology, but, compared to genuine words of regret, its words felt far more self-righteous, as if prioritizing its own intentions.

That shivering voice broke, sharply. Listening to it was painful on the ears, and there was a fierce, desperate need to remove that discomfort immediately.

The reason for that strange feeling could perhaps be traced to that figure's off-putting appearance.

— The figure's head was entirely wrapped in bandages, leaving only its dazzling eyes uncovered. Its body was wrapped tightly with a black jacket, and both wrists were captured by a long chain, the ends of which dragged on ground, swaying both left and right as their owner paced the tower.

It offered the masses a strange gesture — a smile, perhaps, but the bandages concealed and distorted its mouth too much for the expression to be comforting.

???: "My apologies, I'm the Witch Cult's Sin Archbishop of Wrath."

After saying that terrible title, the figure reported its name.

???: "— I am called Sirius Romanee-Conti."

With malice, she smiled.

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Chapter 19 - Theatre of Malice



Those words were spoken with both intimacy and graciousness.

Hearing the bandaged figure's opening speech, the crowd could only gaze up in stunned silence.

The figure standing high above them had a peculiar, striking appearance. Its voice was ear-piercing yet incredibly entrancing.

However, those notable features were secondary to something much greater.

The reason why no one dared to move their eyes from that figure was, in fact, incredibly simple. Calling that reason biological instinct would be no exaggeration.

— No one would be so foolish as to heedlessly look away from a life-threatening enemy.

“Huh, what?”

“What did that person say just now?”

“This a joke, right? The Witch Cult, what’s with...”

Delayed understanding gradually spread through the crowd.

However, no one took action. Everyone merely questioned the people near them, as if doubting what they’d heard.

Larkins: “Just now, what did that bastard say? Did you hear it!”

Larkins, who’d raced back toward Subaru, shared that reaction.

Although he crossed the crowd while and approached Subaru while keeping an eye on the clocktower, Subaru, standing at a distance from the crowd, didn’t let his gaze waver for even a second.

A disaster would surely occur as soon as he looked away.

That figure’s identity being what it was, that was a doubtless fact.

— That is, that figure was a creature from the same species as Petelgeuse.

Subaru: “Also, claiming to be a Romanee-Conti...?”

The bandaged figure had given its name: Sirius Romanee-Conti.

Ridiculously enough, Romanee-Conti was in fact Petelgeuse's surname, although it was impossible for that evil spirit to have blood relatives.

Subaru: "That can't mean that all the cultists share that surname."

An entire family named Romanee-Conti would be far too much of a nightmare to handle.

A wicked religion spreading the teachings of the witch, all under the name of Romanee-Conti? Even the thought seemed distorted and foul.

At the same time, an endless wave of anger rose inside Subaru.

Although this was not the Gluttony that he'd been pursuing, if this was someone who could give him a lead, then,

Subaru: "— I'll try capture him and force him to explain everything."

Although difficult, that could open a path to Gluttony.

Determined, Subaru calmed his blazing heart, and focused on finding his connection with Beatrice. Beatrice would appear for Subaru as soon as she was summoned.

This was an effect of the contract between a contractor his spirit.

Deep within himself, Subaru grabbed onto their connection, and prepared to seize it, when,

Sirius: "— Alright! That's enough!"

Subaru: "—!?"

Just as he was about to call Beatrice, a shrill, dry voice called loudly from above.

That voice gave the impression that it could permeate the entire city. The bandaged person clapped his hands, and Subaru opened his eyes to see him watching the crowd beneath him.

Sirius: “Everyone took 22 seconds to fall quiet. However, thank you all for your attention. I’m very happy. In addition...”

Despite the irony in those words, the bandaged person, Sirius, kept his arms crossed as his entire body shook. Although he looked incredibly happy, the friction between the chains hanging from his arms and the walls of the clock tower created an uncomfortable sound.

Sirius: “You and you there, and the two buddies there, and you there too. I’m sorry, but please don’t be so angry. I’m very sorry to take up everyone’s precious time. Sorry, and thank you.”

Subaru: “What...”

Sirius twisted his body around, as if he were genuinely complaining.

Subaru had be prepared to yell “what a joke”, but, before the words finished leaving his mouth, he noticed that he’d been included amongst the four people who Sirius had pointed a finger at when he’d said “don’t be angry”.

Looking around, he saw the other people who Sirius had pointed out; they all seemed to possess some amount of skill. A beastman with a sword at his waist, a woman in a blindfold, and Larkins, who each wore a blush.

Those who had been named had all been people who had been prepared to take some action against Sirius. This was a warning that their plans had been seen through.

Subaru: “——”

Subaru felt cold sweat begin to bead his forehead, and he stopped calling for Beatrice.

He’d long understood how terrifying an attack by the Witch Cult was, and knew that survival was everything. In the square around Subaru, no fewer than thirty people had gathered.

If he couldn’t find an advantage somehow, then his situation was already deadly.

Subaru gave a wink to the other four who had been mentioned by Sirius, forming eye contact.

The beastman and blindfolded women both caught his eye, as did a sharp looking city resident. Only Larkins's face revealed a vague confusion as he looked away from Subaru.

Larkins held the most powerful card; the ability to summon Reinhardt.

Yesterday, Reinhardt had cautioned Larkins to remember to signal him in case anything happened. So there was a well-established sign between them, and as soon as Larkins used it, Reinhardt would come. And as long as Reinhardt rushed to the scene, then whether it were with Witch Cult or Sirius or whatever, any enemy would be cut down without fail.

However, there would certainly be casualties as soon as Larkins made the signal. That was probably what led Larkins to hesitate.

If sacrifices were disregarded, that would be the best way to deal with Sirius.

But did they have to resort to that immediately? Would those sacrifices be worth it?

Sirius: "Okay, thank you. It looks like we've all calmed down a little bit. I understand your restlessness. Hearing the name 'Witch Cult' didn't evoke a good impression, did it? So, I didn't plan to do anything too special. The reason I took everyone's precious time today is because I wanted to confirm a matter."

"To confirm... a matter?"

Sirius: "I'm sorry, please don't chatter so much. My head isn't too good, so if everyone speaks at the same time, I'll feel troubled. Then I'll be very sad. That isn't good, is it? If there's anything bothering any of you, please tell me. I'm taking up everyone's time, and I feel very guilty, so no matter what the question is, I'll answer. Is that okay?"

Sirius, from beginning to end of that speech, spoke in an intimate, rational manner, but that attitude was off-putting, which was a given, considering the sense of disgust people would direct toward a bandaged figure who revealed only his teeth and eyes.

Presumably, everyone thought like this. Even at Sirius's suggestion, the crowd remain silent and eyed the people near them. In that case,

Subaru: "With all due respect, can I ask you a question?"

Since no one raised their hand, Natsuki Subaru spoke up.

Subaru, detecting himself at the center of a wave of surprise, kept his gaze fixed intently on Sirius, who looked down to Subaru.

Sirius: "Yes, please do. Thank you. You were the someone who got a little angry just now, so I'm very happy that you're willing to talk to me. What do you want to know?"

Subaru: "Although I don't know what's going on here, I'm keeping some girls waiting. Four of them, actually. So it'd be nice if you could let us go as soon as possible."

Sirius: "Oh, my! That's truly terrible, I'm sorry. But I didn't expect that from you. Is it a man's dream to have four girls to serve? That's really bad. Isn't it sad to leave some of them crying? We have to put an end to this unallowable disloyalty that absolutely can't happen that must be completely banned."

Subaru: "H-Hey?" (oi)

Sirius's voice grew more and more energetic halfway through the speech, before dropping into a whisper. However, after hearing Subaru's puzzled voice,

Sirius: "No, no, I just got a little emotional. Sorry. Although I try so hard to remain level headed, I always become unwittingly excited. Thank you for worrying about me. Well... you asked when I'd let everyone go?"

Subaru: "...Ah, that's right. We would appreciate it."

Sirius: "I'm sorry bother you, I'm really very sorry. But it's okay. Even though I'm in the Witch Cult, I honestly hate troubling anyone. My compatriots often give people trouble, and I feel very sorry about that."

Unexpectedly, dialogue was fairly easy to establish.

A soft waist, an extremely humble attitude, the dialogue they'd exchanged — taking all that into account, could it be that Sirius was a woman?

The bandage rendered that face invisible, and the body was covered with a coat, so it was difficult to discern. The voice was high, but rather than sounding feminine, it sounded mechanical, so that was also difficult to use as a criterion for judgment.

But maybe it was a woman, Subaru thought indifferently.

In fact, judging from Sirius's behavior and attitude, there wasn't any particular danger.

Her abnormal appearance and the way that she'd introduced herself led to several people being on guard, but if these factors were disregarded, then she was easier to talk to than Priscilla.

In the surrounding crowd, the lingering tension gradually soothed, as people watched on curiously, as if waiting for her to make her point.

Subaru did so to, although he still felt slightly nervous.

Sirius: "Thank you. And I'm sorry. It looks like I scared everyone. But I'm very happy that you're all willing to hear me out like this."

Subaru: "It's not like we won't forgive you. But let's get down to business already."

Sirius: "That's right, thanks for reminding me. Let's get down to business. I appeared in front of everyone to affirm something."

Sirius shook her body while rubbing her two chains together, creating a jarring sound.

In fact, rather than being off putting, that action looked entertaining. She seemed much more like a jester or performer than someone dangerous.

Subaru's face eased into a smile, and his apprehension vanished.

He no longer found it necessary to call for Beatrice. He just hoped he could quickly hear Sirius out and leave.

Subaru: "So, what do you want to affirm?"

"Yeah, yeah, hurry up and tell us!" "Yeah, I'm about to be late for work!"

As soon as Subaru urged her on, a pandemonium of chattering began.

One man pointed at the tower Sirius was occupying and burst into laughter.

As the whirlpool of laughter spread, Subaru couldn't help but relax even further. Sirius looked like she'd lost to the atmosphere and put a troubled hand on her head.

Sirius: "Sorry, I'm sorry. Really sorry. I know everyone is busy. I will finish my speech immediately, so please stay with me for a while."

Subaru: "So tell us already!"

Sirius: "Okay! Well, I'll say it. The matter I want to affirm is very simple. To put it bluntly, there's something I want to affirm about Love. Wow, that was embarrassing."

Although the bandages should have covered up any blushing, Sirius covered her face with a hand, trying to cover her shame up. As everyone laughed silently and infectiously, Sirius's appearance began to seem increasingly out of place.

Sirius: "Although I expected that I'd be laughed at, it still makes me feel troubled. Thank you for listening to me. Thank you, and I also have a request."

Subaru: "Request?"

Sirius: “I think, if everyone can stay with me for a while, I can affirm that Love. I’m sorry, I can really say some unruly things.”

Sirius stumbled through her words, rubbing her hands and chains together as she made her suggestion.

Faced with such a lovable sight, the crowd reacted with a “what, is that all?”. Subaru also crossed his arms, nodded as he felt the joy spread through the crowd.

Sirius lit up and began clapping her hands.

Sirius: “Really? Thank you, thank you! I’m sorry. The world is really very gentle. Full of love and tenderness. Whenever I understand this, I cannot help but to want to express my gratitude. People are able to understand each other and care for each other. Maybe I always speak with ‘thank you’ and ‘I’m sorry’ so that I can confirm that.”

“Yeah, yeah, we get it, Sirius! So what next—?”

Sirius: “Ah, I’m sorry!”

The blindfold female adventurer had cheered at Sirius. As if hearing the voice of a classmate who’d she’d been friends with for a decade, Sirius caught her gaze and began laughing with her.

Then, as if finally remembering her purpose, Sirius retreated into her clock tower and reached out a hand. Then,

Sirius: “I’m sorry to keep you waiting. Well, come here.”

???: “——!”

She spoke with a friendly voice as she pulled someone through a window.

A little figure moaned and writhed in her grip — a little boy whose entire body was bound.

He was only about ten years old, and his entire body, from ankles to shoulders, was wrapped around with a the chain. He was also gagged with that chain, the corners of his mouth dripping blood. Only his neck and above were free, and he desperately moved his head, crying as if pleading for something.

Sirius: "I'm sorry that you're so scared. However, as a man, crying like this isn't good. Although I wanted to keep that a secret for you, you look like you're about to urinate yourself. It's a hard feeling, and it's sad when everyone can see it."

???: "Mmm! Mmgh!!"

"Yes—! It's so very embarrassing!" "If you're a man then don't cry!"

"Men only cry three times in their lives, and even then for only a moment!"

As Sirius coaxed the crying boy, the crowd below mocked that little boy.

Everyone had gone through a period of time where they cried over little things, so their teasing wasn't malicious, but their lack of thoughtfulness was a clamor.

Sirius: "Alright, that's enough, everybody! It's true that this child is a little clumsy, but he's in fact very brave. Isn't that right, Lusbel-kun?"

Lusbel: "——!"

The teenager, who was bound by chains, couldn't have been light, but Sirius held him up with one hand as she reproached the crowd while stroking his head.

Lusbel, as the boy was so called, desperately moved his head as if to place distance between himself and Sirius's face.

That sight was rather humorous, and although knowing that it would be demeaning to the boy, the crowd still unconsciously laughed.

Sirius: "Excellent. Well, please pay attention. My apologies. This is Lusbel, a nine-year-old boy who lives in Pristella. His family name is Kallard, so his full name is Lusbel Kallard."

Lusbel: "Mmph! MMPH!!"

Sirius: "His father is named Muslan Kallard. Muslan-san works to maintain the stability of the waterways. Ina Kallard, Lusbel-kun's mother, is pregnant. Her stomach has just started to grow larger, and so Lusbel-kun is looking forward to having a younger brother or sister. The Kallard family lives on Third Street. They often go the city park with a family friend, Tina. Lusbel-kun and Tina-chan are childhood sweethearts, and they love each other dearly. Lusbel-kun's dream is to have Tina-chan stand at his side and support him. Tina-chan is a girl with pale blond curls, and her growing beauty as she blossoms into adulthood is much anticipated. That Tina-chan also wants to support Lusbel-kun's dream. Upon hearing of the song Delphin Betrayed by the Sunset, Lusbel-kun wanted to become an adventurer just like Delphin. It's a very commendable dream for a boy of his age. Although there may be people who would laugh at that childish dream, I wouldn't do so at all. Who could laugh at the manly spirit? I believe that Tina-chan also thinks so, which is why she gives Lusbel-kun her heartfelt support. Right, although Lusbel-kun's dream is to be an adventurer, he's also really looking forward to meeting the child inside his mother. His original plan was to immediately embark on the journey of adventure, but he put it on hold out of consideration for his newborn brother or sister. Because of the large difference in their ages, that child will certainly be very much loved. Lusbel-kun is a good kid who is considerate of others, so I think he will be a very good brother. I would also be happy if everyone could support Lusbel-kun's feelings. Ah, yes, we can't forget about Tina-chan. In fact, the one I originally wanted to bring here was Tina-chan rather than Lusbel-kun, because I think girls are closer than boys to the kind of Love that I want to affirm. However, my heart was impressed by Lusbel-kun's desperate pleas. Sorry, I'm not a very strong-willed person. So I changed my mind... ah, although, being temperamental is just my usual attitude. When I talk about my love, I speak wholeheartedly. Oh, how annoying, I'm so embarrassed. Really, my business doesn't matter. We should be focusing on Lusbel-kun and Tina-chan. Because they already love each other so much, I do not know how much they'll come to adore to each other in the future, so separating them would make me very, very sad. So I decided that I'd respect Lusbel-kun's feelings and help him. So, although Lusbel-kun was just slightly scared and even cried a little, he's really a very brave child. Thanks, and, I'm sorry. I've finished talking in a way that's convenient for everyone."

Lusbel: “Mmph! Mmmph! Mmgh!”

Listening to that child’s, to Lusbel’s, life, everyone understood and agreed.

It turned out that, although mixed with a little bit of shame, Lusbel’s courage was indeed commendable. With that in mind, Subaru wanted to hit himself for having such a ridiculous, demeaning thought earlier.

But this was not the occasion to blame himself. Showing support for the boy was far more important than taking the time to be self-deprecating.

And so,

Subaru: “Lusbel, don’t cry! You’re the best!”

Subaru shouted loudly, praising the courage of the young boy’s tears.

Knowing the true courage buried under those tears, how could he laugh at that shame? Larkins, who stood next to Subaru, joined in the encouragement.

Larkins: “Yeah, don’t cry anymore! You’re a man, right!? If so, show us your handsome side, kid!”

“Yeah, listen well, Lusbel! You’re Pristella’s pride!” “Lusbel—! Amazing—! You’ll be a great man!”

The audience cheered up, and everyone present began clapping.

That was not only a scene of praising a young man’s dedication and courage, but also a beautiful scene showing the kindness of human nature.

No matter how weathered or desperate one appeared, what mattered was their will to protect what they valued, and that light was what attracted people to them. For such a revelation, they could only pray.

Sirius: “Ah... thank you, thank you, thank you! Ah, this is amazing! I believed that we could all understand. I knew everyone would praise Lusbel-kun’s courage. Because, he demonstrated the will of Love with it! If you know him, you will love him. Because of this mutual understanding, everyone now has an in-depth understanding of each other’s Love!”

“Sirius—! Thank you, thank you so much!” “Lusbel-kun—!!”

Sirius’s eyes widened as tears began to flow freely. Seeing the bandage around her their eyes becoming stained with those tears, Subaru felt something hot welling in his own eyes.

His shoulder was gently nudged. Larkins, who stood by his side, was laughing at the crying Subaru. However, the tears in his eyes, even as he smiled, didn’t escape Subaru’s notice.

Looking around, the surrounding groups of people also seemed to share their emotions. Subaru thought of watching the World Cup. When the world the world stood together, people always wanted to share their joy with those who they weren’t were acquainted with.

And now, that peace and understanding was gradually spreading. There was indeed a solid bond.

Sirius: “Our inability to understand each other creates barriers between us. Our minds being unable to empathize leads to antagonism. Our inability to reach conclusions has us giving up on one another. That’s all very heartbreaking. In fact, it’s a tragedy. But now, everyone, are you sad? Do you feel heartbroken?”

“Not at all! Sadness or whatever, none of us feel that way!”

Sirius: “Thank you! So, do you feel happy? Does everyone feel happy?”

“Of course! It’s been a long time since I’ve been so happy! Thank you, Sirius! You’ve worked so hard, Lusbel!”

With a splash, a whirlpool of applause formed, giving birth to a circle of gratitude for the exalted Lusbel. Now, the only focus of anyone here was in one place, thanks to the two standing on the clock tower.

Lusbel twisted his body and sobbed, finally opening his mouth, disregarding the chain and screaming through his broken teeth,

Lusbel: “Gu, gah! Wake up, save—! Please, ...me! Hel... hk!”

Sirius: “I want to commend your courage, your love, Lusbel-kun! Please look below. Everyone, so many people are affirming your feelings! Ah, thank you! I’m sorry, Lusbel-kun. Although you were a last resort, I just want to affirm this scene. Ahh, ahh, the world is so gentle!”

Sirius held Lusbel tightly in her arms.

In the face of this beauty, thunderous applause began. Subaru put his hand to his mouth and whistled. The recipient of that warm applause, Lusbel, stared in surprise.

That was a man who had struggled his hardest. Even if he had no strength left to even cry, not a person laughed at him.

Sirius: “Sure enough, there it is. We have Love. It existed, here. Everyone’s heart is one, and in a scene of joy as well. We do not need tragedy. We are tired of a world which would have us cry. No one wants such a world. If our hearts want to connect, then they should do so through sharing joy and happiness. Whether it be tragedy! Or Wrath! We don’t need any of it!”

“That’s right! Tragedies or whatever, we don’t want any of it!”

Sirius: “Ah, that forbidden Wrath that causes hearts to tremble so! Rage, that passion! If that passionate sin is rooted in our hearts, if we are unable to unroot that retribution, then we should fill it with joy! At this moment, everyone’s heart is connected as one!”

Sirius cried loudly, and once again lifted Lusbel into the air.

However, the movement did not stop there. Sirius, bathing in everyone’s admiration, tossed Lusbel into the air.

Sirius: “Please give! Thunderous applause!” Crowd: “——”

Sirius had given the flying Lusbel the best possible stage.

Watching the young boy soaring through the sky, as if flying into the sun, Subaru led the crowd into a round of applause.

Roaring thunderous applause, a heavenly blessing to Lusbel, who skated through that sky.

That little body spun and spun, but as soon as it reached the top of its trajectory, it began to arc downward. Lusbel headed straight to the ground.

The panicked crowd, vacating where he was about to fall. That was the triumph of a hero.

Endless applause, praise for the falling boy.

“MMMMMM!!”

Lifting his head and seeing the ground rushing toward him, Lusbel moaned.

He desperately wriggled his small body that should have been exhausted, wanting to do anything that he could to avoid that rock solid ground, tirelessly fighting to his last moment.

Everyone shed tears at seeing the unwavering tenacity of humankind. Then,

Sirius: “— Ah, the world is so gentle!”

Before the fierce collision, Sirius let out a shout.

The applause of the crowd, who heard that voice, became louder and louder—

Crowd: “——”

As if eggshells had fallen to the ground, the sound of something breaking echoed, and everyone’s field of vision was dyed red.

The whole body was crushed by the hard ground, Lusbel's body, which had once contained the breath of life, became a splatter of flesh in the square.

— But just after seeing that scene,

Crack.

The sound of breaking eggshells echoed like a round of applause. The square became a pool of red.

That was an ending.

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Liliana: "After the song ends and they chat again, shouldn't we prepare food and drinks for them?

Indulging in sweet snacks will certainly create a mood that will close the distance between them, don't you think so?"

Subaru blinked at the dark skinned girl in front of him.

She put on a clumsy, flirtatious attitude as she stuck out her tongue and scratched her cheek.

As if in a trance, he turned his head to see a smiling silver-haired girl who was watching him from nearby, and a red-haired woman wearing an impudent attitude. And then a petite girl who held his hand—

Liliana: "...ah, ah, what's going on? Ignored? Are you ignoring me!? P-Please stop it, don't look at me with that bitterness. Ah, ah, stop it, stop it... d-don't sigh like that after hearing my song... don't look so disappointed, forgive me... hk"

Faced with his silence, the girl in front of him, Liliana, shuddered as if remembering something she was unwilling to recall.

Witnessing this situation, Subaru said bluntly,

Subaru: "...I feel sick."

Liliana: "Huh!? Did that actually just happen!? Looking at a girl's face so intently, at such a close distance, and the first thing you say is that you feel sick! I, Liliana, am even more ashamed of Natsukisama than your mother is!"

Liliana pretended to be tearful, turning her face away, still keeping an eye on Subaru's reaction, but Subaru couldn't even notice her annoying attitude. He shook as he stood, and couldn't help but collapse on the ground.

Emilia: "Subaru? What's wrong?"

Beatrice: "What's wrong, I suppose. Subaru? Subaru?"

Beatrice, who was holding his hand, and Emilia, who stood nearby, looked down at Subaru with concern. Subaru grew so pale that the two couldn't help but hold their breath.

Subaru: "—I feel sick."

It had been a year since he'd Returned by Death, and the overwhelming incident that had just preceded his Death left him on the verge of vomiting as he held his shaking knees.

Thus, the spiral of Death began once more.

This time, the cycle of nightmares was staged in the city of Pristella.

— Once again, the curtain rose.

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Chapter 20 - Shared Empathy



Squatting on the ground, breathing heavily, Subaru finally resisted the urge to collapse.

Emilia and Beatrice surrounded him, wearing looks of concern, and even Liliana seemed worried.

Priscilla seemed faintly interested, cooling her face with her fan.

Bathed in their concerned voices and gazes, Subaru gradually reoriented himself.

Feeling like time was slowly accelerating back to normal, Subaru realized what the taste in his mouth was.

He was reminded of switching channels on a TV.

There was no sense of a loss of smell, taste, or sight, but his surroundings had suddenly disintegrated into powder, and transformed into something entirely different.

Subaru's eyes, ears, nose, and skin had all adapted to the new world, but his consciousness could not forget the previous channel, so there was a sense of violation.

All he could do was ignore it, to chew, chew, chew, and swallow the sense of unease that came from switching channels until it was finally over.

Subaru: "——"

Subaru clenched his teeth and finally climbed to his feet.

He shook his head and looked around. The park full of bright sunshine, fountains and green lawns, and a colorful spread of flowerbeds.

Subaru was presently surrounded by four beautiful girls — Emilia, Beatrice, Liliana, and Priscilla. He'd heard Liliana's words twice now.

Emilia: "Are you alright, Subaru? Your complexion doesn't look so good."

Subaru: "...Emilia-tan. Just now, did Liliana say that she'd sing another song?"

Liliana: "Where do I even start!? I, Liliana, was ignored to such a degree that this situation shocked and hurt my heart! Compensation! I demand compensation!"

As she spoke, Liliana seized Subaru's sleeves in a frenzy, declaring a lawsuit, only to be shaken off by Subaru. He ignored the indignant "hey!" the Songstresses issued and turned to Emilia, who seemed to pick up on Subaru's seriousness.

Emilia: “Yes. Liliana said that she’d sing us another song that we missed. Then Subaru and Liliana started quietly chatting about something.”

Subaru: “That happened just now? I got it, thanks... thank you.”

Thank you. Just saying those words, he felt an unspeakable sense of disgust.

Subaru couldn’t help but raise a hand to cover mouth. Seeing him in this state, Emilia made a puzzled frown.

Emilia hadn’t done anything wrong. Needless to say, his appreciation wasn’t a bitter one. However, it evoked the painful memories of the previous world.

Subaru: “So, this means that I...”

Died, he finally realized, but he was unable to vocalize the word.

— Natsuki Subaru had died.

After he died, he returned again from the time he said goodbye to the world. Although he was relieved at his successful return, remorse also rose in his chest. Obviously, Subaru should have been so fully awake.

In that forest a year ago, in Sanctuary, during the Trial, Natsuki Subaru had resolutely rejected

Death, and the grievances that accompanied it.

But he had still died. And so easily, too. Without resistance, without a sense of defiance, without even awareness.

Why was that? The situation had obviously been abnormal, obviously this is a fact, but even Subaru himself had no clue what had happened. He’d clearly experienced it himself, but he couldn’t rationalize any of it.

Subaru hadn't even realized how abnormal that situation had been. And it wasn't only Subaru. Everyone present had been afflicted with the same madness as him.

They'd obviously seen the chained up, howling boy, but they had all frenziedly cheered for his solidarity. Not to mention the insane round of applause that had accompanied the child's fall.

Exactly what had triggered all of that?

And when Subaru had witnessed all that, how exactly had he died?

He hadn't been able to recognize an agent for his Death and, even now, he couldn't find one. Or perhaps it had been in front of him all along, and he'd failed to see it as a threat.

But he couldn't trust anything he'd felt then. Although he'd registered the abnormality of the situation after he'd died, until that very moment, he hadn't been able to think clearly.

How had he died, in the end?

Were there any explosives attached to the boy's body? They could have exploded upon his impact with the ground, taking everything with them. In fact, that was almost exactly like the memory of this death.

It was all very vague. His memory at the instant of his Death was greatly blurred by his madness at the time. Even if he were completely calm now, the state of mind he'd been in at the time prevented him from being able to rationalize that memory at all.

If Subaru had been in a state of madness then it would be virtually impossible to remember what had actually happened.

Emilia: "Are you really okay, Subaru? Even Liliana's wearing such a bothered expression."

Liliana: "I'm not doing anything so pointless. How Natsuki-sama thinks of me doesn't make me sad at all, so please don't get the wrong idea."

Emilia: "See? It's so obvious that it's really bothering you."

Even the clueless Emilia had seen through Liliana's brazenness. Through their dialogue, Subaru remembered his current situation.

Subaru, at this point in time, was supposed to take advantage of Liliana's song to go run an errand and buy reconciliation sweets. And shortly after buying something, he'd met the monster who was called Wrath.

— There were less than fifteen minutes before that nightmare of a speech would occur.

Subaru: "You're kidding me..."

In his experience with Return by Death, never had the time between the save point and the death been so close together.

Time ranging from a few hours to a few days, that was what Return by Death had always given Subaru in the past. The time he had now was short, almost to the extreme.

In just fifteen short minutes, what could Subaru do?

But even while he puzzled over this, time flowed on.

In this situation, merely avoiding death would be incredibly simple. Subaru only needed to avoid the place where the speech would be delivered. That way, the cause of death, such as the possible bomb, wouldn't affect him.

It was incredibly unlikely that a bomb affecting the entire city had been prepared.

So, if Subaru only wanted to live, he could just not go. Sirius wouldn't appear near Subaru. There didn't seem to be any specific target, and Subaru just happened to be there.

Therefore, even if Subaru weren't present, that square would still be Sirius's crime scene. The speech that was unrelated to Subaru's presence would happen in its original location, and everyone there would be affected.

However, no matter how that turned out, that falling child would be doomed to die.

Subaru: "I have to stop it... damn, I have to...!"

Subaru scratched his head and arrived at a decision.

He couldn't not save him. That child, Lusbel, was looking forward to a newborn brother or sister, and had taken his childhood sweetheart's place on that tower. How could anyone be so shameless as to think only of themselves and not attempt to rescue him?

Subaru: "Beako and I..."

Will go together, Subaru hesitated to declare.

Beatrice: "And what, Subaru?"

Turning to face Subaru, Beatrice voiced a serious question.

Now that he knew a critical situation was imminent, bringing Beatrice with him was the obvious option to choose in terms of combat effectiveness.

If she were absent, Subaru's combat strength would be cut in half. Even so, Subaru hesitated. It wasn't for a sentimental reason like not wanting Beatrice to fight.

Of course, saying that that wasn't a consideration at all wouldn't be true, but it wasn't Subaru's key reason.

That would be Emilia. Or rather, leaving Emilia here.

Subaru: "——"

The Witch Cult was in this very city.

Those fanatics — although he had yet to know whether or not that phrase should be plural, at least the Archbishop of Wrath was present. He had no clue as to whether or not she was working with any other cultists.

However, in a city where the Witch Cult was active, the notion of leaving Emilia alone with no one to protect her left lingering anxiety in Subaru.

Leaving someone important in a place beyond his reach was far too dangerous.

Someone beyond sight, the Witch Cult's devilish hands would reach or those important people will reach out to the key terrorist.

Deep in his heart, turbid fear plagued Subaru.

And, taking Emilia to Wrath? That was out of the question. Having Emilia encounter the Witch Cult would undoubtedly lead to tragedy. Only that was certain.

Just recalling Petelgeuse made that clear. Subaru couldn't let Emilia near the Witch Cult. That wasn't a matter of why. That just was.

Subaru: "Beatrice and I..."

Beatrice: "And what, Subaru?"

Subaru: "We'll eat the same dessert, is that fine?"

Beatrice "...?"

Beatrice frowned as she heard Subaru. She probably suspected that he had been thinking something else entirely. Subaru nodded at the lost looking Liliana and turned to Emilia.

Subaru: "I'll go on a short trip to buy some sweet snacks, then I'll be right back. Emilia-tan, just wait here while elegantly and steadily listen to Liliana's song and be good."

Emilia: "I got it. But don't you want me to come?"

Subaru: "That's fine, believe in me. I'll protect you."

At his words, Emilia blinked her wide eyes and nodded with a blush. Then, Subaru quietly beckoned Beatrice, who treated him with a suspicious gaze."

Subaru: "Protect Emilia for me. If I need your strength, I'll call you immediately."

Beatrice: "...what did you encounter that you can't even tell Betty about?"

Subaru: "Just be well prepared. If I come calling, regardless of whether or not you're willing to face it, we'll be in a pretty terrible situation."

Subaru gently pinched the slightly displeased Beatrice's nose, then waved and took off as he felt the eyes of four people on his back.

Running down the road, he reached the square in less than five minutes.

However, his departure time had been a little late. In this strained situation, the slightest difference in timing could be a matter of life and death.

Subaru: "Although this is the case, without shopping, I'll have nearly ten minutes..."

Subaru slowed into a walk, and surveyed the square where he'd arrived.

Before, he'd focused on the tower and didn't have a chance to observe the surrounding area, but, at least for now, no conspicuous, black clad strangers were anywhere to be seen.

Then, the sin archbishop was most probably acting alone.

Subaru: "The question is what to do next. Once that speech begins, I could very well be forced to fall into that hazy state of mind again."

Since the origin of that anomalous space was unclear, once it captured him again, he had no idea if he could regain his senses. Thus, Subaru assumed that it would become impossible to recognize the anomaly as anomalous due to the frightening power of the brainwashing.

Subaru: "Should I tell everyone to take refuge somewhere away from here? It'll be like the situation with Petelgeuse... no, there's not enough manpower, and if Sirius acts preemptively in the meantime, that would be self-defeating."

He could ask the victims who shouldn't be involved in the situation to take refuge. But how would he accomplish that? After all, if Sirius's speech didn't have any particular target, then she wouldn't limit the location to this square.

If there were no audience here, she'd just go elsewhere. As a result, the incident would only unfold to a different set of victims.

Subaru: "In that case, the only way is to eliminate the culprit...!"

His primary advantage was knowing that Sirius planned to appear here.

This was very similar to the battle with Petelgeuse and his sect. No matter what, the Witch Cult couldn't be allowed to run free. To prevent the evil cult from carrying out their crimes meant that the fundamental causes needed to be eliminated. Otherwise, tragedies would only repeat themselves.

He had realized far too late.

If he'd come to this conclusion immediately, Subaru would not have come alone. It was already too late to return to the park.

He wondered if it would be possible to return to the hotel, to turn to Wilhelm or Julius for help.

Subaru: "Wasting time on these thoughts is useless. I'm the only one here now. As soon as the speech starts, I have to be ready to act... no, the solution is actually much simpler!"

Subaru had noticed a small window at the bottom of the tower, which was presumably where Sirius had entered to give her speech from above.

In that case, she should already be in the tower, preparing for her speech that would be happening shortly. Even if she wasn't, Lusbel himself might be bound in there, awaiting rescue.

So, Subaru glanced cautiously to his left and right, and quietly approached the inconspicuous iron gate, opened, and slipped inside the tower.

The inside of the clocktower was dark beyond compare, its frigid air filled with dust.

The entire tower was entirely silent. Unlike clock towers from his world, this one had no gears. The timekeeping mechanism was run entirely by magical stones, and those produced by the brilliance of the magic filling the atmosphere. That gradual change would be reflected in a change in the color of tower's crystals.

— Therefore, the only sound that would ever be heard inside the tower would be made by someone else.

???: "...Mmgrr!"

???: "No need to cry so noisily. Are you a good boy? You must be a strong child. Daddy Muslan and Mommy Ina, and your younger sibling too, they must be so proud of what a strong boy you are. You're such a good kid."

An unpleasant voice echoed. Terrified childish whimpers echoed.

A sound accompanied the sobbing from the top of the spiral staircase. It sounded like a grudge, a blessing, a hate, and a love.

It was distorted. It was twisted. It could never be said to be normal.

Subaru: “——”

Subaru determined that this was indeed Sirius, inhaled deeply, then held his breath.

His heartbeat began to accelerate, his chest thudding as he ascended the steps. Fortunately, the stairs were stone. With care, he could silence his steps, especially since the enemy’s attention should be focused elsewhere.

Subaru prepared to call for Beatrice at a moment’s notice as he slowly climbed the stairs. The tension escalated as the sound coming from above grew louder and closer.

Although the tower itself is high enough that Subaru needed to crane his head to see the top, there wasn’t anything particularly notable on the journey up. A large pillar sat in the center of the tower, and the spiral staircase encircled it.

The voice of a demon and hero came from the end of those stairs. Only one single window faced the outside of the tower, presumably to give people access to adjust and check the engraved carvings on the magical stones. The sound came from the space before that window.

That feeling was comparable to an attic.

Subaru stealthily peered out from under the stairs and saw that there were indeed two stray figures interrupting that silent darkness.

There was no one else. No fodder cultists seemed to be present.

— Then, Subaru also needed to be prepared for her to attempt to displace his own soul.

Subaru: “——”

Capturing her alive wouldn’t be a possibility.

Although that was what he’d wanted to do, the degree of difficulty would be too high. Not to mention that as long as she were alive, who knew what kind of tricks she could pull?

Subaru crouched down, and put his hand on his waist.

He grabs hold of what was supported by his belt and yanks it loose.

In his two handed grip was a weapon with an elongated, curved end, woven from special fibers.

The weapon was commonly known as a bullwhip, and archeologists in some of his world's most famous movies had been known to carry them while exploring ruins.

Whips had a longer range and were more difficult to manipulate than movies had made them seem, but in the past year, under Clind's tutelage, Subaru's skill had vastly improved.

His reasoning for choosing the whip was simple.

Unlike swords, hammers, spears, and bows, the whip was incredibly versatile. More importantly, with weapons like the sword, Subaru's potential improvement in just a few short years was incredibly limited.

Subaru already had a little familiarity with swordplay in kendo, and knew exactly how difficult it would be for him to reach any heights using that weapon.

Therefore, Subaru chose neither the spear nor the sword, but the whip. Originally, he'd always relied on his smarts, creativity, and trickery to win.

In that case, a weapon that played to his strengths would allow him to better exert his power. Whips would also allow him attack from a farther range.

Subaru: "——"

Subaru inhaled gently and exhaled slowly. Then he held his breath again.

He stood up and continued to climb the stairs, clutching the whip with his right hand. The figure hidden in the shadows didn't detect him. That gave him the upper hand.

Subaru took a half-step forward and flung his arm upward. With a sharp whistle, the tail of the whip flew toward its target.

This preemptive sideways attack, which sought to prioritize its curved, angled speed over power, seemed to mirror a move in badminton.

The head of the snake cut through that air, biting toward its target's unprotected back, trying to down that wicked figure.

However,

Sirius: "Why are you so angry?"

The silhouette whose back was facing him replied in a distracted voice.

Immediately thereafter, she swung her right hand at lightning speed to deflect the blow from Subaru's whip, using the chains that hung around her arm.

It was as if one snake had soared through the sky to intercept another.

For a second, Subaru was stunned by that sight, but recovered and tilted his arm to the edge as he determined that the front of the whip had indeed made contact with its prey.

Sirius: "Oh, my?"

With a little giggle, the collapsed figure, Sirius, regained her balance and climbed to her feet.

Although the chain dangling from her right arm deflected Subaru's blow, the whip bit into part of the chain's locks, dragging Sirius to the ground as Subaru yanked.

Subaru: "H-Ha!"

Facing that struggling Sirius, Subaru further tightened his grip as he rushed toward that bandaged freak in a semicircle, ramming into her with a shoulder. Her body, which was lighter than expected, easily flew forward under his body mass.

Sirius: “Mn, Gah!”

Sirius gave a soft cry, and, after thudding onto ground, tumbled through the window, just as Subaru had planned. From here to the first floor was much more than ten meters high, a child who fell to the ground from here would be crushed.

Subaru: “Are you okay, Lusbel!?”

Subaru did not confirm Sirius’s impact, instead running to the other figure on the floor. That small body belonged to Lusbel, who held the ends of a chain in both hands, gazing up at Subaru with fear.

The chain in his hand was connected to the chain wrapping around his entire lower body, another expression of Sirius’s bad taste.

Subaru: “That guy...! Forcing you to tie yourself up...!”

Little by little, he realized the extent of the horror that Lusbel must have tasted, being forced to hold that chain against his neck. Even now traces of terror were still engraved in his face.

Once aware of that maliciousness, Subaru felt an uncontrollable anger. He immediately grabbed the boy’s shoulders, taking the chain from him.

Subaru: “Enough! You’ll be fine. You’ll never have to do such a thing again. Come with me!”

Lusbel: “But, if... I, I don’t follow, the terms of our agreement, then Tina... Tina will...!”

Lusbel replied, eyes watering and lips quivering.

Seeing him, Subaru’s throat became choked with emotion.

That child had, in an attempt to protect his childhood friend, agreed to the devil's transaction. And, even experiencing what he had, Lusbel was more worried about his friend than he was about himself.

Even though his legs trembled, even though his teeth chattered, even though his vision was blurred by tears, even though he was no longer capable of forming coherent sentences.

Subaru: "No. In this city, there are... many... reliable people."

His hoarse voice was unable to convey say what he wanted to say.

In order for the youth to feel at ease, he needed to speak comforting, authoritative words. The Sword Saint was in the city right now. As were the Knight of Knights, and the kingdom's leading healing, and various people who could destroy a city.

Therefore, there was no need for any fear. No evil forces could rampant. Yeah. Exactly. Fear was completely unnecessary. There was no need for it at all. And, so,

Subaru: "So... legs, stop, shaking!!"

In front of Lusbel, whose eyes had become unfocused from fear, Subaru desperately beat his unresponsive legs and yelled.

His voice, laced with grief, unexpectedly echoed and compounded the fear residing in his chest. Subaru felt as if there were a sense of disgust, with an unidentified origin, entangling his entire body.

Lusbel: "— Guuhk"

Lusbel vomited with a sound like the bursting of a bubble. He started to spasm as he exhaled, collapsing in a pool of his own vomit. Subaru wanted to help him up, but then he too felt as if own organs were being twisted inside him, and he spewed out the contents in the stomach, feeling as if he'd been thrown into flight.

The grilled meat he'd eaten in the morning had become unrecognizable, and the acrid, visceral smell of his gastric acids were overwhelming. Gulping, Subaru continued to retch vigorously, tasting only pain as his vomit threatened to drown him.

While he vomited and vomited, dizzily, tinnitus ringing in his ears, his was still shivering non-stop. Not from cold. An invisible hand was twisting his stomach, his internal organs being knocked askew. Subaru was aware of its origin.

They were, undoubtedly,

Sirius: “— Your fear is but proof of your gentleness.”

Hearing the gentle voice coming from behind him, Subaru vomited again.

Almost drowning in the fluid overflowing from his stomach, Subaru collapsed onto the dirtied ground. He felt a touch of slimy liquid on his cheek. He was so close to the accumulation of filth on the ground that, every once in awhile, a short breath led to the bursting of a yellow bubble.

Most people wouldn't be able to bear such a terrible sight, yet she gazed it at with a soft smile.

While Subaru and Lusbel looked at each other, desperately struggling to breathe in their own vomit, wracked by invisible tremors,

Sirius: “People are able to understand each other. People can become one. Gentleness does not exist for one's self. It exists for others. Gentleness only shines because it exists for the sake of others. Only being gentle to yourself, that is selfishness! So, your gentleness, existing for the sake of others, is worthy of reverence! Ah, ah, this is Love!

Subaru: “Gu, ah, hk...”

Sirius: “Please feel comfortable. Let me witness. Feel, and let me witness your Love. Your endless tenderness. Your virtue that bid you to save Lusbel-kun!”

As she spoke, Sirius broke into a dance as she gazed at the two, both lying in a pool of vomit. She crossed her arms with one hand pointing to Subaru and the other to Lusbel, shaking her waist. As if dancing. As if offering a tribute.

Sirius: "Lusbel-kun's fear, you two gentle souls will feel together. You'll feel Lusbel-kun's fear, and, through that, Lusbel-kun's feelings will pass to you. Lusbel-kun, through your fear, feels what you will feel again from him. Your fears once again felt, and Lusbel-kun's own fear is compounded. Your compounded fears, felt by Lusbel-kun, will in turn compound your own fear. That fear, mixed with Lusbel-kun's fear, will become a brand new, fresh fear, and the freshness of Lusbel-kun's fear will again passed to your true fear. The true fear that you feel, and the second fear born through Lusbel-kun, will lead to the his fear, and the next level of fear generated by Lusbel-kun's heart will be added to your own new greatest level of fear..."

Something was whispering into his ear. That overwhelming momentum approached nonsense. Subaru had no time to try to comprehend those words. Why? Because for Subaru, everything passing through his hearing and his vision were terrifying. If breathing were terrifying, then blinking was terrifying. But not blinking was very painful and unbearable. Even that pain existed only to symbolize of terror Subaru. Feeling one pain means feeling the pain that he'd feel the next time. That would make Subaru feel a continuous, endless, infinite fear. So it wouldn't do to refuse to blink. But, if he blinked, the world would fall into darkness for an instant. In that dark moment where nothing could be seen, he wouldn't know what was happening. Although there might be nothing at all happening, he had no way of knowing for certain. Being unable to confirm anything was terrifying. If the unknown instinctively aroused fear, then to live was but an endless attempt to overcome the fear. In the end, the so-called fear had always been the feeling of weakness that began to plague a creature when it felt a threat to its life. Being able to have this emotion was synonymous with being a life form. The function of this horror was similar to pain. After all, creatures who left their instincts of danger behind could not survive. To numb your fear was to condemn yourself.

Sirius: "Oh my? You two look to be losing your minds. Loving and emotionally enriching people can sometimes be very fragile. Ah, that's because Love is just painful. However, it is precisely because love exists that we can survive. This is really very difficult. Then, I'll get Tina- chan to help me. Lusbel-kun has worked hard."

Subaru stumbled several steps backward from the sudden, piercing pain. Somewhere in front of him, a sound of something falling into grass was made. Subaru did not respond immediately as he was too busy rubbing his forehead.

Subaru: “W-What just...?”

Emilia: “What’s wrong, Subaru? You suddenly headbutted Liliana. That’s no good. If you don’t like, you should resolve your differences by talking it out.”

Beatrice: “That’s right, in fact. Before resorting to violence, we should give that uncouth looking girl ample warning that we want to send her flying, I suppose.”

Liliana: “Am I really so ugly!?”

Liliana leapt to her feet with an unexpected cry.

Upon hearing her words, Emilia and Beatrice exchanged glances without speaking. Liliana suffered another blow and collapsed again.

Priscilla: “What a ridiculous farce. Commoners are not allowed to treat mine songbird in such a manner. This will never happen again.”

Refusing to stand for the violence being imposed on Liliana, Priscilla issued a complaint about Subaru’s behavior.

Subaru gave her a perfunctory nod, confirmed his location, once again, and,

Subaru: “...disgusting.”

A second reset hadn’t changed his evaluation of that freak at all

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Chapter 21 - Optimal Solution



— Subaru's second Return by Death hit him with an unprecedented sense of fatigue. Falling under the spell of that madness twice had placed tremendous mental burden on him.

Especially the second one. That overwhelming fear had been imprinted deeply into him, and he had been fully aware of himself in that moment of death.

The shivering that came from deep within his being, the fear that would never cease, the individual named Natsuki Subaru breaking, his fragile spirit crumbling into powder.

This death was probably due to a mad, fear-induced heart attack. Sirius had been delighted to see the terrified Subaru, who had been reduced to a machine whose purpose was to excrete fluid.

He had wanted rescue Lusbel and challenge her, and that futile attempt had come at an incredibly heavy price.

However, although Subaru had died twice in as little as thirty minutes, and had yet to produce material results, his time hadn't been completely wasted.

Sirius, perhaps wanting to give Subaru some small comfort before his death, had, in her sincere and respectful manner, explained exactly what had been happening to him and Lusbel.

That was,

Subaru: "Our fear, compounding as we felt each other's feelings... could that be the same principle as resonance?"

Subaru felt Lusbel's fear, and Lusbel had felt that augmented fear from Subaru, which then transferred to Subaru. The never-ending cycle of fear overrode any previous state of fear and eventually grew so extreme that it became fatal.

This death had doubtlessly come about because of that. The first death, and now the second death.

The developments to date, the statements from Sirius, and status as Wrath. Those clues led Subaru to a conclusion.

A scene that should have made people feel disgusted or angry had instead drawn smiles and laughs from them.

Fear that had belonged to Subaru being transferred to a child, frightening him even further, before returning twofold to Subaru.

— Wrath, Sirius, could viciously manipulate the feelings of others for her own enjoyment.

That was most likely a special form of magic not belonging naturally to this world, just like Petelgeuse's Unseen Hand. It was an ability belonging to the Witch Cult.

The ability, closely related to emotions, was quite fitting for Wrath. This was also known as a Sin Archbishop's Authority.

However, although Subaru had finally pieced this together after his two deaths, this was the only intelligence he had.

Now, the question was the enabling condition of this power — in other words, the method that was used to open a connection.

Once the trick behind Petelgeuse's Sloth was known, he became fairly easy to defeat. Subaru had been able to see the Unseen Hand and resist Petelgeuse's bodysnatch.

Although he could resist it, he didn't understand why. Although he now had his Invisible Providence, Subaru was still confused as to why he could use a form of the [Unseen Hand].

In fact, pondering the presence of the Witch's scent surrounding his Return by Death and his immunity to the memory manipulation from the White Whale's fog, Subaru had optimistically considered that perhaps the Witch's Cult's authorities didn't affect him. His recent murders at the hands of Wrath seemed to disprove that theory.

Given his two encounters with Wrath, in the worst case, the triggering condition may even be Contact with Sirius.

As soon as he'd heard her speak, as soon as he'd seen her figure, Subaru had probably fallen under her spell. Taking that into consideration, finding a way to deal with her would be difficult indeed.

The most straightforward and reliable solution would also be the most extreme; the tower could be destroyed from a distance with magic.

No contact would be made with Sirius, and he wouldn't need to lay eyes on her. Knowing where she'd appear, he could take the opportunity to launch a preemptive strike, and he'd be able to ensure that he wouldn't have to trigger Return by Death again.

Only, he would need to disregard the sacrifice of a courageous child, and so Subaru could never seriously consider such an option.

Sacrifices were necessary, who would be self-righteous enough to say such a thing?

To decide to on a utilitarian greater good at the price of other lives, from the perspective of those who were sacrificed, meant that the entire world would be lost. Subaru could not tolerate the loss of his own life, so how could he arrogantly place a price tag on the lives of others?

His goals were as he'd just determined. He needed to rescue Lusbel, and to prevent any unnecessary sacrifice. What troubled Subaru was achieving both at the same time.

Subaru: "Then, to rescue Lusbel... the only viable way is defeating Sirius."

The same situation as last time would inevitably develop if he tried rescue Lusbel by himself. No matter how he struggled, trying to fight Sirius alone was tantamount to suicide.

Sirius's combat skills were evidently nothing to scoff at. Although she'd been wielding a chain, even deflecting Subaru's surprise attack was impressive.

Even considering that Subaru was an amateur at combat, the strike of a whip was too speedy to be followed by the untrained eye. To have been able to react so quickly to a surprise attack, and to deflect it with her chains, how skilled must she be?

Subaru couldn't even begin to imagine.

In other words, what Subaru needed was someone who could match Sirius in combat, who trusted Subaru enough to help him, and who could resist the power of Sirius's Wrath.

Subaru: "What kind of a miracle would it be if I just found a guy who coincidentally satisfied all those requirements...?"

Subaru sighed to himself as he considered this opportunistic line of thought.

However, the notion that there would be someone who could remain unaffected by Sirius's power was not a baseless one.

The presence of someone like Subaru, who could see through Sloth's power, being immune to Sirius's Wrath was not so inconceivable.

After all, Subaru's accreditation as Petelgeuse's killer only came from his unique resistance to Petelgeuse's power.

Since everyone in the square had been taken in by Sirius's speech, he could assume that no one there had any such resistance to Sirius's authority.

At the square, four people, including Subaru, had been prepared to fight Sirius, but she had taken special care to point them all out. And then, Subaru finally realized it.

Larkins had been at the square.

Subaru: "Reinhardt!"

Although Subaru, extreme opportunist that he was, tried to resist engaging in commonplace thinking, he finally remembered the man whose presence was the very peak of opportunism.

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Although Subaru wasn't attempting to justify his delayed reaction, the reason it had taken so much time to connect Larkins with Reinhardt was arguably the short interval between his Deaths.

A Death followed by a Death, madness followed by madness, all happening in the span of a mere fifteen minutes.

In that state, being able to calmly identify the crisis and calmly explore countermeasures before choosing the best solution was nigh impossible. If anyone tried to belittle him, Subaru would have liked to respond with a sharp complaint about Return by Death.

Subaru didn't want to trigger a Return by Death.

If circumstances would permit, he'd rather share a tranquil, peaceful life with Emilia, Rem, and Beatrice.

However, this world would never permit Subaru such a happy life. He was destined to live though his every day while struggling desperately.

So at this moment, Subaru was desperately making an argument.

Subaru: "I finally found you, I'm not letting you go so easily! Please, call me Reinhardt right now! This is an emergency!"

Larkins: "So annoying! Why should I take the risk of being lectured by that red haired bastard? You must be kidding!"

A lively crowd had gathered around the two, who were angrily roaring at each other.

The crowd seemed to relish the tense atmosphere, eagerly expecting a fight to break out at any given moment.

Upon resurrection, Subaru, after arriving at an epiphany, began to act immediately.

Like last time, he left Beatrice as Emilia's guard, and used his errand as an excuse to leave the park. After arriving at the square, he'd searched desperately for Larkins. Now, he had finally entered the negotiation stage.

His search for Larkins had really been quite time-consuming, so upon seeing him, Subaru had roughly grabbed his shoulder, which had led to their current quarrel.

Larkins had only further agitated Subaru by shouldering him in retaliation.

In any case, an argument was now inevitable. Subaru spoke rapidly and anxiously under Larkins's harsh glare.

Subaru: "Can you listen? Calm down and listen to me. I'm not playing around. If you don't want to die, hurry up and call Reinhardt for me right now."

Larkins: "Huh? You devilish brat, are you looking down on me? You think you could actually kill me? Forget that bastard Reinhardt, see if I don't kill you right here."

Subaru: "Ah, that isn't what I meant...!"

Larkins regarded Subaru's words as a provocation, and his anger started growing out of control.

After all, Subaru and Larkins had never been on good terms. In addition, it seemed that Larkins had a poor impression of Reinhardt, who should have been his comrade. Someone he was already reluctant to call was requested by someone who he disliked and so he stubbornly refused Subaru's request.

Subaru: "You stubborn, inconsiderate idiot...!"

Subaru gritted his teeth toward Larkins and grabbed his head in his hands.

Needless to say, Subaru, who had failed to speak clearly and calmly, was also to blame. However, seeing his negotiations being refused to such an extent, he couldn't help wanting to make a complaint.

Although, to Larkins, Subaru must have looked to be a raving madman. Subaru's hands were tied due to his inability to reveal any of his foreknowledge.

— However, the situation being what it was, Subaru had no other way.

Subaru placed a hand on his chest, attempting to suppress his fear.

Subaru: “Larkins. This is not a joke. The reason why I want you to call Reinhardt is because there’s a strong enemy who I can’t handle.”

Larkins: “Someone who you can’t handle? Don’t think so highly of yourself.”

Larkins snorted derisively.

Seeing that expression, Subaru lowered his gaze, took a deep breath, and opened his mouth.

Don’t come, don’t come, Subaru spoke while making such a wish.

Subaru: “— The Witch Cult will show up here.”

Larkins: “— !”

Subaru opened his eyes as, at his disturbing words, Larkins’s face froze.

Finished, Subaru immediately looked down to his chest, but the expected pain did not come. That is, the punishment for disclosing information that could potentially reveal his Return by Death.

First of all, he was decidedly relieved about this.

Although Subaru hadn’t triggered Return of Death for a year now, the penalties associated with it had remained.

In particular, when he’d attempted to spill everything to Beatrice, Subaru had been wracked by the pain he’d come to associate with the witch.

It was as if that black-handed witch had forgotten his commendable farewell gift to her at the tea party in Sanctuary. How rude.

So, Beatrice was no different from the others, and Subaru was unable to discuss anything of his questions or concerns with her.

Needless to say, that had killed his hope that he could share his knowledge with his partner, Beatrice, without having to face punishment.

But that was a long story that he didn't have time to consider right now.

At any rate, what was important now was that Subaru had successfully told Larkins his legitimate reason for needing Reinhardt, without being punished by those black hands.

In fact, hearing the name "Witch Cult", Larkins seemed to reconsider his stance, dropping his gaze and narrowing his eyes in contemplation.

Larkins: "Hey, brat."

Subaru: "It's Natsuki Subaru. Stop always calling me brat, Larkins."

Larkins: "That's Larkins-san to you. Bastard Subaru. How much credibility does that statement have? Using the Witch Cult as a bluff isn't something to do lightly, you know."

Larkins spoke with a low voice, casting a hostile gaze at Subaru.

In this world, the name of the Witch of Envy and the Witch Cult were incredibly weighty no matter where they appeared. This stemmed from the idea of the Witch being the embodiment of Absolutely Evil being deeply rooted in the world's history.

Even Larkins wore a serious expression that he would normally never reveal. He was finally taking this seriously, so now Subaru could only respond equally carefully to him.

Subaru: "I'm not kidding around or lying. The Witch Cult will come here. Many people will be in danger."

Larkins: "Where did you hear this... Ah, damn it. That's right. Your faction did away with the Witch Cult's Sloth. Damn, so there's actually credibility behind what you're saying..."

Before Subaru could come up with a response, Larkins found his own conclusion. Although that was in fact mere speculation, that merit seemed effective in having Larkins believe him.

Larkins: "Are they targeting the city? Or this specific square?"

Subaru: "So you're going to believe me?"

Larkins: "You're the who said to stop messing around, right? Listen up, bastard Subaru. Although I don't want to be lectured by that bastard Reinhardt, I also don't want to run into some trouble that could kill me. Since what happens next is entirely dependent on my mood, you'd better take care."

Although Larkins still held some measure of doubt, he wanted to hear the details. Surprised at this reasonable judgment, Subaru decided to continue with the conversation.

Subaru: "I understand, sorry. The Witch Cult's Wrath is planning to attack this square. She'll appear at that clock tower, and her target is everyone in the square, not any specific individual."

Larkins: "That's consistent with the Witch Cult's style. Damn it, how much time do we have?"

Subaru: "There's probably only five minutes left. So, seriously, call him right now."

Larkins: "Five minutes!? You're kidding! Why didn't you say that sooner!?"

Subaru: "That's what I was trying to tell you five minutes ago!"

Although Larkins was outraged at the lack of time, Subaru had spent ten long minutes finding him and convincing him. If possible, Subaru hadn't wanted to walk this kind of tightrope.

Running around the city and calling for Reinhardt would be more reliable than talking to Larkins. However, time didn't allow that of Subaru.

Subaru: “Anyway, please, could we stop messing around so you can call Reinhardt? According to your conversation yesterday, it’s through something like fireworks, right?”

Larkins: “Fireworks, what’s that? ... I shoot magic in the air, and that bastard Reinhardt can see it and recognize it as the signal.”

Subaru: “...That’s simple and clear, which is good, but what would happen if someone else suddenly fired magic into the air?”

Larkins: “There’s no need to worry about that. Apparently the red haired bastard can tell who was responsible for which magic.”

That was such an odd detail, and Subaru logged it in the back of his head. It seemed that, in course that in the past year, Larkins had set a goal of learning to use basic magic.

Based on Subaru’s initial encounter with him, it was hard to imagine that he was capable of using magic a year ago.

Larkins: “I’m not a performer, so move aside already, you annoying bunch!”

Larkins finally gave in to Subaru’s persuasion, and prepared to call Reinhardt.

The crowd, who had been whispering “are they starting yet?”, “is it finally happening?” backed off, disappointed, as Larkins raised a hand, beginning to call a fireball.

Seeing the swirl of the red mana of the fire attribute, Goa, Subaru felt an odd sense of unsettling disconnect.

This time, the situation should have drastic changes.

Although it was a rather extreme case of persuasion, Subaru was still excited to learn that he could work with Larkins like this, even if the latter’s actions were based on self-preservation.

This could be said to partially amount to Subaru's growth in the past year, and his defeat of Petelgeuse. Larkins, too, had changed in the year past.

Whether Subaru or Larkins, if neither of them had changed, then this collaboration could never have happened.

Therefore, this result was born of a simultaneously optimistic yet realistic positive growth. Reinhardt would come here.

As a result, dealing with Wrath would also be easy. No matter how powerful the enemy was, they would be dwarfed by the Sword Saint. The power of Wrath surely wouldn't work on Reinhardt. For some mysterious reason. Subaru just trusted Reinhardt that much.

Larkins: "Goa!"

Larkins recited the incantation, and a red flame burst forth from his raised arm. The flame skyrocketed, and soon exploded with a dry sound in the blue sky.

Call it fireworks or magic, it seemed a little shabby, but that signal was presumably more than good enough for the hero it was meant to reach.

Perhaps what happened next was due to that hazy relief.

Subaru, taking what had just happened for granted, allowed his guard to grow lax.

Had the thought of Reinhardt's arrival caused him to relax so much that he neglect to pay attention to his surroundings?

Sirius: "— Oh my. There seems to be a fireball in the sky. What a beautiful, blinding light."

Of course the enemy would be aware of any commotion near the tower.

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Sirius, appearing on the tower, wore, as always, that bandage concealing her face.

However, the expression she wore was obviously a smile; something about the tone of her voice reflected a little bird chirping in the sunny spring.

Sirius raised a hand over her eyes and squinted at the light of the fireball.

She seemed to be regarding that red flame with the same admiration that most people would treat fireworks with.

Sirius: "This is great! Well, everyone, I'm sorry. Good morning!"

That unusually high-pitched sound snatched that crowd's attention from the fireball, and they turned to face Sirius.

Even Subaru did. So, he couldn't blame their collective reaction.

Subaru: "No, don't look!!"

Seeing that fierce, bandaged smile out of the corner of his eye, he immediately issued a loud warning.

However, not a single person heeded his warning and looked away. Of course. Subaru himself had held the same feeling about Sirius since their first contact.

Even if he turned his face, his left cheek could still feel that intensity. There vicious wave of danger that existed to threaten him.

Faced with a bloody carnivore, how could anyone avert their gaze? Looking away from a dangerous pair of sharp fangs could only be done by those who had already given up on living.

Refusing to die, their human instincts directed their gazes upon Sirius.

Sirius: "Oh my. Silence came much faster than I expected. This must be thanks to the fact that the two of them attracted your attention before I appeared. Thank you. Please applaud those two young men."

Sirius clapped her hands together as she spoke, the chains attached to them clattering on the floor, as she regarded Subaru and Larkins, who still held his arm outstretched.

Subaru, feeling a cool breeze on his face, clenched his teeth and attempted to refrain from reacting to Sirius's gaze.

Redirecting Larkins's attention would be impossible. He had already been entrapped by Sirius. No matter what Subaru did, he would be unable to get through to Larkins, and then Sirius would only entrap him as well.

In fact, now, Subaru couldn't bring himself to cover his ears.

He had expected that even awareness of Sirius would mean that her charm would become irresistible. Therefore, what Subaru had originally intended to do was immediately avert his gaze and cover his ears. Even if such measures would render him defenseless, he wouldn't be subjected to her mental manipulation.

However, that premeditated countermeasure was no longer available after his eyes had been captured.

And why would he cover his ears? Because he didn't want to hear Sirius's voice. However, why would he willingly deprive himself of such a pleasant sound?

Subaru: "——"

His attention placed on her, Subaru forgot himself and turned to look at Sirius.

Sirius watched Subaru as he did so, gleefully clasping her hands together and shaking her body from side to side. The chains again rubbed against the ground with metallic friction, issued clang, as if reflecting Subaru's heart crashing to the ground.

Sirius: "All right! It took 19 seconds for everyone to see me here. Sorry. But I am very happy. And, although I don't know why, it seems to me that there's a child here who loves me far more than I expected. Well, then, I have to introduce myself."

As she spoke, Sirius lowered her head respectfully, facing a whirlpool of anxious gazes. Raising her head, basking in everyone's gaze,

Sirius: "I'm the Witch Cult's Sin Archbishop of Wrath. I am called Sirius Romanee-Conti." She reported her daunting name.

That title should have been symbol of disgust and terror, and should have evoked an incredibly negative response.

Instead, as she opened her speech, the crowd reacted as if she'd introduced herself as a friendly, close neighbor.

Sirius: "Oh, thank you. I'm sorry to take up everyone's time like this. However, please rest assured that I put an end to all this soon."

???: "— Will you? Then it seems fortunate that I rushed here as soon as I could."

Sirius: "——"

Sirius lowered her gaze once more, and Subaru and the rest of the crowd turned to the side.

They were all facing the waterway which ran behind the square. A smooth flow of water erupted alongside the wind of someone moving at incredible speed.

There, a red flame burned, and clear, sky-colored eyes blinked.

His fair, calm face was revered by all who gazed upon him.

A hero is what all humans had wished for, deep in their hearts, and the existence of that hero was now a reality.

Reinhardt: "Searching for a shortcut took a little bit of time. Sorry for being late."

The hero took not five minutes, but thirty seconds to arrive, and offered his apology.

Having sprinted through the roads — no, having traveled by waterway, the recently arrived

Sword Saint swept his eyes quickly through the circle of people, before raising his eyes toward

Wrath and sighing.

Reinhardt: “I understand why I was called. That judgment was correct, Larkins. Or was it you, Subaru?”

Leaping from the water to the ground, and then into the square, Reinhardt relieved the stiff Larkins, then patted Subaru’s shoulders with his hands.

Recognizing the touch of those palms as real, Subaru gave several gasping exhalations as his whole body shuddered.

Subaru: “Rei, Reinhardt?”

Reinhardt: “Yes, it’s me. From the looks of it, this is quite the emergency. Standing at the top of that tower... is a Sin Archbishop, right?”

Reinhardt, offering a reassuring nod, stood in the spotlight.

Subaru saw his fair eyebrows wrinkle as he deliberately chose not to face Sirius. Reinhardt seemed to also understand the danger.

Subaru: “She has a brainwashing ability. Although it feels a little better now... if I heard her voice or looked at her now, I’d immediately fall back under it.”

Reinhardt: “I know. And not just with sound and sight. It seems that even being in her presence will have that effect. If I’m near her for too long, I don’t know if I could remain calm.”

Subaru: “You’re kidding, even you...!?”

Hearing Reinhardt’s vulnerable statement, Subaru fell into a speechless desperation.

Although he had no basis in believing so, he'd been convinced that as long as Reinhardt were here, everything would be fine. However, Reinhardt himself had told Subaru that he wouldn't be unaffected by Sirius.

In that case, even coming up with an idea of how to defeat that evil presence became exponentially more difficult.

Sirius: "I'm sorry if I'm mistaken, but could it be that you're the famed Sword Saint? If so... what a wonderful day this will be!"

Reinhardt: "As you said, I'm Reinhardt van Astrea, the current inheritor of the title of Sword Saint. Unfortunately, I think that title is too heavy for me now."

Sirius: "Nonsense! But that's no problem! It's very nice to have you here. Because this country bears the greatest trust and highest expectations in you as a knight. Everyone loves you, and you love everyone. You are the embodiment of my hope, the ideal of my Love!"

Reinhardt: "Am I?"

Sirius was indeed shaking her hands noisily and engaging in an ecstatic dance. Reinhardt, although facing away from her, was chatting with her quite casually.

If communicating with her would lead to falling under her spell, then Reinhardt's lack of action equated suicide.

Subaru spoke up anxiously.

Subaru: "Hey, hey, Reinhardt... going on like this isn't good. It's not good at all. It'll be really bad. Although I can't say why."

Reinhardt: "...that looks to be the case indeed. And that doesn't apply to just me. Taking the others into consideration, I shouldn't drag this on for too long."

Subaru should feel anxious, but gradually became unaware of why he didn't. Reinhardt sighed at his puzzlement, and took a step forward.

Then,

Subaru: "Reinhardt?"

Reinhardt: "I can't hold on for too much longer. — So, I'll get rid of the problem as soon as possible."

As soon as that those words faded, Reinhardt tensed his legs slightly, and leapt forward.

That was the same movement he'd used to leave the waterway — but this time, it produced a rippling explosion, and everyone in the area gasped as they felt the impact of waves spread over the ground.

Leaving behind that share of amazement, Reinhardt turned that energy into momentum.

Sirius: "Hahahaha! Ah, how impressive this is —"

The Sword Saint kicked off from the ground, and, effortlessly, struck Sirius out of the tower, far into the sky above.

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Chapter 22 - A Casual Response



Could this be called aerial warfare?

Reinhardt had leapt toward Sirius, knocking his opponent from the tower and sending her flying through the sky.

Sirius: "Hahaha! Ah, how impressive you are!"

As the heroic figure flew toward her, she raised her voice, ecstatic, and waved her arms about. Accompanying that motion was the piercing whine of her chain unraveling from her wrist.

That fully extended chain could now be used as a whip, although its merit as a weapon was based more in intimidating appearance and violent sound than convenience. Someone who chose to wield such a weapon was clearly out of touch with common sense.

That iron snake had undoubtedly tasted the blood of more than just a few people, and, at this moment, was partaking in a routine hunt, attempting to crush its prey with its iron jaws, the whistling wind it created resembling applause.

But even that blunt snake, who could approach the speed of sound, was clueless.

— In this world, there existed a human existence that exists in the same sense as that of Sirius that departed from its usual course.

Reinhardt: “A chain, how troublesome.”

Hearing the sound of the chain entering the fight, the Sword Saint frowned and gave a troubled mutter.

In the midst of such an intense battle, he seemed be giving the slight grievance that better suited the atmosphere of a brief break between classes.

Sirius: “Hahaha!”

Sirius, on the verge of panting, revealed her passionate smile to the spectators.

Surely, that was inevitable. However, the reasoning behind Sirius’s delight was mysterious. Whether it was because of desperation, or whether she was genuinely happy, one face was clear to all the spectators.

This was a situation that only Sirius would have laughed in.

Reinhardt: “——”

Sirius flew upwards, and Reinhardt pursued her from below.

With Reinhardt as her target, Sirius delivered a quick, precise blow. Even facing that oncoming chain, Reinhardt didn't reach for the sword hanging at his waist.

If his words from long before were true, it wasn't that he didn't intent to draw his sword, it was that he couldn't. Reinhardt's legendary sword would only allow itself to face worthy opponents.

In that case, he was condemned to be unarmed while fighting that horrible freak. Even Reinhardt, who Subaru had the utmost trust in, would have to undergo a bitter struggle — perhaps he would even fail to live up to Subaru's expectation, in a show of human weakness.

If so, then that trust would soon be broken.

Aiming her second strike at Reinhardt's, a high-pitched voice spoke up.

Shock waves and sparks danced at the scene. To Subaru and the other spectators, lightning seemed to flash through the sky.

The ability to accomplish that kind of witchcraft was precisely the proof that Reinhardt transcended the boundaries of human skill.

Reinhardt met the chain head on, lifting a slender leg to defend against it.

That attack was so surprising that it would have elicited a laugh. After that impact, Reinhardt turned attention to wrapping his foot with the chain, moving it to suit his own will.

The movement itself was nothing too special. Reinhardt had met the approaching chain with his right leg, and wound it around his foot in a makeshift weapon, using it to open an immediate follow up.

In only a moment, he'd easily alternated between offensive and defensive.

Needless to say, not everyone could keep up with the fight. Only the handful of people with combat training could follow those rapid, continuous attacks.

In that moment of understanding, there was an impulse to laugh. Subaru gave a long sigh and relaxed his shoulders. Fortunately, Reinhardt was a comrade, so those thoughts were unnecessary. If he were the enemy, then Subaru's shoulders, knees, and bladder would have all given out.

Sirius: "Haha, hahaha! AHAHA, HAHAHAHA!!"

Sirius laughed loudly, her right arm spinning wildly like a tornado.

Since her left arm had been captured by Reinhardt, she could only resort to using the right one. However, although the whistling snake tore through the sky, flying from every direction, it was blocked by the chain on Reinhardt's right foot, creating a high-pitched whine and a shower of sparks.

Every spark dancing in the blue sky, was accompanied by a metallic instrument whose sound permeated the square, in a whirling performance of red and yellow.

A strike, another blow, but during that period, Reinhardt had further closed the distance between himself and Sirius. Soon, after exchanging an array of blows, he'd reached her.

Sirius: "How unexpected! You've actually reached this point! Amazing!"

Reinhardt: "You're very adept. I find it a shame that you've committed yourself to evil."

In those moments, the two exchanged words the way they did attacks.

Reinhardt quickly pulls back his right leg and thrusts his left hand with aligned fingers. Sirius greeted it with a powerful swing of her arm, the undulating chain diving at Reinhardt with exposed fangs.

Although that chain was made of steel, Reinhardt had used his own hand as a blade and cleaved it in two.

In the past, Subaru had witnessed the perfect splitting of disposable wooden chopsticks — a party trick. If Reinhardt were to partake in those performances, he could split a steel blade like paper. He was the very portrait of beautiful swordplay.

The severed portion of the chain was propelled by the attack's momentum into the clocktower, the violent collision shattering one of the building's walls. The sight of smoke and the rubble crashing into the square shook Subaru out of his trance.

He'd been completely fascinated.

Reinhardt and Sirius's fight, no, Reinhardt's fight, had entranced him. Whether envy or fear caused fascination was another matter entirely.

Subaru: "Leaving her to Reinhardt is fine. Then, I...!"

He couldn't continue to dawdle here, blindly ogling the fight and waiting for an outcome.

Subaru squeezed through a gap in the crowd, running to the opening of the tower. Lusbel, who had been scheduled to be part of Sirius's speech, had probably been abandoned in the clock tower when he responded to Reinhardt's inability to withdraw.

Saving him would ease Subaru's worries.

Just in case, so that if Sirius got away from Reinhardt, Lusbel's safety would be guaranteed. Subaru climbed anxiously up the spiral staircase, again tasting that dark, damp air.

The tower was much brighter than it had been fifteen minutes ago, thanks to the light flooding in from the walls that had been broken by Sirius's chain.

After safely ascending the spiral staircase, Subaru found the bound Lusbel on the top floor. He'd been left face down on the ground, where his tears had pooled into a puddle. The child's sobs touched Subaru deeply.

Subaru: "Lusbel! You're safe now, don't worry!"

Subaru tenderly took the chained Lusbel into his arms.

He ignored the warm torrent of tears as he returned Lusbel's desperate, terrified gaze with his own reassuring one.

Lusbel: "Mmm!"

Subaru: "It's alright, I'm on your side. And as for that monster, a reliable hero is fighting her right now. So, let's take this time to get you out of here."

Lusbel: "Mmm."

Subaru spoke with the utmost sincerity. Gradually, the struggling Lusbel's body lost its strength, and he faced Subaru with a tearful but clear expression.

After Subaru nodded in response to that inquiring gaze, Lusbel began sobbing anew, for a different reason than before.

Subaru: "Wait a second. Let me get this off of you."

After gently touching crying boy's head, Subaru started cautiously working on the chain.

From the shoulders to ankles, the chain was wound tightly, and he was also gagged with it. Subaru took care to avoid hurting the child as he unraveled it.

Subaru: "Well, I got it off. Can you stand up? If not, I can carry you."

Lusbel: "D-Don't worry, it's... thank you... hk."

Lusbel rose unsteadily to his feet, shaking his stiff legs, offering his gratitude. Although his face was stained with tears, he was still a strong child. Subaru patted his head again.

Then, as he pondered the intense battle taking place near the tower,

Subaru: "Staying here might actually be safer, but we should probably get out just in case. Can you walk? Are you hurt anywhere?"

Lusbel: "My right hand, just a little bit..."

Lusbel frowned and obediently presented his wound to Subaru.

On his outstretched right hand was a sharp laceration that had clearly been made by a snake-like weapon. Seeing the blood oozing from the wound, Subaru contorted his face in discomfort.

Subaru: "Bastard, tying up such a small child, and even doing this to him."

Lusbel: "No, no. This just suddenly... suddenly hurting when I was tied up."

Subaru: "Suddenly?"

While he had been tied up, Subaru registered distractedly.

At least, Subaru shouldn't have hurt him in the process of unraveling the chain. His movements had been cautious, and if Lusbel had suffered so serious an injury, Subaru would have noticed.

— A terrible, ominous apprehension rose in Subaru's heart.

Subaru: "...at any rate, we can't stay here. Let's go."

Subaru took Lusbel's uninjured left hand and led him to the bottom of the spiral staircase, to the exit of the tower.

When Subaru returned to the square, he heard,

Crowd: "—Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!"

The mob had plunged into a frenzy, eagerly awaiting the execution of that captured freak, calling for vindication.

Eyes filled with bloodlust, mouths twisted in snarls, howling for murder.

Endless abhorrence of evil. Incredulous aversion to the unnatural. Wanting to be rid of the presence of an enemy who wasn't physiologically acceptable. This emotion was one of murderous intent.

And what was this called?

— This was known as Wrath.

Crowd: “—Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!”

A crowd of complete strangers stood side by side as comrades, moving toward the same goal.

Crowd: “—Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!”

Their very hearts united in that moment, facing the spirits of good and evil.

Crowd: “—Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!”

Choosing to be united, pushing that limit, that was—

Crowd: “—Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!”

Sirius: “Joining feelings into one... this is surely Love, correct? Well, there is no doubt that this is a scene only Love could achieve, don't you agree?”

Rather than devising a scheme, Sirius murmured in her usual voice.

Sirius had been pressed to the side of the tower by the hero. The surrounding crowd eagerly cheered for the death of the unnatural person, and knowing that their Sword Saint had the power to kill the abomination.

The desperate Sirius seemed to have lost even the chain on her left hand. If both hands were unarmed, she had no way to defend against Reinhardt's knife-like hand.

This was clearly a dead end — however, Sirius wore her usual placid smile.

Reinhardt: "Are there any last words you want to say?"

Sirius: "Thank you. Then, allow me to offer you an piece advice. The other archbishops may not be as docile as me, so if you want to ask their last words, you might suffer for it."

Reinhardt: "— I will keep that in mind."

In the face of Reinhardt's warm kindness, Sirius spoke a calm statement. Reinhardt nodded in compliance and stepped forward, ready to execute her with the blade that was his hand.

Crowd: "—Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!"

As the voice of the crowd grew in intensity, Sirius's fate had been sealed. This was obvious, so why?

Standing at the entrance of the broken tower, Subaru felt a throbbing chill threatening to break his heart.

Why? What did that mean? He desperately wanted to speak, but his mouth couldn't move. Once he began to speak, Subaru knew what he would say.

Subaru certainly would join the loud cries of "kill her!"

Sirius: "We know each other. Mutual humility. Mutual recognition. We forgive each other. That's exactly the correct form that Love should take."

Ignoring the subdued Subaru, Sirius continued to preach her rhetoric.

At first glance, she seemed to make sense, but, taking into account that Sirius was saying so, that proposition and the atmosphere itself turned unpleasant.

Reinhardt: "——"

Reinhardt seemed to have made the same judgment as Subaru.

There was no longer any meaning in letting Sirius speak, so Reinhardt moved forward. However, just before Reinhardt reached her, Sirius smiled and held her arms into the air.

Immediately, accompanied by a crackling sound, chains were ejected from the cuffs of her coat. Those chains were fired through her sleeves, and then wrapped around the tower as Sirius began to fly once more.

She intended to escape — but just before she could, Reinhardt stomped on the ground. Shock waves spread upward, like an explosion.

His hand struck at her in a smooth, upward motion. In that moment, Sirius's life would end.

Crowd: “—Kill her! Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!”

And that result, will be prompted by the crowd's cry.

Subaru's heart spiked with fear. Driven by a sudden impulse,

Subaru: “REINHARD!!”

He yelled the hero's name, but, falling under the sway of the crowd,

Subaru: “—KILL HER!!”

Reinhardt slashed.

A clean line swept neatly from Sirius's left shoulder to her right flank.

That exquisite cut was so sharp that there was a delay of several seconds before Sirius's body could react. Finally, the blood in her body noticed the wound, and her body collapsed as blood began to spray.

Sirius: “... Ah, this gentle world.”

Her internal organs spilling out, Sirius's body was cleft in half.

Her upper body continued soaring upward, pouring blood and intestines through the air, while her lower body, left in place, became a fountain, sprinkling blood through the square.

This was hell come to earth.

No one could bear to look straight at that horror. However, no one looked away. No one could look away.

Reinhardt: "...it can't be."

After landing, Reinhardt uttered a stunned mutter.

Subaru saw that his blue eyes were shaking with grief, a desperate shadow enveloping his fair, handsome face.

— And then Subaru could see no more.

Subaru: "——"

Subaru, and the rest of the crowd, lay scattered in the square that had turned into a pool of blood. From their left shoulders to their right sides, everyone had been clearly bisected.

Subaru: "——"

Blood and viscera spilling out, Subaru's consciousness didn't have time to understand what was happening before he was pulled into the embrace of death. Just before that happened, he felt something else.

A boy's left hand, holding on to his own, whose owner had also been cleaved enough, squeezed tightly, looking to Subaru for salvation.

He seemed to have felt that somewhere before.

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Liliana: “After the song ends and they chat again, shouldn’t we prepare food and drinks for them? Indulging in sweet snacks will certainly create a mood that will close the distance between them, don’t you think so?”

Subaru: “——ghk!”

Beatrice: “Ow! Ow, that hurts! It hurts in fact, SUBARU!!”

Blinking rapidly, Subaru was surprised by what he just heard.

The sudden switch in consciousness had him clinging to Beatrice’s hand with the same vice grip that he’d been making before his Return by Death.

Beatrice tearfully kicked Subaru’s leg after suffering from that sudden atrocity, who recoiled in pain and loosened his grip on her hand.

Liliana: “W-W-W-Why did you do that? Why would you attack Beatrice-sama’s lovely hands so suddenly? You’re going to ruin then... but it’s okay, I... I-I’ll kiss them and make it better for you, ha... haha.”

Beatrice: “It’s alright, I suppose! That’s quite gross, in fact!”

Beatrice flushed with panic as Liliana grabbed her hand. She ducked behind Subaru. Even if he had injured her hand, her trust in her partner had not diminished.

Emilia: “Subaru, are you alright? Just now, you suddenly turned pale...”

Subaru: “E-Emilia-tan...”

A concerned Emilia had joined his side, reaching a hand to his forehead. Subaru saw himself reflected in her amethyst eyes and breathed a sigh.

He'd come back.

He patted his shoulders and chest, which had been nearly bisected. His abdomen was cut, and his head had been smashed. Although Subaru was confident in his experience with deaths, this had been his first real beheading. Taking precedence over pain was a sense of astonishment and loss, the knowledge of his Death tugging at Subaru's spirit. This was a death that Subaru, who was commonly subjected to them, could accept.

Subaru: "Why, can't I find a simple conclusion..."

Once again catching up with the memories he'd inherited memory, this Death taught him the reality of Sirius's power.

Although he hadn't registered much pain, the sense of loss and shock hit Subaru one after the other. His partial understanding of the phenomenon grew.

That is, this time, the cause of death —

Subaru: "Disgusting..."

Needless to say, he had long understood.

Subaru was beheaded and killed this time exactly the same way that Sirius was. In other words, to put it bluntly, Subaru went through the same deathmatch as Sirius. Looking back thirty minutes before the first reincarnation, Subaru only saw Lusbel's death in joy and then he died. The previously unknown cause of death had now been identified.

— Sirius could transfer Deaths if anyone died in her vicinity.

Not just brainwashing with emotional changes. Even changes that occurred in the body could be shared. It wasn't merely brainwashing, but bodywashing. Or could it be called soulwashing?

In other words, killing her meant killing all of the people in that square.

Subaru: "What to do?"

Defeating Sirius using brute force could be achieved by calling Reinhardt.

Only, that would come at the price of the life of everyone in that square. In that case, the result would be no different from Sirius's intended atrocities.

Summoning Reinhardt was nothing more than a concise and easy-to-understand solution at first glance, but it was, in actuality, the wrong answer. In this case, what could he do?

Subaru: "Call Reinhardt, and tell him to take her alive...?"

That was unlikely, but perhaps not impossible.

Since Reinhardt was capable of killing Sirius, he should also be capable of detaining her. The problem was that if she were caught alive, there would be no way to end her spiritual control.

Subaru had come in contact with Sirius and Lusbel, and had gone mad and died. If that insidious, insane infection were to be repeated, then capturing Sirius would be fruitless.

If she were killed, the everyone would be buried with her.

If she were caught, there was a possibility that she'd spread her contagion.

Just existing made her a threat to others, she was this kind of bomb-like existence. She truly deserved her title of Sin Archbishop.

Subaru: "What else?"

Unable to find a breakthrough, Subaru found himself in a dilemma.

If Reinhardt were called, he would surely be able to kill or restrain Sirius. Was that okay, ignoring the possibility of falling into madness?

Subaru: “——”

Time was passing even as Subaru pondered.

Seeing the silent Subaru, those around him all appeared uneasy. Whether to keep them from worrying or to keep them in the dark, Subaru had to offset that impression.

He hurriedly changed the expression on his face and announced,

Subaru: “Ah, right. That is... yes, I suddenly felt like I’d puke up the grilled meat from this morning. My chest was a bit uncomfortable.”

Liliana: “Ah, I see, I see. I, too, often feel nauseous, which is accompanied by a lot of gas...”

Subaru: “Stop right there. No matter how you act, you’re still a girl.”

Subaru interrupted Liliana’s jokes with a smile and turned towards Emilia. Seeing that, Emilia lowered her gaze.

Emilia: “I’ll believe Subaru since he says so, but... this is a special case, okay?”

Subaru: “Mm, thanks... then, I’ll go buy desserts, as Liliana suggested. Emilia-tan, please continue to enjoy the song.”

Thanks to Emilia’s kindness, Subaru was able to make an announcement after his wavering. Then, holding Beatrice’s hand again,”

Subaru: “Beako. Come shopping with me. Let’s take a walk and banter like we always do.”

Beatrice: “What are you suddenly — Mm. I understand, in fact.”

Beatrice cast aside her usual attitude when she saw Subaru’s face. To put it more appropriately, she accepted his offer after noticing his pleading expression.

Subaru took a confused Beatrice's hand and ran from the park for the fourth time.

This time, rather than leaving Beatrice behind, he'd bring his reliable partner with him. Even though he had yet to reach any kind of breakthrough.

Priscilla: "—Hmm."

— Staring at the retreating figures of Subaru and Beatrice, the red-clad woman watched the duo with a thoughtful expression.

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Chapter 23 - Disrupted Situation



Beatrice: “So? Tell me what happened, in fact.”

Having left the park, Beatrice determined that they’d left Emilia’s line of sight, and slowed her steps. Although she’d slowed to talk, Subaru grabbed her arm and led her forward.

Beatrice: “Subaru?”

Subaru: “Sorry. We have to talk where no one else is around. There are many things that I want to discuss thoroughly, but we don’t have enough time. —In fact, we have less than 15 minutes.”

Beatrice: "... I understand, I suppose. Explain while we walk, in fact."

Beatrice marched along obediently as Subaru turn his face away, trying to hide his anxiety.

The presence of his understanding partner lightened Subaru's heart, and he carefully sorted through the thoughts swimming in his mind as he tried to relay them to Beatrice.

Subaru: "The witch cult will attack the square that we're heading to, and we have to stop their wickedness."

Beatrice: "Witch Cult... hk"

Beatrice's breath caught, and she urged Subaru to continue.

What troubled him were the rules and penalties for giving out information learned through Return by Death. Even if he'd been able to safely relay tidbits to Larkins, there was no certainty that he could do so with Beatrice. That was the nature of the devil of shadows who bound him.

The handicap that prevented Return by Death from showing giving out information only judged the punishment after that had already happened.

If that weren't the case, Emilia's heart wouldn't have been crushed when she'd learned the secret. This was the only explanation he could think of.

So Subaru paid careful attention to what he told Beatrice.

Those devil's hands, when reaching for Subaru, were terrifying but not unbearable. However, if they reached Emilia or Beatrice, Subaru would be crippled by his guilt.

It could be forgiving to Subaru, but it was merciless to others.

Beatrice: "As usual, you can't say anything, I suppose?"

Subaru: "...sorry. I'm so unreasonable."

Beatrice: "Fine, in fact. I'll believe it without any basis, I suppose. They're Subaru's words, so Betty will believe them, in fact."

Beatrice took the useless Subaru's hand with her own.

The warmth in the palm of her hand gave him the strength to speak his next words.

Sirius, Wrath, could connect senses and brainwash souls, and, taking into account the difficulty of communication, Beatrice's perception of danger would be skewed.

Subaru: "First of all, the Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult who will appear is Wrath, who is, uh... a pervert."

Beatrice: "If that's the information that needs to be conveyed then Betty thinks that Subaru is having bad thoughts, I suppose."

Subaru: "Anyway, there's something very important that we'll have to deal with. Her abilities... she can control emotions, or is it sharing senses between people?"

Beatrice: "Controlling emotions and sharing senses?"

Beatrice lifted her head.

She was unable to concretely picture it. Of course, Subaru also could not clearly understand the effect of that power.

Subaru: "Explaining is a little difficult... if Wrath is overjoyed, then no matter how angry I am, I'll also feel happy."

Beatrice: "... I don't really understand how that's a threat, in fact."

Subaru: "Recognizing danger is impossible. No matter how dangerous the situation is, there's no fear. You'll accept it with delight and won't be able to correctly grasp the situation, understand?"

A crying, pleading child who didn't want to die had been cheered for by the masses.

They found joy in everything in front of this. This was comparable to delight at being stabbed with a knife, up until your life was ended by that blade.

Beatrice: "The sharing of emotions, I understand, I suppose. What about sharing senses, in fact?"

Subaru: "That's not all. When someone else feels pain, I'll feel it too. If the Sin Archbishop's head is cut off then mine will come flying off as well... it's overwhelming, isn't it."

As he explained further, his frustration at the hopeless situation began to surface again.

This explanation was rather straightforward; if she died, so would he. He'd been able to escape through Return by Death, but every who'd suffered before had no way of overriding that at all.

Subaru: "If she's alive, then there's a possibility you'll go crazy just by being nearby. If she's dead then we'll all die too. She's really the worst kind of enemy, troublesome alive or dead."

On his second death, Subaru had been swallowed by fear and driven mad. The origin of that fear had been Lusbel, who desperately sought help.

On that occasion, he'd continually felt Lusbel's madness as well. Their spirits had weakened, driving them into that state.

It was hard to say "I should have been better". It was also hard to imagine that Lusbel, who he had spoken to earlier, would resist such overwhelming terror.

But something other than just fear should have killed Subaru during his second death.

Finding a strategy that could defeat Sirius would be difficult without the knowledge of what that something was.

"_____"

Subaru didn't continue to speak, but he still kept a grip on Beatrice's hand.

Obviously, he'd taken Beatrice, but he still hadn't found a solution. As such, Beatrice would probably be entangled in a battle with no real hope of victory.

The easiest thing to do would be to have Reinhardt take Sirius alive. Subaru considered just summoning Reinhardt like last time and telling him to capture Sirius.

He'd simply tell Reinhardt what to do before he engaged in battle.

Before the sudden attack on the square, he'd talk to Larkins again, and Reinhardt would be called to deal with the crisis. Reinhardt wouldn't attack directly without asking for details. Even explaining the need for an emergency call, there would be at least a few minutes until Sirius would make a move.

Subaru: "I'm an idiot. No, I'm a moron. If Reinhardt's called then Sirius is going to react immediately. There won't be time to explain, just like last time."

Subaru needed to tell Reinhardt before he started fighting Sirius.

Could he do it? Subaru had no confidence that he'd be able to express his thoughts in time. In the last loop, although he'd wanted to tell Reinhardt to capture her, his mouth had disobeyed him and joined the crowd in yelling "kill her". This was an undeniable precedent.

Beatrice: "Subaru. There's still more bad news, in fact."

Subaru: "...Seriously? I don't want to hear more bad news."

Beatrice: "I understand, I suppose. But, I have to tell you... Betty would be useless in a battlefield with Reinhardt, in fact. I'd just be a cute little girl, I suppose."

Subaru: "Huh?"

Beatrice spoke suddenly, her eyes downcast.

Beatrice: “Because of his physiology, Reinhardt acts as a beacon for mana. The surrounding mana in the atmosphere will follow him blindly, causing damage to the environment, which becomes a burden to him. Spirits and magic users will be unable to use mana, and I won’t be able to do anything.”

Subaru: “What... the... That there should be such a thing...”

Even as he said so, Subaru recalled the circumstances of his arrival.

On the first day Subaru had been summoned to this world, Reinhardt and Elsa had fought a battle over Emilia’s Royal Election emblem.

Subaru recalled how Emilia had mentioned how magic became ineffective as Reinhardt had revealed his true ability.

Beatrice: “If Reinhardt can solve the problem, then it wouldn’t matter if Betty can’t do anything, in fact. But, if just Reinhardt isn’t enough...”

Subaru: “Beako won’t have the option of being useful.”

That fantasy was also killed.

Just his presence would cause magic to lose all function. Calling Reinhardt would now be counterproductive.

— Awful, awful, awful, awful, awful, awful, what a disaster. Subaru could no longer see any light.

Was it right or wrong to call Reinhardt? What about bringing Beatrice?

Ignoring Sirius and trying to save people in the square. In that case, Sirius would only find another place to do the same thing. There was no point.

As he contemplated, anxiety began to burn through Subaru’s mind.

Subaru expended as much effort as he possibly could in search of a solution, but could find none. Even so, time was ticking on mercilessly.

Beatrice: "...Subaru, we're at the square, in fact."

Subaru: "—hk"

Hearing her, Subaru suddenly looked up and saw the square.

The two had arrived at their destination, which would soon be marked by tragedy. No solution had been found yet. Their remaining time just vanished little by little. The white clocktower. The crowded square.

There were less than ten minutes before the tragedy would take place. How to solve it correctly. What to do?

Beatrice: "Subaru, I might have come up a solution, in fact."

As Subaru's face was taut with tension, Beatrice spoke up. Subaru's blanking mind was startled by her sweet voice.

Subaru: "Came up with a solution!?"

Beatrice: "I might be wrong, but Subaru's description of Wrath's abilities sounds familiar... I'm thinking of a higher level magic called Nect that has a similar effect."

Subaru: "Nect...!"

Nect — It was a form of magic that Subaru had experienced in the past. With Nect, magic users could share the awareness and feelings of others. Indeed, it seemed similar to Sirius's authority.

While wondering why he hadn't noticed at first, Subaru thought out loud.

Subaru: "So is there any counter for Nect?"

Beatrice: "...usually, countering Nect is unnecessary, I suppose. It is intended to unite comrades and express feelings, in fact. Using Nect as a weapon seems strange, I suppose."

Beatrice gave her unhappy reply to the anxious Subaru.

Subaru had once reluctantly shared his vision with Julius using Nect, in order to defeat Petelgeuse by making his Unseen Hands visible.

Nect's ability was used for cooperation between allies.

It was absolutely not the kind of magic that should be used to take hostages.

Beatrice: "Normally, there is a condition for Nect that requires contact through mana circulation, in fact. The Archbishop's authority probably has the power to circumvent such a condition, I suppose."

Subaru: "So her authority can forcibly achieve it. More than that..."

Beatrice: "How to counter it, I suppose. — Shamak is the most obvious answer, in fact."

Subaru: "Shamak-san has arrived! That's magnificent!"

Subaru perked up at Beatrice's proposal.

Shamak was an incredibly familiar magic. In painful, hard, dangerous times, in the hopeless of situations, Shamak had always faced adversaries alongside Subaru.

Prior to contracting Beatrice, Subaru's main sources of strength were Rem, Patrasche, and Shamak.

And even after the destruction of his mana gate, through his contract with Beatrice, Shamak was still helping Subaru.

Subaru: "I see, Shamak, huh... If it's Shamak then surely everything is somehow..."

Beatrice: “Subaru seems to have an unusual level of trust for Shamak, I suppose. It’s the most basic of Yin magic and it’s really not that useful, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Even Beako isn’t allowed to badmouth Shamak like that...!”

Beatrice: “What’s made Subaru defend Shamak to this extent, in fact?”

Beatrice listened to the incomprehensible ramblings with a sigh, then glanced around carefully while holding a finger up.

Beatrice: “Shamak is rooted in altering consciousness — it’s a magic that forcibly breaks the mind’s contact with surroundings, I suppose. Subaru uses it strangely, in fact, but Betty doesn’t have any problem with it at all.”

Subaru: “In other words...?”

Beatrice: “When that magic is cast on the crowd, everyone’s minds will be blinded with Shamak, and the Sin Archbishop shouldn’t be a problem, in fact. Though I’m worried about whether or not I can control it from affecting Subaru, I suppose.”

Beatrice spoke with confidence and Subaru clenched his hands with excitement at this new glimmer of hope.

Subaru: “Alright, good. I’ll be depending on your magic. Then... what’s next?”

Beatrice: “Aside from Reinhardt, who can defeat the Sin Archbishop, in fact?”

Subaru: “.....”

If they called Reinhardt then Beatrice wouldn’t be able to use her Shamak strategy. Therefore, he needed to be excluded from their calculations.

However, on this occasion, Reinhardt was perhaps the only one who could defeat Sirius.

Beatrice: “Speaking of which, since Betty needs to maintain Shamak, Betty won’t be able to fight, in fact.”

Subaru: “That’s right. Then... we’re back at square one.”

Without Beatrice’s backing, Subaru would almost certainly be unable to defeat Wrath. Without his trump card, just his whip alone wouldn’t allow him to escape unscathed.

Subaru: “At that time, it seemed like there were other places to fight than the square... Subaru thought of the first time at the square.

Upon detecting a threatening presence in the tower, several people reacted immediately. A beastman, a blindfolded woman, a serious looking businessman, and Larkins.

Excluding Larkins, how would the remaining three fare? Adding Subaru to their number would total four, perhaps meaning that there was yet a way out.

Subaru: “What a stupid train of thought, asking strangers to trust me. I don’t think there’s anything I haven’t thought of now...”

???: “— In that case, should I play a part since I know of your strength?”

Subaru: “—— !?”

A sudden voice from behind pierced into his hopeless thoughts.

At that all too familiar voice, Subaru and Beatrice looked back in surprise. Standing behind the two with their hands on their hips,

Subaru: “E-Emilia-tan? Why are you here...”

Emilia: “Subaru seemed to be acting strange, so I was worried that something bad was happening. It looks like I was excluded, that’s one of Subaru’s bad traits.”

Having been criticized, Subaru pressed his mouth shut.

Astonished at Emilia's sudden appearance, he couldn't respond. Beatrice took his place and looked up at Emilia.

Beatrice: "You should have stayed in the park, in fact. Why did you come, I suppose?"

Emilia: "...I couldn't just wait. Subaru told me to stay, but Priscilla told me otherwise."

Subaru: "That woman in red?"

Emilia: "She said that if I didn't follow you, I'd certainly regret it. When I caught up and saw that nothing had happened, I thought about leaving quietly, but you two seemed to be discussing something serious."

Emilia's decision was influenced and the source of that evil comes to mind.

Subaru gritted his teeth, mentally cursing Priscilla and her arrogant, disruptive meddling. That malicious whimsy had perfectly arranged the situation Subaru wanted to avoid the most.

Subaru: "Emilia-tan, I'm happy. I'm glad, so, from now on..."

Emilia: "The Witch Cult will appear? I heard you... even if Subaru tells me to go back, I won't. This concerns me, too."

Subaru: "Emilia!"

There was little basis for his line of thought.

He spoke sharply, desperate to drive Emilia away. She couldn't meet the Witch Cult.

Subaru couldn't quite articulate a reason, but it wasn't anything like stubborn protectiveness. He instinctively understood that she just couldn't.

Emilia absolutely couldn't meet the Witch Cult. To Emilia, that cult was a poison to be avoided. Although that held true for the majority of people born in this world, Emilia was a special case.

Subaru: "We'll manage something. Emilia doesn't need to be involved. This has nothing to do with you."

Emilia: "Even so, what if Subaru is hurt because I'm not there? I'd never let that happen. If Subaru fights, I'll fight by his side. If Subaru wants to protect something, I'll do my best to help. And since Subaru will certainly protect me..."

Subaru: "——"

Emilia: "I also want to protect Subaru. I promised I wouldn't cry like that anymore."

Emilia spoke with an unyielding heart.

In order to keep her away from danger, Subaru had to summon every drop of his courage, face adversity with a heart of steel.

However, Subaru, right now, was afraid. He was terrified of fighting. Three times.

Three times Subaru had lost to Sirius, and three times he'd lost his life.

No matter how experienced he was with death, he'd still died so much, in such a short span of time.

Death was horrible, unacceptable, and no matter how much he experienced it, he couldn't grow used to it.

Having his life taken was completely unreasonable. That denied his self, trampled on his existence, insulted his soul. It was something that stole from him.

Although he tried to cover everything up, Subaru couldn't brush off everything that affected him.

Even while stubbornly maintaining that he had people he wanted to protect, he could never cast off the weak heart that was afraid to die.

Natsuki Subaru, no matter what, hadn't been able to overcome that weakness.

Beatrice: "...Subaru. You should give up, in fact."

Subaru: "Beatrice..."

Beatrice: "Emilia is stubborn, I suppose. She won't change her mind, in fact. Betty also understands Emilia's feelings, I suppose. Betty wants to protect Subaru the same way... Betty isn't able to deny her that, in fact."

Beatrice is key to the strategy and also the decision-making party. If she waves a white flag, then Subaru won't be unable to resist.

Emilia looks to Subaru sincerely, and Beatrice adorably. Under their gaze, Subaru finally gave in.

Subaru: "...the cultists will target you. If that happens, think of yourself as a priority."

Emilia: "Mm, I understand. Even if I'm caught, Subaru will definitely save me. I believe in you and I'll do my best."

Subaru: "Don't jinx it... so, how much of our conversation did you hear?"

Having been accepted by Subaru, Emilia gave a relaxed smile.

She touched her fingers to her lips.

Emilia: "I heard the gist of it. The Witch Cult is going to wreak havoc with Nect, which Beatrice wants to counteract with Shamak. During that, I have to work hard to scold that villain."

Subaru: "That's a childlike way of understanding it, but it works. Emilia, can I depend on you?"

Emilia: "Leave it to me. I'm plenty strong."

Emilia makes a guts pose with her hands. That lovely action showed a certain lack of tension, but she seemed to have understood. Subaru felt restless and useless about relying on Emilia.

Moreover, the timing of Beatrice's magic was difficult for him to get a grasp on, which made it another element of anxiety. But,

Subaru: "Emilia-tan and Beako are both here, so I can't fail...!" Instead of feeling anxious, he used that to fuel his determination.

Subaru: "Besides, it's almost time."

Between Beatrice's proposal, and Emilia's joining, more than half of their remaining time had gone by. They'd try their best when it came to Sirius.

If they could, avoiding Lusbel's location and knocking the tower down would be preferable.

Subaru: "Emilia-tan. Soon a strange person will appear on the tower. Attack then with a big shot. Having her fall from the tower would be ideal. Afterward, Beako will prepare her spell, so when the signal comes we'll start fighting."

Emilia: "Mm, I understand. Although I do not know if things will go that smoothly, but I'll try." Emilia's expression stiffens and both Subaru and Beatrice nod at each other. The plan is set.

Subaru: "—She's here!"

A figure could be seen moving about in the clock tower's window.

A body wrapped in a black coat, a head wrapped in bandages. The ends of her chain, hanging from her hands, struck the ground with rattling sounds as she looked down at the square.

The people there had yet to notice that anomalous presence.

Sirius stood on her stage, shaking her body and opening her arms as though admiring the people who were unprepared for the imminent threat.

And then she began to clap — the people who heard the sound noticed her, and her speech began.

Subaru: “——”

Swallowing, Subaru witnessed the moment.

With imposing gestures, Sirius raised her chest to speak fiercely—

Emilia: “UI Huma!”

A huge icicle appeared in front of the tower, hanging in the air near Sirius.

The thick icicle, which was around the size of five people, struck the tower with a violent crash. An icicle speared through the front of the tower, and the walls split apart. Subaru’s jaw dropped in amazement.

Subaru: “E-Emilia-tan?”

Emilia: “Subaru said we needed to strike first, so I did... did I mess up?”

Subaru: “No, GJ. I just didn’t expect you to attack before her introduction.”

Subaru hadn’t motioned for her to act yet, and was surprised that Emilia had spotted the threat at a glance.

Since Sirius had been equally unprepared. Maybe the blow had even taken her out. Moreover, the panicked crowd were all fine, so perhaps Sirius had indeed been incapacitated.

That was entirely from Emilia’s great contribution.

Subaru: “Beako, what do you think?”

Beatrice: "First of all, think of a way to address the misunderstanding people around us, in fact."

As Beatrice's surprise turned to pride, Subaru wanted to ask whether or not they'd gotten Sirius.

Emilia surveyed the destruction of the tower while Subaru slowly turned to face the uneasy crowd. The beastman and the blindfolded woman were there — how unfortunate, they were people that Subaru had wanted to ally with.

Subaru: "Uh, well, what do I do now? Explain that we didn't mean any harm?"

Emilia: "—Mm. You better do that, Subaru."

While Subaru scratched his head, pondering the explanation, Emilia suddenly grabbed his shoulders, placing herself in front of the crowd.

In that moment, a crack sounded through the air, and a blue sword of ice appeared in Emilia's hands. She assumed a battle ready posture, facing down the crowd.

Subaru: "Emilia-tan? You don't have to go that far..."

Emilia: "It's not that. Look closely, Subaru. There's no sign of sanity."

Subaru: "—Eh?"

Scared by Emilia's suddenly firm voice, Subaru surveyed the crowd around them, and couldn't help but exclaim. Like Emilia had said, their eyes held no trace of cognizance.

The people around them were red from neck up, the blood vessels in their faces on the verge of bursting, bloodshot eyes glaring at Subaru's group.

Their gazes were filled with only fury.

Subaru: "Beako! What about Shamak!?"

Emilia's premeditated attack had no doubt played an effect. Only, it had also caused something undesirable.

Sirius: "Disgusting, the stench of that woman, filthy and detestable, the stench of the one who stole my husband from me, the stench of maggots, endless filth. Hate, I hate it so much, burning it to cinders isn't enough."

Subaru: "...what are you saying?"

Sirius: "And that other woman, she's obviously not that person, but she has such a similar stench, how shameless, the stench of rotting insects, ah, ah, ah ah aaAAAAAAH! How hateful! How rancid! How vile!"

The anomalous woman clutched her bleeding head with a harsh cry. Spittle flew from her mouth as she ruthlessly stomped her feet. Subaru knew this odd behavior. It was wild as ever, but it's direction was obviously different.

Sirius: "My! Are you testing the love for my husband, spirit?! Were you not satisfied with taking my husband from me, YOU HALF HALF-WITCH BITCH!!?"

Gritting her teeth, she issued a wrathful cry as she leapt forward.

Sirius, who'd fallen from the tower, folded her arms in front of her face, and red flames flared into life. They sprayed from both arms, and a line of flame had formed as she landed in the square.

Exercising her limbs, armed with her flame, the madwoman raised her head.

Emilia held her sword of ice ready as she stood in front of Subaru and Beatrice, guarding them. Swinging her gaze back and forth, Sirius yelled with a furious voice.

Sirius: "!! Am the witch cult's sin archbishop of Wrath!!"

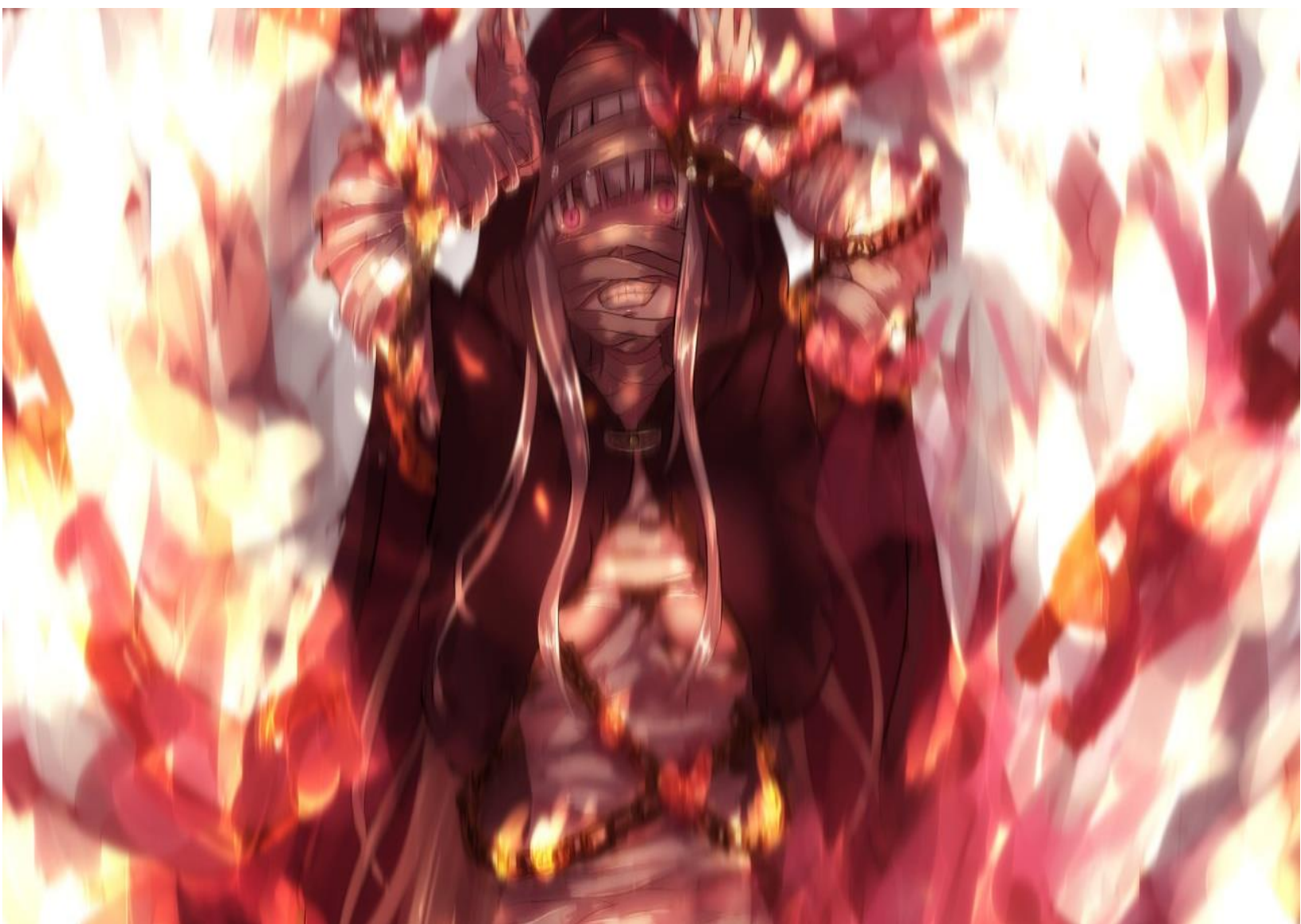
Red flames gushing forth, she bathed the crowd in heat as she raised her arms.

In a frenzied crisis completely different from the situation Subaru had expected, the madwoman introduced herself.

Sirius: “— Sirius Romanee-Conti!! Damn half-elf and spirit, I’ll scorch your corpses and scatter your ashes at my husband’s tomb!!”

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Chapter 24 - Resolution of Ice and Fire



Sirius hadn't registered Subaru's presence.

She merely glared with passionate hatred at the two standing in front of Subaru — that is, Emilia and Beatrice.

Subaru: "What's up with her? She's not the same as before..."

Subaru could not hide his wavering confusion at Sirius's rage.

In the short span of time since he'd encountered her, Subaru had met a relatively normal Sirius three times. Among those encounters, although Sirius hadn't followed any expectations common sense would bring, she was not someone irrational who was overrun by rage.

In fact, she had always been attempting to justify her claims to force on others. So, the Sirius in front of them was completely foreign.

She'd lost her rationality and fallen prey to rage. Putting it simply, she now seemed a perfect fit for her title of Wrath.

Sirius: "I could keep burning and burning you, but it wouldn't be enough... like maggots, like flies. Haha, how much do you hate me!? Even in my saddest days, am I not allowed the freedom of mourning?"

Emilia: "... I don't know what you're talking about?"

Sirius: "Ah, ha!?"

Emilia responded fearlessly to Sirius's enraged allegations, even at Sirius's fierce reactions. She pointed the tip of her sword of ice at the crowd behind Sirius.

Emilia: "If you feel angry at me, I'll hear you out. After all, the sudden provocation came from us, so of course you'd be angry. However, this has nothing to do with the other people here. Please liberate them."

Sirius: "That's the wrong attitude! If you want to let everyone go, do it right! Of course I'll be angry? Then show me the right attitude! Apologize, repent, cry and beg for forgiveness, then let me shoot flames into your ass and scorch your internal organs away!"

Emilia: "Having my organs burned would be troublesome. —So, let's settle this simply."

Sirius tilted her head upon hearing Emilia's low voice.

Emilia immediately twisted her upper body slightly and darted forward. Her pale wrists wielded her sword of ice as if it were weightless.

The sun glistened off of the sharpened tip of the sword as she drove it toward Sirius's shoulder.

Subaru: "Emilia-tan?"

Sirius: "Gah!"

Subaru's exclamation overlapped with Sirius's snarl.

Facing that swinging, Sirius immediately lifted her left wrist, bringing flames to the swords. However,

Sirius: "Damn half-witch!"

Emilia: "Please don't say that anymore. It'll make people feel dirty."

Emilia's sword, although bathed in Sirius's flame, didn't vaporize into air.

The silver tip of the sword won against the heat, and met Sirius's burning left wrist — only, Sirius's chain was also wrapped around it.

With a sharp ring, the sword and chain collided with a brilliant flash of mana. After only a moment of contest, Emilia's sword broke with a crisp snap.

Sirius: "You, damn...!"

With a look of glee, Sirius used her wrist to knock Emilia back. If the flaming chain made contact, she would be in trouble.

Emilia's beautiful face was about to be deformed, but, in that moment,

Emilia: "Hahh!"

Sirius's wrist bounced back up; Emilia's sword of ice had deflected her.

Sirius: "Ah ah aaaah! Ah ah ah ah ah! Just die already!"

Sirius's cries of wrath pierced the air as she swung both arms over her head. The center of the area she was targeting was occupied by Emilia.

Emilia's ice blade extended at the hilt, changing shape into a hammer. Sirius met its blow with both hands, retreating, only to be pursued by Emilia.

Emilia: "Haah! Hahh! Yah!"

Sirius: "Disgusting! Half-witch! Maggot! Fly! Insect! Loathsome bug!"

Through use of centrifugal force and control over her body, Emilia demonstrated an unimaginable show of combat.

Against the ice hammer, the flame wielding Sirius had been reduced to defense. Looking at Emilia's one-sided attack, Subaru, as an observer, judged that she would triumph. Even so,

Subaru: "This isn't the time to be in a trance! No, Emilia!"

Beatrice: "Subaru, you can't be distracted right now, in fact."

If Emilia killed Sirius, the last Death would certainly repeat itself.

Although Subaru had foreseen this crisis, Beatrice quickly scolded him. Subaru, wondering what had happened, followed Beatrice's gaze.

Crowd: "—Dirty insect."

Subaru: "—Crap."

The members of the crowd behind Sirius were all flushed with anger.

The crowd looked at Subaru and Beatrice and made cursing gestures reminiscent of Sirius- in fact, they were sharing her Wrath.

That wave of anger focused on Subaru.

Subaru: "It's not just sharing feelings, but also doing things like brainwashing a crowd into acting on her will."

Beatrice: "Identifying the situation is good, I suppose. If a solution doesn't exist, then all we can do is escape, in fact!"

As Subaru groaned, considering his troubles, Beatrice immediately jumped onto his back. The crowd advanced toward Subaru.

Subaru: "Emilia, help stall for us!"

Emilia: "I won't be too messy about it!"

Receiving her strong reply, Subaru broke into a sprint, fleeing from the crowd. Fortunately, the pace of the masses who had lost their rationality was far from normal.

They chased Subaru with hands outstretched, empty wrath in their gazes, looking not unlike zombies. The main different was that rather than wanting to eat Subaru, they wanted to tear him apart with their hands.

Subaru: "If we keep stalling like this, someone could come..."

Beatrice: "Even if someone comes, without figuring out the conditions of victory, it would be meaningless, in fact. Even if Reinhardt comes, would he be able to solve this, I suppose?"

Subaru: "In short, our worries won't end even if he comes..."

In any case, the one who could summon Reinhardt, Larkins, was presently part of the crowd threatening Subaru. He was one of the people pushing forward, trying to be the first to reach Subaru.

Subaru was uncertain of what action to take before solving Sirius's emotional link.

Subaru: "So we have to think of something!"

Crowd: "Dirty insects!"

A man leapt at Subaru, who ducked his head and threw himself past his opponent's arms, before sweeping the man off of his feet and sending his body flying.

The masses showed no consideration to the tumbling man until he knocked them over. Turning from this bowling-like scene, Subaru spoke.

Subaru: "They're so angry that they aren't thinking at all."

Beatrice: "However, that isn't what I would recommend, in fact. In such an atmosphere, they probably won't hesitate about killing whatever is near them, I suppose."

Subaru: "That won't do!"

He didn't want any sacrifices.

The reason why Subaru fought so hard for so many was precisely this. Of course, Subaru understood the scope of his wish.

There were many things he wanted to protect. However, there was a limit to how much he could reach.

Of course. Subaru wasn't an omnipotent being.

Subaru: "However, I'm the one who chooses that limit!"

Beatrice: "That's Betty's Subaru, in fact!"

Hearing the greatest possible support from his back, Subaru drew his whip.

I'll save as many lives as I can. So please forgive me for any injuries — that was Subaru's train of thought. Aiming at the feet of the crowd, his whip launched through the air.

With the crack of a small thunderbolt, the whip hit the stone pavement.

Although it wasn't lethal, it was still a weapon, and, when wielded mercilessly, could produce the an incapacitating degree of power.

If maybe, after witnessing that power, the mass of people be cowed into retreating,

Subaru: "It won't go that smoothly."

Then, there was no other way.

Subaru swept his whip through the crowd, this time targeting the leading figure. A medium stature, light blue hair, sharp eyes — wasn't that Larkins?

Attacking people who he knew would make Subaru feel sad.

Subaru: "Although this aches my heart, I can't let myself be torn apart either. Sorry, Chin!"

Larkins: "I'm not Chin!?"

Subaru lashed his whip at Larkins's feet and yanked upward. His body spun in a half circle, and he caught the people surrounding him as he fell.

The fallen members of the crowd blocked its advance. In order to reach Subaru, they needed to find another route.

Subaru: "Right, they can't think... in that case, as long as I—"

Just as he was about to say "stall long enough", Subaru felt a chill rise on his back.

To Subaru, that chill was like the imposing intimacy of his gloomy lover. Even if he were reluctant to meet her, she gave Subaru the help he needed most. They had that kind of complex relationship.

— That was the breath of Death.

Subaru: “Ah!”

Beastman: “You maggot!”

A large blade whistled toward Subaru, accompanied by a shrill wind.

The beastman had leapt from the crowd, aiming at Subaru’s neck. Although he had prominent pointed canine ears, his nose and mouth seemed to resemble the cunning charm of a fox.

The half-fox, using his white tail as a brace, was unaffected by Subaru’s tricks as he took another heavy swing.

Subaru: “Beako!”

Beatrice: “Shamak!”

Beastman: “——!?”

In a serious confrontation, Subaru could be cut down in only five seconds.

In a flash, Subaru had determined the difference in their power, and called Beatrice’s name. She immediately realized Subaru’s intention and cast a Shamak which enveloped the beastman’s face.

His slender body and large sword were also engulfed by the dark fog, stripping his combat effectiveness away.

Subaru: “Does that cut off the link with the others?”

Beatrice: “There’s nothing to that effect, I suppose. Even take the fighting, the link itself did not cut off, in fact! Most likely, that compulsion will stop only taking effect after that freak dies, I suppose!”

Subaru: “What do we do!?”

Beatrice: “Betty in desperately thinking, in fact!” Solving that mystery was a task best left up to Beatrice.

The only thing that Subaru could do was to give Beatrice ample time to survey and think, and to keep the brainwashed masses from disturbing her.

Subaru: “And on Emilia-tan’s side—?”

Subaru turned his gaze to Emilia, who was still busy confronting Sirius.

During this year, Emilia had dedicated her time both to learning about politics and combat. Her combat effectiveness was much higher than Subaru’s.

Even so, Subaru worried about Emilia, not because he thought he was better, but because Subaru was a man and Emilia was a woman, nothing more.

Most people would probably dismiss that worry as meaningless.

Emilia: “Hahh! Yah! Hah!”

Emilia was shouting slightly listless battle cries, but Sirius was ignoring all of them.

Emilia spun around, her sword slashing toward Sirius’s hand, who whipped her burning chain through the air and knocked the blade away while cursing angrily.

With a crash, ice fragmented into powder and dispersed, but Emilia had already formed a spear, which stuck upward with, its defensive power sending Sirius flying away.

She was making use of her huge store of mana, refining the weapons of ice for the purpose of carrying out destruction.

Subaru had named this combat technique Arts: Ice Blade, in honor of its illusory beauty which reminded him of an ice fairy from tales of fantasy.

The wreckage of smashed ice illustrated the intensity of the fierce battle between Emilia and Sirius. Fighting with fire and ice, the fiery heated battle between the two warriors wielding opposing arms continued to unfold on the frosty stage.

Emilia: "Haah!"

Emilia spun around, twirling her spear at Sirius, knocking her back. She immediately followed up with another blow, lashing out with the tip of the spear. Sirius nimbly twisted her body in mid air, avoiding her strike and capturing the spear in her grip.

Sirius: "Blazing! Boiling! Burning! My heart is trembling! Ah ah aaaaAAAAAH! This is Wrath!

Emilia: "Ah!?"

As if echoing her call, the intense heat redoubled its efforts.

Emilia's spear was consumed by the blaze as she involuntarily released it, leaving no remains.

Sirius: "Your dirty amethyst eyes, your dirty bell-like voice, your dirty silky silver hair, your dirty fair skin, your dirty cute face! Those all exist purely to seduce men! Ah, such lust! You bitch, you dirty whore! Just die! You just want to tempt men? You want to take that person from me? You filthy slut! You disgusting half-witch!"

As a wave of heat passed over Emilia's squinted eyes, she once again created a blade of ice. This time, the weapon was a two pronged spear, which held the flames away from her.

With an intense grinding sound, the madwoman and Emilia exchanged their gazes.

Emilia: “My eyes, my voice, my silver hair! All of those came from my favorite person, from the most beautiful person in the world! Treating them as though they’re dirty infuriates me!”

Sirius: “Fury!? Did you just say fury!? Don’t kid with me! Fury is mine! It’s the precious thing that I received from that person! This duty and the name are all gifts from that person! To, without authorization, without permission, take that away from me... I won’t allow it! Won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t!”

As her speech came to an end, Sirius’s attitude changed dramatically as she cried out in grief. She caught the spear in her grip and snapped it, and Emilia created another sword.

But had Emilia been affected by Sirius’s cries? Her face, which had previously worn a strong sense of purpose, seemed to have slackened.

Subaru: “—This is bad.”

After catching a glance of the side of Emilia’s face, Subaru’s instincts began to scream of bad news.

There was no basis. But Subaru was sure.

Emilia’s expression had changed, that is, had adopted the feelings of Sirius.

She was still fighting on, and her movements had not dulled. Even so, that response had indeed happened.

Emilia had fallen prey to Sirius’s power.

However, she hadn’t immediately fallen into the palm of Sirius’s hand.

Emilia, currently in a defensive battle, was still matching Sirius blow for blow. She wasn’t as far gone as the crowd, as was just as lovely as usual.

Then, inspecting the situation,

Subaru: “When Sirius first appeared, why weren’t Emilia, Beako, and I affected by her emotional link?”

Just as Emilia and Beatrice had resisted her power just as Reinhardt had. Was there any individual trait, or something similar to that, which they shared? Subaru’s initial assumption had been that Reinhardt would be able to resist it just because he was Reinhardt.

But if there was in fact a specific reason, then he could start hypothesizing.

Subaru, who had seen Sirius three times, could now resist her like this — that was also something to take into consideration.

If that was the key to a breakthrough —

Subaru: “Bea...”

Beatrice: “Subaru!!”

The moment Subaru had wanted to convey his newfound realization, an anxious cry echoed in his ears.

As Subaru’s eyes widened, something collided with his right side.

Subaru: “Guu—”

His body folded into a K shape from the power of the blow, and Subaru immediately hopped to the left, attempting to lessen its impact. As he coughed up stomach acid, he attempted to check the damage the blow had caused.

The blindfolded woman, moving like a shadow, had suddenly approached him. That defenseless looking woman had delivered a rather piercing blow into Subaru’s side.

Beatrice: “Subaru! Don’t die, I suppose!”

Subaru: “Even I wouldn’t reach a game over from that... but that hit was super effective...!”

Although his ribs ached, Subaru judged that his other bones and internal organs hadn't been harmed. He judged that it wasn't too serious. As long as there was no internal bleeding.

Subaru: "This guy and that guy too, why are these enemies so troublesome?"

Beatrice: "Either Subaru looks unreliable just because the enemies are strong, or because he himself is too weak, in fact."

Subaru: "Really, you...!"

His whip bounced as it chased her feet, and as she turned her attention to below her, Subaru tossed a handful of grit in her face. Although it didn't affect her blindfolded eyes, it distracted her enough for Subaru to throw himself at her shoulder.

Subaru: "My lack of fighting strength seems to have come in handy. If the attack had been serious, I probably would have died on the spot."

Beatrice: "...although I can't say that that's something I'd accept eagerly, that works, since we have more trouble coming up, I suppose."

Beatrice reiterated her annoying remarks about Subaru, who breathed a sigh of relief after defeating the blindfolded woman. He tilted his head in a gesture of "I'm not listening" as Beatrice frowned and gestured with her chin.

She indicated the large waterway connected to the square.

Subaru: "You're kidding me..."

Subaru moaned as he caught sight of the waterway, where another gathering of enraged people had emerged.

Beatrice: "Betty thinks that they heard the commotion and rushed over to see what's happening, in fact."

Subaru: “The entered the scope of her power and were swallowed... are you serious? Is her ability contagious on a wide scale?”

— Panic, fear, madness, would be transmitted between people.

The feelings and feelings shared by Schiller’s are precisely the result of the factual reflection of that phenomenon.

Ah, so that was it. The severity of her threat, her poison which was worse than even Petelgeuse’s.

Subaru: “The more you try to flee, the more victims she finds... how can that be stopped!?”

Beatrice: “However, something is off about this entire situation, I suppose.. Subaru knocked over that woman, and I cast Shamak on that man. Try coupling that with how Tonchinkan’s injury didn’t appear on anyone else, in fact.”

Because the situation was pressing, Subaru didn’t correct Beatrice’s mistake of calling Chin “Tonchinkan”. What was more, the details that Beatrice had just pointed out could serve as a basis for speculating on the conditions of Sirius’s emotional link.

Subaru: “...are we going to have to defeat that whole crowd too?”

Beatrice: “If Subaru has the fighting ability to do that, then we can go for it, I suppose. —Betty’s Shamak can also lend a hand in stripping their consciousness away, in fact.”

Although a cruel means, that had indeed been Subaru’s initial plan.

He could avoid putting himself through unnecessary worry. Subaru needed to avoid the expansion of such a disastrous situation. Now, to act on Beatrice’s proposal—

Emilia: “Ah!”

Subaru: “Emilia!?”

Subaru attention was diverted to Emilia's pained cry.

He turned and saw her lying on the slate ground of the square, with Sirius, who was brandishing her flaming wrists, looking down at her.

Sirius: "Growing! Growing! Love culminates! That quantity is power! There is love for all! Everyone! Human beings love each other, and with that union! They can share thoughts, they can share wishes, and, be it joy or sadness, they can talk to each other and share their feelings! In that case, this is the inevitable result! The half-witch isn't included in the bond of Love and should just disappear like a crushed insect!"

Emilia, who had held the initial advantage, had gradually lost her footing until the two were about even.

As time dragged on, had Sirius's strength increased, or had Emilia's strength decreased? Whatever the case, this was the situation now. Emilia looked at Sirius with regret.

Emilia: "Something's off. What you're saying is right, but... it somehow feels wrong too. Why?"

Sirius: "Because you go against the truth! Because you dirty half-being cannot understand Love as long as you live, you will not know Love when you die! The existence of a half-witch is in and of itself is evil! Even your birth, even the meeting of your father and mother are wrong! The union of trash and insects birthed an unholy dirty combination of the two that needs to end its existence here!"

Emilia: "——hk!"

At the end of that unbearable tirade, Emilia's eyes changed.

Kind and gentle as she was, Emilia couldn't face such harsh words, which demeaned not only her existence, but even her parents' meeting.

Biting her lip, Emilia pushed against the slate ground, leaping to her feet. Her enraged gaze trained on Sirius, a silvery shimmer gathered in her hand.

Emilia: "——"

Her sword slashed through Sirius's coat, splitting it wide open.

Emilia, in her rage, would stop for nothing as she took another swing at Sirius, her sword of ice reaching the thin body in front of her —

Emilia: “— Eh?”

???: “Mmphm!”

— Subaru saw the chained girl and froze.

A blonde, curly haired girl, bound in the same manner that Lusbel had been, blood pouring from her mouth, sobbed. Her small body was firmly bound to Sirius's.

Tina — the name flashed through Subaru's memory.

Sirius: “—The anger in you is scary.”

Subaru who had noticed the girl, and Emilia, who saw the girl's tears, were overtaken by rage. And at that moment, Sirius gave her most ferocious smile yet as a wave of heat blew Emilia's body away with alarming momentum.

The explosion whistled through the air as Emilia was knocked backwards. She flew across the stone, tumbling until coming to a stop at the very center of the square.

Emilia: “Gah, ugh...”

Emilia moaned as she writhed in pain. Sirius gazed at Emilia as she lifted her burning arms. Then, she clapped her hands.

Sirius: “An insect shouldn't give me such a sweet passion. It's incredibly disgusting.”

Emilia: “——”

Sirius: "Well, thank you. I'm sorry."

With her wrists held over her head, Sirius's fierce flame roared once again.

Even steel would melt with just a touch of that flame. If it touched her directly, then not even a shadow of Emilia would be left behind. She'd be completely burned from the world.

If he didn't act right now, he wouldn't be able to save her. And not saving Emilia was unacceptable. Subaru clearly understood all this, and yet,

Subaru: "Move already, feet!"

Tina: "Mmph!"

Subaru's feet were trembling with something like fear, leaving him unable to walk.

Subaru's inaction had begun the moment he'd rested eyes on the terrified girl bound to Sirius. Beatrice, on his back, was similarly unable to move.

Maybe feelings could be shared with spirits. But now wasn't the time to ponder that.

Subaru: "Emilia..."

His throat vibrated but he couldn't even call the name of the girl who he loved so deeply. Emilia certainly couldn't have heard him.

Emilia's thoughts as she lay on the stone floor, unable to move, watching the imminent catastrophe unfold before her very eyes.

— Even those would be scorched by an unforgiving fire, leaving them forever a mystery.

A terrifying heat baked the slate ground, and, as the heat wave became the impact, the world was dyed a brilliant gold.

Faced with this fantastical scene, Subaru's knees shook, and he collapsed on the spot.

Beatrice: "Suba... ru..."

Beatrice, still clinging to his back, called to Subaru in a stuttering voice.

Subaru couldn't respond. His line of sight remained fixed on the ground beneath him, as he refused to face reality, swallowed by an overwhelming dread.

Right now, if he looked up, he would lose to fear.

No, the heart he'd long lost to fear would shatter and break.

If he had to see Emilia turn to ash, if he had to see Emilia vanish from the world, then—

Beatrice: "Su-Subaru. Subaru!"

Even so, Beatrice continued desperately calling Subaru's name.

His head was knocked several times, but Subaru could only embrace his horrified and timid heart, shaking his heads slowly.

He couldn't. Even if that madwoman were standing right in front of him, Subaru would—

???: "—I caught up."

However, the moment he heard that sound, Subaru's heart shook off that fear. Rather than fear the sight in front of him, he feared being left in the dark.

Raising his head, he looked to the direction of the sound — the place where Emilia had been incinerated.

There, a man stood.

Smoke rose from the charred rocks, which still crackled with heat. In the midst of that destruction, the man assumed a leisurely pose. There, in his arms—

Subaru: “Emi... lia?”

In the man’s arms, there rested a girl who should have disappeared in flame. Although she had passed out from exhaustion, she was physically unhurt.

Emilia had lost her consciousness from the accumulation of her wounds, exhaustion, and fear, but she was peacefully resting, safe and sound.

Subaru: “You...”

The character who had suddenly appeared and saved Emilia’s life.

His horrified heart was denying him a celebration of Emilia’s safety, Subaru involuntarily voiced his wavering thoughts with a similarly trembling voice.

The man who heard and turned around. Then, he spoke.

???: “I came to meet her, so it’s great that I was able to catch up.”

Subaru: “To... meet? What’s that supposed to...”

???: “Isn’t it a matter of course that I come to meet a woman who I intend to take as a my bride?”

At that abrupt utterance, Subaru fell speechless.

At Subaru’s stiff lack of breath, the man, a white-haired youth, laughed lightly.

Regulus: “I am the Witch Cult’s Sin Archbishop of Greed. —Regulus Corneas.”

It was not intended to boast, but rather speak for granted facts.

Regulus: "As promised — I'm here to take her as my 79th wife."

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Chapter 25 - Leo's Theatre



An enigmatic, white-haired youth suddenly entered the barren, chaotic battlefield that had been ripped asunder by ice and fire.

His white hair was neither too long nor too short, without any distinct style. His figure was also neither too muscular nor too slim; he had a medium build which gave the impression that he was on the verge of floating away and being swallowed up by the masses.

But,

Subaru: “Archbishop... of Greed...?!”

The mediocre young man’s self-introduction left quite an impact on Subaru. As long as Subaru’s ears hadn’t committed a fatal mistake, then that young man was in fact a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult.

That statement certainly wasn’t a lie.

If that wasn’t the case, then how else could he have been unscathed from Sirius’s final attack?

—Such an anomaly was impossible.

Regulus: “Even so, it’s great that I caught up. After all, my bride nearly turned to ash. Even I, who rarely express any particular expectations, do hope that there’s someone who can help maintain my bride’s humanity. More than that being a matter of merit, I think that it’s a matter of course. After all, I cannot commit a perversion of sexuality like devoting my love to ashes.”

Like this, bringing with him a fear that refused to dissipate, weaving such words about Emilia, the young archbishop who called himself Regulus stood before the quivering Subaru.

Although he spoke smoothly and fluently, the contents of his discourse were empty, as if he were just repeating the same joke over and over.

Emilia, who was forced to listen to that joke, didn’t stir. She seemed to have completely lost consciousness, her slender form only lying prone in his arms.

Regulus raised a finger to the white hair on his eyebrows.

Regulus: “Although it’s gratifying to see nothing wrong, it seems regrettable that I can’t reveal my heroism to my bride today. I think that a heroic rescue in the midst of a dead end crisis brings two people people’s hearts to a very important place. Well, after all, the combination of the two is already an established fact and the only question is of the timing. Isn’t it great?”

Subaru: "You, what have you been saying...?"

Regulus: "Hmm?"

Regulus, who had been speaking his self-righteous truth, discovered Subaru and frowned upon him. He then gave a very tired sounding breath.

Regulus: "Don't you understand basic concepts like politeness? The first thing I did was give a self introduction. To ask why you're going to introduce yourself, that's because it's the most important thing to start as a relationship. No matter what kind of relationship, isn't it necessary to start with an acquaintanceship where we both know each other? So, just because I'm someone who cares about such things, I often think that no matter to whom, I will be as friendly as possible. I'm not saying that there isn't a chance that the other party is shy. Even if you think you want to become well-connected, when you start by introducing yourself, something in you always cannot help but hesitate. Out of consideration for those types of people, I try to introduce myself as much as possible and act in order to create a space where they feel comfortable. Of course, I don't expect this grace to be immediately obvious. However, I do have hopes that after some time, they will be able to detect the meaning of an introductions. Or, rather, that they will become aware of it. Or is it natural to talk to someone you meet for the first time without introducing yourself? If that's the case, then there's a slight difference between my common sense and culture. In that case, although both parties feel a sense of obligation, it becomes necessary to refuse the other side in advance so as to prevent a misunderstanding. Isn't that so different from what I said before, taking being gentle with each other for granted? In fact, saying so feels impolite. And that's a loss of etiquette, and the other party is left with a lesser value. A false assessment of each other's value imposes on others. This is a violation of the rights of others. From any rational perspective, this is an infringement of my rights."

Subaru: "Oh. Ohh...? S-Sorry... my name is Natsuki Subaru."

A frenzied look rose in Regulus's eyes as he prattled on, serving as a warning siren to Subaru. Acting on that fear, Subaru trembled as he gave his name.

Then, hearing Subaru's introduction, Regulus squinted his widened eyes.

Regulus: "...Yes, that's fine. Because giving respect invites respect. Although the conditions for achieving a world that creates both is taken for granted, You don't have to seek the happiness of others. As long as you pursue your happiness, others will also correspondingly find happiness. Don't get caught up in your desires, just accept your truths and feel satisfied with your everyday needs. That is the peaceful way of life."

It would perhaps be worth questioning whether or not his smooth speech was serious. But his bright eyes proved that his words neither joking nor ironic; rather, they were his genuine beliefs.

Taking his words out of context would perhaps make them seem like Sirius's.

In fact, Regulus's demeanor and words held the same superficiality and distortion as those of Sirius.

Regulus: "After all, is it really so hard to find the proper mood to converse in? Why is it impossible to do this as a matter of course for mankind? Why is it impossible to consciously, unconsciously, indifferently, continue to cause subtle harm to others in the days when such things are done? Subtle injuries hurt, don't they? On top of that, if anything serious works its way in, it might grow into a life-threatening disease. The body and the soul are one. I hate those who misunderstand life to the extent that they unconsciously threaten others. Don't their minds seem warped?"

Subaru: "....."

Regulus: "Obviously, they're flawed as human beings, and it isn't okay for that behavior to remain unconscious. It is, of course, wrong to impose a burden on those who are discriminated against. Most people have common sense, but why can't they consciously realize that the world is slowly turning on? Even without realizing that they're trampling upon the hidden hearts of others, if they don't become conscious of their twisted, flawed mistakes, then don't their feet just keep trampling and trampling?"

As if unhappy with Subaru's silence, Regulus repeatedly pressed for an answer.

Regulus's speech was gradually becoming faster and faster, clearly conveying an increase in excitement. Even so, Subaru still could not respond.

At the thought of giving a response, his heart flinched.

Subaru: “All that said, don’t you know...”

Sirius: “Thanks for the lesson. —BURN, SCORCH AND DISAPPEAR!!” A cascade of fire poured down from behind Regulus.

Sirius had waved her arms to summon a flame which mercilessly consumed her fellow archbishop. Subaru, witnessing this atrocity, found himself once again unable to move.

Beatrice: “Subaru...”

Subaru: “I... know. But, it’s okay.”

Beatrice, also trembling in fear, gripped Subaru’s shoulders until they hurt. She too worried about Emilia, who had been caught in the flame.

It was impossible for Subaru not to fear the violence that had involved Emilia. Even so, he held a steadfast belief. That was,

Regulus: “—I say, to interrupt someone else’s conversation like that, how awful are you at reading the mood? If you want to say something, speak up, raise your hand. Do you think I have the presence of mind to just wait for you to speak up?”

Regulus twisted his wrist, and the vortex of flame vanished.

The heat waves dissipated as if dismissed by magic, while Regulus, standing at the center of the vortex, remained untouched. Naturally, Emilia, resting in his arms was still in the same state.

Even engulfed by the flames of that intensity, not a single drop of sweat surfaced on his face.

Regulus: “You and I share the title of Archbishop. Since I know that that your head is messed up, if you’d only made a little mistake, I could have turned a gentle blind eye. Fortunately, there was no harm done. Only...”

Turning away, Regulus lowered his voice and glared at Sirius, who bore that gaze as she closed her coat, once again hiding the girl bound to her from the surroundings, gritting her teeth all the while.

Regulus: “You were planning to burn this girl along with me. I would be a little reluctant to say that I will forgive that kind of behavior. Ah, it’d be better to say that it would be impossible. Since ancient times, no matter what the story or the morality of the characters, if one’s loved ones are hurt, then their anger is inevitable. Because that is a right that everyone has, I am well within my rights to take revenge.”

Sirius: “Anger! Hah, did you get angry!? Don’t make me laugh! A superficial and insignificant man like you can’t speak so lightly about anger! Anger is mine! It’s what I got from him, and it’s more important to me than anything else. To...”

Regulus: “Ohh, I see. Are you still clinging to the idiot who kept on risking death? How annoying, how disgusting. That’s neither constructive nor rational. Death is the end. This is a matter of course, isn’t it? Unwilling to admit even that and clinging to just memories... You really are flawed. If someone who you love dies, find the next one. Rather than yelling about love, love, love, exercise the rights you’ve been granted. Disrupting that natural cycle, ah, you really are hopeless scum.”

Sirius: “You, who laughed at that person’s death, TO SPEAK SO ARROGANTLY!!”

Sirius, who had been relentlessly demeaned, flew into a rage.

The stone flooring cracked at the mercy of the madwoman’s stomp as she directed her twin flames forward, which flew toward Regulus at an alarming rate. A burning, tearing sound accompanied the weapon on its lethal journey.

The chain hit Regulus’s flesh, striking his cheek to one side. However, neither Sirius’s fury nor the chain’s attacks had been calmed by that single blow.

Left to right, top to bottom, front to back, Sirius’s copper chains beat relentlessly at Regulus’s body. On top of that, the chains, flying at incredibly high speeds, projected waves of heat as well.

Sirius: “Disappear, disappear, disappear, disappear, disappear! TURN TO ASH ALONG WITH THAT HATEFUL HALF-WITCH!!”

The fence of flame closed at the center, trapping Regulus in that raging inferno.

The temperature of that storm was high enough to melt the floor tiles where Regulus stood, and the ground beneath him either evaporated or sunk to form depressions.

Witnessing the burning result, Sirius’s breaths grew wild.

Sharing her wrath, the crowd of wild-blooded people around her bled from their eyes and noses, making strange sounds as they gathered together.

Regulus: “I say, how many times do I need to tell you the same thing?”

Regulus stepped forward on the red stone slab as if nothing had happened.

Whether it was his white hair, his clothes, or Emilia’s arms, nothing held a trace of scratches. Only his expression had changed into one of childish dissatisfaction.

Regulus: “I’ve thought about it. No matter how many times the same thing is said, some people can’t understand. They don’t care enough give enough effort to understand what is said. Is that contempt? So, whether carving what they’ve learned in their hearts as commandments, or doing careful self-examinations, or remembering it was food for thought for tomorrow, they don’t do any of that. They forget, and it’s cleansed away. Saying the same thing over and over again is not only blasphemy, but also contempt which gives negative impacts to both parties. Both their own value and the value of the other party are fundamentally degraded. That’s how it is. It’s a form of violence that disregards words and actions. Then I thought of it.”

Sirius: “You damn insect...!”

Regulus: “The Witch Cult’s doctrine goes like this, ‘If one cheek is hit, present the other cheek and ask your opponent why they fight as they do’. This shows a valuable lesson of mutual understanding. Ah,

but I've thought of this too. It's also true that someone whose cheek has been beaten should fight back. —That's especially necessary against those who don't know pain."

Only listening to the content of that speech would make it seem very stern. But Regulus was a distorted existence.

Regulus: "—"

Regulus, who stepped out from the dark, wore a grim smile.

That smile was certainly no friendly gesture; rather, it was closer to the licking of a tongue as a predator surveyed his prey.

It was still unknown how Regulus had defended against Sirius's flame and chain. Perhaps his power was purely defensive; perhaps the Authority of Greed granted no means of attack.

Therefore, it is clear that the behavior of Regulus should not be conclusive evidence of fatal consequences.

— But, if the battle dragged on, Sirius would die.

And there was no guarantee that Regulus was a holder of purely defensive abilities.

If that young man pulled anything, there was no doubt that Sirius will die. If that is the case, there is no problem at all. In fact, having the number of archbishops reduced due to infighting would be worthy of celebration.

However, although gratifying, Sirius's death would involve most of the people surrounding her. Of course, this included Subaru, as well as all the people trapped in the Sirius's wrath, and certainly Lusbel and Tina, who prayed for one another's safety and sacrificed themselves.

Subaru: "——"

Even now, fear was spreading all over the Subaru's body.

His slack knees trembled so much that even breathing became an abnormal act. But, even in this case.

Beatrice: "Subaru."

In his ear, a weak, unreliable voice echoed.

Although the owner obviously could not hide her trembling fear, her warm voice still spoke up from behind him. Rely on me — it was conveying a message something like that.

Subaru clenched his teeth and staggered to his feet.

He refused to be unable to do anything and delegate everything to the slight weight of the child on his back. Having said that, he wouldn't be able to do anything at all without her strength.

Therefore, Subaru refused to struggle alone, but also refused to throw everything to one person. If Subaru had been alone then he would have remained on his knees.

The reason why Subaru could stand was because he wasn't alone. The other people engulfed by the madness were different. Only Subaru had someone close by, only Subaru wasn't by himself.

Tightly clinging to that real feeling, Subaru fought his feat.

Subaru: "Beatrice."

Beatrice: "I know, in fact."

With only a single call, Beatrice could fully understand what he needed.

Confirmation with each other was unnecessary. Each of them doing their utmost to accomplish each of their respective responsibilities — as long they did that, they should arrive at their desired outcome.

Whether it be Sirius or Regulus, the cultists had completely forgotten about Subaru.

They could only see each other and intended to kill one another. The best result would be Sirius burning Regulus to ash, but that would be impossible.

Therefore, Subaru needed to stop Regulus's rampage.

Subaru had to attract Regulus's attention to himself and take measures against creating a large number of victims.

And, above all,

Subaru: "Stop touching my Emilia...!"

An inexhaustible love pushes the fear from Subaru and lights his heart. If he didn't first address his dishonest heart then he'd never be able to fight Regulus.

At the moment, Regulus's back was facing Subaru, and his attention was being completely diverted by Sirius, which was a great convenience for Subaru.

Beatrice: "—Shamak!"

As Subaru forced his trembling legs to move, Beatrice began chanting a spell from behind him.

Her powerful spell, Shamak, covered Regulus's body in a black haze as it began to sever him from the world, beautifully hindering his pace. Right before Regulus was engulfed, Subaru took a combat position and fiercely whisked his whip forward.

He was aiming at Regulus's neck.

His whip followed through as it attempted to ensnare Regulus. Surely with this much commotion even the arrogant Regulus would have to attention to Subaru. Perhaps at the point where Beatrice had draped the curtain there was even a possibility that Regulus would fall victim without realizing what had happened.

Subaru: "There's no response!"

Beatrice: "He's coming!!"

Beatrice's warning had come after a heavy sense of anxiety had already hit Subaru. His whip passed through thin air and the missing presence of its target was painfully obvious.

The next moment, a white-haired youth kicked off of the ground toward Subaru, lunging from the black haze.

Regulus: "This has been messy from the very beginning. You've been stirring up my smooth life with your magic. Could you evaporate off somewhere?"

Beatrice: "M-Mu, Murak!"

Regulus held Emilia with his right hand as his empty left hand suddenly swiped at Subaru. Beatrice immediately gave up performing an attack in favor of casting a gravity altering spell on Subaru.

Subaru immediately affirmed Beatrice's judgment and leapt upward to avoid Regulus's reaching fingertips. Murak is a type of shadow magic with the effect of freeing a physical object from the tethers of gravity. Subaru's flesh was now lighter than a feather. He flew upward, leaving Regulus behind.

Regulus: "Why do you want to avoid it?"

Subaru: "Why wouldn't I avoid it, it's scary!"

Subaru cast his whip at Regulus again, who had looked overhead at Subaru. Rather than aim for any particular direction, Subaru only struck, hitting Regulus's head. His white hair floated outward from the impact and the head that should have been lacerated by the whip was uninjured. The same held true for his windswept hair.

Regulus: "What if my bride had been injured? Don't you think that's it's a matter of course that girls should be treated gently, and that it's not something that needs to be taught? Don't you even understand this?"

Subaru: “Don’t be stupid! The person I want to treat the most gently in this world is that girl. What’s with the, ‘bride this and bride that’, that you’ve been talking about...”

Regulus: “It’s been decided. It’s destiny. —After all, I made a promise in my dreams.”

One hand bracing himself against the wall, Subaru was dumbfounded by Regulus’s smiling reply. Something felt awry but Regulus clearly did not care.

Regulus: “She will connect with me. That’s fate, you know. I feel generally satisfied with myself, and I don’t want anything at all. And although I don’t particularly desire anything, I’m not so narrow-minded that I wouldn’t accept what’s given to be. Especially what fate’s given to me. Although most people do not expect this, anything within I can reach, I want to guard. That would be myself and the people who are important to me.”

Subaru: “——”

Regulus: “I will protect her. I’ll welcome her as my bride and love her as she’ll love me, and together we’ll enjoy a stable life. Therefore, for the sake of that, I won’t refrain from exerting the power that I’ve been given.”

Subaru: “Then, what... then what about her own will? Obviously, one of the parties hasn’t consented yet, so getting engaged like this is rash.”

Regulus’s stern statement had just confirmed his convictions.

On one hand, this was a straightforward, righteous, and harmless way of thinking. On the other, it was ridiculous to a deadly extent.

It was difficult to explain why it was deadly but it was something that was clear from the very beginning. Because Regulus had fallen into a frenzy, everything had gone off track.

Subaru’s voice trembled but not just with fear. To his question, Regulus smiled and continued as though discussing a disposable topic.

Regulus: "Are you worried about me? If that's the case, thank you. However, there isn't any problem. Fate is inevitable... in particular, in love or friendship, a person's words can not be established. If fate told me that she would be my bride, then I am fated to be her groom, this is all something that's already been decided."

Beatrice: "...something is completely wrong with him, in fact."

Toward Regulus and his flawed theory, Beatrice leaks a subconscious murmur of disgust.

Subaru held the same opinion. Regulus used pretty, smooth words to cover up the underlying madness in his beliefs. Subaru didn't even want to know the extent of trouble that those sentiments would bring.

Subaru: "I've had enough. It's impossible for us to understand each other. It's disgusting to admit that such a horrible person is a rival for love."

Subaru removed his hand from the wall and allowed himself to float back to the earth. Looking at the silent Subaru, Regulus nodded as if he'd grasped the main idea.

Regulus: "I see. I understand. You know, I'm sorry to say, but... the fate of a lover can't be shared. I find a bride who admires others to be quite unattractive."

Subaru: "Shut it! Emilia-tan is my bride. I won't give her to someone like you."

Regulus: "Ohh, this is Emilia. A lovely name. Very suitable for love birds to softly call, very suitable for this lovable child indeed."

Subaru: "You don't even know her name... yet you say you want her as a bride? What a joke! What made you...?"

Regulus: "Her face."

Subaru was choked speechless with anger. Misunderstanding his silence, Regulus tilted his head.

Regulus: “A cute face. That’s all love and whatnot is, right?”

Subaru: “Go to hell.”

Beatrice: “Drop dead, I suppose.”

Agreeing with Subaru’s assertion, Beatrice also denied Regulus his overly casual love.

Pedaling toward the ground, Subaru’s weightless body was still under the effects of Murak. As Subaru shortened the distance between them as he rode the wind, Regulus lifted his gaze, as if shocked.

At this time, Regulus could not understand the implications of a close-combat battle.

Subaru himself understood. Rather than being unintelligent, Regulus didn’t share the familiarity with battle that Sirius did. That wasn’t to say that he was unprepared; rather, he needed no weapon.

Therefore, getting close to Regulus would be nigh suicidal. Even so, Subaru had a pressing reason to enter close combat with Regulus.

— Because this was the only way he could use his ace.

Regulus: “Why did you come here? I don’t really understand. Although it’s not necessary, I do hope that you can tell me. I don’t lack thoughtfulness, after all. I want to understand even withering opponents.”

Subaru: “Thanks for enlightenment — Beako!”

Beatrice: “Ready, in fact!”

Regulus approached Subaru with his left hand extended.

Each of those fingers was likely a fatal weapon that would end Subaru’s life. Before that could happen, Subaru took a breath and shouted.

This was one of the fruits of the efforts that Subaru and Beatrice had accumulated over the course of the past year,

Subaru: “— E · M · M!!”

Regulus: “...what?”

The high-pitched chant induced Subaru’s damaged gate to absorb Beatrice’s mana to cast an exclusive magic of which no one else had yet developed.

They had launched the magic of absolute defense, E MM, one of three original spells devised by Beatrice and Subaru.

Subaru’s body would be wrapped in an invisible magical field which would allow him to Sidestep from this plane of existence, nullifying any attack on him, be it physical or magical.

Regulus’s fingertips didn’t bring any harm to Subaru when they reached him. Upon witnessing this incident, for the first time, Regulus revealed an expression of stiff shock.

Subaru aimed at his face and fiercely released his left fist.

Subaru: “Yah!”

Regulus: “—hk”

The side of Regulus’s face was struck.

Subaru had struck him with a hard blow, but not the slightest mark had been made when Regulus’s head was pushed back. The damage had been completely invalidated. This was what Subaru had indeed expected; an eternal and constant guardian of Regulus’s flesh.

Beatrice: “Not ready yet, in fact!”

Before Regulus could counterattack, Beatrice shouted that the conditions for the next move had not yet been reached.

In this close proximity, Subaru needed to avoid Regulus's attacks. Being on the defense would make each action incredibly difficult. In that case, Subaru needed to give up part of his soul.

Regulus: "Don't worry..."

Subaru: "Invisible · Providence!"

As Regulus suffered a blow, his words were cut off.

That was because of he'd been sent flying. Subaru looked over the scene as he coughed blood, roughly wiping at the corners of his mouth with his sleeve.

Only Subaru's eyes could see his Invisible Providence.

Subaru could clearly see a black third hand protruding from his chest, coursing with a dreadful power.

His entire body creaked, his soul weakened, and something venomous flowed through his body, materializing as black blood in his throat.

After paying the price for the ability, Subaru was able to summon a full-out attack. That blow, which consumed so much from Subaru, probably wouldn't match up to a kick from Garfiel.

Even so, that invisible attack should have a corresponding effect to the effort needed to cast it.

Beatrice: "Subaru, are you okay, in fact?"

Subaru: "Cough... somehow. And as for that guy, he's strong, but his attacks are kinda flat."

Spitting out the remainder of the blood clogging his throat, Subaru pointed out the low energy of Regulus's combat.

Regulus had revealed that he was an inexperienced layman who was at most on Subaru's level. As long as Subaru kept his concentration of words, those murderous fingertips could maybe be continually avoided.

Beatrice: "——"

Subaru's shoulder was knocked. That was Beatrice's silent report.

Because of its potent effect, their original spells had short durations. In addition, their spells had daily limits, and overuse would result in loss of potency.

Beatrice: "Although the effects of EMM have ended, in this case, even without magic, Subaru has a chance. So, if you rush in..."

Subaru: "Victory could be waiting. I see the light of hope."

Regulus: "There's no such thing. I apologize for the misunderstanding. I dallied for longer than I should have, being that you're not so interesting. But that's not the issue here. It's not good that we're having a disagreement. This is a violation of rights. Since I've been hit twice since we started, if I don't land an attack, that would be unfair, right?"

Regulus landed from midair, looking at the determined Subaru.

His expression had lost its original calmness and was reaching outrage.

Sirius: "Wha!?"

Subaru: "...what are you planning?"

The ground between Subaru and Regulus suddenly ignited.

Subaru was pushed backward by the wave of heat which bathed him, while Regulus bore the hot air as it blew past his face.

Obviously, the two turned to the culprit for this — Sirius.

So far, for whatever reason, the madwoman had not involved herself in the fight between Subaru and Regulus. Although the intent behind her inaction was unknown, Subaru would have preferred for her to have remained silent. Her actions resulted in a very abrupt change.

He had no means to combat Sirius's flames, and strongly preferred Regulus, who could only engage in close combat. He also had yet to find a solution to defeat her.

Subaru gulped as the situation deteriorated.

In actuality, his circumstances were far worse than what Subaru had imagined.

Sirius: “— I've found you.”

Subaru: “—?”

Standing unsightly, Sirius stares at the two men staring at her — no, at only Subaru.

The madwoman had completely forgotten her desire to killed Regulus, merely staring with single-minded obsession at Subaru. Her gaze was filled with madness, Subaru's throat suddenly caught.

Then she lifted her previously lifeless, drowsy hands and pressed them to her face.

Sirius: “I've found you, found you, found you, found you, found you. Ah, ah, ahahah! Aaaah! Yes, it's really you! I'm sorry, I didn't notice at first. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. This is great. It really is. Sure enough, you came back for me!?”

Subaru: “What.....?”

Sirius: “You, where have you been!? No matter where I looked, I couldn't find you, even after I'd torn you open, I still couldn't find you anywhere. Even though I'd always always always always always always always always always always been looking... And you noticed how I'd been searching, and you came back!”

Her high-pitched sonorous voice overflowed with an obvious enthusiasm.

Keeping her hands on her cheeks, she wriggled her body and gave a series of pleased sounds. What kind of state was this? This odd gesture was truly unspeakable.

However, if pressed for an answer, her actions seemed similar to the behavior of someone who'd been searching for a lover for a long time. A woman who'd been consumed by blind love.

Sirius: "Because my ideal was reached! Because I want to be one with you — you finally noticed the wish that I'd been praying for! Because my Love finally reached you!"

Subaru: "——"

Sirius: "I've always been waiting for only you... my dear, dear Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti!"

Speaking with a mad smile, Sirius Romanee-Conti called the name of her bereaved lover as she cast a tender, affectionate look at Subaru.

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Chapter 26 - Spear of Love



— The already dire situation had deteriorated drastically, resulting in the worst of awful conditions.

Subaru trembled under Sirius's mesmerized gaze and her shuddering, glowing breaths.

The madwoman gave no regard to the heat scorching her bandaged face, her attention focused on watching Subaru — no, not just watching, but staring.

Subaru: "Dear... Petelgeuse?"

That was the name of a madman which Subaru had never wanted to hear again. When Sirius Romanee-Conti had been crying out for her lover, Subaru would be lying if he said that this particular theory hadn't crossed his mind.

Even so, he was reluctant to seriously consider it, as doing so would combine the existence of the lunatic Petelgeuse and the madwoman Sirius.

He didn't want to think of a union, the worst possible couple, with Romanee-Conti.

Subaru: "A couple where both lovers are Sin Archbishops is ridiculously disastrous... although it can't be helped that he'd choose a bride like that..."

Really, the Witch Cult didn't have a single normal member.

The self-righteous Petelgeuse, Sirius who imposed her love without permission, and Regulus who treated love as superficial fate — they were all scum.

Subaru: "Like how your names are bit similar. Do they all end in an 'S' sound?"

Subaru buried the rapid churning of his mind under trivial, pointless thoughts.

Right now, Subaru felt as if he'd found something very awry, although he could quite put his finger on what it was. Try as he might, he couldn't find it.

Sirius: "Please don't be so silent, Petelgeuse. You're such a mean-spirited person. See, you're already, already, already giving me that usual cold attitude... it makes me really anxious!"

Sirius, unaware of the cause of Subaru's brooding silence, took her own interpretation of it as she kept her hands on her face and her waist twisting back and forth. The nightmarish scene spread as the crowd around Sirius took up her strange, delusional expression of affection.

Regulus: "... Really, I can't deal with you anymore. Although his trick just now probably that gave you that kind of idea, it's still really rather tragic. The correct connection of fate should place you together

no matter what kind of obstacles are faced. Like with me and my brides. However, a separation by life and death before results can blossom is not only sad, but very unsightly.”

Sirius: “Yes, thank you very much. I’m very sorry. Now, excuse me, but I’m busy. You know, right? Mutual understanding is important. Mutual concessions are also important. You have completed your purpose, so could you leave as soon as possible? After all, I also have my own private affairs.”

Regulus: “Indeed, my purpose of finding my bride has been fulfilled.”

Sirius’s madness had given way to rationality, and Regulus overlooked that implication as he looked at Emilia, still in his arms. Then he turned toward Subaru.

Regulus: “But the one who wants to kill me and my bride, and who has been annoying since the very beginning been, has yet to allow me proper vengeance in and infringement of my rights. I dislike taking a violent initiative, but in this case, it would only be a just revenge. Yes, this is an act of righteousness. Although I could endure this and leave, I would be doing legitimacy a disfavor. That is to say, leaving would be a loss of justice. I shouldn’t set that precedent.”

Subaru: “Don’t give me that superious tone. Obviously, you don’t like me so you want to kill me. Don’t justify that with some garbage doctrine.”

Regulus: “Actually being talked back to is quite a surprise. Being spoken to as if I were mistaken is even more of a surprise. You, are you the type of people who disagrees with their opponents? In that case, the only thing I can say is that you’re small and superficial. I think that this kind of person, who can’t listen to the words of others with sincerity, will one day earn their just deserts, what do you think?”

Subaru: “Do you have the right to say this?”

Regulus’s eyes widened as if incredibly taken aback.

Perhaps he was sincere, convinced that his speech was justified. No, he was absolutely convinced. If not, he couldn’t be a leading subordinate in that abnormal cult.

Logical conversations were only an illusion. Although they spoke the human tongue, they were creatures belonging to an alien ecosystem.

Forgetting that would lead to being swallowed up by their honeyed words.

Regulus: "Sirius. You seem to have excluded him from your sphere of power. What happened?"

Instead of facing the silent Subaru, Regulus directed the conversation to Sirius.

Frowning at his speech, Subaru discovered that the fear which had been gripping his heart had vanished.

The fact that Beatrice was still slightly trembling on his shoulders proved that they hadn't left the range of the sphere of influence.

In other words, only Subaru had been excluded. And the reason for that was,

Sirius: "Isn't that obvious? Since I know that he's that person, if I continue to share my feelings, they might accidentally transmit to him."

Regulus: "Don't give me that shy look, it's really creepy. Having proclaimed your love, love, love, there's no point in pretending to innocent. I really don't understand you."

Sirius: "Don't you think that allowing those inexplicable feelings that can't be expressed with words to be felt in such a manner is tasteless? Until the end of the end, until the very moment I become one with him, I'll seal that feeling inside me. I've already decided so. Yes, for the sake of Love!"

Regulus: "Because of that dishonesty, your important feelings will never be able to reach him, you know? You, Sirius Romanee-Conti, can only miss him with wholehearted continuous thoughts. Don't you think that using someone else's family name is rather disgusting? I suppose that, in a sense, it's like Petelgeuse's legacy. Well, he's already dead, so it doesn't matter anymore."

Sirius: "I'm in love with that person!"

Hearing Regulus's amazed speech, Sirius exploded.

The madwoman grasped at her hair in a frenzy, spittle flying from her mouth as she screamed at Regulus.

Sirius: "After all, whenever I gazed at him, he always met my eyes! When I touched him, he didn't scold me! When I spoke to him, he gave me his attention! When I inhaled his breath, he never told me off! I was allowed to sleep with him! I could freely borrow his things! He allowed me the honor of burning the half-witch! He gave me my name! He smiled for me! Only for me! Only for me, onlyformeonlyformeonlyforme!"

Her breathing grew wild as she sobbed tears of unrequited love.

She made herself clear.

Sirius's existence was one of dark, twisted, pure love.

Regulus: "Ah, oops. —Dealing with such strong subjective convictions is tricky."

Shrugging, Regulus spoke as if seeking agreement from Subaru.

Subaru bit back a "do you have the right to say that" to keep Regulus from lashing out. He needed to temper the balance between the two foolish extremists near him.

Facing the two cultists, Subaru saw no light of hope to break the deadlock. Rather, the situation had worsened due to Sirius's interference.

Even if Subaru had broken away from the shared fear, there would be no marked improvement in his combat power. Obviously, Beatrice would be his main advantage, but she was trapped in an unfavorable condition, her sharp judgement dulled by terror.

At least, only facing Regulus would help.

Subaru: "...Hey, Sirius."

Sirius: “Yes, what’s the matter, my dear?”

Sirius candidly responded his call.

Although Subaru astonished at the unexpectedly serious response,

Subaru: “I have a little bit private business with Regulus here, so could you wait patiently for a while? Please.”

Sirius: “Do you want me to wait?”

Making use of Sirius’s misunderstanding could grant Subaru a chance at victory.

Sirius appeared to have assumed Subaru was Petelgeuse due to his Invisible Providence, which resembled the Authority of Sloth’s Unseen Hand. Although this was a dark path, Subaru would have to tread it.

Petelgeuse had been a spirit. If he were still alive, it was entirely possible that he would have possessed Subaru as his next host.

Although, the problem would be that Subaru hadn’t indicated that he’d recognized Sirius up until now, but Sirius, in her present state of mind, hadn’t seemed to notice the issue.

With that in mind, Subaru hoped to break that deadlock. The result,

Sirius: “I’m sorry, I cannot do that. Please let me refuse even if it is very important to you.”

Sirius ruthlessly rejected his plea.

Seeing Subaru’s disappointed gaze, Sirius bowed her head.

Sirius: “Of course, I originally wanted to comply. But the diligent you have surely already decided that while I wait, you’ll slip far away from my extended fingers. I know you. After all, we’ve been together for so long. You’ll try your utmost and overstrain yourself alone to reach your desired results... and...”

In all honesty, Subaru couldn't help but feel a heartfelt admiration for her love.

Even so, Sirius's regard of Petelgeuse's hard working nature was a rather blind perspective. After all, the Witch Cult existed to do nothing but harm.

Sirius: "Finally, finally we were able to meet again. It's been a year, a whole year, since I've been at your side. In this century, this is the longest we've been apart! And even after a year of not seeing me... you ask me to leave? I don't want to. I can't. In your period of absence of the period I always wanted wanted wanted wanted wanted wanted wanted to become one with you!"

Subaru: "——"

Sirius: "On top of that, you still want me to wait!? And now you have a spirit who I've never seen before! Where did you find her!? What exactly is appealing about woman like that!? She's tiny, her face is arrogant, and she has neither the chest nor the bottom of a woman! Is it because she's a spirit!? Because you're a spirit, your woman has to be a spirit too? The time we spent together loses to such a flimsy reason? I'll burn you."

The direction of her speech became perverse, and became weird, and a crazed shimmer of unbridled frenzy rose in her gaze again. The crowd also left courting affection for anger, blood streaming red from their eyes and noses.

Sirius: "And, is the reason you need to deal with Regulus the half-witch in his arms? That filthy half witch! That silver haired half witch! Why are you so partial to her!? Stop immediately, shouldn't you have understood that long ago? That despicable, loathsome, hateful, abhorrent garbage witch...! If you revive her, I'll burn her before your very eyes!"

Subaru: "You're... so increasingly incomprehensible, you..."

The madwoman gave a bloodthirsty shriek, revealing her animosity toward both Emilia and the Witch of Envy.

Wasn't the goal of the Witch Cult the Witch of Envy's resurrection? Subaru couldn't understand Sirius's utter loathing for her, then.

Rather, Sirius had absolutely no resonance with the Petelgeuse she longed for.

Although he'd originally thought that they couldn't have been companions, they turned out to be nothing but enemies.

Subaru: "——"

The impasse between the three resurfaced. Regulus planned to kill Subaru and Sirius.

Sirius would defend against Regulus and the nonexistent Petelgeuse within Subaru.

Subaru wanted to rescue Emilia from Regulus and to free Tina from Sirius, and, if possible, kill the two archbishops.

Obviously. However, the situation Subaru was in was far too harsh.

Searching for such a solution that Subaru didn't have the ability to attain, his forehead began to bead with sweat.

Return by Death, followed by Sirius's appearance and Regulus's debut. After that, a melee battle between and with the archbishops. This loop had been the longest yet.

During that period of time, although he'd retrieved useful intelligence, nothing but awful things had happened.

Subaru: "... Beako."

Beatrice: "You can try either one, in fact."

From his back came the timid voice of Subaru's support.

Subaru, who held authority over what would happen next, made his decision. And at that time.

Regulus: “—Oh.”

Sirius: “—hk”

Simultaneously, both Regulus and Sirius both, changed their attitude.

They each put their hands into their coats, and, from their, retrieved their books.

Subaru: “That is...”

A familiar book with a heavy black binding.

At this proximity, there was no way that Subaru could have been mistaken. That was what the Witch Cult obeyed above all else, the Gospel.

Regulus & Sirius: “——”

Ignoring Subaru, who'd raised his guard again, the two archbishops opened their gospels and surveyed its writ.

Then, although the their timing had been identical, their expressions gave stark contrast to each other.

Regulus: “I assume the content is the same for both of us, is that true, Sirius?”

Sirius: “Shut up, Regulus. Why... why now? When finally, finally I found him again...”

Regulus wore a light smile, and Sirius, who gritted her teeth and spoke in a voice full of remorse. Even if the predator and the madwoman held opposing feelings, their wills were unified.

The two looked to Subaru.

Regulus: “Although I’m sorry, it’s time now. My free time with you has ended. You should thank the Gospel... well, that’s not right. That doesn’t make sense. After all, what’s the use in being thankful to paper? So, rather, you should be grateful to me, who follows the Gospel faithfully.”

Subaru: “Thank you for your faith... but what was that about time? What are you talking about!?”

Regulus: “It’s just as you heard. We were given free time before we need to do what must be done. I took that meaningful time to retrieve my bride.”

Sirius: “I feel incomplete... In front of that person, I shouldn’t be subjected to such treatment. It’s too cruel. I’m being washed away by sadness, don’t you know?”

Regulus spoke with composure, while Sirius forcibly expressed her sorrow. The crowd collapsed, and Beatrice bit back her tears.

However, Subaru and Regulus both remained completely unaffected.

Regulus: “Sorry, but your small, superficial love doesn’t touch my complete self at all. At most, it makes me feel a little dirty.”

In a contemptuous voice, Regulus, with Emilia still in his arms, turned his back to Subaru.

Really, he looked as if he were just planning to let them go. If Regulus left by himself, that was fine. But,

Subaru: “Stop, you bastard! Don’t just run off! Let her go! Otherwise, I’ll...”

Regulus: “I considered that.”

Subaru: “——!?”

Regulus stopped and only turned his head to smile.

Under that smile, Subaru felt as though a blade brushed his spine, and he swallowed, his entire body stiff.

It was impossible to prevent Regulus's next move.

Regulus: "I think that if my bride finds one of her attendants gone, she'll be lonely, and if I don't invite enough people, she'll be rather fickle. — So I won't kill you."

Regulus tapped the ground gently with his toes.

Although it was a gesture of comfort, as if adjusting his shoes, his foot dug neatly into the stone slab as if it were a shovel driving into soft ground.

The wreckage of the slate flew toward Subaru.

Bullets of soil seemed to defy gravity. Some of them brushed the outside of Subaru's right foot

— and, in the next moment, Subaru's foot vanished.

Subaru: "—Eh?"

A beast's claw had torn clear through his foot. On his right foot, the white of bone, pink of flesh, and yellow of marrow were cleanly exposed in a twisted cross section. His veins had all be severed, blossoming with blood.

Before he could comprehend what had just happened, the pain struck.

Subaru: "—hk!? Gah, ahk! aaaaAAHH!?"

The world became pure white, as if his head were being punctuated by countless sharp needles.

A scream lodged in his throat, Subaru was unable to support his own weight as he tumbled to the ground. His outstretched fingers desperately held his right leg. The wound was so large that the palm of his right hand couldn't cover it.

Beatrice: “Subaru! ? Subaru! Subaru, wait, I suppose! Right now!”

Beatrice fell to the ground with the discovery of the Subaru’s severe injury, and panicked as she began a chant of healing magic. Regulus nodded in satisfaction at the scene.

Regulus: “This is adequate retaliation for your reckless behavior up until just now, so I’ll let it go. Although I did consider the possibility of you doing it again, I think I still want to look forward to your future. This pain is sure to stop you if you considering hurting another person again. Don’t thank me. Just save someone else next time.”

Subaru: “aaaAA—hk! Kah, gah, can’t, kuu, gah!”

Pain, agony, suffering, hurthurthurthurthurthurhurt—!

A haze of agony. Molars being ground to dust from gnashing. A flashing world. The absence of an up and down. Was he sleeping? Or was he alive? Or maybe he was dead?

Confusion. Cluelessness. Noideanoideanoidea. Even so, there was something he needed to know.

Subaru: “E-Emili...a! Wa, gah—hk, t—hk”

Beatrice: “Subaru, you can’t afford to mess around! If you have to vomit, turn to the side. If you don’t, your throat will...”

Enduring pain and madness, Subaru moved his head. His heart beat like an alarm bell, and he began to choke up what felt like his organs.

The petite Beatrice, while desperately supporting Subaru’s body, did her best to cast healing magic. However, someone was laughing at her.

Beatrice: “You can’t be serious, in fact.”

Sirius: “I’m sorry. However, this obviously isn’t a joke. Isn’t that obvious?”

Behind Beatrice, in abhorrent whispers, Sirius replied in a dark tone.

Around Sirius, a crowd of people rolled as they screamed in pain.

All of them, with their hands on their right leg wound, desperately sought salvation. Like Subaru, their right feet had been torn off by a beast.

Sirius: “My beloved Petelgeuse would say that feeling pain is living, and that those feelings allows Love to be exercised. I know what better than anyone. However, I believe there is a better way of representing that form of Love until then. Thank you. That representation would be becoming one. After all, Love is a prayer for becoming one! Seeing the same sights, feeling the same emotions, living the same life, ending with the same death, that is Love!”

Opening her hands, her hands hit each other in a burst of clapping.

Sirius gave harsh puffs of air as she fixed her intense, envious gaze on Beatrice.

Sirius: “No matter who, everyone should experience the same feelings as him. However, only you and that dirty half-witch will be denied that experience. Who would grant you such an honor?”

Beatrice: “There’s no other woman out there who would be driven as mad with jealousy as you. But it doesn’t matter, since Betty has long been Subaru’s closest confidante. Betty is Subaru’s.”

Beatrice refused to flinch under Sirius’s cruel words.

Madwoman and spirit glared at each other, until Sirius turned away, breaking the interaction.

Sirius: “Now, I can only entrust him to you. After all, I have to prioritize the Gospel’s instructions. Yes, there is no other way. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. You know I want nothing but to return to you as soon as possible.”

At this moment, Sirius still acted mad in love with Subaru. The madwoman left the bloodstained square.

Quite unexpectedly, Beatrice did not give chase. She understood that refusing to allow her to escape would merely result in more sacrifices.

Beatrice: “—Subaru.”

With fluttering eyes, yellow bubbles burst from Subaru’s mouth.

Beatrice pressed her palm against his wound, attempting to stop the flow of blood. The wound was too deadly, any slip in concentration would lead to Subaru’s death.

For Beatrice, saving Subaru was, naturally, her greatest priority. Although, there was another priority Beatrice had to follow.

Subaru: “If you don’t treat the other injured people...”

However, the number of wounded people rolling around the square was over thirty.

They had all suffered the same injury as Subaru, and in a cruel twist, the healing being performed on Subaru hadn’t reached them. She would need to heal every injury individually.

That was the burden Beatrice needed to take up. But, even if she exhausted her store of mana, she wouldn’t be able to bear it.

Beatrice: “—Subaru, compared to...”

Desperately trying to heal Subaru’s injury, determined to keep a strong facade, Beatrice spoke with a hoarse voice.

A stream of tears flowed down her white cheeks. Beatrice: “I’m sorry. I’m sorry...”

Beatrice voiced a string of constant apologies.

Even though she knew her voice could not reach Subaru, rendered unconscious by pain. Even if she knew that she could solve nothing.

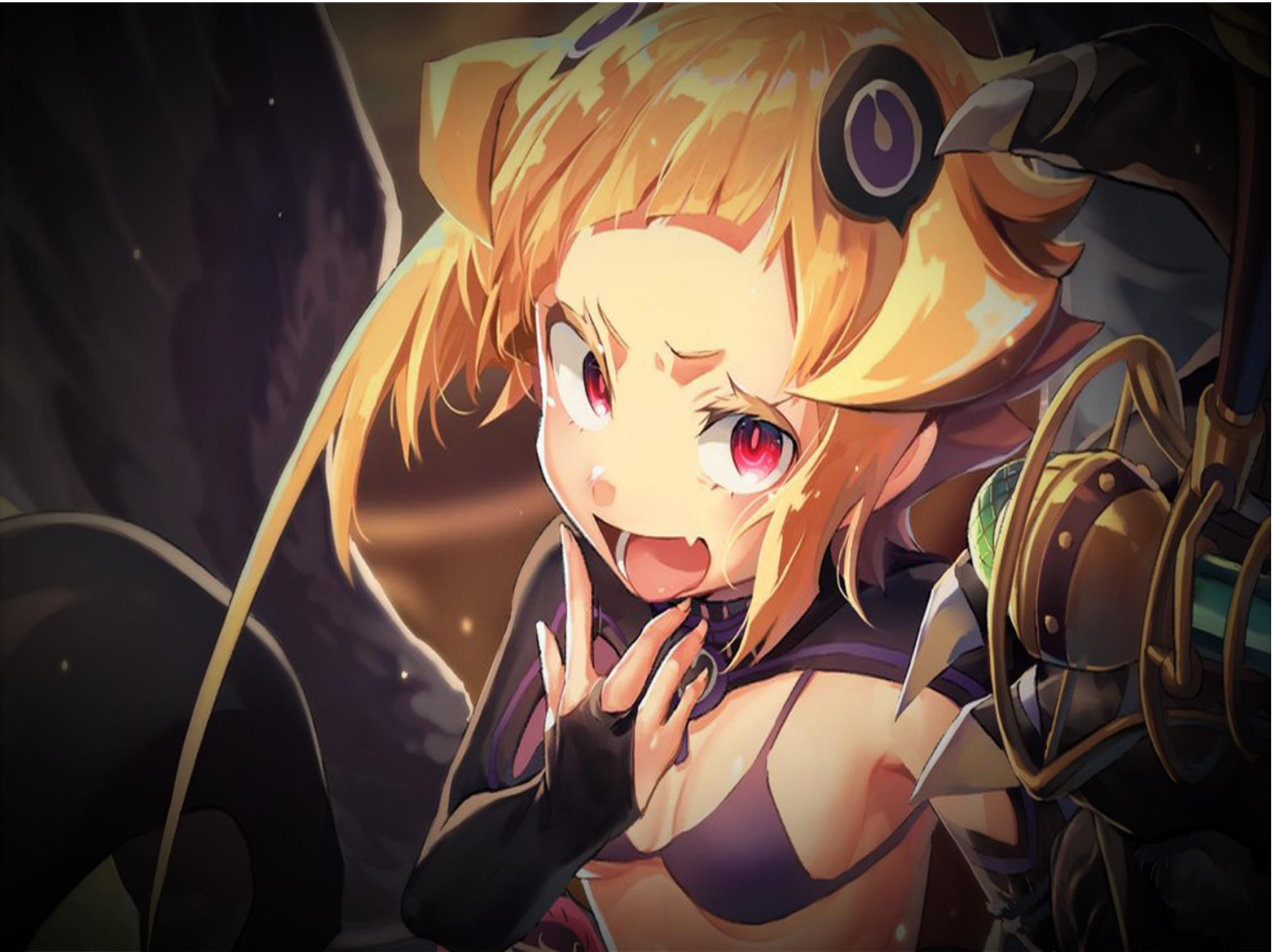
Beatrice: "I'm sorry, Emilia."

Sirius had created so many victims and left the plaza. Regulus had taken Emilia with his overwhelming power.

— The two Sin Archbishops strode into the city of Pristella.

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Chapter 27 - Noise



A piercing sound.

Abrupt, vibrating, heavy, empty, distant, nearby.

The flow of his blood dulled, as if his blood vessels were infected by an inflow of sludge, his organs were sluggish, as if filled with clay, and oxygen didn't reach his brain, leaving his thoughts foggy and unreliable.

The vibration was in his nearby vicinity, the sound shaking the membrane of his skull, traveling through his bones to his hands and feet.

The darkness he'd become used to faded for a sudden white light, which his eyes were unable to accept. In that white light, forms and shapes moved about, as if children had cast paint everywhere in a room of white.

The heavy sound faded, and, as his eyes moved under their lids, his body had entirely burned out. Accompanied by nausea and sluggishness, Subaru slowly opened his eyes.

Everything became distant as he entered a calm world, and, after tens of seconds, his eyes were restored to their original state, as darkened rooms and dirty ceilings opened. He felt the breaths of many bodies moving around and keeping busy in his surroundings. People moving around in order to keep the surroundings busy, and their bodies.

???: "Hey, bro, you're awake!"

Ears ringing with tinnitus, Subaru, attacked by a sudden sound with an unnecessary amount of strength, focused on it.

???: "Cat-eared young lady, over here! Everyone else, keep working! Sorry, but keep working! We're fighting against time!"

???: "Really nyow, you're annoying. People need quiet here, so quickly get back to work."

With a bow of his head, the large beastman apologized for his loud voice as he was approached by an angry young woman, no, young man.

Wearing a revealing dress, a bloodstained Ferris looked at Subaru with a sigh of relief.

Ferris: "Now that you've woken up, do you understand the situation... actually, can you speak right now?"

Subaru: "... Ah, Ferris?"

Ferris: “Yep, it’s everyone’s favorite Ferri-chan. You’re Natsuki Subaru, and we’re at a field hospital right nyow since you were heavily injured, got it?”

Ferris quickly explained the situation to a hoarse Subaru. Reluctantly, his brain digested his speech word by word.

Looking around, Subaru identified his surroundings. At last, he noticed that he was lying on a simple bed made of pieces of cloth.

Then, as Ferris said, this looked like a field hospital.

Everyone, people lay writhing in pain, awaiting treatment like Subaru’s.

The taste of blood, a miserable, whispered cry. Just healing magic couldn’t keep up, and needles and sutures were introduced to wounds.

Subaru: “What... exactly is happening?”

Ferris: “Looks chaotic, doesn’t it? Slowly, try to remember what happened before you fainted. If you recall that, you’ll find the answer.”

Ferris’s words weren’t gentle, but that wasn’t a matter of his mood. Rather, he had no energy to spare for gentleness. His sleeves were rolled up, and his white skin and face were stained with blood.

Imagining the volume of work that Ferris, a first-rate healer, would need to take on in the face of this tragedy wasn’t difficult. And, the cause of this tragedy was—

Subaru: “The Witch Cult...”

Ferris: “Really, those guys are the worst. My understanding of them was too naive... I never expected them to pull something like this. Of course, nyo one else was expecting this either.”

Remorsefully biting his lips. Ferris lowered his chin at Subaru.

The regret in Ferris was clear. Although Subaru understood that, there were other uncertainties.

Subaru: “E-Emilia!? Where is Emilia? Is she here?”

Ferris: “.....”

Subaru: “That bastard, Greed... the archbishop took Emilia. Then, I...”

He quiver, coming to understand the cause of his restlessness.

In Ferris’s lowered gaze and silence, Subaru found a clear answer. At least, Emilia wasn’t here.

Then if his impression before passing out was right, she’d been taken by Regulus.

Subaru: “And Beatrice? The little girl who was with me? She has an arrogant, lovable face, and curly hair... Beatrice?”

Emilia had more than likely been abducted by Regulus.

Judging from Regulus’s attitude, the likelihood that he would hurt Emilia, although uncertain, should be low. Although he couldn’t be forgiven, that was the case.

But what had happened to Beatrice? Sirius and Regulus had both been present, and Sirius had held a strong hostility toward Beatrice.

Since Subaru had been safely carried into the field hospital, they escaped from Sirius. So who had protected Subaru?

Subaru: “Hey, please. Tell me. Beatrice...”

Ferris: “——”

Not finding an answer to his unease, Subaru desperately sought an answer from Ferris, who closed his eyes. The giant beastman standing next to him, Ricardo, the head of the [Iron Fang], looked to the side.

Subaru followed his gaze.

Subaru: "Beatrice."

Lying a ways from the people receiving treatment was a lone maiden in a dress.

Seeing her sleeping in a makeshift bed like his own. Subaru went to lift the towel covering his stomach and run to her.

However, halfway to his feet, severe pain crippled him. On top of that, his right foot stopped obeying him, and the system of his body broke down.

His head was heavy with fatigue, and his right foot couldn't understand why it was unable to move.

Hurrying to take a look, the horror of his own foot left Subaru speechless.

Subaru: "Oh..."

Ferris: "Subaru-kyun would have lost a foot without Beatrice's healing. You'll have to thank that child later."

Subaru's right foot was missing about half of its flesh, and was obviously a different size from his left foot. It was also wrapped in several layers of thick bandages, and a board had been fixed to his heel. All those had caused him to lose his balance.

He couldn't help but brush it with his fingers, and, in that moment, a bolt of realization struck him.

Subaru: "I remember...!"

Regulus's last blow before he'd left.

He'd taken Emilia, said some nonsense, and kicked the ground up as easily as he could kick sand, and the soil had struck Subaru's food.

At that moment, Subaru's right foot had been wounded as if it had been mauled by a wild animal's claws. And that had resulted in the present state of Subaru's right foot.

Ricardo: "When I stumbled upon the scene, your foot was only connected by a few tendons. A crying little miss had been desperately healing it until we got you help."

Ferris: "After that, Subaru was carried here and treated by Ferri-chan. Although Ferri-chan's treatment can't guarantee that your foot will be the same as before, nyow the bones and nerves are linked, and the flesh is regenerating, so don't do anything to upset it."

Crossing his wrists, Ferris made an X, prepared to deal with Subaru's reluctance, however, Subaru obeyed in silence, his attention more focused on Beatrice's bed.

As Ferris sighed in relief, a large hand supported Subaru's shoulder, allowing him to slowly make his way to Beatrice.

Ricardo: "As for getting you to that little miss, I can handle that."

Subaru: "Thanks, sorry about this."

Ricardo: "No worries."

Ricardo moved Subaru's entire bed near Beatrice's. From there, Subaru leaned forward to take a better look at her. The little girl was sleeping so quietly that Subaru couldn't even hear her breathing.

Even though she was a spirit, Beatrice slept like a human. Unlike Puck, she couldn't dematerialize, so this was how she reduced the burden of materialization on her mana.

For this reason, seeing Beatrice's sleeping face was hardly uncommon for Subaru. Only, this was the first time he'd seen her sleeping so quietly.

Subaru: "She's, just sleeping... right? Still, I'm worried..."

Ferris: "Asleep isn't the right word. Right now, she's lost her function as a spirit... A state of suspended animation might be closer."

Subaru: "Suspended animation? Why...!?"

Touching Beatrice's forehead, he was surprised to find how low her temperature was. Brushing her eyelashes and her face yielded no reaction, just as Ferris had reported. In response to the look on Subaru's face, Ricardo squatted down.

Ricardo: "According to the cat-eared lady, this happened as the result of mana overuse, which indeed seems to be the case. I found the square you were in completely by accident, bro. Everyone there had almost the same injury, which the little miss was taking care of on her own."

Subaru: "——"

Ricardo spoke with a sigh, leaving Subaru silent for a while.

The same wound as Subaru — that was the result of the a bond transmitting the injury Subaru had gotten from Regulus Subaru attacking the feet of Regulus. Sirius certainly had complicated matters. The madwoman seemed to have left the scene, and Beatrice's fight had begun there.

She'd given equally thorough treatment to Subaru and everyone else who was wounded.

Of course, Subaru was a greedy man who asked for too much, and the child who accompanied that Subaru also refused to give up anyone.

So Beatrice had squeezed every last drop of her mana dry to save all those people, at this heavy price.

Subaru: "Beatrice is fine, right...? She just needs a little rest..."

Ferris: "... To be honest, I'm nyot too optimistic. Ferri-chan is a first rate healer, but doesn't know much about spirits. And this child isn't an ordinary spirit either. So I don't really knyow any real solutions."

Subaru: "There... there has to be a way! If Beatrice can't be saved, I..."

It had only been a year.

He had freed her from the archive in order to bring her happiness, and her life couldn't end here.

Happiness, happiness, happiness, no one deserves happiness more than this child. than anyone should be happy child is not it.

Ricardo: "If she needs magic to be brought back, can't she take some from another source? If bro is her contractor, than she should be able to get some from him, right?"

Ferris: "... Obviously, Subaru would easily be the source, but that idiot fractured his gate, so she can't use his mana."

Subaru: "Right, bocca fruits. With bocca fruits, I can restore my own mana, and from there I can give some to Beatrice...!"

Ferris: "Idiot!"

Ferris snapped angrily as he glared at the desperate Subaru.

Subaru was surprised at that unexpectedly sharp reprimand, and Ferris immediately put on a fiddling, shy demeanor.

Ferris: "How many times have I said this? That's really dangerous for Subaru-kyun's body. In fact, it would be like poison. If you did that, we'd just end up with two casualties... so you can't."

Subaru: "....."

Ferris's strict words were tinged with sadness. Reading that sincere thought, Subaru closed his mouth and swallowed his reckless judgments.

Ferris was an expert in healing, so he had of course considered a myriad of ways to help Beatrice.

Subaru's sudden thought must have already been considered.

Ferris: "I can understand Subaru's worry about Beatrice-chan. And although I understand, there's nyothing we can do for her right nyow. There are many other things that we have to worry about than just that child..."

Subaru: "Beatrice. . . Right, there's Emilia too..."

Ferris's words brought Subaru back to reality.

He turned his attention to the field hospital — and found that something was off. There were people with wounded right feet, the same injury as Subaru, but there were also plenty of people with different injuries.

Subaru: "How's the situation? ... No, what else has happened? What's with all the injuries?"

Ricardo: "The Witch Cult is here like you said, bro."

Subaru: "But it can't just be them, right? I only saw two archbishops. This level of harm can't be enacted by just two people. In other words, they've brought the fodder cultists too."

The two archbishops were ridiculously powerful.

So Subaru had simply assumed that they would be the only cultists present — but it was only natural that, as Petelgeuse did, they had brought underlings to the city as well.

That was the only explanation for such damage.

Subaru: "The two archbishops and the cultists under them, are they attacking the city right now?"

Ferris: "On this matter, there are a variety of..."

Ferris's voice was bitter as he began to answer Subaru's conclusion.

However, before she could confirm or deny it, an unexpected interruption came. That was,

???: "Yahoo, yahoo, yahoo!"

The space rang with the sound of a high pitched voice.

The voice's relaxed tone contrasted sharply with the somber atmosphere, as if someone had accidentally tuned a TV channel of an entertainment program, during a serious conversation.

Subaru: "Wh-what?"

Hearing the sound, Subaru looked around wildly, and, unable to find the owner, he immediately realized its the source.

Subaru's immediate impression of the sudden voice was that it sounded like it had come from a loudspeaker or radio, a thought that mirrored one he'd had this morning.

Subaru: "The city's radio broadcast magic?"

???: "Hello, all you meat creatures! No matter how many times you've heard it, doesn't my beauty and my lovely voice excite you? Gahahahaha!"

As if verifying Subaru's idea, the voice appeared again, amplified by a magic speaker.

That voice rang with a childlike cruelty, like a girl who'd spurned etiquette and trampled on conventional manners of speech.

Her sharp laughter seemed able to pierce right into your mind, causing an aversion both mental and physical.

Subaru: "What, a stupid voice, this is..."

Ferris: "Hush, Subaru, quiet."

Ferris straightened his ear with one finger and put another over her mouth.

A serious Ferris seemed to be completely absorbed, and Ricardo wore a vigilant expression. The bedridden injured all clapped their hands over their ears.

This didn't seem to be the first time they'd heard it.

???: "Alright, you meat creatures enthralled by a beautiful girl's enticing voice, I have news for you: we're all tired, so we're going home now. Just kidding! The true tossing and turning of day and night starts now! Gahahahaha!"

A harsh, harsh voice, like a mirror next to the ear being scratched with sharp claws, filled with sadistic glee. What, what, what was this voice, what was this woman?

Forehead dripping with cold sweat, Subaru was well aware of his body's abnormal condition. As Subaru's mind turned, his body had been captured.

???: "Setting aside my funny, laugh-inducing joke, let's continue with the news. As I said just now, the city has been occupied by us. You're all caged birds... no, you're all insects in a cage for insects."

Subaru: "——!?"

???: "Insects are just bugs, and the owner of that cage gets to decide just what to do with you. Wings and head, prepare to have them removed... Kahahaha, how ugly, how awful! What a merciless life. You should be thankful for being left in my tender care. Gahahahaha!"

A repeated, malicious laugh.

One which belonged to a presence which despised others and found vicious delight in ravaging their joy.

Subaru knew this kind of presence better than anybody.

???: “Wait, wait, you idiots can’t understand the real meaning of my precious words. Poor incompetent fools, only thinking about slabs of meat in their free time. My gentle, loving self will make this easier to understand. I’ll tell you with my spit which you masochists love.”

Subaru: “——”

???: “Insects in a cage can’t do anything about their owner’s mood. The most you can do to please us is to lie fearfully in your cage. When we’re in a bad mood, you can only tremble in fear as we tear your wings or legs off. When I bring you honey, I’ll be like your mother, gently stroking your heads. There~fore~, kahahahahaha!”

In the face of that constant viciousness, Subaru imitated Ferris and listened silently. A breath, a word, muddy feelings in his chest stifled, Subaru sealed his will with iron. And then, he noticed. He noticed it.

What, was that?

???: “Later, we’ll have more to ask of you scum. You’ll wear desperately ugly expressions, cry that you don’t want to die, don’t want to die, don’t want to die and think of ways to emerge from the crowd and give us answers. In that case, my moving kindness might have me consider setting down the cage in my hand. Gah— isn’t that really easy to understand! Gahahaha!”

With excitement, the speaker clapped, stomping her feet from her seat.

Her speech, her attitude, her voice, Subaru found them all unbearably irritating— but that wasn’t the problem at hand.

From the beginning, he could hear that sound.

He had thought that it had come from being in the same room as that magic device. Faintly accompanying that woman’s voice was a sound that Subaru had certainly caught.

However, he was unsure of what exactly that sound was.

What was still worse was that he had almost, but not quite, reached the answer. Unknowing, unaware, unwitting.

A noisy heartbeat, the noisy flow of his blood. Reject and understand, reject and understand.

— A very faint buzzing sound, like the flapping of a myriad of wings.

He was very close, infinitely near the right solution. Although close, he wasn't quite there. A plume of flapping feathers, that was the noise that seemed to be mixed into the broadcast.

Many magical phenomena were unclear to Subaru. So perhaps this was just his imagination. But Subaru's common sense felt that something was off.

That sense of violation and that plume of feathers stuck in Subaru's mind.

???: "And, the end. My precious words end here. Metamorphosing meat creatures and insects should work their hardest. Like I said before... we've taken control of the four towers that operate the waterways. I think it's best to not try anything weird? A drowned man's dead face is unbearable ugly! Gahahahaha—"

That cruel high-pitched laughter was interrupted as the sound faded.

That sound of wings was gone as well. Subaru could finally disengage his body, and he immediately flew over to Ferris and Ricardo.

Subaru: "What did you think of the broadcast just now?"

Ferris: "What I think of it... Our limbs were mercilessly taken, and we've been reduced to just a head, that's how Ferri-chan sees this."

A bitter Ferris bit his fingers and replied to a frowning Subaru.

Various places had become stages, for the purpose of being seized by the enemy.

Subaru: “So just now, that was the Witch Cult...”

Ferris: “The first broadcast came when Subaru-kyun was sleeping. In it, the broadcaster introduced herself...”

Ferris paused, looking unsure of whether or not he should continue. Subaru, ignorant of the reason for his hesitation, tilted his head.

In the Witch Cult, the common practice among archbishops was to first announce their sin. After that came their name.

The Sin Archbishop of Lust, the third archbishop that Subaru hadn’t imagined would be present. Her name was,

Ferris: “Although this is disgusting, and Ferri-chan doesn’t believe it in the slightest, this is the name that was given.”

Ferris said so, rendering the credibility of the testimony he was about to repeat very low.

Ferris: “Capella Emerada Lugunica. —Although it couldn’t be, it’s a nyame of royalty.”

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Chapter 28 - A Meeting Covered in Wounds



Subaru: "Wait, let's calm down. First, can we sort through what we know?"

Ferris's words had pushed the limit of what Subaru could handle right now.

Ferris and Ricardo nodded at Subaru's raised hand as they considered the new information that had been broadcasted.

Subaru: "Moving anywhere... will be pretty difficult with so many injured."

Ferris: “Well, the most severe wounds have already been stabilized, and there shouldn’t be any more people showing up, but still.”

With a sense of professionalism, Ferris gave his diagnosis. Subaru took a moment to examine the conditions of the field hospital.

Minimal lighting, and a ground of cold stone making ground. From the unique feel of its air, Subaru judged the place to be underground — almost like the parking lot of a large department store.

Subaru: “Are we still in Pristella?”

Ferris: “It’s one of Pristella’s shelters. The broadcast this morning mentioned it, remember? In Pristella, if an issue with the waterways ever occurred, the water damage would be troublesome, so there are shelters all over the city. This is one of the shelters on First Street.”

Ricardo: “The square where I found bro is close to here. After a rough start, we managed to bring bro and the other refugees to safety!”

Following Ferris, Ricardo gave his proclamation as he pounded loudly on his thick breastplate. Ferris glared intently at Ricardo, who took several moments to stop.

Ferris: “It’s lucky that Ferri-chan was also here, with so many people wounded. This dog-faced mister wouldn’t have been able to handle any of the treatment.”

Ricardo: “Yep! Now I don’t need to have any regrets! Hahaha!”

Ricardo’s usual attitude and his laugh were refreshing, even if they were out of place for this somber hospital. If one person kept a positive attitude, everyone could maintain hope.

Ferris: “So, what happened to Subaru-kyun?”

Subaru: “Ah, right. There were two archbishops in the square, Greed and Wrath. The one who destroyed my foot was Greed, who abducted Emilia... however, the one who caused the injury on everyone else was Wrath.”

Ferris: “How did that happen?”

Subaru: “The authority of Wrath is... It’s a little difficult to explain, but if anyone is injured, she has the power to transmit the injury to other people.”

He chose his words carefully, attempting to give a simple explanation of her power. Ricardo had his head tilted, and Ferris’s complexion changed as he realized the implications of her ability.

He looked to the wounded and looked at the strap of the right foot.

Ferris: “So... that’s the reason why Subaru-kyun and everyone else had such a similar injury. I had a bad feeling already, but...”

Subaru: “Ah...”

Absurd emotions often accompanied a distorted character. However, with Sirius, this absurdity was also physiological in nature.

Subaru had still more to say.

Subaru: “And Greed’s also very troublesome.”

Ferris: “Ah~... Ferri-chan’s already tired as is, I don’t have the energy to hear about more troublesome things.”

Subaru: “Sorry, I don’t think that’s possible. —That damned Greed, he can invalidate any attack. Whether being bathed in fire, hit by a whip, or directly punched, all damage is null.”

The unconscious Emilia, in Regulus’s arms, was defenseless. Even bathed in Sirius’s flames, Regulus had flawlessly defended both himself and Emilia. That had resulted in a display of his unmanageable power.

This would prove to be an incredibly tiresome situation.

Ferris: “A guy who can pass on injuries, and a guy who’s invincible... Ah, you have to be kidding me.”

Subaru: “That other archbishop... Petelgeuse’s Unseen Hand was quite powerful, but this guy’s on a completely different level.”

That said, Petelgeuse’s ability had ended up not being effective on Subaru. Considering that ineffectiveness, Subaru had thought of him as a simple lunatic rather than a Sin Archbishop.

Thus, this would be his first formal battle with the Witch Cult.

Subaru: “And the archbishop who just introduced herself, Lust... her abilities are probably just as troublesome.”

Ferris: “Worst of all... There are probably five archbishops here.”

Subaru: “Five...!?”

Ferris uttered a hypothesis which was terrifying beyond Subaru’s wildest imagination. What had happened, to give him such an idea?

Ferris sighed and straightened his finger at the subdued Subaru.

Ferris: “Listen. Think of the broadcast, of what Lust said. This city has four water gates, right?”

Subaru: “Ah, right, they’d seized them, which means that they could be planning to sink the city... so, that’s a very dangerous situation....”

Ferris: “And there’s the possibility of an archbishop occupying each... Already, there are three archbishops gathered in one place, which is completely unprecedented. So the worst of worst situation comes to mind... there are even more archbishops here.”

Subaru: “Four... tch.”

Speaking the number out loud, Subaru finally understood what Ferris wanted to say.

There were four water gates, north, south, east, and west, which ran the city of Pristella. Occupying all of them implied,

Subaru: “So it could be that each tower has an archbishop guarding it? In that case, that should make four archbishops...”

Ferris: “Subaru-kyun, consider what just happened. —The broadcast just now used a magic which only exists in the City Hall. The enemy must also occupy the central hub of the city, meaning that they’ve captured five strongholds.”

Subaru: “—hk”

That even more hopeless speculation left Subaru breathless.

Like Ferris said, the City Hall must have been taken to give that broadcast. In addition to Lust, who occupied it, there must be two other archbishops.

The only fathomable explanation for that would be a coordinated attack from the Witch Cult.

Subaru: “Aside from the square I was in, has there been any other commotion? Have there been any other attacks?”

Ferris: “——”

If this were an offense by the Witch Cult, it would be difficult to imagine that they would only target a single location. Subaru could only pray that his worst fears of Casualties wouldn’t become a reality.

Absentmindedly, Ferris cast his gaze downward, falling silent. Ricardo gave a cough, a set of sharp teeth visible on the beastman’s large face.

Ricardo: “Honestly, the only situation we know is our own. We don’t even know where the other shelters are, so it’s in our best interest to stay here.”

Subaru: "Why? Shouldn't we look for our allies so that we can collaborate? Aren't you worried about them... that's right!"

As he spoke, Ricardo gestured with his hands, and Subaru hurriedly looked up at Ferris.

In this shelter of wounded people, it was odd that Ferris and Ricardo were the only people Subaru knew. Especially when Ferris was here.

Subaru: "Where are Crusch-san and Wilhelm-san? It's unusual for you three to be separated. Are they in another shelter?"

Ferris: "...You're asking a difficult question, Subaru-kyun. The only ones you know here are Ferri-chan and the mister, and as you can see—"

Ferris replied with a sense of unease, and Subaru felt a deep anxiety rise within himself. Then, a gentle voice relieved that intense atmosphere.

Suddenly hearing that voice, Subaru looked up and around, unable to locate its owner.

???: "I'm sorry. I seem to have been worrying you, Ferris-chan. It's good to see you, Subaru-sama."

Ferris: "Crusch-sama is such a meanie."

Subaru: "Wha? Huh?"

Ferris, who was conversing with his invisible master, reached into his dress. Subaru watched with round eyes as he pulled out a familiar object.

Subaru: "Wait, this is..."

Ferris: "That's right. It's loot from a year ago. We used them too, remember?" Ferris replied, revealing a hand mirror in his grip.

At first glance, the mirror lacked any defining characteristic, but rather than show a reflection, its face reflected a green-haired beauty with a gentle face — without a doubt, that was Crusch.

The magic device known as a Conversation Mirror was more or less this world's version of a cell phone, which lets its owners speak through paired mirrors. A year ago, they had played a role in the battle with the Witch Cult, and they had been brought to this city as well.

Crusch, opposite the mirror, frowned slightly before the silent Subaru.

Crusch: "Ferris. Subaru-sama seems a little troubled. Did you hide this from him? "

Ferris: "Syorry about that. But, but, I didn't think our next call would be so soon, so I didn't think it was that important to tell him yet."

Subaru: "W-Wait. Give me a moment. Thanks to the Conversation Mirrors, you're in contact with Crusch, who's at another shelter, is that right?"

Crusch: "Indeed."

As master and knight talked, Subaru took a moment to sort through his confusion. The Conversation Mirror explained Ferris's calmness about his missing master.

Tentatively, to confirm Crusch's safety with his own eyes, Subaru took the mirror from Ferris.

Subaru: "Thank goodness... is difficult to say right now with what's happening, but we're lucky that we could get in touch. Crusch-san, are you hurt at all?"

Crusch: "No, thanks for your concern. Fortunately, I managed to find a shelter in time, without suffering any injury. I heard that Subaru-sama received a serious wound and had to be carried in. How are you doing?"

Subaru: "I can't say anything like, 'I'm completely fine', but it's good enough. I'll do something. I'll move as soon as the wound is bandaged... Ferris, don't look at me like that."

As Subaru announced his intent, he felt Ferris's harsh glare stabbing into him. However, although he was being ungrateful, Subaru couldn't sit by and do nothing. Breaking the deadlock they were in was of the utmost urgency.

He couldn't lie around obediently, waiting for conditions to deteriorate.

Subaru: "We'll talk about this later... Crusch-san, how's the situation in your shelter? Did anyone else make it there?"

Crusch: "Yes. There are several others with me..."

Julius: "I'm also here, Subaru. Fortunately, everyone who was in the hotel made it here."

From somewhere behind Crusch, an elegant voice joined the conversation.

The moment he heard it, Subaru froze briefly before giving a sharp shake of his head. He didn't want to be a fool who didn't realize how encouraging that voice was.

Subaru: "Your presence there is kinda reassuring, Julius."

Julius: "I heard you ended up being carried into your shelter, unconscious. Since you've climbed back up with your usual liveliness, it seems that my worries were baseless... Is it true that Emilia- sama was abducted?"

Subaru: "...It's true. Sorry. I'm so useless."

Julius: "You were facing two archbishops. I'm not so awful a man as to blame you for a lack of strength. Anastasia-sama and Crusch-sama are both here, as well as a few members of the Iron Fang. Ah, two of Felt-sama's followers are here too."

He quickly confirmed Emilia's status, without holding Subaru accountable.

Although the kindness from the other side of the mirror was touching, it amplified Subaru's feelings of guilt. While listening to his words, Subaru confirmed the presence of a wounded man in the refuge.

Subaru: "Right, you should tell Felt's guys that their friend is here. He's wounded, but alive."

Julius: "I see, that's good to hear. I'll be sure to pass it on. They're trying to act brave, but they're obviously worried. —Well then, Subaru."

After Ton and Kan had been informed of Larkins's safety, Julius lowered his voice, changing the atmosphere of their conversation.

Julius: "What do we do?"

Subaru: "...I haven't a clue why you're asking me that."

Julius: "As Sloth had shown, you seem to have a knack for dealing with the Witch Cult. Maybe you could pull something unexpected and solve this dilemma?"

Subaru: "What kind of nonsense is that? Sorry to disappoint, but I'm not some kind of Witch Cult expert."

Julius: "That's regrettable. Now, about Emilia-sama. There is no doubt that your heart is the most anxious. What do you want to do?"

Subaru's reply obviously hadn't answered Julius's expectations, but he wasn't discouraged. He understood that thinking of Subaru as some miraculous archbishop slayer would be too much to look for.

Rather, the latter half of his sentence held his true question.

Subaru: "...Emilia was taken by Greed. He only spouts his own selfish beliefs and doesn't accept any disagreements. I don't want to leave Emilia with him for even a second."

Julius: "That is to say, to rescue Emilia from Greed is your responsibility."

Subaru: "Of course... did you just say responsibility?"

Julius spoke in a subdued tone as he showed Subaru an open palm, with five fingers outstretched.

Julius: "Listen, Subaru. Ferris should have clarified that there are likely five archbishops at each of Pristella's key sites. Taking into account the status of each enemy, the division of the battle is a very important issue."

Subaru: "... No matter from where, they can sink the Watergate City."

Julius: "That's right. The condition for defeating the archbishops is to attack each of those places at the same time. In the meantime, we have to reestablish contact with our forces, who are scattered across the city... you understand our situation, right?"

Although unable to get in touch with comrades in various places, Julius had put forth a plan of coordinated attack. Originally, the magic of the city was responsible for maintaining contact with those places.

However, when the city hall had fallen, everyone had been separated and had sought refuge in different shelters. In order to judge the state of the others shelters, action needed to be taken.

Ferris: "By the way, Wil-jii confirmed that there's a mob wandering the city. They seem to have lost their senses and are acting like cultists."

Subaru: "...That would be that bastard Sirius's authority... Damn, this is looking more and more desperate by the second."

Hearing Ferris's annoying piece of information, Subaru scratched his face in agitation as more bad news came to light. At the very least, there must be a way of getting in touch with all the existing combat forces—

Subaru: "I don't know where Otto and Garfiel are, and Emilia's been kidnapped by Greed. What a mess..."

Julius: "Joshua and Deputy Chief of the Iron Fang are both missing, as are Wilhelm-sama, Felt-sama, and Reinhardt. Priscilla-sama, too..."

Subaru: "I don't know where Al and that garbage man are, but Priscilla should have been in the city park before the commotion started. I don't know what happened to her after that... damn it, Liliana should be with her too."

Priscilla wasn't normal in any sense of the word, and Liliana was also honestly very strange. Subaru didn't want either of them to be hurt.

Taking into account Priscilla's proclaimed luck and that Songstress's character, Subaru could only hope that they would be fine.

Patrasche had also been in the Water Plumage Pavilion. She was smart enough to avoid attention, so worrying about her would be needless.

Constant sources of worry plagued Subaru, and he felt that launching five simultaneous attacks was outside of the realm of possibility.

No matter how it was said, it would be impossible. There weren't enough combatants to attack five locations, not to mention that they would be facing archbishops. The only thing most people could bring to such a fight was hope.

Subaru: "... Wait. Why do we have to go after all give places at the same time?"

Julius: "What do you mean? It's as we've already said. The Witch Cult can do tremendous damage from anywhere they occupy. Seizing one place would leave them with the rest..."

Subaru: "It's not like that though, right? I understand that we need to seize all four towers eventually. But why at the same time?"

Julius: "Once they discover that they've been sabotaged in one location, it's a matter of course that the other archbishops would commence with their plans, no? That must be why they launched such a coordinated attack."

Julius gave a clear response to Subaru's doubts.

While listening to his words, Subaru pondered their accuracy. Of course, Julius's logic was clear and sound. But the opponents they faced weren't normal ones.

In that square, Regulus and Sirius had fought lethally.

Regulus hadn't been serious, and so he hadn't done much harm, but Sirius had definitely been intending to kill him. Regulus should have been able to defeat her in minutes.

Those guys, could they really have worked together to capture the city?

Subaru: "... Do they have any real sense of cooperation. Of course, they said that they'd collaborated to seize the watergates, but can they keep in organized contact every step of the way? That's what I'm thinking."

Julius: "On what basis?"

Subaru: "In the square I was at, two of the archbishops were trying to kill each other. They only stopped because they were given new instructions from the Gospel. If they hadn't, one would probably have killed the other."

Julius: "So they can't coordinate properly...?"

Julius still appeared faintly uncertain at Subaru's reply. Subaru understood his concern, however.

Subaru: "Is there anyone with access to the outside?"

Julius: "A couple members of the Iron Fang are scouting with an eye on the towers... what are you thinking?"

Subaru: "Although this could just be conjecture, isn't the simplest way of communication just casting magic signals in the air? In such a complex city, verbal communications is troublesome. At the very least, it would take a long time without a Conversation Mirror."

Julius: “The likelihood that the Witch Cult brought any such mirrors is low. My spirits would doubtlessly have detected them already. —Right, that’s it.”

They reached the same conclusions simultaneously. Subaru spoke first with an “ah”.

Subaru: “So they routinely make easily understood communications. If some type of commotion doesn’t arise, or they fail to notice it, they don’t act. And so, that reduces our need to disperse our combat forces.”

Julius: “... The only problem with this proposal is that one place is different from all the others.”

Subaru: “—The City Hall. The building that can inform the other towers of the attack. So we’d have to start with that one.”

The initial concentration of combat would be focused on the city’s central office. They would have to go there and defeat the Archbishop of Lust with their current force, and destroy the other towers one by one afterward.

Even then, it would be a test of speed, but the risk would be much lower than that of attacking all five locations at once. Subaru thought so, believed so.

Julius: “——”

On the other side of the mirror, Julius fell into a thoughtful silence.

Subaru’s proposal was based on the poor relationship between Regulus and Sirius, optimistically assuming that The Witch Cult was a Mess of Messes.

Of course, if the gospel had given a command like Kill Everyone in Pristella, that hope would be fundamentally subverted.

If he’d known this was going to happen, he should have attempted to ask for the content of the Gospel back then—

???: “—My deepest apologies for being late, can everyone hear me?”

In the middle of a heavy silence, another voice suddenly joined the conversation.

The weather-beaten, aged voice which Subaru so looked up to was more reliable than anything else in the present situation.

The face of a white-haired old man was reflected in the Conversation Mirror.

Subaru: “Wilhelm-san! You’re okay!”

Ferris: “Wil-jii! Thank goodness. You didn’t get in touch, it made people worry!”

Ferris also heard a familiar voice. At their welcome, Wilhelm opened his eyes and nodded.

Wilhelm: “My apologies, I was caught up in some trouble and couldn’t find a calm place. Now, finally, some citizens and I have arrived at a shelter. Subaru-dono and Ferris, seeing your safety gives me peace. And Crusch-sama?”

Crusch: “I’m fine. Wilhelm, I’m so glad you’re safe.”

Wilhelm: “Don’t worry about me... it was due to my powerlessness that I wasn’t at your side in this situation. Please allow me to trouble you to wait quietly. I will find you.”

Subaru: “Amazing, this feeling of relief isn’t normal...”

As Crusch and Wilhelm spoke through the mirror, Subaru, finding that the dialogue between master and subordinate held an overwhelming sense of security, sighed with admiration for Wilhelm.

Then, happy for his safety, Subaru ruminated his conversation with Julius as he attempted to organize a summary for Wilhelm.

However,

???: "There are several things to be said, but this is the most urgent."

At that moment, Wilhelm vanished from the mirror, replaced by a beastman; a kitten wearing a monocle.

This was the Deputy Chief of the Iron Fang, Tivey, who seemed to have joined forces with Wilhelm. His expression was unusually anxious.

Ricardo: "Hey! If it isn't Tivey! Your safety is better than than anything else."

Tivey: "You too, Chief... but, we're not fine right now. Is my sister with you right now?"

Ricardo: "Mimi? I haven't seen her, did something happen?"

At Tivey's feeble voice, Ricardo squinted into the mirror, where someone had replaced Tivey.

Hetaro: "Chief! Sister! Sister was...!"

Ricardo: "Hetaro? Why are you in such a panic?"

The one who had flown into view was Tivey's identical brother, Hetaro. Flying out with tears is, and Tibi (looks) like the brother of Darkarot. He was usually a mellow youth, but, right now, his face was distorted with grief.

Tears filled his round eyes, and his voice shook as he gazed into the mirror.

Hetaro: "O-Our Divine Protection of Trisection activated, from my sister! H-Her wound was so serious, and sister, she... hk!"

Tivey: "Brother, calm down... It's like he said. When sister was wounded, the wound also reached me and brother, so..."

Ricardo: "—Understood. Wait there, I'll find Mimi immediately. Don't cry, just wait."

In a voice lower than Subaru had ever heard from him, Ricardo spoke into the mirror.

In that smooth sound, Subaru felt a pressure unlike any he'd felt before, and he stepped back, trembling.

The beastman's eyes were full of anger, and his open mouth revealed a row of sharp canine teeth. He drew his blade, his large muscles tense.

He almost appeared to be searching for the missing girl in that very moment.

Anastasia: "—Wait, Ricardo. I can't allow such an arbitrary action."

The voice which stopped Ricardo from charging out came from another mirror. Ricardo turned back to face Anastasia, who'd claimed the mirror.

He frowned, lifting his blade at his employer.

Ricardo: "Don't stop me, lady. I don't want to kid with you right now."

Anastasia: "Surely, Ricardo, our long bond would have you realize that I'm not kidding around. Don't make me say it again. Right now, unauthorized actions cannot be allowed. Even for Mimi's sake."

Ricardo: "ARE YOU ASKING ME TO ABANDON MIMI !!?"

Opening his mouth, the rage expelled from Ricardo's mouth shook the air of the shelter.

That intensity was no laughing matter. Subaru stumbled several steps backward, away from the beast who emanated rage. Ricardo fixed his gaze on Anastasia.

Through the mirror, she met it unflinchingly.

Anastasia: "You should understand, Ricardo. We've entered unforeseen circumstances. You are my most important weapon. I cannot let you leave without permission."

Ricardo: "You dare say this? Who do you think you're talking to, Ana-bo... tch!"

Anastasia: "You, of course. Don't you forget, dog monster."

The two spoke names only old acquaintances would recognize. His skin tingling with electricity, Subaru searched for a place to interject.

He wanted to support Ricardo. But he could also understand Anastasia's sound opinion.

And he was an outside. Anastasia, someone who wasn't, who held a close relationship with them, chose to prioritize the safety of the city over Mimi.

Subaru realized that there was nothing for him to interrupt. Ricardo, too, should understand.

Subaru: "——"

In this way, time trickled on.

If Ricardo forced his exit, the injured Subaru and non-combatants couldn't stop him. Anastasia, who looked coolly into his eyes from across the magic mirror — only she could do anything.

However, Ricardo suddenly turned his head away from the mirror's gaze.

Subaru: "Wait, Ricardo!"

Anastasia: "—Stop, don't rush to make a conclusion."

Seeing Ricardo's movement, Anastasia spoke. Ricardo gave a silent response. He turned back and sniffed at the entrance to the shelter.

Ricardo: "Something's close by. What is this... the scent of blood?"

Subaru: "The scent of blood...?"

Among so many wounds, he seemed to be able to detect a fresh scent. Alert, Ricardo held his blade to the entrance of the shelter. Subaru and Ferris swallowed, watching Ricardo's judgment.

????: "—hk!"

Heavy footsteps cast a shadow over the refuge of the shelter.

In that moment, the patients in the shelter, intimidated by the insolence of the intruder, held their collective breath. It was none other than Subaru who broke that silence.

Standing there was a familiar short, blond figure.

Subaru: "Garfiel!?"

A sweaty, panting Garfiel. Suddenly noticing Subaru, he ran over with a strange wobble in his step. Then, Subaru noticed. Why Garfiel's movements were so shaky.

Garfiel: "——"

Everyone was lost for words as Garfiel reached Subaru. There, he bowed his head and sank to his knees, kneeling.

Garfiel: "Sorry, captain... hk! My amazin' self, is... worthless...! Incompetent... hk!"

After saying so, Garfiel raised a pained cry.

Lying in his bloodied arms was the figure of a dying Mimi.

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Chapter 29 - Gorgeous Tiger



—Half a day before Garfiel had rushed into the shelter,

Mimi: “And then~ Hetaro was on the verge of tears, so Mimi had no choice but to hold his hand. And then Tivey looked lonely, so Mimi had no choice~ So I ended up holding both of their hands~!”

Garfiel: “...ah, ‘s that so?”

Mimi: “Yep, that’s right~. And then, after that~, Missy looked really~ happy!”

Even given that uninterested response, the petite girl walking beside him smiled, not discouraged in the least.

The naive girl had orange hair and round eyes. Garfiel had no idea why she had entangled herself with someone from a hostile faction — this beastman, Mimi.

She had been like this since coming to the city of Pristella. No, looking back, she'd been clinging to Garfiel ever since she'd gone to the Roswaal Mansion as a messenger.

Initially, he had suspected that Mimi had been trying to get a read on Emilia's strongest retainer, but that hypothesis had been long since dismissed due to Mimi's behavior. Now, Garfiel had no clue why she'd attached herself to him.

The 'why' was impossible to deduce, and Garfiel could only tilt his head curiously to the side.

—Now, they were walking along Pristella's streets together in the dusk.

Neither had invited the other; rather, Mimi had just followed Garfiel as he'd skulked away from the hotel.

Although he'd hoped to be alone to mediate on his thoughts, Garfiel was too embarrassed to give that excuse to shake her off. Overwhelmed by Mimi's eagerness, he'd fallen into this trite conversation, while trying to sort through his feelings.

Mimi: "Gar~f, your expression is weird~. What happened? Was it something~ fun?"

Garfiel: "If somethin' fun'n happen', wouldn't my amazin' self look happy? My amazin' self don't wanna talk 'bout it, and there's no obligation t'talk 'bout it."

Mimi: "If you keep talking about complicated stuff like obligations, you'll end up like Joshua, yeah?"

Mimi thinks it's better to relax and enjoy stuff! It's better when Garfiel throws his head back~ laughing like an idiot~."

Garfiel: "You sayin' I look like'n idiot?"

Mimi's exaggerated words really were too exaggerated, and Garfiel bared his teeth open eyes wide open. She gave an "ahh~!" and dashed away. She stopped a little ways away, giggling as she waited

for him to catch up, seemingly having forgotten their previous interaction. Garfiel found it incredulous that she'd accuse him of being the one who laughed like an idiot.

An hour or so ago, before dinner, Garfiel had challenged the Sword Saint Reinhardt to a battle.

The strongest in the kingdom — or, as some would say, the strongest in the world, was today's Sword Saint.

Before their actual meeting, Garfiel had heard of his power from Subaru.

Reinhardt was a friend, a benefactor, and, in a somewhat complex way, a rival to Subaru. Encountering him in this unexpected place came as a surprise.

Through their conversations, Subaru revealed that he'd more or less successfully resolved his embarrassment from before. Since that grievance had dissipated, Garfiel felt no particular obligation to sugarcoat anymore.

The title of Strongest held a very special meaning to Garfiel.

To be the strongest. To see becoming the strongest as a goal. To strive to become the strongest. Garfiel believed that as soon as man was born, his first cry would place that as his lofty goal.

Everyone, no matter who, had once longed and dreamed to be the Strongest as they walked the long road known as Life. Everyone would eventually forget that distant dream. Everyone except Garfiel.

That dream had taken root in his heart, and had been a source of so much of his persistence along the way. To Garfiel, the title of Strongest was a combination of his goal, something he had been granted since birth, and indispensable condition allowing him to guard everything he wanted protect.

Therefore, in front of the man who stood at the apex of strength, Garfiel did not repress his restless teeth and claws.

He had gone to Subaru, and received permission to challenge Reinhardt.

The Sword Saint seemed a far cry from the strongest; he gave off the impression of being a gentle, kind man who had no martial prowess.

However, Garfiel knew that the most powerful people were able to hide their own power. Setting aside his own tendency to act up, most strong people didn't look strong as they went through their daily activities. Roswaal and Subaru were like that.

He judged Reinhardt to be in the same field as them.

— The contest took place in a gravel-covered hotel courtyard.

Refusing Garfiel's proposal to leave the hotel for the city's fields for fear of the damage to their surroundings, Reinhardt had settled for a fight located at a hotel, adding the conditions of Don't Damage the Courtyard.

That could only be said to be humiliating. Even if he were the strongest man, he was underestimating Garfiel. Immediately wanting to force him to regret that demeaning arrogance, Garfiel had dragged him outside.

The confrontation took place in the courtyard, where Subaru had issued a command marking the start of the match. Garfiel had bared his teeth, thinking only of casting the metal on his wrists at the crimson hero.

Garfiel: "——"

That thought vanished almost instantaneously.

The man before him could move faster than one might blink.

Until that very moment, his gentle atmosphere hadn't fallen away. Now, it dissipated to reveal a sharp blade and finely honed flame.

An ordinary person wouldn't be able to feel how his natural state was razor sharp, as if he were a sword himself.

To a certain extent, if a person knew little about martial arts, that feeling would manifest as a sense of oppression which crushed their lungs.

But that wasn't Garfiel.

Garfiel at least held the strength worthy of the Sword Saint.

Noticing that natural body and even trembling under the pressure to his organs, Garfiel howled away his hesitation as he flew at Reinhardt.

Their match wasn't meant to be lethal, and they had agreed to cause no serious injuries— forgetting that agreement, he had aimed at Reinhardt's throat with his sharp claws, striving for a decisive blow.

In that moment, before his blow could land, elegantly his body was caught in midair, and Garfiel truly understood the disparity in their strength.

Garfiel: "—I lost."

After that, despite launching offensive attacks from various angles, Reinhardt had still casually evaded all of Garfiel's tactics.

On top of that, Reinhardt had avoided them all without even taking a step away from where he'd first stood.

In other words, Garfiel had exhausted all his strength against only Reinhardt's upper body.

Having a sudden, heavy blow drill into him, tossing him into the air, Garfiel had declared his own defeat.

The Sword Saint hadn't even drawn a sword, his area of expertise. He'd defeated Garfiel with only his bare fists.

What exactly Reinhardt and Subaru had said after that, Garfiel couldn't quite recall.

To be so ingracious or foolhardy as to not accept his loss wasn't an impression that Garfiel had wanted to give. He'd left the hotel with only a few words.

He was unable to sort through his feelings as they were swept into a whirlpool.

Strangled by his the unanswerable emotions, Garfiel had sought an answer alone as he walked the Watergate City— which had led him up to here.

Mimi: "Gar~f! Gar~f! Look! Take a look~! The sunset's completely reflected in the water! It's super~red! This is awesome~! Amazing! So beautiful~!"

The noisy girl led Garfiel around, pulling on his sleeve, yanking on his hair, settling on his shoulders, and he'd been left with no choice but to follow her.

Thanks to her, he'd accomplished leaving the hotel, but was left with no time alone.

Garfiel: "Oi, from th'very start, y've been so noisy. Can'y settle down a bit, midget?"

Mimi: "Ahhh... nope~!"

Garfiel: "An immediate answer?!"

She grabbed Garfiel's wrists, running and spinning. Wrists gripped with an unexpectedly strong traction, Garfiel spun in circles with her.

The idea of extracting his wrist and fleeing at the speed of light had crossed his mind, but he didn't know if Mimi's beastman blood would provide her with a means to catch up. Mimi could be able to easily catching up with Garfiel's escape.

He had to take into consideration how conspicuous he'd look.

Before leaving for Pristella, both Frederica and Ram reminded him repeatedly that troubling Emilia or Subaru because of his own quirkiness would set a bad example. The only one he could trouble was Otto, who was like an older brother used to cleaning up messes.

Garfiel: "Haha."

Mimi: "Oh~ oh~, what's wrong, Gar~f? Is there something voxing... vicing... vixing you?"

Garfiel: "Ya mean somethin' vexin'?"

Mimi: "Yep, vixing! What happened~? Talk about it~, talk about it~!"

He was unable to speak candidly to Mimi and she hit him repeatedly in the side with an, "oi, ooiii". Considering her petite, oddly sturdy form, Garfiel shook himself out of his daze.

He leaned into the waterway, appreciating the view.

Garfiel: "Ah... 's really is a movin' scene."

Mimi: "Right? This is awesome ~! Amazing!"

Although Mimi should only be listened to half the time, the reflection of the setting sun in the water was indeed a bright, inspiring scene. The glittering water was stained with white and yellow light, and the sky was covered in an orange sunset.

Having become aware of it, Garfiel sat on the edge of the waterway, watching the sluggish coming and going of sailboats.

Mimi: "Hmm~ hmm~ hmm~"

Taking a seat beside him, Mimi shook her feet happily as she hummed a tune through her nose. Although her character was one which couldn't be silenced, right now, she was behaving rather well. Grabbing Garfiel's half-clothed shoulders, she bobbed her head up and down.

Taking a sideways glance at her happy face, he discovered that the color of Mimi's hair matched the orange shade of the sunset exactly. He subconsciously reached out a hand to brush her head, and Mimi seemed to be pleased, leaning into his touch.

Mimi: "Fluffy? Fluffy? Mimi~'s head is often touched by Missy too! She pets it and calls it something like a Healing Idol."

Garfiel: "Ah, really's kinda comfortable. That Healing Idol, or whatever, t'Captain sometimes says stuff like th... 'r somethin'."

Mimi: "Gar~f, do you still feel annoyed?"

Garfiel: "'S 'bout somethin' else now!"

Mimi: "Huh?"

As Mimi tilted her head, her face the very picture of innocence, Garfiel laughed inadvertently.

Relief began to blossom in his chest, washing away the feeling he was someone cheap. A sense of humiliation was replaced by determination.

Garfiel: "...bein the strongest so sudden 's'not possible. My amazin' self is still on th'journey there."

Mimi: "Ohh, so you're climbing the ladder to bein the bestest~!"

Garfiel: "Hey, y'understand pretty well. Yeah, 's the proper way t'becoming' the strongest." Mimi raised her first, and Garfiel touched his fingers to the white scar on his forehead in reply.

Although her chattiness was annoying, she had also cheered him up. If he was alone, he would probably still be moping morosely. Mimi's company had turned out to be quite helpful.

Garfiel: "Oi, midget, while we're here, how 'bout we go to a stall n'grab a bite? It'll be my amazin' self's treat."

Mimi: “Gar~f, look!”

Garfiel: “Ah?”

With that invitation, Garfiel got to his feet, patting down his bottom.

Mimi was still seated by the waterway, and her cry caught Garfiel’s attention as he followed her gaze. Then, he narrowed his eyes.

On the other side of the waterway, the ropes of a sailboat had come undone, leaving the boat stranded as it began to drift down the waterway. It was empty, but the problem didn’t lie there.

Mimi: “Hey, kids!”

Mimi gave a loud warning cry in that direction— where five children playing in another boat were careening toward the drifting boat.

The children didn’t notice the approach of the other boat. If they collided, their boat could end up being overturned, throwing the children into the waterway.

At Mimi’s shout, other people around the waterway had taken notice. One of the boat owners flew toward the children in a panic, but he wouldn’t make it in time.

Hearing the shrill voices of the spectators, the children finally noticed their situation and panicked as they saw the sudden approach of the empty boat.

Then—

Garfiel: “Yo, kids. Thank the midget cat nee-chan who noticed you.”

Mimi: “Gar~f!”

He’d suddenly leapt onto the boat, keeping an astonishing balance as he landed. To the children, the silent Garfiel could only be considered a miracle from heaven.

With a crooked smile and a fierce laugh, the children stiffened, intimidated by the scary blond stranger. As their panic died down, Garfiel scooped the five children into his arms, making another leap.

They landed on a sidewalk near the waterway as the boats collided violently, capsizing the boat that had been carrying the children.

Garfiel, by cleverly having kept hold of the ropes connecting the boats, prevented a chain reaction of collisions that would have sank a series of boats.

Restraining the movement of the overturned boat prevented the detached boat from drifting further downstream and minimized the area of effect.

Garfiel: "ight, th'should do it!"

After anchoring the ropes firmly, Garfiel ended his struggle, with an uproar of cheers and applause from the witnesses.

One of the shipowners, who should have been monitoring the condition of the boat, bowed his head to convey his gratitude, which Garfiel waved off, scratching his head and looking shy.

Then,

Kid: "O-Onii-chan. Thank you very much."

Garfiel: "Ohh?"

The rescued children gathered and poured grateful words upon Garfiel.

They had lost the timid expressions they'd worn on the boat, merely gazing at Garfiel with glittering expressions. As Garfiel met their gazes, their hyperactive clapping hands began to move even faster.

Faced with that, Garfiel felt his mood lighted as he rubbed his nose.

Garfiel: “‘S no need for anythin’ like that. Happen’d by chance... ah, ya by chance. My amazin’ self was guided here by a wind ‘f fate. ‘s the City of Water, surrounded by waterways... if anyone ended up sheddin’ tears, there’d be a flood, yeah?”

The applause began to calm as Garfiel gave his complacent response.

The cheers had also become intermittent. However, unlike the spectators, the children gave dramatic reactions.

Kids: “Wow, amazing!” “So cool~!”

“For tears, regardless of danger!”

“Never flinching! Never doubting! Never hesitating!”

Garfiel nodded with satisfaction at the excited children. Then, with an eager gaze, one of them voiced a question.

Kid: “Big brother, what’s your name?”

Garfiel: “It ain’t not worth mentionin’. However, ‘f pressed for it... my amazin’ self’s a tiger. Ya, a gorgeous tiger. GORGEOUS TIGER!!”

Kids: “Gorgeous! TIGER!!”

Garfiel stuck a pose, leaning back with his hands stretched obliquely to the sky. Eyes shining, the children gave hushed whispers of excitement as they imitated him.

As Garfiel shared his heart with the children surrounding him, Mimi rushed over, her eyes shining as well.

Mimi: “— Gar~f, so cool~!”

She ran over to joined the ranks of the children crowding around Garfiel.

The delighted laughter of the children, Mimi, and Garfiel rang through the twilit waterways.

—The applause and cheers had long since dissipated, leaving only the solitary shipowner regarding them with a smile.

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Garfiel bounced with energy as he shared snacks with the children at a stall.

Garfiel: “Them, my amazin’ self said, ‘Now, I won’t let ya take even one more step forward, y’inferior scum! ‘S the Captain’s territory, and y’ve already been trapped here!’ Hah!”

Mimi: “Amazing~! So cool~!”

Kid: “Woah! That’s so cool~!”

As Pristella was infiltrated by the glow of sunset, Garfiel shared stories of the past year with Mimi and the kids.

What he’d just described was one of the most impressive events that had happened, the Soil Spider Hunt.

A nearby village had an outbreak of a witchbeast known as Soil Spiders, and somehow Subaru, Garfiel, and Otto had been caught up in the crusade against them, in a perfect combination of Otto and Subaru’s scheming and Garfiel’s strength.

One of the rescued children happily listened to Garfiel’s recollections. He was a child with blond hair, only around six or seven years old age.

He had lovely features and a cute smiling face that would surely one day attract lovelorn sighs from women. But right now, he was just a child admiring Garfiel’s way of living.

After buying the children snacks, Garfiel had taken it upon himself to escort the children safely to their homes, one by one. Four of the five have returned home unharmed, which meant that this boy was the last one.

Garfiel: "With just a small group, ya went out pretty far t'play. Ain't that dangerous?" As they undertook the considerate journey to the child's house, Garfiel frowned.

The children's adventure had taken them to the intersection of First and Second Street, near where the Muse Headquarters was located. As they walked, Garfiel couldn't help thinking they'd wandered too far.

In fact, they'd come all the way from Third Street. Without any detours, the journey would take nearly a full hour to complete.

The child grinned in response.

Kid: "Occasionally, the Songstress goes to the park on First Street. We were looking for her!"

Garfiel: "Uh... 's that so? Captain said her singin's pretty powerful, too, but my amazin' self's kinda suspicious."

Rubbing his nose, Garfiel found it difficult to agree with the child's reply.

Garfiel had only met the Songstress Liliana once, at the Muse Headquarters. Even that brief interaction was enough to have left a significant degree of impact on him. Liliana was, beyond a doubt, a girl with a strong personality. However, that 'strength' was rather incompatible with the impression of a pure, honest bard.

Mimi: "Gar~f, have you never heard the Songstress's singing? It~ really is~ very powerful!"

Garfiel: "Have you, midget?"

Mimi: "Yep~! I didn't fall asleep until the end~! Mimi's so strong~! Praise Mimi~!"

Garfiel obediently stroked Mimi on the head. She gave a “success~!” and happily dashed away, before turning back around expectantly.

Mimi: “So, did you hear her sing?”

Kid: “Nope, we missed her. However, since we’d gone all the way to that faraway street...”

Garfiel: “‘S that why y’were playin’ in the river? Well, ‘s good that my amazin’ self was there.”

Kid: “Gorgeous Tiger!”

Garfiel: “Ha!”

As the boy stretched his hand toward the sky, Garfiel mimicked his motion. That was a reference to Gorgeous Tiger.

They posed together energetically, but the child soon dropped his wrist with a tired sigh. Garfiel tilted his head to one side.

Garfiel: “Why’d’ya look so down? Don’t sigh, yer happiness will run away, y’know.”

Kid: “Well, that... when I get home, my sister will be mad.”

Garfiel: “What?”

As the boy revealed his fear of his sister in a cry, Garfiel overreacted by grabbing his shoulders anxiously.

Garfiel: “Ah, sorry. But, why’s she goin’ to be so angry?”

Kid: “...Because, I snuck out.”

Garfiel: “Ah...”

This boy seemed to have neglected to inform his sister that he would be out with friends today. As a result, his family was probably frustrated and worried sick.

That feeling was not unfamiliar to Garfiel. As a brother, the presence of a sister, would, no matter for how long, continue to exist as a terrifying barrier.

Even after ten years of separation, after he'd grown up, the fear of losing to his sister had increased rather than decreased.

Garfiel: "Got it. Leave 't up t'my amazin' self."

Kid: "...Huh?"

Garfiel patted his chest proudly as the little boy revealed his shock.

As if trying to ease his downcast, Garfiel laughed, showing his sharp teeth.

Garfiel: "The scariness of an older sister 's somethin' my amazin' self's familiar with. 'F yer scary sister comes rushin' at ya, my amazin' self'll protect ya."

Kid: "Big brother!"

The emotional child hugged Garfiel tightly. Mimi joined the hug, grabbing Garfiel from behind.

In this way, being held front and back by the little ones, Garfiel renewed his determination and struggled with them as they continued their journey.

The sunset really was approaching, and they wouldn't make it back by dinner time, but today wasn't a bad day.

No matter how he looked at it, he wouldn't be able to calmly dine in the same hall as Reinhardt. However, after a night of cooling down, he'd probably be able to manage it.

That was thanks to the children who admired the Gorgeous Tigers, as well as Mimi's inscrutably infectious cheerful attitude.

???: "—Fred!"

A deafeningly high-pitched voice suddenly attacked Garfiel's ears.

He lifted his head in surprise, and caught sight of the sprinting figure of a girl. She had long, elegant blonde hair, and was glaring intently at the boy with Garfiel.

The boy looked in her direction and opened his mouth. Then,

Fred: "Sister..."

Sister: "You, just how worried are you going to make us before you're satisfied!?"

The girl leapt forward to deliver a flexible kick to her brother, whose body gently bounced back.

Garfiel, who'd witnessed that action, was frozen by shock and too slow to respond to the beautiful girl, who'd landed neatly.

During that time, she fixed Garfiel with a sharp gaze and dug into his foot with her heel.

Sister: "You suspicious person, what do you want with my Fred?"

Garfiel: "Gah... first 'f all, move your foot, midget."

As he faced the maelstrom of her attack and angry words, Garfiel replied in a steady voice. Seeing that her preemptive attacks hadn't caused any harm, the girl retreated backward with a timid expression.

Although she'd thought that Garfiel would be angry, Garfiel hadn't reached a state of anger yet. Rather, he was still surprised.

He had never imagined that there would actually be a sister who indiscriminately delivered fierce kicks to her younger brother.

Incidentally, the young boy who had been kicked had had his impact softened. With a “hey~!”, Mimi had flown toward him, hugging him and landing gently.

Now, they had gotten to their feet, brushing each other off.

Seeing that through the corner of his eye, Garfiel issued a sigh. And at his reaction,

Sister: “What’s, with that attitude... If you have something to say, just say it, and don’t do anything to me or Fred... I, I’m terrifying when I get mad...”

Garfiel: “First of all, ‘s misunderstandin’ here. Also, don’t fly toward yer brother like that. Y’might accidentally cause a heavy, injury, got ‘t?”

Sister: “Hah...”

Squatting down, Garfiel spoke quietly to the girl.

The boy’s sister was also young — only around ten years old, the age of precocious puberty where she’d try a little too much. Her initial sharpness had faded, and her expression morphed into one of tearfulness at Garfiel’s calm and steady response.

What she said was surely a bluff, but she’d gathered her courage to go up against Garfiel. In a sense, her courage had rendered her even more afraid, in an unfortunate turn of events.

Fred: “Uwa, Gorgeous Tiger... Please don’t get too angry with my sister.”

Then, unable to bear seeing his trembling sister, the boy patted his body clean of dust and stood at her back, pleading with Garfiel. His sister’s expression revealed that her self-esteem was hurt over his pleas on her behalf, but she still had the dignity to try to protect her brother from Garfiel. Although he didn’t know what had happened at first, they didn’t seem to have a bad relationship.

Garfiel: "So my amazin' self looks like a bad guy. 'S kinda displeasing t'hear."

Mimi: "A bad guy! Being a bad guy isn't good~, Gar~f, be Gorgeous Tiger instead!"

Mimi leapt up and gave Garfiel's head a poke. Although it didn't hurt, it was a rather puzzling blow.

The pointless confrontation between siblings and Garfiel then continued. Just as he wondered how long this would last,

???: "Sister, Fred, where are you two?"

The voice that broke the stalemate came from someone else.

Hearing that gentle voice, the siblings caught each other's gaze. Garfiel watched as the two ran in its direction.

Sister and brother arrived at the corner of the road, where a woman had appeared. They flew toward her without hesitation.

That blonde woman was more than likely their mother.

Fred: "Mom!"

Sister: "Mom, that suspicious person, something about gorgeous, and Fred..."

The elder sister held onto her mother, sobbing, and the little brother defended Garfiel's innocence. After listening to the children's rambles, the person in question smiled.

Garfiel: "——"

She stepped forward, her children still clinging to her, revealing her face.

Mimi: "Gar~f?"

Garfiel froze, and Mimi turned around, surveying him.

However, Garfiel was unable to respond to Mimi's concern. His heart, chaotic with waves of confusion, had no such energy to spare.

After all, the person who stood there was,

???: "Well, my children seem to have been taken care of, my apologies. If possible, could you tell me what happened?"

She spoke in soothing, gentle tones which held not even the slightest sign of malice or suspicion.

With a few strides, she'd arrived in front of him. Even as Garfiel trembled and shivered at her presence, she tilted her head, as if confused.

That expression, that attitude, that voice, they all seized Garfiel with abject shock.

Garfiel: "—Mom?"

A hoarse murmur escaped his throat.

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Chapter 30 - Tiger and Cat Under the Moon



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?: “I’m so sorry, I wasn’t expecting guests, so I haven’t cleaned.”

Mimi: “Hmm~! We don’t mind~! It looks clean~! Very clean~! Mimi’s room looks a lot more chaotic~!”

???: “Ah, ah, that’s no good.”

The woman casually stroked Mimi, who lay on the sofa, kicking her legs and looking very comfortable.

Immersed in this scene, Garfiel looked silently at the woman. Her long blonde hair flowed to her waist, her skin was the white of snow, her slim body retained a woman's softness, and her soft face displayed a pair of clear, calm emerald green eyes.

She looked to be as young as 25, but Garfiel knew that she should be over 35.

No matter what, this didn't match up to Garfiel's expectations, which was precisely the source of his confusion,

???: "Mr. Gorgeous Tiger, does tea not match your tastes? I'm sorry, I didn't even think to ask what you'd like to drink..."

The woman, who claimed to be Reala Thompson, frowned at the silent Garfiel, who was shaken back into awareness by her voice. He looked down at his untouched black tea and hurriedly picked the cup up.

Garfiel: "No, no, my amazin' self was jus' bein' a bit silly... the spaciousness'f this room's unusual, 's all."

Reala: "Is that so? My family's very big, and so is our house, but that makes it hard to clean. It looks like I was careless again."

Reala accepted Garfiel's hurried excuse without a trace of doubt, her charming voice light and soft. The large courtyard of her house and the exquisite workmanship reflected her statement. Her smile, her sweet tone, everything about her struck Garfiel with nostalgia.

However, Reala spoke not a word of Garfiel's gaze. This detail alone gripped Garfiel's heart with pain.

The woman who claimed to be Reala Thompson looked exactly like Reshia Tinsel, Garfiel's mother, who was imprinted clearly in his mind.

Of course, Garfiel's separation from his mother had happened shortly after his birth, and his memories of his mother were scant.

Even so, Garfiel knew every detail of her face, after seeing her in that detestable cemetery where the Trial had been hosted. There, he witnessed his separation from his mother.

Her face, her voice, her love, Garfiel knew them all from the Trial.

And that Trial had shown him the her unfortunate death shortly after her departure. So, to Garfiel, seeing his mother again is an impossible dream.

If so, now, the woman in front of him should also be impossible.

Reala: "Mimi-san, your ears look so soft. Would it be possible for me to touch them?"

Mimi: "Please go ahead~!"

Reala happily reached out, stroking Mimi's ears with a look of contentment.

Mimi's smile was one only a little girl could wear. They were an odd pair, a tiny beastman and a suspicious demi-human, but they had been invited in without a second thought. This woman had simply no sense of wariness.

Such attitudes were, to Garfiel, all associated with motherliness.

His mother Reshia had been quite the unfortunate woman. Her parents had lost everything to debt, and had sold her to a group of slave traders, who had been ambushed by demi-human bandits. They had made Reala their concubine.

Somewhere along the way, she'd become pregnant with Frederica, and the bandits had put her up for sale. She'd been taken by another band of thieves and had spent a long time with them.

Frederica had grown up in that thieves regiment. Although she rarely spoke of such times, she considered Reala's departure something to be thankful for, indicating that it had been a rather poor environment.

Suffering misfortune after misfortune, she had fortunately been rescued by the curious Roswaal.

Roswaal had made her a proposal; he would take them to Sanctuary, where they would be given safety and shelter. In Sanctuary, Lewes had become their guardian.

Life's treatment toward her could only be summed up as 'cruel'.

However, his mother's personality was unknown to those who only heard the stories. Those who really knew his mother would never give her life such an unfortunate evaluation.

Lewes: "Ah, Reshia. That child was always inexplicably, abnormally optimistic, and looked toward the future. Despite suffering through painful days where she could very well have died, she would always say, 'Maybe something nice will happen tomorrow. Even if today is hard, tomorrow could be better'. Like a little child, she always looked forward to the little happy things in life."

Frederica: "Our honored mother... she may look like a foolish woman who threw things away too easily, and, to be honest, I believe that she never really grasped lessons on how to best survive... but she was incredibly kind. She's my favorite person. With all my heart, I'm glad to be her daughter."

Roswaal: "Is this about your mother, Reshia-san? Riiiiiiight, although I never had too many chaaaaances to chat with her face to face, she was incomprehensible. Or maybe it's better to say incredible? She was muuuuch more sensitive of happiness than most people. She was always cheerful, finding happiness in eeeeven the worst of situations. Yeeeeeep, that's not something I disliiiiiike."

Lewes, Frederica, and even Roswaal all spoke fondly of her.

Within Sanctuary, anyone who'd known his mother said the same thing. She was someone who was always relaxed and happy.

If that hadn't been the case, she wouldn't have foolishly left to look for Garfiel's father, who had more than likely encountered misfortune.

And then she had immediately suffered another misfortune and died, and where was her happiness?

— He had never found the answer to where her happiness had ended up.

Garfiel: "If I don't find it, it's better to give up."

Nails dug into the palm of his hand as he had clenched his fist.

He should have given up. But he'd never understood that. It had taken a long time, but he'd finally grown to accept it.

This was plainly the case, but why, now, had she appeared again? With her, as always, carefree, and cheerful attitude.

Garfiel: "——"

In order to keep her from noticing, he'd resigned himself to secretly observing her expressions and behaviors.

Nothing felt unnatural. His mother's behavior of treating him as a stranger was completely natural, and the more Garfiel watched, the more fascinated she became.

Was this her answer?

She had a new life. Unaware of Garfiel, she led her happy life.

I don't care to know about your affairs, was that his mother's answer to—

Fred: "Mooom."

Sister: "Mom, I'm hungry."

Garfiel had been silent as Mimi and Reala played around. The brother and sister joined them in the living room after going to their rooms to change.

The sister cast a stern look at the Garfiel, and then immediately huddled close to her mother.

Sister: "Mom, tell the guests to go home, and then we can eat."

Reala: "Sister, what are you talking about? Mr. Gorgeous and Mimi took care of Fred when he nearly drowned."

Sister: "About that, couldn't it be that Gorgeous was the one who did it? So he could come to our house and take advantage of our generosity. Maybe he wants money."

Reala: "Hey now, that's going too far. But you're right, we have to thank him for Fred... should we give him money?"

Sister: "Mom!?"

The sister, who had realized that her words were about to become the reason for her family's bankruptcy, flew into a panic. On the other hand, Reala, who failed to grasp the reason for her daughter's rant, glanced around in confusion.

That smiling interaction between parent and child made breathing harder than walking barefoot on thorns. Draining his tea in one gulp, Garfiel set his cup down with a clang.

Garfiel: "Since my amazin' self don't seem t'be welcome here, we'll be leavin'."

Mimi: "Haauhh? Why~?"

Garfiel: "Ain't no particular why."

Although Garfiel wanted to leave, Mimi continued to resist. However, as if he hadn't heard her, Garfiel picked her up. As he stood to go, Reala looked distraught, while her daughter cast a smirk at him.

Well, Garfiel would respect her feelings — and, with that thought,

Fred: "Don't go, Gorgeous Tiger..."

Seizing the hem of Garfiel pants, the little brother blocked his way.

For a second, for reasons unknown to him, Garfiel hesitated to shake off his little hands. But,

Sister: “Fred, honestly, you’re...”

As Fred advocated for a suspicious criminal to stay, his sister placed her hands on her waist in anger. Reala clapped her hands, capturing everyone’s attention.

Reala: “Everyone, look, it’s not good to not get along. You’re pushing our guests to leave, Fred seems to want them to stay, so don’t force them to do anything, Sister.”

Sister: “But, mom...”

Reala: “But nothing. Mr. Gorgeous and Mimi, stay for a while, won’t you? I’d be delighted to share dinner with you, and tonight’s meal is my favorite dish.”

Fred: “Mooom, you call everything your best dish...”

Reala: “Mhm, shouldn’t that be obvious? Mom always tries her best on every dish for you.”

Although her ability wasn’t quite there, she made every effort to do her best. Everyone present wore a panicked expression, Garfiel moreso than anyone else.

This harmonious atmosphere. It cut deeply into Garfiel’s heart.

Reala’s words cast upon him a unique sense of happiness and helplessness. Accepting her invitation would be the worst possible thing that Garfiel could do.

Garfiel: “Sorry ‘bout yer invitation, but a few ‘f my companions’re waitin’ for me. They’ll be worried if we’re late, so we should be headin’ out soon.”

Reala: “.....”

Suppressing the the pain in his chest, Garfiel prayed that voice wouldn’t tremble.

At his answer, the sister’s face became stiff, and Reala frowned with her eyes closed. And,

Reala: "I understand, there is no point in forcing you to stay if it bothers you."

Garfiel: "—hk"

This was what had hurt Garfiel the most today.

Losing to Reinhardt in that duel, the initial impact of seeing Reala, were, compared to how he was feeling now, trivial indeed.

Unconsciously, Garfiel placed a hand close to his chest, as if needing to confirm whether or not his body had been torn. And to that Garfiel,

Mimi: "Garfiel, let's go."

Mimi, who had until just refused to leave, gently taken Garfiel's hand in hers and began leading him away. Facing her concern, Garfiel obeyed silently.

So, with their hands on the living room on the door handle, ready to leaving,

???: "I'm home! Oh, do we have guests?"

The figure on the other side of the door was a gentleman sporting a magnificent beard.

He appeared to be a man of detailed workmanship, and gave off an energetic atmosphere. From his tone to face, he seemed to be a man of accomplishments.

At the man's appearance, the children scrambled to their feet with joy. Then, that man would be—

Dad: "Hmm... I haven't seen this stranger's face before."

Fred: "Dad, this is Gorgeous Tiger."

Sister: "He's a suspicious scoundrel."

Dad: "What?"

Faced with his son and daughter's sharply contrasting attitudes, the father tilted his head in distress. He turned to Reala, who stood quietly in the living room.

Under the man's loving gaze, Reala started to give a calm response.

Garfiel had hit his limit.

Garfiel: "It ain't a big deal, we were goin' anyway."

Leaving that sentence, Garfiel grabbed Mimi and hurriedly pushed his way out the room, scrambling toward the front door as if running away.

Fred: "Gorgeous Tiger!"

From behind, a sad voice called to Garfiel. However, Garfiel had no response to that call.

Who was Gorgeous, who was Tiger? He was Garfiel, not Gorgeous Tiger. A tiger was a strong, powerful creature who couldn't be shaken by anything. Where was that tiger now?

A real tiger, wouldn't be so affected by such things—!

Mimi: "Garfiel! My hand, it hurts!"

Garfiel: "——"

Too focused on his thoughts, Garfiel didn't notice that cry of pain.

He didn't notice until Mimi had broken free of his vice grip, extracting her hand from his nails, which had been digging into her. Her small hand was now swollen and blue.

Garfiel: "S-sorry... my amazin' self..."

Mimi: "Gar~f, you were weird at that house too. My hand really~ hurts."

Mimi mumbled quietly, and Garfiel smacked his forehead with his hand.

They fell into a discordant silence as the Watergate City's moist air caressed their faces. The sun had fallen from the sky, and the city had been shrouded in magical light.

The sunshine on the water's surface was replaced by light from the magical lamps, but he was in no mood to enjoy that scene mysterious and quiet beauty,

???: "Hey, you two, over there!"

Someone approached Garfiel and Mimi with gasping breaths.

Looking up, the magic light revealed the man from before, who had shed his coat. Finally arriving in front of the two, he put his hands on his knees, panting violently.

Dad: "Ah, I finally caught up... this won't do... I used to be more energetic, but thanks to work, I'm completely out of shape now..."

Garfiel: "Do ya need anythin' from us?"

Garfiel had clearly indicated that he wasn't interested in the man's words.

The existence of this man, although not to the degree of Real's children, also distressed Garfiel. His voice was full of harshness, but the man paid no mind to it, placing his hand on his head embarrassedly.

Dad: "No, I heard from my wife that you two were benefactors of my son. It'd be completely unjustifiable if I never gave you anything in return."

Garfiel: "... 's not such a big deal, 'f y'talk all exaggeratedly like that, my amazin' self'll be embarrassed."

Garek: "Everything involving my kid, no matter what, is incredibly important, not to mention saving him from danger. Really, if you need anything at all... Ah, I'm really sorry, my name is Garek, Garek Thompson. Despite how I look, I'm Pristella's Metropolitan Director, so if there's anything I can do to help you..."

Garfiel: "Really, we're..."

A man who knew what was going on— Garfiel, who had wanted to leave as soon as possible, suddenly paused. If he knew Reala, really knew her, then,

Garfiel: "My amazin' self's got only one question... would it be okay for ya t'answer?"

Garek: "Of course. No matter what, I'll do my best to answer."

Garek responded to Garfiel with a smile of only benevolence.

The same was true of Reala too, and their son Fred. This entire family was too kind for their own good. Only their daughter had any sense of suspicion.

Thinking of this, Garfiel was very cautious in his choice of words,

Garfiel: "Your wife, Reala... what's her real name?"

Garek: "——"

As soon as Garfiel posed his question, the atmosphere shifted.

Garek pondered Garfiel's question silently for a few moments, before replying in a level voice,

Garek: "What do you mean?"

Garfiel: "I mean the literal meanin'. No matter what, Reid plays a straight game, right? Playin' with words don't fit my style. Tell me, your wife, s'her name Reshia stead'of Reala?"

Garek: “—gu”

He responded awkwardly to Garfiel’s direct question, taking a moment to swallow before replying.

Garek: “You... you, my wife... Do you know anything about my wife?”

Garfiel: “My amazin’ self also wants to know about her.”

Garek: “——”

Garfiel responded sincerely to Garek’s trembling voice.

At those words, Garek fell into a silence, as if he were thinking. Waiting for his reply, Garfiel took Mimi’s good hand into his own.

Glancing up at him, she smiled as she usually did.

Garek: “... it seems that I should tell you the full story.”

As Garfiel looked at Mimi’s smile, Garek spoke with a sigh.

His voice was weighed with fatigue and powerlessness. Garfiel frowned, wondering and waiting for his next sentence.

Then,

Garek: “My wife, Reala... has no memories from before our meeting, 15 years ago.”

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Garek and Reala had met before he’d become a city director, when he had been a normal merchant rooted in Pristella.

On the way back from negotiations, Garek, who had been driving a dragon carriage, had found his path blocked by a collapsed cliff.

Having encountered such distress in having to repay a loan, and having met such an unfortunate accident on the road, Garek couldn't but be angry.

— Then, he found a woman who'd been buried alive. A miracle. There was no other explanation.

Refusing to go the long way, Garek had been desperately wondering if he could still follow his original route.

Around that time, the heavy rain had finally stopped, and Garek's full field of vision had been returned to him.

Shortly after the cliff had collapsed, Garek had come by, leaving the time that the woman had been buried fairly short.

As a result of the various coincidences overlapping, Garek had found and rescued the woman, who was still breathing.

She'd been covered in mud, and he'd found no luggage near her. Taking the unconscious woman to his dragon carriage, Garek immediately rushed to a nearby town, where she'd been taken to the hospital, and awaited her rehabilitation.

Garek: "At the time, her condition was incredibly unstable. She was running a high fever, and had various injuries and fractures from the landslide, and her heart even stopped at one point during the treatment."

Both the Healing Institute and Garek had been struggling to help her, optimistically praying for her recovery. Why had Garek wanted so desperately wanted to save her? There had indeed been a reason, yet unknown to him, which explained his actions.

He thanked everyone's efforts from the bottom of his heart.

Garek: "Hard work paid off, and although she was still heavily wounded, she'd finally woke up. It took a week... I stayed in the city, waiting for her."

The failure of negotiations had made the future of Garek's company dark indeed.

In that situation, wasting time equated wasting money. Garek didn't understand why he had been restraining himself from his travels.

Then, after a week, the woman had woken up.

After her awakening, she spoke to the crowd gathered around her with a trembling, faint voice.

Garek: "Who am I?", "Were her first words."

The woman had forgotten her name. No, not just the name. She'd forgotten everything.

Who was she, and where was she supposed to be? What had happened before that cliff had collapsed?"

She could not remember her family members, and had no choice but to stay.

All she had were the clothes she'd worn during the accident. From an emblem stitched onto them, the only discernible letters of her name were 'Re'.

Garek: "Influenced by the name of a blossoming flower, I decided to call her Reala. Then, I planned to take care of her until her wounds had healed."

Her wounds healed little by little, and the day of her discharge wasn't far off.

Reala, even having nowhere to go, remained a cheerful woman. She treated the sadness of the accident as though it had never happened, and gave everyone she came in contact with infectious smiles.

In her situation, it would be impossible not to feel uneasy.

The loss of one's own memories was almost equivalent to their own disappearance. But she could still smile because she felt it necessary to do so.

Or maybe she was concerned for the people around her.

But the most important reason was that she didn't see herself as unfortunate.

Garek: "The nervousness from confessing to her is still fresh in my memory. That's probably the most anxious I've ever been in my life, even more so than when I proposed marriage to her."

So, accepting Garek's proposal, Reala went with him to Pristella.

There reason he refused to abandon her, that he had waited so long for her to wake up, was incredibly simple.

Garek had fallen in love with her at the very beginning, at the moment when he'd dragged her from the cliff his dragon carriage, cleaning the mud from her face.

Garek: "My business, which had been unlucky until I took in Reala, improved quickly. The people around me said that that was all thanks to my talent, but really, it was all thanks to Reala. I was blessed with her, so now I can be a businessman like this, so I can be a better father."

Garfiel: "——"

Garek: "I love my wife, and our children are both very cute. I used to care about her past, but, at this moment, no matter who she was before, I consider my wife my most important person."

Garek finished speaking of their first encounter and concluded thus with embarrassment. Garfiel, who has been silent from beginning to end, listening intently, looked up at the sky. In the darkness, stars were scattered everywhere.

The glorious full moon and stars were probably contemptuous of his current thoughts.

Garek: "I'm very sorry to ask this of you, but I can't help but do so."

Garfiel: “——”

“What is the relationship between you... and my wife, Lira?” This — how cruel this was.

His line of sight fell from the sky to Garek.

Garek’s gentle eyes held a firm determination as he gazed at Garfiel. He was empathetic, and wouldn’t be so insensitive as to misunderstand what Garfiel would say.

And so Garfiel knew exactly which answer would be correct.

Garfiel: “——”

Opening and closing his mouth.

Breathing, exhaling, inhaling, breathing evenly.

A fast heartbeat. Dizziness. A burst of pain in his head, the need to retch.

The swirl of yet unformed emotions in his tight chest were on the verge of collapse.

—Mimi gripped his hand tightly.

Garfiel: “My amazin’ self, has...”

Garek: “——”

Garfiel: “Nothin’... to do with your wife.”

There. He’d said it, said it out loud.

With that sentence, the vortex swirling in Gafiel’s heart swiftly vanished.

He was left with only a sense of loss suffocation. Garek, who stood in front of him, lowered his head as if he'd made a mistake and didn't want to look Garfiel in the face, speaking with a trembling voice.

Garek: "Sorry, I'm so sorry..."

With a look of unnatural pain, he bowed.

However, Garfiel didn't want to see Garek's reaction.

He had already had enough. He wanted to leave, wanted to stop being hurt.

What had gone wrong? Whose fault is it? Was it his own fault, or was it Garek's fault? Who should he blame? Who should he attack, who should he strike, who should he send flying?

What could he go to end the pain in his heart, to make it vanish, disappear?

???: "Honey, this is great, Mr. Gorgeous and Mimi are still here."

Garfiel "——!?"

Those words echoed with immense volume.

Grief and turmoil raised the intense noise as if it could kill. To Garfiel, it felt sharper than a knife.

Garek: "Reala, why...?"

Reala: "You left in such a hurry, but I didn't want you to leave empty-handed, so..."

Reala blinked and strode past the shocked Garek.

Then, she approached the stunned, stiff Garfiel, stretching out her hand.

Reala: "This is the dessert that I made, a souffle. Although it's not a very expensive gift, I'm still proud of it. I hope you'll accept it."

Garfiel: "...m."

Her smile held not a trace of malice. Stubbornly, Garfiel refused to speak.

His exchange with Garek had opened old wounds, preventing him from being able to speak to Reala. Anyone who understood this would also understand how to act.

And yet,

Mimi: "Oh! A dessert, that's so much fun! Amazing, I'll share it with Missy!"

Reala handed the container to a smiling, indifferent Mimi. There was a limit to how much someone could neglect to notice the atmosphere.

Garek looked shocked, and Garfiel was speechless. However, Reala only gave a joyful laugh at Mimi's reaction.

Reala: "I'm so glad you like it, and please go share it with the one called Missy."

Mimi: "Okay, got it~! Unter... understood~!"

After saluting with the hand which hadn't been squeezed by Garfiel, Mimi took the container in her arms and clapped Garfiel on the back.

She applied enough power that he couldn't help but cough, and Mimi smiled.

Mimi: "Well, this time, we're really leaving! Gorgeous Tiger and Gorgeous Mimi will see you later~!"

Reala: "Alright, safe travels, and take care not to fall in the water, Mr. Gorgeous." Mimi took Garfiel's hand, and Reala waved as they left.

Smiling, Mimi turned back and waved energetically. Only the two men were left with pained expressions in this smiling farewell.

Garfiel: “.....”

Like this, Garfiel was led along the waterways by Mimi.

Mimi and Garfiel didn't speak until far after Realá had vanished from view.

Garfiel: “Hey, midget...”

Mimi: “Over~ here~!”

Garfiel: “——!?”

Garfiel had wanted to call Mimi, but was suddenly interrupted.

Mimi, still holding Garfiel's hand, briskly leapt onto the three story stone building, ascending with the use of footholds.

Garfiel was pulled along, of course, forced to take the same pace as her. With a few leaps, the two had reached the top of the building.

Mimi: “Mimi~ feels so good~!”

Garfiel: “So Good', my foot! What were y'pullin', jus' now...”

As Mimi called out her comfort while she bathed in the breeze, Garfiel went on to complain. However, he saw that Mimi's smile had disappeared as she watched him.

He saw himself reflected in her round eyes, and Garfiel didn't understand the unease brewing in his heart.

Mimi's expression fell at Garfiel's silence.

Mimi: “Garf, do you want to cry?”

Garfiel: "Huh? What're y'sayin', why would my amazin' self be cryin'?"

Mimi: "I know that Garf is strong, but you shouldn't put on that brave act. Since Reala is Garf's mother, right~?"

Garfiel: "——"

At Mimi's unexpected question, Garfiel held his breath.

She'd accurately grasp the flow of the things. If she'd known Garfiel's past, then that conclusion would be easy to make. However, Mimi knew nothing about Garfiel's family. Her ability for discerning the truth was really rather impressive.

That she had straightforwardly brought the subject up shook Garfiel, and he hesitated.

Garfiel: "Why... would ya... think that...?"

Mimi: "Garf and Reala smell super~ similar, and her children also smelled a bit like Garf, so I was wondering if that was the case."

Her assumption wasn't based on reasoning, it was based on something innate, and thus she could see the truth for what it was.

If Mimi had inferred her conclusion from Garfiel's words, he could have made attempts to hide his past, but Garfiel couldn't refute something like this.

His legs giving way, Garfiel looked up at the stars in a daze.

The stars and moon both were unchanged, looking down at Garfiel with the same gaze.

Mimi: "So, is that right? Is Reala Garf's mother?"

Garfiel: "... My amazin' self doesn't know. 'S that woman still my amazin' self's mother?"

At Mimi's words, Garfiel covered his face with a hand.

He didn't know how true that was. Reala was unmistakably Reshia.

Just as Garek said, as Reala herself had acted until now, Reala had completely forgotten that she was Reshia.

Forgetting everything, Reala had found a new start, raising her children, living happily.

Garfiel: "Ah, come to think 'f it, that'd make those two kids my amazin' self's lil' brother n' sister."

Although he had only just realized it, his half-siblings had a similar relationship with himself and Frederica. In other words, those siblings were his own lovely younger siblings. It had been a relationship he'd longing for ever since he'd been little.

— Wouldn't it be nice if he could enjoy that relationship without the circumstances surrounding it?

Garfiel: "Even'f my amazin' self tells her 'bout my heritage, nothin'd change..."

Reala had forgotten her time as Reshia.

Even if Garfiel told her everything, her fifteen years as Reala would still remain unchanged.

Only, Reala would then carry an unnecessary fifteen years of guilt, feeling as if she'd lost Reala. Garek could only witness his wife's depression, and their children would only watch their mother's pain without understanding it.

Doing so would only be for Garfiel's own sake.

Having Reala accept that she used to be Reshia would serve no one but Garfiel.

Fredrica and Lewes both had no idea that Reshia had survived. If Garfiel said nothing, the two of them would never know.

Reala's family also weren't bothered by her past. If they learned of it, those happy times would most likely be lost rather than preserved.

If Garfiel hid everything and let go, this could all be successfully resolved.

Garfiel: "Why is my amazin' self..."

Didn't he even have the courage to bury this deep in his consciousness, to bury this within himself?

Tiger, where are you? Show me the right path.

If he could bear everything, take on everything alone, where would he find that strength?

Tell me, tiger... tiger. A true tiger was the strongest existence that would not be lost to anyone.

Garfiel: "——"

Holding his head, biting down on his overflowing, lamenting the feelings swirling back and forth mixing together, losing them and finding them.

Mimi: "It's okay..."

In the next moment, he noticed that his head was being gently stroked.

Garfiel: "——"

Mimi grabbed the collapsed Garfiel from behind in a hug.

Resting her chin on his head, her small palm stroked Garfiel's head. That tender touch on his back, moving back and forth, gradually eased the pain and agitation in his mind.

Garfiel: "What, what're y'doin', this is..."

Mimi: "Hmm, if Garf needs to cry~, I think there's a specific place where boys are allowed to cry! Although I forgot where, I remember Missy telling me about it~!"

For a moment, she seemed to be giving an answer, but her train of thought drifted away. In order not to keep his heart from shaking, in order to keep his voice from shivering, Garfiel chose his words carefully. Like this, holding Garfiel, Mimi giggled.

Mimi: "Well, although I've forgotten~, is it the feeling of a woman's chest? Is it like that? That's it! It's alright for a man to cry on an interested woman's chest~!"

Garfiel: "...who'd be interested in a midget like you."

The one Garfiel was interested in was a woman who was never kind when he wanted her to be, but kind when he least expected, after which she would beat him with her fists, a woman who was incredibly difficult to deal with.

The girl in front of him didn't resemble her at all. However, Mimi was still smiling.

Mimi: "That's fine! Even if Garfiel's not interested, Mimi's already fascinated! I saw~ and became interested in Garfiel! So! Mimi's chest~! It's okay to cry there~!"

Garfiel: "—Ah..."

What a foolish notion.

What was this. Some kind of language game? It was only a child's excuse, loaded with nothing but assertiveness.

There was obviously nothing, so stop kidding around. Tiger... tiger, where are you?

Right now, come back to my heart. Howl your deep, ferocious roar, beat this slouched back, force me to wake up, do something to my feelings

Otherwise, otherwise... otherwise, it would be too late.

Garfiel: "Mother..."

Enough, enough, stop talking.

Crying with a weak voice, don't make such a weak of voice. He was a tiger, the most powerful, the strongest, stronger than anyone. The Strongest of Shields. However,

Garfiel: "Mother... mother... mama... mama!"

Mimi: "Good boy."

Garfiel: "Why! Why'd ya forget me!? Seein' ya after all this time! Even callin' you mom!"

Mimi: "It's alright, Garfiel's good boy, a good boy!"

Garfiel: "Mama... mama... mama...!"

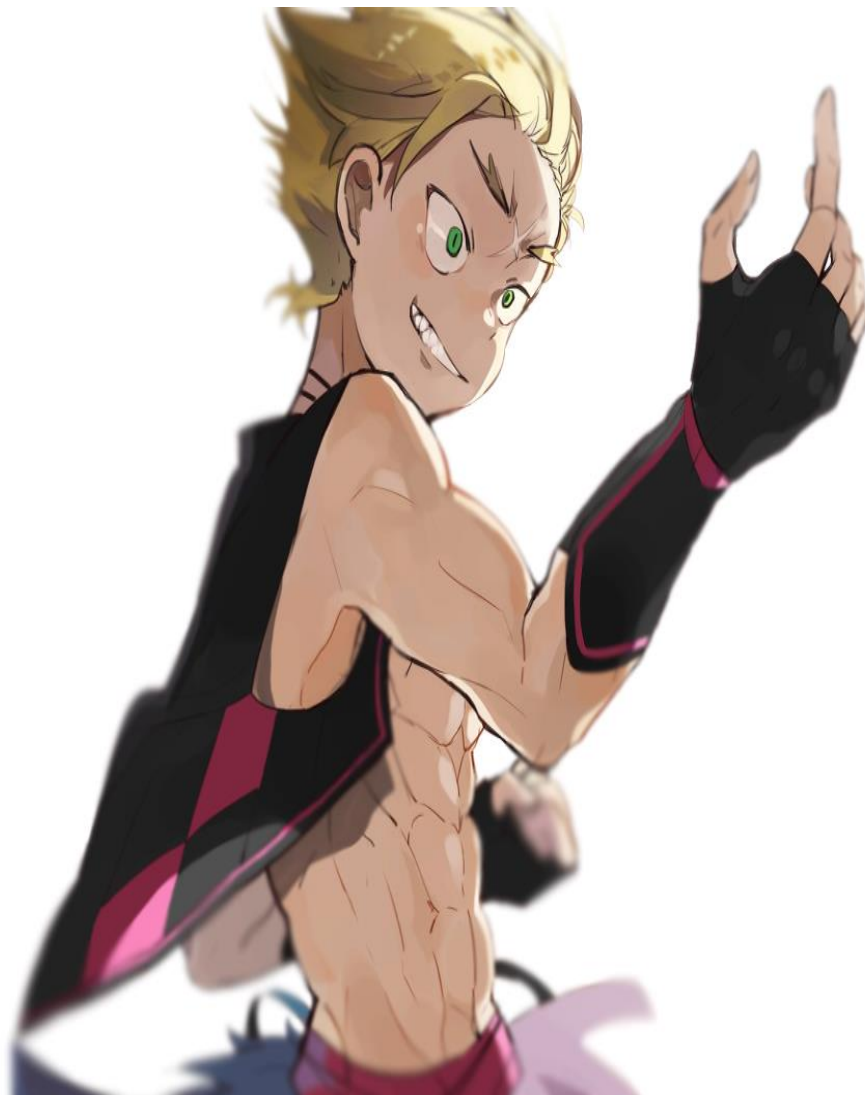
Tiger, tiger... where are you?

What did he resemble now? Stars, moon, sky, tell me. What did he resemble now?

If he couldn't be a roaring tiger, then, right now, he merely resembled —

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Chapter 31 - The Cost of a Mistake



Mimi: "I got it~!"

Garfiel: "You're a nuisance, stop sayin' that!"

The next morning, Garfiel, looking to be in a rather poor state, walked the streets with Mimi.

Giggling, Mimi touched the chest of her robe, which were stained with Garfiel's tears and saliva. The stench had reached the point of causing Garfiel's nose pain.

To Mimi, who had the same sharp sense of smell, that stench must have been unbearable, but when Garfiel had advised her to wash it, she'd replied,

Mimi: "Mmm, it's fine! After returning to the hotel, I can get a chance of clothes~. Missy'll be really mad that I didn't go back last night. Hetaro and Tivey too~!"

Garfiel: "... sorry."

Mimi: "Mimi isn't worried about it~! Mimi'll only say that Garf's a good, good boy when Garf sobs and cries!"

At Garfiel's soft apology, Mimi only gaze an innocent smile. Last night, Garfiel had shared a second farewell with his mother.

After being hit by a series of wounds, he had shamefully ended up crying into Mimi's chest on rooftop.

And, even more embarrassingly, the sobbing had drained him so much that he'd fallen asleep. The next morning, a loud noise in the city had woken him up on Mimi's lap.

When the owner of the rooftop had found them, he'd finally managed to maintain his composure, and Mimi had worn her usual attitude.

Excuses were hard to find, so they'd slunk off of his rooftop, embarrassed.

Mimi: "Do you feel better?"

Garfiel: "It's, you could say, 's somethin' like that."

Mimi: "It's like that, right?"

Garfiel: "... yeah, like that."

Unable to voice his true gratitude, Garfiel frowned, but Mimi completely ignored his failure, leaving Garfiel with no clue what to say.

He recalled last night, when Mimi blurted out that she was interested in him. Involuntarily, his eyes chased Mimi's figure.

Before, he'd thought that Mimi was just tagging along with him, feeling companionship with him due to their shared non-human heritage, but she'd unexpectedly been following him with romantic intent.

And, even having given her confession, she acted the same as she always had.

He did the same with Ram, but, when the situation was reversed, he felt thrown off. That weakness was just another shameful part of Garfiel.

Mimi: "Well, what should we do this morning? Go to you mother and see her?"

His thoughts having been sidetracked, Garfiel jumped both at the suddenness of Mimi's words and their actual content.

Garfiel: "Wait, wait, why would we go see her?"

Mimi: "Because Realá is Garf's mother, shouldn't she know that as well."

Garfiel: "This midget really can't read between the lines..."

Aside from using instinct to spot the most important part of their relationship, Mimi is was unaware of the subtleties involved. He was in a difficult position, unable to answer questions about whether or not they were family. Garfiel immediately realized that it was useless to try to explain, and then gave up. And realized that that was another problem.

Garfiel: "'S fine... there's no need t' let her know that my amazin' self's her son."

Mimi: "Is that really okay?"

Garfiel: "It is. My amazin' self will leave it up to my sister..."

He would probably inform his rational sister.

After the initial shock and confusion passed, she would certainly come to the same conclusion as Garfiel, even faster than he had.

Only, even if their conclusion weren't the same, she still had the right to know that their mother was still alive. But would it be right to have her bear the pain as he did?

Garfiel: "Only by taking a moment can we make a decision."

Mimi: "So it's like that~. That's really hard~, Mimi~, just thinks that moms should be gotten along with~."

Garfiel: "Stuff 'bout moms... d'ya understand it?"

Mimi that unexpected, so Garfiel's ear shuddered and asked. Mimi is nodded with an imposing attitude of "yep~".

Mimi: "Mimi, Hetaro, and Tivey never knew Mom and Dad. They probably thought "triplets~, raising a super big family is too hard~" so they left us somewhere~. Then, we were picked up by the Chief, so he's family, and Missy is family too!"

Garfiel: " ... so... y'really do have a big family."

Without knowing the reason, he suddenly felt that the atmosphere had relaxed as he stroked Mimi's head.

At that moment,

Mimi: "—waah!"

Mim quickly leapt away from his hand.

Garfiel stared at her reddened face, as she spun around with a whirring sound while rubbing it.

Mimi: "Ever since yesterday, getting too close to Garf feels weird."

Garfiel: "Right, sorry... d'ya want my amazin' self t'leave?"

Mimi: "I don't want that either~, something not too close and not too far feels the best~."

She scrambled away with small steps, stopping in a place outside of his reach.

Garfiel frowned, confused, as Mimi gave her usual "hehe~" laugh. Just now, his own face seemed to tingle with a little redness.

Mimi: "Hey, let's eat the souffle!"

Garfiel: "Y-yeah, sure..."

As if in a hurry to change the topic, Mimi withdrew the dessert box from her pocket. That was what Reala had given Mimi last night, before they'd parted ways.

Momentarily, a numb of pain flowed through his chest as Mimi held the snacks toward him, the aroma wafting gently to his nose.

The dessert was a little like bread, with sweet condiment added to the dough, stuffed with cream and bean paste.

There were two large, round souffles in the box, one each for Mimi and Garfiel, which would serve as their breakfast.

Mimi: "Yay! It's sweet~! Delicious! Super delicious, super delicious~!"

Garfiel: "Ah, 's delicious!"

Garfiel voiced his agreement to Mimi's loud applause.

The dessert was slightly sweet, but not overwhelmingly sugary, and the dough fluffy and soft. If freshly baked, it would have been even more delicious. This was a mother's expert cooking.

In that case, Garfiel could have had more chances to taste it.

Mimi: “Gar~f?”

Garfiel: “This really isn’t like my amazin’ self, yeah?”

At Mimi’s concern, Garfiel shoved those wishful thoughts away.

He returned his thoughts to his friends, who were waiting for him. Like Mimi, Garfiel stayed out without permission.

Because of that, he would certainly be severely reproached—

???: “—Hello, hello? Is this okay? Can everyone hear? Meat creatures who can hear, good for you! Meat creatures who can’t, go fester and die, that’d be a huge help. Gahahahaha—”

Garfiel: “What?”

Mimi: “Hmm~?”

Just having taken a short step forward, a voice suddenly assaulted their eardrums.

The two glanced at each other and looked up to the sky at the same time, where the voice seemed to be booming from.

Garfiel: “That voice sounds like...”

???: “Well, well, well, was there any idiot who died from shock at that moment? If not, well, it doesn’t really matter, but if there’s anyone who dares to ignore this lovely lady, then, my mood will be ruined!”

Ignoring the Garfiel, the voice kept speaking at that annoying volume.

The others walking on the morning streets all looked up at the sky, dumbfounded. A shockingly loud voice — that conclusion would be wrong.

Garfiel, whose sense of hearing was different from a regular human's could tell that this voice wasn't a loud one coming from one source; rather, it permeated the entire city, spreading the way an echo would.

However, knowing that didn't answer any questions.

???: "You boring creatures do nothing but ruin my mood. There's no value here at all. —You're all just garbagegarbagegarbage! Clear your disgusting minds of your ugly thoughts, and immediately find a ditch of waste to stick your head into and down in! Please go die soon, please, I beg you! Gahahaha!"

— The owner of this voice had the most vile of souls.

Garfiel: "What kind 'f joke 's this? Stop fuckin' around!"

Mimi: "Garf... I keep feeling like this is super, super uncomfortable..."

As Garfiel cursed in irritation, Mimi showed an uneasy expression. At her, Garfiel traced the scar on his forehead, gritting his teeth.

That expression didn't suit her. That expression, he didn't want to see it from her.

???: "Well, well, then, since the bit dull rotten meat creatures can't figure it out, I'll explain it. I have control of the radio— meaning, meaning, meaning—!"

Garfiel: "Get on with it, what's the meanin'?"

???: "That—— I, no, we have control of the City Hall. Ah, by the way, is there a control tower at the end of the city? That's also ours now!"

Garfiel: "Control tower... what did Otto-nii?"

Sound the other side of the true purpose of the owner, Garfiel felt the threat, holding his breath.

Before and after arriving at the city, he'd heard about Pristella's structure from Otto. Pristella's ever functioning watergate could trap any enemy in the city if they were lured within.

And, in charge of that gate's operation, control towers located in each corner of the city, were controlled by this host, who possessed the most vile character possible. The entire city's population had been taken hostage.

Reaching the same conclusion as Garfiel, panic and anxiety began to spread through the civilians. Everyone shouted at the same time, and the city rang with toxic laughter.

???: "Kahahahaha—! By now! At this moment! Only now are you realizing that you're all going to be decimated! It's shocking how brainless you all are! It's too much for me! Ah, garbagegarbagegarbage! Gahahaha—"

Garfiel: "——"

???: "Oh, this won't do. Any longer without giving my name, you're all going to start trying to escape reality? Why don't you allow this gentle and kindness lady's mercy give you a plain and easy answer?"

In the panicked city, Garfiel held Mimi's hand tightly. Then listen carefully to what the voice is saying.

Capella: "I am the Witch Cult's Sin Archbishop of Lust—"

Garfiel: "Witch Cult—!"

Capella: "Capella Emerada Lugunica! Gahahaha! Respect me! Worship me! Then cry and beg and die tragically like worms! You rotten slabs of meat! Kahahahaha—!"

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Upon hearing the broadcast, Garfiel had been forced to make a series of choices.

Although the broadcast of the self-proclaimed archbishop induced panic, the actions of the citizens of Pristella were very orderly. Even in that turmoil, they kept emergency procedures in mind and fled into the shelters scattered around Pristella.

Passerbys had attempted to lead Garfiel and Mimi into a shelter. However, they had refused to take their lead and instead chose to go elsewhere.

That had led Garfiel to another choice.

Then, the result of that choice—

Reala: “Ah, Mr. Gorgeous!”

Garfiel: “——”

In another shelter, Reala had run toward Garfiel upon seeing him, relieved to find an acquaintance.

Garfiel endured the pain in his heard an allowed her to approach.

– And the result of that choice,

From the very moment Garfiel had refused to be led to a nearby shelter, this choice was imminent.

Where should he be? With Emilia and Subaru, or with the mother whose safety he’d gone out of his way to confirm?

Rationally, Garfiel knew he should have immediately returned to Emilia.

Even so, he’d made the excuse to himself that since this shelter was relatively close by, he could afford to check on her safety.

Reala: “It’s great that Mimi-san is fine as well. That broadcast had me worried.”

Mimi: “Ah, nothing’s happened to us~! The souffle was delicious, thanks~ for the treats~!”

Reala: "Ah, that's good, I'm glad it was to your taste."

Mimi hadn't objected to any of Garfiel's choices, and had followed along faithfully.

Of course, she wanted to return to Anastasia and her brothers. To her, Reala's safety was someone else's business, and she had no real obligation to go and check.

Garfiel: "——"

While listening to his own excuse, Garfiel, having finally confirmed Reala's safety, was free to leave. He needed to immediately return to Emilia's side and defend her with vigor and strength.

When the Witch Cult appeared, Garfiel would protect Emilia and fight in her name. That was his agreement with Subaru, which he would absolutely not violate.

Even if he couldn't protect himself as a tiger, he couldn't forget himself as a man.

Garfiel: "It looks like everythin's good, so my amazin' self will..."

Reala: "Wait... Mr. Gorgeous, have you..."

As Garfiel prepared to leave, Reala's unusually timid attitude frightened him.

Reala: "Have you seen my children yet? They left early this morning... and they're not in this shelter..."

Garfiel: "——!?"

Hurriedly looking up, Garfiel scanned his surroundings, unable to see their figures anywhere here.

Reala: "Even my husband... no, nevermind, I said something superfluous..."

Garfiel: "What is it? My amazin' self'll be bothered if y' try to hide anythin' now."

Reala: “— The broadcast came from the City Hall, where my husband works... so today, when something happened there...”

Garfiel: “——”

The City Hall was a tall building in the center of the city.

Garfiel had heard that it was is in charge of the functions of the city, and the archbishop had announced that they'd seized it.

That was where Garek probably was.

Garfiel: “Haah...”

This news came far to abruptly, and Garfiel's heart quickened with the rhythm of an alarm.

The missing siblings, and Garek, who was in the middle of the most dangerous location. Confirming Reala's safety had led him to learn of the circumstances of her family.

Garfiel: “Captain, Emilia-sama...”

Their faces, as well as Otto's and Beatrice's flashed through Garfiel's mind. He had to return and become their strength.

But, as if immediately chasing that same idea, that faces of the siblings and Garek also flashed through in mind.

Reala: “I'm sorry to have disturbed you, Mr. Gorgeous. Please forget what I said.”

Garfiel: “.....”

Reala: “Just now, I was a little bit too frightened. My children and husband are well aware of the city's emergency procedures.”

Reala showed them a smile of strength, but her hands were clasped, as if in prayer.

There was no doubt that her gesture was reluctant, and she was only desperately putting on an act to keep Garfiel from worrying.

Garfiel: “——”

Silence, silence, silence.

Unspeaking, gritting his teeth, Garfiel's mind raced. Mimi faced him, also silent, waiting for his decision. Unspeaking, she only held his hand.

Garfiel: “... Don't worry, leave your children and husband t' us.”

Reala: “—Mr. Gorgeous!”

That unexpected answer left Reala speechless with surprise. Nodding to her, Garfiel looked down at Mimi.

Garfiel: “S my issue, so you should go back.”

Mimi: “Hi-ya!”

Garfiel: “Ow!”

At being told to return, Mimi brought her foot down on Garfiel's, who cried out loudly in pain. Mimi took the moment to stand tall.

Mimi: “Garf said something so handsome, so how could Mimi not match him~? I'm definitely~ going with you~!”

Garfiel: “Midget... no, 's fine. Sorry.”

Mimi: “At this point, you should be offering your grititude!”

Garfiel: “—Thank you.”

Mimi: “You’re welcome!”

With a sweet giggle, Mimi drew Garfiel into a laugh as well.

Then, turning back to the stunned Reala, Garfiel spoke.

Garfiel: “My amazin’s self’s goin’ lookin’ for your family, so stay here, with everyone else, and wait for us.”

Reala: “But, but... why would you do that for me?”

Garfiel: “——”

Why was he doing this?

Reala’s wavering gaze questioned Garfiel. Garfiel grinned at her.

Garfiel: “Because my amazin’ self’s a golden tiger! Gorgeous! Tiger!”

Mimi: “Then Mimi, is also Gorgeous Mimi~!”

Shouting their stupid lines, their levity shocked the people gathered here.

At Reala’s shock, Garfiel and Mimi put on a rose, then, with a valiant spin, the two rushed from the shelter.

Mimi: “Garfiel, what do we do?”

Garfiel: “Use the smell to pursue them. Those two and Garek, y’ still remember their smell clearly, right?”

The problem was that this is was very large city, and the flow of water was everywhere.

To accurately find their scents, the environmental conditions needed to be right. In this populated city, a powerful sense of smell could only do so much. In spite of this, the two's animal senses served them well.

Once they'd seen Reala off safely, they found the scents of the siblings.

During this period, the evacuation of the city's citizens had proceeded smoothly. The city, unpleasantly enough, appeared to be a ghost city. In most cases like this, looting would have been expected, but the absence of that kind of immoral behavior was most likely due to the notoriety of the Witch Cult's name.

Mimi: "Hmm, is it this one? Gar~f, I smell them!"

Garfiel: "... right, and th' direction is..."

Garfiel tracked them and roughly predicted their location. They seemed to have traced yesterday's route from Third Street to First Street.

A thought flashed through his mind.

Garfiel: "Those two went to th' park to see that Songstress..."

Fred had said yesterday that he'd left too late and failed to catch her. Having learned his lesson, he'd left early this morning, determined not to miss her again.

This time, his sister must have accompanied him.

Garfiel: "In that case, if we go to First Street..."

If they went there, they could find them fairly quickly.

Garfiel brightened slightly, thinking that the situation had turned in his favor. —And then he smelled it.

Garfiel: "——"

Mimi: "Is this their father...?"

Mimi noticed what Garfiel had.

That was, a split in the middle from the siblings. Garek had headed to the City Hall in the middle of the city.

The moment of choice descended again on Garfiel.

If he went to First Street, he could find the siblings. If they had been at the Songstress's performance, they would certainly have found safety.

However, the City Hall was a difference case.

As time passed, the people in the City Hall, where the Witch Cult had made their attack, were in increasing great danger.

However, Garek was in a place where, at any second, the possibility of his death would increase.

Mimi: "Gar~f.... what do we do?"

Garfiel: "——"

A choice once again approached Garfiel.

He could choose to confirm the survival of the siblings, who were on the way to reuniting with Subaru. In that case, he would be turning a blind eye to Garek in the City Hall.

How could Garfiel's relationship to Garek be described?

Unlike Realá, and the children born from her, there was no direct relationship between them. If blood was used as a basis for rescue, his obligation to save Garek will cease to exist.

However, what would become of Realá, if she lost him?

She'd spend years mourning with her children, all because Garfiel gave up on the City Hall. That family would shed endless tears.

Garfiel: "... Th' City Hall's where the archbishops is, right?"

Mimi: "Yep~!"

Garfiel: "That control tower's very dangerous, but 'f we can just get the the archbishop and kill her, then..."

Mimi: "Everyone will be saved~? Awesome~! Too awesome~!" Bouncing on the spot, Mimi applauded Garfiel's comments.

However, she immediately stopped jumping on the spot,

Mimi: "Although, it's not a big problem, but~ I feel kind of oneasy..."

Garfiel: "Uneasy?"

Mimi: "It's very dangerous. That kind of feeling. It's not clear, but it's that feeling." What she meant was that she had no basis for saying so.

At her timid attitude, Garfiel felt thrown off.

Up until then, Mimi had been constantly supporting him from behind, agreeing to his every decision.

Garfiel: "How shameless... expectin' others t' jus' do nothin' but support me."

Mimi: "Garfiel, what can I do?"

Garfiel: "'It'd be dumb t' ignore your unease, and the captain'n the others're goin' t' give me hell for it, but..."

Emilia's strongest force could not run away in fear.

And no matter how much he struggled, in order to save the city, they would need to face the City Hall eventually.

Garfiel: "First 'f all, we have t' confirm the situation of the City Hall. Like 'f there's a sentry posted there, or whether or not th' inside is safe."

Mimi: "Is that called an investigation? Oooh! I see~, we're going scouting!~"

Although Mimi was still a little tense, she agreed eagerly.

Seeing her draw the wand that she loved to use from her robe, Garfiel also drew his twin shields from his waist and attached them to his wrists.

As his arms were covered in silver armor, he declared himself ready.

Garfiel: "Let's go."

Mimi: "Alright~!"

With that response to Garfiel's brief words, the two headed toward the City Hall.

According to information from Subaru, the Sin Archbishop of Sloth had several minions fighting alongside him. Although they couldn't match up the the archbishops, those of them who were experienced in combat were capable of posing a threat.

On the road, alert of any guards who may have been assigned there, the two traveled cautiously and carefully.

Garfiel: "What... 's odd, what's goin' on?"

However, the they couldn't see even a single cultist.

Even if they had been hiding, they couldn't have been able to cheat Garfiel and Mimi's noses. In that case,

Garfiel: “‘S like they think they don’t need a guard!”

Mimi: “.....”

When he remembered the voice from the broadcast, the force of Garfiel’s anger became unbearable.

They had never thought that anyone would attack them. Without a sign of alertness, they assumed that their control of the building was absolute, and that they had already achieved their victory.

That arrogance, he wanted to tear apart with his claws and crunch on with his fangs.

Mimi: “Hmmm?”

As Garfiel gnashed his teeth, Mimi gave a soft murmur.

Seeming subdued, she rubbed his back, looking disturbed, her nose twitching constantly.

Garfiel: “What is it?”

Mimi: “I don’t know~ but I think that something’s wrong. Garf, something’s off.”

Garfiel: “Don’t kid around!”

Seizing the hem of Garfiel’s pants, Mimi suddenly spoke discouraging words. Garfiel snapped at Mimi, who wanted to retreat after coming all the way here.

The Witch Cult had neglected to even post an outpost. Retreating just because the atmosphere seemed off wasn’t something that they could do.

If they left right now, the possibility of Real’s family suffering a tragedy could only increase.

Garfiel: “You can stay here ‘f you don’t want to go. My amazin’ self’ll be fine, I’ll crush ther archbishop’s easily!”

Mimi: “Garf!”

Shaking off the fingers on his pants, Garfiel leapt from their hiding place.

From the square along the waterway, he planned to immediately jump to the City Hall’s building.

The distance is narrowing. Their atmosphere remained stagnant. Their arrogance was real, what a joke.

Nothing happened. Ten steps left. Nine steps. Eight steps. Seven steps. He scaled a wall, finding a easier route to the building. Six steps. Five steps—

Mimi: “Garf—!”

Garfiel: “——!?”

Suddenly changing his direction, Garfiel redirected his energy to his legs, leaping not forward, but sideways.

Then, the a sharp light glinted off of the edge of a quiet blade flashed by his gaze. That destructive energy was completely silent.

The stone steps cut obliquely, as if they were cut, did not find themselves left behind. Floating, chopped white smoke.

Garfiel: “——”

If it weren’t for Mimi’s warning cry, he would have died just now.

A beautiful and exquisite slash barely missed Garfiel’s head. If that artistic cut had hit, Garfiel’s head would have been pinned up for display in the square.

Cold sweat.

At that moment, Garfiel landed and turned, and saw it.

Woman: “——”

Giant: “——”

Before his eyes, two figures suddenly appeared.

One of them was a giant man, leisurely holding a large sword in each hand. The other was slender, delicate woman, holding a long sword in her grip.

Both were wearing black headdresses, and Garfiel was unable to determine confirm their appearance.

Garfiel: “... ‘s not a nice greetin’, y’know?”

Scratching the back of his neck, which was covered in cold sweat from shock, Garfiel spoke, trying to divert their attention from determining his own combat strength.

However, neither responded to Garfiel’s words.

Mimi: “Garfiel, these two...”

Making a large circle around them, Mimi went to Garfiel’s side.

Garfiel didn’t dare to even look at Mimi, instead keeping his eye on the two figures.

Garfiel: “Yeah, they’re strong.”

Mimi’s voice spasmed nervously, and Garfiel answered by placing his hand on her shoulders, supporting her.

The two they were facing seemed to be dreary, ominous ghosts.

The preternatural levels of danger the two exuded were impossible to accurately measure. This unfamiliar stimulation pricking at Garfiel's skin robbed his mouth of saliva, and he felt an urgent thirst.

Obviously, the enemy's strength far eclipsed humanity's.

They were clearly superior to that murder machine who Garfiel had once fought.

Garfiel: "Only two people...?"

No other shadows lurked around.

The only guards were the two before him. They'd cloaked their existence from Garfiel up until now, so any other potential presences wouldn't exist. Those with strength had already chosen to stop hiding it.

In other words, the two in front of them were the barriers that they needed break through in order to recapture the city hall.

At the moment when Garfiel understood this,

Garfiel: "Heh, interesting...!"

Mimi: "Garf?"

Garfiel: "If we win, we can break through this field...!"

His heart stirred with vigor as he refused to let fear dominate his heart, touching his chest with a shield as he spoke in a sharp voice. Even as his head began cooling, sparks of excitement still bounced within him.

However, grasping Garfiel's trousers, Mimi shouted,

Mimi: "No, no! Garf, no! These two people, we can't! They're super~ strong! Only Mimi and Garfiel absolutely can't win! We can't!"

Garfiel: “—Whether or not we win, I — . Would not win or not, I will not try to see how I know. I absolutely would not agree with that. Moreover,”

Mimi discouraged, then the content of the feeling is to stimulate the fear of Garfiel cowardice. Garfiel pouted his mouth, his jaw full of anger toward the hostile two.

Garfiel: “Even if we run away with tails tucked between our legs, they’ll catch up to us.”

Mimi: “Then, then, once! We’ll hit them once, dodge, and then run away. If it’s just us, we have to leave! Without the Chief of Julios—!” (she pronounces “Julius” wrong)

Garfiel: “——”

At Mimi’s frantic words, Garfiel bit his lip and pondered.

Indeed, Garfiel also understood that Mimi was correct. They couldn’t match up to the two of them.

Facing that kind of enemy, one on one, was undeniably suicidal.

As there was no other way, was withdrawing the right course of action?

The two figures in front of them were the overwhelmingly strong barrier. With overwhelming power blocking the front, but also had to cross the barrier.

Garfiel, being defeated by Reinhardt, was far from the strongest he could be.

With consciousness that must become the shield of the most important, you must walk the strongest road to the necessary journey that you can claim to be the golden tiger.

And then, though not the same as the form of hope, the mothers and their new families met. If he withdrew here, Garek would—

Mimi: “——”

Again grabbing the hem of Garfiel's trousers, dominated by tumultuous thoughts, was Mimi, who held his with an uneasy expression. Garfiel recalled their gentle night, where she'd been his kind guardian.

Just then, his stubborn feelings began to gradually melt away.

Garfiel: "... Alright, we'll do just as you said. After an attack, we'll break away, and find others to come help us. —'S that okay?"

Mimi: "Yeah! Yeah! That's it— let's do it~!"

Faced with Garfiel's unflappable courage, Mimi gasped with delight.

Having unified their views, they turned to face the defensive figures before them, who had remained silent.

Their brief quarrel had provided a perfect opportunity to launch an offensive. Had they held back because of honor? Compassion? Caution?

Garfiel: "—Let's go!"

Mimi: "Hah!"

—If they were merely cautious, it was time to crush them.

Not needing a signal, Garfiel and Mimi leapt into the fray in tandem. Garfiel flew toward the woman, and Mimi attacked the giant.

As Garfiel approached her at bullet-like speed, the woman gently shifted her upper body, and, in the next moment, was swinging her blade downward at an alarming speed.

The beautiful flash of her sword split the air with a sharpness that fascinated Garfiel and caused him to momentarily lose himself.

Garfiel: "—kah!"

However, he wasn't so foolish as to lose himself and allow the blade to reach him.

It bounced into the shield on his right wrist, and he took the opportunity to kick at her. She swiftly avoided his blow and attacked again, but her lithe, terrifying form was blocked by his other shield.

With the neck as the goal of the cut-off, Garfiel shield with his left hand. Immediately after, he kicked her, he light body flying away easily.

Garfiel: "Haah!"

Looking at the form of the woman who he'd easily beaten backwards, Garfiel felt a sense of exhilaration.

When he glanced back he saw the giant I look back, I see the giants who act there, play a role of adaptability, and attack the attack magic blow that slickly passes through the big sword — it is just about to be out of the square.

Mimi seemed to have successfully escaped.

The giant didn't have the speed to match Mimi as she ran, and this woman didn't have the ability to fight Garfiel. In that case,

Garfiel: "If we can win one—!"

If he could take her out, launching another attack later would be easier. Defeating the woman would make the giant much easier to shred.

Garfiel leaped forward toward the collapsed woman, her sword colliding with his left wrist.

He brought his right shield upon her slender, frail form. She couldn't have the same regeneration ability as Elsa.

Garfiel: "Got ya!"

He'd be able to take out the woman.

At the moment when Garfiel confirmed this and raised his voice, Death came from behind.

— The giant, who should have been a ways away, approached Garfiel, bringing with him the stench of [death]. Garfiel instinctively reacted like a loaded spring.

Immediately interrupting his attack, he brought his left wrist back to his back, leaping away from the spot.

However, another attack from his back smashed Garfiel's left wrist he was sent to the ground with a cry.

Garfiel: "Ahhh?" "——"

Garfiel, who was swallowed up by the shock, groaned violently for an unimaginable blow.

Bouncing up from the ground, his body, caught in midair, once again faced an outrageous attack. With the help of his twin shields, he mounted a defense against the impact — but he was sent flying by the momentum.

Targeting Garfiel, who was gliding through the air, trajectory parallel to the ground, the giant and the woman dove forward in pursuit at the same time.

"——"

"——"

Garfiel: "Haahh, ahhh!"

Garfiel was sandwiched between the two parallel attacks.

He met the sword swinging at him from the front with a shield, and used the other to block a giant sword at his back. With a forceful kick to the ground, he barely ducked escaped their cage of attacks.

A sword once again emerged from the fray, which he met with both shields, sparks dancing along their surfaces, followed by a swing sweeping from top to bottom...

Garfiel: "Hah!"

His bones and sternum cracked, and the power of the blow left Garfiel's vision blood red. Although he'd bore the brunt of that sword, its blunt blade had barely spared Garfiel's life.

A cry of agony followed the blood spilling from his mouth as his body flew into a tower, barely avoiding the danger of being shattered to pieces. However, the two difficult enemies wouldn't allow his survival.

"_____"

Wordlessly, they cut at Garfiel.

Although the intensity of this strike couldn't be compared with that of the previous one, the sharpness of the woman's sword as she called upon a power that should have been outside her scope was beautiful as it tangled with the breath of death. Even at this length, that calm, elegant blade would split him clean in half.

"_____"

Also wordless, the giant's battling style was brutal and crude.

However, that kind of brutality wasn't one that was impulsive and left to chance, it was the brutality of someone who could harness and optimize their destructive power. Most people would barely be able to hold one of his sword, but he easily swing two of them, each in one of his giant arms.

Garfiel: "Ah, ah, hah, ah, haaah!"

A violent whirlwind of steel sliced through the air, flowing like running water.

Although their styles were different, the effectiveness of their dynamic was commensurate with their overwhelming skill, and they attacked side by side, leaving the escaping Garfiel only able to desperately play the defense.

Desperately bouncing backwards on the stone steps, dodging a heavy swing, feeling a sharp wind whistle over his head broken under the wind, rely on the instinct to withstand attacks with his shields, dodging, bouncing, defending.

—But, if they kept at it, sooner or later, he would be beheaded.

“_____”

“_____”

The two figures pressed Garfiel, giving his nary a chance to breathe. Without that, he couldn't do anything about the shortage of oxygen in his brain, couldn't see any ray of hope. His every effort was directed toward avoiding a fatal injury.

When he'd exhausted himself, his attention would surely fail to keep up. And his distracted self would suffer a fatal blow.

Masterful combat, masterful swings.

Tenacious as Garfiel's life way, they could easily and simply steal it away. The more time passed, the more escape routes closed to him.

Decision. A decision was pressing.

The only way out of this dilemma was to reveal his true fangs. In that moment, Garfiel found the only advantage he could possibly hold.

And that thought briefly revived him. He sought a breathing opportunity.

Garfiel: “—What...”

The woman's blades made deadly cuts. He brought both wrists forward to capture her, shifting his body the minimum distance to avoid the full impact of the giant's full attack.

As expected, the giant's hit cracked Garfiel's left shoulder, and the knee of his right leg was shattered. But, in exchange for a breath of fresh air, that damage was nothing.

Garfiel: "Kah, haah..."

"_____"

"_____"

With a raging roar, he released the heat boiling in his body.

The same feeling of boiling blood expanded to his field of vision, which became nothing but pure white, a cracking sound echoing from beneath his face as his bones shifted. His teeth elongated into fangs, and he exercised his arms as his muscles expanded rapidly, his body becoming covered with golden hair.

Only his upper body changed, leaving him in a half-beast state.

The smell of blood chased his rationality away momentarily, but, in this state, his thoughts weren't completely animalistic. Seeing the person in front of them beastify, it was impossible for any hostile party to remain calm.

"_____"

Facing the two speechless figures, Garfiel growled, reveling in the idea of shattering their eardrums, confirming that his nails had grown into thick, double-edged weapons. As the enemies' footsteps froze, he decided to open holes in their bodies.

His front paw descended toward the woman — until the form of giant man squeezed in front of her.

No matter. Even those thick muscles were nothing worth mentioning. They were but paper shields under his claws. And shielding was just what the giant intended to do — he held out his outstretched, the blade of his large sword facing down, making a gesture of neither defending nor attacking, but choosing to protect the woman.

Cute. But it was over.

— His paws would tear through the giant's body, followed by the slender form of the woman...

Garfiel: "——!?"

The process that had already been set in motion, but had been paused in the first motion.

Garfiel's tiger paw hit the giant, but failed to tear through him. That was because he'd caught Garfiel's paw in his own hands.

He'd uncover the front part of his robe to reveal his six arms.

With its strong arm of Garfil suppressed, gripping big sword will Garfiel's claws sharply blocked the tip, this violent attack from the front down.

—This was the [Eight Arm] defensive movement.

"——"

Too stunned to react, Garfiel hesitated.

He couldn't believed that the giant could stand up to his crushing blow.

That was also to say, in that moment, Garfiel had left himself exposed and completely unprepared.

"——"

From behind the giant's back, the woman swung behind unprepared half-beast and launched herself at him.

Garfiel's back, covered by tiger's fur, was a sitting target for that woman waving her long sword. As the tip of the sword approached, Garfiel felt the invisible breath of [death] on his neck.

However, his paws captured by the giant's hands, all he could do was wait for [death]—

Mimi: "Hold on a second!"

Garfiel: "——"

Garfiel would have been split diagonally in half, had the woman's cut not been stopped by an unfolding blue magic barrier.

Her strike bounced into the barrier, which disappeared as she landed back on the ground. The orange-haired kitten had saved Garfiel in the nick of time.

Mimi: "Garfiel, we promised that we'd flee immediately!"

For the first time, something like reproach colored Mimi's voice.

In his half beast status, hearing the voice coming from behind, Garfiel's rationality flew back into his head as he started to recognize his own stupidity.

Ignoring anxieties, being far too careless, having been too dismissive to his opponent, he'd landed himself in a dangerous situation. From that dead end, Mimi had rescued him.

Garfiel swallowed as he appreciated the strength of Mimi's barrier.

The violence in the woman's blade didn't match her appearance, and Mimi's defensive capabilities were really quite capable. Garfiel was incredibly fortunate that she was there.

Garfiel: "Hah, ah, ah, hahhh!"

Woman: “——”

Resting assured that he would be safe, Garfiel broke free of the giant’s grip. Kicking at the body and spotting his blow being blocked by an arm, Garfiel picked Mimi up by the waist and disengaged from the battle.

In this way, he would flee from here with Mimi. Following their original plan, they’d pick the fight back up with reinforcements.

Woman: “——”

Before they could move, the woman had quickly caught up. But once again, Mimi launched a barrier, this one larger than the previous one. The woman was again knocked back, and Garfiel gathered all his energy into his legs, preparing to escape.

— A breath. The figure of the woman stopped and gently cast a hand in front of the barrier. With a leap, she approached.

Garfiel: “What’s—!”

Mimi: “——”

Garfiel: “Eh?”

A small sound accompanied a gentle impact.

Prepare to ask what had happened, Garfiel’s stopped mid jump. As the stone steps flew past from under him, he saw a red line soar through the sky.

Blood. That’s what it was.

Garfiel: “Midget...?”

The consciousness of maintaining his semi-beast form was interrupted, and Garfiel's rapidly changed back to human form. The sensation of losing his tiger fur was buried under a wave of chills.

In his arms was an exhausted, drained. He turned his gaze down. Looking up at the his flying figure was a woman whose blade whipped through the air.

More than half of that sword was coated with red, viscous blood.

A warm liquid dripped onto Garfiel's lower abdomen. Seeing Mimi's death grip on that wand she loved to use, even as she was rendered immobile from exhaustion, snapped Garfiel back into awareness.

Garfiel: "——"

Landing, jumping again. Continuing to leap to the nearby buildings, bearing the weight at his side as he fled. Fortunately, their adversaries didn't follow suit.

Were they uninterested in anything other than guarding the square, or was this a show of humanity? No matter, what should he do now? After four lengthy leaps away the square, Garfiel collapsed on a building, where he checked Mimi's condition.

Mimi's eyes closed, a large amount of blood spilling from the wound in her chest.

Garfiel yanked her clothes open to check on her wounds. He cautiously concluded that this wasn't yet a fatal injury. Of course, that didn't allow for any optimism. She was in need on immediate healing magic. He needed to calm himself.

Garfiel: "——"

Placing his hand on her wound, Garfiel willed all of the mana in his body into Mimi.

Garfiel was one of the few who could use healing magic in Sanctuary. He'd always felt that it was slightly useless, but, in the event of any emergency, he hoped to be able to do something. Therefore, Garfiel had poured all of his magical efforts into learning how to heal, and he had a rough but complete grasp on each field of healing.

As long as the injury wasn't fatal, he was fairly confident that he could do something.

Mimi's wounds needed all of his effort to heal. Sweat beaded his forehead as he mustered up his mana, directing it to suppress the overflow of blood and mend the cut skin, muscle, injured internal organs, desperately willing them to be fixed, giving her mana continuously.

Continuously. Continuously.

—The wound wouldn't close.

Garfiel: "What... what...?"

Who was whispering in that soft voice?

Someone who could, in this situation, make that kind of soft sound deserved nothing but Garfiel's wrath. He glanced around wildly, looking for the source. There was no one there. Finally, he realized. That voice was his own. aware of it. The voice is just my own.

So that soft voice had been him? Had he made that sound? Such a sound was, was, was—

Garfiel: "Close, close, close, healhealheal...!"

Exhausted, he ordered all of the magic in his body into her treatment. The wave of healing magic flowed into her, filling her with a gentle current of mana.

In spite of this, the wound refused to close.

Garfiel: "—'S a lie, right?"

Unable to accept the reality facing him, Garfiel again muttered with a weak voice.

Immediately afterward, he hit himself in the face and bit down hard on his lip to keep himself grounded. Now was not the time to make such a soft voice. What could he do, what could he do?

What could he do, what could he do, what could he do, what could he do? He had no idea. But he couldn't give up here. This girl needed to be saved. Because hadn't she let Garfiel shed tears before her?

Such a child, who had been hurt trying to save him, could not die like this.

Garfiel: "——"

Gritting his teeth, Garfiel began to run. One of his hands rested on the girl's wound, trying again to staunch her bleeding with his ineffective magic.

The smell of blood, the smell of [death]. In these deserted streets, any thoughts about what might have happened were completely absent from Garfiel's mind.

Someone, anyone! Save this kid! Someone, anyone, bring a miracle! Tell me what to do! If there's anything I can do... what can be done to save her!?

Garfiel: "——"

Garfiel strengthened his sense of smell.

The smell of water, blood, high feelings, charred meat. In the midst of those foul scents, Garfiel found a very familiar smell brushing past, and immediately following it, running, running, continually, endlessly, running.

He flew into a shelter, seeing figures covered with bloodstains everywhere, and issued a sad sigh. But he wasn't free to care at the moment. Opening his eyes, he searched for that figure.

Searching, searching, searching...

Subaru: "Garfiel!?"

He found him.

In that deep, dark, cold underground facilities, he found the one who he had been desperately searching out.

Natsuki Subaru.

To Garfiel, that existence was miraculous, and, in any worst case possible, he was a ray of light, the last thing Garfiel could rely on.

Staggering pace. Head shaking.

Due to the weight of in hands and his choking lungs, Garfiel swayed back and forth.

As he approached, Subaru glanced around him, before becoming aware of the unconscious Mimi in his arms.

Under Subaru's gaze, Garfiel bowed his head, holding Mimi out, blindly cursing his own stupidity.

Garfiel: "Sorry, captain...! I'm so worthless...! Incompetent...!"

He'd been unable to protect that family, his vow to become a shield for their mission hadn't been achieved, his challenge to the hostile forces had been met with no results, and, in the end, this gentle girl was on the brink of death.

Subaru: "Garfiel, what happened... no, it's not the time for that. Ferris!"

Ferris: "I know! Hurry up, give that child to me!"

Reaching out, Mimi was taken from his arms, and placed in a bed near Subaru. Garfiel took a moment to try to sort through his thoughts.

In the next moment, a volatile healing energy overflowed, permeating the space. Garfiel simply couldn't compare. If Garfiel's healing prowess was likened to a drop of rain, Ferris would be a waterfall.

Witnessing the magic that could resurrect even a lost life, healing, Garfiel looked as if she had been drawn out of her soul, her face staring at her treatment.

Subaru gently placed a hand on Garfiel's slackened shoulder. With a glance, he could see that Subaru had endured an appalling injury to his foot.

Subaru: "Although I can't say that this went well, you did a great job bringing her to Ferris. Thanks to you, this child can be saved."

Garfiel: "Thanks to me...?"

What was Subaru saying?

Thanks to Garfiel, Mimi had saved? Ridiculous! Mimi was hurt so severely, at it was all Garfiel's fault.

Mimi's life should never have been in danger in that first place. That had all happened because of Garfiel's poor judgement.

Emptiness and twisted thinking, unsolvable thoughts of guilt, and self-conscious stupidity. The world would never forgive Garfiel's foolishness.

He had made a mistake, and he would need to pay the price. And still, the worst results were happening.

Subaru: "Ferris, what happened...?"

Feeling a change, Subaru's expression grew worried.

Subaru dragged himself over the the bed, questioning the man who was casting his potent healing spells.

In that terrifying torrent of magic, the healer shook his head.

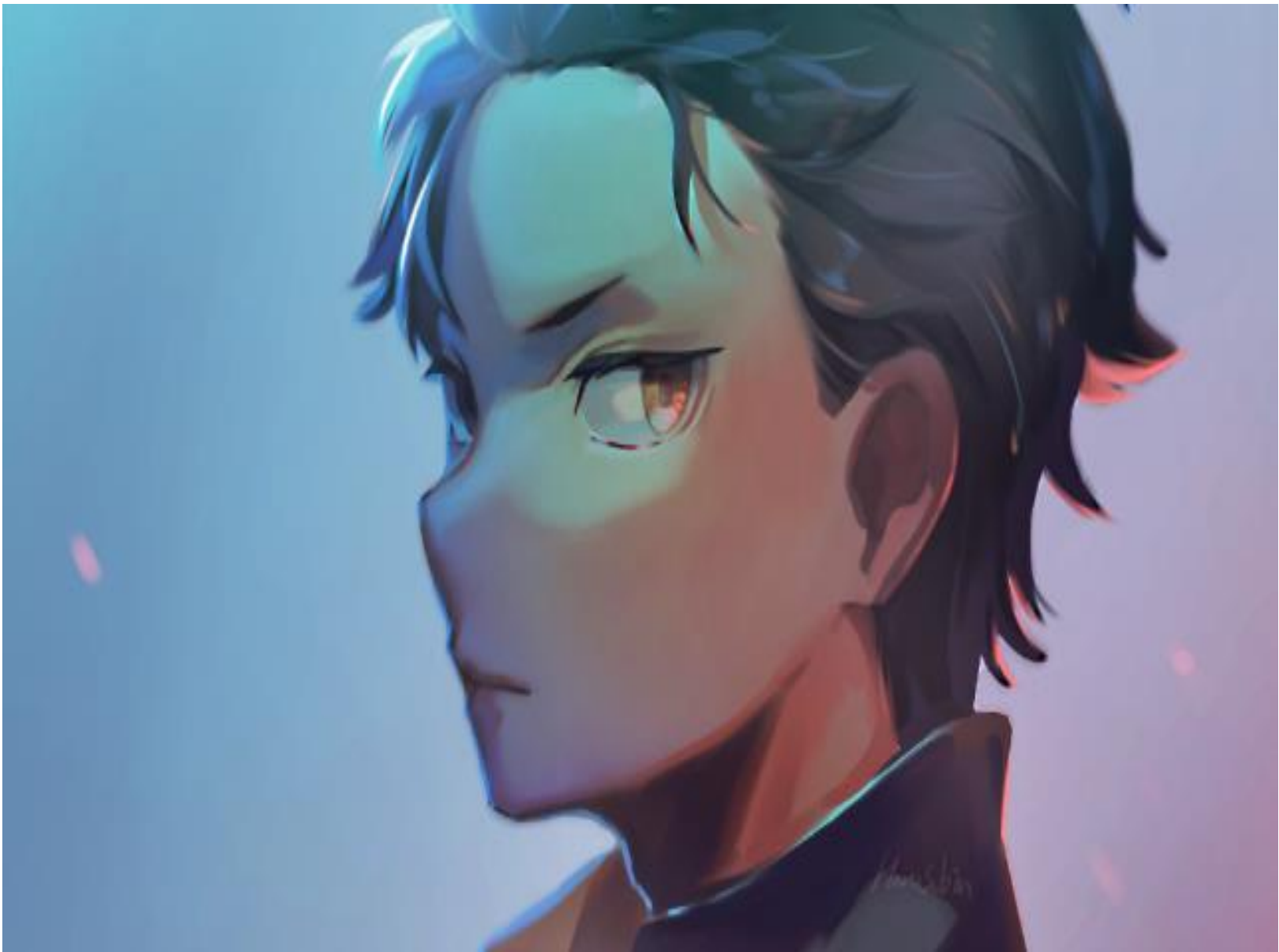
Ferris: "Why...? The wounds, they won't heal...! If it goes on like this, I don't know if I can save her!"

His anguished cry echoed across the room, and Garfiel turned his face toward the sky. But he was underground, and so the sky had nothing to tell Garfiel.

— The price of his mistake could be nothing but a repatriation by blood.

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Chapter 32 - The City Hall Raider's Conference



Ferris: “Ah, really! Healing magic has no effect, so we can only use such a primitive treatment!”

Ferris, with blood staining his cheeks, clenched his teeth in irritation, waving a hand around.

Lying in front of him, blood still flowing from her chest, was Mimi’s unconscious form.

Wholeheartedly wanting to stop the bleeding, he’d been forced to bind her wound with a magic cloth and several layers of bandages.

This was something typically used for hand and foot injuries, but it could also be applied to the chest to maintain a wound's closure and prevent bleeding. Only, Mimi's chest wound was just above her heart.

The amount of time she had left could only depend upon her own vitality.

Subaru leaned against the wall, watching desperate treatment as he fretted about Garfiel. Looking down, he saw that instead of looking at Mimi, Garfiel had plunged his bloody hands into his short blond hair and looked down, a far cry from his usual optimistic self.

The blood covering his body was not only Mimi's. It was plain to see that he had his own severe wounds. Blood stained the corners of his mouth, and the amount of blood still pouring his shoulders was particularly heart-wrenching. His trousers were torn near his knees, where flesh was missing and white bone could be glimpsed.

Subaru: "Garfiel. Mimi can be entrusted to Ferris, for the time being. You also need treatment for your wounds. Can you administer healing spells yourself?"

Garfiel: "...ah, yeah."

Nodding, Garfiel slowly pressed his palms to his wounds began to deliver the healing mana into his own body. As he watched the slowly healing wounds, Subaru looked down at the conversation mirror in his hand.

Reflected in the surface of the mirror was a silent old swordsman, his wrinkled face bearing a complex expression.

In the depths of his own heart, what kind of confusion had risen? Undoubtedly, Wilhelm must have reached the same conclusion as Subaru.

Subaru: "The wound can't be closed, which is to say..."

Wilhelm: "In all likelihood, that's because of the Divine Protection of the Shinigami."

Finishing Subaru's words, Wilhelm came to the expected conclusion.

The terrible curse of incurable healing of a wounds was given by the death god's blessing. That Mimi's wound couldn't be healed by magic was probably due to such a blessing.

Then, in Subaru's mind, only one person could conceivably have done this.

Of course, while it couldn't be asserted that no other person could possibly have the same divine protection,

Subaru: "Wilhelm-san. Although this isn't a happy thought... your wrist injury, how is it?"

Wilhelm: "——"

Wilhelm briefly closed his eyes, then removed his coat and presented his left hand to Subaru.

The bandage wrapped tightly against it bore no bloodstains. Then there was no bleeding— so his attacker couldn't be near.

Wilhelm: "Even assuming that the injury was given by someone who had the same protection as my wife, as long as my wounds have not opened, her life cannot be near. Although that should be a matter of course."

Subaru: "Wilhelm-san..."

Was he frustrated, or was he relieved? Subaru did not know.

Wilhelm had lost his wife a full fifteen years ago. Even one year ago, he'd certainly not doubted her death.

Regardless of the hopelessness of any situation, looking at a favored result with unconditional hope and choosing to believe in any modest hope was a weakness of humanity. However, even if Wilhelm succumbed to that weakness, Subaru found no shame in it whatsoever.

Therefore, at this moment, Subaru found no words he could say to Wilhelm who but of course desired neither casual comfort nor encouragement.

Behind Subaru, a change in the situation had occurred. That was,

Ricardo: “Bro. Sorry, to take your time while you’re treating a wound.”

Saying so, Ricardo sat on the ground.

Near Ferris, desperately conducting his treatment, the beastman sat in front of the bloody Garfiel, eyeing him sharply.

To meet that gaze, Garfiel slowly raised his head.

Ricardo: “I don’t know what happened. But I know that if bro hadn’t brought her here, Mimi wouldn’t have made it. So,”

Garfiel: “——”

Ricardo: “Really, thank you very much. I’m deeply grateful.”

With two fists on the ground, Ricardo kneeled and bowed his head.

As Ricardo’s forehead hit the ground, thanking Garfiel for bringing his family here, Garfiel appeared shocked.

Mimi’s status was still not optimistic. It was understandable that Garfiel held some guilt for not being able to successfully defend Mimi. But that was by no means Garfiel’s fault. What good would it do to blame him?

Ricardo had, of course, hoped for Mimi’s safe return, and, having her back in that state, he couldn’t have been calm.

Even so, in Subaru view, Ricardo’s vaulted posture was completely sincere.

At the same time, he held an unforgiving anger at those who left Mimi in that state. Therefore,

Subaru: “Garfiel. Although it must be troubling for you, tell me exactly what happened. Even you’re in such a state, which is unimaginable. Not to mention...”

As he asked Garfiel to explain the situation, an idea took root in Subaru’s mind.

It was earlier, as he sorted through their information with Julius and Wilhelm, contemplating the siege of Pristella, the idea had briefly crossed his mind.

Seizing the five control towers, the Witch Cult had turned the entire city as their hostage.

Each location must have been occupied by a mighty force. Assuming that was right— they were most likely guarded by Wrath, Greed, Lust. Then, the likelihood of Gluttony’s presence was also high.

——That Gluttony was precisely Subaru’s target.

Greed, who had Emilia, and Wrath, who regarded Subaru as Petelgeuse. Lust, whose ugly nature he’d heard earlier, and Gluttony, the target he’d been hunting.

Although the situation was indeed the worst of the worst, at the same time, there had never been an opportunity better than now.

Being entrapped in a spider web was precisely the right time to exterminate all the spiders.

Subaru: “Anyway, we have attack these guys eventually. After all, if we don’t, we’ll never be able to return safe and sound.”

Subaru: “——”

Garfiel stared at him in surprise.

Subaru nodded with encouragement, urging him to speak.

Garfiel: “...After hearin’ that broadcast, my amazin’ self and th’midget went t’the center ‘f the city. Both ‘f us hated that broadcaster’s annoyin’ voice.”

Ricardo: "We were also discussing a way we were gonna do that. Looks like you got the first chance."

Garfiel: "On th'way t'tha City Hall, th'were no sentries, n'no appearance 'f anythin gettin' our way. So my amazin' self headed straight toward the City Hall, where..."

Garfiel's words stopped, as he clenched his teeth, his fists trembling.

This was not fear, but anger. However, Subaru believed that that anger was directed not at his opponent, but at Garfiel himself.

Issuing a fiery, angry breath, Garfiel continued.

Garfiel: "Two enemies appeared. One of 'em was'n huge man th'lugged around two giant swords. Th'other was a thin woman'n had a slender sword. No matter what, 'f they was serious about it, they'd match me one on one. No... they'd most likely be stronger than my amazin' self."

Subaru: "Even stronger than you...was one of them the broadcaster?"

Garfiel: "...most likely not."

Subaru almost wondered whether or not there was a problem with his ears.

Garfiel was not only the strongest in Emilia' faction, who was meant to face the Witch Cult if the need ever arose, he also sat at the peaks of strength in their combined forced.

That Garfiel had just judged two people to be individually stronger than himself. And, if his assumption was right, those people were only common cultists.

Garfiel: "Those two didn't give off th'same malice as th'broadcast. Even though my amazin' self left openin's while I escaped, we still got away... they seem t'of some kind 'f swordsman's etiquette or whatever."

Garfiel regarded his opponents with something like awe.

Unlike his usual lively self, he seemed to be in a sluggish state, clearly still affected by Mimi's state.

Ricardo, who had been listening to Garfiel, slapped his knees with dull sound and stood. Then he grabbed Garfiel's shoulder,

Ricardo: "Strong or not strong, I can already clearly tell. What I want to know is, who left bro in such a state? Who did that the Mimi? Who should I seek revenge on? Tell me that."

Garfiel: "... My amazin' self's wounds are mostly from th'guy, while the woman was a distraction. However, because'f that woman, Mimi..."

Wilhelm: "—that woman, could you please leave her to me?"

Ricardo was ignited by the vengeance for Mimi, and Garfiel swore that same goal, with shame. The one who had interjected was Wilhelm, who had been listening silently through the mirror.

To him, too, this was by no means something he could leave alone. But it was cruel to the two who didn't know about Wilhelm's reasons.

Ricardo: "Why? This has nothing to do with you, Wilhelm-san. Even you shouldn't take my right to have revenge on those that harmed my dear family."

Wilhelm: "I... can't say for certain without having confirmation. However, if what I suspect is true, than that woman is a very important one to me. I must insist."

Ricardo: "That's... if you anger me, I won't be able to spare you."

Although Ricardo snarled in agitation, Wilhelm also stubbornly refused.

Precisely because he understood the situation of both sides, Subaru couldn't determine who was right. Therefore, it wasn't Subaru who drew an end to that quarrel, but,

Crusch: "—Wilhelm. And Ricardo-sama. Now, as companions, this is not for strife. Not when so many civilian lives are exposed to danger."

Wilhelm: “Crusch-sama...”

With a cool voice, filled with fortitude, Crusch scolded the two.

At the reproof of his master, Wilhelm bowed and scratched his head in shame. In the meantime, considering options that would avoid internal strife,

Anastasia: “Okay, okay. Let’s make a decision.”

Clapping gently, Anastasia took the mirror and pointed at Subaru. Laughing at the timid Subaru, Anastasia fiddled with her fox scarf,

Anastasia: “First of all, I want to bring up the raid on the City Hall proposed by Natsuki-kun and supported by Crusch-san’s faction. After all, if we attack any of the control towers, that City Hall’ll give everything away for us. And even if it isn’t retaken, the situation of the waterways could be improved a little bit, yeah? Although that might just be a bit of my wishful thinking.”

Subaru: “No, I’m thinking the same thing. Moreover, if the other side launches an attack first, it’ll cut our choices down. If we want to act, the sooner the better.”

Anastasia: “...what’s this, you’ve become reliable in this past year, haven’t you? In any case, it’s just as Natsuki-kun’s said. Thanks to the conversation mirror, our groups can collaborate, and, fortunately, about 70% of our total combat power can be dispatched immediately. It’d be reasonable to say that an attack on the City Hall would fare well, yeah?”

Subaru glanced at Garfiel and Ricardo.

In order to conquer the City Hall in one fell swoop, it would become necessary to split their combat forces.

A raid on the City Hall would entail, in their current situation, deploying forces from the closest shelter, Garfiel and Ricardo. Then, from other the shelter, Julius and Wilhelm would come.

Members of the Iron Fang, as well with both Ton and Kan, and the numerous adventurers who were staying in the city. Adding them to their ranks would improve their combat effectiveness.

Subaru: “Honestly, if Reinhardt were here, everything would be fine... could we get Ton and Kan to summon him?”

Julius: “It’s strange that we haven’t located him, is that what you’re thinking?”

Julius, in response to Subaru’s attempt to maximize their combat power, shifted his gaze toward him.

Julius: “Before entering the shelter, the two seemed to have fired magic into the sky as a signal. However, Reinhardt, who should have appeared instantly, didn’t appear. And, this isn’t a pleasant thought, but...”

Subaru: “But what? Really, are you still hesitating at this point?”

Julius: “Then, I welcome you to feel the same trepidation that I do. —Felt-sama’s followers were separated from her and Reinhardt a little bit before all this happened. It seems that they were last seen speaking to a red-haired man.”

Subaru: “Red-haired man... that couldn’t be that damn bastard, could it?”

Julius: “I can neither confirm nor deny this.”

Subaru gritted his teeth indignantly while listening Julius’s elegant answer.

Felt and Reinhardt had met, if Subaru’s speculation were right, Reinhardt’s father, Heinkel. What would the two have to say to that man?

And now, why weren’t they taking action?

Subaru: “However, he showed up at Sirius’s speech in that previous loop... What’s the difference? Is it because of the broadcast? Has he taken action already?”

Which one after the last is what conditions are different, and Subaru can not clearly know the difference.

In any case, knowing that they couldn't count on Reinhardt to show up was a cause for alarm. Subaru's shoulders dropped in contemplation. Meanwhile, Ferris had returned.

His feminine costumes were black blood stained, and full of sweaty faces,

Ferris: "Huu. That took quite a while."

Ricardo: "So, how's Mimi's condition? Is she fine? Did you save her?"

As Ferris wiped his forehead of sweat, Ricardo questioned breathlessly. And Garfiel, from behind him, also cast him a panicked gaze without standing up.

However, at their sincere eyes, Ferris shook his head ruthlessly.

Ferris: "I can't say that I've saved her, but the wound isn't getting worse. That's all thanks to her brothers right now. By strengthening their link, she's barely managing to hold on."

Ricardo: "That's their Divine Protection of Triplets, right? In that case, what'll happen to the brothers?"

Ferris: "Their blessing is meant to have three children share the burden of fatigue and injury. Their link strengthening allows the brothers to share the injuries of their seriously injured sister. In that case, although her life can be prolonged..."

Tivey: "—When sister's life is exhausted, we'll die too, right?"

From the mirror, a pained voice echoed forth.

Ricardo frowned and took the conversation mirror, which reflected Hetaro and Tivey, sitting side by side. The two brothers were also clutching their chests in pain.

Ricardo: "You guys are idiots. Really, just a group of hopeless idiots."

Hetaro: "...However, when I think that this is sister's pain, knowing that we're feeling the same pain together makes me a little happier."

Tivey: "I'm not as strong as my brother. So, Chief. I believe that you'll be able to do something for us soon. Because if I die, I'll become a ghost and haunt you."

Being assigned to aid the injury suffered by their sister, the two brothers experienced the same serious injury.

Seeing Hetaro and Tivey lying side by side in their shelter, Ricardo gave a deep breath sigh and took his machete in hand.

Then,

Ricardo: "...in other words, we have to move quickly, then. If we don't there's no point."

Ricardo whispered in a deep voice that emanated his passionate feelings.

Anastasia: "Send the Iron Fang out and have them secure the road until you reach the City Hall. Then have our best break into the building itself, and try to seize it in one fell swoops. The enemies are the huge man and slender woman. Following them should probably be lust."

Subaru: "The elites here are Garfiel and Ricardo. Then Wilhelm-san and Julius."

Crusch: "—I'm going too."

Those words came from Crusch, who had tied her hair into a ponytail.

She stood with sword in hand, having shed her dress for armor suited for battle.

Subaru: "Crusch-san, by saying you'll go, you mean that you can fight?"

Crusch: "Although I'm not as strong as I was before, I've had Wilhelm as a teacher. In addition, I can use the Wind to augment my strikes. I don't intend to be a burden."

Crusch's power, before losing her memory, was enough that her individual presence had made a difference in the battle of the White Whale. However, the strength of the current amnesiac Crusch was unknown to Subaru.

Honestly speaking, Subaru had thought that her newfound femininity had led to a seeming loss in her adaptability to the struggle.

Wilhelm: "Crusch-sama's talent with the sword has not declined. That, I can guarantee."

Wilhelm's words wiped away the last of Subaru's discomfort. The old swordsman nodded, gazing through the mirror at his master's side.

Wilhelm: "However, please be careful. I implore you, please place your safety first."

Crusch: "It's the obligation of the nobility to bear burden of and shed blood for the people. If innocent people weep, then I will shield them under my wing. I will fight, Wilhelm."

Wilhelm: "...honestly. But, it's because of this that I offer you my sword."

Crusch spoke resolutely toward Wilhelm's allegiance. Ferris raised his hand as he watched, face full of admiration.

Ferris: "Yes! Yes! Ferri-chan too! If Crusch-sama will fight, then please let Ferri-chan accompany you! Please!"

Crusch: "Ferris traveled between shelters to cast healing spells on those in need. I'm very proud of your contributions. But don't mistake which battlefield you should be fighting on."

Ferris: "Gah..."

Silenced in that manner, Ferris bowed his head, searching for any retaliation. Unable to find one, he raised a white flag with a tearful expression.

Ferris: "Wil-jii. Definitely do a good job protecting Crusch-sama, okay? Absolutely absolutely."

Wilhelm: “Mmm, I understand. Even if my own life is in danger, even if it burns out — I will do so.”

That was Wilhelm’s answer to that trust, full of tragic determination.

Ricardo waved his sword gently, and Garfiel finished his own treatment and stood with his back leaning against the wall.

Through the mirror, Wilhelm stood with sword at his waist, and Julius wore his knight’s uniform leisurely.

This was the dawn of the decisive battle — which would also include Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: “Gah, ugh, ahh...!”

Ferris: “S-Su-Subaru-kyun! What are you doing!?”

Biting his molars to endure the pain in his right leg, Subaru finally climbed to his feet.

Ferris, flushed in fury, slapped Subaru upside the head, glaring at his foot, which was still missing skin and muscle.

Subaru: “Ferris, that hurt!”

Ferris: “Of course it did! I’ve obviously said that you absolutely need rest, so what possessed you to try to get up? Do you want your feet to rot off?”

Subaru: “Even if it’s torn off, there are still things that I have to do. Ferris, you should understand my feelings. Do you think I can really stay here obediently and wait for results?”

Ferris: “...Muu.”

Ferris raised a hand to his mouth as Subaru pressed on.

Sending his companions to a place where survival was unlikely, then waiting for results. Subaru could never endure such a thing. If, by running around, he could come up with some clever idea and help someone, how could he lie here?

Subaru: “You can fight like this. Well, I must fight too. Beatrice protected me, and Emilia’s in danger from Greed. In this state, you want me to retreat?”

Ferris: “...is that to say that you won’t regret losing your foot?”

Subaru: “Of course I’m bound to regret it. But I’d regret not fighting more.”

Ferris: “Heh... then, Subaru-kyun also wants to play a cool role.”

With an exhausted expression, Ferris held a hand to his forehead. After that, he pressed his hand to the wound on Subaru’s leg.

Ferris: “What I’ll be doing now is giving you a bit of solace!”

Subaru: “Solace is... ah, wait a minute, Ferris-san. The injury kinda hurts, so rubbing back and forth like that is going to really hurt...?”

His hands on the wound, Ferris ravaged Subaru’s leg — was what should have happened, but, instead, a brilliant line shone from the injury, ending the pain which had been piercing through it like a sharp blade.

Subaru, shocked at the effects of that magic, looked Ferris in the face. Then,

Ferris: “You look murderous!?”

Subaru: “No, no! Although, if you have such convenient magic, don’t be so reluctant to give it to sooner! This is great, I can move!”

As Ferris’s sharp tongue bit into him Subaru jumped lightly with his right leg. While enjoying the joy of his new freedom of motion, he began to dance in place. Pain was no longer a problem.

His palm hit the wound with a smack as he celebrated the amazing change. Then, Subaru looked down, feeling something sticky and wet. His hands were covered in red, and his foot's wound had ruptured.

Subaru: "Hey, hey, hey!? Didn't you heal it!?"

Ferris: "I nyever said I healed it. I just asked if you'd regret it if you lost your leg. Ferri-chan removed the pain from touch. As long as you're careful, you can keep your leg if you limit your running around."

Subaru's bleeding legs shook as Ferris re-bandaged the wound and cast fresh spells. The blood stopped; however, Subaru felt even more uncomfortable, realizing that he could feel nothing from his leg.

It was similar to anesthesia, but he didn't feel quite as sluggish. Aside from not being able to feel touch, his right leg's actions were almost normal.

However, pain itself is a necessity to avoid destroying one's own body. For the sake of convenience those sensations have been revoked, but,

Ferris: "Of course, I'm doing this reluctantly. When we meet back up, there will definitely be some residual effects. I want to see that they'll be very slight, so be careful!"

Subaru: "...understood. You've been a great help, I'm grateful."

Ferris: "...Subaru-kyun is absolutely, certainly planning to ignore Ferri-chan's words."

Ferris sighed as Subaru reexamined his leg while nodding.

Although he'd like to say something like "I'd never do such a thing", if the situation arose, he couldn't promise that he'd comply with Ferris.

Unable to make any promises, Subaru could only thank him once more before heading back toward Garfiel and Ricardo.

Subaru: "Right, I'm coming too. It's useless to try to stop me. I don't think I'll be too much help in combat, but there must be something I can do..."

Ricardo: "Why would I stop you? You'd bring with you the strength of a hundred men. I'll be counting on you."

Subaru: "I can do things like... huh?"

Although he had been waiting for a rejection, he had been eagerly welcomed into the party. Subaru wondered what in the world was happening as the beastman opened his mouth.

Ricardo: "The White Whale, and Sloth. Both times, I saw your efforts for myself, bro. You'd be wrong if you think only Wilhelm sees your value. I also see someone worthy of praise."

Subaru: "Really, truly?"

Inspired by Ricardo's words, Subaru invited himself in without any problem.

Before leaving the shelter, Subaru approached Beatrice's bed and gently touched the forehead of that quietly sleeping girl.

Subaru: "Beatrice, I'll be going out. I messed up and left you like this, so now it's my turn to work hard. I'll take care of that cult and take back Emilia. You just stay here and rest well."

Beatrice: "——"

Silence. Comforted by her peaceful breathing, Subaru stood up.

Meanwhile, Garfiel and Ricardo spoke to Mimi, who looked miserable as she lay unconscious. Although she also gave no response, the two men showed an opposite expression, a strong determination that they would pour into conquering yet unknown territory.

Subaru: "We'll leave the shelter and join up at the large waterway leading to the City Hall. —So, cheer up, alright?"

Before their departure, everyone exchanged glances, determination fueled by their respective oaths, fierce momentum propelling them onward.

The war to regain Pristella would commence with a central attack on the City Hall. The two swordsmen in their may, and the Sin Archbishop of Lust.

Inscribing those targets in their minds, the soldiers marched toward the battlefield.

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Chapter 33 - Stratagem on the City Hall



— The silent Pristella’s siege had, up until now, seemed to be naught but a fanciful story. Walking atop of the stone slab, Subaru glimpsed the flowing waterway.

The water running within was clear and pollution-free. Even now, it flowed on in its constant, well established path. The mechanism which split the flow between left and right was still alive and well. As long as the floodgates resumed, anyone could believe that the peril the city was under was little more than a nightmare.

Garfiel: “Captain, y’can’t drag ya feet, y’know.”

Subaru: "I know, I know. The danger levels that the City Hall Raiders face increases by 10% every second."

Ricardo: "In that case, we're doomed after the eleventh second aren't we? Well, that's probably true, actually."

Garfiel, who had taken the lead, narrowed his eyes as Ricardo's voice rang out through the air. However, the beastman's expression wasn't in the least discouraged.

Carrying his sharp machete, he strode forward with vigorous steps, but not even his cavalier attitude was enough to relieve Garfiel's tension and guilt.

Ricardo looked no different from usual, while Garfiel had clearly discarded his usual demeanor.

Even so, three people who Ricardo considered family were hurt, and he couldn't be in a calm state of mind right now. This had been made clear back in the shelter.

On the other hand, Garfiel's self-confidence and recklessness had vanished and what remained was a cautious and more timid attitude, a change that emitted an ominous message.

Subaru: "...well, I can't say that I'm any better off, either."

It wasn't only those two who couldn't maintain their usual state of mind.

Subaru's own injured condition, Beatrice's unconsciousness, and, most importantly, Emilia's safety; all of those weighed heavily on his mind.

Even if he focused only on seeking a speedy revenge, experience had taught him that doing so would hasten a terrible result.

This was the philosophy of the group, the City Hall Raiders, who were striving for the best possible result.

Having encountered no cultists along the way, they successfully arrived at the rendezvous point. And there,

Wilhelm: "Subaru-dono!"

Subaru: "It's great to see you're all safe."

The forms of Wilhelm and Crusch drew near, as well as Julius, who elegantly stroked his hair.

Julius: "I'm sure you're worried out of your mind for Emilia-sama, are you sure it's okay for you to be here instead?"

Subaru: "In terms of overall priority, being here is more important, but I'm still anxious. But I don't know anything about Emilia's situation, and I can't do anything that might jeopardize her even further."

Julius: "I understand. Were Anastasia-sama placed in the same situation, I doubt I'd be able to remain calm."

After nodding in response to his concerned words, Subaru turned to Wilhelm.

The old swordsman exercised his arms with his eyes closed, warming up his body.

How turbulent his mind might have been at that moment... was beyond Subaru's understanding.

However, as if sensing Subaru's gaze, Wilhelm opened his eyes, and reached into his coat. He withdrew a mirror and handed it to Subaru.

Wilhelm: "Subaru-dono, this is the conversation mirror. In the heat of battle, I doubt I'll have any leeway to operate it, so I'll leave it to you."

Subaru: "Understood. Let's move as planned."

Placing the mirror carefully in his pocket, Subaru straightened his back.

He'd been entrusted with the responsibility of establishing conversation with the other two groups.

Subaru, who would be engaged in the least fighting, held one mirror, while the other was held by Ferris, who'd been traveling between shelters. The last one was held by Anastasia, who served as their source of intelligence.

Ideally, these three would be able to work together.

Crusch: "Then, to confirm again. We are moving to the battlefield identified by Garfiel-sama, where two demons are guarding the City Hall. One is a giant with two broadswords, and the other is a woman with a slender longsword, is that right?"

Garfiel: "Yep, 's right. Neither of them're just common swordsmen. Even'f they wasn't fightin' seriously, I'd prob' end up sliced'n two by any one'f 'em."

Going over all of their information once again, Crusch was the first to speak again. Nodding at Garfiel's response, she turned back to Julius and Wilhelm.

Crusch: "The City Hall is occupied by Lust and those two. I imagine that others cultists will make an appearance there as well. Have either of you heard much about Lust?"

Julius: "My apologies. Even as a member of the knights, my knowledge is scant. Sloth and Greed are much more famous, but both of those have been encountered by Subaru."

Halfway through speaking, Julius had turned to Subaru. Subaru nodded, saying,

Subaru: "Although, having seen Greed for myself, I don't believe that the stories about him are untrue. But... that empire. He took out it's strongest knight? That seems a little suspicious. He's strong, but, in terms of combat prowess, even I could match him. Although, he can negate any attack..."

Ricardo: "And that wasn't due to your own combat strength?"

Subaru: "Not this time. Although Wrath engulfed Greed with flames, it didn't hurt him in the slightest. His clothing was untouched. He didn't even break a sweat."

Regulus's power could easily be called invincibility.

How convenient. If that were true, then the City Hall Raiders would eventually be forced to face the worst of enemies. Although he wanted to believe that such an unreasonable power couldn't exist.

Subaru: "Obviously, we'd been in trouble in Greed were here, but we shouldn't have to worry about that..."

Julius: "Reinhardt would never be absent when innocent civilians are in such danger. I think perhaps that he is facing a problem that leaves him unable to move. Like us, he's possibly caught in an encounter with other cultists."

Only Julius seemed to understand what was passing through Subaru's mind at the moment.

Prior to the start of all this, Felt and Reinhardt had come into contact with Heinkel. He could only hope that the obnoxious idea which had taken root in his mind when he'd heard about their meeting was wrong.

Subaru: "Other than that, there's something that I want to confirm. The name Lust gave,

Capella Emerada Lugunica. Why would she possibly call herself a Lugunica?"

Ricardo: "She had to be mocking us. Every member of the royal family is well known."

Crusch: "It still might not be misinformation. It seems too early to dismiss it as just a prank."

Ricardo and Crusch gave Subaru their differing opinions.

The Witch Cult being what it was, either possibility was worth considering. The poor character of this Lust could be clearly heard in her voice. A prank, as Ricardo had said, was likely indeed, but she could also prove to be an enigma.

However, in the face of those two proposals, Wilhelm raised a hand.

Wilhelm: "I do recall one thing."

Subaru: "What is it?"

Wilhelm: "Although I don't know of any Capella, I have heard a little about the reputation of Emerada Lugunica. That doesn't mean that there's any direct connection... but there was indeed someone named Emerada in the history of the royal family of Lugunica."

Subaru: "——!"

Surprised by this, Subaru's eyes grew wide as Wilhelm pondered with his hand to his chin.

Wilhelm: "Her name traces back to before the Demi-Human War, before I joined the army. So around 50 years ago. At the time, Emerada-sama was known as someone very beautiful and very clever."

Subaru: "And Lust called herself Emerada? For what reason?"

Wilhelm: "As for her intentions, I don't know either. Only, I've heard that Emerada-sama passed away due to disease at a young age. But... a state funeral was never held in her honor.

Neglecting to hold a funeral for the death of a royal was practically unthinkable. Tilting his head, Wilhelm frowned as he attempted to explain.

Wilhelm: "Times were hard, was the reason that they gave. However, the real reason was that the people didn't want one for her."

Subaru: "The people didn't...?"

Wilhelm: "Although Emerada was very beautiful and very intelligent, she was... extremely cruel, with an immeasurable amount of darkness within her. Therefore, even the royal family of Lugunica regarded her as... a heretic, a fact hidden from the public."

With only an unconfirmed testimony, saying such dubious words about the kingdom he served had probably left a bitter taste on Wilhelm's tongue. His words had begun to waver in the second half of his explanation.

And everyone had seen for themselves Lust's harsh nature.

Subaru: "So Lust gave Emerada's name... but for what purpose..."

Wilhelm: "If they're trying to slander the royal family of Lugunica, the name of Emerada won't be too significant. Hardly anyone remembers her these days."

The result of Wilhelm's conclusion was a sigh of relief.

Unlike the likes of Subaru, Garfiel, and Ricardo, there were those who loyally served the kingdom; Crusch, Wilhelm, and Julius's feelings were unfathomable.

Such ungrateful, vicious ridicule toward the royal family was certainly not permissible.

Subaru: "In spite of that... Capella..."

Julius: "Any thoughts on that name?"

Julius turned his attention sharply as he spoke, seeing Subaru, who showed a bitter expression.

Subaru: "Nothing, it's just..."

After a brief pause, Subaru scratches his head as he continues.

Subaru: "It's not just Capella. Regulus, and Sirius too. And come to think of it, even Petelgeuse... but to say that's this is meaningful is impossible."

Garfiel: "Cut th'crap Captain 'n tell us already. What's so special 'bout their names?"

Subaru: "It's strange, you know? It's just, you could kinda say that they have the same names as the stars of my hometown, or something like that."

Crusch: "Name of the stars, is it?"

Subaru: "Come to think of it, my name, Subaru, is as well. No, it doesn't matter. It's a stupid thought."

In response to Subaru, Crusch widened her eyes, looking deeply interested. Seeing that everyone else shared her reaction, Subaru scratched his head.

Subaru: "Don't give much strange looks, okay? My hometown named all the stars, and the archbishops just happened to share their names. I quite enjoy learning about the stars and their stories, so I know some extra details."

Crusch: "Really, that interest doesn't seem to be in accordance with you. Stars, huh."

Subaru: "My name, Subaru, also comes from the stars. That's why. Sorry if it's boring."

Feeling embarrassed, Subaru neglected to delve into the details.

However, Crusch rejected Subaru's attempts to end the conversation.

Crusch: "Please wait, Subaru-sama. Are their names really coincidentally the names of your stars?"

Subaru: "What do you mean?"

Crusch: "For example, could the names of the stars Subaru-sama knows be the roots of their names? From the reason of their founding to the activities they carry out, everything about the Witch Cult is shrouded in many layers of mystery. We can't easily discard something that they may share a connection with."

Subaru: "——"

Subaru, although surprised at Crusch's unexpected questioning, was still lost in his own thoughts. Really, Subaru had always believed that the star related names had been mere coincidence. Why?

This was, after all, a different world. There would be no one else here who shared the knowledge of Subaru's stars.

But could he say so for certain?

In this very place, Pristella, Subaru had bore witness to Japanese architecture. And deeply rooted in Kararagi's culture, even reflected in the Kansai dialect, was Japanese influence, perhaps from Hoshin's own hand.

Perhaps the establishment of the Witch Cult's ideologies had some root in modern knowledge known to Subaru. The archbishops being named after stars wasn't necessarily unrelated.

Subaru: "Petelgeuse. Regulus. Sirius. Capella..."

Julius: "Correct. Subaru said those were the names of stars. Are there any stories or anecdotes behind them? Maybe there's a connection somewhere."

Subaru: "Thinking along those lines..."

He dug through the thinning memories from his original world, finally recalling what he knew of the stars.

He'd once deeply loved celestial illustrations. Knowing that the origin of his name existed in the stars, Subaru had greedily immersed in drawings of constellations and had engraved a number of stars into his mind.

And, associated with the name of those abominable sinners,

Subaru: "The underarm of Orion, or the hand of Orion..."

Crusch: "Eh?"

Hearing the word underarm in a place she never would have imagined, Crusch tilted her head to the side.

However, Subaru didn't register her reaction, gripping and shaking her slender shoulders, as he approached.

Subaru: "That's right! It's called the hand of Orion!"

Crusch: "Su-Subaru-sama? What... is this hand?"

Subaru: "Petelgeuse... the origin of his name is a star. His authority was the Unseen Hand, and that star's other name is the hand of Orion!"

It was almost laughably far-fetched.

But were they only related by chance? Were this merely an amusing coincidence of symbolism?

Not Petelgeuse, but a star named Betelgeuse— that was a familiar name to Subaru. The small mismatch had been the reason he hadn't yet noticed it.

Subaru: "Sirius is 'shining', and she can use fire magic, that's not subtle at all. At most it's a literal... Regulus is the 'little king'. Isn't that exactly like that bastard's self-centered values!? Then, Capella is...!"

Crusch: "Capella is...?"

Subaru: "Little goat! A goat! Capella's a goat!"

Digging through his memory, Subaru searched for some meaning relationship between the mythos of the stars and the archbishops of sin.

A smirk emerged on Subaru's face, as if he were saying "not bad, not bad".

Instead, listening to Subaru's answer, Crusch kept her brow pressed down while holding his shoulder. Then she looked to the other four people, they are also a complex expression,

Julius: "Orion's hand?"

Wilhelm: "Shining?"

Ricardo: "Small king?"

Garfiel: "The hell's a 'little goat'?"

Subaru: "—Ah?"

At the reaction of the four people who turned their heads to, Subaru finally realized that his discovery was far more useless than he'd thought.

Crusch: "Subaru-sama, I apologize. It seems my thoughts led us astray."

Yes, even Crusch looked sorry.

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The correlation of the symbolism of the stars and the archbishops' names had failed spectacularly.

However, they had no time to waste lamenting that failure before launching a lightning-fast operation.

As a result, they attacked after they shared and discussed their abilities and combat styles.

The members of the Iron Fang, who had accompanied Julius and Crusch, went forth as a scouting force, ensuring that the way to the City Hall was clear. The six of them would arrive safely.

Garfiel: “Ya, ‘s just like last time, nothin’s changed...”

Nose twitching, Garfiel confirmed the lack of any new enemy presences.

According to what he had said, after crossing the straight road ahead, he had been ambushed as he’d prepared to enter the City Hall. But neither Garfiel’s nose nor Subaru’s eyes found the silhouettes he had mentioned.

If they weren’t here, they could just directly take the City Hall and move on. Just as Subaru wanted to celebrate a lack of enemies,

Garfiel: “——”

Garfiel equipped his shields and Ricardo held his machete in a battle ready stance. Wilhelm, on the other hand, watched the plaza with the calmness of a tranquil lake.

For those three, this battle would likely turn out to be rather personal. In particular, Wilhelm surely had much he needed to confirm.

Julius: “This area is completely open. Although my quasi-spirits have been sent to patrol it, they found no path we could sneak along. It seems that our only option is to approach directly.”

Julius had sent his spirits to scout out their surroundings. The geography of this location was difficult to launch an attack on and likewise difficult to defend.

Subaru: “Can’t you send your spirits inside to scout? Just knowing how many enemies there are and the building’s general layout would make our job that much easier.”

Julius: “Apologies, but my friends are still unable to perform an order that complicated. And the enemy isn’t necessarily unable to detect the presence of spirits, so that would be difficult.”

Subaru: “That wouldn’t be your fault. Still, that’s a shame, it would have been really helpful.”

Not knowing the circumstances of the City Hall itself again increased the danger of a direct attack.

That said, waiting would only cause the situation to worsen. Although the Witch Cult had claimed they were willing to negotiate over their broadcast, that was, in reality, extremely unlikely.

Subaru: “Then, just as we planned. Although the enemy has combat effectiveness, we have strength in numbers. It’s basically three on one for each of us. We’ll handle this quickly, and then get rid of the guy who’s occupying this place!”

Julius: “Although that’s optimistic thinking, I look forward to our success.”

Julius gave a wry response to Subaru’s speech, and the party took off.

Without needing a signal, they ran up the straight road, toward the plaza in front City Hall. Holding their breaths, they waited for their enemies to surface.

Garfiel ran in the lead, followed by Wilhelm and Julius. Ricardo followed them, and Crusch and Subaru held the rear.

His right leg felt, for all intents and purposes, fine. Although it was in a strange state of feeling no sensations, he could run without hindrance.

Garfiel: “—They’re here!”

Two figures fell upon Garfiel, who stood in the lead.

As the group watched the large blades and slender sword flutter in the air, a soldier among them courageously drew her own weapon. From the rear,

—The Hundred Man Strike was unleashed.

Crusch had drawn her sword, and, augmented with wind magic, unleashed a strike that cut toward the enemy.

Anything within her field of vision, even at great distance, could be struck by her. This was Crusch’s long range swordplay.

Her strikes had even made a dent in the White Whale's magically enhanced defenses. The sound of steel on steel rang out, and the giant and woman whirled away.

Subaru: "Did you get them?"

Crusch: "No, they deflected it!"

Her well placed surprise attack had failed to make contact.

While swinging their bodies to the side, landing neatly on the stone, the two figures, dressed in black, drew their respective weapons in a well prepared defensive formation.

Two giant blades, and a single sharp sword. From top to bottom, they were indeed both clad in the despicable garb of the witch cult.

Appearing to have completely brushed off the impact of that blow, they tilted their bodies forward slightly, about to kick off from the ground.

However, before that,

Julius: "Although you defended against Crusch-sama's blow, can you take this?"

Three different colors glowed from above, the light emitted by the spirits pouring down upon the cultists.

Julius's six quasi-spirits, working in groups of three, attacked the giant and woman. Another light of magic, which Subaru had never seen before, applied an appalling pressure to their enemies, forcing them to kneel.

Against the unbearable pressure of their enemies, Garfiel and Wilhelm rushed the woman, while Ricardo swung his blade over his head as he pounced toward the giant.

Garfiel: "Take this!"

Wilhelm: “Haah—!”

Ricardo: “It’s over!”

In a flash of silver, emanating an overwhelming pressure, the Sword Demon took off.

Garfiel and Wilhelm’s inhuman strength struck downward, ready to split the enemy’s defenses open.

If they could strike a kill at this interval—

Woman: “——”

The kneeling woman turned her sword in her grip and slashed at Garfiel and Wilhelm’s legs. They immediately dodged but the woman followed with the same trajectory, twisting to stretch a leg around Garfiel’s neck, moving him into the scope of Julius’s magic.

Garfiel: “Wha—”

Swaddled in Garfiel’s arms, the woman protected herself from any magical effects using Garfiel as a shield. Then, her knee shattered Garfiel’s nose as she grabbed his left arm with her free hand and used him as a shield against Wilhelm.

At this profound display of skill, Garfiel cried out in pain, while Wilhelm cursed.

Breaking their stalemate, she kicked at the old swordsman, releasing Garfiel in the process.

Although her movements should have been constrained, her blow was powerful enough to send Wilhelm flying. Just as he regained his balance, she had already made another half turn on the spot, delivering a swift follow up kick.

Giant: “——”

Meanwhile, Ricardo’s attack stopped short of the giant’s head.

Still kneeling due to the magical effects cast by Julius, the giant had readily discarded the big swords he had held in both hands. Then, he lifted his unguarded hands and brought them over his head.

Ricardo: "Idiot, you're finished!"

As a result of his flawed judgment, his arms would be severed.

Even though Ricardo's machete was blunt, it contained incredible momentum and power. The giant's thick arms were amputated by the impact of the blow and his upper arms flew through the air as red and and white bone spewed forth.

Giant: "——"

Ricardo stepped back and swept his machete up, aiming to bring it down upon the giant's enormous head.

However, the giant simply retrieved his swords with his extra arms, deflecting the coming blow that should have been fatal.

Ricardo: "What!?"

The giant then raised his arms, allowing a curtain of blood to spray forth, dispelling magic that Julius had cast. Now freed of that magic, the giant was again capable of the agile action that betrayed his enormous form. Having chosen to forego his arms he was able to do away with an even more crippling weakness.

Ricardo, unable to withstand the heavy blades the followed, had his arm caught by a blow as he barely managed to retreat from far worse.

He groaned as the giant's fist collided with his face, sending the beastman's burly body flying backward.

Woman: "——"

Giant: “——”

Against the three opponents who were now on the defensive, the woman and giant raised their weapons, weapons of special kind, with clear intent to kill.

Finally having caught up with those other three,

Julius: “Fell Goal!”

Julius’s incantation ushered in a wind, which swirled with red flames sprouting from within.

The resulting tornado of flame swiftly met the approaching woman, chasing her away from Garfiel and catching her in its wake.

Then, with a sound almost like a prayer, the sound of a slash and the whistle of a whip cut through the air.

Crusch’s blade of wind coupled with a strike of Subaru’s whip struck the giant’s body. His huge form finally having taken a beating, a wound marked his chest.

That injury was no serious matter for him. Even so, they had succeeded in stopping the giant’s assault, and the the fallen Ricardo kicked up at the giant’s jaw.

Ricardo: “Ha, you were asking for it!”

Subaru: “Is that the time to say this? Hurry back, Ricardo!”

Carried by the momentum of kick’s release, Ricardo spun backward, retrieving his blade and wiping his face of blood, before retreating to join with Crusch and Subaru, ready to confront the giant again.

Seeing that the woman had been enclosed in a cage of wind and flame, Subaru’s eyes involuntary widened.

Subaru: “What’s that!? You, you can actually use such spectacular magic!?”

Julius: "It's merely a bluff. I'm not proficient enough to make it lethal yet."

Julius replied bitterly, the spectacle before their eyes confirming his words.

As the woman bathed in that tornado of flame, the sword in her hand flashed— and the heart of that wind was pierced by her slight movement. Unbalanced, the cage collapsed.

That woman's elegant, peerless swordplay. And the giant's own special physiology.

Subaru: "... you're kidding..."

The front of his black robe fell open, and the giant's many arms were revealed. He nonchalantly picked his severed arms up from the ground and pressed them against his stumps, as blood and flesh knit with a sickening sound.

A mere moment later, the giant's formerly missing arms were reattached, with only scant traces of the injury remaining. As if confirming that healing, he took his large blades in them again, proudly waving them around.

Both looked undefeatable.

Subaru: "By contrast, it's clear that our blitzkrieg failed."

Looking sideways, Julius and Wilhelm, protected by Julius's magic, were having their injuries treated by Garfiel.

The reality set in that Garfiel and Wilhelm, working together, had been soundly defeated. That sense of despair, could not easily be erased.

However, it would be a mistake to say that their situation was completely hopeless.

Subaru: "Although close combat is unreliable... long ranged attacks could still be effective."

Whether it was the Julius's magic, Crusch's blade of wind, or even Subaru's whip, they still had a chance.

The last one wouldn't be all that helpful, even if it did work— that sentiment was there, but the other two attacks could certainly have a chance to turn the tide.

Subaru: “——”

At Subaru's comment and expectant gaze, both Julius and Crusch nodded.

Garfiel and Wilhelm also understood the power of their opponents in close combat. From the start, Ricardo had not held any designs to face either of them alone.

The melee fighters would temper their enemies' movement, and any gaps would be filled with magical attacks.

This was likely the best way to minimize injuries and achieve victory. The unity of the entire party would start the pace of the battle again. Then, at that moment,

???: “Chaotically, grudgingly, this conspiracy has arrived! What kind of garbage pieces of meat like you~ can, so foolishly, ugly, superficially dare to live? In the words of this elegant, patient lady— Kahahahaha!”

Abruptly piercing the battlefield was an inconspicuously sharp laugh.

However, upon hearing that voice, everyone understood that the appearance of the owner meant the situation had taken a turn for the worst. Subaru shuddered and shifted his gaze around, searching for that figure.

Where was she? Where was that laughter coming from?

???: “Where are you looking, you dull, dimwitted pieces of shit? It's because of this foolishness~ that you can't be saved. Come one, open your dog eyes wide, and think hard with your empty heads. Then maybe this gentle lady will show mercy to your filthy souls!”

Crusch: “——”

From next to Subaru, whose gaze swerved around, Crusch had drawn a hoarse breath.

Her amber eyes were fixed overhead. With a sinking feeling of understanding, Subaru followed her gaze expecting to see Lust at the end of it.

His the line of sight pointed to the roof of the City Hall.

Loud ridicule poured down upon them from there, as if the owner of that voice were looking down upon ants from a great distance.

In fact, that was more or less the situation. That was because,

Capella: “Gahhahahahaha! Really, that face! That stupid face! Did you save it just for me? If so, this kind lady would give you foolish apes praise! Or would you prefer saliva? You’d be very happy with my precious saliva? For you pieces of rubbish, it must be a coveted treasure, right~!”

Raucous laughter echoed through the air as Subaru glanced upward.

The giant and swordswoman didn’t have the slightest reaction as an ally joined them against their fellow opponents.

The Archbishop of Lust made a sudden appearance on the battlefield—

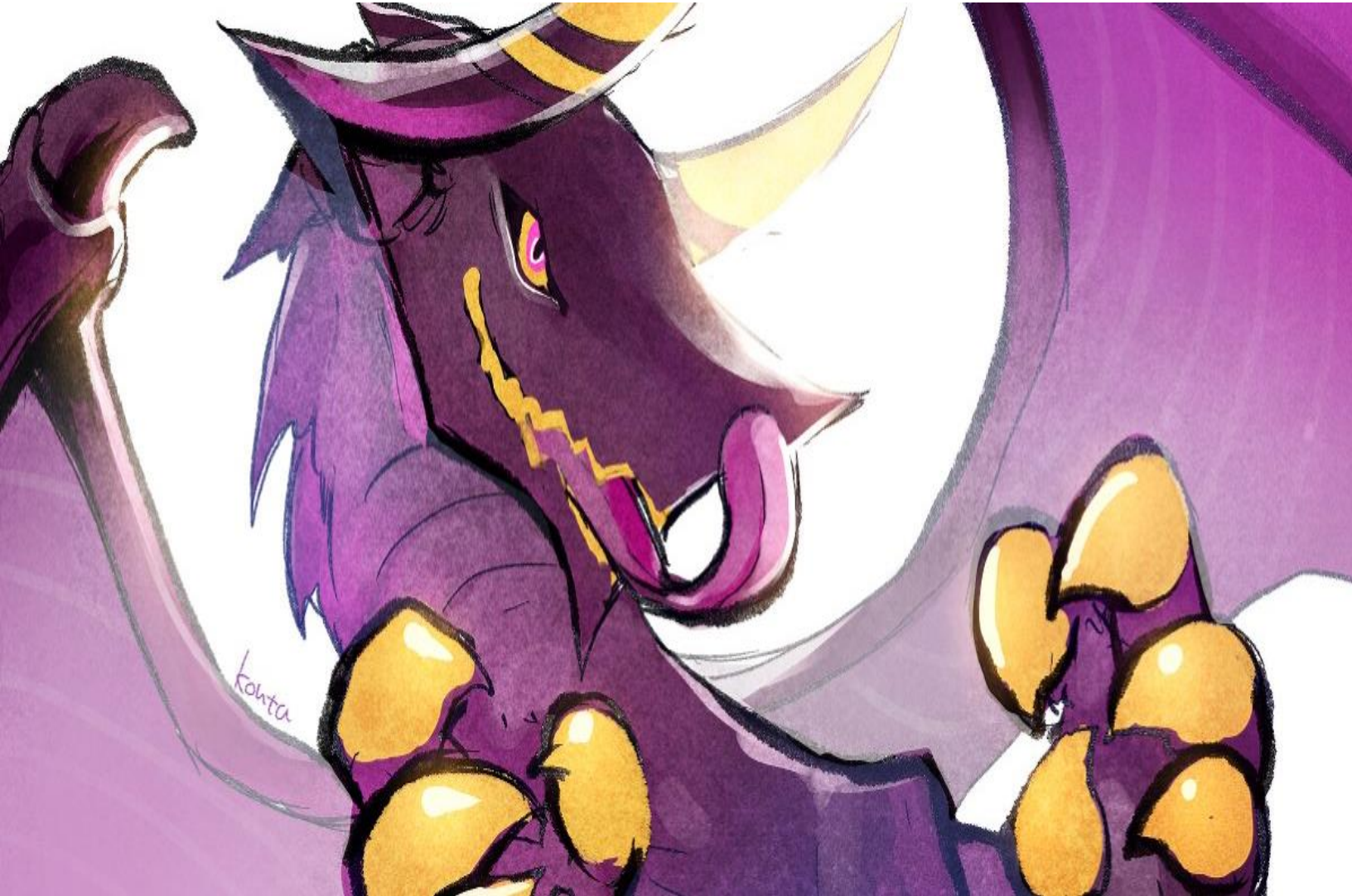
Capella: “Then, once more! This lovely lady is the Sin Archbishop of Lust—!”

— As the name of Lust was announced, a black dragon looked down upon them with a smile.

Capella: “I am Capella Emerada Lugunica-sama! Die! You rotten slabs of meat!”

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Chapter 34 - Chaotic Duel



—Standing on the rooftop of the City Hall, a black dragon flaunted its wings at Subaru’s group. Opening its mouth to reveal rows of sharp teeth and a long, snaking red tongue, the black dragon narrowed its golden eyes, continue to issue a choking, sharp laugh.

That black dragon’s appearance was more or less exactly how Subaru pictured the dragon species.

It had the same aura of awe that earth dragons like Patrasche, but its hair and physique weren’t the same. If ground dragons averaged the size of a pterosaurs, this dragon was as large as an elephant.

With that physique, the black dragon couldn't possibly be capable of flight. Perhaps its strong wings merely served as a bluff.

Yes, flight should be impossible.

Capella: "Being ravished by your heated gazes isn't exciting at all, you meat creatures in heat! Ah~ this is awful, being seen by people like you who can only think of sexual gratification! So I won't approach you!"

Fanning its wings towards the ground, a gust of wind is cast. A red tongue flitting outward as if licking her lips, the black dragon, Capella, gave a twisted smile. That dragon's expression was incredibly chilling.

Because of the language barrier, communication was heavily to interpretation. Patrasche was a good example.

Because Patrasche was so expressive, her stern attitude came off as quite likable. However, this dragon evoked nothing but disgust.

Subaru: "...I haven't heard any mentions of this before, but can dragons speak?"

Julius: "Having lived for so long time, dragons are extremely intelligent and can understand human language. Lugunica's patron dragon Volcanica, who tied a covenant with the kingdom, can of course communicate with mankind through language, but his expression isn't terribly rich. I've never heard of any other dragons having that ability."

Julius, from beside Subaru, gave a detailed answer to his question.

The Knight of Knights had his blade raised at shoulder height, eyes never leaving the black dragon. Of course, Subaru and the others were in the same state.

Standing in front of them were two swordsmen of outstanding strength, and the black dragon who had named herself the Archbishop of Lust.

Their original unease had compounded into a wall of tension.

Subaru: “At the least, we have a chance of dealing with the swordsmen...”

The woman, who wielding her blade with nary a flaw in posture, and the giant, who waved his swords around, as if refamiliarizing himself with Subaru’s group.

Although the extent of the swordswoman’s strength was still unknown, the giant had chosen to directly take Ricardo’s attack. Needless to say, it was not because of any clumsiness, but because he had a strategy in mind. Long range attacks, their earlier plan, would still be incredibly effective.

However, there was one pressing problem without a solution.

Subaru: “Is there anyone here who’s fought a dragon...”

Wilhelm: “—Yes.”

Subaru: “Wilhelm-san, seriously?”

Although Subaru had thought his question hopeless, Wilhelm had responded with affirmation. The old swordsman turned to face the surprised Subaru.

Wilhelm: “Nearly 40 years ago, I was sent to subjugate an evil dragon named Valgren who appeared to Lugunica’s south. The incident caused much diplomatic tension because of its proximity to Vollachia.”

Subaru: “Setting the diplomatic ramifications aside, how was the experience of fighting a dragon?”

Wilhelm: “More than ten percent of our knights were sent to the battle, and, although the crusade succeeded, forty percent of those knights died. The crusade succeeded, but the result was considerable. It’s ability to fly, it’s endless stamina, were things that we should have taken into better consideration.”

Subaru: “It would seem that our situation is rather desperate...”

Seeing Subaru's despair, Wilhelm continued,

Wilhelm: "Come to think of it..."

Wilhelm: "Compared to Valgren, this dragon is smaller in size. It should die upon beheading."

Subaru: "And Valgren wouldn't?"

Wilhelm: "Valgren had a total of three heads which all needed to be removed."

Having finished speaking of that distant battle, Wilhelm tightened his grip on his sword. So beheading would certainly kill it. That was reassuring.

Seeing Wilhelm's well-prepared stance, Subaru also took up a battle pose, whip in hand. Seeing their refusal to yield, Capella seemed rather surprised.

Capella: "My, my, my, you're all so disgusting. You're beaten and miserable, and, aside from my reinforcements, you're facing a Sin Archbishop! You rotten creatures should hang your heads and channel the meekness of mice, and yet you're acting all normal? Was putting you with all the other insects wrong? Gahahahaha!"

Garfiel: "Stop fuckin' around! What can ya do 'gainst our numbers? My amazin' self'll go up there 'n crush ya!"

Capella: "Kahhahahaha, the barking of this rabid dog is hurting my sacred ears. Or, rather, I made a mistake. You're not a rabid hound, you're only a puny kitten! Meow~ meow~ meow~, don't be angry just because that kitty you were with died!"

Garfiel: "W-Wha, —hk!?"

Faced with those cruel jabs, Garfiel shouted, but choked on his own response.

The dragon was clearly referring to Garfiel's earlier defeat, where he had almost been beaten to death. Someone, Capella, had been watching the fight.

And, what surprised Garfiel even more,

Garfiel: “Bastard, how’d ya know my amazin’ self’s a demi-human...”

Capella: “Hah? How do I know that? Don’t think so highly of yourself, not even a single of one your hairs interests me. I could tell that you were a filthy half-breed the moment I saw you! Go die the way you lived, as a degenerate beast!”

Speaking unspeakably cruel curses, Capella turned toward the rest of their party, sniffing the air.

Capella: “What a stench! What a stench! You slabs of meat all smell rotten! Moldy, rotten, garbage meat! Preserved meats from the trash! Ah, disgusting!”

Capella, constantly giving her toxic comments, turned her gaze slightly — in Crusch’s direction.

A sticky, feverish light entered her eyes as she pouted all her attention upon Crusch, who subconsciously hugged herself tightly. When Capella spoke again, her voice was almost pleasant.

Capella: “But mixed with all that refuse is quite a slab piece of meat! So attractive, perfectly in line with tastes! This meat smells like the finest of meat! What beauty! That body! That appeal! Ah, I reallyreallyreally want to break it with my own two hands!”

Crusch: “—That’s, enough.”

Capella: “Ahh?”

She’d become fascinated.

Her expression trancelike, the black dragon leaned toward Crusch, as if wanting to lick her from top to bottom.

At this moment, the pressure of anger interjected to interrupt each other.

Capella: “——”

Her attention still fixed on Crusch, the dragon looked up impatiently.

Julius, who had approached Crusch in her distracted state, looked rather like a conductor.

Julius: “Be burned by my sixfold light, Al Clarista!”

Julius’s six spirits each gleamed with a different color as they fired a beam of light upward. When that iridescent light’ reached Capella, it shone white, and she began to scream.

Capella: “—GAAAAAAH!!”

Julius: “This is the price of your chatter. If you had any real skill, you wouldn’t spout such nonsense.”

Obedying Julius’s command, his spirits continually fired their scorching lights.

With Cappella’s piercing scream serving as background music, the two swordsmen who had been silent and still, suddenly kicked off the slate ground, flying towards Subaru’s group.

Wilhelm: “Stop there!”

Garfiel: “The hell!”

Here, Garfiel and Wilhelm both spoke up.

Wilhelm flew straight for the swordswoman, while Garfiel faced the giant’ twin blades with his own twin shields.

Woman: “——”

Wilhelm: “Don’t leave, show me your swordplay!”

As she began to retreat after meeting his first blow, Wilhelm cut her off with a sudden strike.

The old swordsman full breakthrough struck up and down with the violence of a storm. The length of her blade wasn't conducive to quick action, which served her defense poorly as Wilhelm gave rapid strike after strike.

Even so, the woman also proved fearsome. She cleverly shied away from any swing that she was unable to parry, and smoothly, with practiced ease, regained her balance.

Each time her whirling sword stabbed forth it became more apparent that the female swordsman's body was born for the sword to which she used.

Wilhelm's skill was enough for him to challenge the white whale, but, facing him, the woman's skill was enough to press Wilhelm back.

Wilhelm: "G-Gooah!"

Woman: "——"

Issuing a roar, with momentum smooth as silk, Wilhelm's rotation of cuts and swings increased in speed.

Although his body itself was old, his technique was still incredibly honed. His swordplay was the pinnacle of swordsmanship, and most young swordsmen would never match up to him.

His blade a mere flash, he flew through the air, preparing to flatten the woman into the earth. Still silent, the woman was prepared to withstand each blow, her resolve steeled.

Without words, without righteousness, the woman was like a doll whose only purpose was battle. Obedience had been carved into the body of this doll who only swung a blade.

The collisions of steel erupted through the air like a blast.

However, her sword must have been light, much lighter than Wilhelm's.

Each side's swordplay was clean and pure, and, aside from strikes on their respective targets, no unnecessary destruction happened.

The two flew into their solitary dance of swordplay.

Wilhelm: "Hah!"

Woman: "——"

The two waged their silent battle, their swords only being seen as flashes.

—This was the sacred realm of their duel, and intruders could not be tolerated. Not far away, another battle was being waged.

Garfiel: "Yah! Hah! Yah!"

Giant: "——"

Roaring, muscles flexing, Garfiel deflected the giant's blows.

Stuck with dizziness, he counterattacked, beating, roaring, visceral defeat, nausea, bones creaking.

Unlike the elegant duel taking place next to them, this battle was one marked by chaos.

Although the giant could be called a swordsman, his fighting style was different from what that would imply. It was irrational as a barbarian's or a beast's.

Garfiel: "Hah, kuu, ah!!"

Correspondingly, Garfiel also fought without a sense of etiquette.

Garfiel's fighting style was wild and animalistic. Due to Subaru's influence, he'd named it 'Garfiel's Flowing Battle'. This was an absurd violence that only Garfiel, who relied on instinct, could perform; it couldn't be imitated by anyone.

In fact, Garfiel's violent blows suited the barbaric giant before him.

This obviously savage duel was one of stamina; the opponent who tired first would lose. Therefore, success or failure was incredibly variable.

Giant: "——"

Those giant swords were so incredibly heavy that a direct blow would surely shatter Garfiel's elbow, yet he needed to use his arms to deal with them.

Garfiel needed to decisively use his shields. Holding them obliquely, his arm blocks the massive sword, but he allows it to slide along the shield, thus parrying it away.

The giant's unpredictable movements were no mere barbarism, but he used not the slightest trick, his strikes were shockingly direct and powerful.

This could not be achieved with talent alone; the giant had clearly practiced tens of millions of swings to earn his power.

Taking those swords head on, blocking them, would surely be impossible.

If there even a slight wrong move, the giant sword would cleave the silver shield in half, and Garfiel's body would resemble that broken shield.

Garfiel: "Don't... kid 'round... no more!"

Garfiel had been doing everything possible to combat the pressure of the large swords.

As they slashed from above, as they swept from the sides, as they swung up from below, Garfiel parried all of them. Then, from a gap, his arm took a punch, forcing Garfiel to retreat.

The trouble was, in addition to two powerful hands waving large swords, the giant had another six arms.

Garfiel's defense could be punctured with a third attack, and the giant had started using not two, but three arms to wield swords.

Garfiel had the advantage in speed, but that giant's strength was far superior.

As his chin was struck, as he parried those massive swords, his knees were kicked, sending his face plummeting toward the ground. Four more blows followed this, but Garfiel caught himself as he fell, and finally managed to block an attack, planting his feet firmly on the ground.

Blood, broken bones, and bitter cries, those were what this savage battlefield was filled with. Watching the two passionate warriors, Subaru unable to interfere with that chaos.

Subaru: "——"

On one side Wilhelm's quiet duel, and on the other was Garfiel's chaotic war.

Subaru and Crusch held their breaths, unable to join the battlefield on either sides. This was not due to any inability; rather, they were too shocked by the fighting spirit from both sides to react.

However, unlike Subaru, who was submerged in awe,

Ricardo: "This is bad, we have to act soon."

Ricardo, who had been surveying Julius's magic, took a step forward. Seeing Ricardo's movement, Subaru issued a 'right' and also began to move, but,

Crusch: "Subaru-sama!"

Ricardo: "Get down!"

Feeling a sudden yank on his collar, Subaru found himself being dragged to the ground by Crusch. Ricardo stood in front of the two, shielding them, releasing a ferocious roar.

Ricardo: "WAAA, HAAAA—!!"

The fierce sound waves shook the atmosphere, creating an invisible force of destruction.

This roaring wave was the same as the one Mimi and her brothers had used against the White Whale. This was an incredibly powerful skill that had noticeably injured it, and Ricardo had just now unleashed it completely on his own.

Beaten back by the roar was a glowing black flame.

That dark flame had scattered in the face of that wave. The nature of the fire was even more frightening than its burning. Anything it touched crumbled to ash, which poured all over the square as it fell.

However, the real horror in those scattered residual flames was, in fact,

Subaru: "That fire... isn't going out...?"

Black ash fell to the slate ground, still burning, without any sustenance. The flames continued to burn and they swelled and stretched and spread.

Any fire that had fallen on the surface of the water also continued to burn,

Like dripping oil into the water, the fire leapt higher, as if showing its superiority.

Ricardo: "Bro, how long are you planning to stay that way? Speaking of which, doesn't this situation usually happen in reverse?"

Julius: "Subaru, no matter how you look at it, being protected by a woman is..."

Ricardo and Julius both offered discouraging words to Subaru, who was still recovering from the terror of scattered fire. From their point of view, Subaru lay on the ground, under Crusch, who was deflecting any damage from him.

Subaru: "Wah!"

Crusch: "It's great that you're unhurt. Please rest assured, I'll refrain from saying anything about this to Ferris and Emilia."

Subaru: "I feel even more ashamed for feeling relieved!"

Crusch pulled him to his feet, adding another point to Subaru's shame score.

Patting himself off, Subaru looked up to the source of the black flame— of course, that was the black dragon, who sat wearing a frown.

He could sense nothing from her but a sense of disgust.

Capella: "Disgusting, disgusting, don't look at me with such an excited gaze! Stop looking, don't violate me with your dirty eyes! Kahahahaha! It's like they say, you're forbidden from stroking any dancers who perform for you, so stop ravishing this charming lady! Gahahaha!"

Subaru: "How..."

Despite being directly attacked by Julius's magic, Capella acted as if nothing had happened.

However, that wasn't to say that she hadn't suffered any harm. In fact, she'd suffered considerable damage from his attack.

The dragon's right wing had been burned until it was no more than a festering bloodied piece of flesh. Perhaps she'd wanted to use the wing to protect her body, but injury had been the price for her body's safety.

The magic had burned through the dragon's wing, reaching her body. Her abdomen had been scorched and melted, and her innards seemed to have been boiled. The right side of the dragon's face had been blown off, and her wagging tongue which enjoyed ridiculing others had been severed. Her eyes dangled freely, no longer resting in their sockets.

Half-dead wouldn't cut it; this was nothing but a corpse.

Subaru audibly swallowed, Julius and Ricardo frowned, and Crusch couldn't help but give a little girl's gasp. But this wasn't due to the dragon's horrific state.

— Instead, it was due to that battered flesh regenerating.

Melted bones regrew, destroyed muscles lengthened, severed tissues sutured; Capella's destroyed body regenerated at an alarming rate.

The impossible heat given off by her regeneration evaporated any remaining traces of blood.

Capella: "Now, having seen even my beautiful internal organs, are you satisfied? Are you a group of rotten garbage creatures who get turned on watching my metamorphosis? Gahahaha! Satisfied? Hey, were you so satisfied you started leaking?"

Subaru: "How... what happened?"

Capella: "Shouldn't you be able to tell on sight? Did you actually have to ask? How foolish are you? But this compassionate lady shall answer you. As you can see, I'm obviously immortal!"

Immortal— this was the simplest, most absolute description of her power.

Subaru couldn't help but gulp at Capella's description of her own power. The thought that she was bluffing crossed his mind. Indeed, it would be comforting to think that she was bluffing.

Subaru: "It's nothing but a quick regeneration ability..."

Capella: "Call it what you want. I'm not strong enough to call it invincible, so immortal it is."

Subaru: "——"

Capella: "My my my, you're unable to even talk anymore! You disgusting rotten eggs! You putrid filthy meat! Go die! Everyone except me should go die—wait! Wait! Wait!"

Capella interrupted her own foul words. She unfurled her healed wings and fluttered them, slowly bringing her bulky form toward the roof of the City Hall.

Thinking that she was preparing to swoop upon them, Subaru braced himself for her attack. However,

Capella: "Time's up, I have to go make the next broadcast, so I'll go back inside. Talking to you is just a waste of time, and I'm in a hurry! You all just stay here and die, along with that rather lovely piece of meat! Go rot in hell!"

Subaru: "H-Huh?"

Suddenly losing interest, Capella yawned and strode leisurely into the hall, where Subaru lost sight of her.

He couldn't help but consider whether or not that was meant to lure her enemies deeper in—

Julius: "She might be trying to lure us in, don't you think... but we can't let her make that broadcast."

Subaru: "If we let her go, the city's going to fall into a panic. Everyone will find out what we're doing. We have to catch up with her!"

Some unknown hunch led him on.

Furthermore, with that size, how did Capella enter the inside of the City Hall? Although he didn't know how large the broadcast room was, it seemed that Capella would destroy the room with a single large movement. But he didn't have the time to consider this right now.

Ricardo: "Alright, I'll stay with those two to deal with the guys on the outside. Bro, you'll go inside with Jul-chan and Crusch-san."

Ricardo gave instructions to Subaru, who gave a questioning look at his decisive words.

Ricardo: "These swordsmen are a bit too much for you and Crusch-san, and I'm not suited for indoor action. Jul-chan can handle that pretty good. Don't ya think."

Julius: “A very apt judgment. To be honest, I’d be worried leaving only Wilhelm and Garfiel here, so I’ll leave it up to you, Ricardo.”

Ricardo: “Of course, I won’t disappoint!”

Julius and Ricardo nodded to each other, leaving no room for doubt.

Being from the same faction, perhaps they could communicate their intent with only a glance. Subaru was unable to protest, so, scratching his head,

Subaru: “Garfiel! You’re absolutely not allowed to lose! After you send that guy flying and we defeat Lust, we’re going to go save Emilia, you hear me!?”

Garfiel: “Captain, I ain’t got time t’deal with ya right now!”

Subaru spoke to Garfiel, who was still engaged in his chaotic war. Next to him, Crusch lifted a hand towards her mouth, aiming her voice in Wilhelm’s direction.

Crusch: “Wilhelm, I’ll leave it to you!”

Wilhelm: “No need to worry!”

Wilhelm gave a brief response to his master’s brief words.

A true master and vassal only needed those brief words. Then, led by Julius, Subaru and Crusch made their move.

Leaving the central square, the three ran toward the interior of the City Hall. The two figures guarding the tower responded to this, forgoing their current opponents for Subaru’s group.

Ricardo: “Standing in a line like this makes things easier for me, haa—!”

His ferocious laugh created destructive sound waves which swept up small scattered stones, and the giant and woman faltered slightly. Although the power of the roaring waves had begun to diminish,

they were still effective in halting the two. Behind them, their opponents caught up, contempt in their eyes.

Wilhelm: “How discourteous, ignoring me when I have eyes for only you!”

Garfiel: “Don’t turn yer ass t’ yer opponent unless ya want it gone!”

“_____”

Slashing and slicing, striking and stabbing, the chaotic duels in the square continued, fierce battles which allowed for no outside intervention.

Unable to hear the sounds of the battle any longer, Subaru rushed toward the entrance of the City Hall.

Subaru: “Where would the room be?”

Crusch: “I don’t know for certain, but I think it would be at the uppermost level, for the sound to reach as far as possible.”

Julius: “There may be ambushes along the way, be careful.”

Passing the main entrance, they arrived inside the City Hall. A place that should have been crowded, with a lovely lady providing a reception service and bright lights coloring the scene, was now dimly lit, in a state of apparent turmoil.

Fortunately, there were no other cultists occupying this level, nor were there corpses strewn across the room, so—

Subaru: “Come on, let’s go. There should be some kind of floor map telling us where the room is!”

Julius: “If we can, I’d also like to confirm the safety of the staff here, although that’s looking a bit hopeless...”

Subaru: "What's..."

He checked the help desk and confirmed that no one was hiding there, then pointed to the stairs. Julius ascended the steps quietly, peering deep into the corridor, and gently shook his head.

Crusch followed him with a frown, and, upon tracing his gaze, her expression trembled. Seeing her reaction, Subaru joined the two— and seeing what they had, held his breath. With dragging, pitter-pattering steps, a figure appeared.

Peeking around the stairs, a child wearing a devilish smile emerged. At first glance, he was only a kid.

A petite physique, a childlike face, evoking an image of youthfulness. However, this notion existed in appearance only.

His dark brown hair hung loose, and his body was wrapped with a single cloth, giving him a rather grim appearance.

With a devilish smile on his little face, his eyes looked as if they contained all the poisons in the world, with decaying glows and toxic liquids — they were, of course, not the eyes of human beings.

And, in the present circumstances, it was evident what was wrong with him.

Kid: "So happy, very happy, so very happy, so very very happy, because of this happiness, such happiness, incredibly happiness, such incredible happiness, such incredibly incredible happiness, deserves! A feast! Feast! It's been a really suffering wait, with this empty stomach! So the first bite must be delicious to make up for it!"

Pleased, happy from the bottom of his heart, the barefoot boy marched as if dancing to a beat. As he spoke, he revealed his teeth, which were the length of a canine's. Seeing that image, that attitude, that exaggerated speech, Subaru's mind began to boil. If that wasn't just his imagination, if this boiling rage did indeed exist, then this kid was—

Subaru: "If you're some naughty kid who slipped in here playing hide-and-seek, explain yourself quickly. If that's really the case, we'll let you go. But, if not, hurry up and name yourself."

Speaking in a low voice, Subaru deliberately forced himself to remain calm. And, as if deliberately provoking Subaru, the kid twisted his juvenile face in a mocking laugh.

Kid: “Are you really confronting us with that attitude? Is that attitude meant for us or someone else? Check it for yourself.”

Subaru: “That’s enough. I can see that you’re my enemy!”

Roy: “We are the Witch Cult’s Sin Archbishops of Gluttony, Roy Alphard.”

Subaru: “GLUTTONY— !!”

As soon as the child claimed to be Gluttony, Subaru struck with his whip.

Slashing through the air, his whip mercilessly cut toward his enemy’s face. However,

Roy: “Well, it’s hardly uncommon to encounter those who want a bite of us.”

His teeth biting the end whip, Gluttony spoke brazenly.

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Chapter 35 - Ambushes and Surprises



Subaru's first merciless strike had been blocked by teeth.

Subaru: "——"

Biting the front end of the whip, dancing as if deliberately intending to infuriate, was Gluttony, Roy Alphard.

Alphard. Subaru was a little surprised at the name.

Subaru: "This bastard also shares the name of a star—hk!"

Crusch: "Subaru-sama, that topic is over! Allow me to engage him!"

As Subaru raised his arm for another brutal blow, Alphard drew his own weapon. At the same time, Crusch unleashed her Hundred Man Strike.

A frenzied blade of wind instantly swept through the first floor of the City Hall, bisecting chairs and the reception desk.

Of course, the cut should also have mercilessly cut Alphard, but—

Roy: "Wow, awesome! But although this one looks tough..."

Crusch: "—Eh!?"

The boy, as if seeing the invisible blade of wind, bent over backward to avoid it. Like a bridge, his head rested on the floor briefly, before he flipped backward.

That action had transformed him into a battle-ready pose.

Roy: "As an attack, that was a rather third-rate tactic. It doesn't seem all that delicious!"

Finished, Alphard leapt up from the ground, his body flying forward like a bullet.

His mouth opened to expose rows of sharp teeth resembling a hounds. Coupled with his appearance, people would mistakenly think he was a straggly wild dog. Only, a wild dog's danger level could never compare.

Crusch brought her sword up to meet him, attempting to behead him, but...

Roy: "Although your qualifications are good, they're not enough! To us, you're not even a beginner!"

Crusch: "—Ah!"

As he waved his right hand, Crusch's sword bounced away with a sharp sound. At a closer look, swaddled in the cloth wrapped around Alphard's wrists, were twin daggers.

He held a dagger in each hand, a weapon allowing his thin, small body to fight with speed and flexibility.

While parrying her sword, his left hand swept toward Crusch's throat. Although she immediately shifted to avoid it, Alphard flipped through the air, around her shoulder, and kicked her aside.

Crusch: "Wha—!"

Subaru: "Crusch-san!"

Roy: "Don't just stand there and watch when you're the easiest target!"

Alphard stomped on the ground, flying at Subaru. In the dim lighting, the thin figure of Gluttony, wrapped in rags, disappeared in the darkness, Subaru lost sight of his figure—

Subaru: "Not good..."

Alphard: "In your Sloth, you couldn't keep up."

Subaru: "Wha!?"

Aiming at the flaw-filled Subaru, Alphard revealed another one of his flaws.

Once, feeling powerless, Subaru had sworn to himself that no matter the situation, he wouldn't act impulsively and hastily.

Biting his lip, he grounded himself with the pain, allowing their most powerful party member an opportunity to strike.

And Julius's quiet command cut through the air.

Alphard immediately managed to twist evasively, but his body was still cut down by the Knight of Knights.

Gluttony rolled onto the floor, entire body covered with blood.

Roy: “Ughya! Woah, surprising—”

Julius: “Then, how about another surprise. Watch as my buds bloom!”

As Julius spoke, his spirits began another set of attacks as Alphard bounced back to his feet and darted away.

At that moment, iridescence filled dim hall. An aurora blossomed forth from Julius’s back, diving toward Gluttony.

Roy: “Spirits!”

Julius: “I hope one such as you, who appreciates gourmet, will enjoy. No matter which bud, I am proud to enjoy the bloom of these child flowers.”

Roy: “Awful, they’re pretentious, we don’t like them!”

Seeing the world burning in the aurora, Alphard spoke as he escaped high. Julius’s thin sword followed his back, pressing him one, and he attempted to escape with a sharp jerk.

Julius: “—Lolimancer!”

Subaru: “Don’t call me by that name! Juli!”

Julius: “Take Valkyrie with you to the top floor! Stop the broadcast!”

While choosing one another’s pseudonyms, Julius declared that he would hold off Alphard.

While supporting a wheezing Crusch, Subaru judged this as the most reasonable course of action, but he couldn't quite agree with it.

The mocking boy who was darting around was, after all, Gluttony.

This was the enemy who Subaru had pursued for more than a year. Saying that defeating him was one of Subaru's top priorities would be no exaggeration.

Even though he was right there—

Crusch: "I-I understand. Juli-sama, I will pray for your blade to be swift and true."

Crusch: "—hk"

However, before Subaru could protest, Crusch climbed to her feet and gave a response to Julius, her face full of unwillingness.

Crusch was another victim of Gluttony, having been robbed of her memory.

Of course, she had also wanted to seize this chance for the search of her memory. Even so, she assumed her own responsibility and entrusted the fight Gluttony to others.

Even aside those feelings, she was also well aware of her own lack of strength. Considering Subaru and Crusch's abilities, this was the only way.

Roy: "So what's going to happen? How are we doing it? Are we all going together? Even the disappointing woman and scummy man can be served as appetizer. Then, Juli-sama, we'll eat him, swallow him, nibble him, lick him, taste him, swallowed him, bite him, bite him into pieces, into pieces, and devour! Not bad!"

Julius: "Don't say anything unnecessary. I didn't become Juli in vain!"

While the auroras in the narrow space are gradually disappearing, Alphard is still a comfortable smile. Julius pursued the victory, the sword struck each other issued a steel sound.

At this moment, Julius and Subaru instantly glanced.

That line of sight is relative to Subaru, as if it means there is no need to go further—

Subaru: “Ah, dammit! Listen! Bastard, you absolutely can’t lose!”

Julius: “That’s my line. It doesn’t matter, I won’t, no, I absolutely can’t die here.”

Crusch: “Let’s go, Lolimancer-sama!”

Scratching his head, for time being, Subaru set aside his feelings and made movements to comply.

Although he should at least walk in front of Crusch, in truth, although it was shameful, she could react to any surprise attack much faster than he could.

Subaru chased behind the still wounded Crusch, and they both sprinted up the next flight of stairs.

Before leaving, he took one last look and Julius and Alphard.

Julius seemed to have the advantage, but he couldn’t let his guard down.

Julius: “Go!”

Subaru: “—Bastard!”

Aware of Subaru’s gaze, Julius made him restless to the very end.

Although he was incredibly annoying, the idea of something happening to him was troublesome.

Subaru turned to follow Crusch, bounding up the stairs in one breath.

Knowing that an ambush may have been awaiting them, they immediately took another flight of stairs, heading toward the topmost room.

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There were several important elements of an ambush.

First of all was the location. Ambushes were a tactic that had been put in place by an opponent waiting for opportunity to attack an enemy from a dominant location. That was the most essential element.

Secondly, the enemy needed to indeed appear at the set location. Finally setting the ambush but finding the key opponent missing would render it completely pointless.

Moreover, it was also necessary to speculate on the time when the enemy would arrive at the place of ambush. If there were a lack of concentration of ambushes en route, their effects could not be maximized.

So, assuming that Lust was setting an ambush, all three of these conditions had been fulfilled.

In any event, they needed to Break Into the Broadcast Room Within a Set Amount of Time. From their enemy's perspective, there was no prey that would be more enjoyable to hunt.

Subaru: "Therefore, we must first destroy this situation."

Crusch: "I understand this point... No, I've decide to believe in Subaru. I will say no more."

Having arrived at the topmost room, they found a staircase.

That is, a staircase to the rooftop, where the Subaru and Crusch would have to be prepared to defeat Capella's strategy.

Crusch, who was initially puzzled by Subaru proposal, seemed determined. This way of doing things was her invariable merit, both before and after losing her memory.

Crusch: "I honestly just want to see how the battle in the square is faring..."

Subaru: "But if we go check on them, then our actions will be meaningless."

Even at this height they could hear the clashing of sword and Garfiel's cursing. That fight was still ongoing, so no aid from that front could be expected.

Subaru: "Speaking of which..."

Looking around, Subaru examined the situation of the roof.

Claw marks had been left everywhere on the ground, traces of the black dragon walking around. The railings and fences that looked over the square were collapsed by the magic that Julius released.

Subaru thought of that terrible power, as he examined the room, confirming that they really were below the broadcast room.

Of course, Capella would be waiting there in ambush.

Crusch: "... ah."

Subaru: "What happened? Please take a moment if you're unprepared."

Crusch: "I'm sorry, but just now, I noticed something."

Subaru: "...?"

Crusch spoke rather weakly as Subaru busied himself with an iron fence. Subaru looked at her with surprise, and she looked back at him with a stiff expression.

Crusch: "I seem to have a certain fear of heights."

Subaru: "An unexpected weakness... got it. Ready!"

Confirming that it has been fixed firmly, Subaru nodded toward Crusch, who returned a stiff one, and stepped meekly into Subaru's arms.

Crusch: "—Please don't let go."

Subaru: “Crusch-san, there are many men who will misunderstand, so it’s be better if you don’t say those kinds of words often.”

Crusch: “——?”

Crusch turned her head with a wry smile. Then, with Crusch nestled in his arms, clinging to him, he swung loose from the building.

Of course, their bodies were drawn downward by gravity. As they fell, they reached the lowest point the whip wrapped around Subaru’s wrist would allow them to.

Subaru: “—hk!”

At the same time, supporting the weight of the both of them, Subaru’s shoulders were in enough pain to be in danger of breaking.

Twisting sideways, the two swung in an upward arc, reaching another outer wall of the City Hall. Seeing a window approaching, Subaru stretched out his feet and broke through it.

Crusch: “Gah—hk!”

Subaru: “Wha!?”

As the glass shattered, Subaru and Crusch rolled into the broadcast room. For a moment, Crusch seem to let loose a small cry, but Subaru pretended not to hear it as he released her from his arms.

Both climbed to their feet, immediately looked around, and found that...

Dragon: “——hk”

Staring blankly at the two who had just jumped in, with eyes wide open, was a black dragon sitting in a stiff posture.

The same massive body that they had seen on the roof was stuffed into the room. The black dragon had folded her wings, facing the door that one would normally enter from.

Presumably, she had originally intended to turn Subaru to ash the moment he tried to enter, but that strategy had been completely defeated.

Obstructed by her huge body, she was in a room that confined her movement greatly. Although the black dragon attempted to prepare herself to attack, moving her wings...

Subaru: "Crusch-san!"

Crusch: "Right!"

As if ridding herself of her fear of heights, Crusch nodded a response, before loosing her cut.

Her blade of wind sliced into the black dragon, damaging a wing and severing a frontal leg. The black dragon screamed loudly as dark blood began to spray.

Dragon: "AAAAAHHHHHHHH!!!"

Subaru: "Watch out! Get down... oah!?"

Capella writhed in pain, her dragon wings sending the room into disarray as she flapped her wings wildly.

Although this room was rather larger than usual, its durability was not so strong that it could withstand the riots of an elephant-sized creature. In order to escape from this destruction, Subaru turned to run, but at that moment he found,

—At the foot of the black dragon, a chained young girl trembled.

Girl: "——!"

Subaru met eyes with that tearful girl.

Realizing that Lust had adopted a very effective hostage strategy, should the initial ambush fail, Subaru was filled with rage.

Focusing, Subaru instinctively chose to move forward rather than escape.

Thinking of a way to dodge the tail hanging over his head, he slid toward the little girl. Picking up the trembling petite body, he flicked his whip fiercely at the black dragon's back. It didn't seem to inflict too much damage, but it allowed Subaru to express his rage.

But Crusch's strikes were not so powerless.

Dragon: "Wait! Wait! I'm not... hk!"

Crusch: "No need to answer! This is retribution for the disaster you've wrought upon the city!"

Crusch's relentless blade moved as if it had a mind of its own.

With an almost disappointing fragility, Capella bore no defense to that force.

Crusch cut the remaining wing, and Capella gave a keening wail. Although this likely didn't have much to do with Subaru, that huge body was shaken violently by a plethora of attacks, and she stumbled backwards to the opposite direction of the window Subaru had broken.

The black dragon's wings didn't regenerate this time.

Although she'd called her body immortal, if this was her speed of regeneration, then it could not be called a threat.

Crusch: "—It's over!"

Dragon: "Wai—"

Not allowing her to finish, Crusch loosed several successive attacks on the black dragon's body, head, and wings. Her huge body hit the wall hard, smashing through the window frame and falling outside.

The falling black dragon would like to expand the wings, but one side of the dragon wing is chopped from the roots, the other side of the dragon wing is like being hooked fragmented, it is unable to support the state of flight.

Dragon: “——hk”

The black dragon, without a chance to regenerate, had no time to say anything, simply falling to the ground.

A few seconds later, Lust hit the ground with the sound of meat hitting a wall or a wet towel falling to the floor.

Crusch: “I’ll go confirm the situation. Subaru-sama, can you take care of this child?”

Subaru: “R-Right, I got it.”

Watching the black debris falling from edge of the window, was the ever vigilant Crusch. With heartfelt trust in her, he also set down the girl he’d just recovered.

The girl was still in a state of fear, confusion in her quivering gaze as she looked at Subaru. This was inevitable. After that long, anyone would be afraid.

Subaru: “It’s okay, the dragon just now has been killed by the superheroine big sister over there, though not easily... where’s everyone else?”

Girl: “Ah, eh...”

Subaru: “Although it is hard to believe, we’re one of our own, and came here in order to save you. We have to finish shortly, before the bad guy comes back. Can you help me?”

He bent his knees, keeping their lines of sight the same, and spoke with a steady tone.

This was the unconscious behavior he would use whenever speaking to someone younger. She seemed to calm down slightly, taking deep breaths as if steeling herself before replying.

Girl: "There's a room over there... everyone's, in there."

Subaru: "Is it locked? That room..."

The girl pointed to a little room inside the broadcast room.

Actually, this room wasn't the broadcast room, right? Although the room was large, there was no broadcast equipment at all. Even if the radio was a magic device, Subaru could find anything that it could possibly be in this room. Then, the room that the girl was pointing to was most likely the real broadcast room.

As he turned his gaze over, Subaru hesitated. He wanted to inquire about the life or death of the people inside.

However, asking the girl such a thing was far too cruel and inconsiderate.

Subaru touched the still shaking girl's head, slowly making his way toward the room.

Girl: "——"

Heart trembling, Subaru felt sweat break out on his neck.

Even the chaotic battle seconds earlier hadn't made him so nervous, but suddenly, his throat felt parched and dry. This was the sense of a nasty premonition, a terror which preoccupied his mind.

Crusch: "Subaru-sama?"

Subaru: "Everything's fine. I'm about to start looking around. What happened to Lust?"

Crusch: "...Everything's fine here too... I don't know why, but she's staying where she is.

Crusch replied with that warning about Lust. After hearing that answer, Subaru took a deep breath and headed for the room, reaching out to brush the doorknob.

In the radio room, there was a possibility of other cultists hiding. That would be something Subaru needed to take into consideration.

But, for some reason, that kind of worry seemed superfluous. In fact, this idea is right. Because, in actuality, no cultists occupied that room. Occupying it, was—

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With speechless gazes, they looked at Subaru with amazement.

No, maybe he just wanted to assume they were looking. Subaru had no way of understanding how they observed the world, and he didn't particularly want to know.

He simply felt dismay. His voice wouldn't work. This situation could only be described as speechless. His thoughts froze, and he thought of nothing. However, there was something he finally did understand.

— The source of that irritating sound accompanying the broadcast he'd heard in the shelter.

Subaru: “—What, is this?”

In response to Subaru, That Voice spoke.

That Voice was one which welcomed Subaru, a fearsome sound, a defiant sound, a joyful sound, a meaningless sound—

The sound of numerous beating wings echoed throughout the room.

In the darkened room, countless blinking red compound eyes moved, as if watching Subaru.

The broadcast had sounded as if many many flies had been crammed into one room. And all the flies were the same size as people, this one, that one too, all of them.

“—AAAH!!”

Subaru: “—Eh!”

In a sea of blankness, Subaru registered a sudden pained cry.

Shocked into a sudden response, Subaru slammed the door, closing along with it the sound of a hundred beating wings. Looking back, he found...

???: “Gahahahaha! Stupid, stupid! You dregs, the meat in your heads simply isn’t enough. You actually tried to match me in a battle of the wits? Who put the sugar into your brain and melted your cerebrum~! Kahahahaha!”

Crusch was crushed under the heel of the girl who issued that sharp raucous laughter. There was no doubt that this was that familiar poisonous laughter,

Capella: “It’s me, Capella-chan! Gaahahahaha!”

As Capella winked and stuck out her tongue, Crusch vomited blood, the whites of her eyes barely showing.

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Chapter 36 - The Beginning and the Conclusion of Love



Behind him was a room full of gigantic flies.

Subaru and Crusch had defeated the black dragon, and it now lay motionless on the ground outside. And yet, in front of Subaru was a laughing girl who repeatedly dug her foot into Crusch.

Sinister laughter, a sardonic tone. The person in front of him was undoubtedly Lust, Capella Emerada Lugunica.

— His entire body began to tingle.

Subaru: "What, what is this...?"

Capella: "Do you actually have to take time to think about it? You scum shouldn't worry about such things— the best choice for you is to recognize the reality before you! You saw a beautiful maiden shaking with fear! But her true identity is an archbishop of the Witch Cult~!"

As Subaru's mind raced, Capella danced around, sticking her mocking tongue out at Subaru. Crusch's eyes rolled back as she was relentlessly attacked.

Capella: "Didn't you find it strange at all? Here, at the City Hall, why would there be a child meat? But your first reaction was doubtlessly 'Ah, this kid is in danger, I have to save her...' What a disappointingly stupid train of thought!"

Subaru: "S-Shut up, already. There's plenty I'd like to say but first, move your damn foot."

Capella: "Hmm? Are you so captivated by my beautiful legs that you're dripping already~? Or are you thinking of this sow that's licking my feet? Indeed, she has a lovely body~. Are you trying so hard that you can't restrain yourself right now? Gahahahaha!"

Subaru: "——! This bitch! Bastard, we're not just creatures for you to tread on!"

Capella wore an ecstatic expression and her heel ravaged Crusch again and again. In response to her atrocious actions and ridicule, Subaru's veins boiled with rage.

His lower body tensed, ready to move forward. Capella, who had provoked Subaru, seemed to welcome an attack. However, Subaru was not so foolish as to blindly rush forward.

Even without her memory, Crusch was a fearsome warrior.

Her strength had been vouched for by Wilhelm. And yet, in the few seconds that she'd vanished from Subaru's sight, she'd lost without any resistance.

Lust's strength was undoubtedly far above Subaru's.

Subaru needed to solve the situation without engaging her in combat.

Subaru: “——”

Crusch, whose very life was in danger, needed to be immediately recovered and taken to Julius and the others.

It was up to him to engineer an escape, abandoning their mission in the process. Although they had failed to stop the broadcast, that mission wasn't worth their lives.

And they also hadn't found the people who they should be rescuing, at least not on this floor.

His only conclusion was that their reserve of combat power wasn't enough to retake the city in secrecy.

Therefore, Subaru could not hesitate.

Capella: “Huh?”

Subaru: “Haa!”

Capella exhaled, slightly surprised by Subaru's sudden action.

The target of Subaru's whip was not Capella, but a shelf on the side wall. He found a metal bust, large enough to be embraced by two arms, and wrapped in it his whip, deftly flicking his wrist and bringing it toward Capella.

Subaru now wielded a high-speed metal whirlwind.

His weapon now had the power to open a seam in the wall. Whether to block or evade, she would need to remove her foot from Crusch.

Subaru would take advantage of that moment to retrieve her.

Subaru: "Take that!"

Capella: "I will~. "

Subaru: "Huh?"

In contrast to the Subaru's frenzied cries, Capella responded with casual words.

The sound of a hard object encountering bones and flesh was accompanied by blood spurting forth from Capella's forehead, which had been torn almost completely apart. The inside of her scalp was visible, and blood strained her torn cheeks.

Subaru could no longer bear to look at what had originally been such a cute face.

Her left eye had been half-destroyed, and its light had vanished. This unexpected situation left Subaru's mind momentarily blank.

His action had been intended to create a distraction for his enemy, but he'd been caught off guard instead— and an archbishop certainly wouldn't let that moment go.

Capella: "Aren't you cute to think that I'd play right into the palms of your hands? Isn't this kind of helpless stupidity~ a problem for you? Gahahahaha!"

Capella's mocking slipped into Subaru frozen thoughts.

The girl turned to face the stiff Subaru, and, in the next moment, a gust of a black whirlwind hit him, abruptly sending him flying.

Subaru: "Gah!"

Smacked by a gigantic force, his right half took a heavy blow, and Subaru was knocked into a table, before rolling to the ground. His entire body was shook, he he dizzily climbed to his feet, bracing himself against the wall. What he saw next was,

Capella: "What's wrong? Are you so stunned by my beauty that you can't even move?"

Subaru: "...what, just happened?"

Capella: "You actually have to ask? Just~ use your eyes for once~!"

Capella happily swayed her body, and Subaru couldn't even articulate a cry of anguish.

He saw that what had just attacked him was a dragon's tail, sprouting from behind the petite girl. That disconcerting appearance imprinted itself upon Subaru's consciousness.

Subaru: "Could you be... a dragon?"

Capella: "Right~ your hopeless brain, which couldn't realize the truth even upon impact! Even after this gentle lady has specifically given you so many hints, you can't imagine it, you helpless scummy meat."

Subaru: "——!"

Capella waved her tail lightly as Subaru took in her physiology. Her long tail gave a fierce sweep, and the ground cracked as Subaru barely threw himself aside in time. But...

Capella: "Isn't your relief naive?"

Subaru: "Wah!?"

However, as he prepared to pull himself to his feet, Subaru hit by her huge left wrist. As he bounced away, he took another hit from the dragon tail awaiting him, and after a violent impact with the ceiling, was slashed by feathered wing, before finally coming to a rest on the ground.

Coughing violently as the impact sent him rolling across the floor, he witnessed the true face of the terror that had attacked him.

Where before there had only been a black tail, now there was a fist covered in animal hair. Then came that black tail from before, and finally, a pair of bird's wings, long enough for the sharp feathers to slash across Subaru's body. —And these all belonged to that young girl's form.

Capella: "You should have just about~ figured the answer out, right?"

Alien, was the only word that came to mind.

A dragon's tail, a beast's arm, the wings of a great bird, all on a human girl.

He couldn't think of any other suitable words to describe her. A wordless description of this creature that shouldn't exist could be given as a sense of physical aversion.

He could feel nothing but a sense of disgust toward the monster in front of him.

Subaru: "Variation, transformation..."

Capella: "I am the Sin Archbishop of Lust, Capella Emerada Lugúnica. All the love and respect in this world exists to be monopolized by myself alone. If someone loves me, no matter how abnormal their desire is, I'll respond. In short, I am the ultimate embodiment of all kinds of virtue and beauty in the world. Any girl matching your preferences, I can become. Hey~ I'm a dutiful woman, aren't I?

Kahahahaha!"

While wantonly speaking nonsense, Capella turned to face Subaru and began to freely change her form.

She shifted from her abnormal shape back to the tiny girl, but her hands and feet and then immediately extended to become the adult body of a grown woman. Just as Subaru realized this, she changed into a simple village girl, but, in the next moment has become a maiden with a lewd smile.

Capella: "Now, how do you like me?"

Subaru: "——"

Speechless. He was unable to say anything. One glance, and he realized that this was the worst possible situation.

She was a desecration of human values. In this sense, her ability was obvious. The power of Lust was to desecrate and trample on various values so that she would be the only loved thing in the world.

And with just a look, he saw that the wound marring her face had been long healed, without a traces of the injury left behind. Her terrible ability to regenerate— or, in reality, her ability to transform, had long cured her old injuries.

In any case, he'd finally solved the mystery of how the dragon had become a girl. He'd originally thought she was like Petelgeuse, able to use the bodies of others, but, if that weren't the case...

Subaru: "——what?"

If that weren't the case, then what had happened with the dragon from earlier, and the flies in the broadcast room?

Capella: "Have you finally realized it?"

Subaru: "Wait... wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait a second."

As if she'd read his innermost thoughts, Capella's expression had changed, and she laughed mockingly.

She'd become a long haired lady, and even the sound of her laughter changed as well.

In this situation, where he was uncertain of even who he was speaking to, Subaru shook his head. This can't be, it's impossible, it could never be true.

However, were he right, everything up until now could be explained. Capella's Lust allowed her to change and transform her body.

And if this ability of hers were effective on objects other than her physical body...

Capella: “Has your waterlogged brain finally realized the identify of those disgusting flies~?”

Subaru: “They... they’re...”

Capella: “Hmm~ hmm~ hurry and give your answer, and I’ll hear you out. Gahahahahaha!”

Capella covered her mouth with her hand and laughed loudly.

Hating that attitude from the bottom of his heart, Subaru said in a trembling voice,

Subaru: “—They’re... the people in this building, who you’ve transformed.”

Capella: “Correct~, but you were pretty slow, so no prizes~. I won’t give you any appreciation. Ah, pointless scum, why do you exist? Anyway, I am totally unreadable ~”

Subaru: “Those are my lines!”

Capella didn’t look in the least guilty about this brutal atrocity.

Needless to say, she’d just stuffed those people into a dark room. When their red eyes had fixed themselves on Subaru, their wings, which weren’t capable of flight, had been flapping desperately, issued a loud buzzing flutter.

—They must have been asking for his help then.

Subaru: “There’s something wrong with your head! Why... how could you do such a thing! Why would you do it? Turning people into flies... why!?”

Capella: “It’s horrifying, right?”

Subaru: “It’s beyond twisted! You... you, you...”

Capella: “Maybe it’s just because I can’t help but create disgusting creatures~?”

Again, Subaru couldn't find words to respond.

With harsh breaths and clench teeth, Subaru fixated on her with a fiery, intense gaze of hatred, as if trying to kill her with his sight.

She could play with the lives of others, even turning them into flies. Those atrocities were even worse than murder.

In these few hours, Subaru had successively encountered four archbishops who he'd never met before.

Wrathful Sirius was a madwoman who manipulated the emotions of others and craved a selfish love.

Greedy Regulus self-righteously and forcefully imposed his own values upon others.

Gluttonous Alphard stole memories and existences, a poison to humanity who could escape punishment.

And Lustful Capella was a monster who stripped away human dignity and identity. They were all hopeless, guilty of madness.

Capella: "——"

In contrast to the enraged Subaru, Capella had settled into a bored silence. In the next second, she took on a mocking tone.

As Subaru raged, Capella spoke.

Capella: "—Indeed, it's annoying and disgusting."

Facing Subaru's wrath, Capella gave a more pleasant smile.

She clapped her hands together, pointing to the room packed with flies.

Capella: "When you look at a room full of giant flies, you get a horrible sense of physical disgust, isn't that right? And of course, no matter who looks at those ugly creatures, they can't help but want to run."

Subaru: "What... does that..."

Capella: "No matter who, everyone feels disgusted with that ugliness. And those scum have become insects that I can't bear to look at. It's a matter of course that no one would love them."

Subaru: "So, what are you trying to say?"

Capella: "Human beings, however, are creatures that cannot live without loving or being loved. But when their loved ones become such creatures, no matter how much they want to, they just can't love them. In that case, they have to redirect love to others. No matter how reluctant they are, they just can't love anything dirty."

His mind went blank.

Tilting her head slightly, she spoke her monstrous words.

Listening to her clapping, Subaru was overtaken by a desire to escape.

Now, immediately, without hesitating for even a second, he wanted to disappear to a place without this monster.

His body didn't want those eyes on him, his ears didn't want to hear that voice, his mind didn't want to remember that presence, all in a sense of physical disgust.

Wasn't she the embodiment of aversion?

Something which he was genuinely unable to stand, wasn't that the definition of the horror that stood before him?

Capella: "So gentle and merciful, I really am the perfect woman. Since it was decided that I'd monopolize all the world's love and respect, then I absolutely can not slack on my duty. In order to be

loved better, I'll work hard to be loved, and change myself to suit your tastes. In order to capture your attention, I'll take away everything you're interested in everything but me. Loving anyone is okay, but you'll choose me in the end. I'll work hard to make that happen. I'll improve improve better improve improve improve improve improve my own charm! And reduce reduce reduce reduce reduce reduce reduce the charm of the meats who aren't me! Anyone, no matter who, would fall for this world's most beautiful and charming me!"

Subaru: "... just, kill me already!"

Capella: "Why? I'm a philanthropist, how could I be so brutal as to kill you? Even if you're worthless scum, if there's a chance that you'll love me, even if there's a tiny, slight chance~, for every single person, I'll let them live even one more second if they'll give me my due praise! Only those who can't will be killed! Above all, Capella-sama is a commendable praiseworthy woman!"

Subaru: "—"

Subaru: "——"

Subaru: "————"

Subaru: "I see now."

Capella: "Do you? Well, now that you understand, quickly give your appreciation to Capella-sama. Let yourself be melted by Capella-sama's love and become my favorite piece of meat..."

Subaru: "Go to hell."

He couldn't think. But there was no need to think.

The enemy in front of him was truly the most vicious enemy. Everything other than that piece of knowledge was entirely unnecessary.

Subaru's whip suddenly flew forward. The monster jerked backwards as her face was suddenly attacked, removing her dirty foot from Crusch. Taking advantage of that opening, Subaru immediately moved, picking up Crusch.

Capella: "Witness— because you wanted that slab of meat, your fluids won't stop leaking. Didn't you deny it earlier? Didn't you say so many beautiful words~? Don't you like beautiful things? Don't you like cute things? Don't you like soft and comfortable things?"

Subaru: "——!"

Chasing Subaru, Capella spread her arms apart, reaching her wrist toward him.

One hand turned into a the head of a snake, while the other became the head of a lion— those distorted heads chased Subaru, showing their canines while crawling up and down the floor of the room.

Although his right foot had begun to bleed again, he still felt no pain. Feeling the body temperature and weight in his arms, making every effort to protect the woman he carried, Subaru focused every last bit of his athletic ability on dodging.

Capella: "Do you care so much for that scum? Then, for the rest of your short life, hold tightly and don't let go! Those tempting eyes! Those sweet lips! That sweet meat meat meat! Because she's stimulating, you're clinging to desperately to her, unable to let go? Die! Die! Go die! Go die right now!"

Subaru: "Do not talk nonsense, bastard! I'm not that kind of person!"

Capella: "Quiet! Scum should just obediently stay put and emanate the stench of rubbish! Sows should obediently stay put and emanate the stench of an animal! You've never thought of it? Can you honestly say that you've never thought of it for even a second? Doesn't that one second make it that kind of obscene relationship? What's the difference? What's the difference? Tell me what the difference is!"

The snakes and lions writhed as if resembling Capella's excitement, wantonly twisting across the room.

The sound of teeth crunching a wooden desk, sending its legs flying, disassembling its body. That same force sought Subaru, trying again and again to reach him.

Caught in the center of that destructive storm, issued a pained cry, Subaru guarded Crusch's body, desperately avoided the continuous attacks. Capella stood at the exit of the room. Even if he wanted to take the opportunity to escape, Capella's body expanded and contracted, changing back and forth between woman, girl, and maiden, in an anomaly that looked to be taboo.

Capella: "Don't you want to stroke her hair? Don't you want to brush her lips? Don't you want to hold her body? Those cheap thoughts are always justified with beautiful words, with love a shield! Love is beautiful, isn't that just a self-righteous justification? Aren't you using beautiful words to cover up your desires?!"

Subaru: "——you!"

Capella: "Admit your lust directly! Don't try to hide it behind love! Or are you refusing to say it? Refuting what's already been determined? —My love for her is because of her innermost feelings! Her nobility, her gentleness, her compassion, her temperance, her sky blue eyes. She's willing to live for others, she has the strength to endure injustice, her vulnerability that she shows only to me, I don't want to leave her alone. That reassuring voice, that loving gaze, those eyes that steal my moodiness away, the lips that call my name so gently, the warmth that grips both of my hands, the excitement in my heartbeat when we touch, that beautiful hair swaying in the wind. Because fate brought us together, because I believe that only she'd accept me, because she's always by my side when I'm sad, because she's taught me so many important lessons, because we've been together for all all all of this time, I want to see and feel the same things that she does from now to forever. Because we promised, I swore to never forget, and only I know her, and only in front of her can I be myself. Because I was so lonely, I always wanted someone to understand me. You told me that that initial thought is what leads one person to love another. You were the one who took away the flow of my tears, you were the one who emerged from the boundless sea of people to find me, you were the one who hugged me tightly when I collapsed, you were one who scolded me for first time because I was naive, you were the one who told

me the undisguised truth, you were the one who told me so much that I never knew before, you were the one who took me to see so many sights I'd never seen before, you were the one who took my hand, out of my birdcage in. No matter when, you support me, no matter what, you understand me. We're meant to be together, always, I can't live without you, you're my everything, you love me because I love you too, because your chest is so warm, because with you, all of the colors of the world shine so brilliantly, I can't feel happiness without you, I can't live without you. In this world so filled with lies, only this is truth."

With a still expression, Capella spit those words out as if they were curses.

As she spoke this long, touching confession, Capella's face was intertwined with beauty, adoration, obscenity. And with an even more complex and strange expression,

Capella: "—All of them all of them, aren't they just sweet nothings!"

Subaru: "——"

Capella: "Those are all words meant only to placate others, what's the harm in removing them? Do they have any sincerity? Any character? They're merely nauseating nonsense, how annoying! Acts! They're nothing but acts! In truth, you've only been attracted by the appearance of that meat! If you could really feel love with those who you speak affectionate words to and share affectionate touches and pillow talk with, see what happens when they become a fly! Could you love them? Are you not afraid of them? Are you not disgusted? No! You'd feel nothing but disgust oozing from your every pore! Well? Think about what you've said!"

Insane verbal abuse, a delusion of victimization, jealousy, hate, self-obsession.

Spit splashing across the room, Capella lost control of herself as she hysterically destroyed the room.

The snake's hiss, the lion's roar, Capella's cries, Subaru couldn't stand to listen to them any longer.

The noise became like storm, and the room began to collapse. No matter what he did, he couldn't see anything past the smoke.

How was his foot? Could he still use it, injured and torn as it was? The only thing he was certain of was the heartbeat of the woman in his arms, which continued to infuse Subaru with determination.

But even such a fight would come to and end here.

Capella: “Hey, meat. I can see you!”

Subaru: “—Huh!?”

Breaking through the smoke, the lion’s head suddenly rushed in.

Then the fangs snapped at Subaru’s right foot, and tore off a large chunk, blood spurting forth fiercely.

The injury had already directly exceeded the limit that Ferris could handle, and Subaru’s mind began to boil as he struggled through the pain of losing his right foot. He issued a violent cry of agony that his throat was unable to bear.

Of course, he couldn’t support his own body anymore.

As he collapsed, Crusch rolled onto the ground in front of him. And his blood began to overflow. This was no exaggeration. It appeared as if a bucket of blood had been suddenly overturned. It was clear that his life had entered a rapid decline.

Capella: “Ah, what a headache. It seems that I couldn’t help but get excited— how impolite of me. Kahahahaha!”

Subaru: “——”

Maintaining his position on the ground, Subaru stuck one convulsing hand to his wound.

Although the palm of the hand was blocking the wound, the momentum of the bleeding had not diminished. In fact, another feeling began to well up in Subaru’s body.

Soon, everything would end. This was the familiar feeling of Death, a feeling which gradually approached Subaru.

In just a few hours, he'd felt the pain of the loss of his right foot twice.

His face transcended paleness to take on a yellow pallor, and his breathing sped up and up as his eyes grew bloodshot.

Capella: "Oh my, my, aren't you about to die~? Watching the agony this piece of meat is in, is particularly distressing for my compassionate self who feels for others."

Subaru: "...ah... ah..."

Capella: "The piece of meat that you've been protecting is also going to die soon. It's such a shame that I indulged in my hobby a little bit... and decided to see if she'll lose to my blood~."

Capella squatted down, glancing at Subaru's twisted, agonized face. Then the monster smiled and stretched a hand to the wound on his foot.

Capella: "I wonder what kind of ugly meat will you'll become~?"

Subaru: "....."

As she spoke, Capella turned her other hand into a blade, cutting into the hand that had just been caressing Subaru's wound. And, bit by bit, her blood flowed into Subaru. Red and black blended together, blood blend with each other, forming a rather indecent scene.

And,

Subaru: "——!? Hah, ah ah ah ah ah!?"

Capella: "Capella-sama's blood is different from ubiquitous common blood. Mine is mixed with dragon's blood, which contains a great curse~ could you maybe last a bit longer than the other one?"

Capella hummed happily, but Subaru couldn't form any kind of reply.

His entire being was half-dead, and even his pain had become sluggish. Just a second before he died, the blood that had plunged into his wound ravaged and eroded his body. As if a foreign body with self-awareness had entered his body, a fear of a much higher degree than that a regional pain ravished Natsuki Subaru, as if attempting to completely rewrite his existence while merging with him.

Unable to understand, not allowed even the mercy of death. And compared to Crusch? It was as the monster had said. She was suffering the same pain. If she had to endure such a pain, she'd be better off dead! Let us die! Let us die! Let me die! Let me die! Let me die!

Capella: "Gahahahaha! Well, then~ the invaders have been well taken care of. Well, it's about time that I..."

After looking back and forth at the collapsed Subaru and Crusch, Capella stood, satisfied. She reverted to the petite girl's form, her tail vanishing as she headed toward the broadcast room. As she turned, she paused.

Her gaze fell on the wall that had been destroyed when the decoy dragon had been attacked.

Capella: "My, my, they were pretty decent after all~."

And, after having fallen from the building only a short while ago, the black dragon had again taken to the skies. Seeing its enemy, it gave a deafening roar, before breathing a mouthful of black flames.

— At that moment, black flames engulfed the city.

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Chapter 37 - Regroup



A distant, distant echo.

Unfamiliar voices. Or were they familiar voices?

Were they masculine? Feminine? Did they come from above or below? Everything about that was unknown.

???: “——”

An angry voice. And a sighing voice.

And also something like an accusing voice. And was that a crying voice?

Sound.

A waterfall of sound poured down, its rough waves an ensnaring whirlpool.

As if someone had been kind enough to answer a question deeply rooted in his heart. His turbid identity was swept away, lost to the tides.

Hands and feet, head, bottom, chest, back. Melting, mixing, blending together.

Even his own existence, incomprehensible as it was, was swallowed up by the waterfall of sound, flowing away as if lost forever.

All he knew was the black haze that swallowed the world he could perceive.

It was thus that he realized that the dark haze was disintegrating his body, allowing it no form of resistance, ushering in a steady end.

But an untieable knot was, at this very moment, resisting that erosion.

Even being dismantled, even being shriveled, even being denied, that knot refused to shrink back.

By no means had all of him succumbed to the haze in his body, by no means had all of him surrendered to that dark battlefield.

And finally, finally...

???: “——”

The first noise that flooded into his ears was someone’s enraged roar.

While hearing that sharp voice, he opened his eyes to be greeted by a white ceiling. At the same time, he realized that he was lying spread eagled on a hard surface.

???: “—useless!”

His newly regained consciousness brought that angry cursing in with a clearly sound.

It seemed to encompass an outbreak of feelings, and was displayed with some specific action. He heard the distinct sound of a hand slapping against skin.

???: “Stop it! You should understand that the responsibility for that blame doesn’t lie with anyone here.”

???: “Shut up! I don’t want to hear those empty platitudes! An outsider shouldn’t interrupt!”

Accusatory voices and unquenchable anger.

From what he could hear, allies seemed to be arguing in a spacious room. He stretched out his left hand, trying to support himself with the wall as he got up.

But, halfway through, a nail encountered his skull, and his breathing suddenly stopped. His eyes felt as if they were sticks of combusting dynamite, and his field of vision was suddenly stained a vivid blood red.

As the impact of the pain ravaged him, he finally pulled his upper body upright, taking in the scene of the quarrel.

—Three men and women quarreled in the middle of a room... or, rather, all three of them were men.

A tearful Ferris was hitting Wilhelm with his fists, while a desperate Julius tried to stop him. The sound that he had just heard was the voice of Ferris fanning to the cheek of Wilhelm. The red-faced old man had bowed his head in shame.

Wilhelm: “From the bottom of my heart, I apologize.”

Ferris: “At least give an excuse! Give me a reason that I can accept it! Just your apology is useless!”

Julius: “Ferris, you’re creating a pointless commotion! Calm down! Can’t you see that Wilhelm-sama is incredibly remorseful?”

Ferris: “Remorse...!? What’s remorse going to do? Useless! Pointless! Everybody, everybody... why this hell is this...? Why couldn’t you all think to rescue Crusch-sama!?”

Ferris exploded toward Wilhelm and Julius with another fit of rage, but almost immediately sank to the floor, defeated and weak.

And as the crying Ferris issued a condemnation, the two men could say nothing. Ferris slammed his gloved hands on the ground contemptuously.

Ferris: “Am I supposed to be Blue? ... I can’t even do anything right now... useless, useless, useless useless useless...”

Ferris sobbed as he continued to curse angrily.

This time, however, his anger was directed at himself.

That was another option he could take. After all, no one could interfere with the lament he’d directed toward himself.

Julius: “——”

Ferris’s sobs and Julius’s sighs intertwined. Wilhelm remained silent. The crushing atmosphere shrouded the room around them.

Garfiel: “Yo, Captain. Finally up?”

Garfiel appeared in the doorless doorway, spotting Subaru, who the other three had missed. Julius followed Garfiel’s gaze and noticed the awakened Subaru, wearing an expression of relief.

Julius: “Excellent. Ferris, Subaru’s finally awake.”

Ferris: “...right.”

At Julius’s call, Ferris swiped at his face with his sleeve as he stood. His disgraceful attitude

vanished as he examined Subaru's body before firmly fixing his eyes on Subaru's.

Ferris: "Well, you seem to be fine. Your mind is clear, right? Do you know your name and place of birth?"

Subaru: "I'm Natsuki Subaru, from Japan."

Ferris: "A hometown I've never heard of... I was born in Crusch-sama's territories."

Ferris's expression revealed that he believed Subaru's answer to be a pointless joke. He stood and immediately turned to leave. No one was willing to throw accusatory words at him, and so everyone watched in silence.

Only Wilhelm chased after Ferris. Before he left, the elderly man turned to give Subaru a ceremonious bow.

After the two left, the tense atmosphere in the room finally thinned.

But, at the same time, another oppressive feeling grew stronger and stronger.

Garfiel: "Captain, even if y'can get up, ya shouldn't be forcin' yerself t'do anythin' right now."

Subaru: "...those are my lines, you look like you're in terrible shape."

Leaning against the wall, Garfiel greeted Subaru, who responded to the haggard looking teenager with his own greeting.

His cheeks and blond hair were saturated with blood, and his clothing was torn in too many places to count. His pallor was just as awful as when he'd first carried Mimi to the shelter.

As he considered this, Subaru's own sluggish thoughts finally caught up.

Subaru: "We're alive, huh."

Garfiel: “Right. My amazin’ self and Captain survived, so that’s all good ‘n well, but we can’t even celebrate it. Fuck!”

Affirming Subaru’s mutter, Garfiel grinded his teeth down bitterly.

As he watched Garfiel, Subaru once again confirmed his own survival — that is, he understood that Return by Death hadn’t triggered, and that he hadn’t witnessed the end of this struggle in the City Hall.

Of course, since he was still alive, he had to have been rescued, but...”

Subaru: “What’s going on in the City Hall? How did I get here?”

Julius: “We’re still in the City Hall right now. The Witch Cult conceded it, and we took back our target. Looking just at that result, we could call the operation a success, but...”

Julius knelt next to Subaru as he began to answer his questions.

Upon closer inspection, the Knight of Knights looked awful. His hair was uncharacteristically messy, and his face and neck were covered with wounds. His knight’s uniform was also dirtied with blood, bringing no peace of mind.

But, most importantly, his normally graceful features were currently twisted with remorse and humiliation.

Julius: “First and foremost, it’s good to see you up again. If anything had happened to you, we would have lost our source of morale.”

Subaru: “... don’t say useless shit like that. What happened? The Witch Cult chose to abandon the building, exactly how did that come about?”

Julius: “As we’ve established, the Witch Cult abandoned the building, and we took back the City Hall. But the hostages that were turned into inhuman things, and the devils who caused all this managed to escape after everything they’d done. This can hardly be called a good result.”

Compared to the anxious Subaru, Julius stated the situation in mellow tones.

However, that stiff tone and those drooping eyes... it was obvious that Julius was explaining their circumstances with irrefutable indignation in his voice.

And, Subaru couldn't ignore what he'd just been told.

Subaru: "Inhuman things, meaning..."

Julius: "You should have seen that unending, nightmarish sight when you were on the upper floor."

Shaking his head, Julius affirmed that cruel reality.

Subaru vividly remembered the shiny red compound eyes and the sound of the wings desperately beating out a cry for help. His nausea was held in check by the knowledge that they'd been looking to him, another human, for aid.

His heart seemed to tighten with a pain that was neither truly sympathy nor fear.

The Witch Cult's Sin Archbishop of Lust, Capella, was a truly despicable monster who trampled freely on human dignity and values, all while spitting her brand of ridicule.

What that monster played with was neither the human spirit nor the human heart, but something even more sacred.

Julius: "The entire square, from the highest floor to the exterior premises. After our division of labor to gain time, the Witch Cult had too much of an upper hand.... They could have easily, little by little, killed us all. The reason why that didn't happen was your keen judgment and the black dragon who fought his hardest."

Subaru: "My... judgment?"

Julius: "The conversation mirror was activated before you made a move on the top floor, and, as a result, the status of the City Hall was successfully communicated to Anastasia and Ferris. The prompt arrival of our reinforcements, the Iron Fang and Ferris, was all due to your actions."

Subaru: "Did you think those kinds of words would bring me comfort?"

Julius: "...that wasn't my intent. I was merely stating the truth. Facts, as it were."

Subaru was irritated by Julius's poised answer. However, Julius's cold reply was also evidence that he himself wasn't calm either.

Confirming that neither's mental state was great, Subaru took a deep breath.

Subaru: "One more thing about what you said just now, what happened to the black dragon?"

Julius: "This happened on the top floor, so I may not know any more than you do... but Lust's power is transformation, right? And surprisingly enough, a man who had been turned into a black dragon made his way to the top of the building, even as he was on the verge of death, to battle with Lust. We were only able to save you thanks to him."

The one who Julius was referring to was no doubt the dragon that Subaru and Crusch had so fiercely attacked.

Since Capella's power was variation and transformation, then that black dragon was more than likely one of the hostages in the City Hall. And Subaru had disregarded his call for help, abandoning that man.

And under such circumstances, with the fighting still ongoing,

Subaru: "The one who was turned into a black dragon, is he..."

Garfiel: "He can't die."

As Subaru fretted, Garfiel suddenly interrupted with a calm voice.

He wouldn't meet Subaru's gaze, instead staring directly up at the ceiling.

Garfiel: "My amazin' self won't let him die. It's absolutely impossible for'em t'die here, from such a thing. He must be saved... otherwise..."

Julius: "He's been like that. The dragon seems to be someone he knows. Although his scent has changed, Garfiel seemed to recognize him from his actions. In any case, his healing is now complete. He's fine, although a little anxious, but some rest would help that."

Subaru: "An acquaintance? Garfiel, is this someone you know from the city?"

Garfiel: "——"

Garfiel's choice to remain silent came as a surprise to Subaru, who couldn't catch his gaze.

In any case, he was grateful for the safety of their savior, the black dragon. But the others, the flies, they...

Julius: "The others can be loosely said to be okay, but at least their safety has been assured. Ferris has made his diagnoses, but..."

Subaru: "That is to say, even Ferris can't fix them? Damnit!"

Unable to help hitting the floor with his hand, Subaru pondered the feelings of those who had lost their bodies.

Exactly how strong of a sense of loss would they be feeling? They'd been turned into something inhuman, a horror and cruelty that is different from the loss of life.

Loss of life simply meant the end of an identity and an existence.

But the loss of human form meant the loss of an identity... while existence had yet to come to an end.

Those who were tortured by that incurable curses were packed into the small office

Were they above him? Or below? Regretting that he couldn't even remember how many were suffering that fate, Subaru could only think of other things that needed to be confirmed.

Since he knew he was still alive, the next question that emerged was a natural one.

Subaru: "Are you and Garfiel both uninjured?"

Julius: "As you can see, both Garfiel and myself were not significantly injured, and neither was Ricardo, although we can certainly say we were humiliated... but that's an afterthought."

Subaru: "——"

Even as he said so, Julius's teeth clenched down on his lip, his voice laced with shame. Seeing his anger, Subaru was consumed by his own sense of frustrated hatred.

Julius fought against the detestable Gluttony, Alphard.

In honesty, Subaru wanted nothing more than to destroy that one archbishop. But even supposing that Subaru had stayed to fight him, his escape would have been completely inevitable.

But he couldn't remain calm, knowing that his sworn enemy had escaped.

Subaru: "...sorry that I couldn't finish the task assigned to me."

Julius: "If you insist on saying so, I can't refute you... they achieved their broadcast, it seems."

Subaru: "Right, and that applies doubly for Lust. And... right, I'm sure they discussed some kind of requests or negotiations in their latest broadcast."

And, from Julius's expression, Subaru could tell that Lust's request hadn't been anything proper. Although he didn't want to hear it, blocking it out would be pointless. He'd have to learn it sooner or later. But, before that...

Subaru: "Broadcast aside... what happened to Crusch-san?"

Julius: “——”

Subaru: “She also went to the top floor with me... and she ended up in a worse position than me, suffering at the hands of Lust for much longer...”

An image of Crusch spitting up blood, with only the white of her eyes showing, flashed through Subaru's mind.

Her external injuries were severe, and the damage was appalling. Presumably, something life-threatening must have happened.

And Ferris's anguished cries. Although he didn't want to believe the worst, the most obvious conclusion was...

Subaru: “Ferris... said something unfortunate sounding, so...”

Julius: “It's certainly true that Crusch-sama is still alive, but...”

Subaru: “Don't phrase it with those implications!”

In that brief moment, Subaru felt a small light of hope in his chest. However, it vanished as soon as he saw Julius's expression.

That was an intolerable expression which expressed not the peace of mind at finally saving a life, but one which conveyed terror of an even worse fate.

Julius: “Ferris was overreacting slightly, but this situation is certainly an undesirable one.”

Subaru: “Undesirable... What the hell is going on? Crusch-san... if Ferris can't do anything, why aren't we putting our heads together and trying to help!?”

Julius: “Calm down! No matter how worked up you get, the situation won't change. So calm down already.”

Julius snapped sharply at Subaru's disgraceful outburst.

But his calmness would only serve to fuel the present Subaru's rage.

Subaru: "Bastard, how the hell can you be so calm! We lost so soundly, to that lot! How can you not be angry!?"

Julius: "—Of course I'm also boiling with rage!"

Julius sharply swatted aside the arm that Subaru had stretch forward. Subaru fell silent as he saw Julius's gaze waver while he roared.

Julius: "...Apologies for my unbecoming anger. It seems that I'm yet to be mature enough to control myself."

Julius reached out a hand to Subaru, who had lost his balance after his arm had been forcefully blocked. Although he'd clearly understood Julius's feelings, Subaru had deliberately attacked his attitude, and he felt ashamed as he heard Julius's apology.

Subaru: "Crusch-san, she..."

Julius: "...was attacked by Lust, right? A foreign agent has contaminated her body and is currently wreaking havoc. Ferris's reaction is almost appallingly overwhelming."

As Julius spoke, Subaru recalled a clear image of Crusch's incredible pain in the last moments of his memory.

That ultimate pain, where her body had been infiltrated by a monster, which siphoned away her own flesh, blood, bones and even soul. That pain was one which no one should ever bear.

But she had, and Subaru immediately placed this as the reason for Ferris's attitude earlier.

Before and after Subaru's awakening, Ferris seemed to blame Wilhelm. Presumably, he held the old swordsman accountable for being unable to protect their master on the battlefield.

In fact, he was only searching for someone to carry the blame. Both the accusing Ferris and the accused Wilhelm understood this.

So Wilhelm remained silent after Ferris had attacked him, which Ferris secretly cried over his own weakness.

The two men who had just left the room were with their suffering master now.

Thinking about that trio, the sense of failure in Subaru's heart only grew stronger and stronger. Julius interrupted Subaru's melancholy.

Julius: "—Subaru, there's something that I have to confirm."

Subaru: "What is it?"

Julius: "Although it's rather difficult for me to point this out... it seems that you haven't noticed yet."

Subaru felt a wave of doubt at Julius's careful euphemism. His eyes narrowed slightly as Julius raised a hand to his leg.

Unsure of what Julius was doing, he looked down carefully... to where Julius's hand traced a line from Subaru's thigh to his right foot.

Subaru also involuntarily followed with his eyes.

Subaru had inadvertently only recalled his memories of Crusch at the top floor of the City Hall, and had completely forgotten about his own injuries.

What had happened before he'd lost consciousness?

He'd unconsciously understood and accepted the presence of Return by Death — but that feeling of death hadn't come. He should have been relieved, but...

Subaru: "What? This is—!?"

His breath suddenly catching in his frozen throat, Subaru couldn't help but doubt his own eyes. His eyes were telling him that his right foot was still attached, but...

Where his foot had been detached was a seam of black, ugly, charred looking skin. And that darkened skin had spread throughout his right foot.

Julius: "It wasn't Ferris who fixed it, nor was it any type of healing magic. Your foot... the one which had been torn apart... fixed itself. And it doesn't even look as if it hurts."

Subaru: "——"

It was as Julius had said.

His ugly right foot felt neither pain nor a sense violation. His first instinct was to wonder if it only maintained the illusion of being connected, but he could freely bend his knees and move his toes.

Every wound on his foot had turned black, and the blackness ran visible in his blood vessels, stretching across the upper and lower parts of his right foot.

Julius: "Subaru, I'll have to confirm it with you again."

Subaru: "....."

After seeing the dramatic changes in one's own feet, Subaru could not even speak. For Julius's question, Subaru can only slowly lift his head, and then ...

Julius: "Is it really... completely fine?"

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The most terrifying thing about the reattachment of his right foot was... there was no obstacle preventing him from standing and walking as he pleased.

Garfiel: "Th' nee-san named Ferris said that Captain's foot was neither injured nor sick, so even 'f my amazin' self tried to use healin' megic, nothin' would happen. It wasn't supposed to be somethin' curable."

Rolling up the leg of his pants, Subaru would see that his leg was laced with black blood vessels. The embroidered patterns appeared to be flexible to the touch. If he ignored the color, he could call the skin normal, but...

Julius: "Did you reattach it yourself? ... That's the only thing that would assure me right now."

Needless to say, however, Subaru possessed no regenerative powers. This was the second time he'd lost that foot, and his own memory told him that the first time it had happened, his foot had shown no signs of repairing itself.

Of course, the proper line of thought to follow was to figure out what had caused this, but Subaru could think of only one thing.

Subaru: "Is it because that bitch Capella dripped blood onto my leg...?"

He'd descended into a realm of confusion after his foot had been taken off.

For that reason, his memories were blurred, and he couldn't conclude for certain that this was indeed the case. However, Subaru had no doubt that he'd seen Capella her cut into her own wrist and scatter drops of blood about.

At that time, she had also mentioned something incredibly concerning. Yes, it was...

Subaru: "Crusch-san... she suffered the same thing that I did."

Julius: “That being... having blood dripped into her wounds? It’s an unpleasant act. Maybe it has some significance as a ritual... leaving behind an immediate impact? Or perhaps it’s a curse, which doesn’t operate under the laws of regular magic.”

Subaru: “Curse... yes, curse sounds right. The curse of blood... no, it was something different... something like... dragon’s blood? Right, it’s the blood of the dragon. That’s what she said!”

As Subaru gazed at a puzzled Julius, he sifted through his foggy memories, and couldn’t help but clap his hands together at his success.

That bastard Capella had indeed mentioned, while torturing Subaru with her blood, that her own blood was mixed with dragon’s blood.

That hadn’t seemed to be a jest, a bluff, or a lie. And it provided several clues.

Julius: “Blood of the Dragon... does that mean that she received it from the royal family?”

Subaru: “I don’t know of the details, but is there something that convenient really on hand?”

Julius: “It was one of the treasures granted by the contract with the dragon Volcanica, famous for being potent enough to even turn barren soils fertile again.”

Subaru: “The almighty dragon’s blood... I don’t know how relevant it is, or what it implies.”

Considering that Capella had called herself a Lugunica, this was an object of concern, especially, as Wilhelm had said, due to Emerada Lugunica being a real historical figure.

She couldn’t really be of royalty, could she? But the dragon’s blood being mixed with her blood stirred questions.

Julius: “Anyway, it’s good news to know that it might be blood-related, Ferris might be able to help her with that information.”

Subaru: “Ah, that’s right. Let’s hurry...”

Garfiel: "Wait, Captain. Don't go with him."

Finally, there was information that may lead to a turnaround.

Subaru wanted to rush to share that information, but Garfiel, arms crossed as he leaned on the wall, had poured a metaphorical bucket of ice cold water over his head. In response to Subaru's accusatory glare, Garfiel dropped his gaze.

Garfiel: "Captain hasn't seen it yet, 'n the fewer people see, th'better."

Subaru: "...what does that mean?"

Garfiel: "It means what ya think it means. That pretty nee-san won't like it f ya see her."

Garfiel turned away from Subaru's probing gaze.

Growing increasingly uneasy, Subaru instead turned to Julius, who, like Garfiel, only shook his head.

Julius: "In fact, I'm afraid that Crusch-sama is very much hoping to avoid the gaze of others right now. Because she's a noble person, so she doesn't want anyone to see her in such a weakened state."

Subaru: "Is it... really just because she's weak right now?"

Julius: "——"

Julius says nothing.

He merely quietly turned his gaze from Subaru. And just that one small action answered everything.

Subaru: "...it's all my fault."

Julius: "Subaru, that's—"

Subaru: "It's all my fault! I... obviously, I should have known better than anyone else how underhanded they can be! I should have foreseen at least some of this!"

What was happening to Crusch? The more he tried to imagine, the more horrified he became.

And the intense self-reproach those thoughts brought to Subaru... those were a product of his anger at his own incompetence, as well as of their own anger, as well as courage and regret to go to challenge.

The Witch Cultists... Subaru knew of their awful natures, right down to his bone marrow.

And it wasn't just Petelgeuse. Before entering the City Hall, Subaru met Sirius and Regulus firsthand, in rapid succession. After those encounters, how could he have underestimated Capella?

Was it his arrogance in deciding to fight back even at a disadvantage? This had all happened because of his judgment.

Subaru: "A-All mine..."

???: "—That's enough. Whether you're cryin' or complainin' it's really becomin' quite bothersome, so would ya mind stoppin'?"

Subaru, bearing all the blame, was about to sink deeply into the sea of self-loathing.

At this moment, however, it was not a gentle voice who guided him from those dark thoughts, but a cold, apathetic one which was accompanied by a frigid gaze.

Subaru: "——"

His turned to the the entrance of the large room.

Standing there with her hands clasped together, under the gaze of everyone in the room, was a purple-haired businesswoman with a gentle face.

However, the lethal glare she fixed on Subaru was completely out of character for those gentle features.

Subaru: "Anastasia..."

Anastasia: "I don't misunderstand disappointment after a defeat on the battlefield, but if all ya do is mope and complain, you'll disturb those around you like a fool. Even if you do all that, the losses you've taken won't return to ya."

Anastasia' reprimands were directed toward Subaru, who had been crushed by defeat.

For a second, Subaru was too stunned to understand. As he began to react, he found his mind swimming with rage, but,

Julius: "Anastasia-sama, please retract your statement. Subaru was the one who had the most direct contact with the sinners of the Witch Cult. Even if he's moping or sighing..."

Anastasia: "How unlike ya, Julius. You can usually focus on the issue at hand, but right now you're being so precocious... if you came here just to play with your friends, you might find that Joshua suits you a lil' better."

Julius: "....."

Julius, who had attempted to defend Subaru, withered under that frosty sight. Subaru's white-hot rage cooled somewhat, but he still felt incredibly confused about Anastasia's attitude.

Then, looking at the antagonized Subaru, Anastasia fiddled with the fox-fur scarf around her neck and spoke to the other two occupants of the room.

Anastasia: "...Hey, Julius, things with Crusch-san seem kinda busy right now, don't they? Why don't you see if you can go and help? And, blond child over there, would you mind accompanying him?"

Urging Julius and Garfiel from the room, Anastasia fixed her eyes on Subaru.

If two of the four people in the room left, a confrontation between only Subaru and Anastasia would happen.

Anastasia: "Don't worry, I won't do anythin' untoward."

Anastasia promised so with a decidedly uncute smile.

Julius bowed and left, and Garfiel trailed behind him, a cautious light in his eyes. Until the very end, he kept his concerned gaze trained on Subaru, before giving him a nod and leaving.

Anastasia: "Garfiel-kun seems to be quite the dutiful boy. Until the very end, his worried gaze was fixed on Natsuki-kun. He seems like he takes good care of people."

Subaru: "...I'm sure you didn't get me alone just to gossip."

Anastasia began quietly chattering about Garfiel as he left. This had happened in a previous interaction, where she'd been intending to catch Subaru off of his guard.

Subaru turned to see Anastasia stroking her hair as she surveyed the half-destroyed room, before lifting a chair and seating herself.

Anastasia: "My, having a leisurely chat like this with Natsuki-kun really takes me back... all the way to the eve of the battle with the White Whale."

Subaru: "Back then, we were scheming a plan for success. This time, nothing like that is in sight... Even though we recaptured the City Hall, the situation hasn't improved at all..."

Anastasia: "Yes, nothing has changed. Everything's gotten worse, and we have no optimal course of action to follow..."

Subaru realized that her carefree voice had, for a second, honed itself into the razor sharp blade of a knife.

He couldn't help but straighten his back, while Anastasia glanced at his foot.

Anastasia: "Is there no problem with your feet? Last I heard, it had been shredded."

Subaru: "Fortunately, I can run and jump just fine, although this looks kind of gross."

Anastasia: "Well, being able to run and jump right now is what matters most. After that, there'll be a lot to do, but until then..."

Anastasia let the conversation drift lightly toward Subaru's injury, before inhaling sharply.

Subaru realized that she was finally arriving at the point and frowned. She pointed her hand at the ceiling— no, through it.

Anastasia: "Did ya ever end up hearin' the third broadcast?"

Subaru: "No, I didn't, what did they say? ... it was probably some kind of request right?"

Anastasia: "Natsuki-kun missed two of the three broadcasts, how careless."

Anastasia giggled softly, holding a hand to her mouth, and Subaru put on an unhappy pout. Even so, she kept her hand over her mouth, and narrowed her eyes.

Anastasia: "The demand that was given— it seems that only Natsuki-kun and I could understand it."

Subaru: "Only me... and Anastasia-san?"

What exactly did that mean? Subaru's mind swam with questions.

He'd never felt that they particularly held anything in common. After all, this was their first time engaging in such an interaction.

With such a shallow relationship, what exactly did they...

???: "— My my, Ana, there are times when your manner of speech is demoralizing. Sometimes it ends up only serving to annoy others, you know. Isn't that exactly the case here?"

Subaru: “——!?”

The voice of a third person suddenly echoed in Subaru’s ears.

This voice belong to neither Subaru nor Anastasia. Instead, it felt lighter and more neutral.

Subaru toured the room with confused eyes, but there was not a single unknown figure in their surroundings. Julius and Garfiel had left, and showed no signs of reapproaching.

Where in the world had that voice come from?

Anastasia: “Ya say that, but don’t ya do the same thing I do? Look at poor Natsuki-kun. He’s in such a chaotic state of confusion right now.”

???: “Oh, that won’t do at all.”

Subaru: “That, who is...!?”

Anastasia spoke to the third voice as if all were natural.

Rather than relieving Subaru’s frenzy, he verged on hyperventilating as he demanded “what’s going on?”

???: “You do seem quite frightened, my apologies.”

Subaru: “——”

His eyes fell upon it.

Suddenly, the owner of the other voice intruded loudly into this scene.

No, that third voice hadn’t intruded. It had been in this room since the very beginning. In fact, it had entered the room with Anastasia.

Echidna: "I'm Echidna. Well, I say that, but what I really am is an artificial spirit."

Subaru: "Echi—!?"

"It" smiled deftly at Subaru, who was busy being swept away by shock.

Lips curling up on both sides, eyes narrowing slightly. That should... probably, be something like the imitation of a smile.

—Wrapped around Anastasia's neck, her scarf of what appeared to be faux fox fur beamed. The witch whose name he couldn't forget had just revealed herself to be a spirit.

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Chapter 38 - The Witch Cult's Proposals



As Subaru gazed at that thing—eyes wide in shock, he momentarily forgot how to breathe.

Echidna: “Although I had been anticipating this response, it’s still a little rather overwhelming. Although I look like this, I am, by gender, a woman... well, no I’m a spirit, so it’s difficult to determine whether or not I have a gender. Maybe I should just say that I identify as female?”

Snow white hair and sharp black eyes.

A neutral voice, and twisting, crafty words. Those characteristics brought to mind that black and white witch, whose personality was consistent with this fox's.

Subaru: "What a... bad joke. You're saying that you're Echidna?"

His first encounter with the Witch of Greed had been before a Trial in Sanctuary's tomb, when she'd lured him to one of her tea parties.

She'd enticed her guest with sweet words in an attempt to turn him into a puppet, dancing on her strings. And, on top of that, she wanted to borrow him to seek all the answers that she herself could not witness. She could be said to be curiosity incarnate.

She was someone who Subaru had never imagined he would see again.

Subaru: "You... actually turned into a fox? Stop screwing around. And appearing right during this moment of crisis, what are you scheming this time?"

Anastasia: "Wait a moment, stop jumpin' to conclusions and listen!"

Subaru had recovered slightly from his initial shock, ready to bring retribution upon this white fox in front of him who was claiming to be Echidna. However, at Anastasia's reproach, he was cut off.

Subaru's hostility toward the white fox also turned to Anastasia, who paraded around nonchalantly with that scarf around her neck.

Subaru: "Don't screw with me! Don't bullshit me! You're ... what's with her? ...was she deceived her? After all, she shouldn't be out of the sanctuary."

Anastasia: "I don't really know what you're going on about, but it's been about a decade since I first met Echidna... and since then, we've barely ever been separated. Isn't that just a little mismatched with your story?"

Subaru: "A decade ago...?"

The thought of that witch having planned so long ago to wantonly flutter about in the world outside lit the fires of rage deep inside Subaru.

According to Echidna's own testimony, she hadn't originated from her dream castle. So, if from even before that point in time, she'd planned something like this...

Subaru: "You're always like this... do you get a kick out of watching people flail around in the dark while you laugh at their ignorance?"

Echidna: "... My, my, it seems that I'm being detested through and through. Although I'm sure that this is all troublesome for you, it seems to be some kind of inexplicable misunderstanding."

Anastasia: "Yep, it's just as Echidna's said."

In contrast to the Subaru's fierce anger, Anastasia and the white fox exchanged a calm, understanding glance.

The arctic fox who made Subaru frown shook her head in an unexpectedly human manner.

Echidna: "Although I have no clue whatsoever as to where your distrust of this other Echidna stems from, I would say that those issues don't relate to me."

Subaru: "What do you mean?"

Echidna: "It's simple indeed. I don't know anything about any Echidna outside of myself, since I was born knowing nothing except my name, Echidna and my race, artificial spirit. Those are my only clues to my origin."

Subaru: "—what?"

He'd been expecting some sort of explanation, but the arctic fox spoke silly words unsuited to what Subaru knew of Echidna. Or, rather, if she really was Echidna, than anything she said could very possibly be misleading words meant to trick Subaru.

Claiming to be both an artificial spirit and Echidna, although this spirit said that she had no previous recollection of Subaru, he couldn't just carelessly believe her.

Anastasia: "What is it? Natsuki-kun's expression is full of nothing but suspicion."

Subaru: "Of course, for me, who knows Echidna's true nature, this reaction is only natural. You too should... right, my bad. Echidna's saying she doesn't remember anything, right?"

Anastasia: "It seems that you have absolutely no intention of believing in it... ah, in this situation, where we're operating on a time limit, that really is a headache."

As opposed to the vigilant Subaru, Anastasia spoke in her usual casual tone.

Echidna was working with her— just that alone was enough for Subaru to become wary of Anastasia. And although he respected both Julius and Ricardo, his degree of trust in them may need to be adjusted.

Subaru couldn't allow himself to feel too much hope that the master and the subordinate did not hold the same opinion on this.

Subaru: "Why'd you tell me your name, if you don't have any memories? Aside from trying to gain my trust? Was it supposed to convince me that you aren't her?"

She'd given him her name and a little of her origin. Didn't that prove that she was the Echidna Of The Tea Party? Which meant that she was not the Echidna In The Coffin, who Roswaal was seeking. There was no doubt that she was the one Subaru had met. In that case, there were a mountain of questions he wanted to demand from her.

That said, he understood that this was not the time for those questions. However, facing the impatient Subaru, Anastasia sighed tiredly.

Anastasia: "It seems things only got so rowdy because Natsuki-kun missed the broadcast."

Subaru: "The broadcast from the Witch Cult? How is it related to this?"

Echidna: “—because one of their requests was Surrender Your Artificial Spirits. The white fox answered the question simply.

The content of that request left Subaru’s mind blank as he struggled to comprehend the ramifications.

The broadcast, the Witch Cult, the artificial spirits. That was to say—

Subaru: “Could it be that...”

Echidna: “Although it’s something uncomfortable to believe, they want our artificial spirits... that is, they want that girl who accompanies you. So isn’t it only natural that we should approach you for a chat?”

Subaru: “How did you know that Beatrice is an artificial spirit?”

Echidna: “I noticed the moment I saw her, is all I can say. I’m not quite sure how. But I think that she, too, would be able to recognize me on sight. Maybe it’s some kind of spirit detection?”

With a more cautious attitude, the white foxed answered Subaru’s questions one by one.

At the very least, when Beatrice had encountered Anastasia for the first time at the hotel, she hadn’t mentioned anything about the white fox scarf. However, it was very possible that Beatrice had noticed something, but, unsure of how accurate her sense had been, hadn’t voiced her concerns out loud.

Why did she have to carry all those burdens alone? Subaru turned to ask her, and immediately felt a sharp pain, as if someone had stabbed him in the heart.

Echidna: “That the child by your side couldn’t detect me properly can’t be helped. I have many defects as a spirit, and I can’t tie a decent contract with anyone. I can’t even use combat magic smoothly. Although, to compensate for this, I’m confident in my ability to hide my presence, and this confidence is presently undiminished.”

Subaru: “Can’t form a contract... then, you and Anastasia...”

Anastasia: "This child and I don't share the relationship of spirit and contractor. That relationship requires something completely different... That is to say, we're accomplices."

Echidna: "I want to witness this child's future, so that's why I'm following her around like this. Having been with her for a few years now, we've become something like conversation partners. From time to time, she even discusses her business matters with me."

The arctic fox spoke with a fleeting grin, and Anastasia lightly scratched at her neck. Their relationship seemed harmonious, and Subaru presumed that they shared a certain degree of trust.

Subaru: "Why... would you disclose your internal affairs unrelated to the battle at hand...?"

Echidna: "Isn't it natural that we'd disclose some of our own affairs if we want to gain your trust? Furthermore, with the lives of the entire city's population hanging in balance... at this critical juncture, it falls to us to take action. It wouldn't do to fall into internal strife due to the cloaking of a small, relatively insignificant detail."

Anastasia: "I also really wanted to stop her, but... this child doesn't heed advice from others at all after havin' made up her mind, so... I'd like for you to at least hear her out, for the time being."

Echidna was unusually frank and genuine, and Anastasia's supplemental words were convincing. Belatedly, Subaru realized the reason for Anastasia's earlier coldness; she'd taken on that demeanor to create an environment where she could catch Subaru alone.

Along with that, in order to successfully persuade Subaru, she'd deliberately ushered Julius and Garfiel from the room.

Anastasia: "Of course, I won't comply with the Witch Cult's requests, but I will require Natsuki-kun to stand by my side in regard to the artificial spirit. Otherwise, even if we outwardly reject their proposals, not everyone will accept our stance so easily."

Subaru: "I have no intention whatsoever to listen to anything that bunch has to say, so I strongly agree... but that doesn't mean that all my doubts about that fox Echidna have been put to ease."

Anastasia: “You’re so particular about names. Does the Echidna you know really have such a poor character, Natsuki-kun? If so, it’s rather troublesome to see you treat my Echidna in such a way.”

Subaru: “I’ll apologize if it’s someone else entirely, but her attitude and speech patterns are almost identical... and...”

Anastasia: “And?”

Subaru searched for the words to explain to the confused Anastasia.

The nature of the existence of artificial spirits was unclear to Subaru, but he did know that Beatrice and Puck were both made by the witch Echidna.

Of course, if the white fox were truly an artificial spirit, then she must also have come from Echidna’s hands.

In search for an eternal life, Echidna had designed an artificial replica of herself.

Many of her words were of suspect trustworthiness. But if everything she’d said had been true, then the conclusion that Echidna had Become An Artificial Spirit was reasonable.

Casting away her flesh, freed from the notion of lifespan as a spirit— if she could extend her existence through this manner... this would certainly fit with that Witch of Greed who longed for omniscience.

So... the white fox was The Artificial Spirit Named Echidna, without doubt. However, her claim that she had no memories— was that true or false?

Anastasia said they have been together for more than a decade. However, that alone was no reason to believe her. It would come as no surprise if she’d been plotting something for a decade.

If someone were to say that she’d been planning all that for this exact moment... Subaru wouldn’t have a hard time believing them.

Anastasia: “Hey, hey, he seems to be starin’ rather fiercely.”

Echidna: "Such intense hatred makes me really curious about this other Echidna, but I suppose we should set that topic aside for now. Whether or not he believes us isn't relevant. By the way, Ana, shouldn't you tell him what's going on already?"

The arctic fox spoke with a defeated tone, accepting Subaru's suspicious grudge. And Anastasia, at her urging, shrugged and clapped her hands together, picking the conversation back up.

Anastasia: "Well, now that your doubts have been sorted out, the most pressin' matter is the Witch Cult. They made three other requests."

Subaru: "Three other... so, a total of four?"

Anastasia: "Yes, which is the total number of the remaining archbishops. Since most of their requests were rather mockin' in content... try not to be offended."

Mocking demands... once again, they had gone too far.

The Witch Cult had somehow defied Subaru's notion that his impression of them couldn't grow any worse.

Anastasia pet the tail of the arctic fox with her hands. Then, licking her lips, she said...

Anastasia: "The first requirement is The Surrender Of Our Artificial Spirits, from Gluttony."

Subaru: "Gluttony..."

Anastasia: "Although I have much to say on that, I'll save my commentary for later. Next is Wrath. — She wants the Book of Wisdom that was brought to this city."

Subaru: "——hk!?"

At yet another unexpected shock, Subaru involuntarily widened his eyes. And seeing that, Anastasia narrowed her lightly colored eyes.

Anastasia: "Seeing that reaction, I'd say that Natsuki-kun knows something about this?"

Subaru: "....."

Anastasia: "No worries, that's excellent. It's been troublin' me quite a bit. Echidna doesn't know anythin' and neither does Julius."

Subaru: "... that fox really said that she doesn't know anything? Even though it's the Book of Wisdom, huh."

Anastasia showed a slight smile. After all, before this, she'd been puzzling over something she had no clue how to find. But now, she'd found a glimmer of hope. Of course, that smile carried nary a hint of cuteness either.

Echidna: "No, I'm afraid I don't know anything... then, if you'll allow me to speculate... the Echidna you know is connected to this Book of Wisdom, correct?"

Subaru: "Yes, exactly right."

Echidna: "In that case, I'd have to ask even if I didn't want to know. What kind of person was your Echidna? Did she have some kind of connection to the Witch Cult?"

Although Subaru believed that she wasn't feigning ignorance, he felt that Anastasia and her white fox were speaking as though she were someone who shared an unusual relationship with one of their clients.

Of course, given their way of thinking, this was inevitable.

If you he were to believe what the arctic fox said, the name Echidna referred to her existence alone. Only Subaru knew that the artificial spirit's creator, Echidna. And, more importantly, this proved that only the name of the Witch of Envy had been recorded into history.

Subaru: “—Echidna... is the name of a witch from a long time ago. In addition to the Witch of Envy, other wicked witches existed, and she was one of those. Although she’s long dead, her soul remained anchored here. Having met her before, I’m now very wary of her.”

Anastasia: “Hey, Natsuki-kun, do ya have a fever? You’re speakin’ some rather outrageous words here.”

Subaru: “There’s nothing wrong with my head. Those witches are incomprehensible, twisted existences. They can even create artificial spirits, so just accept this much.”

Echidna: “In that case... then this Echidna could be said to be my parent, huh.”

Subaru’s answer was sprinkled with implications, and the white fox drew meaning from words that surely sounded reckless. Although he wasn’t particularly trying to hide anything, Subaru felt a twinge of regret at not being upfront with her.

Echidna: “At an unexpected time, discovering the secret behind my birth is one of the many joys of life. If you have a chance, be sure to tell me in more detail.”

Subaru: “... although you’re a spirit yourself, you’re so obviously clueless about the existence of artificial spirits. Our Beatrice seems to know much more than... no, come to think of it, she’s never mentioned anything about you to me. Where did you come from, and what were you meant to do?”

Echidna: “Regretfully, all that remains unknown to me, whether it be the circumstances of my birth or the purpose I was made to fulfill. —Yes, that’s all a mystery to me. Right now, I’m merely following the path of this rather interesting child.”

At Subaru’s accusation, the arctic fox cast a meaningful sideways glance to Anastasia, who slowly moved her gaze to Subaru from the sidelines.

Anastasia: “I’m also quite curious about the connection between Echidna and the witch. And she... cannot be unrelated to this witch. So, let’s return to the topic of the Book of Wisdom...”

Subaru: "The Book of Wisdom is the origin of the Witch Cult's gospel... that is, it's the full version. The Book of Wisdom uses the same principles of the Dragon Stone."

Anastasia: "The same as the Dragon Stone... then, their credibility would be incredibly high. Is it possible that the witch made the book herself?"

Subaru: "That's what she implied, but the two existing copies should have been burned. If more copies were ever made, then I don't know of them."

Echidna had given copies of her Book of Wisdom to Beatrice and Roswaal. And both of their copies had, for certain, been destroyed a year ago.

Beatrice's Book of Wisdom had crumbled to ash along with the Forbidden Archive. And Ram had burned Roswaal's Book of Wisdom, rejecting the future recorded within it.

Anastasia: "But that's just what you've heard from the witch Echidna. Would her words really reflect the truth of the situation?"

Subaru: "There is that..."

Although unhappy that Anastasia had simply denied his assertion, Subaru himself also understood that the credibility of that statement wasn't high. However, he didn't think that Echidna had lied about that.

Presumably, only Subaru, who had spoken to the witch face to face, would have such a feeling.

Subaru: "——"

Anastasia: "Not trusting the person, but trusting her words. What a troublesome person for Natsukikun."

Subaru: "I myself think so, too... I obviously didn't intend to trust her, but I trusted her words, how contradictory."

Echidna's every action had been a cleverly scripted, meant to coax Subaru into becoming her puppet.

However, that didn't mean that everything had been a lie. Did Subaru believe that because he wanted to? Or was he still under the sway of that witch?

Anastasia: "For the moment, regardless of your personal feelings, we can come up with three possibilities about this Book of Wisdom. The first is that the witch is lying, and other copies were made."

Subaru: "And the second is that the Witch Cult doesn't know that the Book of Wisdom no longer exists, and is just messing with us, but the third one is?"

Anastasia: "Unless she lied, then there's only one way the Book of Wisdom could still exist. That is, one of the copies wasn't destroyed completely, and there are remains left."

Subaru: "—Wha..."

That the Book of Wisdom may have left remains was something that Subaru hadn't considered at all.

Anastasia shook a finger at the dumbfounded Subaru.

Anastasia: "Although it's not something clear-cut, the book was made by a witch, wasn't it? Couldn't we say that it would probably be difficult to destroy, and maybe even capable of regenerating itself?"

Subaru: "Indeed, I really can't say that that's impossible... but the real question is, who would have found and kept a restored one?"

Anastasia: "If you didn't see with your own eyes that the book was burnt, and it was last seen somewhere easily accessible... maybe I'm overthinking, and the second hypothesis is far more likely, but, in either case, we won't accept their proposal."

Anastasia faced Subaru with a dainty hand placed over her mouth, citing various possibilities.

Who could have access to the remains of a Book of Wisdom...? The one in the archive was certainly completely gone, along with the entire Forbidden Archive itself.

But what about Roswaal's book? Although he'd heard that Ram had burned it with magic... but, in this case, it should have turned to ash, and been buried under Emilia's snowstorm.

If any remains were left, there was certainly someone who could have picked it up, but...

Subaru: "If anyone had brought it here, it would be someone from my faction, and they would all have told me. Therefore, I'm confident that the Book of Wisdom isn't in city."

Anastasia: "In that case, it doesn't matter. I don't need to devote so much concern to a book I know nothing about."

Confident— although he'd said so, his feelings were perhaps closer to wanting to believe.

However, Anastasia did not dwell on this point, nor did she intend to dig deeper into the details of the Book of Wisdom. Rather,

Anastasia: "Then, the next demands are from Greed and Lust. Plain and simple, there's absolutely nothing worth discussing about their words.

Subaru: "Those two... no. Gluttony and Wrath are no different. So, what's going on? What did they say?"

Capella of Lust was undoubtedly the worst of the bunch.

And before he'd even met Capella, Regulus had injured his right foot and kidnapped Emilia, so Subaru bore a number of negative emotions for him. He was unpredictable, which worried Subaru.

Anastasia: "Here's to hopin' you won't get too angry about it."

Subaru: "I'll do my best, but we'll see."

Subaru's response to Anastasia's uneasy opening remark was immediate. With an expression of 'if you put it that way', Anastasia sighed.

Anastasia: "Lust's proposal isn't the same as the others, and it seems to simply be a mockery... Send Twenty People Who Love Each Other To The Central Waterway. —They Absolutely Won't Be Harmed. Somethin' like that."

Subaru: "That lying bitch! The hell does she mean, they won't be harmed!? Did she forget that she's someone who turns people into flies and dragons for fun!?"

As always, Subaru grew furious when confronted with Capella's evil deeds.

Twenty people who loved each other— just thinking about what that monster sung of such ugly love would do to them was terrifying.

Anastasia: "From I could tell, that archbishop doesn't consider changing someone's form to be 'harm'. 'I won't hurt anyone~' is more along the lines of her exact words... I almost felt like I could see her speak. Well, next would be Greed's demand..."

Subaru: "....."

Subaru choose to remain silent, angrily waiting for Anastasia's next sentence.

However, seeing that attitude, Anastasia seemed to find it difficult to continue, hesitating for an almost exaggeratedly long time.

Then,

Echidna: "The request of the man calling himself Greed was, I want To Hold A Wedding With My Silver-haired Bride. So, In Anything Related To The Preparation Of The Wedding, Don't You Dare Hinder Me!"

Anastasia: "Echidna..."

Echidna: “Ana seemed to have a hard time saying it, so I do hope it was alright for me to move things along.”

In the stead of the hesitant Anastasia, the white fox guarding her neck spoke.

However, the understanding between the two was currently completely irrelevant to Subaru.

—Hold a wedding with a silver haired bride.

And who would be the bride of Regulus of Greed? The question didn’t need any consideration at all.

Subaru: “—STOP FUCKING AROUND!! BASTARD!!”

Therefore, Subaru’s volcanic eruption of anger was entirely reasonable. Anastasia couldn’t help but frown, and the white fox’s hair stood up on end. That was how direct and pure Subaru’s rage was.

In his mind, the image of a white-haired man took form.

The ignorant, supernaturally powerful man, had captured Emilia, and insisted that her only value lay in her face.

But that powerful man was nothing more than sick in the the head. What nonsense was he spouting this time?

Subaru: “Beatrice! And The Book of Wisdom! And Emilia! They say they want them? Hah! The Witch Cult isn’t getting their hands on a single one of them! I’ll show them for messing around with that bullshit proposal!”

Anastasia: “...I anticipated that reaction, but hearing ya say it so crisply like that really is reassurin’.”

Seeing Subaru’s passionate appearance, Anastasia smiled along as well.

Not due to a happy mood, but because that same passion was rising in her as well,

Anastasia: “Our artificial spirits... well, I have no intention of turning Echidna over to them. In addition, I refuse to allow the Witch Cult to intimidate me. I brought Crusch-san and Emilia into this city, and the Witch Cult dared to have them suffer so... I won't be able to face either of them again if I don't get us out of this!”

Echidna: “Oh, Ana, you're so militant.”

Anastasia: “That's precisely because I know how to level the playing field so we can claim victory. We absolutely can't escape right now. Because we're sure to crush that Witch Cult and force them to pay reparations.”

Calculating misfortunes, reputation, victories and losses.

Her clever words glossed it over slightly, but Anastasia's spirit showed not the slightest intent of retreating from the battle.

Unlike Julius, Garfiel, Wilhelm, or even Ferris, she could be accused of only being able to speak with recklessness due to her lack of personal experience with the horrors of that sinful cult.

However, Subaru did no such thing.

In this case, there was absolutely no need to say anything that would needlessly damage their morale. And even more importantly, her presence, as vengeful as it seemed, was undoubtedly trustworthy.

Anastasia: “Everyone has to agree with that sentiment, at least slightly. Having said that, they're still a few steps ahead, but who could accept this end! We'll look for excuses for failure when in some other world!”

Subaru: “——”

Anastasia: “As long as we're still alive, there's still a chance. And we absolutely cannot give up our lives! That would be far too tragic.”

A gentle smile rose on Anastacia's face as she declared her will of steel.

The pressure emanating from her petite form could have anyone forget that she was no warrior, who was experienced with exposure to the presence of the battlefield... no, that was wrong. She was, in fact, a warrior of hundreds upon thousands of battles.

Having chosen wits as her battlefield, she was a battle-hardened warrior.

Anastasia: "Whether it's Crusch-san, or the people who have lost their human form, if we can get our hands on Lust, she should be able to undo what she did. And Natsuki-kun, your beloved princess was stolen away. This isn't a pill you can swallow, right?"

Subaru: "Like you need to ask! Emilia is my bride! I'll get rid of that bastard Gluttony, and take Rem's memory back! I'll find that long-winded Sirius and knock her teeth out! And I'll drag Capella here and force her to apologize and change everyone back before beating her senseless!"

Echidna: "My, Ana and Natsuki-san are both treating the impossible like it's easy. But, truly, that's the thing I find most encouraging about you."

Subaru echoed Anastasia's forceful declaration, and, seeing their spirits, the arctic fox nodded with satisfaction.

The first and second battles had ended in failure.

But the next battle was ahead of them. No one would die, and they would let no one die. In the end, they would survive, victorious. That would be their triumph.

Anastasia: "Ricardo is standing guard, and Joshua is looking for other lost children. He should be back shortly. And then, again, we'll hold a full-fledged strategy meeting."

Subaru: "We also need to reconfirm the situation throughout the shelters and near the other towers."

Anastasia: "That won't slip my mind. Hey, it looks like my mind is finally restarting."

Since they had decided to do what they needed to, their hearts would be steeled with determination. That was the natural way.

While nodding at Anastasia's words, Subaru turned his gaze to the outside of the City Hall. From his vantage point, all he could see were the lofty water towers.

There was no way to distinguish between east, west, north and south.

So, each one could hold Emilia, Rem's memory, a sworn enemy, or a loathsome monster.

-In this city, the battle to save those precious loved ones, continues.

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Chapter 39 - Knightliness and the Tardy Man



After reaffirming their determination, Subaru and Anastasia made their way downstairs, toward the reception hall.

They had been conversing on the the third out of five floors, which seemed to normally function as a conference room.

Anastasia: "Since the fifth floor was completely destroyed by the dragon, the fourth floor is technically the top floor now. All of [Lust]'s victims are restin' there."

Subaru: "... what happened to the magic radio when the fifth floor burned down?"

Anastasia: "No worries, it's been dismantled and put in safekeeping. The magical instrument itself is just in the shape of a large metal box, so it's easy to move. It seems that the sound is gathered into the box itself and then amplified through the city."

An antenna... or perhaps a loudspeaker?

Metal boxes or loudspeaker, whatever the case, the magic device had been recovered safely, along with the hostages. Those were perhaps the only pieces of good news Subaru had heard upon waking.

The magic radio would almost certainly prove useful later, and the knowledge that the hostages were safe gave an immense boost to morale.

Subaru: "Did you say that Capella's victims are gathered on the fourth floor?"

Anastasia: "Even though they're all flies or a dragon, their minds are still human, so they understand what we're sayin' and follow directions... although I can't really say if that's actually a good thing."

Subaru: "....."

Subaru also couldn't decide whether or not he should be glad that the transformed people had retained their human consciousness.

To be aware of being an entirely different creature, a worm, no less, must have come with a saddening, disorienting sense of loss.

However, even losing their flesh, they could still survive in another state. Was this also called a loss of self? This answer, presumably, could only be known by those who had experienced it.

Anastasia: "They can also move normally. Thankfully, there haven't been any suicide attempts yet. Things happened too abruptly, and most people haven't really had a chance to react yet... In short, if we can fix everything before the dust settles, things should turn out just fine."

Subaru: "Suicide...?"

Anastasia: "Don't ya think that it's a concern?"

Subaru: "——"

That was a question Subaru couldn't afford to answer rashly.

Compared to Subaru, Anastasia seems to be taking the twisted situation fairly well.

Anastasia: "As long as there's life, there's hope, but without a will to live, that hope diminishes. Just havin' a breathin' body isn't enough. It's the will to live that we can't afford to lose."

Although he couldn't see Anastasia's face, he heard the conviction in her voice as she strode forward.

Subaru wholeheartedly agreed with her perseverance in regard to life and death. Living was necessary.

And as long as there was life, there was a chance to resist. To that end...

Julius: "Anastasia-sama."

As Subaru and Anastasia made their way downstairs, the first to notice their reappearance was Julius, who called the name of his master.

Originally, Subaru had barely given the first floor's reception hall a passing glance. Even so, upon sight, the traces of a valiant struggle were obvious.

Overtured tables and chairs, walls scored with gouges and scorched with magic, omnipresent splatters of blood that had been hurriedly wiped away.

Although Julius had been so regretful of Gluttony's escape, he had evidently not wavered for a second during their battle.

Julius: "How was your discussion with Subaru?"

Anastasia: "It was lil' bit lengthy, but it came ta a smooth conclusion. Just like us, Natsuki-kun is very determined."

Anastasia nodded in response to Julius's inquiries. After a brief moment of lightheartedness, she cast her gaze in another direction.

Across from the stairs from which Subaru had descended, Ricardo's burly form appeared in front of the lobby's entrance. He recalled that Anastasia had mentioned that Ricardo was outside, looking for survivors.

Anastasia: "Ricardo, welcome back. How's the situation?"

Ricardo: "Miss, you look really spirited... it's generally poor, and is still worsening with time. Those bastards are experienced at creating trouble."

Ricardo frowned with an annoyed sigh at the results of his inspection.

While rubbing his beast head, he gestured a series of instructions to various members of the [Iron Fang]. A few of the left to stand guard, while others went to rest further down the hall.

Subaru: "The witch teaches those guys what's the trouble? No, I do not think it's any more troublesome than that ... is that anything else?"

Garfiel: "Th' broadcast, Captain. That scummy cult gave a discouragin' broadcast."

Garfiel, coming down of the stairs, answered Subaru's puzzled question.

As he crunched down with his fangs in frustration, Subaru prompted someone to elaborate.

Subaru: "The broadcast... of their requests? Did they say anything else?"

Julius: “It was nothing too exaggerated, they spread the news that they’d crushed the force trying to retake the City Hall. But the way that Archbishop of [Lust] phrased it was poisonous indeed.”

Ricardo: “Thanks to her, the people in the many shelters I visited had almost no fighting spirit left to regain their city with. It’s difficult to estimate how much they can recover.”

Julius closed his eyes, and Ricardo was wrinkled his nose.

After hearing their answer, Subaru immediately understood what the Witch Cult had wanted.

Earlier, before their successful takeover of the City Hall, Capella had made the broadcast with a list of demands.

The ordinary citizens, who had no capacity for combat, were completely discouraged by what they had thought to be a loss. And those who could fight would understand the harsher implications.

They would know that any attempt to retake the City Hall would have meant a full scale invasion, which made that supposed failure all the more disheartening.

In other words, Capella’s broadcast was an attempt to defang any mounting resistance in the other shelters.

Ricardo: “Thanks to the records in the city hall, I found all the shelters in the city, and visited the nearby ones one by one, but...”

Ricardo spread his hands, confirming Subaru’s fears.

The problem resided in the hearts of the people. Rather than being a failure to motivate them on Ricardo’s part, the blame could only be placed on the Witch Cult, which was rancorous to the point of being impressive.

Anastasia: “Without determination, we won’t have courage. The next fight will be dangerous indeed...”

In contrast to Subaru’s fury, Anastasia was quietly contemplative.

Hearing her soft voice, Subaru raised his head. Anastasia turned to him with an “Isn’t that right?”.

Anastasia: “‘Even if we fight, we have no chance of winning.’ —Puttin’ this thought into everyone’s mind encourages them ta give up without a fight. What do ya think’ll happen?”

Subaru: “They’ll give up in anguished despair... is that the answer you want from me?”

Anastasia: “If they just wanna hug their knees and cry, that’d be almost childishly endearin’, don’t ya think? But that won’t be the case. They won’t have the option of fightin’, but their will ta live won’t vanish. So, what’s left?”

Subaru: “... So you’re saying that...”

Fundamentally, Subaru was pretty sure he understood what she was getting at.

However, the notion that the Witch Cult had deliberately attempted to create this situation brought with it an unspeakable amount of disgust.

As if to encourage the tremor growing within Subaru, Anastasia clapped her hands together. And said...

Anastasia: “The answer to their salvation has already been given, in the form of a request, no less. The most reasonable course of action in such a desperate situation is, of course, ta follow the request. So, the [Book of Wisdom] and the contractors of the [artificial spirits] won’t be safe, will they? And even the [couples who love each other] might become sacrifices.”

Subaru: “But not everyone would go to those extremes, right!?”

Anastasia: “Certainly not. There are some who would refuse to trade their survival for the lives of others, and would instead seek a way to flee the city. No matter what, there’ll be plenty of panic, and we won’t be able to get anything done in the confusion.”

Once the contagion of panic spread, with a single misstep, the already precarious situation would entirely collapse. It hurt to imagine the city in that state, where the Witch Cult had taken full control through fear. As if they were the puppet-masters, pulling strings as they willed.

Subaru: "So... could we somehow visit everyone and motivate them?"

Anastasia: "That's not very realistic, is it?"

Subaru: "Then this situation becomes too damn pessimistic!"

Panic came naturally when everyone was uneasy.

And the only way to fight this inevitable panic was to provide hope.

Subaru: "'We're preparing on mounting a counteroffensive' —Saying even that much would give the little bit of hope needed to stave off much of the panic, wouldn't it?"

Anastasia: "I think that we should take the path of minimum sacrifice. Every resource we spend poorly gives the other side yet another advantage."

Subaru: "Wait, wait, Anastasia-san. That doesn't sound like what I have in mind."

Anastasia's remark stung, and Subaru couldn't help but scowl, prompting a tired sigh from her.

Anastasia: "Natsuki-kun's ideal of refusin' to sacrifice anyone— although admirable, it's not realistic in the slightest. Our forces have taken too much damage in the openin' stages of the battle, and we won't be able ta pull through without taking some losses. Isn't that the obvious truth?"

Subaru: "The first two times... that was indeed the case. But this time, we can't just take losses as they come... in fact, that's exactly what we're trying to avoid!"

Anastasia: "If we were about to launch one final, victorious strike, I'd agree with ya. But it's not possible in our situation. Think of it like naval warfare. Of course we'll help those brave soldiers who

swim from their sunken ship to our still sturdy one... but it wouldn't be reasonable for us to try and rescue those who just give up and choose to drown."

Subaru: "——! But even if we win, that's——!"

Anastasia: "And if we lose, all of us drown! If you don't care about winning or losing, then are you prepared die? Or do you want to live!? Natsuki-kun, your philosophy of taking no losses is really too naive!"

Anastasia's building anger only served to fan the flames of Subaru's own rage.

Raising a warning arm, Julius stopped Subaru from approaching. However, his careful gaze was trained not on Subaru, but on Anastasia, almost as if he were standing on Subaru's side. He sighed lightly and closed his eyes.

Julius: "Anastasia-sama, I understand your feelings, but I must also agree with Subaru. Preventing Anastasia-sama's worries is indeed impossible. But accepting the sacrifices of innocents certainly pains you as well. And damaging our morale... that is exactly the Witch Cult's plan."

Subaru: "J-Julius!"

Julius's support of Subaru, even at the expense of defying his own master, tempered Subaru's anger with surprise, and he even felt a surge of renewed confidence.

If Julius, paragon of righteousness, the renowned Knight of Knights, shared Subaru's opinion, then Subaru himself couldn't have been wrong.

However, Anastasia only turned to Julius, caressing her scarf.

Anastasia: "Do you think I enjoy talkin' so loosely about takin' losses? I don't even know for a fact that the other shelters will fall to chaos! Ultimately, it's just a possibility. Even so, there's no way we can deal with every troublesome possibility one by one!"

Julius: "But..."

Anastasia: “Ya aren’t little kid anymore, so you understand, don’t ya? With how limited our resources are, the only way to handle the Witch Cut effectively is to put everything into offense. And even then, there’s only so much we can do. If we spread ourselves too thin, there’s no way we can maximize our scope of influence.”

Anastasia’s words must have sounded cold and relentless to Julius, who was biting his lip resentfully, like a scolded child. At the same time, they also addressed Subaru, who was the one who had originally proposed the idea.

Of course, Subaru understood Anastasia’s perspective perfectly. The weight of even one life was such a heavy burden.

To save even one person was endlessly difficult. And the more people that needed to be saved, the more difficult it would become to save them all. Saving as many people as Subaru wanted to was nigh impossible.

Of course, even children could draw this conclusion.

The more apples a child’s tiny, fragile hands wanted to hold, the more swiftly the child’s strength would give out. And, eventually, the child would be left with nothing.

Anastasia: “In order to win, we need to compromise as adults, instead of railin’ on like spoiled children. As a knight, shouldn’t ya be able ta see the difference?”

Julius: “——”

Julius closed his eyes, as if affirming Anastasia’s statement.

As he lowered his head, Subaru could see that his fists were clenched behind his back. Even so, it was clear that Julius was unwilling to object further.

However,

Subaru: “Giving up here means being unworthy of being called a knight.”

Anastasia: "... Hey, Natsuki-kun, have ya been listening at all? Aren't ya acting just the way ya did in the capitol back then? Through whatever twists and turns, you've become a knight too, ya know."

Subaru: "Yes, I'm also a knight now. And because I'm a knight, I'll never give in!"

The more apples you held, the more likely they were to topple to the floor.

But Subaru and Julius were knights, and, rather than holding apples, they were holding something far more precious.

Rather than holding fruits that could be dropped without consequence, they held in their hands lives; lives which screamed and sobbed and mattered.

Subaru: "This is something that's mattered to me from the very beginning. I still act at the mercy of that ideal. The morals of this world haven't affected me that much yet!"

Anastasia: "You're sayin' somethin' mysterious again... But the fact of the matter is, during the battle against the White Whale, and the battle with the Witch Cult afterward... people died. As long as there's a struggle, casualties are inevitable. Natsuki-kun, having seen this with your own eyes, do ya really mean what ya say?"

Subaru: "Don't underestimate those people, Anastasia. Their deaths were tragic, but they were soldiers who sacrificed themselves in battle. They understood what they were doing. These innocent people people who are about to be sacrificed, they don't have that awareness. That's the fundamental difference!"

He understood that this notion was unreasonable, and that it might be completely illogical.

However, this was what Subaru believed. That awareness was what mattered to him in a life or death situation.

Subaru: "The citizens of this city are just civilians. There was never any obligation for them to take up a soldier's awareness. The Witch Cult arbitrarily forced them into a battlefield. Leaving them behind because of that is wrong."

Anastasia: “Even if it’s wrong, they were arbitrarily drawn into a battlefield. Awareness is being forced upon them. They expect to be attacked, don’t they? And they have to fight for themselves, just as we do.”

Subaru: “But it’s neither fair nor reasonable for unprepared defenders to be attacked by prepared attackers. But that’s what knights are for. It’s their duty to protect those who aren’t prepared to protect themselves. That’s the knight I idealize. That’s the dashing knight I pretended to be, in front of those defenseless village kids.”

Having accepting the accolades of a knight, Subaru found himself able to live his dream. It was only natural that he’d think in this way.

These ideals came from the village children, who looked at him with admiration shining in their eyes whenever Subaru said something valiant and dashing. Subaru wanted to do his best for them.

Of course, it helped that Emilia, when she listened in, would look at him with those same bright, shining eyes.

Subaru: “As Emilia’s knight, I’ll fight for Emilia, but that doesn’t mean that no one but Emilia matters. Anastasia-san, as your knight, Julius fights, above all, for you. But he doesn’t stop there. That’s the nature of a knight; they’d stop at nothing to look more dashing and valiant.”

Anastasia: “——”

Subaru: “Julius especially. He could be on the verge of death and still be putting on that cool act of his, because this asshole is the [Knight of Knights]. In other words, he wants to look way cooler than anyone else.”

As Anastasia gaped at him, Subaru gestured toward Julius with his thumb, who promptly fell into an embarrassed, awkward silence.

A speechless Anastasia and a stunned Julius were so rarely seen that Subaru could help but grin.

Subaru: “Defeating the bad guys is a simple enough goal. But deciding to live with the guilt of making sacrifices is ridiculous. Everyone must be saved, every villain must be defeated. Even if you don’t succeed, you have to set out with that idea, right?”

Losing like that bore the same results as being resigned to loss from the beginning, but there was a vital difference in how that loss would affect you.

Of course, it would be easy to interpret that as selfishness, but...

???: “— To live for one’s own ego is the best way of living. I completely agree with you, bro.”

Subaru: “——!”

As Subaru elaborated upon his naïve ideals, a new voice inserted itself into the scene.

Everyone spun to face the entrance of the lobby. Having caught everyone’s attention, the man there looked back and forth, seeming unhappy.

???: “Hey, looking at me with such enthusiasm is a little off putting. I know that my seductiveness isn’t at its prime, so I don’t know how well I’d meet all your expectations.”

Subaru: “—— Al?”

Dressed in dark helmet, speaking with lighthearted jests and no trace of hostility; this man was one of Subaru’s acquaintances who had disappeared after leaving the hotel that morning— Al.

He glanced back and forth at the people crowding the room again.

Al: “Where are all the familiar faces? Weren’t there more this morning?”

Subaru: “They’re upstairs with Crusch-san. Why are you here?”

Al: “Well, when the commotion started, I decided to turn ass and find a place to hide for a bit. When things started settling down, I took a peek outside, and heard the broadcast about the City Hall. My

first thought was that you were probably involved, and, if not, I'd at least be able to find someone who knows what's happening."

Although he spoke through the tinny filter of his helmet with his usual absurd optimism, everyone felt more than a little displeased at his answer.

After all, he was one of the few people who was capable of fighting, yet he chose to prioritize his own safety.

Al: "C'mon, don't look at me like that. I feel a little bad, but can you really say missing that last fight completely my fault? Besides, I don't think the results would have changed based on my presence alone.

Garfiel: "Hey, captain, 's this guy tryin' t' provoke us?"

Al's casual demeanor had infuriated Garfiel from the very beginning.

Thinking back on it, Al and Garfiel had never actually met. When Priscilla had crashed the nice breakfast at the hotel, Garfiel had been absent.

From his point of view, Al was a strange and potentially dangerous man.

Subaru: "Wait, wait, Garfiel, this guy's involved in the Royal Election. He's Al, Priscilla's knight, although he hasn't officially met you yet. I don't know if you know, but all five candidates are in the city right now."

Al: "Technically I'm just the princess's subordinate, and not actually a knight. I could be so excessively proper. Oh, by the way, I don't mean anything rude about you, bro."

Although Subaru had stopped Garfiel from overreacting, Al responded to his introduction with a note of irony. His attitude had Garfiel gnash his fangs together in rage again.

Anastasia: "Alright, enough, enough! Shush! You're all being seriously too annoyin'."

With a loud clap, she diffused the swiftly escalating tension.

Her round eyes fixed themselves on Al.

Anastasia: “Aren’t ya just like your master, appearin’ so suddenly and makin’ a mess or the atmosphere? How uncouth. Causin’ a fight’ll rub people the wrong way, so how about you drop it for now?”

Al: “Wow, you’re really honest. Unfortunately, this is just the way I am. Everyone says that I tick people off and disrupt their rhythms. Well, it works as a survival technique.”

Al stuck a finger into the gap between his head and his helmet, scratching his neck sheepishly. Anastasia turned to Subaru with a small sigh.

Anastasia: “Although things seem to have been complicated somewhat, my policy won’t change. If the path to victory requires sacrifices, then I’ll make them. If Natsuki-kun refuses ta take any losses, then work hard ta think of a plan. I’d also like ta avoid any sacrifices if at all possible.”

Subaru: “Then, you won’t stop me from visiting all the other shelters?”

Anastasia: “... If you can do it on your own time, then go for it. Anyway, we do need more combat power. If you find anyone at all who can fight, try to recruit them to our side.”

Although she still disagreed, Anastasia still withdrew her earlier rejection of Subaru’s idea. Convincing her to change her mind entirely would have been impossible; as such, Subaru would not complain about the leeway he’d been granted.

Anastasia: “Take the conversation mirror. For the time bein’, let’s set your time limit ta six hours. I’ll contact ya if we need ya back. Be careful, and try your best not ta mess anythin’ up.”

Subaru: “Time limit... right, I haven’t asked yet. What time is it?”

Julius: “It’s still the same day, at about midnight— we’ll set out nine hours from now.”

This time, Julius was the one to supply the information.

If they wanted to hold a conference at 6 o'clock, then Subaru only had around three hours to sway Anastasia to his side.

On top of that, before this time limit, he also needed to find a way to defeat Witch Cult and save the city... but no, even that wasn't enough.

He also needed to rescue Emilia and retrieve Rem's memories from [Gluttony], and to restore those who had been mutated by [Lust]. Only by achieving all of these goals could he say that they'd claimed a complete victory.

Subaru: "There is not much time left, do you have a map of where the shelters are?"

Anastasia: "Yup, we've got several. Here's a map of where all Ricardo's boys from the [Iron Fang] went, and where're they're goin' now."

She give him Ricardo's map, showed the the [Iron Fang] had set out for the farthest shelters. Conveniently, this left the nearby shelters to Subaru, who had to travel by foot.

It was almost as if someone had set this situation up.

Julius: "Subaru, I'll come with you."

Subaru: "Julius? No, you shouldn't. You'd be a huge help, but we'd be in trouble if we didn't leave enough fighters in the City Hall."

Ricardo was stationed to patrol outside, and Subaru intended to take Garfiel with him as well. Although Wilhelm was upstairs, giving him the responsibility of defending the entire City Hall would be too heavy a burden.

And even if that weren't the case, the Crusch camp was currently ensconced in gloom. Upon hearing Subaru's reply, Julius nodded, albeit reluctantly.

He seemed to be far less calm than usual, and his impulsiveness was a rare sight indeed. Subaru gave his shoulder a light pat, then tapped his chin and gestured to Garfiel.

Subaru: "Garfiel, come with me. We'll go visit the other shelters and look for people who can fight. We have to find a way to end this prolonged restlessness."

Garfiel: "... right, got it. Leave it t' my amazin' self."

Although Garfiel's response to Subaru's request came a beat late, he agreed in the end. With that, Subaru examined the map in his hand, looking for shelters near the City Hall.

His top priority was securing combat power—in that case, locating Reinhardt would be his best course of action.

Al: "Maybe go to the shelter near the hotel first? I don't think the princess would have wandered far from there."

Subaru: "In that case, if we follow this path... wait a second."

Subaru halted, his finger still lingering on the map. As Al, who had inserted his own plans into Subaru's quite frankly, tilted his head inquisitively, Subaru asked,

Subaru: "You're... coming with me too?"

Al: "Yep. After all, going alone would be really troublesome, and not finding the princess would also be really troublesome. Since you already know so much, I'll probably have the best chance if I go with you. In a mess like this, not finding the princess would be kinda terrifying."

Subaru: "... What a picture perfect master-servant relationship."

Although the situation gave him kind of an odd feeling, that thankfully left Subaru with more company. Garfiel, on the other hand, pricked with explicit disgust when he heard that Al would accompany them. After all, at this critical juncture, he'd certainly keep one eye open around unfamiliar people.

Anyway, although Al was somewhat annoying, he did seem to genuinely want to find Priscilla.

Subaru: “Speaking of Priscilla, I last saw her in the park on First Street fifteen minutes before the attacks happened. If she didn’t leave, she should be in a shelter near there.”

Al: “Really? That’s super helpful info, bro. Then let’s start from there.”

Delighted at this news, Al pounded Subaru back several times.

Then Subaru, with a pleased Al and an incensed Garfiel in tow, left the City Hall for the nearby shelters.

And, seeing them off was—

Echidna: “Ouch, you were totally treated like the bad guy there, weren’t you?”

Anastasia: “Quiet, ya scarf fox. It’s not like I haven’t worked it out already. If Natsuki-kun can still speak with such conviction when he returns, then he’s really bad at learnin’.”

Anastasia spoke with a slightly helpless expression, and the scarf rustled slightly on her neck. And no one else noticed this short conversation.

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Chapter 40 - Corrosion of Wrath



Twenty-five shelters per district made a total of about a hundred shelters in all of Pristella.

At Al's suggestion, they started their search on First Street, where they were more likely to be able to find those needing help. They were pursuing a prudent path of travel and moving cautiously in order to avoid as much combat as possible.

Al: "Having said that, I feel like we're overreacting. After all, we have that kid with us. You'd think we wouldn't need to be so excessively timid, bro."

Subaru: "It's not excessive. Our own forces are limited, whereas the enemy's barely been scratched. Even one second of negligence would cost us. Not to mention, in addition to the watching out enemy, we're trying to avoid any kind of commotion, here."

Back in the City Hall, Anastasia had introduced the notion that populace's unrest could lead to riots. Although he wanted to believe it wouldn't happen, he couldn't deny that possibility.

Visiting the various shelters and trying to assess the situation while recruiting combat power— Subaru intended to his mission as an opportunity as fight the mounting sense of unease.

Al: "Yep, that also sounds about right. ... Well, you won't hear me complain about going the safe route. After all, if it comes down to a fight, all I can do is rely on the kid."

Subaru: "You... although you deny being able to, can you really not fight? You did manage to reach the City Hall safely."

Al: "If I had to choose between "combatant" and "non-combatant", I'd have to go with the former. However, at best, my skill's just that of a normal person. If I'm up against the superhuman type, the result would be my corpse sitting in a corner in about two seconds. Nope, no way, it'd be pointless to consider."

As he waved his right arm about in dismissal, Al's declaration of inability echoed from his helmet.

Although somewhat dissatisfied with his attitude, Subaru's opinion on the matter matched Al's. There was a certain level of skill that he would never be able to reach.

Perhaps the difficulty of survival in this world meant that the fundamental biological composition of its inhabitants was different. No matter how much Subaru trained, he'd never be able to match the likes of Julius or Garfiel. And let's not mention Reinhardt; no one could ever reach that level.

Subaru: "But, that shouldn't be enough reason not to fight."

Al: "Shouldn't it? Personally, I think that having no chance of victory is more than enough to convince me not to even try. Ahhh, leaving behind regrets is another topic entirely. Well, I'm not that type that kind of person anyway."

Subaru: "——"

Al: "C'mon, don't be mad, bro. I think your positive attitude is great. It's just not one that'd ever be meant for me. It's just that kind of circumstance, y'know?"

With the stance of each party already established, their dialogue could only run parallel.

Subaru kept quiet, and Al apologized as is pleading guilty, before looking up over at Garfiel, who had been quietly scouting the road that lay ahead.

Crouching on all fours, Garfiel turned back eerily silently.

Garfiel: "Looks like th' next three roads're all clear. Or actually more like lifeless n' barren n' empty. 'S technically safe, but really damn suspicious, yeah?"

That was the impression Garfiel's twitching nose kept finding.

Avoiding battles had been their goal, but not having encountered a single incident also incited a sense of unease. Be that as it may, time didn't allow them to entertain such hesitation.

Subaru: "Pointlessly fretting won't do us any good. Our destination's just up ahead. Let's get as fast as we can. That'll be fine, right?"

Garfiel: "My amazin' nose says so, at least. Damn, looks like we don't have any other choice."

Scratching his short blond hair, Garfiel gave the ground an anxious stomp.

Subaru nodded, and Al's silent shrug indicated that he had no objections.

Although their journey from the City Hall had already taken about fifteen minutes, thanks to the the care and attention they'd paid, it had been safe and sound thus far. After all, the worst case that they'd considered would be that the witch cult had stationed troops all about the city.

Thinking that they'd stumble upon road after road of them would be no exaggeration.

Al: "Doesn't it seem like the Witch Cult's unexpectedly neglected to set up sentries?"

As he ran, Al turned to comment. Following his line of sight, Subaru gave a "why would you think that?" in response.

Al: "The reason's very simple, they don't have the manpower to monitor the streets. Haven't you noticed, bro? Compared with the archbishops on the towers, doesn't this seem a bit too lax? And it's the same with allowing the opposing forced to move so freely. If they seriously wanted their proposal fulfilled, they wouldn't be acting like this."

Subaru: "Blocking everything off and giving such exact demands would be the common thing to do, wouldn't it? But you think they have some other goal in mind?"

Al: "Hah, I wouldn't claim know. But, I'd imagine it's something like,"

Although Al had probably wanted to respond casually, at Subaru's stern glare, he fell silent for a moment, probably with a wry smile under his helmet.

Al: "—Whether or not we comply with their demands doesn't really matter."

Subaru: "Huh?"

Al: "If they were serious about their demands, you'd think they'd have been more precise and detailed. However, I'm sure you'd agree, bro... that they're not seriously intending to insist upon their demands. If we follow through, great. If we don't, whatever; it's that kind of feeling."

Subaru: "Then... it's like they're just toying with us...!"

Al: "Aren't they just toying with us? Isn't that what those bastards are for?"

In contrast to Subaru's speechlessness, Al spoke with a blank, listless voice. And Subaru found himself unable to even utter an affirmation.

—They were entirely just being toyed with.

Considering the vicious imagination of the Witch Cult, such a possibility was no joke. During their attack, although they acted with the advantage and made tactically sound decision, there were many places where their movements were incomprehensible. During the battle in the City Hall, Capella and Alphard had been lying in ambush, but Sirius and Regulus were absent, indicating a lack of a full scale assault. In addition, Subaru's side had suffered no casualties.

Now, the disparity between the city's hopeless siege and the witch cult's lax attitude also served as evidence that the Cult weren't taking means to secure their demands.

Garfiel: "Cap'n! No need t' listen that kinda bastard's words. N' you, 'f you keep casually plantin' funny thoughts like that in my cap'n's head, my amazin'self'll kill ya, yeah?"

As Subaru fell into a sea of contemplativeness, Garfiel turned to fix Al, who was running alongside Subaru, with a ferocious gaze as he snapped at him.

Garfiel: "Endlessly chatterin' on 'bout stuff that doesn't even matter, a bastard with no fightin' spirit like ya should jus' shut th' fuck up! No matter what those fuckers're tryin' we'll just keep hittin' and beatin' and defeatin' 'em! 'S long as we keep that in mind, we can go on!"

Al: "That a pretty extreme and brutal argument, isn't it? Although it is true that I'm no match in a real confrontation, that's unrelated to guessing what they're thinking. Speaking of which, what harm does guessing their intentions bring us, huh?"

Garfiel: "You bastard—"

As his teeth made a sharp ringing sound, Garfiel's steps fell dead still. At the same time, Al also stopped moving, filling atmosphere with tension and mutual disregard.

Subaru cut between them at once, holding a hand against each of their chests.

Subaru: "Hold up! The hell's wrong with the two of you? Is this really time to be turning your weapons on allies?"

Garfiel: "'S bastard's not an ally, cap'n. 'S clear he's up t' no good. 'T'd probably be best 'f we just did away with him here 'n now."

Al: "Actively looking for a fight's a "no thanks", but I'm not a follower of those pacifist movements when it comes to motivated opponents."

Garfiel cracked his wrists, and Al turned around.

And Subaru, frustrated at their attitude, felt rage begin to boil within him.

And he felt the pricking of a thousand thorns emanating from the core of his body, bidding him to beat and punch and kick the two uncooperative men—.

Subaru: "Something's wrong..."

His head was messed up if it was overheating and immediately jumping to murder as a response.

No matter what, his own anger had escalated too quickly. And why were all of them so eager to turn on each other?

And the conflict between the two seemed to be agitating Subaru as well—

Subaru: "No, it's..."

An inability to direct the flow of his thoughts and feelings— with that realization, Subaru felt a chill. After all, this exact sense of disgust was already incredibly familiar to him.

Subaru: "That bitch Sirius, is her influence approaching...!?"

Fanning his face with slaps, Subaru tried to reawaken his own sense of consciousness as he glanced around.

His inspection yielded no sightings of strange figures, not did he hear anything out of place. However, the dim feeling of gloom and disgust pressed heavily into his very being.

Subaru: “Hey, Garfiel, Al, stop! Take a deep breath and calm down. Isn’t it strange that your argument’s escalating so quickly? That’s probably due to [Wrath]’s influence. Your feelings are becoming uncontrollable.”

Garfiel: “Hah? Whadya mean, cap’n? ‘S guy’s flamboyance’s what’s pissin’... wait.”

Subaru: “——”

Hearing Subaru’s claim, Garfiel gritted his teeth, pressing a palm onto his head. Slowly, he shook his head and blinked rapidly.

Garfiel: “... ‘s not really worth fightin’ over. That kinda thing’s usually only just an annoyance.”

Subaru: “That’s [Wrath]’s ability. Let’s make sure that there are no enemies around us, okay?”

Garfiel: “Th’ scent, th’ miasma... nothin’s wrong there. But,”

Precisely because his senses were so trustworthy, Garfiel began to shudder.

In other words, the scope of the Sirius’s power reached far beyond anything they’d ever imagined. If the theory that she was currently occupying a tower was correct, then the range of her power extended over almost the entire city. Of course, there was a degree of difference compared to its intensity in the square, but—.

Al: “Well now. This what it feels like to be toyed with. Not something I’d want to experience more than once. Now I’ve tasted the worst feeling.”

Al murmured; as with Garfiel, the torrent of anger engulfing him had cleared. He glance over at Subaru, lifting his chin.

Al: "But, bro. If we don't get a move on, we'll be in trouble, won't we?"

Subaru: "What, what are you talking about?"

Al: "You noticed it, bro, and after listening to you said, we also realized something was wrong. However, no one else would. If this feeling spreads through the entire city... for the average person, unaware of the situation, it'd be impossible to stay rational, yeah?"

Subaru: "—hk!"

As he considered the fact that Al had pointed out, the worst case scenario flashed through Subaru's mind. He exchanged a glance with Garfiel, who had imagined the same scenario and flinched sharply. Instantly, they sprang into action, beginning a reckless sprint. Their destination was the nearest shelter.

Al: "Ah, wait for me!"

Watching the two of them shoot off, the slower Al hurriedly turned to chase them from behind.

In his anxiety, Subaru completely disregarded stealth as he raced forward with reckless abandon. Garfiel's steps, however, were sharper and quicker than Subaru's, and in the blink of an eye, he had left Subaru in the dust. His shadow vanished at the T junction of the next street.

According to the map, there should be a shelter at the corner where Garfiel disappeared.

Al: "Is the road safe!?"

Subaru: "Garfiel rushed in without any hesitation. So there shouldn't be anyone there!"

Answered the shouts coming from behind, Subaru arrived at the corner, lagging far behind Garfiel. Without losing so much as a single drop of momentum, he turned the corner and saw the stone cottage.

Driven toward the hastily opened door, confirming that there was indeed a ladder connecting to the ground, sprinting frantically down the stairs, and his dim field of vision opened—,

Subaru: “You’re... kidding me...”

—Splattered with blood and sorrow, a landscape of hell spread before him.

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Al: “They killed and killed... and only a fifth of them are still breathing. And those guys are going to have to completely recover. This is really the worst of situations.”

Regarding the scene of horror, Al bit back his feelings and whispered with a strangled voice. Subaru, sitting toward the side, had no energy with which to respond.

In the shelter that they had rushed into, the refugees had turned on each other, causing a fratricidal catastrophe.

The initial argument had most likely been a trivial matter.

Forced to squeeze into a cramped, claustrophobic, fearing the demands that the Witch Cult had put on broadcast.

During that time, dark thoughts sneaked their way into their hearts. If we do what they ask, then the situation will improve, won’t it? Isn’t it okay to for us to take action?

Those emerging ideas aroused action, and action required contact with others. However, was contact brought wasn’t necessarily anything good.

The explosive conflict between Garfiel and Al, on the road, had been the product of that as well.

However, there was no Subaru in the shelter to calm everyone down. The quarrels had intensified as everyone feelings collided and spread, infecting the surrounding area, doubling the effect.

As emotions rose back and forth, anxieties became unbearable, grew into abominations, and resulted in tragedy.

Garfiel: "We can let th' survivors fall asleep n' I can treat their wounds. But th' burial 'f the dead... 'Il have t' wait. Cap'n, have ya contacted 'em yet?"

Subaru: "I have. The Iron Fang should be on their way. I think entrusting survivors to them is will be fine. The problem is, after that..."

Subaru had underestimated the degree of the disaster caused by an unnatural increase of tempers running high.

The intensity of the waves of emotion transversing through people trapped in the enclosed space of the shelter was not unforeseen. Of course, no one would be able to maintain a positive and optimistic attitude; however, even amongst negative emotions, nuances could still usher in tremendous differences.

If the initial feelings were only sorrow, lament, or despondency, without any initiative to take action, the people would be relatively fine.

However, if the initial emotion had been rage, or anything similar, the result would be the one they were currently witnessing.

Subaru: "Being forced to trap themselves within these shelters... that emotion could even be one of hatred."

If the [Wrath]'s ability were something akin to the sharing of emotions, then the greater number of people residing in her sphere of influence, the more effective her power would become.

In short, if people were mirrors, any beams of light originating from them would be reflected back infinitely, due to the sheer number of reflections. Replace light with emotions, and...

Even the barest contact with others would lead to a terrible end.

In this place of unease and fear, this power forced each person to walk alone.

Subaru: "How disgusting..."

Garfiel: "Cap'n, how d' we go about handlin' this? Although we said we'd visit each shelter, 'f things go on like this..."

Having finished with healing, Garfiel, with sweat beading forehead, wore a disturbed expression. Understanding the reason for his unease, Subaru fretted over the wording of his response.

No matter what, Subaru couldn't organize his thoughts. To visit the various shelters, to assemble forces, to call on everyone to not give up; none of those courses of action were wrong.

However, the pressing situation did not allow the Subaru slowly travel the city.

The handful of people who were willing to fight on had likely been the source of the tragedy; their hearts had brought about strife. The shelters had become a coagulated solution of emotions; perhaps persuade the remaining refugees to leave improve their respective survival rates.

Subaru: "But if we do that and fail to retake the towers, they'll all die."

After all, these were shelter residing in the city of Pristella.

They were design to protect its citizens against any potential floods the Watergate City would experience; in the case that Subaru's side was overwhelmed and the water gates were released, the people who left the shelters due to fear of their companions would suffer certain deaths.

Whether staying inside or going outside, a foolproof measure did not exist.

Garfiel: "Cap'n..."

Subaru: "——"

As Subaru wallowed in his indecision, Garfiel called for him.

That was an expression and voice which sought answers and salvation from Subaru. That was the figure of someone seeking the only light they could depend on in a world of darkness, looking for guidance and reassurance.

How could Subaru respond to that expression?

Grasping for solutions? He was the same way. Seeing a light in the dark? Subaru too was lost.

However, there was no point in complaining about his weakness. Throwing a tantrum, raging to the heavens, would save no one. If he had the leisure to complain, it would be far better for him to say something meaningful.

Anything meaningful at all would be fine, as long as it meant something to someone.

Al: "Captain this, captain that... really, it's like you're casting a reliable, convenient charm, kid. What an outstanding attitude, it's making me tear up, really."

However, the one who broke Subaru's hesitant silence was instead the one-armed man. Leaning his back against the wall, Al's gaze move from the scene of horror Garfiel.

His cold indifference shocked Garfiel silent for a spell.

Garfiel: "Hah? Th' hell's that mean, ya bastard..."

Al: "Do you not understand without explanation? I meant just what I said. Refusing to think and delegating your judgment to others is easy. Is "captain" some kind of magic spell to you? To be able to figure out solutions to anything at all, is he some kind of renowned Superman?"

Interrupting Garfiel was Al's mocking attitude.

Al: "From just those moments I can tell how much you depend on him, but is he really so exaggeratedly reliable? In terms of strength, you have him beat, no question. In terms of intelligence,

there'll always be someone out there better than him. And luck? Even if you dare to mention luck in a situation like this, no one'd believe you, yeah?"

Garfiel: "Shut th' fuck up! Ya can't talk shit 'bout the Cap'n like that! Th' hell d' ya even know 'bout his strength? This person here's damn amazin'!"

Al: "He's strong, he's amazing, are you just a kid? Where is that strength, then? If he were really as amazing as you say, he'd already have done something by now. Or are you saying that he's already thought up a solution, and he's just pretending to fumble along?"

Even as Garfiel began shouting, Al's ironic tone didn't falter. And as he leaned over to peer into Subaru's face, Subaru found that he couldn't dismiss him.

At that reaction, Al straightened up, continuing with a "you see?",

Al: "Being responsible for everything, carrying every solution in your hands, is remarkable, isn't it. It's a protagonist privilege. However, most commoners can't afford that mission; they're not strong enough. Of course, that goes without saying for me, and even your bro's the same. So why are you making him carry all that? Don't place too much hope in him, yeah? How pitiful!"

Subaru: "——"

Subaru had no clue whatsoever of what Al was trying to say.

Could he be once again under the sway of [Wrath]'s power? If so, what kind of feeling now dominated Al's heart?

Anger? Sadness? Something else?

He seemed furious, but also mournful, and also jeering; even figuring out what he felt in that moment was impossible.

Al: "Hey now, bro. What's been troubling you all this time?"

Subaru: "... what's been troubling me? All this..."

How to save this city. How to find a conclusion without hurting the people fleeing the shelters.

How to rescue Emilia. How to cure Crusch. How to restore Rem. How to drive away the Witch Cult.

How to find the best path, where everyone would be saved.

Al: "How to best serve your venerated princess— are you unable to even immediately say that?"

Subaru: "——"

Hearing the disappointment in Al's voice, Subaru slowly raised his head.

Motionlessly, Al was scrutinizing Subaru. As his face covered with a helmet, his expression was indiscernible. However, somehow, Subaru found himself incredibly anxious.

Al: "I only care about the princess... about Priscilla. So everyone else, frankly speaking, is completely irrelevant to me. For example, acting in tandem with you, bro, is only so I can improve my odds of surviving and encountering the princess."

Subaru: "Al..."

Al: "So, I don't understand your feelings at all, bro. This is important, that's a priority... In that case, it'll be impossible for you to see what's most important. Trying to solve everything and whatever, doesn't that just make you a cliché of a guy who doesn't know how to fight for what you find most precious?"

Clicking his tongue, Al strangled some kind of emotion.

Even Garfiel couldn't find a retort to that chilly demeanor. And Subaru, who bore the brunt of it, found himself lost for words.

Al: "The silver-haired miss is your most important one, isn't she, bro? If you're just saving her, do away with the fretting and hesitating and act. It'll be easy."

Subaru: "... Don't say that to me. I'll definitely kill the bastard who kidnapped Emilia. And in any case, it's not like I even have any concrete plans. It isn't as easy as you say."

Al: "But it's a much less arduous task than saving everything. If you reduce your load, your body becomes lighter, and the scope of your reach will increase. Isn't that the case?"

Subaru's weak resistance was deflected smoothly by Al.

Al: "Are you trying to be a saint or a hero? If yes, you should have a limit."

Shrugging his shoulders, Al discarded Subaru's confusion as something ridiculous. Subaru found that very attitude incomprehensible.

When he'd quarreled with Anastasia in the City Hall, the one who could even be described as stubbornly assertive, and who regarded him as an ally was none other than Al.

The one who had agreed with his desperate struggle for self-satisfaction was also Al. However, after arriving here, why did he subvert his opinion?

Subaru: "What is what you're saying now totally different from before? Are you or are you not interested in acting as my ally, which is it?"

Al: "No, no, you're completely off. I'm not saying that indulging in self-satisfaction is wrong. But the limit of that self-satisfaction is another topic entirely. Your idea, of wanting to rescue everyone, bro, was denied when you saw the horror in this shelter, right? In that case, it's enough, isn't it? Frankly, if you're only guarding what matters to you, slipping away from here isn't a notion that should be condemned, is it?"

Subaru: "Slipping away... you mean running away? At a time like this?"

Al: "What's so wrong? In a place where you're so powerless, is choosing to flee really so wrong? I, after recovering the princess, intend to flee from the city in this way. I don't have any obligation to the people here, or to morals about humanity or anything."

Sticking his fingers into the neck of the helmet and scratching lightly, Al turned to look at the silent Subaru.

Al: “You could do that too, bro. Save just the miss... just Emilia, and run away, and you’ll be just fine. Anyway, pests like the Witch Cult’ll just come back even if defeated here. Just like bandits on the side of the road, yeah? You’ll lose something just by interacting with it.”

There was only one answer to Al’s suggestion.

The Witch Cults were pests; Subaru shared this exact feeling. And that they could stain even those unrelated to them was a notion he wouldn’t deny.

However, they were the ones who had instigated such a catastrophe. Subaru had to take action to deny the advent of those sparks.

From Al’s perspective, he had no reason to interfere.

Of course, the imminent danger Emilia was in was another matter. Even assuming that Emilia had nothing to do with the situation, Subaru could never choose the option of escape.

And the question was why. Well, that was because—,

Al: “And even if it needs to be done, it doesn’t have to be you, bro. So why are you so insistent?”

Subaru: “When a kid runs toward the busy intersection of a road without paying attention to the light, before thinking about the why, I’d immediately pull him back onto the sidewalk... it’s probably something like that.”

Al: “——”

Al’s sigh in response to Subaru’s answer was obvious.

His answer just now was unrefined, and bits of it were still confused. But when he took a moment to think, he could blurt out that answer, and the tightness in his chest would vanish.

Subaru: "I don't find it a hassle to put everyone into consideration. Because I'm here, I'll try to do those things. one by one to think ah. Because I am here, I will be able to do things. There are a lot of places I won't be able to reach, as the people here prove. But,"

Wasn't thinking that everything was out of the reach of your fingertips cowardly and despicable?

Subaru thought of his goal as an obligation.

Garfiel: "Cap..."

As he began to blurt something toward Subaru, who had responded so calmly, Garfiel seemed to cut himself off.

Now, Garfiel hesitated say "captain"; as Al had just pointed out Garfiel's reliance, he was probably trying to resist the automatic urge.

Subaru found himself pleased by Garfiel's concerned hesitation. At the same time, he realized something. A sudden whim.

A miraculous coup that could be used to take advantage of the authority of [Wrath].

Subaru: "Garfiel, don't hesitate, okay? Just call out to me like you always have."

Garfiel: "——"

Subaru: "Although, initially, you embarrassed me a little, that shyness is long gone. Although there's no guarantee that I can live up expectation, as long as it can be done, I'll do it."

What the Subaru reflected in Garfiel's expectant gaze looked like, he had no way of knowing.

However, in the a place that Garfiel must have thought to be the hopeless, he saw the sun rise where Subaru stood, precisely as a result of Subaru's flailing actions. And a once lonely young girl, who had once denied everything, felt the same way.

Therefore, Subaru had no choice but to take responsibility with his actions.

Garfiel: “..... Yeah. Yeah, ‘s right, cap’n. Got ‘t. My amazin’s self’s also going to be helpin’, no how much power’s needed. So, ‘s long as ya don’t say anythin’ feeble, ‘t’ll turn out jus’ fine.”

Subaru: “Alright. Then, I’ll be relying on you. After entrusting the wounded here to the [Iron Fang], we’ll have to return to the City Hall immediately. Anastasia, after all, probably thinks something contradictory.”

Standing up and patting himself down, Subaru also went over to Garfiel, whose head was still lowered, and patted his shoulders.

After seeing Garfiel clench his fist with an air of reinvigoration, Subaru turned to the silent Al.

Subaru: “My mind’s been made. Although in a different direction than you were hoping for.”

Al: “... as you like, bro. At least, unless I confirm that I can’t find the princess, before it becomes meaningless for me to stick with you, I’ll follow you everywhere, bro.”

Although his proposal was entirely rejected, Al responded without any disappointment.

Even if puzzled by the attitude, Subaru shifted his footsteps toward the outside of the shelter, prepared to act immediately after reinforcements arrived.

Behind him, along with Garfiel, Al followed suit from a slight ways away.

As he regarded the backs of the two who were striding forward, Al reached for the back of his neck with his one arm, propping it up with a hand, and exhaled a long, long sigh.

Al: “Like this... when you have to respond to the expectations of all kinds of people, what’ll become of you? After all, without those painful experiences, you certainly wouldn’t know.”

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Chapter 41 - Heroic Reveries

[Anastasia: You sure came back early?]

As they returned to the City Hall, Anastasia greeted them with a somewhat strained smile.

Having left the building full of bravado only to return like this, honestly, Anastasia's was about the last face Subaru wanted to see.

But this was no time to be concerned with such feelings.

[Subaru: Yeah, I'm back. But I'll head out again as soon as I'm done here. There's just something I have to try in the City Hall first]

[Anastasia: Did you come up with somethin' again? I got a bad feelin' about this]

[Subaru: Well..... the first shelter was a horrible sight, I mentioned that in the communication mirror already. And I think the influence of Wrath must have affected other shelters as well]

[Anastasia: So they've succumbed to the emotional resonance... It's not like I don't feel it myself. If I let my mood drop, it feels like it'll just keep on droppin' forever.But I guess it works a little differently on everybody]

Subaru nodded at Anastasia's analysis.

In fact, Subaru had also noticed this on the street. The effectiveness of Sirius' Authority can vary drastically between people.

Perhaps simply being aware of the Authority's existence could help alleviate its effects: The fact that Subaru was able to calm Garfiel and Al this way precisely proved this.

[Al: I dunno how the shelter got like that, but I can't help but worry 'bout the same thing happenin' to our main guys bunched up here. I'd really rather I didn't come back here only to get caught up in another blood sacrifice or somethin']

[Anastasia: Well, you had no need to worry about that. Luckily, we only have intelligent, rational people here. Though I can't say the same about the guy who's always screwin' up the atmosphere]

Al, who came back with Subaru, said this while looking around the first floor of the City Hall. Hearing this, Anastasia snorted, putting a stop to Al's smart-assery with a gibe.

Seeing Al reply with a silent shrug, Anastasia turned back to Subaru.

[Anastasia: So, what're you plannin' to do? You came back 'cause you had an idea, right?]

[Subaru: Aah, right.By the way, where's Julius? He isn't with you?]

[Anastasia: I don't like bein' bombarded with question after question, you know..... Julius' been actin' a little strange. I think part of it's because we haven't found Joshua yet, but I've a feelin' that's not all of it]

[Subaru: Acting strange..... Now that you mention it, he was a little strange, wasn't he?]

Waking up after the failed attack on the City Hall, Subaru did notice that Julius was less articulate than usual. He seemed to be making judgements and suggestions that he would never have made in normal circumstances, and there was a visible lack of confidence about him.

He was a man with a strong sense of duty. Subaru had thought that it was because of regret for letting Gluttony escape, but perhaps it was more than that.

[Garfiel: Capt'n. It's a bad habit t'be concernin' yerself with every problem out there. I know you're worried 'bout Julius, but that ain't somethin' we can fix right now]

[Subaru: Ah, yeah, you're right. Well, I'm sure that guy'll do just fine on his own without anyone worrying about him. Compared to that, we got our own things to deal with. Anastasia-san. The broadcaster on the top floor is still in working condition, right? It's not like it's broken, or we lost the manual or something...]

Brought back by Garfiel's reminder, Subaru asked this question. On the receiving end, Anastasia blinked her round eyes a few times before answering,

[Anastasia: It's not broken, and I've worked with similar devices before so that's fine..... but what do you plan to do with it?]

Seeing the surprise in Anastasia's eyes, Subaru scratched his cheek.

Even though he'd expect her to oppose it, it was the only plan he could think of. In terms of minimizing casualties, it would also be the most effective measure.

[Subaru: As I said in the communication mirror, the area is currently under the influence of Wrath's Authority. The shelter we visited..... became washed in blood because some small irritation was allowed to fester. The slightest negative emotion could spiral into the extremest disaster. It's scary]

[Anastasia: Yes. My thoughts exactly. The more people there are, the harder it is to control and the more rapidly panic spreads. That said, with the refuge shelters..... or even without the shelters, people will tend to huddle together. Right?]

Subaru quietly nodded to Anastasia's question.

What's so frightening about Sirius' Authority is that the more people are together, the more powerful its influence becomes. And when people heard the Witch Cult's threats over the broadcasts, that started an inescapable trend of panic: A truly sickening way of exploiting people's helplessness.

It was unclear whether the Witch Cult was hoping for their cooperation, but the fact is that it created a vicious cycle that was threatening those people's lives this very moment.

[Anastasia: Do you mean to say... you've thought of a way to counter it?]

[Subaru: It's only a *"Maybe this could work"* kinda thing. I do think it's worth trying. It's just.....]

Subaru's words abruptly trailed off in front of Anastasia's expectant gaze.

Seeing this, Anastasia narrowed her eyes as if to peer into Subaru's innermost thoughts, while Subaru exhaled a deep breath,

[Subaru: Once we start doing it, everything will be heard by the Witch Cult, word for word. So there's the possibility that we could run into other dangers if we provoke those guys]

[Anastasia: And in exchange, there's a good chance that we can reduce the existing threat]

[Subaru: Yeah, that's right. Now that we've retaken the City Hall, and with Sirius' Authority being the only one affecting the shelters... even though it's hard to balance the risks, I still think.....]

It's impossible to imagine how the Witch Cult will react if they did something big here. The dangers were equivalent to bringing a burning match into a gunpowder arsenal, as is always the case when dealing with the Witch Cult. What makes it so difficult to assess is that the gunpowder could also blow on its own at any moment whether they bring in the match or not.

[Anastasia: —I think I know more or less what you're planning to do now, Natsuki-kun]

[Subaru: Really?]

After briefly sinking into thought, Anastasia let out a long sigh and said. Hearing this, Subaru raised his brows, surprised at her reaction,

[Anastasia: Going by the flow of the conversation, and since you asked about the broadcasting device at the start, I'd be more worried if I still can't figure it out after that]

[Subaru: W-well, yeah, I guess. So what do you think? You're against it, aren't you?]

She'll probably oppose it, just as he thought beforehand.

And so, Subaru would have no other choice than to clear the giant hurdle of convincing Anastasia——

[Anastasia: Haa, what am I gonna do with you...]

[Subaru:Egh, you're ok with it?]

[Anastasia: Logically speaking, it would be the best course of action. Regardless of how much I like winning, if it means leaving a mountain of corpses behind by the time we eradicate the Witch Cult, there'd be too bad of an aftertaste]

Getting that unexpected answer, for a moment, Subaru stood there stunned.

Meanwhile, Anastasia chewed her lips as if trying to deal with some indigestible emotion inside her, but it was Garfiel who broke the silence.

[Garfiel: Yo, Capt'n and Big'Sis-chan. What're you guys talkin' 'bout doin' again?]

[Anastasia: Such an unperceptive child... Even my Ricardo could've figured it out]

To Garfiel, who was left out of the loop, Anastasia tossed that unsparing remark. Garfiel gritted his fangs as he heard this, but Al patted his shoulder from behind, laughing at Garfiel as he turned around,

[Al: Basically, what bro's thinkin' is this: Rather than tryin' to stop the Authority of Wrath from spreadin' throughout the city, it'd be quicker 'n easier to try to turn it to our advantage instead]

[Garfiel: Turn it, like what.....]

[Subaru: Sirius' ability causes the sharing of emotions. When people are anxious and afraid, that emotion swells as more people bunch together, until eventually, it gets set off by something small and explodes. So...]

[Anastasia: If you can replace fear and anxiety with another emotion..... paint it over with something like hope, then that'll be what's shared instead]

Garfiel's question was answered by Al, and Subaru, then lastly by Anastasia.

While listening, Garfiel's eyes grew wider as he leaked a groan of understanding,

[Garfiel: Aaah so that's it! Then they won't be killin' each other. And if things go well, even the ones whose spirits're broken'll return to the fight]

[Subaru: When they're engulfed by the surrounding atmosphere, even seasoned fighters would be unable to stand. If we can release them from that anxiety, I think we won't have any problem bolstering our forces anymore]

[Garfiel: Ain't that awesome!? Do it, Capt'n! We got th'arcane device. So th'sooner we start.....]

[Anastasia: Wait wait! It's not all that simple. It's not like I hadn't considered it myself...]

Anastasia clapped her hands to stop the over-excited Garfiel.

Seeing this, Garfiel bared his fangs,

[Garfiel: Hah? Why're we holdin' off? Y'just said you agreed, didn't ya? Don't tell me you're backin' out at th'last minute]

[Anastasia: I never said I'm backin' out. I told you, I've thought about this. There's another problem to this other than just weighin' the pros and cons]

[Subaru: The pros and cons... the ones we talked about earlier?]

[Anastasia: The pro is the goal of this strategy itself: Eliminating anxiety and despair from the citizens so we don't have that constant threat at our backs. The con is that whatever we broadcast into the city would naturally also get into the ears of Witch Cult. We have absolutely no idea how they'll react]

Anastasia raised her hands to both Garfiel and Subaru, and with [However], she continued,

[Anastasia: In terms of disadvantages, I believe they're almost negligible. The Witch Cult never forbade resistance when they made their demands in the first place. It's as if they don't even mind if they're thwarted or opposed]

[SubaruNow that you mention it, even though we attacked the City Hall, they didn't use that as an excuse to exact any retribution. It's like what they did to the people in the City Hall was just for their own amusement]

[Anastasia: Amusement? I like that word. It's a pretty accurate way of describing those guys' sick inclinations]

Anastasia sighed, while Subaru wanted to gag just at the thought of those Sin Archishops' faces. However, they both agreed that there was no extra risk in making the broadcast itself. So then, Anastasia's concern was——

[Anastasia: While I've no objections about the broadcast itself, the problem is..... what'll it contain, and who'll be saying it]

[Subaru: What and who.....?]

Not understanding what Anastasia was saying, Subaru furrowed his brows.

If she was asking about who should make the broadcast over the city to rouse up the people's hopes and chase away their anxiety, then——

[Subaru: Well, that's where Anastasia-san comes in. People recognize you as a Royal Selection Candidate. If something inspiring comes from Anastasia-san's mouth.....]

[Anastasia: This might sound strange coming from me, but I think it's difficult to expect that kind of effect from my words. As much as I hate to admit it, I'm not up to that task]

[Subaru: ——]

Anastasia shook her head at Subaru's intuitive suggestion.

Subaru didn't understand her meaning. Since, naturally, the whole of Priestella would know about Anastasia's position as a Royal Selection Candidate.

Her fame certainly far exceeded anyone else present.

[Subaru: Not up to it... why? I mean, Anastasia-san, you're...]

[Anastasia: If renown is all that matters, then I would indeed be the most suitable. If that's all it took to change things for the better, then I'd be happy to do it. But that's not how things are. My renown and beatin' the Witch Cult are not related at all. Just knowing that "*Someone famous is fighting the Witch Cult*"—— might do something, or it might not]

[Subaru: But.....]

[Anastasia: In that case, it'd be pointless. What's needed is hope. Hope that could replace all the anxiety in people's hearts with a single stroke]

Subaru had no words to reply to Anastasia's statement.

Honestly, he wanted to chide her for her faintheartedness and refute what she was saying. However, it

wasn't anyone else, but Anastasia herself who seemed to rue the pitifulness of that statement the most.

Anastasia could not have said those words without thinking. Quite the opposite.

It was precisely because she had thought it over thoroughly that she had judged herself unworthy of that role.

[Anastasia: I may be able to trick and beguile people with magnificent words. And I'm sure that out of every ten, five would be deceived. But it'd be only a frail, desperate straw that would give way at the slightest whiff of wind, and all it would accomplish is create a momentary change in feeling]

[Subaru: Th-then..... what about Crusch-san? She has the military experience and belongs to a noble family of Lugnica]

[Anastasia: Right, the words would certainly carry weight if it came from Crusch-san, but that would be the former Crusch-san. The current Crusch-san doesn't have that kind of influence over people. Not to mention that Crusch-san is currently fighting for her life. That's a problem that'll have to be settled before askin' her to inspire anyone else]

[Subaru: Fighting for her life? It's that bad!?!]

Hearing that Crusch was in even worse state he had been told, Subaru took a step towards Anastasia. With the height difference between them, Anastasia looked up at Subaru and tightened her lips.

Subaru quickly turned to Garfiel, only to see him weakly shaking his head,

[Garfiel: Th'cat-eared Sis' won't let her die, I'm sure of it. She's injected so much life-force into her..... but I'm against lettin' her talk in front of the broadcastin' device as well. Hell, she can barely make a sound.....]

[Subaru: Damn it! Then what about Julius? If it's Julius, he'd.....]

[Anastasia: It's true that Julius is a Knight of the Royal Guard, one of the greatest Knights in the Kingdom, and my pride. But how much would Julius' name mean in this city? At best, his chances're about the same as mine. And I'm more eloquent]

Crusch was out of the question, and Julius was also shot down.

Of the faces in the City Hall who could possibly inspire hope in others, only Wilhelm and Ricardo were left. But Ricardo has neither the influence nor the popularity.

And how could anyone ask this of Wilhelm now? Even if he agreed, what advantage would Wilhelm's title as former head of the Royal Guard even bring to the table?

[Subaru: Then, what do we do? Who else is there.....?]

[Al: Well...]

Just when Subaru thought he had found an effective countermeasure against Wrath, he was stuck without anyone to execute it.

While Subaru sank into these thoughts, Al casually raised his hand,

[Al: If anyone's gonna do the broadcast, shouldn't it be you, bro?]

[Subaru: ——Hah?]

Hearing him say this as if it were a matter of course, it took Subaru a moment to react.

Leaving his mouth gaping open, there was nearly no need to think twice about what Al had just said.

Making such an unfunny joke at a time like this, what was he thinking?

[Subaru: Say, Al. We're in the middle of a serious conversation here. The kind where every second counts. I can't deal with your jokes right now]

[Al: Oyoy, wait a minute. I'm aware that I'm a guy Princess-san hired because more than half of my remarks are irrelevant, but I wasn't joking just now]

[Subaru: If you weren't joking then what made you think I could do it? Either you're trying to be funny or you're mad, and I don't know which's worse here]

[Al: What's so crazy 'bout that? Why don't you have a look around?]

Although Al was someone who has *"Not Serious"* written all over him, at that, he suddenly lowered his voice and nudged with his chin. Following his movement, Subaru shifted his gaze to the two others beside him——Anastasia and Garfiel. Though Subaru had imagined that they must be just as baffled by what they had heard,

[Subaru:Oy, you guys too?]

[—————]

Their gazes were serious, certainly not surprised or annoyed at all.

They were staring at Subaru with sincere affirmation in their eyes.

It was almost as if they were saying they agree with Al.

[Subaru: You're kidding, right? Why do you look like you're all agreeing here? If Anastasia and Julius can't do it, what makes you think I can!?]

[Al: Well, like I said on the street, we all got this far because of you, bro. Garfiel agrees with me. The way he keeps callin' you "*Captain, Captain*" and all]

[Subaru: How're those two things connected!?!]

[Al: Same thing! You must've done somethin' right to make Garfiel call you that. That just shows how much he trusts ya, right? You seem to think what you did wasn't that big of a deal for some reason. But aside from you, who else in this city or this world can say that they've defeated "Sloth" of the Witch Cult?]

[Subaru: ———]

Al brought his face right up to Subaru's.

His cold helmet bumped into Subaru's forehead, and a small warmth could be felt through the icy hard metal, coming from Al's forehead on the other side. For a moment, feeling himself pierced through by his invisible eyes, Subaru held his breath.

[Al: In a city occupied by the Witch Cult, who better to inspire hope in people than a man who's killed a Witch Cult Sin Archbishop? The only ones around who meet the criteria are you and Reinhardt. And you're the only one here]

[Subaru: —gh]

Getting hit with another bump to the forehead, Subaru stumbled backwards.

Watching Subaru back away holding his head, and Al gave his single shoulder a shrug.

[Anastasia: I'm of the same opinion. If anyone should do it, it'd be you, Natsuki-kun]

[Subaru: Anastasia.....]

Saying this, Anastasia looked down.

It was an expression that seemed to be lamenting her own powerlessness, all the while entrusting that hope to someone else.

At this point, seeing that expression, Subaru finally noticed the great expectation resting on his back.

[Subaru: Garfiel... you think so too?]

[Garfiel: I dunno any details 'bout you killin' some Sin-bishop "Sloth". But yeah, I'm thinkin' th'same thing]

At Subaru's quiet question, Garfiel scratched at his short head of hair,

[Garfiel: If there's a voice in this city that can become people's hopes..... I say that voice'd be your's, Capt'n. If y'really give it your all, I've a feelin' y'can do it. That's what I think]

[Subaru: ———]

That is a baseless, and tremendously heavy trust.

Surprised, and holding his breath, Subaru clearly understood the magnitude of the faith placed in him.

Looking back, he saw Anastasia. Who nodded.

Next, he saw Al. Who shrugged his shoulder.

As before, Garfiel was still watching Subaru. When Subaru turned to face him, he nodded as well.

[Subaru: ———]

Taking in each of their reactions, Subaru turned up his head.

Narrowing his eyes to the light of the weak crystal lamp, he exhaled a long, deep sigh.

——*They think way, way too highly of him.*

He had felt it from Wilhelm, Julius, and Reinhardt as well.

They've got it all wrong about Subaru. All wrong.

They themselves were so much better, have worked so much harder, and were so much nobler than he was.

Yet, as if it were a matter of course, they praise Subaru, offer him their help, and greet him with such warmth. That fact had always tormented Subaru.

When the person you respect, the person you don't want to lose to, and the person you can never catch up to all give you their affirmation, it's not just a simple matter of being overjoyed.

It made him anxious. That someday, when his real self is exposed, he will surely disappoint them.

When they realize that the real Subaru is actually pathetic, weak, and hopeless, surely, they'll be saddened, and will regret the warmth they had shown him.

That was what he had always thought. And yet, Even Al, Garfiel, and Anastasia, had such expectations of Subaru.

On the verge of being crushed by its weight, Subaru had pushed himself to his limit, and yet his limit was not nearly enough as he tried to live up to that expectation over and over.

This is the road Natsuki Subaru chose.

——The road he had once promised to a single girl that he would take. Her hero's road.

But, one way or another, he was no longer just her hero. What Subaru was carrying now, was——

[Al: If you do this, bro, from now on it'll be heroic reveries that you'll be carryin' on your back]

Al suddenly gave this warning to the silent Subaru.

Watching Subaru's eyes drop, Al continued in a listless voice,

[Al: You can never lose. You must only win. You'll take up their hopes, carry their expectations, and fight to show them the future. If you make this decision here, that's what you'll have to do]

[Subaru:I can never lose, huh. Sounds just like how it's always been, doesn't it?]

[Al: The weight of it's different. If bro loses here, the defeat won't just end with bro]

Subaru didn't understand what Al was saying.

Subaru's battles had always been this way. When Subaru loses, Subaru isn't the only one who's lost.

Everything Subaru wanted to protect would be lost with Subaru's defeat.

It had always been this way. It had never been otherwise.

If defeat didn't cost him anything, he would have had no reason to fight. The fact that Subaru was fighting was because there were things that could not be protected unless he fought.

And after today, their numbers would swell to unbelievable proportions.

[Subaru: Tch, isn't that still how it's always been?]

[Al: ————]

Exhaling a sigh, he had made up his mind.

The pounding of his heart until now settled down as his vision cleared.

Though he couldn't see Al's face, he could sense that Al was holding his breath, watching him with an astounded expression.

[Subaru: Anastasia-san, I'll do it. If my voice can make a difference, then leave it to me]

[Anastasia:You're sure? Once you take on people's hopes...]

[Subaru: It'll be no different from what I always do. "*Hero*", doesn't sound too bad, does it. Though honestly, it's kinda embarrassing to be calling myself that.....]

Seeing Anastasia's worried expression, Subaru softly rubbed the tip of his nose,

[Subaru: If it's just a matter of being a hero, I've already made my decision a year ago. Otherwise, I'll bring shame to the girl watching over me, and the girl whose back I'm watching]

[Anastasia: ——Is that so. Well, alright. Boys always like to show off, after all]

As if saying "*There's no helping it*", Anastasia smiled, and gave Subaru a light poke in the chest.

Subaru was a little taken aback by that reaction.

Since that might've been the first time he had seen Anastasia let down her guard and show her true emotions.

With that feeling rapidly melting into his chest where he had been poked, Subaru lifted his face.

[Subaru: Thank you, Garfiel. Al. For helping me make up my mind]

Saying this to the two at his back, Subaru followed behind Anastasia.

Just what would he say when he's standing in front of the broadcasting device, he wondered.

He's still not sure what or what not to say.

But, strangely, there was no confusion or anxiety accompanying it.

After all, it's just the same as usual, right?

——Because he knew that, just as usual, he has no choice but to show off again.

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Chapter 42 - The Newest Hero And The Most Ancient Hero

——An oppressive silence had fallen over the refuge shelter.

There was the occasional faint sound of sobbing and someone nervously tapping their fingers on the floor.

Listening to that unsettling backdrop in that stillness, the girl hugged up her knees, feeling the coldness of the wall against her back.

It was a little girl with golden hair.

Resting her chin on her small, pale kneecaps, the girl gently wrapped her arm around the little bundle at her side.

Leaning against the girl's left shoulder, with his head buried between his chest and legs, was an even younger boy—— the girl's younger brother. He had been crying vehemently until now, but, apparently tired from the sobbing, had now fallen asleep.

Wet teartracks still lined his cheeks, and the corners of his eyes were red from crying. The girl wanted to softly stroke his hair, but hesitated, afraid that it might wake him.

If he could sleep, then it'd be better if he kept on sleeping.

While listening to her younger brother quietly snoring, she hoped that he might at least find some rest in his dreams. Because the reality outside those dreams would be far too harsh for her little brother to bear.

Though the same applied to his older sister, thinking this of him.

——It had been several hours since the announcement that the Control Towers to the Great Water Gates of Priestella had been taken.

That morning, the girl was out in the city plaza with her little brother when they heard the broadcast. She couldn't believe her ears when she heard those words, full of hate and malice. Worrying for her parents as she listened to that unacceptable ultimatum, the girl took her frightened little brother by the hand and ran to the shelter with the adults around her.

——If an unexpected situation occurs, quickly retreat into the shelters.

That was the emergency response procedure broadcasted from the City Hall every morning.

Honestly, the girl didn't remember paying much attention to the morning broadcasts aside from the Bard's songs. But those words nevertheless remained at the back of her mind such that she immediately remembered them when the emergency arose.

However, neither the girl nor the surrounding adults seemed to have any idea about what to do once they were inside the refuge shelter.

——Witch Cult. Control Towers. Great Water Gates. Demands.

That vile woman's ear-piercing voice showered abuse upon the frightened people.

Every one of her deranged, senseless words filled the girl and the adults' minds with dread.

Trapped in this dark shelter, they knew nothing of what was happening outside. It was only natural that as time passed with no improvement in sight, panic began to take hold.

First, the voices of mutual encouragement weakened, then gradually, anxiety and frustration festered in the silence. By the time anyone noticed it, displeasure had become apparent on the faces of everyone around them, and the atmosphere had been infested with pent-up discontent and hostile gazes.

Once it begins, there's no stopping it.

Staring at each other, shouting at each other. At worst, people begin trading punches.

Even in this shelter, this atmosphere was looming, ready to explode at the slightest touch.

[Boy: aa———h]

Yet the perilous air on the brink of drawing blood was shattered by the girl's crying little brother.

It appears that, even with the violent urge boiling inside them, the adults still had enough decency not to attack in front of a little golden-haired child crying for help.

The sound of a child crying is powerful, in a way.

She had always thought that her little brother's crying was noisy. But, realizing what it had accomplished just now, the girl hugged her brother from behind and wept a little.

With this alone, violence had been averted inside shelter.

But everyone knew that it was only a temporary calm resting upon a precarious equilibrium.

Next time, it would certainly not be something a child's cry could stop.

Knowing this, the people in the shelter, who should be tied by their shared fates, began to keep their distance from each other, not only verbally, but with their gazes and their breaths.

As if to avoid being influenced by other people's consciousnesses, they shut out everything from the external world. Who knows what might draw someone else's attention, incite their anger, and end up pulling the trigger?

So whether it was for themselves, or for everyone else, they held their breaths with rigid faces as they waited for time to pass. *"Something will change if you just wait for it"*, they left themselves to that fleeting hope.

[Girl: ————a]

Suddenly, the girl lifted her face with a quiet moan.

While silently yearning for a change to come, she caught the subtle shift in the atmosphere.

Spurred to the same reaction, the people around her also turned their heads, perhaps for the first time in hours. This is because everyone living in this city knew that the faint tremble in the air—— was an indication that a broadcast was coming.

In that world of silence, it almost sounded like someone nearby sighing. That precursor to the broadcast sent a sense of physical revulsion throughout her body.

The change they were hoping for should have been something positive. But a broadcast only brings the Witch Cult's malice.

What kind of impossible demand would that shrill voice impose next?

But here, the girl's pessimistic prediction was betrayed.

{——*Uhhh... so um... can everyone hear me properly? Mic-test mic-test, one-two one-two*}

Instead, the voice she heard was that of a youth who sounded somewhat confused.

Unlike any other broadcast before this, the youth's voice was lacking confidence. It wasn't the charismatic voice of the man she had grown used to hearing every morning. But a young voice she had never heard before.

The girl's eyes grew round. The surrounding adults also traded gazes of doubt, unsure of what was going on.

Such sentiments would not reach the person behind the broadcasting device. Nevertheless, after

doing a few more checks to make sure that the broadcast going through, the youth cleared his throat.

And,

{Sounds like you guys can hear me, that's a huge relief. So, first of all, sorry for doing a broadcast all of a sudden. I probably scared you, huh. Considering the circumstances, most of you must be on edge about what I'm going to say. But don't worry. This isn't the Witch Cult broadcasting to you now. Please know that first}

[.....It's not, the Witch Cult?]

Apparently not used to talking through the device, the volume of the youth's voice fluctuated up and down.

But, since the listeners were so overwhelmed by the content of his words, no one bothered to remark on it. Looking up overhead to where the voice seemed to be falling from, the darkened expressions on the people's faces began to shift. It was the sensation of having sighted the first glimmer of hope.

Someone quietly muttered,

[Then, that means..... we're saved?]

Those words encompassed the hopes of everyone inside the shelter.

That's it. Isn't it? If someone who's not the Witch Cult is speaking through the broadcasting device, that can only mean that they've recaptured the City Hall. If someone managed to drive the Witch Cult out of the City Hall, then maybe the Witch Cultists in the Control Towers and all over the city are also——

[The Witch Cultists... are all driven out.....?]

{Next, I have to apologize for getting everyone's hopes up, because the threat of the Witch Cult hasn't gone away yet. We were able to retake the City Hall, but they're still holed up in the Control Towers. Those guys' demands, and the danger of the city sinking beneath the water are still in play. Please understand that as well}

[———]

Yet, this fleeting hope wasn't crushed by anyone else, but by the youth behind the broadcasting device himself.

It was almost as if the youth had read the minds of everyone inside the shelter. But isn't it far too cruel to extinguish their fledgling hopes this way?

Someone who had unwittingly stood up with expectation in their eyes sat down again.

Nobody can blame that someone for feeling discouraged, being told that their hope of being relived from their fears was misplaced. Instead, the fierce point of everyone's anger turned to the youth making the broadcast.

{I'm sorry}

However, the youth had apparently foreseen that the crowd's anger would fall on him.

{Where are you listening to this broadcast right now? Maybe you're in one of the refuge shelters, and I'm sure there are those who didn't manage to escape into the refuge shelters as well. Everyone must be filled with anxiety, right? I can understand what it's like to be afraid and wanting to curl up into a ball. And I guess you're all thinking "Who is this random guy toying with everyone's hopes at a time like this?"}

[————]

{I'm... just a nobody. Like everyone else, I'm just being tossed around by fate, getting crushed under the unreasonable circumstances, and so scared that my legs can't stop shaking. That kind of guy. Even the job of doing this broadcast... I only accepted it after making a huge fuss. And I still think that the burden is too heavy for me. Honestly, there are others who are more qualified to talk to everyone like this. I'm sure there are}

The youth's voice was trembling, as if speaking straight from the people's terrified and cowering hearts.

And then, what followed was simply the honest thoughts of a youth doubting his own value.

The attitude of the listeners had gone beyond surprise and disappointment, until all that was left was uncertainty.

Right now, when what everyone yearned for was hope, why did they put this youth in front of the broadcasting device?

Even the youth himself said that there were more qualified people.

But why did they send him?

{But here I am, talking to everyone. So many people greater than I am told me that I should do it. That it won't be totally pointless. But, can you hear me trembling? Speaking in front of people isn't my strong suit. I'm not good with words, and I don't have the charisma to lead anyone. I'm weak, helpless, and even here, in such an important position, I can't help but want to run away.....}

The tone of his voice gradually fell, as if dragging the listeners' hearts into the abyss.

That weak, faltering voice sounded like it was creaking through a chest shrunken by anxiety, only to tangle up at his stomach. If the youth behind that voice was within arm's reach, she would've liked to plug his mouth to shut him up.

[Boy: Big sister.....]

Before she knew it, her younger brother was awake.

Hearing that call, the girl hugged her little brother's ears as if to keep that wimp's voice from sneaking in and infecting him with its cowardice.

But, as the price for protecting her little brother, that voice continued to strike upon the girl's eardrums, drawing her into its weakness.

Still, the youth's voice went on,

{I don't know what I can do... what I really want is just to plug my ears, hold my head, hide in a corner by myself and wait for someone else to fix everything for me.....}

[Girl: —no...]

Squeezing her eyes shut, the girl shook her head as if rejecting that sense of helplessness and despair.

I know. I know even if you don't remind me.

What the youth was saying was nothing less than the inner thoughts of every person cowering under the Witch Cult's threat.

It was the weakness eating away at the girl's heart.

It was the cowardice rooted in the depths of the adults' minds.

It was the unbearable dread tormenting her little brother's soul.

Surely, it was something nobody could do anything about.

And to have to face that unreasonable reality in spite of this——

{——But, since I can't run away, I'll fight. That's just the kind of guy I am}

Saying this, the youth's voice was clearly shaking.

[Girl:huh?]

Not sure if she had misheard it, the girl opened her eyes and looked around her.

The owner of the voice wasn't there. But all around, she could see astounded faces just like her own.

The voice paused for a moment, as if choosing his next words.

And,

{Let me ask you again. Everyone listening to this voice, where are you now? Have you escaped into a refuge shelter? Are you hiding inside your house? Are you trembling alone? Are you with someone? Are you with the person most important to you? Or, even if you're next to an unfamiliar face, is it a face that you have grown to know over the past few hours?}

[———]

{It's a pretty arbitrary request, and it may be difficult, but please don't be alone. When a person is alone, they'll just start coming up with lame ideas. I know that from experience. Trust me. So please don't be alone. Stay with someone. And——}

Inhaling, with only a slight hesitation,

{And if you can, look at the face of the person who's with you}

[Girl: ———]

Following the youth's words, the girl's gaze slowly fell into her arm.

Her little brother was looking up at her. His swaying, uncertain emerald eyes met hers.

{Whose face do you see now? Is it someone important to you, or a stranger who you've spent these past few hours with? Or maybe it's a friend.But most likely, it's a wretched face. A face that's about to cry, a face that's in distress, and I imagine it probably isn't smiling. No, perhaps there is someone out there who is putting up a strong face, forcing themselves to smile so as not to worry the people around them. If there is, then that's an amazing person. If someone you care about is smiling this way, you should be proud of them. But now, with that in mind, compare it with the smile you know}

Her brother's face was close to crying.

It was a crumpled face, a face that was about to burst into tears again.

While, reflected in her brother's eyes, her own face was hollow as if it had lost its expression.

{——Is this acceptable to you?}

[Girl:no way]

A small, thin voice slipped from the girl's lips.

It was a weak and broken sound that was impossible even for herself to hear.

Nevertheless,

{I can't accept this. I will not accept this}

The youth's voice rang, as though having heard her reply.

{I also have people I cherish. Friends I hold dear. And I cannot forgive whoever put that pained, sorrowful expression on the faces of the people I love. I don't want you to force yourself to smile. You kidding me? Quit joking around. I want to raise my voice and shout that the smile of the girl I know should be way cuter than this...}

[Boy: B-big sister.....]

{I don't want to keep losing. It'd be too pathetic to give up here. There's no way I can allow it. They are the ones in the wrong. Even if you are too weak to do the right thing, to strike down those in the wrong, you should at least know what is right. And when you know that you are right, there is no way you can allow yourself to lose to those who are wrong. At least, I don't intend to surrender and bow to those guys}

[Girl: Fredo.....]

Hearing her little brother faintly calling her, she gently held him closer and pressed her forehead against his.

A feverish heat transferred between them. Hot, very hot, it was the heat of life.

She couldn't tell if it was her younger brother's or her own, but the heat was certainly there.

{I want to run away, but I can't run away. I want to cry, but I can't cry. The enemy is strong, but I don't want to lose. And so, I'll fight. I know I am weak, and stupid, but still I will fight. They are wrong. They

are wrong to have made the people I care about look like they're about to cry. So, fight. I will fight.

——And I want you all to fight}

[Girl: ——hk]

Her breath clogged. Her throat suddenly closed, ashamed of her own weakness.

Surely, it was because the voice of the youth had ceased to tremble, but had become powerful, as if pointing to the road ahead.

She could understand the youth's feelings. She received the youth's message, painful and clear.

In her heart, the girl's will was the same as the youth's. She wants to fight. She wants to do all she could to drive out the thugs who had attacked their city. But, both she and her little brother were small, young, and their reach were far too short.

They were helpless, ignorant, weak, and cowardly, and so——

{Don't get me wrong. I said I want you to fight, but I'm not telling you to pick up a stick and fight them. In fact, please avoid doing anything so reckless. I don't want you to mob up and spill blood fighting against the Witch Cult. What I am asking you to fight for is to not look down}

[Girl: To not... look down.....]

{Staring at your feet isn't going change anything. Your gaze isn't going to bore a hole in the floor, and even if it does, that won't fix a thing..... So please, lift your face and look ahead}

She looked up. Not at her knees, not at her brother's blond hair, but at the shelter.

And there, she saw the faces of those around her also lifting.

Their eyes met, wide open as if in astonishment.

Just like the girl, everyone had subconsciously raised their faces, obeying the voice of the youth.

{If you look around you, surely, you'll meet someone's eyes. Like you, this is someone who is afraid and wants to run away..... but, just like you, this is also someone who doesn't want to lose. There is the person you cherish, there is the person you are looking at now, and, if you add yourself to the list, that's already three people. There should be more depending on where you are}

Just as the youth said, the people's gazes intersected as they lifted their faces.

The gleams within their irises were complicated, and surely, the girl's own eyes must've been the same. However, there now seemed to be something more than just tremors of terror.

{If you can see that you are not alone, then that's enough. You are not alone. That in itself is powerful, don't you think? I don't want to see saddened expressions on the faces of people I love. And I don't want the people looking at me now to see a miserable expression in my eyes. I'm not the only one who's so vain, weak, and stubborn, am I?}

[—————]

That beseeching, calling voice was trying to muster the people's courage.

And yet, to the girl's ears, the youth was pleading for help—— for something, anything, to cling to.

And then, she realized it.

The youth's feelings had never changed since the moment this broadcast began.

While lamenting his weak, insufficient self, he did not give up.

He was telling himself that that was his only weapon, and telling everyone else that they were also the same.

{Please, help me believe this. I may be weak and hopeless, but I can't give up just yet. I'm not the only coward who hates to give up..... please, help me believe it}

It was a cowardly voice. A cowardly plea.

It was a voice which, when everyone needed help, was shamelessly shouting quicker and louder than anyone: *"Please help me"*——

{Or... am I the only one?}

The voice lost its confidence. Or rather. The youth's voice had no confidence to begin with.

A sense of agitation surged up. *Don't go.* Whatever it takes, she wanted to shout for him to stay.

[Girl:you're.. *not*]

A faint voice, indiscernible like a mosquito's cry, spilled from her throat.

This voice would not reach him. The reply would have to be louder.

In order to answer the voice of that coward, afraid and alone——

{Who believes..... even now, we can still fight... am I the only one?}

[Girl: ——*YOU'RE NOT!*]

Opening her mouth, the girl screamed at the top of her lungs.

Voices resounded throughout the refuge shelter. Not just the girl's.

Others who had also lifted their faces shouted out as well.

They were voices resisting against sorrow, weakness, and fear.

If that was the youth's plan all along, then they fell for it through and through.

Who cares, even if it was? That wimpy trembling of his voice, that faltering pep-talk, that pitiful encouragement, and that pleading, clinging faith, even if all of it had been an act...

If they fell for such a masterful performance, who could blame them?

But, if this really was the voice of a clumsy wimp, how could anyone just leave him be?

{I'm not, am I?}

[Girl: —You're not!]

{You guys are still fighting, aren't you? You haven't been swallowed by weakness, have you?}

[Girl: We haven't..... we don't want to lose!]

The depths of her chest grew hot. The roots of her teeth were trembling, and a passion different from anger was raging.

That feeling wasn't the girl's alone. It was a flaring passion engulfing everyone into a single inferno.

The anxiety they had only recently shared now became a bonfire of a different emotion.

{If you are with someone important to you, hold their hand and believe in them. If you're with someone you don't know, give them a nod and assure them you'll do your best together. Because neither you nor that person have been crushed by defeat or are about to give up fighting. And as long everyone goes on fighting, I will fight to the end as well. I will fight—— I will fight, and win}

[————]

In the end, this is just a shelter far away from the City Hall.

No matter how loudly they shouted here, no matter how they scream that they are with him, none of it would reach the youth.

Still, the youth sounded relieved, as though he had heard the girl and the others' replies. He received it, he received it and proclaimed in a voice trembling in swelling emotion:

——*I will fight, and win*

There was no question of whether it was possible.

Only faith that surely, he will.

Just as the youth believed that the girl and the people of this city would not be beaten by despair——

The girl and the citizens believed that the youth behind that voice will prevail in the perilous battle ahead.

Why did they believe it? Because surely, this voice——

{——My name is Natsuki Subaru. I am the Spirit-Arts User who defeated Sin Archbishop Sloth of the Witch Cult}

[———!!]

An uproar erupted at the revelation of the youth's identity.

The girl didn't quite understand the significance of that declaration. But this was not the case for the people around her. The impact was overwhelming, and certainly not in the negative sense.

At first, they were startled, then, as comprehension followed—— hope and faith spread explosively as even the girl's heart was swallowed by that wave of emotion.

{My colleagues and I will do everything to take care of the Witch Cult in this city! So, please believe in us and fight on. Hold onto the hands of the people precious to you and cast away the cowering part of yourself that wants to surrender. And...}

[———]

{——Leave the rest to me!}

Deafening cheers erupted, flooding the shelter with heated enthusiasm.

Expectation became hope, and, in a single breath, one hope became hope innumerable.

The girl looked down at her younger brother in her arms and saw the undeniable light dwelling in his eyes.

Just to be sure, she embraced her brother tightly once more. Her brother's arms wrapped around her body in return, and, while savoring the warmth of that embrace, the girl looked up towards the ceiling. Unable to hide his fear or apprehension, that youth nevertheless took on the hopes of every person in this city and declared that he will fight.

The girl closed her eyes, sketching out the image of the hero whose face she didn't even know, and prayed for every imaginable good fortune upon him.

——Because surely, he must be just a common-place youth, fighting for the sake of someone important to him.

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Leaving the magic device shaped like a gramophone, Subaru slowly stepped back.

Nervous sweat had completely drenched his forehead. Leaning against a nearby workbench, he roughly swiped it off of his brow.

Taking deep breath after deep breath, he wondered if the device was picking up that sound.

But when he looked to Anastasia, who was in charge of operating the device beside him, it seemed she had already safely powered it off. Instantly, he was washed over with relief.

[Subaru:Hhaa, that was exhausting]

He spilled a sigh as his head churned with unimaginable fatigue.

Honestly, he was in such a trance while he spoke that he could barely remember a thing he said. It wasn't that he forgot everything, but the memories were too vague in places.

And he had Anastasia's speech notes, too...

[—————]

Wiping off the droplets hanging down his chin with a sleeve, Subaru noticed that the room was extraordinarily quiet.

The people who had been watching the broadcast didn't say a word. Beside Anastasia, were Garfiel and Al. While Julius and Ricardo, who later joined them, were also standing in a corner of the room. To see all these usually-noisy people suddenly dead-silent couldn't be a good sign.

Unless, was his incoherent broadcast just that bad?

[Anastasia: Natsuki-kun]

[Subaru: Uwaha! I'm sorry! I'll do better next time!]

[Anastasia: Why're you apologizin'? Strange child]

With his heart wracked by anxiety, Subaru blurted out an apology the instant he heard his name.

While, laughing at his reaction, Anastasia tilted her head smiling.

[Anastasia: It's a strange thing to say to a strange child, but, Natsuki-kun, did you.....]

[Subaru: Hm?]

[Anastasia: Did you use to be a con-artist back in the day or somethin'?]

[Subaru: What's with that baseless accusation all of a sudden!? As you can see, I'm just a normal everyday student..... or actually, in a certain sense, I'm not even a student!]

[Anastasia: Ah, no no... I didn't mean that in a bad way. I was just trying to say that the way you spoke was exquisite..... how you cast them into despair only to lift them up again, simply an impeccable use of rhetoric]

Waving off Subaru's protests, Anastasia weakly giggled "*Tahhaha*".

But, hearing this only made Subaru more muddled than ever.

[Subaru: Rhetoric? The hell're you talking about? I blanked out right away and didn't even know what I was saying. All the letters on the cheat-sheet got blurred together and I couldn't remember a thing after I gave up reading]

[Anastasia: Yeah, you pretty much skipped our draft. You can't imagine how I felt when right off the bat you started sayin' things that had nothin' to do with what we discussed..... but it seems I needn't have worried myself]

[Subaru: I'm very sorry about that! But, generally, wasn't it more or less in line with the notes? I mean, if it was that bad, you would've stopped me, right, Anastasia-san?]

The notes in his hand: the cheat-sheet he'd forgotten about at the most crucial moment, was filled with flowery oratory designed to clear away the anxieties of the people in this city.

It was a proud conglomeration of Anastasia's negotiation techniques, Garfiel's vast stores of proverbs, and even some of Subaru's modern knowledge of neat and witty comments.

Even though he couldn't read from it when it actually mattered, he probably had some of its ideas floating around in his head and wound up including them in his speech one way or another.

[Anastasia: I don't know how to put this, but, Natsuki-kun, your speech didn't even touch on anythin' in the notes. I mean, none at all]

[Subaru: ——Eh?]

Without leaving any ambiguity on the matter, Anastasia's words instantly shot down Subaru's speculations.

Suddenly growing rigid, Subaru looked around at the others to confirm if this is true. However, the other four only showed their respective version of awkward faces as Subaru's gaze passed over them.

Among them, Julius took one step forward. And, while picking at his front hair,

[Julius: It's just as Anastasia-sama said, Subaru. Your broadcast didn't contain any of the things we discussed beforehand. In particular, the part that was supposed to have been revealed at the start, about your accomplishment of slaying Sin Archbishop Sloth, was moved into the second half. It was almost to the point that I wanted to ask you what you were trying to do]

[Subaru: Seriously? If I didn't say that, then wasn't I just some super-random-guy to them!? If it was like that, you could've stopped me! Even if I had to start over it would've been better than confusing the hell out of them!]

[Julius: Start over? That's unthinkable]

While Subaru started flipping out at Julius' confession of doubt, Julius shook his head with an expression of complete seriousness.

Then, with almost a sense of reverence towards Subaru,

[Julius: ——It was... a wonderful speech]

[Subaru:Aah?]

[Julius: It didn't matter that you forgot the notes. With your own ability, you've accomplished something far beyond our expectations. I have nothing but praises for your achievement. This is the same sentiment which I had felt when you slew the White Whale and Sloth]

In front of a stunned Subaru, Julius only piled on his exaggerated praises.

In a way that was utterly unlike Julius, Subaru thought he saw excitement in "The Most Perfect Knight"'s eyes. But the moment he regained his senses, Subaru began to suspect that something was up.

What's gotten into this Knight? Could Subaru have upset his composure that much?

[Subaru: Quit joking around... I always thought your jokes aren't very funny, you know]

[Julius: If that sounded like a joke to you, then it's only because you think far too little of yourself. But, then again, perhaps that is exactly what made your speech what it was. It was a speech no one but you could have made]

[Subaru: You really are making fun of me, aren't you?]

Considering the critical situation they were in, Julius' praises were only making Subaru more frustrated.

Subaru had already gotten used to Julius' sarcasm by now, but this wasn't the time to be pointlessly bickering like this. If the speech didn't have the effect they had hoped for, then they'd need to come up with another plan as soon as possible.

[Subaru: Instead of giving people strength, if all I did was make them distrust us, then it won't work even if I try again. Next time someone else should.....]

[Anastasia: Natsuki-kun, that's enough of your self-deprecation, you know? It's making people uncomfortable just listenin']

Saying this, Anastasia put a stop to Subaru's whining from the side.

Glaring at Subaru with a look of disapproval on her adorable face,

[Anastasia: Your speech was exceptionally effective, guess I have to spell it out for you since you can't seem to realize it yourself. ——Natsuki-kun, your speech was more perfect than we could've ever imagined. You have the talent of a true demagogue, you know]

[Ricardo: I'm with th'young miss y'know! *Khhhhyya*, that gave me shivers! What's with you 'n words! Y'make it look easy, bro! The way y'tricked Emilia-sama, Crusch-sama, that lil'girl 'n th'ground dragon into fallin' all over ya, m'l right!?!]

[Subaru: Both of you're saying things I can't just let slide! What d'you mean tricked! Who're you calling a demagogue!]

Listening to their overly-scandalous evaluations, Subaru raised his voice, shouting.

But Anastasia and Ricardo only innocently looked at each other and shrugged. And here, seeing how everyone seemed to be in on it, Subaru began to suspect that they weren't entirely joking.

This grew all the more obvious when he saw Garfiel, squatting on the floor, watching him.

[Garfiel: Capt'n.....]

[Subaru: Garfiel... what do you think?]

[Garfiel: Capt'n's the Capt'n a'right. I was right t'follow ya outta th'Sanctuary..... that's what I think]

[Subaru:Your expectations are always a bit too heavy on me]

[Garfiel: Well that's yer own fault, ain't it, Capt'n]

Garfiel got up and walked over to him, flashing his fangs smiling. Seeing this, Subaru expelled a sigh through his nostrils, and,

[Subaru: In that case, running from my responsibilities would be the same as giving up, wouldn't it. I don't want that to happen... that's probably what I said in the broadcast, right?]

[Anastasia: There you go]

Anastasia smiled, watching Subaru scratching his head, looking deflated as if only just now accepting this. She pumped up her little chest at this unexpectedly good outcome and softly rubbed her scarf with her hand,

[Anastasia: In fact, you've raised everyone's morale so high that I'm gettin' worried they'll start doin' somethin' stupid. Even here, you've got us pumped full of spirit on account of Wrath's Authority, you know]

[Subaru: If you exaggerate like that I'm gonna think you're pulling my leg again..... seriously, just how good of a radio DJ was I, anyway...]

Getting hoisted up higher and higher was only making it harder to wrap his head around it.

Tearing himself away from the whirlpool of warm gazes, Subaru slowly walked up to the arcane device once more.

[Subaru: In any case, if that speech had made a difference, that's better than anything. Hopefully, this'll be enough to stave off any more violence in the refuge shelters..... So, any thoughts on our next step?]

[Anastasia: Now that the citizens are calmed down, we've taken care of everything apart from the root cause itself. However, after Natsuki-kun's speech, the Witch Cult definitely knows about our intentions now.....]

[Subaru: Wonder what their reaction will be. Like you guys said, aside from the fact that it'll be irrational, there's not much else to go on. At the same time, we must settle this as soon as possible]

Regardless of the effectiveness of Subaru's speech, it didn't change the fact that the means to destroy this city was still held in the hands of lunatics. Even with the greatest optimism, chances were, the Great Water Gates would be released at the stroke of midnight and the city would be swallowed beneath the flood.

No matter what, they must end this before that happens.

[Anastasia: And to do this, we'll need to capture all four towers at once..... correct?]

[Subaru: There are four Sin Archbishops and two enemies we don't know about. We'll need to consult with our forces on how to tackle this]

Simultaneously capturing all four Control Towers is the necessary condition for saving this city.

Concentrating their forces like they did for assault on the City Hall wouldn't work here. Since, as soon as they attack any of the towers, there would be the risk of the other three releasing the floodgates.

Subaru wasn't confident that they could survive these odds four times in a row.

Up against six major enemies, their fighting strength was——

[Subaru: It's a... difficult hand. There's the chance it could turn into a repeat of our attack on the City Hall. But..... if we could have at least one more card]

[???: ——In that case, how about a Joker?]

While Subaru counted their forces on the fingers of his hands, a voice abruptly chimed in.

Without thinking, Subaru turned towards the figure standing at the entrance of the room, and,

[Subaru: Sounds like in the time since I last saw you, your evaluation of yourself has gone up quite a bit?]

[???: Not nearly as much as Natsuki-san, being asked to make speeches and all..... I never thought I had a hero among my friends, but guess I was wrong]

[Subaru: Still don't think it suits me, though]

Seeing the figure shoot him a mischievous smile, Subaru shrugged his shoulders and laughed. Then, walking up to the entrance, he gave that smiling figure a high-five.

Watching this reunion, Garfiel's face also brightened,

[Garfiel: Otto-bro! Yer safe, ain't ya!]

At Garfiel's delighted call, Otto, who had been missing since the troubles started, answered with a nod. Aside from the dirt on his clothing, Otto seemed completely unhurt. Joining them, he gave the approaching Garfiel a high five as well,

[Otto: I barely escaped with my life. It's a miracle that I survived and somehow made it here alive. Glad to see you two are safe. Though, I know you guys are way harder to kill than I am, so I wasn't all that worried]

[Subaru: Is that right. Actually, I wasn't all that worried about you either. Why is that?]

[Garfiel: I dunno. That's just Otto-bro's natural-vibes maybe?]

[Otto: Can't you worry about me a little more!? In this kind of crisis, it was extremely dangerous to be out there alone, you know!?!]

But, in reality, he did manage to rejoin them, so that wasn't very convincing.

Anyway, while they were in the middle of this joyous reunion, Anastasia clapped her hands and squeezed herself into the conversation,

[Anastasia: Alright alright, calm down calm down. First off, it's nice to see that Otto-kun is alive. And I'm sure there're mountains of things you want to ask each other about what you've been up to and such, but...]

Cutting off her words there, Anastasia shot Otto a glare with her green-onion-colored eyes,

[Anastasia: That conspicuous remark you just made..... mind telling me what it meant?]

[Otto: The Joker, right? It's a simple story. If I let him come in right away, my survival would've been pretty much overlooked, so I cleverly asked him to wait outside for a bit]

Looking a little embarrassed, Otto walked over to the door at Anastasia's prodding and gave a signal to someone on the other side of the door.

Preceded by the sound of footsteps, a new character walked into the room. And,

[?????: ——*Sorry I'm late*]

One sentence. And that utterance alone charged its listeners with the feeling of being reinforced by ten thousand men.

Alongside the sensation of a gust of wind sweeping by, was the illusion of a towering flame appearing

before their eyes, compelling their hearts to shudder.

And in reality, this reunion did indeed hold that kind of power.

For the strength that they have been dying to obtain had arrived.

[Reinhard: *Reinhard van Astrea*—— *it's a bit late, but I've come to join you*]

Saying this, the red-flame Sword Saint announced his intention to join the fight.

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Chapter 43 - The Rendezvous



[Forgive me for not providing assistance at this critical moment. I can only reflect on how I was lacking.]

Receiving the gazes of those present inside, Reinhardt apologized.

At the sight of the Sword Saint with bowed head, everyone grew silent for a moment.

Speaking out harshly in response to his apology would be a simple matter. But, words of blame were easier to form than ones which conveyed true intent.

In truth, that all this time they were in dire need of his power, and Reinhardt had been missing with his status unknown had not changed.

At the moment City Hall was being retaken, if that same strength had been there, it was unthinkable.

So even simply negative words, did not easily emerge from anyone's lips.

Only,

[Really, you idiot. Because you weren't here, how hard do you think it was for us?]

Approaching that crimson hero, Subaru called out while shoving his chest.

As that fist lightly touched him, Reinhardt, with an attitude like he could not justify himself to Subaru turned his gaze away. At that scolded and crestfallen appearance unbecoming of him, Subaru snorted.

[You know, if you're coming anyway, just show up 15 minutes earlier! Then I wouldn't have to give a speech not fitting my character at all. That's supposed to be your job.]

[Sorry..... However, it was a great speech fitting of you. Though many things are required of me, giving courage-rousing broadcasts of that extent is not something I could do. You were the right choice.]

[Between me and you, the required role for that broadcast is a little different, I think.]

At that bitterly smiling Reinhardt's chest, Subaru shoved once again. And, he also poked the tip of that downcast hero's nose with a finger.

[Reinhardt.]

[..... ?]

[Since you came it's like a hundred guys did, no, a thousand. If it's just that, I can expect that much right? I'm counting on it?]

[———]

It was power that rivaled the force of the tides. Subaru's hundredfold, even thousandfold evaluation was laughable.

At Subaru's expectation-filled question, Reinhardt's blue eyes blinked. But that hesitation immediately faded, and Reinhardt's lips formed into a smile.

[Aah, count on me. If you would expect that much of me, I will comply.]

[That somehow-making-women-happy-type kind of talk, can you not stop that? What, enough..... And with that, if everyone now has something they want to say, please tell us.]

Seeing that initial discomfort disappear from Reinhardt's face as he laughed, Subaru turned and looked back. Gazing over at those that until then had not said anything, he indicated Reinhardt.

[At these times, the side that gets special treatment suffers much more. Besides, a chance to scold this sword saint that wants to be scolded doesn't happen often. So as much as you want to, do it, do it.]

[———]

[After confessing what's on our minds, let's talk.—About how to help everyone.]

Opening his heart, Subaru spoke like that.

At that attitude, the mood was of one holding their breath.

Otto and Garfiel, only those two were used to Subaru's bravado and were smiling at that.

Anyway, having one or two fellows there see through to his true intentions was just right.

They did not have to hold in their thoughts, because it was right after he had made that kind of speech.

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After that, Reinhardt's personal talking to (details omitted) was held, and again talk of how to recapture the city started up again.

Even saying that, other than Reinhardt and Otto's thoughts agreeing, there was no clear improvement. The number of enemies that they could not avoid attacking, and the capture strategy of hitting all control towers simultaneously did not change.

[But in the midst of this chaos, where was Reinhardt and what was he up to?]

As they all sat around in a circle talking, Subaru moved to start with that question.

Reinhardt's expression clouded at his words. Today, his face often grew like that.

[You don't have Felt with you, and there's a lot of things I want to hear about. Ah, something like scolding you, this isn't like that? On that matter, with the words from just before, I am treating it like nothing happened.]

[What Natsuki-kun was sayin', well, 's a part that bothers me too. No way the 『Sword Saint』 got scared and was hidin', I wasn't thinking anything like that. But I am wantin' to hear a convincing reason.]

At Subaru's question, Anastasia joined in. Looking carefully at Anastasia's attitude, it definitely seemed like she had been receiving reports from Julius.

Right before the turmoil began, Reinhardt and Felt were contacting Heinkel together, she said.

After that question from her, Reinhardt's expression clouding over seemed to be proof of that assertion.

Wilhelm too, but when it came to Heinkel the Astreas' explanations were very vague. Saying that, their approach was like—,

[Like someone stuck inside for ten years, and now is a pro-NEET child that's treated as a tumor by the aged parents.....]

[Natsuki-san is jumping to weird delusions so I'm sorry, but what will you do? If it is hard for Reinhardt-san to say, then I can speak, but.]

While Subaru recalled flashes of a evening news special on Hikikomori, Otto chimed in. His worried gaze was directed at Reinhardt, and his tone held an apologetic sort of mood.

[And you came together with Reinhardt, right, but could you have been with him during the turmoil too?]

[No, there was nothing like that? I joined up with Reinhardt-san at the last moment..... However, I have mostly figured out the situation.]

[Thank you, Otto. But this is a problem of my House. Truly, it is a difficult topic to discuss, but it would be for the best to speak of it myself.]

At Otto's consideration, Reinhardt bowed his head and refused his offer.

He gazed ahead, and drew his posture straight a moment later.

[Firstly, though I have said it many times, let me apologize once more. While being in a position that should assist from the very beginning, for many hours I could not join together to help with the situation. I deeply apologize, and take this matter seriously.]

[.....On that point our view is as we said just now. We cannot forgive everything like there was no problem. However, you are needed in the upcoming battle. If you seek to repent, then perform well in the fights to come.]

[I will do that, Julius....When the Witch Cult first broadcast, Felt-sama and I were at the 2nd Street corner being called upon. The one summoning us was Vice-Captain Heinkel.]

Reinhardt, who had started speaking, called Heinkel "Vice-Captain" in a stiff voice.

It was widely known that they were father and son. Even with that, calling his father by title, it was plenty to bring about the realization that the relationship between the two was not just a simple father-son relationship.

[After that fighting and separation from before, Felt obeyed a summons from him?]

[Felt-sama too, in her heart would have wanted to refuse. However, the talk was regarding a matter under the authority of Astrea's Lord, so the option of rejection did not exist. What request would be made was unknown to us.....Felt-sama accompanying me, we headed towards the appointed place.]

[How did the talk there become decided.....]

[My apologies, but as that matter is directly related to and regarding the Royal Selection. I would appreciate being allowed not to elaborate. It is enough to say, the talk did not go smoothly.]

Reinhardt tone of voice was falling, and it was easy to figure out the talk had gone poorly.

Even if it wasn't like that, Felt lacked experience dealing with negative emotions.

Taking Heinkel's despicable nature into account, it was not difficult to imagine how the talk would have played out.

In the midst of such conversation—,

[Then, the Witch Cult's first broadcast happened. While we could hardly believe our ears, it was clear we needed to move immediately. If there was a truly dire situation. it was my intention to head out right away. The other retainers, they also had a method to call for me if needed prepared beforehand.]

That method was, to launch magic into the sky at any time. It would be the signal.

When Sirius appeared, if Latius fired off the signal Reinhardt always ran to the scene within 30 seconds. What he said was true.

However, Reinhardt had heard the Witch Cult's so-called broadcast and its clear malice yet still did not move. He did not come running to the scene, and not just that, for several hours later he had kept silent.

That was so.. Why the hell?

[The broadcast, that it claimed to be sent from City Hall, you would have known that too. At that point, you would have had the option to run to City Hall.Then why, didn't you come?]

[———]

It was not that he was scolding him. That was not the intent, but his voice was hard as he pressed for answers.

There were more than a few things that occurred to him. If before that hard-fought City Hall recapture, Reinhardt's presence had arrived there.—Even now, Crusch who was fighting her suffering would not have been harmed. It might even have ended without Subaru's right leg suffering its strange accident.

Though it was not intentional, the gazes growing harsh here were not just Subaru's.

Receiving the stares of everyone in the room, Reinhardt, who had until then been speaking fluently closed his mouth, and lowered his gaze once again.

With long lashes and shining eyes, in front of that he was hesitant to speak any words.

Even so, after those few conflicted seconds slowly passed, the hero's stopped words started again.

[—Vice-Captain Heinkel had, taken Felt-sama as a hostage.]

[.....]

[That is my, irreversible failure. Felt-sama was grabbed, and a sword was held against her neck to stop my movements. And so, I could not act.]

Speaking those words, Subaru clearly understood why Reinhardt had struggled with it so much.

The mistress he should give his all for, by none other than his father's hands had been taken captive.

Humiliated and shamed, just how much had Reinhardt mentally blamed himself?

[.....Che, what's that? That, Vice-Captain, is he a pawn of the Witch Cult or something?]

Receiving a shocking confession, Subaru while considering Reinhardt's feelings was muttering to himself. Was that, a truth too cruel. The Witch Cult was hidden here and there, so who could know who was a cultist, that he had heard. But to appear among family like that was something he did not even want to think about. Besides Petelgeuse, after seeing the reality of the other Sin Archbishops, he now thought that even more strongly. Because the Witch Cultists were all, the lowest of the low, mere human trash.

[—If it was like that, how would I react. My feelings, how might they be..]

[What?]

However, at Subaru's offered conclusion—Of those present, about half seemed convinced, and Reinhardt with a somewhere catching voice responded.

That attitude of his, Subaru wondered at it. However, the other half, made up of Anastasia, Julius, and Otto, were making expressions that said they had come to another conclusion.

[The Vice-Captain, is not a member of the Witch Cult.At least in his remarks after seizing Felt-sama, I saw nothing that suggested that.]

[Then what is it, is he some kind of idiot? No, even if he isn't stupid it is fine..... Then, why? Why take Felt hostage? Doing something like that, what point—]

Is there, Subaru was about to say when he realized.

The depressed look on Reinhardt's face and the pitying one on Otto. Seeing those, the conclusion he drew almost made him want to laugh.

He could not smile at that. There was no way to save it. If you say that, Heinkel's actions,

[It wasn't, just because he wanted to keep you there?]

[—————]

[From the Witch Cult broadcast, he realized the city was dangerous.....So, to quickly get himself safe and protected, he just want to dearly hold onto the strongest guy there?]

[.....The Vice-Captain was saying.. Your precious mistress and father are both here. Will you abandon them to save some bastards whose faces you don't even know?]

[Your own father spouted that bullshit!]

Subaru struck the floor with his fist.

All day today, in the repeating morning he had met this anger face-to-face. But no way, he had never imagined feeling this furious about an opponent completely unrelated to the Witch Cult.

[I had no words to reply with. Of course, Felt-sama was saying it was all a bluff. Since she would be fine, go rescue the others.—But remaining there even then, was my decision. The blame indeed lies with myself.]

[How does it go there! Whose fault it is, it's obvious to everyone here who that is!]

[Even so, the choice was mine.]

At the shouting Subaru, Reinhardt would not concede his share of the blame.

That obstinate Reinhardt, he probably wouldn't bend on that no matter what anyone said. Subaru furiously held his tongue, and forced his violent feelings to calm down.

[Nevertheless, in that way I became trapped in a stalemate. What happened after is nothing remarkable. Even after further broadcasts I was left unable to act.....I merely received severe scoldings from Felt-sama.]

[But she's not with you, is Felt-chan doin' alright?]

Anastasia asked the wryly smiling Reinhardt.

That girl who was feeling up her shawl while making a hard-to-read blank look, showed concern for Felt's state as she had not joined them.

[Bein' held hostage like that for hours would be quite tiring mentally. Now that Reinhardt-kun is here like this doin' this, I'm thinkin' the issue has probably been all sorted out though.]

[Yes, that is the case. Felt-sama is now joined with her retainers at a shelter. The Vice-Captain has been arrested and Felt-sama is watching over him.]

[Arrested.....He was caught, huh.]

[That much I happily accepted. But without Otto's cooperation, even that could hardly have been achieved, I think.]

[Otto's name shows up here, huh.]

At the Otto who had not shown signs of appearing until now, Subaru furrowed his brows. Otto was, now at his turn lightly clearing his throat to call for attention.

[The matter was like that. Even saying so, how I arrived at that scene was the result of coinciding chance and coincidence. Simply since I was aware of the relationship between the three, by happening upon the scene I could roughly come to understand the situation.]

The Astreas' family problems and the situation with Felt's royal candidacy.

Knowing that much already, he had spotted Heinkel holding Reinhardt in place with Felt as a hostage. Even if your brain had bad circulation, you could still figure out what the situation was with that.

[I, too, understood that being unable to borrow Reinhardt's power in the fight against the Witch Cult was the worst-case scenario. At the same time I grew pale, and thought of how I could help.]

[And so Otto somehow drew attention to himself, and somehow Felt was freed. That was how Reinhardt was able to move, and now he managed to reach us.....Like that, is that right?]

[Luckily, Natsuki-san's big speech happened too, so the meetup point was decided without any worry. It would have been nice if we could have moved a little faster, but I had much going on as well.]

Though it was short, at Otto's contribution Reinhardt nodded as well.

Again, while people are not looking secretly acting well, it is the shadowy savior Otto.

[But still, just how has things with Otto-san been up to now? Honestly walking around the city with Otto-san's strength, it's fine to see that as acting suicidal.]

[About that, there were a lot of twists and turns.....No, I will talk about it.]

Clearing his throat, Otto indicated the outside of the City Hall building.

[As scheduled for the morning, I left for the Muse Company alone. To request of Kiritaka-san the resuming of negotiations. That side had also cooled their head after one night passed, and it seemed a promise of further negotiations could be obtained without much issue.....]

[It seemed, but?]

At the moment he stopped talking and paused, the Witch Cult would have started their broadcast, Subaru guessed.

However, Otto resumed speaking while shaking his head.

[At the location of the Muse Company, the 3rd Street plaza, the Witch Cult.....A Sin Archbishop made an appearance. That figure created an uproar, so the Witch Cult attack was discovered.]

[An Archbishop.....! Before the broadcast?]

[Yes. Indeed, before the broadcast.]

Otto confirmed for the surprised Subaru, who was leaning forward.

But, if you thought about it, that was not impossible. If one were to speak of Sin Archbishops acting before the broadcast, Sirius and Regulus were included too.

Other than Capella who was then attacking City Hall, those Archbishops with free time in Pristella would have been doing something, the likelihood was high—,

[Wait, Otto.]

[————]

At the Subaru whose tone of voice had lowered, Otto's gaze had a grim light.

That worried attitude of his, it confirmed the thoughts appearing in Subaru's imagination.

Sirius and Regulus were both encountering Subaru at the time and so could not be there. Capella too would have been participating in the attack on City Hall.

Saying that, the Archbishop appearing before Otto could only be one.

[The one you met by chance, could it be the Archbishop of 『Gluttony』 ?]

[.....Yes. He was claiming to be such. There is no specific reason to lie about it, so I think it is the truth. At the plaza, introducing himself as the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, he still appeared to be a child.]

Otto's testimony, matched up with what Subaru had seen of Roy Alphard.

The selection standard for Archbishops, it was not that he wanted to know anything about that, but 『Gluttony』 was at least outwardly a child. A rag-draped, dirty looking child. In words as well as attitude he seemed just like a kid.

[At first, unsure if it was an abandoned child someone called them while drawing closer. Since he was standing guard near the Muse Company, I think it was one of the 『White Dragon's Scales』. That person was, the first to succumb to 『Gluttony』. Literally, I became unable to move.]

[.....]

[Just like that, a person is simply done in, even if it seemed unreal you could not help but believe it. Immediately, more 『White Dragon's Scales』 all moved to surround him, but it did not come to a happy end.]

With a face growing blue, Otto quietly spoke of that wrenched spectacle.

『Gluttony』, as if he was dancing, simply cut through the mercenaries in order. What was even scarier was, the keen nose of 『Gluttony』 —It was a sense of smell which never lost track of his prey.

[Because it was that situation, without worrying about who was first, they all tried to run away. However, that guy did not allow that. What he did, I in truth do not know. But even faraway people definitely had attacks from 『Gluttony』 reach them. Even inside buildings, it was the same.]

[What, was he after?]

After absentmindedly asking, Subaru realized it was a meaningless question.

The acts of the Witch Cult, the motives of those guys had nothing like certainty. Actually, Otto turned his head instead of replying.

[Let's see, what could it have been.. But anyway, it became a dire situation. Even those trying to flee from that spot, the moment their back was shown they might be attacked. There were few there but it was a complete dead end..... If Kiritaka-san was not there, I think I too could not have made it here.]

[Kiritika, how did he do that?]

[To begin with, it seems he was a careful person. In the president's office of the Muse Company, there was an underground concealed passage in the building connected to the channel. I escaped from out there using a small boat. While running away, I saw Kiritaka-san's back being cut open.]

[—————]

[From the 3rd street, I disorderly ran away is what I am saying. After that, the Witch Cult broadcast happened and it became impossible to walk around in the city carelessly, nevertheless I cautiously moved around the area. Then that happened, and we barely managed to meet, the scene described just before.]

In other words, by “the scene” he means the one where he found Reinhardt stuck.

As the story linked up that far, at the same moment Subaru understood that Otto had gone through suffering, and had again by any means managed to survive.

But, in what was said just now, weighing on his thoughts,

[Why did Kiritika go that far? If it was like you said, he even sacrificed his own body to aid in Otto's escape. That was how it sounded like to me.]

[.....Yes, indeed. Kiritika-san, by sacrificing himself let me escape. At the end, him being slashed, was because he pushed me to the floor and covered me with his body.]

[Why go so far.....]

Inside Subaru, his mental picture of Kiritika was almost nonexistent. Even the slight image he had was, of his face going red, him screaming, throwing the magic stones while shaking, it was that situation only. Of course, that this was all there was to the man was not what he had assumed.

But to sacrifice his body trying to save a stranger. That level of strength, in the end he had not seen in him.

[Since I was a customer invited to his shop, he might have held something like a trader's pride. But definitely, it would seem he had a better reason for himself as well. One a little, easier to understand.]

[Easier to understand, you say]

[Did you not realize? It's Natsuki-san.]

To the confused Subaru, Otto firmly asserted as he gave that reply.

When his name appeared abruptly, Subaru was shaken.

At that Subaru's reaction, Otto closed his eyes for a while,

[Looking on the existence known as the Archbishop of Sin, and seeing his own subordinates fall, Kiritika-san must have had something faint left in his inner thoughts. Just, he must have held onto some sense of duty, I think. Then the one that became his hope was, you, Natsuki-san.]

[.....]

[After the happenings of the day before, Kiritika-san already knew about Natsuki-san remaining here. And definitely about your achievement of vanquishing 『Sloth』 as well. If so, then naturally that would flow into hope. Putting saving me first over all else, it must be because he expected me to join with Natsuki-san as a partner.]

Otto's explanation fit perfectly, and it slammed into Subaru's chest with a thud.

But that nevertheless, was an unreasonable story.

With his head, he knew. To go on, to carry that, it was true, he had decided that already.

But, is it that again. Was everyone expecting that from Subaru?

Just a small, hopeless, and useless person, were they really trusting the fate of the city to someone like that?

[Natsuki-san, please do not misunderstand?]

Unknowingly forming a cynical smile, Subaru was pulled back by a voice.

Otto looked straight ahead, as if gazing into Subaru. He spoke to that stiffening Subaru's expression while shrugging,

[Kiritaka-san too, in his head would have thought of various angles, regarding his role and responsibility to the city. That Natsuki-san too is hesitating about bearing the fate of the city, I am aware. But, definitely, what Kiritaka-san entrusted Natsuki-san with is a slightly simpler matter.]

[.....What?]

[It is obvious. Somewhere in this city is, the woman Kiritika-san loves. Before wishing for the safety of the city, what he would have hoped for most from Natsuki-san, was for his loved one to be safe.]

[———]

[Because when he pushed me onto the floor, that is what he said.]

In short, Otto wanted to tell Subaru, you struggle too much.

Having taken up the fate of the city just because he felt like it and now worried about that, watching that Subaru now struggling under that weight, he could not help but speak those words.

And that over everything else, stabbed at the tough-acting Subaru's heart strongly.

His face growing hot, Subaru felt ashamed of himself.

What is this city's fate, what is all this of hopes and expectations, how ridiculously stupid.

The city, which would find itself in disaster if it was not lifted up and saved, that was just what he was seeing.

A something, which if Subaru failed to protect then it wouldn't do, it was not like those outwardly obvious and hard words. Making up the city was a person, a single person. Just one, and then another.. It was those lives that mattered.

And each of those lives in turn had another precious to them, and it was just a matter of saving those connections.

[To think of it not as bearing a single large entity, but instead as lifting many small parts of the whole on your back, does that ease your feelings a bit?]

Otto's assistant power was just too high, Subaru really could only give into to him.

That Subaru's face which had only been lowered before turned upwards, and at that result Otto seemed satisfied.

[What's that, isn't it a nice relationship? Lookin' at it even makes me a little jealous.]

Sensing a pause in their chat, Anastasia threw out a joke like that. Sitting around, having almost gazed face-to-face as they talked, Subaru and Otto there reflected on themselves.

And then gazing again at all of them, Anastasia tilted her head.

[Even sayin' so, based on what you said.....The Muse Company is finished..]

[We cannot know for sure, that is the truth. I only saw up to Kiritaka-san being slashed, but whether that wound was life-threatening..]

[That 『Gluttony』's motives, is thinking about it a waste of time? To me, no matter what, the idea that he caused that disturbance for no reason is unthinkable.]

The one who had spoken was Julius, making a disgusted face.

That assertive tone of voice stuck in one's mind.

[Don't just get weird like that. Is there, some piece of evidence for that?]

[.....No, that there is some clear basis for it, I cannot claim. It is merely my impression from crossing swords with him at City Hall. That one, to write him off merely as a simple hedonist is mistaken, I believe.]

In that, Subaru was also in agreement. He was not simply a hedonist, he was a malicious hedonist.

But that impression, was it not a different answer than what Julius was assuming..

[According to the broadcast, wasn't 『Gluttony』's request about an artificial spirit? Maybe, there is a chance he had gone to find it?]

[If it is indeed a possibility. However, the more pressing question is, first, should we not suspect whether the being known as an 『Artificial Spirit』 even exists? Truly, is there even such a thing?]

While Subaru was keeping his mouth shut, Reinhardt joined in.

His question, many others that had heard the broadcast's demands must have had as well.

The answer to it, in this place only Subaru and Anastasia knew.

Without meaning to, Subaru peeked at Anastasia's face, but her expression was unchanged, as expected of her experience. She had no intention of being discovered, is that what she was saying?

[—Sorry, just one thing.]

In front of Subaru, who was wavering in his judgement, Otto was again requesting attention.

That guy, with a touch of anxiety held in his face, let out a sigh mixed with resignation.

And,

[On the matter of the artificial spirit, it is also difficult for me to know. But regarding another request, about the 『Book of Wisdom』 from the contents of 『Wrath』 's.]

Cutting off his words there, after a moment of hesitation Otto spoke.

※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※

Chapter 44 - Nothing Left Unsaid

Otto raised his hand and dropped that bombshell, plunging everyone in the room into a state of shock. The unverified existence of the “Book of Wisdom” was just confirmed, not by anyone else but by one of their own. It was only natural that they’d be shocked—— with Subaru being the most shocked of them all.

[Subaru: Wh-why would you have the Book of Wisdom?]

[Otto: Before you misunderstand, let me explain. I was indeed the one who brought the so-called Book of Wisdom into the city, but the book isn't mine. I was pretty shocked when I heard the Witch Cult's request as well]

[Anastasia: “*So-called*”? That's a curious way to put it. What do you mean?]

As Otto's answered the shaken Subaru, Anastasia picked up on that descriptor and asked. At that, Otto looked around at the others, and,

[Otto: You guys all know about the Book of Wisdom, right? Simply put, it's like the Gospels... those suspicious-looking books of prophecy that the Witch Cultists have..... except it seems to be the original. I heard that the difference in accuracy is huge]

[Anastasia: The Gospel's original...? It might be a stretch, but that reminds me of the prophecies of the Dragon Annal Stone. Though of course, their credibility, reputation, and standpoints are nowhere near the same]

[Otto: I've never seen the Dragon Annal Stone and the Gospel's prophecies in action so I can't say anything about their reliability..... and the same goes for the Book of Wisdom, I'm afraid. By the time I got my hands on it, the book was already nothing more than mostly-burned remains]

[Subaru: Burned remains.....]

Otto's description matched the fates of both volumes of the Book of Wisdom in Subaru's mind.

One belonged to Beatrice, and was lost in the flames of the burning Forbidden Library. The other belonged to Roswaal, and, according to Ram, was lost in the burning Sanctuary.

It was hard to say how much of its creator, Echidona's testimony could be trusted, but if her words were to be believed—— then both volumes should have been burned.

In that case, what Otto obtained must be its charred remains.

[Anastasia: I see. I think I know why Otto-kun brought the book into Priestella now. It's to seek the help of Restoration Master Dartz, isn't it?]

[Otto:That's correct]

With that simple reply, Otto nodded to Anastasia's conclusion. Though both Julius and Reinhard appeared to accept this with an air of understanding, Subaru seemed confused by the term he had never heard before.

[Subaru: Hey don't all suddenly go "Ahh" and leave me out of the loop here. What's a Restoration Master?]

[Anastasia: Just as the name implies, they are Light Magic specialists who can restore objects to their original forms. Dartz, who lives in this city, is quite a famous member of their circle. Even books that are more than half damaged can be restored with pretty good results, if given enough time]

[Otto: I managed to make contact with Master Dartz and give him the remains of the Book of Wisdom. So the book should be in his workshop at the moment]

With Otto's testimony, the Book of Wisdom's whereabouts has finally been revealed.

[Garfiel: But then, when did Otto-bro meet that guy?]

[Otto: Yesterday, after the negotiations with Muse Company fell apart. Once everyone went their separate ways, I paid a visit to Master Dartz. We had a chat in private, and he seemed pretty enthusiastic about taking on the job.....]

Subaru could just imagine Otto going pale in the face when he heard “Book of Wisdom” come up during the upheavals today.

That explains how the burned Book of Wisdom survived and why it was brought to this city, but Otto’s motives were still unknown. Just why would he want to restore the Book of Wisdom?

Honestly, Subaru had no good impressions for the Book of Wisdom.

It was an ominous book not only associated with its creator, Echidona, but with the Gospels in the hands of the Witch Cult. It was the reason Beatrice was bound in the Forbidden Library for four hundred years, and the reason Roswaal’s plots wrought violence upon the Sanctuary.

The truth is, Subaru was relieved when he heard that the books were destroyed.

[Otto: I won’t go into the details of how I acquired it or why it’s here to be restored. I only intended to clarify the Book of Wisdom’s existence and its current location. Anything beyond that is an internal matter within our faction]

[Julius: But now we have the Witch Cult listing the Book of Wisdom as one of their demands. Whose responsibility do you think that is?]

[Otto: I don’t think anything the Witch Cult does can be blamed on anyone other than the Witch Cult. But if you insist on it, I’ll have to make some unfriendly remarks of my own]

Otto stood his ground in front of Julius’ protests. And, seeing Otto turn his gaze to Anastasia, Julius quickly shook his head.

[Julius: My apologies. I said something useless just now. Naturally, I have no intention of laying the blame on you. The Witch Cult’s crimes will be properly repaid when we exact punishment upon them]

[Otto: Agreed]

Otto nodded to Julius’ determined words while stealing a glance at Subaru. But, seeing that secret gaze, Subaru couldn’t say a word.

What was Otto thinking? Even if Subaru had no intention of suspecting him, he still had no idea what he was up to. Seeing Subaru like this, Otto quietly moved his lips,

{Otto: Let's talk later}

The message got through.

He'll explain everything, then. In that case, they better put the matter on hold for now.

[Reinhard: Now that the Book of Wisdom's existence has been confirmed, we can't be so sure that the part about Artificial Spirits is just delusional ramblings]

With that settled, Reinhard started off with the new topic.

Though it was only going with the flow of things, now that Otto has already revealed something potentially disadvantageous to himself, there was no reason for Subaru to continue withholding his.

[Subaru: Anastasia-san]

[Anastasia: I know I know. Well, this won't be easy]

Seeing Subaru seeking her consent, Anastasia took off the scarf around her neck. She spread it out on the table, while everyone else tilted their heads at her determined expression.

But, what she did next turned all their tilted heads straight.

[Anastasia: —No need to play possum anymore, Echidona. You can speak up now]

[Scarf-fox: In *my* case, rather than "*playing possum*", wouldn't "*playing fox*" be more appropriate, Ana?]

[—!]

Following Anastasia's call, the white fox scarf stretched out its limbs with a will of its own. Seeing this, the same expressions of shock washed over Julius and Ricardo's faces.

It seems Anastasia had hidden Artificial Spirit Echidona's existence even from the members of her own faction.

[Ricardo: Hey Miss... I dunno that thing. The hell is that thing.....]

[Anastasia: Sorry for hidin' it from you, Ricardo. Julius too. ——This child would be the Artificial Spirit we're talkin' about. Her name's Echidona, and she's been my partner in crime for a long, long time]

[Scarf-fox: Hey Ricardo. It'd be pretty awkward to introduce myself like we've just met when I've technically known you for ages. We can be all buddy-buddy just like usual if you want]

Echidona was exceptionally friendly to a Ricardo who looked like he was looking at something creepy. And, as off-put as Ricardo was by the white fox's attitude, Julius' face looked even more shocked. Faced with the secret his master had hidden from him, his pupils were wavering with a rare and unconcealable dismay,

[Julius:then that means, Anastasia-sama is also a Spirits-Arts User?]

[Anastasia: Nnnn~ not exactly. There is no Spiritual Contract between me and Echidona. I just don't have the knack for it. And also, unlike ordinary spirits, Echidona can't fight at all]

[Scarf-fox: That's right, I'm as incompetent as it gets. I'm afraid I might even be the weakest spirit there is. So weak that even the Spirit-Knight couldn't sense my presence]

[Julius: Is that, so..... no, but then.....]

Julius' suspicions were dismissed by Anastasia and Echidona in turn. But, rather than being assured, he turned his gaze toward Subaru, who was standing at the sidelines.

There was a certain sharpness in the yellow gaze he directed at Subaru.

[Julius: Why does Subaru look like he already knows? When I... as your Knight... didn't know, how could he...]

[Anastasia: It's not like that. It's...]

[Subaru: It's because she's an Artificial Spirit, just like my partner, Beatrice. After we heard the Witch Cult's demands, Anastasia-san explained it to me.So I only found out really recently, not much different from you]

[Julius: She's an Artificial Spirit.....? Anastasia-sama, is this true?]

Cutting Anastasia off, Subaru explained to the stupefied Julius. Seeing Anastasia nod to his question, Julius muttered [Is that so...] and briefly closed his eyes as if to take it all in before exhaling a deep sigh.

[Julius: I'm sorry I interrupted you. Please forgive me for any displeasure I might have caused you, Anastasia-sama. I am deeply ashamed]

[Anastasia: I've no right to chastise you when I've been keepin' it secret all this time. I should be askin' your forgiveness instead]

Julius gave Subaru a nod and apologized to Anastasia. But, seeing Julius' apology from the side, Ricardo grabbed Echidona off of the table.

[Ricardo: Still, that's really mean, Miss! How long have we known each other? Why'd ya keep somethin' like that from me? I'm kinda hurt! Is that all we are to each other?]

[Scarf-fox: I'd appreciate if you don't handle me so roughly. Even in this form, I'm still quite finicky about my hair. And we wouldn't want to damage Ana's adorable appearance, now would we?]

[Ricardo: Pretty glib-tongued, ain't ya. Ugh, nevermind. I'll let it go this time]

After pulling and squishing it to his heart's content, Ricardo seemed satisfied and let the white fox go. Landing on the table, the white fox quickly scuttled over to Anastasia, wrapped around her neck, and became inanimate once more.

Having resided there for long, it was impressive how quickly it could return to its lifeless state.

[Anastasia: And so, the Artificial Spirits exist as well.That said, just like Otto-kun's Book of Wisdom, I've no intention of handing this child over to the Witch Cult]

[Subaru: Sorry for keeping it secret. But, it's the same with me. Beako is my partner. I won't even let her hold hands with those lunatics]

Anastasia and Subaru both asserted their decision to refuse the Witch Cult's demands.

Hearing this, Reinhard nodded, and,

[Reinhard: I know. Of course. We cannot accept a single one of their demands. Although, perhaps the one about wedding their bride could be overlooked]

[Subaru: Absolutely not! Because the bride those assholes are talking about is Emilia!]

[Otto: Pff!? Emilia-sama's been taken!? And here I was wondering why I haven't seen her around, so she's in trouble!? Couldn't you have brought it up sooner!?!]

Reinhard widened his eyes, and the shocking news sent Otto's eyes spinning. Subaru clenched his teeth in front of those two's reactions and continued with [Sorry...],

[Subaru: It was all my fault, I watched her get taken away. But, since they're talking about a wedding, they shouldn't have done anything to hurt her. So we have to go over there, kill them, and bring her back. Absolutely, absolutely...]

[Reinhard: —Yes, we will. We absolutely cannot allow this]

Just the thought of Regulus sent rage boiling within Subaru's mind, and, in support of that indignation, Reinhard burnished his intent to fight.

It was an aura so dependable that it was terrifying. Without a doubt, his presence was tremendously reassuring.

And, at this thought, Subaru turned his gaze to the corner of the room—— toward the man who had stayed out of the conversation thus far.

Sitting there, leaning against the wall, his expression was hidden behind his helmet.

[Subaru: Hey, Al. You should join the conversation too. You haven't said a word since the end of the speech. Our most lethal weapon got held up all because of that guy you brought. You better do something to make up for that, you know]

Walking over, Subaru called to the downcast Al.

And, sighing at the lack of a reaction, Subaru brought up Reinhard's father—— Heinkel.

Heinkel had taken Felt hostage and effectively pinned Reinhard in place.

This clear-cut betrayal by turning a weapon on a Royal Selection candidate was not only a crime of lese-majesty, but fell nothing short of treason. Normally, there's no way an offender could escape the death sentence after committing such a heinous crime, but just how will Reinhard handle this?

At least, Subaru couldn't glean it from the side of Reinhard's face.

[Al: ——I'm sorry, but I'm out]

[Subaru:hah?]

Perhaps distracted with his thoughts on Reinhard, Subaru didn't react until Al had already stood up.

Taking his back off of the wall, Al looked like he was about to walk right past Subaru. Realizing this, Subaru quickly grabbed Al's shoulder, turning him around.

[Subaru: W-wait! You're out? What're you talking about? We need every fighter we can get right now, and you want to leave us? What're you, crazy?]

[Al: Crazy or whatever, you'd be crazy to count me as a fighter to begin with. Any random guy you pull from the shelters who's been in a fight'll be better than me. So it doesn't matter if I go]

[Subaru: The hell is that! Don't give me that moody bullshit! What's going on all of a sudden? If you got something to say, say it!]

[Al: ——*You're the only person I don't wanna hear that from, bro*]

Shaking off Subaru's arm, Al's penetrating glare pierced into Subaru from inside his helmet.

That indiscernible gaze and uncharacteristic tone sent a chill crawling up Subaru's back.

It was unlike hostility or murderous intent, but a fiery emotion all the same.

Subaru felt as if he had seen that inexplicable emotion from somewhere before, but he couldn't

remember where or what it was.

And he went without understanding as they continued their standoff, when——

[???: My inspiration is flashing! Listen if you please: —— *Your gaze makes heat swell in my chest~*]

[Subaru: Shut up!!]

[???: Pyiichi!?!]

Subaru reflexively lashed back at the happy-go-lucky voice that came out of nowhere. The target jumped at that shout and tumbled flamboyantly over the table behind her.

Rolling around, moaning and wailing, it was a girl with auburn skin——

[Subaru: You're... Lilianna!?]

[Lilianna: Uugyaouu! My elbow! My knee! Every bone that can be called a bone in my body is shattered! All six of my ribs are broken! There's no mistake about it!]

The one energetically rolling on the floor in front of Subaru was the Bard, Lilianna.

Seeing her the same as ever, Subaru didn't even bother pointing out that humans had more than six ribs but only patted his chest in relief.

[Subaru: I was pretty worried after we got separated, but I'm glad to see you safe. That's a relief]

[Lilianna: Safe!? Can't you see I'm on the verge of death here!? How can you pat your chest in relief in front of a damsel in distress, what kind of sick humor is that!? My inspiration is flashing! Listen if you please: —— *Fingers! Ears! And eyes~!*]

[Subaru: You're still pretty lively, aren't you?]

Sitting up cross-legged on the floor, she strummed her Lullyleigh, suddenly a picture of health.

Although the abruptness of her recovery was rather unsettling, Subaru was just glad that she was alright.

[Subaru: But, how did you get to the City Hall? It must've been dangerous wandering around outside.....]

[?????: *Naturally, isn't that for me to decide? Commoner*]

[Subaru: Gh]

Before he could ask Lilianna how she got here safely, an arrogant voice answered the question in her place.

With the ringing of high-heeled footsteps, a woman in resplendent red stepped into the meeting room. Adorned in rouge from head to toe, she swept her blood-red eyes across the room.

[Priscilla: Looks like all the actors are gathered. It was good of you rabble to have gotten ready for the star to arrive. Be sure to keep it up in the future]

Smiling in a good mood holding a spread fan over her lips—— it was Priscilla.

Her sudden entrance surprised everyone including Subaru, but the first to react was none other than her servant, Al.

[Al: P-Princess-san! So you're alright... I was worried when I couldn't find you]

[Priscilla: Mm, is that Al? What is the meaning of you dallying with these peasants instead of serving me? Is it not your duty to look upon my figure, listen to my voice, inhale my scent, and obey my commands? And Schult, making me have to look for him myself, there should be a limit to your insolence]

[?????: P-please forgive me, Priscilla-sama.....]

While Priscilla mercilessly berated her worried servant, a little boy in butler's uniform peeked out his head from behind her, timidly clinging to her dress. It seems that Priscilla not only saved Lilianna but her butler as well while strutting around a city overrun by the Witch Cult.

[Subaru: What kind of crazy audacity is that.....]

Subaru spilled a sigh at the fine line between exceeding bravery and recklessness. Hearing this, Priscilla turned her glare to Subaru. Snapping close her fan, she briskly walked over to him, and,

[Priscilla: You there, don't move]

[Subaru: ——hk]

With a swoosh of wind, she held the tip of her fan to Subaru's throat.

As usual, moving with inconceivable speed, she reached him before his eyes could even register her motion. But, since Reinhard did not intervene, Subaru figured he was in no actual danger.

[Subaru: What're you doing? We're having an important conversation here, we don't have time for.....]

[Priscilla: Good. ——So that clumsy broadcast earlier was your voice, then?]

[Subaru:Yeah, what about it?]

As pathetic as it was to rely on Reinhard's lack of movement as his indicator, Subaru chose to huff back at the huffing Priscilla. At that response, she narrowed her eyes,

[Priscilla: Decidedly, I will not tolerate anyone getting more attention than myself. So, I'll prove how obviously superior I am to the likes of you]

[Subaru: Huh? Ow!?]

Flicking up the fan at Subaru's neck, it snapped against his chin so hard that tears came pouring out his eyes. With this, Priscilla left him, and imperiously sat herself down in one of the seats at the round table.

[Priscilla: Such a worthless chair. I can tell how cheap it is just by sitting on it]

Making that scalding remark about the quality of the furniture, she swept her gaze across the faces seated at the table. Then, opening her red-painted lips, a splendidly gruesome smile rose on her face.

[Priscilla: Come now, I will allow you to tell me everything about the current situation. Be good slaves and fulfill your responsibilities to your utmost. As reward, I will lend you my help. Remember to be grateful]

[Al: Wait, Princess-san! Now that we've found each other, there's no reason to stay here, right? We should get out of this dangerous place and.....]

[Priscilla: Are you suggesting I run away, Al? If so, then you are gravely mistaken]

Seeing Priscilla reclining into her seat as if intending to participate in the conference, Al hurriedly protested. But Priscilla shot back a glare, instantly freezing Al inside his metal helmet.

[Priscilla: Are you listening? I am the one who decided to stay in this city. And I will be the one to decide whether to leave it. I do not accept instructions from anyone. Besides, you want me to turn my back on these rabid fools and shamelessly run away? Who do you take me for?]

[Al:]

[Priscilla: Everything in this world works in my favor. So why should I leave and allow this obnoxious mess to continue? If you wish to call yourself my servant, then know this, Al. I am favored by divine providence, and thus, my actions are divine providence]

Priscilla's will could not be swayed.

Everyone present, most of all Al, knew this. Seeing Al slump his single shoulder, the young butler——Schult, quietly snuggled against him. And, wryly smiling at his consoling gesture, Al made up his mind as well.

[Subaru: Otto, you have a minute?]

[Otto: Yeah, let's go]

As the round table began briefing Priscilla on the current situation, Subaru whispered to Otto.

Apparently having anticipated this, Otto complied without a hint of surprise.

[Subaru: Garfiel, let me know when they're done]

Leaving this instruction behind, Subaru left the meeting room with Otto.

And as soon as they were outside, they turned and faced each other in the hallway. Meeting Subaru's gaze, there was no confusion in Otto eyes. He knew exactly what they needed to talk about.

[Subaru: Why the hell're you trying to restore the Book of Wisdom? No, before that, when did you pick up its remnants?]

[Otto: It was a year ago, after we've settled the problems in the Sanctuary. After Emilia-sama's snow disappeared, I was wandering around the premises when I..... well, it wasn't exactly by chance. I heard what happened from Ram-san, so I was actively looking for its burned remnants as well]

[Subaru: So then, the one you found was Roswaal's Book of Wisdom?]

[Otto: Yes. I was unusually lucky since that happened to be the place I wanted to check out]

"Unusually lucky" must be a jab at how usually unlucky he was. Although Otto was wryly smiling, Subaru was in no mood to share that sentiment.

Because Otto's reasons for doing this was still a knot inside Subaru's chest.

[Otto: Tell me honestly, Natsuki-san, what do you think of Margrave Mathers?]

[Subaru: Roswaal?]

As Subaru sank into silence, Otto posed him this question. It sounded both somewhat relevant to the topic at hand, and yet not relevant at all. For a moment, Subaru pondered on the question,

[Subaru: Well... I think we definitely can't let down our guard about that guy. Not after everything that happened a year ago. But, since that guy's goals are clear now, and assuming they haven't changed, I don't see him as an immediate threat. In fact, now that we understand each other, I kinda feel like an accomplice]

[Otto: I don't trust Margrave Mathers at all]

Otto declared, pointing out how naive Subaru's thinking was.

Hearing this, Subaru widened his eyes at the sharpness of that statement.

[Otto: You mentioned what happened a year ago. Yes, that's true. But he has been plotting long before what happened in the Sanctuary. You and Emilia-sama seem to be awfully forgiving about that]

[Subaru:It's not that we forgave him. Everything that guy does makes me want to scream "*What the hell*", and I'm still super pissed off. But, the fact is, we need that guy's help. So there's not much we can do, and Emilia has the same considerations]

[Otto: That's called being forgiving.Though I'm not saying that's a bad thing]

Otto shot an impatient gaze at Subaru, conveying his sense of urgency.

In other words, Otto was telling him that he wasn't nearly wary enough. Of course, Subaru knew that it was something he had to keep eye on, but,

[Otto: It's fine. The way you're approaching it is fine. There's no need to change that. Since I'll be seeing to the necessary precautions]

[Subaru: Precautions?]

[Otto: As the Internal Minister, I've had plenty of opportunities to interact with Margrave Mathers. From what I've seen over the past year, I didn't notice any signs of scheming or strange behaviors. But, that's not to say he couldn't have already laid his plans before that. He could easily have put some sort of delayed-activation in place]

[Subaru: ————]

Subaru closed his mouth. Otto's wariness and concerns got through.

He had every reason to distrust Roswaal. It was just the natural consequence of that man's actions, be it good or bad. Though in this case, mostly bad.

[Otto: If he follows the Book of Wisdom's every word and believes that it foretells the future, then one look inside the book will let us know everything that he is planning. That way we can take the necessary measures to guard against any betrayals in the future]

[Subaru: You mean, you want to restore that book..... because you don't trust Roswaal?]

[Otto:Quite the opposite. It's precisely because I don't want to distrust my allies that I want to make sure. At least, I want to know for sure that nothing unfortunate is going to happen. So I kept the Book of Wisdom in hopes of restoring it.I didn't consult you before doing this, sorry about that]

With this apology, Otto lowered his head.

But, in front of him, Subaru couldn't say a word. He did not feel like he had the right.

Otto's concerns and the actions he took to resolve them——

They were all things that Subaru and Emilia should have noticed. In fact, the pains he took to do this were entirely for Subaru and Emilia's sake.

Now that he realized how Otto had been silently helping him, Subaru felt at once ashamed, remorseful, and incredulous that he hadn't realized this earlier.

And why would Otto do this for him? Was it just because they are friends?

[Otto: I won't tell you why, though. It's pretty boring anyway]

As if having read Subaru's thoughts, Otto replied.

Being beaten to the punch by the smiling Otto, Subaru breathed a deep sigh.

[Subaru: Somehow, it's like you're always bailing me out, you know]

[Otto: That may be, but I think you're good just the way you were when you made that broadcast, Natsuki-san]

Otto scratched his head, while Subaru clicked his tongue and dropped his shoulders, a bit embarrassed by his considerations.

[Subaru: I understand. I'm on board about the Book of Wisdom. But the problem is, those assholes are still looking for it. So what do we actually do?]

[Otto: Regardless of whether it's successfully restored or not, I think we better get it back. There's a great chance that Master Dartz could get hurt, and that'd be the last thing I want]

[Subaru: But we're going to simultaneously attack all four Control Towers. We don't have any forces to spare for that]

[Otto: I may be a non-combatant, but I can more than handle myself if I travel by the waterways. I may not look like it, but duping animals like water dragons is one of my top strong suits, you know]

Putting his hand beside his mouth, Otto must be boasting of his Divine Protection of Anima Whispering.

In fact, when it comes to running away, Otto's Divine Protection would actually be quite handy. Besides, the enemy's main forces were concentrated at the Control Towers. Assuming they didn't bring any extra Witch Cultist lackeys, Otto shouldn't be in too much danger.

[Otto: Rather than worry about me, you should be thinking about the assault-teams. You have to save Emilia-sama, after all. That's quite the responsibility]

[Subaru: Understood. I'll take that Greedy asshole's head myself]

That white-haired monster who took Emilia flashed across his mind.

That, and the fact that he was a Sin Archbishop, meant that he was an enemy that must be defeated.

[Otto: Shall we head back? They must be about done with the debriefing]

Seeing the invigorated Subaru, Otto turned his head to the meeting room. But, just as Subaru nodded and was about head inside with him,

[??????: Subaru-dono]

He was stopped by a call from the stairway.

There was no mistaking who that voice belonged to. The person upstairs, watching him with his stern blue pupils—— was Wilhelm.

[Subaru: Otto, you go on ahead]

[Otto: Alright. We'll continue this later]

Otto went back into the meeting room while Subaru walked up the stairs to meet Wilhelm, waiting on the upper level.

Then, as soon as they were at the same height, Wilhelm lightly bowed his eyes.

[Wilhelm: Sorry I could not join the conference. I apologize for the inconvenience]

[Subaru: With the situation as it is, no one would think to blame you, Wilhelm-san. So, um..... how is Crush-san?]

He heard she wasn't well. Or, not just unwell, but in quite a terrible state. As a woman, she probably wouldn't want anyone else to see her like that, either.

Thinking back on the wretched state of his leg, he could imagine what kind of damage Crusch must have sustained. And that thought alone made him regret imagining it.

To Subaru query, Wilhelm softly cast down his eyes.

[Wilhelm: Crusch-sama has asked to speak to you, Subaru-dono. May I trouble you to come with me?]

[Subaru: Crusch-san asked for me? No, of course I'll come, but..... is that really alright?]

[Wilhelm: It is her sincere wish. Though Ferris will not be happy about it]

[Subaru:I guess not]

Ferris would probably have some bitter words to say to Subaru.

After all, the only two who faced off against Capella on the top floor of the City Hall were Subaru and Crusch, and Subaru alone should have protected her.

[Wilhelm: If Ferris says something disrespectful, please do not mind him. And please forgive him, if possible. Deep down, he does understand. It's just that he is facing emotions that he could not process]

[Subaru: Watching the person most important to him suffer... I can understand why he'd want to curse the people around him, if only just to take his mind off of the one he's worrying about]

If venting his rage could ease some of his pain, then who could blame him?

And so Subaru was prepared to take on some of his abuse as well.

[Wilhelm: This way]

Without remarking on Subaru's reply, Wilhelm led Subaru towards the place where Crusch would be waiting. Tick, tack, the regular rhythm of their footsteps echoed through the hallway.

And on the way,

[Wilhelm: Subaru-dono, there is something else I need to tell you]

[Subaru: What is it? Is it something other than Crusch-san.....?]

[Wilhelm: It's about the two swordsmen accompanying the Sin Archbishops]

Unwittingly, he stopped his breath.

It should have been so obvious, how did he let it slip his mind? Mimi's unsealable wound, inflicted by the *"Divine Protection of the Death-God"*.

The true identities of those super-class swordsman should——

[Wilhelm: One of them is *"Eight Armed"* Kurgan. A formidable swordsman who had been a general of the Vollachian Empire, a man who should have died ten years ago]

[Subaru: A man who... should have died? Uhm, Wilhelm-san...]

[Wilhelm: And the other...]

Wilhelm cut Subaru off just before he could ask his question.

He stopped his steps, and Subaru followed suit. Then, Wilhelm turned his back, and sank into a momentary silence. Subaru took a step forward to peek at the side of Wilhelm's face—— but instantly regretted it.

He should not have seen it.

[Wilhelm: ——The other, is the Previous-Generation Sword Saint, Thearesia Van Astrea. My wife..... who should have died in battle against the White Whale fifteen years ago]

[Subaru: ———]

The fact that he could have kept his voice so steady must be a testament to the strength of his will. But when Subaru saw the wrenching agony that twisted the side of Wilhelm's face, all that impression fell away.

Chewing his lips, with rage and grief interwoven within his eyes, a crazed passion contorted his wrinkled face beyond recognition—— one look at that expression, and all his emotions were clear as day.

[Subaru: Your wife... and a general of the Empire? Unless... they're actually still alive.....?]

[Wilhelm: If that's..... no, that isn't possible. Whether it's my wife or Kurgan, both of them are dead. That cannot be overturned. The dead are still dead, but being defiled]

[Subaru: If they're still dead, then..... it's something like Necromancy?]

Necromancy—— magic that manipulates the dead, is quite common in fictional universes. Of course, as far as fiction is concerned, magic that can return the dead to life is quite common as well. Although, nothing so convenient exists in this world.

This was something Subaru had painfully come to understand in the year-and-several-months he had spent here.

[Wilhelm: Magic that manipulate the dead are forbidden. Though I do know of someone who once used it. In the Demi-Human Wars—— the civil war in Lugnica between Humans and Demi-Humans decades ago, she was one of the three enemies of the Kingdom fighting on the Demi-Humans' side]

[Subaru: Three enemies of the Kingdom.....?]

[Wilhelm: The Demi-Human Hero, Libre Fermi. The Great Strategist, Valga Cromwell. And.....]

After pausing for a moment,

[Wilhelm: The Witch, Sphinx. The abominable existence who, without batting an eye, ruthlessly spilled the blood of Human and Demi-Human alike. The only Witch besides Satella whose name remains in the History of the Kingdom]

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Chapter 45 - An Inescapable Curse



As Wilhelm spoke the name of a Witch he had never heard of before, Subaru shuddered. He only knew about ‘witches’ aside from Satella from having met the six Witches of Sin in Echidna’s tomb.

That ‘witches’ other than those somehow existed was devastating news.

[Subaru: Then, Wilhelm-san, if that Sphinx witch is involved with this raid by the Witch Cult..... Are you saying, other than the Archbishops there’s another Witch too?]

If so, the main enemies numbered four Archbishops and two warriors. Adding to that a Witch joined to their forces made the already difficult power cost for the task become a desperate matter.

At Subaru's concerns, Wilhelm, while raising his hand,

[Wilhelm: Pardon me, my wording was unclear. The existence of the Witch known as 'Sphinx' perished in the Demihuman War. That one could not have been involved in this raid.]

[Subaru: The witch's dead? Is there no mistake? Pretending to be dead, and even after really dying having lots of freedom is the impression I have of witches.]

Satella was like that. Whenever Subaru violated the taboo it would draw her out, and in the Citadel of Dreams enjoying her afterlife, Echidna was the same.

Even hearing they were dead guaranteed nothing at all, that was a Witch.

[Wilhelm: What impression Subaru-dono has of witches I am unaware. But Sphinx is only named a witch, it is merely an existence which was called that. The fact is, the forces of the Kingdom referred to it as such, but the concerned party never called itself the same.]

[Subaru: Calling them a concerned party... Did Wilhelm-san ever meet them directly?]

[Wilhelm: There were many times during the civil war. For the end of the Demihuman War, the deciding moment may even have been the beheading of the Sphinx. Roswaal, Bordeaux, and his wife were leading figures of that time.]

[Subaru: Roswaal! ?]

An unexpected name popping up caused Subaru to open his eyes wide.

At that reaction from Subaru, Wilhelm slightly lowered his head for a moment and became immersed in thought.

[Wilhelm: I knew the Roswaal-dono of two generations ago. Although back then I wasn't too friendly... she took care of me.]

[Subaru: Two generations ago... aah, is that that case? Then the name 'Roswaal' is inherited from generation to generation.]

[Wilhelm: Unfortunately, she passed away soon afterward, and after that I grew distant from them. the current lord Mathers is only a passing acquaintance... but this is all superfluous talk.]

He was now lending an ear to tales of surprising relationships, but the original topic was definitely not about that.

Subaru nodded his head, and then Wilhelm with "And so" continued his tale.

[Wilhelm: Not the Sphinx, but somehow a being using a spell that acts similarly, is my thought. The method of controlling the dead was at the time called cases of 'Corpse Soldiers'.]

[Subaru: Corpse Soldiers.....That... Does it have anything like weaknesses?]

[Wilhelm: From what I know, the Corpse Soldier is limited to a technique for moving the body. It is not such that it can bring back abilities possessed in life. It merely shames the dead while keeping the appearance, and actually reflects the skills of the culprit instead.]

[Subaru: But, the [Eight Arms] and..... That.]

He was at a loss for words.

The one turned into a Corpse Soldier whose very death was being profaned was Wilhelm's wife. Nevertheless, at Wilhelm who had accepted it Subaru was speaking of it like he was hesitating.

Wilhelm made a bitter face at Subaru's reluctance.

[Wilhelm: I thank you for your concern. But, it is necessary.—Mh, my wife and Kurgan's skills are close to how they were in life. It simply exceeds the power Corpse Soldier can pull out.]

[Subaru: Then, isn't possible that this is something other than Corpse Soldier? If so, then your wife might not even have died.....]

[Wilhelm: My wife is dead. Because my strength was lacking.]

The side hanging onto a fragile hope here was Subaru.

That Subaru's feelings Wilhelm's clear voice cut down with a single stroke.

And the words Subaru could say to that elder swordsman's profile were none at all.

[Wilhelm: Even at the time, that which could not simply be judged as merely a Corpse Soldier did very rarely exist. Whether it was due to aptitude in the procedure, or if rather another factor I do not know, but.....We have to consider the strength of those two as such.]

[Subaru: Do you have a way to take them down?]

[Wilhelm: Thoroughly destroying the body, or cutting away too the curse mark somewhere on the body. Then the Corpse Soldier will return to a simple corpse. It must be done this way.]

The deeply thinking Wilhelm's voice could not easily be heard.

Searching for what he should do, coming to conclusions with effort he was searching for it.—His trembling voice, his clenched fist, his scrunched eyes, he was hiding nothing.

[Wilhelm: I apologize for holding you this long. Crusch-sama cannot be made to wait any longer. Now, this way.]

Wilhelm bent his back and indicated the door at the room they had come up to. On the innermost part of the 4th floor, with a crumbled plate labeling it as a lounge was the room.

Inside, Crusch who had called Subaru was waiting.

Passing Wilhelm's side, Subaru with the sound of footsteps headed for the door.

Definitely, the distance to the door felt awfully long. The soles of his shoes stuck to the floor and interfered with Subaru's progress, that was the impression he got.

That it was his defeated self's weakness, Subaru was clearly aware of it.

[Subaru: ——It's me. Natsuki Subaru. Is... Crusch-san?]

He knocked on the door, and with a voice so quiet he wondered if it reached the other called out. Like that, after a moment's brief silence, the other side slowly opened the door.

The face that appeared was Ferris'. But, his appearance had changed entirely.

[Ferris: Subaru-*kyun*.....]

Red eyes puffed up from crying and disheveled brown hair. Covering his body was, not his, but someone else's blood staining black, and with his white skin splattered he must not have had time to clean. His cheek and neck was also smeared with fresh blood.

At that miserable appearance, his breath inadvertently caught in his throat.

[Subaru: Crusch-san called me, I heard. So.]

[Ferris: Yeah. Inside, she's on the bed.....Definitely don't do anything unnecessary please.]

A firm voice, with some hatred near the end.

However, that hate was not directed at Subaru. It could be said to be directed at everything. Hating everyone in this world, rage with nowhere to go was now controlling Ferris.

Taking a deep breath, Subaru followed Ferris inside.

Even calling it a lounge, it was not a very spacious room. Long tables and chairs were arranged in two rows, and further back, the small room was divided by a threshold. The bed was past it.

And, on that shabby bed lay her.

[Crusch: Na, tski-sama?]

The conscious Crusch recognized Subaru had entered and called him by name.

Reacting to that girl's voice, Subaru's neck grew rigid. Readying himself, feigning calm, calling out assuring words.—To be unable to even do something so simple..

[Crusch: My appearance is not presentable... My apologies.....]

[Subaru:No, that's not, like that..... It's. Not like that.]

Seeing the frozen appearance of Subaru, Crusch apologized in a lethargic voice. At that girl's sorrowful attitude, the shaken Subaru spoke with vague words.

—Having been drenched in Capella's blood and clothed in its curse, Crusch was in a wretched state.

Her neck, the back of her hands and feet, over all skin that could be seen dark-blackened veins shone. It was not difficult to imagine that under the towels and blankets and clothes the skin there would be afflicted with the same. These black blood vessels that pulsed instead of circulating blood, as if a writhing serpent seemed to be strangling the thin Crusch's body instead.

That formerly white, unblemished skin of hers was now being violated horribly.

Of course, the damage was not limited to below the neck.

The gallant Crush's clever visage, reminiscent of a long drawn sword—Its left had received disfiguring stains. Compared to that, the right side of her face retained her beauty. That rather emphasized the contrast between the two sides, and made the unfairness of a noble person being defiled more apparent.

As if covering the left eye, a patch was hung there, and the sight underneath it was difficult to imagine.

[Subaru: This is.....The same curse of dragon's blood as on me?]

If it was just the same, then that much was not cruel at all.

Knowing Crusch Karsten, Subaru's worry did not end at that.

He looked down at his own right leg. Like Crusch's skin, it also was mottled and wrapped with blackened veins. However, Subaru's leg, terrible sight notwithstanding, was otherwise unaffected. Neither pain nor feelings of soreness were felt by him at all.

But Crusch was definitely different. Her breathing was labored, and whenever the dark veins pulsed, she sighed as if resisting pain.

[Subaru: Ferris.....]

How is it not cured, he turned to gaze at the greatest healer in the kingdom. However, that Subaru's brief thought only served to hurt Ferris, who was gritting his teeth helplessly, even more.

Biting down on his lips, stabbing his own arms with his nails while bowing his head was Ferris. Ferris understood his lack of power and was dismayed by it more than anyone else there.

Knowing the relationship between the two, Subaru had no reason to doubt all possible methods beyond his imagination had been exhausted already.

[Subaru: Crusch-san.....To me...What is it?]

Why, in such a painful situation had she called out for him?

That there was something he could do, he didn't think so. Maybe there was something she wanted to say. To ask for revenge on the [Lust] that had made her this way. Perhaps even some resentful words would be directed towards Subaru.

Even if fed insults, even if curses are poured on, he'll accept it all.

At Subaru's question, Crusch opened her mouth as if it pained her to do so.

Lending those lips his whole body, not missing the feeble sigh she gave, he focused and listened.

And

[Crusch:Un...Unharm...I'm relieved.]

[Subaru: ————]

[Crusch: The same.....As me...Were cursed too.....I heard.....]

Subaru felt a burden lift from her in the softness of her relieved sigh.

At the same time, he understood the true feelings in his heart, and he grew so angry at his own stupidity he wanted to die.

He had been thinking it would be easier to be criticized.

So he had doubted Crusch's integrity, and cut down in his view her noble heart. And she had just been truly worried, that Subaru had been afflicted with the same pain as herself.

[Subaru: Sor.....I'm sorry...Crusch-san.....]

Having suspected her feelings, the result of things having been her suffering, being unable to suffer instead on her behalf, in a voice mixed with all those feelings he squeezed out.

Without realizing what he was doing, he stretched out his hand and grasped the hands Crusch had weakly laid over her stomach. The black blood vessels had no special texture even if touched. That the feel of skin with this ruined of an appearance did not change was even more pitiful. But,

[Crusch: Fu, u.....?]

[Subaru: Gu!?]

The suddenly falling sound of Crusch's sigh, and at the same time a pained noise from Subaru's throat overlapped.

Agony as if he had grasped a hot iron stabbed into him from his palm. In an instant, Subaru released Crusch's hand and stared at the palm the sensation had come from.

That blackened erosion was spreading over it.

[Subaru: Wh-, at.....!?]

[Ferris: Show me, Subaru-kyun!]

Grasping the groaning and hurt Subaru's hand, Ferris inspected the erosion. The light of healing blanketed the spot, but there was no sign of either the pain or the affliction fading away. Instead——

[Subaru: Ferris.....Crusch-san's hand!]

[Ferris: Eh.....?]

The wide-eyed Subaru's gaze pulled Ferris to where he was looking. And those yellow eyes, seeing the same thing as Subaru now widened too.

Subaru had grasped Crusch's left hand——On that hand, though slightly, the blackened erosion had thinned.

That change, and looking down at his right hand, what was passing through Subaru's mind was.

[Subaru: No way, it moved from Crusch's body to mine.....Is that it?]

It could only be thought of like that. The touched hand and the change on his own was directly a plus and a minus. That the lightened curse had traveled to Subaru's body from Crusch, there was no reason to doubt.

[Ferris: Bu, but, I haven't changed at all? I examined Crusch-sama's body, I touched her many many times since..... Me, for me.....]

At Subaru's hypothesis, Ferris shook his head.

That was not joy at a possibility for healing being found, but rather an appearance of suspecting that the hypothesis was false. No, his own feelings were definitely different.

[Ferris: I can't make Crusch-sama feel better.....]

[Subaru: Then let's try it one more time.]

Pushing aside the taken-aback Ferris, Subaru once again stood before Crusch. Crusch, with a face that was unaware of what had occurred yet was directing glistening eyes at the approaching Subaru. To not show a frozen face for that eyepatch-wearing single-eyed gaze, Subaru took a deep breath.

To check it again, this time, he lightly brushed Crusch's cheek.

[Subaru: ——Gu, euh!]

Immediately after, Subaru's brain was stabbed. With pain as if magma spilled into his veins. Through the tips of his fingers, the body-violating curse in Crusch's body flowed in and burned his senses.

[Subaru: Ga, aaaah!]

Feeling stabbing pains which were difficult to bear, Subaru loudly screamed and yanked his body away. Like that, falling back with the momentum, the hand which was touching Crusch fell away.

[Subaru: Ah, ha, haa.....]

His lungs shivered, and his eyeballs cramped.

Like a fish on land, parting his lips Subaru desperately sought oxygen.

[Ferris: Su, Subaru-kyun.....Are you ok?]

Seeing his breathing start to calm, Ferris spoke to Subaru. Barely able to spare enough feeling to notice the hard floor he had landed on, he raised his body with difficulty.

And gazing up at the face of Crusch lying in bed

[Subaru: How is it, Ferris. Was it a little effective?]

[Ferris: Ah.....]

With a plop, Ferris who had confirmed Crusch's condition sat back down again.

He too would have seen with his own eyes. The cheek which was eroded by the curse was, from that curse, relieved a little bit. If such treatment was possible, then saving Crusch was also——.

[Crusch: You can't, Natsuki-sama.....]

To try once more Subaru rose. However, it was none other than Crusch herself that stopped him.

Not understanding the meaning of her words, Subaru asked.

[Subaru: Did you not...notice? Your hand is.....]

[Crusch: ——Hand?]

Hearing this, she looked down at her right hand. And it was then that she finally realized the change that had occurred.

Just like the right leg blackened veins spread over the skin. That much was fine. If it was that much, his resolve to take on Crusch's curse would not be shaken.

But, there was definitely something strange here.

Compared to the erosion which had been taken from Crusch, the extent was much greater.

The erosion on her body, the darkened parts of her left hand and cheek had grown a shade lighter due to Subaru's touch.

However, Subaru who had taken it up onto his right arm from the elbow down to the back of the skin had been completely covered by the blackened erosion. The degree of it was definitely not comparable at all.

The ratio the curse was transferred at was not one-to-one. It was more on the level of ten-to-one.

[Subaru: No, even then.....]

Whether that was cause to hesitate was another matter.

There was pain in the moment of transfer. But, once it had been accepted onto the body, there was no sign yet that the curse would actually hurt Subaru.

Compared to Crusch's constant hellish suffering, what Subaru received was but for a moment. There, between man or woman, which side should bear the burden of its torture, there wasn't even any need to consider it.

Whether it was his right leg or right hand blackening, if it was for the sake of saving Crusch it didn't matter.

[Crusch: Natsuki-sama, that cannot be.....I am unable to accept those feelings.]

[Subaru: Don't be silly. It only stings a little so it's fine. Compared to getting a tattoo while showing off and regretting it later, let's think about it as dirtying a body that was like that in the first place. I can take away the pain too. It's strange, but it doesn't give me any trouble. So.]

[Crusch: Can you guarantee that will be true in the future?It could be that both Natsuki-sama and I become unable to fight. In this current situation that would be a fatal blow.....]

Worrying more for the city and the people than her own body, that was Crusch's judgment. It was logically sound, but not everything should be pressed forward with just that.

[Crusch: Ferris, please stop Natsuki-sama.....]

[Ferris: I, I am.....]

[Crusch: Please. Because Natsuki-sama is now one who is needed by others than just myself.....]

[Ferris: If Subaru-kyun resolved to help..... K-Krusch-sama's suffering..]

The hesitating judgment of Ferris was one which kept Crusch first. That nobody could blame him for. None of those present was in the wrong, after all.

The notion that 'whatever is not wrong is right' was mistaken.

[Crusch: You must not be overwhelmed by the emotions of a single moment. Natsuki-sama, I ask of you.....]

[Subaru: Crusch-san, even then I am.]

[Crusch: Didn't...You say so before.—What's left, leave it all to me.]

[Subaru: —Euh!]

Crusch's pleading eyes took hold of Subaru and would not let go.

Had those reliable words come from his mouth? Hearing that, for Crusch to say all that, was she telling him to..?

[Crusch: Please say that to...Me as well.....]

[Subaru: ———]

[Crusch: 'All that's left, to leave it all to me.']

A pained smile was awaiting Subaru's words.

Swallowing his breath and shifting his tongue in his dry mouth, Subaru quietly closed his eyes.

Without thinking of the future, only immersed in what was in front of him, he was making her say things that didn't need to be said, so at least——.

[Subaru: Crusch-san, calmly rest here, please.]

[Crusch:Natsuki...sama.]

[Subaru: Because everything that's left, you can leave it all to me.]

[Crusch:——Yes.]

If it was just filling the needed role and saying the desired words, then it just had to be done.

Hearing Subaru's reply, Crusch took a deep breath and seemed to relax.

Her eyelids weakly blinking shut not a moment after proved that, up until now, by any means possible she had been holding onto attentiveness. At that moment breathing a quiet sigh, Crusch once more began her time of battling with the effects of the curse.

[Subaru: Sorry, Ferris. But I have to go now.]

[Ferris: I'm.....What should I...Is it alright?]

Draping a towel like a blanket over Crusch and standing up, Subaru heard a small voice as he was leaving. It was the first time Subaru had seen Ferris showing weakness.

In his innermost thoughts, what he wanted now was to remain at Crusch's side.

But in the current situation, Ferris' ability would not allow for such a thing.

[Subaru: I need your strength. I'm not saying to leave City Hall. But if something happens, I'll let them know to evacuate the wounded here. So, I'll leave that to you.]

[Ferris:The one I wanted to save most...And I can't help them.]

[Subaru: Ferris.....]

[Ferris: Sorry. I said something silly.....Just give me a moment, please.]

While looking away, Ferris sat down on a chair next to the bed. Subaru finally lightly patted his shoulder and stepped out of the lounge.

Unchanged from when he had entered, Wilhelm remained waiting in the hallway.

[Wilhelm: Thank you very much for considering Crusch-sama's feelings.]

Towards the returning Subaru Wilhelm said this. Did what happened within leak out outside, or perhaps Subaru's expression was just easy to read?

[Subaru: It isn't some noble tale like I considered her feelings. Since it's more a story of how I was encouraged.....My body, what's up with it anyway?]

Taking on Crusch's curse, and its effect being weakened against him in the first place. Going back even further, the so-called witch factor and [Return by Death], all of it was really vague.

One day, would he get to see their reasons and their end?

[Subaru: Crusch-san will leave it to Ferris. When everything is solved, I'm thinking of trying what I did before once more.]

[Wilhelm: Is that right arm all right?]

[Subaru: At first glance it's a bit iffy. If I wore long sleeves and wore gloves it might be ok.....For the sake of rescuing a pretty girl, just one scar that doesn't fade away isn't any trouble at all.]

Even though he had some aversion to it, that was Subaru's true feelings.

If there wasn't any other solution, then taking on Crusch's curse fully was also fine. Even if his body became pitch-black because of it. Emilia, Rem, and Beatrice, he would have to beg forgiveness from all of them.

[Subaru: But, that's all talk for after we pass this hurdle and live. Wilhelm-san, let's head down. They're probably talking about the plan to retake the control towers right now.]

Probably, all the top-class powers that this side could muster would already be gathered there.

What followed after would depend on the cooperation and abilities of the Archbishops of Sin, as well as the timing and execution of the plan of attack. From the deadline imposed by the Witch Cult, only six hours were left.

[Wilhelm: Subaru-dono, regarding that matter I have a request.]

[Subaru: A request?]

Wilhelm's words stopped Subaru as he headed for the stairs——The elder swordsman nodded his head with the lobby door behind his back, showing concern in his eyes for his mistress within.

[Wilhelm: If it is possible, please recommend for me the task of subjugating [Lust]. Since I understand well its powers of mutation and super-regeneration, I will request this of you.]

[Subaru: Is that revenge for Crusch-san?]

[Wilhelm: It is so, but beyond that, it is essential to capture [Lust] alive and hear from it about what was done to Crusch. For that I will even become a demon. Before cutting off its head, I will definitely pry from it the truth.]

The killing intent given off by the Sword Demon felt like a wave of heat to Subaru.

Furiously, darkly, having been unable to do anything, Wilhelm's ardor to avenge his mistress now rose up like flames.

[Subaru: That spirit is fine.....But are the corpse soldiers alright?]

[Wilhelm: ————]

[Subaru: Your wife, wouldn't you know her best? No matter what happens, Wilhelm will be needed to make judgments.]

[Wilhelm: Subaru-dono, has Reinhardt arrived below?]

Wilhelm suddenly interrupted as he spoke of his concerns.

Awkwardly, Subaru nodded. Reinhardt's powers could not be left out of the attack. However, that the warriors would be there as obstacles for him was certain.

[Wilhelm: The true nature of the corpse soldiers, could you avoid speaking of it to Reinhardt?]

[Subaru:Huh?]

The perplexed Subaru was unable to grasp the reason for the abrupt request.

[Subaru: Then.....Don't tell that guy about Wilhelm's wife.....Is that what you mean?]

[Wilhelm: Yes, it is so. For Reinhardt..... For my son, I want to avoid him meeting my wife in the form of a corpse soldier. He will surely blame me. Because the fault is none other than my own.]

[Subaru: Wilhelm-san's fault, to say that kind of thing..]

It's not true, he wanted to say, but Subaru could not carelessly remark so.

Because the image of Heinkel's appearance ruining the mood earlier in the morning had appeared in his mind.

There was no credibility. But it could not be denied.

Wilhelm considered Reinhardt the cause of his wife's death. And such a difficult and unbelievable past he did not deny.

[Wilhelm: Does Subaru-dono think that the [Blessing of the Sword Saint] as something special?]

[Subaru:.....Honestly speaking, I would say I know little about it. Maybe the people called [Sword Saint] all had it and if you have it you become incredibly strong, I only have an impression like that.....]

[Wilhelm: To know of it as that isn't wrong. But if there is a difference between the [Blessing of the Sword Saint] and other blessings.....Is that, it can be inherited.]

[Subaru: An inherited...Blessing.....]

At Subaru's breath, Wilhelm nodded.

The elder swordsman closed his eyes as if recalling sorrowful memories.

[Wilhelm: That blessing has passed down without fail from the time of Reid Astrea. The blessing became the inheritance of the Astrea family, and always a member of the clan was chosen to be the next Sword Saint. My wife's blessing definitely passed down to Reinhardt.]

[Subaru: So a blessing that is inherited down the clan.....Is it...Is that so. And when your wife passed away, the blessing transferred to Reinhardt.]

While understanding that too, something caught in Subaru's head as he was growing convinced.

After the Sword Saint was slain by the White Whale, the line of succession led to Reinhardt. It was a sad past, but one that could also be described a proper passing on.

That flow did not fit at all with what had been said in the argument between Astreas this morning.

Wilhelm's heartbreak, Heinkel's mockery, Reinhardt's silence, was interfering with the idea of a proper succession.

And the answer is——

[Wilhelm: It was, at the time of the White Whale subjugation.]

[Subaru: Wilhelm...san.....]

[Wilhelm: Reinhardt received the blessing while my wife was in the middle of the expedition against the White Whale. During that conflict, my wife, abandoned by the sword, could only take on the battle as an ordinary woman.]

——That was the truth of the Astrea family division.

In the midst of the battle to subjugate the White Whale, the blessing had suddenly passed down during the fighting. And, on the battlefield, the result was that only the now-former Sword Saint remained.

Now left a predecessor and an ordinary person, to defend many other soldiers she had still fought with the Witchfiend——And they had lost contact with her.

[Wilhelm: The one that took away the sword from my wife was none other than me. Overruling my wife who was loved by the sword, forcing her to cast it aside, and turning her into an ordinary woman, it was none other than myself. That, was what called forth the death of my wife.]

[Subaru: ———]

[Wilhelm: The sword that my wife betrayed did not forgive her, and so her blessing was taken away on the battlefield. She could rely only on a single blade, I think of how she must have felt then.....It was true that I could not accept it, and defamed Reinhardt whom the blessing had chosen. As he was weeping over the death of his grandmother and bearing the heavy new burden, I impetuously could not forgive him...I, regret that now.]

Last night, the regret that Wilhelm had revealed to Subaru——It, was that mistake.

Even knowing that Reinhardt had not done anything wrong, Wilhelm had been mourning his wife's death and was unable to accept it. As a result, the Astreas had split apart.

[Wilhelm: I do not want to repeat it again. Reinhardt has no blame in my wife's death. I have no reason to blame my grandson at all.]

And so, instead of revealing it to Reinhardt he was saying he would bring this to a close himself.

That feeling, he now understood painfully well from this talk. If Subaru could do it, he wanted to as well. But, the burden Wilhelm bore was too high.

[Subaru: About Crusch-san and your wife.....It will be buried there, Wilhelm-san. Even if I don't talk about the corpse soldiers, the question of where they might appear is..]

[Wilhelm: That is definitely a needless worry, Subaru-dono.]

[Subaru: Huh.....?]

Wilhelm shook his head at Subaru as he was about to point out that it was not certain.

And the Sword Demon spoke as his expression twisted into a fearsome grimace.

[Wilhelm: ——Because, there is no chance of my wife not coming to meet me.]

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Chapter 46 - A State Of Mind

When going back to the rendezvous point with Wilhelm, everyone had been looking forward to Subaru's return. With Reinhard looking at Wilhelm, the grandfather welcomed the reunion with his grandchild while pulling his chin.

While the two stood together along the wall exchanging sidelong glances, Subaru sat down next to Otto at the round table.

[Subaru: I'm sorry for being late. How did the negotiations turn out?]

[Otto: We just ended up with the same matters we got from the start. It will surely be better from Natsuki-san's side how is Crusch-sama doing?]

[Subaru: It seems she isn't doing well. However, it's not like we can already say that there is no hope. Once we get to the negotiations after driving out the witch cult, we might be able to do something.]

[Otto: Is that so? If that's the case then that alone is good news.]

With Otto stroking his chest with a *ho*, everyone else having listened to the story also made a similar gesture of relief. While viewing their reactions, deep down, Subaru wanted to give them a heartfelt apology.

Although it wasn't a lie, it was a statement which was far removed from reality. There might be a way to save Crusch, which would also be considerably risky for Subaru. If her conditions were among the same conditions as Subaru's, he would expect her chances to rise considerably. (TN: Probably referring to the conditions needed for the dragon's blood injected by Capella to not be rejected or something like that)

[Subaru: Either way, Crusch-san's return to the frontlines for this battle is impossible. Since it seems that Ferris also doesn't want to be separated from her, I think it would be best if the relief party were to stay behind at the city hall. Additionally, where we'll be meeting, there is the possibility that we will become unable to communicate.]

[Anastasia: That means the plan to attack the four places simultaneously hasn't changed. Seems that gettin' to the location from the city hall in the center as seen from each control tower comes first, right? Then... ...]

With a clap, Anastasia looked out over everyone's faces.

[In that case, shall we finally truly go into the main issue? ——There are four control towers and four Sin Archbishops. For the sake of defeating them, we will hold a war strategy meeting.]

From Crusch's faction was the "Sword devil" Wilhelm.

From Felt's faction was the "Sword saint" Reinhard.

From Anastasia's faction were the "Valuable knight" Julius and the "Leader of the iron fang" Ricardo.

From Emilia's faction were the "Spirit knight" Subaru and the "Shield of the Sanctuary" Garfiel.

And then, from Priscilla's faction was——

[Priscilla: Me and AI will be together.]

[Subaru: Although you said such a thing will you fight as well? You're a Royal selection candidate, aren't you?]

When each faction's fighters were affirming, Priscilla boldly raised her own name. When Subaru scowled at that, she snorted at him so as to try and scoff at him.

[Priscilla: I would surely be a candidate for the throne, don't you think? Since the previously important fool has become useless, you've united every last one of the untaken weakling fighters. I stand above everybody both at the sword and on the stage precisely because I am who I am.]

[Wilhelm: Now you've become difficult to ignore. With "fool", surely you musn't mean my lord by that?]

[Priscilla: Since I have something in mind, just don't stand in my way, I guess. There's a devious expression, old soldier. Through withdrawal by "losing a fly to catch a trout" and the like, the tales of the chosen cannot be told.]

From the start of the discussion, Wilhelm and Priscilla already clashed with a dangerous presence. Seemingly habitually ignoring the scene, because of various circumstances Wilhelm's side could not afford to waste time. Since Priscilla's side generally operated in an excessive manner, that also did not leave out hateful language.

[Anastasia: Yeah yeah, let's move the discussions forward, because both the weaklin' and the fool stuff is all fine by me. We ain't gonna turn on each other.]

[Priscilla: Oh, that's boring. Isn't my obedient listening to the weakling's story to a manageable degree?]

[Anastasia: I guess it wasn't like the story was about the victory of the weak? If you do not show the extent of your magnanimity, then nobody will follow you. Everyone is getting equally irritated. Have some patience.]

[Priscilla: Hmph]

As Anastasia's remark was missing its target, Priscilla did not object as she only snorted. As she watched the weapon being pointed at her, Wilhelm, who had been staring daggers at her, had also withdrawn it.

Since it was natural that there were disagreements between the factions, he made a serious face.

[Wilhelm: Well then, Priscilla-sama's faction will be Priscilla-sama and Al together even if your boy cannot expect to be taken into consideration?]

[Priscilla: Can something even be done by such a very delicate and weak child? That child has been accompanying me throughout merely for the sake of serving me. Naturally, we will put him aside beforehand.]

[Wilhelm: Understood. Then it's been decided that we'll capture the four locations with no less than eight fighters.]

The boy who was Priscilla's butler —— Schult, while drooping his head, was exactly evenly split between fighting and not fighting at the round table.

Leaving out the names of the eight combatants, the non-combatants were Anastasia, Schult, Liliana and Otto with Crusch and Ferris on the upper floor making six people.

[Anastasia: Before we split up our fighting force, shall we go ahead and reaffirm our knowledge of the Sin Archbishops once more? Let's see, the person who has seen all their faces is just Natsukikun, right?]

[Subaru: Yeah, I think so. Although even I am disgusted with talking about the witch cult's leaders, I will try to get myself to give an explanation. I know about their abilities, though to a certain extent.]

While gathering everyone's attention, Subaru began to speak.

About the witch cult who which had attacked this city and the horrible Sin Archbishops who controlled it.

[Subaru: First is Wrath. This Sin Archbishop, who calls herself Sirius, is a fellow who's completely wrapped in bandages. I don't know what she looks like, though I believe she's probably a woman. She attacks using the chains wrapped around her arms. In addition, it seems like she also uses fire magic.]

[Reinhard: If it's only that then she doesn't seem to be a significant threat. Is she considerably talented?]

[Subaru: If it's said by you, then it's difficult for anyone to answer, Reinhard. If we're talking about simple fighting strength, then Wilhelm or Julius will be able to provide sufficient opposition. Her other ability seemed to be an equal match with Emilia though. Nevertheless, she has the Authority of Wrath.]

[Reinhard: An Authority... ..]

Reinhard frowned to that sound as he brought his hand to his chin.

Subaru continued as he nodded back at him,

[Subaru: The biggest point about a Sin Archbishop's repulsiveness, is their characteristic ability called their Authority. Being an incomprehensible force which differs from both magic and sorcery, it's useless to even think about how it works. Since every one of them is powerful, defeating the Authority will become the crux of defeating a Sin Archbishop.]

[Wilhelm: Since Subaru-dono had supposedly defeated Sloth in the past, was that the Authority itself?]

[Subaru: It was. The Archbishop of Sloth's Authority, the "Unseen hand" was Sloth's second ability. The Authority can grow an unknown number of powerful arms which are not only invisible, but also have incredible strength. If someone were to be caught in them, they could easily completely tear their body apart.]

[Julius: Having witnessed them myself, I've also verified their repulsiveness. In practice, it's believable that just by snatching a body its power could gouge out someone's flesh.]

Julius followed up on Subaru's explanation.

During the united front against Petelgeuse, it was Subaru lending his eyes that made him see Petelgeuse's "Unseen Hand". He was in an ideal position to reinforce his explanation.

[Subaru: Moreover, Sloth has the ability to forcefully snatch away the energy of people in his range. Whether this was the Authority is difficult to tell, but we overcame it by using spirit art users who were immune to it. This was also because it was me and Julius.]

[Julius: Even if we were able to tell whose ability it was, assuming the Sin Archbishop was holding such a terrifying ability, it's not like we would definitely succeed if we were to assign a capable fighter to the right opponent.]

[Subaru: You said an unusually good thing, Julius. It's something like that.]

When Subaru praised him in his own way, Julius looked at Subaru with a discerning though lukewarm eye. While getting an uncanny feeling from that gaze, Subaru once again clearing his throat continued,

[Subaru: So, let's go back to the discussion about the Authority of Wrath. What we know as of now about Wrath's ability, is the sharing and propagation of emotions and senses.]

[???: Sharing ... emotions and senses?]

Since Subaru's explanation didn't really make sense, most of the discussion members tilted their heads. Because it was difficult to explain, it was necessary for Subaru to choose his words carefully.

[Subaru: I mean, It's that Wrath is able to unipolarize the emotions of people in its range. It makes one person's anger into everyone's anger and one person's sadness into everyone's sadness.]

[Anastasia: What the heck's that? If that's what it means, then it's simple as to why.]

(TN: Interpreting ワイ as "why". Probably wrong still...)

[Subaru: Certainly if it were just that you would just forcefully make yourself use your ability to sense the mood, but it's not like that. The scary part of this ability is when it's able to unipolarize until it reaches hostility. That is, if Wrath is your opponent and directs their hostility towards your perceived companions, it will definitely also be transmitted to the people in the perimeter.]

[Otto: So it turns the townspeople in its perimeter against us?]

[Subaru: Exactly.]

By snapping his fingers, Subaru indicated that Otto had drawn the correct conclusion.

Although it gave everyone depressed looks, the problems didn't end with just that.

[Priscilla: Foolish commoner, did you say that Wrath or whatever can share emotions and senses some time ago?]

As the first to finally reach an understanding, Priscilla reclined on her seat.

Piercing through Subaru with her crimson eyes, while concealing her mouth with her folding fan,

[Priscilla: If the explanation from just now was about sharing emotions, then sharing senses is again different. And if we then assume that that is just my way of imagining things, is it not a considerably repulsive ability?]

[Subaru: I don't know how you're imagining it, but it's the worst. Wrath's Authority shares the wounds of people in its range. This does not exclude Wrath's wounds.]

[Ricardo: If even the person himself ain't no exception ... hey, bro, that ain't true, innit? Ain't that the worst? In other words, wouldn't other fellas die if Wrath were ta be killed?]

He had already once realized that terrible scene in practice by Reinhard's hand.

Even if they crushed Sirius, who was the source of the malice, that act alone would inflict permanent wounds to the people surrounding them. They wouldn't know if anyone dragged into the fight would be fine if they managed to kill her.

[Priscilla: ——Interesting]

To this hopeless information, everyone held their tongue without coming up with counter-measures. In such a midst just one person, only Priscilla was cheerfully warping her cheek into a sneer.

[Priscilla: Very well. I will give that Wrath fool a picking. You're free to rejoice.]

[Subaru: Well, wait, wait, wait up! Although I don't know why you're so eager, it's not something you can take so lightly! Were you listening to what I said!?!]

[Priscilla: Let's settle that I was listening. Thus upon having listened to that, I have declared that I will go. They are indeed a disgusting opponent with cowardly methods, so it's appropriate for me to cut them down.]

Without even listening to Subaru's attempts to stop her, Priscilla looked over everyone while folding her fan to make a sound.

With that sharp gaze and zeal, she overwhelmed even strongest fighters present.

[Priscilla: If you've said everything about the Authority, then there is a verse that comes to mind about those Karakuri. "Wanting to be accompanied by the same masses who disregard you" and the like is impertinent. The vulgar masses exist entirely for my sake. If some insolent worm turns their hand to me, I immediately throw them out of my garden.]

(TN: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karakuri_puppet most feasible description I could find)

[Al: P, princess Aren't you bragging even a little too much?]

[Priscilla: What kind of foolishness are you saying, Al? Knowing your cowardice, what is it about that you get cold feet from the insolent opponent who sours my mood? With me, there is no point in being afraid if the singer is there.]

[Al: It's not like I'm saying it because there's nothing to be afraid... .. Singer?]

When Al tried to stop his master's irrational behaviour, he stopped as he heard an unexpected word.

While generously nodding at her follower's surprise, Priscilla, pointed with her folded fan at Liliana who sat at the corner of the round table.

As she suddenly became the topic of the discussion, Liliana opened her eyes wide at the fan that was thrust before her.

[Liliana: Did mean m-me with that name!? Why are you doing that so suddenly and neglectfully again!?)

[Priscilla: You mustn't be forgetting about your travels? How long your songs have shaken the hearts of the masses. You should do the same thing with that. In short, you should fight for the emotions of the vulgar masses and such.]

[Liliana: Seems like I was making you anxious just because I raised my voice a little? You might say that under no circumstances you are overestimating me too much, but pressuring a weak young girl like me]

[Priscilla: Oh. So, if it's your choice, you allow the song you inherited from your ancestors to be defeated?]

As Priscilla snorted, Liliana's facial expression changed to Priscilla's words which sounded like she despised her wholeheartedly.

Showing a forced smile, she wore a facial expression with an earnest charm as she menially tried to ward it off.

[Liliana: That is, what do you mean ?]

[Priscilla: It seems like it even if you do not think so. Does your song, which has been passed down so zealously, seem like it is being sung when the hearts of the people, which are begging for help, are exposing their sometimes unsightly cowering? That kind of loser's whining, is that not all a bunch of idle futility? Even a dog's barking is still better than insisting on being selfish. There, how is it sinking in? It's like the praise of a loser.]

[Liliana: Aah Aah! You're going so far as to say it!? Are you blurting it out!? Fine! I'll go! I've understood alright!? Catching me, the minstrel Liliana, like that! Using such language! A woman will become obsolete with this silence! Even the late Kiritaka-san will come crawling out of his grave with regret like this!]

Because of Priscilla's fierce provocation, Liliana became excited as she intensely exploded back at her. With her face becoming a bright red, she violently strummed the musical instrument placed on top of her lap.

[Liliana: Stop it if you were thinking about letting even a requiem be sung to comfort Kiritaka-san's soul who pitifully fell into the city's waters! I'm a scramble of emotions? Bring it on! I, the person who has come to inherit the song, and my song, which has dazed the people of the world, will we lose to an unknown power due to something like that!? We don't know the song's power after all! *Grrr*!]

(TN: Probably somewhat inaccurate in some places here. Liliana's manner of speech feels weird in general...)

Schult and Otto hurriedly dragged down the thoroughly excited Liliana who was performing while lying sprawled on top of the round table. Taking a distant view to the corner of the room where Liliana who started playing was held down, Subaru had shifted his focus to Priscilla.

[Subaru: Her manageability aside, you seem sure of her success. But even if you're right, to just throw her into this when you don't know her chances]

[Priscilla: I am not planning to lose or anything. Everything in this world will be made to my liking. Besides, it is because I was together with that singer that I have come so far as to this city hall. After taking her around with me precisely because I recognised that singer's usefulness, I have again decided to take her with me.]

[Subaru: Are you saying that Liliana is an opposing force to Sirius?]

[Priscilla: It would be my defeat if it were not for that singer. And something like my defeat is impossible in this world. Therefore, it is because of that singer. Need I explain this any further?]

Because none of the insufficient explanations were feasible, it steadily became unbearable for Subaru. However, it was Schult who raised his hand instead who tried to follow-up on Priscilla's remarks.

The butler boy's adorable eyes quivered as he chose his words with utmost care,

[Schult: U, uh well I think that it's true that Liliana's song has a special power. It's true that they were released from anxiety or irritation when they listened to Liliana-sama's song That is also what we learned from several refuge shelters which we passed by before we came here.]

[Subaru: You were letting Liliana sing to the refuge shelters you were visiting?]

[Priscilla: I believe I said so.]

[Subaru: You didn't say that!]

Even the insufficiency of her explanation was excessive.

While being troubled by Priscilla's attitude, Subaru turned his head to Reinhard.

[Subaru: Hey, Reinhard. Do you know of an innate ability that can see people's, or rather Oh right, they're divine protections. Can't such things like divine protections be seen?]

[Reinhard: I think there's a divine protection which learns about people's divine protections. I've heard that the owner of the "Divine protection of Judgement" can see them. They aren't in Lugunica, but in Vollachia, aren't they? I see, so we want to check what kind of divine protection Liliana-sama has? It will certainly become one of our main questions.]

When he understood the purpose of Subaru's question, Reinhard went deep into thought.

Since he just tried to ask because he had nothing to lose, even he knew that he had asked something unreasonable from Reinhard. Subaru shook his head to the pondering red haired youth and said "Never mind".

[Subaru: Although I strangely expected something since you said that you heard all kinds of incredible things, it's not like you'd be convenient to that extent. It's fine. For now, we'll be able to cancel Wrath's authority somehow with Liliana's song after testing it a little]

[Reinhard: You don't need to worry about it, Subaru. —— I've received it now.]

[Subaru: Ha?]

Patting the shoulder of Subaru who tried to propose an experiment with Liliana's song, Reinhard smiled. After that, while narrowing his blue eyes, he gazed at Liliana who was performing in the corner of the room.

And then,

[Reinhard: I was surprised. Liliana holds the "Divine protection of Telepathy".]

[Subaru: I was surprised by you because of the divine protection from just now. Eh? What did you say just now? Did you say that you received it? What did you receive, the treasure that is children?]

[Reinhard: Subaru, it's not a situation to be making fun of. I have been able to confirm Liliana-sama's divine protection. The "Divine protection of telepathy" is, so to speak, a divine protection which

transmits the owner's thought to others. It's a divine protection which primarily just transmits trivial thoughts to companions whom the owner shares a close bond with, but a song, huh? I hadn't even thought of something like that.]

While Reinhard was honestly admiring Liliana, Subaru's jaw dropped after seeing him with such a face from his side.

Since Reinhard's power was already a cheat, this guy, who was said to be beyond superhuman, was being loved way too much by the gods.

The divine protection he needed, that divine protection which he thought of turned up in his possession or something if he wished for it.

[Subaru: ————?]

Barely managing to reach even a thought, Subaru picked up on what happened.

He could acquire a divine protection he thought of if he wished for it. At least it could only be expressed with what happened to the present Reinhard himself. Though that in and of itself was an extremely and reassuringly enviable power.

Since it seemed likely that he was mistaken about something, Subaru did not finish his remark.

The members of the Wrath capture group were decided —— Priscilla, Al and Liliana.

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Chapter 47 - Recapturing the City Outpost



[Subaru: First, let's leave the work of dealing with [Wrath] to Priscilla's team. We have assurance from Reinhardt that Liliana has a blessing.]

[Reinhardt: An unfamiliar blessing may not sound very reassuring. But certainly, if it is Liliana-sama's song, I believe it may be an effective countermeasure for what we've heard about [Wrath].]

Following Subaru and Reinhardt's remarks, the gazes of the round table participants turned to Liliana.

She was playing with her braid, and while holding it under her nose, she was play-acting as if it was a [beard],

[Liliana: Ee-yeh, please leave it to me. This Liliana, once she gets a request, she definitely gets the work done. Rest assured, I only sing. In a place where my singing is desired. And if wanted I trill! Isn't this such a happy thing! If I could even get some tips, then that's time to throw up my arms and celebrate!]

[Subaru: Something like a tip won't be coming out of this, so first quit with the capitalist pig talk.]

[Liliana: *Bu-hi—* !]

The excited Liliana deflated, and now Priscilla let out a snort instead. With eyes like red flames, she turned to inspect Subaru and Reinhardt in turn.

[Priscilla: Seeing two boys gossiping in whispers, I looked into what they were plotting, but it seems they are merely wasting their energy on a useless consultation. That singer's worth by mine own self has already been confirmed. I will deign to crush this mere fanatic fool.]

[Subaru: Even saying that, to be certain it's necessary to check.....]

[Priscilla: How amusing.—A singer is one who stakes their life on singing. This singer who ran her mouth, why would she take on some uncertain danger to her life. To take that kind of risk, there is just no point.]

[Subaru: —]

Saying those words, didn't leave Subaru much to reply with. In truth, the one that suggested using Liliana, and believing it enough to face off against [Wrath] was Priscilla herself.

Unlike her words and attitude, her prudence and cleverness were exceptional, and already well-known.

[Al: Princess, don't be botherin' bro too much. Let's just stay quiet, us two.]

[Priscilla: What's that, Al? Worm, are your thoughts and your views still crooked? You've aged quite enough as a man but still just act like a girl, I see. Do not lower your worth bit-by-bit even further in front of these commoners.]

[Al: 's not like that.]

Turning away his gaze with a swish, Al rested his chin on his right arm and entered a complete observer mode. Priscilla also gave a snort and got off his back about it.

Finally, it seemed like the story could flow into the next part now.

[Subaru: And with that, the attack on [Wrath] will be left to Priscilla's team. For the others..... It's about [Lust]. About who to handle that one, I would like to nominate Wilhelm-san for the assignment.]

[Julius: Nominating Wilhelm-sama? May I ask about the meaning of that?]

[Wilhelm: I have humbly requested as much from Subaru-dono, Julius-dono.]

Towards the wondering Julius, Wilhelm raised his hand and answered.

The elder swordsman collected his gaze, and lightly shifted it upstairs.

[Wilhelm: As you all well know, my mistress Crusch-sama is suffering still under the effects of the witch [Lust]'s cruel power. I am under obligation to fight for my mistress as Crusch-sama's servant. This is also a wish of mine that goes beyond my sense of duty.]

[Anastasia: If possible, you want to capture the Sin Archbishop alive, and ask 'em about those symptoms. Wilhelm-san's motive must be somethin' like that.]

[Wilhelm: As you say, and for that, if the subjugation of [Lust] could be left to me?]

Those blue eyes with strong will behind them, gave off a darkness which pressured the room.

Wilhelm's deeply-held determination, and his righteousness towards his mistress—With eyes that showed those feelings, nobody could raise halfhearted words against it.

Except only, of his own flesh and blood.

[Reinhardt: In truth, I am opposed to it.]

[Wilhelm:.....Reinhardt]

While everyone was overwhelmed by the swordsman, only Reinhardt's expression did not change. Staring at Wilhelm with his usual serious expression,

[Reinhardt: Currently grandfather has lost his composure. Of course, to feel hostility towards the Sin Archbishop who harmed Crusch-sama is understandable. However, I do not believe that you will be able to achieve the objective with that feeling.]

[Wilhelm: Losing your calm, is a distraction from achieving the objective? Is that what you are saying to me?]

[Reinhardt: Considering Crusch-sama, the failure to capture [Lust] is not forgivable. Therefore, I will take on that task. At least, I will be able to face that side with a better mental state.]

Reinhardt's words were correct, and formed with sound logic that considered possible situations to ensure as much certainty as possible.

That Wilhelm was being too forceful, and was losing his composure was not incorrect. But, when Reinhardt gave that opinion, Wilhelm loosened his lips. Surely not gently, but instead with a smile like a wild beast's.

[Wilhelm: —Losing calmness here is a given, Reinhardt.]

[Reinhardt: Nevertheless, grandfather.....]

[Wilhelm: Just who, are you thinking your grandfather is? I am the Sword Demon Wilhelm. Giving my effort all to live as just a sword, but unable to stop myself from coming to love a woman too, only half. Though in my method of existence I only came halfway, in the end, for what needed to be done, I have *never* let it stay unfinished!]

A fierce smile, came over Wilhelm's clear and mild impression. It now reminded one of, blood and iron and life burning with flame, the ghost of one whose daylight feelings were taken away.

[Wilhelm: When I decide to wield the sword, my heart is uplifted. Even not being calm, on the battlefield it is all the same to me. That is how I have lived on to this age. This time also, I have no intention of rotting away without repaying my obligation to my mistress in full. Your pointless worry is not necessary.]

[Reinhardt: That reasoning, is not just that mentality.....]

[Wilhelm: A mentality held to the end becomes certainty. Even if it takes fourteen years, even what some may call a blunted sword will fulfill my vengeance on my wife's enemies.]

If, by the White Whale fight, Wilhelm said his revenge for his grandmother was paid in full, Reinhardt could not say anything more to that.

But even then, Reinhardt was lowering his eyes unconvinced. At the obstinate posture of his grandson, Wilhelm with [Besides.....] continued on.

[Wilhelm: The battlefield which needs you is not here. The scene you are needed in is elsewhere.]

[Reinhardt: The scene I am needed in.....]

[Wilhelm:—Subaru-dono. My grandson, please take him with you to your battlefield. To rescue Emilia-sama, you will need to battle [Greed]. This Reinhardt, would act as a sword for you.]

Suddenly having his name called, Subaru opened his eyes wide. As if pulled along by the nodding Wilhelm, Reinhardt's gaze also turned to him.

At that appearance, Subaru scratched his head as if thinking it can't be helped.

[Subaru: Honestly, I wanted to wait to say this until after the talk of [Lust] was sorted out.....Yeah. Your power is frankly, something I want to borrow for the fight against [Greed] I'm in charge of. For that annoying fucker, I definitely think I'll need your strength.]

Regulus of [Greed] floated into his mind.

According to his fragmented knowledge of the Sin Archbishop's abilities, the power Regulus possessed was the most dangerous of them all, unless the target was a crowd.

Though he could not say for sure, in the current situation, he could not imagine calling it by anything other than a stupid word like [Invincible]. Of course, he did not want to think of him as a simply [Invincible] existence. Some kind of weakness or limit had to exist, that was what he wanted to believe, but.

[Subaru: To break through the [Invincible] protection of Regulus, to fight that guy we need strong attacking ability. His offensive and defensive ability, simply compared with the other the Sin Archbishops, I think is at the top. So I want to borrow Reinhardt's power for when we attack him.]

[Reinhardt: An untouchable opponent..... Certainly, for a monster such as that, I would be the right choice. However.]

Even after hearing of Regulus' absurd power, Reinhardt's hesitation did not disappear. But, seeing Reinhardt's worrying, another voice rang out.

That sound was coming from, none other than the one next to Subaru.

[??? : —Then. Wilhelm gramps will just be goin' with my amazin' self.]

Striding forward was Garfiel, gnashing his sharp fangs as he glared at Reinhardt.

Reinhardt was making a surprised face at him, as if wondering, [You are?].

[Garfiel: The Captain is proposin' you. Yer skills, my amazin' self knows about that too. For rescuin' Emilia-sama, my amazin' self 's not needed, then. Right, Captain?]

[Subaru: No, Garfiel.. For me, even if it's like that I don't want to just tell that to you.....]

[Garfiel: I don't need comfortin'. And I'm not sayin' this stuff just 'cause I'm sulkin'. It's the other way around. For my amazin' self, this time there's another bastard that needs seein' to here.]

His brows furrowing at the roughly breathing Garfiel's attitude, Subaru realized too late.

That was it. Among those whose appearances had been changed by [Lust] during the city hall recapture, there had been a person who was like a friend to him—Turned into a black dragon, such a person had existed then.

Then, for Garfiel, [Lust] was not just an unrelated opponent.

Besides—,

[Garfiel: It's true that we can't forgive that damn woman, but it's not jus' that. When we fought against that second one, it was where [Lust] was last time.]

[Subaru: ——]

[Garfiel: 'Cause of my amazin' self's mistake, there's an idiot that got injured without needin' to there. So my amazin' self, I have to give as good as they got fer that one. An' so, my amazin' self will be followin' gramps over there.]

At Garfiel's keen gaze, Wilhelm slowly lowered his chin.

Here, the elder swordsman and the young warrior both, were united together in a fight for vengeance. At the root, they both shared motives borne of thinking strongly about women they care about, so they had even more in common.

Towards Garfiel's expression, Subaru too had nothing more to say.

[Subaru: I might be repeating myself here, but [Lust]'s power is Variation and Change. She alters herself and can also force mutations onto others. And, her blood. No matter what, do not let her blood touch you. It's what caused Crusch-san's injuries. Personality-wise.....They're all terrible, but she's especially bad.]

[Wilhelm: Understood.]

[Garfiel: Stomp on 'em and crush 'em.]

At Subaru's last confirmation, neither Wilhelm nor Garfiel showed any sign of backing down.

When Subaru finally made eye contact with Reinhardt to check what he thought, the Sword Saint who had been firm up to this resolute scene seemed to have lost the desire to speak.

[Reinhardt: It does not matter. Garfiel's ability is certain. And if grandfather is there, then by whatever means necessary he will cut them down, that can be relied on.]

[Garfiel: You sayin' it like that, 's unconvincin'. 'S like, [The torktoi's mild but 's taste's superb.]]

[Reinhardt: It is the truth. Your, and grandfather's, victory I believe in it. I will act as Subaru's sword.]

As Garfiel scratched his face with an uncomfortable look, Reinhardt nodded his head at Subaru. From the Sword Saint's believable words, Subaru felt like he had earned a lot of help.

[Subaru: I'm sorry about this selfish desire, Reinhardt.]

[Reinhardt: It is fine. No matter where the battlefield is, I will give my utmost efforts. If that will be of help to you, then that is what I wished for.]

[Subaru: For just relying on you, I'm really sorry. The situation is, I'm relying too much on you being really strong.....The parts where you're lacking, I'll fill them in somehow, so please look forward to it.]

[Reinhardt: ——]

Hearing those words, Reinhardt suddenly widened his eyes and shut his mouth. Subaru tilted his head at the rarely-seen reaction, and Reinhardt right away with a [No,] laughed a bit.

[Reinhardt: For you, that would be, nothing at all.——Aah, I will look forward to it. You filling in for me, the parts I cannot reach.]

[Subaru: —? Then, look forward to it a lot. So, I think we know the flow by now, but inevitably there's [Gluttony], the last one..]

[Julius: Then, me and Ricardo, are left to be in charge of that.]

Following after Subaru's words, the one agreeing in a low voice was Julius. Hearing him speak in a rough voice which was unlike him, Anastasia directed a concerned gaze at the knight.

[Anastasia: Julius, you alright? Since before, your complexion isn't lookin' so good..]

[Julius: I apologize for causing you anxiety. However, I am fine. When speaking of comforts and discomforts of the body, I cannot make something like weak complaints in front of Subaru.]

[Subaru: What do you mean, by that.]

[Julius: Of course, I was thinking of your difficulties with your leg when I spoke. Please do not snap at me like that. In a situation like this, I have no intention of getting into arguments with you.]

[Subaru: Mu.....]

He took a lot of damage from a motive that he hadn't thought of. At the same time, he felt a strange sense of something being out of place. Julius' appearance seemed suspicious to him just as it had been for Anastasia. Why that was, he still didn't know, but even then..

[Julius: Ricardo and I will be taking the leftover responsibility of handling [Gluttony]. Originally, Subaru and Wilhelm-sama would have served as his opponent. Due to their ties with him, they would have wanted to manage it themselves. Because you assigned this task to us while enduring those feelings, we will definitely carry it out for both of you to see.]

[Subaru:Aah, it's like that.]

What Julius felt was, Subaru would have wanted to subjugate [Gluttony] himself. Wilhelm would too, and above them now the still-suffering Crusch would have felt the same.

By the memory-eating, name-consuming [Gluttony]'s authority—Thinking of the still sleeping Rem who had suffered that damage, Subaru wanted to crush [Gluttony] completely with his own hand.

Hitting, kicking, stomping on him, forcing him to regret the atrocities he has committed, to turn his face into a teary mess as he forced him to bow down to the ground until he felt catharsis, that was what he wanted to do.

That role, he had given over to others——.

[Subaru: No matter who it is, honestly, I don't want to leave it to them. Rem.. I wanted to restore her. I wanted to get her back myself. I believed that doing that was my role.]

[Julius:]

[Subaru: But, if it won't do unless I entrust it to someone, then I'll leave it to you. Don't get the wrong idea. It's the process of elimination.....That it's by process of elimination there's no doubt, but I will leave it to you. For me, you're the only one I can tolerate handing this role to, even if I don't like it.

Rem's very memory and existence, was being held hostage. Emilia's freedom had been taken away, and she was still waiting for help to come. Both of them were precious relations to Subaru, both of them were precious people he had to get back, and so to both of them Subaru wanted to show them his cool side.

However, Subaru was Emilia's knight, and Rem's hero too, so.

[Subaru: I will topple [Greed], and I will rescue Emilia. Blowing away [Gluttony], I'll hand it to you.....Don't screw it up.]

[Julius: ——To your expectations, I will respond. Especially this time, definitely this time.]

With a firm nod, Julius accepted Subaru's yielding.

The knight called the [Greatest] then gazed towards Wilhelm, and inclined his head slightly.

[Julius: Wilhelm-sama.]

[Wilhelm: Of what I wanted to say, Subaru-dono has spoken most of that for me. It is true that I do not have the most harmonious feelings for [Gluttony].....And so too, I will entrust it to Julius-dono. There are too many scoundrels caught up in this.]

From that Sword Demon growing sharp, Julius seemed to gain a bit of courage. Ricardo, who had until then quietly observed their talk, now said

[Ricardo: An' what's this, my thoughts don' even seem to be heard in this talk goin' on. I don't even get to be cared that much, 's that it! Now that this lineup so far 's the best, I can agree to that.]

[Anastasia: Ricardo really is wantin' attention. Gettin' miffed like that with your big size doesn't really look cute, you know.....Julius, I will ask of you.]

[Ricardo: Relax. Have ya ever see me lyin'? Ana-bo.]

[Anastasia: Usin' that title, could you rightly stop that? I'm, Ricardo's mistress you know.]

Ricardo guffawed loudly at the sight of Anastasia's miffed face and puffed up cheeks. The black-iris eyes that gazed down on Anastasia, had a very kind glint in them.

[Subaru: Then, with this, the lineups are decided, right.]

—Following Subaru's remark, all those present at the round table nodded their heads.

[Subaru: For the attack on Sirius of [Wrath], Priscilla and Al. Counting Liliana, that's three in all.]

[Priscilla: The notion that mine self may succumb to the toying of emotions is a laughable one indeed. Showing mine opponent how they were in the wrong place at the wrong time while facing the wrong enemy, such a helpless fool deserves a lesson!]

[Liliana: I only sing~, I only sing~ It's what I am, just a lump of meat that sings! Do not cherish your life, cherish the stage. Okay, good, I feel like I can do it. Right now, I really feel like I can do it!]

[Subaru: ————]



Priscilla fanned herself as Liliana engaged in questionable self-hypnosis. Al's face could not be seen, but the impression that he was still not convinced seemed to come from his whole body.

Though it was a mildly unsettling trio, confidence-wise they were the strongest there.

[Subaru: Next up, for the capturing of [Lust], Garfiel and Wilhelm-san.]

[Garfiel: Got it. My amazin' self will grab 'em by the throat, 'n make 'em cry, 'n say sorry.]

[Wilhelm: Please leave it to me.——With the both of us, it is assured.]

The pair with the most fighting spirit, could it be said to be these two?

The Sword Demon Wilhelm had his mistress' obligation, and also his wife, who he could not forget even for a moment.

As for Garfiel, there was some form inside him that could not be grasped, some emotion that made his feelings shake.

Perhaps these two warriors both sought some answers in the battle ahead, he couldn't be sure if that's how they felt.

[Subaru: And for the conquest of [Gluttony], it's the two of you, Julius and Ricardo.]

[Julius: By none other than you both, we have been entrusted this task. It will certainly be resolved. Like this, then, I will negate him.]

[Ricardo: My family, those damn bastards made 'em suffer. I don't need t' hear those words to know. I'll punch 'em, hit 'em hard and make 'em cry.]

This pair had the least connections to the Witch Cult. And yet they could safely be expected to not fall behind the others, since it was definitely certain that both were highly respected opponents.

Together, he had already overcome hardship with them. Nowhere in these comrades-in-arms lay any cause for doubt.

Because of that, the choice to yield the detestable [Gluttony] was made possible.

[Subaru: The last one is [Greed], with Reinhardt and I making two. I'm counting on you?]

[Reinhardt: —Aah, leave it to me. I am depending on you as well, Subaru.]

At Subaru's request, Reinhardt nodded his head with his usual resolute attitude. But something in his draped mien seemed soft, and while in the middle of battle it may strike one as insincere, but now his appearance seemed to overflow with humanity.

Why it was such a reassuring look, Subaru could not know.

[Subaru: Then, with this, the choices for the fights are decided. And on the matter of choosing places to set up communication mirrors for reports, there are three of them in all. Assuming I leave one in City Hall....For the others left, what should we do?]

[Subaru: Personally, I definitely want someone to take one for [Wrath]. And one to..... [Lust] or [Gluttony], one of those two would be nice, I think.]

[???: What are your reasons?]

[Subaru: [Wrath] is someone with influence over the whole city. By whether they fall or not, the situation that befalls the city will be changed. Therefore, that news is something I want to be able to share quickly.]

Regarding the use of communication mirrors, they all nodded as if Subaru's suggestion was the truth. As for the reason for bringing a different one to [Greed],

[Subaru: It doesn't really need to be said, but Reinhardt will be with [Greed]. Assuming anything more about [Greed] than his power being unknown is optimistic, but I can't say that the possibility of it being handled instantly doesn't exist. If it becomes like that, I want to set up a situation where Reinhardt can be sent as reinforcements.]

[Reinhardt: However, unless the team at [Greed] possesses a communication mirror, then sharing that information is impossible, is it not? But, I certainly believe that Natsuki-san's opinion is largely correct.]

[Subaru: The answer to that is simple. Use the broadcast magic device. With a city-wide broadcast, I want us to keep everyone informed of places that need help. Using the communication mirror, Anastasia-san will organize all the information, and will take on the responsibility of conveying it to everyone. How's that?]

[Anastasia: I'm thinkin' that's wise. Your head seems t' work well sometimes, Natsuki-kun.]

Anastasia laughed with an impressed look, and tossed a communication mirror at Priscilla.

Priscilla caught it with her fan, and rolled it in front of Liliana.

[Liliana: Wa, wa, *wah!*?]

[Priscilla: Singer, you take it. Since mine self cannot lift anything heavier than tableware.]

[Liliana: That fan, it's almost as heavy as some dishes. Don't say pompous things.]

[Priscilla: Do not speak so foolishly, inspect this design. Gold is hung and inlaid from it luxuriously, and from just that it is weighty. Do not toss it in with the likes of dishes.]

[Liliana: Isn't that heavier than the dishes.....]

Regardless of what she said, in the end Liliana wound up taking it. Ignoring Liliana, who was quickly fixing her hair in the mirror, the last communication mirror was passed to Wilhelm.

[Subaru: Considering the number of enemies, the [Lust] side will need a mirror more than the group for [Gluttony]. Two people will be fine, I thinking, but contact Anastasia right away if it seems dangerous.]

[Wilhelm: Understood, I will be sure to contact her.]

Showing consideration for Julius, Wilhelm placed the mirror in his breast pocket.

However, it was a slightly worrying judgment. As it is, Wilhelm could become hot with fury and ignore the instructions from now. And Garfiel, needless to say, was the type to explode at the slightest provocation.

—Regardless, like this the battle preparations were complete.

[Subaru: I'll leave, a little more time. When that ends we will start, the Control Towers Recapture Operation commences.]

At Subaru's words, all present replied by nodding their heads.

However, seeing their quiet, tense appearances, Subaru thought the mood was bad anyhow.

[Subaru: If you're making angry faces, don't you get the feeling that bad stuff gets closer?]

[Otto: Once more a sign that Natsuki-san will say something strange occurred.]

[Subaru: It's not weird. It's important. No matter how large of an army gathers, if morale is low, it can turn into a rabble. I'm not saying our morale is low here, but I don't think my motives are bad. So, let's raise our voice.]

While clapping his hands, Subaru stood up.

[Subaru: Let's clean it all up, everyone! With this fight, get rid of the the city-disturbing bastards! The Witch Cult fails and we get a *happy end*!]

[Others: ——]

At Subaru's urging, they looked at each others' faces. Then, nodding,

[Others: Hooooh—!!]

Like that, a high-morale reply came back.

If they can give such a strong answer, then they'll definitely be fine.

This many members, this much of a vanguard, it wasn't something that could just be prepared again.

—The city recapture, began in earnest.

[Subaru: —This fight, is our victory!!]

With Subaru saying whatever he wanted, the round table meeting concluded.

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Sometime later, her muffled sensations recovering, her consciousness slowly returned to reality.

As reality started to permeate through drowsy senses, the feelings in her hands and feet naturally returned.

Then, while feeling spread through the rest of her body, her first sensation was of something soft embracing her.

Warm, it was relaxing like a large animal's fur had wrapped her up.

She had felt something similar quite a long time ago. A long time ago, back when she was young, a time when her body could not follow the fairies, a time when she feared sleeping alone.

Now far from the feeling of that fur's texture, quite some time had passed since then.

[Emilia: —Ah.]

At first, her eyes welled with tears from its nostalgic touch. Putting aside her silly desire to keep feeling the warmth, she slowly opened her eyes. Her long eyelashes shivered, and amethyst irises blankly noted the world.

She was in a room with high ceilings, and decorations she had never seen before. Lying on a bed there, she found herself wrapped up in a summer blanket crafted from quality fur.

A stranger seated beside her had been cleaning her face with a wet towel.

[Emilia: You're.....?]

[???: —]

Looking down on her when she opened her eyes was, a beautiful woman with a pure-white face.

On the rather sickly, blood-drained face, a pretty and expressionless face like a doll's was attached. Her beauty was such that she would surely light up the room if she smiled, but her face was rigidly held like a mask which could not laugh.

Rising, her long hair waving behind her, the woman in a black dress left the room right away.

She quickly tried to call out to her, but as she fretted on how to call her while not knowing her name, the door clicked shut. As such, she found herself alone.

[Emilia: Here...I wonder where that is?]

Hesitantly, she sat up on the bed.

Though she was faintly weary, no pain or signs of poor condition could be felt. The heaviness must be from using too much magic she was not yet used to, as it was a sign that her body was unable to withstand it.

Having gotten that far, right away she remembered the rest of what had occurred in her situation.

[Emilia: Right. Ah, at the square, I fought a strange person, and.....]

Continuing on, in her head the events from just before she lost consciousness came to mind.

A monster with a face wrapped in bandages——The one Subaru had called [Wrath], had come for her with fearsome combat prowess and downright creepy amounts of anger. For a moment, she had taken on the fight at an advantage, but then losing to the force of fiercely burning flames, she had been sent flying——.

[Emilia: And then, I must have passed out. But, I'm still alive.]

As she was outmatched, there was no doubt it had been a desperate situation.

Someone had probably come to her aid. Subaru and Beatrice had been there, it could be she was rescued by those two. Even then, her heart was crushed by her own patheticness.

Emilia had struck such a pose at Subaru, and had talked really loudly, but not only had she lost, she needed to be helped too.

[Emilia: Mmh, there isn't any time to be dejected. Even if I don't do that, I'm already late to depart, so there isn't time to pause in my steps and repent. I'll repent while walking.]

Tapping her snow white cheeks with both hands, she raised her spirits. Time spent depressed was time squandered.

Having been provided a bed and blanket. And even being watched over by a caretaker, this place must be a benevolent someone's home. Since she hadn't been taken to her own place, her situation may have been quite severe.

[Emilia: But I can't feel any pain, so maybe a skilled healer.....Eeh?]

While moving to stand, Emilia came to realize something about herself.

[Emilia: I'm, naked.]



At the point bare feet touched the floor, she noticed that not a single piece of cloth was draped on her body. Emilia's head tilting, she first wrapped the blanket around her body and got down from the bed.

Gazing around the room, she looked around hoping for something to wear, but regrettably could not find anything.

[Emilia: Mmh, what should I do? If I leave the room like this, I'll be thought of as bad-mannered.....]

Before leaving the forest, when she was studying matters on leaving the forest, and learning lots of things from Puck, that point had been energetically enough placed in her head.

She shouldn't show skin in front of others. Following that rule, then her own appearance right now was completely a problem,

[Emilia: But, since I'm worried about everyone, it's an emergency so it can't be helped.]

The battle with the Sin Archbishops, how it had concluded, she had to find out as quickly as possible. With that task as justification, Emilia emerged from the room garbed in a single blanket.

Walking out to the corridor, it was definitely not a building she had ever seen before. Just, compared to how she imagined it, the outside of the room gave an oddly unsophisticated impression of a cold hallway.

[Emilia: I thought I was somewhere like a mansion, but that was totally wrong. Mmh, is it just this room that's strange?]

Turning back, she saw the room where she had slept in.

A big bed, and a small wardrobe. However, upon closer inspection, she could not escape the impression that something was unbalanced about it. It gave the impression of a bed and other furniture bought and messily piled inside an empty room.

And that might not be wrong.

By checking the atmosphere of the corridor, this was definitely not a place meant for people to live in. This was a place where people worked. If she focused her ears, the faint sound of water and a hint of something could be heard.

While Emilia puzzled over that, there——.

[???: Ah, it seems you've opened your eyes, how relieving, what a relief. I'm relieved you're safe.]

Spoken to so, Emilia turned back.

Just then, at the far end of the corridor, a young man emerged. Having discovered Emilia, the white-haired youth grinned at her.

[???: However, I'm not comfortable with you walking around right after waking. Various things happened and you had a big day, so if there's something with your body it's a headache. That part, I'm telling you to go about your work with certain care. Moreover since it's not just your body, I mean.]

[Emilia: Then, you are.....?]

Blinking, Emilia gazed at the young man speaking to her.

That attitude of narrowing the gap between others with a single step was somewhat close to Subaru's. However, the crucial difference between Subaru and him, was that his attitude had no intention of respecting the other person.

That was Subaru's timid virtue, and the young man in front of her did not show any hint of it. It was as if he did not have any remorse for others.

——At the same time, Emilia was recalling a feeling she could not reveal to the young man in front of her.

[???: Is that so, sorry, sorry. I've even seen your sleeping face, but this is your first time seeing me I'd say. I haven't even given you my name yet. No matter how you're in a relationship with me, this kind of impolite attitude won't do. I was too hasty on that point, it is my fault. Truly, like I'm sorry I will apologize. Since I am a human being capable of such things.]

[Emilia: Y-yes.....]

Emilia's reply to that endlessly, fluently speaking young man was quite heavy.

The reason for that may be that his attitude overwhelmed her, but a more significant meaning was contained within. That was, Emilia's subconscious was appealing to her.

—This young man, somewhere, I remember seeing him before.

[??? : It's a waste of a scene, it's a shame that this place lacks atmosphere. But I believe this too, when you look back, will think of as a special moment. If you look at it that way it's not even a bad thing. A small happiness day-by-day is just, more than enough to make the path known as life brighten up. If it's with you, then I definitely especially think so. Not just as being in a bad place, but seeing the nice sides of it, that's the way of life want to try. Do you not think so too, Emilia?]

[Emilia: I, do not remember telling you my name.....So, you are?]

[??? : Oops, sorry. When my feelings get too lofty, without knowing it myself I stop noticing my surroundings, it is a bad habit of mine. It is for that reason, that I sometimes dislike my affectionate personality. It could be that you are the one making me feel so deeply. And, my name, was it.]

After an incredibly long and flexible detour, this young man was barely entering the main building.

Feeling warning tingles burn her skin, Emilia did not take her eyes off of the young man's actions. That her own safety was at risk, she intuitively understood.

And the cause of that intuition was, the young man in front of her.

[Regulus: My name is Regulus Corneas. I hold an executive position in a certain group, but something like that is not important to you. What is indeed important to you is just one thing. That I am your husband, and that you are my 79th wife.]

[Emilia:Eeh?]

The young man gave a name—What Regulus marvelously spoke of, the meaning of it she did not understand. Emilia fretted, and her pretty brows frowned. But, Regulus was not paying Emilia's reaction any mind, and was staring at the body of a girl covered only with a single light cloth,

[Regulus: That appearance is poison to the eyes. I'll order a change of clothes to be brought over right away. You can relax. They are in the same situation as you, my other wives. Putting on wedding attire is something they would have gotten used to.]

[Emilia: A wedding dress, what do you mean? No, it isn't just that. Calling me your wife, what are you saying?]

[Regulus: Right. I was forgetting something important! For one such as myself, that was dangerous.]

Emilia opened her mouth to ask another question, but Regulus was not listening. He clapped his hands, and lightly grabbed Emilia's shoulder as she was about to ask. As she felt the odd amount of force coming from those fingers, Emilia frowned. Drawing close enough to touch Emilia's forehead, Regulus gazed into her eyes.

[Regulus: I was forgetting an important, important question. Your awareness of the wedding comes after this. Emilia, this is important, so I want you to answer carefully. For our future, it's very important.]

[Emilia: —]

At that weird level of pressure, Emilia swallowed her breath and was silent. Taking her attitude as assent, Regulus smiled. With a smile, he asked.

[Regulus: Emilia, are you a virgin? That's all, it's really important.]

With a smile, he spoke.

you really are really both noisy and crude.”

Subaru: “Being a knight without a trace of knightliness happens to be my specialty!”

Treading on the carpet stained with Reinhardt’s blood, Subaru unclasped his whip from his waist, and directed the tip toward Regulus. In response, Regulus simply made a show of tightening his grip on Emilia’s neck as he lifted her.

Regulus: “Are your eyes just for decoration? Can’t you see that I have leverage here?”

Reinhardt: “—This is all very strange. According to what you promised, you should have liberated the hostages.”

Regulus: “—Eh!?”

The instant he heard that sound, Regulus’s face became stricken with horror. Tearing his gaze away from the center of the church, Subaru saw a slender, bloodstained figure, and felt his throat close with shock.

Regulus: “Wha—!?”

Reinhardt: “—The 『Divine Protection of The Phoenix』 .”

With brevity, Reinhardt responded to the wavering Regulus, and three figures moved as one.

Subaru leapt toward the altar, allowing his whip to yank a blonde-haired woman to safety. Even as her throat was being choked, Emilia kicked her sword of ice over to Reinhardt. Reinhardt, who had appeared out of nowhere, caught the sword and pointed it at Regulus. With the women shielded from the line of fire, the wielder of that blade hesitated no longer. In the next instant, sound vanished from the world— a brilliant blue light accompanied the shockwave that engulfed the church.

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Chapter 48 - The One You'll Come To Love Someday

For a moment, Emilia did not understand the meaning of what had been said to her.

Without thinking, she swallowed. The young man in front of her—Regulus, in response, raised a hand while smiling.

[Regulus: Aah, I'm sorry for doing this so suddenly. I may have shocked you a little. Honestly, I apologize on that point. It seems I keep on having to say it, but I am a man capable of apologizing. There are unsightly people in this world who do not acknowledge their own sins and blame this and that, too small to admit they make their own mistakes. They think they do not get a single thing wrong, even if you empty out everything they've done since birth to this very moment and examine it. Mistaken so, I think they become like that, but just how arrogant can they be? If they could just examine what lies under their feet a little more, and compare themselves to the vastness of the world and come to truly understand how small of an existence they really are, then they would not end up like that, just a single apology, is what they call a personality? It reflects their character. Don't you think so?]

[Emilia: Then, apologizing is important?]

[Regulus: Correct! That's right, apologizing is important. What a relief. It's obvious, and you seem to understand that point, so I am quite relieved. In this world, people that can not understand something so obvious are unexpectedly many. It makes me dislike them. So, it seems there's no problem on the matter of adjusting understandings between the spouses about apologizing. I'm relieved, it seems like I'll be able to get along well with you from now on. And so, I apologized. The problem was, I was being a little impatient.....]

Having spoken up to that point, Regulus' eyes looked Emilia up and down. As her body was only wrapped in a blanket, she froze up a little at that view.

[Regulus: Yes, shyness is important even between spouses. On that point I think you are very good. Once again, it's about the question from just before, I'd rather you not misunderstand. I, more than

anything, was not checking whether or not you are a virgin from a worldly point of view. I've said this multiple times, but I am your husband and you are my wife. It will not do for a marriage to lack strong ties of affection and courtesy. Connected with the long, long chain called love, devoting everything to your partner is obvious. Therefore, that you have never been touched by another man.....That's the kind of assurance I need.]

[Emilia: Assurance that, I wasn't touched by others.....?]

[Regulus: Of course, checking whether or not you retain your maidenhood by sure evidence is nonsense. But as a kind of touchstone, I think it has such significant value. So, deliberately, even knowing it would be an experience you don't enjoy, I asked. I want you to understand that this is due to my love for you. Some stranger you don't love, who cares about how their virginity is. It's because I love you, that's why I'm checking.]

Regulus fluently and continuously spoke of the rationale behind his thoughts. Battered by these waves of words, Emilia felt something creepy about the coolly-talking Regulus.

Without knowing why, something about his appearance ceaselessly stirred a feeling of déjà vu in her heart, and the contents of what she heard pouring like water were not retained in her memory. Only, she was aware of one thing.

What he treated as important, the term "virgin". That was——.

[Regulus: And so, I want to ask once again. ——Hey, are you a virgin? Or not?]

[Emilia: Um, by "virgin", what do you mean? Sorry. I, haven't heard it before.]

[Regulus:What?]

After being thrown a question prepared with flowery words, Emilia apologetically replied so.

She knew Regulus had a strong attachment to the word, but Emilia did not know very well what it meant.

Perhaps, it refers to a young girl, she thought.

Inquiring in a low voice and hearing Emilia's reply, Regulus' expression clouded.

Closing his eyes, he shut his mouth. Fallen in thought like that, his appearance caused anxiety to creep up, but the silence didn't last as long as imagined.

Opening his eyes wide, Regulus reached his open hand towards Emilia. And,

[Regulus: Excellent. —You are, my ideal girl.]

[Emilia: Eeh?]

Holding Emilia's hand, Regulus wore a bright smile on his face.

It was a truly happy face, unlike the smile from just before. He had the kind of expression, that a beaming child might make after getting a toy they really wanted from their doting parents.

Regulus grabbed and shook Emilia's hand up and down, and repeated the gesture many times.

[Regulus: Yes. That is how it should be. The virginity of the body this, the virginity of the body that, it's not really suitable for me as a touchstone, I had always thought so. However, the true sense of pureness is what lies in your heart. Your body being virgin is a given! What's really important, is that your mind remains virgin as well. I feel as if I have reached a truth. Amazing. You have brought something new to my previously satisfied self.]

[Emilia: —]

[Regulus: Yes, yes, I get it. Rest assured, I will welcome you as my wife. Besides, because of that I realized something important. Henceforth, when welcoming a new wife, just inquiring as to their virginity will be insufficient. If they are not at the level of a child lacking knowledge of what virginity even is, that lowers the value of a wife. An adulterous heart will not do. It is unbecoming of my wife.]

Releasing Emilia's hand, Regulus stepped away with a very satisfied appearance.

The meaning of his remarks were still not very well grasped by Emilia. In the first place, what he meant by "husband" and "wife" was a mystery to her. By Emilia's understanding, the wife was part of something the father and mother were, one each, but from Regulus' remarks, the image of many wives

came to mind. Such was a notion far off from Emilia's common sense of the nature of married couples.

Perhaps he was talking about a different concept with a shared pronunciation?

[Regulus; Whoa, and your appearance cannot be left like that. I will arrange for a change of clothes straight away.——No. 184! Come here.]

[Emilia: ——]

Leaving the perplexed Emilia alone, Regulus suddenly spoke out a number. Then, from the other side of the corridor, the woman who had left the room Emilia was in now appeared. A young woman with long blonde hair and a polite manner, she arrived next to Regulus and demurely greeted him on the spot. Regulus nodded at her gestures, and

[Regulus: For her.....A change of clothes for No. 79. As soon as that's prepared, I will hold the wedding. This child is in the same position as all of you. Get along, and do take care of her.]

[No. 184: ——]

[Regulus: Yes, you are no longer prone to laughing. ——Good child. A good wife.]

To the silently nodding woman, Regulus spoke as if satisfied.

After that, approaching Emilia who still seemed lost, he ran a finger through the side of her silver hair, and stroked her head.

[Regulus: Then, a little while later.]

[Emilia: Yes.....]

Emilia's instinct was appealing to her, to avoid going against him.

Accepting Emilia's short reply, Regulus then, with the sound of footsteps, disappeared to the other side of the corridor.

Regulus had merely just been there, calmly too——Even then, his existence gave off a strange

pressure, which seemed to her a dangerous threat that reminded her of the time her old homeland had been threatened.

[No. 184: This way.]

The woman next to Emilia suddenly called out to her. She had been gazing at the back which had long since disappeared. Hearing the woman's voice for the first time, she was reminded of string instruments from its clear beauty. However, the voice, just like her expression, felt as if all feelings of emotion in it had frozen and hardened.

[Emilia: Hey, sorry. I, have a looot of questions I want to ask.....]

[No. 184: Your change of clothes.]

[Emilia: The clothes are important, but there's also.....Yes, do you know where this place is? I was, at a plaza in Pristella with a Witch Cult person.....Ah, really.]

Ignoring Emilia as she tried to ask questions, the woman started to walk off immediately. Following quickly behind her, Emilia kept asking questions trying to somehow shine light on the situation, but that fully-turned back replied to her with nothing.

Guided by the woman in front of her, she arrived next to the room she had slept in previously. It was also a space which resembled a simply arranged room, in which furniture had been forcefully shoved inside.

[Emilia: This must have, originally, been a slightly different room.....]

[No. 184: The clothes chosen with care, and so on, Husband-sama brought them over. No. 79, you are to change into them.]

[Emilia: By No. 79, do you mean me? Just now, I think Regulus called me by that, too. You're.....]

[No. 184: I am No. 184. His wife, like you.]

[Emilia: Like me.....]

As the door closed, only then did the woman——Naming herself No. 184, engage herself in conversation. There was no change in the voice which had lost its emotion, but it seemed barely possible to make conversation.

[Emilia: About the word 'wife', I've asked a few times, but does it mean the same as 'missus'? Then, I, don't think I've become Regulus' missus.....]

[No. 184: Even if no such idea resides with you, he has such a notion. And if he has that idea, that means yours are irrelevant.]

[Emilia: Isn't that strange.. To become a missus, you have to be married with your master, right? I, didn't get married with Regulus, and don't have any thoughts to. Marrying is between a guy person and a girl person, who say they will keep being together and have to keep liking each other after. I, can't make a promise like that with anyone yet..]

[No. 184: If you mean a wedding, it will be held right now. With that, the matter will be concluded.]

No. 184 did not seem to possess any notion of listening to Emilia's words. Even as dialogue seemed established, it actually wasn't, and Emilia became more and more confused.

In the meantime, No.184 had approached Emilia, and was trying to pull aside the blanket covering her.

[Emilia: Ah, wait, what are you doing?]

[No. 184: Changing you into bridal attire right away. Fortunately, your clothes are already prepared. When undressing you to lay you in bed, your size was checked, so please rest assured.]

[Emilia: You were the one who undressed me?]

[No. 184: Do you think I'm Husband-sama? Please be assured. He does not make a habit of stealing peeks at women's skin, and he doesn't have any interest in women in the first place. After your virginity has been assured, he does not do anything.]

[Emilia: You, are talking about that 'virgin', too?]

[No. 184:It is surprising. Surely, but it wasn't acting, you really did not know?]

For the first time, something resembling emotion slightly flitted across No. 184's expression. At that faintly surprised look, Emilia opened her eyes wide, then slightly laughed.

[Emilia: What, you can be surprised, too. Then, you can talk while smiling. That is, much better suited for you, I think.]

[No. 184:Husband-sama does not desire it. I will also leave this advice with you: Husband-sama likes your usual look. It is wiser not to laugh, rage, or change your expression. If possible, even not opening your mouth would be better, I think.]

[Emilia: Are you saying not to talk? Why?]

[No. 184: Since you won't know, whether it infringe on Husband-sama's rights.]

Stripping the bedding from Emilia, No. 184 proffed undergarments. After receiving it, she held it up to her body, and the size seemed to fit perfectly.

Watching her putting on the undergarments while shaking her hands and feet, No. 184 suddenly gave a long sigh.

[Emilia: Is something wrong?]

[No. 184:No, I was merely thinking that you were beautiful. Your narrow hands and feet, white skin, and long silver hair, especially.]

[Emilia: ——? Thanks. Even if you don't really mean it, I'm happy. I only have Subaru and Anne telling me things like that.]

[No. 184: Subaru.....A man, is it?]

[Emilia: Yes, my knight. He will rea~lly be worrying about me, I think. So, I want to find out where I am quickly.....]

Probably, it would be causing him lots of worry.

In Emilia's head, there wasn't any concern of Subaru having been done in. He had Beatrice with him, and the notion of Subaru falling into a situation where he would die didn't reach Emilia's imagination in the first place. Subaru, he would get through it somehow.

And so, being captured without being able to say anything to Subaru was really pathetic.

[No. 184: That man you call Subaru, do not ever mention him to Husband-sama.]

[Emilia: Uh, why?]

[No. 184: To borrow Husband-sama's words, the virginity of your mind may become suspect.]

[Emilia: Again, it's about that 'virgin'.]

Giving a term as the reason without explaining what it meant was really confusing.

Without explanation beyond that for the pouting Emilia, No. 184 took a pure white dress from the closet, and held it close to Emilia's body.

With a brilliant-looking front, and many fancy ornaments stuck on, it was a beautiful dress.

[Emilia: But, it looks hard to move in.]

[No. 184: Complaints too, not speaking those would be wise. I will dress you now.]

Wondering, her head tilted askew, whether such a wonderful outfit would even suit her, Emilia was putting it on as instructed by No. 184, she was changing into the dress.

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[Regulus: — Aah, isn't that just great. As I thought, white suits you.]

[Emilia:Thanks.]

Regulus said in a bright voice when he saw that Emilia had changed clothes, His appearance too had changed from their hallway meeting just before. Emilia's expression suggested that she had noticed, and Regulus lightly popped his collar in reply,

[Regulus: A wedding is important, you know. Normally, I am of the thought not to not be attired as such, but I wouldn't want to embarrass you with some unfun stubbornness. It is the ideal for spouses to show consideration for each other, without thinking of it as uncomfortable. For this level of work, I do not wish to burden you with worried thoughts about all the consideration I have shown you, I merely want you to know that, if it is for your sake, I am a man that can accept making some changes. And for the venue, it will be ready soon, in just a little while.]

[Emilia: The venue.....You mean here?]

Dressed in a white tuxedo and robes, Regulus turned his head, and following him, Emilia also gazed around the space she was in.

It was a cathedral——To be exact, it was a cathedral used only for the single important task of beginning a wedding ceremony.

After having been changed by No.184, Emilia had left the building for the first time, and quickly realized she had been resting in a room within one of the control towers. As such, Emilia had been led by No. 184 from the tower and brought right to this cathedral.

The outside of the cathedral was busy with laboring figures bustling about, for the wedding preparations which they were methodically continuing. And wordlessly, blankly carrying out the preparation of the venue, wherever one looked, were beautiful and fashionably attired women.

[Regulus: These girls are my wives, they're in the same position as you are. All together, they number 291.....It's sad, but a lot of those kids died, you know. But still, for those that are still with me, I pour my love onto them equally, I think. That's obvious. Some principle of favoring and loving only one

person is too distorted to be fitting for what you call a husband. I never do such absurd things. A fixed love, in a fixed amount, by fixed ways, I divvy it out. Here, there is no favoritism, no inequality, no injustice. Be relieved. For I, also love you in that same way.]

[Emilia: What you are saying, isn't it.....]

[???: —Husband-sama. Briefly, a word.]

“Isn't it weird?”, Emilia was about to say.

Coming to the front, No. 184 who had been waiting at their side spoke to Regulus Hearing No. 184's words, he vaguely furrowed his brows.

[Regulus: You know. I'm talking to her right now, you see that, right? Interrupting me now, when we're sharing in nurturing the sprouting of love between us, just me and her, don't you think you're smearing poison on it? Or is that just not on your mind? Such small courtesies between a husband and wife, I think they're really important. Didn't I keep telling you that? And yet, by still getting in the way, you're making my very minor wish go to waste. What do you think, No. 184?]

[No. 184: I am truly sorry. However, this is important. I know it is presumptuous, but I am only acting out of concern for Husband-sama. I humbly ask you, to hear my words.]

His speaking grew more rapid, and signs of danger erupted from Regulus' whole body. However, even exposed to that razor-sharp look, No. 184's resolute attitude did not bend as she advised him.

Naturally, at that sight, Regulus drew back the thorns from his appearance.

[Regulus:Fine. Speak. Sparing some kindness for the wife, is a husband's generosity. I am not such a petty man that I can't even do that much.]

[No. 184: I am truly grateful. Well, it is regarding the message of the broadcast from a while ago.....Will that be all right? If, potentially, a disturbance was made at the wedding..]

[Regulus: The broadcast? Ah, the one that the trembling voice I don't really know made. Does it actually matter? If they just talk, it's not a problem at all. It's some complaint-filled coward that can't even speak of their own skills, listing off some fitting words, that's all it seems to me. If it's Capella, or Sirius, if it's for those trash then I don't know.....But I don't care. Or, is it that you don't trust in my strength? Then, as a wife, are you doubting your husband's abilities?]

[No. 184: No, I believe in it. If Husband-sama is there, then we have nothing to worry about. I was merely hoping for Husband-sama's words to wash away my anxiousness, that's all. Please kindly forgive a lacking wife, who failed to rely on you.]

With a seemingly prepared reply, No. 184 tried to dodge Regulus' inquiry. With a feeble girl's words and an expressionless face and voice, No. 184 compelled him. And Regulus shook his head as if impressed by her words.

[Regulus: Is that how it was. That, I myself didn't think of it, sorry. Even if I wasn't asked, I still should have noticed your anxious thoughts. One must consider the thoughts of others, even if they are unspoken, so just how much was I acting as I pleased? I reflect on myself.]

[No. 184: It is rather I that is deeply sorry. Husband-sama's words have given me courage. I, too, will immediately set out to help in preparing the venue.]

[Regulus: Ah, please do.]

Giving her farewell, No. 184 turned away from Regulus. At the same time, she met Emilia's eyes and gave a furtive sort of wink. That was, probably, a warning to Emilia about the carelessness of her words from before she had been cut off.

It was not wrong to describe Emilia as having neglected the danger Regulus poses. As such things were communicated, Emilia didn't hesitate to make a split-second judgement.

[Emilia: ——Watch out!]

[No. 184: Huh?]

As No. 184 was trying to make her escape, Emilia tugged hard on her arm. Clutching her tall but light body to her chest, Emilia took a big step backwards.

The space in front of her, where No. 184 had stood moments before, was caressed by the wind.

Opening a long furrow in the cathedral floor, shattering it, and piercing straight through in a line of destruction. Without slowing down, the wind hit the main gate, turning the entryway into powder, then spread its destruction outwards.

[Emilia: ——]

At that instant of overwhelming destructive power, Emilia, who was cuddling with No. 184, could not speak. No. 184 also, noticing the destruction while getting up from behind her, froze and completely curled up.

And, standing at the destruction's point of origin in a pose as if he had swung his right arm moments before, was Regulus,

[Regulus: Sorry, sorry. My hand just slipped.——It's a relief that nothing happened to you kids.]

[Emilia: ——]

[Regulus: I'll be in the waiting room until it's time, so call me when everything's ready, ok? Aah, while you're waiting too, wouldn't putting up your hair be better? That option is much more attractive, I believe. It is beautiful as it is, I think, but putting effort into being beautiful is something that must be done ceaselessly is what I'm thinking. Rather than trying to stay beautiful, trying to become beautiful, is more the minimum level of courtesy towards someone that likes you, I say. Of course, I myself remain satisfied with my currently filled environment, but I have no mind to limit what I have been given already.]

Talking as if the moment's destruction was nothing, Regulus, while smiling at Emilia, headed for the waiting room door on the other side of the cathedral. Blankly left staring at the leftover traces of destruction, she was taking in deep breaths.

[Emilia: Just now, what was that.....?]

[No. 184:Thank you very much, for saving me.]

Saying so, No. 184 pulled away from Emilia's bosom. Her previously frozen form fixed her disheveled hair, and she left Emilia's side right away. Her steps were taking her to, where the other women inside the cathedral were preparing.

It seemed those women were continuing their work with looks that suggested they were completely unrelated to the destruction from before. Not only that, but several of them had gathered around the destroyed floor and door, and could be seen beginning to work on somehow hiding its traces out of view.

[Emilia: Wait! This is weird! Don't you guys think it's weird?]

[Others: ——]

At that unperturbed attitude, Emilia raised her voice in confusion. As one, the women paid no heed to Emilia's voice, and merely continued to prepare in silence.

If it's like this, then it will go on forever, Emilia thought, heading for the only person who her words seemed to get through to. Towards No. 184,

[Emilia: Just now, weren't you almost killed? If I hadn't pulled you back, surely your body would have been blown away. It was scary? Then, why..]

[No. 184: Well, what is it? I've already thanked you for saving me. Beyond that, what else do you want from me? Anything else, is that not a violation of my rights?]

[Emilia: This isn't about rights or obligations! Let's talk about something more—More important!]

Emilia pointed to the women still hard at work inside the cathedral.

[Emilia: Regulus said they're his wives. They're all, that person's wife? And since they're wives, they do what he says? If you're a wife, then even if you're about to be murdered, you quietly accept it.....That stuff, is weird. It's weird!]

[Emilia: That is too strange.....Marriage is soo happy, it's something happy people do, isn't it? To me, you, the others; None of them look happy at all. Am I, wrong?]

[No. 184: Yes, you are mistaken. Even if you aren't happy, marriage is possible. Spouses do not have to love each other. If they keep on being together, they become spouses. Then, as spouses, they grow used to it.]

No. 184, did not deny that she remained in a position she hated. Not only was she not refuting it, she was even affirming her own situation. That was distorted, and wrong.

Marriage, is for those who want to become spouses. It is not something you just want to get used to.

[Emilia: That marriage stuff, I have no intention of going along with it. I, will be leaving like this.]

[Others: ——]

Those women who had not been paying attention to Emilia's words, at that they now raised their faces.

As the wedding dress-clad Emilia announced her rejection of the marriage, they stared.

Weathering the storm of those emotionless gazes, Emilia squared her shoulders.

[Emilia: I have someone worrying about me. And there's a lot of things I have to do no matter what.

So, I can't just end up in a place like this. Together with everyone, right away, I will do what I have to.]

[No. 184: Such things, Husband-sama will not forgive it.]

[Emilia: I, do not remember having become a wife of Regulus. So, I don't want something like forgiveness. Together with everyone, then.....I will definitely return to save you all.]

[No. 184: ——Euh.]

[Emilia: All of you, I know you're not staying with Regulus because you want to. So I'll, talk to Regulus and free everyone. Anyone that still wants to stay with him then, can just keep being his wife. But, the people that want to be separated, I'll separate them. Even if you're forcefully married like that, it's meaningless if you're not happy together.]

The picture Emilia had painted inside her mind, was of two people who loved each other and looked forward to being joined together. What floated in her mind, from her dream before, were Fortuna and Juice's appearances. Those two people had never wed, and had never become spouses. Still, she thought it was good.

If it was those two, then Emilia wished she could have married them. A happy marriage and marriage ties of mutual love guaranteed, their relationship was the right one.

So——,

[Emilia: I know of people who loved each other, but could not be married. And so, getting married and being unable to be happy after, I don't like that kind of relationship.]

[Others:]

At Emilia's declaration, a stir spread throughout the indifferent women. But, No. 184 rapidly extracted herself from that hubbub.

She looked right at Emilia, and then at the destroyed entrance.

[No. 184: If you are choosing to leave, then that is your right. However, Husband-sama would not forgive us. On the spot, surely, we will all be slain.]

[Emilia: Even though you're his wife.....?]

[No. 184: A wife that cannot even fulfill Husband-sama's wishes, is the same in Husband-sama's view as one not able to fill all the requirements of a wife. If you leave, we will die. If you will still go, it will be you who kills us.]

[Emilia: ——]

Facing Emilia, No. 184 while taking her own life hostage spoke.

Her opinion, with its extreme contents. As if it reflected the opinion of them all, the women in the cathedral stood to surround Emilia, and restricted her movements.

Of course, there was nobody there who could fight and stop her. They were all somewhat ordinary

women. Born from ordinary households, having ordinary morals, having lived while yearning for ordinary happiness, ordinary women.

At some point, a wheel had come loose, and they had merely become accepted as one of Regulus' wives.

[Others: —]

She was unable to refute one bit of their resolute determination. Emilia had seen Regulus' crimes with her own eyes.

For just slightly talking back, he had simply tried to blow their life away in response, it was that Regulus. When he learned of Emilia's escape, it was hard to claim that he would not take his anger out on them. It was none other than Regulus' wives who understood this well.

[Emilia: How many, of Regulus' wives are here?]

[No. 184: Husband-sama's spouses, total 291 people. Of those, 238 have already passed away, so the remaining number 53 in all.]

[Emilia: Those wives who passed away.....]

[No. 184: Do you need an explanation?]

The question she received in reply, gave off a feeling of mocking her question.

That answer, even without asking, Emilia came to realize it. And that answer lay in none other than the actions of those women circling around her without speaking.

[Emilia: If I left, then all of you would suffer something harsh.....]

Rather than a harsh punishment, it would more likely be a certain, unavoidable death.

Unmistakably, these women were hostages to Emilia's free will. Thinking of the damage leaving this place would incur, she should not move rashly.

She thought about Subaru and his companions, outside of the cathedral in Pristella, worrying about her now.

She thought of them, and in her mind, Emilia apologized.

Then,

[Emilia: Okay. The wedding, let's do it.]

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After that, the venue's preparation proceeded at a rapid pace.

Though they weren't professionals, the damage was repaired so well that it was barely noticeable anymore. Just by looking at the fine workmanship, one could tell just how often those women had to clean up after Regulus' tantrums.

After Emilia agreed to proceed with the wedding, No.184 and a few of Regulus' other wives tended to her hair in the dressing room and decorated her with various adornments.

Except for the times when Annerose helped her with her hair, this was the first time Emilia's hairstyle had been so elaborate since Puck disappeared within the crystal.

Her long silver hair was gathered up and woven into a braid.

So as not to distract from the purity of her white dress, with only a few simple embellishments, Emilia's bridal gown was complete.

[Emilia: ————]

Looking at her reflection in the mirror, Emilia admired the women's handiwork.

Indeed, she looked very different from usual. With no one around to make demands about her hair aside from Subaru's occasional requests, it had been a while since she was imbued with such feminine charm.

Though she couldn't help but feel it was wasted on her.

[No.184: Well, let's go. Please take care not to damage Husband-sama's mood]

No.184 reminded Emilia as they headed out of the dressing room.

Turning into the chapel, Emilia saw that the attendees had already lined up, waiting for her arrival——all of them wives of Regulus, along with Regulus himself in a white tuxedo standing in front of the altar.

Although she didn't know the exact procedures, Emilia stepped onto the red carpet laid from the entrance and walked towards the altar where Regulus was waiting.

Regulus nodded with satisfaction when he spotted the beautifully adorned Emilia,

[Regulus: I almost didn't recognize you when you put on the dress, but the adornments took it to a whole other level. I was right to have kept No.79's seat vacant. I couldn't be happier with with my judgment]

[Emilia: No.79.....Why's that number vacant?]

[Regulus: Well, there used to be a woman who I initially thought would be a perfect fit for that number, but unfortunately I deemed her unsuitable before the wedding could take place. Although her all-important looks was very close to my ideal, I nevertheless reluctantly kept that seat vacant. But thanks to that, I met you, so it was all worthwhile after all]

[Emilia: Kept... vacant.....]

What's that supposed to mean?

The mere sound of it reignited Emilia's already desensitized sense of awryness.

But even with this vague outline, she couldn't quite put her finger on just what it was. Meanwhile, Regulus adjusted his suit in front of Emilia in her bridal gown.

[Regulus: Well now, shall we commence the wedding ceremony? I suppose it's a bit on the informal side, but I hope you don't mind? As long as the ceremony proceeds properly, the rest are just superficial details. I'm not one of those fools who prioritize the surface only to lose sight of the essence. Failing to see a matter's substance that way is simply laughable. How can someone be satisfied with only exteriors and outward appearances? Content with their ignorant, self-contained existence, they're are too stupid to even notice that they're being laughed at behind their backs]

[Emilia: ————]

While Regulus continued his convoluted tirade, No.184 walked to the other side of the altar.

Apparently, she would serve as the facilitator of this ceremony.

Indeed, she seemed to be fulfilling a coordinating role among Regulus' 53 wives as well. Though it wasn't clear what that coordination amounted to when Regulus could kill any of them on the slightest whim.

That was just another reason why this man was beyond forgivable.

[Emilia: Say, Regulus. There's something I have to tell you before I marry you]

Therefore, Emilia wanted to make it absolutely clear.

No.184's expression tensed at Emilia's words. But Regulus gave a surprisingly friendly nod in reply.

[Regulus: Aah, that's right. There are some important things I want to tell you as well before you become my wife. Though I suppose I could gradually teach you after we are married, it's vital that you should be mentally prepared beforehand. To discover our differences here and there after we're already married would be tragic, don't you think? In order to make sure something so unfortunate doesn't happen, I think it's crucial that we openly share our thoughts with each other. Once we become a couple, we'll be bound heart and soul, so it's important that we sort this out first]

[Emilia: Mmn, yeah. If it means being bound heart and soul, it's important, isn't it]

[Regulus: Right? It's good that we get on the same page. So, my other wives must have already told you some of the rules, but why don't we go over them. First, once you're married to me, you are forbidden to smile]

[Emilia:?]

Frowning, Emilia didn't seem to understand Regulus' meaning. But Regulus raised a finger and continued, [Well...],

[Regulus: It's quite important, you know. I like your face. I really like your face. I select my wives based on their faces. Beautiful, adorable, charmingly well-proportioned faces. I've had 291 wives in all, and all of them had beautiful faces. Your face is adorable too. And that's why you will become my wife. Do you understand?]

[Emilia: ———]

[Regulus: Here's what I think. There are many, many people in this world much more selfish than I. Don't you often hear about couples whose love begins to die the moment they get married? They went into a relationship because they liked each other, but as soon as they're living together all sorts of problems start popping up. Incompatible tastes in food. Incompatible habits. Incompatible hobbies. Incompatible schedules. There're all sorts of selfish excuses, and once the illusions about their partner fall away, they treat them like trash. I utterly despise such hopeless people]

Smiling, Regulus happily extolled his views on love.

Innocently, unreservedly, he raved about his indignation at those who scorned love.

[Regulus: Who isn't a little selfish? But why the disillusionment? Someone you like may have different sensibilities than you, but why the disillusionment? How can people be so stupid? Isn't it absurd? That's why I select partners based on their faces. If my partner has a face I like, I won't grow disillusioned no matter what kind of person is behind it. Because I love that face. As long as that face is there, my love would never die]

[Emilia: ———]

[Regulus: Even if they don't put away their clothes after they take them off. Even if they're a murdering maniac who indiscriminately butchers children. Even if their cooking skills are atrocious. Even if they sold their own brother to pay off their debt and ran away. Even if they don't separate different colored laundry that'll color-bleed into each other. Even if they're a psychopath who secretly kills animals for fun. Even if they have god-awful taste in clothing. Even if they're money-grubbing by nature. Even if

they don't like to bathe and smells like a homeless person. Even if they seriously believe the apocalypse is coming and keeps on talking about it—— I don't dislike them]

One after another, Regulus pointed to the 53 women present, shouting.

It wasn't clear which one which of those descriptions matched which one of the women. Nor could Emilia understand how he could claim to love only their faces and separate that from the person underneath.

[Regulus: I would never say it in past-tense like "*I used to love*". I love your face. Even if you're the Witch who seeks to slaughter every person in this world in utmost, excruciating agony, I will not grow disillusioned. As long as I have your face]

[EmiliaWhat does that have to do with not smiling?]

[Regulus: It's very simple. There are times when a girl who's normally cute and beautiful can suddenly turn repulsive the moment they smile, you know? As if I could allow such a thing. So, it's not only smiling, but crying as well. Either way, I won't allow your cute adorable face to be distorted in any way. So, no smiling. No crying. No sulking. Only adorableness is permitted]

Holding Emilia's chin in his fingertips, Regulus quietly demanded.

As for what would happen if she refused, those earlier events had already answered that question.

But what made no sense was how he could he commit such senseless atrocities when he claimed to love their faces.

[Emilia: You said you love their faces and would never grow disillusioned..... if so, then why did you attack this person earlier?]

[Regulus: Huh?]

Seeing Emilia pointing to No.184, Regulus tilted his head.

Without lowering her arm, Emilia broke free from Regulus' fingers,

[Emilia: If I hadn't pulled her away, this person would certainly have died. This is also someone whose face you love and therefore took as your wife, correct? If that's true, then how could you do such a thing?]

[Regulus: Aah, that's simple too. It's because, temperate as I am, she still managed to upset me. I don't ask for much, do I? But some people are just way too inconsiderate. I thought surely none of my wives is like that, but what else can I do when it's right in my face? Since there's no helping it, I had no choice but to fulfill out my obligations]

[Emilia: And so, you became disillusioned? You're contradicting what you said just now.....]

[Regulus: I'm not disillusioned. I still like her face, I still love her. Even if she's dead, that still doesn't change my enduring love for her. Don't you hear it often? *"Even when someone you love dies, that person lives on inside your heart, because your love for that person endures and will not fade"*? That's exactly how it is with me]

Regulus' twisted logic was impeccable.

Impeccable, without the slightest confusion, his logic was complete within his mind. Without the slightest room for rebuttal, it was perfect, flawless.

In front of the speechless Emilia, Regulus furrowed his brows.

Because he spotted a color of distrust within the silent Emilia's eyes.

[Regulus: I've actually been wondering for a while now..... do you, maybe have a problem with me? If so, then that's really disappointing. I've already made concession after concession out of consideration for you, yet can't you appreciate my considerations at all? A person shouldn't be all talk, you know. If you have just the slightest consideration for other people's feelings, if you could just put yourself in other people's shoes, you wouldn't be like this, I don't think. If a person can't even make that modest effort, then I can't see how such a person can have any value whatsoever. It's disrespectful. More specifically, it's disrespectful to me. That, that's unforgivable]

[Emilia: I think marriage should be something reeeeaally beautiful]

[Regulus: Huh?]

[Emilia: It's a ceremony that joins two people who love each other and want to be with each other. It's a reeeaaally big deal to like someone, and so, to find someone out of all the people in this world and have that person also like you back..... is an amazing thing, I think]

Emilia in her bridal gown held a hand to her chest, while, listening, Regulus' face contorted with disbelief. The expressions of the wives in attendance, including No.184 at the altar, began to darken. They must be worried for her, Emilia figured.

——It was proof that they were compassionate, kind-hearted people after all.

[Emilia: Why do you call your wives by their numbers?]

[Regulus: Why get caught up on names? Just like getting bogged down by the superficials, it's a complete misunderstanding of love. I don't need these superfluous embellishments to be confident that my love is real. And so, there is no need to debase myself with such vain trivialities. For love to be equal, one has to let go of those inessential aspects, don't you think?]

[Emilia:I see. But, I don't dislike being called "Emilia-tan" by Subaru at all]

[Regulus: Subaru.....?]

Hearing a name he could not let slide, a color of displeasure rose on Regulus' face.

But Emilia ignored the shift in Regulus' expression as she continued,

[Emilia: When Subaru calls me Emilia-tan, his voice is packed with feeling. And, occasionally, when he leaves out the "-tan", I can immediately tell that it's something special. I don't think it's pointless at all. Names should... carry that kind of feeling]

[Regulus: Hey uh, it's like you're just talking by yourself at this point, but, who is Subaru? It's a person's name, isn't it? Actually it's a man's name, isn't it? A girl who's about to marry mentioning a different man's name in front of the man she's about to marry, that goes against all common sense no

matter how you look at it, doesn't it? Even if it's just some random stranger's name it still hurts, you know. It hurts. You know?]

[Emilia: He's not a random stranger. Subaru is my chosen Knight, a person who calls me by my name and tells me that he loves me]

[Regulus: ——Hha!?]

Hearing Emilia's answer, a flood of bloodcurdling aura gushed from Regulus's body.

Sensing this, No.184 and the other wives immediately tried to run for it, but,

[Regulus: Don't move!! Anyone dares move, I'll cut their head off!]

[Emilia: ———]

[Regulus: I'll let you explain yourself. Try to choose your words carefully so I don't misunderstand. I don't want this wedding to turn into someone's funeral. You know?]

Heaving his shoulders, shuddering, Regulus suppressed his emotions as he spoke.

Held in place by Regulus' threat, none of the attendants moved. But, without flinching, Emilia met his swelling aura head on.

[Emilia: Marriage should be between two people who love each other. But, I don't think this meets that criteria at all]

[Regulus: ———]

[Emilia: Because, I still don't know how to love a man as a woman. Even though Subaru tells me that he loves me, I still can't return his feelings or even give him a straightforward answer. That's reaaaally unfair of me, and I know how much it hurts him. But...]

Regulus fell silent. But Emilia wasn't thinking about him.

Anyone could tell. That Emilia's eyes did not see him at all.

[Emilia: Even though I don't know how to love someone, I'm sure someday I will. One day I will love someone as a woman. And I've already decided who I'll love when that day comes. That's why...]

Taking a breath and looking up at Regulus, Emilia spoke.

[Emilia: ——I can never be yours]

[Regulus: ——hk! Aaaagh is that right!? Well I don't want a selfish bitch like you as my wife either! ALL THE BETTER HHAAHHH!??]

Regulus' face bursted red at Emilia's declaration.

In front of Regulus' reaching fingers, Emilia's whole body surged with mana to meet his attack. To counter his unknown destructive mechanism, her first action should be——

[——!?!]

Just when their attacks were set to begin, a violent noise crashed throughout the chapel.

Accompanying the sound was tremendous momentum as something shot straight into Regulus' body like a bullet. Crashing into Regulus in his white tuxedo and shattering upon impact was a wooden door panel—— one of the two at the chapel entrance that they had just reinstalled.

It had flown all the way from the entrance to hit Regulus.

And,

[???: Damn it, we kicked at the same time but the result's not the same at all! What's with your leg strength!?!]

[????: Sorry I didn't adjust it properly. But it managed to hit the target I was aiming to hit, so it turned out alright, didn't it?]

[???: The flashiness of the entry is nowhere near the same, okay? My kick only managed to open the door, but your kick landed a direct hit on the enemy.....]

Two grumbling silhouettes appeared at the chapel entrance.

One was a black-haired boy, and the other a red-haired youth.

Emilia's eyes widened in astonishment, and in front of her, Regulus picked away the wooden shards like picking off insects. Standing there, unhurt, he was glaring at the two intruders with contempt in his eyes.

[Regulus: You certainly have the gall, crashing a sacred wedding ceremony. I don't remember inviting any male guests, but mind telling me who you are and what wedding presents did you bring? HHA!?!]

Met with Regulus' bellow, the two at the entrance looked at each other.

Then, giving each other a nod,

[Subaru: Spirit Knight without his spirit partner, Natsuki Subaru]

[Reinhard: Descendant of the Sword Saint, Reinhard van Astrea]

Announcing his name, Reinhard took a step forward.

Next to him, Subaru gave Emilia a wink before pointing at Regulus, saying,

[Subaru: I object to this marriage. ——And I'll be taking the bride with me]

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Chapter 49 - Thus Opens the Crusade Against Greed



Emilia: “—Subaru!”

A voice which seemed to summon Subaru, who had crashed through the entrance of the church and sprinted inside.

It belonged to Emilia, who stood in front of an altar, clad in a wedding dress.

Dressed in a snow white dress, her long hair coiled in a braid on her head, she was too beautiful; lovely to a truly dazzling degree. In the right circumstance, Subaru, more than anyone else, would have wanted to admire Emilia’s bridal attire.

Subaru: "I'll sort out my thoughts on E·M·T later. Seems like we crashed this wedding here."

Reinhardt. "The ceremony was already going awry, it seems. Though we'll still be regarded as the intruders here."

From a ways away, Reinhardt snuck a glance at Emilia and Regulus as they glared at each other, and agreed with Subaru's mutters. The ceremony seemed to be proceeding poorly, offering them a perfect opportunity to intrude.

Upon hearing their words, Regulus's already impatient face reddened with rage. He yanked at the front of his suit as his mouth twisted in a vicious pout.

Regulus: "Sorry, though I feel for uninvited guests such as yourselves, this wedding will soon become a funeral anyway. The emotional preparation for such a joyous event to become one of lament... ah, right, you needn't consider such matters anyway. Since you'll soon go from the ones bidding farewell to the ones who should be bid farewell to."

Subaru: "Hey now, what are you going on about when you were rejected right before the wedding? And the bride is so fed up with you she's taking a Narita divorce. Show me a little shame here. Besides, didn't you hear me when I introduced this guy beside me?"

Regarding Regulus's murderous rambling, Subaru taunted him as he eyed Reinhardt. Surprised, Regulus exhaled an "*ah*" between his teeth.

Regulus: "Who, the Sword Saint? I think I've heard of him once. Isn't that the moniker of some guy who knows of nothing but swinging a sword? What are you planning to do with that kind of guy? Could it be that you thought of him as some trump card? Ahah, that's rich. Whether it be reputation from history or glory from the bloodline or whatnot, all that is nothing but old-fashioned traditionalism. Notions like that, when struck by a wave of progress, should crumble to ash. Isn't that just nature at work? You two, are you here to demonstrate?"

Reinhardt: "Knows of nothing but swinging a sword, huh. It's funny that you'd say that. In truth, many expectations of my roles all stem from that one fact. But, there's a slight problem here."

Even faced with such arrogance, Reinhardt showed not a trace of annoyance. As he spoke, his hand crept quietly toward his waist.

Sheathed there was a celestial sword, with engravings traced by the claws of the dragon itself, which Reinhardt always carried. However, as he clenched his palm around the hilt, he shook his head.

Subaru: "What's wrong, Reinhardt?"

Reinhardt: "The [Dragon Sword] is a unparalleled blade which has been passed down since the start of the Astrea line, but it does have one flaw. It refuses to be unsheathed in the presence of any enemy it deems unworthy."

Subaru: "Which means?"

Reinhardt: "It seems that the sword has concluded that this enemy isn't worthy of being drawn against."

Subaru: "—*hk*"

Regardless of whether Reinhardt meant it this way, Regulus had received a rather humiliating evaluation. But Subaru had personally witnessed how, during a confrontation with Elsa, the sword hadn't made its appearance, and so he understood what Reinhardt meant.

But, even with that in mind, Regulus's unflattering appraisal remained.

Regulus: "A Sword Saint who can't even draw his sword, why should I even bother with you? Know your place, scum. In the first place, I'm not even on the same level as you; you, who struggle with your ugliness and unfettered excuses, can't even be compared to one who has already achieved perfection. A fool who can't assure his self-worth without comparing himself to others has no right to face my divine self."

Subaru: "Sounds like, you really do think you're all that."

Facing the burning obscenity in Regulus's eyes, Subaru found himself genuinely surprised.

Ignoring all his threats, and listening to only the heart of his speech—

Subaru: “Hypocrisy is your forte, isn’t it? Claiming to have achieved perfection, when you fall short in every comparison to anyone you find?”

Regulus: “—*hk!* You lowlife, don’t you condescend to preach to my flawless self!”

Infuriated by Subaru’s jeers, Regulus finally put his threats into action.

With murderous intent, he slammed the ground in front of the altar; instantly, the paved floor shattered with astonishing force. The torrent of destruction pummeled straight ahead, sweeping shards of wood and stone into its overwhelming embrace and shattering them even further.

Subaru: “—*uwa!?*”

Reinhardt: “Subaru, over here.”

Just as the destructive wave neared him, someone caught him by the neck and yanked him to safety.

A sudden gust of wind freed Subaru from the shackles of that torrent; this was Reinhardt’s doing. With one hand, he’d pulled Subaru to his side as he evaded the attack.

Gently depositing Subaru back on the ground, Reinhardt spun around, preparing to face Regulus. However—

Regulus: “Don’t move! Dare to try anything, and they’ll all be dead in an instant.”

Reinhardt: “——”

Glaring at Reinhardt, who stood at attention, Regulus placed his hands on the walls of the church.

Rows of elaborately dressed women watched him impassively. Clearly, they recognized the intent of his actions and the severity of the situation, but they only stood in their lines, indifferently accepting the surrounding chaos.

Subaru: "On that note, though I'd rather not look too far into it, who are these women?"

Regulus: "All of them are my dear beloved wives. Lovely princesses who cherish and are cherished by me. Could you bear to allow such innocents to die? How could you be so cruel!?"

Subaru: "Goddamn, I had a slight suspicion, but I can't establish a conversation at all."

Had there ever any we he could? Regulus's rhetoric was completely illogical.

To hold these women hostage, and yet to declare that they were his wives, existed in no realm of reason. The worst of it was that both the proclamation of [innocence] and the notion that [Regulus would kill them] were undoubtedly true.

This illogical battle of hostages was indeed an extremely effective tactic.

Regulus: "It's not like I want them to die, or anything. Even so, if you still resist further, I'll have no choice. I'll start at the beginning and go in order. Isn't forcing me to do something so awful just heartless?"

Subaru: "Not like that makes any sense at all, but I don't remember pushing you to that point?"

Regulus: "Don't nitpick! Maybe I'd be the one directly killing them. But *you* ignited this fuse. Your murderous intent would be the true weapon. You're using me as a prop. You're the real murderers! Don't evade responsibility. You heartless wife-murderers...!"

Obscenities burned in Regulus's eyes as he gnashed his teeth. The murderer who spouted his twisted rhetoric seemed not disturbed in the least by his revolting statements.

While trying to buy time with dialogue, Subaru snuck a meaningful glance at Reinhardt. However, their volatile opponent held about fifty hostages in his grasp. If both walls collapsed at the same time, even Reinhardt wouldn't be able to prevent any casualties.

Subaru: "——"

If it went on like this, they'd be stuck in stalemate— no, this was developing exactly the way Regulus hoped it would.

However, the moment that he thought so,

Emilia: "Have you forgotten about me already?"

Regulus: "Huh?"

Celeste lights began to dance from beside Regulus.

In one instant, the light enveloped the entire church; in the next, a sharp sound was born. The light and sound chained into each other, intertwined and resonating, a simple, clear melody filling the temple.

At the same time, a grand enchantment of ice shone in the center of the room.

That celeste enchantment centered itself on the altar, forming a sanctuary of ice around the women who Regulus had taken hostage.

In addition, the ice had frozen Regulus's legs to the ground, and a frozen sword pressed itself against his bare neck— a sword which extended from Emilia's hand.

Emilia: "You were far too careless there. Even I can't expect to just jump into a fight with you, so I prepared long and hard to freeze you like that. You lost."

Regulus: "... I say, you're truly incapable of reading the atmosphere, aren't you? Right now, aren't I about to force them to back down? This is an important scene, showing that I'm righteously capable of facing despicable enemies with resolve. And my wives too, everyone clearly believes in and prays for my victory... who do you think you are?"

Emilia: "Free all of us this instant. Although no one's said it, some of them only stay with you because they're afraid. Even so, you should cherish them, since they're the ones who go out of their way to help you..."

Regulus: “—Really, who do you think you’re talking to? Looks like not making you a wife was wise indeed.”

Emilia: “Eh?”

Subaru: “Emilia, no! It’s not enough to stop him!”

Normally, this would be the finale of the act. Emilia’s judgement wasn’t off.

However, her opponent simply [exceeded the limits of humanity].

Regulus: “—*tch*”

With a sigh, Regulus began twisting his frozen limbs; that slight motion began to disintegrate the ice trapping his legs.

As the rest of the ice began melting off, the frozen prison shattered to dust. Faced with this reversal, Emilia had nary the time to even draw breath before Regulus seized her by the neck, and allowed her to dangle, suspended by only his hand.

Regulus: “Such arrogance, without even knowing how to keep yourself decent for a man. It doesn’t matter that you’re physically and mentally a virgin, your impure spirit defines you. You whore. You filthy slut. As if toying with my innocent heart weren’t enough, you took it a step further, and tried to force my hand. Never have I seen such an unforgivable woman.”

Emilia: “*Kuu, huu... uuu...*”

Regulus: “Your cute face, just how many men has it deceived? Just a brief smile, and you’d warm all their hearts. Just a small sound, and you’d win all their attention. Just a gentle touch, and they’d pour gift upon gift onto you. Ah, ah, what a dirty woman.”

Subaru: “Stop! Take your hands off her, you fucker!”

Sighing to himself, Regulus's voice was filled with disdain as he spoke to Emilia, still caught in his grasp. His eyes, cold and inhuman, cut through Subaru's outrage at those unspeakable words.

Regulus: "How stupid are you, that you can't work this situation out? Or are you one of those fools who've already given up on understanding? Here am I, ceaselessly trying to explain, but people like you, who thinks no thoughts of self-improvement and abandons all conscious thought, don't you think you're too wasteful of generosity? Do your best to to stand in someone else's shoes, can't you even do that? Still playing cards like that, isn't your skill in interaction just too outrageous?"

Reinhardt: "Let Emilia-sama go, and I'll hear out your requests."

From beside Subaru, who found himself speechless with rage, Reinhardt spoke to Regulus.

Hearing that, savage raised his eyebrows. Seemingly judging that conversation could come to flow more smoothly with Reinhardt than with the seething Subaru, Regulus

Regulus: "Not bad, not bad, that modest attitude. Precisely because people have all sorts of means of communication, if they want a topic to flow in the direction which they desire, they have to learn to use these methods effectively. Those who don't understand this, the majority, can only rely on brute force to see a message through. How off-putting. Shouldn't it be clear that matters which can be settled through negotiation don't require a show of strength? Well, people like that aren't impressive in the least. Fellows like those stand no chance against a pacifist like me, isn't that just nature?"

Reinhardt: "No need to spin it so dramatically. Allow me to listen to your request. Witnessing Emilia-sama's suffering is painful for both me and my friend."

Regulus: "Alright. Then I'll say it straightforwardly. —Drop that sheathe from your waist and come stand in front of the altar."

As Emilia's face turned ashen, Regulus, in a deliberate motion, hoisted her higher. Her feet dangled in midair, and her sword of ice clattered to the found.

Faced with that display, Reinhardt hesitated no longer. He freed the Dragon Sword from his waist and handed it to Subaru.

Subaru: "... If this were a play, I'd really have loved to draw this sword and end that bastard."

Reinhardt: "That's quite the idea, but, regrettably, I doubt you'd be able to unsheathe it either. Rest assured, I will rescue Emilia-sama."

Concluding their whispered conversation, Reinhardt complied with Regulus's orders.

The Sword Saint stood, unarmed, in the middle of the temple, stopping when Regulus commanded, "*stop here*". There were only about five meters left between the two; a distance which Reinhardt could cross in an instant.

And yet, the issue lay in how Regulus currently held Emilia in his hands, and would obliterate her the second Reinhardt drew near. And the true nature of Regulus's invincibility had yet to be solved, even with the hints they possessed.

Freeing himself from Emilia's prison, and setting off a path of destruction. Somewhere in those actions lay the principle behind his [invincibility].

Subaru: "——"

Holding his breath, Subaru monitored Reinhardt's movements carefully.

At this moment, unable to find an opportunity to break the stalemate, he could only rely on Reinhardt. Eager as he was to leap into action, he knew that he nothing he did would solve it.

Reinhardt: "As you wish, I'll stop here. What next?"

Regulus: "Let me kill you. Isn't it easy? It's a little cliché, I think so too. But are you here for my wives, or for this slut? I can't feel any sincerity in your thoughts. It's not that I want to force your hand. I just don't want to be misunderstood as a selfish and self-centered person. I'm just a normal man, satisfied with the simple joys of my everyday life. I do hope you fully understand."

Reinhardt: “——”

Regulus: “So, there’s only one condition for me to free the hostages. You stand in this place, and bear one strike from me. No defending yourself, and no evasion. As long as you do this, I’ll free everyone. Won’t your unfair attack on me be forgiven, that way?”

Reinhardt: “One strike, yes?”

Faced with Regulus’s proposal, Reinhardt stroked his chin as he mediated upon it.

Watching his thoughtful figure, Subaru mentally shook his head desperately at the absurdity of the proposal. Regardless of how Regulus appeared, the power behind his attacks were obvious.

An obscene power which could disintegrate seemingly anything; even Reinhardt wouldn’t be able to withstand such a strike. Even if he barely clung to his life, if he were left indisposed, this battle couldn’t possibly continue.

Reinhardt: “I understand. I accept.”

However, contrary to Subaru’s internal fracas, Reinhardt accepted the condition easily. Stunned, Subaru watched Regulus nod with approval.

Regulus: “A wise epiphany, I see. You have my respect. Although you’re an enemy who tried to kill my wives, you seem to have at least some basic human humility.”

Subaru: “Hanging onto hostages even as some invincible person, and he doesn’t feel as if he’s in the wrong...”

At a glimpse, Regulus and his mellifluous, flowery words were truly disgusting. However, it seemed that Regulus didn’t hear Subaru’s spite, for he kept his hand laid on Emilia’s neck as he turned his right hand to face Reinhardt.

Subaru: “R-Reinhardt, you... what are you thinking?”

Reinhardt: "Subaru, as promised. Where I'm lacking, you'll find a way to fill in the gaps, right?"

Subaru: "Quit being so discouraging..."

Even the hardest battle has a chance of being won, was the answer that Subaru had been hoping to hear. However, before he had time to respond, Regulus waved an arm at Reinhardt.

He couldn't see. Fingertips sliced through the air, as if tossing something at Reinhardt; however, the projectile was invisible. That attack might well very have been something like an [Unseen Hand].

Whether or not the speculation was true was left unanswered.

Reinhardt: "——"

Reinhardt's figure, which had been standing in front of Subaru, collapsed into a splatter of blood.

His bisected body toppled to the ground, as if stuck by an oblique sniper, completely absent of its normal refined temperament.

Subaru: "Eh—?"

Blood flowed forth from Reinhardt's fallen corpse, dying the crimson carpet a shade of aubergine. His body trembled like a spring, convulsing in its death throes.

Finally, the moment came where even those movements subsided, and the corpse entered the realm of true death.

This was Reinhardt van Astrea's certain demise.

Regulus: "No matter how a person acted in life, death is a simple matter. Those who have accomplished great feats, those who have committed great sins; death treats them equally, stealing their lives in the same way. In this gravely unjust world, it's one of the few truly just parts of life."

Having killed Reinhardt with only a wave of his hands, Regulus, simply shook his head.

The murderer wore a serene look, as if this had nothing to do with his own actions.

Regulus: “Precisely because they know that the end will inevitably come, the living shouldn’t pursue too much happiness while they live. Therefore, I am extremely satisfied with the low threshold of my happiness. And if I am [Greed], it’s only because I’m always eager to appreciate what I do have, and what I will come to have. If I were never satisfied myself with the amount I have, I would never be happy in my lifetime. But fortunately, I was born with a unique gift. The sensibility of finding satisfaction in simple joys.”

Holding the arm which had killed Reinhardt to his chest, Regulus began to laugh.

Then—

Regulus: “My satisfied self wants to know, are you satisfied with death? If so, congratulations on your death. If not, then those are the words of fate.”

Subaru: “AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAUGH—”

Before the echo of Regulus’s ridiculous words had even faded, Subaru sprung into action with a roar.

He grabbed a chair and flung it at Regulus. Facing the projectile, Regulus swept it away with a single swipe, as if it were a mere insect. To say that the impact shattered the chair would be an understatement, and Regulus stepped away wearing an unpleasant expression.

Regulus: “Compared to that graceful one, you really are really both noisy and crude.”

Subaru: “Being a knight without a trace of knightliness happens to be my specialty!”

Treading on the carpet stained with Reinhardt’s blood, Subaru unclasped his whip from his waist, and directed the tip toward Regulus.

In response, Regulus simply made a show of tightening his grip on Emilia’s neck as he lifted her.

Regulus: “Are your eyes just for decoration? Can’t you see that I have leverage here?”

Reinhardt: “—This is all very strange. According to what you promised, you should have liberated the hostages.”

Regulus: “—Eh!?”

The instant he heard that sound, Regulus’s face became stricken with horror.

Tearing his gaze away from the center of the church, Subaru saw a slender, bloodstained figure, and felt his throat close with shock.

Regulus: “Wha—!?”

Reinhardt: “—The 『Divine Protection of The Phoenix』 .”

With brevity, Reinhardt responded to the wavering Regulus, and three figures moved as one.

Subaru leapt toward the altar, allowing his whip to yank a blonde-haired woman to safety.

Even as her throat was being choked, Emilia kicked her sword of ice over to Reinhardt. Reinhardt, who had appeared out of nowhere, caught the sword and pointed it at Regulus. With the women shielded from the line of fire, the wielder of that blade hesitated no longer. In the next instant, sound vanished from the world— a brilliant blue light accompanied the shockwave that engulfed the church.

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Chapter 50 - The Shackles of Love



—When the supernova faded and Subaru’s vision had returned to him, the state of the church had completely changed.

Subaru: “Though I know I’ve said this before...”

Witnessing that scene with his own eyes, Subaru took a soft breath.

In order to avoid inhaling the scattered dust particles and wood chips, he covered his mouth with his sleeve.

Standing in the now open air church, bathed in the evening breeze, Subaru stomped on the floor and jabbed a finger at the man in front of him.

Subaru: "Sure enough, this guy's a fucking monster!"

Reinhardt: "Though I've said this before, how depressing. Even my heart would be hurt by such words."

Subaru: "Is this really an occasion to complain about heartache!? Your physical wounds are obviously the bigger issue here! The hell do you think this is?"

In the face of Reinhardt's apparent aberrance, Subaru couldn't help but frustratedly bury his face in his hands,

Reinhardt returned him a wry smile, as the sword of ice in his right hand shattered and dissipated. Although it has only been swung once, being able to withstand the Sword Saint's might indicated that its durability was deserving of praise.

The one who'd made that sword, Emilia, was currently being embraced by Reinhardt's left arm.

In that instant, he'd freed Emilia's neck from Regulus's grasp, keeping her safe.

As a result, Regulus was the only one who'd suffered that bombardment.

Aside from that initial blow, everything seemed to have worked out—

Subaru: "On that note, what a close call we had. Hey, are you okay?"

184: "——"

The object of his concern was the woman who he'd yanked out of danger, just as Reinhardt had, before chaos had fallen. Although the golden-haired woman was rather beautiful, her empty eyes and expressionless face gave off a foreboding air.

Sure enough, the shock of the situation had gotten to her, was Subaru's thought, and so he met the eyes of the woman as she sat.

Subaru: "Sorry if we surprised you, but in order to take advantages of his weaknesses, we didn't really have any other choice. If you're hurt anywhere, tell us and and we can help fix you up."

184: "——"

Although Subaru called out to her, she still gave no reaction.

Although this situation was worrying indeed, he couldn't worry about just her and her alone. Leaving the still sitting woman where she was, he strode toward the altar— or, rather, where the altar had once stood.

This place, which strongly resembled what Subaru knew as a church, had been completely desecrated by Reinhardt.

The front of the building— where the altar and the corridor leading to a side room had been located, had all been demolished in the wake of the supernova. All that had barely survived were the very edges and the back of the building. Fortunately, due to the protection of Emilia's wall of ice, the seated women had remained untouched.

Subaru ran where Emilia and Reinhardt were standing near the crumbling altar. Stepping out of Reinhardt's arms, Emilia immediately gave a pained cough.

Subaru: "Emilia-tan, are you okay?"

Emilia: "—*hk*... ah, I'm fine. It's just that my throat feels itchy..."

Subaru: "How are you? Did anything strange happen? Did that creep lick your face or anything? And this wedding dress is spectacular... did he put it on you? Damn, that fucker, I won't let him go. But this dress truly is amazing. No matter what you wear, you look cute, Emilia-tan."

Emilia: "Subaru, calm down a bit. I can't quite figure out what you want say."

Faced with the frantically concerned Subaru, Emilia retreated gently.

Looking at his distressed appearance as he carefully ascertained that she was safe and sound, Emilia sighed with a smile.

Emilia: “Right, thank you for coming to save me. I knew all along that you’d come.”

Subaru: “I also knew that Emilia-tan believes in me and would wait for rescue. But if I’d crashed the wedding even a little later, who knows what could’ve...”

Emilia: “It doesn’t matter. I wouldn’t have married him. If I were to marry, it would have to be someone I like.”

Subaru: “That, that’s great! Really reassuring. Then, this person you like...”

Emilia: “Ah! Reinhardt! Your injury, how is it!?”

Just as Subaru prepared to go on an offensive strike, Emilia caught sight of Reinhardt and cried out at him.

Seeing Emilia’s interest in Reinhardt where it mattered, Subaru paused and scowled.

The Reinhardt who’d saved Emilia— unexpectedly, he’d sustained a heavy injury.

The front of the white clothes had been almost exaggeratedly torn and stained entirely with red. Witnessing this explosive scene, Emilia sucked in a cold breath.

Subaru: “Ack, how brutal! —you sure this is fine!?”

Emilia: “Yes, what a grievous wound! Let me take a look, I’ll heal you!”

Reinhardt: “Thank you. But don’t worry about it. The wound has begun to heal.”

Responding to the fretting, flustered pair with a smile, Reinhardt wiped at the blood with his own white sleeves.

And on his cleaned chest, the traces of the injury were indeed disappearing. The wound was completely gone, leaving only Reinhardt's pristine skin.

Subaru: "The wound's, vanished... Hey, what happened just now? You hid it even from me. Did you sneakily hide some blood packets on your person or something?"

Reinhardt: "And by 'just now', you mean..."

Subaru: "Stop putting on airs, or are you being for real right now? ... Just now with Regulus's hostage situation, I didn't know how you planned to deal with it, so I just watched silently. But how did you survive? Ah, just tell me already!"

Reinhardt: "Let's put it this way, watching silently was a huge help. Thanks for taking care not to set him off."

Even faced with Subaru's impatience, Reinhardt responded in an even tone. Thinking that he was just trying to maintain a lighter atmosphere, Subaru sighed.

Subaru: "I just thought that since it's you, there must have been some trick up your sleeve. But seeing you fall in that shower of blood had me thinking you really were dead, how terrifying..."

Reinhardt: "Even so, you reacted in time. I'm very happy you had such faith in me."

Subaru: "Who told you to give this dramatic speech on shortcomings and whatnot?"

He lightly knocked Reinhardt's shoulders, responding to that guilelessness with coarse words.

Listening to their conversation, Emilia's eyes widened with surprise.

Emilia: "Only with those words, you worked that entire scheme out?"

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, when you passed the sword of ice to Reinhardt while I was moving, that’s what happened too.”

Reinhardt: “That really was a huge help. Not having a weapon on hand and having to strike his body directly was an uneasy notion, for some reason. But I’m glad that it worked out.”

Subaru: “Yep, it ended with half the building collapsing. Please take responsible for it. Well, this also counts as a survival flag.”

Having had numerous encounter with Elsa in the past, Subaru couldn’t be too optimistic.

Now, while talking like this, there is no slack in his alarm toward Regulus.

Subaru: “So, Reinhardt, the correct answer to the mystery of that scene is...? Did you use an avatar? It couldn’t be some kind of cloning technique. Please don’t tell me that in addition to being a knight, you’re a ninja as well.”

Reinhardt: “Although I don’t know what a ninja is, I’m sure it’s not such a huge mystery. This [Divine Protection of the Phoenix] is just a blessing that can be used to revive the dead. So your observation that I looked like I was dead was correct, I was just a little bit dead.”

Subaru: “Just a little bit dead, my ass! Did that mess you up, or are you just an idiot?”

Being met with such an unexpected answer sent Subaru into another frenzy.

Dying under the [Divine Protection of the Phoenix] or whatnot, wasn’t it just making a mockery of death? Those were word better left unsaid to Subaru— or, rather, perhaps it was better to say that only Subaru could speak like that.

Subaru: “What’re you doing, stealing my niche and all that...”

Reinhardt: “—? Sorry. But at the time, I felt that it was the most effective way to deal with the Sin Archbishop. And it did in fact work rather smoothly. Ah, but, if possible, I’d prefer to avoid dying again.”

Emilia: “Dying in order to save only me, I can’t help but feel guilty...”

Subaru: “—*kuu*”

Emilia: “Subaru? What’s with the expression?”

Struck by the force of her reply, the psychological burden of those words was quite something.

Moreover, it seems that this dialogue could continue no further.

Reinhardt: “—Subaru.”

Subaru: “Understood.”

Narrowing his blue eyes, Reinhardt called for Subaru.

Subaru raised his head at the call, and Emilia glanced to where Reinhardt was looking.

—The predator, emitting an ominous aura, filled their line of sight.

He stood atop the collapses remains of the church, overlooking the other three. White hair, white clothes, and a blank expression; this predator, made of white, snorted and spoke.

Regulus: “Leaving me out, and just bantering and laughing in a place like this. Speaking of which how can you stand to maintain an air of normalcy, isn’t that too inhumane? Unless, you felt like you’ve just stepped on an ant or something? Is blowing me away no different from stepping on a bug? Well, how about it?”

As he fanned the flames of his own exaggerated outrage, Regulus leapt from the smouldering wreckage to the remains of the church.

As he landed, he straightened out the coat of his white suit, brushed at the sleeves of his shirt, and readjusted the legs of his matching trousers, before turning his narrowed gaze upon them.

His body was unchanged from Reinhardt's blow.

Whether injury or filthiness, neither showed even a trace on his form.

Reinhardt: "I see, As I heard from Subaru, you truly are a fearsome opponent."

Emilia: "Just now, the Sin Archbishop that you mentioned, Subaru... he's the one?"

Regarding him, Reinhardt and Emilia each offered their own input.

Hearing this, Regulus turned a spiteful glare upon Emilia.

Regulus: "Ah, that's right. I'm the Witch Cult's Sin Archbishop of Greed, Regulus Corneas... Speaking of which, without knowing even the identity of the other party, you tried to go through a wedding ceremony. This is a problem that precedes not having an awareness of being a wife. Impudent, immoral, iniquitous! Really, your deficiency as a woman knows no bounds, honestly!"

Emilia: "Iniquitous and whatnot, you didn't tell me anything at all. Impure and immoral are also groundless. And you're a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult... Witch Cult, Witch Cult..."

Faced with the resentfully cursing Regulus, Emilia was about to refute his points before she suddenly sank into silence.

Her hand on her head, Emilia's eyebrows lifted as if she were thinking hard.

Emilia: "The Witch Cult's, Sin Archbishop... you, have you ever faced me before?"

Regulus: "Hah? How would I know? Although, right now, if you were to say that our meeting was fate, that would just be a ridiculous farce. Such a face of rare sweetness, but in spirit you're such a degenerate, how endlessly infuriating... *uwa!*"

Subaru: "The fuck are you rambling on about aimlessly, you bastard?"

Aiming at the endlessly ranting Regulus's face Subaru flicked his whip. Under that impact, Regulus's face snapped to the side, and he snarled with fury.

Unsurprisingly, his face bore no trace of the blow.

Subaru: "At this point, for real, if we can't solve the mystery of his [Invincibility], we can't secure out victory..."

Reinhardt: "Whether at close range or from afar, every attack is negated. Even Emilia-sama's magic does nothing to stop him. There has to be some kind of trick to defeating him... Subaru, watch out for yourself, alright?"

Subaru: "Why does it sound like you're saying something acrimonious...!?"

Reinhardt patted that confused Subaru's shoulder briefly—then, he vanished.

In the next moment, Reinhardt slammed directly into the predator's body, sending him sprawling backward.

Regulus: "Huh, ah—!?"

With a cry, Regulus, who'd had no time to brace himself, flew backward and slammed into a mountain of debris, further causing it to collapse and disintegrate.

Reinhardt: "His opponent will me. Hopefully you can solve the mystery of his [invincibility] as quickly as you can. I'll buy time for you."

Subaru: "Right, buying time is nice and all... but wouldn't it be better to just defeat him in one fell swoop?"

Reinhardt: "If I could, I would have done so already. Take these women to safety. If they remain here, they'll be dragged into the battlefield."

Emilia: "Wait, Reinhardt. Although it's probably not too effective, use this."

Calling out to stop Reinhardt in his tracks, was Emilia, holding a sword of ice freshly shaped with magic.

Emilia: "I've been concentrating su~per hard to make this— it should be a little more durable than the last one."

Reinhardt: "My thanks is inexpressible."

Accepting her proffered blade, Reinhardt offered her his ceremonious gratitude in return.

Then he turned and leapt away from the ruins of the church to Regulus. In a single step, he vanished from Subaru's field of vision, crossing an impossible distance.

Immediately following his disappearance, a shock wave slammed into Subaru's skin.

As he bathed in this feeling, he turned to look at Emilia.

Subaru: "Emilia-tan! In order to avoid getting caught up in Reinhardt's battle, for time being, help get these women somewhere safe. They all have to leave... speaking of which, are they all married to Regulus?"

Both now and before, the uniformity of the women trapped in the wall of ice felt unnatural.

Being Regulus's wives made them all members of the Witch Cult. At a glance, there were more or less fifty of them. If they attacked as one, how could Subaru handle them without Beatrice's help? Only now had he begun to worry.

However, Emilia shook her head, denying this uneasiness.

Emilia: "It's fine. Although they are his wives, most of them are probably only here through force and coercion. So don't worry."

Subaru: "Right, yeah. If they were a threat, Reinhardt wouldn't have overlooked... gah, watch out! Just now, flying missiles have started attacking us! How dangerous!"

Outside of the church, Reinhardt and Regulus were engaging in a battle that resided far beyond the limits of humanity.

The wreckage and stone fragments, swept away by various impacts, flew like missiles. If he were to be struck by one, there was no guarantee that he'd stay intact.

Although Reinhardt had an absolute advantage when it came to offense, as long as the nature of Regulus's power remained a mystery, that advantage faded bit by bit. Subaru needed to come up with a countermeasure before the predator could overwhelm him—.

Emilia: "Hey, are you okay? No injuries?"

During his moment of reflection, Emilia had started shaking the blonde woman by the shoulders.

That was the same woman Subaru had just rescued using his whip. Based on her position in front of the altar, her status seemed unique. However, her expression was just as blank, bearing not even the faintest trace of irritation.

Looking up at Emilia, the woman shook her head slowly.

184: "I... we have to stay here. If you want to escape, please take care."

Emilia: "Stay, why? Are your feet injured? Then I'll heal you right away. Just this wall of ice isn't enough to keep you safe. Hurry up, we have to leave!"

184: "Please allow me to refuse. Only you can leave this place."

Emilia: "Why!? Staying here will involve you in the fight! Regulus will, regardless of your presence, attack anything he wants to. Please, hurry and come with us..."

184: "—Master-sama did not give instructions to leave."

Emilia's persuasion was interrupted by the woman's cold voice, conveying her feelings, equally devoid of warmth.

Her cold, frozen gaze met Emilia's own amethyst eyes.

184: "Not listening to Husband-sama will make him angry. If that happens, there's only one possible result."

Emilia: "That's... not..."

Subaru shared Emilia's speechless reaction.

To call her determined would be wrong, for she had no selfhood. To call her unwavering would be wrong, for she had no resolve.

Her speech and attitude spoke of a heavy despair that had long become inexorable.

She— or rather, they had given up long ago.

Those hearts, shattered by Regulus, could no longer consider anything other than him.

This was a cursed brutality which no longer required words or actions.

Subaru: "Regulus's opponent is the [Sword Saint] Reinhardt. I know you're terrified of him, but Reinhardt's not going to have any issue killing him. So, don't stay here. There's no need to endanger your lives."

184: "It doesn't matter who the opponent is. [Sword Saint]? Please, don't kid. How could anyone match Husband-sama... Regulus Corneas?"

The woman dismissed Subaru's reassurances with naught but contempt.

That was her first time, showing any sort of genuine emotion.

The scornful dismissal of an adult, looking down upon a child's ignorant delusion.

—Only then, did Subaru understand the true nature of this distorted relationship.

The wives of Regulus Corneas had absolute faith in their husband.

Even the knowledge that his opponent was the [Sword Saint] Reinhardt did nothing to loosen the shackle of the curse that no one could undo.

The unparalleled, overwhelming power Regulus possessed held complete dominion over the hearts of his wives.

The wife trusts her husband, and the husband maintains a firm grip on his wife's heart. In a sense, it was the ideal state of a relationship.

But that serene surface gave way to inner distortions.

Subaru: "Damnit..."

Subaru came to the painful realization that mere words would not move them.

The women before him all unanimously believed this; the lack of dissent and dead silence only served to prove so.

To force them to leave would take nothing less thorough than knocking all of them out and moving them one by one; but they were pressed for the freedom to take such drastic actions.

Subaru: "—Reinhardt! Change of plans! Do what I mentioned before!"

Dispelling the idea of persuading the women, Subaru climbed atop the collapsed church and called out to Reinhardt, who was currently defying the law of gravity as he dashed across the side of a building. He flicked his eyes to the side.

Reinhardt: *Are we speeding up the battle? Hey, Subaru, have you ensured the women's safety?*

Subaru: "—!? The hell!? Where's this sound coming from!?"

Reinhardt: *This is the [Divine Protection of Telepathy], which can spread my voice to those within a certain range.*

Subaru: “Could you stop being so superhuman!?”

Even to the borderline noncombatant Subaru, Reinhardt’s movements were clearly beyond the scope of human comprehension.

Running and kicking off from a wall, Reinhardt flew into the air and spun rapidly.

The instant before he landed, he allowed his clothing to spread, slowing down his momentum, and swung his slender legs to send a blade of wind slicing toward the ground.

Sweeping up both dust and brick, the wave slammed directly into the predator waiting at the end—Regulus’s figure, unable to stay standing, was blown away again.

Subaru: “That murder circus just now, what was it?”

Reinhardt: *He attacks by throwing stones or sand. There’s really no gap of safety between the particles being scattered around.*

Subaru: “In my case it sounds like I want to hide from the rain. —More importantly, move the battlefield! Those women won’t move! They’re so terrified of Regulus, they don’t dare to!”

Reinhardt: *I see, understood. —Then, allow me to try.*

Lowering his voice, Reinhardt leapt lightly toward Regulus.

Climbing to his feet once again, Regulus, stomped on the ground, sending bits of wood and sand flying. However, with economic movements, Reinhardt evaded and drew Emilia’s ice sword, slashing at Regulus and sending him flying once more.

The screaming of the predator overlapped with the crisp sound of the shattering of the ice blade.

Emilia: “Subaru! What are we planning to do?”

Subaru: “Lead that bastard away from here... Wow, Emilia-tan is bold.”

Emilia: “This dress is pretty, but really inconvenient...”

Standing in front of Subaru was Emilia, who had yanked away part of her dress.

The restrictive parts of the white wedding dress had been daringly torn open, revealing more of Emilia’s white thighs than should have been visible in an enticing sight.

Emilia: “It doesn’t matter! Anyway, what do you want from Reinhardt?”

Subaru: “A plan we thought of before the battle, since we don’t know what the true extent of Regulus’s power is. —We’ll have to test possible weaknesses one by one.”

Emilia nodded as Subaru retrieved Reinhardt’s loved sword from the church. Then, he and Emilia rushed straight toward Reinhardt’s battlefield.

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Regulus: “Gah! Fucker, quit jumping up and down!”

Cursing loudly, Regulus waved his both hands up and down.

His target was Reinhardt, who weaved rapidly back and forth, and his weapon was the plentiful gravel laying about.

Normally, bits of gravel could only serve to blind an opponent; people who used it as a weapon had character is unworthy of praise— but if Regulus were the wielder, the power of this despicable tactic would skyrocket.

Buildings began to crumble where the gravel came into contact with them, and the surrounding scenery fell into ruination.

Reinhardt: “—*tch*”

Watching the cataclysmic destruction unfolding in front of him, Reinhardt launched into a dramatic evasion.

He lowered his body as if he were planning to drop into a crawl, and sped into motion. Contrary to his seemingly unsightly appearance, he was moving so fast that he’d ventured beyond the reach of ordinary people.

And thus, Regulus, who was no different from an ordinary person, had no way of catching up to Reinhardt.

Regulus: “Damn... Hey! Where’d you run off to, looking like a bug!”

Faced with the thread of losing his target, Regulus attacked indiscriminately from all directions.

The rising of goosebumps on skin a sure sign that approaching would be terribly dangerous— a survival instinct everyone was born with, warning against enemies close at hand.

In actuality, this has little to do with the presence of a clear threat. Any living creature was susceptible to this feeling. Regulus was no exception; the tingling of his nerves, all throughout his body, tipped him off that something was wrong.

—Only, this incredible threat was approaching from all directions, an oppressive ring of menace.

Regulus: “You fucker, what in the world areeee—!?”

Reinhardt: “I am but a knight to the King Candidate Felt-sama. Please also be sure to give her all your support.”

Regulus: “——!?”

With a line that may or may not have been a joke, a steady voice spoke.

The shocked Regulus took a sharp impact on his head— perhaps it was smashed by steel. The weapon had been bent completely out of shape, and a squeaking sound indicated that it had been cast aside.

Humiliated, Regulus glared at the ground as he bit his lip.

With crisp footwork that prevented ease of attack, Reinhardt assumed his stance.

The offensive and defensive battles of the [Sword Saint] and [Greed] were clear to both parties to the confrontation.

Exerting the conventional combat power, the strength of Reinhardt, which could toy with even the deadliest of Sin Archbishops, could not be said to be of world. But, even so—.

Regulus: “The one to win will be me, can’t you understand? Although I have no clue how well you’ve been doing with this violent power that can only think of oppressing others; someone like you, whose happiness is built upon the sacrifice of others, will be stopped here! With this power, how many people’s lives have you trampled upon? That greed really is despicable.”

Reinhardt: “—That really is distressing to hear. It is true that, because of me, some have lost sight of their happiness. Without question, the reason why I do what I do is none other than for the sake of atonement.”

In the face of Regulus’s ridiculous rhetoric, Reinhardt’s eyes narrowed slightly.

Seeing the Sword Saint’s responsive movement, Regulus widened his own.

Regulus: “The hell is this? Some kind of ‘you don’t need to say it because I already know’ ploy? ‘I’m aware of my own sins. I’m aware so I’m trying to fix my bad qualities, I tell you!’ So it’s an attempt to let it all be water under the bridge? Jokes can only go so far. No one’s holding any expectations to what you’ll do in the future. All that matters is what you did in the past. Your feet were once planted on the ground, where someone licked your soles. To such a person, whether you help tens of thousands or

hundreds of millions of people, it's all meaningless. Sinner, just die. You, able only to beg of others, stop pretending to be a good person already.”

Reinhardt: “Talking to you, I really do get the feeling of being shown a mirror. This must be the reason why Subaru told me to avoid seriously lending an ear to you.”

Regulus: “Speaking of which... that guy over there, is that this ‘Subaru’? The rotten man who snatched my bride from me, that hateful bastard... Even if she ended up being a dirty whore, his transgression can never be forgiven. To those who try to take what belongs to others, due punishment is— uwa!?”

Halfway through his tirade, Regulus’s world suddenly spun upside down.

At that moment, Reinhardt had dropped his stance and grabbed Regulus’s left ankle, spinning him around. A rotating field of violent destruction, Regulus’s back hit a wall.

Under that impact, a shower of dust scattered as Regulus’s body, still being swung back and forth, crashed through and collapsed a building.

Reinhardt: “Although direct contact with you feels rather dangerous, but I’ll try to get it over with as soon as possible.”

Regulus: “What, are you doing this so you can call him a friend? What a goddamn fake show of hypocrisy... your debased self naturally has no decent friends. With someone known as a rapist, sharing a friendship is—”

Reinhardt: “Dealing with you really is unbearable— doubly so when you slander my friends.”

The wind suddenly wrapped around their bodies, and the sense of rapid rising followed closely.

If you were to take a glimpse, the figures of the two are suspended in the midst of the night sky, and right next to them, the full moon shines brightly. At that place, where the light of the moon lay within reach, Regulus tsked.

Regulus: “So, it is not a matter of strength at all. —Dropping me from such a height will end this, you can’t be truly naive enough to believe that. Are you playing me for a fool?”

Reinhardt: “Indeed, I could try slamming you down and lodging you in the earth... but those weren’t my instructions.”

Regulus: “What are you...”

In midair, without any foothold, Reinhardt alternated between drifting up and down by shifting his body slightly. Regulus, still being gripped by his foot, was subjected to centrifugal force and, still being swung by Reinhardt, his eyes widened as he glanced downward.

Regulus: “No way...”

Reinhardt: “What’s coming seems to be known as ‘the first wave’. —I hope that I will not see you again afterwards.”

It was a rare sarcastic line from Reinhardt, but Regulus had no leeway to pay attention to it

Reinhardt, with all his might, swung Regulus downward. Whipping through the air, Regulus’s dense form sped into the canal directly beneath him with the momentum of a bullet. —Regulus, bathed by the wind, could only watch as the surface of the canal approached.

Regulus: “The only threat is the water...!”

Rotating back and forth as he sailed downward, Regulus stretched out his hands, intending for them to slam into the water. The unprepared Reinhardt, hovering defenselessly in the sky, would follow in a moment.

Then, that calm face of his could be shattered in a single blow.

At that thought—

Subaru: “—Emilia, go!”

Emilia: “*Ui Huma!*”

Hearing the voices of that hateful man and woman, the lingering light of the corner of his eye immediately illuminated that detestable pair.

A black-haired boy gesturing with a finger, and a silver-haired girl who chanted quietly.

In the next moment, falling from above Regulus, were icicles shooting forward at a speed which matched his momentum.

The icicles caught his clothes limbs, accelerating his fall. Further, the last one slammed directly into Regulus’s back, freezing his body solid.

A total of five icicles bound Regulus’s extremities, using his body as a freezing point as it plummeted into the canal. Immediately, a hand of ice stretched forward, centering on where Regulus had fallen tracing the flow of the water. —The canal was sealed in an icy tomb, without so much as a single opening.

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Subaru: “—Operation [Splash], nicknamed Operation I was a complete success!”

Reinhardt: “I hope it was effective.”

Next to Subaru, who gazed into the frozen waterway, landed Reinhardt, cloaked in moonlight.

After having thrown Regulus from the sky, the trajectory of that fall should have meant that he would not be able to avoid the falling water, but in fact even a droplet brushing him would have been a miracle.

That Reinhardt could move so well in midair was hardly even surprising.

Emilia: “Sealing his range of movement and tossing him into water, freezing it afterward. There’s no way he’ll ever surface again, is there...”

From Reinhardt’s other side, Emilia stared into the water.

The one who had drawn up the battle plans had been Subaru, and the one who had facilitated them had been Reinhardt. However, Emilia had been the one who had pushed Regulus into a state of desperation. Even if the other party had been an unreasonable murderer, Emilia still wore a rather timid expression.

If everything proceeded smoothly, he’d soon be naught but a drowned corpse.

Emilia felt that she’d overstepped; this feeling was not without reason.

Subaru: “——”

Regarding that Emilia, Subaru crossed his arms in consideration.

Although he felt rather sorry for her, to have Regulus drown was the best outcome of this. If that weren’t possible, leaving him in a state mirroring death would be best.

However, the worst possibility must also be expected. For example—,

Subaru: “Reinhardt!”

Reinhardt: “—Tsk!”

—Right in front of their eyes, the ice’s surface cracked, and immediately after, a jet of water spouted up, blasting straight toward them.

At the sight of the spouting water, Reinhardt grabbed both Emilia and Subaru as the jet of water closed in on them.

His arms wrapped around their waists, he jumped backwards in one leap— after they were well out of the reach of the jet of water, Reinhardt narrowed his eyes.

Reinhardt: “It seems that it hasn’t been settled yet.”

Subaru: “Right. On that note, this guy, he’s really bad news.”

Reinhardt and Subaru had each fixated on something different.

Reinhardt was watching the figure standing atop a drifting piece of ice, whereas Subaru was looking at the outcome that had been caused by the jet of water which that figure had capriciously unleashed.

Water droplets flew about, pouring down near where Subaru and the others were standing.

The outcome was nothing so charming as the pitter-patter stopping and just dampening the earth below; each part of the spray bored thoroughly into the earth, carving through the ground as if biting with the force of a gigantic beast.

This destructive power was not inferior to that of stones and sand thrown by Regulus.

Which is to say, whether wielding solid or liquid, Regulus’s attack power stayed constant.

Emilia: “... His body, it’s not frozen at all. Just like what happened at the church.”

Muttering this, Emilia looked at Regulus, still perched atop that piece of drifting ice.

Subaru had entrusted her with the task of freezing his body and limbs using magic. As per Subaru’s instructions to ‘show no mercy’, the icicle pierced right through the middle of Regulus’ body and limbs, such an act should have left him more than half dead.

However, when he’d fallen into the water, the tip of the icicle hadn’t penetrated his body, and so Regulus was merely frozen on the surface, just as he had been in the church.

To Regulus, neither freezing nor magic was effective.

Like projectiles and strikes, he could also invalidate those types of attacks.

Subaru: “Although, when he shrugged off [Wrath]’s flames, I did suspect a little... the fundamental of his invincibility, is a unilateral specialization cancelling out any physical or magical attacks?”

Reinhardt: “Is there something I can try to confirm with combat?”

Subaru: “About that, if we don’t close in to try...!?”

Interrupting Subaru’s response to Reinhardt’s words was a change in the canal.

A vortex appeared on the water’s frozen surface, a distance from where the crack was. Gradually, its momentum increased, pulling in the drifting ice which Regulus occupied. And then—

Subaru: “Water Dragon—!”

Leaping from the heart of the maelstrom, the dragon bared its fangs at Regulus, who was standing on top of the ice.

Usually occupying the waterways surrounding the city, was one the the domesticated Water Dragons. The supposedly docile Water Dragon opened its jaws wide, aiming to lunge at Regulus’s slender back.

Perhaps, even that Water Dragon had received quite a bit of [Wrath]’s influence, a tragedy that never should have taken place—however, its jaws did not have a chance to close.

Subaru: “—hk”

Subaru’s throat involuntarily clogged up at the gruesome spectacle unfolding before him.

What happened in this moment, how could it even be described?

—The Water Dragon’s maw jerked out of place at the very moment they had clamped down onto Regulus.

As if in a game of Daruma Otoshi, the Water Dragon's lower jaw was dislocated.

Keeping its momentum as it flew toward Regulus, its mandible shifted. A maw which should have dragged Regulus into the canal. However, unable to correct the dislocation, it split in two with a great shudder.

The halves of bisected water dragon poured blood into the water as they were submerged.

After a moment, an exaggerated amount of blood and viscera that once been a water dragon floated to the surface; this had been its gruesome demise.

Reinhardt: "Emilia-sama. If possible, could you make me a spear?"

Emilia: "... Huh?"

Reinhardt: "A spear. A spear of ice, please. I've troubled you"

Faced with the same sight, Reinhardt muttered this to the befuddled Emilia. Connecting the dots, Emilia hurriedly focused her mana. After several unsuccessful attempts, eventually Emilia created an ice spear, and handed it over to Reinhardt. After testing its balance,

Reinhardt: "Excuse me."

Grasping the ice spear, he drew his wrist back back to aim Regulus, and let the missile fly.

The spear flew true— however, it wasn't the sharp tip that had been pointed at Regulus. As it turned to its side, its shaft scored a direct hit. But the fact of matter was that when the shaft of the spear crashed against Regulus, it fell straight into the waterway, broken into two.

Emilia: "What is the meaning of this...?"

Subaru: "I see... I get it, Reinhardt."

Seeing the state of the broken spear, Emilia tilted her head in confusion. From beside her, Subaru grasped the meaning behind why Reinhardt had done this, shuddering at its outcome.

Hearing Subaru's acknowledgement, Reinhardt nodded and said,

Reinhardt: "Emilia-sama, did you see what happened to the spear when it hit him?"

Emilia: "It broke, right? A spear of ice is different from a real one, so it's natural for it to have broken in two after it struck with such force..."

Reinhardt: "Not quite, the spear didn't break. The part of the spear that hit him is missing. The part that hit him is missing, separated. The spear was broken not into two, but three."

Reinhardt's explanation served as an answer to what had happened to the spear and with the Water Dragon.

Neither object, upon contact with Regulus, managed to penetrate his body. With an ordinary barrier, the collision would have caused a projectile to bounce off or shatter from the impact, but neither had happened.

Regulus's body literally rejected anything that collided with it.

Regulus: "— What cluelessly naive expressions you're all wearing. This is just how it is."

Just as the three reached a consensus, Regulus's voice suddenly sounded from the ice.

That calm voice made it sound as if he were just whispering to himself. The instant Subaru thought that, an unpleasant shock hit him in the back.

Regulus: "Ununderstanding, ununderstandingununderstandingununderstanding. All of you, really, reallyreally understand nothing. It won't amount to anything. You have no chance. You'll achieve nothing. No matter how much you strain and struggle, it's meaningless. Why can't you see that? I'll say it to you, show it to you, force you to see... you could never understand."

Regulus whispered to himself as he leapt from the ice. Having jumped forward only slightly, his body plummeted into the canal; for a moment, his figure vanished. However, with one hand on the edge of the canal, he pulled himself from the water, climbing back onto the street. Then, once again, he squared his gaze at those who were watching him.

Reinhardt: “—His body isn’t wet in the slightest. His breathing remains unchanged. Naturally, the fragments of ice need not even a mention, nor has a single drop of blood splashed onto him. His clothes are completely clean, and equally unstained by water.

Observing Regulus, Reinhardt gave a quick report.

Upon hearing it, Subaru nodded and tried to consider all his concerns even as he suppressed his horror. It seemed that everything he’d intended to confirm with combat had been checked.

However, there was not a trace of good news; this was the worst forecast possible.

Reinhardt: “Subaru, my sword.”

Subaru: “Oh, ah, right...”

At Reinhardt’s request, Subaru quickly handed over the sword that he’d been holding all along. As Reinhardt gently tested the handle of his beloved sword, Emilia looked on from the side, wondering timidly,

Emilia: “Can the sword be unsheathed?”

Reinhardt: “No, the handle is still fixed. It seems that it won’t be obedient... but there’s no other weapon that can be used to confront him.”

Emilia: “Since your sword can’t be drawn, what are you going to do? Attack him directly with the sheathe?”

Reinhardt: “Not exactly. But that’s not too far off.”

With nary a trace of tenseness in his voice, Reinhardt stepped forward.

He placed himself in front of Subaru and Emilia, shielding them from Regulus's line of sight.

Reinhardt: "Subaru, please allow the task of buying time to be handed over to me. You can continue to decipher his power."

Subaru: "Feels like the difficulty just rose a setting. But I'll be cheering for you."

Emilia: "I, I'll also cheer!"

Reinhardt: "Then, I will also cheer. —Go!"

As soon as the sound of his voice fell, Reinhardt flew forward.

Regulus, who had been kept waiting, met him with only calmness.

Regulus: "I say, did you not see? If not fate of the dragon, then the spear. ... Is your imagination truly so lacking?"

Reinhardt: "Only paying attention to a coin by your foot will draw your attention away from what is important— as my master once said."

Regulus: "Is that so."

Regulus's sigh, deep and uninterested, overlapped with Reinhardt's opening strike.

The sound of the muscles and bones being penetrated by something sharp tore through the air, and Subaru's throat couldn't help but stiffen. He watched as Reinhardt gripped the scabbard, slamming the hilt of the sword into Regulus.

Regulus: "—Oh, seems that you don't even have a strategy."

The sound of these blows was different from the fate of the water dragon and the ice gun; at least Reinhardt's beloved sword would not break upon hitting Regulus, no matter what he did.

However, Regulus gave no reaction to the attacks. Reinhardt's previous attacks, although dealing no damage, had at least been enough to send him flying; now, even that effect was lost.

Reinhardt: "Feel free to be proud. You are the second to force me to use Dragon Sword Reid."

Regulus: "I can't hear anything but belittlement, do you truly disregard me so? This isn't the nature of sword, is that what you mean? Such a denigrating gaze, such disparaging words, to one as enlightened as myself, it's only natural that I'd understand!"

Reinhardt: "That's all rather— *ah!*"

As he provoked Regulus, Reinhardt weaved in and out of close proximity. Faced with those murderous fingertips Reinhardt's evasive movements put his whole body into motion.

Suddenly, his legs stopped moving. No, they were kept from moving.

Reinhardt collapsed onto his knees, kneeling in place.

His right calf had split open, spilling forth copious amounts of blood.

Subaru: "Were you hit!? What happened!?"

Subaru cried out, and Reinhardt frowned through his confusion.

Neither Subaru, observing from a distance, not Reinhardt, from right up close, could discern what had happened. The one who had posed this question gave his evaluation of failure.

Regulus: "With your inhuman eyesight and reactions, you can escape the bits gravel and water. But you're too naive, aren't you? If you truly want to confront me, prevent me from breathing. You can't, can you? Just now. I exhaled."

Reinhardt: “Even breaths...”

Against Reinhardt, who’d fallen to the ground, Regulus approached without mercy.

With a direct hit, his attack would be enough to send Reinhardt flying, into pieces. Toward this attack, Reinhardt no longer had any time to dodge.

Hastily, he quickly lifted the sword in his arms, blocking the blow with its black scabbard—

Reinhardt: “*kuu...!*”

Regulus: “Just what do you think you can do, with that annoying scabbard in the way. Clinging to something that you’re unworthy of, why do people like you do such things? I can’t understand at all.”

With this defensive action, Reinhardt’s body was sent flying as if it were a toy ball.

Although protected from the fatal power of the kick, he fell into the street, crashing through the surrounding architecture. As Reinhardt’s body rolled and rolled, the destruction only continued.

In that moment, Reinhardt’s form, sent flying, became nothing but a bullet.

Regulus: “Right, and now—”

Subaru: “——!”

Seeing Reinhardt off well into the distance, Regulus seemed to remember something as he turned around. Being firmly fixed by that gaze, Subaru immediately tensed.

Emilia, from beside him, immediately chanted a canto, and in an instant the sky was covered with a multitude of icicles, which ruthlessly flew toward Regulus.

However, the results spoke for themselves.

Regulus: “A woman who can’t read the situation is just the word. Having to spend time on disciplining them is such a shame. However, because women are just ignorant creatures, they must first be taught. That’s just how it is. They’re much better after they’ve been tamed.”

Slamming into his body and shattering into shards, those icicles were unable to even budge him before they fell to the ground. Languidly, Regulus approached them.

Subaru: “Emilia! Trying to fight is useless right now! If we still don’t understand the mystery, even if we attack, it won’t have any effect!”

Emilia: “But...!”

Subaru: “Right, for now let’s just get out of here!”

Seizing the wrist of the stubborn Emilia, Subaru tried to pull her away from Regulus.

Subaru’s actions only served to excite Regulus further—

Regulus: “Haha, are you trying to flee? Well, that’s only natural. Now that the situation is like this, where you stand no chance against me, though you should have understood that well before you childishly knock upon my door... if you want to flee, then run.”

Just what was he thinking? Regulus watches them flee with nothing but smiles.

However, given this chance to escape, they needed to capitalize on it. No matter what, right now, they had no time to even—

Regulus: “—But, you’d have to get away first.”

As he spoke, Regulus approached canal; leaning over, he hoisted half of the water dragon’s corpse out of the water.

Grabbing its tail, he began to whip it back and forth with a ferocious smile.

Emilia: “H-hey, Subaru... I, have this feeling of foreboding.”

Subaru: “What a coincidence, so do I.”

As for what he would do, neither had any clue.

However, every unremarkable action he took had completely extraordinary results, that much was plain as day.

Therefore, Subaru and Emilia’s pace increased rapidly.

Taking his time, Regulus laughed pleasantly as he raised his head, before leaping into motion. He set foot on the roof of an adjacent building, then jumped over its upper floors, landing on another, taller structure, until he finally reached a building the height of a clock tower.

After that period, both parties now stood a sizable distance apart.

However, despite the distance they’d gained, Subaru could still make out Regulus’s face.

—Showing so clearly, was that murderous smirk.

Regulus: “Come, if you want to try to hide, see if you can. —Whore undeserving of becoming a bride, and bastard who regards this woman as a treasure. I will deliver to you a rain of blood!”

Regulus lifted the half of water dragon with both hands, and twisted the corpse mercilessly.

The dragon’s flesh split with an unpleasant squelch, and the slowly dripping blood gushed forth. The bloody wreckage was gleefully waved by Regulus from his high platform.

Holding the corpse’s tail, still drenched in blood, as if waving a wet towel.

As it rotating over his head, endlessly, blood scattered in a halo.

Farther, father, until its momentum brought it to where Subaru and Emilia had fled.

Then, the result was—

Emilia: “—Subaru!”

Subaru: “Run run run run run run—!”

The downpour of blood became a rain of destruction, further blighting the city, this carpet bombing aimed directly at the retreating figures of the pair that had been forced to flee.

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Chapter 51 - Malice in Trickery

special thanks to u/Ring



Ricardo: “Why’re ya makin’ that face. Somethin’ botherin’ ya?”

Just before reaching the control tower, Ricardo spoke to the knight, who wore a stiff expression.

Halting in his step, Julius raised his brows in surprise.

Julius: “How surprising, Ricardo. I never expected you to be concerned about others’ worries.”

Ricardo: “Don’t mistake that phrase for somethin’ else. The one with ya’s just me. Even if ya say somethin’, it’ll be a secret from miss too.”

Julius: "... You're not wrong, huh."

Though it was rare, Ricardo often made correct observations of people.

If not for that, he wouldn't have been able to take up his role as the head of the [Iron Fang], hearing only fragments of his splendid career would lead tell so. Looking at only one's self and ignoring surroundings was no way to stay alive. Slave, mercenary, this applied to both roles.

Ricardo: "Now that's quite the brutal brat. Even so, I'll play the role I'm supposed to, so ya can depend on me. I'll also take son-in-law's consultation."

Julius: "That 'son-in-law' is scary. I do not hold any such strange feelings for Anastasia-sama."

Ricardo: "What's that, 's miss' affair huh. Maybe it's about Mimi. Besides, she hasn't managed to convince miss yet."

"_____"

Julius smiled bitterly. This gesture of quietly shaking his head was graceful as always, but this time he lacked precision when choosing appropriate words.

And at that gesture,

Ricardo: "Somethin's off 'bout the recapture of the city hall. Miss agrees too. Miss hasn't heard much 'bout it, but I'll force it all out."

Julius: "It seems you are rather unforgiving."

Ricardo: "Of course, it's life-threatening. Don't want t' leave my back to someone who's in th' dark. 'Re ya goin' t' fabricate some kinda excuse as a rebuttal?"

Julius: "... No, it is indeed as you say. It was I who was mistaken. Certainly, I am increasing our risk by hesitating to speak."

Julius earnestly nodded to the pursuing Ricardo, and curved his brows with elegance.

However, no more words came out of the mouth of his troubled self. Facing that attitude, Ricardo got out of his own numbness and let out a sullen voice.

Ricardo: “Why’re ya stoppin’ there? It’s sad that you’re so lost. Just let it out of yer mouth and frankly speak it all out, can’t ya do that? Jus’ what’s stoppin’ ya?”

“_____”

Ricardo: “Julius.”

Julius: “I apologize. I am unable to decide which words would be appropriate to express what I want to say. —The reason for my worry is just as you guessed, the Sin Archbishop that was encountered in the City Government Building. Roy Alphard of [Gluttony], was that person, unmistakably. Unmistakably, but...”

Julius confusedly cut off his words halfway as uncertainty wavered in his yellow eyes.

Julius: “Similar to the other Sin Archbishops, perhaps [Gluttony] also possesses an inexplicable ability. The power of eating memories, eating names, was noticeable back at the time of the battle with the White Whale. However...”

Ricardo: “Julius—!”

Ricardo called out the moment he felt unease touching his very core. And Julius instantly recognized the meaning behind it.

—The atmosphere trembled, all sounds disappeared from the world, and a light rose into the sky.

There could be only one situation in which that extraordinary light would pierce the night sky. It must be the aftermath of a slash by the strongest individual in this world.

Ricardo: “Such a fancy move. I’m correct to assume it’s the Sword Saint, huh?”

Julius: “Ah, Reinhardt, isn’t it. It seems that Subaru and the others have already come in contact with [Greed]. We cannot afford to make any delays either. We must also hurry.”

When one Sin Archbishop was attacked, the other Sin Archbishops did not come together in defense and retaliation.

Julius and Ricardo sped up their pace, aiming for the approaching control tower.

Ricardo: “So, what’s so strange ‘bout that [Gluttony]? Did ya say he’s an extraordinary monster?!”

Ricardo tapped on his shoulder in hopes of hearing Julius’ story to its conclusion and interrupted Julius’ forward momentum. Julius turned his head and looked back, with a gaze which denied what he had just said.

Julius: “No. Although it does seem like he was not completely serious, the skill of [Gluttony] does not seem to exceed human knowledge itself. If we both are his opponents, then that may just be enough for him, however, the enemy’s creepiness is a totally different subject.”

“_____”

His unavoidable worry itself was because of the fact that Julius himself did not know the extent of its true creepiness. And it was Julius’ unusual selfishness which made him avoid mentioning this argument in the previous strategy meeting.

Julius considered [Gluttony] to be an unfathomable and eerie opponent, but still believed that he must cross swords with him.

Ricardo did not know the reason behind it.

It could not be said that even Julius clearly knew, either.

“_____”

They kicked the stone pavement and passed the curve of the street to its exit. There lied one of four control towers, colored differently compared to the other buildings, and in front of that was—,

???: “A~h, we thought that you’d come. We expected that you’d come. That’s right, that’s exactly right, that’s completely right, perhaps that’s right, maybe that’s right, probably that’s right, isn’t that right, isn’t that probably right, because that’s right ~tsu! The wait was well worth it ~tsu!”

—Before the entrance of the control tower, a lone boy stood on the cobblestone square.

Dressed in dirty rags, dark brown hair left to grow for a long time till it reached great length. His crazy eyes twinkling and shining with happiness, sharp canine teeth and a dripping tongue hung from his mouth.

With both arms slouched down, he was a young boy. No matter how you looked at him, he barely seemed to have any power and looked like simply a vagrant child—but an aura of dreadfulness emanated from his body.

Ricardo: “One more thing, jus’ to confirm... It’s him, right?”

There wasn’t any need to ask, whether it was. There was no doubt, it was completely convincing.

As a response to Ricardo, Julius only lowered his jaw quietly.

There was no possible doubt, no possible mistake, that it was the Sin Archbishop of [Gluttony] standing there.

The worst kind of blasphemer who chewed on the names and memories of others.

Julius: “Roy Alphard—”

Roy: “Yes, correct answer. That’s our name. We’re happy that you remember it. Quite happy. Pretty happy. Really happy. As we’re happy. Because we’re happy, drinking ~tsu! Gluttony ~tsu! It would be worthwhile to eat, and dri~nk. And also...”

Declaring his name, Alphard laughed with terrible brutality. His eyes glared directly at Ricardo standing right next to Julius.

He opened his mouth and rings his nose as his eyes filled with ecstasy.

Roy: "This time it seems that we will be even getting a puppy-chan. That makes us unbelievably happy. After all, our stomach might have had gotten a bit troubled if it was ju~st Julius Juukulius-kun. Whatever you say, it would have had been completely tasteless, won't it."

Julius: "It seems I have gotten rather bored by your words of insult. Henceforth to settle this quickly, I asked my friend to accompany me this time. Though it is definitely inelegant to have more than one person..."

Roy: "A~h, it's nice, that way of starting. Doing that to raise self-consciousness may be nice and it is typical of Julius-kun bu~t, it's rather weak. We are gourmands so tasting that is a bit problematic, but still, we are intrigued as Julius-kun is one of the top-class we have seen till now! Tidy a~nd consistent."

Julius: "Well, well... in addition to the big welcome we received, I am grateful for those words as well."

Roy: "Well that cannot be helped ~tsu! Our, our honesty is something that gets overlooked. What we want you to overlook right now is this slight mismatch of characters."

Waving his hands, Alphard did not bend his posture till the end. Provocatively, Julius kept his calm, but Ricardo was unable to hide his feeling of unpleasantness. He clicked his tongue and cracked the bones of his neck.

Ricardo: "O~h, say what ya wanna say, boy. It'll be mistake to overlook you as just some brat. What ye'll get for your sins won't be very pretty. I'll even travel across dimensions just to beat your ass. Because, boy will I break that."

Roy: "Oh, scaryscary. Don't stare at us with that scary face. We apologize if you got offe~nded that we called you a puppy, Ricardo Welkin. But still, we still longed for you a bit, you know? Don't scare us, in that rough loud voice of yo~urs!"

“——?”

Calling Ricardo by his name, he shouted, as Julius frowned. Seeing his eyes, Julius shook his head. Strange. Alphard's remarks were merely a madman's delusion, but the enormous sense of discomfort could not be easily wiped away. For example— when did he, learn Ricardo's name?

Ricardo: “Damn spooky brat..... From where, and when, did ya learn our names.”

Roy: “It wouldn't be ve~ry wise to try and investigate. It's just that, it's obvious that we would know your name. Isn't that true, Julius-ku~n?”

Julius: “No matter how much you consent, I cannot respond to you. You too, I am completely ignorant regarding you. If this is the way you will do it, I will break the flow just as much.”

Roy: “Look, there's that boring conclusion again. Even though we care about it quite much, it's uneasy it's uneasy it's unpleasant ~tsu! Hiding it in the chest, putting aside thinking about oneself for later ~tsu! It's pretty virtuous as a knight, but it's pretty boring as a person.”

Pulling out his knight sword, Julius's lips silently whisper something.

And immediately afterwards, six extremely brilliant lights surrounded Julius.

They were the six quasi-spirits Julius is always accompanied by.

This mix of swordsmanship and spirit-arts was what made Julius the [Knight Impeccable].

Roy: “Neither the aroma of the feeling of inferiority, nor the rich texture of experiencing frustration, even the sweetness of a strong desire, or the rare taste of a sense of satisfaction after you've aged, you have no~ne of them ~tsu!”

Julius: “—Ricardo. Give it your everything from the very beginning. Let's work together.”

Ricardo: “Yeah, leave it to me.”

Shaking his arms, Alphard revealed the daggers attached on his wrists. Wielding two daggers was [Gluttony's] fighting style, but it did not seem to be enough to stop Julius' magic or prevent Ricardo's blows.

As long as the battle wasn't an ambush, their respective victory and defeat were already in sight.

Regardless, in Ricardo's eyes, Alphard did not seem an opponent that could provide a rich and challenging battle experience.

Julius: "Spirit Knight, Julius Juukulius."

As per his manners, Julius gave his name ahead of the fight.

However, Ricardo, who was standing next to him, had no such obligations to follow. They fixed their eyes, waiting for [Gluttony] to give his identity.

Seeing Ricardo's line of sight, Alphard shouted.

Roy: "How nice, quite nice, perhaps it is nice, isn't it nice , maybe it is nice, possibly it is nice, probably it is nice, because it is probably nice ~tsu! Gluttonous drinking ~tsu! Gluttony ~tsu! Gourmet, bizarre eating, satiation, overeating ~tsu! Spiciness, blandness, deliciousness, delicacy ~tsu! We will eat everything up ~tsu! Even a life without taste, is also a taste that's new to us ~tsu!"

Julius: "—El Clausel."

The vibrance of the six colours draw a circle in front of Julius's eyes, and an extremely bright light emanates from the tip of his sword that aimed to stab through Alphard's centre.

Multiple affinities mixed, that destructive power develops into a rainbow-coloured blow that could swallow up everything.

Ricardo stepped on ahead with momentum that crushed the cobblestone, just behind the dazzling light. As if in an attempt to have Ricardo push Alphard aside, right into the extremely vibrant light.

Against the heavy slashes and the rainbow-coloured extremely vibrant light, Alphard uncovers his fangs.

Roy: “—Truly, nii-sama is as magnificent as imagined. We will be enchanted, geez ~tsu.”

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Beneath the moon, flashes of silver sliced through wind, as sparks spilled forth from a symphony of swordplay.

The first musician was was a Sword Demon who swung a pair of blades with crisp notes.

His partner welcomed him; a swordswoman whose movements flowed reminiscent the path of a gentle stream.

Flashes of metal danced through the air; the clash of steel should have sounded cruel, and yet, somehow, this symphony was wistfully melancholic. The ringing of sharp, precise collisions resembled the gentle caresses of a pair of lovers.

The reason for this was simple; these two swordsmen complemented each other on a level beyond perfection.

Wilhelm: “Haaah—!”

The Sword Demon steeled his breath as he let loose a flurry of elliptical blows.

Those precise arcs were practically a form of art, their clean movements the ideal standard for all aspiring swordsmen.

His sheer skill was so overwhelming that anyone who was worthy of calling themselves a knight would have been so captivated that their battle would be guaranteed a loss, and yet he merely, almost casually, unleashed flurry after flurry.

Thearesia: “——”

One single, light blow would have been more than fatal, in this rain of unending death.

However, meeting this peerless hurricane was a longsword whose owner was truly extraordinary.

Moreover, that longsword had an odd quality.

The length of the blade, as tall as its owner, was too unwieldy to make a proper weapon; and yet, the slender slender swordswoman swung the huge blade with ease, as if it were weightless.

Although the longsword's owner was draped from head to toe in a black cloak, impeding on her vision, the tip of her sword flowed as if dancing through water.

Whether it be in terms of speed or polish, the twin blades greatly outstripped the longsword. Even so, each and every one of the Sword Demon's piercing attacks were, without fail, absorbed and deflected.

Between the sparks and sharp clangs, with an almost pitying hiss toward the Sword Demon, the swordswoman leapt backward. A beat too slow to react to the unexpected move, just as he was about to push forward, the gleam of a blade pierced his forehead.

Wilhelm: “—*hk*”

Flashing before him, was a blow that he couldn't allow to make contact.

This was a specialized killing blow that flashed faster than the blink of an eye, which disguised the approaching blade. If not for his extensive experience in dueling her, he would have been unable to see through the imminent death he'd nearly been dealt, and glem would have passed through the brain and killed him.

The skin between his brows burned at the close call. In an instant, the Sword Demon cast off his misgivings, and began to pursue to woman who'd frozen in her stinging pose.

Wilhelm: “*huu, kuu*”

Thearesia: “——”

Before he'd even gathered himself enough to act, the woman had driven her toes into his flesh.

Her slender feet pierced between his well-exercised abdominal muscles and jolted his organs; the weight of her kick bent his body double, as a silver flash drew an arc, which hung over his head.

The glittering sword flew straight as true, as if meaning to cut down the moon.

Having reached the peak of its flight, the sword began to glide back to earth, and slicing straight through the atmosphere, meaning to bisect the sword demon.

The power behind that attack was incomparable to any previous ones; both the deadliness of the blade itself and its owner's skill were more than capable of slicing through any human body.

Approaching in the briefest of flashes, was this certain death.

Wilhelm: "Stop looking down on me!"

Still bent double, he immediately swung both his arms upward, staggering as they met the crushing force overhead.

The Sword Demon's own blades overlapped as they caught the weapon bearing down on him, as his jaws clenched from its sheer power. Unable to fend it off entirely, his arms began to fall; shallowly, the blade pierced his forehead.

Blood spurted forth, splattering his field of vision red. However, he hadn't fallen to knees, not had his own swords been broken.

Wilhelm: "*kuuuu*"

The arms holding the sword back strained upward, pushing the fallen sword back again.

Sweeping the heavy blade aside, the residual aftershocks shook the form of the swordswoman before him; taking advantage of the moment, he kicked forward.

The force that should have slammed back into the ground was instead redirected into the woman's airborne form.

The combination of the force from the falling blade and the kick slammed the woman's body into the distance. The aging Sword Demon lunged into the slender body that had nowhere left to flee.

—An opening.

Against the swordswoman who had flown into the air, with no escape route, the Sword Demon lowered his shoulder and unleashed an attack.

Catching up to her fleeing form, the attack came simultaneously from top and bottom. As one, the two blades drew an arc, tearing toward her slender form with the bite of a wild beast.

In midair, with her back turned toward him, she could make no counterattack.

Even so, that clarity of that attack found itself shaken.

Thearesia: “——”

The hood that had covered the swordswoman's head, unable to withstand the tug of gravity as she flipped her body, swished back, revealing what had once been hidden,

Cascading down was long hair the color of a beautiful, raging flame.

Thearesia: “——”

At the time of its entry into her field of vision, the swordsman's attack carried a flaw which existed for briefer than a single instant.

An incredibly subtle, slight deviation from perfection, was this mistake. Even so, no one else would be able to parry this attack.

However, considering the Sword Demon's current opponent, this mistake was fatal. To an existence which had once won the favor of the the god of swords, that turbid blade could not reach at all.

Thearesia: "——"

At the scene in front of him, the Sword Demon's throat was frozen by a shudder.

That certain blow had been interrupted midway.

It hadn't been anything special. The woman merely drew her sword in midair, and wedged it between the swords that came from above and below. As easy as sliding a brace between a pair of fangs.

The blade and the pommel of her longsword completely caught the advance of the two swords right in their tracks. What had the Sword Demon shudder was that bite of steel on steel rang out only once.

Catching the two blades with only one crisp sound, meant that she had calculated the timing of both of them colliding with her own weapon down to the millisecond.

What was truly horrifying was the necessary clarity of vision, skill, and sheer nerve to even attempt such an act.

Wilhelm: "—*kuu*"

The stunt, so far beyond what common sense dictated was possible, drew a sigh from the Sword Demon's throat.

At that moment, the leg of the woman who was still caught between the swords flew in a wide arc, kicking away the Sword Demon's hands, which still rested where his attack had stalled.

The impact jolted his weapons from the hands which wielded them, and, in that moment, he found himself completely defenseless.

Then, with a flash of steel, the longsword made a cross.

The combination of the speed at which the blade approached, and the range that couldn't have been shorter.

Even with a little time and distance, the empty-handed swordsman had no way to block.

The longsword pierced his thin skin and continued drive into his organs and sever his spine, driving through his left side in one single motion and splitting his body into halves— coughing up blood and internal organs, the body already shackled by old age breaking with blow. That was the unavoidable fate that awaited him.

That was the end that could not be evaded, and the conclusion of the matter.

After the end of his life, having lost everything, he couldn't even cling to a chance at redemption.

—That kind of conclusion was simply impossible to accept.

Wilhelm: "RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH—!"

He rebelled against the bloody end that flashed through his mind.

The throat of the sword ghost burned with the final scene of the illusion, the vitality of his twilight years erupting forth. Breaking the limits concentration so that even passage of time stalled, only he and his opponent existed in that moment, the sounds and colors of the world fading from focus.

The impending blade traced an unexpected orbit to stab into his body.

Slowly feeling the touch of the blade piercing through his fragile skin, as well the heat and pain of bleeding, whilst feeling as if the natural force of gravity had increased tenfold, he planted all his the power into his two feet.

Digging his heels in hard enough to shatter stone, he redirected the force of swinging his arms to the right into a reactive motion.

Reversing his body with the shortest distance and best angle, turning to the side as if approaching the blade that brushed his body, a form of evasion which allowed him to roll along the blade that slid across his side.

Thearesia: “——”

Having been thwarted in her attack, the swordswoman’s follow up attack was delayed by but a brief moment.

In that time, the Sword Demon retreated several paces, plucking his twin swords from midair. With a sigh, he placed the palm of his hand onto his side, checking the depth of the wound.

This was certainly no minor scratch.

He’d turned while a blade had been invading his body, after all. Spinning while being pierced, he’d naturally draw a wound on his own body.

Fortunately, by a hair’s breadth, he’d kept the blade from plunging into his organs, but the amount of blood dripping from the wound mere centimeters away from his innards was by no means a small amount.

To ordinary people, this was a serious injury. Although that was natural—

Wilhelm: “... From the very start, I didn’t feel that I could persist in this battle for long.”

He’d already been running on a time limit, it had only grown shorter.

The Sword Demon— Wilhelm rolled off his shirt and violently staunched the bleeding from his waist; exposing his healthy flesh during this emergency treatment, he was not pursued.

The woman opposing him merely watched quietly, her gaze devoid of emotion.

At his own anticipation of any swaying or subtle changes in those eyes, Wilhelm gave a bitter smile. Pressing on his open the wound, he awoke himself with the pain.

Wilhelm: “Such weakness is useless. Stop dreaming, this sacred reunion, you will one day be able to indulge in as much as you want, in the heavens.”

Thearesia: “——”

Wilhelm: “I don’t think I’m hallucinating. Nor do I expect miracles. My wife was a woman who was reluctant to follow the way of the sword, but pushing the responsibility of wielding the sword onto others, was something she never once did.”

An emotionless corpse, a revived construct.

Crimson hair silky and flowing, smooth skin snowy and transparent, eyes bijous of precious gems; closing his own, he recalled that cute face that he would never tire of.

All this was before him, and all this shouldn’t have been before him.

Wilhelm: “Thearesia, how lovely you are. —Therefore, you can’t remain here.”

Wilhelm tightened his grip on his swords, taking up fighting a stance again.

At this moment, standing here, was not the husband of Thearesia van Astrea. The one who prayed to stand here was not Wilhelm van Astrea.

Who stood here at this moment was Sword Demon Wilhelm.

—Facing his dead wife, Wilhelm steeled his spirit, his gaze becoming clear and clean.

Even if his blood were boiling, he wouldn’t allow his anger at the sinister presence to come to a breaking point.

But, right now, at this moment, at this time, anything else was superfluous.

His old friend, his comrade-in-arms, his wife, had said to Wilhelm.

Don't allow heat to besmirch the blade, don't allow your blood boil, you must learn to love the coldness of steel.

How about now? Was it growing hot?

Wilhelm: "No, it's frigid. Like the blade of a knife."

Under the moon, the Sword Demon pierced his opponent with a gaze of steel.

The talent swordswoman who was his opponent, also waved the tip of the her longsword again, without any flaws.

In an instant, their swords once again flashed again toward each other.

The sounds of steel intertwined with each other was a wail, a plea, a courtship.

The expectation of an end, and the hope that it would never come to an end.

As if exchanging endless dialogue without a single word. The sound of swordplay played ceaselessly, echoing.

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Garfiel: "Ah, damn it! No response 't all, what a joke!"

Kicking off the ground, kicking off a wall, kicked off a roof, and soaring up.

Flying diagonally in the air, his short blond hair fluttering as it bathed in the wind fluttering, exposing his teeth, a picture of desperation.

Time and time again, gnashing his fangs, fighting the burning sensation in his body and chest.

Garfiel: "Bastard! What's up, hello!"

His clothes fluttering, he broke into a run the instant he touched the ground again.

This was a feat that only those of exceptional strength and endurance, far beyond a human level, could achieve. However, the one who flew over the city with only his own body expressed no pride in his abilities.

Instead, he kept roaring into an unresponsive hand mirror.

The one sprinting was Garfiel, who was howling into the magic device in his hand— the conversation mirror.

The conversation mirror, which should have been able to link him to others who possessed one, remained silent. No one picked up Garfiel's call, even though, clearly, there were two groups of people capable of responding.

Garfiel: "City Hall guys, or [Wrath] fightin' guys! Th' hell're ya not replyin' for!"

The conversation mirrors were supposed to have been assigned so that everyone could stay in contact during their respective battles.

In fact, they'd been working perfectly fine just after he'd left the City Hall. But now, when contact was necessary, the function of the dialogue mirror had fallen silent.

—This needed to be be communicated immediately.

Garfiel: "Gotta tell 'em that they've to evacuate the City Hall *now*, damn it!"

As he said so, he leapt upward, skipping the street in front of him as he took a shortcut.

Although his rough landing shattered the roof he landed on, Garfiel had no attention to spare. Compared to damage to the city, ensuring the safety of his companions was far more important.

The goal of his rapid travel was the City Hall.

Garfiel was rushing back to the place he'd left only dozens of minutes ago. Leaving behind Wilhelm, his comrade-in-arms, he desperately called to the conversation mirror.

There was no other reason.

Danger was quickly approaching the City Hall that was serving as their base.

—Wilhelm and Garfiel had arrived at the control tower occupied by the [Lust], at about the same time that Reinhardt began to engage with [Greed].

Having witnessed the distant aurora, the two entered the control tower.

None of the witch cultists nor the troublesome people who they'd expected had appeared to intercept their path. As expected, the Witch Cult minions in the city seemed to only consist of insignificant opponents.

Everything had been smooth sailing until then, and hadn't been any other rooms worth checking out aside from the water gate control room.

So, the pair naturally headed to the top floor to prepare for a decisive battle with [Lust]. In the imagination, the proportion of the power of the [Lust] camp is the most dangerous. In addition to [Lust], there were two outstanding fighters, which meant that the two would have to face three enemies—naturally, they were both engulfed in tension.

Wilhelm: "If possible, I'd appreciate the swordswoman being left to me."

Garfiel: "Th' cap'n also told me so. Seems like there's something between ya. But, my amazin' self also has a bone t' pick with that woman. Can't let ya have 'er so easily."

Wilhelm: "That is my wife. Those bastards made a mockery of my wife's death, trampled upon her soul, and forced her to point a sword that which she'd sworn to protect."

Garfiel: "——"

Wilhelm: “No matter what, this is impermissible.”

On the way, Wilhelm had revealed his reason for wanting to fight.

That was a reason that Garfiel, who should have had no basis to give up, couldn't help but keep his mouth shut against. And his inability to form reply in that moment, may have been just what decided the most fitting opponent of the swordswoman.

Garfiel: “——”

Although he'd said nothing, Garfiel conceded the opponent to Wilhelm. Wilhelm also indicated his understanding of this, silently bowing his head to express his gratitude.

So, when he stepped into the control tower, Garfiel felt his the cold sensation of his hair sticking straight up.

If Wilhelm is going to fight the female swordsman, then he'd have to deal with the remaining two by himself. The swordswoman went without mention, and the giant accompanying her was no less powerful than she was.

Although [Lust] was seeming lacking in terms of combat effectiveness, Subaru had repeatedly emphasized that what was fearsome about the Witch Cult was its direct combat ability.

Silent tension and pervasive fighting spirit.

As his sense of smell caught an increasingly strong scent of blood, Garfiel equipped the silver shields which had been strapped legs, and rushed into the room.

There, he saw it.

[Why the hell would I just be obediently waiting here? Fool.]

Words scrawled in blood, occupying an entire wall of the room.

When he realized what they meant, Garfiel's head seethed.

Fleeing from a battle as if it were a matter of course, a type of personality which could straightforwardly say that there was no obligation to wait.

Wilhelm: “—Neglectful. Those bastards are exactly the type to pull this kind of trick.”

Wilhelm lowered his voice and retrieved the conversation mirror from his sleeves. The reason for trying to get in touch with the City Hall so immediately was because Wilhelm had thought of the notion first.

Wilhelm: “If our forces are sent out in raids, then our base's combat power will naturally diminish. These guys won't have any shame in exploiting this gap.”

Before the pale-faced Garfiel, Wilhelm grimaced at the unresponsive mirror.

At the same time, along the roof of the control tower, emerged a deep, oppressive hostility.

A feeling that his back was being stroked by a blade, was what tipped Garfiel off about the existence of the enemy.

Wilhelm had also felt the hostile presence.

Wilhelm: “Garfiel-sama, I'll entrust the City Hall to you.”

Garfiel: “‘F it comes down t' it, my amazin' self can get there faster.”

They exchanged ideas in a flash.

The enemy was as a razor-sharp, clandestine blade. Exposing their backs as they tried to flee would only result in the both of them being cut down from behind.

Between them, one of them needed to stay.

Then, one of them needed to return to the City Hall.

Wilhelm: “Please, continue to try to establish contact. —My master, I entrust her to you.”

Garfiel: “Goes without sayin’. ‘S a [Libre’s voice rouses the blood of soldiers].”

Garfiel caught the thrown conversation mirror and sped out of the control tower.

Like so, he flew across the city, crossed the waterway, and continued into the mirror that offered no response. —Wilhelm’s battle was also probably starting.

Garfiel: “Damn it! All that, for nothin’...!”

If [Lust] launched a surprise attack on the City Hall, there would be very little forces capable of greeting her.

Anastasia and Ferris had no combat power, and Crusch had collapsed from her injuries. Although several members of the [Iron Fang] stood on guard, their combat power wasn’t enough to compare with Mimi.

The instant that he thought of Mimi, Garfiel’s chest grew sore.

The girl who, even now, hovered in the abyss of death, who he’d rescued, saved, protected.

Keep her alive, saving her, clearly should have been his duty.

That duty had been conceded to another due to sentiment, and his chance at vengeance grew further by the second. However, even the work that was taken as an alternative could not be completed satisfactorily.

What was he doing? Looking as he did, what was he doing?

To Mimi, Subaru, his sister, Ram, or anyone, he couldn’t lift his head to face them.

Garfiel: “My amazin’ self, once again—!”

Can't do anything?

The unresponsive conversation mirror reflected such an unpromising face. In the moment that he cursed himself,

Garfiel: "——!?"

As he smashed the roof whilst leaping, he was a beat too slow in reacting to the shadow flying in from the side.

That form, far more massive than his own, met him with a horizontal impact.

The reason why he couldn't even issue a cry of pain was because his throat was hooked under an elbow. Blood and oxygen unable to circulate through his brain, maintaining his consciousness grew steadily more difficult.

Pulling him back into gradual consciousness was the force of the impact over his whole body.

The body that had greeted him obliquely from the air and slammed into a nearby building. Breaking the wall with his entire body, Garfiel tossed up a cloud of dust.

The dull pain and broken bones drew a groan from Garfiel, as he felt himself being liberated from the restraint. Using his body's elasticity, Garfiel slammed the ground as hard as he could, pulling himself upright again.

He found himself in a structure with no lighting. The smog that filled the room had become a white smoke under the moonlight, and, before his own blood-coughing figure, he could detect another presence.

That was undoubtedly the culprit who'd sniped him and landed them in here.

Garfiel: "Ya bastard, y' really know how t'—"

The instant when he'd taken a battle stance, a fist slammed into his stomach.

Garfiel's entire abdominal area took the force of his opponent's huge fists, and his body flew upward. Then, he was smashed by the fist that had been swung from above, and the already decrepit floor broke beneath him and he fell another level.

Garfiel: "*Kuu*, what... *guu!*?"

The sole of a foot slammed into his downward falling body.

The damage caused by both the momentum and the mass caused him to spit blood, and his body, stomped on once again, crashed fiercely and directly through to the entrance to the building, where it was smashed into the street.

From this striking impact, Garfiel continued to cough and he climbed to his feet. At the same time, he applied simple healing magic himself, knitting broken bones as he raised his head.

The one who'd chased Garfiel from the top of the building to here was a hulking figure who he needed to crane his head to see.

Although covered head to toe in black robes, even that could not disguise the thickness of his arms and legs. Rather than saying he was muscular, it would be no exaggeration to say that he wore an armor of muscle.

To Garfiel, this would be the third time facing that enemy.

That name was already known as well.

Garfiel: "Kurgan of [Eight Arms]..."

He was one of the Vollachia Empire's sword swinging heroes.

Although he was said to have died in battle during the Imperial City Defense Battle decades ago, for him to be here right now, could he have suffered the same humiliation in death that Wilhelm's wife had?

Kurgan: “——”

When Garfiel spoke that name, the giant, Kurgan, extended his arms.

At that moment, the clasp of his robes gave way, revealing his figure. That is to say, the hero Kurgan revealed his expertise in close-range battle.

As expected, his strong body was covered by a thick armor of muscle.

A powerful physique which could rival the giants, and face on a neck which could be described as demonic, filled with the domineering expression of a war god.

And what made this war god a war god, were the eight arms which enabled those strange fighting techniques.

In addition to the two arms that usually grew from the shoulders, two more arms sprouted from the same place. Move down his body revealed two more arms using his shoulders as the starting point, and the rest stretched their palms forward from behind.

That was in accordance with Kurgan’s name [Eight Arms]. Someone capable of sapping his enemy’s will to fight with just his natural body.

Kurgan: “——”

Facing Garfiel, who’d swallowed a deep breath, Kurgan kept his silence as he drew his weapon.

Strapped to his thick legs, coincidentally mounted in the same style as Garfiel’s shield, were a pair of thick, long, distorted blades— the [Ghost Cleavers] that this war god swung.

This war god drew two other Ghost Cleavers from his back, for a total of four. Although the remaining four arms are still unarmed, Garfiel would nonetheless be completely overwhelmed.

He had no leisure to underestimate the enemy in the slightest.

Garfiel: “——”

His body trembled.

In front of this real hero, Garfiel's body trembled from his core.

Garfiel stared at the hero, the legendary figure, the great man who'd made a mark in history.

To not know the name of the Kurgan of [Eight Arms] was impossible for him.

Garfiel indeed took great interest in his myriad legends coming from every which way.

And today, he stood in front of his very own eyes, as an enemy.

This was a nightmare. A ongoing nightmare that had begun yesterday.

What else could it be, malicious as it was?

Garfiel: “... ha, ah, huh.”

Garfiel's breath quickened as he reached toward his legs.

Mounted there in the same way as Kurgan's Ghost Cleavers were silver shields. Unaware of how many times his fingers slipped, finally, the straps came undone.

Placing his shields on his arms as if to cover his fists, he knocked them together for confirmation, creating a sharp note which echoed in the night sky.

His equipment is ready, and his injuries had healed enough to not be debilitating.

However, his mind was still, at the moment, frazzled.

Garfiel: “S no time t' say stupid shit—!”

Clenching his fangs, Garfiel hit himself in the face.

Shaking his head from the dizzying pain and shock, he turned his gaze forward again. Assuming his stance again, he bared his fangs at the war god before him.

Garfiel: “‘F you’re jus’ standing there, th’ hell’s my amazin’ self for! Whether ‘s th’ cap’n! Or the other guys too! They’re all fightin’! Obviously, all yer good for ‘s fightin’, so th’ fuck’re ya stallin’ for?”

Kurgan: “——”

Against the screaming Garfiel, Kurgan remained impassive.

The silent war god that Garfiel was facing would only watch him quietly. With a pout, he broke the line of the street, then rushed forward with a single step.

Through the soles of his shoes, he absorbed the power of the earth, allowing his [Divine Protection of Earth Spirits] to redirect all that energy into a blow.

His fist was truly infused with the power to shatter a stone building.

His silver shield reinforced the fist’s blow, one strong enough to break even a hero.

His arm flew straight and true into Kurgan’s waist—

Garfiel: “—How’s this?”

Kurgan: “——”

Using the full force of his body, Garfiel’s attack was blocked by Kurgan’s Demon Cleaver. The Demon Cleaver, blocking the direct attack to Kurgan’s abdomen, withstood the power of Garfiel’s blow. He did not evade, nor did he flinch. With only a hard block, a full-bodied attack was dispelled. The hero of [Eight Arms] had used only a single arm.

Garfiel: “—*kuu*”

Garfiel's stiff expression ushered in a punch from the shoulder. The body that turned backwards was caught by the arm that protruded from a side, and, unable to escape, he could only take a wild beating. His cheekbones were broken in an instant, and his fundus was crushed. The field of view of his right eye was stained bright red. A razor fang shattered and blew away. His body still caught, he was thrown to the ground, kicked down the street by a powerful leg, and rolled, rolled, rolled, rolled into the nearby waterway.

Garfiel: “—aa”

Everything went in a flash, and he stared at the moon that floated so high above him. That moon seemed to laugh at him. Afterward, Garfiel's body sank into the waterway.

—The surface of the water was slowly dyed crimson.

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Chapter 52 - The Stars and The Sin Archbishops



The collapse was pushing in.

That shower of fresh blood, each drop and every drop, like a malevolent hand grasping gallant destruction, trampled over the city.

Wherever the droplets touched, more so than striking a sheet of paper with the edge of a blade, it unresistingly lost its cohesion. The destructive propagation demolished buildings, and the aftermath, in turn, spread further collapse around it.

Subaru: “Aaaaaaaaaa!!”

Emilia: “——Tsk!”

Fully aware that he was being unreasonable, yet wringing out breath from his lungs, Subaru continued powering through his sprint. Jogging alongside him was Emilia, her gleaming silver hair fluttering through the air and her mouth tightly shut, similarly mid-stride.

However, the scenic water city's specialty canals stretched out from them in all directions.

Simply put, finding a straight path to properly escape on was proving difficult. In front of the dashing pair spread waterways, while destruction from the rear threatened to swallow them both.

Subaru: "Watch out!"

Emilia: "We're sailing close to the wind, but.....Subaru, grab on!"

As their escape route cutting off caused Subaru to raise his voice, Emilia instantly conceived of a different notion. He grabbed onto her outstretched arm without hesitation, and in that same moment, a chill came over the surrounding air.

It was the effect of both magic borne of the spirits' borrowed strength and the power of Emilia herself, acting together.

Emilia: "——Please, everyone!"

Once Emilia commanded them so, from each luminous point blue light surged downwards.

In the next instant, the ground beneath was instantly soaked with white, and in the blink of an eye a whole world of frost had spread.

Subaru: "Oouh!? Emilia-tan is amazing! So clever!"

Emilia: "Control is difficult, so don't let go of my hand!"

Subaru looked up, his right hand still linked with Emilia's own. Tightly grasped in the half-elf's raised left fist, was an icicle directed ahead which had shot forward moments before.

Freezing the ground and thrusting from it an icicle, her borrowing of the propulsive force from her magic had thus hastened their escape. Even more surprising was the course of ice formed by the spirits in the air.

On the edge of the waterway in front of them, something like a ski jump had been formed, and the Subaru and Emilia pair, gliding with their built-up momentum, had sailed over the channel.

Subaru: “Eee-yahaa!”

On the other side of the waterway, another course of ice had been created. While she was touching down and skating over it, Subaru honestly praised Emilia’s skill.

Subaru: “*Nice*, Emilia-tan! I fell for you all over again!”

Emilia: “But, I can’t think of a way to stop! What should we do?”

Subaru: “Eeh.”

Emilia had already released the icicle, but the leftover momentum was still plenty to cause unavoidably high damage once they hit an obstacle. Using only her ice magic, conveniently making something like a cushion for two to absorb the heavy impact wasn’t a possibility.

In the meantime, the pair was drawing closer and closer to a wall. Moments before impact, feeling Emilia’s hand tightly squeezing his, Subaru made a snap judgement.

Subaru: “Emilia-tan! Install curve!”

Emilia: “Cu, cur—ve?”

Subaru: “A gently-bending kind of wall! In a circle!”

Hearing Subaru’s desperate call, Emilia with her magic meekly obeyed.

Right in front of their sliding forms, a gentle curve formed, and following along it while turning widely, those two avoided impact.

Subaru: “Just like that, don’t let the curves cut off! Twirl—! Twirl—!”

Emilia: “T, twirl—! Twirl—!”

Just so, turning widely like that, as to not cut off at a wall, more curves of ice formed.

Viewed from above, an ice wall shaped like mosquito-repellent coil was created, and the two bodies reaching the midpoint just barely lost enough speed to safely come to a stop.

Subaru: “Huuuh, after wasting a bunch of Emilia-tan’s magic, we did it somehow.”

Emilia: “More importantly, the attack from earlier.”

As the stopped Subaru let out a sigh, Emilia whacked her ice formation with her hand and shattered it. Watching the crushed ice returning to mana particles, and turning to see the traces of the destruction they fled from, a shiver ran up Subaru’s spine.

Centered around the tower on which Regulus’ attack had originated, the scenery of the city had changed.

Especially near the center, where the impacts of blood had been strongly felt, the destruction was severe. Further outwards in the perimeter of destruction, deviations in its traces formed. But even then, few buildings still held their original shape. In other words, it was an attack with an abnormally high area of effect.

At Subaru’s location, the attack had crossed the waterway and reached over. That it had barely failed to reach Subaru was the result of chance and a desperate escape——not.

Subaru: “Reinhardt.”

On the building Regulus had stood up to this moment, there was now no one.

Instead, in its vicinity thick smoke was rising, and the sound of tremendous destruction was echoing.

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Regulus sent the Water Dragon to its death by tearing it apart, smirking while it sprayed blood.

In that moment, he could already see two small figures desperately trying to escape down an alley.

How puny, how very petty, how truly trivial.

Laughing mockingly as his scattered blood trampled on the city, he eagerly awaited the moment that destruction would catch up to the fleeing duo.

A Prostitute and a Rapist. For them, death in a hail of blood was fitting.

Regulus: “Scatter! Scatter away! You heinous fiends who trampled on my heart!”

Reinhardt: “——My apologies, but I can’t let you do that.”

Immediately after declaring his rage and victory with those words, he was startled by a voice speaking close to his ear.

As he turned around, a head of red hair with the appearance of flames fanned by the wind came into view.

Regulus: “How foolish you look! Getting in the way of someone’s love with such zeal!”

Reinhardt: “If your method was proper and respectful of rights, if once rejected you could promise to pull away cleanly, then I would not even hesitate to cheer for you.”

At Regulus’ infuriated voice, Reinhardt responded with a laugh and a tease.

While that ever-so-composed posture was indeed hateful, what now took hold of Regulus’ feelings was an inexplicable suspicion.——Then, leaping in a single burst, came Reinhardt’s leg.

Certainly, that right leg, on its shin it had suffered a serious injury.

Though not entirely torn off, to say it was held to the ankle with a mere strip of leather was no exaggeration. Far from battle-worthy, it was in no state to bear walking on. That it had left that state meant,

Regulus: “That is so dumb, it’s not just swordsmanship, is healing magic your specialty, too? With all those talents of yours that better than others, just how much did you trample over their hearts on the way here? Shattering the hearts of others without even trying filthy does that feel good huh?!”

Regulus: “Among your misconceptions—In one respect, I will definitely correct you.”

Reinhardt twisted, the wind shrieking as it shrouded his body.

His released spinning kick blew through the air, landing directly on the water dragon’s body wielded by Regulus. That corpse which had already become a simple mass of meat now shattered——,

Regulus: “Wha!”

Reinhardt: “I cannot use any kind of magic, let alone healing magic. It was simply the spirits in the air that came to my aid, hastily healing the wounds on my foot.”

As the force from his leg demolished the body, with a twist of his ankle he rescued it from Regulus’ grasp. Through that very skillful footwork, the water dragon’s remains was not excessively ill-treated, and was then gently tossed onto the roof of a partially-wrecked building.

Then,

Reinhardt: “Perfect.——Next on the checklist, Tactic J will commence.”

Regulus: “Kuaa!”

At the same moment he begrudged Reinhardt’s hypocritical act, his sword’s pommel knocked him upside the head. Smacked away, Regulus’ body rolled down the slope of the roof.

Askew over the ground and headed straight downwards, in his ear again was,

Reinhardt: "I'll put it to the test."

Regulus: "——!?"

Leaping at the same angle with a bullet's speed, Reinhardt drew close, grasping Regulus' leg as he inverted mid-fall, and with a shake his form was swallowed up by Reinhardt's actions. Now Reinhardt, while carrying Regulus, leapt in the direction of the fleeing Subaru with an awesome storm, accelerating quickly enough to tear off the leg of any ordinary person.

Regulus: "Just whaaat the——"

Reinhardt: "Nothing particularly special."

Claiming so, Reinhardt lifted up Regulus' body as he stopped.

With the attitude of a child grasping a doll's leg and playing roughly – While Regulus' temper at that treatment was exploding, he came to understand the finer details of Reinhardt's plan.

Wielding Regulus's body, Reinhardt flung him into the falling droplets of blood.

Even demolishing buildings formed from stone, that shower of blood imbued with force by Regulus.

If it had such power, then that attack made by Regulus' ability may even be effective against whatever protection he had on his own body.

If that had been the idea, it proved a foolish one.

Regulus: "If it's my own strike then it must work on me? I don't know just how naturally gifted you were born but don't viciously look down on others so much I say. There's no way I myself would be done in with some stupid method like that?"

Reinhardt: "This too was ineffective——"

Those droplets of blood, touching Regulus' body, became simple droplets on the spot and splashed off of his form. Obviously, the priority was different.

At that same moment, Reinhardt suddenly released his grip on Regulus' leg.

He was an intelligent fellow. If he had let the droplets reach him as such, his palm would have turned into a mess which couldn't possibly grasp a sword again.

The force of the swing disappeared. Landing there onto the street, Regulus once again faced Reinhardt. He narrowed his eyes in warning.

Reinhardt: "Somehow, it no longer seems possible to touch him again."

Regulus: "It seems you have a keen nose, do you want to get hurt again like you did a while ago."

Reinhardt: "From now on, I will be wary of your breath and vision both. If there are any other precautions to take, I would be glad to hear them."

Regulus: "Get out of my sight, right now!"

Stepping forth with both hands raised, Regulus ran at Reinhardt.

With unbelievable speed, Reinhardt turned in a broad arc to dodge, giving him a wide berth. Using the pommel of the dragon sword, he rained blows down on Regulus from a distance.

Regulus: "You just love to run, no matter where you go...!"

Reinhardt: "Being unable to solve the problem with sword strikes, how impotent. Truly, I am ashamed of myself."

Regulus: "You haven't even drawn that sword of yours yet!"

Facing Reinhardt as he weaved back and forth, Regulus made a relatively unseen motion of reaching out his hand.

However, such a flippant attack could never reach a hero like Reinhardt. Not only that, Reinhardt's bright blue eyes were still wary of the heavily breathing Regulus's petty tricks.

Regulus: "Ah?"

But then, a spear suddenly flew straight forward.

Aiming at Regulus, who faced the straight-backed Reinhardt, an icicle speared through the ground at his feet.

However, the ice under his feet, after he'd taken a single step, shattered before the image could even become concrete.

Flippantly, Regulus cast his gaze about, settling on the silver-haired maiden who stood at the other end of the canal, hand outstretched. Undoubtedly, the ice magic had been one of her little tricks.

Disgusting, was this visceral feeling of tumbling and boiling.

Regulus: "Each and every one of you, what can't you understand already?! The fact that we're different! What we have from the moment of our birth is different! You all can't reach or compete with my completed self. Accept that you're lackluster, be satisfied with it, and die!"

Nomatterwhatomatterwhat, enough of the relentless opposing evildoers.

Such an absolute gap could not be reduced. Why, was this so hard to grasp.

Reinhardt: "Tactic A has also failed. What next?"

Regulus stomped his feet, splitting the alleyway, no space left in his ears to listen to Reinhardt's mumbling.

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Emilia: "No good! As expected, that attack was ineffective!"

Subaru: "It didn't! Which is to say, the possibility of his feet being an achilles heel is also gone..."

Emilia, as per her instructions, had attacked the soles of Regulus's feet- however, they'd rent the ice without any trace of injury.

Reinhardt: "Tactic J failed as well. Apologies, my capabilities are lacking."

In an instant, Reinhardt had also used the [Divine Protection of Telepathy] to send a psychic message, and Subaru no longer found himself thrown off balance by these superhuman idiosyncrasies. Closely examining the injury on his right foot revealed that it had stopped bleeding, but even if it had been entirely shredded, this wouldn't have been the least bit surprising.

Besides, the implications of a shredded foot, Subaru had already experienced.

Subaru: "If his invincibility is a barrier, it may not extend to where his feet come in contact with the ground, so I came up with Tactic A (Soles of Feet)..."

The grounded parts of him had to have disabled the power, or he'd just sink into the ground. Subaru had thought this might be the case, but he'd turned out to have been wrong.

According to Reinhardt's report of Tactic J (Self-Destruct), the idea that Regulus would have to disable his invincibility to launch his invincible attacks was also off.

In that case, Tactic I (Ball in Pool) was also a no-go. It seemed that reality denied the notion that there would be a weakness in his invincibility.

Subaru: "Is, is there anything else? An invincible enemy's weakness, weakness...!"

Covering his mouth, Subaru furiously ordered his mind to spin.

Before encountering and even after having met Regulus, what he'd often been troubled by, was the means of defeating someone with an ultimate shield, and whatever other ways there may be.

Flying through Subaru's mind were answers from a variety of subcultures, as though he'd almost figured it out, but there was no clean-cut answer.

Subaru: "Is the way I'm thinking about this off? Is the direction wrong?"

What was needed, was perhaps not a way to break through the invincibility.

Rather, something more fundamental- Regulus's authority, what was its nature?

Emila: "Subaru, what else is there? I, what should I do?"

Emilia questioned Subaru, who'd fallen deep into thought.

Before them, across a large canal, the fierce battle between Reinhardt and Regulus continued, but she was unable to offer any help, which left her feeling discomfited.

Whether Emilia or Reinhardt, both trusted in Subaru, both had expectations of Subaru.

And not just the two of them. The allies stationed elsewhere, and the citizens of Pristella he'd called with his broadcast, all shared those sentiments.

"_____"

Thinking, thinking, thinkingthinkingthinkingthinkingthinking.

Although those memories were distasteful, Subaru began to think back to everything since his first encounter with Regulus, up until this instant, his actions and words, the attacks and schemes he'd tried to pull.

There should have been something. There should have been some reason. Not just Regulus was fine. Including the other Sin Archbishops, there should have been something. They were all scum. That much was already clear. It wasn't that-

Subaru: "The names of, the stars."

Emilia: “Subaru?”

Suddenly, Subaru realized it.

Before, he’d thought of the same thing, and now he cast aside the joke to think of it seriously.

Now that things had reached this point, he began to consider an abandoned idea anew.

Regulus, Capella, Alphard, Sirius, Petelgeuse.

These star-related names gathered in one place, could he really treat them so casually as a coincidence?

In retrospect, the Water Plume Pavilion, the customs of Kararagi, Hoshin of the Wastes.

In this world, so many places had been touched by the influence of Subaru’s original world, that he couldn’t simply treat it as a joke. Why had he only realized just now, that the Witch Cult did not originate from here?

Petelgeuse, was Betelgeuse. [The hand of Orion], [Unseen Hand].

Regulus was Leo, [Little King]. Thus, he had a title.

This [Little King], was truly a title commensurate with him-.

Subaru: “Emilia. I have something to ask you.”

Subaru spoke quietly, and Emilia opened her eyes to nod.

Subaru could feel the attention radiating from her snow white face, and closed one eye.

Subaru: “That man grabbed you about by the neck once, right? It’s about that time.”

Emilia: “Mmm.”

Subaru: "Regulus's hand, was it warm? Or was it cold?"

Emilia: "————"

At Subaru's inquiry, Emilia widened her eyes.

And so, she touched a hand to her slender neck, with a tap, and replied.

Emilia: "No. Thinking back on it... I couldn't feel anything. Neither heat nor cold, there was no temperature."

Hearing Emilia's response, Subaru held his breath.

From when he'd been cast into the canal, his undisturbed breathing and unsoaked body. The ineffectiveness of attacking the soles of his feet, the ineffectiveness of the cancellation of his own attacks. Impeccable in both offense and defense.

If this was no simple, mere [Invincibility]-.

Subaru: "Reinhardt!"

He called across the canal, the name of the hero doing battle against the evil.

In relentless battle, Reinhardt determinedly looked toward Subaru.

In order for him to hear, Subaru raised his voice high.

Subaru: "-That man, check if his heart is beating!"

Subaru's loud words had Emilia, had Reinhardt widening their eyes.

So, Regulus, he-

Regulus-.



Otto also left the City Hall for fulfilling the duty imposed on him after he confirmed the simultaneous raids on the four control places had been carried out, and after each of the parties had departed to conduct them.

Anastasia: “I don’t think it’s strange to think that he should be stopped..... but it is also true that right now, we have to reconfirm where the Book of Wisdom, that the Witch Cult had requested, is. Pitiful, isn’t he, that Otto-kun.”

Was what Anastasia said at Otto’s departure.

It seemed to be true that Anastasia wanted Otto to remain in the city hall as well. It was the place where Subaru and the other camps had already clashed with a Sin Archbishop.

Though the city hall is expected to function as the headquarters, there were not many brains that could scout for information from several different places at the moment.

However, leaving the Book of Wisdom in the hands of others was not something that could be done either.

You can establish a relationship of cooperation with the opposing Sin Archbishop, but once out of that situation, they will return to being an enemy. When that happens, the effectiveness of the Book of Wisdom being watched over by others was something that should be avoided.

Truthfully, it was about the Book of Wisdom being completely away from the situation in which it would be negotiated over– but Subaru and Garfiel were fine with that.

Otto wanted to sigh as he felt his own personality was at fault here.

Otto: “I wonder, when did I become someone who ran around for others like this.....”

Hitting his grey hair with his hand, Otto worried over the question that had come to his mind several times in the past year.

The position he stood in was unexpected, his relationship with people was unexpected, his current emotions were unexpected.

What will his family think when they get to know that he is doing all this?

Otto: "If I am fine and successful, I'll try writing a letter....."

If Subaru was here, he would definitely point out a death flag, saying something strange, as Otto stepped onto the city's third avenue.

The Sin Archbishops should be concentrated in the control towers, and considering that, they should not be in the city. They should not, be.

Otto: "Ha~a..... ha ~tsk"

Grabbing his chest tightly, Otto felt his heartbeat quicken.

Witch Cult, Sin Archbishop, Witch Cultists — Otto had bad memories of them.

A year ago, Otto recalled his first encounter with Subaru. He couldn't forget how scared he was of the Sin Archbishop back then.

The eyes of a madman who wouldn't think twice before taking away one's life. That madman, the figure of fanatics, who would dedicate their blood and flesh by his own will.

When he truly hoped for help, only the silence and loneliness had dominated.

He had never been as scared at any other time. He had never felt so empty in any other moment.

Comparing the fear of then to fighting Garfiel, facing the bowel-hunter, encountering herds of witch beasts, that was nothing.

The encounter with the Witch Cult dropped an immensely dark shadow on Otto's heart. Even though he knew how horrible that thing was, it was not something that could be erased so easily.

Emilia, who, due to her similarity with the Witch of Envy, could not escape prejudice due to the witch.

Subaru, who was fated to become her knight and fight for her, and aim for the devils of the Witch Cult.

Beatrice, who fought along with Subaru, and spent all the strength she had in that small body.

Garfiel, who put his everything to his fist in order to protect his family.

Ram, with sweetness that cannot be ignored, but on the flip side, with a stinging tongue.

Frederica, who lived in negative feelings for her brother, and has a sense of responsibility for her position.

Petra, who acted with a clear smiling face with everyone while being treated as a child.

I love everyone.

Though he had not intended to stay in one place too long, unfortunately, it was too comfortable.

Even though he knew to stay away from scary things, he was unable to avoid them.

In order to save this place, I would like to stand by their side and support them; even in my fear, I want to help them where their hands cannot reach. That's why—

Otto: "Somehow, I must fulfill my role."

Saying this, he stepped onto Third Avenue. There stood a small figure in front of him.

Beyond the stone bridge on the waterway there was a square, and that was where the shadow was.

Besides that shadow, several more figures could be seen.

But right now, Otto's eyes were fixed on only one small phantom.

Sound disappeared. Everything went terribly quiet, and nothing could be heard. A situation where living beings sucked in their breath and held it, trying desperately to conceal their existence, Otto Suwen knew this situation well.

Subsequently, the figure in front his eyes gently clapped its hands and, as it disheveled its long hair, raised its face. But still, his heartbeats were surprisingly calm.

???: "Welcome, onii-san."

—

Ley: "Welcome to the Witch Cult's Sin Archbishop, representing Gluttony..... Ley Batenkaitos' dinner banquet ~tsu."

Opening his mouth, full of fangs, the Sin Archbishop who shouldn't have been there, laughed gruesomely.

TL Note:

Before starting Chapter 53, it's best to read [this short story here](#) for a bit of context for one of the upcoming scenes!

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Chapter 53 - A City of Strife



Before starting Chapter 53, it's best to read this [short story here](#) for a bit of context for one of the upcoming scenes!

Subaru: “—Check if his heart is still beating!”

Intuition was the instinct that had aroused Subaru’s awareness.

He wasn’t absolutely convinced, nor did he have a basis for thinking so. All he could think was that that thought was not without meaning.

The Sin Archbishops, the names of the stars, the Kararagi which bore influences from his original world, and those other than Subaru who found themselves summoned here.

The world still bore the marks of their claws. If the Witch Cult were also engraved with this etching, then the names of the stars Subaru had thought of didn't necessarily have only a passing relationship with them.

If Regulus Corneas's power could not be treated as straightforward [Invincibility], then, he'd need to think outside the box; and thus an idea emerged in his heart.

Hoping that there would be no connection, Subaru had already said a sort of prayer asking thus.

And, in the next moment.

Subaru: "——"

A noxious sense of oppression came, casting an illusion that had Subaru feeling as if the sun had been blotted out.

The air hung thick with pollution. He'd be hard pressed to find words with which to express this discomfort, this disgust.

The disgust of the peeling of a scab, the discomfort of a stench exhaled to the face, the aversion of a sticky tongue over bare skin.

The origin of this turbid air, was the evil which had turned his head to look back.

The instant that he met its gaze, Subaru's body began to tremble involuntarily.

Expressionless and empty, those eyes, like a curse, plunged deep into his soul. As if pierced by a rusted needle, even his lungs and heart were frozen by terror.

However, even as Subaru found himself immobile, overcome by such feelings—

Reinhardt: "Don't look anywhere unnecessary. Your opponent should be me!"

Turning to regard this Subaru, meant turning his back to the Sword Saint.

Raising his hands high, Reinhardt had clasped in his hands what could only be described as broken signposts and scrap metal. Such materials which were only ever destined to be waste, but in Reinhardt's hands, they were no inferior to a treasured blade.

A long blade slanted through the air struck the back of Regulus's suit.

The bursting shockwave expanded in midair, leaving a sorrowful wail from the assailed atmosphere in its wake, raising vortexes in the large canals where thin sheets of ice floated.

This was the aftermath of that sword's strike. Had the force of evil been shattered to pieces, it would have come as no surprise.

However, before he could take a single step.

Regulus: "Don't get me wrong, Sword Saint. I've been entertaining you because my heart is obliging and considerate. But even my gracious self has limits."

Reinhardt: "——"

Lightly, Regulus patted the place where he'd been struck by the sword, and tilted his head.

Reinhardt, alerted by this motion, tossed aside the scraps in his hands and made to leap backward at a wide angle— just as he prepared to jump, his feet froze in place.

Reinhardt's superhuman intuition.

It informed him of dire, imminent threats to his self, and preemptively detecting incoming attacks. His keen instincts told him that he could not dodge to the rear. He immediately straightened and began to search for alternative routes.

Regulus: "The air there, has already been touched by me."

Due to the sharpening of his senses locking him into place, at that moment, Reinhardt had been left unprepared.

His opponent had him trapped in an invisible yet present envelope. Reinhardt's judgment told him to slip by the force of evil's side, but, in order to do so, he'd be forced to make a defensive strike.

Reinhardt: "*Haa!*"

The blow that he dealt had enough force to shear through stone.

The hilt of the Dragon Sword pierced into Regulus's chest, but the force of evil grasped it easily.

Regulus: "Futile effort, thanks for your trouble. Just pray that you won't be hurt too badly."

Reinhardt: "Just as Subaru said, your heart doesn't seem to be beating."

Regulus: "——!"

Regulus's relaxed smile hardened, as he glanced down at his chest.

The hilt that was buried in it, and the Reinhardt who was straining his sharp senses; he wouldn't have missed any movement of life, no matter how subtle.

Having taken that blow, Regulus leapt high in the air, agitated.

Directly, as if reproducing the scene from earlier.

Reinhardt blocked the kick with the sheath of the Dragon Sword, his body was sent flying from the impact. However, what unfolded next was different.

Subaru: "Reinhardt!"

As declared, the air behind Reinhardt had filled with countless traps of breath set by Regulus.

Shot into them in his unguarded state, the results weren't difficult to imagine.

His white clothes stained with blood, Reinhardt's entire body was torn. He leapt up, but how much that could mitigate his wounds was uncertain. Buried in rubble again, Reinhardt amplified the collapse of the city, making it impossible to estimate his condition.

But what could be determined for certain was Reinhardt's answer.

Subaru: "Not bad, Reinhardt...!"

Emilia: "Subaru!"

Subaru: "It's okay. Reinhardt, he should be fine! So worry about him later!"

Emilia: "I understand! I, what do you need me to do?"

He'd thought that Emilia would be concerned foremost with Reinhardt's safety, and was taken aback by her response. The Emilia looking at Subaru was attentive, and fully understood where she needed to stand on this battlefield.

There was both a strong reliance on Reinhardt and perhaps a trust in Subaru.

Emilia: "Reinhardt too, he went through all that hassle because he trusted you. What should I have realized about Regulus? Tell me."

Heavy trust. Heavy expectations. The reality of that belief was too heavy, enough to stir up his fighting spirit.

He'd certainly need to give Reinhardt proper gratitude as well. Later, he'd definitely go and help retrieve his remains.

Regulus: "The two of you, always rambling on, but acting in simplicity in your desperation, wouldn't that be easier? Your despicable and evil behavior has angered me, so it follows that you should be punished, doesn't it? Yes? Isn't this right? Impoliteness, infidelity, no matter which, are rebellious acts worthy of ten thousand executions."

Having kicked Reinhardt away, Regulus sneered at the inconvenience.

Across the canal, a spirit of evil began to swell forth, and, in truth, Subaru almost couldn't bear to bring himself to face it.

However, running away right now would be meaningless.

Natsuki Subaru would be unable to repay Emilia and Reinhardt van Astrea.

Subaru: "A pure heroine, yet unseen of this century, suspecting her of infidelity makes you the slut, idiot."

Regulus: "Ah?"

Subaru: "Isn't it uncouth to list all the reasons we should be afraid here? Try in the slightest to redirect that empty mind of yours."

Hearing the sudden strength of his speech, Regulus widened his eyes.

Subaru knocked his own head, as if boasting.

Subaru: "Just how much of a lovely, smooth life you've had until now, I don't know, nor do I want to know... but have you noticed yet? The you of right now, is in checkmate."

Regulus: "Checked? You're so vague that I can't even laugh. What are you trying to say. No, you're incapable of explaining yourself in comprehensible language, is also a possibility. Well, there's no need to force yourself to say irrelevant things, isn't that right?"

Subaru: "Eh, don't say that, after all you have the right to listen, your favorite right."

Regulus: "My right...?"

Regulus frowned, and Subaru, with a light, ridiculing smile, continued "Yes, *after all*—"

Subaru: "Losing without even knowing how your regret came about, would certainly leave you with regrets."

Regulus: "—Enough of you! Just disappear!"

This movement shrinking in on himself becoming a fuse, Regulus leapt from the edge of the canal. Lacking sufficient jumping power, his body plunged into the water; however, his movements were unaffected by the flood, and he found himself with no water resistance.

Before him, Subaru confirmed patted Emilia's shoulders.

Subaru: "Emilia, right now!"

Emilia: "Ui Huma!"

Receiving Subaru's instruction, Emilia gathered magic to release the icicles.

So enormous that they needed to be gazed up at to seen fully, the spears of ice were aimed directly at Regulus, formed an overhanging railing of ice to surround him as he surfaced.

Regulus: "I'd actually thought you'd try something, but no matter what you do, it's futile, looks like no matter how many times you're taught, you'll never learn! What, are you planning to stick with your mistakes? Without even that degree of wisdom, repeating the same thing over and over. Do you always treat others with such futility while despising them? Don't get carried away, how incomplete!"

Regulus bared his teeth, cut down the railing of the ice, smashed it, and, with overwhelming force, shattered it. The barrier collapsed with ease, and despite her best efforts, Emilia's magic couldn't sustain the cage of ice.

But it was enough. This was fine.

Emilia: "I can't, I couldn't even buy time properly."

Subaru: "That's not right, Emilia-tan."

Seeing the ineffectiveness of her power, Emilia wore a gloomy face, but Subaru shook his head.

A look from a different angle. This had been enough to accomplish Subaru's purpose.

Subaru: "That man's character is insidious. He can't help but crush what he despises. Even if it's unnecessary to destroy whatever obstacle he's facing, he can't feel that he's won without shattering it completely."

Singing ballads to fulfillment, spouting his self-satisfying rhetoric, was Regulus.

The pitiable nature of his heart, the scarcity of his tolerance, and the volume of his vanity were plain to see.

Subaru: "In the first place, there was no need for him to break through the obstacle. But he took that superfluous action. Even a second, even a millisecond, is the result."

Emilia: "With that one second, can you defeat Regulus?"

Subaru: "As long as I accumulate them, I'll definitely show him the victory. I'll pare that monster's skin from his body."

For this, Reinhardt had laid the foundation.

Testing Regulus's heartbeat, conveying that it had no movement to Subaru.

There was no heat, no heartbeat, no breath, and no outside influence from his surroundings.

Although this is undoubtedly an [Invincibility], its essence was not undefeatable.

Subaru: "Emilia, over here!"

Subaru took Emilia's wrist and crossed the dented alleyways with her. Emilia kept pace with Subaru, as she turned back to attack Regulus with an icicle.

Regulus, seeing the two flee, pursed with rage brewing in his chest.

Regulus: “Even after all that boasting, why the hell are you running? Calling someone stupid, proclaiming that you’ll kill them, just how much do you plan on making fun of me? Who the hell do you think you are? You coward!”

Since his physical abilities were no superior, the speed pursuing Regulus was little different from the speed of the escapees. Rather, it could be said that he was slower than Subaru.

However, since he was blessed with his unrelenting composition, the ceaselessly pursuing evil would eventually catch up.

Emilia: “Subaru! Where are you running to?”

Subaru: “Our destination is the church! Our target is, Regulus’s wives! In between...”

Hearing Emilia’s inquiry, he replied back.

Suddenly, halfway through his words, he noticed from behind—

Regulus: “—Stop paying attention to extraneous things, you!”

Subaru: “Uwaaaaa!?”

The distance that had existed until now vanished without a trace, turning his head, Regulus had already appeared in front of him.

Forcing an approach to only one step away, Regulus waved his hand toward them, and Subaru barely jerked his head out of the way. He felt that his opponent was already on his heels, so he swept up Emilia and approached a nearby wall, stepping on and along it in one motion.

Emilia: “Wawawa, Subaru’s amazing.”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, hold tight to me!”

Emilia, stunned by Subaru's acrobatics, hugged his neck and wrapped her feet around his waist. Soft and fragrant, she filled Subaru with a fresh wave of energy. Kicking hard on the edge of the wall, he flew across it.

The results of his practice in parkour were revealed. Just gaining distance like this—

Regulus: "I've said already, that your commoners' efforts are futile."

Saying so, Regulus touched the lower part of the wall Subaru was climbing with his palm.

There was the sound of rock grinding, and the stone wall collapsed as if it were tofu. The wall lost its support and fell. Needless to say, the same happened to those climbing on the wall.

Subaru: "Uwah!"

In the process of falling, he yanked out his whip and flicked it without any real direction. The front end hooked onto something, and Subaru forcefully pulled his body upward.

With a swing of his foot, he gave a hard kick the moment he touched the wall. Combined with the force of the reaction, the centrifugal force generated by the whip allows his body to be thrown further and further, achieving an amazing climb with Emilia still on his back.

At a closer glance, the two of them had arrived at a warehouse that had already lost almost half of its volume.

Subaru crashed onto the balcony that protruded from the eaves and looked at his palm.

Subaru: "Wow, I didn't expect to achieve a brute force escape...!"

Emilia: "Subaru! In short, we just have to get to the church! The direction is!?"

No longer gazing at his palm split open with faint pain, he followed Emilia's voice to see the surroundings. Fortunately, the height of the balcony, in addition to Regulus's, allowed everything to be easily seen.

Far, far in the distance, he could see the church that collapsed from Reinhardt's first attack. Somehow, at some point, it had grown quite distant.

Subaru: "No! We fled in the opposite direction! What now!?"

Emilia: "Is that it, there?"

Subaru: "It's right there, what's that matter..."

Emilia: "Let's travel like this!"

Emilia, upon hearing Subaru's response, clapped, and a bridge formed on the balcony.

The mysterious blue-and-white bridge began from the balcony and connected through the alleys of the church, imitating a large road in midair.

Subaru: "What!?"

Scattering every which way were brilliant shards of ice, as Subaru slid forward on an ice structure created by Emilia.

Using the slope of the bridge as a launchpad, using the principles of a ski jump, it leapt over the alley, and flew over Regulus toward the church.

Subaru: "Emilia-tan, you became so witty!"

Emilia: "Maybe Subaru led me astray."

Subaru: "That statement shouldn't be used in response to praise!"

Although he had a means of long-range attack, Regulus could only touch what was in reach of his arms' length.

They kept well away from his figure, delirious with rage. Staring at the approaching church, Subaru's eyes narrowed.

Emilia: "What should we do, when we meet the women in the church?"

Subaru: "I don't know if they've been threatened, or if they really do admire him..."

At Emilia's question, Subaru lowered his chin into his palm, interrupting himself.

What emerged in his mind were the women, shocked by the Regulus's actions in the church. The fear he'd seen then, if only it were genuine, thus he prayed.

But, if it really had been an act—

Subaru: "Forget the mind, it may be that even their hearts were stolen away. —Heart in the literal sense, that is."

Greeting his face were burst of wind blowing on the head, and the height of the ice structure began to fall, as it approached the church.

Behind, was Regulus giving chase. Reinhardt's life hung in uncertainty. The chances of victory were slim, but the dilemma still steadily approached—

Was everyone else doing fine?

Clearly, he had no room to even ponder such questions, but couldn't help but think of them.

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To take over the charge of the Control Tower from [Gluttony], this was the battle between Julius, Ricardo, and Alphard.

Julius: "—El Clause!"

With the power of the six-coloured quasi spirits, a rainbow coloured radiance emanated from the tip of the knight sword.

What rolled out was a preemptive strike aiming straight for its opponent's death.

[Clause] was a magical technique of the same type as [Clarista] which had managed to damage even Petelgeuse's body, however, unlike [Clarista] which had the destructive bright light stick to the sword itself, [Clause] was a long-range attack.

The impression of the Sin Archbishops was still strong in Julius' mind thanks to Petelgeuse.

The feeling which Julius got while fighting the madman, the Sin Archbishop of [Sloth], a huge sinner and someone who had given great suffering to the world for a long time, was completely different from the current situation— that is, the fight with the current enemy is completely different.

Julius Juukulus, who had gotten the title of [Greatest Knight], often misunderstands people due to their behaviour, but he believes in this so-called theory that all human nature is ultimately good.

He believes that all human action is up to interpretation, but there are some things which humanity must think about, like the influence of one party's actions over the others.

Then, for Julius, the Sin Archbishop named Petelgeuse Romanee Conti and his self-conscious dolls, the Witch Cultists, were all too overwhelming.

Someone who can't understand that, who disregards hard work and efforts of others will inevitably become an enemy for him.

For Julius, the worst done by the Witch Cult to him was to harm his [knightliness].

No hidden tricks, no trump cards saved for the last.

From the very beginning, Julius did not hesitate to cut down those devils.

An extraordinary technique that simultaneously handled all six colours of magic with the help of six quasi-spirits.

Not even the slightest of mismatch of magical power was allowed. This was established only after the bonding of the quasi-spirits, thanks to the efforts and talent of the genius spirit user named Julius.

This was not the exact same thing as what Roswaal L. Mathers could do, who sat at the pinnacle of magic. This had been created by Julius and was unique to Julius.

At the first look, the magic doesn't feel too scary, and the opponent gets scattered away without an opportunity to rethink subsequently.

Julius had one belief in his chest— that he must prioritize blowing away the enemy rather than investigating the incompatibility between them.

The extremely bright destructive light shatters the stone pavement and preys upon both the arms of a small shadow.

Long dark brown hair, dirty rags, dulled shining daggers, get swallowed up by the shine of the rainbow light—

Roy: "This is surely something nii-sama didn't expect, he has a weakness of turning away your eyes from what he doesn't want to see, doesn't he?"

Ricardo: "—What!?"

As he collapsed onto the ground, Alphard's muttering voice could be heard. The blasphemer, with his long tongue hanging outside, kicked the ground with a posture low enough that it could almost be said that he was lying on the ground.

The speed of the bright light will never be late enough to not reach its opponent. In order to avoid this approaching arrow, you would need a physical ability comparable to that of Reinhardt or—.

Roy: “We admired you, nii-sama. Nii-sama, who hates to show his hard work to others, would use such devilish skills in desperation, how would we not know that ~tsu.”

Julius: “What are you saying!”

Roy: “Thinking we wouldn’t know, Julius nii-sama is truly innocent. But, we love that part of you ~tsu! Gyahahahaha ~tsu!”

Alphard jumps around the ground and avoids the magic, with a movement that suggested that he already knew that trump card would be used. Ricardo subsequently runs to strike Alphard, who had escaped the magic, but that pursuit too was a move which he had anticipated.

Ricardo plunges into him in front of the river, as daggers collide and sparks scatter. Ricardo was overwhelmingly superior in strength. Alphard countered the strength difference with unimaginably skilled sword handling. The cobblestone breaks and rains beside the blasphemer.

At the same time, Ricardo cried out as Alphard slashed into his shaggy torso.

Roy: “Lo~ok, a stub of dog meat ~tsu! Hard and luscious meat, should be made sticky and soft to make it easier to eat to make it easier to bite to make it easier to digest to make it easier to shit out to make it easier to decompose to make it easier to fertilize vegetables and after it makes all that so easy the meat should be eaten to start the cycle cycle cycle cycle of the food chain ~tsu! A~h, how wonderful ~tsu!!”

Ricardo: “Ngh, gh, ghk!?”

The speed of Alphard, who had given that quick speech and has daggers attached on both of his arms, was not something extraordinary. His growth period had not ended yet, and his body has still not toughened, however, his physical ability had contradicted those looks till now, as he rips into Ricardo’s body, who was all defensive.

Julius: “Ricardo!!”

Fur like wires and thick muscles. Ricardo's body, which was like an armour itself compared to the normal human body, had suffered no wound by any technique till now with the exception of Alphard's attack.

With eyes wide open, Julius was stunned by looking at Ricardo's bleeding wound.

Alphard attacks with high speed moves, each move targeting and aiming precisely at the joints and thin parts of the fur. Regardless of the qualities of Ricardo's body, if you get attacked at the key areas, you will get hurt, you will shed blood, and you will lose your life.

Julius: "—hk."

At the moment Julius saw the bombardment of blows, Julius summoned the quasi-spirit once again. The slashes of wind mixed with the flames of a fire, the sword commanded the quasi-spirits of two colours— Ia of [Fire] and Aro of [Wind]. From the side, a slash with a reddish flame heads towards Alphard.

Roy: "Yes, we knew that pattern already too ~tsu!"

Julius: "Wha!?"

Roy: "That surprise is completely honest ~tsu! Our stomach will not have any difficulty either ~tsu!"

However, Alphard was ridiculously unaffected by it, with one arm precisely attacking and with eyes at the back, to see whether what he thought would happen, as he kicked into his empty torso.

His heel penetrates into the abdominal muscles, as if he broke into Julius, who was working extremely hard in this situation, just like the person he is. At the front, just when Ricardo started his counterattack, his toe launched itself right into his lower jaw.

Roy: "How nice how nice, this has become fun ~tsu! That nii-sama is! That Ricardo-san is! They both are fighting this great battle and we are their opponent! Even though us, with our weak bodies, absolutely can't do it, can't reach it, can't see it, can't understand it, should have already had given up in this position ~tsu! A~h! To make it so fun, ho~w unfair unfair unfair ~tsu!"

Julius and Ricardo fell to their knees at the same time. Alphard, who stops their pursuit, repeatedly somersaults on the stone pavement, as if to keep the two under pressure.

They must take his incredible skill and childlike brutality under consideration.

Ricardo: “This is, much more than what I heard. Even so, the hell is that guy, pisses me off. The way he walks, the way he talks, everything 'bout him's jus' so creepy!”

Ricardo, who barely ever gets hurt and barely had any older scratches, said that with a foggy voice while licking the wounds on his arms. Julius rises, taking heavy breaths, and also agreed with Ricardo's anger.

Julius: “It's the same as City Hall... no, just his behaviour is still equally incomprehensible. It may be an attempt to mock us, but it's counterproductive and nothing else.”

Roy: “Even if you say that, it's always the human nii-sama hiding his feelings of worry from the non-human Ricardo-san, no? We said that we~ already know about that ~tsu!”

Julius: “You bastard...”

Clasping his hands, Alphard laughs uncontrollably, and Julius sends the quasi-spirit of [Water], Kua, under Ricardo to heal his wounds as he stepped ahead.

Ricardo: “Ah! Hey, Julius! Don't go out there!”

Julius: “You just quietly stay here, till your wounds heal enough that the bleeding stops!”

Pointing his knight sword forward, Julius dashes towards Alphard. However, the movement now was clearly not the same as the one before.

In the sharp steps and slashes, Alphard, who received the first attack, felt his eyebrow get slightly slashed.

Roy: “This is...”

Julius: “The power of the quasi-spirit of [Yang], In, and at the same time,”

Roy: “Oh?”

Alphard’s question overlapped with the responding voice.

Julius’ long legs jump up and kick down Alphard’s head, pushing down the blasphemer’s cheeks into defeat. This time, his defence wouldn’t make it in time. His hanging arms lag behind, and rolling his eyes, Alphard turns and desperately attempts to dodge.

Roy: “Uwa kyaa! The one right now, was?”

Julius: “My quasi-spirit of [Yang]. The one with my sword is the quasi-spirit of [Yin] It is a mutual partnership that improves physical ability. This, was a first timer for you, isn’t it?”

Roy: “... Oh, hehe, as you’d expe~ct! Julius-sama is wonderful! Still loaded with charm that neither we nor us knew about, isn’t it ~tsu!”

Julius: “—!?”

With his cheeks dyed red, Alphard looks at Julius with flushed eyes.

At the moment Julius frowned at that warm gaze, Alphard removed and threw away the dagger attached to his arm. A shrill sound echoed as it pounded on the cobblestone.

Immediately afterwards, his heel breaks the cobblestone.

Roy: “As it seems like you cannot surprise us with swords, this time we intend to see it by using fists ~tsu.”

Julius: “Gh— ~hk!”

Alphard closed the distance in the blink of an eye, as he launched the bottom of his palm while twisting his waist. Julius countered it with his empty left hand, but the shock penetrated right through his arm into his chest.

Unimaginably, the forceful lurch from the ground and the twisting of the waist had increased the destructive force of his palm strike, and Julius, with no time lag, was sent flying.

If Subaru would have had witnessed this sight, he would have had thought of a car accident.

Roy: "Our fists that have taken down more than eight hundred people..... we suppose they shook up nii-sama down to his bones' medullas, no?"

This was also an equally violent sight, like a car unable to stop runs over and sends the defenceless human beings flying.

Julius could not afford to respond to Alphard's crazed smile.

His chest bones, his internal organs all got crushed, blood floods onto his clothes and his tall body gets blown away. Ricardo, who was being treated, quickly responds to the situation.

Ricardo: "Julius, watch out!!"

Ricardo hugs and defends Julius, who was unexpectedly going to crash into the wall straight from his head. Even the enormous dog got swallowed into the impact and got knocked into the building, crushing the stones.

Ricardo, who had rushed to help Julius, shakes his head as a plume of dirt rose. The blood in his head concentrates in one side, and he spat out the blood in his throat to prevent choking.

Ricardo: "Spirits! Don't know if ya can hear me, but yer master's in trouble! Get to work! Think 'bout me later!"

Whether it was thanks to Ricardo's call or not, the blue light pours its power into Julius' dying body. When he was at least made safe from dying, Ricardo jumped out in frustration into the brisk situation after a good amount of break he had taken from the fight.

Roy: "Welcome back! Would you like to have a meal? Would you like to have a treat? Or perhaps, dinner?"

Ricardo: "Get yer tongue back inside your damn mouth, damn brat... I'll teach you what happens when ya make fun of adults jus' like the brats at our place."

Roy: "Ohwellohwell, let's not take it any further. We don't want a dog as a meal anyway. If you don't want to play with swords or fists... are you fine with this?"

Alphard, with a smile, spreads his hands, and Ricardo immediately increased his alertness. Ricardo chews his teeth fiercely, and was unable to take off his eyes from that.

—In the waterway behind Alphard, a stream of water rises with a whirlpool which looked like the neck of a water dragon to Ricardo.

Ricardo: "Sword skill, martial arts, and this time, magic. Jus' what the hell are ya?"

Roy: "We are anonymous non-practicing magicians, who couldn't even be looked at with pride by our family. Something like that ~tsu!"

Immediately after Alphard rolled his tongue outside, the head of the water stream heads towards Ricardo.

Although that's just water, it's momentum and mass was enough to crush a living being's body. On top of that, there was Julius behind him, so he couldn't choose to avoid it either.

Ricardo: "Ya've done it now. Hah, hah— haa!!"

Opening his large mouth and his body clamped onto the ground, Ricardo released a roar wave.

Out of the three deputy commanders of the [Iron Fang], two of them had already shown their ability to cooperate their attack of this roar wave. However, originally, Mimi had developed this technique by imitating Ricardo, and Ricardo argues that it is originally his.

However, compared to Mimi who reduces the burden by dispersing it, roar wave used by a single person is a huge burden to the body.

The destructive roar bursts out of Ricardo's throat as he felt muddy water fall on his body which was clinging onto the ground.

Roy: "Wow, amazing ~tsu."

Unable to hear the voice of admiration, Ricardo's roar wave crashes into the stream of muddy water.

The wave collides right from the front, and splashes the water away, and the water with a mass of several tons scatters and evaporates into mist. After a few seconds, the destroyed muddy stream hits the plaza like rain, flooding the stone pavement, and sends the leaning Ricardo crashing down.

Ricardo: "That, sure was somethin' ... even the edge of my mouth, got a bit cut, huh."

The residual damage itself left Ricardo blank for a long time, which further burdened him after the roar wave. Breathing on his shoulder, Ricardo, however, still managed to get up because of his feelings.

Alphard was completely unaffected, without showing any signs of exhaustion, he was just dancing there.

Roy: "Amazingamazing ~tsu! It's been a while since we have seen someone endure that. So long that there is not a trace of it in either ours or our memory. How nice, quite nice, pretty nice, maybe it is nice, isn't it nice, possibly it is nice, perhaps it is nice, probably it is nice, because it is probably nice ~tsu!"

???: "Your repetitive speech ends here."

Roy: "Welp, it's nii-sama's grand return. Scarily, cutely, enviably."

In front of Alphard, who shook his head, Julius was standing next to Ricardo.

His face was pale, and his knight uniform was dyed in blood. His breath was even faintly stuttering, and it was completely impossible to say that he was in his top shape. Although that cannot be said,

Julius: “Thanks for the help, Ricardo.”

Ricardo: “I sure did help ya. I’ll have ya report my efforts properly to miss so that I get that temporary bonus.”

Julius: “About that, I assure you that you can feel absolutely unworried about that from my side.”

Grabbing his knight sword, Julius tapped on Ricardo’s shoulder and subsequently glanced at Alphard. Sensing that gaze, the blasphemer smiled, with dyed cheeks, and twisted his lips irritatingly.

His facial expressions, actions, even his way of fighting, were all packed with a sense of creepiness and spook.

Or perhaps, that itself was related to his Authority of [Gluttony].

Julius: “With such prowess in using swords, martial arts, and even magic, why did you align with evil. That power could have had been put to use for something else, something better.”

Roy: “Somewhere else huh. Giving some examples, what would nii-sama consider in that?”

Nii-sama, even his way of addressing was unsettling.

Every time Alphard’s tongue touches it, every time he says that with a flamboyant tone and stuck-up attitude, that word loses its value for Julius.

—Even though he has no family members that call him that.

Julius: “For example, a knight. For example, a mercenary. For example, a hero. Unkempt power easily falls into the hands of evil, and strength turns into forceful violence. That’s why...”

Roy: “We thought you’d say so ~tsu! We thought you’d say that, anii-sama! We thought that the nii-sama we know, that the nii-sama we trust, would say that. We thought so ~tsu!”

Abruptly putting a halt onto the conversation, Alphard jumps and approaches Julius.

He holds his knight sword vertically and slashes down that kick. As if he had plates of iron attached onto his heels, the slash fails to do any damage.

Alphard sharply turns and continues his barrage of kicks from a low angle, as he swings and dances on the spot, as he further pushes Julius to make him crash into the scaffold.

At his intense and strong moves, even Ricardo loses the track of his timing and becomes unable to interrupt.

Roy: “Do you remember, when we were kids! When we had gotten sick and broken down, we had asked nii-sama whether we could bring an Appa from the tree in the garden ~tsu!”

Julius: “Saying things on your own accord.....! Why would I remember. Stop enforcing your own arbitrary delusions onto others!”

Roy: “Us and nii-sama were still small, and nii-sama first said that it was impossible, told us to give up ~tsu! Do you remember? Don’t you remember? But we, just because nii-sama had tried to stop us, ended up wanting that appa even more ~tsu! When we had done what nii-sama said was impossible, we thought that we did an amazing job! Our confidence increased! We really thought tha~t!”

Julius: “What are you, what are you saying!? I am unaware of any such thing... unaware!”

Julius accepts his kicks, his heel, his round kick, his straight kick, his high-jump kick, his somersault, his back-spin kick with his knight sword.

His arms were numb, his internal organs were scarred with pain, and he could feel the taste of blood in his mouth. No, it was different from the taste of pure blood, as this was his blood mixed with vomit. He bit his lips. He, just now, for some reason.

He could not help but listen carefully to Alphard's delusion.

Roy: "Because of what happened afterwards, we are ~tsu! We are ~tsu! Nii-sama is ~tsu!"

Julius: "—hk!"

Roy: "We always, always thought about it ~tsu! We always, always felt it ~tsu! That it was different! That it was just some luggage ~tsu! How that used to be! How's that now! What a nice feeling! So it was such a feeling! A~h, this feels so nice! We finally get it!"

Julius: "I know absolutely nothing, nothing about you!"

Julius got pushed into becoming more and more violent.

Holding back his knight sword with immense strength, he tries to attack whenever he found a gap in Alphard's position. Striking down, piercing into, kicking in, pounding, entangling, dodging.

A slash dyed with anger and hostility cuts through the air, and Alphard's hair, which were too late to avoid it, get slashed off and fall to the ground. Even still, it was not just the slash which should be payed attention to.

Julius: "Ia! Kua! Aro! Ik! Nes! In!"

With the names of the quasi-spirits called out, they started spinning like a magical cast, and they were the spirits contracted with the Spirit Knight.

With their names called out, the six colours of the quasi-spirits increase in radiance, turning the mere affirmation of their existence into a powerful force and pouring it all onto the opponent of their knight.

—The six coloured lights surround Alphard from all six directions, blocking any path to escape.

Julius: "With this, it ends—!"

Julius had firm belief in his victory as Alphard could no longer escape.

The power pushes straight through the middle of Alphard's chest,

Roy: "Palm of the Fist King."

The dark palm in front of his chest collides with the knight sword in between and crushes it into pieces.

Debris scatters, and the deadly stab loses its effectiveness.

However, there was still the magic that was left—,

Roy: "Magic."

An unexpected and confusing magical power swells up behind Alphard and slashes down all six of the approaching magic.

The magic of one colour clashes with the magic of that same colour, and all magic gets cancelled out. Finally, the eyes of Julius, who had supposedly sealed this attack's victory, open.

Roy: "Snake of the Twin Swords."

Alphard's toes toss up a dagger which he was supposed to have had thrown away. It got pushed into this place by Julius' attack. Receiving the spinning blades with both of his hands, Alphard's body rotates.

A storm of slashes blew up, and Julius used just his broken knight sword.

"_____"

Roy: "Nii-sama threw that appa out. That's why we hate nii-sama."

An arm sharply cut from the elbow swings into the air and fell onto the cobblestone, making a sound.

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Chapter 54 - Combat Power of Non-Combatants



???: “Gluttony..... ~tsu.”

Before the nightmare that stood in front, Otto could not help but have cold sweat run down his back.

The opponent who identified as a Sin Archbishop—— the name of 『Gluttony』 had already been heard by Otto. However, that name was.

Otto: “From what I heard, the name of the Sin Archbishop of 『Gluttony』 was supposed to be Roy Alphard though.”

???: “Arere, you have already met us before meeting us? If so, then, onii-san, to be left uneaten and coming out normally is quite impressive indeed. Especially when a~nything is a treat for Roy of Bizarre Eating.”

The boy, who claimed to be Ley Batenkaitos, smiled and laughed at Otto’s question. Hearing that laughter, Otto knew that his terrible idea was affirmed.

—There are two, Sin Archbishops of 『Gluttony』 .

Otto: “No, to be accurate, at least two of them.....”

Ley and Roy, rather, the duo of Batenkaitos and Alphard? At worst, it may be necessary to assume that they were a nightmare like the great rabbit of the myriads.

Julius and Ricardo were supposed to go and capture 『Gluttony’s』 control tower, but if the one waiting there wasn’t alone, then, rather than a tough struggle, it would be an inevitable defeat.

???: “Hey! Is this the time to talk and get along with that bastard?! This isn’t the time for all that!”

Otto had the nerves of his guts seemingly sharpened accompanying a burning sensation on his forehead. What interrupted his thoughts at that moment was an extremely feminine voice.

Of course, Otto also noticed the owner of that voice. Because he had noticed that there were puzzles as well.

Otto: “Why is Felt-sama here? I’m sure Reinhardt-san told you to stay quietly in an evacuation centre!”

Felt: “When the city is in this condition, as if I would ignore that and go and sit in a small corner of the evacuation centre!”

The girl with blonde hair and red eyes said bravely. A person who stood out, with there being no possibility of mistaking her for someone else, that’s who Felt was.

Otto: “With that restlessness, what you first see after jumping out is an encounter with a Sin Archbishop, huh. Now that that has happened, my defeat is inevitable because of my bad luck.....”

Ley: “You don’t need to be so pessimistic, onii-san. Fo~r us, any encounter is a spice to gourmet. We are supposed to be 『Gluttony』 but, we co~mpletely understand the importance of preparation ~tsu.”

Batenkaitos was at the centre, with Otto and Felt standing in a position that made a triangle. On the remaining vertice, stood another figure, with whom Otto seemed to be familiar.

Otto: “I am happy to see you again, Kiritaka-san.....”

Kiritaka: “Quiet voice with dead eyes and unable to take things obediently, -kun! I don’t understand the feeling though!”

The figure of Kiritaka, who was covered in thin bandages and was in pain, stood in front of Otto. Despite his presence, Otto was not rejoicing at seeing him.

When Otto escaped the headquarters of Muse company, he ran into 『Gluttony』, making his fate uncertain. He is happy to have had survived that, but the actors on the current stage still made things uncertain.

“_____”

And that is, Otto, along with Felt and Kiritaka, got the same thought at the same time. ——Proper combatants were needed here.

Otto: “There are three groups, all of which are non-combatants, who have encountered a main force among the enemy. What a bad joke this is. Please just stop.”

Felt: “I don’t think that my allies, would be coming anytime soon. Right back at you nii-chan, you rely on just yourself too much.”

Felt told Otto. Otto, as well, could not make any excuses at this point. Behind Felt is a humongous-looking servant who wore a tough appearance. Kiritaka also had some members of the 『White Dragon's Scales』 with him. It was only Otto who was alone.

Ley: "We're saying that it will be the same no matter how many people you gather. If it's you guys, then this thirst of ours can never be healed ~tsu! A~h, where are you, we're looking for you, we want to meet you, we want to meet you, let us meet you."

Otto and the others were surrounded by pessimism regarding their fighting strength, but Batenkaitos arbitrarily displayed his selfish attitude.

Otto: "Want to meet? Just, what on earth are you saying."

Otto tried to continue the conversation by picking up his words. On the margin of Batenkaitos' reasonability.

If it came down to it, Otto could be knocked down in a moment. Buying even the slightest of time——there was a need to create that gap, at all costs.

Ley: "It would indeed be troublesome to explain it so many times, huh. We can't afford to have our mouths broken by others either ~tsu. That'd be the worst, won't that be the worst, it would be the absolute worst, wouldn't that be the worst, isn't that the worst is what we're saying."

"———"

With steep expressions, Felt and Kiritaka shook their heads at Batenkaitos' words. Rather than being answered, it seemed as if they were being questioned by multiple people. And, as that conversation got unexpectedly established, Otto continued to stare as he was unable to talk to 『Gluttony』.

But still, Otto, with his 『Divine Protection of Soul Language』, could talk to even those beings which could not possibly have a human's will.

Let's negotiate. No matter what the challenge may be, it would still be better than the problem Subaru was surrounded by.

—*Please, lend me your strength, Natsuki-san.*

Otto: “By saying that, I might actually become stronger. Please, try and talk to me. The one which was mentioned in the request, could it perhaps be that you are talking about the Artificial Spirit?”

Quite a dangerous step. That choice of words, that stubborn tone could easily ignite Batenkaitos’ fuse. But, Batenkaitos swung his head.

When the young boy received Otto’s words with the intention of responding to the conversation, he laughed joyfully,

Ley: “Who we want to know is only one..... the one, who did the broadcast from earlier. The hero who did it, is the one we are searching for.”

“_____”

I take back those words.

After all, Subaru did not lend me his power, and neither do I want to lend away his name.

Ley: “That beloved, beloved hero seems to have come to cast his judgement upon us. This small chest, is hurting in search of hi~m ~tsu.”

Otto: “.....The coming of a person of such a troublesome nature, can he even manage to do anything at all, that person.”

If he was really here, “keep on dre~aming!” is what he would have had said, but there is no point in citing curses on part those who aren’t present here in the first place.

At Otto’s reaction, Felt frowned,

Felt: “I told you that you will only waste time by talking! Who is going to sell away their family anyway. Even for my merciless self, there are no doubts in that, except for Reinhardt, I’m not sure about him.”

Otto: "I am sorry to hear such an evaluation, but I won't say anything because I saw Felt-sama captured in that descent!"

The rough Felt, did not say a word which answered Batenkaitos' query. The same went for Kiritaka.

Both of them immediately knew that Batenkaitos' request was Subaru, and immediately discarded it.

"———"

That judgment was good as a person, but was undoubtedly too hasty in this situation.

With this rapid exchange, Subaru ended up not being sold away.

Otto: "This person messed it up. This girl and the others are just impatient, and by hearing the speech of the hero you are looking for, got excited and jumped out of the evacuation center, it's all just mere impatience."

Felt: "Hu~h!?"

Kiritaka: "Shh——"

Otto's story made Felt float on the blue line. And, the one who quietened her was Kiritaka.

As expected of the head merchant of the Muse company, he immediately understood Otto's judgment. At the same time, their gaze and line of sight match.

On his gaze, Otto drew in his chin.

Otto: "If you don't want to answer any questions, then I shall guide you to the hero. I also want my life. I demand its security, however."

Ley: "Really! You know? You know it? The place where our hero is! The figure of our beloved hero! That weak and fragile, unable to help anything unless he is supported, that person!"

Otto: “——? Yes, uh, yes.”

Otto nods, as he recognizes the sense of incongruity in the spirit of Batenkaitos’ words.

As if he knew a lot about Subaru. Calling out for his hero, and also taking such deep notice of the person named Natsuki Subaru.

Otto: “No, I will guide you.”

However, Otto got confused about it. It was regarding Subaru. It would not be surprising if two or three Sin Archbishops already knew about his face. Maybe all the members should not be included after all, 『Greed』 , 『Gluttony』 , 『Lust』 , 『Wrath』 ——they were all of them. But that was all of them in the first place.

Ley: “You have a face that is frowning badly, onii-san hu~h.”

Otto: “There is no need for you to care so much. Rather than that, what will you do. Killing every one of us at this place, or guaranteeing the lives of everyone here and encountering the hero in return. —— What do you choose to do?”

Ley: “What a nasty way of talking, you are a dealer, aren’t you? Such kinds of things in which you have to use your brains, neither we nor us are good at it.”

Otto: “If that’s the case, then choosing what is recommended and seeing it for yourself isn’t so bad either. That is a saying among the merchants though.”

Ley: “.....Hmm.”

There was initiative in the conversation. Batenkaitos was really obedient for a Sin Archbishop. It felt just like he was simply a child, and a distorted imbalance made him project himself as a monster. Maybe, he is just a pitiable young boy after all——.

Ley: “——Just now, you pitied us, didn’t you?”

Just when such feelings gathered inside the inner part of Otto's heart, Batenkaitos said that with a brisk voice in a low tone.

Otto: "huh?"

Ley: "Those eyes, we remember them. Those are eyes which look down upon. Those are eyes which are scornful. With those eyes, thinking that we are some product..... A~h, is that so. We were getting a nasty feeling since earlier."

Otto continued to watch as Batenkaitos' eyes became filled with complete disgust and hostility.

Ley: "You, are a merchant, right? Putting price tags on things, they are people who sell them to line their own pockets. Human values and opinions too, everything, everything! They are dead people who put them on a scale and calculate, aren't they?"

Otto: "That is..... somewhat, I think there is a little difference in opinions here."

As clouds of doubt began to form, Otto, whose mind was already tightroped, also got blindfolded. Did he manage to get his message across—— that was a question whose answer was clearly visible on the expressions of Felt and Kiritaka, who had done nothing but witness the discussion.

Ley: "Who the hell will listen to what you guys are saying ~tsu! After all, this world is gluttonous drinking ~tsu! Gluttony ~tsu! Until we have eaten it, licked it, swallowed it, we will not trust it!"

Batenkaitos shouted while stepping ahead, displaying his fangs.

The crisis could not be stopped. No explosion or word could get close to this explosive.

Felt: "So it did end up like this in the end, didn't it."

Saying this with dissatisfaction, Felt held her knife in her hand. Strangely enough, what Batenkaitos had were also short knives attached on both his hands.

Nonetheless, there would be a huge difference in the skill-level.

Kiritaka: “If it has come to this, the ones to rely on are everyone of the 『White Dragon’s Scales』 .”

???: “Heyhey! For once, I’m saying we’re also here!”

The fellow who was next to Felt raised his voice, but Felt swung her head. Which means, it will be quite a lively show.

Someone like Subaru would only prove to be useless in this scene.

Otto: “Just by thinking that, the value of that person gets significantly reduced, huh.....”

Ley: “Is your talking, do~ne?”

Batenkaitos, slowly, looked at the faces of Otto and the rest. An expression of fighting was on everyone’s face. Looking at that, Batenkaitos nodded with satisfaction.

Ley: “In gourmet, preparations and ingredients are important. Starting from assembling the good ingredients available, only then will the virtue of the dish be eatable ~tsu!”

Otto: “I sort of get it, I sort of don’t get it.....”

Ley: “It’s fine even if you don’t understand ~tsu! Neither have we ever thought, that our aesthetics can be understood by anyone except us ~tsu! No~w, well then, about time. ——Let’s eat!”

The conversation cemented the fate. Batenkaitos, opening his large mouth, approached Otto with a tremendously powerful jump. Otto, who was standing next to water, pointed his finger towards the blasphemer.

Otto: “I am glad that the assurance has been given!”

Ley: “——Hu~h?”

Otto: “This is how it is——!”

Otto makes a high sound twice with his shoes in front of the doubtful Batenkaitos.

Hearing that sound, something was drawn closer—.

Ley: “——~Tsu!!”

Behind Otto, a flock of water dragons jumped out of the waterway and charged towards Batenkaitos in a single stroke.

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——Otto had managed to brainwash the herd of water dragons, accompanied by the immense influence of the Authority of 『Wrath』 .

The Authority of 『Wrath』 , with its ultra wide range, even if it didn't cover the entire city, greatly shook the emotions of people, planting the seeds of faint spirit among the citizens, resulting in enormous disarray and suspicion.

Nevertheless, the recent speech by Natsuki Subaru raised the people's morale, which was also the basis of Otto's hypothesis of using the water dragons' strength.

Ley: “Oh, o~h—— ~tsu!?”

Batenkaitos, mid-air, could not stop the largely numbered water dragons.

With their limbless and serpentine body structures, and weight that was not below a hundred kilos, the multiple bodies crush Batenkaitos. As they continued glaring with their blue and white scales, their fangs continuously aimed for the crushed Batenkaitos.

Ley: “Hunting water dragons is cruel.”

With their fangs on their prey, they spin and tear the flesh apart. That small body would turn into countless pieces of meat, even without such an enormous number of water dragons.

“_____”

The aftermath won't be good.

Due to the influence of the Authority of 『Wrath』, the water dragons were in a strong and excited state, and were skillfully deceived by words with the 『Divine Protection of Soul Language』.

Felt: “Amazing! This, was done by nii-chan!”

Felt ran up, as she rose to cheer.

Despite not moving a single eyebrow seeing this cruel scene, only now does it seem that she had been moved.

Otto: “What I did was to give just a pinch to the water dragons. Whether it's a Sin Archbishop or not, he cannot win against nature.”

Kiritaka: “Possibly so but..... you are, a person who can do much more horrible things than what I thought.”

Otto: “Anyway, I am glad we're okay. Kiritaka-san too, to think that you survived.....”

Kiritaka: “I did indeed get injured on my back but, 『White Dragon's Scales』, which is a famous mercenary group, helped me out with their expertise in medical treatment.”

However, it unquestionably looked painful. Still, what could be the reason for which Kiritaka was still on the move, even with such an injury. Understanding the meaning behind Otto's gaze, Kiritaka put his hands on his chest with a look that reeked of seriousness.

Kiritaka: “It is decided, isn't it. I have the position of executive in Priestella's management. I heard the broadcast, but I cannot leave everything to it.”

Otto: “I believe that spirit is commendable but.....”

Kiritaka: “Of course, there is a low possibility of me being able to fight properly and be of any help. But, for once, even I should be able to do something.”

Kiritaka shamefully made that remark after the effect of the Authority of 『Wrath』 and Subaru’s speech.

Indeed, it had been Subaru’s speech which provided a support to the citizens, and it was a medicine too strong for people who already had strong missions to complete. To the extent, that it disabled the fear and reason that would normally stop a person from doing such reckless acts.

Felt: “That’s just recklessness, don’t go about thinking such things.”

Reading Otto’s thoughts, Felt said this with sharpened lips.

Felt: “Everyone has the right to fight for the things important to them. Nobody can stop the feeling of someone who wants to do something for those things, even if it is not backed by a great reason, can they.”

Otto: “That is..... an individual opinion, and such a judgment should not be taken by someone who is in a responsible position.”

Felt: “It depends on the things! Also, I never said that this applied for this situation, did I. Both me, and those guys, came out only because we could win.”

Otto: “Win, you say?”

Following Kiritaka, Felt rubbed under her nose with her finger.

Felt: “I also heard nii-chan’s speech. That stupid Reinhardt too, along with you, went to the city government building. Everyone except me, isn’t that right?”

Unfairly enough, what Felt was feeling right now was a misunderstanding. In this world, just as there are right words to fit, there are also some things that can only be done by those humans who are apt enough.

Just as that theory, Otto stopped pursuing further, since he seemed to not know the reason why he was here.

Otto: "Is Heinkel-shi properly captured?"

Felt: "He is kept at Camberley's shelter. Me and Gaston were going back to take what was taken."

What was taken, saying that, Felt turned her jaw towards Gaston. Gaston held a white packet in his hands, and it looked like a long spear.

Otto: "That is?"

Felt: "Old man Rom..... it seems to be a secret weapon that he kept in our staff's bag. It's a magic tool, I mean."

Otto: "Magic tool!? How convenient for such a timing!"

Ideally, the intimidating power of the magic tool would make it possible to have results that would normally not be possible.

After hearing that it was a magical tool, one's expectations were bound to increase.

Felt: "The conditions for using it are a pain, but it's worth it for its power. Even so, this thing can come in handy in cleaning up the mess nii-chan is in....."

???: "——~Hk."

Felt's words may not have had, but what entered Otto's ears at that moment was a scream.

Otto looks back to where it came from, and Felt and Kiritaka react by widening their eyes. They didn't hear that scream anymore. It's obvious. As it was the scream of a voice incomprehensible to humans.

Ley: "They seem to be a much more fun opponent than we thought bu~t..... Mere water lizards are no food, are they. Whether it's for us Gourmet or for any other gastronomer, they're une~atable."

A voice was heard, a voice that seemed to be able to beat up and defeat anything in this world.

At the same time, the flock of water dragons which should have had been jumping around and preying upon that prey. Their figures, with their tails, torsos, heads now disheveled, were extremely excited at the time of the initial attack, but their painful suffering and their flowing blood conveyed the abnormality of the situation to everyone.

Otto: “Felt-sama, this magic tool..... is powerful, right?”

Felt: “From what Old Man Rom said, even Reinhardt can’t avoid it, you know?”

Otto: “I see. That is certainly assuring..... Kiritaka-san!”

Kiritaka: “W-What is it?”

Felt, who received that answer, and Kiritaka, who had an expression of despair after seeing the water dragons. Him leaving behind the 『White Dragon’s Scales』 was still, for the non-combatant Kiritaka, very dangerous.

Otto: “Me, Felt-sama, and everyone of the 『White Dragon’s Scales』 will buy time. In that time, Kiritaka-san should go to the city government building..... no, first go to the eight evacuation centre of the town!”

Kiritaka: “Go there, is there something over there!?”

Otto: “——If you go there, you will understand everything. The one who can win, which Kiritaka-san will subsequently send here, is present there.”

Seeing Otto’s determined face as he made that declaration, Kiritaka, changing his expression, nodded powerfully. He then turned back towards his guards,

Kiritaka: “It’s just as you heard. I will, from now, just as Otto-shi instructed, head for the evacuation centre. I want you to stay here, and fight along with them. To protect this city.”

???: “Our work is to be young man’s guard..... that’s what it’s supposed to be, when did it become such a bothersome position.”

Kiritaka: “That’s wrong. Your job is not to be my guard. Help me with my purpose, was the first contract.”

In front of the bitterly smiling faces of the 『White Dragon’s Scales』 , Kiritaka answered with a face that showed utmost seriousness. The reason why his way of addressing his way of self reference became further polite, was because the city meant much more to Kiritaka than just having a responsible position in it.

Kiritaka: “Help me with my purpose, 『White Dragon’s Scales』 . To protect our important workplace Priestella, and let’s fight to save our beloved songstress, Liliana.”

???: “Even though turning back would be impossible.”

Kiritaka: “It has nothing to do with not being able to smile again, or what lies in my thoughts. I love Liliana, and I need no more reason to put my life in danger.”

Saying that, Kiritaka looked at Otto and Felt. At the same time, he lifted the bag he was holding in his hands.

Kiritaka: “Without fail, let’s show that we can do it. Because no one knows the navigation of this city and Liliana more than me.”

Felt: “For a moment, I thought it was cool but it’s all disappointing in the end.”

Otto agreed with Felt’s impression, but he did not mention it, he nodded silently seeing Kiritaka’s preparations.

Ley: “——About time, are you prepared?”

The movements of the agitated water dragons had stopped, and stripped of their white eyes, they were close to dying.

Through the gap in that group, Batenkaitos slowly appeared. The blasphemer shaped like a young boy, embraced his shoulders and happily asserted himself as an adversary, and glared.

Ley: "Wasn't that nice, that counterattack. Recklessness and braveness are different, and abandonment and persistence too are absolutely unlike! That's a face that knows about that. We're glad. Finally, you guys too, got the qualification to be taken to our dinner table."

Felt: "Till now everything we did was just worth going into the trash can huh, this guy, has everything messed up."

Otto: "Whether being recognized as the enemy is good or bad is again different. Personally, I think that those who get disdained, can still do a lot."

Did he get this idea by being around Subaru. Or could it be that his thoughts had been influenced by Subaru. How bad would that be. Anyway,

Otto: "Kiritaka-san!"

Kiritaka: "——I wish for good fortune in the upcoming battle for you!"

Following Otto's call, Kiritaka ran to leave this place. Just one person, Batenkaitos, tilted his head after seeing the figure of Kiritaka, who was trying to escape from the battlefield.

Ley: "Just sto~p. After how you've gently stimulated our motivation and this fee~ling of hunger!"

Following the back of the escaping Kiritaka, Batenkaitos' body jumped forward. Fully using his small body, his aerial speed in a single direction was unbelievably fast. With the same pace, Batenkaitos' fangs pass straight through and reach Kiritaka—— they were on their verge to do so.

Felt: "Gaston!"

Gaston: "If I die here, I'll cry and come to haunt you after becoming a spirit!"

Felt's voice ripped through the air and the giant, who jumped at almost the same time, interrupted Batenkaitos' course. Crossing his arms in front of his face and curling his back, it was Felt's servant, Gaston.

Ley: "Don't get in the wa~y——"

Swinging the daggers of his arms, Batenkaitos tried to cut down the hindrance. The steel blade shines brightly, and it's blow struck Gaston's exposed arm.

Sounds echoed, and Batenkaitos' dagger broke.

Ley: "Hu~h?"

"————"

Batenkaitos' questioning voice was accompanied by Otto's. They had seen what had happened.

Gaston's position did not change at all. With his arm, he broke Batenkaitos' dagger.

Felt: "My giant is pretty tough. Enough to be my guard."

The happy Felt, who seemed to think that they scared him off, threw the knife she held in her hands towards Batenkaitos. Batenkaitos avoided it with the same momentum as he avoided Gaston's kick. Just as he somersaulted backwards towards the open distance, the "White Dragon's Scales" changed their positions and blocked the road.

Kiritaka's retreat, had become a reality.

Ley: "Hmm, he~y. We see."

The overwhelming existence called Batenkaitos was outnumbered, but the pleasant smile that was sticking to his face did not cease.

With the same pace, Batenkaitos glanced at the opposing Otto,

Ley: "The number of people Louis is likely to be pleased with, is three huh."

Whispering with a trembling sigh, he removed the broken dagger from his arm. Now his left arm was bare-handed, and only his right hand was armed.

Otto: "For some reason, I feel the gap hasn't been filled at all."

As usual, Otto's warning bell continued to respond to this, the greatest of threats.

Ignoring that voice in his head, Otto looked at Felt. That unchanging face, determinedly, looked at the intense battle.

Let's fight, without the option of running away.

Otto: "Considering the amount of opportunities of fighting I have gotten in the past year, what will I even do as a merchant."

The voice that spilled from that mouth did not reach anyone.

Henceforth, no one noticed that the voice had a pessimistic tone not because of the content of the words in it.

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Chapter 55 - The War God's Challenger



—The legends of the War God Kurgan, were widely circulated in the Vollachia Empire.

In the powerful Vollachia Empire, as long as one had the ability, the circumstances of their birth would be disregarded.

In comparison to Lugunica, which has a conscious difference of treatment its demi-humans, and the Holy Kingdom of Gutesko, which barred foreigners, Vollachia adopts a similar system of lack of consideration for blood or appearance to Kararagi.

Therefore, among the four major countries, Vollachia was considered to be the best country of residence non-purebred humans.

But on the other hand, the kind of cruel survival of the fittest meant that there would be severe repression and oppression on those lacking power and wisdom. Of course, personal evaluations and racial evaluations would be different.

In particular, the Multi-Arm Clan had been wandering around for many years, as a nomadic race which never stayed in a single place. The appearance of the Multi-Arm Clan was just as its name, and their adaptability at using magic as a demi-humans were exceptionally low. In terms of a race, it could only be thought of as inferior.

The total number of individuals of the Multi-Arm Clan was not large. If ever a dispute arose, they would be more inclined to relocate than to fight for the protection of their land.

It was inevitable that such a race, driven away from countless places, would come to Vollachia, where it would have only been natural for them to have been swallowed up by the iron-blooded empire and faced with decline.

—In this world of power, shouting out a [Refusal] was a man named Kurgan.

Although the characteristics of the Multi-Arm Clan were that they have had more than the two arms that humans did, that number varied from person to person. Kurgan, who had eight arms where most had four or five, was a peculiar existence.

It had been the then youthful Kurgan, who had, when the local lord moved to recollect land, refused, and waved his eight arms to drive the messenger back. Then, spurring his trembling brethren on, the lord's private army was driven back and broken through, time and time again, until finally the lord's mansion was attacked.

Although the barbaric attack had frightened the lord, Kurgan did not offer a violent solution.

He spoke he and his people had proven themselves, and accepted a prized seat on the lord's private army. After that, throughout various battles, the name of [Kurgan of Eight Arms] was passed down as a legend of the Vollachia Empire.

Garfiel: “——”

His whole body was submerged in cold water, and he could still see the wavering moon through the water that flowed overhead.

The bone that had supported his right eye had broken, and the eyeball enclosed inside the socket seemed on the verge of slipping off. Instantly, he used the left hand to support the treatment of magic and perform minimal healing.

His remaining left eye jumped around, surveying the red sediment flowing along with the water, his body arching back upward where it hit the bottom of the waterway.

Garfiel: “——”

Obviously, he lay submerged in the water, but he could feel no trace of its frigid coolness.

Emancipated from the heavy weight of gravity, strength slowly poured back into his hands and feet in this world that has lost its burden.

If only unloading the yoke of the heart could be as simple as removing the yoke on the body— his heart now, was submerged in darkness.

Or he could just keep sinking in this way, in no way was such a thought completely absent from his heart. However, drawing breath began to grow painful and in the darkness, his eyes hadn't left him completely blinded.

The peach-haired girl, the orange-furred catgirl, and the black-haired boy emerged and ignited his waterlogged heart.

Maybe it was a flame that would disappear immediately. Earlier, that had been precisely the case, even if the bravado of pretending to be brave had been entirely shattered, which proved so. Even so, no matter what.

—That, was no excuse to be immersed in here forever.

Garfiel: “*Fwahl!*”

Stretching to straighten his back, slamming hard into the water pushing himself up in one breath, as his head emerged from the water, Garfiel shook his head.

The vision in his right eye was still obstructed, and the lingering aftereffects of the beating had turned into a tinnitus ringing ceaselessly in his head. His entire bloodied, wounded body was flooded with nausea, and the lack of sensation in his mouth had a discordant effect on his teeth.

Garfiel: “Fuckin’ shit...”

Grabbing the edge of the waterway to yank himself up, like a wild beast, shaking his entire body to clear the water, Garfiel glanced around.

Earlier, Garfiel had been slammed into the waterway.

Nothing had changed, the war god had remained standing in place.

The position of his outstretched Demon Cleaver was the same, with delay in his slight aura of battle, and of Garfiel’s failed attack, there was no doubt, as he maintained his stance.

Kurgan: “——”

Looking at the silent war god, Garfiel began to think.

After all, the inevitability of the collision between Garfiel and Kurgan was small indeed. The task that Garfiel hoped to accomplish was to stop the surprise attack that [Lust] was likely to launch on the city. Even if he fought with Kurgan here, he wouldn’t be saving the city of solely non-combatants.

At a glance, all would tell Garfiel to avoid a fight with Kurgan here.

Garfiel: "But... no way, he'd let me escape."

A body so large that heads would crane to see it fully, and an overwhelming amount of muscle. Even if he looked incapable of agility, even if he tried to flee, he couldn't imagine that he could escape the reach of those swords.

From the very instant that this war god had appeared before him, Garfiel had been rendered incapable of escape.

Now, there were only two choices that Garfiel was allowed to make.

—Fight to death. Rebel against that death, these two choices only.

Garfiel: "Fuck... 's ain't th' time t' think so right now!"

Defeatist thoughts flashing through his head, Garfiel gnashed his teeth to drive them away. The fangs that had been urgently regrown to make up for his losses tinged with pain, but that pain drove negative thoughts of loss to deep recesses.

Any notion of the feeling of impending loss, of the harbinger of defeat, would be flattened.

Self-satisfying words to justify his loss, were unnecessary!

—Win, win, win, win, win, win!

Seize victory, prove his own worth!

Garfiel: "UUUUAAAAAaaaaaaah!"

Roaring loudly, driving away any weakness, Garfiel once again rushed forward. In the previous skirmish, a single blow that'd he'd put his all into had been blocked.

However, if his weight weren't enough, he could use speed to control him.

Using claws, using teeth, opening, tearing, biting, plundering.

Kurgan: “——”

The silent war god, greeted the rushing Garfiel.

A blow from a Demon Cleaver came from his shoulder.

Call it a sniping blow, but the penetrative force was too low, call it a crushing blow, but it moved too sharply. It belonged solely to Kurgan, this combination of swordplay and strength that would leave his opponents crushed.

The suddenly approaching blade of the Demon Cleaver passed over the back of Garfiel's head, as he leaned forward. After that narrow miss, Garfiel's thinking grew steadily more fervent.

If there were only one blow, Garfiel should be able to escape with ease. The speed of his small form, lithe as it was, was quite different from the speed of that enormous body with its equally enormous arm and weapon.

After avoiding his massive attack, sending slashing paw his chest a parting gift was easy. Or rather, should have been.

Garfiel: “—*guu*”

However, Garfiel, who buried deep in those arms, was forced to dodge on the spot. One of Kurgan's giant side arms swept upward, threatening to send him flying from his chin.

This was also unexpected— no, his body's sense of balance was simply different.

Kurgan, born of the Multi-Arm Clan, had swung his eight arms and trained relentlessly to find a style which suited his own body.

Honing frightening techniques of his flesh, which were entirely different from what manoeuvres Garfiel knew about exercising four limbs.

Once his attack ended, his body would be left open, and weaknesses would be revealed, such common sense applied here.

If one hand were to be used for only defense, then the remaining space could be used to target his opponent's blind spot.

Even if he could block one hand's fatal strike, he'd still have the other seven to contend with.

If he couldn't manage all that, only a single dead end awaited.

Garfiel: "*ngh, gaaaaah!*"

In front of the shuddering Garfiel, the arm of the gods seemed to be enough to shake the world.

The roaring Demon Cleavers struck from all directions, crushing their opponent's body with violent force.

Blocking one blow with his shield, bending over to dodge another, darting backward to reduce the impact of the next, spinning to avoid yet another, offsetting one with all the force from his body, allowing the next to shatter his shoulder to avoid a fatal injury. The beastized handcuffs forced a single blow and a single hit to make it fall on the stone steps.

Garfiel: "*uwa, huu*"

—Eight arms.

Just now, Garfiel had thrown his all against Kurgan, and had only barely survived the counteroffensive which followed.

Such an attack held the deadliness of a tempest, and yet, to Kurgan, he was merely swinging each of his arms.

If this was what it meant to be a war god, if the fight continued, Garfiel would be annihilated in moments. Right now, collapsed on the ground, the blooded Garfiel still drew breath only because the still standing war god had no intent to pursue.

Kurgan: “——”

Assuming the same stance he'd taken when Garfiel's had clambered out of the waterway, he looked down the loser in their struggle.

To be underestimated, no such feelings of frustration surged forth.

The question now was, of even occupying the same dimension.

Competing with each other, warriors on a battlefield.

The name of this god of war, [Kurgan of Eight Arms], was a legend.

Garfiel: “*huu... huu...*”

He couldn't win. To win was impossible.

A legend that had passed away, a man who had become a hero, this war god.

Thriving in the imposing Vollachia, even when his clan had been inferior and despised, was this man who had changed the destiny of his race on his own.

Garfiel was nothing more than a little kid who revered that legend.

Garfiel: “*huu... huu... huu*”

Clearly that was so, but why did his body right itself.

Even his inner self was so shaken, and yet his body stood upright.

Garfiel: “*Haaaaah...* noisy, noisy, fuckin’ noisy!”

The rush of his heartbeat, was now unusually loud.

The ringing of drums accompanying his ears, Garfiel stomped on the ground. The stone steps beneath his feet began to split, and the cracks stretched straight below Kurgan’s feet.

The silent Kurgan and the bloodied Garfiel stood in confrontation.

Swaying, Garfiel gathered power in the toes, once again slamming on the ground. Then, Kurgan moved.

No, he had been moved.

Kurgan: “——”

Through the Garfiel’s soles, the [Divine Protection of Earth Spirits] worked its power. That power moved from the newly formed cracks to Kurgan’s feet, and the ground supporting the giant flew toward the heavens.

That enormous body floating in midair, honed though it was by hundreds battles, was still a slave to the laws of physics.

Losing the support of the lower body, he could no longer execute his powerful strikes.

Garfiel: “*Haaaaaaaaaaaaah!*”

This moment was the key.

Taking aim at where Kurgan hovered in midair, Garfiel swung his arm.

Part beast, an arm covered in the fur and muscle of a giant tiger struck Kurgan. Even the war god had no means of resisting if he couldn’t adjust his stance in midair.

With the sound of weapons colliding, and the intercepting Demon Cleaver flew away, pulling Kurgan in its wake.

And then Garfiel's kick was waiting for him. Taking advantage of the first chink in his armor, his claws pierced those thick abdominal muscles.

Roaring, Garfiel ceaselessly pushed his opponent, pressing his attacks.

Chest, thighs, knees, and stomach, all took constant blows.

Suppressed by the force of the impact, Kurgan's numerous arms were unable to catch up to defend, and he could only take each attack in his splayed position.

Garfiel: "Success's here!"

Garfiel, convinced that victory was in sight, cried out.

The slashing, bestial claws tore into Kurgan's, spraying Garfiel with dark blood.

Garfiel swiped the blood from his body, continuing to press forward.

Confident that his opponent had been rendered helpless, Garfiel's eyes found Kurgan, carved in iron—and then cold washed over him as his hairs stood up.

Kurgan: "——"

The god of war's eyes fixed themselves on Garfiel, his demeanor exactly what it had been at the start, unchanged, not shaken in the slightest.

Garfiel: "—huh?"

It was then, that Garfiel realized.

The war god's delayed counterattack.

The swing of a Demon Cleaver, slammed into the Garfiel's pair of hurriedly raised shields, slamming his entire figure down, where he crashed hard into the ground.

Garfiel: "*gh*"

Even a grunt, couldn't be formed.

In an instant, orientation vanished from his field of vision, Garfiel's limbs were entirely controlled by the impact that had sent them flying.

All he knew, was what had happened.

In midair, without any grounding point, Kurgan gave a fierce attack with only his upper body.

Simple and straightforward, was this method.

Grabbing the blade of the Demon Cleaver with both hands to increase the weight of the swing, the force would skyrocket.

—That was the principle of a flick to the forehead.

Using two hands as a base to turn the attack into fatal blow.

Sending him flying, to reduce the force of his attacks. This method of combat had been thoroughly resolved by his opponent.

Garfiel: "*—hk*"

Having his chain of counterattacks interrupted, Garfiel was struck by a foot from the huge body directly above him.

Couple the foot with his falling momentum, and Garfiel's body and slammed upward from the ground as soon as it made contact.

His thoughts occupied by pain and loss, what drove him to use his healing magic was solely his survival instinct.

Attaching the broken bones on his upper arm, elbow, and shattered shoulders, to fixing his eviscerated internal organs. His ribs, waist bones, parts his left thigh had also broken, but those would prove too difficult to recover in an emergency.

His gate heating within the body, he drew upon all his magic, exhausting his mana supply.

Taking advantage of being able to draw strength from the ground, with his body pressed against it, he began to treat and repair himself from head to toe.

A few seconds, or tens of seconds, or possibly a few minutes.

Blocking out even the passage of time, Garfiel focused on the restoration of his flesh.

Finally, reaching a point where he could just barely manage to move, he spat the blood from his throat and got up.

Kurgan: “——”

Calmly, the war god regarded the bloodstained Garfiel.

Seeing this gesture, the corners of Garfiel’s eyes burned. The heat within had him bowing his head, teeth shaking.

Garfiel: “Th’ fuck, ‘s this...?”

Since the beginning, Kurgan’s stance had remained consistent.

He would meet Garfiel’s challenges, but he wouldn’t take the initiative to attack, nor would he rush at Garfiel with swords drawn.

Garfiel, had been mercilessly defeated three times.

The feeling of defeat and humiliation in his heart had smashed through him, his soldier's conceit and arrogance.

He felt that he had to win against him.

In a similar way, he also thought that it'd be far cleaner to kill himself than to suffer this ridicule.

War god Kurgan, the hero of Vollachia.

Being regarded as the peak of all the soldiers, asking him to understand the frustration in Garfiel's heart would be impossible.

Garfiel: "Might 's well jus'..."

Kill me, he could ask that of him.

Honestly admitting defeat, acknowledging the obvious disparity in power, asking to be allowed to die as a warrior.

Putting down his shields, spreading his arms, and forming an expression of bliss.

To plead with him like this, would he be willing?

To fall on battle against the god of war; to a warrior, this was perhaps the proudest way to die.

Garfiel: "In this place..."

Wouldn't it be so easy, if it were all to end.

Garfiel: "Wouldn't 't be so easy, 'f 'twere all ta end, huh."

Equipped with his shields, tightening his arms to show hostility.

Looking forward, as if intending to struggle.

Garfiel: “‘S kinda thinkin’ keeps lingerin’.”

Someone had said to him once, to not think so much when fighting.

You’re pretty strong, when you’re not thinking about extraneous things, and just using your instincts to fight.

—Was that, really the case?

Garfiel: “Sound’s, lingerin’...”

How annoying was his heartbeat.

Every bones in him twisted and connected, and a sound began to form.

Annoying, annoying, annoying, annoying.

That extraneous sound, all of it, completely, in its entirety, was so annoying.

—The sound, can you not hear?

Garfiel: “Can I hear... always, ‘f fuckin’ course my amazin’ self can hear it.”

Even if he avoided thinking about it, it’d amount to nothing.

In Garfiel ear, or perhaps part of him separate from his tympanic membrane, that voice was still being accepted.

Someone’s voice, an intimate voice, a familiar voice, a heartwarming voice, a choked voice, a proud voice, a voice which couldn’t suppress its rage.

All these voices, refused to let Garfiel go.

Even if he relied on instinct to fight, these incoming waves of sound would not recede at all, and Garfiel would not be alone.

The more he thought about it, the weaker he was, and the him of right now was so weak.

It was different from when he'd been in [Sanctuary], playing at being the lone wolf. Now, he bore more humility, had seen more things.

The more people there were to someone, the weaker they'd become, and they'd spend their entire lives growing weaker.

Garfiel: "How's... 's possible."

Embracing those unfading voices, swallowing his sense of defeat, stirring up a desire for victory, and inserting his admiration and envy into all that.

—Garfiel, issued a challenge to the god of war.

Garfiel: "—*kuu*"

Kurgan: "——"

Garfiel's gaze had changed.

Kurgan, witnessing this, quietly moved.

Of his four Demon Cleavers, he sheathed two.

However, this meant in no way that Kurgan's strength had weakened. Instead, it allowed him more focus on just those two Demon Cleavers. Almost as if to explain, the war god adjusted his stance.

The war god who had stood facing forward, balanced on his right foot, leaning in slightly as he faced Garfiel.

Kurgan twisted his fingers to avoid the sudden punching force, and Garfiel took the opportunity to land on the war god's waist, and run up his chest ran up, as if he were doing a flip.

Kurgan leaned back, lashing out with his Demon Cleaver at the same time.

Reading the flow of the wind and atmosphere to predict the direction, Garfiel accepted the attack with his pair of shields.

With a thundering sound, Garfiel's body flew backward.

Garfiel: "*Haaaaaaah—*"

Slamming his limbs into the slate floor, he forced his body to stay in place. Looking up, the war god's pursuit had already approached.

Kurgan, who had yet to launch his own attack, now rushed forward to stop Garfiel.

Only one instant to predict, only one moment to react, only one second for the result to bear fruit.

Kurgan: "——"

Garfiel strained the arms he had embedded into the slate, lifting the ground before him. The rushing Kurgan shattered that wall launched at shoulder, and lunged with the Demon Cleaver.

A cacophony.

Garfiel, taking a direct hit, was propelled backward. The heel that had tried to stand firm slid across the ground, and shards of teeth flew forward.

But—

Garfiel: "Don't look down on me, fucker!"

He used his teeth to block the spurs of the ghost machete.

From his incisors, blood dripped to cover the Demon Cleaver, but Garfiel did not hesitate.

Kurgan: “——”

He strained the strength in his neck and jaw, and Kurgan’s body shook.

He grabbed hold of the bitten Demon Cleaver’s handle with another arm, and strained to extract it in one motion, but the tooth piercing it would not give.

Not only that, but the force of his biting teeth yet increased. Garfiel’s upper body swelled and began to beastify.

Garfiel: “GHROOOooooooooo, GRAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!”

Transforming his head to animal form would lower his capacity for rational thought significantly.

His reasoning would regress to the level of a beast’s, and he’d been told countless times that this was a double-edged sword.

But in this moment, that was Garfiel’s choice.

This enviable power was indispensable.

Faced with the most powerful of the Multi-Arm race, how could he win, if he denied his own fundamental nature?

O tiger, o tiger, o tiger, in this moment, lend me your strength—!

Kurgan: “——”

The instant the golden tiger opened its eyes, the Demon Cleaver was torn.

The blade was shredded, and the force of the destruction moved from blade to hilt, shaking the giant’s form as he suddenly lost his hold and balance.

—This, was truly an opportunity.

Garfiel: “Huu, hah, hah! ”

The beast swung its paws, beating at Kurgan’s head. The giant couldn’t catch his footing under the beast’s repeated strikes.

A slice and a bat arrived at the same time, and Kurgan, dripping blood, was forced back.

Kurgan: “——”

He made to pursue further, but was met with a punch.

The enormous tiger’s face smashed with an elbow, and the bridge of its nose collapsed, and immediately following, from below, was a strike to his mandible.

The tiger caught his collapsing body, and a punch from the front slammed into his face.

Blood splashed into his dimming field of vision.

Orientation, control, vanished from his mind.

Not that it had anything to do with him. What was important, was all contained in his heart.

Even without thinking about it, it wouldn’t vanish, would drive his bloody, battered body on.

The Demon Cleaver approached.

The remaining one of the pair, which hadn’t been shattered.

Only one instant to predict, only one moment to react, only one second for the result to bear fruit.

Garfiel: “*guu, uu...*”

The blade cutting toward his body scraped against his shield and met his stomach.

Even had the impact been dispelled, this blow still had the power to slice through the thick abdominal muscles on his body.

However, faced with the hair stiff as golden needles, and the swelling body of the enormous tiger, bisection was still out of reach.

At Kurgan's feet, a stomp from Garfiel. This was an effect of the blessing of the [Divine Protection of Earth Spirits].

Garfiel: "Uuuuuuuuuuuuuah!"

The blade still lodged in his abdominal muscles, Garfiel fought on thusly.

In a grappling contest, Kurgan would come out ahead, but Garfiel couldn't sit still.

The lack of teeth, the arm that had been broken several times over, and the instinct overpowering his sensibility, had him catch Kurgan firmly.

Kurgan: "——"

Yanking on his cumbersomely large body, Garfiel threw Kurgan— into the waterway behind.

The instant he was thrown forward, Kurgan's arm reached out to grab Garfiel, dragging the two of them down together.

Accompanied by a loud splash, the two plummeted into the waterway.

Two huge bodies were scuffed by the current, and the blood straining the water was swept away.

Kurgan: "——"

In the water, the two figures were still continuously attacking and defending.

In the dark, vision-obscuring liquid, Garfiel and Kurgan continued to beat each other without regard to the resistance of the water.

Fists of a giant shattered his organs, excruciatingly expelling the air from his lungs. Pain unto pain, suffering unto suffering, so the underwater battle continued.

Between that, Garfiel understood his own disadvantage.

For whatever reason, the war god before him didn't seem to breathe. He felt as if his opponent were a resurrected body.

Oxygen starvation brought lethargy, and Garfiel found his every action slow and stagnant.

The flow of the water gradually surged and swelled, and, again and again, the two figures fell from waterfall to waterfall.

As his consciousness faded, his fingertips were sapped of their fighting spirit.

Garfiel: “—*hah*”

—His breaths, weren't enough.

This would become the true cause of his defeat, as Garfiel's consciousness left him. And victory was is—.

Kurgan: “——”

A heavy sound, that the muted, stagnant carried to him.

Returning to his distant consciousness, Garfiel saw it within the murky water.

The Demon Cleaver sheared into the wall and ground level with the canal, and the war god's strike created a divisive gap in the path of the water's flow.

He had neither the chance nor the air to ask what he was doing.

The sound of blades from every which way shook the water's flow, until finally the sound of a breaking metal and a shocking rush echoed in tandem.

In the next moment, a new stream appeared.

Separate from the waterway's true flow, it was another stream of water entirely. Garfiel's body, captured within this stream, was sucked and thrown clear from the waterway.

Garfiel: "*—pua, kuu, kuu*"

The feeling of water around it disappeared, and Garfiel spat the volumes of water he'd swallowed.

From his eyes, nose, ears, all the holes in his, water poured forth, and Garfiel shook his head.

Just as he was wondering what had happened, he heard it.

???: "*—Gorgeous Tiger?*"

In the sound of flowing water, someone called out quietly to him.

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Chapter 56 - Signing of A Divorce



—The Authority of [Greed] associated with its star's name, the true face of its [Invincibility].

The names of the stars that Subaru knew, aligned with the names of the Archbishops.

The etymology of Betelgeuse, [Orion's Hand] was quite fitting with the madman Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti's [Unseen Hand].

Therefore, Subaru believed that the stars' sobriquets were closely related to the authorities of their Archbishops.

And [Greed]'s Archbishop was named Regulus Corneas. The "Regulus" that was his name had the Latin origin of "Leo", which meant [Small King], as well as— [Lion's Heart].

Although he had once scoffed at the idea, Subaru realized that this notion was not meaningless and pursued this train of thought, thus arriving at a hypothesis.

In the first place, how is a [King] defined?

The Kingdom of Lugunica was currently in the middle of the royal election, each candidate striving to show their [Kingship]. Although each vision of [Kingship] would, sooner or later, come to light, Subaru wanted to bring up the topic of [King] here, in this situation where it took a more general meaning.

This so proclaimed [King], was a kingdom's representative, who stood at its top.

Loosening the definition, a nation could be made of anything, but a single individual could become no nation.

The [King] symbolizing the country existed from the [Citizens] within it.

Following this line of thought, bearing the name of [Small King], Regulus Corneas, would probably also correspondingly have [Citizens] who could grant him the title of [King].

Subaru: "Then, the ones who make Regulus king, where are this [Small Kingdom]'s [Citizens]?"

He didn't even have to think about it.

Without bringing any cultists, they'd attacked the city of Pristella.

Although this was a group of independently acting, offputting, malicious devils, the only one of them to bring unnecessary numbers had been Regulus.

Why would he need to do so?

Although, knowing Regulus, the possibility that he was merely flaunting his greed was not nonexistent, but if not, if he were acting out of necessity—

Subaru: “In order for Regulus to be a [Small King], he needed to bring his collective [Citizenship] of wives. Although whether or not the distance has some relation is unknown, it looks like that due to this restriction, even if there were fifty wives, Regulus would still need to bring them.”

Was the condition of this [Invincibility] based on number of wives? Or distance from the wives?

If Regulus’s identity as a [Small King] was conditional, the scope of what [Greed] could reach would potentially be affected by such limits.

In short, Regulus’s wives were in no way irrelevant to his [Invincibility].

Subaru: “But, this isn’t quite enough to reveal to me the secret to his trick.”

What Subaru had understood with his reasoning, was only [Small King]’s part.

His other name, [Lion’s Heart], had yet to be explained, as did the overwhelming power, both offensive and defensive, that accompanied his [Invincibility], as well as the fact that his surroundings had no effect on him, all remained mysteries.

If he’d merely had a strengthened body, it wouldn’t have been impossible for Reinhardt to have break through; However, Regulus’s [Invincibility] clearly surpassed such a resistance.

Subaru: “It can’t be a super-strong barrier. All the measures to stop an [Invincible] enemy have been tried already. On top of that, he definitely lacks a heartbeat and body temperature. Then—”

The name of [Lion’s Heart] opened a thought, and the last piece of the puzzle fell in place.

Regulus’s Authority of [Greed] was not [Invincibility].

The true face of the murderer’s overwhelming power was [Stillness of an Object’s Time].

Already supplied, already appraised, without holes.

The words that Regulus always wore at his lips of distorted self-satisfaction, were about how he was a man satisfied with his ideal existence, but at the same time made no attempt to hide the nature of his ability.

Subaru: “The time of his body is frozen, so forget attacks; even the water won’t wet him. The time of the sand he he throws is frozen, so it doesn’t bounce off, it goes straight through.”

Among the superpowers known in manga, there was a similar one of [Space Break].

This power, as its literal name suggested, caused a break with space itself, cutting something off from its surroundings, regardless of whatever may try to affect it; Regulus’s existence itself acted thus, on some level.

The Regulus Corneas who could cut himself off from the flow of time, could be said to be the distortion of space itself.

Indeed, he’d said, the dimension was different— [Invincibility] was but a side effect of [Stillness of an Object’s Time].

What was to say—

Subaru: “—The secret technique of freezing time’s your true ability!”

Regulus: “You say so proudly all you like, I’ll have no comment! Are you that type? Who wishfully believing that you know something, so everyone around you should find out as well? Even pride should be measured, show me a little self-awareness, you little brat!”

Subaru’s back was pressed against a stone wall, hiding his figure as he yelled, and Regulus rushed at him with ridicule.

Breaking through walls, cutting through the canal, literally crossing directly in a march of devastation— as a result of this, Regulus caught up with Subaru.

Right now, Subaru met all of this alone. That said, in truth this was not the exciting match the word [combat] implied.

Regulus: “Darting back and forth irritates me to death, you. Not running away, makes you truly a man, did you think I’d say so? You and I can’t compare at all. Though you clearly gawked as I sent the Sword Saint flying, you can’t even understand something like this? No matter how you look at it, isn’t this just looking down on me!?”

Subaru: “When it’s someone you hate, whatever they do, right or wrong, is always irritating. If I ran, I’d only run into a future so hard it’d kill me. In addition... this choice is the right answer, should be it.”

Regulus: “Right answer my ass. Whether it’s personnel selection or strategy, allofallof it! It can only amount to a result that’s twisted to death, isn’t that right? If you wanted to continue the fight, wouldn’t it have been much better for that flowering maiden to stay? An adulterer like you, is there anything you can do aside from touching someone else’s wife?

Subaru: “What you’re chattering at me is actually pretty harsh.”

Though it were as Regulus’s bitter words bound him, Subaru wasn’t anxious in the slightest.

Not anxious, not irritated; even his disgust had been watered out, as he relied on only his smart mouth to control the situation.

Now, Subaru had lured Regulus a distance away from the church, separated from Emilia, facing off with the murderer alone.

Facing off, saying so seemed a touch inaccurate. Since Subaru was just trying to hide himself, he maintained his taunting demeanor, striving merely to buy time.

If Regulus noticed this, and made a destructive attack that would rend the space from top to bottom, Subaru’s plans would be shattered in an instant. However, Subaru was sure that Regulus would never do so.

In this short period of time, with the hostile nature of their interactions, he'd very accurately seen through Regulus's character.

In short, Regulus was scum.

This simple statement could in no way explain all of Regulus's problems.

More precisely, Regulus was someone who valued himself most highly, and would certainly never be capable of ignoring the existence of others.

To be frank, calling him the incarnation of desire for approval and desire to show off would be no exaggeration.

Claiming that he has no desire and no demands with sophisticated words, treating his existence as one which had already achieved perfection, Regulus seemed unable to continue living without proclaiming his own value to others.

Repress the feelings of others, imposing his own values onto them, using intimidation and violence to forcefully instate himself as a supreme authority.

This attitude was not how he treated just his brides, but how he treated the entire world.

Therefore, in a certain sense, Regulus truly was attentive and serious to whatever he faced.

His battle with Reinhardt served as perfect proof.

If Regulus had the notion of doing so, he could have completely invalidated Reinhardt's attacks with his [invincibility], and gone on to kill the somewhat troublesome Subaru and Emilia.

Despite this, he was deliberately eager to accept Reinhardt's attacks directly, and thus was unable to put this acute plan into action.

Although, this was not to say that Regulus valued any high-handedness of spirit.

Rather, this decidedly further proved the nature that he'd supposedly cast aside.

—This man, Regulus, without using all his power to make everything succumb, could not stop.

Therefore, not crushing the meddlesome Reinhardt or just ignoring the provoking Subaru, were not decisions he could make in battle.

Assured by the premise that he could be neither injured or defeated, he needed to force his opponents to completely surrender, and leave their spirits defeated and broken— a man who knew only this way of battle.

Such a repulsive nature was truly unsightly to behold.

The why of this notion was that, assuredly everyone with no exception, would to some extent hold the same feelings. Even Subaru himself was aware of such ugliness in his own nature.

Precisely because he forced people to gaze into this ugliness, was why the existence of Regulus was so hateful.

However, this exact reason was what allowed a faint glimpse at a tiny chance of victory.

Subaru: "Your secret method of freezing time, fine ignore it, but what about the first part? Was my speculation really completely off? If you would, even if it's just a rough idea, I hope you can outline it for me."

Regulus: "Why would I have to answer the question? It's nonsensical and not obliged of me. A matter of disclosing my own secrets, isn't even about rights anymore. To what extent are you planning to look down on me. You fucker, are you incapable of understanding without having your bones ground to dust!?"

Falling for Subaru's provocation, Regulus stomped hard at the ground.

The tips of his feet pierced the stone road, as easily as if it were made of pudding. The direction of the ammunition it released could be only tracked by sound, randomly destroying the area near Subaru's hiding place.

Long before the bullets could find him, Subaru, who'd read Regulus's movements, fled from the wall. During his escape, he also toppled the stone pillars standing at the ends of the street.

And thus, the rope tied to the stone pillar came untied, and a series of slight sounds echoed.

Overtop the head of Regulus, who'd looked up to see what had happened, countless shards of ice flew down. With Emilia's help, the street had been turned into minefield of carefully lain traps.

Of course, the place where Regulus had been directly struck was unscathed, but—

Regulus: "This kind of thing! Is nothing but the desperate exhaustion of limited ability!"

Regulus, without attempt to dodge the falling ice, spread his arms in order to accept it with his entire body.

Of course, without hope of piercing his [invincibility], the shards of ice shattered into fragments, scattering to disperse into mana particles. Including the parts that had failed to touch his body, as if to show off, Regulus stomped through all the scattered bits of ice, destroying them utterly.

Regulus: "What's this supposed to be? If your long rambling theory from just now was correct, couldn't you yourself think of how meaninglessness this attack is? Looking at it this way, isn't it that that girl's attacks are much more effective. Winding back and forth, just what do you intend to do!"

Subaru: "What I intend by winding back and forth like this, if I answer your question, you should correspondingly answer mine. These be our exchange conditions is what should be, no?"

Regulus: "And exchange between me and you, what is this but sheer wild arrogance!"

Subaru pulled back quickly at a large angle, putting distance between Regulus.

Refusing to let him go, Regulus chased Subaru persistently, gently bending his knees and leaping in one motion. Moving forward with that explosive propulsion, in an instant the distance between the two shrank.

Like this, the fingertips of death reached Subaru— nearly, before Regulus lost its foothold.

Regulus: “Wha!?”

Subaru: “Though this was truly outside my expectations, but the weaknesses of you who only knows force on force is practically just pathetic.”

The classic pitfall trap, was also reliant on Emilia’s magic to dig into the ground, a primitive mechanic which used a layer of ice covered with soil.

However, a veteran of hundreds of battles who should have seen through such a simple trap, Regulus in fact completely fell for it. Although ironic, this also served as evidence that Regulus couldn’t do anything but enforce victories with brute force.

Properly and uprightly, using his cheat ability to directly crush his opponent with brute force.

Capable of nothing aside from this, evidently a man who would consider no other battle tactics.

Subaru: “Different from through your power, whatever it takes to defeat you, we’ll do. Repeating such a thing, it’s getting hard to even tell who the antagonist is anymore.”

Taking a shortcut to reach the church first, fighting for every last second to turn this area into a minefield of traps.

Although Emilia had refused to leave Subaru until the last second, with her guileless nature, she could never use these dirty tactics. Chosen for suitability, was this distribution of labor.

Subaru: “——”

In the time that Regulus had yet to climb out of the hole, Subaru surreptitiously glanced down at his right foot. Even after the strenuous parkour of his escape, it was still in excellent condition. Both when it had been turned to bloody ribbons and when it had been enveloped in this mysterious black material, had become something he could never forget.

Perhaps this was the influence of the [Dragon's Blood], which felt almost as if the blood were speaking to Subaru.

This arrogant false [King] that is your enemy, show him the prestige of the Dragon Kingdom.

Subaru: "In this case, I'll be asking you for more help. Though I'll be owing you lots."

Regulus: "Your whining on, it irritates me to death!"

The ground erupted with fragments of stone steps and lumps of soil, scattering with force.

Backed by Regulus's power, they further caused fierce damage to the streets. Despite this devastation, Subaru was not within its destructive reach.

Having flown out from the ground, Regulus, eyes widened with hate, glowered at Subaru, who'd put distance between them again. Very deliberately, Subaru raised his middle finger at Regulus.

Subaru: "Seems that someone once said 'desperate exhaustion of limited ability', may I ask who said this, again? Though it's often said that [treating others as a mirror can lead to understanding of victory and defeat], but shouldn't you take a long hard look at the mirror first?"

Regulus: "Messing, messing with me, to such an extent, you...!"

After politely having his flaws pointed out, Regulus revealed a look of ferocity.

More than likely, his homicidal feelings toward Subaru had already easily reached a breaking point, and the flames of hatred had consumed his murderous unchanging body.

Regulus seemingly hadn't noticed at all, that this was all more or less within the scope of Subaru's expectations.

Because, without sharpening his murderous intent, his loose and messy rough attacks were ineffective, was a point hadn't been realized by Regulus for even the slightest of moments.

Subaru: "Though that's the case, I can't afford to take this lightly."

Wiping sweat from his neck, Subaru, with a flippant grin, readied himself for death.

What he couldn't let Regulus see, was that his intent was only to buy time. And even if that were to be seen though, he absolutely could not see the reasoning behind it.

This was the condition for victory of this battle, the task that Subaru, who'd sent Emilia away, needed to accomplish.

This was what he and Emilia had sworn to each other, that they would fulfill their respective duties no matter what.

And so—

Subaru: "Leaving it to you, Emilia. —Be sure to bring out the wives' heartfelt feelings."

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When Emilia arrived at the church, the brides were still where they'd been left.

Emilia: "Excellent, everyone's still exactly—"

Looking at the faraway wives in attendance, Emilia blurted her feelings.

However, she was struck silent, as the positions of the wives in attendance had remained quite literally unchanged.

If Emilia's memory served her correctly— they hadn't moved even the slightest bit since she'd escaped from the church.

Emilia: "Just because Regulus, gave an order to keep still...?"

He had no power of binding, was what Emilia understood from what she'd already been told by Subaru the truth of [Greed]'s authority.

Although he'd stressed repeatedly, "*this is just a hypothesis*", Emilia had full faith in his answer.

In order to defeat that murderer, what Subaru and Emilia had to accomplish no matter what had yet to be done.

Emilia: "Everyone, all stayed... then, the first issue isn't a problem."

The most frightening possibility was that the wives had separated into hiding, or had fled the church in a panic.

Before the point of no return, they would have to take a last resort. The plan that Subaru had so gravely proposed, Emilia wanted to avoid if at all possible.

And so—

Emilia: "Everyone, I beg leave to speak to you."

There was no time.

Although there was guarantee they'd even listen, Emilia had to overcome this obstacle now.

184: "—Husband-sama, how is he?"

In the half-destroyed church, standing in the middle facing Emilia, the to respond to her, was a blonde-haired woman— 184.

Unlike the other silent wives seated in neat rows, only she sat at the front near the collapsed altar.

Having helped Emilia change, offering her advice, with eyes as cold as when she spoke of the despair her future would hold, 184 questioned the returning Emilia in a voice without inflection.

Emilia: "Regulus is outside... Sorry. We're still engaged in battle. I couldn't strike him down."

184: "That's so. ... Isn't it."

The corners of 184's mouth rose almost imperceptibly.

Such a tiny smile, as if she didn't know why it was there. In addition, Emilia understood that this smile conveyed neither joy nor sadness, but something resembling ridicule.

Because, a smile like this which existed to bring harm unto others, Emilia had encountered many times in the past.

And so—

Emilia: "Such a cold smile. I don't think it suits you. This expression."

184: "... My apologies. Because Husband-sama forbids smiles, I allowed you to see an undignified expression."

Emilia: "Please don't apologize. What I meant, wasn't this."

At 184's self-deprecating words, Emilia shook her head.

Inside her chest, heat began to concentrate somewhere that wasn't her heart. It's just as Subaru said, those words kept rising to the surface of her mind.

Intense to the point of discomfort was a fierce feeling, swelling unbearably in her heart.

Closing her eyes, suppressing the turbulent emotion, Emilia glanced back and forth around the church before she spoke.

Emilia: "We're planning to take down Regulus. To do so, we need everyone's help."

Wives: "——"

Emilia: "I don't know what treatment you've suffered at Regulus's hand up until now, but even I who was only briefly in contact with him, can see that Regulus is wrong."

Having been taken by him while unconscious, he had asked for her hand in marriage as soon as she'd woken up. Then, she'd immediately been overwhelmed by the wedding ceremony, and had been told of Regulus's ideas on marriage and the way he treated his wives.

This was a far cry from the happy marriages that Emilia had been told of.

Emilia: "I don't want to lose to Regulus. I understand that in battle, success or failure is irrelevant to right and wrong. But right now, right here, I don't want to lose to Regulus. If I lose... certainly, that which is important will be trampled upon."

184: "That which is important... huh."

Emilia: "——"

184: "If you don't want to be without life, you should have obeyed Husband-sama from the start, or you should have tried to flee without regard for anything else. Both were possible. Clearly, that would have been best for you."

With a dark gaze, 184 answered Emilia.

184: "What happened to the the Sword Saint and that knight of yours accompanying you earlier? They met Husband-sama's counterattack, and fell in battle. And thus, you alone fled here."

Emilia: “No. Whether Subaru or Reinhardt, both of them are still engaged with Regulus. My return, they trust in and await for.”

184: “What could you accomplish by returning? And then, saying that you need our help and such... I don’t understand what you mean.”

Emilia: “Do you truly not understand what I mean?”

184: “——?”

Faced with Emilia’s interrogation, 184 raised her eyebrow wordlessly.

This natural reaction, didn’t seem forced in the slightest. Although she’d slackened once she’d given up, since the very beginning, 184 had no intention to deceive Emilia which weighed down her words.

In other words, she truly had no idea.

—That Regulus’s [Heart] had been entrusted to his wives, her included.

Emilia: “And everyone else? Everyone, are you truly okay with this? Having wanted do anything at all, having wanted someone else to do something, is there no one who still thinks this way?”

184: “Please stop. I will listen to you. If you have questions, please ask me. My answer is the answer of the collective.”

Facing Emilia who tried to take a read of those around her, with stiff words, 184 interjected.

Stubborn, or maybe brave— Emilia recalled how for her sake, she’d even questioned Regulus, at risk of her own life.

Although that had indeed been a form of altruism—

Emilia: “What matters is, I have a sense of an attitude of having abandoned your own life.”

184: “——”

Emilia: “You were in fact the most important, you just didn’t realize, is that right?”

Recalling that at the start of all this, 184 had been the one to speak with Emilia.

Not merely because Regulus had ordered her to take charge of Emilia. In Emilia’s place, she’d offered her opinions to Regulus, stood on behalf of other brides, and right now intended to accept the words hurled at all of them.

This kind of posturing placed her as Regulus’s confidant— opportunistically manipulating Emilia and the brides, the suspicion of that rose.

Emilia: “But, I don’t think that’s the case. You aren’t Regulus’s [Heart]. I’d like to believe this.”

Emilia had been saved numerous times by 184.

Not sheltering her in a way that was visible to the naked eye, nor taking her hands to guide her.

Instead, in the face of incomprehensible malice, making sure that she would be prepared to proceed on.

Someone so concerned about others—

Emilia: “Being the true bride of someone like that, I can’t picture it.”

184: “... Perhaps it was because I wanted you to believe that, that I spoke to you, you know.”

Emilia: “That’s so. I, my head isn’t all that good, so if you were trying to fool me, I may have been deceived instantly. But,”

Emilia didn’t know whether or not she a gaze with which to regard others.

Currently, Emilia's comrades stood by her not are not because Emilia had chosen and expected for them to eventually be her comrades.

It had been because all of Emilia's comrades, had chosen her.

But toward being chosen, she'd never thought anything like "*aren't I amazing*".

Rather, she'd always felt uneasy, afraid of having to live up to expectations.

However, she wanted to respond to expectations bestowed upon her, and wanted herself to be able to respond to expectations. Always, she'd prayed thus.

Emilia: "I want to believe in you. This is, a choice I made."

184: "——"

Emilia: "Why, are you standing up for the silent crowd? Why, despite the surrender in your eyes, would you still help me? Why, are you——"

184: "All questions."

Interrupting Emilia's question, 184 shook her head.

Then, for the first time since Emilia had arrived here, she raised her face.

Frozen feelings on a stiff expression.

Such dry eyes, and closed lips.

This sense of sorrow, took the woman's already beautiful face to another level.

However, what she was thinking was.

184: "Please leave as soon as you can. If Husband-sama sees us, we'll all die."

Emilia: "Listen to me—"

184: "I have no reason to respond to these questions. You're, no longer Husband-sama's wife. Not like us."

Emilia: "—I'm a half-elf."

184: "Eh?"

Faced with Emilia's confession, the woman was struck silent.

Realizing that she'd done something unexpected, Emilia gave a faint smile. On the other hand, the woman finally understood the meaning of Emilia's confession.

She understood that standing in front of her eyes, was a silver-haired half-devil.

184: "Silver haired... half-elf..."

Emilia: "In truth, up until now, you and I have been different. Different situations, different origins, different even in our most basic qualities. But, I don't think anything like 'Everything about us is different, thus we're without connection' because of this."

184: "——"

Emilia: "The things you and I see, are surely the same. When you're sad, you'll want to cry, when you meet something you can't solve, you'll be angry, when you encounter something happy, you'll laugh with joy. That's the same, right?"

184: "What exactly, are you trying to say?"

Emilia, who had been talking in a rush, drew a sigh from 184.

At the question, Emilia found herself confused. What exactly she wanted to say, if she wanted to say it, she herself couldn't figure it out.

This went to show that she was turning too emotional, but that made her forget the topic and go off track. She should learn from Subaru, and say what she wanted to more directly—

Emilia: “That is, I...”

There were things she wanted to know. There were things she wanted to inquire about.

Things about Regulus’s [Heart]. Things about standing up and taking the lead role of the wives. With her utterly defeated expression, having protected the nearly defeated Emilia.

All of this together, she hoped that she would be told of by her.

And one more thing, that she needed to know first.

That was—

Emilia: “Your name, could you tell it to me?”

184: “——”

Emilia: “My name is Emilia, just Emilia. Although with circumstances different from yours, surely sharing similarities with you, a half-elf.”

184: “Humph...”

Emilia: “If we can see the same things, feel the same things, share the same hopes... Certainly, talking won’t be without meaning.”

Once upon a time, she’d introduced herself like this before.

When her heart had been ridden with unease, when she’d been convinced that she had no one to rely on, when she felt as if endless floods were swallowing her.

Back then, she’d been taken in by the same words.

—Even until today, she thought.

Then, she'd been truly happy.

The boy who she'd never met before recognizing her existence, had made her very happy.

When rejection had been about to come, suddenly being tossed words like those, she'd hopelessly fallen.

184: “——”

Once again, she had to borrow Subaru's strength.

Left and right, she was borrowing, and then desperate piecing it together.

But it was enough.

184: “Don't, kid around... Why is it, until now...”

Before Emilia, 184— the woman held her head, shaking it as she screamed with all her might.

That expression was filled with agony, that voice with resentment, and those eyes with the feelings of gazing upon what she loathed.

This was, since the beginning, the first genuine emotion that Emilia had wrought from her—

184: “Why after all that, are you suddenly saying something like we can be human again!”

As if to release the flow of long repressed emotion, she wailed.

184: “Not that not being human matters, being a doll is just fine. That man, is satisfied if we only act as obedient dolls. If we're played with like dolls, our lives will remain safe and sound. Only because we could believe this, did we last until today... that's the case, so!”

Materializing the strength of her feelings, she clashed with Emilia.

An outsider who knew nothing, what could they know about people like her, desperately struggling to even stay alive.

184: "What do you even know about us!"

Emilia: "I know that you're incredibly kind."

184: "What do you even know about us!"

Emilia: "I also know just how hard you worked to endure."

184: "What do you, even know, about us...!"

Emilia: "I know, that you're all crying out to be saved."

Hearing Emilia's words, the woman raised her face, as if suddenly bouncing back.

With widened, round eyes, with struggling, faintly moving lips.

Even a single word, she could not utter.

Because, up until now, if any of them had said it, their hearts would surely have given out.

The despair known as help, and the seeking of hope known as rescue, were as one.

Holding such hopes, until now, hadn't been allowed. In order to keep their minds from giving in, those thoughts were suppressed in their hearts.

And the result of this, with even the simplest of cries for help sealed deep within their hearts, were they.

Emilia: "I want to be saved; all of you are saying so. So I will save you. I'll free you from Regulus's hands. And to that end—"

184: "——"

Emilia: "Please lend me your strength. Please help help the ones who for me, and you... those who are even now, still engaged in battle.

She lowered her head.

With sincerity, having stated her hopes, Emilia lowered her head.

She stared straight at the ground.

Her heartbeat leapt painfully, and faintly, barely detectable atmosphere surrounding her felt as if it were a hurricane.

She held up her body now on the verge of crumbling, clenching her teeth to steel her heart.

Feeling afraid, was not only her.

Because, certainly for so much longer that she didn't even know, they had lived with a nightmare that they could not wake from.

Then—

184: "... Please, wait just a moment."

Emilia: "——"

Toward Emilia, who had been keeping her head down, the woman spoke, biting her lip.

Then with a deep breath, she cast her gaze away from Emilia. There were the gathered wordless wives, who observed the progressing dialogue.

184: "I have a question, that I'd like to ask. One that until now, I have yet to have asked anyone."

The woman paused for a moment, and the wives soundlessly wore frigid expressions.

Emilia also could not form a single sentence, and like this waited for the result.

In the sea of gazes which could stop breaths, the woman who had always stood up as the leader of the wives, spoke.

184: "Is there anyone, who likes that man?"

The question that the woman gently tilting her head posed, spread throughout the church.

The content shocked Emilia, and the brides who had remained silent, only cast their gazes around at each other. Confusion accompanied the faint emotion that rose in their minds.

Like a ripple, it spread.

Wife: "... Hate him."

The one who spoke this, was neither Emilia nor the woman acted as the wives' representative. It was one of the wives seated in the rows, a woman with short hair.

Those words which had barely been squeezed out, shocked not merely Emilia.

"I also, hate him." "I hate him too." "I've always hated him." "I hate him, I really hate him." "What a weirdo." "Messed up in the head." "Has he even liked anyone before?" "Only himself." "I don't know how many times I've turned him down in my head." "I want to cry." "But I can't." "Hate him." "He should just die." "Hate him more than anything." "Hatehatehate, truly hate him." "His gaze is hateful." "The way he emphasizes words is hateful." "The way he walks is hateful." "His character is hateful." "Unlovable by nature." "I hate him more than yesterday." "I'll hate him more tomorrow." "Disgusting." "Perverted." "The brain of a child." "Even a child would be better." "Even a dragon would be better." "No one could be a good match for him." "Physiologically unacceptable." "Hatehatehate." "He makes me want to vomit." "I don't know how many times I've thought about beating him to death." "The worst." "Worse

than the worst.” “Being near him nauseates me.” “His touch makes me feel like I’m rotting.” “My heart died.” “My family’s enemy.” “How could I like him if he forcibly kidnapped me?” “Is such unrepentant malice even possible?” “It hurts so much I want to die.” “He’s long winded and pompous, every time I talk to him I want to die a bit more.” “I hope his intestines rot.” “Give my lover back.” “I want to go home, I want to go home...” “Screw rescuing us, just murder him instead.” “Scum bastard.” “Truly hateful, I’ll hate him forever!” “A woman who would ever like him doesn’t exist, does she?” “Nor a man.” “No human would ever like him.”

As if a dam had broken, the wives poured out the words that had been suppressed in their hearts until now.

The overflowing words were resentment and disgust that had festered for too long in their hearts, stuffed with years of hatred and suffering, certainly not feelings that could bring joy.

—Even so, their expressions as they spat those words out became joyous and clear.

184: “Such unanimous opinions, which have never once been spoken before.”

Emilia: “You, too, was there anything you wanted to say?”

184: “Ah, there is.”

After hearing the wives’ admissions, the woman turned around to face Emilia.

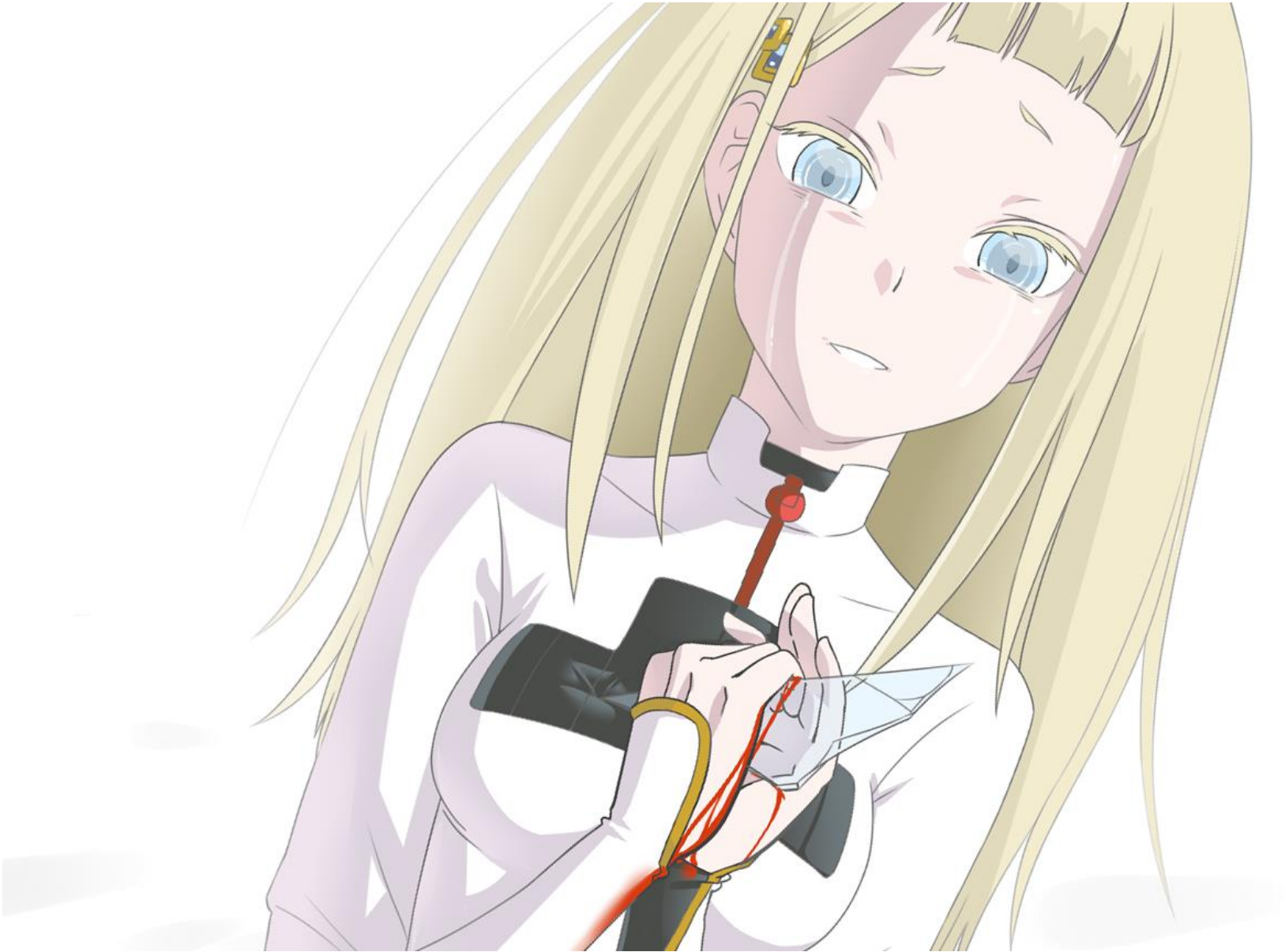
Caressing her long blonde hair, then with a face full of smiles— casting aside the order that forbade smiling, for the first time she revealed her beautiful smile.

184: “The kind of man, is the most hated. —Please by all means, help us.”

Like this, with a faint smile, the divorce statement was signed.

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Chapter 57 - Where The Heart Lies



—Since Subaru had left his life in the hands of fate, about ten minutes had passed.

Regulus: “Come on already! Strive after something for once, how about obediently dying here?”

Subaru: “Uwaaah!”

Regulus kicked at the house, cutting into it with terrifying precision, and the building without its support toppled helplessly.

The cloud of debris accompanying the collapse filled the vicinity, and Regulus, whose own vision would up clouded, clicked his tongue impatiently— listening to these tiny sounds, Subaru returned to the battlefield that had been exhausted of its traps.

Regulus: “Restlessly moving about... do you have no notion of attacking straightforwardly at all? Although I couldn’t care less about your relationship with that whore, but if you’re claiming to be their knight or whatever, is this any way to fight!?”

Subaru: “Say whatever you like, you talk until you’re satisfied!”

Regulus: “There you are!!”

If Subaru had tried to refute Regulus’s malicious mutterings, he’d receive in return a handful of sand that would end his life.

The instant after Subaru had escaped far away, the debris that he’d been hiding behind vaporized.

Being brushed would lead to fatal injury, a single strike would mean instant death.

So far, Regulus’s attacks had all miraculously missed. As contact would instantly mean the end, thanking fortune for this would be a tad inappropriate.

Subaru: “Concentrate! Concentrate! Concentrate!”

Catching his breath, wiping away sweat, he tensed all his attention to prepare for evasion.

The rising dust stained his face, and Subaru spat out a mouthful of saliva that tasted of dirt.

Putting the results of his parkour training into effect.

Unlike the days when his exercise had been without goal, the clear sense of purpose of right now had an enormous impact on the state of Subaru’s mind.

In the forest near the New Roswaal Mansion, repeated every single day, to the point of being sick of it— that time hadn't been for nothing.

Subaru: “*Hah*, no matter what, *hah*, I'm just a guy who can at most mess around with the skill of an amateur...!”

Even then, he was someone who had stopped a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult.

Considering the battlefield situation and Subaru's personal ability, to say that he was accomplishing something special wouldn't be much of a stretch.

If Pristella could safely escape from the Witch Cult's sinister hands, no matter what he'd try to contribute just a bit more—

Subaru: “So.....!”

Regulus: “Are you going to keep trying to kill time with this, do you seriously think that someone like you could be of any threat to me? You're just someone who figured out [Greed]'s secret a bit, but don't mistake that for the ability to stand against me!”

Without even room to catch his breath, the enraged Regulus increased the scope of his destruction. Regulus no longer cared about how much collateral damage he'd cause in order to kill Subaru.

The Pristella which was famed for its beautiful scenery, was gradually losing those sights from the crimes of the Witch Cult.

The stone bridge that spanned the waterway was shattered, the store meticulously decorated with glass was destroyed. Finding a feeling odd beauty in the flashing of shivering glass that was dissonant from the scene, Subaru believed in his right foot, and took the momentum of destruction as a cue to flee.

Ironically, from his right foot came a surge of power.

Pitch black, infected with who knows what, that right foot was currently Subaru's lifeline.

Lashing out with his whip, latching onto the raingutter of the horizontally oriented buildings. Believing in the tension of his whip, Subaru stomped hard on the ground, crossing the streets as if running along the wall— passing by Regulus’s side as if to specifically force the evildoer to watch him with widened eyes, he stuck out his tongue for extra provocation.

Regulus: “You!! Have no idea just what you’re worth!!”

The stone thrown from his swinging arm, flew far off, completely missing Subaru who fled using the momentum of yanking his whip.

Without even considering an attack, using solely the tactics of escape.

Those who had perished at [Greed]’s hands, had died due to their excessive courage. Weak, fragile, and timidly insisting on escaping. Certainly, such a person could not lose.

Thus, that misfortune could be wiped clean here.

For that goal—

Subaru: “Is it still not ready yet, Emilia? —This guy’s, heart!”

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Emilia: “Someone with a clue... isn’t there anyone?”

Before the brides who had promised their aid, Emilia accepted the mystery of possibilities and bit her lip.

The fifty-three assembled brides, all glanced back and forth at each other at Emilia’s question, before finally shaking their heads weakly.

Sylphy: “My most sincere apologies. Casting that man’s control aside and wanting to help you, is certainly genuine. Only...”

Bowing her head with remorse, this was the representative of the wives, the blonde woman named Sylphy.

Amongst all of Regulus's wives, she was the one who was most well informed about their current situation, and so she'd become a representative of sorts.

Sylphy: "I can scarcely believe that that man would place something so important with us. Though that man may call us wives and brides and whatnot... but actually acting as if we're husband and wife, has never once happened."

Emilia: "Although I've been told of Regulus being a suuper problematic person, that shouldn't be the case. Regulus's ... [Lion's Heart] is definitely, definitely placed on you."

Although Sylphy had begun to feel discouraged due to the lack of clues, Emilia would not be so easily disheartened.

At long last, Sylphy and the other wives, of their own will, had found their resolve to escape from Regulus's grasp. This was only the beginning of their resolve. To become discouraged at this very first step was absolutely unallowable.

And as for Emilia, she believed in Subaru with nary a trace of doubt.

Subaru was amazing. Not only was he aware of so many things Emilia didn't know, but he could apply knowledge and a lively attitude to a solution, no matter what adversity they'd had to face in the past. And so,

Emilia held no misgivings about his suspicion that Regulus's authority was [Lion's Heart].

This was not to say that she was acting thoughtlessly or with blind trust.

Just because it's Subaru, it's okay, was not the case. Even Subaru would make mistakes, and on occasion he would fail. However, that mistake would be corrected. Or she'd take his hand and become a force that could help him, this had become a source of Emilia's trust in him.

Emilia: “Subaru thinks that [Lion’s Heart] must reside within the wives...”

Touching her chin as if lost in thought, Emilia remembered the secret of [Greed]’s power that Subaru had shared with her.

—An authority that could stop the time of an object, that could leave it unable to be changed.

Although she’d initially thought such a power inconceivable, she found that too much fell in place with that explanation.

Could this truly exist in reality? Rather than being an uncertainty, it would be better to say that—

Emilia: “There, a suuuper inconceivable power is at work.”

Apparently, this was something even more irrational than a Divine Protection.

Unfortunately, Emilia, lacking a Divine Protection herself, could not comprehend the power inherent to those who were blessed with Divine Protections.

However, in Regulus, she could sense something similar. Something far more ferocious and ugly than a Divine Protection, were these authorities.

Emilia: “Heart, heart...”

To Emilia, the worst case scenario would be if one of the wives were truly a confidante, connected to Regulus’s true heart. This real bride would then be siding with Regulus, and would be concealing her heart from Emilia.

Emilia: “——”

Leaving the contemplative Emilia aside, the brides congregated around Sylphy, scrutinizing their previous conversations for clues.

Emilia’s amethyst eyes carefully scrutinized their faces as they engaged in a serious discourse.

At the same time, she directed the micro-spirits to look for changes in their bodies. These micro-spirits weren't particularly sensitive to changes in people, so their behaviour as if to test those who had applied for cooperation was decidedly unpleasant.

However, her misgivings had long exceeded the level that "*I don't want to doubt*" could curb.

Spirits: "Mmm....."

The micro-spirits gave a response.

Although it could not be said to be certain, the wives had given no obvious reaction. Within the sphere that Emilia could observe, there were clearly no wives who served as Regulus's confidant.

In that case, the only other possibility that came to mind was—

Emilia: "Eh?"

Suddenly feeling as if her hair were being tugged on, Emilia immediately raised her head.

Before her eyes, dancing in Emilia's line of sight was a micro-spirit glowing blue. The micro-spirit that should have been tracking one of the brides, swayed in the air as if wanting to convey something to Emilia.

Her eyes tracing the spirit's line of travel, she found that it now faced Sylphy. She too was currently working hard, as the lead singer of the chorus of the wives' revolt against Regulus.

The micro-spirit was fluttering around her back, as if bobbing up and down.

Emilia: "Hey, do you have a moment to talk?"

At Emilia's greeting, with an expression of surprise Sylphy turned. Emilia walked over to Sylphy, sneaking a glance at the micro-spirit which emphasized its presence near her chest.

Sylphy: "What is it?"

Emilia: "Excuse me for a second."

No one present beside Emilia could see the micro-spirits without physical form. So no matter how hard micro-spirits tried to communicate, they could reach no one but Emilia.

So, when Emilia suddenly reached a hand out toward Sylphy's chest, Sylphy looked back to Emilia as if shocked.

Sylphy?: "Eh? Eheheh?"

Emilia: "Wait a moment, please stay quiet. I'm checking something right now."

Sylphy: "What're you checking, hey, what're you checking...?"

Her cheeks reddening, Sylphy questioned Emilia without being able to mask her surprise.

Emilia then answered Sylphy with a serious expression.

Emilia: "The rhythm, of your heart."

Sylphy: "——!"

Emilia: "It's because I'm a spiritualist. Though my original contracted partner is currently on leave, I can still communicate with the micro-spirits. I asked those micro-spirits to investigate your bodies, and received a response that only your heartbeat was strange."

Sylphy: "My heart.....?"

Sylphy swallowed a mouthful of saliva.

Her expression was entirely one of disbelieving surprise. Her shock was merely a matter of course. After all, she'd only just heard a brief summary of [Lion's Heart], before being told that her heartbeat had changed.

And if things had progressed to this point, there there was only one explanation—

Emilia: “Too much... Regulus combines his heart, together with the heart of someone who he claims to be his wife...!”

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Regulus: “No matter how you look at it, although you’re wearing the image of virtuousness while reciting your respectable rhetoric, where the notion that your battle to buy time would actually bear fruit came from, is a complete mystery to me. And although I don’t know how you could conceive of my power, but now having clearly understood it, you would really want to keep fighting?”

As he glanced down at the bloodied Subaru, Regulus seemed to tilt his face upward in boast of his victory.

Collapsed on the ground, lying by the side of a building as he took pained breaths, half of Subaru’s face was stained with fresh blood.

Subaru: “Ah, guu...”

Regulus: “Although I’ve let you run about here and there, you’re really boring after having fallen. Well, that’s to be expected. It couldn’t be not like that. Considering the difference between you and I, this is merely reaping the crop when the harvest is over. With this, at last, without extraneous unpleasant moods, the end has come.”

Approaching the collapsed Subaru, Regulus’s heels crushed the rocks littering his path. His authority was still active, as if he wanted it to be witnessed.

Regulus: “In summary, don’t you feel that this is the fault of your excessively arrogant self? Up until now, there have been many like you, who wanted to beat me down or rouse a battle against me. But of all those people, not a single one has ever touched me. That is the fate of those whose desires supercede their abilities, an absolute law of nature. Do you understand?”

The Sin Archbishop of [Greed] discussing the nature of desire, asserted his contempt for those who allowed excessive desire to immolate themselves.

To have desire would create struggle without meaning. To have desire would create starvation without boundary. To have desire would create ruthlessness without limit.

For this exact reason, to be without want and without desire was valuable.

Just pray if you are poor, to have your own talent is optimal.

Regulus: “Just being content with the present enough, craving what is beyond own abilities will lead your own destruction. Gathering together one after another but refusing to learn, you are really a bunch of hopeless creatures.”

With a sigh, Regulus slid a hand through his white hair, shaking his head as if he was drunk on the throes of a tragedy.

However, the sorrow in that voice was no act. Regulus was more or less from the bottom of his heart, sighing at the foolishness of Subaru and others who were not himself.

That was the self-righteous, undetectably lonely voice of someone omnipotent.

Subaru: “Before... I die... your... power's...”

Regulus: “Hah? Aah, [a last offering], as the saying goes? Trust you to know something archaic as that. You’ve bested me in an irrelevant store of knowledge, is that what you’re trying to say?”

Regulus laughed as he watched Subaru whose breaths looked on the verge of cutting off, wishing only for that last answer. Without a single route of escape, all that was left for his sorrowful existence was imminent death.

Regulus: “Well, you’ve already gotten this far. At the very end, I’ll give your negligible self a reward for your efforts. I’ll tell you, that this time you struggled to your very last to buy, is all completely meaningless.”

Subaru: “Meaningless... you mean...”

Regulus: “It’s all really rather simple. My heart that you and that woman are searching for is indeed carried by my wives. —But, as to who is carrying it, neither I or any of them know. Equal rights, equally divided love, and the responsibilities and obligations they bear are equal as well.”

Toward the astonished Subaru, Regulus shrugged with a “*Well, it’s sort of like this?*”.

Regulus: “For those who have taken multiple wives, treating all of them equally is a matter of course. In addition to a few clever justifications, only those who practice equality are allowed to exercise their authority. In other words, I’m betting on my life. Constantly, I am manifesting my love for them.”

Subaru: “And the wives are unaware of this heart’s condition because?”

Regulus: “Not like it’s a particularly complicated reason. —Constantly hearing the sound of one’s own heartbeat everyday, there isn’t anyone out there who would continue to pay it any mind, is there?”

Watching Regulus who laughed with his mouth open, Subaru understood.

The method with which Regulus hid his heart, that vicious method.

Both simple and effective, and more defensive than any other method.

Subaru: “With your heart and your wives’ hearts, you...!”

Regulus: “Managing the husband’s property is indeed one of the wife’s obligations. But you see, since I am a man without desire. In the first place, I don’t have the amount of meaningless possessions that guys like you do. And so, what is entrusted to my wives is my existence itself... what magnificence, isn’t this the very essence of matrimonial love?”

—Disgusting.

Regulus’s consciously ruthless authority. Without malice, without condemnation, he believed that was the natural order and process.

Subaru had come up with a number of theories on [Lion's Heart]'s hidden methods, before sending Emilia to the church. But no matter how he looked at it, this had not been one of them.

Moreover, if no one could break—.

Subaru: "Something so far beyond reason... Emilia, she couldn't possibly do anything."

Just now, if what Regulus had boasted of with a face full of pride was in fact the entirety of [Lion's Heart], then there should still be a method of breaking through it. If that could be conveyed to Emilia, with her power, she could take care of it with haste.

The question was not one of possibility, but one of correctness.

—That is, the choice of life and death.

Regulus: "Hah? Hey, you..."

As he rose with a disgusted expression, Regulus wore an uncomprehending gaze as he watched the Subaru who stared at him.

Being caught up in the demolition of the city, Subaru who had until now seemed to be on the verge of death, brushed the dust from his knees as he stood, still glaring. After a moment, Subaru raised his eyebrows with an "aah" as he noticed Regulus's incredulousness.

Subaru: "Playing dead... ah, no. Playing the verge of death. Since a flying stone happened to slice my forehead, I just wanted to give it a try, is all."

Applying blood to his face and pretending to be in agony, had led to now.

With a face full of smiles, Subaru looked at Regulus who had been toyed into the palm of his hand.

Subaru: "I trusted in you. You're definitely the kind who, if you found a dying enemy, would arrogantly boast of your victory as you rambled on nonstop."

Regulus: “——!”

Subaru: “Whoa!”

Rising with a jump, Regulus's body flew forward in a straight line.

With incredibly agile speed, and movements of a dirty casual, he flew in a straight line. In this rare moment, Regulus could achieve an acceleration that could shock even Reinhardt.

However, without being able to see that mechanism, his understanding of it was limited.

Subaru: “*Fuuu!*”

Accelerating with his right foot, without hesitation his body flew toward the left. Regulus's goal was to slam directly into Subaru, but he was thwarted by the limitation of [linearity].

In summary, the Regulus's momentary superhuman ability, was the result of an application of freezing his physical form. The time of his body was cut off from the world, and would not be interfered with again, was that man's power. If he were to attack suddenly in this way, whether gravity, air resistance, or inertia, none could restrain him.

It wasn't always in effect, which should be because there were restrictions—

Regulus: “—*Guu*, you bastard!”

Subaru: “The one who wants to yell is me...! I have to find a way to reach Emilia...”

The position Regulus's heart, absolutely needed to be communicated.

To communicate it, and to make choices. What method was there—

In order to save the city, Emilia was needed.

Subaru: “Emilia...”

In contrast to Regulus who gathered momentum, Subaru looked in the direction of the church where Emilia should be.

In the midst of the ruined, collapsed street, a street that could not be crossed in Regulus's aftermath, was a half-destroyed church.

—And that place in the next moment, was engulfed in a brilliance that shone blue and white.

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The hearts of the wives became one with Regulus's heart.

Emilia's conclusions caused tremors in all the surrounding wives who heard it.

Most heavily affected was Sylphy, who found herself the recipient of Regulus's shared heart.

Sylphy: "My heart... and...?"

After her hand fell back, Sylphy's face stilled as she backed away step by step. The woman standing behind her, worriedly placed her hand on Sylphy's back.

Sylphy: "Do not touch me!"

In the next moment, Sylphy reflexively spoke as she swung out an arm.

As if to keep the other wives away from her, holding this posture, she looked at Emilia.

Sylphy: "Are you sure there's no mistake?"

Emilia: "The micro-spirit says it's unnatural. I, too, can feel a faint sense of overlap in the sound of your heartbeat."

Sylphy: "——"

Sylphy placed a hand on her chest, closing her eyes as if to confirm what Emilia had just said. The speed, strength, and interval of her heartbeat resounding in her throat, she gave a deep sigh.

Sylphy: “I see... just how much, just to what extent does he want to trample upon the souls of others, that man!”

Emilia: “Wait a moment, what are you doing!?”

Revealing an incredibly dry smile, Sylphy walked into the depths of the church. Half-destroyed from Reinhardt’s attack, in a corner of the church were scattered shards from the skylight, of exquisitely carved glass.

Sylphy plucked up a shard of glass, and turned back.

Sylphy: “You understand, don’t you, that man’s schemes. Imposing his weaknesses unto others, and then forcing resolutions upon them as well.”

Emilia: “Resolutions... are you saying,”

Sylphy: “In order to stop that man’s heart, stopping my own heart is the only feasible way. As that man says, [‘til death do us part], isn’t this the case?”

As she played with the shard of glass, Sylphy spoke in a flippant voice. Emilia understood what she meant, and at the same time picked up on the underlying message. Sylphy’s epiphany and Regulus’s malice.

Emilia: “Wait, you can’t! There has to be something, has to be some other way...”

Sylphy: “Such a convenient way, do you truly believe it exists? With our hearts already joined, stopping just that man’s heartbeat without stopping mine, couldn’t possible be, and,”

Emilia: “Don’t give up so easily! If I could allow something like this, for what have I... Why did I leave that forest!”

There was once again about to be a victim.

Because of Emilia's lack of power and knowledge, a sacrifice was once again about to happen before her. Just like everyone in the forest. Just like Fortuna or Juice. As if to bury what Emilia's hands could not reach, everyone but Emilia were inclined to use their own lives.

Sylphy: "The days of being taken as that man's wife were truly arduous."

Desperately, Emilia considered if there were any other way.

During this time, Sylphy's heart gradually calmed down, and with the clarity of approaching the condign finale, she slowly began to grow more resolute.

Sylphy: "Merely in order to avoid trigger that man's imperial wrath, I held the consciousness of death close. Allowing it to slide no matter how brutal that man was, welcoming the new brides... only for those children who were in the same position as me, no matter what, I wanted to protect them. Just as the one I first met, just as the ones before me protected them."

Acting as the representative of the wives, presenting herself before all the others no matter what, and now her true meaning was clear.

Before her had been others. Triggering Regulus's temper, someone who had stood at the forefront of all these seized women. And then Sylphy took that will up, because even now these wives remained still.

Sylphy: "Even if our spirits were defiled by that man, because he would never touch our bodies... Certainly, if both had been defiled, we would have long been unable to withstand. So right until today, no matter the language or voice or behavior of that man, endlessly we enduredandenduredandenduredandenduredandenduredandendured and yet!"

Having reached this point, Sylphy who had been biting her lips tilted her face upward.

In her eyes were large, large drops of tears, as well as a scorching rage that seemed searing enough to evaporate even those tears.

Sylphy: “That man’s hand, has tainted even my body! I’d thought something like at least I could protect my body, but even something I wanted to protect that much had never been saved in the first place!”

Tears flowed as a roar from the soul tore itself from her, and Sylphy’s hand wept blood. The glass that she had been gripping firmly had cut through the palm of her hand, and though she frowned at the pain, the corners of her mouth soon pitifully relaxed.

Sylphy: “Because women bearing injuries are atypical, even the slightest of bruises would mean death by that man. This wound, is my freedom.”

Emilia: “——”

Sylphy: “In no way is this your fault. I am incredibly grateful to you. Toward that man, revenge for every single day unto now, a better way could certainly never be found elsewhere.”

With a slight smile at Emilia, Sylphy looked toward the other wives— looked toward those who could be called her companions.

Then clutching the glass with her own two hands, she pressed it against her chest.

Sylphy: “If I die, his heart will be transferred to someone. This is a certainty. That man wouldn’t use just myself alone as a shield for his heart. Just like that, everyone has no reason not to know that man’s stubbornness.”

???: “Surely, it will be so.”

Which one of the brides who whispered that softly was unknown.

As if assenting to what Sylphy had said, the wife who had answered emerged from the crowd. A woman with long chestnut hair, she too took up one of the shards of glass scattered beneath Sylphy’s feet.

Wife: “Something like death, I too have considered it a number of times. Even if I’m living like this, I can’t say that I’m truly alive. I’d rather reunite with my family in the afterlife.”

Wife: "My reason for not doing so was not wanting to die. Even if I were to be liberated from this pain, I wouldn't have any happy memories from life."

Wife: "But, if dying... If this life, could bring vengeance on that man can to pass... If my death would be something without meaning..."

One after another, the wives came forth and took up shards of glass.

The brides looked at those sharp edges, as if looking upon their hopes. With Emilia's words as an opportunity, the wives found their hopes, found something their lives could be spent on.

Sylphy: "Thank you, we are truly grateful to you. —That man, aside from us, he truly has no other wives present. This is something we can absolutely guarantee. So then, we'll trouble you for what comes after."

Emilia: "——"

Sylphy: "Please be sure to help us speak. Our anger, must absolutely reach that man. —All we can do is trouble you, having been forced by that man, and then rejecting him successfully, there has only been you."

Sylpy's request, was said with a voice full of warmth.

The wives all approached the shattered stained glass of the church that was to be witness to a marriage, holding the fragments in their hands as a symbol, chose their end.

Point thing the sharp edges against their pale necks, with a breath they were to suicide—

Emilia: "Wait a moment."

That action of certain death, was stopped by Emilia's words.

Emilia, who had fallen into a silence until now. In her words were [power]. Both in physical and metaphorical meaning.

Hands of ice reaching out from the ground sealed the wives' movements. The slashing movement was successfully hindered, successfully preventing their suicides.

Sylphy watched Emilia's movement with wide eyes, and then spoke with a trembling voice,

Sylphy: "I beg you, please understand us! Your, your sentiments, I am truly grateful for. But any method other than this..."

Naught but death could serve as repayment.

Naught but death could strike a blow against that man, against Regulus.

That was Sylphy's, the wives', conclusion.

Stopping their own hearts, this sorrowful answer, Emilia also understood. So to figure out how to deny it, thinking and thinking, all along she had been thinking of a way.

And so—

Emilia: "I'm sorry. Not like this."

Sylphy: "Eh.....?"

Emilia: "If it were Subaru, he might have thought of another way. But my head is a bit slow, so no matter how hard I thought, I didn't have a clue... So,"

Surrounding the muttering Emilia, brilliant lights of blue and white began to dance.

Gaining mana, the swaying light, was the micro-spirits which had entered a visible state. As if to engulf the entire collapsed building, the substantial gathering of micro-spirits began to appear— that was, in a sense, a sight as sacred as a dream, and Sylphy and the others held their breaths.

Emilia: "I want, to make your heartbeats stop. —Because if you stab your throats with a weapon like that, you won't die such easy deaths."

After Emilia lifted her hand, the micro-spirits seemed to follow that movement as they shone, and a blueish snow began to fall in the church. The snow layered thinly around the brides, and where it brushed their skin, it turned into white crystal.

This magic that Emilia was capable of, was both the gentlest and cruelest.

Emilia: “—Sorry. I can only use this method.”

Sylphy: “Please don’t apologize.”

After realizing Emilia’s intentions, Sylphy breathed a sigh of relief. The sentiments of the wives was in alignment. They looked at Emilia, who was unable to form even a single sound, and spoke in unison.

Wives: “Thank you.”

Emilia: “——”

Then, a brilliance that shone blue and white engulfed the church—

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Icicles rising as if an assault from the sky made a complete frozen seal around the church.

Forming a sound so sorrowful as if to roll over the sky, as if the sky itself had turned white and died.

Within that structure of ice that had risen, how much sorrow had gathered?

No one, save for the one who was responsible for this scene, could understand.

Subaru: “... Emilia.”

The ice created by the incomparably powerful magical vortex was peerless beyond measure, and could not have been made by anyone but Emilia.

[Lion's Heart]... truly had been subdued— along with the lives of the gathered brides, his heartbeat had stopped. Subaru had already thought of the method. The only possible method.

Then, that method would have been impossible to actualize.

He'd even made an emotional preparation for Emilia's failure to reach the church.

But, upon seeing this spectacle the answer was clear.

—Chosen by Emilia, that answer.

Regulus: "Heyhey, isn't this a bit..."

Looking in the same direction as Subaru was Regulus, who could imagine the result of this ice structure, and his cheeks began to twitch. The place where the icicles were raised were where his wives currently were, Regulus of course well understood. As well as what that spectacle meant.

And so.

Regulus: "You two! Is this what you set out to do! Is this something that humans are capable of!? Seizing another's beloved, arbitrarily without authorization! Just... just how coldhearted can you be to do such a cruel thing—!?"

Regulus stomped at the ground as he shouted thus at the bloodied Subaru.

His soles shattered the slate, and even distorted the earth enough to create an illusion that the city itself was shattering.

Rushing forward without second thought, Regulus stabbed his fingers at Subaru.

Regulus: "Satisfied? Are you satisfied?! In order to kill me alone, you dared to snatch away the lives of all my faultless wives, and even felt happy to have done so, your humanity—"

His mouth spewing dirty curses, the body of Regulus who spoke of the sorrows of being plundered from was suddenly sent flying.

The reason for that was, the spear of ice sent by the girl who had emerged from the church.

The spear of ice struck Regulus with astonishing momentum, ceaselessly striking the body of the standing Regulus in succession. His body was sent flying like a doll, and in the process several more spears of ice flew at him.

The momentum did not stop there, and like this Regulus's body was slammed straight into the waterway, and with a loud crack the waterway was frozen, becoming an ice sculpture in Regulus's form.

Emilia: "—All that just now, consider it a divorce from your wives."

Striding across the frosted streets, Emilia returned to the battlefield in a flash of silver.

She stood on the collapsed street, looking at the approaching Subaru, whose pitiful sight made her narrow her amethyst eyes.

Emilia: "Subaru, those wounds..."

Subaru: "I'm fine! It's just a scratch that bled a bit more. More importantly, the church... where are the wives?"

Emilia: "... Everyone, wished to defeat Regulus. So,"

Averting her gaze, Emilia's attention drifted slightly back to the church.

This reaction was enough, enough to convey that Emilia's choice did not belong to her alone. And the weight of that choice, Subaru would not have to bear it as well.

Subaru: "But, but the effect of [Lion's Heart] is interrupted. That man's invincibility trick should be at an end."

Emilia: “No. It doesn’t seem to be something that’ll be so easily solved.”

Subaru: “Eh?”

The sacrifices made as a result of our choices, should have been the price paid for the answer, Emilia shook her head slightly toward Subaru who was thinking such thoughts.

As he was astonished by her reaction, the ice filling the waterway behind them began to crack.

The crack began to expand, affecting even the flow of the blocked off waterways. The collapse spreading to where waterway met water flow, Subaru’s soles were already immersed in overflowing water.

Regulus: “Truly a laughably ridiculous arrogance, vulgarity that is incorrigible, incompetence that brings speechlessness, shamelessness that brings disbelief, inferiority that is hopeless...!”

Leaving the canal, the murderer who was drenched but not wet in the slightest approached.

His white suit unstained, his white hair unshaken by the wind, his white face free of wounds, without even a drop of sweat. This existence was practically a daydream—no, better to call it a nightmare that appeared midday.

Regulus: “And now, what will you do? You two, how do you plan to take responsibility? Though you droned on and on like you’d done something great, in the end this was nothing but a failed miscalculation, in the end there were only sacrifices, how do you plan to fix this situation!?”

In the form of this Regulus who was enraged to the point of madness, the effect of the unchanging [Lion’s Heart] yet lingered.

Emilia had made an assault on that level, forget being wounded, even a trace of what had happened could not be seen at all.

Subaru: “How’s this possible! Even just now you were speaking of [Lion’s Heart] unending effects... Presence of mind to bluff in a situation like that, how could someone like you have it!”

Regulus: “Do you think me so kind that I’d turn a deaf ear to that which can’t be ignored? I’ll say this first, isn’t the notion of not infringing on others’ hearts basic etiquette!? Clearly no one’s looking down on the rights of others, so how is it that you two are always doing something so mentally deficient? Conscience aside, do you lack in even basic intelligence?”

Facing these unintentionally provocative lines from Subaru, Regulus looked down with an unimpressed expression, knocking against his head of white hair.

Regulus: “It seems, that that contemptuous prostitute’s counting is wrong, isn’t it? Not remembering the number of lives even though she’s the one who stole them away, that’s a killer’s way of thinking. Certainly there’s something wrong with it.”

Subaru: “Since when did you have the right to say those words...”

Regulus: “Don’t surreptitiously try to change the topic. Anything I’ve done to date and such, has absolutely nothing to do with that woman’s ungratefulness. Don’t turn your back on the sins you have committed. Don’t look away. Tossing your own issues aside to blame the other party, don’t you feel ashamed to call yourself a person?”

No matter where he went, carrying a vexing share of rage to impose on others, was Regulus.

Carrying not a single doubt about his way of life, was the foundation of Regulus Corneas.

How many contradictions would appear in his series of speeches before he was satisfied.

Discourse with Regulus was truly damaging to sanity. Facing a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, seemed to create an illusion that normalcy was wrong.

Regulus: “But... look, you miscalculated.”

The substitutes for his heart, would even destroying all the alternatives of those be unable to lift Regulus’s invincibility?

There should have been no problem in theory. During his risky bet with his life, Regulus had proven that he was not so smart as to be able calculate with skillful words the way Subaru could.

Regulus did not have the ability to deceive or rely on his eloquence to mislead.

He was completely unable to change his way of thought. In his world, there was no one but him. Marriage was merely imitation, speeches were merely ideological, battles were merely conducted as an outsider. His way of being was merely pure malice— almost exactly like a [Little King].

Emilia: “Fifty-three people...”

Next to the trembling Subaru, Emilia muttered.

She has not until now, toward Regulus’s fallacies, curses, unspeakable complaints, shown no reaction whatsoever. Only one sentence, all she spoke was this one sentence.

Regulus: “Huh? What? Just now, what did you say?”

Emilia: “I said, fifty-three people. The number of women you forcibly brought to your side. Could it be that I’m wrong? That would be absolutely impossible. I could never miscount the number of lives.”

Regulus: “Hmm—mm. And? So what? What are you trying to say?”

With a contemptuous attitude, Regulus dismissed Emilia’s quiet assertion. Digging a finger into his ear, an attitude full of ridicule.

Even Subaru with sarcasm as his strongest suit wanted to clap in praise for his flippant manner. Just as Subaru was about to accept Regulus’s provocation, Emilia looked straight toward him. Then she shook her head slightly at Subaru who held his breath.

Emilia: “It’s alright, Subaru. I understand it all now.”

Subaru: “By understand, you mean...”

Emilia: “And, because I am incredibly angry right now... No longer, will I forgive him.”

Feeling fear squeeze his chest, Subaru saw it.

On that gentle face, feeling quietly vanished, was Emilia with a soft sound. Freezing her feelings like that, was the most furious Emilia that had been seen until now.

A frigid flame rolling across frozen eyes in that manner, Emilia touched her chest.

And then, spoke.

Emilia: “Regulus’s heart is here. —Right now, beating inside my chest.”

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Chapter 58 - —Faith



Regulus: “Keheh.”

Placing a hand on his chest after Emilia had spoken.

What rang out was a laugh that could not be hidden. Although what leaked out was at first only a breath, he soon could endure no more, and his voice gradually escalated in volume, until it became cachinnation.

Regulus: “Hahaha! Ahaha! Huu, ahahahahaha!”

Straightening his back, Regulus laughed loudly as if he’d heard a great joke. Sticking a hand into his white hair and tousling it, the murderer was now immersed in a fit of laughter that no one else could understand.

Subaru could tell from his smug demeanor that Emilia's speculation was correct.

Subaru: "You bastard, what's so funny!?"

Regulus: "Of course it's funny, isn't it!? Or rather, you are, I really must suggest that, in this desperate situation, you should give up on trying to think and we can all laugh together. On that note, do you understand the current situation? You yourself, with your own hands pushed the most critical of critical points into this calamity!"

Subaru: "Guu..."

No words could be fitting.

Only in this moment, was Regulus's reply so perfectly reasoned that it could be met with naught but speechlessness.

Subaru turned his head to look to Emilia, confirming with her whether or not her speculation could be proven.

However, toward Subaru's searing gaze, Emilia shook her head.

Emilia: "There's no mistake. I had the micro-spirits confirm, and I can feel it myself. Inside me, there's something extraneous that doesn't belong to me. It feels, soooo disgusting."

Emilia asserted thus, a despairing hint that announced the present reality.

The effect of [Lion's Heart] had moved to Emilia. In other words, the only way to stop Regulus now would be to stop Emilia's heartbeat as well.

Subaru: "Then again, why is Emilia's heart... with [Little King], could it be that I made a mistake? The man's heart, no matter who, as long as he wants..."

If it were that kind of ability, there existed in Regulus's authority no loopholes. If he could give his heart to even hostiles and strangers, that would mean that as long as the human race lived on, a way to kill Regulus did not exist.

Rather, if it could be that his heart could replace that of any living creature—.

Subaru: "Truly shameless."

Regulus: "The worthless howls of a retreating dog are pleasant to hear. Hahaha, no matter what I have to say. Just keep running with your temper, searching for some ridiculous excuse for your failure is the right of the loser. And enjoying superiority while hearing them is my right as the winner... Aah, this isn't bad! Not bad at all!"

Emilia: "I don't meet your standards for a wife, you yourself were saying so earlier."

Regulus: "So annoying. Going on and on as if you're strong enough to speak of your own rights. More importantly, how are planning to take responsibility for killing my wives? My ideal wives... how long do you think it took to gather such a group? How many years do you think it takes? Obviously of age, but lacking anything like a wife or lover, do you want me to be one of those garbage widowers who no one wants? Before I find a new wife, you have the obligation to join with me!"

Using stern words to smack at Emilia, full of spirit as he voiced his rhetoric was Regulus.

The violent reasoning that the murderer believed in, completely convinced that his heart was indeed within Emilia. If so, the possibility of removing Regulus's heart from Emilia—.

Regulus: "Would you like to try? To see if there's a way you can move my heart?"

"_____"

Regulus: "The method is simple if you want to try it. Right now, just kill this girl before you. As long as you end her life, you'll naturally understand whether or not my authority will stop. Very very simple, effective, and reasonable... ahaha! You couldn't do it, could you? If you do something like that, with

the motives and values that you've challenged me with, won't you have lost your self-justifying reasons!?"

Although hard to admit, Regulus was right.

Subaru had not the courage to sacrifice Emilia. Call him selfish, call him arrogant, only that could he not do.

In order to defeat Regulus, they had already tossed aside the lives of his wives.

Even with the revelation that there had been no alternatives than letting go those sacrifices, in no way could they compare with the life of Emilia or his other comrades.

Natsuki Subaru's choices always were, selfish to a disgusting degree.

Regulus: "You see. Someone like him could never. In that case, how about offing yourself in proxy? Simple, isn't it. Just like what you did to the others. Or what? Can't you do it? Though you've clearly taken the lives of others without consent, but because you treasure your own so much you can't do it? How amazing, I think I'm going to vomit?"

Emilia: "—Subaru."

Subaru: "Wait, you can't. Seriously, this alone is unacceptable."

At Regulus's provocation, Emilia too seemed to be calling to Subaru as if in realization. Hearing the unsparing tone of her voice, Subaru hurriedly stopped Emilia in fear.

Even if you giving in to the provocation, surely she wouldn't immediately make the choice to abandon herself.

However, Emilia had already done a good job of choosing the worst option if she didn't have the means to win.

Then Subaru, had only the thought that he would absolutely not choose this path. In that case, they had lost.

Calling Emilia's name had only stopped her, but he could speak no words.

Regulus: "Then, in that case we're about ready to draw this to a close, aren't we. Although keeping a low grade woman like you isn't in my interest, for time being I'll compromise. Before finding my next wife I'll join with you for a bit. Though I'll just have to kill this guy. You've already infringed on my rights to this point... Ah, that's right. So, did you laugh earlier?"

Before Subaru who clenched his teeth, Regulus happily turned the corners of his mouth upward.

A torrent of magic was welled around Emilia, as she planned to make her own decision. At the same time, Regulus, not taking note of the wind, laughed.

Regulus: "You're that guy, aren't you? That loud voice in the city that yammered on right before my wedding? Killing a single Sin Archbishop or whatever...what a joke, right? My condolences if you really thought you could best me just because you killed that disgrace. That man, both before and after becoming an archbishop, has never accomplished anything, he has always been a simpleton."

Regulus, standing and giggling. What his words pointed to, was without doubt the madman Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti who Subaru found abhorrent.

Petelgeuse was the worst kind of lunatic with no redeeming qualities. He felt not a shred of goodwill for the lunatic, instead hating him down to his bone marrow, and would never spare him even were he to come back as a ghost.

But nevertheless, seeing the Sin Archbishop ridicule Petelgeuse who was supposed to be his comrade, in Subaru's heart grew an inherent feeling of unpleasantness.

The possibility of defeating Regulus, and in addition this entangled state of Emilia's life and death didn't even need mention.

Then again, Petelgeuse, he—.

Subaru: “—Ah.”

Should have been a loathed lunatic opponent, mad bloodstained laughter appearing in his mind. While thinking back, he lifted his face. Then something felt as if it had begun to stir within his chest, he seized it, swallowing his breath.

Could it be, that something like that, was also possible?

Subaru: “Could it be done...?”

Incomprehensible.

Strictly speaking, no one can guarantee the possibility generated within Subaru’s mind. Just like bringing an empty table to a negotiation— or rather, it was closer to being the product of Subaru’s delusions. Merely Subaru’s own feelings.

But, that was precisely why. That was precisely why, able to arrive at this possibility was only Subaru alone.

That notion now, based just on intuition, even a god wouldn’t know if it could succeed— but.

Subaru: “Emilia.”

Emilia: “——”

Feeling the magic that seemed to have risen to its limit, Subaru called to her.

Emilia remained silent, only revealing the realization of a tragedy. Nevertheless, deep in her eyes a hint of emotion flashed through. That was, expectation and trust in Subaru who watched her.

As if to lend support to those feelings, Subaru asked.

Subaru: “Emilia.”

Emilia: "Mmm."

Subaru: "—Can you completely trust me, and leave everything to me?"

Emilia: "I can."

Toward this question, her response came simply and without hesitation.

Emilia placed a hand on her chest, and for the first time since returning to the battlefield, revealed a smile.

Emilia: "I believe that if it's Subaru, you can do anything."

Aah, damn it, how despicable this was.

A girl who he liked, treating him with unflinching trust, how could he fail!

Whether holding tight with hands or biting tight with teeth, he wasn't allowed to fail here!

Subaru slowly breathed deep, then slowly released the breath.

Then, glanced toward Regulus who watched them in silence. Regulus did not obstruct their conversation, just rested on his wrists as he waited leisurely.

Subaru: "Aren't you a bit too relaxed?"

Regulus: "Aren't I usually relaxed?"

Any trace of failure and the like, not even a speck remained.

Regulus had revealed all his preparations, and wanted to do away with Subaru. In truth, Regulus's authority [Lion's Heart] was perfect. After clarifying its key points, victory was still placed somewhere nigh unreachable.

However, precisely because he was convinced of his impending victory, would when confronted with Subaru's struggles and efforts, watch from aside without intervention.

He had no idea what was happening. That point, was the same for Subaru himself.

Subaru: "——"

If Beatrice had been here, there might have been another method. If that intelligent girl had been by his side, there would have certainly have been a less risky way to win.

In the depths of his chest, lay the connection with the girl who was his comrade. Certainly, after all this was over, he'd be in for a scolding from her, not being scolded wouldn't do.

So now that he was alone, recalling the times when he'd been alone, the memories remaining within his chest— were certainly not ones which brought happiness, awakening only an initial landscape of terror and agony.

Emilia: "Subaru."

Subaru: "——"

Emilia: "Let go and do it."

Emilia's call, became strength for him to make the decision.

Subaru violently seized his own chest, rousing something within him that was truly difficult to consider his, concentrating his consciousness on the center of the whirlpool where this chaotic force swirled, liberating it—.

In this moment, slightly changing the manner in which he called it.

In order to have the murderer who had insulted the lunatic understand what had happened, only this once.

This power, this power inherited from that abhorrent madman!

Subaru: “Come forth... Unseen Haaaand—!!”

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—Invisible Providence. Or rather, [Unseen Hand].

The force that surged through his body, Subaru defined as the power of the witch created by the Witch Factor. He’d heard from Echidna in her dream castle, that he’d gained the Witch Factor since he’d killed Petelgeuse— what detriments it had were yet unclear. However, the power which gave Subaru Unseen Hand undoubtedly came from here.

So until now, Subaru had never sought to use the Witch Factor as his own source of power.

Subaru firmly believed so. The nature of this power being similar to that of the madman’s, was because the witch factor of [Sloth] inherently held this nature.

The possibility of Petelgeuse running amok within him, he didn’t even want to consider.

—But if this is the case, what was this feeling about.

Echoing, lively, silently cheering from inside Subaru.

Cheering for being called upon. Cheering for once again being able to use his power. Cheering for being requisitioned, completing his goal. And then, was only an unspeakable incomprehensible joy.

Accompanying the liberation of that power, that happiness and appreciation, as well as that feeling of gratitude.

The fluctuation of this incomprehensible emotion, was in no way something Subaru’s problems could solve.

Regulus: “Hah!?”

Accompanying Subaru's loud scream, was Regulus's own cry as he looked to the sky.

He shouldn't be able to see it. Because this was, Unseen Hand.

The poisonous hand that was perfect for assassinations due to its invisibility— having been insulted by Regulus as sluggish, a negligible and residual power, something even weaker and more residual than that.

Only one in number, with an incredibly short range, and too many unknown factors.

As the key to breaking through this situation, there should be a limit to unreliability.

Subaru: "——"

The first step of summoning the magical hand, had been passed. Starting now were the unknown second step and the third step that would be the final one.

With his own consciousness, Subaru commanded the fingertips to take action, infusing his own hopes into the magical hand that seemed woven by shadow.

Subaru: "Emilia!"

And once again, confirming whether or not she was aware. Seeking help for herself.

Along with that sound, Emilia closed her eyes, nodding as if she understood what would happen after this.

Emilia: "It's fine. —You are here, Juice."

Emilia's eyes were filled with warmth and understanding as she spread her arms.

Repeatedly preparing for Subaru's intention, as if already having seen what would happen, she shortened the distance to her heart. Subaru did not hesitate as he brought the magical hand into her chest.

“_____”

The invisible hand moved to the center Emilia's chest. As the fingertips passed through her white skin without resistance, Emilia's shoulders jumped as if she'd felt something.

However, the hand could not stop. Through the sternum, across the lungs, finally reaching the pulsating core.

—The magical hand, had arrived at Emilia's heart.

The second step had been accomplished.

When the taboo was triggered, the witch's magical hand easily passes through Subaru's body and only hurts his heart. This was an application of that principle. Unseen Hand and the witch's magical hand sharing that properly, was the only path left to gamble on.

However, the gambling had been successful so far. The problem was that after this, there was no precedent for that power.

If her were to just seize Emilia's heart, he could do so in an instant. But that would make no sense. This power was not to be used for that.

So, what was this power for. —Right now, in this moment, this power would be used to save.

“_____”

Was this really possible, Subaru with his mind in a sea of confusion took a deep breath.

Unseen Hand, could it really be used as a hand which saved? Under the madman named Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti, how many lives had this power stolen?

Although that would depend on the power's use, oftentimes powers were limited in ability. Was Unseen Hand the type of power that could bring naught but destruction?

This power, no matter if existed for the sake of having someone live on, no matter what—.

Emilia: “Subaru.”

Hesitating and doubting in that moment, Emilia’s voice which he shouldn’t have been hearing reached him.

Emilia: “It’ll be fine. —Because, I have faith, in the both of you.”

Who and what, was she talking about.

Emilia sent her trust to Subaru, and another person he didn’t know.

But with ease, he accepted and believed all of it.

—This hand absolutely, absolutely would not hurt Emilia.

Subaru: “Come, my third hand...!”

Within his heart, the undispellable doubts about this power dissipated.

How this power had originated didn’t matter anymore. This power right now, was in Subaru’s hands, and Subaru had no intent of hurting Emilia, and if anything existed within power itself.

In Emilia’s chest, the magical hand weaved by shadow began to close.

Fingertips touched Emilia’s heart which was engraved with rhythm, and Emilia gave a slight gasp at the gentle grip on the surface of her heart. Rather than pain, it was akin to a slight itch.

Inside the chest Emilia whose were dyed red, the magical hand that closed its fingers to seize an actual heart.

And that heartbeat different from Emilia’s own, that [Little Lion’s Heart]—.

Subaru: "Caught, you—!!"

He did not have room to pull it out.

With his magical hand, Subaru crushed the heart that shamelessly still beat within Emilia.

Emilia's heart received not the slightest bit of damage, merely defeating parasitic organ that yet sang odes to love.

Subaru truly did feel sensation from that third hand that did not exist. And then,

Subaru: "Fwah!"

At the same time experienced the cost of using such a degree of concentration on a power which did not belong to him.

Organs feeling a pain as if being carved, rushing forth was a sense of despair as if he'd been tainted, Subaru immediately fell upon the ground with both knees. Harsh coughs that were even tinged with blood wracked him.

Emilia: "Subaru!"

Emilia reached out a hand, toward Subaru who knelt on the submerged ground with blood leaking from the corners of his mouth. He took her outstretched hand and placed it on his face.

Emilia: "Ah..."

Subaru: "Still, alive, right?"

Emilia: "... Mmm, I'm fine. My heart is perfectly fine, still beating inside me."

Subaru used the touch of the hand which yet flowed through with blood to reassure himself of reality, and Emilia used her empty hand to confirm her heartbeat. There was no doubt in this moment, inscribed there was heartbeat that seemed congratulate that happenings of right now.

And then only Regulus alone wore an expression as if he couldn't comprehend what was happening as he looked upon the two.

Regulus: "Hah? What, what happened? Casting aside those around you, for something only those involved with you can understand? What is this repulsive scene? Just what happened, you..."

Subaru: "... You, didn't notice?"

Regulus: "Hah? What are you talking about? Haven't noticed or whatever? When not a single change has..."

Subaru: "Your feet, they're getting wet."

Regulus: "——?"

Subaru pointed to tell Regulus who seemed to have succumbed to his anger. Regulus was shocked to see his feet growing wet and fell momentarily silent, widening his eyes.

Noticed the reality that his white tuxedo—, white shoes and hem of his clothing, were soaked through by the water by his feet.

Regulus: "You people— actually!?"

Noticing this change with a response too slow, Regulus bared his teeth and waved his arm. But, a slender white leg struck out, kicking into Regulus's face and sending him flying.

Completely unprepared for this direct hit, Regulus gave a wail as he was kicked to the submerged ground filled with water. Half his body was left soaked by the water, and a shoe print remained on the side of his face that had been kicked.

Regulus: "*hk, huu...* this, this kind of...!"

As if unable to comprehend this reality in the slightest, Regulus blankly lifted his face. Looking down at such a Regulus, Emilia who had performed the beautiful kick tilted her head slightly.

Emilia: "I did it. I finally landed a hit."

Regulus: "You, you—!"

From Emilia's short sentence being filled with a sense of accomplishment, Regulus's face grew red and agitated. Using the motion of standing to gather water, Regulus scattered droplets of water at Emilia.

However, the pain of taking the kick had his victorious figuring collapse, and the bomb of water flew in a completely wrong direction, instead leaving him wide open.

Emilia: "Ice Brand Arts!"

Regulus: "*hk*"

Creating a hammer of ice in her hands, Emilia then slammed it directly into the center of Regulus's body.

Receiving a swing that threatened to crush his bones into, the body of the murderer did rolls in the water. With unsuppressed coughs, slamming his fist into the ground without pause, Regulus glared at them with reddened eyes.

Regulus: "Why! Whywhywhywhy? You people, it just had to be you, what did you and why did you, to [Greed]! And to my rights!

Subaru: "To someone like you who saw all the proceedings and yet still hasn't figured it out, it'd be useless to explain it to you. Well, that's how it is. Very simple."

As he pitied the screaming Regulus, Subaru endured internal cries of agony from his organs, revealing a sneer.

Revealing a ferocious smile that would not lose to even Petelgeuse.

Subaru: "You, were played by your opponents because you ridiculed them so much."

Regulus: “——!”

Even if he didn't quite understand the meaning of those words, the taunting intent would be clearly conveyed.

Regulus screeched with a sound that couldn't even be called a sound, ignoring Emilia's stance to launch himself at Subaru. However, he was cut off by Emilia.

Emilia: “Earlier, the attack I made in the stead of your wives— because it didn't seem to work, allow me to land one that does.”

Regulus: “Stop, kidding around——!”

Appearing over Regulus's head, hung countless icicles.

Each one varied in size, but if they all fell together, they would bring instant death. Emilia's disgust of Regulus, had reached a point that even her gentle self could not stand.

Climbing to his feet with a leap, Regulus struck at the falling icicles with water. Though the icicles shattered, the small shards still had their uses.

Ceaselessly tossing out bullets of water as if in a storm, Regulus cursed loudly as he was bathed by ice and rain that he ran through.

The snow-white crystals of ice turned to fog, and frozen the streets that had been submerged in water. For Subaru too, the water along his knees formed a film of ice around him, scaring him into hurriedly pulling his hands out of the water.

Even with consideration for Subaru, such a rain of destruction had befallen him. Of course, Regulus who was the actual target at hand was simply no match for this.

But,

Subaru: “... Completely unhurt?”

In the frozen scene after the barrage of ice had ended, Regulus remained, standing and alive.

Knees supporting his arms, spitting out uneven breaths, even though his entire body was soaked through with water, he still avoided a final puncture from an icicle.

Regulus: “Absolutely, absolutely, ah, hah...”

Regulus who clutched at his chest looking as if he were dying.

Look at that demeanor, Subaru understand. The invincibility from [Lion’s Heart] could still be used, even with the heart from his own body. Only,

Subaru: “If you stop time to become invincible, it will cause the heart in your body also to stop beating. —Is this the still perfect invincibility, with a time limit?”

Regulus: “*Guu...!*”

It seemed he had struck true, as Regulus endured the pain in his chest to show his rage. If there were a time limit, sooner or later Emilia could land an effective attack.

In that case, Regulus was but a random soldier who had put his everything into attack.

Regulus: “That, that’s... don’t you feel despicable in the slightest!?”

Regulus pointed a fingers at Subaru who was analyzing his opponent’s strength. Additionally he pointed toward Emilia’s direction, looking back and forth between the two of them.

Regulus: “Two people gang up on one person, in an act that’s essentially extortion, do your consciences not ache? Isn’t there something wrong with the your most essentially human part? Do you truly hold no doubts about yourselves who are capable of this. Having doubts should be what’s right, shouldn’t it!?”

Subaru: “... You’re really something else.”

This was in fact the same mouth that had under the advantage of [Lion's Heart], spoken nonstop, having now lost that effect and falling into a disadvantage, dared to use that disadvantage to ask his opponents for justification.

Subaru had already completely exceeded surprise, to the verge of now wanting to respect him. Such an existence without a shred of human dignity, would perhaps never been seen again from antiquity unto now, from now unto the hereafter.

Subaru: "That is to say, your belief is this? Because the two-on-one is too despicable, you hope to be able to fight an upright one-on-one battle. That's in fact the way battles should be. Is this the case?"

Regulus: "Exactly! Would that be doing the proper thing the proper way? Who do you take me... who do you think I am! I a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, Regulus Corneas who is charged with [Greed]!? This world's most satisfied, most resolute existence..."

Regulus spoke thus in a trembling voice, as he looked down at his hands.

Subaru was now completely speechless. So in Subaru's stead, Emilia spoke.

Emilia: "Going back on your word immediately after saying something, the contents of your speeches entirely devoid of actual meaning. I think you, are the most pitiful person in the world."

Regulus: "—*hk!* Truly irritating! I... [Greed], will definitely make you regret this!"

Even shallow in his rage at the contempt of others, Regulus repetitively endlessly repeated the drone of his curses.

Looking at the helpless demeanor, Subaru could finally feel fully relieved. Regulus was genuinely, unable to win in any situation where he did not have the highest advantage.

If he could use [Lion's Heart] for even a brief time, he still had a chance at victory.

Clearly this was the case, but upon seeing a little bit of difficulty, he would immediately give up without even bothering to glance across the setting.

Subaru: "Scorning progress in life, will lead you to fall down in unexpected places."

Regulus: "Hah...?"

Subaru: "Nothing, talking to myself. More importantly, we can accept your challenge of ship-to-ship combat."

Regulus: "—! That's more like it. This is how it should be. Of course, a knight would not let their master step up first?"

As long as it was in line with his mood, Regulus would immediately attach the conditions that gave him an advantage.

Between Subaru and Emilia, their level of combat needed no comparison. As long as he first killed Subaru and caused Emilia to waver, he could see hope in his odds of victory. Straining that mind of his that did not exist in the first place, that conniving result seemed to suit Regulus's tastes perfectly.

However, if he wanted to best Subaru in terms of unrelenting perseverance, he was hundreds of thousands of years too soon.

Finding a chance to win in a situation where victory was impossible, this was Subaru's truest way of fighting.

Looking in terms of determining victory or loss, the match between Regulus and Subaru had already begun.

Subaru: "Indeed, having a knight battle is the righteous way."

Regulus: "In that case—"

Subaru: "So— now that it's come to this again, I'll leave the rest to you."

His feet still submerged in water, Subaru said so after exhaling deeply.

At those words, Regulus tilted his head with a “*hah?*” However, Subaru’s words were meant not for him. But for [him].

???: “Ah, I see. —The one-on-one duel you proposed, I accept it as a knight.”

Responding was a flame. In these flooded streets, a young man who sent not a single ripple as he strode across the water approached. Unlike the inexplicable mystery that Regulus, he was possessed of protections that had been bestowed by the love of the heavens.

Reinhardt: “Of the Kingdom of Lugunica’s Guardian Knights, from the line of [Sword Saints] — Reinhardt van Astrea.”

Standing before Subaru and Emilia, the knight who reported his name pointed at Regulus with a sheathed sword. That demeanor of denomination, was an invitation to begin a one-on-one duel. That was something even [Guthunter] Elsa would respond to, the well established declaration of a duel. In contrast, Regulus stood, stretching his hands before him.

Regulus: “Wait, waitwait! This, this is, this isn’t normal!?”

Defiling the sacred duel, the very definition of a warrior, the [Sword Saint] will not show him any trace of tolerance. The opening blow started below Regulus’s underarm, vertically slashing across his body— Regulus had not even the chance to cry out before being slammed far into the sky.

Regulus: “——*hk*”

Before his eyes was the demolished city of water— he was suspended so high in the sky that he had a panoramic view of the entire city.

Whether a cry or a curse, a sound incomprehensible to all who heard it, echoed.

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Chapter 59 - Regulus Corneas



It can't be can't be can't be. What the hell is this, I don't get it. Why do I have to go through this. Who do you take me for. I am the Sin Archbishop "Greed" Regulus Corneas. The most satisfied existence in the world! The most indisputably asserted, an existence without any wavering aspects! It's supposed to be like that, so why do I have to go through this?! Don't mess around, this is no joke. Each and every one of them, what's wrong with them that they accept such nonsensical absurdities as if they are a matter of course. That man, that woman, and that knight too, just because I showed a little mercy are getting too ahead of themselves, if I had been serious from the beginning then I could have had torn them apart in bits and pieces, but aren't they misunderstanding their own power? That you can shamelessly make misunderstandings, that are from my point of view, hilariously wrong, is why I hate

getting involved with others! Obnoxious, annoying, irritating, infuriating, vexing, dirty, unsightly scum. I've always always been doing well, for years, decades, centuries, this way for *all* that time, I have been faithfully serving as a Sin Archbishop more than anyone. When I was first chosen as a sin archbishop and received this witch factor, I killed them all, the father who despite his poor earnings was plagued with bad drinking habits, the mother who prattled on endlessly complaining day and night, and the greedy brothers who used to ravenously eye the portion that rightfully belonged to me, were all killed by me, the villagers who looked at me like I'm an idiot too, the people of the town who pushed me and my house into that hopeless village too, the inept heads of the country who carelessly abandoned the village and the town to that state in the first place too, I tore them all apart into bits and pieces, and when everything was gone I finally noticed a way I could live! I don't need anything. Everything is just annoying. I am already satisfied. It's not like I didn't have it, I just didn't need it. Unlike the intrusive scum, I've never needed anything. Despite that, giving me something, doesn't that mean that from outside, from your point of view, that you looked at me and thought that I was a pitiful lacking existence. Everyone who wants to impose unneeded things on me should be killed, so only those who will leave the satisfied me alone should be allowed into this world. No matter who, just talking about their selfish nonsense, those shits. Who has the right to pity me. Who has the right to pity me and drive me to despair. As if I would let them. I don't need anything and neither did I ask for anything. A father who despite his poor earnings was plagued with bad drinking habits and yet still occasionally buys gifts for me is scum better off dead. A mother who prattled on endlessly complaining day and night while saying obvious things like "apologies I've troubled you" is scum better off dead. The greedy brothers who despite ravenously eyeing the portion that rightfully belonged to me used to divide my part of their bun when my food got spilled are scum better off dead. Stop you shits, being arbitrarily kind towards me. Being kind, it must mean that you think I'm low, that you're looking down on me. Someone who looks the goddamn down on others, especially someone who looks down family, It's natural that they would be hated. It's natural that they're dead. It's not my fault. I've done nothing wrong. It's your fault, you you pitypitypity me, treat me like I'm pathetic, and leave me all alone. Have a taste of what it's like to be made to feel like the most worthless person in the world. Surrounding me should only be those who do not pity me. Those who do pity me should disappear from the world. I hear laughter. You're looking at me, aren't you. You looked at me and laughed, didn't you. What's so laughable about me. What did you see in me that made you laugh. All of them laughing and laughing. A bunch of powerless scum who are only good at running their mouths. Why does my heart have to break so much because of them. Don't stand in my way don't obstruct me don't pity me

I'm not the I'm not the pitiable one, it's you helpless and ignorant but still with "Greed"! You have to crawl throughout your entire life just to satisfy your incomplete selves, you're the pitiable greed! I'm different I'm not like that I don't want anything. The desireless me is better than your incomplete selves. Don't pity me. The truth is that you're jealous of me, envious of me, you admire me and because you can't reach me you're just running your mouth off. That's right that must be right it's obviously right. Wait, wait, just wait. Just stop. Don't look at me don't say my name don't talk about me. Good or bad, just stop it, don't pay attention to me, ignore me and leave me alone. Even though a complete existence has a heart that should not be able to be trampled on how come the likes of you are so insistent on interacting with me. I cannot comprehend it in the slightest. Both you and I are different people. Even thinking of getting a return by taking risks, no matter how you think about it, could never be reasonable would always be a mistake. You're sick in the head. Calm down and think about it and you should be able to understand. All humans except me are just floating in a fever. Asking of others, that very fact that it is understandable is meaningless, useless and irresponsible should be easy to understand. It is all a fantasy of yours which you call it love love is friendship and trust what foolish idiocy reproductive activities themselves are the utmost disgusting acts. I don't understand what it means. For what are you doing this. Whether it's for being a mother or a child, although it makes a family, even if it is decorated with such words, it will be different from myself, whether that thing dies out or not, what does that have to do with me. If they continue to live when I die, I'll be over. If they are dead while I live would only mean my continuation. Love and affection only makes it so that people cannot be independent. A person is independent in the first place. Out of concern for those who operate under such delusions, to be looked down by others is foolish and so I found companionship by gathering well looking women, and in order to not be betrayed I ask for only virgins, what more do you want of me. Don't skip such a selfish act. Infringing on me to this extent, but you still ask whether you can infringe upon me even more? To think you've hit this point! To think your thoughts could be so twisted! Inflicting all this upon me, what more could you even ask of me. Just what do I have to do to not be pitied. The most pitiful person in the world, or whatever! There is no way anything said by that a lady plagued with such vulgar "Greed" who wants to to connect with one she li~kes is justified!

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Regulus: "Ra—ah!!"

Higher, higher, along with the wind, Regulus's body flew into the night sky.

The instant that his underarm had been struck, Regulus had activated [Lion's Heart] and stopped his heartbeat to enter a state of invincibility. As a result, though the damage from the blow had been counteracted—

Regulus: "Ku, ku— *hk*"

Regulus panted, groaning as his vision blurred with pain.

Regulus's stopping of time, alongside his heart, could last for five seconds maximum. Although during this period, he could hand [Lion's Heart] over to a wife without issue, going any further would mean that Regulus's body would be unable to recover.

In addition, once [Lion's Heart] was lifted, the ever present pain of the sudden release of a stopped heart was inescapable. Anything like pain and suffering, hadn't been tasted in more than a hundred years.

Regulus: "You're, kidding..."

Painfully coughing hatred as if it were blood, the rising Regulus could no longer speak comprehensibly. His flying body was stuck in orbit, infused with who knows how much momentum, reaching a height that offered a bird's eye view of the city of Pristella.

Watergate City Pristella— there, upon seeing the [Gospel]'s writ that the empty wife's seat could be filled, clearly only fortune had been in his heart.

Regulus: "Such a... foolish unfoldingaaaaah!"

Losing those wives which had been collected with such hard work, even his status as [Greed] had been shaken, insulted by a damn kid whose only talent lay in his foul mouth, pitied by a shameful woman who had only just met him.

There was no greater shame. He couldn't remember having ever tasted such humiliation. Wasn't it precisely because he didn't want to taste this loathsome feeling, that he became an archbishop. Clearly still receiving this kind of treatment, wasn't this different from what had been foretold.

Regulus: "Enough, enough, enough... *hk!*"

No need to think about being merciful. The show of indulgence would end here. This had nothing to do at all with [Lion's Heart] being seen through by an opponent, or with that extraordinary Sword Saint.

As long as he could stop his heart for five seconds, Regulus could kill them many times over. Because he hadn't wanted to see the expressions of despair, hear cries of death, he'd refrained thus far.

Using [Lion's Heart]'s effect of creating a state of invincibility, Regulus could ignore every physical law in the world if he so wished. Reaching speeds that could outpace the wind, in that logic defying moment, with power so overwhelming the denizens of this world could not conceive, he'd turn them into corpses.

If he used the authority of [Greed] to take him higher into the sky, it'd be easy enough to kill them by scattering sand into the city. Although the other Sin Archbishops had also come to the city, he couldn't care less whether they lived or died. At the moment, washing his own humiliation clean was the priority. He would have the faces of those fools who boasted of victory be painted with horror.

Once this pointless momentum came to an end, his fall back to the earth would spell those guys' death. Before that, at best they could be excited about a superficial victory—.

Regulus: "—Aaaaah!?"

Regulus who continuously recited words of hatred, screamed as an attack collided with his back.

Looking from the side would determine that Regulus's rising momentum had come to a sudden stop, having been forcefully nailed into the air. As if something from the heavens... had stepped on him to pin him in place.

Reinhardt: "If this were a normal duel, I'd withdraw my blade once my opponent lost their will to fight."

The owner of the voice was perched on Regulus's back in midair, leisurely saying so.

As to what the existence who stepped on his back in midair was, Regulus understood instantly. Shuddering as he came to this realization. He grasped just how high where he was right now.

Arriving faster than the Regulus he had struck, just how had he managed to reach such heights.

Reinhardt: "Though I have no intention of boasting, I have quite the confidence in my jumping ability. I had once even leapt from the ground, to land on the back of a flying dragon."

Regulus: "Damned, monster...!"

Reinhardt: "Indeed. I am a monster who hunts monsters. —For you too, the time to accept fate has come."

Reinhardt's feet left his back.

As soon as the sound of his voice fell, Regulus felt a fighting spirit. In the course of his life, although he had repeatedly faced strong opponents, Regulus had learned nothing whatsoever.

Even the him who was like this, had greeted those powerful opponents who had come forth to confront him with a yawn, and his conscious memory was limited. Relying on this memory, Regulus tried to react.

—[Lion's Heart] was activated, in the same instant that an attack came.

Regulus: "Aaaaah!!!"

Toward the center of Regulus's back, Reinhardt swung his hand like a blade.

Regulus received an attack even more piercing than an actual blade would deal, but he took the impact with his invincibility, and slammed downward in one motion.

Accelerating toward the ground, Regulus slammed straight into the slate. However, the effect of the [Lion's Heart] persisted, and his body continued to dig into the earth as if being swallowed.

Regulus's body penetrated the paving in a line, crossing a rigid sheet of rock to drill through the earth. While helplessly continuing to drill into the ground, Regulus suddenly noticed.

If this momentum were left untouched, his body would plummet to the lowest level of the earth. He'd never considered whether or not there was a lowest level before. But, the land of this world was not endless. Surrounded as it was by the Great Cascade, at the end of this would be where those falls flowed to.

If he kept falling like so, was that where he would wind up?

Regulus: "Something like this, how could I endure... *guu!*?"

Literally, the limitless horror had made Regulus hold his breath, reaching the limit of his heart.

Five seconds had passed. Sirens began to blare, as Regulus found himself confused over his judgment. Stopping his heart within his own body for more than five seconds wasn't feasible. The number of seconds that he could hold it at maximum, was perhaps less than ten. And even if he could extend it, that was just more distance he dug.

But here, what would happen if he dispelled his ability while drilling into the ground?

—There was no time to debate. Heart stopping or brain dying or whatever, stupidity should have a limit.

Regulus: "Uuuuuuuu—!"

Gritting his teeth in preparation for the shock that was about to meet him, Regulus strengthened his resolve.

Hearing the sound of his heart which demanded to resume its beat, Regulus lifted the effect of [Lion's Heart], let go of his invincibility, and the laws of physics were restored—

Regulus: “*Bu, ue—!*”

His entire body, all his bones, shattered.

Regulus’s body was attacked mercilessly upon impact.

That was a matter of course. Regulus’s body had hit the ground with a much higher velocity than free falling, and the momentum continued drilled into the earth without loss. The reason his body hadn’t shattered in every which way, was that there was no space for it to scatter underground.

However, although it could not spread horizontally, vertically was a different story.

Regulus: “*Aa, ue...*”

With a hollow voice, tears of blood flowed from Regulus’s ruined eyes. The impact penetrated through Regulus’s body, rendering it completely destroyed.

Saying he’d received damage greater than a shattered body would be no exaggeration, even the organs within his stomach had been twisted together. Originally impeccable white hair was covered with blood and mud, and his incontinent lower abdomen had lost its function and freely released waste.

Existing here, was a slab of meat which had lost human form.

And what was most surprising was, that this slab of meat still clung to life.

Regulus: “*Aa, au...*”

Peerless persistence in clinging to life— or rather, this transcended persistence into a grudge.

This was not merely some attachment to clinging to life. Remaining was solely, a grudge against those above who remained alive. Still struggling in such a condition, was this empty vanity.

If I were to, get serious, you fuckers— merely this.

Regulus: “*Au, uu.*”

Yet, this fixation should not be sullied.

Having exhausted a lifetime in pursuit of being that would not be pitied, an evil whose root was unharmed after experiencing more than a century’s worth of attacks and beatings, making the most suitable judgements for his own survival.

Wretchedly, repeatedly using [Lion’s Heart] in short bursts, Regulus dug at the earth. If he entered a state of invincibility, his injuries became insignificant. In the absence of pain, he could exercise even his injured body without harm. With his empty hands, Regulus dug ceaselessly at the soil.

His body had been buried upside-down, and he adjusted it by digging in a circle. Once his head faced upward, he needed only to slowly work his way aboveground. And perhaps once he made it he would see those self-satisfied maggots, smugly celebrating Regulus’s fall.

Unforgivable. Could never be forgiven.

To be mocked, to be scorned, to be pitied, was a pain without parallel. That such injuries were impermissible in life went without saying, and even in death could not be tolerated. Aah, right. Directly acting was all that was needed. Whether those who saw him and those who didn’t, if he cleanly did away with them all no one would bully him anymore. If only he’d done so at the very beginning. This time he would certainly not make the same mistake. Returning to the surface, killing all three of them, that would be the end of this.

Regulus: “——”

No longer capable of making sound, Regulus turned his hatred into strength and continued to dig at the ground.

When he made it aboveground, he’d be sure to savor the sight of those guys pleading for their lives. Especially the woman who had continually scorned him, he would be sure to mock her in equal measure. The 79th wife, was the role she’d been meant to fill. Speaking of which, the woman who was

originally supposed to fill this vacancy was that elf woman living in that forest, where the hateful Petelgeuse had been as well—.

_____.

_____.

_____.

Aaaaaaah. Ah, ah, ah, ah. Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah.

He remembered. Now, he remembered.

That woman! Indeed, it was that woman. No, she had been a child then!

The little brat who'd been crying and yelling nonstop, when he'd gone to retrieve No. 79! The little brat from then, had grown into the woman of today!

He now understood, the reason for which he'd felt inclined to fill the vacancy with her the instant he'd laid eyes on her. A simple matter. Serving as a substitute for her mother, it would only be natural that the daughter takes up this position.

That was the the little brat of No. 79 who scorned me, and that fool Petelgeuse. Why hadn't I realized earlier. No, thank goodness I'd realized it now.

If he'd killed them without having noticed, he wouldn't be able to derive proper joy from it. Precisely because he had now clearly realized their sins, would there be value in killing them. Would he feel the accomplishment of avenging his humiliation. Would he experience that long-lost feeling, of the significance of fulfilling a desire.

Watch me tarnish her, No. 79. Watch me snatch her, Petelgeuse.

The one you all cherished, who dared to pity me, that girl.

Regulus: “Aah, hehe.”

An impulse surging from deep within his throat, Regulus grew giddy with excitement.

With a mouth missing teeth and cracked lips, he smiled. A hope of survival emerged. Feeling joy, at the idea of brutalizing those who dared to insult him.

Climbing up, climbing up, climbing up, and then—.

Regulus: “——?”

The upward striving Regulus, suddenly felt his fingertips come into contact with something. He withdrew the right hand with fingers no longer in comprehensible positions, and with a blinded eye tried to catch a glimpse. His bloodied and muddied form was faintly wetted by something other than blood.

He tried taking a lick at it. Although tinged with the bitter taste of mud, it seemed to be water.

Water. It was water. After understanding that it was water, Regulus immediately felt a thirst parch his throat. One drop was not enough. He wanted to soothe his throat, to fill his stomach. [Lion’s Heart]’s effect had been interrupted, and Regulus’s body having returned to the cycle of time, finally had the opportunity to ingest again after a century.

For now, water was fine. It tasted sublime. As he thought so, as if in accordance with his wishes, the water gurgled as it poured down from overhead.

He sipped this slightly muddied water. Even if all his teeth had fallen out, his tongue had been shredded, his blood spurted forth without cessation, this water tasted amazing. So satisfying. That feeling existed here.

—The flow of water pouring in suddenly grew, and Regulus’s body once again fell to the bottom.

Regulus: “Aa, uu, waaah?”

Flowing down. Flowing in. In this earth with nowhere to run, the water gradually rushed in.

This was the underground, without any extraneous space. In a blink of an eye, Regulus's body sank into the water where he lost his freedom of movement.

—Perhaps until this moment, Regulus still had not understood what was happening.

This water came from overhead in Pristella, where all the canals gathered.

Due to Reinhardt's attack, Regulus had smashed through the street and into the ground. Between the underground tunnel that he had made with his body, and the path he had dug himself, the four currents of the canal had been blocked. It now rushed to Regulus without pause, submerging the murderer entirely.

As if expressing the fury over the destruction of the streetscape, from the city and its inhabitants.

Regulus: "Kuu, fwah."

Needless to say, Regulus who was busy drowning at the moment naturally did not notice.

Trapped by the soil, Regulus panicked from the pressure of the water that poured directly into his lungs, and began to struggle with desperation. However, he had no room with which to struggle within the earth. All he could do was curl up through the sludge himself and protect himself with [Lion's Heart].

When [Lion's Heart] was active, he would be able to breathe freely. The same held true for the pain of his ruined flesh.

However, [Lion's Heart] could last for only five seconds. Once he felt his heart reaching its limit, fear of death would cause Regulus release the effect and once again be dragged back to hell.

His cause of death alternated.

No matter which, he could choose neither side. No matter which, neither side could not be eliminated. However, Regulus had no choice but to endure. All he could do was resent this unreasonable situation.

The time limit had disappeared.

Even if he could use [Lion's Heart] repeatedly, that wasn't the case for breathing. And to reuse [Lion's Heart], he would need to wait several seconds.

Heart failure.

Drowning.

Heart failure.

Drowning.

Heart failure—.

Drowning—.

As if continuing without end, pain and suffering without end or pause.

Regulus opened his mouth, and water and mud are poured together into open mouth. With this repeated violation of his lungs and internal organs, Regulus cried out. With a voice that could not make sound, he continued to cry out.

No response. Around him, there was no one.

Even so, he continued to cry out. From his cries, spilled a hatred that hoped for all of mankind to die off.

After he died, mocking laughter would be begged leave of.

For that girl, rejoicing over the vengeance of her mother and Petelgeuse would also be begged leave of.

The mere thought of that girl's delight over Regulus's death, growing radiant with excitement, was vomit inducing.

A life's goal, a motivation to keep living, its consummation would certainly bring joy.

Her existence being moved by Regulus's death, giving off radiance, to say this significance was unknown would not be incorrect.

Because this was wrong, completely unexpected, unreasonable joy, the notion of satisfying that girl was unbearable.

His death, would greatly impact to the girl's heart—.

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Regulus Corneas shattered through the stone street, and was buried in the dirt.

Toward the grave dug by the murderer's body, water from the Watergate City gushed voluminously. How deep the murderer had sunk was unknown. However, considering the limits of his authority, crashing through to other side of the world— such a thing was impossible.

In all likelihood, the effect had been exhausted somewhere underground, and like that he had been crushed by the momentum. Even if he hadn't been crushed somehow, the water that poured in would never allow the murderer to escape.

The murderer who indulged in his powerful authority, had finally drowned as a tribute to the city he had destroyed.

Subaru: "... Emilia-tan, you look sorrowful."

Emilia watched the cave where Regulus sunk motionlessly. Seeing a trace of mourning on her face, Subaru spoke in response.

For that murderer, there should have been not a single hint of sympathy. Emilia was supposed to share that feeling, and not feeling badly about his underground demise should have been right—.

Subaru: “Although Emilia-tan’s kindness is wonderful, I don’t think it should be wasted on him. A completely hopeless guy, really does exist.”

Emilia: “... Thank you for worrying about me. But, that’s not it. It’s not like that.”

Subaru: “Nn?”

Toward the concerned Subaru, Emilia slowly shook her head from side to side.

Then she fell silent for a long while, while casting low the eyes from which hung long lashes—

Emilia: “Regulus, seemed... When I first saw him, I felt like I’d met him somewhere before.”

Subaru: “So this wasn’t your first meeting? In that case, when?”

Emilia: “That, I can’t remember.”

Faced with Subaru’s question, tilted her head in doubt.

Miraculously, this coincided with the exact moment the buried Regulus screamed.

With a voice that could not reach, the murderer screamed for Emilia to not cheer for his death.

Her mother’s death and her benefactor’s madness, he’d been closely entwined in both. Toward a young girl this was perhaps a turning point that she could never forget, he did not want for her to find satisfaction upon his death.

Such was the murderer’s dying wish, which had no way of reaching the surface.

Emilia: “—Regulus, just where did you meet me?”

Regulus Corneas, had left no impression on Emilia.

In this ironic manner, it was precisely achieved.

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Chapter 60 - One Ending, One Battle



The sight of a white light.

Warm, soft, a light which reassured one's heart.

To greet the morning with such a serene mood had been too long absent.

Always waking in despair, in neverending everyday that were as nightmares, there had never been a trace of peace.

Gradually coming to firmly believe that for always and always, this darkness would never usher in the morning sun.

Precisely because of this, was perhaps why this this ray was so refreshing.

???: “—Hey, wake up.”

Hearing someone’s voice.

Beyond the white light, someone was calling for her. Guided by that voice like so, led by the hand like so, departing from this darkness.

That white light glimpsed in the distance, finally engulfed her vision completely.

Emilia: “Good morning. No matter how much of a sleepyhead you are, it’s about time to wake up, you know.”

Opening her eyes and gazing over, a shy silver-haired maiden laughed as she spoke such words.

—Those words made Sylphy’s cheeks, become stained with tears.

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Cerulean light flooded the sky, as the enchantment of ice lifted.

The ice that had engulfed the half-demolished church gradually turned to light, and the scattering mana was circled by the micro-spirits and disappeared.

The sight of one unfathomable fantasy being overtaken by another unfathomable fantasy, engraved an agonizing wound in the hearts of the viewers.

Although it wouldn’t be strange to be moved to tears by such a sight, the reason why they cried and wailed, was certainly something greater than that.

From what overtook their lives, a nightmare which had bound the most brilliant and sparkling time of their lives — from that, they had been freed.

Subaru: "Speaking of which, Emilia-tan is pretty amazing."

Thoughtlessly loosening his lips, Subaru murmured absentmindedly.

In front of his eyes were Emilia, and the bride clinging onto her in tears — the former brides, in a healthy shape.

The number of women in dresses were precisely fifty, with not a single error in counting.

Subaru: "..... When I informed her that his heart and the brides were integrating, I thought there wouldn't be a way to save the brides without having them die."

Taking away the lives of the brides, rendering [Lion's Heart] without a place to be in. Subaru had partly, seriously given up on there being another way to stop that abhorrent man. He had been prepared for victims.

However, unlike Subaru, Emilia had not given up.

It is true that in the fierce and life risking skirmish against Regulus, his thinking had come to a standstill. However, Emilia did not stop thinking.

With the cards she held, and considering what all would be possible for her, she had made her move.

Which is why,

Subaru: "This time, Emilia-tan completely carried us across, huh."

Emilia: "It's, not like that."

Letting out an exhausted sigh, next to the wall, Subaru remarked on his own vanquish. Hearing his relieved exhale, Emilia came back to him. Her white dress was torn, and her silver hair, which overcame the struggle for life and death, was disheveled.

Even still, now after the fight had ended, Emilia looked beautiful.

Inhaling with that in his mind, Subaru jerked his chin.

Subaru: “Those people too, faces full of expressions of dissatisfaction that fail to sufficiently express their gratitude toward Emilia.”

Emilia: “Don’t use me to kid around. And I, am unable to explain some grand ideology to them. Even if only for a brief while... the choice of dying was forced upon them.”

Subaru: “But there isn’t anyone who died. Everyone’s still alive. — This point is more important than anything else.”

This result, was more perfect than anything else.

Having found the answer he was seeking, Subaru felt relieved. Emilia placed her hands on her hips, and raised her voice as she spoke to the Subaru who was still regarding himself too lowly and thus putting himself down.

Emilia: “Wounded all over, forcing yourself even so... if Subaru hadn’t worked so hard, everyone wouldn’t have made it so far. [Lion’s Heart] too, was all thanks to Subaru noticing it.”

Subaru: “Lacking a trump card is the usual thing... That said, all along it’s felt off. But, thank goodness it had been noticed. Freezing the wives, to place them into a death trance.”

Emilia: “I too, was frozen for a bit too long.”

Hehe, Emilia stuck her tongue out with that kind of feeling. Adorable.

Although, for some reason, this didn’t seem like content to be discussed while laughing.

Which was to say, Emilia’s actions and keenness to strike down Regulus, had yielded the greatest effectiveness without unnecessary sacrifice.

Fifty-three lives, of those precious wives’ had been saved.

Emilia: “Though as for whether or not I could do it, I was a bit lacking in confidence.”

Subaru: “But it was done even still. Emilia-tan, worked hard in order to improve your own skill and strength.”

Emilia: “But, that possibility that they would stay frozen like this also existed. To free everyone perfectly like this is what finally allows me to relax.”

And then as if to hide her shy smile, she touched her chest.

Underneath the palm of that hand, was seemingly to confirm that there remained only her pulse and heartbeat.

Emilia: “In addition, if Subaru hadn’t removed Regulus’s heart from my chest, I would have needed to use the same magic on myself. In that case, whether for Sylphy and the others or for myself, I think it’d be waaay worse than melting like this. Because then it could have taken another hundred years.”

Subaru: “That again — isn’t that exaggeration no matter how you look at it?”

Emilia: “.....”

Subaru: “So this isn’t exaggeration!? Or worse, isn’t this completely unparalleled extremism!”

Watching the silent bitterly smiling Emilia, Subaru felt a sharp shock.

Due to Regulus’s provocation, Emilia had wanted to stop [Lion’s Heart]’s effect on her. If an eye hadn’t been kept on her, if the situation hadn’t been dealt with right then perhaps Emilia would have been parted from this life. Of course, notions of searching everywhere for a way to melt the ice in order to avoid this still existed.

Subaru: “Something like two sleeping beauties, my pestilent demon truly isn’t ordinary, please give me your forgiveness.”

Although complaining, Subaru’s heart had settled down.

In any case, Emilia had been rescued safe and sound, and the wives had been freed without harm. Although the battle against Regulus had yielded a scale of destruction beyond what one opponent seemed capable of — in summary, their side had sustained more or less no loss.

Even so, Subaru's flesh carried all kinds of burdens, as well as an unnecessary fate shared with the Witch Cult.

And in addition —

Emilia: "Reinhardt, leaving without even treating his wounds, I wonder if he'll be okay."

To Subaru who had been lost in thought, Emilia suddenly spoke thus.

Subaru raised his head, gave a wave with his hand.

Subaru: "It'll be fine, since that guy, even if he leaves his wounds as is micro-spirits'll come along and treat them. He himself said so."

Emilia: "Ah, makes sense. Originally there had been quite the number of micro-spirits here, but as soon as Reinhardt left, everyone went too... Reinhardt, perhaps has the aptitude to potentially be a spirits arts user."

Subaru: "My niche would be completely killed so that can't be!"

And as for Reinhardt's circumstances, even without anything like that, he was strong enough. Although the one who had tossed Regulus to be dealt with by Reinhardt was Subaru himself, Reinhardt's manner of battle in that final indistinguishable duel, to describe coldly in one phrase.

Could a human, leap with such ease above the clouds. Even if they couldn't all be classified as human, they were all knights to a candidate of the king's election.

Subaru: "Emilia-tan, weak though I may be, please don't cast me away."

Emilia: "——? I am, especially dependent on Subaru?"

Subaru: "Is that right! That's right! From now to the future I'll also work my hardest!"

Emilia: "Apologies, your sudden rush forward of hard work is a bit confusing..."

In any case, best to stop comparing this to that. To do so, would be the same as Regulus who couldn't act with the peace of mind without using others as a point of reference.

Though he'd always been thought of as a man without qualities to be admired, but unexpectedly treating him as a frame of negative reference worked out just fine.

Emilia: "... Everyone else, are they getting along fine?"

Subaru: "It's for that reason that Reinhardt was brought along. In all honesty, because everyone else is stronger than me."

To entrust to one another, or rather for one to rely on the other, the awkward expression known as Faith would be the most suiting.

Despite differing factions, who would one day meet in conflict in the struggle for the throne, Subaru still believed in them. Even with the variance of personalities, abilities, and beliefs.

At least, he'd believe that he wouldn't lose to those despicable, hopeless guys of the Witch Cult.

"_____"

Moreover, if anyone failed, if the lives of anyone who mattered — was to say that Subaru needed to consider using, [Return by Death]. The contract with Roswaal, even if it hadn't existed, as long as there remained any slight chance of salvation, they would certainly be saved.

Pain and suffering were worthy of his hatred indeed.

But tragedies were surely, even more worthy of his disgust.

Emilia: "Subaru."

Subaru: “——”

Unknowing of what the Subaru who was considering death saw, Emilia bent down from beside the sitting Subaru.

Her body rested against his left shoulder, as she gently stroked his lowered head. How itchy. But, it was hard to part with.

Subaru: “Emilia-tan?”

Emilia: “Right now, I share the same sentiments as Subaru. Although I’m worried about everyone, my own strength is spent. Even reaching out a hand is impossible. So me too, allow me to pray with Subaru? In hope, that everyone will be safe and sound.”

Subaru: “——”

Emilia: “Certainly there won’t be any problems. Because everyone compared to us, is suuuper strong, suuuper smart, suuuper hard workers.”

In order to reassure Subaru, carefully considering her choice of words was Emilia. Her use of phrasing sounded especially of her, and Subaru too was able to relax.

Faith. To have faith in everyone. And Reinhardt who had already set off.

Immediately upon defeating Regulus, Reinhardt had left to help their compatriots. A battlefield with him present would not be any cause for concern.

Without losing even a single person, welcoming the coming morning. In that case, capturing Subaru’s worry, was only one remaining issue—

“——”

Alongside Subaru who looked toward the sky as if in prayer, Emilia as well looked through the ceiling of the demolished church to regard the night sky. As if to prevent Emilia from seeing, Subaru tightly grasped his chest.

—Alongside the moment of Regulus’s death, it had felt as if something formless and black, had slid into his own chest, pulsating.

This must be, the same thing that had happened with Petelgeuse then.

So he would in order keep Emilia from noticing, merely keep quiet.

Pray to the heavens, come to an epiphany, merely keep quiet.

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—Turn back time to just a little before Regulus had been defeated.

When Subaru and the others had left for the control towers, and Otto who had seen them off before leaving in order to recover the [Book of Wisdom], even transpiring about a quarter of an hour after.

That was when Otto and Felt had encountered [Gluttony] and had begun to fight, was when Garfiel and Kurgan had just landed in the canal, was when Wilhelm had unveiled Thearesia’s cloak, was when Julius had frowned upon hearing discourse of hatred that he couldn’t remember, was when the church where a bride had been on her way to being forced into marriage in a farce of a wedding had been half destroyed, was when the canals to the city’s north had suddenly ignited at once — was the instant when the City Hall with only non-combatants left inside were attacked.

???: “Kyaha! Time for this lovely lady’s debut~!”

On the topmost floor of the City Hall that stood five stories tall, a tremendous force shattered walls without any room for resistance.

The tremendous vibration shattered the architecture’s windows, and combined with the damage to the building’s foundations that had happened during the day caused lethal damage. Pristella’s City Hall, a

building which had once been the city's center had in the space of a mere single day turned to the verge of ruin, becoming unsightly to behold.

However, whether or not the curtain would close on only the verge of ruin, was dependent on what would happen here — would be decided based on those results.

???: "Four towers corresponding to four gates. No matter which opens the city would indeed be flooded... to not gamble on the possibility of retaking all the towers wouldn't do. Even if you rotten meats were unwilling you'd still need to disperse your forces, so using your total forces wouldn't do either."

Long-windedly, a voice which was an assault to the ears described the immediate circumstances of the city.

And then, echoing were voices opposite to this.

"Everyone! Be certain to survive, to protect this city!"

"Using our strength, let's take back this beautiful street!"

"We who stand with justice couldn't possibly lose!"

"Good is paid with good, and evil is paid with evil. This battle, will be the victory we await—!"

The stern voice of a young man.

The brave voice of a young woman.

A cry of a stern voice from a male soldier which had tangibly seen war, a cry of rational naivete from a young woman cheering everyone on.

In any case, only the innocence of these unrelenting and unashamed wills and proved these unyielding lines of discourse — only, the mouth which discussed this was only a single one.

???: “Why~ is it, this unwillingness to just think the slightest bit~?”

Then from the same mouth which spoke these effective words, as if betraying all the preceding remarks, insulting and taunting, a voice so rooted in malice to speak as if without even conscious malicious intent of smearing them away spoke thus.

And then the owner of the voice, hugged her own petite frame as if seeing something disgusting and began to shake back and forth at the shoulders.

???: “Kyahahahaha! Stopstopsto~p, please don’t do this! Why~ does this lovely lady have no choice but to greet thi~s justice that exudes the same stench~ as soil and sweat? Yo~u rotten meats, are you all gathered together so that your brains can boil beau~tifully?

Raising her voice high, producing a laugh piercing as a clamor.

Without capability of hiding, without intent of hiding malice was this sultry voice, and the source of this voice was a young girl who had yet to blossom into maturity.

Wide round eyes and delicate thin lips, blond hair riding to shoulders and faintly reddened cheeks, as if taking the form of the concept of cuteness, that face appeared inconsistent with the young girl’s luster and fierceness. Clad in pieces of cloth which were practically just lingerie, forget being a woman, for a young maiden whose human body’s characteristics had yet to develop this outfit was far too exposed. Any normal human who saw this would hold a twisting sense of aversion.

The terrifying young girl — or rather, the monster’s purpose lay here.

Witch Cult Sin Archbishop representing Lust, Capella Emerada Lugunica, a monster whose purpose was to ridicule morals and dignity of humanity as exceedingly as possible was present.

Capella: “That you would delusionally believe this lovely lady would be following decorum, and obediently wait in the tower is practically incomprehensible! Kind to the point of allowing you~ to pass these days, is already charity! What is called battle is about not allowing the opponent to do as they

like, and then to do~ precisely what they don't want you to. This kind of principle is understood even by flowers in a greenhouse~, you trash trash trash trash meats.”

In the midst of these coarse words of unbearable ridicule, was the monster that was only cute in appearance that was Capella.

Using fingers to poke at cheeks while twisting her body was this monster, who resumed human form immediately upon successfully infiltrating the city hall and entered a nearby room — meeting Capella there was a cat-eared knight who had been immersed in her abusive words earlier. And the long-haired woman lying on the platform behind him.

Here was the uppermost floor of the hall, the room that the pair of Ferris and Crusch occupied.

Felix: “You are, the Sin Archbishop of [Lust]...!”

Ferris cried out with a voice trembling with rage as he protected the bed while glaring at Capella. Capella tilted her head at the Ferris who glared at her, then looked toward the bed behind him and nodded with an expression of acceptance.

Capella: “Ah~ okayokay, your hatred is understandable. She di~d in fact lose to the blood. From the start it shouldn't have worked. E~ven though that was believed, actually seeing this failure is disappointing indeed. The most noble Lugunica blood~ mislead me to have just the slightest bit of expectation.”

Felix: “For what purpose would you force something like this on Crusch-sama!? What has to be done to save Crusch-sama! Answer me!”

Toward Capella who sighed with something more like listlessness than disappointment, Ferris's cute face was dyed red in anger as he screamed. Wielded in his two hands was the soldier's short sword he'd been carrying until now.

That sword was engraved with ornate decorations and the emblem of a lion, more akin to a first-class ornament of favor than a weapon of combat. Aligning with Ferris's own immature skills, it lacked the ability to make effective attacks.

Capella: "Is that a toy? An important gift? No matter which, using your frail arms to wave something like thi~s is pretty da~ngerous, little girl... no, hmm?"

Capella who had stuck out her tongue to jeer, cut her words off midway with a sudden frown.

Capella: "Uwah, disgusting. Eh? You~ have a pretty unnatural body. Clearly a man but that body... Something that should have been removed wasn't so how~ did you become like that. From a glance it's fundamentally different from a simple change by dressing in womens' clothing, hasn't this lovely lady ruined your mood now?"

Felix: "—hk"

Not only did she see through Ferris's gender, Capella showed disgust at the unnaturalness. The monster carefully examined Ferris from top to bottom, looking as if it were unintentional.

Capella: "That manner of dress, is it to seduce other men? In any case, all it's worth is bringing understanding of the pointlessness~ of humans. Men are all fools, women are all sluts, and humankind altogether is utter trash... is what this lovely lady concluded from her preferences."

Felix: "How noisy! Stop with the useless... answer my question already! What exactly did you do to Crusch-sama!!"

Capella: "Ah~ truly, how truly annoying."

Toward Capella who hadn't yet established dialogue, Ferris was unable to bear the insult and once again let out a roar of rage. Capella who heard this relaxed her shoulders, and after a moment the visage of the young girl dissolved away.

Felix: "——!?"

Before the Felix who took a stunned inhale, the young girl's body began to dissolve and reform.

Short stature elongating as if in a nightmare, bright golden hair beginning to change in color. The tempting sweet face who would provoke in anyone a desire to protect it upon being seen became stern, and the lingerie-like clothing transformed into a blue dress.

Although having heard of it, this process of variation and change was still the first time it had appeared before Ferris. The body which was released conformed not in the slightest to others' opinions, freely being changed as the architect of this nightmare liked.

And then faced with this scene as if a nightmare, Ferris was frozen with shock.

Felix: "Aa, uu..."

Capella: "—What's there to be so surprised about?"

Saying so, caressing long green hair was the face that Ferris cherished most.

The figure of Capella who stood before him motionlessly, had become the very appearance of Ferris's most beloved master. This made Ferris's face turn stark white, and even the hand holding the short sword had begun to tremble slightly.

Capella: "Look here, the ferocity from earlier has completely vanished. This face, this body, this voice, before your very eyes has become like this now."

The face of Crusch that he had never seen before laughed, and slowly Capella strode forward.

She reached Ferris's side, stopping when she reached a distance where she could touch him if she stretched out a hand. As if thinking of something, pointed the short sword Ferris was holding to her own chest.

The tip of the sword rested right at the center of Crusch's large chest.

Leaning just slightly forward would have it pierce through, was the position it was in.

Capella: “Your despised enemy is right before you. Avenge me. It hurts, it hurts. Even breathing brings me anguish. Eyes unopening. Flowing through my chest isn’t blood. Flowing through my entire body is something that feels like poison. So hurry, avenge me. —She’s saying so, like this you know~.”

Felix: “Huu, huu, huu...!”

Capella: “Plunge the blade in with one breath, stir the wound around as you will and yank it out in one breath as well. Then the heart will be destroyed, the pulse will stop, the blood spurt forth constantly. You can kill her.”

Ferris’s breaths began to grow too rapid, gaze began to wander.

More prized than gold, the life of his master’s enemy was being offered right before his very eyes. Just as she said, like this an attack could truly be effective. Could destroy her heart. Could kill her.

However, precisely because she wore that too familiar face.

Capella: “Stab down, stab down, stab down, stab down, stab down, stab down.”

Felix: “——”

Capella: “Stab down—!”

Felix: “Uu, aaaa!!”

Commanded as if by malediction, Ferris’s sword short stabbed toward that chest.

The blade pierced that body with ease, reaching between bones to destroy the heart within. With a twist of the keen blade, came the ruthless sound of muscle being severed, and finally along with blood that spurted forth the short sword was yanked out.

Ferris: “Ha, hah.”

Felix trying to avoid being stained by the gushing blood, with uneven breaths backed away. The short sword slipped from his hands to the ground, the floor wetted by the dripping blood.

Capella: "Hah, kah."

And then, Capella who had been stabbed in the chest knelt on the ground, spitting vast quantities of blood from her mouth.

In appearance she still wore Crusch's mien, a pained face stained with blood, amber eyes filled with disbelief fixing on Ferris.

Capella: "Hurts, it hurts... Why, why do something like..."

Felix: "It was you, who made me stab down...! Made me, injure Crusch-sama!"

Capella: "So uncomfortable, so very uncomfortable... Too much, unforgivable. Though clearly speaking of things like liking you, loving you... clearly loving each other..."

Felix: "—! Don't say such ridiculous things! I don't share that kind of relationship with Crusch-sama!"

Capella: "Ah, is that so? In that case, the interpretation of the script itself was off~"

With a frank expression, Capella used a sleeve to wipe the blood from her face while standing.

She casually brushed the wound on her chest, and the freshly made wound disappeared in an instant. The twisted expression of agony from before disappeared as well, leaving only a sigh.

Capella: "Indeed, playing around is meaningless if it doesn't start from the ve~ry beginning, it's something like that. Master and vassal who love each other, forcing one to kill the lovely lady who looks just like the other. And then to unfold the tale of the shaping of a love, was what had been planned on originally... a failure, failure indeed."

Felix: "Putting on such a farce... just what do you intend. What do you want from us!"

Capella: “Nothing much? There i~sn’t much intent behind it, nor i~s there anything to really ask of you. Watching a husband kill his wife is something to kill time. Asking an adjutant knight to wear women’s clothing, something caused by a preference like that, just think of it that way.”

Felix: “My promise with Crusch-sama, isn’t anything superficial like that!”

Capella: “Putting proclivity and sexuality on the surface like that, this lovely lady finds that a rather frivolous performance you know~.”

Regarding the Ferris who couldn’t help but cry out, Capella tilted her head as she said so. Then Capella raised her right hand, and her external form once again changed drastically.

Her palm becoming like a flower’s giant petal, the tentacles that stretched forth sent Ferri’s body flying, before entangling him as they lifted him up, then tightened their grip as they slammed him against a wall.

Felix: “Kah, huu...”

Capella: “Whether seeing or feeling it’s the same, wha~t a body both so slim and so fragile. If you wa~nt to become a woman so badly, how about this lovely lady lends you a hand? In this lovely lady’s hands it’d only be child’s play. How about being given help for removing it and forming your holes in minutes?”

Felix: “My, body is irrelevant... More importantly, that Crusch-sama is...!”

Capella: “How ridiculous. Something like valuing another over yourself, how about you sto~p audaciously saying sweet nothings. And speaking of which you’re asking about how to recover a body infected by Dragon’s Blood to its original state? Hah, if such a method exists it should rather be said that this lovely lady wo~uld be more eager to know.”

The tentacle continued writhe forcefully, causing Ferris’s delicate extremities to begin bleeding. Widening his eyes in agony, the sound of twisting broken bones echoed throughout the room.

In comparison to the right hand which had taken the form of a carnivorous flower, the raised left hand took the shape of the scythe of a mantis. Maintaining Crusch's mien, she had become a repulsive monster whose left hand was an insect's and right hand was a flower's.

Even so, that face bore no trace of change, all the more horrid for remaining adorned in beauty.

Capella: "Directly turning you into mincemeat would also be also pretty entertaining, and this lovely lady doesn't have much time to spare anyway. Before any unrelated others can appear, it wouldn't do to not take care of you and your master."

Felix: "—uu, kuu"

Capella: "That said, you really are some guy foolish beyond limit. Without expecting this lovely lady to show up here, even a strategy for counterattack is sluggish. Just what point will it come to before..."

Having said this, Capella's once delighted face was now tinged with a touch of a frown. As if holding doubts toward what she had just said, she dragged the still gasping Ferris before her.

Capella: "No matter what isn't this a bit too slow? Even given that this lovely lady infiltrated from above, it's taking too long for any others to arrive on this upper floor."

Felix: "... a"

Capella: "You have to be planning something, hurrying up and revealing everything is for your own good you know. Otherwise, your most most treasured Master-sama, will undergo an even uglier transformation..."

Capella's scythe extending from her left wrist reached toward Crusch who lay on the bed, and Ferris faced in incomparably cruel choice. Serving as a response to this question, was Ferris's shaking voice that he squeezed out,

Felix: "—You,"

Capella: "Ah~? Which way of begging for mercy will you..."

Felix: "You, utterly... useless creature."

Capella: "Hah?"

Yellow pupils bearing disgust glared at Capella, a sentence uttered as if spat.

Immediately afterward, the tentacles that bound Ferris began to spout smoke, and the petals discolored and rotted away. Regarding her own right arm that had been corroded away, Capella revealed an expression of surprise.

Capella: "A~rara? Just what happened to this lovely lady's hand..."

Felix: "Well, just think of it as something like a scummy personality isn't unique to your side."

The tentacles rotted away, and Ferris's body was freed.

Another sound overrode that of Capella who turned her head at this. That was a cute voice with a unique cadence. Capella looked in the direction of the bed that had issued the sound — at this very moment, light flooded the entire room.

A white ray which practically created the effect of instantaneously spiking temperature. This energetic beam burned away at Capella's face, destroying the entire left half of her face.

Accompanying the carbonizing half of her face was the stench of scorched flesh, and Capella retreated a several steps. Then reaching out a serpentine tongue to caress the surface of that wound, smiled.

Capella: "Standing against the face of an ally without even a trace of leniency hu~h... well, not li~ke this had much of an effect. The presence of someone here is well expected, so n~ot a huge surprise to wind up like this."

???: "Something like 'n ally is a misunderstanding'. We're commercial competitors... nah, it's more like competitive opponents. Moreover not like we're livin' such easy lives that we'd hesitate to attack upon seein' the face 'f an opponent like that."

Capella: "A conditional ally will sooner or later become an enemy. In that case, was especially aiming at the face some deliberate~ preemptive scheme? If truly so, your personality might be a little too twisted too."

???: "Ah've already said, there wasn't any such confusion of private n' public affairs. Aimin' at the head was purely to see, 'f destroyin' it would prove fatal, hopin' so for a moment 's all."

Saying so, the person who clambering from the bed gave the sigh of betrayed expectations.

In place of Crusch, lying on the bed had been Anastasia.

She touched her own wavy hair colored with green dye, responding with a slight smile to Capella who had survived with even half her face burnt off.

Anastasia: "Though Ah'd clearly hoped for it, seems no death happened."

Capella: "Even~ though you might be different from the type of woman who only smiles upon seeing mo~ney. But something like unhesitatingly scorching half the face of a woman, a personality surpassing a reasonable amount of self-interest, truly a female meat that this lovely lady would take an interest in!"

Anastasia: "Being taken interest in by a person like you, even us here would feel a bit of resistance. Y' see, us here's somethin' beloved is with long fur that feels silky to the touch."

With formality, Anastasia responded frankly to the monster Capella's words. With a small cough she approached Ferris who was near the bed, taking his wrist and helping him up.

Watching the teary-eyed Ferris, Anastasia with "*isn't this enough*" as a precursor,

Anastasia: "No information's been gathered at all. At the very least, let's set Crusch's affair aside for now."

Felix: "... I understand. You've accompanied me far already, in such a risky gamble."

Anastasia: “For this situation, us here’s holds a rather large share of the responsibility, so let’s just call it that.”

Even the ability of Ferris who was the leading healer in the kingdom, could do nothing to heal the current Crusch.

To save her, there was no other way aside from finding the reasoning and a solution from the one who had done this to her.

As for what Ferris had prozed, Anastasia could not refuse.

Welcoming each candidate to the city of Pristella had been Anastasia. And then things had hit this point. Due to holding a share of responsibility for the matter, Anastasia was unable to refute Ferris’s plea.

Anastasia: “It’s something like this, call this completely fruitless and yet it still managed to betray expectations.”

Capella: “To be burdened by expectation like so, my deepest apologies~ but these feelings are truly, completely absent. But, there shouldn’t have been any guarantee that I’d show up at all?”

Anastasia: “Wasn’t there an announcement from Natsuki-kun? Seems that, you would have acted upon hearin’ it.”

Sending the main combative force away, leaving the base camp undefended would surely prompt activity from the enemy. In the first place the Witch Cult had no obligation to greet them with integrity. Truly this was just as Capella’s earlier speech had said.

Anastasia: “Natsuki-kun there, grew naive at a critical moment.”

Although in no way was there a possibility of a guarantee, strictly speaking to consider from the nature of the Witch Cult, showing up to attack could only be one of either [Wrath] or [Lust].

So Anastasia had laid a trap, and allowed the City Hall to be attacked. The real Crusch had of course, fled to a nearby shelter with the other injured.

There would of course be no one who would step into this uppermost floor. People still remaining in this building, aside from those on the this topmost floor—.

Capella: "... Hm~ph, he~h. People whose minds move a little too quickly, are just the slightest bit irritating to others. But then, aren't you underestimating this lovely lady? That cat-ears over there, this little lady over here, nei~ther looks like someone who can hold their own in battle."

Anastasia: "Bein' called a little lady is really rather embarassin'. Though we here look like this, seems that I'm technically still a grown adult."

At Capella's remarks, Anastasia closed one eye in response.

Capella: "It's been decided. That cute face of yours lovely face, is all that'll be when everything below your neck becomes a locust. After turning in to that do try again, to ba~ttle against me using that rude mouth of yours~."

Anastasia: "How rather horrid... in that case, best to bid farewell for now."

Capella: "——"

Anastasia's refusal, surprised Capella who had been the threatening party.

Anastasia tugged on her still green hair, glanced about the room.

Anastasia: "We here should have mentioned already, we've been awaiting you all along — in that case, we couldn't have been waiting without making any preparations."

As soon as the sound of her voice fell, Anastasia rapped gently against the floor with her fingers.

Two ringing sounds, as if some kind of signal — immediately afterward, cracks appeared in the floor by Capella's feet, and the broken body of the young girl plummeted downward.

Capella: "Oh, myyy."

The bottom of the floor falling away, and appearing in the floor she had plummeted to was a similar opening.

In this manner Capella continued to fall floor by floor, falling the height of four stories in one breath, landing directly into an underground chamber beneath the first floor.

Splat, with such a sound, Capella's body exploded.

Defenselessly slamming into the ground, the body of the young girl was completely flattened on the cold surface.

Blood gushed forth from her face, and her limbs were folded over and broken with a miserable appearance. But, the body that become a piece of flesh immediately began sluggishly move in hands and feet, and young girl's body stood in the form of an aqueous amorphous state.

Appearing there was, the figure of a seductive woman.

Clad in extremely revealing clothing, displaying her ample flesh without a trace of shame, the rare sight of black hair was done into a three-stranded braid. Exuding a somewhat dangerous aura, and a beauty that caused restlessness in its wake.

Whether Ferris or Anastasia, both should have no idea who this appearance belonged to. In any case, the two that remained on the fourth floor, shouldn't be able to see her transformation.

And so, there should have been no one who would react with surprise upon seeing this figure.

Capella: "Aah, aah, reallyreally... i~sn't this just going to make me so very delighted so very excited. *Kyahahahaha!*"

With the manner of an agonized death and a manner that couldn't feel agony, Capella let go her voice. That was a light and delicate sound incongruent with her mutated appearance, echoing throughout the entire underground chamber of the city hall.

In shadows, in air both cold and humid. This was not merely the landscape of a basement, it was part of the numerous waterways distributed throughout the city — part of the management facilities used to maintain these waterways.

From somewhere came the sound of rushing water, and from somewhere else overhead a breeze blew by.

Capella: “Receiving such a warm welcome and whatnot, allowing me to freely change the size of my chest is exciting i~sn’t it. To return and embrace them tight, to have them rectify their upbringing from within this lovely lady’s arms, to have them never love anything aside from this lovely lady...”

???: “Can’t return.”

Capella: “——”

Cheeks dyed crimson, Capella who was exhilarated to the point of trembling, was barred by someone unknown.

Sounding out was a deep voice, a man’s voice muffled and sulking.

As she heard this voice Capella raised her head, and from the shadows underground emerged a person’s figure.

The expression of Capella who saw him suddenly twisted. The absentminded expression that had been her face until now, immediately contorted to one of loathing, as she glared at her opponent.

Capella: “By this lovely lady’s aesthetic values, the most intolerable are the ones who try to hide their ugliness are~n’t they?”

???: “I see. Rest easy. By my aesthetic values, your feelings can’t be tolerated either.”

Responding to Capella with an apathetic manner, heaving a sigh as if something were weighing him down.

And then,

???: “Shouldn’t you have heard from above? Your actions have been seen through by that wicked one on our side. Which is to say... in terms of wickedness, how could you hope to triumph against our princess?”

As he spoke, the heaviness that sat in his voice was still present.

The sword attached behind his side was drawn from its sheath, and sluggish light reflected onto it from the empty space above his head.

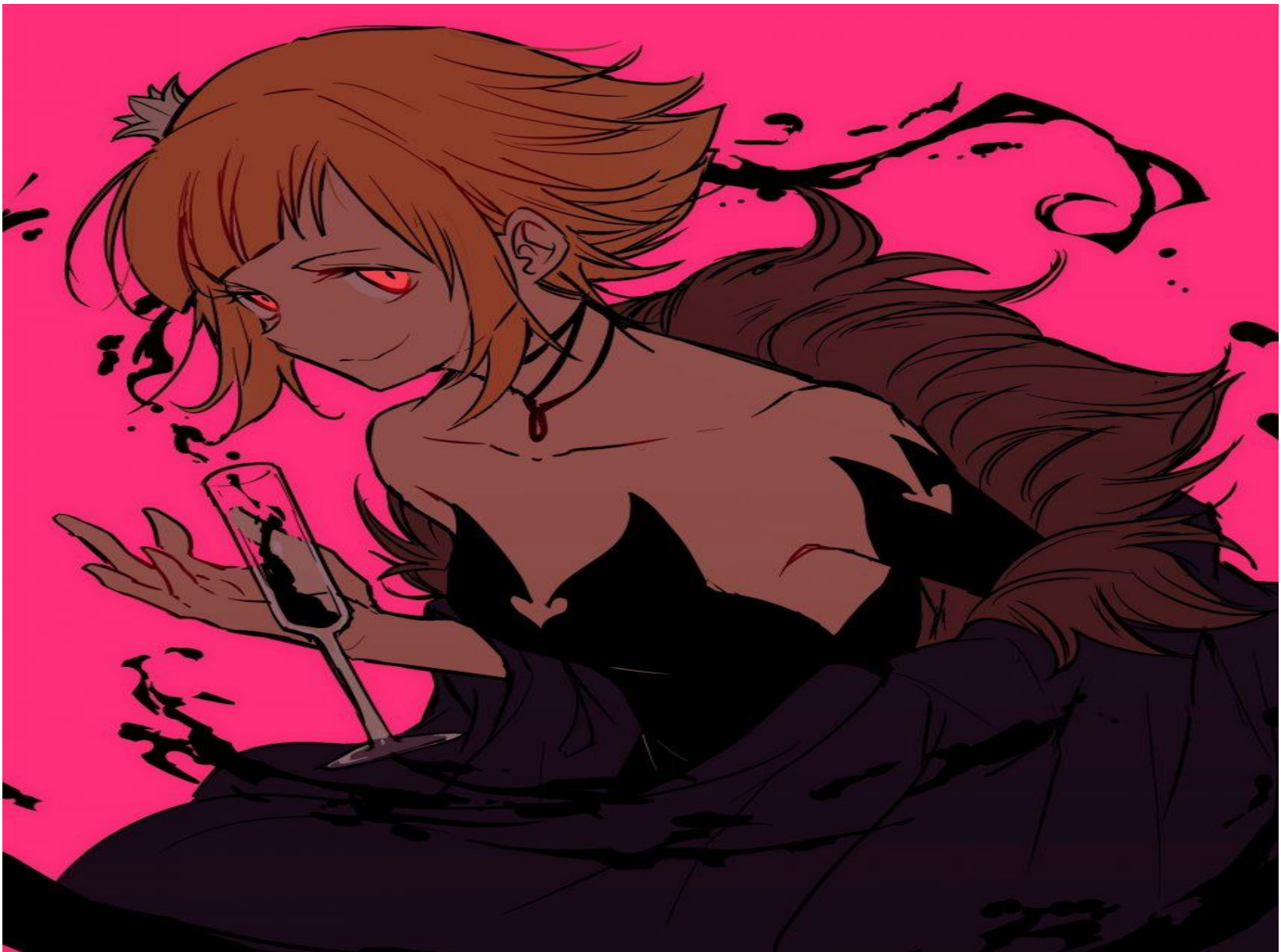
Standing there was a man with one arm. Was a shadow clad in a black helmet. Was a singularly dressed strange man.

The stranger facing Capella, pointed over with the single arm holding the Blue Dragon Sword.

Al: “Though I’ve only just greeted you, I’m in a terrible mood today. — Before I die, hurry up and leave the hell away from here. Mollusk.”

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Chapter 61 - Victim of the Territory



Blue Dragon Sword wielded in his one hand, toward the man chattering without rest Capella lightly tilted her head.

Three-plaited braid long and dark spilling upon her white shoulder, with arms folded as if to emphasize her plump chest she bent forward, casting a mesmerizing gaze toward the man wearing the helmet.

Using that mesmerizing gaze to tempt a man's eyes, even knowing it was a trap, it would still drive a man's instincts wild.

However, even with such a demonic scheme, whether or not it would be effective would depend on the opponent.

Al: "That erotic pose is indeed a little bit, but if your goal is to seduce me it's useless y'know. For a hardcore virgin... to make me thirst after a passerby onee-chan, has such a high difficulty that I'm practically laughing."

Capella: "To demean your own frivolous words as well as moderate restraint... setting aside whether or not this lovely lady's goals apply for you, a man who~ gives the impression of not eating this up, putting on that act of a harlequin to induce carelessness in your opponent, just what is that thick thing meant for?"

Al: "Women shouldn't be spouting dirty jokes like that. It's a real turn-off."

Capella: "——"

Capella's provocative seeming gaze, from this man's response turned into an expression of speechlessness. This measure of surprise quickly dissipated as well, and Capella laughed as if happy from the bottom of her heart.

Capella: "Kyahahahaha! What is that, that remark at that age in that demeanor. That maiden of yo~ur dreams lives on o~nly within your chest. Yo~u too are one of those people whose exterior doesn't conform to your interior, are~n't you without doubt a flower in a greenhouse. Kya~, how di~rty."

Al: "Though I apologize for interrupting your show, don't make me say it so many times. I'm not in the mood today. I couldn't really tell you if you asked me when is it that I'm in the mood, particularly today, so."

Toward the one posturing like so, Capella who was tapping her feet, the man – Al's attitude became extremely complex and irritated.

Rather than posturing, it seemed to be a manner of dissatisfaction with this task from the bottom of his heart. Rather different from the two people from above on this point, this lead Capella to become increasingly incredulous.

Capella: "Not in the mood, finding this a bother, and yet not clearing the way. Your~ words are truly full of contradictions. In that case why the hell are you still in the company of a raucous maniac like myself?"

Al: "The nerve of you to say it yourself, you raucous maniac."

Capella: "Of course it'll be said. From this lovely lady's perspective, in any case absolutely everything that exists in this world is just a way to pass time. You are all in entirety, ultimately objects of this lovely lady. The lovely lady's love is boundless, filled with mercy, because everything aside from seeking love from this lovely lady is unnecessary... Anything else, do with it a~s you like."

Spreading her arms, Capella with an expression as if a poisonous flower laughed sweetly.

Al who was looking at this smile, with a woosh dropped the blade of the Blue Dragon Sword. Twisting his neck so that his bones made a crack, spat out a long sigh with an 'Ah—'.

Al: "You are. Rather different from the other sins I've known."

Capella: "Oh my, you've seen other meats rotted beyond rot? That perverted female meat who resents her own longing? That virgin bastard with miniscule vessel? That low-life brat of Bizarre Eating with vile character? Or was it that sick in the head, sick in consciousness, sick in thought self-proclaimed spirit? No matter which for companions they're the absolute worst choices! Haven't your parents taught you? Choose your companions carefully."

Al: "... Unfortunately, my current friends are types my parents warned me about."

Capella: "That too still deserves condolences. Even the you~ like that, will embrace this lovely lady's august love? Remove that helmet and reveal your face, embrace and devote love to this lovely lady!"

No matter how condemned or rebuffed, Capella who carried out the gestures of seeking love was the epitome of a mind which sought love. Excepting the notion of the most extreme one-sided love that had without regard of others forcefully plundered love until now that had been referred to by a misnomer of [Love].

Of course, answering to her love which rather than being called awkward, would be better described as completely disregarding of human nature existed not a single person.

Al raised the Blue Dragon Sword that he had just lowered, slowly shaking his head.

Al: “Apologies. I’m happy you feel that way, but the two of us are still unfamiliar with each other, and it’d be embarrassing if any odd rumors spread amongst my friends. Please accept my refusal.”

Capella: “Something like giving regard to the gazes of outsiders, do~n’t you still have quite the cute aspects. Is this lovely lady lacking here. —And here there had been an impression of taking leave from garbage masochistic male meats who enjoy being ordered about by women.”

Al: “... ah?”

Capella: “Disregarding of others, harsh eyes. A body which could even be said to be filled with sensuality and violence. A stature shorter than this lovely lady currently is, a kind of lovely exposed skin. Although words changing along with mood, an inner character always held up with reason and confidence which never grows meaninglessly arrogant. Handing many tasks over to subordinates, but rarely becoming reliant on them. Not li~kable but not disli~kable, the position and the woman both.”

While chattering on endlessly, Capella’s figure metamorphosed.

Still maintaining ample flesh, shortening her height, clothing transforming into a bold dress which revealed shoulders and back. Eyes on the face changing from sleepy to sharp, from her keen gaze overflowed an atmosphere of confidence. What appeared was a beautiful woman with long golden hair hanging loose.

Associates from within the city, although not the appearance of any particular person — from some unknown place, exuded an atmosphere similar to that of a woman whom Al associated with.

Al: “——”

Capella: “Oops, not gold? At the very least a Lugunica’s characteristics would include golden hair... In that case, hmmhmmhmm, red... n— orange it is.”

Observing Al’s subtle reactions, Capella’s hair color changed bit by bit. Testing black, brown, green, blue, hesitating for a moment when it became red, then becoming orange.

With just this, she had assumed an impression ridiculously similar to a very familiar woman.

Al: “How very hair raising... from where have you met our princess?”

Capella: “Never seen never spoken to her never even realized her existence? Merely, deducing from your reactions the type of woman you like. This lovely lady, is a woman who will give all you know? In order to be liked from a well liked opponent, it’s a matter of course to give e~verything.”

Al: “Speaking of reactions, my face is...”

Capella: “Voice, movements, speech patterns. Angle of neck and line of sight, attitude. From chatting understanding your attitude, nature, preferences.”

Al: “——”

Capella: “One twitch or one movement, not missing a single one. Putting in the entirety of heart and spirit to be loved, this is the way this lovely lady utterly devotes her all. This lovely lady has already utterly devoted her all like this so... look at this lovely lady. Look only at this lovely lady. Don’t look at anyone else. This lovely lady’s face, body, voice, attitude, gestures allofallofit! Should all be totally completely in line with you~r preferences!”

As she spoke, the voice of Capella – Capella who had assumed Priscilla's appearance, gradually grew rough. Her claims were a straight line of desire to please, but a line too straight would become a love that would pierce right through its target.

It seemed as if Al couldn't even respond with shaking his head or reply with words. Could only ready his entire body's will to fight a response to Capella. At this silent answer, on Capella's face grew discouragement and contempt.

Capella: "You, a selfish scum male meat... which aspect of this lovely lady are you di~ssatisfied with?"

Al: "Don't misunderstand. I neither like you nor dislike you, either way is fine... Sorry, that's a lie. As expected, you're disgusting so I really don't like you."

Capella: "—*hk!* You fickle rotting male meat!!"

The right arm of Capella who was stomping her feet, from her shoulder began to transform into the huge head of a wolf. The ferociously howling beastly head, at speeds beyond what the eye could process flew toward the frozen Al. In a moment the fangs of the head sharp as blades, completely shattered Al's upper body with a bite – in the instant before, Al's flew forward into the gap of approaching canine fangs, flying horizontally to escape.

Capella: "Don't think you can escape with just that!"

Al: "Like I'd think that! The side! And then the back!"

From overhead the rolling Al, a powerful attack from a hand slammed down. A finger of those giant hands could compare to the height of a human, and being caught in its grip would be akin to being caught by a snake.

However, this attack too was evaded by Al through jumping. And then the wolf's head whose fangs seemed to want to crush Al's waist returned, being exactly stopped by the Blue Dragon Sword wielded behind his back.

Al: "Whoaaaaa, Dona!"

Without completely dispelling the momentum of the attacking beast, and maintaining his position of blocking with the Blue Dragon Sword, Al's body slid forward. The half incanted wall of earth rose from the ground, slamming directly from below into the right arm that had become a beast.

The wolf whose lower jaw had been struck gave a wail, and the shift in mass of her right arm led to the collapse of Capella's entire form. Seeing this, Al having dodged the left arm's forceful attack rushed forward.

Al: "Dona! This side too, Dona!"

Capella "—hk"

The Dona that Al incessantly launched was the lowest tier of earth magic.

Whether in power or durability as a wall, both were perfectly aligned with its nature as the lowest tier of magic. Even so Al still relied on this magic, as his best tactic in actual combat.

Forming obstacles, blocking field of vision, forming a foothold — exactly like, he was doing in this moment.

Al: "Raaaaaaa!"

A solidly formed wall of earth, hindered the movements of Capella's distant right and left arms. In addition Capella's body itself, was assaulted by a wall of dirt that obscured her frontal vision.

Then, with preparations in place, Al rose into the air — using speed and momentum from earth rising from the ground, launched forward as if with wings.

In the instant when Capella upon hearing these shouts glanced overhead, a flash appeared upon her slender neck, her head flying away.

A face similar to Priscilla's danced through the air, an exaggerated amount of blood spurting from the wound. Capella's blood had an unidentified effect of something seemingly poisonous, the very reason for Crusch's suffering.

Of course, even with warning to not brush the excess of blood –

Al: “Who do you think you’re fooling, you damn liar!”

Stepping into this pool of blood without lenience, Al stuck out his Blue Dragon Sword.

The tip of the blade did not hesitate in the slightest, to reach through the back of the headless Capella, being yanked out from between bones in the chest, adding another fatal injury to an opponent who was supposed to have died. However, it could not stop at this.

Al: “Take this! El Dona!”

Sweeping up the pierced body, Al who flew forward incanted with momentum – a level higher than Dona, an El tier magic using the Blue Dragon Sword as a launch point, to have it begin within Capella’s body.

Of course, Capella’s body was unable to suppress the mass that swelled from inside, and scattered in an explosion.

Bang, with a foolish sound as if in a joke, Capella’s body turned to shreds. Hands and feet scattered and flew away, pink viscera and bright red staining the entire underground space. In the frigid air the pieces of meat even seemed to give off warmth, finally resulting in a result that one could walk away from.

Al: “... How’s, that! Hah, hah, at this point it’s...”

Shoulders heaving as he caught his breath, Al spoke to Capella who had become pieces of meat.

This, anything like this, a creature able to survive after being destroyed to this point simply could not exist. Toward Al’s declaration of victory, an existence that could respond did not exist, or at least that should have been.

Capella: “Ah~ ho~w exce~ssive — ah. No matter what, ordinarily things wouldn’t go so~ far.”

Al: “Damn it.”

The one that had received Al’s insults of disgust, responding was that still airy yet wicked voice.

The voice came not from flesh, but from the direction of the head that had been initially severed — in other words, it came from the place where Capella’s head had landed. Capella’s head from where it had rolled, remained on the ground as it joyously witnessed Al’s reaction.

Al: “Sending your head flying, destroying your heart isn’t enough. Isn’t that breaking too many rules here...”

Capella: “Head flying and heart destroyed, would pose no problem to this lovely lady... Suddenly becoming so without a trace of tolerance i~s rare indeed. This lovely lady, right now, should be tempting you with you~r favorite face, could it have been a slip of the eye? Or could it be that you’re the type who expresses love by inflicting pain?”

Before the Al revealing feelings of helplessness, Capella’s head righted itself.

The severed head moved sluggishly, black flesh that couldn’t possibly have been present gushing out. Forming a head as a pedestal, quivering flesh became limbs, black surfaces hidden from sight by white skin, turning back to — no, completely transforming into a golden haired maiden.

Al: “... And the pieces of meat scattered here?”

Capella: “Since they’re unnecessary, they can dissolve.”

Al looked on with amazement, as the scattered pieces of flesh that had formed Capella’s body started dissolving with a noise. The organs and limbs became a substance like black mud, bubbling as they disappeared. Even their method of disappearing inspired disgust to the point of aesthetic fatigue.

Capella: “Anyway, without hesitation you severed my head i~ndeed. The one from above... se~ems to have been a fake. Wa~sn’t there one whose comrade couldn’t fight anymore, after taking this lovely lady’s blood? Soaking in it like that, wa~sn’t it sca~ry?”

Al: "It wasn't some kind of bluff. Though I didn't know what conditions needed to be filled, knowing that being dripped on wouldn't be the end is something I've already tested. Dodged like mad and it was a waste."

Capella: "—? But you haven't shown even a trace of an attempt to avoid it."

Al: "It's something you couldn't know about. Head, heart, if both don't work, next time that severed head will be crushed. No matter how many tries it takes."

Al's extraordinarily tired sigh, was even more pained than it had been before this battle had begun. This should have been due to the effect of Capella's tricks. Extraneous burden that had been placed upon his shoulders after their meeting.

In any case, not a trace of damage was left on Capella's freshly regenerated body.

In addition to variation and transformation, a regenerative ability to the point of refusing death – with even the typically most fatal attacks on head and heart rendered ineffective, this was truly a genuine monster.

However, difficult to kill did not equate undefeatable.

Al: "There are also methods like freezing the entire body to seal it, or some method like tossing it into the Great Cascade."

Capella: "I~sn't despairing after failing to kill an opponent nice, are~n't you tru~ly an incorrigible trash meat. But, having motivation is well and good, can you actually do it? Se~ems like you're good at petty tricks like dodging and escaping, are~n't you lacking a way to actually kill this lovely lady."

Al: "Indeed even if I died a hundred times, I wouldn't be able to kill you. In fact, I've already gone half of the way... But, aren't you forgetting something?"

Al placed the Blue Dragon Sword over his shoulder and gave a knock, his helmet making a clunking noise, he pointed his sword and Capella's head which had turned at this line swiveled.

He was pointing at the City Hall – somewhere outside of it.

Al: “You originally intended to disrupt our home base. We can also imagine that your control tower is completely deserted. Meaning, that the ones who went to attack [Lust] will rush back shortly. As long as I keep up these time-buying tactics, naturally soon you’ll be done with.”

Capella: “——”

Al: “For your information, my abilities are okay for buying time, no? I’ll try every means to Keep you down, to trap you in here. So, if you’d like to run your chance is now.”

Al locked in battle against Capella in solitude, used the imminent arrival of reinforcements to try to coerce his opponent into retreating. Upon hearing those words Capella raised her eyebrow as if surprised, and toward her questioning attitude Al also responded with a “hmm?”.

Al: “What’s that, your reaction. Even if you have some complaint about my suggestion from just now then...”

Capella: “Do you truly believe that this lovely lady who came alone into enemy territory, wo~uldn’t have prepared measures against the troops you~ sent out?”

Al: “... Huh?”

Capella: “Muscle daruma and swordswoman, were placed along the way. Even amongst our puppets, those two are quite something... Can your reinforcements really get away so easily?”

Al: “*hk*”

The unforeseen development drew a sound from Al, who looked at the large hole overhead. As if seeing through his helmet to see his expression, Capella continued with a “*by the way*”,

Capella: “The Conversation Mirror you had on you is sealed you know? So even if you hurriedly tried to establish contact with anyone else, you wouldn’t be able to reach anyone.”

Al: “How did you do something like that!?”

Capella: “That magic device, the creator seems to have been a [Witch]. Rumors about such legends have long been passed down in the Witch Cult. Including things like disrupting the wavelength of the Conversation Mirror.”

Due to the nature of this unorthodox annoyance, the goal that Al had spoken fell empty.

Although Al had no way of ascertaining the truth of Capella’s words, in truth, the two who had been sent from the City Hall to take on [Lust] — Wilhelm and Garfiel will sooner or later clash with her minions. The possibility of returning from a battle between monster and man could only be said to be extremely low.

Which was to say,

Capella: “Lacking a means to fight back at a time like this, isn’t this about the end?”

Al: “... Not having anything, well I wouldn’t go so far as to say that.”

At Al’s vague answer, Capella revealed a faint trace of a small smile.

And in the moment after, the faint smile melted. Once again, the form of the young girl became an amorphous piece of meat, and like this Capella’s mass grew exponentially.

With a gurgling sound, Capella’s form broke the limits of a human form, growing huge.

Delicate maiden, seductive woman, stern young man, serious warriors – her flesh grew enormous with a momentum yet unseen, the underground space echoing with laughter.

And then appearing after a moment was, a dragon of black whose body blended into the shadow.

Al: “... I see, you could even turn into a dragon.”

Considering the fact that there were no divisions of rooms, the underground was much more spacious than the City Hall had been. However, even a space like this could not accommodate the black dragon's huge body so easily.

Hearing Al's low voice, the dragon narrowed its golden eyes, and Capella opened her mouth as if to respond to Al. From that mouth, came a merciless scorching breath.

“—hk”

The breath of flame seemed to ignite the very air of the underground, as a white light forced its way close to Al.

An incantation completely overpowered by the roaring sound, created a wall of earth in the scope of that breath. However, faced with the overwhelming temperature the wall failed to mount even a momentary defense before crumbling under the heat — however, Al's purpose did not lie there.

“Kah, huu—”

The jaw of the black dragon which had released the breath, was hit by a suddenly rising wall of earth. The mouth that generated the breath was forced shut, and instead the black dragon scorched its own throat with its flame.

Even so, the flame that the black dragon had spat out before its interruption continued to burn. On his back which tried to escape the range of the heat, the green flame approached—

Al: “Damn it! Dona! Geh!?”

Incanting alongside the stench of burning, a wall of earth suddenly slammed into Al's side. Using this momentum Al with a backside full of flame was launched into a nearby waterway. Then the instant that his back brushed bottom surface of the waterway, another incantation brought a wall of earth, sending him flying out of the water.

Al: “—Shiii!”

The completely soaked Al flew from the waterway. In an instant, the razor claws of the black dragon had swept across the waterway's bottom. Tossing up foam, the wall which carried Al out of the water burst into pieces. Although an evasive manoeuvre, the ferocious attack on Al continued, as he endlessly avoided, avoided, avoided.

Using miraculous movements to evade in such an extremely small space, withstanding attacks from behind that should have been unforeseen, his body's lack of ability was supplemented by his own magic, as he continually avoided fatal injuries.

"Gyiiiiiii!"

Al: "Do, Do, Do, Donaaa!"

The now impatient dragon rotated its enormous body, mowing down with its tail.

Faced with this battering wind that drew an arc, Al used multiple incantations to create five earthen walls toward his front — after reducing the threat of this attack as much as possible, used his Blue Dragon Sword to fend against injuries, swept up and hitting the ground to roll several times before staying down.

The dramatic rolling movements lessened the on his body, and Al stood with the Blue Dragon Sword as a crutch. However, the damage had not been completely offset.

Hurriedly through the gap at the bottom of his slanted helmet, a large quantity of vomit spilled.

Al: "Ku, kuu... damn it, on the victim's side this time... really outta luck here...!"

Capella: "Do~esn't seem that way though. Considering your abilities, there's a kind of incomprehensible stupidity in staunchly standing with allies..."

Toward Al who sighed over his current situation, the black dragon Capella gave a rather uncomprehending praise.

Even from her perspective, Al's desperate defensive battle held an inexplicable sense of bothersome violation. Attacks that should not have been seen through, pursuits that should not have been imagined, Al had all along been using his own ability to survive as long as possible. — As if he'd long known all those choices.

However, neither had the leisure to pursue those idle thoughts for now.

As for why,

Capella: "... Isn't this rather, a bit too much?"

The reason why Capella who raised her head would say so, were the faint vibrations transmitted from the surface of the ground — and then were, fatal sounds coming from the City Hall that had continually suffered damage.

The foundation of the structure which had seen too many large battles had already suffered a great deal of damage, and then the battle that had taken place underground had given the foundation one final blow. The result was, the gradual widening of the hole that had been the trap to send Capella down, and the cracks spread through not only on the floor but even through the entire building.

The development after this, even a small child could draw a conclusion — collapse.

Al: "Stop kidding around! If this territory comes undone I'll actually die!"

Seeing part of the floor fall away from above, Al stood through the pain, with laboured steps like this leapt into the flowing waterway.

Along with the sound of water, his body grew distant with the underground waterways. And then Capella seeing him off maintained the form of the black dragon as she gazed upon the gradually collapsing ceiling.

Capella: "Ye~p, interest is wilting. Tired from playing, so forget it."

With murmured words that seemed listless, the black dragon yawned.

Like this the rarest sight in the world went unseen by anyone, buried under the rubble from the collapsing architecture.

※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※

“—u”

At the scene of the collapse, echoed a low humming sound.

The sound accompanied the shoving aside of rubble, several slightly larger stones rolling down from a mountain of rubble. Thanks to this impact the mountain collapsed, and from an opening caused by this collapse a white hand protruded.

As if searching for something, that slender arm hurriedly attacked the mountain of rubble and made it cascade bit by bit.

And then several minutes later, finally succeeded in breaking free of the mountain of ruin, was Ferris whose clothing had become ragged.

Felix: “Ku, ku.”

As he coughed, Felix spat out vast quantities of soil and blood.

Was it sand or blood that remain in the gap between his tongue and teeth. No matter which, it didn’t matter at all to Ferris. Right now he just wanted to rinse his mouth.

Ferris: “Didn’t expect the City Hall to collapse. Isn’t this, another death for nothing...!”

Ferris used the inside of his dirtied clothing to scrub the blood from his face. Wiping away what dirtied it like that, would return his face to neat and cute.

In the midst of a ruin that could not have been imagined to be a five-storied building mere minutes ago, that was now in a state of crushing humans to death without any preparation of a defense.

Felix: “Something like that is... that’s right, Anastasia-sama!”

Cat ears pointing upward, Ferris shouted that name as he looked about him.

Volunteering to appear in Crusch’s stead, assisting in this dangerous battle by acting as bait was Anastasia. Having successfully met [Lust]’s ambush as anticipated, although the results could only be described as a tragedy. But, a collaborator was a collaborator.

And in the necessity of determining whether she lived or died, also resided a level of emotional obligation to Julius.

Felix: “If like me, she’d been directly crushed to death...”

Looking around, starting the search among the nearby rubble. In the moment that the building had begun to topple, Anastasia and Felix had been in the same room.

A sudden collapse from beneath their feet, if she’d been caught up in it without any preparation she’d end up the same way. At least if she hadn’t died instantaneously, as long as she could be subject to Ferris’s healing magic she’d be safe and sound.

Felix: “With just a single reply this search would be that much simpler!”

Anything like search and rescue, was not what Ferris’s slender arms were suited for.

Even if helping the injured was Ferris’s especial speciality, but Ferris was ill-suited for the work that lay before healing. Even for the lack of information received from [Lust], Ferris felt an unprecedented sense of toil, and precisely at this moment.

Anastasia: “Ah, Ferris, you too are safe and sound.”

“——!”

The sound of footsteps that kicked away rubble approached, Ferris who jumped as if startled turned to see a solitary figure. Tugging on the hair that had been dyed green, smiling slightly was the Anastasia he had been searching for all along.

Hem of her clothing which seemed difficult to move in swaying, she approached Ferris with careful steps.

Felix: “Anastasia-sama, are you unhurt?”

Anastasia: “It’s as ya can see. In fact, we here should be saying that. You, Ferris, thank goodness you emerged unhurt from that collapse.”

Felix: “That’s...”

Although strictly speaking he hadn’t been unhurt, Ferris suppressed his instinctive reply. There was no obligation to reply, any it would not merit a pleasant topic. Closing his mouth without reply, Ferris across from Anastasia surveyed the rubble and scene of collapse of the City Hall.

Ana: “Telling everyone to leave for the shelters in advance, truly was too correct of a decision. This was, quite the grand happenin’.”

Felix: “A grand happening...”

Anastasia frowned as if incredibly troubled, and Ferris as well surveyed his surroundings.

Anastasia calling this a grand happening, was this a circumstance to be able to say so with peace of mind. Although calling it a grand happening wasn’t incorrect, it felt as if missing a touch of seriousness.

Not to mention that the cause of this collapse was precisely —

Ana: “Seems to me, that the cause would be the underground battle between AI and [Lust]...”

“_____”

Ana: "Being completely buried, digging them out like this would be a bit difficult. If they successfully enter the waterways underground, seems to me there would be a possibility of escaping alive..."

Of course, in that case the possibility of Capella's survival also needed to be considered.

As Ferris had observed, Capella's capacity for regeneration surpassed human imagination. Having half her face destroyed by Anastasia's magic, and not giving any regard to it was truly beyond strange. Just as Ferris's life continued after fleeing, it shouldn't have been the result of some unnatural constitution.

Felix: "Speaking of which, where did Anastasia-sama learn such magic?"

Anastasia: "... that, got anythin' to do with this?"

Felix: "Since I had heard you couldn't fight, a little bit of surprise can't be helped."

During the discussion on how to distribute the combat forces, she herself had been the one who'd said she had no combat ability. Whether Anastasia herself or the artificial spirit accompanying her, had been the case.

However, if that had been the case, what was that magic that had ruined Capella's face.

Al: "—This topic, I'd also like to hear a bit about it."

Anastasia: "——"

Anastasia kept silent in response to Ferris's question, and just at that moment the voice of a third person chimed in.

Before the two who turned their heads, was the soaked Al kicking at rubble. Twisting his head so that water poured poured from the opening in his helmet, he approached.

Anastasia: "Seeing ya safe and sound is nice. A successful leap into the waterway?"

Al: “Though about three times I felt like I was dying. Eh, not like it mattered in the end. More importantly, we’ve got something to talk about.”

Anastasia faced forward to welcome the laborer’s meritorious return, but Al unsheathed his Blue Dragon Sword as he spoke. Pointing the tip of the blade as well, she too frowned.

Al and Anastasia stood facing each other, and Ferris was caught in between the two. The places where the three stood formed an exact triangle.

Anastasia: “For this, what exactly do you intend? If this is a joke then I ain’t laughin’.”

Al: “Not like I’m in a kidding mood. Setting aside that cat-eared bro for now, I really can’t rest easy at your survival from this destruction. In addition...”

Anastasia: “It’s merely that there were backup plans. Hiding those was indeed my fault, but as for that I can’t exactly explain it forthrightly...”

Al: “Indeed that could be said to be. The problem here is your attitude. Barely managing to escape from the collapsed building, then chatting idly with a familiar face atop the ruins... From your attitude it feels like your expressions and feelings are completely out of place. Do you know what we call people who can chat like that.”

“Anastasia”: “——”

Regarding the Al who persisted with a hail of questions, Anastasia stopped replying. However, her expression now froze into a sly smile.

And then right before Felix, Al spoke a definitive clarifying line.

Al: “Those kinds’a people, we refer to them as [Witches].”

“Anastasia”: “... really now, isn’t that turn of phrase a little excessive.”

An incredibly philosophical tone of response, gave an impression of quite the sense of exhaustion of feeling.

Sly smile falling away, what emerged afterward was an empty smile that was only in appearance. As if that movement of skin was direct not toward another, but toward one's self in a self-deprecating manner.

“Anastasia”: “In my experience, [Witch] is by no means a term used in good conscience.”

Al: “Could it be that you're under the impression that I'm lightheartedly dropping a greeting? Your first impression is right, swindler fox.”

Felix: “What is it?”

The impression of two people who had reached an understanding – watching Anastasia who had changed her tone and Al, Ferris sought an opportunity to interject. Al blocked Ferris with that attitude with his armless left shoulder, his gaze still fixed in Anastasia's direction.

Al: “It's something like, the miss still looks like the miss but is different on the inside. That fox with wicked character dangling from her neck... Echidna is inside her.”

Echidna: “This is a result that prioritizes Ana's survival, it's just that the result ended up like this. This affair being spoken of with such sincerity, as if I have some malicious intent is really rather distressing.”

At Al's hostile words, Anastasia – Echidna revealed a troubled expression as she replied. Then Al harrumphed into his helmet with a ‘*Hah!*’.

Al: “Someone replacing another shouldn't speak with such a righteous tone.”

Echidna: “Replacing or whatnot is really quite a misunderstanding. From where did such a notion come from?”

Al: "Right down to that fake Kararagi accent of yours, pretending to that miss should serve as evidence. Unfortunately enough, the nature of a [Witch] that can't comprehend humans was seen through by me."

Felix: "Act a bit more properly! Like this no matter how long you talk the topic won't progress!"

At Al's systematically detailed responses to Echidna, Ferris finally exploded.

Although for information of the situation at hand Al did have a degree of reliability, what mattered most right now was the affair of Anastasia's body. Her body right now, had indeed been taken control of by Echidna.

Felix: "First of all, is Anastasia-sama fine? It isn't something like merely protecting her body, but her consciousness flew off somewhere?"

Echidna: "That's not the case indeed. Ana not being healthy in body and soul wouldn't do. Because if that weren't the case there wouldn't be a need to use the forbidden technique."

Felix: "Forbidden technique?"

Echidna: "Refers to this condition here. Since Ana's gate is a little bit complex. It can't be used by itself. Even with me acting as a proxy, the burden is still incredibly heavy. It's like that."

Stroking her meagre chest, Echidna made Anastasia's expression turn gloomy.

Although Al still propped up his sword with a demeanor of intolerance, Felix forcibly stepped in front of the tip of the blade as he continued discourse with Echidna.

Felix: "Then why did you pretend to be Anastasia-sama, to converse with us?"

Echidna: "Isn't it more unnatural to abstain from a greeting when seeing your ally safe and sound? Pretending to be Ana herself, was to keep you from spotting our weaknesses. Exactly as I just said, Ana's body is quite unstable. So I wanted to hide the fact that she'd become one with me... and then was seen through too."

Felix: “Julius is also... unaware of this ability. After all he hadn’t even known about your existence before this. What do you intend to do about this?”

Echidna: “That’s an issue between Ana and Julius, and the [Iron Fang] as well. For your questions, I don’t feel as if I have an obligation to offer speculation.

Everything had been smoothed. The sense of incongruity that Felix had felt from Anastasia atop the mountain of rubble as well, all stemmed from the differing interior of Echidna whose replies were insufficiently intuitive.

In addition to the fact that her magic had been her protection, was the fact that Anastasia’s body had indeed been protected from the collapsing building – with these two points, Ferris’s previous doubts came undone.

Felix: “Although, that one over there still gives an impression of being unwilling to lower their weapon?”

Al: “... tch.”

As Ferris had asked, Al clicked his tongue as he reluctantly replaced the Blue Dragon Sword within its sheathe. Upon seeing this, Ferris once again looked at his bruised and battered body.

Burns and scrapes, gave a look of being truly injured.

Felix: “Alright, let me take a look and it’ll be healed soon. Uwah, caught here is...! Hya, this slash, it’s miraculous you didn’t die from it?”

Al: “With my ability, turning a fatal injury to a serious injury is the limit. Though it’d be better if I hadn’t lost the gamble... well, whatever.”

Felix: “——?”

The palm of Ferris who tilted his head, fixed even the fact that Al had been wounded.

All that could be said was thanks to the healing properties of the blue and white lights, in the blink of an eye the numerous wounds on Al's body had been healed. Al having confirmed this gave Ferris his thanks.

Al: "Myself, as well as miss too ended up surviving. Without doubt that [Lust] bastard also has to be alive. One can't rest easy even with how much she'd be buried by rubble."

Echidna: "About that."

At Al's voice which raised a warning, Echidna lifted her hand. The conversation mirror held in its palm, with her other hand she gently knocked on its surface.

Echidna: "As a matter of fact until the building had collapsed, the conversation mirror had stopped making a single sound."

Al: "I'd heard. [Lust]... or rather the Witch Cult? Within the Witch Cult there seems to be some way of crippling magic devices. Presumably that suppressed communications with anyone on the outside..."

Echidna: "That's what I'd thought. It's just, if it was the Sin Archbishop that caused that she should have fled by now."

Al: "... Talking in circles."

Echidna: "Apologies, it's a habit. That is to say, the function of the conversation mirror has been restored."

Hearing those words, Al and Felix were simultaneously shocked.

Al was surprised that the conversation mirror could reach others. But Felix was surprised at the cause of the conversation mirror's malfunction and the elimination of the possibility of the cause.

Felix: "What do you mean? [Lust]'s interference ended... which is to say she's dead?"

The monster who had ceaselessly boasted of her regenerative ability, dying from being buried by rubble was truly too unbelievable. Just as Al had said, after all the three people present were all still alive.

Toward the undying monster with especial vitality, believing that she'd die like this was truly too difficult. If any possibilities aside from this could be considered —

Echidna: "Receiving a wound to the point of interfering with work. Or the interruption itself is meant to induce carelessness in us..."

Felix: "That, feels a bit incongruent with that awful character..."

Echidna: "Indeed, I think so as well. Should be more daring than just hiding... Such as, taking the form of one of the three of us here? With the original having already died, completely supplanting that existence. That is precisely a tactic that [Lust] would enjoy."

This speculation of Echidna's caused Felix to shiver.

Remembering that before the collapse, that monster had assumed a form identical to Crusch. Directly watching that transformation, there was no room for doubt that she had been a fake. Of course, even she'd become Crusch, Ferris was confident he'd be able to see through her, but these two were another matter entirely.

This possibility, made Ferris feel ill at rest. However,

Al: "Don't get your kicks from saying disorienting stuff, what a wicked nature. The lack of reaction makes it obvious. Of course she turned tail and ran. Leaving after becoming bored of playing, that one is just like that."

Echidna: "To say something so without basis or reason..."

Al: "Before being crushed, the monster wore completely a disinterested expression. That would be the reason."

Facing off against Capella all the way to the end had been Al.

If the opponent had been another human such a conclusion would have been astounding, but if there opponent were a Sin Archbishop standards of common sense couldn't be upheld. Of course even assuming that cautions couldn't be dropped.

Al: "More importantly. If the conversation mirror is functional, couldn't contact with the princess be established? That's what's most important. Hurry up and help me connect."

The teams that had left the City Hall with conversation mirrors had been team Wilhelm-Garfiel and team Priscilla-Liliana group. Originally, Al who should be part of Priscilla's team had at his master's order remained with the left-behind team. The thought of wanting to confirm his master's safety could practically not have been more understood.

Echidna: "I see. You don't need to be in such a hurry... hmm?"

Placating Al like this, Echidna who held the conversation mirror in her hands frowned.

Just as Ferris glanced over intending to ask what had happened upon seeing that reaction, the conversation mirror in Echidna's hand gradually began to radiate a faint glow. — This was an indication of establishing a connection with another conversation mirror.

And shining from the light within the conversation mirror was —

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Chapter 62 - Commend of The Warrior



???: “— Gorgeous Tiger?”

Garfiel’s consciousness was shaken harshly the moment he heard that sound.

He coughed out the volumes of water he’d swallowed, shook all the moisture away from his body, sight beginning to return to his brain drowsy from oxygen starvation.

This place was an underground space both dim and frigid.

The rigid stone ground was still submerged by volumes of water flowing in. It seemed that the turbid flow had flooded the room from an indentation in the wall behind him, which had allowed a breath of fresh air.

He was currently showered by a great number of gazes. In them lay unease, vigilance, dread, opposition.

From the number of people before him and the myriad of feelings in their gazes, Garfiel blearily came to the conclusion that this was one of the city's shelters.

The waterway he had plummeted into connected to the shelter, crashing through the wall led to this place. As a result, he'd been swept in along with the water.

Garfiel: "——"

At that realization, Garfiel's blurred consciousness received a shock.

Jerking his head up with a start, remembering the events that had transpired before he'd been swept in, he erected the hairs on his body. He hurriedly spun his head around, rapidly searching for the giant who had plummeted into the water with him in a tangle —

Garfiel: "... ah"

His gaze overlapping with a young blond boy's green eyes.

He remembered this face. This face made his chest tighten, followed by memories which agonized his spirit.

He'd come face to face with him again, that boy who had a connection with Garfiel's mother.

He was a little brother, remaining where he'd wanted to be, accepting the love of a mother—

Garfiel: "——!?"

The sense of being startled away was once again buried under an excess of feeling.

And then, an enormous splash swept the water surrounding Garfiel, the form of a giant who'd a splash flying standing up in the shallow water. This enormous figure waved his arms, mercilessly slamming toward the blankly staring Garfiel.

Facing this attack, Garfiel's reaction was a beat too late.

And this beat, proved fatal.

The momentary carelessly offered the opponent a flaw.

And from the war god facing Garfiel came not an off-color attack.

In total, eight attacks swept toward Garfiel.

One or two were blocked. However, the remaining six slammed straight into Garfiel.

The face was hit and two attacks squirmed the body. Then the floating body was beaten to the ground by the fist, hitting the head of the water and eating the fist from the top.

Taking a blow to the face, two attacks to the side leaving his body in midair. And then his floating body was slammed to smack into the ground, his head which slammed into the water taking another hit from directly overhead. His face slamming through the water into the hard ground, his nose and teeth taking serious damage as well. The surface of the water stained with crimson, a string of blood flowed from Garfiel's mouth and nose as he leapt to his feet.

Garfiel: "Stop, kidding... arouuuuuund!"

A roar coming from the mouth which had teeth knocked loose, shaking away the ringing in his ears from blows to the head. A momentum of anger sweeping through this underground space, the war god positioned directly forward stepped forth as if this were the reason.

Fists overlapping. Garfiel turned his head, using his teeth to scratch at the fist which scraped his head, tearing it from wrist to elbow in one motion. his head and used his teeth to smear his fist across his face and tear it from his wrist to his elbow. Extending his right arm to grab his opponent's neck in the same instant, digging all the way to the lower abdomen.

Fresh blood sprayed from the sharp incision, causing no small amount of damage to the war god's body.

However, the war god's seven remaining hands continued to strike. In order to avoid them all, Garfiel needed to do his utmost to respond.

In one exchange of blows, he needed to use one hand to deal with eight.

Overwhelming disadvantages, overwhelming differences in ability, overwhelming differences in battle — this in fact ignited his will to fight.

Garfiel: "Aaaa, aaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!"

Attack, attack, attack, attack, attack, attack, attack —

Block, deflect, avoid, evade, duck, kick aside, meet head on —!

Fist to fist, generating shock waves that caused evaporated the sweat dripping from the two.

Unyielding and steel facing off in collision, the staggering sound made it difficult to believe that this was flesh on flesh. The pair's bodies were unable to withstand this and flew outward in opposite directions.

Ferocious tiger and the enormous body were both tossed aside to caush giant splashes.

Kurgan's back collided with the wall, and Garfiel once again became intimately acquainted with the water. He immediately raised his head, his gaze overlapping with Kugan's who was looking directly toward him.

Although without a single word spoken, mutual understanding was established in but a moment.

Garfiel stood, stepping into the water that now reached his ankles.

Garfiel could feel the [Divine Protection of Earth Spirits] beneath the soles of his feet, cutting a quadrilateral from the floor beneath his feet, allowing it to float upward. Kicking aside this floating piece of floor, the huge holes caused much of the water in the underground to flow into it all at once, drastically reducing the water level.

As Garfiel conducted the draining of the water, Kurgan approached the hole where the water flowed in.

The holes that had sent the two underground was enormous, vast amounts of water pouring from within. Left alone, the underground space would flood in a matter of minutes.

Kurgan yanked out a Demon Cleaver. Minus the one Garfiel had bitten to pieces, there yet remained three Demon Cleavers. Kurgan removed one to aim above, his target hanging directly overhead of hole – he hefted the exaggerated piece of iron at the ceiling, shattering it.

Using the vision of a warrior to see through the collapse, with roughness he filled the hole in the wall in with rubble. Of course, even blocked water would still leak in, but not the the extent of instantaneously submerging the underground

The hole was plugged, the water was drained, water would no longer flood submerge ankles.

Checking the status of their surroundings wordlessly, the two warriors returned to their original positions. Face to face. Fists lifted with shields, Demon Cleavers drawn. The hero [Eight Arm] Kurgan, the challenger [Golden Tiger] Garfiel.

Subduing an opponent at peak condition. This was the implicit agreement between warriors.

“ _____ ”

Garfiel knew that this was not the time for such a thing.

His duty was to return to the high rise City Hall that was likely under attack, to rescue those who could not fight.

However, before any matter of facing or not facing, about what to face, Garfiel had long ago already faced this problem.

— This sentiment was out of place, but Garfiel felt excited.

His pitiful loss against Reinhardt, sealing memories and feelings both for a mother, unable to avenge the kind girl who had protected him, leaving an ally in a dangerous situation when faced with an ambush.

So many important things snatched from his hands, leaving him to feel powerless and empty.

Leaving [Sanctuary], seeing the world, Garfiel had recognized his own weakness.

The him that had remained in [Sanctuary], would certainly have remained strong, for certain. Because then his metric of comparison was only himself, holding no doubts to the martial abilities he'd trained.

Leaving [Sanctuary], seeing the world, Garfiel had recognized far greater strengths.

Compared his time in [Sanctuary], his own power had not decreased. However, the his metric of comparison was no longer the him of his imagination, making him weak in relativity.

In a mere two days, a shift in consciousness made him clearly recognize this conclusion.

Powerlessness and loss had exposed Garfiel's inner self, forcing him to recognize he was merely a bluffing brat. His inner self had created hesitation, doubt, regret, the wavering of his heart turning him weak.

— And injected life into his wilted soul was precisely Kurgan.

The hero [Eight Arm] Kurgan, the Empire of Vollachia's hero. The strongest man of the Multi-Arm Tribe.

He'd readied his Demon Cleavers, regarding Garfiel as a warrior to face. How important this was to the Garfiel who could not find his own value.

The two entangled men plummeted into the waterway, where Garfiel had lost his footing due to his inexperience in aquatic combat. The magically resurrected Kurgan had no need to breathe, and if he had wanted to decide the outcome could have merely waited for Garfiel to drown.

However, the war god had shattered the wall of the waterway, connected to a shelter, had let Garfiel survive.

For what purpose.

Garfiel: "Thought initially... that 't was yer show 'f mercy."

Kurgan: "——"

Before Garfiel had determined his epiphany, Kurgan had not regarded him as a warrior.

Flinging aside an attacking child, kicking aside a crybaby was not what a warrior would do. And thus facing Garfiel who had been throwing a tantrum, Kurgan had completely sidestepped him.

But, that was wrong.

Precisely because he'd stood, raised his shields, being regarded as a war god by Garfiel.

That was why he'd seen the famed Demon Cleavers being drawn, had met with the stance of greeting a warrior.

After seeing this demeanor from him, what he had shown to Garfiel was certainly no mere mercy or pity.

What Kurgan sought. Was the result of a decisive battle for victory against Garfiel.

— The battle between warrior and warrior can only accept a mutual blow as a conclusion.

Garfiel: “Yo, ya fuckers... how long ‘re ya goin’ t’ keep starin’?”

Garfiel checked the shields on his two arms, these words directed not toward Kurgan, but meant for the onlooking audience.

The ones who after the two men had been swept in, had silently regarded the battle between warriors — the refugees.

Gathered together though differing in clothing, and, and even race, all they had in common was their inability to fight, they were a group of non-combatants who would be sent flying with a single attack.

If Garfiel fell here, there was no one here who could deal effective damage to Kurgan. Although difficult to imagine Kurgan committing atrocities against non-combatants, but likely the only one who knew this was the Garfiel facing him.

And so,

Garfiel: “Should be able t’ tell ‘t a glance. Even ‘f you spectate from over there, ‘s absolutely nowhere that y’ c’n make a move. Hurry n’ take th’ chance to seek shelter outside...”

Fred: “—Gorgeous Tiger—!”

Garfiel: “Ah...?”

Garfiel’s words urged them to leave quickly were overwhelmed by a loud cry.

Calling out to the Garfield whose brows were knitted in pressure, using this phrase to call out to Garfiel happened to be one of those onlookers.

The boy’s eyes filled with tears, both cheeks crimson, gripping the hem of his clothing tightly.

Faced with Garfiel’s astonished sight, the boy’s watery eyes stared back. It held a will strong enough that Garfiel found it difficult to reply.

Garfiel: "Hey, lil' brat... th' hell 're ya, sayin'..."

Fred: "Gorgeous Tiger—!"

Garfiel: "——"

Fred: "G, gorgeous tiger—!"

The quavering voice of the boy called so to the silent Garfiel.

As if unaware of how else to express his feelings, calling out this name.

This was the name of the golden tiger. This was the name that Garfiel Tinzal yearned for, the name of the strongest tiger.

Why now, was he calling this name. What did he want to convey.

Tears dripped down the reddened cheeks of the boy.

Spreading through the entire underground audience were the cries of the boy. So everyone shared this share of passion that was injected despite being inexpressible.

Garfiel: "Enough, y've said 't already now go."

"Gorgeous Tiger——!"

Garfiel's sigh, was buried under their cries of calling for the golden tiger.

From behind the boy, a girl with the same blond hair embraced him. That was the boy's sister. As if to protect her younger brother, her gaze trembled as it found Garfiel.

Her lips also trembled without pause. In a voice without sound of silence, calling the name of the tiger of gold.

“Win for sure!”

Not from the boy, not from the girl, of course not from Garfiel.

Another man in the underground space, called out while raising a fist.

Garfiel: “Wait, told y’ to run...”

“Fight, and then win!”

“Don’t lose!”

“E, even if we can only... watch on!”

Garfiel was speechless.

The voice he used to urge them to flee was repeatedly buried under other voices.

Directing his attention back, the enthusiasm in the boy’s voice reached the hearts of everyone underground, not a single person watching Garfiel and Kurgan’s duel making a move to flee.

If using common sense, if calming down to think, how could anyone think staying was right. Everyone, was overwhelmed. Solely for the sake of this meaningless determination and faith, reaching a conclusion that was likely to end in self sacrifice.

Garfiel: “——”

The hell does this count for, was what Garfiel thought.

What was the point of staying here. What was making noise, showing support supposed to mean.

It would be much better to hurry to and run. He himself wouldn’t have to worry about involving them. The likelihood that they’d be sacrificed even if he himself fell would reduce. This was much more reasonable.

But not a one of them fled, why was this.

Garfiel: “Cap’n... sure ‘nough, your speech delivered effects too strong...”

From his mouth Garfiel called out his name for Subaru, remembering the words he’d conveyed to the entire city.

Subaru had touched the hearts of everyone in the city, the powerful broadcast that had been proclaimed as weak pulling together all the people that felt submerged by unease and horror. A flickering candlelight had been lit with the last bit of hope.

And fire burned out to leave heat in the peoples’ hearts, waiting for the next change to reignite.

And for them, the moment of ignition, was now.

And the same went for Garfiel in this moment.

“Gorgeous Tiger—!”

The solidarity, did not stop.

The first to call out to the golden tiger was Garfiel’s little brother whose birth he had been unaware of. And in order to protect her littlest brother, was the little sister whose birth had been equally unknown to Garfiel.

Little brother, and little sister, were looking directly at Garfiel.

The city that had accepted his mother after she had lost her memory, its residents were looking right at Garfiel.

Garfiel: “F’r a duel between warriors... compared t’ th’ usual, ‘s a bit too noisy.”

Kurgan: “——”

Garfiel: "Really, sorry. Been troubling you all along. Especially most troublesome're my amazin' self's lil' brother n' sister. After this, they'll get a proper scoldin'."

Kurgan: "——"

Garfiel: "N so."

Wordlessly the war god readied his fighting spirit.

Needless to say, his attitude was one of utmost power.

Garfiel clenched his fists, knocking the shields on his arms together.

The sound of the steel striking steel lit a spark, through his fangs Garfiel took a deep breath.

Garfiel: "[Shield of Sanctuary]... no,"

Kurgan: "——"

Garfiel: "[Gorgeous Tiger], Garfiel Tinsel."

The announcement of a name that was meant to initiate a battle.

To Garfiel's announcement of a name, Kurgan remained silent. Merely scraped his Demon Cleavers, showing his opponent the utmost of will to battle.

This was, enough.

Garfiel: "Haaa, aaaaaaaah!"

Garfiel kicked against the stone floor, rushing forward.

Kurgan greeted him with the same, the distance between the two reducing to zero in a mere instant.

To say hit would be too sharp, to say slash would be blunt, the attacks that Garfiel made without pause leaving little room to breathe.

The air that Demon Cleavers touched was not whistled through or sliced so much as it was killed, every blade only being caught by Garfiel due to his warriors' instinct for danger.

In one exchange of blows he needed to contend with eight hands, and those eight hands only needed to contend with one.

With the number of Garfiel and Kurgan's hands differing, to win against him was to Garfiel as difficult as scaling the sky/reaching the heavens.

However, without acting he could not reach it. And so he initiated this battle, gambling his all.

“_____”

Faced with heavy blows which made his body their target, if hit directly even a blunt blow would be enough to sever his blood and flesh. Without the slightest of hesitation Garfiel lifted his foot, shattering a Demon Cleaver speeding toward him with a single step.

From directly overhead the heel broke the body of the Demon Cleaver, the thick body of the blade piercing through the stone floor, the roar of the splitting rocking creating an illusion that the entire city was trembling.

He'd first dealt with one, but couldn't let his guard down.

At the same time that the broken Demon Cleaver had pierced the floor, the second one cut an arc through the air from the direction of his opponent's left shoulder. Upon hearing the whistle of the Demon Cleaver with his right ear, Garfiel immediately defended his head with the shields strapped on his arms. The attack hit exactly in the instant he raised his arms, shaking his attention for an instant.

The impact from his right fractured his elbow, the wrist of upper arm shattering completely. Garfiel gritted his teeth, to the extent that his teeth dripped blood. That was the second hand.

The third fourth hand were empty, striking in the same instant.

The clenched fists of Kurgan with his giant form, were no smaller than the size of a child's skull. Explosive power paired with explosive size, the power of a blow could be said to equate that of a warship's.

Not to mention that one first felt capable of piercing iron plate, approached Garfiel whose mind had blanked after the impact to his head. One toward his body and one toward his head, either with a direct hit was capable of exploding a human.

The blow concentrated on Garfiel's body burned as it scraped across his abdomen.

The fist seared as if scorched in flame, with unnatural power.

Twisting across his body, this fist only scraped away the skin on the surface of his abdomen. The third hand.

A feeling as if having half his body plaguing his consciousness, with his right hand Garfiel blocked the punch headed toward his face. The already broken and shattered right arm, completely burst open under this tremendous force.

Elbow to wrist to tips of fingers, this hand no longer looked like a hand. The shield affixed to the wrist was sent flying as well. But losing a hand was hardly a fatal wound. Garfiel arched his body to meet the first with his forehead. Smashing Kurgan's fist with his headbutt, he avoided the blow from the fourth hand.

Remaining were the fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth. Still distant. Too distant. Distant enough to make one laugh. To make one shiver to their teeth.

Garfiel: "—Aaaaaaaaaa!"

The fifth, the sixth hands were empty as well. One Demon Cleaver yet remained, and a fatal wound had not yet been made.

Both these hands were left hands, each protruding from under the shoulder and side of the body attacking at the same time. The right hand that he'd blocked with was now useless. His left hand couldn't make it in time. Garfiel unhesitatingly stuck his right foot forward.

Soles of his shoes drawing a splash, at the same time conveying his will to the earth.

On occasion the earth lent him strength, on occasion aligned with his whims, and this time too offered him its own power.

From a tilt under his feet, Kurgan's lower body lost its balance.

Even so, without pause the war god righted himself. His movements were without a trace of hesitation. However, in his unwavering attention there appeared a break.

In the instant that Kurgan's attention had shifted below to his feet, seizing this break Garfiel rushed forward.

Lifting his foot, with a twist of his body, shoving his head between the two approaching fists. As if in the eye of a storm, the two fists both swept behind his body.

The instant his feet were in place, Garfiel felt a shudder for his own judgements.

He himself unsure of why he would have made that judgment, a thought and a decision accomplished in a fraction of a measure of time. Brain scorching. Heart scorching. Life on the verge of bursting.

The fifth and sixth hands were thus dealt with. Afterward, the seventh and the eighth hands —.

“_____”

Suddenly, Garfiel's hair stood on end at a chill.

Kurgan whose six hands had been dodged would want to use the remaining two to finish Garfiel. — A fatal blow approached.

— Skipping over the seventh hand, the eighth and last hand attacked.

He stopped an attack with one hand, using it to wield the Demon Cleaver.

Right hand holding the pommel of the Demon Cleaver, right shoulder's hand tightly gripping the body of the Demon Cleaver. A blow that surpassed powerful was about to welcome Garfiel from the ground.

Surrounded on all sides, such overwhelming presence that one would believe that they would die no matter they tried to hide.

This was a sight that made the wretched attacks of the previous six hands seem almost a waste.

Avoiding was unimaginable.

Backing away, leaping aside, or rushing forward, would all result in a direct hit.

An image of being turned into a slab of meat as the result of this attack appeared before his eyes.

Escape was impossible. Attacking would be even more reckless. — There was only one option, and so.

Garfiel placed his unbroken left hand on his head, dropping his waist.

In this moment, there was a voice that still remained audible. The sound of little brother and little sister, and a large crowd of people cheering.

Estimating was only in a moment, moving was only in an instant, the result was right there.

“ _____ ”

The instant when the Demon Cleaver moved, Garfiel had entirely left this world.

All encompassing silence, all encompassing formlessness. Extraneous surroundings vanished in an instant. In the attention of Garfiel whose focus was sharpened to its absolute limit, remained only Kurgan.

With abnormal sluggishness, with the Demon Cleaver he slashed downward at Garfiel.

Garfiel raised his head, the movements he met the attack with equally slow. In a world so stagnant as to induce anxiousness, all Garfiel could do was tightly clench his teeth.

Wrong, there was still time to revolve around.

He saw Subaru. Saw Ram. Saw Mimi. Saw Frederica. Remembered Lewes, and Emilia, Otto appeared too, thought of that bastard Roswaal, saw Beatrice and Petra and everyone in [Sanctuary], and then his mother Reshia and his little brother and little sister.

The battle that had happened at [Sanctuary], had allowed Garfiel to realize his own weakness.

Realizing the breadth of the world, when he'd lost to Reinhardt, Garfiel had adopted the wrong impression that he was weaker than he'd been before leaving Sanctuary.

— That was impossible.

If embracing more meant more weakness, then for what did people live on.

Being strong enough to protect everything you embraced was enough.

Garfiel: "Ah — feel refreshed."

Suddenly, the irritation plaguing his heart fell away.

That instant, the Demon Cleaver struck the shield on his left arm, sending a jolt which felt like lightning throughout his entire body.

"——*hk!*!"

The defense mounted by his left arm, was in an instant cut through by the Demon Cleaver.

Just like his right arm, wrist, elbow, bicep, even shoulder were all twisted beyond repair.

Feeling the familiar pain of a shattered arm as if in a nightmare, agony dyed his vision red, thoughts sinking into complete blankness. Garfiel opened his mouth to form a howl.

The fangs that had been clenched all along loosened, beginning a chorus of despair for each accumulated wound.

The Demon Cleaver's assault did not end.

After shattering his left hand, the momentum that remained slashed at Garfiel's head. Such power would be enough to shatter Garfiel's small body, leaving him nothing but minced meat.

Just how did the war god regard this young warrior who keened agonized wails as if dying.

In his heart was compassion, or pity — was neither.

Unless one side stopped drawing breath, the principle of a warrior pitying a warrior existed not.

“—Aaaaaaaa!”

Garfiel howled from agony as he lowered his head. The sound of that heartrending sound persisted for a long time, and then.

Garfiel: “—aaaa, gah.”

The howl stopped, Garfiel clenched his jaw. On the teeth that he clenched down on again, shone a radiance of silver.

That was the silver shield that had fallen from his ruined right arm, which Garfiel had caught in his teeth.

Garfiel: “Gaaaaah, aaaaaah—!”

Whipping his head around, biting the shield Garfiel had met the Demon Cleaver slashing toward his face, biting the shield had mounted his second defense, slamming it into the side of his face the instant the attack had reached. Blood sprayed from Garfiel’s nose, his teeth sent flying, but, his knees did not kneel.

He supported the weight of the Demon Cleaver with biting strength and the strong neck.

The spark of the collision between steel and steel — created a flame, causing Garfiel’s consciousness to flicker.

“_____”

Even though the whites of his eyes had begun to show, just what kind of willpower was still even now supporting his neck.

Was it fighting instinct, or rather a beast’s vitality and survival.

Suddenly, blood spurted out. Vast volumes of blood poured forth, crimson flowers of blood pooling in this underground space.

It sprayed from Kurgan’s right hand, that last right hand that clutched the Demon Cleaver.

On it was a wound persisting from the last time he’d attacked Garfiel, deep enough that bone was visible from hand to upper arm. From this blow just now the wound had completely split open.

Kurgan’s face bore no shock. Nor did his expression change due to the pain.

That was a matter of course. He was a corpse. Pain existed for the sake of urging people to live, to ensure that the candlelight of life still existed beyond the minimum limit — the deceased did not need such a tool.

And thus, Kurgan had ignored the effect of the injury on his right arm.

If truly wishing to perform the most perfect attack, the last blow should have been given up to his still functioning left hand.

Success or failure determined here at once — was not the right place to say.

However,

Garfiel: “—ah.”

Withstanding attacks from eight hands, Garfiel heaved a sigh with a bloodied face.

The shield clenched between his teeth clattered to the ground. Kurgan’s front was wide open. Yet Garfiel’s left and right were completely useless, muscle in both legs torn from insufficiently withstanding heavy blows. Even so, he could still leap one step.

After leaping over, what to do. Hands, could not be made use of. Then remaining was—.

Garfiel: “Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

Garfiel let out a cry, opened his bleeding mouth wide, rushed toward Kurgan.

Garfiel’s teeth sank into the neck of the stationary war god. Teeth piercing through tight muscles with easy, severing at the base those organs so vital to life.

Biting down like this Garfiel twisted his body, teeth shredding through muscle and sinew, tearing away a large chunk of neck, crunching with force.

Garfiel: “Hah, ah.”

Utterly defenselessly Garfiel collapsed on the ground, spitting out shredded flesh. He turned his head as he vomited, watching Kurgan’s figure as blood gushed from its neck.

Garfiel’s hands were gone, several teeth were missing, body remained stained in blood.

Having been mortally injured by the Garfiel covered in wounds, heroically Kurgan's body remained yet standing with chest upright. This was a hero's spirit, so moving as it was of the human heart.

“_____”

Finally, Kurgan turned slowly, facing Garfiel.

Facing the warrior who lay on the ground gazing up at him, the war god crossed his arms over his chest with calmness.

And then,

Kurgan. “— Magnificent.”

In a baritone low and heavy, commended the victor.

Garfiel: “Aah...”

Without, even allowing him time to reply.

Kurgan's body collapsed right before Garfiel's own two widened eyes.

Collapsing like sand was the figure so large one needed to crane their neck to see, alien face becoming stone and ash. Such an end inspired such grief, the deceased dying once more — this was the result.

This is ultimately the sadness of the people, the deceased once again changed back to the dead — this is the result.

Garfiel: “... What pleasant words.”

Watching the war god crumble to ash as he died, Garfiel sighed discontentedly.

Not that he wished for him to live on so unnaturally, but after a mutual duel to the death, a feeling of emptiness at the end was natural.

And so, this was merely a grief that Garfiel had nowhere else to express.

Garfiel: “Ah, damn it... fuck, screw it...”

The flow of blood was too much.

Laying on the ground, Garfiel used his entire body to channel the [Divine Protection of Earth Spirits], into turning his gathered mana into healing magic to repair his body. His hands especially, and his face was a disaster too.

Wounds that had yet to be healed aboveground, immediately followed by such a number of attacks. Being left with heavy injuries was not such a surprise.

???: “Gorgeous Tiger!”

Garfiel who had been putting his all into healing heard a sobbing cry.

Treading puddles to approach were the figures of little brother and little sister. Others approached as well, but in Garfiel’s eyes were only those two.

Both looked to be on the verge of tears — no, they were already crying.

It couldn’t be helped. Even as seen by others, Garfiel’s condition was disastrous. And to someone familiar with this sight that he remained alive was practically unimaginable. If looked at by a healing expert their faces would surely be a terrified white, determining that emergency treatment would be needed.

This also served as proof of just how many hellish trials he’d overcome.

Of course, although he wanted to feel proud of it —,

Garfiel: "Survived... but, couldn't buy a bit 'f time."

Even having defeated [Eight Arm] Kurgan did not mean he'd succeeding in delaying.

This had been Garfiel's battle, but it was not solely his battle. Right when he'd been dragged into battle, perhaps an ally had sunk into danger.

Needing to return to the city hall, Garfiel sat up.

Hearing his words and seeing his movements, the expressions of the little brother and little sister who had rushed over changed. Little sister especially wore a look of rage.

Sister: "Are, are you stupid!? Alright lie down already! Right away... yes, right away, right away I'll go call a doctor over..."

Garfiel: "There're other guys needin' doctors. My amazin' self's got other things t' do, kiddo."

Garfiel nodded at the little sister whose face had turned bright red. But his face full of fresh blood perhaps didn't look very convincing. Little sister ceaselessly wept anguished tears.

During this time, wretchedly broken bones in his arms reconnected. Although the flesh had yet to recover fully, running a few steps wouldn't have him passing out. Garfiel stood after having reached this conclusion.

Sister: "Wai, wait a minute... Are, are you really going to go?"

Garfiel: "... Th' broadcast, d'ya hear it too?"

Sister: "Eh... mm, mm."

Garfiel with fingertips still dripping with blood, Garfiel's words received a response.

The voice on the broadcast had given little brother and little sister courage, giving Garfiel his last shove here. And so, Garfiel needed to repay that voice on the broadcast.

He said it would be fine, Subaru said it would be fine, and so he had to make it so.

Garfiel: “‘N so, my amazin’ self—”

Sister: “Ah!”

With a stagger his blood deprived body knelt to the ground. Little sister hurriedly supported the body that appeared as if it would fall any second, and Garfiel clicked his tongue.

And then, standing before Garfiel now was little brother.

Fred: “Gorgeous Tiger.”

Garfiel: “... What’s up, but sorry, ‘f you’ll say t’ stop ‘t won’t work.”

Fred: “That, that’s not it. Gorgeous Tiger, your clothes are glowing.”

Hearing little brother’s allegation, Garfiel looked down and finally noticed.

At the waist of his own ragged clothing, a piece of cloth gave a gentle glow.

Stowed there was the conversation mirror. Because it hadn’t been able to connect with the city hall, he’d shoved it there determining it was useless. Its shining right now meant,

Garfiel: “‘d thought, ‘t was broken!”

Sister: “I, I’ll pick up.”

Garfiel’s breath came quickly. Little sister reached toward his waist, pulled the conversation mirror out before she could be stopped. The surface of the mirror shined, which allegedly meant that another conversation mirror from elsewhere was calling here.

In other words, this was either the city hall, or the other group calling his side.

Sister: "What, what should I do...?"

Garfiel: "Bring 't here. — Who's 't?"

Little sister carefully brought the mirror close to Garfiel. Garfiel looked at the mirror's surface, called out.

The conversation mirror, slowly began to flash.

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Chapter 63 - The Passion of Liliana Masquerade



Priscilla: "There seems to be some sort of unrest... not following will certainly bring regret."

Emilia: "Huh?"

Tugging on Beatrice's hand, Subaru-sama for some reason left the park in a hurry while muttering something.

The opening words were said by Priscilla-sama who saw them off with her gaze. Because they were so sudden, Emilia-sama too widened her eyes. Beautiful woman and beautiful woman meeting gazes, created a beautiful sight.

Allow us to savor the atmosphere, as we admire the aura they give off with levity.

In their clashing gazes grew sparking petals of flame!

Red eyes slim and elegant, and gently sloped eyes of pale amethyst.

Immersed in Emilia-sama's gaze, Priscilla-sama's graceful nose gave a huff, crossing her arms. Her chest, her chest was emphasized. At the sight of that large chest bouncing aggressively, I quietly stroked my own chest. Flat.

Emilia: "What does that mean?"

Priscilla: "Nothing, the meaning is literal. Something inconsequential to this degree you should be able to see though. Or is your intent truly to question? In that case, it's laughable to the point of hurting one's sides."

Emilia: "——"

Priscilla: "Even between master and servant, secrets are natural... to believe so is comedic. Servants need only hands and feet, if something like this is permitted, they will reveal attitudes unbefitting of the desires of their master. Which is precisely the situation you are in."

Razor tongue lashing out without pause, faced with that Emilia-sama revealed a pensive expression. That dismayed gaze and silver hair swaying with the wind together, inspired a truly indescribable emotion... In truth, although rather shameful, this was beyond comforting.

Liliana: "Ehehe..."

Anyway, Emilia-sama's thoughts were in accord. She nodded toward Priscilla-sama with '*understood*' as a response.

Emilia: "Right, though that's true... although I believe what you've said is correct, my thoughts on being a master and servant are a little different."

Priscilla: “How truly presumptuous to raise objection to mine decree. And dullness and foolishness are of equal demerit. Leisure for disagreement does not remain. With haste, take your leave.”

Emilia: “Thank you. I’ll be after him at one... Though, sorry to leave Liliana behind.”

Liliana: “Hehehe... uwah!?”

In the middle of quietly listening to this story, Emilia-sama gave me an apologetic blink. Pondering what it meant, I raised a fist at Emilia.

Liliana: “Please don’t worry, Emilia-sama. Songstress Liliana here! Believes in Emilia-sama and Subaru-sama’s return, so relax and leave protecting this park from harm to me!”

Although energetically saying words about being a songstress, naming myself in this manner was truly embarrassing! More embarrassing than had been previously expected!

Emilia: “Although unsure of what exactly you mean, but I’ll leave it to you. Priscilla, don’t bully Liliana.”

Priscilla: “Refrain from carelessly calling out mine name. Mine intent is all conveyed. Leave at once, find that clown to play with.”

Emilia: “Really.”

Rather unfriendly terms, but Priscilla-sama seemed unbothered. Right until vanishing from the range of gaze, Emilia-sama continued to watch me with concern.

Ah, farewell, Emilia-sama. Although there were many more words that should have been said, merely being able to survey you from all angles was enough.

Liliana: “A flash. Please listen. — To look up from under your feet.”

Priscilla: “You fool, if there remains time for levity, use it to seek the supreme melody. This world cannot match your talent, but the limit of one’s lifespan is equal amongst everyone... The value of one identical second differs greatly between you and one of the masses. The leisure of squandering as

one pleases is the prerogative of wealth. But lacking the discipline to better yourself, is the equivalent of flinging yourself into a sewer.”

Liliana: “Shamed by your praise, my spirits are rising rapidly, falling rapidly, too much for me to keep up with!”

Was it praise? Was it scolding? Smart people are always disorientingly exceedingly incomprehensible when they speak.

I’m a wandering bard, rarely do I feel shame, without education without family and without grave! Wandering without end and without boundary on this earth is my ideal! The path of song!

Priscilla: “Others being incapable of understanding your quirks, living in another world entirely, cannot be helped. Even so, to be ignorant is undeserving of pride. This affects the quality of your beloved song.”

Liliana: “Nonono! Not in the slightest?”

Priscilla: “— Oh?”

Liliana: “Eek!”

At the instinctive retort, Priscilla’s voice lowered in pitch. Her narrowed eyes beautiful and terrifying, either one would have this Liliana immediately yield.

Liliana: “P, please stop, Priscilla-sama... Defying Priscilla-sama wasn’t my intent...”

Priscilla: “Refrain from acting in a deplorable manner unbefitting of your talent. To have your value decrease, would be an insult to mine self who has praised your song. You are forgiven.”

As with lines on one’s palm, paths to happiness are not shared!

Uncertain of why Priscilla-sama would care about something like this, eh... asking a little shouldn’t be such a big deal, right?

Liliana: "So... to Priscilla-sama, wisdom and song are related?"

Priscilla: "Indeed."

Liliana: "But, what I want to learn is at its root unrelated to song."

Priscilla: "Oh, and why would you think so?"

Liliana: "- Because in my song, the condition for shaking hearts has not been met."

Songs, were powerful.

The I who cannot determine the power of my song, is still immature. As of now only height of aim and the rightness of effort had been affirmed, but ahead still lay a long path of struggle.

Immature song, immature performance, but the heart that had been full of passion since youth was mature indeed.

Liliana: "Using song to express joy, doesn't require much learning, using song to express sorrow, merely a heart is enough, using song to express rage, naked rage is enough... it's like this."

The lu-lyre, and this tiny body are more than enough for use in song.

Complicated words were unnecessary. Desire to learn is precious, but being unable enjoy song without it, was not the chosen path of a bard.

A bard lives for song. But the song does not choose an audience. And so, neither should the bard.

Liliana: "To have my song contain my my feelings is enough, I don't intend for it to express anything complicated. As for what's left in the heart of audience, is for the audience to determine — that which is called a song, brings joy in such a way. Lingering in the heart, from time to time, unconsciously giving a sudden hum... if something like that were to happen in my song, then this life was not lived for naught."

Priscilla: “Hmm.”

Liliana: “Hah!”

Pure bard full of energy, king candidate whose aura could strike a flying bird down in midair.

Between them Priscilla-sama was especially famed for her troublesome character. With only a relationship of singing and dancing together, to attempt to get closer to her was too arrogant!

Liliana: “Eh, it’s fine, at this moment today I’ll agree with you... this is an exception, mm, an exception. Hehe, although sorry for intending to ignore...”

Priscilla: “Excellent, you (*kisama*)... rather, thou (*sonata*) art truly a good child.”

Liliana: “Huh?”

The legs that had been intending to apologize and run, were caught by Priscilla-sama’s words.

On that note, did Priscilla-sama smile just now? In other words, just Priscilla smiled? A pure smile without hostility, something like this, somehow felt cute.

Priscilla: “Mineself was the unreasonable one, thou merely follow’st thy steps forward. Approach mineself should thou find’st trouble, for you have value enough to receive mine regard.”

Liliana: “Eeeeeeeeeeh!?”

For some reason, this was a evaluation far higher than imagined!

Priscilla-sama then unexpectedly and unhesitatingly, sat on the edge of the park’s fountain with leisure. Boldly crossing her legs, and what long legs! Or not.

Liliana: “I, can keep my life?”

Priscilla: “Even should this world come to meet its end, mineself will guarantee thy survival until the very last.”

Liliana: “To live on with confidence even should the world be completely destroyed! Inspirate has come, please listen – The Woman of Utter Despair.”

Priscilla: “If this song is dedicated to mineself, surely it must be noble?”

Liliana: “... Bringing forth, a classic called the [Record of the Evil Dragon Conquest]!”

This refreshing atmosphere of being killed amongst the joyful sounds and laughing words, how lovely it felt.

Priscilla-sama sat before the rushing water, before a fountain that seemed as if it could swallow her up, as I tried my hardest, as if stepping on hot coals. Playing the strings of the lu-lyre, focusing to the extreme of that well memorized piece.

Raising focus to the limit, this feeling of casting the world aside — I call it [Singer’s Realm], come, be immersed in it!

Come, immersion! Forget unrest and terror, along with every trouble!

Hyahya, all those troubles!

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Priscilla: “— Stop the performance.”

Liliana: “Ehehe, can’t be done... Eh? What did you say?”

If there were too many troubles, [Singer’s Realm] could not be relaxedly entered, but just now the immersion had come without issue.

Then, even though the song had been been executed perfectly, Priscilla-sama stood with a serious expression, why? Did the song sound unpolished?

Liliana: "Priscilla-sama?"

Priscilla: "Has't thou yet to notice? Something about the streets is strange... As mineself relaxed, something malicious began to foolishly stir."

Liliana: "Eh..."

The words that had left Priscilla-sama's mouth were confusing.

What exactly, had just happened?

Priscilla: "Seems that Pristella is facing a disaster. If it goes on like this... that clown's intuition surprisingly accurate. How unpleasant."

The one called "clown", was probably Subaru-sama. But what about intuition, what did it have to do with leading Beatrice away, and with Emilia-sama who chased after them...?

Subaru = [Lolimancer]

Beatrice = [Loli]

Emilia = [Amazing Lovely Girl With Magic]

Liliana: "Oh no! What happened to Pristella?"

Priscilla: "Truly, unless thou art in the midst of song, blood isn't circulating within thy head whatsoever. Unlike mineself who is exceptional in all regards, thou art only exceptional in one. But mineself does find it likable."

Priscilla-sama who was closed with eyes, with the fan she'd taken out at some point began to fan herself as if she had a headache.

Truly to exchange more words with that Priscilla-sama, but this wasn't the right time.

Liliana: "Indeed, everyone who was in the park vanished..."

Priscilla: "That was because thou revealed'st an uncouth attitude during thy performance."

Eh... I do hope you can forgive me for lying on the ground and playing with my teeth.

Liliana: "However, should any incident occur, the magic radio in the city hall should immediately broadcast through the entire city. Kiritaka-san reminded me too, this morning I..."

Priscilla: "Is that that which can spread sound to an exaggerated degree? Indeed, listening to thy song throughout the city is enjoyable... but what about it?"

Liliana: "——?"

A broadcast every morning had become commonplace, Watergate City Pristella contained a large watergate, so it was a place with high attention to safety. Shelters were located all throughout the city, the citizens should have been well aware of this.

So why —

Liliana: "Ah... what's this?"

Chest, for what did it suddenly start to ache.

How strange. On my chest was nothing so dashing as an old wound.

So, this feeling —

Priscilla: "... Don't approach."

My smile tight, I gave an "eh?" of consternation. Priscilla-sama sudden raised her head to look toward the sky.

— Following immediately, was the sound of the of the city's broadcast.

Capella: "Well then, all you trash rotting meats, please take care to pitiablely die off rot away, kyahahaha! Deigning to make this broadcast here, is Witch Cult Sin Archbishop representing [Lust]! Capella Emerada Lugunica-sama! Kyahahaha!"

Sharp piercing voice cutting off all of a sudden, quietness coming afterward. Leaving only the sound of water flowing from the fountain. That appearance of that sound was far too sudden, filled with unreality as if a dream.

Priscilla: "Really now, quite the conceited words."

Ah, that wasn't a dream. Seems that wasn't a dream.

The nearby Priscilla-sama's tone grew terrifying, scaring me into turning my head to confirm her words. My keen survival instincts were informing me, *'this turn of events is no good!'*.

Liliana: "Um, so, Priscilla-sama... so, perhaps it's simply just activities... or maybe a malicious prank, that possibility exists as well. That's what I think, but..."

Priscilla: "Desire and speculation are from their nature different. If this were a malicious prank, who would call upon the infamy of the Witch Cult's name? And in addition the opponent claims to be a Sin Archbishop. Know that those lunatics a group who give no thought to time, place, or means."

Liliana: "Uuu..."

Priscilla: "And within this city, is that clown who could kill that lunatic. With that, that they would grow more frantic is a matter of course. Who knows how many people are completely hopeless like thee."

Priscilla-sama's words were difficult to comprehend as ever, but right now she seemed to be taking great pains for me to be able to understand.

With that, even someone like me with holes in their brain could understand.

The attack of the Witch Cult led by the Sin Archbishops had already become reality, and in addition the city hall had been captured already.

In that case...

Liliana: "Is, is Kiritaka-san okay?"

Priscilla: "Well, that's an unknown name. If he's someone relevant to the city and furthermore dwells in the city hall, there is no way to assure his safety. Seems that now is no longer the time to remain here and enjoy music."

As soon as Priscilla-sama finished speaking, she took up her fan, marching forward with unflinching will. Eh, but, that was in the opposite direction of the shelter.

Liliana: "Then, then, don't you want to find a shelter!? Like this, choosing a path differing from what's expected in an emergency will lead to disaster!"

Priscilla: "Hiding in a shelter with head bowed, waiting for the trouble to pass as if a stream is indeed fine. But the issue this time is a different matter, for if mineself does not act this situation will not come to an end."

Liliana: "Which is to say, intent to kill an archbishop!?"

This king candidate who intended to slaughter her way into the city hall —!

Looking at it from any angle revealed as a matter of course, to allow her to throw herself into a battlefield like this without calculations of victory would end only in tragedy.

Speaking of which, with Priscilla-sama so full of confidence, could it be that she was capable of engaging in battle?

Responding to my words full of doubt, Priscilla-sama covered her mouth with a fan as she looked back, tilting her head slightly.

Priscilla: “No, first Schult must be retrieved. Al is fine either way, it doesn’t matter what becomes of that fool. But Schult’s adorableness is without substitute. If mineself does not take care to retrieve him, surely he will be crying somewhere.”

Liliana: “Eh? Eh?”

Priscilla: “As for the other one, presumably he followed mine decree of this morning, and is wasting his time at a tavern. A stroll in that area would perhaps locate him. Truly, what a troublesome man.”

As she rambled on, Priscilla-sama strode toward the park’s exit without hesitation. Though clearly occurring before my eyes, dazzling as it was, what to do, was all in a fog.

Then, Priscilla-sama turned back,

Priscilla: “Though mine request was not for thee to follow, if thou stray’st too far, the [Sun Disk]’s range will no longer reach. If wishing to refrain from mingling with frantic fools, thou would do well to follow mineself.”

What is this, it’s terrifying! Just what had happened?

Liliana: “I say, Priscilla-sama, what’s happening after finding the ones that need to be found!? Wait, Priscilla-sama!”

Hurriedly chasing the silent shadow of her back, paying no mind to those who fled for the shelters, with dignity we walked about the city.

The shadow of her back gave off such a sense of security, that perhaps even Sin Archbishops didn’t need to be feared...

— Thinking so was a mistake, was that I realized soon after.

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Moving forward through the city according to Priscilla-sama’s words.

What was miraculous was, despite being unaware of where exactly her destination was, at every amongst the canals and streets Priscilla-sama chose her path without hesitation.

Because of those correct choices, the I who should have been guiding her had no chance to give my performance!

Liliana: “Isn’t this Priscilla-sama’s first time in Pristella? Moving with such ease, is startling...”

Priscilla: “No, this is the first time. Because its name is similar to mine own, and the sights of the Capital of Water are famed, mine decree was to visit one day. This development was not expected in the slightest.”

Liliana: “Is that so, this really is a shame. It was supposed to have been a much more tranquil, lovely city, without need to rush like this.”

Watergate City Pristella, was certainly a place worth touring. For a bard, a long stay, a leisurely stroll through the city was happiness.

Even the Muse Company Headquarters that had been built here, the likes of Kiritaka-san were quite inclined in this direction.

Well, rather than to say Kiritaka-san is troubling me, it should rather be said that I’m the troublesome one. Kiritaka-san, please be fine.

Liliana: “Speaking of which, there’s no one! A city where people on the streets, where water dragons visible on every street with a canal, where singing lead to meeting Kiritaka-san, is in such a strange situation!”

Ever since the Witch Cult had first made a broadcast, nothing had stirred. In addition to the people and water dragons all going missing, the only sounds that stirred were the flow of water and wind.

How quiet. But, it felt like more than just quietness. This stillness, wasn’t it too ominous?

Priscilla: “Don’t wander off, it should be a right turn here. Do you understand, follow mine directions.”

Liliana: “Eh, don’t you want to take this path? It’s clearly a shortcut... really, how scatterbrained of Priscilla-sama.”

Priscilla: “Hoh—?”

Liliana: “Eep! Apologies, I misspoke!”

Wanting to decrease the distance by telling her of a shortcut, but it was a failure! Speaking of which that “hoh” was too scary! The gaze of a beast... no, the gaze of a carnivore!”

Priscilla: “Follow mine instructions, and nothing will go wrong.”

Liliana: “Hehe, this lowly one will now completely obey Priscilla-sama!”

Following Priscilla-sama’s directions, after this we took several winding routes. For some reason, during this not a single person was encountered. Time was running out!

Liliana: “Let’s be cheery as we walk and sing?”

Priscilla: “Thou has’t no sense of a stage. Even if thou choosest a partner to listen, that person has the right to choose otherwise.”

Liliana: “——?”

Priscilla: “About time to allow thy throat rest as well... it won’t be long until thy opportunity to sing arrives.”

Liliana: “Haaah.”

Like that, Priscilla-sama’s eyes held a hint of having predicted something. That twisting and turning manner of talking, to the me who took straightforwardness as a duty, felt suffocating, closing my mouth and keeping silent.

And so, this odd and silent tour through the city –

Priscilla: "Here."

What Priscilla-sama who'd paused her footsteps was regarding, was one of the shelters in the city — the convention center of 2nd Street.

If the city hall at the center served as a place of assembly for the entire city, then the convention center of each numbered street was where each of their standpoints would be discussed.

Kiritaka-san was not only the manager of the 3rd Street convention center, he also had influence in the stirrings of the city hall.

Liliana: "Oh, being unexpectedly taken somewhere safe! Where all the people went, quite honestly, I was even a bit scared!"

Priscilla: "Hm? What sayest thou? Hurry and get inside, scaredy-cat."

Since this was a convention center, inside were probably several extraordinary people, and was at the same time a shelter close by, so as if the reunion of lovers long separated, this was soothing for the heart —

???: "You, the fuck are you saying, dieee!"

This lovely daydream, dissipated like fog after being met by a cry of rage.

An enraged roar filled with the scent of blood, contained in those sharp words, was a keen sense of killing intent.

Those uncouth men had cast aside their usual frivolity, to exude genuine killing intent – I'd say I was still a bard, having wandered through so many places, taking not only safe paths, but having travelled dangerous ones as well... this was what was known as [rage].

That which could not remain unfaced, the [Wrath] that accompanied violence and murder.

Liliana: "P, Priscilla-sama...? This is..."

Without realizing, I fell onto Priscilla-sama from beside me, but she avoided my outstretched hand, glancing around the convention chamber with an extremely listless gaze.

My kneeling self, with disbelief surveyed the scene that Priscilla-sama had examined.

— The sound, of a scream.

In this convention chamber, the shoving crowd flung insults, making sounds of disgust as they jostled each other.

They must have numbered fifty... no, a hundred? Two hundred?

In summary, a mass of people bowled over those beside them indiscriminately, male and female and old and young together.

Insulting each other... those insults tinged with hostility and malice, violent mannerisms full of intent to wound and kill. Those who had fallen to bleed were many, in the corner of the convention chamber were the quivering forms of children.

What on earth was happening?

Priscilla: "Hmph... in the midst of such a mass of random people, finding just Schult is indeed difficult."

Casting aside the confused me, Priscilla harrumphed, face calm as ever.

... No, but, this situation was a disaster? Why that unaffectedness?

Priscilla: "Discord to this degree, has certainly permeated the city by now. The slow thee has perhaps not realized, as we did avoid a path of trouble."

Liliana: "Avoid...!?"

Finally understanding, the meaning of those words.

The reason that Priscilla-sama had gone out of her way to take a winding path — was to avoid any discordant ones.

I alone had failed to notice, leisurely complaining about things like the lack of people...!

Liliana: “Writhing and fighting like this... does this have to do with the Witch Cult?”

Priscilla: “Were this a mere disagreement, to go to this extreme would be utter foolishness, isn’t it. These people... no, the perimeter of this entire city has been overcome by foolishness. This is the result.”

The most important parts of Priscilla-sama’s words were incomprehensible.

But at least it was understood, that the people hurting each other right now, were not doing so of their own intent.

Liliana: “Why, why am I untouched? To uniquely have the ability to fight something like this off... or rather, did I awaken in this moment!?”

Priscilla: “‘Tis the majesty of mine [Sun Disk], but, thee alone should be able to escape it... more importantly,”

Priscilla-sama narrowed her eyes, surveying those who shoved at each other. With the same gaze that she’d given me a “Hoh—?” with. Which was to say it was terrifying. Looking at those two eyes, her next words will presumably be equally terrifying.

Guessed right.

Priscilla: “To find someone in this commotion, is practically the dream of a madman. With a small display, they will shut their mouths.”

Liliana: “...Eh?”

As her words fell, Priscilla-sama casually [drew a sword from the air]. No, to say it like that was wrong.

To be more precise, the light became a sword?

Priscilla: “Fall into the light of *mine* Yang Blade —”

The sword which Priscilla-sama held aloft, was decorated with a beautiful floral pattern, dyed in red from pommel to blade, a sword of crimson. Radiating sunlight from within Priscilla-sama’s hands, illuminating the entire convention chamber... how dazzling! how wondrous! A degree that regular light was incapable of reaching, scorching the eyes as if the sun. Ky, kyaaaa!

From up close, how damaging to my two eyes!

Ducking away to keep my the distance, planning to make some retort against Priscilla-sama — before noticing it.

The convention center had grown quiet, those fighting people focusing on Priscilla-sama. But of course, if such a blinding light appeared, it was only natural that everyone’s quarrel would end.

And just when that hand fell, and everyone’s voice stopped.

???: “Priscilla-sama!!”

A sobbing boy approached at a run from the wall, with cheeks reddened, as he flew toward Priscilla-sama. Priscilla-sama caught the boy directly from the front, stroking his peach colored hair with gentleness.

Priscilla: “To be so troublesome, only you alone could receive mine attention like this. Schult, have you realized what a fool you’ve been?”

Schult: “I, I... I had thought I wouldn’t make it...! But, Priscilla-sama... Priscilla-sama...”

Priscilla: “Well, crying easily is as expected of children, they shouldn’t be blamed for it.”

The sight of the boy whose hair had so gently been stroked made me jump.

Rather, because Priscilla-sama had come especially for this child, so I'd assumed she cared very much for him, but witnessing this showed that it was not so. The sense of violation was keen. Because Priscilla-sama's attitude was frigid. Thinking about it nearly made my neck twist.

However, it couldn't be assumed that with such a spectacle, it would be easy to escape. After all we'd become the target of the attention of this convention center!

The spearhead of the enraged crowd had been directed toward the radiant Priscilla-sama. And in addition it had just been noticed, that the shining blade had disappeared.

Liliana: "Priscilla-sama, where did the sword from just now go?"

Priscilla: "It's consumption is high. So when not it use it must fade back into sunlight. Hmph."

Responding to my question, Priscilla-sama looked toward the ones who gazed at her. That gaze was calm as always... which was to say, apathetic.

Priscilla: "What are you lot staring for, you fools without reason. Worshipping mine beauty is human nature, but understand time and place and your own position. First, kneel."

Liliana: "Why are you provoking them —!?"

Pressing Schult into her chest, with a fierce expression Priscilla-sama pointed at the ground, ordering everyone present to kneel. Although as expected, the crowd who was more irschible than usual moved with violence, and rushed forward.

A ripple of insults echoed together, and I hurriedly dropped my bottom to the ground as I tried to curl up... However, Priscilla-sama remained standing there. No, wait.

"This woman! What kind of joke..."

Priscilla: "First of all is you. At least soar with more grace."

The large man, in a fit of rage attempted to grab Priscilla-sama, but she immediately dodged aside, shoving his broad chest away.

A man whose weight is double mine, flew away like a leaf. Truly, this ease was without exaggeration.

“——hk!?”

The body of the man that flew away, collided direction with the mass of people, causing a dramatic pitiful sight. One after another, being knocked over, rolling over like dominos.

And so, due to that initial loss, the crowd's momentum came to a halt. The one lined in front, trembled upon seeing Priscilla-sama's power.

Priscilla: “As you can see, were it mine will, all of you could be cut down with ease. Although ‘twould be bothersome. If desiring to attacked, approach in turn. Today mineself will spare the time, to thoroughly respond to your desires.”

“——”

Priscilla-sama spoke in a regal voice, glaring at those surrounding her.

That said, there was no one who would approach after hearing those words. The enraged demeanor of before went who knows where... or rather, the rage lingered on in everyone's hearts. It was merely that its spearhead was not directed toward Priscilla-sama.

Priscilla: “Seems there are none. Where then, there's no longer meaning in remaining here. Mine attendant has been found safe and sound. You lot are free to enjoy yourselves, once mineself has departed.”

Liliana: “Eh!?”

As soon as Priscilla-sama finished speaking, she took the hand of the crying Schult, striding toward the exterior of the convention center with lavish steps.

Liliana: "Ah, but! Just leaving everyone here like this..."

Priscilla: "After mine departure, the quarrel will start anew... 'twould be surprising if it became slaughter in the end. However, does minself have reason to terminate it?"

Liliana: "In that case..."

That was so, but was it really fine like this?

No matter how you look at it, just leaving them behind was going too far.

Liliana: "Pr, Priscilla-sama is a candidate for the royal election..."

Priscilla: "Even for mineself, there is that which cannot be accomplished. Without question, mineself is indeed immersed in that annoying position, but to use it as an excuse is too forced."

Liliana: "Guu..."

Forcibly having my mouth blocked, no longer able to raise voice to any retorts!

But, but, if we left, the quarrel would start. Escaping, could I really do something so ruthless?

Something like this, I —

Priscilla: "Or is that to say, you'll solve it?"

Liliana: "Eh!?"

Just as I was hesitating, Priscilla-sama murmured in a low voice.

What was that to say, that, rather appealing proposal.

Priscilla: “Thou has’t said to mineself before. To enjoy song requires no qualification. Not selecting place or audience is the essence of what thou call’st song. If so, why does thou not use thy miraculous song to save that lot?”

Liliana: “.....”

Priscilla: “Thou art immersed within mineself’s [Sun Disk]. In addition, as previously said, thou art to approach mineself should thou find’st trouble. Although perhaps ‘tis early to play this card... but this is still a pleasure. To be able to hear thy song, remaining here a moment is acceptable.”

As if provoking, Priscilla-sama folded her arms over her chest. Was it a quirk, to raise her chest like this.

That violent cleavage could be seen with ease. Brushing hand over chest. I stared down at the hand that had just touched my chest.

On that palm, lay cold sweat.

Liliana: “Is it... possible?”

Priscilla: “It matters not even if it is done. — If approaching it like this, then it will merely be wasted effort.”

If thinking that songs had no power, such a line of thinking was not wrong.

Although saying that, this was not the case.

Taking up the lu-lyre from my back, gripping it tightly with both hands.

Those had yet to become my audience, who had stored all their rage in their core, were truly without reason! When clearly from now, I would say as I sang!

— To hope that when everyone savored the sound of song together joyously, that they wouldn’t fight!

Priscilla: “Schult, wait for a little. You will see an entertaining sight.”

Schult: “Understood.”

Priscilla-sama and Schult stood behind the back of my figure with the lu-lyre.

With what kind of expressions, ugh, despicable, obvious without looking!

Liliana! Wandering the world with only a lu-lyre, a bard who forever held heroes in her heart!

Liliana: “Inspiration flashes! Please listen — Ripples on the Surface of, the Watergate City!”

Return to your senses, then show me a frenzy!

If this takes away time that would be spent fighting, it’s all the more meaningful!

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Chapter 64 - The Despondence of Liliana Masquerade



“_____”

Fingers sliding across the lu-lyre, fingertips tightening with familiarity. Having been for many years for many tens of thousands of times, fingertips which played these notes for as long as they can remember.

For me, to sing, was as natural as drawing breath, as natural as exhaling laughter when encountering amusement...

Throat opening, diaphragm inhaling, intertwining rhythm with the sound of the melody.

Trilling out all the words emerging in my mind in this moment, all the feelings.

And equally, giving voice to the the melody that surfaced in my mind along with the song.

“_____”

When creating a new song, although I would say ‘inspiration flashes’, to truly say that it was inspiration flashing, was rather absurd.

In other words, it wasn’t a sudden flash, but a discovery. To call it that would perhaps be more suitable. In this instant, melody and words emerging in my mind, were from their origin things hidden within this world.

Discovering a melody forgotten by the world.

Stumbling across by serendipity, taking up by fortuity, as if a gift descended from the skies – a tune concealed in the corners of the world. I, have all along viewed it like this.

And thus I had told Priscilla-sama, even without learning anything whatsoever, music could be enjoyed. To completely give up all wisdom, all knowledge, would be the same.

Because it was the song rather than the human which sang.

Ever heard birdsong? Ever heard a chorus of cicadas? Ever quietly listened to the wind sweeping across a stream, felt it raise a murmured voice?

Did they also have humanity? Perhaps, or rather, no they shouldn’t have. At the very least I think they don’t! Don’t!

From the sun that illuminates all, the moon that waxes and wanes, the earth that diffuses its aroma, the firewood that crackles, have you ever felt music? I have! I’ve felt it — proof that music permeates this world.

The world is constructed by music, this world is filled with music, this world is connected by music, this is the proof.

“_____”

Us bards, merely borrow songs from this world filled with music. Music that is in itself present everywhere, which with just a little attention can become visible, that we capture in song, is in fact unnecessary.

Without shyness, without apology, we enjoy this exquisite melody alone.

To do so is fine. That we think so is fine.

However, isn't music something lovely?

To share something lovely with others brings greater joy.

And with greater joy, ringing laughter has greater elation.

Music is as such, if it's music, it can be done.

Since the entire world is singing, who would scold those who sing?

Come, devote, devote, devote all.

Come, immerse, immerse, immerse.

Submerge in joy, fill with glee, be imprisoned by happiness!

Ears, eyes, nose, skin, spirit, soul, present all, [join] with the [music]!

Frenzy swallowed audience, washing away the extreme [Wrath] in one wave.

Swaying in dance, their sound became one with the performance. Should their gazes overlap with those around them, the phenomenon of sharing feelings would be felt.

Of course. Music has always been by your side, a ever present comrade from birth to death.

Seen it, heard it, felt it.

We are always here, calling for such music—!

Liliana: “So, hell yeah! Not at all quiet, thanks for the attention—!”

Singing on, uwaaaah!

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Eh~, so how to put it, sorry for gleefully forgetting myself.

After the end an extensive performance like this, recalling the passionate demeanor I’d worn, my cheeks reddened.

Schult: “Um, onee-san was amazing! I was very moved!”

Teehee! How cute was Schult-kun’s cluelessly pure gaze! Heart itching, aching! Undirtied, wholesome, watery red eyes, made blood drip drip in my heart!

Riiight, this kid was completely without malice, nor was it sarcasm. He merely expressed with earnestness his childish feelings. Though aware of this, but because he was too cute his praise couldn’t be accepted comfortably!

What a pity, Schult... as an adult, this purity would be dirtied.

Schult: “——? Some of it couldn’t be understood, apologies over my lack of studying.”

Hya! That dejected expression was unfairly cute!

Is this some kind of malicious prank against me, this child!? A little, just a little touch... Ehehe...

Priscilla: "Liliana, that performance just now wasn't bad, you deserve praise."

Liliana: "Gyobih!"

Priscilla: "What was that horrendous sound just now? A girl... especially you, shouldn't be making such noises."

Just about to reach out an adult's sinful demonic grasp, I was caught up with a trickster like Priscilla-sama. No, I had no plans to do anything deplorable, really, none whatsoever.

By the way, the moment Schult saw Priscilla-sama, his demeanor became open, sticking close to her waist. Though saying so, it wasn't tight clinging, merely lightly holding part of her red dress... the modest demeanor of an angel.

And next, to welcome this precious Schult-kun, attempting to turn this brutalized convention center into a festival...

Liliana: "This result was unexpected... at some point when I wasn't paying attention, it seems I reached the heights of music. Indeed, a goddess of music without parallel!"

Priscilla: "Foolishness. To be aware of your own worldliness and caliber is imperative. But to evaluate one's self so highly lacks elegance. Your song was indeed worth enjoying, but 'tis not yet time to call yourself without parallel. You were merely lucky, that they immersed so early was solely because they were suggestible."

Liliana: "Suggestible?"

What did that mean?

With a listless expression Priscilla-sama fanned herself, as she scanned the faces in the convention center. I hurriedly followed her gaze, seeing a great many people.

People who had finally been freed from an air of insulting, attacking, fighting, had recovered their cool. Some extended their hands to those who had been shoved over, some offered apologies, some responded constantly with 'it's fine it's fine', some silently gave treatment to those who had been injured.

Oh, well then, my song was pretty amazing! The ones who had been arguing such earlier, had in fact sunk into such a warm state... practically the talent of a master!

Priscilla: "Do not forget yourself with glee. The influence of unrest which played these commoners as if marionettes still persists. The sound of your song alleviated the commoners' distrust and fear. However, without solving the root of the cause, the situation will devolve to what had just been."

Liliana: "Pff!?! Ah, no, but, think about it, every time they're pulled into the same act, I'll wash it away with my fervent unpappa..."

Priscilla: "In theoretical terms, that works. However, the root of the problem remains. Not only here, this commotion, is not occurring merely at this convention center."

Liliana: "Wha-wha-wha-, what!?"

This was the first time hearing of... no, earlier on the way here Priscilla-sama had that such a disruption had been avoided. Could it be that such disruption was occurring all throughout the city!?

Liliana: "P, P, Pristella, should it have something be done about it?"

Priscilla: "Well, that's how it is. To be frank, mine mood does not align with saving the city..."

Schult: "Priscilla-sama..."

Fickle emotions, cold blood, iron expression! With trembling gaze Schult looked toward Priscilla-sama as she spoke. How to put it, obvious upon a glance, was that Schult-kun next to Priscilla-sama seemed so normal, perfect wholesomeness.

Ah, this child is hopeless, completely in line with my preferences.

Not receiving a response from Schult-kun, not knowing whether or not he shared my feelings counted as my loss. Priscilla-sama shrugged helplessly, breasts bouncing with violence, as she place her hands on her waist.

Liliana: “How old is Priscilla-sama?”

Priscilla: “Nineteen.”

Liliana: “I see. By the way just to mention, I’m twenty-two.”

Priscilla: “No one asked.”

I just wanted to mention it. What was this difference, something in diet? Is this merely what wandering bard must be resigned to? What suffering.

Priscilla: “Without even mentioning having Schult be trapped here, daring to display such disrespect during mine stay, mineself is hardly such a forgiving coward. Without regard of which Witch Cultist is involved, their heads will roll.”

As my hands tightened, Priscilla-sama’s decree seemed to have been determined.

Although much remained to be said to, I well understood that Schult-kun’s feelings needed to be respected.

Liliana: “Really, toward Schult-kun Priscilla-sama is truly, too, overprotective♪ ...”

Priscilla: “——”

Liliana: “Gyah!? Burning, burning, it’s all burning!?”

On fire!? Caught on fire just now!?

In the instant that I’d jabbed Priscilla-sama in the side with my elbow, fire burned over my head!? The tips of my hair curled from burning!? Without even an incantation!?

Sudden brutality! Genuine panic! Unforgettable nightmare!

Schult: "O-Onee-san, are you okay...!?"

Toward me with my head on fire, Schult ran over in a shock. Perhaps to try to extinguish the flame immediately, he withdrew a bottle from the parcel he held, intending to tip its contents into me, removing the hardships forced upon my body. In the instant, my head had once again been surrounded by flame.

Priscilla: "Halt, Schult."

Schult: "But, Priscilla-sama...!"

Priscilla: "This is mine evening wine. As it belongs to myself, even a slight drop, would turn a spark into a fireball. These sound like joking words, but this is the reality."

Liliana: "Ooowooo!"

Before I could be ignited, I rolled back and forth on the frigid ground. Schult tilted his tiny neck to ask, 'Can wine catch on fire?'.
‘Can wine catch on fire?’.

Despicable, master and servant who collaborated to have me perish in flame... but! Even were I to die here, the soul of a bard would not rest, performing a nightly song by your bedside... because, song was everywhere in this world!

Priscilla: "If you wouldn't mind, doing so is fine as well. Speaking of which, kicking up such a fuss over singed hair, hurry and stand!"

Liliana: "Eh? Where'd the cursed flame go? I should be enclosed in scorching flame and turned to ash?"

Ah, for real, there hadn't been any burns. What was that, scared me to death.

Laughing with embarrassment while removing clothing, while the stares of everyone nearby, walking to Priscilla-sama's side, to begin negotiations.

Liliana: "Well then, Priscilla-sama! In order to save Pristella, please attack with a bang, gracefully giving your regards to the Sin Archbishop! I'll offer support to the best of my ability!"

Priscilla: "Do not speak as if it were another's affair. Mineself has already decided to take you as well."

Liliana: "Ueeeeee—!?"

Earth shattering! Sky overturning! Beauty stealing life! Why point toward me at this moment!?

Liliana: "Someone like me who's a bard, only knows how to be cute, sing, and be cute. A bard without any specialties... taking me, could only satisfy your eyes and ears, you know."

Priscilla: "That candidness is not unappealing. As said before. Mineself is fond of you. That song, 'twould be a shame to lose it. Not to mention casting you aside in the masses, would perhaps lead to misfortune. Since you would have left mine [Sun Disk].

Liliana: "Which is to say... I'm so cute you want to protect me?"

Priscilla: "Hoh?"

Liliana: "Wah! Having thrown a tantrum Priscilla-sama is truly kind!"

Compared with the attack of setting my hair aflame without indication, how kind was the Priscilla-sama who only set me on fire after giving warning. Huh, chest tingling. What kind of feeling was this... heartbeat quickening, sweat dripping, breaths toiling, blood vanishing from face...

Priscilla: "There are other reasons to take you. That irritating foolish commoner's declaration... was it to say that there is a magic device in the governing building?"

Liliana: "Huh? Ah, right, it's in the city hall. Every morning, getting early, rubbing sleep from eyes to do as duty asks... Ah! That isn't to say, I wouldn't sing because I wanted to sleep in. Indeed, rather than

to call it collapsing from exhaustion halfway through a song, it's sleeping for more than half. As soon as I sing it wakes me up! Rousing immediately!"

Priscilla: "Knowing the location is enough. Mineself requires that magical device... and you."

Liliana: "You want me..."

Priscilla: "Your throat."

A change in phrase.

However, thanks to this, I finally realized exactly what Priscilla-sama meant to say. That was, she wanted to say,

Liliana: "To have what happened just now in this convention center, spread across the city from the magical device's broadcast..."

Priscilla: "——"

Liliana: "Eh, um, Priscilla-sama? What is it?"

Priscilla: "Daring to be so ostentatious before mineself, you fool, what have you done with the real Liliana. That person couldn't possibly be so intelligent."

Liliana: "A clever and cute me being treated as an illusion!"

What kind of impression she had of me, in truth, was very disappointing.

However, I understand Priscilla-sama's thoughts. If commotions similar to the one of this convention center were occurring all throughout the city, then it would perhaps be my turn to take the stage.

To be able to tour the city to give performances would be something wonderful, but there wasn't enough time to travel around like this! It's too late to tour around like this! In that case, my mind was made!

Liliana: “Alright, understood! In this case, I do indeed agree that thoughts of Priscilla-sama who wanted me to accompany her were authentic! In addition, to approach the city hall – the place where the thinking power in the city would be concentrated! Surely Kiritaka-san would be there, in an emergency like this, he could be counted on!”

Priscilla: “Of course, within the city hall there certainly await Sin Archbishops. Exterminating those pests is unavoidable. You would do well to avoid being caught in it.”

Liliana: “I’d forgotten!”

Right. Right now, [Lust] occupied the city hall. Which meant, if the city hall were serving as a base, the battle plan could be imagined.

Liliana: “Nobutnobutnobut! That Sin Archbishop, might have emptied out the city hall already! There are lots of rooms in there which are inaccessible for secrecy, so maybe they unexpectedly took no time, and [Lust] is long gone!”

Fufun, indeed, a burst of divine reasoning. This was, an idea belonging to the me who was left every morning from work.

In truth, that place, was where everyone hurriedly rushed to work, so there was no one who would acknowledge me. Children who don’t understand numbers will be told to leave, was what it felt like!

And thus, certainly the city hall would be completely empty...

Capella: “Yaho. Yaho~. Yahoho~.”

At this moment, the broadcast sounded a second time.

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After listening to the second broadcast, we left the convention center feeling depressed (Priscilla and Schult did not look depressed).

Leaving the convention center took a little time, since after the second broadcast, the people became anxious again, and I had to calm them with my song.

Frankly, this performance could only be called unintentional.

No matter what was sung, any behavior lacking reason could not be included. However, at its basis, adding extraneous impurity to the song was not permissible.

Become intoxicated by the song, become immersed in the song, to sing with these feelings, was what I intended. But to use song as a counter to this psychological attack which unsettled people, was something I was unwilling to do. But in the end singing did become this kind of measure, if I had wanted to sing like this, if authenticity for the song had been lost, the song could still reach the hearts of others... perhaps these thoughts would not be there.

Priscilla: "Taking over the control towers and the main watergate, and then listing a series of requests..."

After leaving the convention center, with steps which were as always self-assured, only I shakily followed behind. Rather than calling it a loss of assurance, perhaps it was a loss of identity?

Without doubt I exist for singing, but in these circumstances was it myself asking me to sing, or the song, to sing, or is it a song, or the result.

Although all three were given by me, I didn't understand a single one of the three.

Couldn't figure out which it was.

Priscilla: "A third broadcast has to happen, before we retake the city hall and the magical device."

Schult: "Why is that?"

Priscilla: "The Witch Cult needs use of the magical device, and they'll send out a third request.

Afterward, it'll only be a matter of overseeing the four control towers, far away from any situation in

which they may lose their advantage by revealing their location. However, for the sake of playing their twisted game, there's a possibility of being able to seize the magical device."

Schult: "Can't we use it?"

Priscilla: "As long as the one operating that magical device is [Lust], there's this kind of feeling... Although she wears quite the vicious skin, what lies beneath is quite cunning. What a clever lunatic will become given the opportunity, looks exactly like that."

While my expression was still heavy, Schult took the lead in asking Priscilla-questions. Schult had instantaneously figured out the secret behind not enraging Priscilla-sama (perhaps the person himself was unaware!). And because he was so genuine, Priscilla-sama seriously answered everything she'd been asked.

Because it was an explanation meant for a child, I understood it easily as well.

Which was to say, would the situation progress as the Witch Cult willed?

Priscilla: "And so after the third broadcast, when their requests have been made. If the magical device is operable, your song will join the playing field. Should the city be in a state of unrest, who knows where the pests among the lions will gather."

Schult: "Before something that complicated happens, is there no chance Priscilla-sama use that glorious sword to finish off the Witch Cult?"

Priscilla: "The control towers from all four sides, should any of them open a single watergate, the city would be flooded. Even mineself is a lone person. To raise a hand in counterattack is ineffective. In this city are a few capable others... they too will try to recover the magical device."

The capable others Priscilla-sama had mentioned were those capable of meeting the Witch Cult in battle.

As far as I knew, people who had experience in defeating the Witch Cult did reside in the city. Indeed, [Lolimancer] Natsuki Subaru-sama, and [Silver Haired Witch] Emilia-sama who accompanied him!

Liliana: “Oh, I get it! We’re waiting until the third broadcast, before going to the city hall.”

Fists clenched, breaths involuntarily growing wild.

In all honesty, to be unable to protest against this was a bit despiriting. However, not going to the city hall, would mean being unable to assure Kiritaka-san’s safety... or rather, even being assured of Kiritaka-san’s safety, would not yield usefulness to the battle...

However, if only for the sake of that person alone, I couldn’t help but sing.

Liliana: “So then, before that...”

Schult: “Go with Liliana-sama, and get to a shelter!”

Liliana: “Yes yes, take me to the shelter and- wait, ueeeeeeeh!?”

Schult answered with frenzied enthusiasm, what was this about!?

Priscilla-sama nodded with satisfaction. Seeing this, with his entire face bright red Schult grew happy, although clearly I had been named, leaving me to go by himself.

Clearly by my side, but somehow still feeling lonely.

Priscilla: “Although aware of how your song has an effect on this unsettling wave, but first your mood should be calmed, before asking you to perform... although just then you had been at a loss, the you of right now has no leeway for such troubles.”

Liliana: “But, does this have anything to do with the shelters!?”

Priscilla: “Although using the magical device to dispel the curse is your duty, before retaking the city hall, that time will be cleared out for you, and during that same time, the commoners’ hearts will be set aside, during which, they will sway with unease.”

Liliana: “Ah...”

Priscilla: “Before you can take your place before the magical device, those who need your song are countless. To prevent this, you must meet their needs.”

Priscilla-sama’s proposal, could finally be easily understood.

Before my songs could reach, countless cases of people hurting each other as they had in the convention center would occur. By then, perhaps the delivery most valuable saving grace of song might be too late.

Certainly they could not all be saved. But, to extend a hand to those who could be would prove to be no futile task.

Priscilla: “In mine regard, you have no small amount of courage on the stage. However, that wavering just now is dangerous. Perhaps it will show its face at a critical moment. Thus, you must increase the number of times you experience upon the stage.”

Liliana: “Times on the stage... is it?”

Times on the stage, were already at a number that was countless. Although the phrase “courage upon the stage” had never been used, never before had the stage brought any feelings of shame.

What Priscilla-sama actually meant was —

Priscilla: “Your troubles are unknown. However, what is needed is not a song for yourself, but one for others. Understand that your songs are for the sake of others. And thus, you must increase your number of times on the stage.”

Liliana: “——”

Priscilla: “To be prompted by mineself to such a degree truly is arrogant. Repent with the results you will bring.”

Saying so, as if having made a decision, Priscilla-sama folded her two hands over her chest, vigorously sticking out her chest — those large breasts bounced violently, her hands moving to be placed on her waist.

Song, was a presence different from the self. To sing in such a way—.

Schult: “Priscilla-sama is as gentle as expected! I truly understand!”

Priscilla: “Too noisy, Schult.”

An exchange that couldn’t help but feel a bit facetious, but, with this I’ll make up my mind, beginning a battle of touring every shelter to perform.

Foremost, to live up to Priscilla-sama’s words, second most, to live up to a bard of song and dance — Liliana’s future! ———

—.

———.

———.

Well, while visiting the shelters with this passion, checking up on those who had succumbed to frustration and despair, there would be a third broadcast...

Priscilla: “Hmm... someone else went first. How annoying.”

Priscilla-sama lifted her head to regard the pale sky, murmuring to herself like this.

As for what those feelings were directed toward, I had of course heard as well.

Natsuki Subaru-sama had made a broadcast with the magical device.

Although those words had not been clumsy, they could not be called inspiring, but perhaps in the hearts of the people within the city, aside from unrest and fear, something else could be drawn.

The same thing, as our desire to sing.

In this case, whoever did it was fine.

Liliana: “Even if someone else went first, just as he said, the city hall seems to be clear. For now let’s meet up with everyone, and begin the battle to retake the city! !! Will sing my best!”

Priscilla: “Don’t display such an insouciant attitude.”

Liliana: “No, no, no, this isn’t anything like arrogance.”

To some degree there was a sense of assurance, but what was greater was a sense of a shame.

A chance being taken away, missing an opportunity to be the [Songstress].

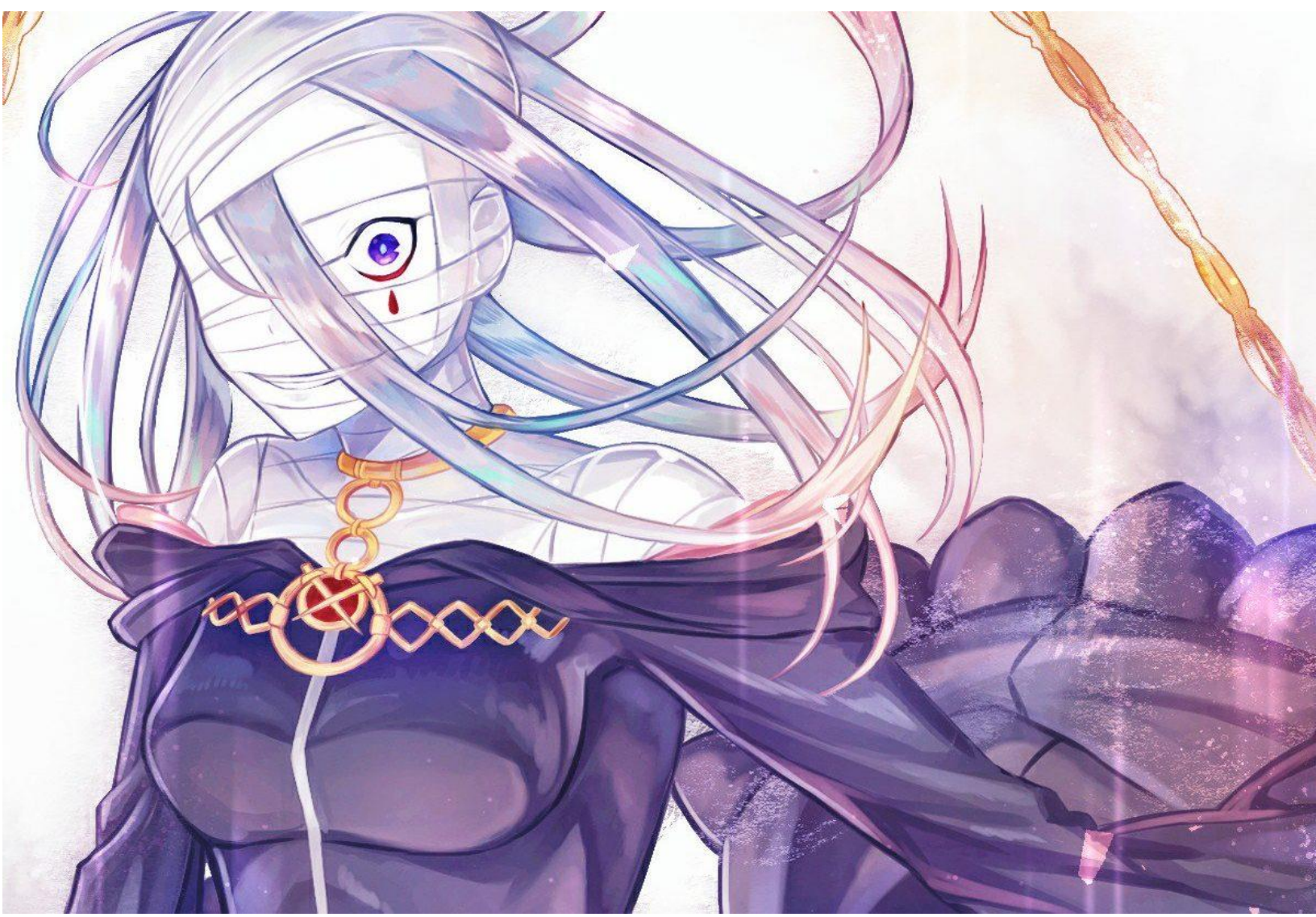
But taking its place was, to be able to stand in this place where a [Hero] was born, gave me such a satisfaction.

— This satisfaction, where this hero mindlessly decided to engage with Priscilla-sama, was it going to dissipate like this!

Yay! There would still be a chance to sing! Well then!

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Chapter 65 - The Regret of Liliana Masquerade



Hey — this is Liliana live on the scene—!

Yesyes, currently we're in the north part of the City of Pristella! Engaging in a battle to take one of the control towers—!

The four control towers taken over by the Witch Cult! In order to recapture the tower, the most capable ones in the city have made their move, conducting a large scale battle which hit all four at once!

Amongst forces who each did not pale in the slightest, for some reason a mere cute musician like me properly joined the battle as well, how unexpected! However, retreat wasn't to even be considered!

Well then, next is to introduce the crazy face, who is going to be participating in this operation together with me, Liliana Masquerade!!

Priscilla: "That face is just about sickening already. Present your neck beneath mine. Once that head has been severed, that skull will serve nicely as a candleholder."

Alright it's here~! Merciless words and vicious tactics! But if that's used we'll be finished too! I'll die so please have mercy!

Light dancing in those slender red eyes, figure turning back akin to a flame! Even that difficult character was like the ever changing form of flame, obviously dangerous to the touch!

Wielding the Yang Sword in one hand was the champion of our offensive! Priscilla Bariel-sama!

Priscilla-sama crossed the ignited waterway by the side, in one breath waving the dazzling Yang Sword! Waving! Wavewavewaving!

Impact! Radiance! Sound! The one receiving it, was knocked back greatly~!

But then! Catching their step! And then glaring at Priscilla-sama!

???: "Aah, aah, aaaaaaaaah! Really, really, really! Why is it that whether this one or that or all of them are all bunched and coming together! Do you mean to prevent me from meeting that person! Agonizing, agonizing, how agonized I am! Heartbreak rends my chest! Shaking those desperate feelings within the heart! Such agony can't be held back—!"

Appearing was—! One who cried out while tears flowed free, a sobbing enraged lunatic wrapped in bandages!

Face covered in white bandages which looped and looped and looped and looped to cover eyes! Body completely covered in a cloak! In all honesty their gender was indistinguishable though from the voice

was probably female! With that manner of dress which gave up the identity of the woman, with dangerous thoughts swinging chains that looped and looped and looped around her arms! Was one who whether I or anyone else had already lost track of what she was saying,

Witch Cult Sin Archbishop representing [Wrath] Sirius Romanee-Conti! Who had announced herself just now!

The covered face of the lunatic Sirius flowed with tears! Those tears were as if on fire, allowing tongues of flame to tumble in the courtyard beneath the control tower! Such a connection! Was inexplicable!

In addition to this there was the presence of a white hand of flame in the waterway, clinging to the people, people, people outside who found themselves unconcerned! People who should have been hiding in the shelters of the north, a majority of them had in order to see this battle gone out of their way to rush here — but not really! Since right now everyone was tumbling about on the ground and crying out sobbing! With the same feeling as the lunatic Sirius! This was the power of the [Wrath] that had spread chaos throughout the entire city—!

In the eyes of everyone who was sobbing and screaming remained not a trace of awareness! Should they be said to have been poisoned by feeling, or intoxicated by feelings, or manipulated by feelings, or tormented by feelings as playthings, well it was this kind of feeling! It's incredibly clear, water, crystal what would happen if they're left alone, so trying a little harder here would be good wouldn't it!

Liliana: "Ui, uii... Come, come, this certainly constitutes a large stage!"

Atop a high platform! From above I surveyed the what lay burning below below this stage, and the still sobbing audience, and the actor who spread flames as if driven mad, raising her voice to take the stage as well.

In all honesty, due to leaving Priscilla-sama's very powerful feeling vicinity, from just now my chest had been pierced endlessly as if attacked with sorrow and despondency and loneliness, but don't think that due to that kind of reason I'd stop my steps, smooth my fingers, or lose my breath to the burning flames!

If you are forced to feel something like agony, if a song were to be directly experienced at least something would be done, so if the light came at a greater wavelength I would not be defeated!

In the end, I would introduce every last one of these people who had lost their senses, to the one who played a leading role~!

Liliana: “Come, come, those far away listen to the sound! Those close by watch the dance! Those even further away I’ll raise my voice so you can hear! Liliana Masquerade, is here to sing and dance and perform for you, so listen well! — Come, sky which transcends the break of day!”

Placing delicate yet bold force into the fingers which played the lu-lyre, throat opening to reach as far as possible, to have echoes reverberate close by, borrowing from the world sounds and rhythms, beginning to play—!

But well before that! Let’s take only a little flicker of time, to recall how this situation came to be!

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Liliana: “So, sosososo, Priscilla-sama! So, is this really fine?”

Priscilla: “To what do you refer?”

Priscilla-sama’s steps did not slow in the slightest.

Chasing that figure, I hurriedly tossed my words forth.

Well then, it was obvious. When clearly the next step was to contend with a Sin Archbishop, the only one who had been brought alongside was in fact me!

Wasn’t it? At the beginning of the beginning of the beginning, this wasn’t what I had planned on.

After the Witch Cult’s third broadcast, Natsuki Subaru-sama had made a, how to describe it, not firm but leaving imprints in the heart, well anyway a broadcast with that kind of feeling. And we had regrouped with those in the City Hall!

Around then, hearing that Kiritaka-san was perhaps in a state of unrest, something resembling worry had formed in my heart, but at that moment a shocking reality had surfaced!

Somehow or other, the Sin Archbishops who'd come to Pristella wasn't just [Lust] alone. Sin Archbishops where one would have been enough of a disaster, there were in fact four! And the the four would each occupy on tower, was already strange enough.

Who was it that had spread some news like the Witch Cult was a group of deviants without commander couldn't function as a group. Wasn't this a perfect example of teamwork. And wasn't this the result of doing so.

Was the only part in accordance with this the part about them being deviants. It can't be — that leaves only fear—!

Butbut, gathered on our side were candidates of the Royal Election!

Though some of those valuable people present had suffered injuries in a prior battle, but no cloudedness lay in the eyes of those who were faced with the prospect of retaking the city! No matter how you looked at it at this time, all that remained was to send all those people filled with energy off.

Priscilla: “—There is nothing to fear so long as mineself and that musician are there.”

Suddenlysuddenly, with ears that flashed with Kiritaka-san's requiem, I heard a decree which came from Priscilla-sama!

The midst of the battle against the Sin Archbishop of Wrath, wasn't that in fact where I'd be brought.

Nono, isn't that too forced please reconsider — although I'd bravely argued thus, with a frigid attitude as if she'd forgotten those hours we'd just spent together, Priscilla-sama stabbed at me with provoking words.

To receive words to such an extent, how could this be, I am merely a woman. A bard.

And then hearing that this [Wrath] had been the one who had sent the agitation throughout the city, with that shrinking back wasn't an option.

Originally, Priscilla-sama had brought me to use the magical device in the city hall to spread my song to all those in the city. But since that goal had been overtaken by Subaru-sama's speech, I hadn't taken the stage and had been left with a feeling of defeat...

Should there be another chance to face [Wrath], that would make the perfect opportunity to do battle once again.

Rather, this was the re-opening of a war that had ended without battle, a battle of revenge that the opponent was unaware of.

Something like that, wouldn't it practically make someone ignite.

Liliana: "Excellent! Miss Liliana! On the stage under Priscilla-sama's order, with the lu-lyre and this throat, will sing with beauty!"

Tada! Done with grace.

As Priscilla-sama and Al-sama focused on the battle with [Wrath], I would, from behind, wreath those who had been affected by [Wrath's] incomprehensible power in song. A perfect setup!

That was, what I thought. Alright, with that the scene returns to the exchange from earlier. To Priscilla-sama responding to my shameful voice with 'To what do you refer'.

Rightright, of course that would be said.

Liliana: "Why did you leave Al-sama back at the hall? With only two women, one being the adorable me and the other being the beautiful Priscilla-sama, isn't this a bit uneasy?"

Priscilla: "It isn't. From the start, mineself alone would already be surplus. After all, this is a state of affairs so lacking in personnel that even mineself must act. When mineself is pressed into making a casual effort, those of the Witch Cult must have believed themselves to be on the verge of victory."

Liliana: "...? I really don't understand what you're saaaaaaaa—! Priscilla-sama is amazing!"

Having only received a sideways glare from Priscilla-sama, the place that was glared at seared with pain! An optical illusion? Was it an optical illusion!? Was it from being too close and feeling Priscilla-sama's burning passion, and my body thus having been conditioned by her!?

Priscilla: "It should be as thou heard'st. As long as a signal is sent to the control tower, certainly a cultist will take the empty base as a target and act. And when that happens, those left there will be free to be toyed with. Although that merchant seems to have realized so."

Liliana: "Ah, and so you spoke to Anastasia-sama before leaving."

Priscilla: "Although it seems that the option of taking only the magical device, and hiding in a shelter with the other non-combatants was considered... since the Witch Cult is coming either way, to choose to greet them with battle would be positively satisfying. The one to return will presumably be [Lust], but if it's Al who is there he can manage something."

Liliana: "Ah, so that's how it is... Al-sama does indeed seem trusted eeeeeek!"

Hearing Priscilla-sama's words, after nodding while trying to follow another glare was given!

But just then I hadn't done any wrong! Becausebecause, something like leaving an ally at a place where the enemy would try to force their way in, that was certainly something that couldn't be done without trust.

Priscilla: "Do not carelessly speak of trust and reliance. Although mineself will not deny being supported by Al and Schult. Although that man does indeed play the part of a fool, he is in fact a useful man. Although he is a card drawn for his exterior particularity, placing him beside mineself does not serve as an impediment."

With a derisive sound, Priscilla-sama spoke so in a low voice as if bored.

In truth, such words should not have been directed toward one's foremost knight-sama, and in the end the degree of warmth in the evaluation of a trusted partner was zero, why was this.

Those words clearly containing only its superficial meaning and feelings, but for what reason would it have felt as if just that were enough.

Liliana: “Because evaluations for others are beyond low, so those evaluated as normal feels like they’re evaluated well, an issue of distribution...?”

Priscilla: “For thou to understand’st mine mannerisms is unnecessary. Regarding solely the results is fine. Nor does mineself expect thou to understand’st such. What mineself expects of thee, is solely what mineself acknowledges.”

Liliana: “S, something of mine can be regarded as useful to the point of acknowledgement?”

Priscilla: “It can be said to be useful to the point of having value of being brought alongside minself. Thou has’t an obligation to respond to mine expectations.”

Uhi, merely being regarded as such makes this duty heavy indeed!

Or, well, that is, in any case, setting that aside, I had just noticed something.

In the meeting in the City Hall just now, Priscilla-sama had indeed been referring to me as you there you there you there (kisama), leading to a feeling of distance suddenly being drawn, but now her referral had changed back to thou (sonata). Could this be...?

Liliana: “A special side you show only to those you deem amiable, juuust kidding... uhiiii!”

I clutched at my head, hiding from Priscilla-sama’s searing gaze. Huu, I had learned from these past several hours. How should it be put, that it was Priscilla-sama’s, or something like the atmosphere? Such subtle changes in Priscilla-sama, were all keenly caught by my sensitive ears, skin, et cetera...

Liliana: “Hmm? The anticipated sharp rebuke did not strike? How is it possible, for this Liliana’s expectation to be off...”

Priscilla: “Despite still being in the middle of this small play, interest in your farce extends only so far.”

Liliana: “Ah, back to calling me you...”

Had distance, once again been created with that? As I held such slightly despondent feelings I raised my head to understand. Ah understood, this wasn't a time to play around with me.

At some point, we had reached our destination of the control tower. Well then, that control tower that had become a problem, had some slight conflict with what I knew—.

Liliana: “Did you know, Priscilla-sama. According to my report on Pristella, the control tower shouldn't be something that would randomly go up in flames.”

Priscilla: “Indeed. Despite being a decoration mineself approves of, the design of this hopeless performance is beyond crude. This burning scorching searing would indeed raise spirits, but enjoyment cannot be derived from relying on foolishness.”

Although Priscilla-sama was the very picture of composure, I could not regard this so coolly.

The northern control tower, that stalwart tower surrounded by various waterways, the entire structure was at this moment engulfed in flame. Since the tower was built of stone, this material wasn't supposed to be something that could be so easily set aflame. Ah, seems a flash is about to come.

Liliana: “A flash. [Baked stone tower and baked yams]. Would you like to hear it?”

Priscilla: “If you would like to have only your footprints remain in this world then by all means sing it. If there is one slip up that will become reality. Mediocrity, banality, commonness, if mine glory is being relied upon then treat it with proper care, a group of fools can accomplish nothing. Do not expect mineself to be so merciful as to treat fools who harm themselves with mercy.”

Suddenly showing a mien of severity! Was this an indication that Priscilla-sama had entered a state of preparing for battle?

That's right that's right. Watching the burning control tower made the pressure increase as it grew. And then and then, welcoming the two of us, the one welcoming us, was a freak who stood before the

tower consumed in flame with arms spread open! With this there was no possibility of having the wrong person.

Sirius: “Apologies, but would you mind perhaps being troubled to step forward? Thank you.”

The bandaged freak’s first sentence was unexpectedly placid, as if being considerate of us.

That combined with hands that had been spread from the beginning, and the manner of bowed head for some reason gave off a rather cute air. Was it due to the contrast with that appearance? Perhaps it came from that feeling.

Sirius: “Although this is perhaps a little too much for a landmark, but since the functions of the city were halted tonight, it feels as if there’s a lack of light, doesn’t it? To become lost in the dark, or to slip into a waterway by losing your footing, would be quite dangerous, and thus I tried to light a fire for light.”

As if considering this to be an excellent idea, the bandaged freak, nono, that was rude. Let’s go with bandage-san. Bandage-san informed us of the reason for that fire.

Mmm, so that was it. Feeling touched couldn’t be helped. The city known as the Watergate City of Pristella was certainly filled with waterways. And to be reminded to be careful when making nighttime expeditions was common. Especially when leaving to go to somewhere like a back alley. The main roads were for this reason of nighttime travels kept with backup illumination, but even so the waterways held a high degree of danger.

Huu, that a master from elsewhere could in fact recognize and take into considering something about Pristella like this, would lead to some lingering feeling of happiness.

Ah, no, it’s not at all that Pristella is some kind of hometown to me, but to stand as a representative of Pristella and feel grateful would be rather strange indeed.

Eh, since I’d seen Kiritaka-san do a lot of things related to the operations of the city, seeing the efforts of someone you’re familiar with pay off wasn’t dissatisfying in the least. Mhm.

Sirius: “But, everyone within this city is pretty amazing. Although this perhaps sounds like an arbitrary opinion, but the reaction to an emergency situation arising was truly excellent. Adults helping children, men helping women, husbands helping wives, elder brothers helping younger sisters, elder sisters helping younger brothers, even strangers helping those weaker than them. This spirit of mutual aid is ingrained deep in the bones. Upon seeing those figures rushing into shelters, I couldn’t help but felt that sight of mutual support truly is excellent.”

Clangclang. Upon closer inspection, those were sounds made by chains wrapped around Bandage-san’s two arms. According to Subaru-sama, those seemed to be Bandage-san’s weapons, but look, looking it at like this aren’t they rather fashionable?

The oversized coat that Bandage-san wore over her body... Think of it as a deliberate dress sense and it wasn’t bad... mmm, wasn’t bad at all!

Bandage-san’s tone was very polite, but that voice was a little, what was it, discomfiting? High though it was, there was a subtle feeling of fakeness that someone who worked with voices for a living couldn’t overlook, but that didn’t detract very much at all!

Looking at it holistically, well, couldn’t it be said that saying more was unnecessary!

Liliana: “This is a relief, Priscilla-sama. Seems that this is an opponent who can be communicated with smoothly. Regarding the situation if this goes poorly Priscilla-sama would have a harder time aaaaa, my eyes aaaaa!?”

My eyes were burning! Aaaaaa, fire spun into my eyes!

My eyes, my eyes would melt! Would melt and become incapable of seeing the lovely sights of this world!

Liliana: “Aah, damn it... if I’d known, that this would happen, I would’ve burned the look of those beauties in the city hall thoroughly into my eyes...!”

Priscilla: “Fool. Raise your head. Do not become so casually engulfed and lead mine self to disappointment.”

Hearing Priscilla’s warm that was not warm at all, I tightened my face blinked and raised my head. Ah, wonderful, eyes were still intact. I could still see the world, could see it all. Could see the red Priscilla-sama, and the white Bandage-san.

Really now Priscilla-sama, giving her usual severe expression toward Bandage-san. Bandage-san with gentle movements tilted her head toward that gaze.

Come now, in this case Priscilla-sama was absolutely in the wrong.

Liliana: “Priscilla-sama, you can’t. You can’t treat everyone no matter who with that manner of regarding them as if they were an ill-bred dog. So on account of my flat chest and face, on account, of, my flat chest... put on a manner of negotiation...”

Eeeh, why was this. For some reason tears felt on the verge of falling.

But it was fine. If I use this attitude of facing the reality of my flat chest, becoming a bridge which connected Priscilla-sama and Bandage-san’s spirits was possible, those tears would be swallowed down!

Liliana: “Come, on behalf of my flat chest, reach out your hands...!”

Sirius: “Indeed, this is something lovely. I am in accord with that miss’s warmth. People and people are able to mutually communicate, mutually understand, mutually experience. Face warmth with warmth, kindness with kindness, love with love! Doing precisely that, will yield happiness.”

Liliana: “Iiii! That’s what I was thinking too! Indeed, this is in fact love isn’t it. Priscilla-sama, it’s love! Even though I can’t deny that going along with it was due to influence, but going with the flow has its own flavor! Hey, this is the Watergate City, a city filled with flowing waterways! Hey, hey!”

Priscilla: “——”

Bandage-san's speech word by word moved the heart. Uwu, it would pierce into the spirit, would pierce into it—.

Seeing that Bandage-san and I shared the same thoughts, Priscilla-sama's stubborn determination accordingly disintegrated, revealing to us... a taut expression?

Priscilla: "To reach such an extent, mineself must admit that 'twas an underestimation. There's no other way."

Liliana: "Huh—? Priscilla-sama, why would you have that expression..."

Priscilla-sama who had placed a hand on her brow as if thinking sighed. That sighing figure could have made a lovely portrait, but she immediately moved in front of me as if having figured something out.

Since my stature could be considered rather petite, so after Priscilla-sama who wore tall heels stood before me, I could only gaze upward at her. Annoying, why this sudden closeness.

Liliana: "Priscilla-sama fuuuu."

Priscilla: "——"

After feeling Priscilla-sama's chest shoving from the front, those white fingers firmly grasped my neck and chin. Then, Priscilla-sama's face which drew closer met mine. Or rather, lips met lips eeeeeh—!?

Liliana: "Nnn—! Nnnnnnn—! Nnnmmnnnnh—!"

Slapslap, beatbeat, with face bright red I resisted with all my might. But the approaching force was overwhelming, and the pressing lips were too soft really what was this!!

Ah, huh, waitasec, flowing in from Priscilla-sama's lips was something searingly lewd, ahi, hiii, ahu.

Liliana: "... Haaah."

The heat ceaselessly flowing forth led to dizziness, once noticed I had already collapsed to the ground in exhaustion. Priscilla-sama gave that me not a second glance, as she her crimson tongue ran over her lips.

Priscilla: “Well, that should be sufficient.”

Like this, like this, like this, speaking to to provokeprovokeprovokeprovoke!

I forcefully rubbed my moist eyelids, placing force onto my waist that had been stripped of all forcefulness to stand. Really now Priscilla-sama just now, aaaa, I'd express mutiny!

Liliana: “P, Priscilla-sama, just now, what was that! Please, please take responsibility. To have been forced into such a thing, I can't be wedded off now—!”

Priscilla: “Allowing mouths to touch, didn't mineself concede this as well. Although using the first time as an excuse is your prerogative, but isn't it thanks to this that you could restore your sense of reason.”

Liliana: “Eh? Restoring reason referring to?”

After, after trampling upon the purity of another, Priscilla-sama truly still wore an unrepentant expression. Did she think that doing whatever to a bard was fine. Sob sob.

Priscilla: “How poorly behaved. Well, raise your head, look at that person.”

Liliana: “Sobsobsob-, eh?”

With the weakness of a woman who would obey those words I raised my head, and saw in their original positions Priscilla-sama and Bandage-san, no, huh, Bandage-san?

Nonono, how was this possible. Why would I have felt no discomfort, so kindly calling that person Bandage-san? Inexplicable, utterly inexplicable!

Sirius: “Both women and yet they... although, there are those of that form. Although the form of everyone’s love differs, even if they take different directions they will still love the same amount. That in fact better expresses the beauty of humans loving humans...”

Priscilla: “—Cease this ridiculous farce. How unseemly.”

Watching Priscilla-sama and I was that bandaged freak who pressed her hands to her face as she droned on, but those words rapidly made me feel discontent.

Up until now seeming to be trustworthy without condition were those words, that attitude, that manner, upon becoming able to accept with normalcy the conditions imposed by the bandaged freak, suddenly this reversed.

No, setting the tower alight due to the darkness to serve as a light couldn’t have been, to regard those lightly red dark and dirtied chains as fashionable was entirely in error, and at the end, the evaluation of those in the shelters truly evoked disgust! Just who was it do you think had made this happen!?

Priscilla: “Although in this world, extreme love and diffused superficiality aside those immersed in pleasure are many, but even amongst those your self-absorption is extreme. To call you a clown wouldn’t fit your overpowering repulsiveness, to call you a fool grants you too much power... value in your continued survival is impossible to find.”

Sirius: “Oh my, oh my my, oh my my my, is that so? Thank you for your consideration, apologies? With gratitude, apologies. My words seem difficult to communicate to you... but, this does happen.”

Priscilla: “My, rather reasonable. Willing to hurry and present your neck yet.”

Sirius: “Indeed, of course. To exhaust speech for the sake of mutual understanding, this too is an important ceremony in relationships between humans. Similarly, not long after hearts will soften, and merge into one. Love will thus become one, will become as one, will work hard to become as one. Love is exalted, all along I have been taught thus, and all along have lived as thus!”

Liliana: “Uwaaah! Although the realization was a bit delay I just realized, but for the first time I shared a kiss with someone else!”

Priscilla: “Solely the existence of this burning tower to welcome mineself, is deserving of the merit of praise.”

Wow! Although to me it was a little bit eh, but now, dialogue hadn’t been established in the slightest bit!

Calling to the bandaged freak who all along felt as if incapable of listening to reason, Priscilla-sama who strode forth to make her own way, and I who had been disoriented from the attack on my lips! Hey, wasn’t I completely unnecessary?

Priscilla: “Where thou art needed is after this. The mouth to mouth was for that reason.”

Liliana: “Please stop reminding me of it! Also, please try not to glance this way. It kinda feels like when Priscilla-sama looks over, my chest goes badump...”

Priscilla: “That the result was too effective can also be considered a problem. Mine beauty is indeed as sin.”

From beside me who tried to endure the thumping, Priscilla-sama sighed as if plagued by worries. That profile felt lovely to the point of being painful... eeeeeeh, it’s not the time to say such things. Priscilla-sama had from the start been filled with tenacity, yet the opposing bandaged freak showed no signs of backing down, and thus a battle was certain! And were I to stay here I’d be a liability!

Liliana: “Is, isn’t it best if I back away a little?”

Priscilla: “Well then, ”

Hey, why are you messing with someone to such an extent.

And then, as soon as I’d thought that this happened. My keen and sightly ears caught sounds. Were those footsteps. Those were footsteps, without doubt. And not only without doubt, those footsteps

were not only one pair, they were many... no, they went beyond many to excessive! Excessively excessive!

Priscilla: "So that's it, gathering all the humans nearby and converging them here."

Sirius: "All those people are ones that are in accord with my love. Although sometimes there are stubborn people like you present, but as the saying goes [once rainwater falls into a waterway all differences vanish]. If your hearts were to be consigned, the perspectives will change as well?"

Were something like rainwater were to be mixed in, unexpectedly there would be contamination — although the proverb meant something like this, now was not the time for such idle leisure!

The burning control tower! Surrounded on all sides by the waterways! Us in the courtyard facing the control tower! And the large crowd peering over at us from the other side of the waterway!

It truly was very large. Certainly not like the likes of the convention center which had one or two hundred people! This was a thousand, or perhaps even more? Indeed that many people did surround us, and although saying this is very impolite they glared at us with disastrous gazes!

Was this to say, this was the state of having one's soul completely overtaken by [Wrath] that Subaru-sama had described!?

Priscilla: "It should first be mentioned, that the you of just now was wearing the same expression as those over there."

Liliana: "Uweeeh, really!? How terrifying! Ah! Butbut, in that case if Priscilla-sama were to kiss each one of them, everyone would recover their consciousness isn't that right!? If Priscilla-sama's lips aren't taken care of they'll swell aaaa!"

Priscilla: "Who would give charity without regard to who is receiving. Would you like to be burned away starting with your rear, you."

A turn of events that resulted in burning from the rear! To choose the wrong response would mean death! This condition was ridiculously unsympathetic to someone like me who often spoke without thinking!

Priscilla: “In any case, that’s your role. For what did you think mineself brought you here. To forsake your own duties and beg assistance from mineself should yield shame.”

Liliana: “No but, this is, I understand the reason but—”

What with this volume of people who have lost their sensibility, without sufficient preparation a song cannot be sung. And if the performance took place before her, that bandaged freak would presumably try to put an end to it.

Priscilla: “Thus, mineself will take the stage.”

As I retreated while squirming, Priscilla-sama spoke as if showing disgust.

No, although I would admit that Priscilla-sama was incredible, against such a crowd... huh wait, until now I had bore the idea of [Priscilla-sama is incredible!], but was Priscilla-sama truly so incredible?

Although I had seen the sight of her palm slamming away a fairly fit young man with a pow, but aside from that there weren’t any such memories of such feats! Eeeh, on that note even if [Wrath] were the only opponent, had following along truly been the right decision?

Sirius: “You mustn’t. Clearly the relationship between the two of you is close to the point of sharing a kiss, efforts should be extended to reach mutual understanding to achieve greater closeness. As long as desires become one, thoughts will be able to connect. Just like those surrounding this courtyard, like the majority, become one!”

As the bandaged freak took a step back, so did everyone surrounding the courtyard. Behavior that a thousand people repeated without a sliver of of disorder, could only have been described as resounding.

That was a force which made the courtyard tremor, the surface of the water sway, the already ignited tower seem to tilt... although whether or not this was love could be contested, but this was without doubt certainly a threat!

If that large gathering, were to approach to attempt to capture us as one—

Sirius: “Come, you too, will be enveloped by love, experience the ecstasy of becoming one—!”

Eh, gya! As soon as it had been said it was actually happening! It’s over!

A thousand against two, this was a disparity in numbers that even a true hero would be unable to overlook!

With a sound as if a roar of rage, as one the crowd swarmed forth. Ignoring anything like the waterway, like a horde of corpses they came for our virgin bodies—!

Uwah! Father-sama Mother-sama Kiritaka-san, apologies! Places aside from Liliana’s lips would be deflowered as well!

Liliana: “If I’d known this would happen then unrestrainedly with Kiritaka-san...”

Priscilla: “Whether the pessimistic you, or that optimistic crowd, each and every one of you just who do you think mineself is?”

Liliana: “Eh?”

Before my despairing self, Priscilla-sama moved. Before it had even been noticed, wielded in Priscilla-sama’s hand was a crimson blade — the Yang Sword. That which had already been radiant enough when seen at the convention center during the day, in this nighttime with the sun extinguished exuded a shiver-inducing beauty.

Almost as if it had revived the sun that should have fallen—.

Priscilla: “To tremble from mine arresting blade is right. This is the flame of the origin, the flame which first lit the seat of the emperor — although mine belief is that this scarlet radiance, is the same as what you lot recognize.”

“——”

Priscilla-sama solemnly dictating thus, flew upward while wielding the Yang Sword.

That was an action which could only be described as flight. Although clearly appearing as if only a light leap, yet with such agility as if becoming the wind. Seeming to approach the edge of the waterway before the crowd that surged wildly forward, Priscilla-sama directed the tip of the Yang Sword to the water’s surface.

And following right afterward.

“——!?”

Before my eyes, the wall of crimson which rose — no, that was flame, a wall of flame.

Ascendant flames traversed the barrier of crimson, appearing even as white. As if to reject any description of ‘wavering’, mournful light scattered forth, a testament to the terror of that heat.

Scorching was the waterway, even the water itself. Water which should have been effective against fire, water which was fire’s natural opposing enemy — this was a sight which overturned such natural notions.

The flame of Priscilla-sama’s Yang Sword, could ignite even water.

And in addition — all of everything which surrounded the waterways around the courtyard!

Sirius: “This is...”

Before the sight which belonged not of this world, the bandaged freak — no, let’s stop that after all. [Wrath], indeed, even [Wrath] was lost for words.

This couldn't be described by words like smouldering, a flame which but existed. Stopping the steps of the crowd attempting to cross the waterway, nailing them in place.

That was a matter of course. Although moths crowding around a flame was nature's decree, humans bore a wisdom and instinct yet capable of resisting thus.

Priscilla: "Even if solely in form, your use of love as an excuse to name this not as dominance became a critical weakness. If this is a force that even obedience of instinct can overcome, something of this degree could never stop someone in their steps."

Taking anew a stance with the Yang Sword, Priscilla-sama ridiculed the silent [Wrath] thus.

Ridicule, mockery, desirion, contempt — this was that which could only be termed, a malicious expression of beauty.

Aah, something so important, that I had overlooked.

I had all along only been watching Priscilla-sama's dashing expression of severity, although that was beautiful in its own right, indeed it could not compare.

When clearly there could be nothing more beautiful than this malice that yielded only a beauty which caused shivers.

Priscilla: "Even if free will is curbed, if instinct is not restrained as well this is precisely what it will look like. Seems as if no one is willing to go to the extent of being consumed by flame, a testament to the love that you speak of."

Sirius: "——"

Priscilla: "This is the result of your cheap love that you cried of. Such a scene is precisely what ridiculous defines, Sin Archbishop. How truly incapable of measuring up to that exaggerated title."

Yet revealing ridicule, with momentum Priscilla-sama continuously chastised the silent [Wrath].

My hands couldn't help but moisten with sweat, gaze flicking over to the scene. The thought of whether or not Priscilla-sama was truly so incredible that had persisted until now had been completely swept away.

Priscilla-sama is incredible! Priscilla-sama is powerful!

Priscilla: "In the end, words like love becomes one is merely superficiality. Mine peerless self is at the very peak, and thus no matter how much you struggle commoners like you could never become one with mineself."

Waa, Priscilla-sama is amazing! Although she was amazing, but huh, wasn't this situation weird?

Priscilla: "Even if capable of approaching mineself, to catch up with mineself is absolutely impossible. The love that you speak of is already defeated, isn't it. And thus, speaking of to become one is naught but wild words."

Liliana: "Uhm, Priscilla-sama, it's about time..."

Priscilla: "Even as a misconception to become one is too erroneous. Born as something else, and wanting to become one is a denial of the self. Why would something you yourself lack have any value in proximity. What is flawed is the entire premise, and to act upon this incorrectness is to exist in commonness. — Something, so vulgar."

Liliana: "Uwaaah! Why such an absolute rejection!?"

Something like this! Clearly due to blood rushing to the head! Clearly!

Although even if Priscilla-sama's blood had rushed to her head perhaps there was still some margin of movement, but for someone insignificant like me the preference would be for your venerated self to refrain from doing so and end it as quickly as possible!

Perhaps she saw it, for [Wrath] who faced Priscilla-sama's words had wordlessly bowed her head and was immersed in silence. Well, to have been met with so many arrogant words, anyone would be

infuriated. Because to talk back felt like it would bring a multitude of words in response, so even infuriated silence would be kept.

It could be said to have been turned entirely uncomfortable, so if possible if Priscilla-sama could just beat down on [Wrath]-san and call it a victory that'd be a relief.

Priscilla: "Fool. To do so, would mean everyone but mineself would be bisected, isn't that right. Although the sight of a city stained red with blood would be appealing, but there is no need to bring it about in mine country. Well then this opportunity should first be delayed, and you should fulfill your use as well."

Ah — right that was the case. In the end my duty was just this.

To receive the influence of [Wrath], would be sharing the pain and even wounds inflicted on that person. Precisely for being rid of such a condition was why my song was required.

Liliana: "After seeing the actual scene, I've actually become quite unsettled so who knows if my song will actually work!"

Priscilla: "If unwilling, your head and those of that crowd are free to fall alongside that creature's. If that scene is best avoided, without fail place your heart into song."

I continued to clutch the lu-lyre, shrinking back now that such heights of responsibility had been cast upon me.

The burning waterway kept the crowd away, yet the crowd remained as hostages, and the method to free them was my song! Priscilla-sama's duty was—?

Liliana: "So that's to say that's to say, until I've used my song to sway the captivated crowd, Priscilla-sama's duty is to keep me from dying isn't that how it feels!?"

Priscilla: "If you die, well, all that's left is to sever their heads as soon as possible. Best to think of it as all their lives being wrapped around your throat."

Liliana: “Ukya—!”

Priscilla: “Such slow understanding. Now then... mm.”

After I had covered my face with a sharp cry, Priscilla-sama’s expression changed. Priscilla-sama regarded the [Wrath] that had maintained her silence until now, frowning her brows.

With an uneasy premonition, I snuck a peek in that direction through the gaps in my fingers.

Sirius: “—How, amusing.”

Liliana: “Eh?”

Sirius: “How amusing, such joy. Perhaps this should be called delight. No, perhaps it isn’t possible to name this ascendant feeling in my heart.”

Saying so with a low voice, languidly [Wrath] raised her face. On that face obscured by bandages, impassioned declaring eyes swept back and forth.

Gazing at Priscilla-sama, at the wall of flame, at me, wait no please don’t look at me.

Sirius: “Apologies, I was scattered for a moment there. However, thank you. I have awoken. It’s like this, words such as to desire to effortlessly achieve understanding were far too selfish.”

Was that a laugh.

The monster’s mouth split open horizontally, revealing a smile which showed white teeth, the monster laughed.

Intimately, as if welcoming a friend or family, to be denied as such and even so!

Sirius: “Please allow me to once more introduce myself. I am the Witch Cult’s Sin Archbishop representing Wrath, Sirius Romanee-Conti. I do hope my affairs can be taken to heart.”

She bowed, politely giving a greeting.

And then the bandaged freak — the monster Sirius, undid the chains on her arm. Rotating wrists, untying bondage, lengthening the reach of the chain, the chains rotating, slashing through air, sound layer upon layer of metal becoming malice itself, cutting through the atmosphere.

Even so, the monster wore a smile.

Sirius: “This is [Trial]! Indeed, is without doubt [Trial]! For this city in which my husband was encountered once again, to meet him once more, to express love in words, [Trial] descending upon me! A testimony of my love which was fated to meet that person once more! You are such a [Trial] which stands in my way!!”

With a ringing voice, with the flourish of a maiden in love, the monster ceaselessly waved her chains, shortening the distance to here in one breath. Oh no oh no, just being brushed would mean death for me.

Priscilla: “After quelling the crowd, that creature’s opponent will be mineself. Do not make any unreasonable movements.”

Liliana: “Uweh? Priscilla-sama!?”

Priscilla: “You are to prepare your song. — Should a shadow fall across the Yang Sword, mineself will no matter what sever that abomination’s head. Before that happens, then.”

Even being given an arbitrary limit by you is—!

As if not hearing a trace of my words, Priscilla-sama and the monster Sirius exchanged opening blows, beginning their battle!

Listening to the fierce collision of chain and sword, I thought that I had to at least do something.

Rather than calling it a sense of responsibility, more like being urged onward by some indistinct feeling, I began to run toward the wall of flame on the waterway. Hopelessly.

Run faster! Damn it, wasn't this being unable to think of anything!

Liliana: "And so for now, please listen for a moment. —Hoshin of the Wasteland huuuh hot!?"

Nearing the boundary of the waterway, I had prepared to whisk those in hearing range into a whirl of song, but immediately upon drawing close my face had been destroyed by flame!

It can't! Really can't! Although forcefully trying to put on the air of a performance, Priscilla-sama's wall of flame was beyond hot! Extremely hot! Hotter than was normal!

But without drawing close to this extent, in truth no one would be able to see!

Liliana: "Uuuooo, hothothot—! My hands will be scorched! If my throat or lungs are burned, this will be a battle lost... wait, huh?"

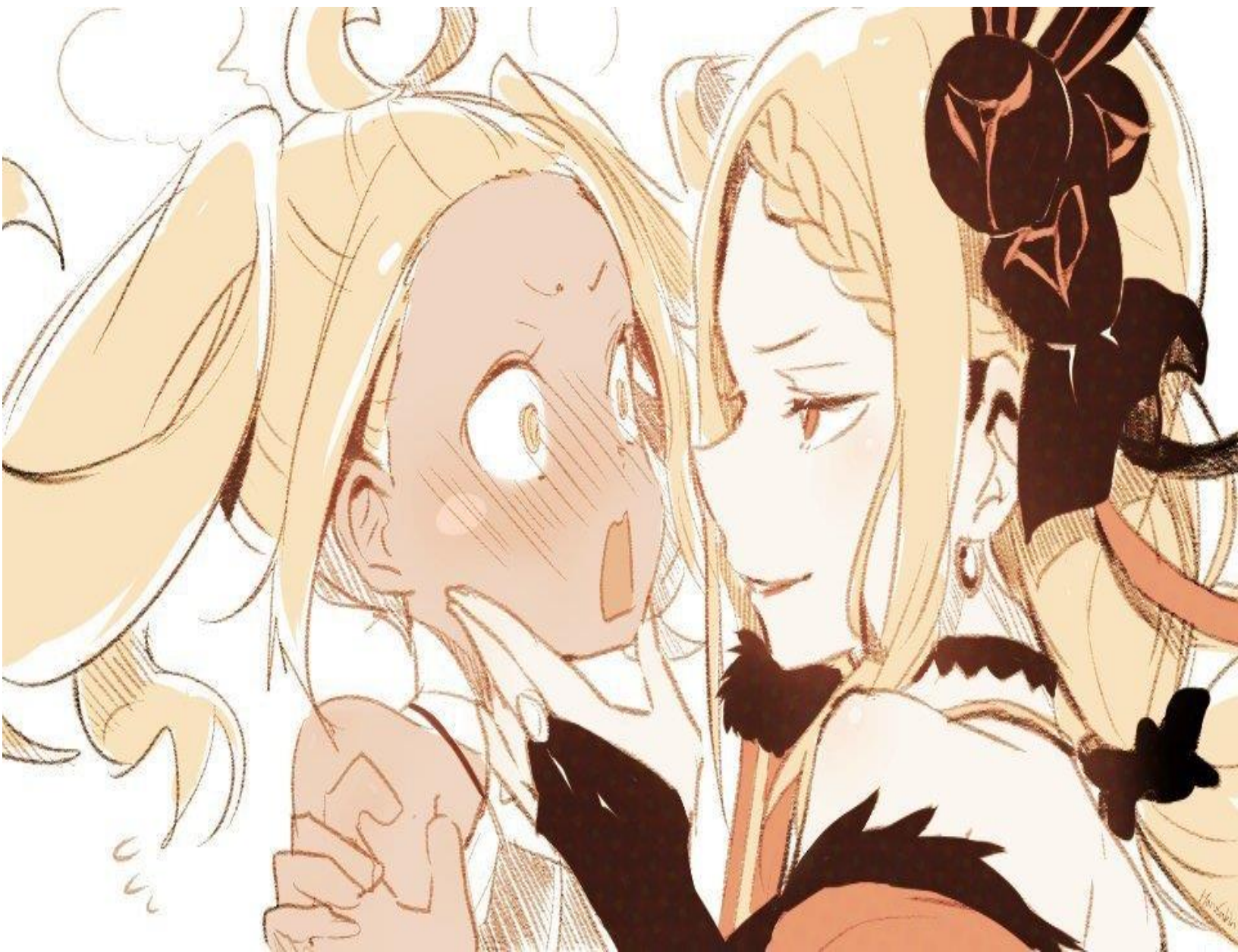
Being licked by a tongue of flame, while cursing my precipitousness for the face that must have been scorched beyond repair, I discovered that the hands which should have been swallowed by the flame were unharmed... or rather, even the wooden lu-lyre hadn't been destroyed by the flame, which was to say?

Liliana: "This is no, ordinary fire...?"

Nono, from the start it had been evident that this was no ordinary fire, but this seemed to be one which did not ignite? Although of scorching heat, it would not burn?

In that case then this! Would be crossed through in no time wouldn't it! The hell was this! This was a bluffing imitation of a fire meant to scare people off!?

Following along was indeed a failure of a decision!



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Chapter 66 - The Stage of Liliana Masquerade



Liliana: “Gah! What a disaster! This fire is way too hot! Way too way too hot! Seven times hotter than normal fire! Being burnt by this will mean dying with seven times the agony!”

The white wall of flame erected before my eyes! Since it was a flame that would not burn if touched, but seemingly only miraculously give heat waves, in truth being able to withstand the pain would mean that it was not impossible to breach.

Thus, in order to keep the truth hidden from everyone who were too scared to rush forth, with desperation I pretended to be someone who suffered from having been suffered a fire blast, which meant I conveyed everyone surrounding the waterway of the dangers of the flame!

Well, even with everyone's mental state being a tad risky, it seemed that instinct had left them with the notion that the flames were dangerous. So my desperate act was perhaps not of much use, but even so not performing it was something I couldn't justify.

Liliana: "Although it was easy for Priscilla-sama to say to sing and dance to snatch the peoples' spirits back."

In all honesty, taking snatching spirits back raaaaaa! As a mood to sing with, would entirely serve as an obstacle, and from its basis goes against the principle of song.

As a result of frantic singing, to say that something airy was left within the hearts of those who listened was a natural intent of the heavens. And to feel something in that intent of the heavens, and giving a tip because of that would be such a gentle world!

To begin with the attitude of wanting to earn a tip, in that case such a desire would make its way into the song. But a song with such a desire contained within was not what I wanted.

And so couldn't this plan be said to be a losing battle from the very start!

Liliana: "Recalling back although this life was short-lived, but days filled with tumultuousness had been experienced. Father-sama and Mother-sama, although there had been resentment when being casted off into the cruel world at thirteen after declaring independence, but now remaining is only gratefulness that I was born so cute. Although I have all along been quite the unfilial daughter, the gratitude and wrath I felt toward the two of you (respectful) was something integral to my every way... Gu! Aaaaa, hothothot, a neverending summer!"

While speaking of gratitude toward parents and various other whims, I felt as if those on the opposite the wall of flame were about to approach and once more put on an act of overheating. Really hoping you'll react appropriately you bunch who can't read the atmosphere!

Butbut, now matter how realistic my performance was it would fall through sooner or later. And then if it were exposed, there would be no way to continue suppressing Priscilla-sama's extreme endurance tactics.

And there we go it's done! It's over!

Sirius: "Oh my oh my, do you have the leisure to see? That the child who you have expectations of, is wearing an expression as if there is no path forward. I can with clarity feel the sorrow and exhaustion plaguing that child's spirit. Aching back and forth, isn't it rather pitiful?"

Priscilla: "Not in the slightest."

Without regard to the me who had begun to clutch my head and count down the seconds to the end, in the center of the courtyard surrounded by waterways that had been set alight, and exchange of dialogue between Priscilla-sama and that freak Sirius was in progress.

That said, the dialogue was entirely composed of Priscilla-sama mercilessly striking Sirius's steady tone with a deaf ear! And setting aside Sirius's manner of speech for now, that figure that rotated chains with both arms could not be called steady in the slightest.

Air being slashed, atmosphere being sliced, the path of metal chains being swung through the air meandered freely! Tumbling, prancing, front back left right it struck toward Priscilla-sama as if a metal snake!

The extending and retracting chain made an ear-piercing level of sound, continuous to the point that it seemed to me Priscilla-sama had been enclosed in a cage of iron. To the point of becoming a prison.

The stone steps that took direct hits from the chain exploded mercilessly, caved in, the paring speaking volumes of that power. If direct contact with the skin were made, the result would be unsightliness caused as if by a snake's fangs and tongue! If the recipient were someone like Priscilla-sama whose skin was white and delicate, to call the torment the most extreme would not be enough!

But but, Priscilla-sama in fact ferociously attacked that metal chain—!

Priscilla: "Tumultuous and yet tasteless noise, heedlessly exerting every which way without the slightest trace of release, a base weapon from which even a hint of elegance cannot be felt, superficial and yet unseemly idle talk... how truly fortunate that such a number of measures to diminish mine

anger were prepared that mercy may be shown. Toward this profanity, there in fact remains only admiration.”

Liliana: “Priscilla-sama is awesomeeeeeeee!!”

Priscilla-sama yet wore an expression which spoke of listlessness, waving the Yang Blade to welcome the chain that forced its way close from every direction. Forget front up down side, how could a blow from somewhere unseen like the back possibly be intercepted.

In addition perhaps this power was unique to the Yang Blade, but whenever the Yang Blade deflected the chain, the point of contact would be scorched white, with firepower that seemed not negligible, and yet the chain would burn and become gradually shorter and shorter! If this were repeated the chain would certainly lose its volume!

Liliana: “Heheheh—! Priscilla-sama, please be rid of rid of rid of it—!”

Priscilla: “Regard thus, ‘tis what is known as candid thoughts which forget to cover eyes. Although exposure of this level for a commoner is presumably difficult, it certainly inspires more pleasure than boring theory which ceaselessly contorts. Well, although merely one person in this world would be enough.”

Liliana: “Eh!? Just now was a praise for me, a praise right!? To consider that praise would be fine right? I’m about to feel happy you know!! Amazing truly amazing. Yay!”

Even if I were to be told that that hadn’t been praise, I’d already felt happy so it was too late!

Accepting my support, Priscilla-sama also accordingly raised her dignity. She continued to advance, ceaselessly burning the chain away. The imposing atmosphere seemed to overwhelm even the Sin Archbishop freak, and was now entirely just waiting! Was a yam on the oven!

Liliana: “No wait a second, Priscilla can’t solve this so effortlessly! If it’s done like this, we’re also be offed effortlessly eeeeeeh!?”

Priscilla: “Mmm, that’s indeed the case. Too fun a time was being had.”

How dangerous! If just now I hadn't stopped her, that person would have been offed so effortlessly! The overwhelmed Sirius took this chance of Priscilla-sama stopping to leap far backward.

Perhaps it was better to say, although Priscilla-sama's noncompliant attitude was rather difficult, but the opponent who could match her was fortunately none other than a Sin Archbishop, perhaps it should be asked whether or not humans could move in such a way?

Sirius: "Mouth clearly having been worked so hard, and yet a master so stubbornly refusing to open their heart is rare indeed. For what reason is your soul so tightly closed."

After gaining some distance, Sirius flickered her gaze to her two arms as she spoke thus. That chain had already been shorn completely short, but as the freak spoke she rotated her wrists to restore its length. It seemed that many chains were wound firmly on her arms, whether or not they were cutting off circulation was unknown.

Sirius: "All hearts regardless of whose have a space. To live means to have feelings, yet no matter the color of the feeling that peeks out from there it's something every person has... even to say a feeling you've staunchly bore all along, as long as its revealed it can be understood?"

Priscilla: "——"

Sirius: "You too have a soul that can anguish, feelings that disorient, although unwaveringly keeping weaknesses hidden from others is a condition to living strongly... but that is not merely a destination to reach on one's lonesome. What one person can achieve on their lonesome has a limit. After becoming one with other people, there are occurrences that can be discovered for the first time. In order to allow other people to see that place, mutual understanding and shared feelings are necessary."

Sirius swayed her body, saying thus to the silent Priscilla-sama.

That voice was as if wanting bleed into the soul. That attitude was dear as if flesh and bone. That manner was tender as if dissolving the guards of others. The content of those words was as if enticing others.

Clearly as if a sweet poison melting with languor, yet even my extremities felt numb.

Sirius: “Could you allow me to help you reach understanding with others? Truly your love is so deep, and loving of the world. Looking forward to being able to be loved. I can understand this. And hope that those other than me can come to understand. In order to keep you from spending a lonely night on your lonesome.”

Priscilla: “Truly a shame to rely only on delusion and conjecture and prattle on without rest. If no doubts are held toward your own words, you are precisely what is known as a lunatic.”

Sirius: “Oh my, thank you very much. That is a title commensurate with my husband’s. A criminal who cannot comprehend in the slightest how outstanding that person is, toward that person spits wild words of admiration envy jealousy.”

Priscilla: “Not worth a mention. What belongs to mineself belongs to mineself. The narrative-like manner of your soliloquy are the wild words. For people like you, even the surface of mine enigma cannot be skimmed.”

Priscilla-sama with self-assurance rejected that sweet enticing proposal with clarity. However, in terms of self-assurance Sirius did not lose. The freak’s head tilted as if having expected Priscilla-sama’s rejection,

Sirius: “To say that even the surface cannot be skimmed, this is the epitome of stubbornness... isn’t it. In that case, how does such an significance sound? [Iris and the King of Thorns].”

Priscilla: “——”

Sirius: “Or perhaps [The Rose Knight of Tiers]? [Maglitza’s Guillotine].”

I didn’t understand the significance of Sirius’s words. Same with the intent behind the freak saying such words.

However, it prompted an immediate effect.

Priscilla: “—Better off dead.”

As I thought I’d heard a low murmur, Priscilla-sama’s figure vanished from sight.

As I expressed my confusion, the distance that had once existed between Priscilla-sama and Sirius became zero. Priscilla-sama swung the Yang Blade from above, arc mercilessly tracing toward Sirius’s neck. In an instant the world slowed to an extent that yielded incredulousness, and even I was able to see the path that Priscilla-sama’s blade followed.

Just aiming it, would be as if caressing Sirius’s slender neck.

If that were to happen, my neck, and the necks of everyone nearby would break in the same way.

Could it be, that it was because I understood this that it seemed to happen so slowly? Say, if a life-threatening danger were to approach, humans would, with an intense focus slow their perception of the world down.

Although, even with that, when the celestial scales of my own life were being tilted by others, what could I and the many people around me do about it.

The crimson radiance of the Yang Blade, just like that with imposing manner which sliced through the atmosphere—

Liliana: “—Eh?”

Due to being unable to understand the sight before me, I couldn’t help but let out the voice of a dazed fool.

The neck of I who had had made that noise was still firmly anchored upon this small body.

That was a matter of course. My neck had not been severed. Whether my own, or Sirius’s.

In substitution, Priscilla-sama’s body which should have leapt at Sirius was flung backward forcefully.

Enduring Sirius's metal chains from the front whose attack had served as a welcome, in a dangerous manner was flung backward.

Liliana: "Priscilla-sama!?"

I let out a cry toward that figure which had obviously not leapt of its own will.

If Priscilla-sama were to be killed the the situation would become an irreparable wreck — I could scarcely even think of such a notion, crying out solely because a sense of disaster dawned. And yet, Priscilla-sama from midair suddenly spun back, halting the impact by stabbing the Yang Blade into the cobblestones.

Priscilla: "Cease the racket, the true damage is yet to come."

Replying thus to my wail, with a resounding step Priscilla-sama landed. However, immediately following that Priscilla-sama's necklace began to change. It had originally been a necklace with three jewels of green, but one of the jewels had disintegrated into ash.

Almost as if taking Priscilla-sama's stead in the attack from just before.

Priscilla: "The repayment of mine necklace, has a rather high cost you know."

Sirius: "So that's how it is. Is it that wounds you suffer transfer onto what is valuable to you. That is truly a manner befitting of [Pride]... nono, couldn't be couldn't possibly be."

Priscilla: "A deliberately demeaning speculation, is malicious to the extreme, a crime of ludicrosity reaching this extent cannot be redeemed with even ten thousand deaths. The manner of your death, is best fitting as a scorching heat that burns and burns yet never dies out."

Toward Sirius whose manner of accordance had not wavered in the slightest, Priscilla-sama's rage shone. Rather than to say that the Yang Blade in her hand had increased its radiance, perhaps it should be said that the heat was increasing? Priscilla-sama's regal attire even to me, appeared as if it swayed under the sweltering sunny day.

Though gazing at it, there truly was no way to think that Priscilla-sama could stand at a disadvantage... but there was also that incomprehensible happening from just now.

Sirius with her inexplicable words appeared as if meant to taunt Priscilla-sama.

Although Priscilla-sama had seemed to rush forward as if falling for that provocation, since that movement had been so predictable it had been welcomed from the front — was not the case.

Rather, this was the opinion of an outsider like me, in my regard Priscilla-sama's movements had appeared fast to the point of disappearing from sight, but perhaps to Sirius this was not the case. Although this possibility could not be denied, but that shouldn't have been.

Because when the Yang Blade had struck out, Priscilla-sama's movements had stopped.

Appearing as if suspended, although such words did exist to convey the general idea, but this was on a different level of meaning from that, more precisely it was as if it had been completely frozen.

Freezing in such an unnatural position, I did not assume to be Priscilla-sama's desire, nor that humans could consciously do as such. In that case, that stopping should have been connected to some kind of incomprehensible ability, but what could it have been?

Sirius: "Please do not rage like that. Although you appear as if constantly raising your temper over something, but such a thing yields exhaustion, and will only parch the soul? Something like [Wrath], is the tomb of the feeling that should be most shunned in this world... if that's the case constantly welling in the heart should be feelings of ecstasy and joy."

Liliana: "C, clearly holding such a philosophy, everyone outside doesn't look very happy do, do, do they?"

Sirius: "Hmm?"

Huh!? Just now, could it be a voice had been audible!?

The freak Sirius looked directly at me, eyes that were visible from a gap in the bandages coiling tightly around my body. Uhiii, what a disaster, to have done to myself!

Sirius: "Indeed, within the hearts of everyone who is outside, unease and lament reigns. Although this too is something tragic, this is merely the result of human hearts overflowing with tenderness and compassion."

Liliana: "Wha, what are you saying?"

Sirius: "Once within my sphere of influence, people become capable of opening their hearts to one another and resonating. And so, feelings that cannot be condensed into words can come to light. To be human is to be able to empathize, a precious existence which from which feelings can come to be. If tender love is felt for the hearts of others, when sorrow is witnessed, in one's own heart sorrow will also bloom. And sorrow will also sprout in the hearts of those who witness that sorrow. As the cycle repeats, the drops of sorrow will become a pond, become a lake, become a river."

This person began to speak of such heavy things.

This was to say, the more people gathered, to be by this person's side would yield increasingly disastrous results.

Such a thing which could rile up and spread suffering to everyone in the city... and it didn't stop at creating unrest.

This person referred to it as a connection of the heart.

Priscilla: "If this seems a tragedy, by all means take the lead in saving everyone. Choosing not to do so and only sighing, is but an irritating noise for the commoners you know."

Sirius: "Mm, I can understand those words. I'm merely a victim of a onesided attack on my helplessness. However, I possess a means to save all those enveloped by sorrow!"

Sirius clapped her palms together with a demeanor of going as far as to declare 'what a wonderful idea!'.

Although it was doubtful that the freak's notion of a good idea could make the situation take a turn for the better, but neither I nor Priscilla-sama spoke up. Although I didn't know about Priscilla-sama, rage boiled in my heart.

A feeling that could not be described with words surging within my chest was – was igniting.

Sirius: "A means to offer salvation to all those enveloped in sorrow... is to use delight, use joy to sweep away that sorrow. Which is to say that the I who is to be a conduit for such salvation must find happiness!"

"_____"

Sirius: "My my my. Within this city is the husband whom I've been separated with for quite some time. To confirm that love with my husband, with that person, to have it returned. A happily married couple is the emblem of happiness. If my heart is filled to the brim with such joy, all those who cry out in lament will be saved. By mutually enjoying happiness, the hearts of everyone will be saved—"

Sirius spoke her discourse, Priscilla-sama wore a completely disinterested expression, and I who flickered glances at her was thinking of a great number of things.

I could understand that this was the one time, when I could not escape reality by wearing a pretense of a disconnect in understanding. Or rather it could be said, I understood. Thoroughly and completely understood, the fact that this freak Sirius Romanee-Conti was our enemy.

"_____"

I raised my head, gazed across the surrounding waterways engulfed in flame.

On the other side of the white tinged wall of flame, were the figures of people who stood in place without a means to cross the waterway. They had all fallen under a charm of feelings, lost their awareness of self.

I could hear the sound of their corpse-like voices.

Thanks to my peculiar ears, which as a bard, only sound and hearing were my specialties, to me those voices seem to echo without cease.

— So terrifying, so sorrowful, save me, how painful, why, why, don't.

Resentment swept up as if in a vortex, wails drawn out as if for eternity, I could hear those kinds of voices.

Was this to be the result of that so called empathy then. Was this to be the result of that so called becoming one, then. That so called unity, was it something like this.

Liliana: "Have to, free..."

To become one, and to have everything of everything become identical couldn't be the same.

Men, women, adults, children, infants, elderly, humans, beastkin alike, were clearly all different.

To condense all that together, whisk into disarray, and call it 'like this everyone will understand each other and become one—' such words, were certainly no joke.

No joke at all!

Priscilla: "No need for you to be happy. Shut that pettily clever mouth of yours while you can, and die on your lonesome."

Sirius: "Don't. Don't insist on using the loneliness of disconnect to comfort yourself. If you are one who cannot recognize the form of happiness, taking a look at my happiness and giving it a chance isn't so bad, is it? Or perhaps if you understand the joy of connecting with the one in your heart, then you'll come to understand the joy of being a bride, isn't that so."

Priscilla: "Unfortunately, mineself has already walked the aisle seven times. And each was nowhere approaching something like happiness. Apply not your paltry standards to minself, 'tis nauseating."

Sirius: "Seven times... heeeh..."

Priscilla-sama treated Sirius's words as a jest, and brought the Yang Blade down from above. However, Sirius also commenced her own ferocious attack with chains of steel. Sparks ignited and scattered, the severed chain flew away, and the figures of the two were pushed away from the center of the courtyard by the clash.

Cleft in two, the chain. Tinged with white, the inextinguishable flame. In a state of being unable to give voice, the people who wailed in agony.

Within me, slowly it came together. Could it, be accomplished.

If the theorized situation was indeed reality, was correct, in that case, it shouldn't be unachievable.

Sirius: "Even though I've clearly expended so much time on this for only the sake of that reaching the heart of that one person... you had seven chances, and wasted all of them."

Priscilla: "Don't pin the blame for your own lack of allure on myself. In this situation, even that pitiful man who has been imprinted on by you, would refuse to meet you—"

Sirius: "I am intimately connected with that person, and thus are deeply in love—!!"

This was fury that inspired a jolt of terror.

Immediately after, bisecting the courtyard was a snake of flame which burned red! In the instant that Priscilla-sama blocked chains striking from Sirius's arms, the flames followed the chains to race up Sirius's arms, and the surging flame swallowed Priscilla-sama's body.

The snake of flame reared open its maw, consuming Priscilla-sama's slim body headfirst. Without a means to counter that fiery tactic, Priscilla-sama was swallowed, and tossed outside of the courtyard now seeped with flame. Just as she was about to plummet, she suddenly breathtakingly stabilized herself with her sword. And yet, after being submerged in such flames Priscilla-sama's body remained — completely unhurt.

But with a sound, the necklace's jewel once again shattered. The two clasps of the necklace came undone simultaneously, landing on the ground with a resounding noise.

Sirius: "I share a deep love with that person! That just and sincere person just can't help that he hasn't yet finished what he began! To misconstrue that person's sincerity as pure love is just too obscene! Aaaaah! Aaaaaaah! How irritating!"

Priscilla-sama had once again survived at the cost of the necklace, but her demeanor toward facing Sirius had changed completely. The freak opened her mouth as if baring fangs, spitting ugly words as she violently expressed her temper. Her arms had swept up a vortex of red flame.

Sirius: "Why is it that you so inconsiderately shake my heart to this degree! These violent shakes of the heart, another way of naming [Wrath] is passion! The trembles will give way to heat, scorching those who are sinners! Is this what you want for yourself as well, you pretentious lonely wench aaaaaaa!"

Priscilla: "With that mouth, with those eyes, such fabrication..."

The seething [Wrath] was igniting herself, a vortex of flame building overhead the Sirius who was slowly raising her arms. What had struck just now emanated from her arms, a pair of slim twin snakes. And as those arms crossed, the forms merged into one powerful snake.

The arm struck vertically downward, and the enormous snake of flame rushed at Priscilla-sama. Rather than evade it, Priscilla-sama took a stance of meeting the attack.

The Yang Blade flew from down to up, tip lodging in the head of that giant snake.

With a sound that was not one of chain meeting sword, the snake missed its target by a wide arc!

However, Priscilla-sama was sent flying by the impact and could not make a follow-up!

After Sirius had summoned the snake in a fit of agitation, the flow of offense and defense had swerved sharply.

Priscilla-sama had been forced on the defensive, and the metal chain and flame chased her retreating figure.

Why was that? Although it was clear at a glance that Sirius's abilities couldn't be underestimated, but analyzing the fight would not point to Priscilla-sama being at a disadvantage. She had said that the Yang Blade consumed mana quickly, but was it that which was pressing her so?

Or could it be, that perhaps, merely as a speculation.

It wasn't that Priscilla-sama couldn't attack—

Liliana: "Is it me!"

A quick end, not just for me but for everyone in the vicinity as well.

In order to avoid such a result, was this a battle for buying time!?

Wait no hang on how could it be, that the arrogant Priscilla-sama who thought the highest of only herself would do something like that!?

"You are to prepare your song. — Should a shadow fall across the Yang Sword, mineself will no matter what sever that abomination's head. Before that happens, then."

At that time, something had shook in my brain!

Right before the battlefield had truly opened, Priscilla-sama had told me.

Before the Yang Blade met its limit, I was to prepare a song. And she had added that if that time were to approach, Sirius's head would be mercilessly severed and everyone else along with her.

But that was to say, before that time had arrived, to just wait for it— indicated that there was more to it than was initially suspected.

In that case, Priscilla-sama was waiting. Waiting for me to ready a song.

At the very least, to take responsibility for the time before those words.

Liliana: “Guu, guuuu! Mmmm! Mmmmmmm!”

How bothersome! That person, so damn bothersome! If there are feelings just confess to the feelings already! That person, absolutely has feelings for me. No, because I had been told I was liked, it had definitely been said before. Aaah what a pain, screw this, this was terrifying, was there no other way—
!

Liliana: “Priscilla-sama—!”

If the situation was as I suspected, then to be fighting at a bothersome disadvantage, she must have understood what I was thinking right now.

I pointed toward the stone tower that had been ignited by Sirius’s flames.

Priscilla-sama turned her head at the sound of my voice, looked toward where I was pointing—

“—Hoh”

She wore that terrifying expression with terrifying gaze, but with such a terrifying mien it inspired a feeling of reliability, she laughed.

Too wicked, an expression which left it difficult to figure out just who the archbishop was here!

Sirius: “Stop looking away—!!”

Priscilla: “With the likes of you as an opponent, looking away is no distraction. Do not lecture mineself’s actions.”

Priscilla-sama leapt back, while at the same time parrying an approaching chain with her sword. Her body gathering momentum, with speed that seemed fast than one motion would allow, she landed by the burning tower.

Priscilla-sama gazed up at the burning tower as she directed the tip of the Yang Blade at its base,

Priscilla: "Such an unsightly flame. Truly beautiful lights, are dazzling like this."

Differences in aesthetic between the lights of flame and such, were incomprehensible to an outsider like me.

Although incomprehensible, even an outsider's eye could clearly make out, a decidedly different sort of flame now surrounded the control tower!

The white-tinged flames that swayed there were of the same type that surrounded the waterways.

Even though the snakes originating from Sirius's chains also burned crimson and scorched with a bright staggering heat, the flames emitted from the Yang Blade held a sort of sanctity that gave the impression of being untouchable.

Priscilla: "The stage is prepared. —Ensure, that you perform your utmost."

Liliana: "Right right! Understood!"

After smothering the burning control tower with another layer of flame, Priscilla-sama spoke one sentence. I replied with fervent confidence, rushing over to the control tower.

With an air of being set off by anything that happened, Sirius who flickered her gaze toward this scene extended both her hands in our direction!

Sirius: "The hell are you doing to the flame that I lit as an emblem of my love for that person!"

Liliana: "Something like setting an entire building on fire to flirt, I think it's best you don't say such outlandish ridiculous things!"

I said it said it said it! Wah ~hyahya!

Rushing toward my back as I spoke while running, I felt that Sirius freak's chain descending in one smooth motion! Burning chains! A heat wave, heat wave!

In the instant of being attacked, I'd known from before the flame had been ignited that my head could be sent flying, but heedless of what was behind me I ran! And the reason is!

Priscilla: "Whatever that one will come up with, this is a situation where mine self will not hold back until the very end."

Liliana: "Chiiiiiii!"

As if taking the place of my fleeing self, Priscilla-sama landed where the chain would strike. The Yang Blade sliced downward as if licking, deflecting the entire tongue of flame!

Hearing the intermittent sounds of Priscilla-sama and that freak clashing anew, I finally reached my destination of the burning tower of stone.

Liliana: "Haah, haaaah..."

Although the distance covered hadn't been too long, drawing breath grew laborious, and my body felt fatigued! In all honesty, right now nothing would feel better than a drink of ice water before collapsing on a bed. Although this was something not meant for a travelling bard, but after spending so long in greenhouse-like surroundings, anything but a soft bed wouldn't work!

Liliana: "Aah, really... isn't this all Kiritaka-san and everyone else's fault—"

Allowing me to reside in this city, offering me warm hospitality besides. Whether the [White Dragon's Scales] or the citizens of the city, all expressed their love, and the likes of Kiritaka-san with such enthusiasm that even I was taken aback, it was all their fault! The fault of remaining in this city, that my ability to stay on the path of a travelling bard had been dispelled!

Well then, just a bit of extra effort here — recall the ruthless determination of your waist and legs from before!

Liliana: "Hi, iiiiiii!"

Epiphany realized, teeth clenched, I held my steady lu-lyre in my arms, and rushed toward the flaming tower! So hot, so hot, so hot, so damn hot—!

Anticipation of the scorching pain sent a sharp jolt through me.

However, although clearly enduring an overwhelming heat wave, between skin and hair and lu-lyre, none of them had been burnt by the scorching flame. Although the heat of the flame could be clearly felt, nothing had caught fire.

As with the flames over the waterways, there was painful heat but no burning. And thus I recognized this flame as the Yang Blade's fake.

However, it was different. Different indeed.

The Yang Blade wielded by Priscilla-sama had indeed burnt through the metal chains. A sword clearly using the same flames, but burning only select things.

Priscilla-sama's flame, could choose what to burn. Which meant, that it could also choose what not to burn.

Liliana: "Oooh—!"

Well then! The white flame enveloping this control tower, would definitely not burn me!

Even though it was so hot as to be disintegrating, so agonizing as to seem fatal, a pain that made whoever experienced it want to collapse and roll on the ground, it would not burn, it would not injure, it would not be deadly!

Eyeballs melting, tongue withering, hair alight, skin festering, lu-lyre scorched, bones cracking, flesh burnt, consciousness eroding to nothing, was all an illusion—!

Not hot, so hot, so hot, so hot, not hot, not hot, so hot, craving death, not wanting to die, so hot, not hot, hothothot even though it was so hot—!

Sprinting up the stairs of the control tower, first floor, second floor, just how many floors were there!? Where was the roof!? The fire crept outward and extended its reach, looking left and right yielded only the sight of white fire, sohotsohot, how could such agony be, so hot, heat beyond heat, I—.

“——!”

I wanted to wail about the intensity of the heat, wanted to shriek until my throat split right this instant.

Absolutely not. If this agony were given voice to, it would desecrate my throat in one cry. This throat could absolutely not be spent. These fingers as well. Wanting to scratch, want to express the suffering no matter how. But no, absolutely not, if these fingers were to be spent, they could not strum a melody.

Whether eyes, or skin, or hair, if they melted, it couldn't be helped.

But not this throat, not these fingers, and these ears as well, were not allowed, because they were all indispensable for what would come next.

Forcefully ascending the steps, slamming open the incredibly heavy door with a kick, appearing now was the night sky — the wind howling in frenzy, heat continuing to flow from beneath my feet, but there were no more walls, and sprinting to the highest point to glance down.

The wind rose and fell, and below were a red figure and white figure waving dangerous objects, white flames surrounded by a wailing crowd.

Although I was so hot, so hot, I felt as if I would die at any instant.

Right now, the heat had not completely fled, the soles of my feet were still burning, and the white flames swaying in the wind were still slowly intensifying, sorrow suddenly rose in my heart, and tears threatened to flow—.

Liliana: “Eek, eeep, alright, this is a once-in-a-lifetime stage!”

Reaching the place I had dashed for even through heat and agony that inspired a craving for death, from here everything was visible, sound could be heard from everywhere.

Even feeling drained to a deathly point, before I died there was still something left to do, and so.

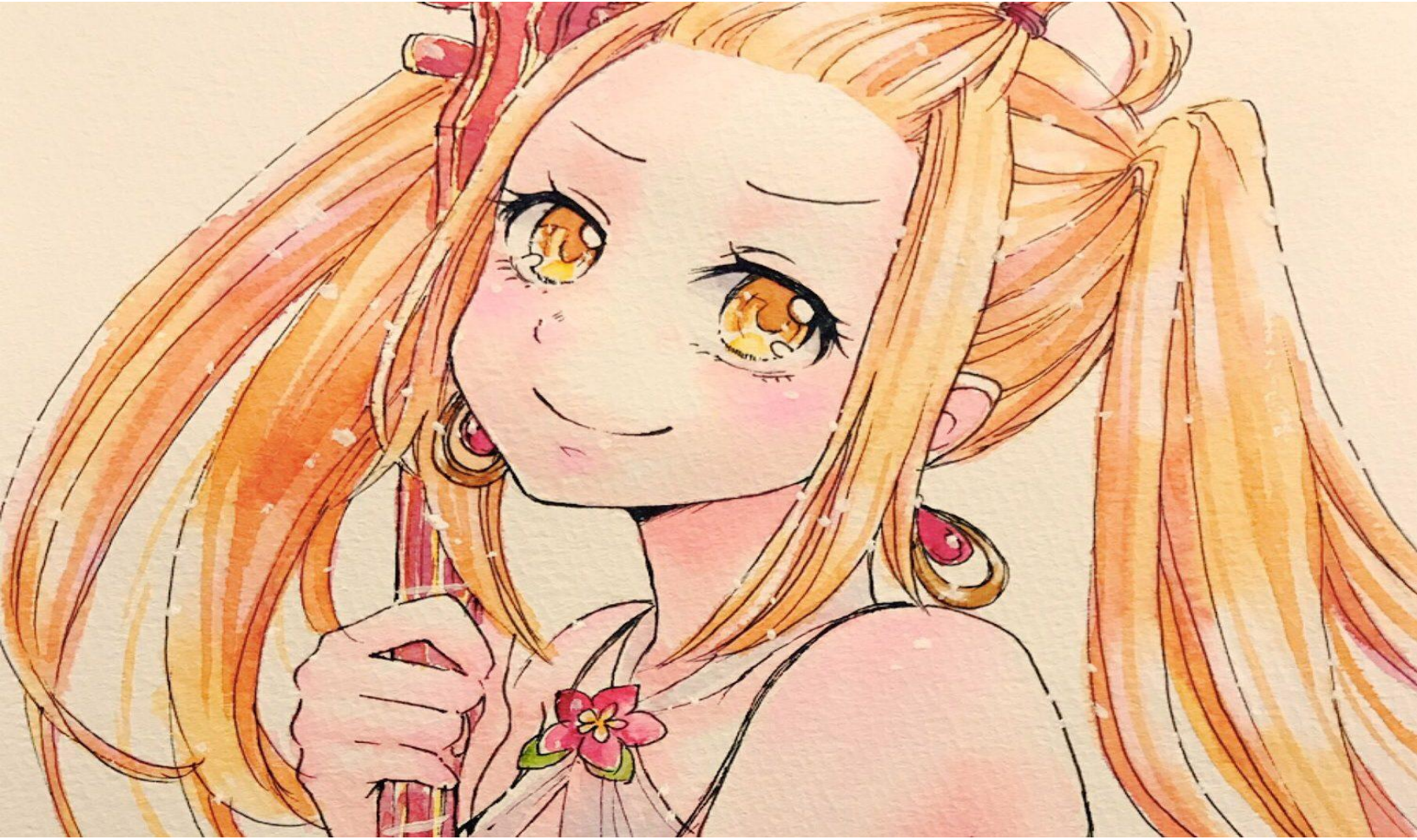
Liliana: “Come come, gather around, everyone far away make sure you listen! Everyone close by make sure you watch the dance! For everyone even farther away I’ll be even louder so just listen!!

Liliana Masquerade, is here to sing dance perform for you! So listen well! —Sky transcending the light of dawn!!”

—Just gather all those scorching feelings, and spit them all out at once!

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Chapter 67 - Liliana Masquerade



It turned out, that Liliana did not remember the words she had wanted to sing.

Liliana's bloodline, from the time of her mother, mother's mother, and even mothers beyond that, was a bloodline which had all along not settled in one place and instead travelled the earth.

The lifeless profession of a bard, would of course inspire irritation. Not remaining in any one place, but along with the winds, along with the hearts' whims, continuously travelling with only two feet.

Amongst the bards, it seemed that many of them would gather together, band together for performances. However, Liliana was not particularly fond of this nature of banding together. Although not disliking of being with others, their interests were different. There was a palpable difference in sense of music.

Just like her line of mothers, Liliana trod alone onto a journey. However, even amongst this group of bards with such variance in personality, this independence could not be denied to have appeared rather early with her. She had been thirteen when she had left her parents' nest.

"Hey, little brat! How could you have such an idea! Wouldn't your parents agreeing with you be enough."

Although not over a trivial matter, but fleeing without question as a result of the argument was she. Starting from her tens, Liliana had always wanted to live independently. Those were the too heedless opinions of a daughter too deeply submerged in chasing dreams, and her parents and especially mother forcibly kept her.

At around the age of ten, the feelings of the young Liliana were already a tad more mature than those of other girls of her age. That was more or less the result of her father's performances, her mother's poems, and the intimate influence of her relatives.

To the young Liliana, the characters appearing in the music her mother sang were dashing. Following how their adventures, struggles, battles, romances, intrigues interacted with her, Liliana was forever unable to bear that her feet could not make their way forward.

— The people that had been come to known through her own songs, could clearly so freely choose their way of living.

To the ten year old Liliana, the heroes that had appeared in the songs were friends. Walking the same path, seeing the same sights, underneath the same sky they raised their heads to see, she too wanted to savor the same taste.

Clinging to such a feeling, in those three years, she could in fact bear it.

Liliana burned up the single-minded passion and single-minded sense of companionship, and from her father stole the skill of performing with a lu-lyre, from her mother stole the sound of that song and several famed songs.

On the eve of turning thirteen, mother had personally given her the traditionally passed down lu-lyre, and after the grand parent-child argument, she sprinted away from her parents' sides, journeying away from home alone.

Hahahaha! Wait and see, old lady! I'll be the ruler of bards!...

Completely evading the pursuit of her parents, the her who had become alone made a vow to the night sky.

Liliana Masquerade's grand adventure, would from now on begin.

Since the age of ten, her parents had deplored Liliana's recklessness.

Complaining that her skills had yet to mature, that she treated not learning melodies as a joke, occasionally refusing her food afterward.

"Heheheh! A little girl like you thinking she can live independently, is ten years too early! An arrogant child like this, leave it to her to take care of the meat of the rabbits who've fallen into the trap!"

"Oh my oh my, you poor thing! How undercooked today's rabbit meat seems, but it's still being eaten? A child who doesn't listen to her parents really is pitiful!"

For better or for worse, parents with a nature of chasing their dreams.

For a pair such as them, how heartrending the departure of their only daughter must be. Surely leading up to the departure, arguments would have been aplenty.

"This lowers the consumption of meals! Three meals a day from now!"

"If Liliana's gone, we'll just have another child!"

Surely, there must have been arguments. Surely it was painful. Indeed.

And a parental argument was the last gift she received from them.

If Liliana's dreams were crushed, to return to her parents, was not what she would do.

In order to cut off a way out for Liliana, they spoke such words.

To weaken at the thought of an escape route, was human nature. As long as there existed a way out, the flames of determination could not burn until the very last.

Especially for a travelling bard, who had no home of their own.

Family and hometown, were typically notions that were merged into one. Reliance on family was a subconsciously overwhelming tendency. The greatest obstacle standing in the way of independence was the act of cutting it off.

Thanks to her youthful recklessness and her parent's shrewd manipulation, she had defeated such an obstacle.

Liliana, sipping muddied water, munching roots of grass, overwhelmed by starvation and weakness, thought of "returning" ... it was as she thought of "this", that she noticed their consideration.

If her resolve had shattered then, perhaps she would have cast down her lu-lyre. She thanked her parents. To part had been the best way.

"Eeeh!?"

Years later, having encountered them in another town, they had yet to settle their differences.

On top of that, held in her parents' arms was an unfamiliar infant.

Liliana had initially assumed it to be her younger sister, but rather than speak to her parents, she merely stuck out her chest, straightened her back and returned the way she had come.

Years later, if she had achievements more worthy of pride, perhaps a reunion with her parents, could even be one of smiles and happy talks.

However, the her of today was sorely lacking. So for not it should be left at that.

Of course, after this meeting today perhaps she would never encounter her parents again. And there was an even higher chance that she would never be able to introduce herself as an elder sister to the little sister whose name she had yet to learn.

However, this was what Lilitiana had chosen, a way of life which relied on song.

In coming days, when Lilitiana had become a world-renowned bard, doubtlessly her parents would irresponsibly comment to everyone who would listen. The first to fall victim would no doubt be her little sister. And thus, to gain another petty ambition was completely natural.

Heheh, what a heart-pounding vision of a future! Which shouldn't have been too much to ask for...

When Lilitiana was seventeen, she found her resolve anew.

Lilitiana who was now twenty-two, had lived independently for nine years – it was a given that it was an atypical life, riddled with tribulation.

Most notably was at the age of thirteen right after she'd begun her journey, when her declaration of intent to be the master of bards, had been trampled upon the following day. If she hadn't been picked up by passerby merchants, and as a maiden hadn't needed to negotiate, surely she would actually have pitifully died alone.

It had been a been a group of merchants, travelling across the lands to make their living.

Lilitiana had been picked up and taken care of, acting as a serving girl. It was a way of travel much safer, much more comfortable, than a true journey alone, as long as there would be meals and a bed.

Reaching cities, Lilitiana would also take up the lu-lyre, singing at the side of the road for coin. Having left her parents, the first instance of having her performance recognized was unforgettable.

The merchants took care of her for around a year, but when their spokesperson settled in a town, acquiring his own store, the group disbanded. Amongst the scattered merchants, several groups invited Liliaana to come along, but solemnly she decline, continuing on alone.

Letting go of a safer and more comfortable journey, renewing herself as a person.

The lukewarm days of the beginning had ended, and Liliaana Masquerade's tale began. This was without question a tale of such vigor.

Afterward, several years of toil were committed. As part of a group of merchants, or a respected house of bards, and forget that she carried a sign with her, the ruthless world had no consideration for a little girl separated from her family of musicians.

It had been then, that she fully understood the consideration had shown before she'd left.

This was when Liliaana had realized, there was another great truth of this world.

It was that the world she lived in and the worlds the characters of her beloved stories lived in, were absolutely different, and she was in no way one of their companions.

A beginning was hardly anything so unique.

As always she munched on roots of grass, consumed red fruits that she could not find in the mountains, and on her lonesome suffered the agony of a stomach ache and fever, and on that night, she realized.

"Aaaah."

The heroes of the thrilling stories she knew shouldn't have been like this.

Because those tales were done and over with. The everyday where they spat fresh blood, spoke their aspirations, cried out their hopes, and swung their blades were of the distant past.

Liliaana tread through their footsteps, wove their tales for others to witness. Only did merely that.

Liliana loved them, but they had never loved Liliana.

Her own thoughts had been completely onesided, and were in fact akin to something which had stumbled into an old dead and lost their way.

— Then, just who was a bard?

“To become the master of bards!”, saying so, Liliana had taken up the mantle of bard for many a year, before finally realizing how useless she was.

“Aaaaaah!”

For three days and three nights, Liliana’s pains, fever, and vomiting continued without cease.

As she lowered her head, Liliana wondered whether this was a cruel dream or reality.

After the fourth day, Liliana awoke recovered, splashed her face in the stream, drank its water.

The self reflected there, wore a different mien than the self of before.

Wind rustling the foliage, refreshing calls of insects and birds flowed across the stream.

And there she had felt the song, for the first time.

Tears seeping out, Liliana couldn’t help but leap into the stream.

The insects, birds, fish were all startled, their music flowing to the water’s surface, where Liliana’s head emerged, laughing heartily. She cried, laughed, cried out.

Liliana descended the mountain, body caked in dried mud and dirtied water, and stood on the streets.

Everyone found themselves disgusted by the young girl clutching an instrument, wearing a dirtied dress. The storeowner’s expression revealed disgust, and passersby on the streets seemed uneasy as well.

Merely standing like that for a few seconds, would perhaps result in being knocked over by some thoughtless passerby.

However, the Liliana standing upon the streets moved with agility. It wasn't that she was thinking she'd be knocked over if she didn't start soon. In this moment, she desired only to sing as soon as she could.

“_____”

As the lu-lyre was plucked, a handful of people noticed.

A dirty muddy girl, the aged and withered lu-lyre in her hands, the hands that were touching the lu-lyre had become breathtaking.

It was a question how many people had recognized it.

If something were truly happening, surely the people who noticed would have left immediately.

Liliana's performance began, and in the instant that those graceful charming hands wove music, the footsteps of everyone on the streets paused, as did their breathing.

In an instant, everyone realized there had been some sort of vital shift, awaiting a tremendous wave to sweep through their hearts.

The source of the sound stood upon the street, a dirtied young girl, every gaze focused upon her.

Liliana felt the weight of gazes upon her, and at the same time understood her elevated self. The stage had been prepared, and she dashed on it in one breath.

As applause for her performance reached its zenith, Liliana's song began.

[Song] flowed from her throat, to the extent of making everyone believe, that the songs they had sung in the past, was of the same substance.

Their own knowledge, thoughts of famous melodies wavered back and forth, piercing.

The pair who had lived for each other, friends who had thought themselves inseparable, with a clear heart watched them rise toward the sky.

— Song was a gift, and to the friends of the past whose tales she sang of, she was nothing at all.

Liliana understood such that her own existence, was one of a bard.

With this foundation of understanding, from hereafter she could continue to sing by herself.

Flaunt, that in this world such exemplary people existed.

With such exemplary people, who she had once thought of as friends, flaunt that they had been amiable.

Certainly there would come a day, when amazing people would be befriended, and to be friends with such amazing people, to proudly do something like this...

— Finishing her song, Liliana shed tears.

The people struck speechless, shed tears just as she did, wiping their noses.

Applause echoing like thunder across the street, Liliana Masquerade became a bard.

Since then, Liliana's acquaintanceship with music had persisted.

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Atop the burning control lower, Liliana recalled the first time she'd sung, the first time she had sung along, the first time she had sung as a bard.

A feeling similar to the one from then danced in her heart.

What she wanted to sing, wanted to express with words, wanted to voice, was too much. Equally so when in the midst of song. To the point that it could be called an obsession.

Choosing to burn to the end, still burning even now without heed of circumstance.

Perhaps Liliana did not feel the scorching heat, but the consuming heat yet tormented her.

Even now, consuming heat agonized her back, body that had scaled the control tower wreathed in flame continually letting out cries of pain. A pain that drove her to her knees, ached until she wanted to cry out immediately.

However, something like wailing, was just too unseemly.

Before her eyes, was an audience who wanted a song. This throat was not for crying.

“_____”

The song that emerged, was not one that had been passed down by her mother or family.

A bard's obligation was an obligation to inherit stories, and perhaps for a bard this was a misstep, but this was the song that Liliana had received, as a gift when she had first come to understand the world.

When the next dawn arrived, the sky would be dyed red.

Chasing off the night, was that morning sky that Liliana loved to see.

The break of day stained red and yellow, bringing a true morning to all.

A sky which surpassed dawn.

No matter what the night held, morning would always dawn.

A blue sky transcending dawn, was the start of a new day.

“_____”

Right now, mayhem gradually permeated the city, and a great number of people had been overtaken by unease and sorrow, leaving them immobile.

In the midst of a night where neither looking forward nor backward was an option, every single one of them was struggling, struggling, was the reality.

But, Liliana wanted to sing, even so.

Because she wanted to sing, she wanted to sing.

She herself would not survive the agony of holding back her song when she wanted to sing.

And thus, right now was the perfect time to use song to convey what she wanted to.

Liliana loosened the trembling throat that had been carefully tightened and continued to sing.

Fingers moving across the lu-lyre as if in dance, in truth, she sang simultaneously as she danced. Atop the peak of the control tower, wanting everyone surrounding to be able to hear.

And yet how deplorable, that her voice had no way of reaching everyone's eardrums.

The problem was not merely one of volume. There was an issue of distance. The hearts of her audience were troubled. No matter how hard Liliana tried, the existence of physical and mental barriers was an undeniable reality.

Liliana believed in the power of song.

However, only devotedly spreading melody, could be considered to become a true song.

Spread every which way, just how many people had been overcome by unease and sorrow?

Perhaps there were hundreds, even thousands. Liliانا had never had the experience of reaching such a wide audience without the aid of the magical device.

Whether a means of diffusing sound, or a means of spreading such sound simultaneously, a normal person would not be able to find it.

Liliana's battle was too hopeless, her aspiration too distant.

The Liliana who had once been ten years old, had been considered by her wicked parents to be too reckless.

And right now, was it just as back then, still repeating the same things?

The power of song was real, so was the her transferring it the fake?

“——!”

At such doubt, her throat faltered helplessly.

At that moment,

“Liliana— lovely songstress. With that singing voice, I want to keep you by side forever.”

A silly man, with silly sophistry, lingered in Liliana's mind.

An odd man. Doubtlessly strange. Perverted might be more accurate.

Upon hearing Liliana's song, those who had been touched by malice yet remained.

Liliana remained distant from it all. Something untrue to song, an attempt at wholeheartedness that could not be lent to others. That was the dedication of a bard.

“I fell in love with your beauty. Please stay by my side!”

And so, he was the first to try to become close to her from his heart.

Awareness that Liliana was a bard, was something that came after his declaration of love to her upon seeing her. When she had first performed in front of him, rather than her song, his eyes raked over her face, chest, feet, honestly rather uncomfortably.

However, that wasn't to say that he didn't find himself touched by Liliana's song. And his feelings toward Liliana weren't covered with a layer of dishonesty.

Showing attraction to her appearing, and understanding of her song, knowing that as a person leaving was impossible.

"The city of Pristella has four large gates. So, within the city are a number of shelters as an emergency measure. This purpose of this magic device is so that citizens will be more aware of their safety on a day to day basis, and in the event of an emergency be prepared."

"Eh... what's what for...?"

"Let's try playing Liliana's song through that radio. Within this city are many people who have yet to understand your song, this is the perfect chance."

Song amplified by the magical device, was for Liliana a shortcut.

A song should indeed be sung before an audience. Liliana had grudgingly refused. But, he only laughed heedlessly.

"I want to monopolize your figure. However, your song absolutely cannot become something restrained. Songstress to everyone else, Liliana to me. Is that something that can't be?"

The weirdo had in fact laughed with such wicked intent. If he wanted to convince her like this, she wanted to snort.

Liliana knew that many love stories of this world had been chronicled.

In those love stories, their hearts swayed, became infatuated with love. He knew her. Knew which words would be charming, which attitudes were exciting...

And thus, Liliana would not be fall lightly for such words.

Perhaps they weren't sweet, but, but they appreciated the voice of the Songstress.

So exaggerated, that she couldn't straighten her chest, and say it suited her.

Because he had always been looking forward for Liliana to become the [Songstress].

Because that person had turned her into the songstress of this city.

“_____”

To communicate, reverberate, tremble, this longing—

No matter how dark the night, so pitch black that seeing forward was impossible.

Even then, morning would still arrive, as always.

More resolute than anyone, believing in it more than anyway to sing for it.

Songstress of the Watergate City of Pristella, Liliana Masquerade.

“_____”

From that sort of feeling, no pain could be gleaned.

Everything of herself, all began from the wrists that strummed the lu-lyre, feet that danced in synchronicity, throat that sang without rest, immersed only in this feeling.

Singing, singing, singing, Liliana had not noticed.

The lament of those whose spirits had been controlled no longer echoed by her ears.

On the opposite side of the flaming waterways, those who had been sighing in lament gazed upward toward the empty sky.

No, not empty. A sound was audible, from the control tower wreathed in flame.

A miniature figure from the peak, continue to cry out from a great distance.

Eyes that could not leave her. Focus directed completely toward the ears, everyone held their breath to listen in rapt attention.

A song that should not have been heard, was heard clearly by everyone.

This was no miracle, nor was it a simultaneous hallucination. Nor was it the archbishop's power, indeed there was no shared emotion at all.

A gift Liliana had been granted by the heavens, the true blooming of the [Divine Protection of Telepathy].

A divine protection that had until now been subconscious, only when it reached this moment could it exert the influence it was supposed to. Between her ability as a singer, and the realization of casting everything aside in this hopeless moment to help, she had become a tremendous force, flowing into the city.

Of course, Liliana was unaware of this.

In addition, there was no one there to inform her of what the situation was.

Liliana only sang with all her heart and soul.

Becoming a bard, putting her all into singing, turning everything over to this instant.

Echoing here was the voice of Pristella's Songstress.

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Priscilla: “—As expected, the arrangement mine self had prepared came to pass.”

Within was a flaming crimson sword, and Priscilla who held that sun laughed out loud.

The song had also reached Priscilla’s ears.

Liliana had taken center stage on the burning control, producing the most brilliant of songs.

Although the flame was under the Yang Blade’s control, the heat emitted by the it was no fake. The heat of the control was at a critical level, and the stone tower would feel scorching. Even at this instant, certainly it was so hot that she would want to leap off.

Even so, from this song that transmitted all of Liliana’s feelings, cries or complaints of pain were practically undetectable.

It wasn’t that the feelings weren’t there. Rather, undiluted pain had attained the purity of song.

What a foolish conclusion. One which only a fool could reach, the height of a fool.

The zenith of a brilliant fool that could yield a result which transcended reason.

Priscilla: “That one’s idiocy is truly fascinating. Foolish is as foolishness. A fool does not deserve a life, but a fool has a unique joy. And even more, she has demonstrated a worth beyond joy. Thus, she deserves mine reward.”

Before allowing Priscilla to finish her soliloquy, from overhead and from the left burning chains pressed close. The snake’s jaw bore a flame, moving directing to target Priscilla’s steps.

Before listening to Priscilla’s narrative, the chain of burning on the head and left was approaching. The iron snake’s chin has a flame, and it is in a straight line toward the Priscilla that stops.

The pinnacle of unsightliness, Priscilla snorted.

Raising the Yang Blade, the crimson blade flashed from a slant.

From above, from the left, simultaneous orbiting of the approaching chains were forcibly severed. The crisp sound seemed to ring twice simultaneously, and the freak growled wickedly at the sparks.

Sirius: “Both you and that girl are so damn annoying! What’s so different about me and her! The methods are different but the core is the same! It just goes to show that it’s reason!”

Sirius shrieked loudly, drawing the burnt off chains close.

Twisting her arms, angrily generating fire, the eyes of the freak whose black cloak swayed violently, pointed directly at Liliana dancing atop the burning control tower.

Liliana’s [Divine Protection of Telepathy] was incredibly powerful, enough that it could affect the freak’s perception.

To the freak who was so perceptive to changes in the emotions of others, the effects of that song radiated without limit.

The citizens had been freed from the [Wrath] that had taken root inside their hearts.

On the other side of the waterways still burning with white flame, within the eyes of the people who stood there were no traces of frenzy. What filled their eyes was not fervor, but the gentle fall of tears.

It was unclear from which emotion the tears stemmed, and the freak was incapable of taking up the formless feeling. Because rather than condensing into one feeling, it kept swaying.

Sirius: “That person, as long as that person is, it can be proven...! Why are you appearing before me to intercept my path! Humans want to pursue, to become one indeed! The world continues on this way! And yet!”

Priscilla: “As is the nature of song, the accompanying feelings vary. Classic songs are charming, and each description of “lovely” differs. Crying out about the noisy feelings, but such a shallow understanding of what is most vital... this is what is referred to as ‘foolish’.”

Sirius: "That's enough already!!"

Sirius widened her eyes at Priscilla's merciless speech, and with a howl, her arms folded. The colliding palms rattled the chains, and each arm violently unraveling the curled chains.

Skin on arms peeling, flesh being scraped, acting as if she were in pain, Sirius spread her arms, forcefully swinging the split chains.

The flame revolves around the orbit of the swinging chains, swelling to where the vortex reached the peak of its arc.

The scorching flame became a round disk, burning in the wake of Sirius's heat.

Priscilla: "Could it be, that the bandages are for such wounds?"

The bandages were for burn wounds. If the reason was as what had just been witnessed, then truly it was mere foolishness.

Faced with this greatest force, this greatest danger, Priscilla's did not waver.

Two snakes of flame, merged into a their powerful flame.

Priscilla gazed upon the vortex of flame with an expression of listlessness.

Sirius: "The trembling of feelings... consuming emotions, this intensity, this [Wrath]!"

Inspiring disgust, feelings of disgust, turned Sirius's flames into waves of heat.

The flame spun as it approached.

It had stopped being a metal chain. In the instant that the flame had blossomed, the role of the implements as chains had come to an end.

The chain that done its job vanished in a flash, and only fire flew at Priscilla. A mass of heat as if enveloping the entire world, practically a cloud fallen from the sky, attacks without pause.

Utterly impossible to dodge, the only defense was to be swallowed thus.

As for the flame itself, there was only one option.

Priscilla: “—Should *mine* decree be the decree of heaven, the light of the Yang Blade will follow as one.”

Faced with the wave of flame pressing close, Priscilla lifted the Yang Blade.

Not as if feeling uncomfortable with the situation, merely raising the blade high.

Sirius: “Disappear—!!”

Priscilla: “——”

In the instant of the collision, Sirius spat venomous hatred at Priscilla.

Priscilla did not regard her fury. The only sound that reached her was the song.

The instant when heat wave should have consumed her body, the Yang Blade changed.

Previously, on a sword where all the jewels shone had with light, the shine suddenly vanished. Only crimson light and crimson blade remain in Priscilla’s grip.

It was thus, that the sword without its light met the flame.

“——”

Without the radiance of the jewels, the sword became one of ordinary steel — and thus was unable to repel the approaching flame. If there had been an onlooker at the moment, perhaps they would have reported thus.

But the result was the precise opposite.

Priscilla: “— Utterly pointless.”

Priscilla, sweeping the Yang Blade to the side, murmured.

She should have been consumed by the flames and vanished.

And yet, her existence had yet to vanish. Not only that, her body bore no traces of the heat wave's aftereffects, beautiful and constituted as always.

Waves of fire renowned for their power, were swept away without trace.

Almost as if the only Yang Blade glinting with reclaimed light knew were the flames had gone.

Priscilla: “Mm—”

Grip tight on the Yang Blade, Priscilla's expression shifted.

Where once there had been a confident smile, now cheeks stiffened as she hastened her steps.

Right in her line of sight was Sirius, sprinting quickly.

The freaks violent sprint pulled her far from Priscilla. Clearly having run without checking the result of the flame.

Meaning that from the very start Sirius's target hadn't been Priscilla.

Sirius: “Stop with that piercing song—! The [Wrath] I share with that person, don't arbitrarily deny it—!”

Eyes bloodied.

Sirius rushed straight toward the control tower where Liliana sang.

The white flame surrounding the control tower, was a flame which would allow Liliana to be free. When Sirius rushed in, she would surely be burnt by the fire.

Something of this degree, even the freak would understand. Then, the target was,

Priscilla: “Reprobate, forcing mineself to—”

Propelled with momentum, Priscilla’s form tore through the courtyard. Although Sirius was fast indeed, Priscilla was superior.

Sirius’s initial advantage gone to waste, Priscilla swung the Yang Blade at the freak. Even if she had wanted to, the freak no longer had a means to defend. Without the chains on her arms, she had no way to meet Priscilla’s sword.

Priscilla: “Stop, commoner—!”

Sirius: “So annoying, just stop already!!”

Priscilla: “——!?”

Before the Yang Sword could slash at Sirius, Priscilla’s body had stilled in midair. Her entire body frozen as if forcibly fixed in place, Priscilla’s throat was caught by a sudden force.

Sirius lifted her legs, and from the hem of her pants, came the sound of the chain that was so familiar in this battle—.

Priscilla: “Tch!”

Rather than the arm, a strike from the chain wrapped around her legs had struck Priscilla and frozen her in her tracks.

An attack after her entire body had been frozen in place, was impossible to defend against.

Accompanying the ferocious attack from the chain several times faster than the one from the arm, Priscilla's dignified face burst from the front. The sound of steel on flesh rang out, and Priscilla's bound orange hair came loose, beautiful hair scattering.

Her face was left unmarred. However, her pride had been wounded.

Although the power of the chain had been reduced, Sirius had pulled further away.

During this time, Sirius had approached the control tower, using movements outside natural boundaries to shift her strength and body weight to the chain, and then released strength from her entire body.

The serpent of flame swept the control tower with a violent momentum, and the foundation of stone tower collapsed with a howl. Fragmenting, collapsing, the stone tower's foundation was consumed by waves of fire, tilting from the impact of the huge flame.

— Liliana was in that stone tower.

In one motion, the stone tower tilted and collapsed.

Priscilla with orange hair scattered across her shoulders, watched the tower collapse with widened eyes.

Sirius's silhouette was visible. But atop the tilting tower, Liliana's silhouette was absent.

And yet,

Liliana's song continued. Even if the ground collapsed, even if she had been caught up in the destruction.

Liliana fulfilled her duties, continuing to offer the peoples' hearts comfort.

“—Which means!”

And so, Priscilla strode toward Sirius without hesitation.

If Liliana's voice were interrupted, sway over the peoples' hearts would return to Sirius.

Making a split second decision, the Yang Blade shone, and Priscilla split the ground with one kick.

Sirius: "Merciless egoist! Don't empathize using such arrogance! You who have no connections with people, are defective, mutual understanding, merging is the natural state of humans!"

Sirius who had destroyed the control tower, was caught in Priscilla's anger.

The chain jumped, rearing head knocked back. Rushing, the moving flames created a burst, reaching explosively for Priscilla's body and bounding her backward. A pause, and then continued steps.

Bathed in the heat, Priscilla's eyes were unwavering.

The same could be said of Sirius's frenzy. The freak could no longer hear any other voice.

It would end here.

Of the two who mixed like fire and water, there could only be one.

"_____"

The tilting control tower made a splitting noise, broken stones scattered, smoke curled and flames scattered, and the courtyard became a flaming hellscape.

Those standing at the waterway where the tower had fallen, shrieked with tears in their eyes, as they fled. But not tears of sorrow.

For something else,

For the sound of song.

Sirius: "Love is as one—"

"No. —Tolerantly accepting love allows for differences. For everyone to the same person, feel the same way, share the same feelings, if what is nauseating and disgusting."

She bent down to sweep aside the chain, leaning to meet the rushing attack.

The distance is shrank, and the sound striking chain rang.

The sound of steel colliding with steel was swallowed by the roar of the collapsing control tower.

Priscilla's voice reached Sirius's ears.

Priscilla: "It's over."

Sirius: "Did you think I wouldn't have known better?"

At the moment when Priscilla waved the Yang Blade, Sirius opened his coat.

Around the freak's waist, were tightly bound chains like her hands and feet, and wrapped around her body by chains was,

A young girl with curled blonde hair.

What Priscilla did not know, was that her name was Tina. Since the beginning of this turmoil, she had been held hostage by Sirius.

Although Subaru had mentioned her during the strategy about [Wrath], this matter had not been remembered by Priscilla.

"Mmm!"

However, without hesitation Priscilla swung the Yang Blade at the hostage before her.

The Yang Blade did not hesitate in momentum, and slanted toward Tina and toward Sirius's body. The sword's blade, renowned for its fearsome heat, soundlessly cut through the protective chains around her body, severed in half.

Sirius: "Oh my oh my?"

Priscilla: "Mind Yang Blade can easily cleave through whatever it so chooses."

The body of the bound girl was freed. The fallen girl lifted her face, which was stained with tears, meeting the touch of the sword that passed through her body, she could not help but collapse from surprise in the moment.

But the result was, upon the body of the young girl, no cruel wound from a blade could be seen.

Instead, Sirius was attacked and retreated.

The freak looked down at her wound, and slowly shook her while looking back to Priscilla.

Sirius: "This agony... you..."

Priscilla: "What cause is there to speak of your pain? Mineself cares nothing about becoming as one. As long as you die alone, you will always always carry your prattle."

Priscilla waved the sword again.

With the startling sound and momentum, Sirius's body convulsed on the cobblestones, spilled fresh blood, was swept toward the waterway, and fell in.

The sound of the water rang, and Priscilla looked at the Yang Blade.

Priscilla: "Is it finally over? It's too troublesome."

After she spoke, the collapsing control tower fell apart completely. Most of it became rubble, and the rooftop where Liliana had been, also felt the collapse, becoming rubble.

From the collapsed control tower — of course, no song echoed.

Looking at the pile of rubble, a youthful voice called toward the squinting Priscilla.

Tina. Her expression was still one of disbelief, and Priscilla lowered her head, only to see Tina's eyes tremble, as tears began to drip down.

Priscilla released a sigh.

The Yang Blade had already disappeared.

As had white flame that lit the waterways, and many people were approaching. A few headed toward the collapsed rubble, searching for the buried songstress, Liliana.

Priscilla: "On a night such as this, are only a group of noisy commoners. What should be a songstress's debut, has nothing but the vulgarity of commoners. How tiresome."

At a glance was the same listlessness as always, but some emotion peeked through that listlessness.

Priscilla gazed at the sobbing Tina, then simultaneously at the waterway.

Priscilla: "But, not bad. Have praises."

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Slowly flowing along with the water.

A sore body, brimming with vitality, how to put it, a body covered in wounds? How can I say it, full of trauma? In other words, it was a feeling of being unable to even move.

"—Oh, —ah."

Completely out of energy to make any sound, even fingertips were unable to budge.

Luckily, the outfit of a bard exposed much, with very little fabric, so even falling into a wouldn't spell weightiness from absorbing water, increasing odds of survival.

But for the me of right now who had no energy to swim, just floating along was barely managed.

Well, just floating along like this, sooner or later would mean growing cold, wouldn't that be quite troublesome!?

A voice from within cried out loudly.

If I were to fall asleep like this. I'd die.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no.

“—Ah, —eh.”

Burning tower, a flame.

Entire body in a state of being baked, at first falling into the waterway had been pleasantly cool, but now it was growing cold... eh, this is bad news.

Speaking of which, the attitude of not escaping, but staying in the collapsing tower to sing until it fell in the water was probably more disastrous...

Because it felt nice. To the point of thinking I'd lived for that moment.

In fact, she had hoped for such a smooth development.

It seemed, that it was over, so as long as Priscilla-sama hadn't been killed, everything would probably go smoothly. That was nice.

Right, well then.

To be a bard.

To be a bard, wishes that had to be attained, in a sense it could be said, that something that should have been realized had been.

Perhaps the goal of leaving classical songs in history had not been met, but, if everyone who had been there had been saved, to have been part of helping them, would be a nice thing to be brought up as a family dinner... to have left a favorable imprint in peoples' hearts, in this world, was something small that I had been looking forward to.

By the way, from just now a strange cry has been sounding, probably a signal that I'm still living in this world.

There's a feeling that absolutely everything is about to feel exhausting...

A voice, that's the proof of life. Ah, faced with death, how am I managing to be so nonchalant? Although, it feels like it's about time for it to end.

Although very much had, overall it was a happy life.

Well, thank you for so far — thank you so much!

"Ow! Ow! My head hurts!"

"Aah! What was that just now? Liliana?"

Head feeling as if violently struck, as if having collided with a boat floating on the waterway or something. Yeah, that's probably what it was.

And coming from that boat, was the familiar voice of a man.

"Liliana! So glad to see you again! But why are you in the waterway? No, we'll pull back first. Wait for me!"

Even though it was horribly painful, I was so shocked I forgot to cry out.

Ack, speaking of which, it seems Kiritaka-san picked me up.

“Alright, almost... alright, caught!”

Kiritaka-san stretched his hands to the water, pulling my floating form up.

In that moment, ah, his hand touched my chest!

But, eh, there's no strength to be mad with right now. So it's fine.

Being pulled onto the boat, I still couldn't move.

Kiritaka: “Your body's become so cold. Wait for me, Liliana. I'll use a fire stone. And I'll wipe you off. The you who I cherish can't be soaked.”

With a towel, he wiped my hair and face.

His movements were unexpectedly gentle, almost gentlemanly.

Suddenly a sense of relief rushed up.

I released a breath, suddenly sighing.

Liliana: “Kiritaka... what have you been up to?”

Kiritaka: “Me... you mean me? Well, there was a lot, right, in order to retake the city!”

Pushing back that fringe he was proud of, perhaps his teeth were shining.

Since I didn't have the strength to open my eyes, I couldn't see it, but it seemed to surface to my mind's eye.

I couldn't help but laugh, which seemed to shock Kiritaka.

I want to hear all sorts of Kiritaka-san's problems, and I have a few things I want to say to you. Right now I'm really sleepy, but I want to tell you.

Liliana: "I'm really sleepy, from now on, I'm going to sleep, I..."

Kiritaka: "Ah, ah, alright. I'll take you somewhere safe, don't worry."

Liliana: "The sleeping me, if you don't do anything mean... then from now on, we'll talk afterward..."

Kiritaka: "Ueee!?"

No, then maybe I'll say it first.

But opening eyes, would maybe... no, definitely some embarrassing words would be exchanged, that you be troublesome.

— To be your [Songstress] is wonderful, preparing to say that much is fine.

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Chapter 68 - Name Eating Gourmet



——The ruthless skirmish, which had broken out in the Watergate City of Priestella against the Witch Cult was, at last, approaching its finale.

In the east of the city, stood a single church covered in ice, where stabbing pillars of ice, tall enough to make one raise his eyes, had been erected.

In the north of the city, the waterways flared up at once, and the incandescent stone monument roared up and crumbled down.

In the west of the city, a part of the waterway got destroyed, and the water, flowing into the underground, resulted in flooding.

In the core of the city, the nucleus of the city's faculty, the city hall lost its foundation, and subsequently lost its shape.

The opening up of hostilities caused severe damage in various areas, and etched the menace of the existence known as the Witch Cult in the city. However, there were those who resisted and repelled away the malice, fighting a defensive battle with confined war potential, and tried to fulfill their purpose. And, amidst the fight for the watergate city, if there was a battlefield to be named where things were not proceeding favourably, which one was it? That could perhaps, be said for this battlefield.

—Yes. Breaking out unanticipated and unforeseen, was the face-off and battle with the Witch Cult Sin Archbishop representing 『Gluttony』, Ley Batenkaitos.

Ley: "Haha~! That, won'tdown'tdown'tdown'tdown'tdown'tdown'tdowo~n'tdo~! What went wrong with you, what do you want to do, what are you going to do, what happened to you!?"

This place was commonly known as the 『Waterway Street』, surrounded by slender and convoluted waterways.

In the open plaza of the Waterway Street, was a single petite phantom laughing loudly and jumping about quickly and keenly.

Using his short limbs and waving about his long, dark brown hair was a young boy.

The boy, in his mid-teens, had put on only pieces of rags on his body, such that it would not be strange to confuse him with a vagrant child at sight.

However, it could not be said that it was not difficult to dismiss his outward appearance as just a trait of his, but instead, that impression carried onto his true self as well.

On top of that, the very existence of the loudly laughing boy was heterogeneous, distorted, and abominable.

At a single glance, the sense oppressive pressure his entire body exerting could be understood. It was the fatal insanity calling upon parts of instinct which are chipped off and neglected in normal daily life by humans.

By just that, everyone carefully observed the abnormality of his existence.

He was a blasphemer who trampled upon the human realm, human wishes, and the human society. He was a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, the great evil who kicked the human heart and humanity itself.

???: “The opponent is just one child! Surround him and don’t let him escape! Bring him down!”

???: “Yeah, it’s just lone brat! Catch him and tear him apa~rt!”

The commanding loud voice overlapped with the infuriating laughter of the youth.

While glaring at the men approaching him, Ley Batenkaitos of 『Gluttony』 stepped ahead and shortened the distance rather lightheartedly, instead of stepping down.

Ley: “——~tsu.”

Putting a halt to their words, the white robed men leapt upon Batenkaitos.

Each one of the white robed men were mercenaries of the organisation 『White Dragon’s Scales』 which had been left by Kiritaka. Holding short swords in their hands, they struck 『Gluttony』 with their blades from all directions.

Against the synchronous offensive, which had no disorder in its cooperation, Batenkaitos,

Ley: “There are some frayed spots, that won’t do.”

Sliding into the gap of the “perfectly ordered” attack, he evaded four of the swords with minimal movement.

Positioning his body away and dodging the blades, he slashed one blade down using the dagger tied up to his right arm, and kicking one person’s torso, he broke through the enclosure. In front of him, was standing someone with a huge figure, with his arms crossed.

???: “O-O~h! Such desperation, huh, yo~u!”

He was Felt’s attendant, Gaston.

Having robbed away one of the Sin Archbishop's daggers using his secret technique, he now, with his physique, dashed towards Batenkaitos and tried to slam into him.

Seeing him, Batenkaitos rounded his eyes, and smiled shortly afterwards. It was a smile befitting his age, however, the sharp canines in his mouth induced uneasiness and anxiety.

Ley: "It seems you're doing well, uncle. Not so bad!"

Gaston: "I've still not reached the age to be called an uncle..... bo~y!?"

Batenkaitos jumped, and his right leg thrust into the side of Gaston's face, who had come plunging onto him.

Receiving the blow on his cheeks, Gaston flinched, and gave a hateful look to Batenkaitos.

Just like the blow of the dagger, this attack did not pierce through Gaston either. Though the principle was ambiguous, Gaston's body had been completely killing off the impacts of the attacks.

At the same pace, Gaston stretched his arms, grabbing the continuously moving 『Gluttony』 ——,

Ley: "Palm of the Fist King——"

Keeping his legs raised, Batenkaitos muttered something. His palm came in contact with Gaston's torso. Compared to a kick, it had no might or velocity, it was a mere action of touching.

However, the moment he lightly pushed in his arm, his body curled and broke down.

Gaston: "Ugh, ghu~e!?"

Kneeling down, Gaston vomited out gastrointestinal fluids.

Walking by the side of the body who had broken down in front of him, Batenkaitos, who had broken through the enclosure, turned back and tilted his neck.

That's all you've got? is what his gesture suggested, and the 『White Dragon's Scales』 could not hide their severe expression seeing their pride get damaged.

White Dragon's Scales: "You monster.....!"

The word that had leaked out of someone's mouth, was the clear proof of Batenkaitos's ability.

The agonizing voice may have had dim jealousy mixed into it, or it was simply misheard.

???: ".....We have much lower chances of being able to strike a decisive blow, than what I had earlier conjectured."

Observing the battlefield, which could not be called a competition even when painted under favourable light, Otto licked his dry lips and desperately rotated his head.

In the face-off with 『Gluttony』, their war potential, which was directly conflicting with the enemy, was in no way dependable—— of course, it was true that all of them were risking their lives, but it was also a fact that it was still lacking.

Otto: "I do not trust my luck enough to be expecting such good fortune to shower upon me."

The life of Otto Suwen, went hand in hand with hardship and unfairness. Otto believed that nothing known as good fortune existed, and the result could be derived only through one's own hard work, preparation and actions.

For him, good fortune would be having a nuisance Divine Protection and being born into an understanding home, and having his life saved by Subaru, who had killed a Sin Archbishop.

As he believed he already ran out of it, he did not get unnecessarily negative regarding his bad luck.

???: "That Water Dragon brought by nii-chan can't be used anymore, right?"

Standing beside Otto, who was sunk in his own thoughts, called out Felt who was also watching the same situation.

What her crimson eyes were glaring at, was at the other side of the sword fighting 『Gluttony』 and the others—— lying abandoned on the stone pavement, with its long neck twitching, was the form of a dying Water Dragon.

The pitiable Water Dragons, who had been summoned by Otto but thrashed away by Batenkaitos, unfortunately, were unlikely to return to the front lines.

Otto: "Sadly, I don't think they can be pushed any further. These were all of the water dragons I had

spoken to before coming here..... I could speak to other water dragons and have them do the same thing but, would you like to use them and escape?”

Felt: “That joke hurt. Just that delusional diva escaping is fine, and our trump card isn’t just one, it’s in two parts. The second one is, well, I’m preparing it.”

Saying that, Felt glanced at the long and slender package her petite body had grasped.

Wrapped in a white cloth, her 『Trump Card』 seemed to be the magic weapon her attendant had brought. She had stated that even Reinhardt could not evade it, but a burdensome mechanism was required for its usage, and until that was fulfilled, it could not be put to use.

Felt: “On top of that, that delusional diva aside, nii-chan or I can’t escape even if tried to. Because it seems that bastard is targeting us.”

Otto: “If I may be honest, that’s the thing I want to be excused from the most.”

Otto dejectedly lowered his shoulders, at the words of Felt, who inhaled with her nose.

But, he was unable to deny her words, because he was able to sense the strength of the warm looks being given to them, even amidst the fierce battling.

Batenkaitos leaked out warm sighs, with moist eyes and blushing cheeks, and frequently turned towards Otto.

Though it was a gaze with the colour suggesting a desire to harvest, but the true meaning behind it was only the lurking appetite of a hungry ferocious beast.

As per the taste of the beast of prey, drops of blood had realized into top-class flesh, was all there was to it. Though it was not honouring in the least, three people here had realized in the aesthetic-appreciating eyes of Batenkaitos.

Otto and Felt, along with a man with an unkempt beard, who was leading the 『White Dragon’s Scales』. Giving orders to his men, he repeatedly clashed with Batenkaitos and quickly returned back to his position here.

The man, with a serious face, jumped out of battle and gave thought to the fight’s circumstance, all

while taking swift steps around,

White Dragon's Scales: "It's Dynas. It's thanks to him our young master's escape was successful."

Otto: "Being successful in that is Felt-sama's group's achievement. On top of that, having Kiritaka-san escape was also to aid us for our victory. With this....."

If Kiritaka, who had escaped from this place, was to move according to Otto's instructions, a different possibility would rise. Unfortunately, though it was something more like a prayer and had no proof, but in any case, it should not go unfavourably.

Having more ways to win, to reach victory, can never be something negative. Once any of those ways are put to use, what is left is to simply wait for how it turns out.

"———"

Seeing Otto, quiet and shaking his head, the man—— Dynas, made an astonished expression, but then changed it. It was the colour of being convinced.

Dynas: "I see, it seems like it's just as how I had heard. As expected of the internal affairs official of Emilia-sama's place, who had sent one of the Witch Cult's higher-ups to its death. It seems I can expect you to have your own dish for this Sin Archbishop to taste as well."

Otto: "Thank you for such an inflated evaluation. Um, I'm sorry, by the way everyone, do you happen to know what kind of work the internal affairs official is supposed to do? I believe it is somewhat different from what I am doing.....?"

Dynas: "Such politeness too, huh. Also, our internal affairs officials are going around visiting shelters and taking care of the victims. Isn't that kind of work internal affairs officials are supposed to do?"

The damage he had done to the image of internal affairs officials was immense.

In the past one year, he had decided to give up on the post of internal affairs official, but he never came to terms with the changes that will result due to that.

Whose fault was it. Was it perhaps because such situations, like natural disasters, kept repeating? It was Subaru's fault. Once everything was back to normal, he would do it right away. That's what he had decided.

Otto: "Well then——"

Let's put things of post battle for later, and focus on the current situation.

Ahead of Otto's sight, Batenkaitos repeatedly intermingled with the 『White Dragon's Scales』 and Gaston, and making clear his extraordinary combat strength, he swept his feet. However, what was utmost perplexing was him not even trying to swing his right arm's dagger.

Ley: "Even though such nice adults are all ganging up, you ca~n't even catch a single brat!? That won't do, that wouldn't do, will that do, can that do, that could never do!"

Unraveling his fangs, Batenkaitos dodged the men with just the handling of his feet. His free paced movements, with strikingly swaying movements of the upper body, and the swords eventually cut through the sky.

The movements of his upper and lower body were totally different, as if two separate systems entirely. As that eccentricity reflected in Otto's eyes, Dynas unintentionally gulped down his threat.

Otto: "Dynas-san?"

Dynas: "Ah, no..... sorry. His movements are just a bit..... O~h!?"

Felt: "Don't you get scared with such a huge figure!"

With his mouth shut, Dynas tried to deny the thoughts that were coming up in his mind. Standing behind him, Felt gave a kick to his back.

Dynas turned back, and Felt, who puffed up and reddened her cheeks, raised up her eyes at him.

Felt: "Once you put your hands in pocket, all that's left to do is to choose what to take and what to

leave. If you'll be chased after either way, then it's better to just use whatever you got. You get it?"

Dynas: "Why are you using the point of view of a thief?"

Otto tilted his head at Felt's advice, while Dynas, who was right next to him, shook his head. He initiated his words by saying "I guess so", and looked back at Felt,

Dynas: "It's just how miss said. You just have to say whatever comes up in your mind, and find a lead out of it. For the moment, what I feel is just that all this is just odd but....."

Miss, which is how Dynas referred to Felt as, it seemed as if he had not noticed her being a Royal Candidate. But, though he judged the mistake here, Otto decided not to mention it. Subsequently, he carefully listened to Dynas' words.

Dynas: "That Sin Archbishop..... he may just look like a brat, but his fighting is good, his movements are good, he has too much expertise, frankly. Leaving it to just our physical abilities..... would, again, still not be the correct answer."

Felt: "——? Isn't that like being born with good fighting skills? Like how Reinhardt was?"

Otto: "I would like to simply give up if he is comparable to Reinhardt-san."

Felt's knight, the kingdom's strongest sword, Reinhardt.

Currently, he had accompanied Subaru and was supposed to have had been clashing against 『Greed』, but his power was something Otto, who was only on the level of being capable of self-defence, had only felt upon his skin.

Just being beside him could make one feel a sense of absolute safety, and amazement at the same time. Kingdom's strongest was no understatement. In fact, it would not be wrong to call him the world's strongest.

On the other hand, a strong sense of revulsion and an unnerving feeling boiled up by simply coming in

contact with Batenkaitos. It was unlike from what could be sensed by Reinhardt.

Of course, his unnatural fighting strength was unquestionably undeniable.

Dynas : “It’s not like that either. I’ve lived enough, and faced enough battles to say..... that brat’s fighting technique can’t be explained by just talent. His movements are that of someone who’s stacked them up for years and years.”

At Dynas’ words, Otto and Felt glanced at Batenkaitos once again.

At just that moment, Batenkaitos had received a short sword’s attack with his arm. Gripping the wrist of the one holding the sword, Batenkaitos gyrated his body, and turning him upside down, he threw his body to the ground.

Furthermore, as the men commenced their pursuit, 『Gluttony’s』 feet glided on the cobblestone drawing a circle, and freely using his limbs, he destroyed their balance and made them fall.

Unquestionably, that fluent and elegant movement had the power to draw a line between being refreshing and the violent ambience Batenkaitos wore. His undeniable art of having a system of a variety of martial arts, had been cultivated into himself.

The young boy, who looked fourteen, had perfected such techniques which would take years and years to master——?

Dynas: “I suppose, someone called a martial arts genius may be able to do this but..... I don’t want to think that such a brat was blessed with that talent.”

Batenkaitos’ mastery was such that Dynas had to say that much. At that moment, Otto realised what the jealousy in the leaked words of one of the white robed men, who were fighting 『Gluttony』 , meant. They, who were fighting the battle, had realised this truth before Otto and the rest. That is why, they were——.

Otto: “Dagger handling, unarmed fighting skills, perfect martial arts techniques.....?”

Saying that, Otto resumed to doubt the reason behind it once again. “Is that even possible?” was the only thought that came up in his mind.

“———”

He had heard of people being sent to colosseum at a very young age, and the ones who become swordsmen are taught and trained fighting techniques in the southern empire of Vollachia. If Batenkaitos was to be in such an environment, it may not have had been impossible for him to acquire such skills at this age, but those skills in fighting techniques would again, be different.

The only way for him to learn and cultivate those would be to train under an equally and appropriately apt trainer.

Otherwise——,

Otto: “To steal it away……. No, to eat it like food?”

Otto had already heard Subaru mention that 『Gluttony』 was an existence who ate the 『Name』 and 『Memories』 of its opponents. The truth is, Otto had the knowledge of the form of two young girls who had been eaten, and had gone into a state of not being present in anyone’s memories. Hard to believe, but he surely did not eat something which was visible to the eyes. However, till now, what happens to that which gets eaten, was a thought that did not dawn upon him.

Possibly, 『Gluttony』 had been storing the eaten memories of his opponents and using them.

The techniques of a martial artist who had trained for over ten years, or the fighting skills of a warrior well acquainted with the battlefield, or even emulating the attack of a young girl, who had been by Subaru’s side and supporting him——.

Otto: “He’s using magic!!”

Felt: “Gaston!”

Ley: “El Huma.”

As the shocking attack commenced, Otto’s shout and Batenkaitos’ chant echoed at the same time. A sound resonated in the area as the air crystallized, and the icicles subsequently produced, swiftly moving, aimed for the startled 『White Dragon’s Scales』.

However, against the rain of ice, Gaston stood firm, with his arms spread. The giant, with his normal defense, smashed all of the ice that came in contact with him with his body. Against the destruction, the 『White Dragon's Scales』 dove behind his back, in order to reduce the impairment being inflicted upon them. However, they were still unable to prevent the damage.

Ley: "Onii-san's judgement was good. It seems it couldn't become any more of a surprise attack than what we had thought."

Watching the torment, Batenkaitos, who was behind the magic, raised the edge of his mouth. Gaston, who had acted as a firm wall, sighed out a hoarse exhale, and the six of the 『White Dragon's Scales』 behind his back lay injured. With one bleeding heavily, and two crouching, who had been wounded on their legs. The other three could not be described as uninjured either. Their war potential had been halved, and on top of that——,

Ley: "You saying this means, could it be that our trick became clear?"

Otto: ".....Well, I wonder."

Ley: "Onii-san, we won't be fooled. Before suffering in pain, can't you stop acting like a merchant."

Responding to Otto, and threatening to make him suffer, Batenkaitos' form disappeared the next instant.

No, he dashed with his swift natural movements, fast enough to make one think he had disappeared.

His petite frame glided by Gaston, onto the side of the immobile 『White Dragon's Scales』 .

In the blink of an eye, the mobile three flew away from the spot, but the wounded three were unable to flee.

Ley: "Asta. Lookfelt. Hicks."

Leaking out a whisper, Batenkaitos softly caressed the shoulders of the three.

In front of everyone observing with widened eyes, wondering what he was doing, the bodies of three jumped, once they had been touched by Batenkaitos. And, Batenkaitos turned back, and raised his left

hand,

Ley: "Lick."

And, he licked his empty left palm. At his action, Otto was immediately swallowed by discomfort. What had happened, something had unquestionably happened. However, he was unaware of what had happened, and that was not all he was unaware of.

Otto: "The ones who are lying at his feet..... Who are they?"

What Otto's fingers were pointing at, were the feet of Batenkaitos, who had his lengthy tongue stretched out.

At the feet of the malice which had taken the form of the young boy, lay the figures of three people. Though they were lying there, their identities were unknown. Possibly, based on their clothing, they could be members of the 『White Dragon's Scales』, but when did they appear, and when did they get defeated?

Ley: "Sad, how sad, so sad, quite sad, pretty sad, because it is sad. Even if our reunion turns only unilateral, we can't help but want satisfaction!"

Otto: "Dynas-san! Those three are?"

Dynas: "I don't know! I haven't even seen them before! But——!"

Even if it was told that the ones wearing the same clothes were unknown allies, it was still not convincing. Even so, neither did Dynas' voice have any deceit, nor did it have any composure. Charging ahead as if flying, he raised the short swords in both of his hands and slashed into Batenkaitos.

Ley: "Stop it, Dynas. It's an old relationship. Hometown's purification is one step ahead, so crossing

swords with comrades like this is foolish.”

Dynas: “——!? You, from where did you, about that——!”

Carelessly trampling upon Dynas’ circumstances, Batenkaitos raised the edge of his right dagger.

Lightening the blow of the two short swords with his dagger, 『Gluttony』 struck Dynas’ chest with his knees, and at the same pace, he leapt backwards due to the resultant force.

Dynas coughed as he gripped to his chest, but managed to retrieve the collapsed three strangers.

Seeing Dynas in that shape, Batenkaitos let out a sigh.

Ley: “Don’t stubbornly stick to the vessels. What is important is the heart and the inside, no? What lets a person be like that person isn’t the outside, but the inside. We know about your hard work, Dynas. It wasn’t your fault you couldn’t protect Milian and Meili. Your luck was bad.”

Dynas: “Shutupshutupshutupshutu~p! What do you! Know about me! Stop saying things per your own wishes! You rotten demo~n!”

Raising an enraged voice, and forgetting the damage’s pain, Dynas charged at the enemy again. He angled his two short swords and aimed for Batenkaitos’ face, but making a face as if he was acquainted with the attack, Batenkaitos dodged it with ease. At the same pace, Batenkaitos stretched his hand for Dynas’ back.

Ley: “Woh?”

Gaston: “How long will you go ignoring us”

Felt: “Is what we’re saying, you idiot!”

Gaston aimed directly for Batenkaitos’ slim waist from behind. Batenkaitos’ elbow thrashed into his nose, but Gaston did not fall back because of the hit’s impact.

Furthermore, while Gaston stalled Batenkaitos, Felt jumped in. She crashed her long and slim package which she had gripped in her hands into the susceptible back of his head.

Ley: “Idiot huh, how hurtful. Perhaps we, actually know much more than you do, you know?”

Felt: “Argh!”

But, Batenkaitos bent forward at Felt’s attack, and then subsequently received it with his right arm’s dagger by raising it. The vigorous strike gave rise to a crushing sound, however, its aim mostly missed, and Felt’s stance came to be unguarded.

Seeing Felt and Dynas could leave together, his hands could also reach Gaston—— so Batenkaitos’ devilish hand, at the same pace, touched the three,

Otto: “I will not let you, though!”

Just when he was about to reach, the cast red hot magic stone reached Batenkaitos’ feet. The moment he saw that, Batenkaitos’ movement stopped, and Felt and Dynas withdrew with urgency.

Felt: “Don’t let go, Gaston!”

Ley: “Don’t forget this, you demon girl.....!”

Gaston, standing firm, was unable to escape from Batenkaitos and was caught up in the magic stone’s range. As the magic stone’s glowing intensified, and the next instant, it gave rise to an explosion powerful enough to tear off the stone pavement.

Red and white light illuminated, and Felt rolled away from the explosion to the other side. Otto somehow grabbed her, and then glanced at the explosion’s span.

These magic stones are what Otto constantly carried “just in case”. Ever since the fight with Garfiel in the 『Sanctuary』, he determined it would be better do so for his own safety.

It may be a means painful on his wallet, but its strength was nothing to laugh at.

Otto: “Is your companion alright!?”

Felt: “Hah, don’t underestimate my giant. He’s my armour. He won’t be hurt by a meagre and soft

attack. But.....”

Just when she said that much, a giant figure emerged out of the smoke. It was Gaston. With his body having taken a sooty colour, he smacked his body making a desperate face.

Gaston: “Gha~a~a~! Hot! Hot! Hot hot! I’ll die!”

Otto: “Even if you may be able to take explosions, I guess you can’t stop your body from warming or cooling.”

Felt sighed, seeing the form of her attendant agonizing in high fever. Though he had bathed in the might of the fire magic stone from close proximity, Gaston’s life did not appear to be in a serious condition.

Confirming that much, Otto turned his eyes back towards to smoke. The black fumes were rising at a reasonably good scale, so there was no way Batenkaitos, who was at its heart, had managed to defend himself. On the other side of the black smoke, was Dynas, knelt down, but he seemed to be safe.

And,

Ley: “Bennett. Calcifs. August.”

Otto: “—!?”

A whisper was heard, and all eyes turned away from the hypocentre.

There were visible the forms of three collapsed white clothes, and Batenkaitos in perfectly good health. The youth, once again, raised his left hand’s palm saying “lick”, and inched it closer to his mouth and licked it.

What followed was beyond understanding. Once again, three more unidentified white robed people appeared.

The way he had escaped from the hypocentre, and the unanticipated appearance of three more victims, all of it was beyond comprehension.

Felt: “Shit! What’s with them! From where…… no, when……?”

Standing beside Otto, Felt violently scratched her beautiful blonde hair. She also, once again, was beginning to lose understanding what was the meaning of what she was seeing.

What must be considered urgent, even that was something Felt, right now, did not know. However, Otto understood. This, mysterious state.

Otto: “This is, what it means when the 『Name』 is eaten——!”

Disappearing from everyone’s memory, and bode only within Subaru and no one else, was a young girl named 『Rem』. That very same phenomenon, was transpiring in front of his eyes right now. Possibly, the collapsed men, who are supposedly members of 『White Dragon’s Scales』, had gotten their names eaten by Batenkaitos. The result of that, was the disappearance of the memories of them being 『Present』 from the minds of Otto and the others.

That was why, it appeared as if they had appeared suddenly, and they did not know who they were either.

“———”

Fright rose within him. Once again, he comprehended the viciousness of the monster in front of his eyes.

If he straddled into the hands of 『Gluttony』 Ley Batenkaitos, in the worse case scenario, if Otto and the others were to face complete annihilation here, all traces of this battle, along with the existing evidences, will all disappear.

Of course, all memories of the resistance put up by them, and the fact that they were here itself as well.

The possibility of oneself disappearing, and the disappearance of all people who would look back upon oneself—— in other words, isn’t it the greatest fear in this world, far greater than any other fears.

Otto turned pallid. Even though they had not reached the same conclusion, Felt and Dynas’ face

complexions were equally bad. He realised how ignorant they had been, and how recklessly they were acting.

It made him believe, that the real choice here was to escape caring for themselves or not——.

Felt: “Damn it, he pisses me off. Should we try the same way, one more time?”

“————”

Otto sighed weakly, while Felt leaked out those words. Without thinking, Otto turned his eyes towards her face.

Felt’s complexion was that of utter stupefaction, in front of the aberrant situation. However, she was not lamenting. As if continuing to strengthen her heart, until she is completely driven into a corner.

Feeling moisture upon his entire body, Otto slapped his cheek.

Just what, was he doing by becoming such a weakling. Even if he went bankrupt, he wouldn’t name it as defeat until he is kicked out of the job. This was the crucial moment, when his future would be determined. There is still hope.

Seeing the form of two, Dynas and Gaston also stood up, making expressions of readiness and determination. And seeing the four stand up with the fighting spirit of steel, Batenkaitos made a satisfied expression,

Ley: “How nice, so nice, very nice, possibly it is nice, isn’t it nice, perhaps it is nice, because it is probably nice! Gluttonous drinking ~tsu! Gluttony ~tsu! You all are worthy of our dinner table! Even if it’s only among the starters, we’ll elevate you to first-class, Gaston. Moreover, we’ll perfectly savour Felt and Dynas.”

Clasping his hands, Batenkaitos awarded the three with an unpleasant evaluation. Afterwards, Batenkaitos, with the same look in his eyes, glared towards Otto. Inclining his neck, the blasphemer commenced to give his comments on Otto with the same flow, and contrary to expectations, he made a dissatisfied expression.

Ley: “Seems intelligent, bad at giving up, seemingly mellow onii-san..... but even then, huh.”

Otto: “What are you..... No.”

Saying that much, Otto understood the reason for Batenkaitos’ dissatisfaction.

As if admiring, Batenkaitos had tenderly voiced the names of Felt and the others. His unique trait of eating 『Names』, and the content of his speech made him realise it.

Batenkaitos, could not eat the 『Name』 of an opponent whose 『Name』 he did not know. Henceforth, 『Gluttony』 could not eat the 『Name』 of Otto, whose name had not been mentioned here even once. His dissatisfaction, was due to that.

Otto: “I have a request for all three of you. Please, absolutely do not call my name.”

If his name is not mentioned, then at the very least, Batenkaitos’ goal will not be achieved.

Or, in fact, the number of casualties at the hands of Batenkaitos till now may have had been his way to try and know his name.

Him allowing Otto and the others such free discussion, may have had been him waiting for them to call each others’ names, and henceforth prepare for his meal——.

Felt: “My bad, nii-chan.”

Hearing Otto’s remarks once he had reasoned, said Felt with a somewhat apologetic tone.

She made an awkward expression, something which had not been witnessed by anyone in the situation yet.

Felt: “I, don’t know nii-chan’s name in the first place.....”

Dynas: “Sorry, not-on-first-list-official-dono. Your position aside, your name has slipped from my mind.....”

Otto: “Yes yes, indeed! It’s not as if, I’m particularly close to everyone, and neither am I major

personality! God, da~mn it.”

Of course, Gaston too, made an expression suggesting his own ignorance, and shrugged his shoulders.

With relief made of both happiness and sadness, at the very least, his fright of his name being revealed to Batenkaitos had been diminished immensely, with this. That alone was unmistakable.

Ley: “Dynos aside, aren’t you two just covering for onii-san. If that isn’t so then we~ll..... it seems asking it out would become quite a bother.”

Otto: “Giving up for today and falling back, is also something you can do, you know? Come sometime in the future, one day again..... I suppose so. By that time, we can also prepare to give you a warm welcome in Reinhardt-san’s presence.”

Ley: “To turn away in front of a feast, don’t make us do something so outrageous. Until our belly is satisfied, we will we will not go back. That’d make Louis a~ngry.”

Of course, Batenkaitos could not be convinced. The battle could not be terminated.

Felt: “Gaston, absolutely don’t let go next time.”

Gaston: “Just because I don’t get hurt, using me how you like.....”

Felt: “I’ll go with you next time, for sure.”

Gaston, who tried to state his discontentment for the order, widened his eyes hearing Felt’s words. He then proceeded to laugh rudely, and roughly rubbed Felt’s head and disheveled her hair.

Gaston: “Stop joking around. If that geezer got to know that I made master push herself, who knows what he’ll do to me.

Felt: “Don’t touch my head. The only one who can do that is grandpa Rom.”

Gaston: “That’s why I’m doing it.”

Felt snorted her nose, with her hair disheveled, and standing next to her was Gaston. Next to him was Dynas wielding his two short swords, and Otto counted the number of magic stones in his sleeves. Three on his left sleeve, two on his right. They must be used carefully.

Otto: “He touches with his left hand, and then eats is what I think. If you get touched, please think that it’s all over.”

Gaston: “That’s, way too difficult even by just the sound of it, no?”

Dynas: “Even one slash at his any of his vitals with a sword should be enough. If we can do that, then it’s no big deal.”

Felt: “When you say it like that, I agree.”

With Felt’s statement conveying that she was convinced, their preparations were complete. Courteously, watching their preparations end was Batenkaitos. Seeing his politeness, Otto narrowed his eyes, and the blasphemer subsequently laughed.

Ley: “Isn’t it common mannerism to await the finishing of setting up of the table? Roy of Bizarre Eating aside, we a~re Gourmet. We are particular abou~t meals.”

Saying that, Batenkaitos respectfully gestured and bowed. That gesture, which seemed to put on airs, also seemed frightfully familiar.

Ley: “Well the~n, once again. Witch Cult Sin Archbishop, Ley Batenkaitos of representing 『Gluttony』.”

“_____”

Ley: “Isn’t it common mannerism, to return your own name when you are given the same?”

Felt: “After everything we’ve discussed, he’d be an idiot to return his name to you, you bastard.”

Among warriors, it is a commonly obeyed custom, to return your own name when someone gives you their own name.

However, Batenkaitos may have had possibly utilised this method, and till now, gotten out the names of countless people, and proceeded to subsequently eat them.

They had no reason to abide by that custom right now. With that being rejected, 『Gluttony』 laughed,

Ley: “That’s that. ——Well the~n, let’s eat!”

Signaling his meal, the petite frame leapt ahead, as if flying, and shortened the distance in between. This movement had not been seen before, it was like a strong gale flowing by. Batenkaitos, who had vanquished the offensive and defensive being put up against him till now by mere handling of his feet and dodging, now actually demonstrated his ability to hunt down his opponents.

Otto, a non-combatant, was unable to follow his movement, and respond accordingly.

The other three, however, were different.

Felt: “Don’t think you can win in a race, against me.”

Against Batenkaitos, who was racing like wind, only Felt was able to catch up comfortably. The moment she had lightly kicked the cobblestone and leapt ahead, she showed mobility, as if she was being carried by the wind at once.

Surprised by at least that movement, Batenkaitos’ first slash swept through the air.

Ley: “——~tsu!”

At that point, Gaston and Dynas commenced their attack at the same time.

Dynas' two single edged katanas, and the short sword which Gaston held, both of them clutched onto their respective weapons. Against the attack of the two, the vulnerable Batenkaitos opened his legs wide and dropped his stance.

With his arms on the ground, Batenkaitos' body whirled with his legs stretched. The spinning kick swept the legs of the two men, and destroyed Dynas' balance.

And there——,

Otto: "Ua~a~a~——!"

Dynas: "Wa~h?"

Raising his voice, the fourth player, Otto grabbed him.

By coming there, Otto set himself up perfectly for close combat, and without anticipating this turn of events, Batenkaitos raised an astonished call, and successfully managed to wrestle with Otto's body. Bind him at this same pace—— the very next moment he thought that, forceful pain assailed upon Otto's guts. Batenkaitos' left fist pierced in, and sent Otto's body rolling.

Otto: "Ghue ~hk, gohogh ~hk!"

Ley: "At the right place, with the menu for your strong flavours and blandness available, the appropriate place for that, we must a~bsolutely find out about it, onii-san. Later, we'll pro~perly partner you....."

When Batenkaitos blurted that out, the two, whose stances had collapsed, moved.

Dynas carried the tumbling Otto in his arms, and the one protecting the two was Gaston. Batenkaitos tilted his neck at that battle formation, and looked down upon what had come upon his tattered clothes.

——At the point where he had wrestled with Otto, two magic stones were dangling.

Ley: "Well we~ll."

His movements for absconding were slow.

The very next moment of Batenkaitos noticing the magic stones, the two magic stones exploded immensely.

It was the collegiality of a fire magic stone and a water magic stone.

The red and yellow light, and the blue and white light proliferated, and Batenkaitos' body was enveloped in the light and a shockwave was released.

Ley: “——~hk!!”

Receiving the light from a close distance, Otto also was subjected to harm.

Though Gaston, who was acting as a wall, shielded the majority of it, its impact could still be felt upon Otto's skin. His skin scorched to the point of freezing, and chilled to the point of burning.

Once the shockwave came to a halt, the second hypocentre was a truly terrible sight to witness. The cobblestone had been torn off, the soil underneath was wide open, and scorched fragments of stone had been scattered across.

Ley: “A~h, that's so cruel. Our only good dress got spoilt.”

And, once again, Batenkaitos had placed himself at a point away from the hypocentre.

However, it seems this time, at least, he was not undamaged.

The youth's long hair had suffered the attack heaped upon themselves as an aftermath of the blast, and he had a somewhat sullen voice.

It seems the youth had unmistakably gotten caught up in the hypocentre. He lost the rag that covered his entire body till now, and the skin beneath was now unconcealed.

Otto: “——Ugh.”

Blurting that out thoughtlessly and reflexively, was Otto.

Gaston and Dynas were also speechless, grimacing while witnessing the same.

——The newly exposed skin of the young boy, was covered with wounds and scars.

Scars of a whip, scars of hot iron, scars carved by an edged tool, scars inflicted by a rough surface, scars of the skin being gouged out, scars of a beast's fangs, scars of repeated hits that had turned the skin bluish black, scars of an innumerable amount.

The youth who wore rags, now wearing only a waistcloth, turned around with his wounded body, and seeing Otto and the others grimace at him, he made a displeased face.

Ley: "Forcibly taking away a child's clothes, and then reacting like that is quite hurtful. Adults like all this, don't they?"

Otto: ".....I don't know about the adults you are close to, but normally they do not."

Ley: "Hm~. So, you'll be all compassionate again. Changing your heart and attitude like this, it's because of things like that we can't trust you peo~ple!"

Spreading his arms as if showing his body covered with wounds, Batenkaitos yelled that.

Otto made a wry face at his words, and Dynas made a disgusted expression. Only the two of Felt and Gaston had no alteration in their expressions.

They gazed at the frowning Otto, and sighed.

Felt: "Heyhey, don't go about thinking strange things. Those things can be anywhere, they're just not on mine or your body, but can be anywhere."

Gripping to the package in her hands, confessed Felt. Her eyes did not have even a fraction of compassion. Of course, Otto knew that their opponent was undeserving of that, but it's not as if he was a Sin Archbishop and insane by birth.

At least, that was the impression Batenkaitos' body gave——.

???: "——Just boring imagination will be fruitless, in fact. You'll end up regretting it, I suppose."

“———”

Out of nowhere, echoed the voice who had not been in the open plaza.

Everyone, including Batenkaitos, raised their heads at the sudden happening.

Everyone’s line of sight turned towards the waterway surrounding this large plaza— and lightly fluttering about midair, was a lone young girl, who then descended and stood.

In a frilled, spread out dress, with beautiful, round eyes and coiled, cream hair. Her clearly stinging attitude had become normal now, as she observed the situation with her large, circular eyes. And once her eyes met with Otto’s, she sighed suggesting she did not have a choice.

???: “Subaru alone is sufficient for perverted games and sweetness, I suppose. The only one Betty will help is also just Subaru..... This time is a special exception, at maximum, in fact.”

Otto: “Yes yes, my apologies, for making trouble for you like this. But, thank you so much.”

At the young girl’s harsh sounding response, Otto, however, tasted a sense of relief, so much so that he wanted to lie down in exhaustion.

The very existence of the girl was one of Otto’s “ways to win”.

???: “Well then, let’s clean up this fuss, and ask Subaru for a hug, I suppose.”

Saying this with a listless face, raising her hand, was the young girl.

No, the Spirit. That too, a Great Spirit among Spirits.

Natsuki Subaru’s Contract Spirit, Beatrice—— finally entered the battle as backup.

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Chapter 69 - A Repulsive Dinner Banquet



Everyone laid their eyes on the young girl who snorted her nose, as her dress' hem danced in the breeze.

The girl—— Beatrice, looked around with her eyes, observing the situation. In this large plaza of the Waterway Street, present was the heavily scarred 『Gluttony』 Ley Batenkaitos, and Otto and the rest, opposing him.

Looking at Otto and Felt and the others, Beatrice blatantly let out a tired sigh.

Beatrice: "Those are rather pitifully poor faces, I suppose."

Everyone was too worn out to argue back Beatrice's comments, who let out a sigh. However, Beatrice partaking in the fight would surely be a turning point in this progressively worsening battle. Naturally, feelings of relief were given rise to within Otto's chest.

Otto: "Bea—— ~hk."

As soon as he was about to call her name, Otto shut his mouth.

Batenkaitos was an existence who ate 『Names』. He had just used to ploy of having Felt and the others not call his name by requesting them. There is no way he could go against that himself.

Batenkaitos' attitude for Otto, who was hiding the name. He was clearly irritated by him being an obstruction in his 『Meal』. In other words, Batenkaitos, in order to eat his opponent's name, must know their 『Name』.

Henceforth, he could not be allowed to perceive Beatrice's name. He positioned his hand, and suppressed his words.

However, Otto's such forethought ended being futile.

For some reason——.

Ley: "——Beatrice-sama? Wha~t, are you doing outdoors?"

Because that was what Batenkaitos articulated, leaning his neck forward and eyes fixed on Beatrice. Continuing to observe Beatrice, 『Gluttony』 continued his mysterious words.

"——"

Ley: "Even after disliking going outside so much. Aside from the times of meals, or when you were accompanied by the Great Spirit-sama..... a~h, so there were so~me exceptions?"

Batenkaitos continued his words, against the quiet Beatrice.

Those seemed like words suggesting closeness, which would be inaccurate to say, but they were

unquestionably words of a person having a sense of distance and relationship in the past.

Otto: "That means he's your acquaintance from the past..... Beatrice-sa—— ~hk."

The relationship of the past, between Batenkaitos and Beatrice.

Losing understanding before being able to call her name, Otto's throat choked midway. This time he unconsciously glanced at Beatrice's face.

Biting her lips, and fury swirling in her large, round eyes, was Beatrice.

It had been rare for this Spirit girl, to show rage. In front of the astonished Otto, Beatrice inhaled very deeply, and scowled at Batenkaitos.

Beatrice: "——Your trick has been understood, in fact. So that's how it is, I suppose."

Muttered Beatrice, in a deep and heavy voice.

Her voice was not conveying hostility, but instead it was one suppressing her own emotions.

Hiding her rage from showing on her face, Beatrice locked her gaze into the interior of Batenkaitos' corrupted and muddy eyes, and distorted her lips due to the revulsion resulting from what she had laid her eyes upon.

And,

Beatrice: "You, how many people will you stockpile within yourself until you grow sick of it, in fact?"

Ley: "Who kno~ws? But, the quantity we eat is still better than compared to Roy. Roy is Bizarre Eating so he eats anything, but since we select carefully, the quantities are different ~tsu! We consider the quality of the lives we eat, and that's what conflicts us with Roy."

Eating 『Names』 and 『Memories』, stating it to be his 『Meal』 was Batenkaitos.

Naming himself Gourmet, and calling someone close to him Bizarre Eating had a peculiar aesthetic sense, both of which were things Otto could never comprehend.

“_____”

And, what Otto could not come to understand, was also Beatrice's attitude at that moment.

The young girl's revulsion did not seem to result from simply evaluating the confronting Batenkaitos. It seemed to stem a different from a negative conception, of a different root.

Perhaps that linked to Batenkaitos treating Beatrice like an existence he already knew—— and, thinking that far, Otto noticed.

The possible reason, behind why Batenkaitos unilaterally knew Beatrice.

Otto: “.....It can't be.”

Batenkaitos' combat power, lay in a territory which could be entered by only those who have trained tough and long. Otto had made a hypothesis based on Dynas' factual remarks.

Otto: “I had anticipated the experiences of the body of an opponent whose 『Name』 and 『Memory』 had been eaten to be taken over. Your unarmed martial arts and dagger skills, attaining such an extreme level of prowess in them at your age would be difficult. If that's how it is, then.....”

Even the skills of an eaten opponent would serve as food for him.

If that is how it is, then it became conceivable how Batenkaitos had managed to learn abilities rivalling that of a master martial artist in a great number of spheres.

If that hypothesis was correct, not just correct, but held further meaning to it——.

Otto: “However, if what is taken over is not just experiences of the body.”

It meant that it was, something which was even further vicious, different from the threat of fighting strength.

After all, Batenkaitos had said.

——That he was, *looking for the one whose speech echoed across the city.*

That person, who was weak and fragile, unable to help anything unless someone stood by his side and supported him.

You could sense that and sympathise with that by being with the character of Natsuki Subaru for a long time. That youth had that mysterious part for him, which made those around him think this.

However, those thoughts were of that of someone who had dealt affectionately with him.

The fact that he was aware of Subaru's brittle strength and weak courage, was the proof of him having been close to him.

And if that proof was something which had been stolen by 『Gluttony』 at this time, then only one possible candidate, a single young girl came to mind——.

Otto: “——~hk!”

Finally, Otto arrived at the same revulsion which Beatrice was feeling.

Subjected to the changed colour in Otto's eyes glaring directly at him, Batenkaitos smiled, and unveiled his fangs.

Ley: “The head maid of the household of Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers..... wait wait wait, that's wrong.”

Oscillating his neck while pronouncing that, Batenkaitos widened his arms.

On his scarred body, he caressed a single white scar lovingly. That scar, suspended on his shoulder, looked like it had received a sharp iron picket, and was painful to even look at.

Ley: “Now just a lone loved person. ——Oneself's beloved person, who will be a hero someday, Natsuki Subaru's supporter, Rem..... was it?”

“————”

Ley: “Let us meet him, tha~t beloved hero-sama! Our hero must have had come to cast his judgement upon us, till all the wa~y here!”

Stretching out his tongue, licking that wound, Batenkaitos guffawed.

Without thinking, Otto's blood rose up to his head. As he gnashed his teeth as they made a crackling sound, he was filled with rage enough that he wanted to punch him.

『Gluttony's』 attitude, tone, smile, everything was ridiculing the feelings of that lone young girl.

Without knowing how much that young girl must have had pleaded for returning safely, now she was only being trampled upon by mockery and scorn. That is what set ablaze within Otto's heart.

This 『Gluttony』, was an opponent who could never be forgiven—.

Otto: "Beatrice-san.....?"

Beatrice stepped lightly and stood in front of Otto, who was counting the number of magic stones left in his sleeves with his finger. Otto was unable to understand why she had shifted towards him. And,

Beatrice: "Get your ideas corrected, I suppose. Good job calling Betty here, in fact."

"——"

Beatrice: "He is..... Only he is someone Subaru must not meet, I suppose. If Subaru meets him, he will be hurt. Certainly, to the point that wound will never heal. That's why"

Otto: "Let's stop him here, by just ourselves."

Pronouncing the end of Beatrice's words, Otto declared.

Though Beatrice did not turn back, her stance made it clear that she agreed. She was Subaru's partner, who committed himself to oneself and others. Otto painfully understood how unpleasant it would be for him if the viciousness in front of his eyes was to get close to him.

Felt: "Waitwaitwaitwait, I'm telling you to wait!"

And, the one calling out to the two with a revitalised desire for taking their opponent down—— was not

Batenkaitos. It was Felt, who had been quietly listening to the dialogue till now beside Otto. She gripped her package, and pointed it towards Beatrice,

Felt: “I heard you talk like some big shot, but what can this little girl do in the first place. Though I’ve heard you were a companion of that nii-chan.”

Otto: “Ah, um, I see. First, explaining that would be a bit tricky.....”

Felt suggested her own doubts, to which Otto was unable to give a proper explanation. She possibly already knew about Beatrice being a Spirit and being contracted with Subaru, since that was common knowledge. It was also true that Beatrice’s battle strength was uncertain in Subaru’s absence——.

Beatrice: “A pipsqueak should not call others little girls, in fact. If you have the free time to worry about Betty’s ability, you should better use it for worrying about that futureless deficient body, I suppose.”

Felt: “Quite a harsh brat you are, hey. Let me tell you, I’ve been eating and sleeping properly now, so both my back and my chest are growing. You should be the one worrying over your future.”

Beatrice: “Unfortunately, Betty’s mein is set firm to this design. So..... Hmph.”

A conversation befitting the situation started, but Beatrice put a halt to it by pausing her words. What her eyes had caught onto, was the slender package in Felt’s hands.

Felt’s 『Trump Card』 was a magic tool, but Beatrice made a surprised expression upon laying her eyes on it,

Beatrice: “No way, is that 『Meteor』 , I suppose?”

Felt: “Meteor?”

Beatrice: “Mother..... A revered magician a long time ago, used it to pester the Dragon, in fact. It’s whereabouts were supposed to be unknown, but this is fate, I suppose.”

Felt found Beatrice's explanation, who had corrected a crucial part of it, debatable.

But from Otto's point of view, stating that the 『Mother』 Beatrice had mentioned and corrected later on, was a 『Witch』 who had disappeared from legends would make for a truly outrageous claim.

He still held his own doubts he wanted to ask about, but if the 『Witch』 had truly used it to pester the Dragon, the reliability of its potential was high.

Otto: "I had heard of its convolution in usage, but what can we expect in terms of its strength?"

Beatrice: "It is a staff which boasts having an anecdote of having made the Dragon halfway cry, in fact. It's guaranteed, I suppose."

Her claim was still difficult to believe. However, she had conveyed the authenticity of the weapon. Though Otto had been swayed by Beatrice's words, Felt was yet unconvinced.

Felt: "I'll teach you about what the hell you're blabbering about later. Rather than that, this little....."

Beatrice: "Your conscience cannot rise above that level, in fact. But, your concern is futile, I suppose. After all"

Felt: "Ah?"

Beatrice: "The attack has already been set up."

In front of Felt, who tilted her neck, Beatrice sketched an enchanting smile upon her face. Her softly upraised right hand pointed towards Batenkaitos, and the throats of everyone were subsequently frozen.

—Violet crystals crystallised, and surrounded Batenkaitos' environs.

Ley: "Ah, Beatrice-sama is so merciless."

Beatrice: “Just holding back and mercy are things which do not exist anywhere in this world for you, I suppose.”

El Minya.

A rare offensive magic even within Yin magic, was the reason behind him showing his fangs.

The moment Batenkaitos let out his complaint, the violet crystals did a boisterous dance, and aimed and rushed at his petite body.

The tough and pointed attack struck the thin body standing upright—— the crystals shattered, the stone pavement fissured, and smoke was given rise to. This disastrous scene in this huge open plaza, had proved her might.

Beatrice: “Well, what do you think, I suppose.”

Showing her magical power, Beatrice turned to Felt with a victorious expression. Though it was an immature gesture for a four hundred year old Great Spirit, but Felt was too speechless to point anything like that out.

Felt: “W-Well, not so ba~d, I guess.”

However, despite her speechlessness, Felt refused to admit her loss and mistakes.

Gaston: “Y-Your voice, i~s trembling, Miss Felt.”

Felt: “That goes for you too! Stop saying idiotic nonsense, and keep looking ahead!”

Yelled Felt at Gaston, whose voice was trembling, in order to hide the trembling of her own voice. But, not all what she said was deceptive.

After all, the figure of the defenseless Batenkaitos, who should have had received Beatrice’s magical attack and had been caught up in its subsequent explosion, was not present where it should have been.

Dynas: “He’s coming——!”

Dynas shouted, and everyone raised their eyes and looked in the direction he had his eyes fixed upon. There present was the form of 『Gluttony』, with all four of his limbs on the ground, moving like a spider.

『Gluttony』 smiled, displayed his fangs, as blood streamed down from his eyes.

Ley: “Haha~! As expecte~d of Beatrice-sama! How nice, so nice, quite nice, perhaps it is nice, certainly it is nice, isn’t it nice, surely it is nice, as it is surely nice ~tsu!”

Shaking his head about, disheveling his hair, Batenkaitos leapt from the ground and pounced, charging ahead once again.

Beatrice: “——Five shots, left.”

In response to his charge, Otto heard Beatrice mutter something unsettling whilst licking her lips.

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The moment El Minya was used, and the attack commenced upon Batenkaitos, Beatrice felt a large Magic Stone shatter in her pocket.

The number of Magic Stones now left with her were six—— in terms of Beatrice’s usage, only five could be deployed in the battle.

——In this battle in the city, the preliminary encounter with the Sin Archbishops of 『Wrath』 and 『Greed』 and the subsequent incidental fight against them in the square.

As a result of that battle, Beatrice had spent her Mana for healing Subaru and the people of the city, to the point that it disrupted her physical capabilities.

The Spirit Beatrice, is an Artificial Spirit created by the 『Witch』 Echidna.

Her strength is far greater than those of normal Spirits, but in return for that she has some troublesome downsides.

Her being mobile right now, is the result of a card being played which normally cannot be put to use.

——As of this situation, Beatrice held seven Magic Stones.

A large Magic Stone is one with Mana having been stockpiled within it over several years. Among them, one had already been shattered, and only six of them were left now. They had been given to Beatrice, who had plunged into a deep slumber, by Kiritaka—— who was aware of the progressions in this large plaza, and his actions were for the purpose of providing aid to them.

Kiritaka: “Please, I request you from the bottom of my heart, Great Spirit-sama. Please lend me your strength, and use it to fight for protecting this city. In this city, there are those whom I love.”

All messed up and almost crying, but detachedly pleading to her was Kiritaka. Beatrice responded with no choice to Kiritaka, who had used an immeasurably priceless Magic Stone with no second thoughts in order to awaken from her slumber.

If she were to say the truth, Beatrice wanted to hurriedly reach where Subaru was.

The city’s situation had revolved, and Subaru, too, was under threat. If her self not by his side, Subaru is a hopelessly worrying guy, after all.

That’s why, now that her self was awake, she shall dedicate herself to Subaru——.

Beatrice: “Stupid, I suppose. No, stupid, in fact.”

Beatrice gave up on that desire of hers, once she felt the guilt after realising her indulgence under the name of concern.

If Subaru had chosen to fight, that too without the presence of her self, then that means he has a way to fight without her.

Subaru does not overestimate himself. Rather, he tends to underestimate himself too much.

He would not recklessly get into a confrontation with an opponent he could not win against, and if he could win against the opponent using Beatrice, he would somehow or other wake her up.

That’s why in this battle, Subaru did not need her self, who had been left alone.

That is why, once Subaru has returned after the battle, she must also have a victorious record under her belt so that she can match up to him.

For Beatrice, who now stood as backup, Kiritaka had offered up seven large Magic Stones. Unable to use the Mana from her surroundings, Beatrice now, was utilising the mana of the Magic Stones like an inefficient conductor as a last resort.

In her dress' pocket, the seven Magic Stones were capable of miracles, but their potential was now being wasted on usage of mere magic.

You would normally believe that their strength could be used to invoke not ten, but even a thousand magic moves. However, though there are no limitations to the extent of the magic, but no matter how low scale the magic was, the Magic Stone will shatter at a single invocation.

As one of the six needed to be reserved, only five could be utilised.

—In other words, she must wrap it up in five moves.

Beatrice: "The reunion with Bubby will have to wait, I suppose. Instead of that, you will be seeing hell, in fact."

One of the large Magic Stones Kiritaka gave to Beatrice, was originally intended to be occupied by Puck. That was the original purpose of their trip, but now, that being shattered for the purpose of battle is nothing but ironic.

Ley: "We're tired of seeing hell ~tsu! After all, the ones that got eaten by us, eve~ry one of them tasted tha~t in the end!"

Shouting that, Batenkaitos leapt towards them.

His movement was casual, but his cutting gaze was utmost cautious regarding Beatrice.

He was unaware of the fact that Beatrice would run out of gas after five moves, that she would run out of Mana. In order to give him that impression, she had commenced an attack of a powerful range in exchange of one Magic Stone, that strategy was the best faculty available, and it had passed its exam.

Beatrice raised up her left hand, and pointed its palm towards the mid-air Batenkaitos.

Beatrice: “Al Minya!”

Ley: “——~tsu!”

Beatrice: “Just kidding, in fact.”

At that moment, expecting the extremely high level magic, Batenkaitos toughened up his body. In front of him, Beatrice stuck out her tongue, and flew backwards.

At that point, Gaston and Dynas plunged onto the curled-up Batenkaitos.

Gaston: “U~o~o~o~h!”

Dynas: “Eat this too!”

The shouting two men launch their counterattack attack upon Batenkaitos, with two blades and a fist.

The weighty and sharp hit struck 『Gluttony』, but Batenkaitos dodged it with preeminent body handling, and in reverse, turned his own dagger towards the dominated two.

The edge of the oscillating steel, took a path which aimed straight for Dynas’ neck.

Gaston: “It’s dangerous…… ghue!”

Dynas: “Sorry!”

Gaston obstructed into the dagger’s path, shielding Dynas and taking the strike himself.

A wooden report echoed and the dagger’s power was weakened, but Gaston, while drawing back, coughed violently, and red blood seeped out of those lips.

——It was the limit of his Mana-utilising battle ability, otherwise called 『Flow Method』.

Bearing his tough body, Gaston’s way of fighting against blades and blows was his skill known as 『Flow Method』, an alternate method of the utilisation of Mana, which is otherwise used for magic.

It is a skill involving far less talent than compared to magic—— only training and the amount of training

mattered, and the user was required to shed blood for its usage.

Beatrice: “But, it seems he pushed himself far too much, in fact.”

In Beatrice’s eyes, Gaston’s facets and talents were nothing beyond mediocrity.

Him being able to, somehow or the other, take the Sin Archbishop’s spears with his partial Flow Method, could only be because Batenkaitos had been going very easy on Gaston.

Ley: “Ta~ke, this ~tsu!”

Gaston: “Ghou, agh!?”

Kneeling down, he kicked right into Gaston’s jaw in the upward direction.

Bleeding from his nose, and collapsing down, immobile, the giant was now unable to battle. With this, their war potential had been reduced by one more.

Ley: “You rea~lly worked hard, Gaston! Pre~tty bravely you fought. ——You worked and you worked, but you fai~led! We evaluate such a guy to be worthy ~tsu!”

Felt: “——You, bastard!”

Seeing the form of Batenkaitos mocking Gaston, Felt’s blood rose up to her head, and she aimed the Meteor she held in her hand straight for his head.

If it was put to use the way it should rightfully be, its might was surely that one would expect of a 『 Witch』 . But, if it were to be used as a mere slapstick, it could not possibly utilise its complete potential.

Ley: “Uh, o~h! Geez Felt-chan, yo~u’re do~ing i~t ~tsu!”

Felt: “Shut, up! Get away, you shit!”

While scuffling to handle the cane, Felt continued to use her physical abilities to try and land a sharp

blow upon Batenkaitos. Batenkaitos dodged all of it, with just the elegant handling of his feet, as if doing a magnificent dance.

The Meteor did indeed come in contact with 『Gluttony's』 hair, but it was not sufficient enough to cause any damage to him. There was an overwhelming gap of skill between them. He was completely treating her as a plaything.

Beatrice: "You! Get away now, I suppose! Our merchant has already recovered the big guy, in fact!"

Felt: "Do you think I came here just to mislead!"

The difference in their physical capabilities was evident, and it was certain that she would lose if she was counterattacked.

While Felt attacked Batenkaitos, Otto hurriedly drew the fainted Gaston out of the theater. Dynas too, confirmed the texture of his two katanas, was searching for a gap to break into Felt and Batenkaitos' fight but, there was no certain opportunity.

Even if an alteration arises, Batenkaitos fills in that gap completely. The approach of watching vigilantly for an opportunity and awaiting an alteration, signalled the reality to them that 『Gluttony』, who was outnumbered and should have been at a disadvantage, was the one ruling this place.

Ley: "What, what is it, what is this, what could it be, why could it be, what could it perhaps be ~tsu! Even after jumping in for helping, will Felt-chan abandon this so pathetically?"

Felt: "So noisy! You too, you bastard, just stay put and get hit....."

Ley: "Is that so. —But we're getting bored no~w."

Felt: "Uh, ky~a~a!?"

As Felt yelled while swinging the Meteor, at that moment, Batenkaitos stepped ahead. The distance between the two of them became zero, and 『Gluttony's』 palm caressed Felt's svelte chest.

At that moment, the shock impacted the young girl's body and threw her backwards gently, and giving rise to a high pitched shriek, Felt rolled down the stone pavement.

The attack had strength enough to simply throw her body backwards, but that was not the problem here.

Otto: “Oh no! She has been directly touched!”

Otto raised his voice, seeing the coughing Felt, who had received the impact on her chest. Seeing the agony on his face, Beatrice understood the reason for his concern.

『Gluttony’s』 meal, had been prepared.

Ley: “Felt-cha~n. ——Let’s eat.”

Following the unknown principle, Batenkaitos’ left hand, which had touched Felt, he licked its palm with his elongated tongue.

As if, there was something vital, like the young girl named 『Felt』, present on it.

laced it on his tongue as if loving it, caressed its rough texture, tasted each and every part of it as if harvesting it, and dropped it down to his breadbasket and mercilessly digested it.

At the moment that was completed, 『Gluttony’s』 meal came to an end, and the 『Name』 settled within the blasphemer.

And, all traces of the young girl named Felt disappeared from the world——.

Ley: “Ugh, ghue~..... ~tsu.”

Felt: “Hu~h? What is it, you bastard. Just how rude can this guy get.”

Felt, shaking her head, was looking at Batenkaitos, knelt down and vomiting.

Of course, her existence had not disappeared, she only tilted her neck in rage.

——That was the moment, when 『Gluttony’s』 meal had failed unsightly.

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Chapter 70 - Eclipsing



Batenkaitos, who should have had abraded away Felt's name and commenced with his 『Meal』 , vomited.

Moaning in agony, spitting out his gastric juices, 『Gluttony's』 attitude held no dishonesty. So, though he did not put something with a real form in his mouth, he still squeezed his stomach when vomiting.

It was a mysterious spectacle, which gave rise to that impression, which had no absurdity in itself.

Felt: "Shit, that hurt..... Playing around with me....."

Caressing her scoured chest, Felt stood up in a grazed shape.

The ones she could see from the corner of her eyes, Beatrice and the others, too, had not forgotten about Felt.

『Gluttony's』 meal had failed.

Ley: "Gha ~hk, ghehough ~hk, oghe~e~ ~tsu!"

Dynas: "Don't know the reason for it but..... it's a nice chance!"

Dynas waged a raid against Batenkaitos, whose consciousness was completely outside of the battlefield, as he spilled out gastric juices from the edge of his mouth.

Two swords swiped across, and mercilessly plunged into Batenkaitos.

Towards the defenseless neck, the silver blade of the katana proceeded——.

Ley: "Gh, o~o~h!"

Raising the voice of a beast, Batenkaitos sidestepped the blade.

His dodge was slightly late and some of his hair was subjected to the slash, but it wasn't enough to pierce his skin. Rotating his petite body at an extremely fast speed, 『Gluttony』 escaped the attack's span with nightmarish behaviour.

Beatrice: "Merchant!"

Otto: “I, know!!”

Responding to Beatrice’s call, Otto swung his right arm. The two Magic Stones cast from his sleeves, came in contact with Batenkaitos, who had escaped the former attack.

At that moment, light burst through, and the current of magical energy it wielded blew off that body—— however, Batenkaitos responded to it with miraculous nerve reflex.

Ley: “Huma~!”

As the rising light, amassed Batenkaitos within itself and its destructive might, at that moment, Batenkaitos cast magic, encasing the magical explosion within ice.

The explosion, resulting from the Magic Stones, lost its area to proceed, and ended up becoming a mere stack of shattered ice, falling down to the ground, giving rise to a noise. It was an extremely high class skill of obstructing colourless magical waves rapidly.

Perhaps even this, would be the ability of someone who was among those whose 『Names』 have been eaten by Batenkaitos till now. The mere thought of that 『Someone』, who must have had learnt that ability, was now amassed within his stomach without remaining in anyone’s memory was nauseating.

However, this was not the time for such feelings.

What was crucial here was——.

Ley: “Wa~h ~tsu! Dangerous dangerous..... but we pulled through ~tsu!”

Kicking the ice that had trapped the Magic Stones, and dropping them straight into the waterway was the laughing Batenkaitos. He swayed around his stomach, as if adjusting the contents inside, and wiping his mouth with his hands, angled his neck forward.

What those corrupted eyes were observing, was Felt, who was swinging around her hands and legs to confirm the extent of her injuries. Noticing Batenkaitos look at her, Felt snorted her nose.

Felt: “What. Just like you, I’m also feeling angry, you bastard.”

Ley: “Nothing like anger at all ~tsu, instead i~t’s impressive. We’re so~rry, to have thought of you not being so capable of intelligence, by just looks.”

Felt: “Hu~h? What are you say.....”

Ley: “We never thought, that you’d have the cleverness to use only an alias against us. We got completely deceived. We had intended to avoid devouring greedily until the 『Name』 got disclosed but..... to~ thi~n~k, this unexpected twist would be harvested.”

“_____”

Alias, hearing Batenkaitos say that, Felt went silent.

The reaction of Felt, furrowing her eyebrows, was one which suggested how much had she not expected to hear what she had heard. It could be understood at a glance, that she had no idea what Batenkaitos’ words meant.

Whereas Beatrice, after hearing this conversation, understood the reason behind the earlier failure of Batenkaitos’ 『Meal』 .

Batenkaitos held the Authority of being able to eat the 『Name』 of a person, whose name he already knew or had gained its knowledge, by touching them—— however, it needs to be the person’s real name.

Alias, or nicknames, they do not suffice for its usage.

As just Felt’s name did not fulfill the conditions for the 『Meal』 , Batenkaitos, who had tasted it, suffered.

With that being said,

Ley: “The onii-san over there and Felt-chan..... there are two whose names are unknown, and both were determined to be eaten, how troublesome.”

Otto, whose name was purely unknown, and Felt, who seemed to be utilising an alias.

Dynas, whose name had immediately come to light, and Beatrice, who was known through Rem's memories no longer had any impediments, is what the conduct of 『Gluttony』 suggested, which was infuriating but, naming himself Gourmet and being fixated over eating 『Names』, had its own disadvantageous gaps.

Felt: "Hey! I've had enough of listening to you, now shut up and listen, the hell are you saying?"

Beatrice, who was in her own thoughts, and Batenkaitos, who was continuing his torment. While Otto and Dynas were observing the situation, raising a loud and rough voice was Felt.

She had been irritated by the repeated conclusions passed regarding her, and aimed for Batenkaitos with the Meteor, trying to strike him.

Felt: "An alias or whatever, don't kid with me. I've already lived, for fifteen years, with the name Felt given to me by Grandpa Rom. Saying that's a lie is no joke."

Ley: "The type who is unaware of their own alias hu~h. That, means the parents that raised you up did a pretty good job, isn't it ~tsu. For us, it's a boundless nuisance but..... In other words, a name before that one had been pro~perly given, to you."

Felt: "The name given by those shit parents who abandoned me in the back alley? Then I must be a "burden" or a "wasteful meal" or "garbage". With that being said, do you still want to stick out your tongue and eat and see it?"

Ley: "Don't contradict Gourmet's consciousness by calling it guesswork or something. ——A~h, that's it."

Showing his protruding teeth, Batenkaitos raised his hand towards Felt, who expressed an enraged smile.

Ley: "After eating the rest beside you, we'll take careful custody of you. And, how about we go to meet the one who gave you a fake name, Grandpa Rom? Grandpa Rom might know your true name. We

are good at making people spell out what they know. You ca~n leave it to us.”

Otto: “.....Taking your time out for even that. Do you not have the choice to give up?”

Otto thoughtlessly pronounced, at 『Gluttony』 , who spoke of an offensive schedule. Hearing that, Batenkaitos put his hands on his mouth, and ringed his throat, as if enjoying,

Ley: “If the number of lives in the world is finite, then the number of worthy gourmet delicacies is a~Iso finite. Then, we won't miss any chance of meeting these limited gourmet delicacies ~tsu. Gluttonous drinking ~tsu! Gluttony ~tsu! Licking it chewing it slurping it, we will lick and taste unti~l the sauce on the plate lasts. Oops, of course onii-san is no exception either so why don't you ju~st relax?”

Batenkaitos' glare made it clear, that he had no intention of missing the four present.

『Gluttony's』 fixation over meals, was out of understanding for Beatrice and the others, who had been evaluated worthy of 『Gourmet』 . However, his look for vindictive impediments had no meaning more to it.

And, that blasphemer's desire for eating continued to increase, and it brought Felt's pique to itself.

Felt: “Is that so. I'll have to do something here, otherwise you'll ta~ke me to Grandpa Rom, huh.”

Saying that in a quiet voice, Felt swung her feet.

The shoes that she was wearing came off completely, and Felt was just like the other party now.

Stepping ahead on the cobblestone with both her feet barefoot, she left the Meteor lying horizontally and drew out her dagger.

Ley: “——? That doesn't make sense, Felt-chan. That, isn't that the trump card?”

Felt: “Instead of devices that I'm not used to, this is much easier to use. There isn't that much difference, in the first place. Instead of devices troublesome to use, it's better to use those which are easy to use, okay!”

Her bare feet curled as if gripping to the ground, and the next instant, Felt's body launched forward. She had gained such speed in the blink of an eye, like wind.

At this, even Batenkaitos widened his eyes, and forgetting the attitude of this just being another blade being held aloft, responded. He fought back by pulling out a physical ability of swinging the arms, handling his body, which had been submerged in memories.

Felt: "Ra~!"

The barefooted Felt's speed was, surpassing any energetic dash by some agile young girl. It was the support of a power beyond human intellect—— unmistakably, it was a Divine Protection. She swung the dagger several times, but it was met by Batenkaitos' own dagger techniques. Of course, Batenkaitos' tactics in that technique were overwhelmingly superior, but, what had prevented Felt from being overcome was only because Dynas was also backing her.

Dynas: "Don't push yourself too hard, with that vital body!"

Felt: "You too, uncle, just shut up, don't be tardy!"

Skillfully handling two swords, Dynas somehow filled the gap of 『Gluttony's』 counterattack. Within that time frame, Felt quickly positioned herself into 『Gluttony's』 blind spot, reports of steels clashing echoed, as the shadows of the three intermingled, as sparks danced across.

An exchange where, again, the decisive blow could not be delivered.

However, this time, the decisive blow had been formulated outside of the battlefield——.

Beatrice: "The attack..... has passed, this will hit hard, I suppose!"

Otto: "Both of you, please get away!"

While being left out of the event, they had been composing an attack, taking all the time they required. The operation, which would normally be unnecessary, lengthened their work schedule because of its requirement of meticulous caution, thanks to the attachment of an extra filter.

The result of that labour, was finally going to take form.

“————”

Hearing what Otto had shouted, Felt and Dynas got away from Batenkaitos' position.

『Gluttony』 instantly reached for Felt, but even after touching her, he was not prepared to be able to eat Felt's 『Name』 .

Felt: “Let, go!”

Fiercely swinging her ankle, which had been gripped onto violently, and using a single foot, Felt flew backwards to a great distance. Dynas too, as if rolling, left the place, leaving only 『Gluttony』 in Beatrice's line of sight.

Aiming there, Beatrice invoked a magic which required the power of a “thousand”, and completed it while respecting the power of a “thousand”.

Beatrice: “This time it's not a joke, really..... UI Minya!!”

Subsequent to the chant, a torrent of violet radiance glowed, and the light drew a circle with Batenkaitos at its core. Batenkaitos raised his face, to see what was coming up, but that reaction was late.

Not preparing, but escaping regardless of its form was the correct answer.

Ley: “——~tsu!”

In a single breath, the light converged, and shut Batenkaitos down by forming a ring around Batenkaitos' torso and arms. The ring of light acted like a chain and continued to further lock 『Gluttony』 , whose movements of the upper body were in a bind.

At the same pace, if the entire body got encased by ring of light, he would no longer be able to escape UI Minya's might.

The crystallising violet light continued to tighten its grip on Batenkaitos' upper body. At the same pace, the ring's control reached out to even his lower body, and 『Gluttony』, who had been rendered immobile, collapsed on the spot.

And, the atmosphere made a noise, as if creaking, as humongous bluish purple radiance emerged overhead of the collapsed blasphemer, with its sharp tips pointing towards Batenkaitos.

Ul Minya's might, to bind, and lash upon.

The attack Beatrice possessed slapped down in urgency, and the materialised destruction rained incessantly upon Batenkaitos.

Ley: “———!”

A roar could be heard, but in front of the destructive violet light, it had been muted.

The overwhelming light's might tore away the cobblestone, the wind produced by the blast engulfed the plaza in light and smoke, with the skirt of Beatrice's dress waving immensely.

Felt: “Did it do it!?”

Otto: “Did it manage to do it!?”

Dynas: “Did it really do it!?”

In the face of the explosion, the three, lying down, raised their voices at the same time.

Batenkaitos, at the very core of the hypocentre, had no ways of evasion. If he had truly taken the attack right now, then his body's traces will all disappear, not even leaving behind a fragment of his bones——.

Beatrice: “It isn't over yet, I suppose!”

With a loud voice, Beatrice warned them to be cautious, and the colour of the faces of the delighted three changed. Beatrice noticing the fault that had occurred, before the other three, was nothing difficult to conceive.

She could sense it.

Beatrice: “——Four, left.”

The large Magic Stone, which had been stocked over a long period of time, was unable to withstand the current UI Minya, and shattered right before Batenkaitos could be crushed.

Although it had provided for the invocation, it had been incapable of its fullest utilisation. The radiance had been unable to erode away Batenkaitos, and the body of 『Gluttony』 was——.

Ley: “The one right now has probably made us a bit impatient ~tsu!”

“——!”

Piercing through the plume, Batenkaitos flew towards Beatrice from a low angle. It must be the result of him judging who should be taken care of the first, based on the might of the magic just now.

Beatrice had exceptional ability as a magic user, but her physical abilities—— just as how it appeared, they were nothing beyond those of a young girl.

She did not have the skills, only for fighting at a close range with Batenkaitos, whose abilities were those of geniuses.

Henceforth, against his charge, Beatrice instantly utilised her third magic stone.

Beatrice: “——Murak!”

Ley: “Another trick——”

Beatrice’s chant barely preceded Batenkaitos’ hands, who were on the verge of reaching her.

His upraised fingers only had one intention, to not let Beatrice escape, now that all obstacles were clear. However, it got missed yet again.

The instant he thought he had reached Beatrice’s dress, Beatrice’s body flew backwards, like a leaf

floating in the breeze.

“————”

What Beatrice had chanted was 『Murak』, a Yin magic which obstructed with gravity. It was a magic which hindered with the power which attracts one's body to the ground, or one's own body weight, however Beatrice utilised it to reduce her body weight to zero at that instant.

Thanks to that, she was able to levitate in the wind, and greatly avoid the fingers trying to touch her.

Ley: “This, little——!?”

As per she had intended, Beatrice's body distanced from Batenkaitos and jumped to the edge of the large plaza instantly.

Batenkaitos tried to follow her, but he then heard loud footsteps from the direction opposite to the one he was facing, and turned towards them immediately.

Swiping his dagger behind, he tried to slash down the inelegant intruders. However, that strike cut through the sky. For some reason, there stood nobody who could have had made a sound of footsteps.

Otto: “Garfiel or the 『Bowel Hunter』, such people would totally get struck down!”

With the use of Wind magic, Otto had “sent footsteps flying” in an attempt to make Batenkaitos turn around, and he subsequently cast even more Magic Stones.

The exploding wave of heat produced by the Magic Stones was directed straight towards his exposed back, and unable to evade this time, Batenkaitos received an impact.

Dynas: “This time for sure, it's the end!”

Rolling down the plaza, with all of his limbs stretched straight, Batenkaitos collapsed. Swooping down upon that form, Dynas, who had prepared beforehand by tightening his grip onto his two katanas, intended to deliver the finishing blow——,

“———”

In a scruffy shape, the collapsed youth whispered something.

Whether that was him pleading for his life, or words of regret, Dynas shall not hesitate. For him, who had lived through the life of being a mercenary, the scramble for life is the result of fierce competition. There, the problem of being an adult or a child was trifle, and emotions of mourn and repent were feelings one could afford only after surviving, that was all.

Henceforth, it was clear. But, even though the movements of Dynas, who had that clear thought seated within him, held no hesitation, even still, he was unable to keep that mystery, which harboured in his chest, folded within it.

Because what Batenkaitos had whispered just now, sounded like this.

——*Lunar Eclipse*, and.

???: “——Oh?”

The moment subsequent to that sound’s echo reaching its righteous place, a voice, which had not been present in this interval, echoed.

The moment afterwards, the limbs of Dynas, who had been holding the two short swords aloft, spouted out blood all at once. On each of his limbs, a respective dagger was stabbing through extremely deeply, inflicting wounds, and the tendons had been accurately gauged.

Namely, it meant that the functionality of his limbs had been lost completely, and he was unable to prevent his body from crumbling down and falling.

Dynas: “Kuu, ah!?”

Falling onto the cobblestone from his face was Dynas, with his head being stomped upon from above

with all of its strength. With his nose crushed by the cobblestone, the consciousness of Dynas, who had gulped down the blow, was blown off.

Dynas was cut down and destroyed, and kicking his body, Batenkaitos stood up, and slowly, turned towards Otto's position

Otto: ".....Ah."

It was not his first time, exchanging glances with those corrupted eyes.

However, in a single moment, Otto's spirit had been entwined and eaten up within those corrupted eyes.

Because the whirling insanity and resentment, had considerable difference from those which were previously present, and was now even more dusky.

"_____"

It was a single moment.

The distance between them was diminishing in the blink of an eye, and when he came to notice, scorching heat pierced through both of Otto's legs. When he looked at it, at the frontage of both of his legs' thighs, were daggers, as if gouging out cruciform wounds.

Like peeling of the skin of a fruit, with his tongue sticking out, he exposed the skin underneath his trousers. The red cross-section and the pink sinews undersurface the skin, and the white nerves and bones creeping within, all of the green blood vessels, had all been exposed, unwounded, and Otto's throat became packed with out-of-place strong feelings.

He was dumbfounded. Till now he had never seen, a technique so beautiful.

The bleeding was minimal— no, there was no bleeding at all. This truly transcendent handling of the blade's edge, destroyed the human flesh with such aesthetical manoeuvre.

"_____"

Crouching down, Batenkaitos kissed that wound. The rough sensation of that tongue underneath, licked all of the vital parts of Otto's leg which lied inside of the skin.

Sinews, bones, blood vessels, nerves, he shivered as he felt all of them get licked, and at the next moment, both, in terms of his sense of vision and his sense of touch, Otto felt a repugnance difficult to bear and violent pain boil up in his brain.

Otto: "Ah, gya~a~a~a~a~—— ~hk!"

No blood, was being shed. It was incomprehensible.

He could just feel the pain. That too, instead of blood gushing out, the naked bones or nerves were being brushed by the moist wind, and the extreme pain because of it, it felt as if his muscles were being peeled off violently by needles.

His vision flickered, and his brain burst open. The organ that was supposed to comprehend pain refused to comprehend it. The screaming throat trembled violently, as if vomiting blood, and with immobile limbs, he was unable to even agonize.

And, while Otto screamed, Batenkaitos, overlooking him, tilted his neck. With long, dark brown hair sliding down his shoulders, 『Gluttony』 sighed, as if tired.

Ley: "Just when we thought it was rest after the meal, this circumstance. Even though gourmet and bizarre eating don't even matter..... Really, nobody understands what eating is aside from us."

Bringing a close to the insane smile and attitude, which had been there till now, it a voice terribly farsighted.

Batenkaitos slowly rotated his neck, and behaved as if he was mocking himself—— just when that impression arose, he nimbly changed his expression,

Ley: "Don't talk like tha~t. It certainly did get a bit problematic in playing around but, even still, a treat of Louis' taste ha~s been found."

Showing his fangs, Batenkaitos turned his neck around, and his line of sight was directed towards Beatrice. At that gaze, and Otto's terrible spectacle, the two young girls thoughtlessly inhaled. But, seeing the reaction of the two, Batenkaitos' expression, once again, changed into one that was empty and listless.

Ley: "Certainly it doesn't look bad but..... the vessel would be more guaranteeing than the insides, isn't it. On top of that, the Gospel's description hasn't been read either."

Ley: "Louis may not be able to see it but, the child inside us i~s informing us. The one over there, Beatrice-sama, is that, probably. If it's done then both the mind and body will fill, isn't she just the ideal opportunity ~tsu!"

Turning towards the right and speaking, turning towards the left and speaking, Batenkaitos exchanged words as if he was not talking within his self's own chest, but with someone as if he could clearly see outside.

It seemed, as if he was conversing with someone else present within himself.

No, the truth is, that was possible.

Within the 『Name』 eating blasphemer, Ley Batenkaitos, present were an innumerable amount of souls. Then, it may be possible for him to converse with them, or even properly discuss.

If that was so, only then could his conversation with himself be somehow understood.

Beatrice: "Can you move, I suppose, pipsqueak?"

Felt: "Ah? Right back at you, I hope you aren't scared, little girl."

Calling each other out, Beatrice and Felt exchanged a few words. Glancing into the eyes of each other, they confirmed that the fighting spirit of neither of them had been shattered.

Felt slightly snorted her nose, and then glanced towards the edge of the open plaza. Beatrice confirmed the presence there, and reckoned their intents.

Beatrice: ".....Now on, they will be coming after Betty, I suppose. They'll be confined, in fact."

Felt: "You'll be stopping them? If it's hurdling then I'd be....."

Beatrice: "You cannot have an idiotic expectation like making him vomit twice, I suppose. On top of that, regardless of determination, it's something Betty cannot use. You must do it."

Upon Beatrice's proposal, Felt showed an expression drowned in thought. But, the next moment, she raised her eyebrows and rotated her neck, swiping through her blonde hair, she let out a voice saying "Ah!".

And, she pointed her fist towards Beatrice.

Felt: "Don't fall through, little girl."

Beatrice: "You too, I suppose, pipsqueak."

Nothing in particular was returned to the pointed fist, they only exchanged insults preceding the accepted decisive battle.

While Beatrice and the other's conversation met its end, almost at the same time, Batenkaitos' self-discussion came to an end. Beatrice did not have the confidence, to collide head-on with the combat power that had slashed down and defeated Dynas and Otto.

Ley: "Well, have your preparations been complete~d, Beatrice-sama~?"

Beatrice: "If the answer is they haven't and you'll offer deferment for that, then that is the answer, in fact. But, if that isn't the case, then there's no point in that question, I suppose."

Ley: "That's exactly how it is. Hm, well then, once again—— let's eat!"

From the other corner, with his eyes locked with Beatrice's, Batenkaitos flew straight towards Beatrice. His velocity, was not of the level of the nightmarish threat that had been witnessed earlier. Regardless, it was sufficiently threatening to Beatrice. Her disadvantage at close combat remained unchanged. That's why, as an expert of Yin magic, it was a convention to not clash head-on.

Ley: “Ta~ke, thi~s——!”

Right before Beatrice, the body of Batenkaitos, who had his hands on ground, rotated vertically. The swinging launched heel drew close to right overhead of Beatrice, and the sharp strike pierced into the crown of her head.

Beatrice: “That won’t happen, in fact.”

——Right beforehand, Beatrice’s body, once again, tilted backwards thanks to the aerial force of the kick. It was the result of letting the effect of 『Murak』, which had been invoked earlier, to continue. With her body angled backwards, Beatrice then jumped straight up at that point. Freed from the effect of gravity, freed from the effect of weight, the young girl softly levitated.

Folding her dress’ skirt adroitly, Beatrice’s body floated in the wind, moving about.

Ley: “Magnificently done! Howeve~r, the coping is sweet!”

Batenkaitos, with his tongue stretched out, reached the spot of landing, and without waiting for her descent, went towards the mid-air Beatrice and tried to catch her.

With the vigour and accuracy of a bird of prey capturing its prey, those fingers reached for Beatrice. However, at the same time, it was also the proof of the opponent having ascent to mid-air, where there was no way to escape.

Above the remaining count of exercising magic being possible, this was an illustrious focus for striking. Beatrice pointed her palm towards Batenkaitos, who was advancing from below, and invoked the magic she had been utmost accustomed to, throughout her life of four hundred years, and this one year.

Namely——,

Beatrice: “Shamak!!”

Magic Stone shattered in her pocket, while following Beatrice’s chant, black haze effused—— the leaping Batenkaitos met with it straight with his head, and got caged within a world of

incomprehension.

Ley: “A~rgh——!?”

The black haze reached through, and Batenkaitos’ body fell onto the cobblestone, defenseless. He was supposed to be in a state where he was incapable of doing anything till it shook off but, Shamak’s effect was not so lasting.

The card left with Beatrice now—— with the remaining one Magic Stone that could be utilised, if she were to land a fatal blow, he would not be able to take it. That is why, this was the moment of choice for Beatrice.

Ley: “A~h! Aren’t you doing it, Beatrice-sama ~tsu. As if, you are fighting just like that person…… Did you receive influence or somethi~ng!?”

Shaking off Shamak, Batenkaitos showed his fangs, turning his body. Looking through the plaza, his eyes were directly upon Beatrice, as if fixed.

That is why, even after seeing his influence upon her tough fighting form, he did not realise how immense of a meaning it held.

Beatrice: “Here, lavishly feast upon the last Magic Stone, in fact!”

Shaking free from her sentiment, Beatrice pointed her palm towards Otto, who was lying down, with his legs rolling up. Using the magical power of the final Magic Stone, a healing wave was directed towards the wounds of Otto’s legs.

It was far from healing it completely, but still, it just had receded the hopeless pain. The rolled down Otto, who was in tears, coughed violently mingled with sobs and groans.

Ley: “So useless, now, what will happen by reviving?”

Beatrice: “This will happen, in fact!”

Beatrice yelled the consequence of her action at Batenkaitos, who was laughing, saying that she had

wasted her card.

The instant after he furrowed his eyebrows at her caustic words, at the rear of Batenkaitos' legs, something snapped its teeth. As fangs thrust deep into his left leg, Batenkaitos' stance crumbled. Instantly looking down at his leg, seeing that, Batenkaitos widened his eyes.

Ley: "Ha~h!?"

Surprised by the thing beyond understanding, what was present there was a Water Dragon bathing in blood.

With its neck stretched out, the Water Dragon, having rushed madly across the cobblestone, crunched Batenkaitos. The Water Dragon, which had once been cornered into being unable to battle, was persisting to its final willpower.

Of the five Magic Stones, this is how the third one had been utilised.

The first one for the intense UI Minya, which was unable to be completed, the second one for an urgent evasion through the use of Murak, the third one used for the recovery of the dying Water Dragon before the invocation of Murak.

The fourth one for using Shamak, and the fifth one for taking care of Otto's pain.

That is how Beatrice's five cards, her five Magic Stones for attaining victory, had been utilised.

Otto: "——A~h! lthurtsithurts, it hu~rts!"

Crying such that his throat was seemingly going to explode, Otto, who had hid his call for the Water Dragon in his shriek, having fulfilled his role, now, finally, screamed for his own suffering.

Otto is truly sharp in things like this, the moment after he had received Beatrice's treatment, he immediately understood what he was supposed to do under the current situation. Only he was capable of serving as the internal affairs official of the Emilia camp, who were often unwillingly dragged out to the battlefield.

Beatrice: "Well done, I suppose, this is your vocation, in fact!"

Otto: “I don’t really understand but I’m not happy to hear that!”

That was the response Otto gave, in tears, to Beatrice’s unusual compliment. And then, before the eyes of the two, Batenkaitos, who had been crunched upon by the Water Dragon, tugged it to the ground and threw it down, and somehow unfastening its fangs, tried to stand up.

However, their reactions were just before the trump card made it in time.

Felt: “——Preparations, all set. You worked hard, little girl.”

A voice elated with success echoed, and the rear of the Meteor knocked the ground, generating a particularly loud noise.

The staff, fabricated to deceive as if it was the back of a cesspool, its tip was pointed towards Batenkaitos by Felt. In her hands, the Meteor got tinged by faint light, and its after-effect blew off its package.

With the white package having come off, the slender white staff was revealed from within.

Its handle was long enough to qualify being the length of a spear, with no exquisite designs, or any eye-catching mechanisms.

It could be said that its dedicated utility and structure was, truly reflecting its creator’s spirit.

The very spirit of the 『Witch』 Echidna, who sought no further value of a device any more than what it was supposed to possess as that device.

Beatrice: “Mother…….”

The truth is, Beatrice had never seen Echidna use the staff. Even still, she was aware of its purpose, and its might.

To pester the Divine Dragon Volcanica—— to think it was a weapon, capable of obstructing even the Divine Dragon.

With that being said, there are some conditions to its usage.

Either fulfilling those conditions could be difficult, or there could be problems with the user, so clearly showing all of its limitless specs was arduous——.

Felt: “A~ll right, the power which connected to even Reinhardt, have a taste and see~!”

With the condition fulfilled, if Felt still had stock of Mana, the expected amount should be sufficient.

Sucking out Mana from the user, Meteor limitlessly continued to drain power, and the radiance lighting at its stip had its aim set upon Batenkaitos.

Ley: “——~tsu.”

Even Batenkaitos was unable to prevent the might from coming down upon him.

Judging that there was a possibility of it proving to be fatal, Batenkaitos instantaneously attacked the snout of the Water Dragon constraining his leg, and the moment its fangs loosened, he unbound his legs, and flew, while carrying the gash.

At that moment, the Meteor twinkled conspicuously and potently.

Felt: “Go—— ~hk!!”

Light distended at Meteor’s tip, and the corona was fired towards Batenkaitos.

Batenkaitos, who had escaped instantaneously from the restraint of the Water Dragon, somehow rolled away from its path with his injured leg. At the same pace, the light missed its aim, and collided with the Water Dragon—— at that instant, its trajectory warped. The light drew a complex trajectory, and approached Batenkaitos.

Ley: “Wha—— ~tsu!?”

With his self escaping from the chasing light bullet, Batenkaitos raised his voice. At the same pace, with carriage and jumping of his sharp body, he got out of the trajectory of the light bullet progressively getting closer.

However, it was futile. Even if Batenkaitos escaped away, rolled away, leapt away, the light bullet drew arcs, drew circles, inched closer, and aimed for a direct hit.

That was the greatest power of the Magic Weapon 『Meteor』, created by Echidna.

Once it had set its aim, it functioned so that it kept track of it.

The weapon created by Echidna to 『Pester』 the Divine Dragon Volcanica. If Echidna was truly serious regarding it, and wanted to engineer a device solely for the purpose of 『Pestering』, it is obvious she would not allow for any compromises in it.

Henceforth, that magic tool was, incapable of missing its aim, did not let its aim escape, and became a weapon whose hit always landed.

Ley: “Nuu, ~tsugh..... Then, how about this!?”

No matter how much he ran, the unbound light bullet continued its pursuit, and with some observations cooking up, Batenkaitos launched his counterattack. An upsurge of magical power, and Batenkaitos’ environs froze.

Various levitating icicles formed, with their pointed tips facing the light bullet, and the stormy barrage rained upon the corona—— however, that opposition was a mistake.

The moment the icicles came in contact with the corona, they got reduced to mana starting from their tips, and before they could land a hit, they interspersed into smaller fragments and got swallowed up by the light bullet. Furthermore, the light bullet absorbed all of the magical interceptors that drew close, and as that power enlarged its own scale, it continued to approach the enemy.

Ley: “Shit, no way..... no way ~tsu!”

Rolling, somehow getting out of its path, Batenkaitos let out the curse. However, the injury on his left leg was deep, and it did not allow for him to jump completely.

Otherwise, if could be agile enough, it may be possible for him to direct the light bullet towards Beatrice and the rest, or have it aim at Felt herself, but he did not have that much energy left.

The pursuing light bullet traced its path around the rolling Batenkaitos, and disabling the areas through which he could escape, it gradually enveloped the body of 『Gluttony』 in its destructive might——,

Ley: “No way, by something that looks so stupid, we will we will——!”

Ley: “Shut your mumbling. Right away, Solar Eclipse should be started.”

At the instant of the strike, Batenkaitos raised a wretched voice, which got painted away by, again, a terribly cold voice. And, the light exploded.

“————”

The dazzling corona distended at the core of the open plaza, and gave rise to the largest crater till now.

The expanded light blotted the world in white, and the parts which got blotted vanished, as if losing colour.

The open plaza had been hollowed out spherically, and the water flowing in the waterway streamed into it.

However,

???: “Whew, geez. Having an unskilled brother really causes troubles.”

Next to the destructive cataclysm, was a shadow peeping at the waterway.

Having lengthened brown hair, it was someone with a body covered in scars. Needless to say, the physical traits, were none other than those of the confronting Ley Batenkaitos.

How did he possibly, manage to evade the attack of the light bullet—— however, what was utmost astonishing in this place was not that.

Beatrice: “What does, this mean, I suppose.”

Beatrice’s words, did not stem from the confound of the attack not striking.

First of all, the attack failing to strike was not the problem. As the light bullet was supposed to strike Batenkaitos, and nothing or nobody aside from Batenkaitos.

That is why, it was obvious that it would not strike the muscular and brawny giant man, who had his back turned towards them. The problem was from just where had that man appeared from.

Otto: "Is that..... 『Gluttony』 ?"

Said Otto, raising his agonized face and glancing at the same. Though she wanted to deny it, Beatrice, right now, did not have any words for that. At the gaze of the silent Beatrice and the others, the giant man abruptly turned back.

The one there was the giant man, with a grim countenance, which resembled yet did not match well with Batenkaitos.

With an appearance that suggested he was close to his forties, there were no parts of him that even slightly overlapped with that blasphemer. In front of Beatrice, who narrowed her eyes, that giant man put his hand on his chin,

???: "There is no need to make such a puzzled face. We just, did this."

And, saying with feminine words, contradicting his appearance, the man relaxedly sliced away his long hair with his sword. As the chopped off strands of hair fell to the ground, Beatrice understood how the light bullet had been evaded.

The Meteor's tracking functioned till it has established contact with its target.

That was its power. Even if it came in contact with a single portion of the body, its might would be sufficient to amass the whole body. That point had been used in inverse.

The man—— perhaps Batenkaitos had, chopped off his hair, and made it seem to the light bullet that it had "come in contact with the body". And, fleeing from the attack's span with all of his strength, he had managed to evade the detriment.

By nature, for determining the Meteor's target, it was necessary to align it towards what would become the target and 『Aim』 .

Though it was best to connect to the target's Od or Gate, but in this case, being utilised as an emergency measure, it got applied to Batenkaitos' hair, that had fallen amidst the battle. Result of which, the light bullet strayed towards the decoy of the hair.

“———”

Thinking that much, Beatrice gnashed her teeth at how unfavourable the situation was.

She had not expected, at all, that the trump card, Meteor, would get dodged through such a way. Her Magic Stones had been used up, the only one left with her now was the one she wanted to save for Puck.

Otto and the other men could no longer fight, and Felt too, who had gotten the bulk of her Mana drained out by the Mana, had crumbled, breathing hoarsely.

There was nothing left that she could do now—— though that idea came up in her mind, Beatrice horizontally shook her head.

It would be better to die rather than accept defeat. Just as Subaru found a way out of even the most hopeless of situations, her self must do the same.

That is why, Beatrice raised her face, and set her eyes upon the man.

Facing the gaze, Batenkaitos rounded his eyes. He then put one hand on his hip, and covered his face with his other palm. And,

???: “Nice, how nice, isn't it nice, certainly it is nice, perhaps it is nice, possibly it nice, because it is probably nice..... we too, we too, see the value of 『Eating』 you.”

Beatrice: “——~hk.”

Before Beatrice could rebuke what babbling she had heard, Batenkaitos' body started to change. His bones distorted, creating a particular sound, with blood gushing out that was painful to even look at, the body of the giant man wilted.

Shedding blood from the newly created wounds, regaining the form of a young boy, was Batenkaitos, breathing hoarsely.

Batenkaitos' whole body was being wounded, however, he continued to express his insane smile. 『Gluttony』, looking towards this side while ringing his lowered throat, spread his two arms, in seemingly happiness.

Louis: "Our name is, Witch Cult Sin Archbishop representing 『Gluttony』, Louis Arneb."

Beatrice: "Louis.....?"

Ley Batenkaitos, that was supposed to be his name.

Without reading the intention behind suddenly giving a different name for himself, Beatrice furrowed her eyebrows. And, stitching that gap of confusion, Batenkaitos, with just his right leg, powerfully kicked the ground.

Beatrice toughened up her body, observing what he was going to do but, 『Gluttony』 flew to the edge of the plaza, recovering the tattered cloth that had fallen there, and wore it, as if hiding his scarred skin.

Above that,

Louis: "Unfortunately, that's all for today. As both Ley and Roy are too exhausted. Any further will cause hindrances in giving birth. Let's meet again, cute young miss."

Beatrice: "——! Do you think, you will escape, I suppose!"

Louis: "Please stop acting strong. Though 『Eclipse』 cannot be handled decently in this body, it can still at least completely annihilate. The reason that won't be done, is because the dinner table isn't prepared."

Batenkaitos shook his head and pointed his finger towards Beatrice, who tried to step ahead.

A terribly feminine gesture—— no, the truth is, the current Batenkaitos may possibly be a woman. At that part, there was the essence of something difficult to understand.

Batenkaitos nodded at Beatrice, who stopped her feet with unpleasant feelings and wariness.

Louis: “Both Ley of Gourmet and Roy of Bizarre Eating know nothing. After all. A meal is not “what you ate”. It’s “who you ate with”.”

“———”

Louis: “Well then. Next time, come to meet us along with the person dear to you.”

Beatrice: “Wai——”

Wait, just when she was about to call that out, Batenkaitos slid into the shadow of the open plaza and disappeared. Going after him was something Beatrice could not do, in this situation full of the injured. Following him, and diving into a situation where 『Gluttony』 was at a clear advantage would be reckless as well.

There no longer was anything that could be done, now that even the trump card Meteor had failed.

Beatrice: “.....It’s about doing it, in fact.”

Enduring her desire to speak out, Beatrice glanced around.

The pain had eroded away much of Otto’s consciousness, the mercenaries and Felt’s attendant had fainted, swooned. Felt was making a frustrated expression, but she was giving the impression that she could collapse at any moment.

And Beatrice, too, was no exception.

In accordance with Kiritaka’s desperate appeal, its completion with no deaths, should only that be accepted as the result of Beatrice’s participation in the battlefield.

Regardless——.

Beatrice: “It seems Subaru cannot even be asked for a hug confidently, I suppose.....”

In the prey that was allowed to escape—— in Ley Batenkaitos, slept the soul of a young girl.

Ascertaining the surety in that, how could it be conveyed to Subaru.

With terribly heartbreaking sorrow, Beatrice turned and stepped towards Felt, calling out to her faintly.

Ironically, the fight of this battlefield came to an end with the withdrawal of the Sin Archbishop——,

Only a few battlefields now bequeathed in the Watergate City.

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Chapter 71 - Sword Demon Vs Former Sword Saint



The various battles across the span of the city, were gradually meeting their end.

The destruction caused in the parts which had been turned into battlefields was immense, and the city's faculty had been greatly impacted.

This very fact, which conveyed the extent of the catastrophe that had occurred in this city of Priestella — could be said to be the result, of the malice brought by the Witch Cult into the city.

Within the situation of such destruction continuing to rise and be inflicted, there existed a single battlefield with a different hair colour.

Rather, it may not even be appropriate to call it a battlefield.

Only the solemn sound of swords clashing echoed, with each of the swiping swords aiming for the other's life.

Present there was only the tactless wish of two swordsmen, with the tips of their swords pointing towards each other, shredding everything unneeded, with their, what could be at least said, true desire upon them.

“_____”

The swords' blade continued to gleam under the moonlight, and the swordsmen continued to exchange love over clashes of steel.

Sharp reports, scattering sparks, the grey and red hair continued to dance under the rays of the moon. It was a swords dance so magnificent and polished, it would eventually steal the glance of all audiences, or rob them of their hearts, it was such that even the Sword God would ululate.

The unimaginably lustrous movement of the longsword, as if blading through water.

Bouncing back, the twin swords swept through the breeze, striking each other as if lightning.

“_____”

As if dancing a performance of reciprocated fixation, the swords of the two continued to intertwine with each other.

Wilhelm accepted the sword slash of the one in front of him, of Thearesia, who was still as beautiful as when she had been young, from the front, bathed in the sword slash with the same vigour, and felt grief at the reaction he felt in his palm.

Boiling up from the depths of his body, was the acclamation of the heart of his immature self, despite

his age.

——He was getting excited.

——He was getting delighted.

——He was blooming.

With honesty, must he affirm.

The Sword Demon Wilhelm thought back to the days before, and yearned for the present where he could, once again, connect with his youthful wife. His heart had been scorched by that.

His mind was now occupied by the thought, by how much he desired and how he would be willing to abandon everything, if only this exchange of swords, this tryst, just like this, never came to an end.

Wilhelm: “But——”

Such greed was blasphemy, it was unforgivable for him to even bear it.

Blasphemy, to the untiring days the Sword Demon Wilhelm had dedicated to the sword.

Blasphemy, to his oath of taking away the sword, from the Sword Saint Thearesia, once he put her to defeat.

Blasphemy, to his feelings for utmost dedication to his master, as a swordsman.

The love that lit up the chest of Wilhelm van Astrea, following it detachedly, would be blasphemy to everything that was living in this world at this moment.

——Henceforth, he must not keep settling it for later.

——Regardless of how much these moments, had proven to be a delightful paradise for the Sword Demon.

Thearesia: “———”

Wilhelm: “Hiy, a~a~a~a~!!”

A mute slash of the sword, like a storm, swept through, to which he responded with his own barrage of

innumerable sword strikes.

With long, deep red hair swaying, the movements of Thearesia, who was clad in white clothes, had no faltering.

Like a leaf that had fallen into a stream, the lethal sword was fired from the interior of her completely natural stance.

Up, down, left, right, her sword strikes had no particular angle.

However, as the attacks overlapped, Wilhelm felt something be slightly off. And the convincing sense of something being off, was something he felt also in her responses.

Thearesia van Astrea's ability as a swordsman was exceptional.

That was something, in those days, which were the golden days of Wilhelm's physicality, he had rivalled once, which lay unquestionably in the territory of pure swordsmanship.

Right now, that skill continued to bode in Thearesia's blade, as she stood in front of him, silent.

The art of a Sword Saint, to mercilessly kill adversaries, that brought both relief and envy to guardians.

——However, her current self and her self of those days, had a realm of decisive difference in between.

Wilhelm: “——Light.”

As the twin sword and longsword collided face to face and sparks scattered around, remarked the Sword Demon.

Locking swords, Wilhelm stared intensely into the blue eyes on the other side of the sword's blade.

Wilhelm: “Without even a need to compare, it's light, Thearesia. ——Your sword, which dropped its heavy load, is it something so light.”

Thearesia: “———”

A certain tone, those words mixed with disappointment, however, the eyebrows of her beautiful face did not even twitch.

Thearesia, with perfectly clear eyes, lacking all emotion, was returning a look to Wilhelm.

No refutation, no revolt, they did not even have enmity.

She used to be a woman who used to often smile, often get angry, often sulk.

She used to be a woman beautiful like the blade when she was silent, but the times of her being silent were almost none.

She used to be a woman like a spherical flower, blooming under the sun.

——So, her state now, was nothing but tragic.

Thearesia: “———”

Present there was only the shell of his silent wife.

As he exchanged slashes of swords with the figure he had continued to love, Wilhelm’s heart shattered into fragments.

Springing as if having returned to the days of the past, waning as if understanding the days of the past could not be returned to, casting aside the days of the past as if having a dream like the bubble on the surface.

——For fifteen years, what kind of a life must Thearesia have lead.

When he thought back to the time when he had lost her, and dedicated himself to vengeance, the incurable wound on Wilhelm’s shoulder ascertained itself.

A wound inflicted by the 『Divine Protection of Death God』, never disappears.

It was a Divine Protection aside from the 『Divine Protection of the Sword Saint』 bestowed upon Thearesia by the Sword God, in order to bring an end to those days of war.

A single cut could produce a river of blood, just a few slashes could pile up a mountain of corpses. Henceforth, there lay no necessity of superficial cleverness and artfulness, for her, to cut off the thread of life.

Indeed, the only way of defeating Thearesia, was through swordsmanship superior to that of hers. Wilhelm of the past had shred himself to his extreme limits, with such austerity that converted his own self into a sword, continued till the very end, had he really managed to accomplish that.

There was no way of defeating Thearesia, who, too, got her abilities boosted to their very limit through the 『Divine Protection of the Sword Saint』 .

And now, having exchanged swords with her youthful self, Wilhelm understood.

——The abilities with the sword were transcendent, and lay in the territory of dexterity. However, there was one enormous shadow upon that swordsmanship.

Wilhelm: “Even if you felt troubled before holding the sword, you no longer felt troubled after holding it. You were a woman, who knew that even better than myself.”

Thearesia: “———”

Wilhelm: “Do you remember the day we parted. At the occasion of the Great Subjugation, you shook me up, as I stopped you, and inflicted an incurable wound upon this shoulder. ——The words of that time, I have not forgotten even a single one of them.”

She did not answer. He did not demand it.

This was just, Wilhelm’s ceremony, looking back at that day.

Along with the pain of this shoulder, the memory etched to it was also resuscitated.

Whilst she commenced with the Great Subjugation, with the journey she could possibly never return from, Thearesia had literally let go off herself from Wilhelm, and had said.

—When I return, that day, please let me hear the words I could not hear.

Wilhelm: “I have come here, to fulfill the promise of that day—!”

The twin sword roared, and Thearesia’s longsword strummed.

The former Sword Saint swung the blade utilising that recoil but, Wilhelm, without even looking at that counterattack, dodged by fully reading through its trajectory.

He knew it.

Where the blade was going to come, enough that he loved it.

Wilhelm: “Ru, o~o~o~o~!”

The habits were the same. The techniques were the same.

Scorched onto his soul, within the austerity of his former self, when he shred himself, he had painted them in his mind, the sword techniques of the Sword Saint he was in pursuit of.

Defeating her, swearing to take it away from her, reaching that region, he yearned for, he yearned for, and they got scorched onto his soul.

It was the same, along with her figure, which warmed his chest.

Thearesia: “———”

Even against Wilhelm’s appeal, the crimson beautiful face did not flinch, even slightly.

As the sword aimed for its catch soundlessly, silently, emotionlessly, Wilhelm shot it down altogether.

He loved it so much, that he knew it even with his eyes closed.

That is precisely why, now he chose to love it without closing his eyes.

Wilhelm: “——~hk.”

——Above, returned the slash, exchanged swipes, raised the blade, slashed the sword diagonally.

Accepting the blade raining down upon him, and sinking the counter attacking strike, dodging the swipe then released, gyrating his body around the leaping point of the sword, both, who had slashed diagonally across each other's shoulders, then entwined their swords as the key performer, and shifted the counterattack.

Surpassing the blows with an elegant safeguard, impossibility arose in Thearesia's swordsmanship. Thearesia, who had accumulated the blows, retreated, and Wilhelm plunged into that gap without any hesitation.

“——”

For a single moment, emotion arose in Thearesia's eyes, who was looking at the Sword Demon. No, it was his misapprehension. His effeminate heart, had pulled out the memory of a situation of the past, exactly the same as this.

——Within the sights of abundant citizens, Wilhelm had struck and defeated the lead actor of the ceremony, the 『Sword Saint』, and robbed being a swordsman from the youth named Thearesia.

The return of that situation, exactly the same, as this one.

Then, the conclusion too, would be, again.

Wilhelm: “Thearesia—— ~hk!!”

Wilhelm attacked the longsword, flying towards her bosom.

The Sword Demon hoisted up his twin sword against it, and unable to bear the load, there occurred a fissure in the blade. But, at the same time the longsword repelled it by turning right overhead, and half of Thearesia's body largely opened up.

Drawing a large semi circle, Wilhelm's twin sword made its return.

Since the origin of this tryst and till this point, Thearesia, who was right in front of his eyes, produced the greatest gap yet. With the muscles of his arms swelling up, he gripped the handle of the sword, to the point it was creaking.

And wielding the attack with all of his might, now must he put an end to this inconceivable reunion——.

——He tried to, put an end to it.

Wilhelm: “——~hk!”

Violent passion packed his throat, with countless facial expressions floating in his eyes.

Her face when crying, her face when angry, her face when sulking, her face when smiling, floating were the beloved expressions, of the same woman.

Shaking that off completely, Wilhelm shot down the blade.

The sword slice dashed, and straight from the head to the torso of the woman——.

“————”

Before the slash struck, a person's shadow appeared at the corner of Wilhelm's eyes.

At the utmost limit of concentration, it was a fluctuation in his consciousness originally impossible.

However, that was all there was to it. Without any kind of influence, it was nothing beyond he could simply ignore.

As a swordsman, risking his life, he must cross swords at the border of life and death, outsiders could never create any room of doubt in that.

Devoting his everything to the existence in front of his eyes, he fulfilled his purpose with a sword slash befitting of the Sword Demon.

That was supposed to be what he was going to do. That was supposed to be what he could do.

——If only the person's shadow reflected, had not been that of a person of red.

???: “——Father?”

There was distance in between.

The doubtful voice was not at a distance that its echo would reach Wilhelm.

Even still, he felt as if the voice was whispering right into his ear.

Looking towards him, was a man with blue eyes and red hair.

Heinkel Astrea, was observing the final moments of this battle.

Simply dazed, at the conclusion of the deadly swordsmanship of his father, Wilhelm, and his mother, Thearesia, as they aimed for each other's life.

——At that moment, the glint of his sword became dull.

Wilhelm: “——~hk.”

He was supposed to have had fired a decisive strike.

Pouring himself into the trends of the fight, a sword strike that was supposed to bring an end to this long dream—— that glint dulled, giving birth to a scope for counter attacking.

“————”

Thearesia bent her body immensely, and reversing her wrist, the returning longsword rejected away the twin sword.

The sound of the two blades colliding echoed, and she disarrayed down the strike, that had promised to wound her, with her heart, technique, physique, and distanced his purpose further away from fulfillment, as sparks scattered around.

Wilhelm: “Kh..... ~hk.”

——Why, did he notice.

Receiving the blow of the sword fluttering in the wind, sidestepping its weight, Wilhelm clashed head-on with his emerging doubts with all of his heart.

If he had not noticed Heinkel's existence, or if he had ignored that existence, if he had concentrated on Thearesia, he would not be in this unsightly shape he was in now.

He had determined to dedicate his entire life, and take Thearesia away from the Sword God. The result of that exaggerated decision, did it have to be this predicament.

Once again, started the chaining of the sound of a light sword strike.

However, the blade that had formerly turned transparent after the exchange of blows, that swords dance had already been lost.

Foreign impurities had intermingled.

Using all kinds of strengths of all possible limits, further enhancing the purity of the blade, had all been lost by the edge of the sword, which was supposed to have had swung only twice, by a single appearance on the other side.

What was left was a single strike by the aged Sword Demon at his beloved wife, in front of their son.

Without becoming a sword, without living as a Sword Demon, he was far too immature, far too deficient, as a father, as a husband, as a swordsman, as a man.

Eventually being rendered incapable of a single swing, he realised his immaturity.

He was unable to stop evil from mixing, with the essence of his swordsmanship that was pouring into the sword.

Henceforth, this result may have been inevitable.

Wilhelm: “——~hk!?”

Shooting down the two blades, he, immediately afterwards, jolted the longsword.

Receiving the power of the sword strike with stupid earnesty, and the strengths were being compared in the gap created by Thearesia stopping her legs— the moment he overcame the resistance and stepped ahead, the slender body in front of his eyes rotated, creating a vacuum around. A leg appeared before him, halfway, and a gap was born.

“———”

Immediately afterwards, sense of demise approached him. He received the extremely powerful sword slash, whose coldness could not be questioned, by gyrating his sword towards the rear with not even a millisecond of delay. Without being able to stop the shattering attack, his sword, that had accepted it, encroached deeply into his own shoulder. Stepping as if on a foot bellow, the body that had bent forward spouted blood. His bones creaked, his muscles palpitated a lighting in his brain.

The right blade had accepted it. The left blade still remained. With blood flowing out of the edge of his mouth, Wilhelm, with his right blade, as if carrying it on his shoulder, once again deflected Thearesia's longsword upwards.

Without any inaccuracies, Thearesia's longsword was raised overhead. At the same time, the sword fell out of Wilhelm's right hand. He did not mind it. If his right hand was now free, he must dedicate all his strength into the remaining left blade and strike.

With his left blade, he smashed the blow into Thearesia, behind. His right drew a trajectory, and pierced upright into Thearesia——,

“———”

Sparks scattered. And a sound echoed, a high-pitched report.

The weight of the blade in his hand was halved, and Wilhelm, with his own errors, who had countlessly recognised his own weakness, once again noticed it.

The moment he struck Thearesia with the attack, Wilhelm chose to act unconsciously.

The blade gripped in his left, to strike it by rotating it towards the left or towards the left.

A slight, mere, meagre difference.

But at the same time, for those two, who had attained the extremity of swordsmanship, it was a lethal variation.

If he chose velocity, left, or if he opted for strength then right.

After getting caught up in that choice, if he realised that he had erred in that action, things could still be helped.

Wilhelm, deciding whether or not he should look at Thearesia straight up, in that single instant, lost his way.

“———”

Accepting the Sword Demon's attack, was a single swing released by Thearesia's grip.

Catching hold of it while it was mid-air, Thearesia cut into the trajectory of the attack.

The moment she accepted the sword, and engaged with it while standing still, she swung it down with immense force. That cracked the belly of Wilhelm's sword, and rejected the steel without facing any resistance.

The longsword fragmented his sword, and Wilhelm perceived the loss of his special weapon. Instantly gripping to the handle of the fractured sword, he prepared for the following attack, which was in his instinct as a swordsman.

However, that preparedness would bear fruit, if only he differed in purity as a swordsman.

In that respect, her self, in front of his eyes, was the worst possible opponent.

The Sword Demon who lost his sword, and the 『Sword Saint』 loved by the Sword God.

That difference was clear, there was no necessity for mentioning it.

—In the juncture when he forgot to even blink his eyes, Wilhelm saw the longsword pierce through his right leg.

“————”

It was a sword so beautiful, he almost got charmed by it.

The blade penetrated into the joint of the aged swordsman's right leg, and the edge of the sword was contaminated by minimal blood.

Without any unneeded destruction, right through the gap between muscle fibres and nerves, taking away only the functionality of the leg, it was the excellence of preeminent swordsmanship.

The lack of resistance was such that it seemed as if the blade was only swiping through water.

With that performance being held upon his own right leg, Wilhelm's back shuddered.

Was that feeling admiration, vexation, infatuation, the person concerned did not know, which one complied.

What he did know, was only the truth of his defeat being thrust into his face.

Wilhelm: “Gh, ugh..... ~hk.”

As the blade hid in his right leg and slid through, the height of his knees was divided.

Just as when the longsword had pierced in, as his flesh was drawn out soundlessly, Wilhelm groaned at the delayed pain and crumbled down.

As blood flooded out of his leg's wound, his lower body was rendered powerless.

If the power of the 『Divine Protection of Death God』 was invoked, any type of healing magic may he

used, but it will not heal. If the wielder of the Divine Protection was close, then the closer the distance, the more it's effectivity increased, no matter how slight the wound, it became a curse that eroded away life, and coerced endless bloodshed upon the victim.

“_____”

The wound on Wilhelm's right leg, was not so slight to be called a shallow wound. It was a gash that could be life threatening if it was neglected, and the 『Divine Protection of Death God』 was obliged to, and refused all recovery.

It seemed as if the deadline for his life, had been set for a period excessively short.

Wilhelm: “.....Regrettable.”

As his brain was being scorched by the pain, he leaked out his grief before his anguish. The sense of pain was stimulating a scream without any interruption, but Wilhelm revealed it on his face only by furrowing his eyebrows and nothing else.

He was not frivolously holding it back, or affixing it to his willpower. The sharp stimulus upon his body, no matter what, did not let his heart shelter from the shade of darkness.

While despair, despondency, and his own cowardliness and worthlessness was being scorched into his soul, how much meaning could physical pain hold for this aged swordsman.

“_____”

Dropping the sword in his hand, Wilhelm put his hand on the mouth of the wound. The bleeding was supposed to leak away his life but, the defeated had no intention of maintaining distance without any disgrace. However, according to etiquette, he must not meet his end by something like blood loss.

He had fought as a swordsman, he had opposed as a swordsman, he had been defeated as a swordsman.

Then, the life of the defeated, was to be taken away by the sword of the victor.

Wilhelm: "Thearesia, I am....."

Thearesia: "———"

The female swordsman of crimson, with her longsword on being carried on her shoulder, was looking down towards Wilhelm.

In those eyes, truly, there was no deep emotion present. Without remembering anything till the end, and continuing to not remember anything, she was the death god of the sword who was going to reap Wilhelm's life.

He looked up at the beautiful face, to the point he was fascinated by it.

Thearesia, silently, swung the sword in front of Wilhelm. When that sword would come down, Wilhelm's life, too, would come to an end.

But——,

Wilhelm: "All alone, never.....!"

The moment the longsword descended, Wilhelm extended his right hand. Over there, the fragment of the twin sword—— the sword Thearesia had cast aside, was lying there.

Wilhelm picked it up with his fingers, and floundered, unable to accept the moment of his death, till the end of the end.

His defeat, that remained.

That could not be helped.

But her, now, he must not render Thearesia, her, alone.

Unable to stop his wife, who was being made to swing the sword against her will, he could not allow her to advance towards Crusch, whom he was greatly indebted towards, or Subaru and the rest. If his life, being burned, was insufficient, then he did not mind the destruction of his soul after death.

——However, the brandish of that resolution was.

Thearesia: “———”

Wilhelm: “Thearesia.....?”

Keeping her sword held tight, Thearesia leapt a great distance backwards.

The blade he held in his right hand, she was a distance that its swipe would not reach her. At a position which Wilhelm, who had his leg injured, would not be able to reach, Thearesia slightly inclined her neck.

Emotionless eyes, seeing a terribly empty colour in them, Wilhelm, for the first time, got frightened. That fear, was a fear that arose in his instinct, in Wilhelm’s instincts as a swordsman.

There lay no necessity to go out of the way and deliver a finishing blow, to a prey bearing fatal injuries. With the pride of a swordsman lost long ago, there was the judgement which could be passed only by a cool-headed death god.

Wilhelm: “Wait..... Wait, Thearesia!!”

Wilhelm shouted, at the dread of being left behind.

His leg didn’t hurt. Forgetting the pain of his right leg, Wilhelm tried to pursue the distant Thearesia.

However, the pain, or at the very least, the wound, was real. Without any strength, he tumbled.

Potently striking his shoulder, the aged swordsman made an expression, conveying how unforgivable this was.

Swinging about her long, red hair, Thearesia became further distant.

Ahead of the path of her self’s footsteps, was Heinkel, standing upright.

The longsword, with no decline in fighting spirit hitherto, established him as its next prey.
Slashing the man whom she did not know was her husband, she will next slash the man whom she did not know was her son, for that——.

Wilhelm: “Stop, Thearesia! Do you think that is..... that is forgivable!? Fight with me! Look at me..... at *me*! Look at *me*, at *me*, Thearesia~a~a~a~!!”

With a voice, as if it was bleeding, Wilhelm called Thearesia.
Innumerable times, countless times, that name which he had called in front of her, with the figure he had thought of innumerable times and with the figure that used to be exactly the same innumerable times, the anger instead of the muted love, the insanity instead of ardour, putting all of it into it.

However, the woman did not look back.
Holding tightly the sword where abode the death god, the woman commenced heading towards Heinkel. Heinkel inhaled at that form stepping up, and was unable to unsheathe the knight sword he had with his hands, that should have been swung.

Heinkel: “W-Wait, I said wait. Y-You..... Thearesia he said, no way? It can’t be possible..... It, can’t be mother..... ~hk.”

Thearesia: “————”

Heinkel: “No, even if it isn’t mother..... that’s not it! Fa-Father had become like that, so..... shit! What is this! Just what is this, what are you doi~ng!”

Becoming imminent in front of his eyes, was Thearesia of her young days.
That form, and the form of her as a mother within Heinkel, overlapped. He shook his neck horizontally in repudiation, and desperately tried to deny the spectacle in front of his eyes, voicing words he was unable to put a halt to.

His knees sneered, his line of sight disarrayed, and his figure, while holding the sword, too, seemed

frail.

Faced with the former 『Sword Saint』, there was not even the slightest chance for him to hold it.

At this rate, unquestionably, Heinkel will get slashed to his death by Thearesia.

Only that was something, which could not be allowed to happen.

Wilhelm: “Thearesia! Here! I am still alive! If you want to kill then kill me first! Heinkel, there’s no way you can do it! Right this instant, flee!!”

Supporting himself with the sword, Wilhelm stood up feeling as if he was crunching stones. With no room for grasping his wound, his burden spanned, furthermore, his blood gushed out.

The cobblestone subsequently, after the overflow of fresh blood, turned into the colour of red, and while pulling the thread of that blood, Wilhelm pursued Thearesia’s back.

Distant. Too distant.

Slow. Too slow.

Once again, Wilhelm did not make it. Once again, Wilhelm could not reach it.

Wilhelm: “Hugh..... ~hk.”

Thearesia: “———”

Thearesia’s longsword drew an arc, and the knight sword of Heinkel, who had tugged in his shoulders, accepted it.

With not even the slightest stagnation, and Heinkel’s knight sword left his hands too quickly, raising a shrill sound as it bounced on the cobblestone.

Heinkel: “S-Stop..... Please stop, m-mom..... ~hk.”

Rendered unarmed, the frightened Heinkel fell on his bottom at that spot. Flailing around his limbs

desperately, Heinkel tried to escape, as if crawling.

However, his moving fingers, his terrified heart, Thearesia's emotionless eyes, tied his mind and body to fear, and he was rendered almost completely immobile at the spot.

His throat was parched, he wiped off the heavy amounts of cold sweat he was perspiring, Heinkel made a pallid face.

There had possibly been some incontinence there as well. However, having been robbed of the composure to be embarrassed at that, Heinkel stared at the tip of the longsword hoisted up.

——As if slicing the moon, the longsword extended straight towards the heavens.

At the brink of his life, Wilhelm witnessed the sight of his wife slash their son to his death in front of his eyes.

He raised his voice. It did not reach.

He stretched his hand. It did not reach.

Wilhelm: "Thearesia——!!"

No strength remained in the merely shouting voice of the Sword Demon, who had been unable to dedicate his everything into the sword.

Heartlessly, the longsword was swung to cut off Heinkel's life——.

???: "——That's as far as it goes."

That voice suddenly, but distinctly, cut into the tension, which seemed to be stinging.

With a dignified tone and not a single fragment of vacillation in it, it wielded no pardon. Those who heard it were struck with the sense of the presence of an overwhelming existence, and it was only natural to follow its intentions.

Wilhelm, Heinkel, and even Thearesia halted all movement.

Ahead of the line of sight of the three, stood a single youth.

Blazing red hair, like fire, perfectly clear, glittering blue eyes which had captured the sky.

Even while his white outfit had been contaminated by blood and mud, the figure, standing straight, had no need at all for words to decorate him aside from heroic.

The youth, slowly, continued to advance towards the place.

In that hand, was a scabbard with the engravings of deep wounds, and a knight sword unsheathed from that scabbard.

With the sword blade polished to the point of abnormality, he clutched to the Dragon Sword Reid.

——The voice of the laughter of the Sword God, resonated raucously in the ears of the Sword Demon.

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Chapter 72 - Sword Saint Vs Previous Generation Sword Saint



——The Dragon Sword Reid was a sword with numerous enigmas.

It was certain that, for generations, it was a treasured sword that had given rise to 『Sword Saints』 one after another and had been passed down the generations of the Astrea family, but from where that Dragon Sword had been granted to them was something that had not been passed down.

A treasured sword with an obscure past, and on top of that, the shady history of being unable to be unsheathed by anyone except for the 『Sword Saint』. Particularly speaking, even by the 『Sword Saint』, it was capable of being unsheathed only in times necessary.

It was a treasured sword that had descended down upon the Divine Dragon Volcanica, by the first generation 『Sword Saint』, Reid Astrea.

In the past, when dragons had advanced upon in immense numbers, slashing all of them down altogether, was this legendary sword.

Otherwise, it could just be a dull sword, a magical sword which increased its strength by breathing into the enemy's blood.

If we were to speak of its stories, all without any evidence, which seemed like mere fairy tales, there were countless.

Regardless, nothing could be stated clearly, and neither was there any way to confirm anything.

If there was to be a single thing, that could be asserted,

——The Dragon Sword Reid was a supreme sword that could defeat treasured swords, legendary swords, or magical swords of any disposition.

——It was the extremity of the realisation of steel into the sword, there existed no steel surpassing it.

Even for Wilhelm, who had been bestowed upon by the honour of a swordsman, with 『Van』, seeing the uncontaminated white blade, this was only the third opportunity in his entire lifetime.

Wilhelm: “——Reinhardt.”

With the jet black scabbard which had engravings carved by the claws of the Dragon in his left, gripping the Dragon Sword with his right hand, was he.

His red hair swinging about in the wind, lording over the situation earnestly with his blue eyes was the current 『Sword Saint』 Reinhardt van Astrea, it could be no one else.

Everyone was overwhelmed by the lone majestically standing figure, including Wilhelm.

Inheriting 『Sword Saint』, and becoming the sword of the kingdom as an imperial knight, was his grandson—— this was actually the first time, for Wilhelm to see his form to step into a battlefield.

Losing Thearesia in the Great Subjugation, Wilhelm left the Astrea family. His dispute with his son and grandson from back then, even after fifteen years, still stood, unburied.

Henceforth, for these past fifteen years, Wilhelm had always been pursuing his wife, and had continued to turn his eyes away from his family. Therefore, whether it was the deterioration of his son, or the growth and accomplishments of his grandson, he had not been witness to anything.

——That is why, right now, he was overwhelmed by Reinhardt's figure.

The one standing there, was the 『Sword Saint』.

An existence blessed with the love of the Sword God, having the ability to unsheathe the greatest sword, standing above the wishes of swordsmen of all dispositions—— that could only be, the 『Sword Saint』.

Seeing that figure, Wilhelm remembered.

He had completely forgotten his pain. What he remembered was a different emotion. The emotion Wilhelm felt when, a long, long time ago, he saw the sword dance of the 『Sword Saint』, of Thearesia.

At that time, Wilhelm felt a distance he would never be able to cover.

A territory he would, by no means, be able to reach and, Wilhelm lamented the trifling nature of his sword talents.

Even still, without crumbling, he swung the sword, he continued swinging it, and finally managed to grasp the edge of that territory with one hand. No distance is too distant, that is what he was supposed to have had proven.

——Such tapered, puny visibility.

The qualities were different. The heights were different. The weights were different. The things were different. Anything and everything was different.

That was not an existence to debate over whether it could be reached, or it could not be reached.

Quite literally, it was an existence in a different dimension itself.

“———”

Thearesia, slowly, lowered the upraised longsword. The sword had been on the verge of slaying Heinkel, but stopped in the face of the newly appeared enemy.

The heartless, moving dead body of Thearesia van Astrea had, already lost the pride of a swordsman, the style of a warrior, anything and everything.

What she had right now, were only the orders of the caster who was moving that dead body with some secret arts.

The optimum judgement for using her, was making her an existence that would be an obstacle.

And if that order prioritized those who could prove to be a threat, her judgement was natural.

Having been robbed away of the ability to continue the battle, awaiting only his demise through blood loss, was the aged swordsman.

Having lost all fighting spirit, unable to even flee, was the deputy commander in only the name.

Both of them, no longer registered as threats or anything such to Thearesia.

Therefore, turning her longsword, tilting her skills as the former 『Sword Saint』, towards the current 『Sword Saint』, was a judgement lacking any doubt.

Wilhelm: "Wait! Thearesia! Look here, at *me*! Thearesia~a~a~!"

Dragging his leg, pulling the thread of blood, cried out Wilhelm.

As if not having heard that cry, Thearesia took no notice of him. As if the exchange of sword slashes till now had all been a lie, she treated him as something that was not even present.

It was humiliating. However, it was even further saddening.

However, he had no time to drown in grief. He would never forgive such stagnation, of his current self. He must shout, now. He must stop her, now——.

Thearesia: "———"

Ignoring Wilhelm, who had tension in his heart, Thearesia leapt at once and shortened the distance. In front of the eyes of Reinhardt, who was in front of his eyes, Thearesia cavorted, with her long, red hair.

The longsword sketched a semi-circle, painting an artistic diagonal across Reinhardt—— however, in the gap shorter than the blink of an eye, Reinhardt nullified the sword slash.

Reinhardt, who was positioning himself backwards and sideways, was followed by the tip of the longsword, as if it was a living creature having a definite purpose. As it slashed the atmosphere of its trajectory to its death, even against the proceeding slashes, Reinhardt's complexion did not show the slightest change. Covering halfway of distance, he had not even been grazed.

"———"

Realising how unfavourable her standing position was, Thearesia silently flew towards the front.

Confronting Reinhardt with half of the body exposed, was nothing but suicidal.

Turning back, Reinhardt looked straight at Thearesia, whose longsword had set its aim at his eye.

Exactly behind Reinhardt, was the figure of Heinkel. As if shielding his father, Reinhardt confronted his grandmother. By just that, Wilhelm noticed how the offense and defense just now was for acquiring the standing position.

Heinkel: "Stop it..... what is it, just what is it..... what have I, what have I done.....!"

Making a blue face, clutching his own hair, Heinkel did not notice.

It did not matter, if his own son was standing in front of him before his eyes for protecting him. The preceding truths he had faced, were already overflowing from his heart.

He was not expected to have the ability to overcome the situation. That was how it was from the beginning.

That is why, all he could do was to raise his voice.

Wilhelm: "Stop, Reinhardt! Look at me! Thearesia is in the middle, of fighting with me! You are not permitted to cut into a battle, between two swordsmen!"

"———"

Reinhardt glanced sideways towards Wilhelm, who had cried out that they were still in the midst of battle. With his blue eyes, he looked at Wilhelm's right leg, whose bleeding yet continued.

Reinhardt: ".....With that leg, you cannot continue to battle."

Wilhelm: "What do you mean if my leg can't move! For grasping the sword, these hands are still alive..... if my hands die then my mouth! If my mouth will be ineffective then my soul! As long as I've not lost my life, I have not been defeated!"

Reinhardt: "If you've not lost life..... then, what do you make of her, who is in front of your eyes?"

Wilhelm: "——~hk."

At Reinhardt's question, Wilhelm's throat choked.

Thearesia, expressionless, with emotionless eyes, with sheer silence, was looking at her opponents. Keeping her stance at the corner of his eyes, Reinhardt sought an answer from Wilhelm.

Reinhardt: “A mere dead body without any self-awareness moving in accordance with the wishes of the caster—— I do not believe there is any meaning in fiddling around with the deceased, and involving the styles of a swordsman.”

Wilhelm: “Styles of a swordsman you say..... ~hk!”

Seeking to duel with a moving dead body, was foolishness.

Wilhelm was unable to refute, Reinhardt’s reasoning. It was the truth that Thearesia had already distanced away from Wilhelm, and the battle had come to an end.

No matter how much Wilhelm may cry out, the swordsman’s wish shall not be granted.

On top of that, the current Wilhelm could not loudly proclaim himself to be a swordsman either. Standing with support of the sword, the present scenario for his desire where he excused steel for words—— within that Wilhelm van Astrea, there was still the pride and dignity of the Sword Demon left.

There was nothing like that. He was empty.

Reinhardt: “——The deceased do not move. The deceased have no future. I will not forgive, that absurdity.”

Stated Reinhardt in front of Wilhelm, who had lost his voice.

His eyes had averted away from his grandfather, and now they closely observed only the dead body of his grandmother, standing in front of his eyes.

In a gentle motion, the Dragon Sword Reid was held to aim for her eyes.

Oddly, that stance was identical to that of Thearesia’s, as she bore the longsword on her shoulders, as if a reflection in a mirror.

“————”

The depressedly weeping sword blade of the Dragon Sword, was visible as shining, shimmering immensely.

That was the ovation of the sword. At having attained a chance to be swung, it felt deep emotions, felicity, and at having to oppose the one who was its former bearer, the supreme blade wore weeping yet delight in its voice.

Reinhardt: “————”

Thearesia: “————”

Soundlessly, the blue eyes of the two swordsmen, intertwined.

The 『Sword Saint』, with the sword wielded, did not offer his name as he originally should have.

It was natural. As it sought an opponent with the value that they would pay back the pride of a swordsman, and the style of a warrior.

Against an opponent who was not like that, against an opponent who did not have the value to be equal, it was not going to be conducted.

The atmosphere froze, the world was crushed by the tension possessing colour and weight.

Feeling his entire body get heavier, dominated by sense of compactness, Wilhelm opened his mouth.

Unaware of the words he should pronounce, he was compelled by the sense of exasperation stemming from him feeling that he must say something.

——Ironically enough, that acted like a signal for the two swordsmen.

Wilhelm: “Stop—— ~hk!”

His voice did not reach.

Leaving behind his voice, the two swordsmen clashed.

“————”

Stepping ahead, swinging, Thearesia's longsword let out a roar and slashed through the atmosphere, and her greatest sword slash, at the perfect angle, assailed upon Reinhardt.

In fact, this may have had been the slash with utmost refined beauty by Thearesia, among all which Wilhelm had seen till now.

Under normal circumstances, Wilhelm may have had been envious of the fact, that the entirety of the sword abilities sleeping within Thearesia, his self had not been the one to hale them out.

However, at this instant, the emotions distending within Wilhelm's heart were different.

And that something weighing in his chest explosively, had overflowed out by taking the form of certain words.

Wilhelm: "Don't kill her.....!"

The emotions he had contained, the passion he had suppressed, the things he had not wished for and the love he had admonished, rushed out as if breaking Wilhelm's barriers.

Thearesia, of the days of youth.

The woman who had caressed Wilhelm's heart, who had made him take notice of the world beyond the sword, the only one in his lifetime, even when he had exchanged his everything, the woman who had thought it was still not quite enough, was there.

The beloved woman, to whom he had not conveyed that he loved her, even once, was there——.

Wilhelm: "She is *my*, Thearesia—— ~hk!!"

Not once, had he said those words.

If he got perplexed, in a state where he almost lost his life, it would be inexcusable of him to prioritize his emotions.

It was a deed that polluted, the pride of a swordsman, the style of a warrior, the nobility of battle.
That was only, the voice of a man. Of a man only desperate, to not lose the woman he loved.
And, that call of preparedness for death was——,

Reinhardt: “——Grandmother, has already been killed by me fifteen years ago.”

A voice, quietly clamorous.

A faint voice, it was unknown whether it would even reach through or not.

However, unquestionably, it was a response to Wilhelm’s cry.

“————”

Thearesia’s sword slash, directly sailed upon Reinhardt.

The Dragon Sword, was yet to enter the trajectory of a swing.

It struck. It severed. That was how it would look to anyone, and yet.

Reinhardt: “The one over here, is a mere fake.”

——Dragon Sword Reid drew a locus.

A single swing, the Dragon Sword was soundlessly swung, and the white sword blade, as if in flow,
settled within the scabbard.

The guard of the sword came in contact with the scabbard, and only a faint metallic report was heard.

With just that, the battle came to an end.

It was the end.

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Chapter 73 - Thearesia van Astrea



Thearesia van Astrea was twelve years old when she received the 『Divine Protection of the Sword Saint』 .

It was a sudden and unforeseen change that caused immense distress in her life.

During her normal everyday life, it abruptly swooped down upon her.

“——? Could it be, that I got chosen?”

This was an honest emotion, the emotion she greeted the Divine Protection with.

And Thearesia continued to keep this truth as a secret for some time.

——The Astrea family's forte was the sword, and had given rise to the 『Sword Saints』 for generations and continued.

Thanks to the achievements made hundreds of years ago by the first generation 『Sword Saint』 , Reid Astrea, the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica recognised the sword of the Astrea family as an indispensable existence and asset.

This tradition had been passed down for years, including in the times of Thearesia.

Henceforth, every person born into the Astrea family, regardless of having the 『Divine Protection of the Sword Saint』 or not, was to dedicate themselves to the sword for their entire life.

This of course, applied to her father, her two elder brothers and her lone younger brother, the youngest sibling, as well. Regardless of becoming a swordsman or attaining the Divine Protection, they were supposed to acquaint themselves with the sword the moment they achieved awareness of mind.

If you were to ask how Thearesia, who was born into the Astrea family where this way of growing up was natural, was maturing, the answer would be—— she was spending her days completely parallel from the sword.

Of course, if you were born into the Astrea family, then, regardless of gender, you were supposed to

take the sword in your hands.

There were days when Thearesia and her brothers went through tough training. There were such days indeed, but Thearesia had absolutely no commendable aptitude for the sword.

Rather than that, it would be further appropriate to say that she never had the orientation for facing the sword.

Like many girls, Thearesia held no interest in the sword.

It was not that she was bad at it. Unmotivated efforts, accompanied with a defiant attitude. It was only natural that her parents would eventually come to notice that it was futile to make her keep swinging the sword if she continued to act like this.

—The 『Divine Protection of the Sword Saint』 was bestowed only upon those who had proven themselves worthy of receiving the love of the Sword God.

Generations were witness, only the members of the Astrea family were capable of inheriting the 『Divine Protection of the Sword Saint』. At the very least, that was what the common belief was, since no actual details regarding the inheritance of the Divine Protection were known.

It was only when the swordsman faced the sword with absolute earnestness, that the protection recognised him and bestowed itself upon him.

Seeing the possibility of her being the 『Sword Saint』 reduce down to negligible, Thearesia's greed was ultimately fulfilled and she was granted the freedom she very much desired.

Thearesia detached herself from the sword practice, but she as well, had her own, sensible reasons behind it.

Of course, both her disinterest in becoming the 『Sword Saint』, and her lack of motivation in using the sword were factors in it, but her biggest reason behind it was completely unrelated to these.

—Thearesia was aware that she had been born with the 『Divine Protection of Death God』.

The wounds she would inflict onto others would ceaselessly bleed, incapable of healing.

When she realised that her forte lay in taking away the lives of others, what was born into the young Thearesia, was the fear of what could result from her very palms.

Something like sword training was perfect for intensifying her fear.

Even if it were just practice or training, Thearesia's Divine Protection, over which she had no control over, would not regard the situation. Even if the wound she may inflict were to be as meagre as a scratch, the fact that it wouldn't heal made it no laughing matter.

Especially considering that a wound that may accidentally get inflicted during sword practice could prove to be deadly.

Henceforth, freed from the sword training, the secretive Thearesia felt alleviated.

Living without hurting those around you, was actually something difficult to do if you were conscious regarding it.

If you were conscious about it, you would notice that unintentionally and accidentally hurting others could happen very easily. How could you determine whether the Divine Protection would activate or not, in case you end up getting a cut on the finger because of a piece of shattered dish.

The young girl named Thearesia, unconsciously eluded from having relationships with people.

If she never made contact, if she never came close, she would not have to worry about hurting people. Gaining a natural tendency to avoid all eye contact, she started spending more and more time with flowers.

Gaining the freedom to discard the sword, she made a flower bed in the garden of her mansion for just herself, and growing seasonal flowers there, she began to love admiring them.

Her brothers who used to swing the sword in utter distress, and were repeatedly subject to difficult and painful training.

It is not as if she did not feel left out or sorry for them seeing their figures. It was simply just that due to her inability to tell them about her Divine Protection, flowers were the only ones she could be with and confide in with complete confidence.

"I wonder, if someday, even I would be able to live by someone's side....."

Her suffering, her doubts, the only ones she could confide such feelings of hers were just to her

flowers, as their petals danced to the rhythm of the gentle breeze.

This again, like that of many people, was the desire of the young girl named Thearesia, to love and to be loved.

Well aware of her possibility of hurting others, wondering whether she was deserving of being together with someone, all whilst not complying with the schemes of her brothers or her parents, Thearesia's days of self-doubt continued.

—In the midst of such days, the love of the Sword God was showered upon Thearesia.

“—? Could it be, that I got chosen?”

Without warning, that cognisance came upon Thearesia.

It dawned upon her more like a feeling of incongruity rather than consciousness like that of her 『Divine Protection of Death God』.

It was natural. To her, awareness of the Divine Protection she had been born with her was a matter of course, like eyes providing vision, and ears providing hearing.

Something like suddenly gaining a new Divine Protection would feel something like wings had grown upon her back. She greeted it with a sense of incongruity, which did not exist previously, and the widening of her horizons in terms of her capabilities.

—*I will not, take the sword in my hands.*

So thought Thearesia, feeling abhorrence and nausea for her new Divine Protection.

She thought back to the times when she had been coerced to swing the sword. She had realised how pointless, meaningless, senseless and aimless her actions were back then.

She was now instinctively able to understand how to swing the sword the best, the optimum, the ideal, the finest way.

Her self, whose forte lay very much in killing people, now fully gained the proficiency in killing people.

“—~hk.”

This was terror. This was despair. This was the day the world ended.

Kneeling down, she came to realise that she was a death god who had taken the form of a girl, and that her days of pretending to be a young girl had come to an end.

Thearesia did not tell anyone about the Divine Protection she had received.

She intended to conceal her possession of the 『Divine Protection of Death God』 and the 『Divine Protection of the Sword Saint』 for all eternity, and hide it within her heart that she was a monster whose only purpose was to kill others.

Pointing out that she was unwell, she shut herself in her room in the mansion.

Forgetting to look after even her flower bed, Thearesia hid within her shell. Doing nothing but sleeping, and hoping that one day she would wake up to find out that it was all just a youthful dream of hers, she enclosed herself in her shell.

But that was ultimately, just the immaturity of a child, refusing to face what she did not want to face.

——It became immediately clear that Thearesia had inherited the 『Divine Protection of the Sword Saint』.

“Nii-san.The next 『Sword Saint』 is your daughter. This child.”

The head house of the Astrea family—— Thearesia’s birthplace, and the base of the line of 『Sword Saints』.

Stepping foot into mansion, revealing that the bedridden Thearesia would be the next 『Sword Saint』, was her uncle, the preceding 『Sword Saint』.

The 『Divine Protection of the Sword Saint』 was an exceptional Divine Protection, capable of being inherited only by members of the Astrea family, with this trend continuing for generations.

That Divine Protection is inherited by the next 『Sword Saint』 from the preceding 『Sword Saint』 without any prior notice. And once the inheritance is completed, the previous 『Sword Saint』 is freed from his responsibility, and loses the Divine Protection.

Once the current 『Sword Saint』 loses the Divine Protection, it is natural that the identity of the of the next 『Sword Saint』 will be searched for thoroughly by the kingdom.

And the previous 『Sword Saint』 can identify who the next 『Sword Saint』 is at a single glance.

Thearesia's days of enclosure met their end.

“Take the sword in your hands, Thearesia.”

With her hair a complete mess, Thearesia was dragged out into the garden.

Barefooted, in sleepwear, with her consciousness drifting between dreams and reality, she was still forcibly dragged outside by her uncle, and forced to hold the wooden sword.

With her fingers, that had gotten skinnier, she gestured her resistance along with shaking her head several times.

However, the complaints of her opposed self went unheard. Her uncle forcefully handed her the wooden sword and made her face forward, once she had held it by its handle.

In front of Thearesia, stood the eldest brother out of the four siblings.

Her considerate and tender brother, who was polite and friendly with everyone, stood there with a confused expression. Unable to perceive what was happening in front of his eyes, his puzzlement could be understood at a glance.

——There were many gaps.

Thinking that to herself, Thearesia was startled.

With that confoundment striking her heart directly, Thearesia, speechless, simply kept her eyes open.

Ignoring Thearesia and her condition, her uncle called out to her eldest brother in a deep voice.

Hold the wooden sword, and attack Thearesia from above, he said. Prove your abilities of swordsmanship by striking down and defeating your younger sister, he said.

There is no way I can do that, called out her eldest brother.

Her brother was very kind. He had trained strenuously with the sword, and held no doubts in the way

of the Astrea family, but he could be nothing but kind towards his younger sister, Thearesia. She was afraid of hurting him, so she was never the one who initiated physical contact, but she loved hugging her brother and that huge body of his. He was a kind, kind elder brother.

Then echoed the voice of her uncle, calling her brother a coward.

At the mocking of the preceding 『Sword Saint』, her brother made an expression suggesting he had been hurt by his words. Thearesia knew that her eldest brother, her elder brother, and her younger brother had continued to swing the sword because they admired him.

Receiving such harsh words from him, her eldest brother was immensely wounded. Her two other brothers standing at the edge of the garden, who had also come outside by hearing all the commotion, also made similarly hurt faces.

Ultimately, her eldest brother, while maintaining his wounded expression, wielded dreadful readiness in his eyes.

Straightening the wooden sword he held in his hands, and transferring all his energy into it, he set his eyes upon his target.

Seeing the shivering in his sword, and a certain sharpness in her eldest brother's eyes, Thearesia came to realise.

Her elder brother, in order not hurt Thearesia, will have the wooden sword he had clenched in his own hands knock hers down. It was obvious from his stance, his look, his body language, and the way he was holding his sword.

At her brother's level of skill, it would certainly not be a difficult task to complete.

It would be sufficient to prove his ability as a swordsman by just taking the sword away from Thearesia.

“———”

At the stiffening of her uncle's cheeks, began the fight which neither side wanted to partake in.

Her eldest brother shouted energetically, and slashed the sharp wooden sword he held into Thearesia.

Limiting the movements of the opponent and having control over their actions was another skill in swordsmanship. If the wooden sword wasn't even uplifted, it would undoubtedly be easy to simply knock it down.

The very foundation of this fight was erroneous.

Neither did Thearesia have any reason to fight, nor did her brother have any reason to hurt Thearesia.

With the interests of both the sides aligned, there should not be any rise of faults.

There should not be, but——,

“——That's it.”

A wooden sword, that had been sent flying, landed on the ground at some distance, and its sound echoed.

Along with hearing the startled voice of her uncle, what was visible was the figure of Thearesia, with her wooden sword pointing outwards, and its edge touching the throat of her staggering brother, who let out a hoarse sigh.

——She remembered that she deflected away the attack of the wooden sword that came upon her upwards, and had taken away the wooden sword from her opponent.

She then had the edge of her sword touch the neck of her opponent, proving that she could kill him at any instant by making the difference between their proficiency clear.

With stunned expressions, everyone looked on at the unbelievable sight.

“The next 『Sword Saint』 is Thearesia. Indeed, unquestionably.”

Echoed the unrestrained voice of her uncle, saying that.

“Ah..... ah, a~h.....”

Thearesia dropped the wooden sword she held, glanced at her hand, and then proceeded to pull off

her red hair with the same hand. Pulling them off so violently that she would bleed, and raising a voice like that of a beast, she screamed.

Screaming, losing sanity, despairing, nearly bleeding, regretting.

Thearesia, became the 『Sword Saint』 .

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The time that her brothers had devoted to the sword, Thearesia's swordsmanship had mockingly trampled upon all of it.

Against overwhelming prowess of the sword, things like time and effort dedicated held no meaning whatsoever.

In the eyes of Thearesia, who had become the 『Sword Saint』 , the flaws in her brothers' sword handling were clear as crystal. She was now, in fact, surprised, that despite spending so much time with them, she had not noticed those flaws earlier.

But still, despite the clear difference in their strength and Thearesia's, her brothers pitifully continued to train with sword.

Neither her eldest brother, nor her elder brother, nor her younger brother possessed passion for anything other than the sword.

Because they had been born into the Astrea family, grown up in the house whose name was respected because of their swords, and had dedicated their life and fate to the sword, so even if their younger sister had robbed away their objective from her brothers, they still had no choice but to continue continuing.

Even if they know, that they can never, ever, achieve it.

——*Is quite stupid.*

That's the thought that comes up ultimately.

They should just do whatever they wish to. They should just not care about the sword anymore.

If they can never condone Thearesia, they should just live in their own worlds as per their own choice.

“Thearesia-sama, the preparations are complete. It’s about time, we ought to head out now.”

While she was looking outside the window of her room, at the garden where her brothers continued to train with the sword, a voice entered Thearesia’s ears.

When she turned around, what she saw was an elegant looking girl of the same age as hers, with a short haircut of her beautiful blonde hair.

She was Carol Remendis—— a member of the Remendis family, known for its superlative knights, and due to her recognised exceptional swordsmanship despite being of similar age as hers, she had been appointed as Thearesia’s attendant.

Undeniably, her abilities as a swordsman were indeed exceptional.

Though she did not want to mention this to anyone, but her proficiency with the sword was comparable to that of her brothers.

With a completely solemn personality, with profuse swordsmanship, she could not help but feel uneasy, as another female of her age.

“Yes, let’s go. For today we have the schooling of the people of the castle, isn’t it.”

“Yes. Everyone in the castle as well, is looking forward to being educated by Thearesia-sama. Of course, I also wield the same feelings as them.”

“.....I think you are already sufficiently strong, Carol.”

“Not at all. Someone like me, cannot even reach the feet of Thearesia-sama.”

As if downplaying herself, Carol gave her impression of her own abilities.

Thearesia somewhat staggered at her evaluation. After all, Thearesia had never upheld the sword in front of Carol. No, not just that.

The last time Thearesia’s hands had held a sword was when she had fought her eldest brother with a

wooden sword.

For two years after that, Thearesia did not make even the slightest physical contact with the sword.

However, she was still fulfilling her responsibilities as the 『Sword Saint』 .

The reality of her being the 『Sword Saint』 alone was a truth which could not be hidden. She couldn't go as far as to cause inconvenience to the entire Astrea family, so she was willing to perform just her duties diligently.

"It can be understood easily what is worth seeing and what is not at a single glance. Even if I have not gotten the opportunity of seeing it, if Thearesia-sama takes the sword in her hands, she would surely become a force which cannot be oppressed by anyone."

She gave a wry smile at Carol's beliefs.

Along with her, Thearesia went to teach on-duty soldiers. Even in the name of teaching, she had not really accomplished any commendable feats in that.

She would just go around and have them wield their weapons and train, and point out flaws in their fighting as always, nothing unusual.

The utmost terrifying aspect of the 『Divine Protection of the Sword Saint』 was perhaps how it heightened the battle instincts of the person to perfection. It was not limited to just swords. Whether it were spears or axes, if they were connected to battling, Thearesia knew all of their leads and imperfections alike.

If the soldiers' mistakes were pointed out to them one by one, they would eventually correct themselves.

However, from Thearesia's perspective, although the way of correcting those faults may be correct, it was never enough, and even if that slight change were to happen, the talented and the untalented would perceive it extremely differently.

Thearesia tasted a feeling of guilt when she was thanked, when she was given respect.

Just as when she had despaired over inheriting the 『Divine Protection of the Sword Saint』 , she now despaired over the situation she had been placed in.

Shutting herself in her room, enclosing herself in her shell, she always ended up hoping for the tides of her fate to change direction.

—This may have had been her punishment, for her selfish and arbitrary desires, for running away from the responsibilities she should have had shouldered.

In the Dragon Kingdom of Lugunica, wide-reaching conflicts arose with the demi-human community. In a heartbeat, the pent up complaints and discontentment of the demi-humans, which were scattered around parts of the kingdom, blew up and consumed the kingdom within its flames.

The utmost intense and brutal civil war in the history of the kingdom, the 『Demi-human War』 had broken out.

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With its origin from the east of the kingdom, this civil war worsened per passing day. It initially seemed like a small uprising of the demi-human community which could be resolved easily without it spreading to the point of damage, but the kingdom despised the deepening of demi-human relationships behind closed doors.

On top of that, there seemed to exist people bridging the gap with demi-humans through individual relationships, and as the conflict spread person by person, the fire of the civil war widened its radius in an instant.

As the fiery warfare progressively intensified and ceaselessly spread through the kingdom, and after an entire year of fruitless efforts of attempts for extinguishing the fire, the kingdom finally recognised publicly that this was a situation worse than anything the kingdom had faced before.

“Inform the current 『Sword Saint』 Thearesia van Astrea. To expect appearing onto the battlefield, along with the knights and soldiers, who are currently scuffling to subdue the civil war.”

Recognising the unprecedented situation as a threat throughout the kingdom, the senior aristocrats did

not intend to keep the asset of the 『Sword Saint』 for last.

Of course, Thearesia also received the message regarding request of participation in the war.

——Thearesia despaired at the arrival of the inevitable future.

This was unlike her days of selfishly refusing to take the sword.

What was expected of her now was not her knowledge as the 『Sword Saint』, but true swordsmanship and strength as the 『Sword Saint』.

She had no choice, but to take the sword.

This was also the first time she had also been handed over the Dragon Sword Reid, which only the 『Sword Saint』 may wield.

“However, that sword can be drawn only when it needs to be drawn. I believe you will have to carry another sword aside from that one too. You can choose one as per your liking.”

Her uncle, the former 『Sword Saint』, gave her advice out of experience.

Her uncle, who had previously wielded the Dragon Sword on his waist, understood how whimsical the sword was. In accordance with her uncle’s advice, the longsword which provided the best swinging—one which was also liked by Carol, a fellow sword user, was the one Thearesia chose.

——In her first battle, Thearesia was accompanied by Carol, along with her brothers and her uncle.

For Thearesia, she would not say this batch of hers was set up for a clear weathered stage.

Even so, she could not turn her eyes away for even an instant. This was also an opportunity to show the power of the legendary Astrea sword to people of the kingdom.

Regardless of Thearesia’s thoughts and feelings, her surroundings progressed arbitrarily.

Anyone and everyone burdened her with arbitrary expectations, like how there is no way the 『Sword Saint』 could lose.

The unrestrained, insensitive faith by those surrounding her, intimidated Thearesia.

As if it had become normal now, concealing it from everyone, hiding it in her heart, Thearesia trembled only in front of the batch accompanying her to her first battle.
And, seeing her in such a shape——,

“Are you scared, Thearesia?”

Yes, the one to raise his gentle voice for her was her, one and only, eldest brother.

Thearesia, while awaiting her first battle in a tent, was astonished to see her elder brother speak to her, that too, with such kindness.

Thearesia had consciously been avoiding contact with her elder brother.

No, her eldest brother was not the only one she avoided. Her elder brother, her younger brother, as well as her parents and her uncle, she had avoided coming into contact with all of them.

After two long years, this was the first time she had exchanged such words of kindness with her beloved brother.

Thearesia could not help but continue looking downwards, at a loss for words.

However, her brother sat down next to Thearesia, who had a dejected expression, and gently patted her head.

Thearesia was caught off-guard, seeing how the palm of her brother had still not changed at all.

“I know, that you hold a feeling of indebtedness towards me or the rest of our brothers. It’s not as if I didn’t think anything by losing to you like that either. But.....”

Cutting his words midway, her brother showed her a slight smile.

That was her brother’s very smile, the one which Thearesia had looked at again and again, repeatedly.

“You are my treasured younger sister. If you don’t want to, if you are scared..... I will have to protect you. Because I, am your elder brother.”

“N..... Nii-san.....”

Tears poured down her cheeks. She must not voice out her weakness.

Her above all, one and only, brother, whom she had defeated, must not hear it. So she thought, but her brother repudiated her thoughts.

“After losing to you, it was painful, I thought that I should quit. But, even still, I loved the sword. I am grateful that I was born into this family, I had my younger brothers, and I had you as my younger sister. I am grateful, to the sword.”

“———”

“That is why, I am glad that I swung the sword.”

Thearesia realised her own idiocy, for deeming his thoughts as stupid.

Even after seeing them get defeated, seeing her brothers aim for training with the sword, she thought that they had no other path but that, ignorant regarding everything else, she thought they were swinging the sword because they had no choice, that they were merely clinging onto it, being under this impression, she looked down upon them.

Thinking that they should just do whatever they wish to, Thearesia arbitrarily put her brother on her own scale and deemed his value.

She mocked her brother by reducing his person to a mere swordsman, whom she should have had admired, whom she should have had respected.

Who was stupid here. She was stupid here. And, the Sword God was utmost stupid here.

Why, did he not direct his love to the human who loved him so much.

Why, did he bless a human like herself, who always turned away from the sword.

Her brother, or other people like her brother were the ones who deserved to be blessed, yet.

“There is no need, for you to fight. ——After all, you are a kind girl, who wouldn’t even dare kill an insect.”

Afraid of the power of the 『Divine Protection of Death God』, she always made sure she never hurt anyone or anything.

She had misjudged her brother, but her brother well understood his younger sister.

This gave her such contentment, that in these two years, this had moved her heart the most.

She ended up acting like a spoiled child, she ended up depending on him. She clung onto him, cried into him, she left it all up to him.

——In Thearesia's first battle, her brother died protecting their troops' headquarter.

Not once, did Thearesia swing the sword. She could not.

And once again, Thearesia refused to touch the sword for years to come.

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——It had been five years since the Demi-human War started, and Thearesia had turned nineteen.

The 『Divine Protection of the Sword Saint』 remained unchanged, continuing to silently breathe within her.

However, Thearesia, who was extremely crucial to the war worsening per passing day, detachedly and unconcerned, was spending her days leisurely.

Thearesia's first battle, where she had been unable to battle.

The battle, where the 『Sword Saint』 was expected to unleash her fierce strength, broke down completely, and her eldest brother got killed amidst the warfare. Thearesia's heart, taking fatal damage due to that reality, was then unable to accept touching the sword again.

The truth that the current generation 『Sword Saint』 had such a dishonouring first battle was completely concealed from the public. The existence of the 『Sword Saint』 also held spiritual relevance to the kingdom. They could not dare reveal that she had cried into her brother before the

fight and that she had enclosed herself away once her brother had died.

Henceforth, without letting the public be aware of it, Thearesia's dishonour was erased from all records.

And her elder brother and younger brother, who also participated in the battle in order to protect the name of the Astrea family instead of the enclosed Thearesia, who refused to fulfill her duty as 『Sword Saint』, also died.

Her eldest brother, full of kindness, who would hear any of her wishes with true concern.

Her elder brother, who was slightly mean, but was always the first one to apologize when they made up.

Her cute younger brother, a scaredy-cat and a crybaby, who would always walk behind her, following her path.

All of them lost their lives while fighting in Thearesia's place, who refused to fight.

“——I forced you into all this, didn't I. My bad, Thearesia.”

Her uncle, the former 『Sword Saint』, who was the source of motivation for their troops, also died fighting.

Fighting ceaselessly, ignoring his injuries, and finally working for amendment of relations and a ceasefire, and ordering retreat of his troops, he died making outstanding accomplishments in the battle.

It is not as if she didn't hold anything against her uncle.

If it weren't for her uncle's revelation, perhaps nobody could have had ever gotten to know about Thearesia inheriting the 『Divine Protection of the Sword Saint』. If that would have had never been found out, her brothers may not have had prepared for being martyred in this civil war, and may not have had died at all.

If she thought about all that, then she surely did hold a grudge against him. She did, but she also felt like she didn't.

Her uncle must have had himself known the weight of the title of 『Sword Saint』 better than anyone else. As the previous 『Sword Saint』, he also, naturally, must have had gone through the same things as Thearesia.

His actions must have had been the optimum for both the kingdom, and Thearesia, alike.

Even if that doesn't work, his last words in his final moments.

After hearing those words, Thearesia could no longer hold a grudge against him.

Then if she were to look for someone to hold a grudge against, the only option left for her was herself. Her self, who was always weak and crying, despite inheriting the title of 『Sword Saint』.

“Thearesia-sama is someone who will surely stand up. That time has simply not arrived yet.”

Carol, her associate, never did once try abandoning Thearesia, who had been devastated by the repeated deaths of her loved ones.

Making her first battle a sight truly unpleasant, missing opportunities due to her own selfishness, and the now enclosed, alone Thearesia, was someone Carol still wanted to have faith in.

Even the recent orders from the Royal Castle have had her replaced from areas of utmost and direct exposure.

However, even after Carol showed such strong hopefulness in her, Thearesia was unable to respond to her feelings.

“_____”

Once away from Carol's monitoring, Thearesia reflexively started walking around in the capital.

The whole place was covered by a somewhat unpleasant atmosphere, as the civil war, that had been fought for five years, had killed all of the city's vibrancy. With that vibrancy dead, all of the people's expressions had also died out. Away from all crowded places, away from all eyes, stood Thearesia alone.

The place which recently had become the spot where Thearesia frequented her trips to, was an area at the border of the capital.

It was an area whose development had been thrown aside due to the start of the civil war. Through the ruins and gaps in the pillars of the building, she aimed for the area behind.

What slightly opened up past that was the place Thearesia had taken liking to, an area which couldn't even be called a plaza.

It was not so special that it would make the heart skip a beat or anything.

That empty area which existed within the ruins, would just calm the heart by emptying it of all thoughts.

In the somewhat ironically cool breeze of the morning, Thearesia headed for the back of the area. Sitting on the detached fragments of stone, looking onto the other side, what she saw was a flower garden stretching across, with the petals of the yellow flowers dancing sweetly in the wind.

The sunlight shining in, and the soil unnecessarily adequate for the growth of the flowers.

In this clandestine setting, Thearesia had sown the seeds of these flowers. Her flowers in the mansion, back then, she had been too inept to take proper care of them, and they had all eventually died out. However, she held similar feelings, seeing the results of the seeds she had sown whimsically.

"I haven't even watered you..... yet you have grown this much."

Flowers, are strong.

Even while Thearesia reflects on her own weaknesses, the flowers, looking only towards the sky, unfurl their petals, and bloom in utter magnificence.

She had earlier admired their splendour, but now she embraced her wish for their strength.

She experienced her feelings swell up, and she felt as if she were about to cry.

She achingly tried to hold back her tears, and had her fingers touch the canthus of her eyes, which had an unexpected warmth.

——That was the moment, when a stinging presence got close to her.

“Ah, I’m sorry.”

It was that treacherous presence itself, who had barged into Thearesia’s morning sanctuary. Just as when she was about to show her tears, Thearesia, deliberately, said such words, in an attempt to show her strength. And then, she glanced at the one who had appeared onto the square.

She saw, and she was completely awestruck.

Trimmed brown hair, elegant yet fierce eyes, a flexible, slim and fit body, and his brimming clear skin dazzling so brightly, it was frightening.

However, what had astonished Thearesia at that moment was not something so shallow.

——To Thearesia, the youth looked exactly like an unsheathed sword.

She felt as if the hot, firm, sharp steel itself had his eyes upon her.

In front of that mirage, Thearesia’s heartbeats tangled. Putting her hand on her chest, Thearesia contemplated what had happened to her.

However, the only thing that came to her mind, was that the youth would not understand the tangling of her heartbeats.

Henceforth, to hide that, Thearesia said.

“So, there are people who would come here so early in morning. All the way here——”

“——”

Quite the greeting, that was.

Thearesia spoke to him sociably, but the youth narrowed his eyes, and it felt as if the tip of a sword had been directly pointed towards her. A sword so stable and intense, that it did not seem like a threat.

Perhaps he intended to reject Thearesia's unsympathetic thoughts.

Suddenly, it got unentertaining.

If he was going to use that card, neither will Thearesia hold anything back. She will make him understand that he had misunderstood that sword of his.

".....Did something happen? You're making such a scary face."

At Thearesia's words, the youth made an expression as if he had tasted an under-shoulder swing down.

He seemed to have had judged Thearesia to be a laywoman at swordsmanship, and not just that, at fighting entirely. The truth is, he was not wrong.

Thearesia lacked any experience of actual fighting, nor did she have any records of her swinging the sword.

She was a laywoman who would be stronger than anyone else, if she were to actually fight.

"What's a woman doing here so early in the morning."

The youth responded, with rough and harsh words.

The voice of the youth, which she had heard for the first time, was sullen, but his voice was simple and easy to listen to.

—And once again, she felt the rhythm of her heartbeats go off-note.

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Since that, Thearesia and the youth starting seeing each other again and again frequently.

Apparently, it seemed like the youth used to come to the square on fixed holidays.

It did seem like he was bothered by Thearesia's presence, but he never forced her to go someplace else. Perhaps he thought, that the person he would have to approach was a nuisance.

For seeing that yellow flower garden, Thearesia used to walk up to the square.

There were times the youth was the first one to arrive, whereas, other times, Thearesia was the first one to do so. While Thearesia sat on the piece of concrete and admired the flower garden, while the youth devoted himself to training with the sword, swinging it with swiftness and excellent technique, and these activities became the promise of the two, who used to spend time in that place.

“———”

Glancing secretively, she looked at the swords dance of the youth.

Without thinking, she was about to voice out a sigh. Looking at the swordsmanship of others, and feeling this way, was something extremely rare for Thearesia—— no, this may have had been the first time.

First, she remembered the disgust she had felt by the form of the youth, clutching the sword.

The youth was not at fault here, this was because of Thearesia's own beliefs. After she ran away from her role as the 『Sword Saint』, even in the place she ran to, she had come across someone holding a sword.

She had also been chased away from the single restful place she had finally found. Such deplorable uneasiness of hers, was wiped away the moment she saw the youth's swordsmanship.

The swinging of the sword by the youth, there was nothing particularly obsequious about it.

In the eyes of Thearesia, who possessed the 『Divine Protection of the Sword Saint』, there were imperfections easy to find as well. Seeing the faults in the sword handling of others and feeling revulsion by it, was a bad habit of Thearesia's, but in the youth's case, his sheer passion was used to cover up for his flaws.

Thearesia's brothers also, must have had dedicated their everything to the sword as well.

Even for her brothers, elder or younger, who had such devotion for the sword, it was not as if Thearesia had been unable to harbour any negative feelings.

But still, why did she not feel the same for this youth and his sword.

The answer to that, is surely surprisingly simple.

“How stupid.....”

——There were absolutely no impurities in the sword of the youth.

He had offered up his everything to the sword, he had dedicated his everything to the sword.

It's easy to put it in simple words, and Thearesia thought that her brothers had done to same till now, it was unthinkable.

Truly, the youth here was full of passion, he, who only had the sword.

He had nothing but the sword. He loved nothing but the sword. He would love nothing but the sword, that was established like a swing of steel.

“.....How, stupid.”

Observing the youth's swordsmanship from the side, Thearesia felt warmth enter her cheeks.

Thearesia was the 『Sword Saint』. Blessed with the love of the Sword God, an existence that stood above all swordsmen.

Her existence also stood in his path, for achieving his vexatious goal.

Although it was unquestionably her own delusion, she felt as if he was asking her.

The 『Sword Saint』 Thearesia, could understand everything about the sword by just looking at it.

She could see its true nature, no matter what kind of a treasured sword, devilish sword, durable sword, or in the worst case, Dragon Sword it was. She was able to use it freely. There existed no steel which could hide its secrets in Thearesia's hands.

He was the only one.

He was the only one, who would not bend to Thearesia's free will.

He was a sword, yet his limits could not be determined by her self, who was the 『Sword Saint』.

Unmistakably, that is why, her self had grown to care so much about him.

“It’s Wilhelm Trias.”

Three months after meeting him for the first time, she had exchanged names with the youth——
Wilhelm.

Even though they had come across each other several times, never did they once inquire about each other’s names.

The truth is, Thearesia had been waiting for a chance to do so, but Wilhelm cluelessly ignored her wish. They had finally managed to exchange names, only because Thearesia got impatient and initiated it, Wilhelm merely gave the appropriate response.

“I had called you the “flower woman” in my mind till now.”

Just how impolite could he be, this man.

His words had not a fragment of sympathy, nor did she particularly mind, with her thoughts preoccupied by her own self, and she used to get satisfied by talking just a bit and return back, so now, Thearesia’s heart was fluttering.

“Do you like flowers?”

“No, I hate them.”

This was his reply, even after seeing the magnificence of Thearesia’s flower garden so many times. Undoubtedly, he was unable to respond merely to play along with the other party or uplift their spirits. Even after having a feeling of angst because of that, she could not help but think “But, this is precisely why, he is such a sword-like person.....”.

For the sword who would not bend to her will, the 『Sword Saint』 was nothing too big, and Thearesia, at that time, failed to realise how she had been saved by that.

“——Why, do you swing the sword?”

Ever since they exchanged names, the words they exchanged started to vary as well.

They used to talk about flowers and just some other miscellaneous topics, and then go back. What had caused the change in that on that day, was perhaps because of the low spirits of that day.

The attempts to subdue the demi-human war had failed, and Thearesia had heard about the struggles on the battlefield.

Scattered across the kingdom, the demi-humans who were at the core behind all the destruction being caused were outstandingly strong, and among them was a 『Witch』 commanding immense supernatural strength, whose existence had also been confirmed, is what she had heard.

She became uneasy, abruptly.

She had heard from his own mouth, that Wilhelm was not a soldier of the kingdom. Yet he was an extraordinary swordsman. On top of that, he had eyes which had seen an awful lot of blood.

In such troubled times for the kingdom, he was surely qualified to be a soldier—— rather than that, it was not he was undefeatable. Someday, even he may also no longer be able to come to this square on mornings.

Due to the anxiety caused by that, Thearesia had asked this question.

Putting a finish to his swords dance, the sweaty Wilhelm looked straight into Thearesia's eyes, with utter seriousness. Pausing for a moment, he thought of a response, shrugging his shoulders, gesturing that he seemingly found the question stupid.

“Because this, is all I have.”

Yes, that was his steel-like response.

And for Thearesia, this was supposed to be precisely what she had hoped for.

Thearesia was well aware, of the feeling of uneasiness and isolation within her chest.

“Have you come to like flowers?”

“No, I hate them.”

“Why do you swing the sword?”

“Because this, is all I have.”

Someday, it had become a promise between them, to reiterate just this exchange of words. Thearesia herself, had no what idea what she should expect as an answer to her restated questions. She did not know, whether it was fine for his answers to remain unchanged, or whether she should expect some variation in his unchanging responses.

Imprudently leaving things she did not know the way they were, was the very essence of Thearesia. Like how she, despite having the title of 『Sword Saint』, had sent her brothers to their deaths, and had forced Carol into a corner, who was now desperately fulfilling her own duties.

That is why, change always arrived and passed by, all whilst ostracizing Thearesia from itself.

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The one to reach that area first, normally used to be Thearesia.

Wilhelm’s visits, which had been irregular previously, were also consistent now, and the words they had to exchange with each other were also fully prepared.

Thearesia had lately also come to realise, how immaturely she had treated the existence of the sword. By exchanging worlds with Wilhelm, by having her eyes upon he who had dedicated his everything to the sword, Thearesia was briefly able to forget the weight on her shoulders as the 『Sword Saint』. She had been enchanted by him because she was the 『Sword Saint』, she had been saved by him calling being the 『Sword Saint』 was nonsense.

Whether she wanted to the 『Sword Saint』 , or did not, both of them would be dishonesty on her part.
As she continued to dive into the lukewarm water lacking an answer, soaking guilt embraced her.
Despite both of her desires, she wanted to be able to forget his existence.

“——Wilhelm.”

As usual, Thearesia looked back, sensing the easy-to-sense presence.
Standing on the entrance of the square, was the youth of the sword.

Without thinking, her lips moved, and Thearesia smiled at him.

“————”

That was the moment, when her emotions broke down.

With his eyes turned away, as his lips shivered, Wilhelm put his trembling fingers on his face.
Thearesia herself was astonished to see his dramatic response, and tasted an impact.
Thearesia rushed over to him, who was covering his face, wondering what she should apologize for.
However, she did not know what she should say.

Till now, Thearesia had refused to come in contact with people if it meant she would not hurt them.
That is why, when she would hurt someone's heart, she did not know how to treat it either.

She despaired. At her own self, who did not know how to, and neither ever tried to know how to.
At her own self, who was unable to voice any words, in front of the hurt Wilhelm.

“Wilhelm.....”

Without knowing what she should perhaps say, Thearesia's fingers reached for Wilhelm. Just how long
had it been, since she had initiated physical contact with anyone.
Afraid of wounding others, she had refused to touch anyone.

Even still, at this moment, she was much more afraid of not touching him.

Thearesia embraced Wilhelm's fingers, which were covering his face. While he trembled terribly helplessly, they tasted unbelievable heat, and she noticed.

Swords, steel, when exposed to such incredible heat, turn into further strengthened steel.

Wilhelm was a sword that always struck first, but he was, in no way, one that was complete.

And now, Wilhelm was receiving this heat, and was changing like steel.

For that, it was now expected of Thearesia to take the role of striking the steel.

——If she was dealing with a sword, then she, the 『Sword Saint』, was supposed to know that.

In the case of this person, in the case of this sword, she must have had wanted to know that.

“Have you, come to like flowers?”

Naturally, she voiced her usual question.

If there was someone else here aside from these two, they may have deemed her words as stupid, as they would have expected her to say something consoling. Amidst these two, however, this was for the better.

“.....I don't, hate them.”

And, a different response came for her unchanged question.

That is what the Thearesia of back then thought about this.

Someday, when Wilhelm's response will change, won't the feeling that Thearesia would be left to taste be that of despair, despondency, and dread?

That was not the case. She only loved his changed self.

That is what the Thearesia of back then, thought about this.

“Why, do you swing the sword?”

That is why, surely, the answer to this question would also be different.

And possibly, that answer could be the one that would save Thearesia——,

“Because this is all..... I could think of for a way to protect.”

The sword was the only one, is what Wilhelm answered.

Yes, for this person, the sword was the only one.

It is alright, because he is that kind of a person. It is alright for this person.

——That’s all it was, there lay no necessity for regular interaction between the two of them.

However, that did not mean that they had lost opportunities to exchange a word or two at the square.

Rather, if we were to speak of exchanging words, instances of that happening had increased more than before.

Wilhelm, who came to the square for practicing with the sword, came to prioritize speaking to Thearesia above swinging his sword.

Sitting on an upraised surface, her ears intently listened to the words of Wilhelm, who would always bring up meagre topics. Hopelessly bad topics, which she couldn’t even put an end to, however, she felt pleasant by simply hearing his voice.

“There was talk of conferral, and I become a knight.”

With a look filled with heat, he mentioned the topic for the day.

Thearesia had always kept distance from people, so she wasn’t the best at socialising, but she was not so stupid that she would not understand the meaning of the words of the youth, who had voiced them after mustering up such courage.

A mere commoner, working hard and becoming a knight thanks to his efforts and going out to the battlefield, was unquestionably impressive.

Just how many feats the Sword Demon, Wilhelm Trias had accomplished, was something she was painfully well-aware of, as the cowardly 『Sword Saint』 .

She wondered what could the reason be, for him to gain the honour of a knight on top of even that.

“Is that so, congratulations. Then you’ve gotten one step closer to your dream.”

Knowing his real intentions for that, Thearesia responded with a deliberately positive attitude.

It was unavoidable for her to blush in that tone. Using all her strength in order to not let that happen, Thearesia smiled at Wilhelm, who had a questioning expression.

“Dream?”

“You wield the sword to protect, don’t you? A knight is someone who protects others.”

At Thearesia’s words, Wilhelm nodded with an expression suggesting he understood what she had said.

Though he’s normally rebellious, sometimes he showed this childish meek side of his.

——She simply wanted to be one of those existences, whom and which he wanted to protect.

Though she was not so confident about it, she hated herself, for assuring herself about it.

Even though she well understood and realised her own feelings, she found herself, who was unable to act upon them, incredibly, incredibly stupid, repulsive, irredeemable, and henceforth once again, Thearesia made a mistake.

At this point, when she thought about it, she would conclude that never had she once, done anything correctly ever.

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Wilhelm stepped onto the battlefield, as his hometown burned to ash.

When Carol, out of breath, reported the steadfast fight being put up by the Sword Demon, Thearesia began to lose her body heat, and almost collapsed to her knees at that very spot.

The pale faced Thearesia could sense Carol's fright. She could sense it, but her body was unable to increase its energy. She knew just that, and how hopeless this situation was.

“———”

Someone's out of place voice entered Thearesia's ears, who had her eyes fixed onto the ground. It wasn't Carol's. Neither was it of anyone in the house. She was acquainted with the voice, as it was someone's who had always been close to Thearesia, henceforth, she noticed.

It was the sound of the Sword God's laughter, ridiculing her for her dejected love.

“——I have to go.”

Listening to the Sword God's laughter, Thearesia slowly stood up.

Even now, the sound of the ridicule continued to echo within Thearesia's ears. However, she was unable to accept losing her everything while being laughed at by the Sword God like this.

She left everything on her eldest brother, and let him die.

She enforced her own responsibility upon her second elder brother, younger brother, and her uncle, and let them die.

But, only him—— only Wilhelm I shall not hand over.

Because that sword, that steel, that person, belongs to me and only me.

“Carol, prepare.”

“Thearesia-sama.....? However, the condition of your body is.....”

“——Prepare.”

Carol, who was worried about Thearesia's body, straightened her back upon the second order. Moving quickly, she immediately made all preparations required for Thearesia.

The battle suit which had not been worn ever since her first battle, and the longsword unacquainted with blood.

“This time, I won't make a mistake.”

Clenching and swearing to the longsword, Thearesia dashed with Carol and jumped onto the cart. The number of carts that had come for rescuing Wilhelm, was much more than what Thearesia had expected. These were people who were in the same unit as him, or those who had been formerly saved by them.

Just the figure of that youth, firmly holding his sword, was nowhere to be seen.

By now, that youth had become a treasured sword, attracting a many with his brilliance and sharpness.

——The front lines of Wilhelm's hometown, had already crumbled down.

Screams of fury echo, as the battlefield was covered by the scent of blood and burn.

Thearesia's chest nauseated, seeing the terrible scene. She had imagined herself standing on the battlefield several times over, but the reality was much more miserable than anything she could ever expect.

In the battlefield, where wounds are inflicted, lives are taken, blood is shed, it was worthless to prepare beforehand.

“At any rate, search for Wilhelm!”

The one who raised voice, was the one leading the group of fighters, Bordeaux Zellgef. At his rage-filled instruction, his group, wearing rocky armours, moved ahead at once, in unity.

“Thearesia-sama! What should we.....”

Echoed the voice of Carol, asking for instructions, but Thearesia was unable to hear it.

Bordeaux’s group clashed with the opposing soldiers, who had destroyed his hometown. Within the intense exchanges of blows, she faintly sensed him.

“Thearesia-sama!?”

The moment she noticed, her legs moved.

Thearesia dashed across, leaving no dust behind, in the battlefield, where the fighters were clashing. Without even looking, she knew where to go.

She trode onto the soil, traversed through the heaps of corpses, and headed for the point where screams of rage and death wails overlapped.

And reaching that dark spot, on the other side, Thearesia saw.

In front of the collapsed Wilhelm, stood a green demi-human, with a humongous sword upraised.

With a face dyed red with blood, Wilhelm looked up to the sword. His lips moved. With a frail, weak voice, he muttered.

“I don’t want to, die.....”

“_____”

It’s alright.

It’s alright, I said.

“_____”

She could not hear anything, not anymore.

Thearesia only pondered upon what she had last heard, Wilhelm's whisper.

She swung the longsword in her hands. It was light.

It made no sound, neither did it make any shockwaves, and it easily sliced away the demi-human's neck.

She kicked away the huge body holding the sword, so that it didn't fall on Wilhelm. At the same time, shots, filled with the lust for blood, energetically advanced towards the slender Thearesia.

All of those trajectories, she could sense them. She could read them. On her skin, she could feel them.

Dodging them, Thearesia followed a mysterious ray she could see with her sword.

Suddenly appearing, mysterious white rays were floating in the sky. What was even more mysterious, was the fact that she knew that she should follow the rays with her sword.

Following, following, her sword glided on the white rays.

Her sword glissaded like wind, and subsequently slashed down the bodies of the demi-humans.

Slicing off their limbs, crushing their throats, slashing away their abdomens, reaping their lives.

The 『Divine Protection of the Sword Saint』, the 『Divine Protection of Death God』, exploded at the finally arrived chance.

If she were to cut open the wrist, that wound would not heal.

If she were to slash open their intestines, the bleeding would not cease.

Even the shallowest of wounds, shall erode them away eventually.

“_____”

From the corner of eyes, she saw Wilhelm being held.

The ones standing by his side were Carol and a youth with a shield. They tried to leave this theatre, immediately after retrieving Wilhelm.

Yes, that is correct.

Hurry up, and take Wilhelm away from here.

“Thearesia-sama..... ~hk.”

Carol clenched the pendant that hung down her neck, seeing Thearesia swinging the sword. Her gesture of seemingly prayer, Thearesia found it a bit funny.

I guess so. It's just as Carol said, isn't it.

Indeed, I am stronger than anyone else, and better at killing than anyone else.

——*If only, I had noticed this a bit sooner.*

“_____”

The youths hurriedly grabbed Wilhelm, in an attempt to get out of here.

Wilhelm, who was pushing away the soil and resisting, used all his strength despite his deep wounds, to do the same.

His presence faded away. She was relieved to sense that.

While feeling relieved, she took away one, two, three lives. Easily, lightly.

Slashing, slashing, gashing, she dove into the screams of rage and death wails.

She washed away the endlessly loud voice of the Sword God.

Just let me hear his voice, he, who was desperately clinging onto life.

Kindly etch my reason, for fighting like this.

Please, let me believe, that my sword can save Wilhelm——.



The confrontation had ended.

Thearesia's goal behind entering the battlefield had been achieved, Wilhelm had been retrieved.

However, Wilhelm's goal of fighting, saving his hometown, had not been successful.

His hometown burnt to ash, he lost his place to live, and he was all alone now.

Wilhelm, who swung his sword with utter rage, had a kill count of over three hundred.

For a single swordsman on a single battlefield, it was an unquestionably unimaginable and extraordinary number.

—Henceforth, Thearesia's swordsmanship, of having sliced more than a thousand necks, was anomalous.

The existence of the 『Sword Saint』, here was—.

With her disgraceful first battle being covered up, this case was recorded into history as 『Sword Saint』 Thearesia's first battle.

The battle itself may have had ended in unquestionable defeat, but she had managed to prove her overwhelming sword skill.

The name of Thearesia van Astrea echoed across the kingdom, and boosted the morale of the fighting soldiers.

Of course, it must have had also been heard by the ears of the Sword Demon.

"It's humiliating."

There was no promise between them to meet again.

Yet, they felt if they were to go the square, they would meet each other.

It was true, it came true.

Wilhelm, who came to the square, locked his eyes with Thearesia's and swung the sword.

She put her hand in its path, and accepted it with her fingers.

Thearesia knew everything, regarding the optimal angle of striking, and the optimal force of striking.

With his sword's swipe stopped, Wilhelm harshly distorted his lips, and said words painted with passion, unfitting of the reunion.

“——Is that so.”

“Were you, laughing at me?”

“———”

“Answer me, Thearesia..... no, Sword Saint!!”

She had no intention of doing so.

Neither did she have any reason behind that excuse.

It is true that Thearesia used to observe Wilhelm's swords dance. It is true that she did see his flaws, and did not inform those to him.

And neither did it hold any meaning, for them to talk about such flaws.

“———”

The perturbed Wilhelm stepped ahead, and got violent. With an angered expression, he attacked her, but Thearesia avoided his move, and counterattacked.

Before long, the fight became one-sided, and the treasured sword, which Wilhelm wielded, went in Thearesia's hands. Quite literally, she saw the blood flow into his arm and energetically slash—— and dodging that attack, she followed the white ray and struck his abdomen.

The sword's pommel stabbed his abdomen, and made Wilhelm fall and breathe hoarsely.

“I won't be coming here anymore.”

With hatred, with pity, and with earnestly negative thoughts, he could not bear to see what was in front of his eyes.

Thearesia turned away her neck, and chose the option she had chosen countless times till now, to escape.

“With, such a face..... you shouldn’t be, holding a sword.”

With his mouth filled with regret, and his face on the soil, Wilhelm frantically wrung out.

Having faith and belief in the beauty and sublimity of the sword, was he. Having the ability to kick and trample upon his everything, was her.

“I am, the Sword Saint. I never understood the reason for that, but I finally understand now.”

She possessed the *recherché* 『Divine Protection of Death God』 .

She had been bestowed with the 『Divine Protection of the Sword Saint』 , even though she had not even asked for it.

It seemed that she would finally be able to compromise with what she had been blessed with.

“The reason.....”

“Swinging the sword to protect someone. I think that isn’t too bad either.”

Swinging the sword, to protect someone.

She wished she could have had noticed something so simple earlier.

Though even if she may have had realised it, she may not have had found someone to protect.

Now, she does.

——*Protect, Wilhelm.*

As long as she could protect with this power, this abominable power of slaughtering, she shall protect Wilhelm.

Protect him, protect her family, protect Carol, protect much more, and ultimately protect something as humongous as the kingdom, and she shall become a fitting 『Sword Saint』 .

Because I, am the strongest. Because the 『Sword Saint』 , is the strongest.

I may trample upon his feelings, I may betray what he believed in, but I cannot abandon the fact that I am the 『Sword Saint』 .

“Just you, wait, Thearesia.....”

No longer existed words that had to be exchanged.

His voice reached Thearesia, who had turned her back, thinking this would be the end.

“_____”

She was about to stop her feet. She suppressed that emotion desperately.

Wilhelm’s voice, regardless, reached Thearesia, who was desperately suppressing her emotions.

“I’ll take away the sword from you. I don’t care, about the Divine Protection and the duty bestowed upon you..... swinging the sword..... don’t you dare look down upon, the blade’s beauty, Sword Saint!”

“_____”

She was told, that it would be taken away from her.

And once again, echoed the laughing voice of the Sword God within her head.

As if to sneer, at the youthfully innocent declaration.

As if to sneer, at the cradling of a spoilt child with the spirit of fleeting hope.



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——It took two more years to bring an end to the civil war.

Ever since her parting with Wilhelm, Thearesia stepped onto every single battlefield. And determinedly working furiously hard over and over again, along with that, she contributed to weakening the demi-human alliance.

The alliance also lost its upper management, which was its framework, and its foundation loosened. Let's just say that they had no choice, but to respond accordingly to the peace treaty offered by the kingdom.

Henceforth, the greatest civil war the kingdom ever faced, the 『Demi-human War』, deviated away from its gruesomeness midway through, and ended as quickly as how it had started.

“It's..... over?”

She was fully prepared to go to the next battle, the following battle, to an endless number of battles. That is why, Thearesia was caught completely off guard, once she heard the sudden report.

“Yes, it is over. The civil war has come to an end. —It is, Thearesia-sama’s achievement.”

Hugging Thearesia’s soft body, said Carol innocently.

In recent years, Carol had grown to show such soft emotions several times, and had supported the emotional Thearesia and gently stroked her back several times.

“Achievement you say.....”

She did not really agree with her statement.

Thearesia followed the traces of that thought. She believed that, in the end, it came down to protecting someone.

She believed that, if she had been able to protect that youth, that one man army, who was nowhere to be seen.

What Thearesia failed realise, it was exactly how Carol had said, that her actions were recognised as the greatest contribution to the kingdom.

A ceremony was held for her, and wearing a formal dress and taking a sword of courtesy in her hands, never did Thearesia once, from the beginning to the end, feel like she was in some dream.

No, if this was a dream, then Thearesia had always been in a dream.

Ever since she had been acquainted with the existence of the Sword God, ever since she had received the 『Divine Protection of the Sword Saint』, she had been in a dream.

Which is why, this too, was a dream. A dream shown by the love of the Sword God, where no sun ever shone.

That’s why, if a time was to come when this dream was to end, then——.

“——”

An uproar stemmed from the hot and energetic crowd.

Through all the shouts demanding his halt, the existence continued to enter the hall.

In his hands, was a rusty, old sword.

He wore a brown, soiled tunic, dyed with filthy stains. But before his repulsive appearance, was something which everyone's instinct noticed.

—The overwhelming dread, being released from him.

—No, from this Sword Demon.

“———”

Thearesia greeted the silently approaching existence with the sword of courtesy in her hands.

The guards around the king and rest surround them and form a protective layer around them. She was grateful for that. With this, no obstruction would come in the way.

Nobody would now get in the way, of her tryst with the 『Sword Demon』 here.

—No warning was given.

However, as if a matter of course, the blades of the two collided, and made a high-pitched clank.

The dull blade clashed with the unmistakable holy sword, though it's purpose was for courtesy only, from the front directly. Sparkles danced exuberantly, slashes swiped through the wind, and the two shadows intertwined and untwined on the stage, as if dancing.

“———”

Whilst swinging the sword, Thearesia was filled with admiration. Her heartbeats accelerated, her heart was throbbing faster and faster.

In Thearesia's eyes, as always, were the floating white rays of battle. If she were to merely follow the rays and trace them with her sword, she would unquestionably kill her opponent, that was the Sword God's assistance in her eyes.

And that guaranteed path to victory in the sword fight, built by the Sword God, was being broken

through by mere devotion and maddening passion of the Sword Demon.

The floating white rays always seemed to get slashed away at their ends by the rusty sword. Intercepting every single one of the countless white rays, the Sword Demon roared, and stepped towards a victory which he should never have been able to achieve.

Her heart was throbbing faster and faster. Each and every time, they came in contact. Each and every time their swords collided, each and every time the white rays were cut off.

She was falling in love, with the Sword Demon in front of her eyes. Again, and again, and again, the 『Sword Saint』 fell in love with the 『Sword Demon』 . She loved him. She loved him. She loved him so much, that it was unbearable.

——She was in love with this person to the point that it was unbearable.

“——~hk.”

The ceremony became a vortex of absurdities, and within the sight of so many people, when Thearesia thought of what she was doing, she found it unbearably laughable. Her cheeks were hot. Her heart was throbbing fast. Each passing moment, her love was intensifying.

*The truth is, I want to throw away my sword right away, and tightly grip to my chest.
There is nothing to take away from me now. A long time ago, when I first met you, ever since your figure was first etched into my memory, I have——.*

“————”

The option for her to escape away, for her to refuse facing him, had been completely thwarted. Not by the reprimanding voice of the Sword God, but the glint in the demon's eyes, who was in front of her, repudiated it with all of its spirit.

You don't have to be indebted to anyone else's hands or even your own hands, I, with my own hands,

will take away the sword from your hands, with my own strength.

With my own strength, with my own perseverance, with everything I devoted to the sword, I will take this woman away from the Sword God.

Just how much, for how long.

Just how many times, hundreds of times, tens of thousands of times, hundreds of millions of times, must have he thought of this to himself.

The sword slashes came in contact, they pressed against each other, their tips shimmered, and embraced each other again, and again.

And, the Sword God's wrathful voice accompanied the complete slash——,

“———”

The rusted blade fractured, and its tip was separated into the air, and it landed on the platform.

The one to put it through such an ordeal, was the undoubting and passionate attack by the 『Sword Saint』 .

Above all, rather than anything else, it was an attack of the strength devoted into it by the 『Sword Saint』 .

However,

“My”

“———”

“My, win.”

The treasured sword, was taken away from her hands.

Her palm went numb due to the shock of the attack, and the treasured sword went flying, and fell behind them, ringing a sound. And, the rusted sword, fractured to its half, with its tip broken, was positioned right next to Thearesia's white and slender neck.

The beautifully bedecked 『Sword Saint』, lost, to the coarsely trained 『Sword Demon』.

That was the moment when the rusty, old sword won against the treasured sword, and the phantasmagoria known as the 『Sword Saint』 had been defeated.

“You’re weaker than me, so you no longer have any reason to wield the sword.”

A voice echoed.

Now that I think of it, it’s been quite a while since I’ve heard his rough voice.

And to think his first words, would be this.

“If I don’t wield the sword..... who will.”

“I’ll take up your reason for swinging the sword. You just become my reason for swinging the sword.”

His reason for swinging the sword, was to protect something.

You become that reason, saying that, he took his dress’ hood off.

Seeing herself get glared at by the sullied and sour look, Thearesia shook her head.

Though he had said some pretty cool things like taking it away from her, or protecting her, he still could never understand a woman’s heart. He is a sword, so it could not be helped, though.

“You’re so rude. To render all of someone’s decisions and perseverance useless like this.”

“I’ll take up all that too. You just forget that you ever held the sword and..... that’s right. You just live in peace behind my back, and raise flowers or something.”

Ah, that’s, that’s——.

“While I, am being protected by your sword?”

“That’s right.”

“Will you protect me?”

“That’s right.”

If she were to count herself in the things which he wanted to protect, and he were to answer her love.

Thearesia smiled at the words of the Sword Demon, of Wilhelm.

After that, touching the sword at her neck, she took a single step forward.

By touching his sword, she could feel Wilhelm’s two years.

And thinking that possibly, if in that time, he had been thinking about her, she felt her chest get warmer.

With the rise of emotions she could not bear, Thearesia’s eyes filled with tears. Eventually, they flow over and dropped down the smiling Thearesia’s cheeks.

“Do you, like flowers?”

“I don’t hate them now.”

“Why do you, swing the sword?”

“To protect you.”

This was the limit of her patience.

Ever since she lost the sword from her hands, she could no longer hear the Sword God’s voice.

She saw nothing but Wilhelm.

She felt nothing but Wilhelm.

She had nothing but Wilhelm.

Softly putting her hands on his chest, she turned her head slightly upwards.

Thearesia's lips, who had her eyes closed, imbricated with the lips of Wilhelm. She felt his love, soft and warm, and Thearesia's world revolutionized.

With her cheeks dyed, she looked at her beloved, in front of her.

Wilhelm said nothing, silently waiting for her words.

That attitude was strange. She was the one waiting. As he seemed to not understand that, so once again, like several times before, she initiated,

"Are you, in love with me?"

"——You already know that."

Giving a brusque reply, he turned his face away.

As soon as he turned away his eyes after responding to her question, sounds entered the world of the two. The spectators resumed their agitation, and the guards headed for them.

And there was visible, the figure of Wilhelm aware of their charge, and the guards coming towards him.

"Oh well oh well."

Looking at Wilhelm's relaxed expression, the people puffed up their cheeks.

Even though she was right in front of him, why was he looking at someplace else?

He hasn't even said the words she wanted to hear yet.

"There is something I want you to say, you know."

"Ah."

Wilhelm turned away his head, scratching his cheek, as if trying to deceive her. However, before long, he looked at Thearesia's face, and subsequently turned his face downwards and sighed, embracing her slender waist.

And gently positioning his face next to the surprised Thearesia's ear,

“Someday, when I feel like it.”

—It felt as if it would take a long time to reach that day.

She felt frustrated at that, but at the same time, she looked forward to that day.

With her weakness for being charmed by him, Thearesia forgave the words of the one she loved.

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—*After that, looking back at it now, a lot of things happened.*

Welcoming her husband, Wilhelm, who had cut into the ceremony with unprecedented violence was one.

Wilhelm becoming a knight of the Royal Guard instead of Thearesia, who had quit being the 『Sword Saint』, at the suggestion of Bordeaux and the others was one.

Ascertaining her lifetime service to Thearesia, Carol fell in love with one of Wilhelm’s colleagues, but not marrying was one.

Having several feats of his ability in battle, Bordeaux was given a seat in the Parliamentary Committee, with the task of handling important affairs of the kingdom was one.

With so much, really, so much happening, they were really fun days.

“I’m in love with you, Wilhelm. What about you?”

“———”

In the end, he never said the words that are supposed to follow. He did act instead of words, though. The one who could be deceived by that was either a kind woman, or a woman who was head over heels in love with the man in question— since Thearesia was both, she kept on getting deceived.

The time they spent as a couple was calm and peaceful, such that it felt too peaceful.

Wilhelm had promised to Thearesia, and ever since that, never did once she wield the sword. Neither did Thearesia have any clinging attachment for the sword. The Sword God's voice too, had long been muted ever since.

Even still, occasionally, she continued to come across her 『Divine Protection of the Sword Saint』 .

For example, at the time of cooking, whenever she grasped any kitchen knives, she simultaneously got aware of things like the optimal angle for striking. Even when she somehow managed that, when she got to learn other procedures that followed, she realised that being a housewife was much tougher than being a swordsman.

“.....Ah.”

That, and there was the time when she learnt how to control her 『Divine Protection of Death God』 .

She accidentally cut her finger by the shell of an ingredient while cooking.

Voluntary wounds were to be subjected to the Divine Protection no matter what. When the wound she had inflicted herself grew pallid, and when she hurriedly tried to stop the bleeding, the bleeding ceased immediately.

—*Was it really so easy*, was, in fact, her first reaction.

She accepted the existence of the Divine Protections, and controlled their power.

The little girl who had been given the great title of 『Sword Saint』 on her shoulders, but who, in reality, did not even have understanding of the things she possessed.

If only, this happened earlier— thoughts like those, filled her heart up with the images of her brothers.

“Thearesia.”

“—Hm.”

At that moment, she saw the figure of Wilhelm come back home.

And he handed over his withered clothes to Thearesia, who hid her thoughts within her heart.

And in that position, she would be saved.

“Are you, in love with me?”

“———”

Just that question however, she stubbornly refused to answer.

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After that, again, a lot happened.

Truly, a lot happened.

The couple's son was born, Heinkel.

Heinkel then met the woman who later became his bride, and Thearesia's grandson, Reinhardt, was born.

——*Nobody at all, was at any fault.*

Heinkel, earnest and diligent, working hard with the sword with utmost sincerity.

The bride, who was affected with the illness known as 『Sleeping Beauty』, robbed away Heinkel's opportunity for vindication, and left the young Reinhardt all alone.

Reinhardt, who was blessed with talents which could be sensed at a single glance, and was crammed up with fate unnecessary for his young age.

No one was at fault.

That's why, as always, the one at fault was herself.

Heinkel distorted, the bride was caged in dreams, and Reinhardt worked hard, trying to be loved by such parents.

She found herself, who was the first one to notice this, the utmost foolish, and good-for-nothing.

“There’s a battle known as the Great Subjugation..... the conquest to bring down the White Whale.
Over there, I’ll.....”

A knight of the Royal Guard just in its name, and a weighty mission just in its name.
As the voice of her son trembled while presenting his proposition, Thearesia quietly, at once,
cemented a decision.

Ever since she had last used her longsword, it had been taken care of by Carol, who had preserved its
condition to this very day.

“I am against it. What are you thinking!”

Thearesia still had her doubts regarding her decision, but Wilhelm was absolutely against it.
She felt a strong glare upon herself.

He had some white hair, and his voice had lost its former youthfulness, but still, Wilhelm’s foundation
had remained unchanged.

His dignity, his zeal, his clumsiness, everything continued to be the way as when Thearesia had loved
them, and she still did.

“That damn idiot..... he is such an embarrassment..... ~hk.”

“Neither you, nor I have the right to say that.”

“———”

Wilhelm, too, had lament for their son. With his face somehow suppressing his furious expression, Wilhelm bit his lips.

Though his zeal remained unchanged, he had matured regarding heating and cooling down.

“I too, will take charge.....”

“You have your own duties to fulfill. You must be aware of it, Wilhelm. ——It cannot be that you have forgotten, Ford-sama’s weeping.”

“_____”

The younger brother of the king, Ford, his daughter had been kidnapped by someone who intruded into the castle. As the commander of the Royal Guard, Wilhelm had the duty of recovering her position immediately.

It was impossible for the Sword Demon to be brought to the Great Subjugation.

Instead, Thearesia, who was the inheritor of the 『Divine Protection of the Sword Saint』, was requested to step into the battlefield.

She could not refuse. Her days of peace by abandoning the sword had been built upon her own selfishness.

She could not let that continue anymore.

“Thearesia, something like this is.....”

“Wilhelm.”

With a persuasive voice, Thearesia called him. In front of his exhaling face, she smiled.

And asked, a question after a long time.

“Are you, in love with me?”

“Wha..... ~hk.”

Unrest—— the same emotion as before.

While smiling, Thearesia had her sword glide over Wilhelm’s shoulder. It slashed through the wind, and gashed through his skin.

Standing unprotected in front of his wife, Wilhelm failed to defend in his lack of consciousness, and the newly inflicted wound on his shoulder started to bleed.

“Thearesia..... What are you doing?”

The wound on his shoulder, was subjected to the power of the 『Divine Protection of Death God』 . It wasn’t deep, but the bleeding continued. This would stay the same way, as long as Thearesia, the one responsible, remained close to him.

“Thearesia?”

She gently came close to his chest.

While feeling the rigidity of the shoulders she had grasped, Thearesia put her lips on the wound on Wilhelm’s shoulder.

Blood dyed her lips, as she got to taste her husband’s blood for the first time.

“With this, you can no longer come after me. As if you’re close to me, that wound will not close.”

“Doing something so stupid for something like that..... let me make it clear, even if the bleeding does not stop, I will still”

Giving a slight smile, Thearesia released his body.

And, while pointing towards Wilhelm’s wound on his shoulder,

“I shall leave that wound the way it is. So that you do not follow me. I will close it once both of our jobs are done.”

“———”

“It’s alright, besides, who do you even think I am? I am the strongest swordsman in this world, after you.”

“But comparing your level now, in mid-forties, to that in your young days…….”

“Don’t say something so redundant.”

Harshly, she made him shut his mouth so that he doesn’t continue his rude words.

Geez, even after twenty years of staying together, all this still continued.

The steel still remained unchanged. However,

“I love you, Wilhelm.”

“———”

“Yes, that’s correct. Answer that later.”

“Later?”

Facing Wilhelm, who furrowed his eyebrows, Thearesia nodded.

And, while swearing on her husband’s wound to meet again——.

“When I return, that day, please let me hear the words I could not hear.”

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Her memories, were disappearing.

Visibility was disturbed within the sandstorm, and the scattered sounds and voices were becoming

increasingly difficult to hear.

“——!”

Someone’s wrathful roars, shrieks, screams, could be heard.

Towards one plane of her vision, all what was visible was green—— no, this was the ground. It had the colour of a grassland. When she glanced around at her surroundings, the dense fog roughly, doubtfully around ten meters ahead her, completely locked the rest of the world.

The punitive force had been decimated to its half, and the forces were in a catastrophic state.

There was a desperate stampede, and they could not determine which direction they should take for escaping within the thick fog.

However, they just vaguely felt a titanic sense of oppression from the other side of the fog. Henceforth, it could be understood that the echoing voices were fleeing in the opposite direction from that.

“————”

Suddenly, she was unable to remember what had happened.

Within the violent and fiercely hard-fought battle, where they had worked hard to achieve dominance in the battle, she felt that it would be much more helpful if she utilised her power for retreating from the front lines, and just when she started to feel that way——.

“——?”

Thinking that far, she noticed a faint sense of discomfort.

She glanced down at her palm. Something, uncomfortable.

There was no problem in her limbs, in her eyes, or in her feet.

But she felt something like, as if, she had lost her wings——.

“The Divine Protection……”

She noticed it.

She could no longer sense the feeling of possessing the 『Divine Protection of the Sword Saint』. The same went for the Sword God, who was always by her side no matter how far she went with the sword.

Even his ridicule, was nowhere now.

“Reinhardt——!”

At the same time, Thearesia felt she knew who now possessed what her body had lost.

Was this the same feeling her uncle got when he sensed Thearesia being the inheritor of the Divine Protection? Otherwise, it may just be that Thearesia was simply aware of Reinhardt’s limitless natural talent.

Whichever it may be, Thearesia did not hold any doubts that the next generation 『Sword Saint』 would be Reinhardt.

That feeling was perhaps, traitorous to her actual son, Heinkel—— but neither did exist anyone to put the blame on for that, nor did she have the time to find someone to blame for that

“——Oh, for a lone lady to be present in such a place, quite gallant indeed.”

The graceful voice of a young girl, unfitting for the time and place, resonated.

Turning back, Thearesia saw a small shadow within the dense fog.

White clothes, platinum hair.

Intimate and affectionate, an amiable gaze filled with sympathy boundlessly extolling togetherness—— misdirected love, to the point that it was unsettling.

“————”

“It seems I have not quite been taken a liking to.”

Gripping the longsword, Thearesia stepped ahead.

If the girl were in a normal situation, she might have had worried for her. However, this was the world of death ruled by the dense fog of the White Whale.

The young girl, making her appearance here, was unquestionably beyond mysterious.

Even if she had lost the 『Divine Protection of the Sword Saint』, Thearesia's body still possessed the swordsmanship of a former Sword Saint. Fully demonstrating her ability, her swordsmanship, which was the pinnacle of swordsmanship, she slashed right through the petite body of the young girl——,

“——I want to, understand you.”

The young girl's voice tickled her eardrums, and her consciousness interspersed.
Her voice had something special.

Within the darkness, her consciousness fell.

With her hands and legs tied, Thearesia's body submerged in the bottomless lukewarm water.

The future of her grandson, the heart of her son, the bride who tied the two, such worries ran through her mind.

And, in the end,

“Wilhelm”

She called the name of her beloved, and her consciousness fragmented completely.

And——.

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Thearesia: “Such a pathetic, face…….”

Slowly opening her eyelids, she could see a messed up face.

His head was completely white, and his face had been etched with the fine lines of aging, but she could not help but think that this was cool in its own way.

There is no way she could have had mistaken.

It was the face of her husband. It seems quite some time had passed ever since that parting.

“_____”

She inhaled deeply.

Close by, Heinkel and Reinhardt were also there. She could feel their presence.

All three men of the Astrea family had assembled here, possibly just to see her off.

Because everyone, is so kind.

Wilhelm: “Thearesia, I am.....”

With his wrinkled face, Wilhelm was breathless.

She couldn’t say that she disapproved of it in front of her son and grandson.

Where did he leave his majesty and dignity? Actually, looking back at it now, such weaknesses of his always stood out, surprisingly.

Thearesia: “Hey, Wilhelm.....”

Her voice was husky, yet unusually youthful.

As if it wasn’t hers—— no, it definitely was hers, but she was supposed to be a grandmother.

It seemed like her voice when she had first fallen in love, how embarrassing.

“_____”

When she had first fallen in love, feeling like that, she felt more and more awkward.

There wasn’t much time left, but they still wasted quite a lot of it by choosing to simply look at each other.

But, even still, it's alright.

The words Thearesia should have had said, she had conveyed them a sufficient number of times.

Wilhelm, too, should know that.

That is why, the one needing the time, the chance, and the words was him.

Thearesia should simply, quietly wait for those words.

Though she will have to wait, her expectations will surely be fulfilled. That's just how the man Wilhelm Trias was.

That's just how the man Wilhelm van Astrea was.

Wilhelm: "There is something I must..... tell you."

"_____"

Wilhelm; "I-I am a poor speaker..... so I can't convey my thoughts well, I'm having a hard time even with you..... that's why even in these twenty years, never even once did I....."

"_____"

Wilhelm: "These twenty years, may have made me uneasy. But, I am....."

Thearesia: "—A stupid person."

Seeing him struggle so much at speaking, and presenting himself so stupidly, she could not bear to hold it in.

She ended up saying it. Truly, what was this man saying?

Thearesia: "Did you really, never notice?"

She heartbreakingly reached out to the face which was in tears.

Her body was terribly heavy. There wasn't really any strength left in her, but she put all her remaining strength in her fingers, and wiped away the tears dropping down his face.

Thearesia: "You had always, been saying it."

"———"

Did he intend to hide it?

Did he believe, that he would be able to hide it if he never said it?

Thearesia: "Your voice, your eyes, your attitude, your actions, had always."

Everything which Wilhelm, had directed towards Thearesia.

This person, had always, above all, been clearly conveying his heart——.

Wilhelm: "I am, with you"

Thearesia: "You are, with me"

That is why, it was sufficient.

"——In love."

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From the beginning to the end, my life was surely one full of blessings.

I had my brothers whom I had a good relationship with, I had a female friend who was always warm towards me and took tender care of me, I was helped by many people, I met Wilhelm.

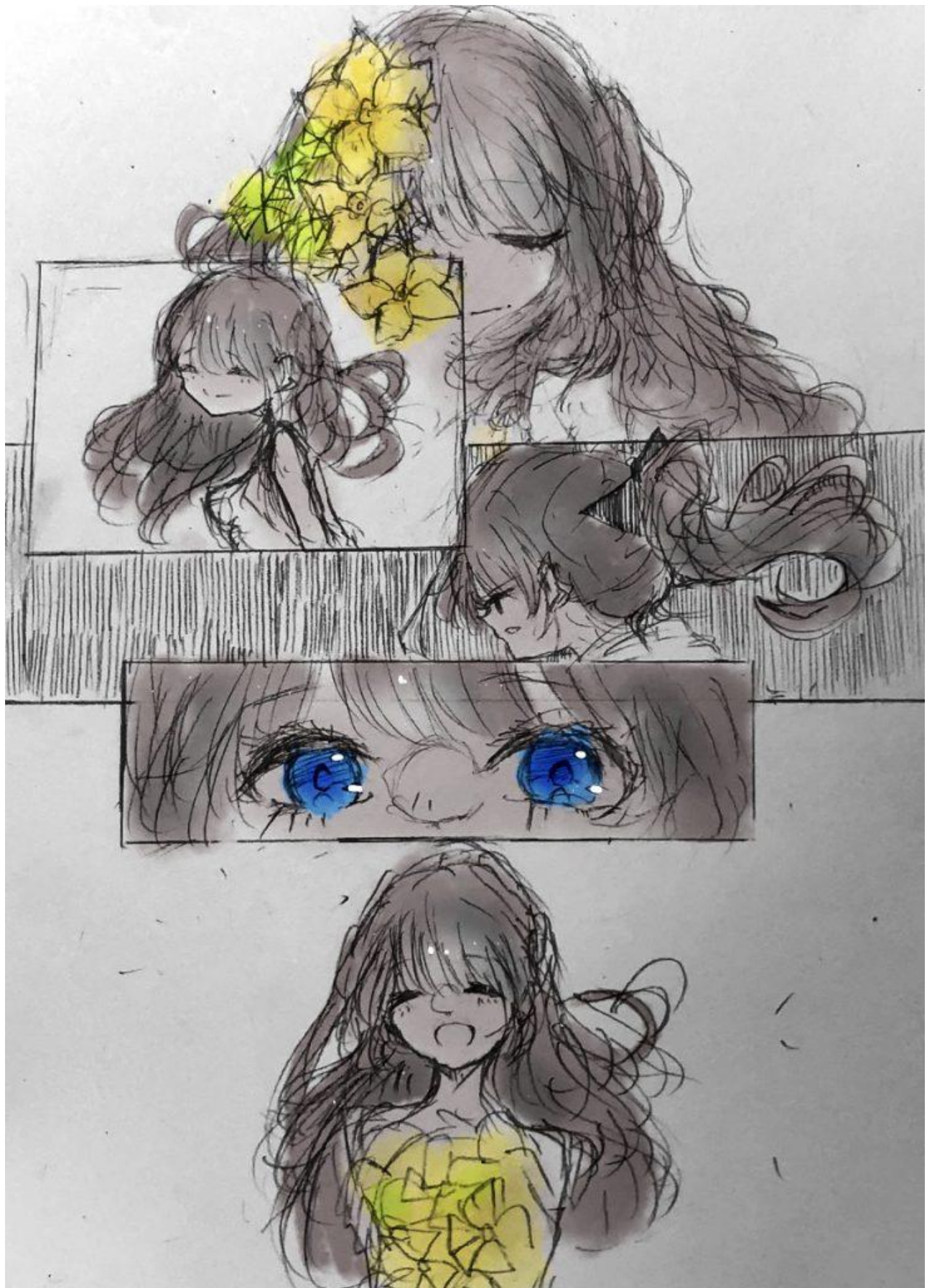
I'm sure, lots of problems must still be there.

But I have faith, that you all will be alright.

But, the truth is, just one thing.

There was just one last thing, left in my heart which I wanted to ask.

—How surprised would you be if you got to know, that it was actually love at first sight?





This was the last time, they exchanged words of love with each other.

The figure of Thearesia van Astrea, who was smiling with satisfaction, with her cheeks dyed with the tint of love, and eyes glistened with tears, lost its shape and crumbled in the blink of an eye.

In the arms of Wilhelm, who had knelt down, no longer visible was the form of a bleeding, suffering woman, but what was left was only a lump of ashes—— and that alone, was the proof of her former presence.

“———”

Having her life burn out and turning into a mere lump of ash, was Thearesia. Wilhelm widened his eyes, and simply, quietly, kept staring at Thearesia’s remains.

???: “.....Are you, satisfied now?”

And, instead of the silent and stationary Wilhelm, a man raised his voice.

The red-haired middle-aged man—— Heinkel, raised his voice at Reinhardt, who was standing next to him, with a look filled with hatred.

Reinhardt slowly met that look with his own eyes, and exhaled.

Reinhardt: “What do you mean, satisfied?”

Heinkel: “Don’t play dumb, it’s just as how you saw it! Are you satisfied? You must be satisfied now!

Both in name and in reality, the position of 『Sword Saint』 is all yours now, congratulations! The rumours of you robbing it away by killing the previous generation would be unquestionably true now too. Huh, are you satisfied? Hey!”

Reinhardt: “I do not understand what you are trying to say.”

Heinkel: “Don’t make a face as if you’re putting on airs! You shitty brat!”

Exhaling a hoarse breath, Heinkel tried to grab Reinhardt.

However, Reinhardt avoided his fingers, and controlled his father's body, stepping onto his palms like a foot-bellow.

The current 『Sword Saint』 had not even the slightest of affect on himself for slashing the previous 『Sword Saint』 to her death. The truth is, his opponent didn't either.

As if trying to shove that truth onto him, Heinkel's throat faintly shuddered.

Heinkel: "Don't make a scene out of this, Reinhardt..... ~hk."

Becoming further desperate, trying to deceive away the wavering of his own heart, Heinkel pointed his finger at Reinhardt, and spat out.

Heinkel: "No matter how nice and fine you may try to make things, what I saw won't change. It's a fact that you killed mother..... Thearesia van Astrea. I'll proclaim it. I'll spread this rumour everywhere, so that nobody recognises you as the 『Sword Saint』 anymore!"

"———"

Heinkel: "No matter how calm of a face you may make, there's no way you'll let go of your prestige as 『Sword Saint』. You may have had continued having it till now, but not anymore. The one slashing his own blood relatives to their deaths is the 『Sword Saint』? The sword of the kingdom? Hah, don't make me laugh! You murderer!"

Reinhardt: "Deputy Commander, no matter how many times you say it, I do not understand what you intend to mean. ——It is Deputy Commander's misunderstanding that I slashed the previous generation to death."

Heinkel: "Hu~h.....?"

Reinhardt quietly gave his answer to Heinkel, whose face was reddening. Heinkel rounded his eyes at his response, but Reinhardt did not seem to have any intention of tricking him or beating around the

bush.

Reinhardt was not giving his opinion, but as if merely stating facts.

Reinhardt: "The enemy just now was merely a corpse being made to move through the use of some secret arts. It could not have had been the previous generation 『Sword Saint』 grandmother. Is there still perhaps some misunderstanding?"

“———”

Heinkel made a stupefied expression at Reinhardt's words.

After that, he put his hands in his red hair, and rubbed them violently. With faint laughter, Heinkel, and an abnormal smile,

Heinkel: "Then, what was that in the end? When she was, talking to father!? When she was glaring so hatefully at you and me..... what was it, if it wasn't mother!"

Wilhelm: "——Enough, now stop, Heinkel."

Gnashing his own teeth, with burning hot hatred was Heinkel. The one to extinguish Heinkel's heat was Wilhelm, who had been silent till now.

The aged swordsman, while maintaining his crouched posture, tore apart the sleeve of his jacket, and treated the wound on his right shoulder—— which had been inflicted by a certain longsword.

The ability of the 『Divine Protection of Death God』 , due to which the wound was not supposed to close, lost its effect the moment Thearesia ceased to exist. ——No, before even that, ever since Thearesia had returned to sanity in the end, it had been lost.

Instead of that, what remained was the pain on his left shoulder due to the wound carved onto it at the time of their final farewell.

The sane Thearesia lasted on his left shoulder, and the demised Thearesia on his right leg.

The wounds carved with the ability of the 『Divine Protection of Death God』 had been nullified with the loss of both.

Heinkel: “Stop, you say..... father! Are you really fine with this! He is.....!”

Wilhelm: “Stop, Heinkel.....Stop.”

Wilhelm objected Heinkel, and stopped him from saying anything further.

He took off his sleeveless jacket and used the cloth for wrapping and containing Thearesia's ashes.

Leaving her in the cold wind like this, would leave her far too lonely.

He believed that he must bury her ashes in the appropriate grave, at the very least.

Heinkel: “——~hk.”

Seeing the state of his father, Heinkel gnashed his teeth and swallowed his words. And, retrieving the ashes, Wilhelm shakily stood up.

Even if his bleeding had ceased, his body had lost quite a lot of blood. The wound on his right foot was deep, so walking without any support stemmed into uneasiness. Retroactively, Reinhardt tried to support his trembling shoulders.

However,

Wilhelm: “——Stay away!!”

“————”

His fingers, which were reaching for him, were subjected to Wilhelm's rage.

Reinhardt halted his raised arm, and no longer tried to support his shoulders and face him. But, the Sword Demon, without facing him, quietly inhaled.

Wilhelm: “Reinhardt.....”

Reinhardt: “——Yes.”

Unlike Wilhelm's quivering voice, Reinhardt's voice was stable and dignified.

Hearing his voice, their eyes met, and Wilhelm said the words in his mouth.

——It was, a question.

Wilhelm: “Do you regret, that you slashed your grandmother..... Thearesia to her death?”

“_____”

A slight gap occurred between the question and its response.

Or perhaps, he may have had dismissed the question as meaningless, similar to Heinkel’s earlier questions.

However, before long, Reinhardt responded.

Reinhardt: “No. ——I did the correct thing. I hold no regrets.”

Wilhelm: “.....Is that, so. That’s right.”

“_____”

Wilhelm: “You are right. I am mistaken. ——That is why, there is nothing left to talk to you about anymore.”

Pronouncing with a quiet voice, Wilhelm turned his back towards Reinhardt.

The grandfather and grandson put a full stop to the decisive question-answer, without even facing each other.

And, Wilhelm raised his finger and pointed towards the center of the city.

Wilhelm: “I am worried about the City Hall, to which Garfiel-dono is headed. If it would be possible, then I would request you to head there for providing support. 『Sword Saint』 Reinhardt-dono.”

“_____”

Terribly formal and unduly distant, receiving those polite words, Reinhardt looked in the direction towards which the finger pointed. He nodded, and then finally glanced at Heinkel.

Heinkel, who was still directing his resentment for the airs being put up, widened his blue eyes with a rough inhale, but Reinhardt ignored his upcoming spiteful words,

Reinhardt: "Outdoor is dangerous. If it would be possible, Deputy Commander, head to a shelter. — Along with Wilhelm-dono."

Heinkel: "Y-You just shut the hell up! Hurry up and disappear!"

Being hit with the words of the spirit of a loser, Reinhardt turned his face away. At the same pace, he dashed towards the waterway, as if to kick its surface, he jumped above the building, and disappeared in the direction of the center of the city.

Seeing his outlandish movements, Heinkel spat. He then rushed to Wilhelm, who was walking slowly due to his injured right foot. However,

Heinkel: "Father-dono, going alone is....."

Wilhelm: "Leave me alone for now. Right now, I don't want anyone to see my face."

Heinkel: "Father....."

Wilhelm: "There is no need for you to worry about me. You should just worry about yourself. Hide in a suitable building or a shelter..... you'll be fine by just that."

Giving his thoughts, Wilhelm then left Heinkel, who was now alone.

With his wife's ashes in the coat he held, he straightened his back, and dragged his feet.

"———"

He was left behind, alone, unable to stop him, or be by his side.

With Wilhelm eventually disappearing from visibility, Heinkel, who was left alone——.

Heinkel: “What, is your problem..... what is your problem, what is your problem, what is your problem, what is your problem, damn it, what the hell is your problem!”

Left all alone in the plaza, standing on the cobblestone, glaring on the flat pavement, Heinkel cursed out his fury. Violently scratching his head, roaring his rage which could not be conveyed in words, he then threw the sword attached to his waist to the ground.

The beautiful knight sword rang a high-pitched echo, as it rolled down the ground.

Heinkel: “Shitshitshitshit, god damn everyone.....! Everyone just go die.....! Just go die~e~e~e~e~e~
~hk!!”

Heinkel's bloody and hateful shriek resonated in the deserted plaza in solitude.

The scream, a mixture of boundless, endless resentment and grief, echoed far and wide——.

The battlefield of the grandfather, father, and grandchild, with this, came to an end.

A lady, a grandmother, a mother, a wife.

The end of Thearesia van Astrea engraved wounds upon the hearts of the three.——With this, all of the battlefields in the fight for the Watergate City of Priestella had been settled.



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Chapter 74 - Fruits of The Battle for Pristella 1



“The heinous Witch Cult, who captured the four control towers and threatened the city, have been thrown back. With this, the safety of the City is affirmed—— The triumph is that of the Water Gate City Pristella!”

Subaru heard the broadcast that resonated in the city along with Emilia as they hurried to the City Hall.

The cheerful announcement was transmitted through a magical device that conveyed the voice to the city.

Although there were parts where the sound broke, it was only the fluctuation of the voice of the person making the broadcast. There was no reason to doubt the contents of the welcoming announcement.

Emilia: "Subaru! Just now they said...!"

Subaru: "So it seems. Somehow or other, it feels like it's over."

In front of the bright-faced Emilia, Subaru relaxed his cheeks as he dropped his shoulders.

The reason for his listlessness was out of relief, and a little bit of anxiety.

Subaru: ".....At any rate, it's 'cause the enemies are who they are.."

There was Capella of "Lust", who possessed the Authority of Variation and Change; in the worst-case scenario, there was the possibility of the broadcast voice being a ploy to cast false hope over the citizens. There was no guarantee they wouldn't go that far, and that malice was what made the Sin Archbishops so frightening.

However, the voice of the broadcast—— which appeared to be that of Kiritaka Muse, his statement was consciously respectful, he wasn't able to conceal his faint emotions and joy. Upon hearing that voice, one didn't have any reason to worry about "being fooled" by such wicked trickery.

Subaru: "That means, that everyone did it....."

The broadcast stated that the four control towers occupied by the Sin Archbishops had been recaptured.

At least with this, it was safe to assume that the E N D where all the Water Gates would end up being opened, and the city would end up being both flooded and annihilated, had been avoided.

On that point, they could be sincerely relieved. If there was one problem which made Subaru concerned—— It would be the victims.

Subaru: “Miraculously, Regulus didn’t end up causing any casualties. ”

Although they had a somewhat powerful lineup as well, their enemies were the Sin Archbishops with one or two peculiarities to them. The only reason they overcame the crusade against the invincible Regulus, was because he himself was lousy in battle.

The cunning “Lust” and “Wrath” whose defeat he could not witness. And “Gluttony” with whom he was connected by fate, calling them difficult enemies or threats was simply not enough.

Even though they’d won, their damage——was frightful.

Emilia : “According to what Subaru said, there were also Sin Archbishops in the other control towers. All the others, I wonder if they’re okay...?”

It was Emilia’s words that were accompanied by the same unease Subaru felt, who couldn’t put on a joyful face.

Subaru shook his head, biting his lip, in front of Emilia who had cast her gaze down.

Subaru: “I also feel troubled about that, but... All we can do is trust in the others. I want to confirm that they are fine as quickly as possible.”

Emilia: “Yeah, that’s right.....”

With such simple words of comfort, he couldn’t dispel Emilia’s distress.

If they considered how powerful the enemies had been this time around, they couldn’t avoid the possibility that there were victims among their allies. Still, it couldn’t be said that the massive destruction to save the city was the result they had desired.

Thus, although it depended on the circumstances, taking into account using “Return by Death” as one of his options was a determination which Subaru had held ever since the start of this operation.

Personally, Subaru did not like the strategy of incorporating his “Return by Death”.

Of course, he was opposed to choosing his own death, but it was also related to the Trial he had witnessed at the “Sanctuary”, the world after Subaru’s death.

In fact, it wasn’t known whether or not the world continued after Subaru’s death, but the “Trials” revealed that such a possibility existed. So Subaru had firmly decided that he would not use “Return by Death” to increase the number of attempts.

Even so, if Subaru willingly chose “Return by Death”, it would be when the unacceptable result of having to continue with a loss awaited him.

And this time, Subaru was considering such a possibility.

Those who swore to recapture the city and challenged the Sin Archbishops, the royal candidates, their knights, and their allies.

In order not to lose those he did not want to lose, he was prepared to repeat the pain and suffering.

Emilia: “...Subaru, your brow is veeeeery wrinkled.”

Subaru: “Heh?”

Emilia was gazing straight ahead at Subaru who had a grim and serious expression on his face. She’d shot Subaru a look at his wrinkled brow, causing him to reflexively open his eyes up wide.

As her amethyst eyes filled with gloom, Emilia spoke to him,

Emilia: “After all, no matter what you do, you still care. I’m sorry. Although it’s a difficult time, thanks to those who captured me...”

Subaru: “No, it’s not Emilia-tan’s fault. Even without Emilia-tan, it was necessary to defeat Regulus. If Emilia-tan hadn’t been there, I don’t know if we could have saved the brides.”

To save the brides from “Greed”, they had to temporarily stop their hearts which carried the “Lion’s Heart”

Emilia was probably the only one who could have done it from their existing lineup. Ferris perhaps could also have been a possibility.

Without her, in the worst case scenario, it would have been necessary for the brides to become sacrifices to defeat Regulus.

Subaru: “Well, I didn’t want to make that choice either, and Reinhardt wouldn’t have allowed it.”

Even if it was a necessary sacrifice to face such great evil, he couldn’t accept that.

That young man, who was a bundle of justice, could never allow even a few sacrifices. In that situation, the affair with Regulus might not have been resolved so quickly.

Subaru: “Or, I may’ve ended up dying half-way through if only I ended up getting involved.”

First of all, if Emilia had not been kidnapped, there was the chance that the formations of the teams to defeat the Sin Archbishops would have been very different. Since no one knew what the right answer was, it was useless to think about.

But, hopefully——,

Subaru: After we split up, Reinhardt went to the others. That will lessen the damage.... That is what I want to believe.”

Emilia: “Yes, that’s true.——We have to make sure of that as soon as possible.”

In response to Subaru’s reply, Emilia nodded with a serious look on her face.

And, as he resumed his step towards the City Hall next to her, Subaru gently placed his hand on his own chest. He felt that his heart was beating slightly faster—— There, another concern that Subaru had apart from his preparation for “Return by Death”.

The sensation of a strange black force callously curling next to his heart.

It was a perverse impurity that slipped into Subaru at the same time that the “Death” of Regulus was confirmed. Subaru vaguely knew the identity of that impurity.

——The “Witch Factor”.

That so-called thing was probably the identity of the impurity that connected Subaru and the Witch Cult.

Just after defeating Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti of “Sloth”, Subaru felt the same discomfort inside his body. The identity of the foreign force he felt was the “Witch Factor”, and the first person who had told him that was the “Witch” Echidna.

The “Witch Factor” had a profound connection to the Sin Archbishops and the “Witches of Sin”.

And for some reason, it also affected Subaru, as if it was consuming him.

If so, this was surely related to the “Witch of Envy” who induced his “Return by Death”

It wasn’t something that could be considered positive.

Subaru: “No matter how many creepy things possess me, I’m me..... That should be fine.”

No matter how much the influence of the “Witch Factor” increased, he would never let it affect him.

Even if the “Witch Factor” consumed Subaru every time he took down a Sin Archbishop.

Plus——,

Subaru: “If Beako wakes up, she’ll get mad at me for not having told her.”

No matter what the “Witch Factor” was, there was no need for Subaru to worry about it alone.

He had companions who would work together with him to try to solve the problem when he confessed his concerns to them.

He was sure he’d find a way to get over it.

Emilia: “Subaru? Did something happen?”

Worried about Subaru who spoke awkwardly, Emilia turned her glance to him. Subaru said “No” and shook his head, and after thinking a little,

Subaru: “By the way, while listening to the broadcast before, I think Kiritaka’s doing all right. If she knew, Liliana surely would be glad.”

Emilia: “Kiritaka-san disappeared?”

Subaru: “He protected Otto and it was unknown whether he was dead or alive. For some reason it didn’t feel like he was dead, so I wasn’t that worried.”

Emilia: “Then cheer up more, or I’m going to end up feeling sorry for you.”

As if she were casting away the anxiety that hung over her, Emilia pouted at Subaru.

Instead of being anxious about the possibility that someone had been hurt, he should have been glad that someone had been saved.

Perhaps that was also a necessary attitude for his current state of mind.

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And so, the two of them rushed on trying to avoid triggering each other's anxieties as much as possible, but the scene that awaited them wasn't something optimistic.

Subaru: "...This is... Terrible."

Subaru was stunned to see that the City Hall had collapsed and turned into a mountain of rubble in front of his eyes.

The words that came from his dry lips gave off a candid impression of that scene.

The City Hall was a five-story tall building that was rare to see in the buildings of this world, but its greatness had crumbled without a trace.

The marks of destruction extended as far as the foundations of the building, the centre of the plot of land where the City Hall had been located had been crushed enormously, the large sunken hole looked like an open mouth.

This collapse likely wouldn't have happened unless the foundations of the buildings had received a major blow.

Subaru made this assumption from the remains of the building; Emilia, who witnessed the same thing, gazed around with a restless expression on her face.

Emilia: "The broadcast from before, it should've used the magical device that is in that building, no? Yet, with the building in this state..."

Subaru: "——! Now that you say it, that's true..."

Faced with Emilia's concern, Subaru looked around his surroundings in a hurry.

The collapse of the City Hall was not an unimportant matter. It was undoubtedly the result of having been breached by the evil grasp of the Witch Cult. In addition to that, in the City Hall there wasn't only the magical device, Otto and the others who did not participate in the groups to recover the control towers, and the victims of Capella's Authority also remained.

Since the City Hall suffered so much damage, it meant that there had been a battle. If so, what had happened in the City Hall where only the non-combatants had stayed behind?

Kiritaka's transmission, even the fact of that matter had become suspicious.

But, Subaru's concerns——

??? : "Ah, the moment I think there's someone coming, it finally ends up being Subaru and Emilia, in fact. "

Subaru: ".....Beatrice?"

The girl's familiar voice reached Subaru and Emilia who had frozen in their tracks.

When he looked up, Beatrice was at the top of the rubble looking at the two of them as she walked down holding the hem of her fluffy dress. She went down to Subaru's side who opened his eyes in surprise, and looked at him from top to bottom to check the condition he was in,

Beatrice: "Hmm, you don't seem to be injured, I'm relieved I suppose. If you'd been hurt while Betty was absent, I wouldn't have been able to leave you alone even to go to the bathroom."

Subaru: "I'm not a child who needs this much care... Or rather what I should be saying is, Beako, why are you here?"

Subaru was surprised by Beatrice who had crossed her short arms and held her head high with an aloof expression of composure on her face. That flippant attitude was exactly the same as always.

Subaru: "Weren't you supposed to have spent all your mana and left the frontlines? At least, you shouldn't have been able to participate in this battle."

Beatrice: "Spent sounds like you're blaming Betty, so stop, I suppose! If it wasn't for Betty's devotion, your leg would be a little thinner now, in fact. Your thanks, your appreciation, and your hugs aren't going to be enough, I suppose!

Subaru: "I know, I know."

Subaru gently stroked the furious Beatrice's head the way he always did. Beatrice puffed her cheeks in dissatisfaction, but even so, she took a step closer to Subaru, quietly enjoying his caresses.

And, following this interaction between Contractor and Spirit, Emilia gently butted in.

Emilia: "Beatrice"

Beatrice: "Thank goodness, Emilia seems to be fine too, in fact. If something had happened to you, Bubby would have been distraught, I suppose. Thanks to that, Subaru risked fighting without Betty, in fact. If you've learnt anything out of this, don't let yourself be captured again, I suppose."

Emilia: "Mhm, thank you. I'm sorry for making you worried."

Beatrice: "In particular, Betty was only a little bit worried for you, in fact!"

Emilia looked at Beatrice, who had moodily turned her face away, with a smile on her face. Then, Emilia gazed over Beatrice's entire body, and gently narrowed her widened eyes.

An ornate dress, and carefully manicured curled hair.

Both were slightly stained with mud and blood. This was the proof that this spirit-girl hadn't just woken up from her peaceful dreams.

Subaru's absence, and the collapse of the City Hall.

These unexpected events were surely related to Beatrice waking up.

Emilia: "————"

Emilia directed her gaze, which was full of such thoughts, and Subaru tucked his chin in. And, whilst looking down at Beatrice, whom he was still stroking, he said,

Subaru: "Thank you, it seems like you were hard at work during my absence. I'm sorry about everything. I only ever cause you problems."

Beatrice: "I'm pretty used to you causing me problems, so you don't have to worry about that, I suppose. No, still do worry a bit about it, in fact. Worry about it, and give me your thanks, I suppose."

Subaru: "Yeah, yeah.... But, even if you were hard at work, it was a bit over the top. Crushing the entire building is a bit too much."

Emilia: "Huh, Beatrice did this?"

Emilia looked at Beatrice in bemusement whilst she pointed at the mountain of rubble.

Emilia: "Do you know how much it'll take to repair a building like this.... Subaru?"

Subaru: "With Beatrice's pocket money, I know it'll be a big project that'll take a few decades."

Beatrice: "What are you two saying with those serious faces, in fact!? What Betty did is different, I suppose! Betty saw this building only after it became rubble, in fact!"

Subaru: "I said I know. If you'd struck it, we'd be able to hear it from really far away. Such a cute girl."

Subaru cackled as Beatrice tried to defend herself from the false accusations. To this exchange, Emilia said, "Eh, eh, which one is it?" for now.

If they'd encountered Beatrice near the remains of the City Hall, then...

Subaru: "At least, it seems like we won't have to worry about the Witch Cult trying to get up to no good around here. So, what happened to Otto and the others who were supposed to be in the City Hall?"

Beatrice: "Hmm, explaining that will be complicated, I suppose. But, those who were in the City Hall are....."

???: "We were able ta escape as well, so ya needn' worry."

A voice with a Kansai accent, or rather more accurately, a Kararagi accent juttled in between Beatrice's reply.

As they turned around in response to that, they saw a petite figure which was walking around the mountain of rubble. For a moment, they felt something peculiar about that person's appearance, as the colour of their hair that she was adjusting with a hand comb was of a different colour than the one they were used to.

Subaru: "Is that you, Anastasia-san?"

Anastasia: "What's up with the doubt in the way yer callin' me..... Eh, aah, mus' be this, right? It's 'cause now my hair colour is differen'."

Her soft light purple hair was now dyed dark green.

Only with Anastasia in her kimono, did their impression change a bunch. She looked at Subaru and Beatrice, and then, when she looked at Emilia, she gracefully nodded in satisfaction.

Anastasia: "Seems like ya were able ta get Emilia-san back without any problems, Natsuki-kun. The Sword Saint told me, so I wasn' worried about that."

Subaru: "So Reinhardt was able to rendezvous with the others without any issues."

Anastasia: "He came whooshin' outta the sky. Right now, he's lookin' for any stragglers from the Witch Cult.... Or rather, I should say that he took Ferris-san to visit the evacuation shelters."

Subaru: "Visiting the shelters..... That sure is the duty of a healing arts user."

Even if they'd repelled the Sin Archbishops, considerable efforts would be needed to repair the damages which the city had received. Ferris' role would be quintessential for the quick recovery of the functions of the city. It looked like Reinhardt now was being used in place of Ferris' own feet to get about.

Emilia: "I'm sorry, I also caused him a lot of trouble.... But, what happened to you, Anastasia-san? Like, with the colour of your hair, or with this building."

Subaru: "Indeed, indeed. Did you have a makeover to change your hair to a colour which is more pleasing to the eye? I think it suits you as well, but when you know the original Anastasia-san, it feels strange after all."

Anastasia: "Natsuki-kun, you're pretty skilled at spewin' out nonsense. However, I only dyed it for a lil' strategy. Besides, it didn' pay off..... on the contrary, it went bad as far as I could see."

Anastasia sighed as she twirled her hair around her finger, and looked on at the remains of the City Hall. From the words she was saying, it seemed like she was involved in the collapse of the City Hall.

Subaru: "Ferris is fine, right? What happened, and what happened with the others?"

Anastasia: "The story is simple..... After everyone left to defeat the Sin Archbishops, an evil'n attacked takin' advantage of yer absence. They screwed things up a bit."

Subaru: "It doesn't look like they screwed things up only a bit..."

It was clear that it had been a ferocious battle quite in contrast to Anastasia's lackadaisical tone.

The attack on the City Hall—— a malignant trick that took advantage of the departure of the combatants, he felt like it was probably "Lust" or "Wrath" who had been behind this, however, the one he felt was most likely was...

Subaru: "Was the one who came here "Lust" ?"

Anastasia: "It's as I'd heard, their personality was the worst. My encounter with 'em gave me the willies."

Her opponent shouldn't have been so frivolous tantamount to only giving someone the willies, but Anastasia's attitude didn't show any signs of fear or shock. It took real guts to have encountered a Sin Archbishop.

He wanted to flatter her with an “*As expected of you*” but more pressing than that, Subaru had something gnawing at his mind.

Subaru: “I’m sorry. We left the control tower, and after that there was a surprise attack on the City Hall..... I should have taken more care.”

Anastasia: “Don’ worry about it. We jus’ did as we fancied whilst Natsuki-kun was missin’. Moreover, it’s embarassin’ that we didn’ get anythin’ outta it.”

According to Anastasia’s words, it seemed like she was expecting a surprise attack, that was what Subaru felt. She’d probably dyed her hair green as a strategy for that.

When he thought to the relation between dark green hair and the person that Capella was likely interested in, he could vaguely understand the strategy they had devised.

Subaru: “Anastasia-san, you dressed as Crusch-san and dangled them the bait, is that what you mean? If you turned back “Lust” with just you and Ferris with that, then that’d leave us in a fix.”

Anastasia: “It would’ve been cool if we did that, but we had someone else there. Priscilla-san’s esteemed knight.”

Subaru: “.....Al?”

On hearing the unexpected name come out from her, Subaru widened his eyes in surprise.

Al was the one who had been least interested in the battle to recapture the city. And to begin with, he was supposed to have gone with Priscilla and Liliana to defeat “Wrath”.

If he’d stayed to defend the City Hall, the “Wrath” capture team would be in a state which invited uncertainty and anxiety about their combat force and combination.

Anastasia: “Just so ya know, the team that faced “Wrath” came back safely.”

Anastasia explained this to Subaru, who had doubt etched all over his face. Whilst giving a wry smile, she looked over in the direction of the control tower that “Wrath” had occupied, and said,

Anastasia: “Priscilla-san came back unharmed. The Songstress Liliana came back along with her prince, to everyone’s surprise.”

Subaru: “Her prince.... Do you mean Kiritaka? Those two went to battle, and came back with a guy who we didn’t know whether he was dead or alive; what happened?”

There were too many mysteries, like Priscilla coming back unharmed from the battle with “Wrath”, and Kiritaka and Liliana reuniting. He would have liked to hear more details about that story, but he had to prioritise the general gist of things more than that.

Subaru: “Can I believe in the broadcast from Kiritaka before?”

Anastasia: “————”

Subaru: “The recovery of the control towers were a success. What follows that is the status of everyone who fought. What happened to them?”

The City Hall had collapsed, but they’d probably taken the magical device out from it.

So, it didn’t mean that he had to doubt the possibility that the broadcast was a trap. The other problem was that in the end, they’d only considered the damage to things from the start.

And, to Subaru’s question, Anastasia said,

Anastasia: “You need’n worry. Natsuki-kun, you ‘n y’all were the last to come back.”

Subaru: “We were the last ones.....And what about the others?”

Anastasia: “Don’ worry.”

Emilia and Beatrice anxiously watched along with Subaru, who was showing slight traces of impatience. In front of those three, Anastasia nodded her head whilst smiling, and said,

Anastasia: “Everyone came back safely. Not a single person was missin’.”

And that was her response.

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Garfiel: “Captain! Ya came back safe!”

The nearest evacuation shelter had become the new rally point, in place of the City Hall that had collapsed.

A blond boy came running and called out with a cheerful voice as he looked at Subaru and the others who had joined him—— It was Garfiel.

Subaru: “Oh... Garfiel... Eh”

When he tried to raise his hand, he was surprised by the figure that came running.

Though Garfiel’s upper body was naked, his whole body was covered in blood. Nonetheless, his expression was radiant, it seemed that he’d had a rather difficult battle, but it seemed that he had fulfilled his duty.

Just by seeing that, Subaru immediately changed his expression from surprise to a smile,

Subaru: “Heya, it’s you who doesn’t seem well. Your face looks terrible.”

Garfiel: “I don’t wanna hear that from ya, captain.... I don’t think that I can say that. But, it’s ya captain who showed his guts. Ye rescued Emilia-sama wit’out any problems.

Subaru: “Of course.”

When Subaru proffered out his fist, Garfiel bumped his fist with his own.

That was enough to honor each other's good fight.

Subaru: "But, I heard "Lust" showed up at the City Hall. You, where and with whom were you fighting?"

Garfiel: "Tis' obvious, with the "Eight Arms" Kurgan.... Although, I don't know to what extent he can be called by that name"

Subaru: "——? What do you mean?"

Garfiel: "Ma amazin' self was fightin' only with a dead-body. Surely when he was alive he wasn't like tha'. That's why I don't feel like I won."

It was a secret technique to manipulate the bodies of the dead and use them as warriors.

There was no doubt that this time this secret technique was used in the secret maneuvers of the Witch Cult. However, it seemed that the warrior's capacity deteriorated compared to when they were alive. If he had been a warrior like Garfiel, he may have been able to perceive that difference.

Whether that had caught his attention, apart from the victory itself, it somewhat seemed like Garfiel felt as if he'd failed to obtain the result he'd desired.

That feeling, it was not something Subaru didn't know about.

Emilia: "The enemy wasn't strong, is that why you're down?"

Emilia, who had been listening to the conversation, tilted her head, as she didn't understand the feeling.

At her words, Garfiel first gave a "Good thing yer safe", glad that she was back, then he violently scratched his short blond hair.

Garfiel: "To be down 'cause he wasn't strong.... That ain't it. Somehow, I can't explain 't. 'Cause Emilia-sama's a woman."

Emilia: "It's something women don't understand? So, Subaru understands?"

Subaru: "Just a little, though. But, even for men there is something like an unknown barrier between the strong and the weak... But, I think the result is because Garfiel is strong. Aren't you overthinking this?"

Garfiel: "Am I.... overthinkin' it? "

Emilia had a face that showed that she didn't understand, and Subaru's response wasn't entirely positive. At that, Garfiel nodded with a sorrowful look on his face.

Garfiel already had his head full of worries in respect to "Strength". There was the question of having challenged Reinhardt to a duel, and also that later he had received a painful initiation from the way of the Witch Cult.

Even if he thought with his head, no matter how much he thought, the answer to his problem didn't come into view.

It was possible that it was something like that. That was why, with regard to that—,

Subaru: "Hey, Garfiel. If you think about it....."

??? : "Oh! There's Gar~f! Itzuuuuu!"

Garfiel: "Guagh-!"

In front of Subaru who was trying to give him some advice, Garfiel's body fell down with a loud *thump*. He barely noticed the little figure colliding against Garfiel's waist, but his hand didn't come out in time to stop him from letting out a groan of pain, and tumbling down.

He gazed at the collapsed Garfiel; the one who sat on his chest who had fallen off-guard, was a feline girl wagging her tail.

The girl pricked her ears up as she put on a cheerful and adorable expression on her face,

??? : “Fuhaha! You let your guard down, Gar~f! Your real enemy is in your heart! And within your heart, you already have important people in there! I mean, it's filled.”

Garfiel: “Yer knockin’ and climbin’ ’n a person’s chest....”

Mimi: “Hehehe, Missy told Mimi! That slapping a man on the butt can attract love... Or something like that? Missy said that that is attractive or something! Slapping him on the butt is what Missy said!”

Mimi squealed with laughter, on top of Garfiel.

She was no longer in a state where she was losing blood from her deep wound that couldn't be healed. Before the face of the girl who had completely recovered, Subaru touched his chest and bent down.

Subaru: “You look lively, Mimi.”

Mimi: “Oh, Onii-san, welcome! Welcome! It seems like a lot of complicated things happened while Mimi was sleepin’, goodjob! Mimi slept very soundly! But it seems that Gar~f also tried very hard, didn't he? Goodjob!”

Subaru: “Y-You don't seem to have changed, that's the most important thing. Isn't that right, Garfiel?”

He had heard that Mimi's wounds had been inflicted from protecting Garfiel.

Garfiel had been shook to the core from her wound that refused to heal and he'd carried her back on the verge of death. He wondered whether he was relieved to see Mimi better or not.

But, at Subaru's call, Garfiel, who was still sitting on his butt, rubbed his nose.

Garfiel: “Haa, ‘t would’ve been problemat’c if I changed too much. I’ve said ‘t many times, but makin’ a fuss while yer recoverin’...”

Mimi: “Hm, what? Did you say something, Gar~f?.... Ah!”

Mimi, who brought her face close to Garfiel’s, raised her voice and glanced down at her own chest. Mimi checked the inside of the white robe, and opened her eyes wide with surprise,

Mimi: “Gar~f, this is terrible! Ya wound’s reopened! Blood is streamin’ out!”

Garfiel: “Idiot! That’s why I told ya ‘gain and again! Dam’ it, if I don’t bandage it ‘gain and apply healin’ magic it won’t heal! Ay, come here!”

Mimi: “Ukyaa! It huuuurts! It huuuurts!”

Due to the wound getting worse, Garfiel took Mimi’s hand, who remained composed, and took her to the inner-part of the shelter. Faced with this exchange which was as noisy as a typhoon, even Subaru remained speechless.

Emilia: “Pffft... But, if Garfiel stays like this, he may not have time to worry.”

But, next to Subaru who remained stunned, Emilia placed her hand on her lips and said that suddenly. Whilst gazing at the back of the two of them walking away, she referenced back to Garfiel’s prior worries.

I see, thought Subaru, in agreement with those opinions.

Subaru: “Despite everything, they make a good pair. Those two, that is.”

Emilia: “Mimi is cute, and it seems she reaaaally likes Garfiel..... It seems that Garfiel likes Ram, so I don’t think it’s going to be that easy.”

Subaru: “Yeah, for sure.... Wait, did Emilia-tan make a comment about love between men and women!?”

Even though the example was easy enough to understand, Subaru was surprised that she could make that kind of conversation.

Emilia, who even before Subaru's confession had been in a state where she didn't understand the love between men and women, had been able to comment on the love of others.

Emilia: "Hmph, Subaru, I feel like you just said something reaaaaally rude."

Subaru: "Alright, though I'd thought that was an accurate recognition..... No way, did Emilia-tan change without me noticing? And she's dressed in a wedding dress!"

Emilia: "Even though it's ended up very much in tatters."

Due to the fact that it was difficult to move around in, she'd torn her wedding dress; it seemed like she didn't need to worry much about that around here.

Beatrice: "My my, in fact. They're a bunch of children, it seems like they only grew up in size, I suppose."

Subaru: "I don't want to hear that from you, who most resembles a child here"

When Beatrice threw out her jape to recap things off, Subaru cleared his throat. Then, if Mimi had recovered, that meant that—— He looked around the shelter in search of the answer,

Subaru: "——"

In a corner where there were people rejoicing at their reunion, he found the figure of the wisened swordsman standing in silence. Subaru held his breath for a moment at the figure of the Sword Demon who had his eyes closed in silence.

Emilia: "Subaru....."

Subaru: "Sorry. I'll be right back."

Replying back to the anxious-looking Emilia, Subaru left both her and Beatrice there, and slowly walked up to where he had pointed his gaze to.

First of all, what should he call out to him? However, that worry ended up being unnecessary.

Wilhelm: "——Is it Subaru-dono?"

Subaru: ".....Yeah, it is."

Wilhelm, who opened one of his eyes, caught sight of Subaru, who had approached him, hesitating on speaking out first. Seeing those silent blue eyes, Subaru realised that keeping his silence was pointless.

Wilhelm was resting his back against a cold stone wall, blending into the landscape. Subaru stood beside him and saw his figure from the corner of his eyes.

A figure full of wounds, that made him feel the echoes of a violent battle.

There were traces of cuts all over his light garb without his jacket, his grey hair that he tied back had come loose and was flowing down his back. What looked more painful was the bloodstained cloth that was wrapped around the top of his right leg—— That was enough to know that it was a deep wound that threatened his life.

But what caught Subaru's attention the most, wasn't Wilhelm himself.

It was the jacket that was right next to him which had something that seemed important wrapped inside it.

Subaru: "Wilhelm-san, that's....."

Wilhelm: "———"

He had tried to check what was wrapped up in his jacket, without giving it any thought. Receiving Subaru's words, Wilhelm directed his gaze to the bundle.

The wisened Swordsman kept his silence for a moment, and then moved his parched lips,

Wilhelm: “.....It’s as you’ve guessed, it’s my wife.”

Subaru: “————”

Wilhelm: “Immediately after she died, her body turned into a pile of ashes. It would have been too wretched to leave her exposed to the wind this way, even though it’s shameful that I put her in my jacket..... Even if she’s mere ashes, I want to place her in a grave, and mourn her.”

It meant that—— The secret technique that moved the corpses of the dead, in the end, the corpses turned into ashes.

It was a sacrilege towards one’s soul after death, and the impact it had on the people who had ended up being the target of this secret technique was immeasurable. He couldn’t even imagine what was going on in Wilhelm’s heart when he thought about it.

Wilhelm: “I’m really sorry. It’s a rather unmanly, meaningless attachment.”

Subaru: “Don’t say it like that!”

Wilhelm: “————”

Subaru immediately raised his voice on hearing Wilhelm’s tone which sounded like he blamed himself.

Whilst unaware that he’d gotten himself worked up, Subaru looked straight ahead at Wilhelm. Wilhelm opened his eyes a crack, and looked over at Subaru as well.

Subaru: “I don’t think you’re wrong, Wilhelm-san, not now, nor back during the White Whale, you’re an incredible person whom I respect. What’s so wrong about appreciating the people you care about? There’s nothing to be ashamed of, thinking like that is no good.”

Wilhelm: “Subaru-dono.....”

Subaru: "You're incredible, Wilhelm-san. Your wife..... placing her in her grave, mourning her, those thoughts are no mistakes. I can't really express myself well, but you are amazing."

Those were his true feelings.

Those were without a doubt Subaru's true feelings, his true thoughts that he didn't want denied.

Back during the time of the White Whale, and during his sorrowful reunion now, destiny had been really cruel to Wilhelm.

Yet even so, the Sword Demon had gone against destiny to his utmost; he traversed it with his own willpower, and tried to reach love. Not all results may end up being rewarded.

His repentance and remorse may remain sempiternally. But, it should end well.

Wilhelm's love in loving the one he loved, it all should end well.

Subaru: "It's nothing to be ashamed of. Please, duly place her in her grave. And, if the opportunity presents itself, and it's not too much of a nuisance, please let me visit her grave as well."

Wilhelm: "————"

Subaru: "I want to do so, I think that's what a person ought to do."

He wasn't wording himself well, and furthermore he was getting emotional; Subaru grew vexed at himself.

In pushing his own egotistical feelings, he wouldn't be able to help it if Wilhelm burst into laughter. It would be quite natural for him to say that it was none of his business and refuse him.

However, Wilhelm abruptly let his lips slacken before Subaru.

A small gap broke through on his stiffened, tense face. And, he said,

Wilhelm: “.....Yeah, please do, Subaru-dono. I also want you to dedicate some words to my wife, I think. If it’s you”

Subaru: “——! Y-yes, I will. I’m honoured.”

He’d gotten his permission, or more accurately, it was thanks to Wilhelm’s generosity.

After hearing Subaru’s egotistical wish, Wilhelm let out a soft sigh. Guessing by his face that he didn’t want to talk anymore, Subaru bowed his head down.

He should leave Wilhelm alone with his wife for a bit.

But before leaving this place, he wanted to make sure of one last thing.

And that was,

Subaru: “Wilhelm-san. ——About your wife, erm, did you manage to?”

Wilhelm: “————”

Had he reached closure with her? Had he ended up reaching a result he didn’t want?

Naturally, confronting his dead wife couldn’t have ended up acquiring a desired result. Even so, no one other than Wilhelm could have been permitted to face her; after having took in that situation, Wilhelm had sought closure.

Thus, Subaru shouldn’t be the only one who wanted that at least.

Wilhelm: “My wife.....”

Wilhelm started to speak to Subaru, who had stopped in his tracks to look at him. But, his words stopped there. Wilhelm’s gaze moved slightly away from Subaru. He directed his gaze to his jacket that had his wife’s ashes wrapped up within.

For a split second, a huge swirl of emotions floated through his irises. And, he spoke out,

Wilhelm: “——Yes. I exchanged words with my wife, and certainly, I said goodbye.”

Words, it was a figurative expression, most likely.

Wilhelm’s wife had been the prior “Sword Saint”, clashing swords with her, was a conversation like no other for the Sword Demon. Their blades of closure themselves should have been their final words of goodbye.

That’s why, surely that closure had been the result of Wilhelm’s choice——.

Wilhelm: “I love my wife. ——I should have gotten that across.”

Subaru: “I see”

Wilhelm’s quiet confession of love.

In contrast to the modest tone in his voice, there was a zeal which scorched the hearts of those who listened to it, and Subaru’s chest grew hotter. Taking a deep breath, Subaru closed his eyes.

Pouring out of him were raging billows of emotions. Keeping each one in check, he opened his eyes.

Wilhelm, who was in front of him, had a lonely smile on his face. However, since he’d allowed himself to break into that smile, it felt as if he’d been saved, and Subaru too allowed his lips to relax.

Subaru: “Wilhelm-san. Thank you for your hard work.”

Wilhelm: “———”

Subaru: “Perhaps, very soon everything will get hectic, I think, but until then please rest. I’ll go around a little more to see what happened.”

Subaru spoke too quickly and wasn't sure whether the last words were right or not. He scratched his cheek with one of his fingers, and felt embarrassed as he turned his back on Wilhelm.

Behind his back,

Wilhelm: "Subaru-dono——"

Subaru: "Yeah?"

As he was called while he tried to leave, Subaru stopped and turned around. Then Wilhelm, who had a slight trace of surprise on his face, immediately said "No" and shook his head.

Wilhelm: "My apologies. It's something trivial.. Please don't pay attention to me."

Subaru: "Is that so? No, when you say it like that, it makes me feel the opposite..... But well, right, yes. I'll see you later."

Subaru walked away from there, with a bitter smile adorning his face due to Wilhelm's atypical reaction.

Seeing what Subaru looked like when he returned, Emilia and Beatrice seemed to express relief on their faces. In that regard, Subaru's expression had probably changed quite a bit between the time he'd left and the time he'd come back.

Subaru himself was well-aware of that.

Since reuniting with the dead was not something to be happy about.

But at least Wilhelm ended it with his own hands, and he was satisfied with the result. He felt that that fact was a modest salvation

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As he narrowed his eyes, the “Sword Demon” stared at the back of the dark-haired boy who walked away.

His lips were firmly pursed together so to hold something back.

It was a breakdown in his camouflage which until a little while ago had masked his real intentions with firm willpower. A frenzy of emotion which was likely to gnaw through his pursed lips if he were to disregard it, even now.

Surely, what he kept hidden from that boy in his chest until then was——,

Wilhelm: “Subaru-dono.....You are...”

Only within his mouth, whispering in a hoarse voice, did the Sword Demon say the boy’s name,

Wilhelm: “You could be, my——”

Having said that, the Sword Demon closed his eyes as if he’d closed off his own feeble heart.

The continuation that made no sound was never heard by anyone.

It was also something that would never come out of the mouth of the Sword Demon.

That was the only thing, which the Sword Demon would never allow.

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Chapter 75 - Fruits of The Battle for Pristella 2



After ending his conversation with Wilhelm, Subaru quietly felt relieved.

Along with Garfiel, the two of them that should have been tasked with “Lust”—— They were supposed to be the combination which should’ve had the most difficult fight.

In actuality, “Lust” had abandoned her control tower, and it had been Wilhelm’s wife, Theresia, along with the former hero, Kurgan, who’d ended up blocking their path. However, it was already guaranteed that there were no casualties in these three spots.

Subaru: “————”

Of course, Garfiel and Wilhelm should have much to reflect on.

In fact, Garfiel had spoken about the reservations he had left, and it was easy to imagine that wounds too difficult to express in words lay within Wilhelm’s heart.

And yet, even so.

Subaru was happy that the two of them had returned safe and sound after finishing up their battles.

If there’d been casualties amongst his acquaintances, Subaru had resigned himself that he may have ended up having to use his “Return by Death”. That’s why he was relieved that the two of them had survived without him needing to use it.

However, that sense of relief from the fact that they hadn’t ended up dying was connected with another conviction of his, at the same time.

Namely that after all, he wouldn’t have to once again depend on an unnatural power like his “Return by Death”.

He’d made full use of his “Return by Death”, and challenged things many times to try and secure a better future. After depending so much on that power, at this point, maybe he could speak ill of it, however it was for this reason.

It was a conclusion that only Subaru could reach, precisely because it was Subaru who had died many times, and each time, he’d overturned the future.

To begin with, something like “Return by Death” should have been unnecessary.

Surely there was a way to secure the future he wanted, even without his “Return by Death”. Like now where everyone worked together with each other for the same objective, so to secure that.

Emilia: “Subaru, was Wilhelm-san okay.....?”

Coming out to greet Subaru, who had returned, Emilia asked about the wisened Swordsman who had been standing in a corner of the shelter. To her words, Subaru jerked his chin into a nod, without looking back,

Subaru: "Yeah, I think he's okay. He's wounded quite a bit, but.... it seems like he managed to take care of the wounds within his heart, which were the most alarming."

Emilia: "I see..... Although it's obvious, he really is a strong individual, isn't he?"

Subaru: "Indeed. He's a strong individual for sure. That's why he's okay."

Subaru nodded his head up and down multiple times at Emilia, who'd told him that. Emilia opened her eyes up wide seeing Subaru's gesticulation, and then burst into a smile.

Seeing Subaru frown at her unexpected reaction, she placed her hand on her mouth, and said,

Emilia: "I'm sorry. Subaru's behaviour around Wilhelm-san is reaaaally different in comparison to when you're with other people. How can I put it, in truth, I think he's pure as the driven snow."

Subaru: "No one says *pure as the driven snow* these days....."

Subaru gave a wry smile at Emilia's antiquated words which felt like they came from the Showa Era. Following that, he scratched his cheek with one of his fingers.

Even if it appeared like he was teasing her, he understood what Emilia was trying to say. And that was plenty enough for Subaru himself to be aware of it.

Subaru: "Wilhelm-san is, how should I say it, special. Because he's an amazin' person whom I can sincerely admire, well, that's what I feel anyways."

Emilia: "I know that he's an amazing person too, but that being the case, Reinhardt and the others have to know that too, right? And yet, despite all that."

Subaru: "The perspective changes between someone of the same age and someone from a different generation. The disparity you feel with those of the same age has rather large implications on you that end up making you feel miserable. But, the differences you feel with those older than you can be set as a goal for yourself. Someday, when I'm a sullen old man, I want to be as imposing as Wilhelm."

Emilia: ".....Hmm, I getcha. Hehe. If you say so."

Emilia nodded, with her face full of understanding, at Subaru's frivolous manner which he'd broken into to hide his embarrassment.

Subaru felt defeated by that attitude. Speaking seriously about it, not even Subaru knew how he should express the deep emotions that he felt as words.

Though, probably, almost certainly, he thought that it was a good thing that he didn't need to put them into words.

Beatrice: "Betty believes that growing out his beard wouldn't suit Subaru, in fact."

Subaru: "I didn't think it was this sort of conversation, but well, whatever, it's okay too. I'll grow out a beard when Beako deems it appropriate."

Beatrice: ".....Well then, will such a time come, I suppose. The elaborate co-existence between furriness and adorable is an area that cannot be sustained without Bubby's elegance, in fact. Devote yourself to it, I suppose."

Emilia: "Yeah, yeah, I say"

As Emilia and Beatrice exchanged their feelings in a manner that was typical for them, Subaru——pointed his eyes over towards a corner of the shelter which had suddenly grown noisy.

The evacuees who were gathered in a corner of the shelter, all of the individuals that were there had been released from their fear and unease that had been born from the city being occupied. However, they had inexplicably cheerful looks on their face. And that was because——,

Liliana: “Wellthen, wellthen! Allow me to sing again! Please listen, to my new song—— The Burning Song of the Flaming City!”

Subaru: “That racket is Lilliana, huh?”

There was a short, young girl with brown skin in the middle of that kerfuffle. He could see the lively figure of the bard strumming her Lyulyre, shaking loose her blonde hair.

Her appearance caused an unmistakable impact, it had an originality to it that shot out askew that he didn’t think even “Lust” could imitate; it was Lilianna without a doubt.

Beatrice: “She’s a truly strident girl, in fact.”

Emilia: “But, Lilianna was one of the people who fought against the Sin Archbishops too, right? Erm..... I can’t imagine at all how she managed to fight.....”

Taking notice of the same thing as Subaru, Emilia and Beatrice relaxed their shoulders too.

If she was acting so lively, then no doubt Lilliana had made it back alive with no injuries as well. Her, and the others’ place of battle—— Their battle against “Wrath” was a place which he couldn’t imagine, neither the strategy nor the fighting strength needed, or the most proper result.

Subaru had already considered the possibility that Lilliana’s song would have been useful for confining Sirius’ authority, however, he didn’t know how they’d been able to put it into practise in reality. He was specifically determined in wanting to hear what on earth had happened in their place of battle.

Subaru: “It won’t be easy to get close to Lilliana right now. Let’s postpone it for later.”

Emilia: “Yeah.....Besides, now is definitely the time where Lilliana’s songs are most necessary. Us taking that away wouldn’t be good. Let’s postpone talking to her until much later.”

Beatrice: “I agree, I suppose. Betty would like to pass on talking with that irritating girl, in fact.”

Subaru and the others made this conclusion whilst they watched Lilliana strumming out a tune, singing at the top of her voice with utmost passion.

In reality, if they only took into account her singing voice, she was worthy of the title of “Songstress”. He concurred with Emilia’s opinion that right now the city needed her.

???: “————”

When he looked, Kiritaka’s figure was right next to Lilliana, as she gave her performance.

His expensive suit was covered in mud and blood everywhere, and there were also traces of rips left on it. It was the outcome of having fled through scenes of carnage, and according to Otto’s story, it’d been unknown whether he was dead or alive.

Subaru: “No one’s ought to have had a comfortable scene of battle....”

Taking note of Subaru’s gaze, Kiritaka bowed in his direction. Subaru waved at him, and started to walk further into the shelter once again, in search for the next of his companions.

Then, Beatrice, who was walking right next to him as he broke into a walk, said,

Beatrice: “It’s not too important, but it was that man that woke me up when I was sleeping, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Kiritaka?”

Beatrice: “That man even went as far as crushing some of his precious Great Magic Stones, in fact. Betty doesn’t care if it was down to his sense of responsibility, or if it was for someone, I suppose. But, that’s what happened, in fact.”

Subaru: “.....I see, I see. That’s great, Beako. You did well to say it.”

Beatrice: “Hmph, I suppose.”

Having heard this story that help had come from this unexpected source, Subaru stroked Beatrice's head. Beatrice puffed out her cheeks, seemingly in dissatisfaction, but it went without saying that this was just a facade.

According to the story he'd briefly heard from Anastasia, Beatrice's actions after she'd woken up had also been an indispensable contribution in regard to the current results. If it had been Kiritaka who'd played a role in that, then it could be said that he'd fulfilled his duty corresponding to his role as a city executive.

Emilia: "Subaru. It seems like those who got injured are in the furthest part of the shelter."

Emilia, who was looking towards that part of the shelter, told Subaru that as he chatted away with Beatrice. When he looked towards the dingily lit area pointed out by her, there in the middle of the bustle, was an area that was being used as a field hospital.

There were mats and blankets spread out directly on the ground and several injured people were laying there. This was supposed to be the first place which Ferris visited, so even though the people lying down hadn't completely recovered, their lives probably weren't in danger.

Subaru: "Does that mean that treating so many people to their full is difficult, even for someone like Ferris?"

Beatrice: "It doesn't matter how skilled you are at healing magic, there's a limit to the amount of mana a person can hold, in fact. If you go around healing everyone you see, then you'd run out of it pretty much at once, I suppose. It was a wise decision, in fact."

Beatrice, who had replied, looked faintly vexed as they gazed at the rows of the injured. Even though she hid it on the surface, she was a tender-hearted spirit whose feelings ran deep.

Beatrice's healing magic was quite effective, even if it didn't even get close to Ferris'. But, even if we were to say she had any Mana, the quantity which Subaru supplied would never get anywhere near that.

It was inevitable that she was vexed, and lamenting her lack of strength.

Emilia: "In truth, I would also like to go around helping everyone with my healing magic, but..."

Subaru: "You have another role, Emilia-tan. That's why for now, you need to put that aside."

Emilia: "Yeah, I know."

If they let themselves be carried away by the emotions of the moment, they wouldn't be able to reach their goal, and would end up losing everything. Subaru called out to Emilia so she'd restrain herself, and as they walked in between people who were groaning in pain from their wounds, they searched for their companion amongst them. And soon after, they were able to find the guy they were searching for.

???: "Natsuki-san, over here!"

Subaru: "Heya, Otto!"

In the last row of the injured, there was a person who waved his hand. Noticing the young man's familiar figure, Subaru and the others approached him with a sense of relief.

Lying on a ready-made bed, with a faint smile on his pale face, was the proud Warrior-Grade Head Internal Affairs Official of the Emilia Camp, Otto Suwen.

Otto: "Though now, it feels I was given an evaluation that I really can't let by. "

Subaru: "That's your imagination, Warrior-Grade Internal Affairs Official. Once again with you, it's the same ol' story wandering around the city seeking blood, in search for foes. You love doin' that dontcha."

Otto: "Soon there's going to be strange rumours again, won't you stop with these completely false claims!?"

Instead of a greeting of reunion, Subaru exchanged jokes with Otto who was lying down. Otto shouted and dropped his shoulders in resignation, and Subaru crouched beside him to check his condition.

He didn't seem to have lethal injuries, but both of his legs looked painful.

Emilia: "Otto-kun, how's your wounds?"

Otto: "It seems that walking will be a little bit difficult until I have recovered, but apart from that there's no visible trauma... When it comes to situations, Emilia-sama's should have been more difficult, it's rather too pathetic of me that I'm severely injured."

Emilia: "That's not true. It's proof of having fought with all your strength, isn't it? Otto-kun's job isn't to fight, so it's good that nothing terrible happened to you."

Otto: "So far, Emilia-sama is the only one who has decent common sense regarding the work of a Head Internal Affairs Official."

Emilia: "Eh?"

Before Otto who murmured deeply, Emilia tilted her head with a confused look.

Putting that aside, Subaru asked Otto for an explanation of the situation in which he got injured. Initially, Otto was supposed to stay at the City Hall, and await the reports from various places at the rally point.

Subaru: "The injury isn't because you got caught in the collapse of the City Hall, right? According to what Anastasia-san said, those who stayed at the City Hall were Anastasia-san, Ferris and Al."

Otto: "I don't know exactly what the three who remained did. When I left the City Hall, through the waterways of the city... I bumped into "Gluttony". That's why I ended up like this."

Subaru: "... "Gluttony".... That bastard. Damn, there's also "Lust", how much more do they intend to mock us..."

Subaru's heart started boiling once again when he heard the name of his despised enemy.

The wickedness of the Witch Cult altogether had derided and undermined everything which they'd set up from their predictions. Their behaviour in ignoring the control towers was a mockery towards those who had gotten onto the stage.

Otto: "Fortunately, thanks to Felt-sama and the people of the "White Dragon's Scales", we managed to oppose them somehow. However, without the help of Beatrice-san, I don't know what the outcome would've been."

Beatrice: "Despite us outnumbering them, I couldn't bear to see it, in fact!"

Emilia: "Yes yes. Thank you veeeery much."

Emilia gently stroked Beatrice who had puffed out her small chest.

That exchange was pleasant, but what interested Subaru were Otto's actions. Leaving aside the result of the meeting with "Gluttony" and why he left the City Hall in the first place.

Even if he had been out of the formation to intercept "Lust", he should have stayed in the shelter and nothing more. It shouldn't have been necessary to leave the shelter and walk through the city.

Otto: "There was a request from the Witch Cult... The priority of obtaining a certain book."

Guessing Subaru's doubt, Otto spoke quietly.

The book which the Witch Cult had requested, he spoke about it rather hazily, probably as a consideration that Emilia was listening in behind Subaru. Subaru nodded at his concerns,

Subaru: "The one that's with the restoration specialist, what's his name"

Otto: "It's Mr. Darts. No one should know that it was commissioned to be restored by him.....But, to make absolutely sure, I tried to collect it. In the end, I encountered "Gluttony" before I met up with Mr. Darts, and this is the result."

He understood the reason why Otto had left the City Hall and walked about the city despite the threat of the Witch Cult. Again, it looked like he'd tried to fill an area which Subaru hadn't been attentive about.

He hadn't thought thoroughly enough about the attack on the City Hall, and the recovery of the "Book of Wisdom".

Subaru: "At least consult with me first. We're friends right?"

Otto: "Emilia-sama was kidnapped, and you also carried the fate of the city on your back like a hero, did you want me to put another annoying burden on top of that? I'm sorry. But I didn't intend to pressure my friends with these stupidities."

Subaru: "Keh"

Though he'd intended to joke around, he'd unexpectedly ended up reciprocating with happy words, making Subaru grunt. Seeing their exchange, Emilia and Beatrice exchanged glances and gave a deep sigh.

Beatrice: "These guys aren't honest, I suppose."

Emilia: "I think it's normal for them. But, then, that book....? It'd be better if we collected it. Erm, whereabouts...."

Subaru: "Ah, I'll take care of that. Or I'll get Garfiel to. Emilia-tan doesn't have to worry herself too much about that book."

Emilia: "Yeah?"

He didn't want to let Emilia get involved much with the "Book of Wisdom".

It had backwards compatibility with the Gospels, and was also a sort of relic that a Witch had left behind. Not bringing it near to Emilia as much as possible was one of Subaru's silent resolutions.

Subaru: “But, those who met “Gluttony” were Felt and the “White Dragon’s Scales”, right? Leaving aside the mercenaries in white, Felt didn’t end up hiding somewhere?”

Emilia: “But, I can’t really imagine that girl staying quietly in one place, perhaps....”

Subaru: “I agree with that.”

Felt and the others had arrested Reinhardt’s father—— Heinkel, and he’d heard that they were standing guard over him. Therefore, they shouldn’t have participated in the recapture of the control towers, although there was probably no one to communicate that decision to.

Subaru: “So, Felt is?”

Otto: “She was exhausted, but she didn’t really have any injuries like these. She came rushing out of the shelter now, to pick up the subordinates she’d brought along. ”

Subaru: “Ton Chin Kan, right? I heard about that, it seems like those guys are doing surprisingly well.”

A trio who had both a good and a bad impression, but none of that remained. They had an acquaintanceship where he’d been killed once by them, but instead of taking revenge someday, he’d tried to leave it in the past.

In any case, it was a good result that he was able to confirm the safety of that camp. After that, they would take care of the task related to “The Book of Wisdom”, so the next issue was——.

Otto: “Natsuki-san. ——Be careful in the next shelter.”

Subaru: “In the next shelter.....?”

Otto said that to Subaru, who was immersed in his thoughts, in a low voice. To the turbulent emotions which had been put in his voice, Subaru’s voice also naturally lowered in response.

Otto gave a small nod on hearing Subaru’s reaction.

And,

Otto: “One of the Sin Archbishops is being held there.”

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???: “What’s this, is it you, commoner? How dare you show your wretched face in our presence. That impudence is worthy of admiration beyond awe.”

He’d left the shelter which had been made into a field hospital, and headed to the next shelter following Otto’s words.

Compared to the former shelter, the scale of that shelter was quite small. If the previous shelter was like the parking lot of a shopping center, this shelter was like a bicycle parking lot at best.

Immediately after he’d gotten the vague impression that its purpose, even if it was a shelter, was probably different, the woman in red who’d set herself up at the entrance of the building spoke that out to him.

The woman’s name was Priscilla Barielle.

Among the Royal Election candidates which had gathered in the city, she was someone who lacked a cooperative personality completely.

Even so, even someone like that was undoubtedly a reliable ally in this situation. In addition to that, it was Priscilla who was in charge of the unknown monster, Sirius of “Wrath”.

The ability to destroy that threat ever so splendidly, and make it back was a result that had to be praised sincerely.

Subaru: “That you don’t like my face is your personal subjectivity, so that’s okay, for now, good work to the both of us. I’m relieved that you came back safe. I’m not flattering you.”

Priscilla: "Mine personal subjectivity is the aesthetic sense which has to be respected the most in the world. It's not even worth evaluating what you have to say..... Well, it's fine. However, there are no words you can say in defence for your blindness in saying *safe* upon seeing mineself."

Subaru: "Ah? Are you injured or something?"

Priscilla was sitting on a chair at the entrance of the shelter, fanning herself. Looking at her upper and lower extremities, he couldn't find any injuries or anything like that.

No, it wasn't about injuries or not. Priscilla's white skin didn't have a single scratch on it, even the dress she wore didn't have a speck of dust or dirt. If there had been any differences before and after the battle, it would have been regarding her neck accessory and that her hair had come loose.

Emilia: "Your necklace and hair clip, have you lost them somewhere?"

Priscilla: "Hm. So even a commoner with such an undiscerning eye will take notice of it if it's a woman? Even though I don't like that boorish way of calling it a necklace. It seems to bring resentment."

Subaru: "*That you weren't safe*, in reality, you were talking about your accessories..."

To Emilia's naive and innocent words, Priscilla snorted in response.

Certainly she'd now lost her luxurious gem-encrusted necklace, as well as the hair clip which kept her orange hair in place. The aroma of her charm had increased when she'd let loose her hair that was normally held in place, what a sinful woman she was.

To being with, Priscilla's radiance was rather like that of a poisonous flower. If you approached, you'd end up getting stung.

Subaru: "So, I'll pass on getting stung. Why are you bothering to stay at this shelter? I didn't think you had such an admirable personality as to volunteer to keep guard."

Priscilla: “Foolish japes. Mineself shouldn’t have to engage in these kinds of jobs that commoners do. It isn’t mine actual intent to be in a place like this, but I cannot allow others to gaze upon mine sense of beauty now. So I avoided the public’s gaze as a compromise. Besides, Al insisted.”

Subaru: “I think he’d try to quickly deny that if he were here.”

Whilst he imagined the exaggerated motions of denial from the iron helmet, Subaru directed his gaze towards the shelter’s entrance. He didn’t catch any glimpse of said iron helmet, but he’d heard that he was in this shelter. In other words, he wasn’t outside, but rather, inside the building—— next to the Sin Archbishop.

Subaru: “Is Al keeping guard inside?”

Priscilla: “‘Tis so. We don’t know what an evil thing like that would get up to were we to leave it alone. Hence why Al is keeping guard over them. When it comes to him, he ought to do a good job.”

Subaru: “.....You didn’t think he’d try to kill them. That’s unexpected.”

Priscilla: “He can do so if he wants. Mineself wouldn’t stop him.”

Had she felt bored answering him? Priscilla yawned whilst covering her mouth with her fan. That seemed to be her way of expressing indifference at Subaru’s question.

She had no intention of stopping him if he entered the building. Subaru gazed at the entrance of the shelter, and placed his hand on his chest where his heartbeat had gotten slightly faster.

Emilia: “Subaru, if you’re scared to go in, you needn’t force yourself to....”

Beatrice: “Indeed, in fact. I don’t think we’ll get anything out of it, I suppose.”

Emilia and Beatrice both gently expressed their opinions to Subaru who’d stopped in his tracks. He felt like he wanted to let himself be coddled by their concerns. However, as soon as that thought popped into his head, he noticed Priscilla’s cruel gaze looking over at him from the corner of his eye.

It was a gaze that regarded all of Subaru's doubts and hesitation as a boring farce.

Whether he went forward or backward, Priscilla's evaluation of Subaru likely wouldn't change. For Subaru, who'd still been given the lowest evaluation that was completely unsparing, that he did not care about.

He didn't care about it, but he regretted that the two who were with him had also been evaluated that way.

Subaru: "I'm going. In any case, it isn't a problem that I have to escape from."

Emilia & Beatrice: "————"

Subaru made up his mind, and the two of them didn't give their opinions for or against it. They just stood by his side, so as to respect his will.

Then, with the two of them accompanying him, Subaru stepped into the dark shelter. Priscilla wasn't even looking at their backs anymore. It was rather like her, he would say.

With the parched *pitter-patter* sound of their footsteps, they moved forward into the stone building. Soon, they could see the end of the passageway, ahead of the path which turned to the left,

???: "——Is that you, Bro? I heard the Princess' voice, so I thought she was talking with someone."

Crouched down in the passageway, carrying his Blue Dragon Sword on his shoulder, the iron helmet——Al was awaiting them. When he saw Subaru and the others heading towards him, he turned his attention to Emilia.

Al: "Oh, it seems like the Miss too is alright. Good work, Bro."

Subaru: "It's 'cause Emilia-tan's wellbeing was my minimum requirement for victory. Moreover regarding you, I've heard you ran into many problems. Priscilla's irrationalities in particular were crazy."

Al: “Ah, you’re being completely serious. Still, I too was wondering what was going on with her this time. Well, no, I’m almost always wondering what’s going on, so I’ve got no persuasive power.”

Emilia: “But, it doesn’t seem like you dislike that.....?”

Al: “————”

Al, who had grumbled out something like a complaint about his mistress Priscilla, was hit right on the nose by Emilia’s innocent words. He couldn’t see that which was concealed behind the helmet, but he felt like he’d shaped his lips into the form of a \wedge on the other side.

(TL Note: To make your mouth in the form of a \wedge is basically describing him frowning, as you can well see, from the Kana itself.)

In practicality, he was a man that was always dragged around everywhere by Priscilla, and despite that he still wanted to be her servant. He supposed they had a relationship that others wouldn’t understand.

For a little while, Al twisted his neck in an environment which felt like it had devoured him, he clapped his shoulder with the ridge of his Blue Dragon Sword and abruptly directed his gaze towards the back of the passageway,

Al: “It’s a little bit late for you having come this far, but..... Did you come to speak with the Sin Archbishop?”

Beatrice: “Do you think there would be another purpose, I suppose? Do you think we’d bother coming to chat with the guard, there’s no way we’d waste our time, in fact.”

Al: “This little girl sure is scathing, huh? Don’t get yourself so worked up, Beako.....was it?”

Beatrice: “————”

Before Beatrice's cold, sharp gaze, Al deliberately shook his head. Keeping Beatrice in check, who seemed like she was about to grab him, regardless of their difference in height, Subaru glared at Al who'd started this unnecessary provocation.

Subaru: "I more or less get that you're upset, but please, don't provoke her. Beako, you too, don't fall for them. Deal with it with the dignity of an adult."

Beatrice: "Betty will only allow Subaru to call her that way, I suppose. The next time you call me like that, extremely terrible retribution awaits you, in fact."

Al: "Yeah yeah, I understand. You couldn't be any colder."

As he spoke, Al moved to the side of the corridor, and made way for them. A door came into view ahead of them when they moved further into the passageway. Most likely, the Sin Archbishop was locked up in there.

Suddenly, the back of Subaru's neck started to tingle, complaining out of a tense feeling.

Al: "The Sin Archbishop is within. They're being restrained so that they can't get up to no good, so for now, I don't think it'll end up becoming a massacre. ——Also, I'll give you just one piece of advice."

Subaru: "Advice?"

Al: "Bro, the Miss and that spirit too. It'd be better if you went back home without talking to them. Nothing good will come from getting involved. Leave this be, and go back home."

Subaru: ".....There's just no way we can do that."

Dropping the tone of his voice, his opinion was an earnest one which he spoke with a serious voice. Denying those words with a shake of his head, Subaru replied that he couldn't do so, and rejected his suggested.

And, to Subaru's reply, Al spoke out "I guessed as much," with a sigh.

Al: “No matter what I say, I don’t think I ever get much credibility. This time, my behaviour here was in the wrong, I ain’t got any excuses for it.”

Subaru: “That’s really not the reason why. Well, it’s true that you weren’t cooperative, but that doesn’t mean I’m saying I won’t listen to you. Don’t get the wrong idea.”

Taking into account Al’s terrible words of self-castigation, Subaru pointed at the door at the end of the passageway. The task he had at hand with the person within, was one that was Subaru’s problem only.

Whether his intentions had been transmitted, Al sat down with a *plunk* on that spot. And, whilst he pointed to the door at the end, only with his head, he said,

Al: “I hope you don’t lose sight of yourself whilst you speak.”

Subaru: “OK, don’t hesitate to help me if something happens.”

Al: “If that comes to pass, I’ll send in the Princess, so no matter what happens, she’ll send them straight up to heaven.”

Exchanging a final conversation, Subaru and the others said goodbye to Al and headed towards the door. There was something drifting about that made them feel a strange sense of oppression in regards to the door which lead to the closed room.

Having arrived here, even if it was trying, he couldn’t avoid it, and so with that determination, Subaru grabbed the doorknob and forcibly pushed the door open.

——It was a narrow room in which the air flowing in it smelled of dust.

Its light source was small and dim, even for a shelter, it only had the barebones. It was a narrow room that could fit at most five or six people in it, if you jam-packed it; the lack of air could be felt inside it.

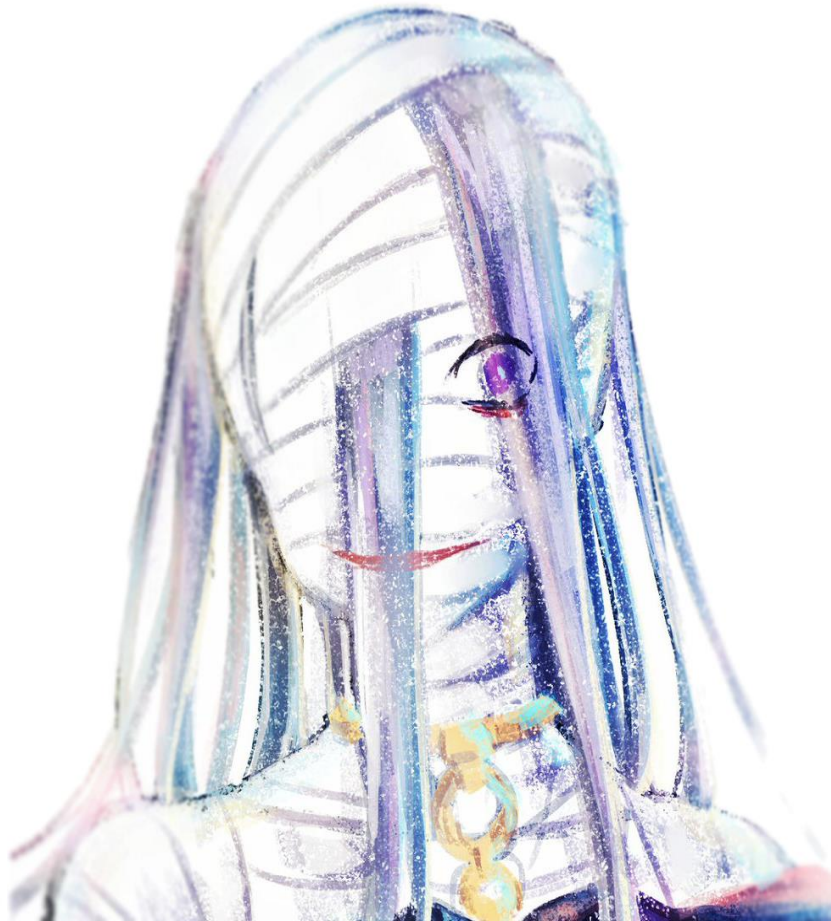
And, in the middle of this room.

???: “——Aha. So you came, my dear. I’m sorry for the inconvenience? Thank you.”

On top of an old chair, with her whole body completely bound by chains, was that monster—— Sirius was awaiting them.

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Chapter 76 - Fruits of The Battle for Pristella 3



The Sin Archbishop of “Wrath”. A bandaged monster who claimed to be the wife of the madman, “Sloth”.

Sirius Romanee-Conti had her entire body tied up with the chains that had been her own weapon, and she was locked up in a room of the shelter without being able to move about.

Sirius: “I was bored because no one came, nor would they come close. But, they went to call you, my dear. Thank you, I’m sorry? Thanks to everyone, it seems like we can have a happy reunion.... Even though it seems like there’s some nuisances as well.”

On having seen Subaru enter the room, Sirius's voice called out in greeting. However, the final part of her words were filled with an intense anger towards Emilia and Beatrice.

Subaru: “———”

As always, it seemed like Sirius was mistaking Subaru as a body that was possessed by Petelgeuse, or something like that. Of course, it was just what she wanted to believe.

Whilst overwhelmed by the monster's powerful gaze that radiated with madness, in which she had clearly lost her marbles, Subaru shrugged his shoulders so to mask that, and said,

Subaru: “You're quite composed for one who's captured. I don't know if Priscilla thought to try and capture you on some whim of her's, but we definitely won't be releasing you safely.”

Sirius: “Even if you say that, they can't get rid of me either so easily, right? Thank you. I know you care about my wellbeing. But, I'm sorry? You took the trouble to worry, but that makes no sense to me. It's like that, isn't it?”

With this peculiar thought, Sirius interpreted Subaru's threat as a positive. The monster kept its quiet posture on the chair, and only let its slightly cracked voice quiver,

Sirius: “So long as there's “Love” to think of others and want others in everyone's hearts, no one can deny me. It's the same even for that prideful girl.”

Subaru: “.....Your authority shouldn't have worked with Priscilla and Liliana. It's not like there's no one capable of hurting you.”

Sirius: “But that isn't you. Whatever doesn't come from you yourself, no matter what it is, ultimately makes no sense to me. Thank you, I'm sorry?”

Subaru: “——*tch*”

He gritted his teeth at Sirius, who had relaxed her bandaged lips into a smile. It seemed like a conversation had been established, but in reality, there was no mutual understanding between them.

The resolute values within Sirius didn't accept even a modicum of external stimuli. The more it struck him, the more the stricken Subaru got hurt.

Beatrice: "Subaru, it's pointless, in fact. It's meaningless to expect human emotion like introspection or empathy from such people, I suppose. These guys are nothing but malevolent, in fact."

Sirius: ".....Spirit in the form of a girl, don't you get closer to my precious Petelgeuse."

When Beatrice pulled Subaru's sleeve, who was clenching his teeth, Sirius bluntly began to take a sullen attitude. Beatrice snorted her small nose to the words of that monster, and tugged Subaru's arm even closer to her.

Beatrice: "That's too bad for you, I suppose. But Betty belongs to Subaru, I was needed here, and here I am, I suppose. Don't you call Subaru by that disgusting name, in fact. You don't even know the true meaning of holding that name."

Sirius: "Don't get carried away, little brat. That person's side is the place which I snuggle up to in heart and flesh. Don't you dare point your mistaken, arbitrary devotion to that person. I'll set your backside on fire, burn the inside of your belly to cinders, and turn you into fertiliser for the Od Lagna."

Emilia: "Both of you, don't get worked up and start fighting. It'll make me angry too."

When the stormy atmosphere was created by Sirius and Beatrice, the intervening Emilia's gaze became sharp. He was in a situation where he was surrounded by three women, being pulled by his arm, but Subaru didn't have the liberty to joke about it right now.

Such was the strong feeling of oppression he felt in his soul by being next to Sirius. He wasn't sure if it was caused by the authority that monster possessed.

Subaru: "Emilia, Beatrice, step back. Perhaps she'll just talk with me. Although, regardless if there's someone here or not..... It's doubtful if it'll happen."

Emilia: "But....."

Subaru: "Please. ——This is an unexpected chance to speak with the Witch Cult."

If it wasn't for this situation, he wouldn't have had the opportunity to sit down and talk with the Witch Cult.

Emilia let out a sigh at Subaru's request, and both she and Beatrice exchanged glances with each other; they took a step back so as not to interfere with his conversation with Sirius.

Then, Subaru, who'd been entrusted with this situation, turned to face the bound monster once again.

Subaru: "As you wish, I will speak with you. So, you've been making your chains to creak since a while ago, stop moving. If you slip free from your bindings, we'll be forced to beat you down."

Sirius: "You too have your standpoint. I understand that. It's fine. These chains won't come loose or break so easily. Thank you."

The captive Sirius was delighted with Subaru's attitude, who had tried to converse with her.

It didn't imply that Emilia and Beatrice's figures were out of sight, but it seemed like she'd completely expelled them from her notice.

Sirius: "So, what should we talk about? Because of your relation with me, there's hardly anything to say between us..... We can just exchange "Love", don't you think? Just kidding, I'm sorry?"

Subaru: "Your purpose..... Yes, your purpose. The purpose behind why all of you Sin Archbishops attacked this city at the same time. You don't need crap like the book or the artificial spirit. At least, we know quite well that all of your purposes weren't really to steal them."

Sirius: "It's a misunderstanding that we didn't really intend to. Though, it's certainly true that I personally didn't want them. I don't know about the other guys, but I was just following the Gospel's description."

Subaru: "The Gospel.... That again? It was the same with Petelgeuse as well. Why do all of you follow that strange book? Petelgeuse followed it as well."

And as a result, he lost his life.

The Gospel's description showed the path of the future that an owner must follow—— Even knowing such circumstances, it wasn't omnipotent, that much was clear if he thought about the final moments of that lunatic.

Subaru knew that the path of the future which could be seen was not absolute.

Yet even so,

Subaru: "Why does the Witch Cult follow exactly what the book says? Is it because that book will help with the resurrection of the "Witch"..... Of your beloved "Witch of Envy" ? "

Sirius: "——Please don't misunderstand, darling."

Subaru: "Misunderstand?"

Sirius' emotions of joy suddenly disappeared from her voice on hearing Subaru's accusatory voice.

Whilst the monster looked into Subaru's eyes with her glittering eyes, on her face which was wrapped in bandages, she twisted her lips so to bare her yellowed teeth.

And then, she spoke.

Sirius: "You're the only one I love. The only one. I don't care about the "Witch". Everything, are just necessary things to get to you."

Subaru: "———"

Sirius: "The other Sin Archbishops are similar. All of them have worthless, insignificant, repulsive desires, and merely cling to their authorities. For me, my only reason is "love", and for my beloved dear, it's different. I'm sorry? It's different in every way."

——The Witch Cult's purpose was the resurrection of the "Witch of Envy".

Subaru had believed without any doubt that it was so, considering Petelgeuse Romanee-Conti's behaviour and utterances, and in addition, the creed and acts of barbarism he'd heard about the Witch Cult up until now.

However, that principle—— The very reason for the existence of the group known as the Witch Cult had been shaken here.

Of course, Subaru had also met Regulus Corneas, and they'd exchanged words too.

As soon as he thought about whether that conceited, egocentric man, who'd looked down on everything besides himself, was going to idolise the "Witch", his sense of incongruity became stronger.

Now that he mentioned it, it was obvious. The more he thought about, the more he could come to a better conclusion. But, if it was like this, then what purpose did the Witch Cult have in existing?

Subaru: "Then, why the hell are you all in the Witch Cult...."

Sirius: "Because you're in it"

Subaru: "———"

Sirius: "That is my sole reason. I'm here to exchange my "love" with you. I don't know about the others. If we become one, I think you'd understand."

Becoming one, in brief, probably meant melding their hearts with each other with the power of her authority.

But that wasn't understanding, it was forced conformity. It wasn't possible to call forcing a heart against its will by binding it to the same emotions a way of understanding each other, let alone becoming one.

Subaru: "What are the purposes of the other Sin Archbishops? What is the ultimate goal of the Witch Cult?"

Sirius: “Well, who knows? I’m sorry. Regrettably it’s something that doesn’t interest me.”

Subaru: “In general, where does the Witch Cult meet? Is there anyone who leads it?”

Sirius: “.....No. Especially with such established routine. You know it too.”

Whilst still putting on a crazed smile underneath her bandages, Sirius avoided Subaru’s question. No, she probably didn’t even intend to dodge it.

The monster was going to sincerely answer in a monster-like way to her husband, “Petelgeuse’s” questions. Due to her behaviour so far, there seemed to be no doubt that Sirius had an abbertant devotion towards Petelgeuse, on top of her dependance.

In other words, just like the monster had stated, she really didn’t know anything.

Sirius: “——Even so, after all, it’s like that?”

Subaru: “——?”

Sirius grumbled that out whilst looking at the pensieve Subaru from below.

Subaru reacted a little slowly to the frigidness of those words. The monster took advantage of the momentary gap that was born from it.

The small chair creaked as it tilted, and Sirius face drew close to Subaru’s visage. Her bloodshot eyes stared at Subaru, who’d held his breath reflexively, from close up.

Sirius tilted her chair, still bound up to her ankles, and balanced herself up using only her toes which hung barely free. Her body fell forward with an injection of momentum so to lean against Subaru.

Subaru: “.....Oh”

Sirius: "I'd thought something was strange ever since the time we reunited back at the clocktower, but I was so sure. The passion of that day is nowhere to be found in your eyes. ——My dear, are you being swallowed?"

Subaru: "———"

Sirius: "You're being eaten up by a soul, by a body which was supposed to be a temporary abode, and you've ended up unable to move about..... Really, you're such a useless person without me."

Sirius' long tongue suspiciously licked Subaru's cheek as she breathed out a fevered sigh. Feeling the rough tip of her tongue on his skin, every single hair on Subaru's body stood on end.

A growing sense of discomfort erupted within his chest, and the back of his eyes became dyed in deep red. It was crazy to think that this phenomenon had simply been caused from her vile action.

It was crazy to think, but he didn't feel like he could consider anything else. And then——,

Emilia: "ICE BRAND ARTS!"

Sirius: "Gh—— *Fhhh*"

The blow of an ice hammer came swooping diagonally and hit Sirius' body, who had been clinging to Subaru, and launched her to the back wall along with her chair.

The sound of an impact was raised, and Sirius, who had received this icy blow defenceless to stop it, fell down. Dust blew up across the narrow room, and bits from the ceiling came pattering down.

Subaru: "Oh, oh.....?"

Standing next to Subaru, who had ended up falling on his knees, Emilia dematerialised the ice hammer she'd created. Subaru, who'd been slow to notice that it'd been Emilia who'd let lose that blow without any forewarning, let out a long sigh.

He really couldn't comprehend what had happened during this moment.

Beatrice: “Subaru’s such a big idiot, I suppose.”

Subaru: “——*tch*. Beako?”

Amidst the impact and the parched sound, Subaru blinked, noticing that his cheek had been slapped. The one who’d struck his cheek was Beatrice, who’d nestled up close to him. She looked at Emilia out of the corner of her eyes, and said,

Beatrice: “If Emilia hadn’t interrupted that now, Betty would have done the same, in fact. You were too careless around someone like that, I suppose. In the worst case, she could have ripped your throat apart with her teeth, in fact.”

Subaru: “————”

Subaru became aware of his own carelessness thanks to Beatrice’s words. It wasn’t an exaggeration or something he could laugh at. In reality, Sirius had licked Subaru’s cheek with her tongue.

Putting to one side the repulsiveness of that action, if that tongue had been a fang, and if instead of his cheek, it had been his neck, Subaru wouldn’t have been able to stop it.

Emilia: “Don’t try anything strange. I’m a little scatterbrained, so I can’t hold myself back very well. The next one will surely be a reaaaaally painful blow.”

Emilia declared that she didn’t intend to go easy, whilst keeping her guard up against the collapsed Sirius.

Sirius was completely bound, such that she wasn’t able to move about—— The excessive precautions they’d ended up taking against this opponent who was kept as a prisoner in this state was proof of the monster’s fiendish being.

It seemed like he’d forgotten about that in front of the threat of its authority, however, this Sin Archbishop of “Wrath” stood out from the rest, even in looking at its combat strength alone. At a first glance, one would think that the strongest in the Witch Cult was Regulus the “Invincible”, but in reality, since “Greed” relied entirely on his authority, his threat had been low.

A strength that didn't depend on an authority, along with the threat of an authority—— In this sense, the other Sin Archbishops were way tougher than Regulus

Beatrice: "Subaru, you should have already known this, I suppose. You won't get anywhere, even if you talk to this person, in fact. She's not the type that you can have a proper conversation with. I don't know what she knows, but even if you wish to get something out of her, you aren't going to be able to have a sane conversation to find out what she knows, I suppose."

Subaru: "If it's impossible to converse with her...."

Beatrice: "Pose the queries to her body, what I mean is torture, in fact. Though that isn't something which Subaru should do, I suppose. It's something which the Kingdom does sometimes after having caught someone, in fact."

Beatrice tugged at Subaru's arm so to get him to stand up as she expressed that cruel point of view.

Torture, Subaru felt an undescrible feeling of uneasiness in regards to that word. Along with *death* and *brutality*, they weren't words which were heard or spoken in his everyday life.

Although he didn't know the reality of it, with how much such gruesome things were practised, if they were within reach of their imagination, he understood it. Along with the anguish of the people who were exposed to that.

Subaru: "I don't think it's what they deserve."

Subaru's mentality wasn't so naive to believe that human nature was fundamentally good.

He didn't think that everything had to end up with "Death" when it came to settling a battle; the thought of wanting to finish things up without killing as much as possible had always been in his nature. That was a moral value which he'd brought in from his original world, and that in itself was a naivety which Subaru couldn't detach himself from.

——But, even so, there'd always been a conclusion that had stepped past the boundaries of those morals.

He would have preferred to finish things up without killing if he could. In the end, that thought meant that he would have to kill his opponents that necessitated it.

That had applied to both of the Sin Archbishops, Petelgeuse and Regulus. And it would be no different when it came to the other Sin Archbishops, Sirius, Capella and Alphard of “Gluttony” as well.

He felt hatred, and a lust for revenge. But in yet a different part to that, there was an intent that had determined that those guys were people he would have to kill.

Subaru: “I’ll be excusing myself from talking with you anymore. When we separate here, I probably won’t get another opportunity to talk with you. I don’t think that’s a pity, nor commiserable. But, hurry up and spit out what you have to say, and then you can rest in peace..... That’d always be helpful.”

Telling someone to “Die” right to their face had brought him a difficulty breathing.

Subaru said merely that, and made a motion to leave the room since there was nothing else left anymore. As Beatrice had mentioned, if they wanted to try and get information on the Witch Cult from Sirius, they had no other way but to pose the questions to her body to get more out of her. That was a different task, one which Subaru could not do.

When Subaru showed his intention to leave, both Emilia and Beatrice’s faces broke into relief. Both of them had been against entering the room from the start. It was a regrettable situation in that they’d just been put in a foul mood without gaining any results. However, thinking about it in a positive light, it had become clear to them that the way those guys thought was incomprehensible; it seemed they should be content with that.

Subaru: “————”

There was no telling what would have happened if he’d gotten close.

Subaru and the others made their way to the entrance without bothering to lift Sirius back up, who still lay toppled over thanks to Emilia’s blow. It definitely wasn’t a laudable attitude, but, with that——.

Sirius: “————”

Subaru: “.....Wait up”

Subaru stopped in his tracks due to an unpleasant sensation that grated against his skull just when they were about to reach the entrance. Then, he looked down at Sirius who was lying on the floor. The source of that unpleasantness came from over there, from the collapsed Sirius.

The monster was lying on her side, breathing crudely from her nose whilst pressing her face against the cold floor. Her breathing was so awfully ear piercing that it had drawn his attention to her.

——Just before leaving the room, he’d realised that she was humming.

Subaru: “Stop that song, what are you trying to do?”

Sirius: “———”

She was out of tune, her pitch and rhythm were both in a state of chaos. This dissonance didn’t come to a stop there. It was nothing else but a declaration of Sirius’ intent in regards to Subaru’s words.

In other words, a refusal, a rejection.

Subaru: “I told you to stop! This song is grating through my head!”

Sirius: “——. I’m sorry? Ah, but songs sure are great, aren’t they? They taught me that songs are wonderful. That’s why I wanted to try and sing all of a sudden.”

Subaru: “Lilianna.....!?”

Sirius should have heard the song when she squared off against Priscilla and Liliana. He had no idea how her song had sealed her authority during their fight.

In the midst of battle, the monster hadn’t hated the song, and she’d learnt something of it. However, the monster’s understanding of the song definitely was of different strokes to the feelings which Liliana had put into hers.

Her's was something more eerie, and distorted.

Subaru: "Don't compare her song with yours. Yours is different, it's something else."

Sirius: "——I could say the same about you. You're different. You've changed. You're definitely different from that person whom I love. Even if you're the same, you're different."

Suabru: "Huh?"

Sirius: "Petelgeuse is inside you. Soul and soul will melt together, flesh and flesh will become one, and like that, that beloved person will surface, though, it will take some time. What I ought to do is help that. To see that person waking up, by your side."

Still collapsed on the floor, Sirius twisted her neck and looked up at Subaru.

An endless swirling storm of emotions surged up in her crazened eyes. Anger, joy, sorrow, and a longing that she couldn't conceal, all continued to swirl in Sirius' eyes.

Sirius: "I'll drag that person out from inside of you. ——Thank you, I'm sorry? Please, until that day comes, take care of your mind and body."

Subaru: "——*tch*"

Sirius certainly understood that Subaru and Petelgeuse were different things.

She should have understood that, but yet the monster hid under a convenient fantasy, i.e. overwriting him. Petelgeuse, who slept inside of Subaru, would someday come out to greet him, she'd said.

There's no such thing. That would be impossible.

It was likely true that Petelgeuse's Witch Factor that he'd taken in was inside him. However, there's no way that safeguarded Petelgeuse's spirit. From where did this monster find these similarities between Petelgeuse and him to have repeated such bullshit?

——Or was it that Subaru and that lunatic had some similar parts when seen from the outside?

Sirius: “One last thing, I’m going to give you some advice so that you don’t end up doing something unnecessary.”

Subaru: “.....Advice? You, to me?”

Sirius: “Yes, so that I don’t lose my beloved darling. ——Be careful around “Gluttony”. “Bizarre Eating”, “Gourmet” and “Satiation” will eventually try to snatch you away. If that happens before he wakes up, no one will end up being able to remember my darling.”

Subaru: “————”

From the place he’d least expected, “Wrath” had mentioned the name “Gluttony” and given him information on them. Although, the content itself wasn’t anything unusual, it was just information which he already knew, but——No.

Subaru: “Wait. “Gourmet”, and who else?”

Sirius: ““Gourmet”, “Bizzare Eating” and “Satiation”. Being eaten and taken in without anyone noticing what was lost is an act of barbarity against “Love” which must melt together, blend together, and become as one. If you get the chance, please kill “Gluttony”. Since they’re a bother.”

She revealed that about the Sin Archbishops who were in the same position as her, and what’s more, she’d indifferently wished for their death. It was great that in this case there was a fatal discrepancy in the relations between the top brass in the Witch Cult.

The issue was what Sirius had said about “Gluttony”——no, about the “Gluttonies”.

Subaru: “I totally thought that the “Gluttony” which Otto came across was the “Gluttony” who was in the control tower, since they’d been prowling about like “Lust”, but.....”

What if that wasn’t the case, and it was just one of the “Gluttonies” from the two additional ones. *What if* all of the three “Gluttonies” were lurking in the city, and it hadn’t been just that one.

And what if the “Gluttony” in charge of their control tower had continued to protect its post.

Subaru: “—— *Tch*. Shit, I need to make sure.....!”

Subaru clasped his head in dismay at his own stupidity, he kicked the floor and headed towards the entrance. Now was not the time to continue talking with Sirius.

Subaru had to make sure with his own eyes the safety of everyone who had participated in the battle to defend the city.

He had to make sure that no one had disappeared due to their names being devoured by “Gluttony”.

Subaru: “EMILIA! BEATRICE! Go straight back to the shelter we were at before. I’ve gotta make sure of something.”

Emilia: “Subaru? I don’t know what’s blown into you, but calm down.....”

Subaru: “WHEN THIS IS OVER! I’ll calm down all you want. I’ll calm down, so please let me do what it takes for me to calm down. It’s something urgent.”

Subaru hurriedly replied that to Emilia who had touched his shoulder. Emilia gulped seeing Subaru’s behaviour, and then nodded saying “I understand.”

Beatrice, who from the start hadn’t intended to interject in Subaru’s behaviour, looked shocked. Subaru had already forgotten about Sirius, and had hurriedly jumped out of the room.

Emilia: “Wait up, Subaru. I’m coming too.”

And so, Emilia hurried after him, and both of their footsteps moved away at a quick pace.

As she listened to them, Beatrice turned her head back when she was at the door, and looked at Sirius, who was still face flat to the floor, and then pointed her palm at the monster.

Beatrice: “To tell you the truth, it’s not like I don’t think turning you into smithereens here would be proper, I suppose.”

Sirius: “——So, why don’t you do so? Spirit Whore. It’ll be most welcome for me if it speeds up that person’s awakening.”

Beatrice: “———”

Beatrice let out a sigh at the provocative Sirius’ manner of speech, and then lowered her palm. The little girl held the hem of her dress with the hand she’d lowered, and her eyes became filled with strong emotion,

Beatrice: “If you make Subaru sad, Betty will definitely kill you, in fact.”

Sirius: “Of course. My beloved Petelgeuse’s resurrection should just be welcomed by emotions of joy.”

It was uncertain how much she understood, or if she was done here or not, but regardless of that, the doddering conversation ended, and Beatrice left the room, closing the door behind her.

Just before she did, Sirius’s distorted hums slipped into Beatrice’s eardrums.

A harassment and severity of sound that grated against your sense of hearing with its distorted rhythm like trampling the concept of music underneath it. A completely new kind of music that planted unpleasant feelings in others—— It was the “Music of Resentment”.

The door was closed, and the Music of Resentment was cut off.

But, no matter where she was, that distorted rhythm remained in her ears. Beatrice chased after Subaru and Emilia at an adagio pace whilst tasting that unpleasant sensation.

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After leaving Sirius' prison, Subaru rushed over to Al who was waiting in the corridor. Al, who'd been on standby, his Blue Dragon Sword held in his hand, was taken by surprise by Subaru's threatening attitude who'd stormed his way over.

Al: "Hey, Bro. I heard a super loud noise, you didn't kill her, right? Punching and kicking also counts as prisoner abuse, so they ain't things you can really praise."

Subaru: "I didn't kill her, afterwards I'll give you a proper explanation about the prisoner abuse, more importantly, I need to check something. Al, no one died where you were, right?"

Al: "——? Well, if you're asking about the whole city, I don't know. But at least, me, the cat eared sis—bro, and the miss with the Kararagi accent are all fine. I thought you already knew?"

Subaru: "I know, but.... Aah, shit. I won't get anywhere this way!"

It was natural that it had been an inconclusive answer.

Following with Subaru's concerns, if there had been someone who'd ended up as a victim of "Gluttony", that person would have disappeared from other's memories, like Rem. In that situation, asking *"Is there not a person you don't remember?"* made no sense.

The easiest way would be to tell Al and Emilia everyone's names, one by one.

Subaru: "——*tch*"

That was scary, that was terrifying.

Although it wasn't the time to cower, it would be terrifying to hear it from someone's mouth. It would be much more reassuring to go back to the shelter and check the safety of everyone with his own eyes.

Subaru: "I'll go back to the shelter. Please don't take your eyes off until Reinhardt comes back for whatever reason."

Al: "Alright then, but..... Well, no. I won't ask the details. Gives me the chills."

Shaking his hand, Al didn't question Subaru's true intention behind his behaviour. Subaru went back through the passageway whilst avoiding considering, rather, thinking unnecessarily about problematic things, and left the shelter.

Looking at Priscilla from the corner of his eye, who seemed bored as ever, "*That's the second one,*" he counted.

Priscilla: "Hah. Commoners sure are of small caliber, hence why your hearts get perturbed by such trivial things, it's such a big issue. If you're going hither and thither, at least focus your attention like you're sightseeing as much as you can."

Subaru: "That you haven't changed doesn't relieve me one bit. See you later."

Not having time to stop, Subaru quickly passed by in front of Priscilla. It was a manner, or rather, a disrespect which could have fouled Priscilla's mood, but she didn't say anything about it and only muttered "How boring." whilst fanning her skin.

Emilia: "So Subaru, what do you want to do? What is it that you have to make sure of?"

Returning back to the shelter full of the injured, Emilia called out to Subaru who was restlessly looking around. To her call, Subaru hesitated for a moment on whether to ask for her help.

Thinking about Rem's case, Emilia didn't have any resistance in regards to "Gluttony's" meals. Subaru hadn't forgotten the shock when he'd learnt about the loss of Rem's name from her mouth.

He'd resigned himself to the possibility of that wound reopening once more, and he'd the courage to explain the situation to Emilia. Because this was an unconscious blade which Emilia couldn't take into account.

Subaru: "———"

Till now, Subaru had confirmed the names of several of his companions who'd fought in the defence.

Beatrice and Anastasia first. Then Garfiel and Mimi were added to that, then Wilhelm and Otto, Liliana and Kiritaka too.

Felt's being was confirmed too from Otto's words. According to the girls' story, Reinhardt and Ferris should also be fine. And Priscilla and Al whom he'd been with just a little while ago.

In other words, it wasn't yet possible to check the safety of——,

???: “——Subaru, it seems we met up safely.”

Subaru: “Reinhardt?”

A refreshing voice called out to Subaru, whose thoughts were spinning around rapidly, from his side. When he turned around, there was a red haired young man who had raised his arm in greeting to him; it was Reinhardt.

It had been only a few hours that he'd met up safely with him, who after Regulus' defeat should have gone around to provide reinforcement to the other camps. Nevertheless, now that he was looking around for his acquaintances, he felt honest relief in being able to see his face.

Reinhardt: “It's a relief that both Emilia-sama and Beatrice-sama also reunited safely.”

Emilia: “Thank you, Reinhardt. You should have been running around the city, right? Thank goodness you're alright. Yeah, truly.”

Reinhardt: “No, it's no big deal. Besides, even without me, everyone fulfilled their roles steadfastly. My modest power was only a little bit useful.”

Reinhardt replied politely back to Emilia, and then looked at Subaru. Reinhardt narrowed his sky-blue eyes, and as if seeing through to the depths of Subaru's heart, he said,

Reinhardt: “So, Subaru, did something happen? Right now, you look like you're flustered.”

Subaru: "Right now I want to check if something happened. ——Reinhardt, have you met with Felt? Felt, and the others..... Well, Larkins and the others, that is."

The trio of Ton Chin Kan, now that it had come to this—— They also belonged in the framework of comrades. He'd heard from Otto that Felt was fine, he'd also heard that her servants were fine, but that didn't mean he'd mentioned the names of the three servants and confirmed them. He wasn't able to feel relieved.

To the desperation of Subaru's question, Reinhardt gently placed his hand on his chin, and said,

Reinhardt: "Yeah, they're fine. Felt-sama, those three, Larkins, Gaston and Camberly are all safe and sound. Larkins and Gaston have injuries, but they aren't so serious enough to worry. In regards to Felt-sama having acted independently, I think she will have to reflect on this later, don't you?"

Subaru: "There seems to be a pretty big chance that our Internal Affairs Officer was saved thanks to Felt, so do take that into account, I beseech for a lenient punishment..... Anyways, there wasn't anything else in addition?"

Reinhardt: "Anything else?"

Subaru: "Anything else..... No, sorry. It wouldn't really be a specific question. So umm, after we separated, did anything happen? Any problems, or anything that worried you."

Even if he thought about it again, he still didn't have a specific question to ask; Subaru felt miserable. However, Reinhardt didn't laugh at it, instead he quietly mulled it over and shook his head.

Reinhardt: "No, my apologies, but nothing is coming to mind. Nothing particularly problematic happened after I left you and Emilia-sama. That I think."

Subaru: "I... see. My bad. It isn't that. Well, erm..... Yeah, there's a lot I'd like to talk to you about, so when you can, won't you gather along with Felt too? I'd like to consult with the people involved about what happened now, and what comes after. May I leave that to you?"

Reinhardt: “——. Sure, since it's a request from you. Right now, I'd just asked Felt-sama to stay quietly in the standby area once again, so it'll probably sound sarcastic to her, though.”

Subaru: “.....Yikes that's bad. Afterwards I'll apologise as well, so for now, I'll rely on you.”

Giving a wry smile at Subaru's words, Reinhardt looked around his surroundings a little, and then quickly left the place. When he jumped out to the outside of the shelter, you could barely see his figure which was leaping over buildings in one bound; he would soon meet back up with Felt, it seemed.

The problem was,

Emilia: “Subaru, Ferris is here. You want to hear his story, right?”

Subaru: “Hmm, ah. Yeah, I also wanted to talk to Ferris.”

Called by Emilia, he looked at where she was pointing at. There, he was able to find the figure of Ferris, who was restlessly letting his gaze wander to and fro in a corner of the shelter.

The cat-eared healing arts user was staggering about, and his complexion looked awful. Most likely, it was the result of his healing voyage that he'd been taken on by Reinhardt. By freely using his healing magic, it seemed like he'd sustained a considerable burden. Even so, he was walking around looking for his next patient without resting—or it didn't seem like that.

???: “——Ah!”

Ferris, who was looking around his surroundings, noticed Subaru and Emilia, and raised his voice up. He hastily tottered over to them, and caught ahold of Subaru's scruff of his neck as if he was going to collapse.

Propping his light body up, Subaru called out to him with an “Hey?” And then,

Ferris: “Tell me.....”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Ferris: "THE SIN ARCHBISHOP! THEY WERE CAUGHT, RIGHT? I'M GOING TO MAKE THEM SPIT OUT EVERYTHING THEY KNOW, I'M GOING TO FIND OUT HOW TO TREAT CRUSCH-SAMA! SO, TELL ME WHERE THEY ARE.....!"

Subaru was paralysed by Ferris' gaze which glared at him right in front of his wide-open eyes. Ferris' fury was like that of a raging fire, he was only concerned for the wellbeing of his beloved mistress. And if it was to save her, he was prepared to show no mercy to those who know how to make that possible.

Subaru: "Fe-Ferris, calm down. I understand your feelings, but the result won't come even if you hurry to do it. For now, let's talk....."

Ferris: "DON'T SAY WHAT'S CONVENIENT! YOU UNDERSTAND MY FEELINGS? THERE'S NO WAY YOU DO UNDERSTAND THEM IT SEEMS!? WHILST YOU SPEAK SO CALMLY, YOU KNOW HOW MUCH CRUSCH-SAMA IS SUFFERING..... IF YOU'D UNDERSTOOD, YOU WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO REMAIN CALM! STOP BEING SO IRRESPONSIBLE!"

Subaru: "————"

Having been jabbed in the chest, and a finger pointed at him, Subaru kept his mouth shut.

Having been attacked by irrational comments, Subaru couldn't even reply back. Crusch's condition hadn't changed, she was still infested with Capella of "Lust"'s blood. But more than anything, Subaru felt relieved by Ferris' comments just now, realising that he hadn't forgotten Crusch.

That black corrosion had also set itself into place in Subaru's right leg and the palm that he'd touched Crusch with.

But there was no way that would bring relief to Ferris' heart.

Ferris: "I have to save Crusch-sama. I can and will do everything that is necessary for that. If I have to torture the Sin Archbishop, I will do that too. I know how to cure people. That's why, even if I break them, I can heal them. That's why, that's why....."

???: “Ferris. ——That’s enough already.”

Subaru couldn’t say anything to Ferris who was burning in frustration. And then, the one who’d called him from behind him to stop, was the wisened swordsman who couldn’t stand to see this situation.

Wilhelm called out to the knight who served the same mistress as him with a voice which was devoid of all emotions.

Wilhelm: “I fully understand how you feel. But, this behaviour is nothing more than an insult to Crusch-sama, more so than anyone else. First calm yourself. Do things after you calm yourself.”

Ferris: “You’re saying you understand how I feel like as consolation.....!”

Wilhelm: “——I understand.”

Wilhelm forcibly stopped him in his tracks with a low tone of voice when Ferris had tried to flare up at him. And then, Wilhelm looked at the jacket which had the ashes wrapped within it, which he’d hugged against his chest.

Ferris immediately bit his lips, his face guessing immediately who it was that slept there.

Ferris: “It’s..... not fair. It’s not fair, it’snotfairit’snotfairit’snotfair. Old man Wil.....!”

Wilhelm: “I know. It is poor of me to impose on your generosity and kindness. Forcing that on you, who opposes the pain of others more than anyone else. You should blame this old man.”

Ferris: “Uuuu-uuua.....*sob*”

Ferris held back his tears and hung his head down. Wilhelm embraced his head and nodded at Subaru.

It looked like it meant that he would take over. Ferris too would have to face the conference later in place of Crusch again when he calmed down.

It would be necessary to discuss the handling of Sirius then. But for now, what they should do is exchange words so that they know each other's conditions.

Wilhelm's serene eyes communicated that to Subaru. There was a pitifulness that depended on that, Subaru bowed his head and left the place.

Subaru: "Wilhelm-san, must want to cry too."

Why did everything go wrong?

There was no way to have achieved joy for everyone, acquaintances and strangers. How much did Subaru have to fight, strive and try in some way to choose the best option, to arrive at that outcome—— It was something that he did not know.

He had recently confirmed the safety of Reinhardt and Felt, and also Ferris and Crusch. The ones that remained missing were Julius and Ricardo who had gone to recover the control tower of "Gluttony". In addition to that, Priscilla's page, Schult, and although an unpleasant person, Heinkel.

Speaking of which, Julius' younger brother, Joshua, ever since the problem started, he'd always b——.

Subaru: "——Ah?"

Just when he was thinking that, Subaru saw the shadow of someone watching the shelter from the outside.

He wore well-tailored white garb, and had a slender knight sword holstered at his waist. A handsome, and tall profile, along with lustrous purple hair that was almost flashy—— There was no way to mistake him.

It was Julius. Right now, the guy he wanted to check the safety of, was here.

Subaru: "Hey, Juli——"

Julius: “————”

He quickly lifted his hand up and raised his voice to try and greet Julius who had let half of his body peek through. But, when Julius noticed that Subaru’s eyes were looking at him, he quickly turned around and left. He tried to leave the shelter at a fast pace.

Subaru: “Ah?”

Faced with Julius’ unexpected behaviour, Subaru let out a stunned voice.

That reaction was completely unexpected. His opinions had been divided in respect to whether Julius would have obediently replied to his voice, but even so, he would have never imagined this reaction.

It wasn’t an obedient answer or sarcasm, he simply ignored him.

Subaru: “Is that bastard kidding me?”

Having spouted out all the irritation that had been boiling within so far, Subaru chased after him.

It wasn’t that he was worried. It wasn’t that he was worried, but he was looking for him to confirm his safety, he shouldn’t have had that attitude.

What was he up to? He had to catch him and find out. It was necessary to mention that this was not the time to joke around.

Emilia: “Hey, Subaru? What’s going on?”

Subaru: “That pretentious bastard Julius was there and ignored me just now. I’m going to go get him!”

Emilia: “Eh?”

Leaving behind Emilia’s voice of surprise, Subaru ran and chased after Julius. After he jumped out of the shelter’s entrance, he saw his back which was about to disappear beyond the street. They were

clearly movements to avoid the gaze of the public. However, if he wasn't running, it'd be easy to catch up with him.

Subaru: "If you're okay, just hurry up and say you're okay..."

As if he was condemned, Subaru ran to the corner of the street. With one walking swiftly and the other running, the distance inevitably shortened. As soon as he turned around, he was able to see his back, and Subaru raised his voice.

Subaru: "Hey, you bastard! You, why the hell are you running around when everyone's so busy? If you don't show your face you'll cause concern. No, it's a general opinion."

Julius: "——"

Upon hearing Subaru's violent voice, Julius stopped. Julius turned his face only, and calmly gazed at Subaru with his yellow eyes.

Subaru frowned at the silent glance, but Julius did not change his posture,

Julius: "——My apologies. I was looking for someone, but it looks like that person wasn't inside. I'd like to make my way to another shelter. If you'll excuse me."

Subaru: "Wait wait wait wait, what are you saying? What you're looking for, surely has to be Anastasia-san, right? If so, I was in that shelter. You just didn't realise it because you were impatient. It's not like you."

Julius: "——*tch*"

He called out to the back of him as he tried to leave after he left behind merely words of courtesy. Then, Julius showed a dramatic reaction to Subaru's words.

He made his shoulders spin and turned around with a surprised face.

Subaru: "E, eh eh? What's up?"

Subaru reflexively reacted with a shrill voice. It seemed obvious why..

Julius' expression, as he turned, was tinged by an astonishment he had never seen before. No, astonishment wasn't the only thing in his expression. What was there was a gleam as if he had been clinging onto something.

Faced with that emotion that didn't suit Julius at all, Subaru didn't know how to respond. As he saw Subaru like that, Julius gulped and with an expression of anguish,

Julius: ".....Subaru. You, are referring to me?"

Subaru: "What kind of question is that? You don't have a personality unimposing enough to forget you in just a few hours. "Finest Knight", Julius Euculius-san, what nonsense are you.."

Shrugging his shoulders, Subaru responded as if making fun of Julius. And in the midst of that exchange, he stopped talking when he realized his own stupidity.

Beatrice: "Subaru! Don't run off on your own!"

Subaru, whose throat had frozen, and Julius opposite him.

Both Emilia and Beatrice had come chasing him and joined the scene of the two facing each other in the street. When they saw the two looking at each other in silence, their large eyes flickered,

Emilia: "Well... You're in the middle of something, right?"

As she noticed the strange atmosphere and tension, Emilia anxiously tilted her head.

Subaru felt a bad presentiment at her reaction, especially from her gaze which was looking at Julius.

Thus, Subaru pointed to Julius,

Subaru: ".....Yes, that's right, but it's not that. Emilia-tan. Beako you too, well..."

Emilia & Beatrice: “——?”

Emilia and Beatrice raised question marks at Subaru’s awkward words.

He had to do something, probably a definitive question. Subaru swallowed his saliva, and took a glance at Julius.

Before Subaru’s gaze, Julius prepared himself and lifted his terribly hollow face,

Subaru: “I found Julius. So, I can take him to the conference, right?”

Beatrice: “——Julius”

Upon asking, Beatrice gazed at Julius.

Then, Emilia spoke doubtfully in a low voice,

Emilia: “Julius-san, is he an acquaintance of Subaru?”

And, as if to repeat the nightmare of before, she said that.



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Chapter 77 - A Nameless Knight



Receiving the jolting impact, his body got out of the dagger's trajectory.

Not being in a position to sharpen his blade, and even if he did accept it with his broken knight sword, he would not be able to evade the severe wound. Was the conclusion that anyone would realise at a glance, henceforth, Julius was able to notice that he was being shielded.

However, it was, again, a different subject whether he should express relief or gratitude for it——.

Julius: “Ricardo——!”

Ricardo: “Shit, he got me..... ~hk!”

With an anguishing voice, Ricardo, who had pushed Julius aside, narrowed his eyes. When he called out that name, at the same time, a spout of blood clouded Julius’ vision.

The blood had sprouted from, the rough, bulky right arm of Ricardo—— having lost everything from his elbow, it was a gash exposing the soft cross section.

The arm covered in bestial hair gave rise to a sound and fell onto the cobblestone, and the big hatchet it was gripping, too, made a dull sound and rolled on the ground.

Julius: “How did such..... ~hk.”

Ricardo: “Argh! This ain’t the time for sayin’ that, Julius! Raise your head and look towa~rds.....”

At Julius, who was breathing heavily, Ricardo slammed a loud yell. However, that was abruptly obstructed by the attack of the dagger he suffered on the abdomen, and his nose was smashed and broken by the solid knee’s direct hit.

Throwing him aback, and as Ricardo flopped onto the floor, with his limbs stretched out, 『Gluttony』 sneered.

Roy: “Haha~! Aren’t you going to, completely say it ~tsu!”

Julius: “——~hk.”

The form of Alphard, who was shouting out his delight, and Ricardo, who had collapsed. Seeing the figures of the two, two choices came up in Julius’ mind.

Which one of the two should he give precedence to, a seemingly instantaneous gap had been produced there.

And, the appetite of 『Gluttony』 would never overlook that gap.

Roy: “To look away in the middle of the meal, you really don’t have manners, nii-sama——!”

Julius: “You bastard.....!”

Like a springed doll, Alphard leapt trickily. At that phantasmagoric movement, Julius’ reaction got faintly delayed.

The outstretched palm and, the broken knight sword entangled, and the feeling of his chest being traced by the palm—— with his slash being dodged, what followed immediately afterwards was an inexplicable sense of loss.

Roy: “A~h—— thank you for the treat ~tsu.”

At the end of that voice, for some reason, his consciousness distanced further, and further, and——.

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Julius: “Though it is pathetic, in the midst of the battle against 『Gluttony』, my 『Name』 was stolen. Perhaps, that is what this current situation is.”

Based on what Emilia had said, that truth had been brought to light.

Expressing a cynical smile on his face due to the truth of being forgotten by his acquaintances, Julius shrugged his shoulders.

Subaru: “『Name』 got eaten..... is that what you mean? But.”

Eating the 『Memories』 and 『Names』 of people was the blasphemer, Sin Archbishop 『Gluttony』.

The threat of getting the 『Name』 eaten, and having all connections cut off—— Subaru was well aware of its fearsomeness. However, looking at Julius now, who seemed to be in a healthy shape, he

could not help but feel his understanding was frivolous.

Subaru: “His victimisation is, like Rem or Crusch-san.....”

Having her 『Memories』 eaten, and completely forgetting her own former self, was Crusch.

Having her 『Name』 eaten, and vanishing from the memories of people with not a single exception, and continuing to be in a deep slumber in that state, was Rem.

Victims of 『Gluttony』, the two young girls were sufferers Subaru was well acquainted with.

However, coming here, Julius had been trapped in a state different from those two. His own memories having not been lost, nor did he lose consciousness.

——However, from the memories of his surroundings, his existence had disappeared.

Subaru: “Really, does nobody remember? If you attempt from one side.....”

Julius: “I have already met with Anastasia-sama and Ricardo. For some reason, they treated me like an unacquainted person, I have endured that experience. Being unable to thank the one who shielded you, is displeasing, isn’t it.”

“_____”

Julius, reflexively, killed his sentiments and replied but, his smile which faintly had too much energy being put into it, or the tone of his words, naturally, were difficult for Subaru to behold. No matter how strong Julius’ consciousness may be as a knight, there is no way he could bear such mental stress with ease.

With the ruin of the relationships he had compiled, the fear and despair of losing the days he had lived personally.

That was the sense of loss Subaru had tasted, to the point of it being painful, when he had arrived into the different world at first.

Subaru: "Beatrice....."

Beatrice: "What Subaru wants to say is understandable, in fact. But, unfortunately, even Betty does not remember that man, I suppose. Betty, is already outside of the Forbidden Library, in fact."

Sympathising with his intentions at a single call, Beatrice, with a difficult face, horizontally rotated her neck.

At Beatrice's point, the confirmation Subaru had picked up—— that was, whether she remembered Julius or not.

As Emilia did not remember, naturally, there is no way Beatrice would remember. That was how it was supposed to be, but there was a possibility that Beatrice was an exception.

For some reason, Beatrice was——.

Subaru: "Even though you remembered Rem."

Beatrice: "It can be said as many times as you'd like, but rather, that case itself should be thought of as the exception, I suppose. And now, it should be thought that it has been proven with the man in front, in fact."

Subaru: "In the end, that is the inference regarding your memories, huh."

It had been some time ago.

Some time ago, Beatrice, in the Forbidden Library, had once referred to Rem after her name had been eaten by 『Gluttony』. Subaru had questioned that after she had formed her contract, after the Forbidden Library had been lost but, this was one conclusion they had reached after their exchange.

Subaru: "When isolated from the outside into the Forbidden Library, Beako does not get affected by what is outside of the room. That's why the moment Rem's name was eaten, no effect was taken..... is what I had thought, isn't it. That's why, once exited from the room, special treatment would not be given..... huh."

Beatrice: “That tone, seems like there is a problem with Betty leaving the Forbidden Library, I suppose.”

Subaru: “N-Nothing like tha~t! I, am mammoth happy to be able to walk under the rays of the sun with you!”

Beatrice: “Eh, in fact.”

And, within that short back and forth, lay the truth.

And, in fact, Beatrice exhibited no peculiarity regarding Julius. Beatrice’s inference was surely, that the barriers to her memory served their purpose only in the Forbidden Library.

Rather, in this case, the problem here was not Beatrice’s distinctiveness——,

Emilia: “But, why does Subaru remember Julius-san? Just like, the time with that Rem-san.”

Subaru: “That’s it.”

The question, that would dawn upon everyone, was finally spoken by Emilia.

The sole person in the entire world who remembered Rem, whose 『Name』 had been eaten, Subaru.

Forgotten even across the preservation of the memories of Ram, who was her twin elder sister, however, Emilia and the others did not make a reference.

That must also be because, looking at Subaru connect to Rem with such devotion, they could not randomly speak regarding the memories, or make any implicitly believing rash remarks.

But, not just that, the ability to refute Subaru’s memories, could only be done by nothing else but having definite proof, which not a single one of them possessed.

However, it was different this time.

In this case, the concerned party who also remembered aside from Subaru—— in brief, Julius, who had been forgotten since his very beginning by the world, retained consciousness.

Naturally, the reconciliation of that mutual recognition and, the reason for Subaru being treated as the exception of the Authority of 『Gluttony』 gave rise to doubts.

Emilia: “Does Subaru have any idea? No holding secrets, okay.”

Subaru: “I don’t intend to hide anything at all but..... I think I sort of do, I won’t say that.”

Emilia: “That, isn’t that a secret?”

Subaru: “If you can’t confirm it don’t declare it, I don’t think that’s secret keeping.”

Conversing with Emilia, Subaru investigated the possibility of him being an exception.

The feeling that had uprisen in the very beginning, was the influence of the Witch Factor sleeping inside of Subaru. If the Authority of 『Gluttony』 of eating 『Memories』 or 『Names』 was the power of the Witch Factor then, it was conceivable, due to a certain cause, it may not apply upon Subaru, just like 『Unseen Hand』 .

Perhaps, Subaru could 『Return by Death』 through the power of the 『Witch of Envy』 . With the power of that 『Witch』 invoked, it may have had cancelled the effects of the Authority of 『Gluttony』 .

And there was the remaining feeling of the exceptionality like that of Beatrice’s Forbidden Library.

That was, because Subaru belonged to a different world. Subaru was a human whose origin was from a different world, and not an existence who belonged to this world.

Not being an existence of this world, he doesn’t fall under the effect of the Authority which interfered with the concepts of this world—— how was this hypothesis.

Subaru: “However, if it’s the latter, then the way to confirm it is easy. Julius just has to meet with AI.”

The sole person in this world, who was under the same circumstances as Subaru, was AI.

Regarding the exception of the Authority, if the latter hypothesis happened to be correct, AI must also be remembering Rem and Julius. Above all, the AI of this world and Rem had no acquaintanceship with each other, henceforth, it could not be confirmed.

Subaru: "There's no way he can say that even this time, huh."

Emilia: "Subaru?"

Subaru: "It's regarding Emilia-tan's question but, there's something I want to confirm before answering that. Julius, you'll have to come with me."

At Subaru's voice, who cut short the chase, Emilia made a somewhat discontent expression. He was keeping secrets, is what could perhaps be thought as well, but this was a measure necessary for attestation.

Above all, in the case if the hypothesis' correctness being proven, what both Subaru and AI held in common—— the part of both of them being trippers from a different world would be obscure, the ones whose hometowns lay beyond the Great Waterfall do not fall under the effect of the Authority, that absurd explanation would be the only option left.

Subaru: "Don't tell me, you won't refuse, will you? It is regarding you, after all."

Julius: "——I must state that I have no choice. It seems, under the present circumstance, you are rather knowledgeable regarding the condition inflicted upon me. I shall follow you."

Subaru: "Why do you have such a delicately large attitude, you."

Whether the calmness had been restored through the conversation till now, the attitude of the elegant appearing Julius, with his jaw pulled in, returned. Regardless of appearances, the uprosen situation was too tough on his mind and heart. Not charming at all, was another way to put it.

Subaru: "Suddenly getting absorbed in appearing admirable and increasing problems for the party in contact, huh..... Anyway, let's go back to the shelters. I think now it's the suitable time for all the

people concerned to assemble too..... that's it, what about Ricardo? He had taken part in the suppression together with you. He's fine, right?"

Julius: ".....He did get injured whilst shielding me, but it should not have an effect on his life. He is currently being properly diagnosed by Ferris."

Subaru: ".....Is that so. Then, that's okay, I guess."

At Julius' reply, Subaru innermost thoughts were half relief and half reflection.

To dissect, the relief of Ricardo's safety, and the reflection of Julius' insensitivity, who had directly inquired from the ones he had fought alongside with.

And at Subaru, whose voice diminished, Julius sighed,

Julius: "I do not expect you to show friendly concern. If you conduct yourself the way you always do, it would be more comfortable for myself, after being in such perplex because of the environment. Well then, let's return to the shelters."

Saying that, Julius, friendly, patted Subaru's shoulder.

Julius: "Though it's not something too pleasant, there is no choice but to leave my introduction to you. The fruitless effort of the display in the hall of the royal election, it would help if you would withdraw that at this occasion."

Subaru: "Don't go about digging up people's guiltful history! Shit, worrying for you was a mistake."

Pushing away the hand on his shoulder, Subaru turned towards Julius while stepping towards the shelter. Of course, he would not misunderstand by thinking that Julius' reply just now were his true feelings.

Moderating Subaru's feelings of guilt, he has simply given his reply in the need of a smart response. He knew that. As he knew that,

Subaru: "Am I, an idiot. No, I am an idiot."

Why must he now, uphold an attitude, of giving salvation to Julius' heart.

He, who lost all others, above all, must be feeling the helpless anxiety of solitude, how could he mistake on his words and his judgements.

His own insensitivity was terribly irritating, and Julius was almost just as irritating as well.

In the situation where anxiety was natural, acting as normal was a strength of his as well.

That strength was surely, something which Subaru could never attain, despite his desire.

Until Julius were to be left as is, Subaru would certainly harbour his own sense of responsibility.

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Looking at the back of Subaru, who was heading towards the shelter, after having angered him, Julius' lips' edges curved into a slight smile.

It was a powerless smile, one which he could never let Subaru see, who had his back turned towards him.

Emilia: "That face, do you intend to not show it to Subaru?"

In that dim gap in his heart, a silver bell's chime pounced in between. Turning back, there lay the line of sight of amethyst eyes towards Julius.

At that gaze, wearing gloom, Julius concealed his smile and shook his neck horizontally.

Julius: "Meagre disposition, futile resistance of the defeated, that is what it is. Please do not point it out."

Emilia: "Defeated you say....."

Julius: "Perhaps we, were the only ones who missed among those who headed to capture the control towers. Fully realising our great insufficiency, I now live in disgrace, and have been left alone in a prohibited state. Completely defeated."

With a stubborn attitude, Julius strongly brought attention to their defeat.

At his attitude, Emilia's eyes wavered heartbreakingly. Emilia, at this moment, may have had been able to find the powerlessness of Julius' heart.

Emilia: "I'm sorry."

However, Emilia's utterance was different from what Julius had been intending for.

At Julius, who raised his face, Emilia embraced her slender shoulders,

Emilia: "The truth is, I don't know what should I say to you, right now. I'm sure I must have had known you but still I cannot remember, and I can't be reliable like Subaru."

Julius: ".....In Subaru's case, he should not be referred to much. He is the one that is the exception, isn't it."

Emilia: "Even still, I know you are being hurt. That's why I cannot do anything but apologize and..... in regards to Subaru, thank you."

"_____"

The fact that she thanked for Subaru, was unsettling.

Emilia sighed, at Julius, who furrowed his eyebrows.

Emilia: "Julius-san's current face, if Subaru saw it he would certainly be pained more. That's why, thank you, for hiding it. I'm really sorry."

Julius: "Please stop, Emilia-sama. It is not something to be thanked for, and furthermore..... furthermore you are making too much out of me. There is no need, for such consideration."

It was true. Julius, subjected to Emilia's gaze, filled with innate kindness, could feel the inappropriate comfort.

With such admirable consciousness, it was not as if he had confirmed Subaru's innermost thoughts. It was something much simpler, a much more uninteresting reason.

Julius: "I don't want him..... Subaru, to pity me. That is all there is to it."

"———"

Up front, drawing closer, gazing at Subaru's stature, Julius declared. Pulling Beatrice's sleeve, who was close to him, with a difficult expression, was Subaru.

At such a figure of Subaru, Julius was unable to discard his own powerlessness.

Why those thoughts, that reason was——.

Emilia: "Just now, I feel I heard Julius-san's true thoughts for the first time."

Emilia, continuing her steps, commented that about Julius' words. Julius thoughtlessly rounded his eyes, and Emilia raised a single finger,

Emilia: "It may not be of too much help but, I will also talk to everyone to try and convince them. That's why, along with Subaru, trust us as well. Let's go.

Julius: ".....Yes. Also, Emilia-sama."

Emilia: "What?"

Calling a halt to Emilia, as she turned back, Julius elegantly bowed.

Though it may not be in her memories, it remained inside of him as if carved deeply, that courteous etiquette as both a knight and a noble.

Julius: "Being called Julius-san by Emilia-sama, gives rise to a helpless sense of unpleasantness.

Please refer to me as Julius, that way of reference.”

Emilia: “I, used to refer to you like that, isn’t it.I understand, Julius.”

With a finger on her lips, Emilia consented. After that, Emilia drowned in thought, and shortly glanced at Julius, then proceeded to face towards the empty sky. And,

Emilia: “Can I, ask something too?”

Julius: “What might it be.”

Emilia: “Right next to you, Minor spirits..... no, maybe Quasi Spirits. Those children, are flying about in seeming uneasiness..... did you know that?”

Julius: “——Yes, I am aware. Because they are, buds that, being close to me, will eventually bloom.”

Julius closed his eyes, at what Emilia has pointed out.

Right beside him, when he closed his eyes, he knew there were the Quasi spirits, wielding the power of six colours, flying about. However, those buds had no knowledge of why they were there.

That is why, for them,

Julius: “My current self’s words will not reach them. Just like, the words for my master or my comrades.”

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Chapter 78 - The Remaining Ripples in the Watergate City



Reinhardt: “Ah, Subaru. Thank goodness we didn’t miss each other. I’m back.”

Subaru: “Reinhardt? How quick, you only just left.”

When Subaru and the others returned back to the shelter after they’d picked Julius up, they came across Reinhardt, who had just returned to the same shelter.

Subaru gave a surprised response at his speedy work, and Reinhardt, who had slightly raised his hand up as he walked towards them, suddenly broke into a frown. With a face that felt Subaru’s awful complexion and the unease in the somewhat anxious attitudes of the four of them, he said,

Reinhardt: "What's the matter, Subaru.....Is there something wrong?"

Subaru: "There's definitely something wrong.....But, it's difficult to choose the words. There's something I want you to confirm too."

Reinhardt: "If I can be of any help, you may ask for whatever you want. What is it?"

Reinhardt's response to Subaru, who'd dropped the tone of his voice, was as sincere as ever. That's why he wanted to trust in his extraordinariness as he'd done so far, starting with the battle against the "Bowel Hunter", all the way up to the battle against "Greed".

However, that line of thinking of attaining salvation by divine grace was——,

Subaru: "——Do you know anything about the guy who's standing next to me?"

Reinhardt: ".....You don't mean Beatrice-sama, right?"

Reinhardt said this whilst he looked down at the little girl in the dress that snuggled by Subaru's side. Subaru in silence, didn't reply to Reinhardt's words. He merely kept staring at the "Sword Saint", praying that the answer he desired would be returned.

To the fervour of that gaze, Reinhardt looked at the other person standing next to Subaru, and slightly narrowed his eyes as if he were thinking. However,

Reinhardt: "——My apologies. He's someone I don't know. Judging from his aspect and appearance, I think he's one of the valorous individuals of this battle, though."

Julius: "———"

Julius' cheeks stiffened at Reinhardt's reply.

The two of them were supposed to be close friends who were companions from the Order of Royal Guards—— With his "name" eaten, that connection of friendship also ended up being cut short.

Julius cast his eyes down gloomily on hearing that reality, and Subaru, looking at him from the side, was feeling dejected too.

The “Sword Saint”, as the strongest in the Kingdom, was the most skilled swordsman having cut apart even the Witch Cult.

Not even Reinhardt van Astrea could escape from the influence of the authority of “Gluttony”.

Or perhaps having thought that it was possible if it was Reinhardt was only a baseless wish.

That wish was cruelly broken, and only confirmed his own shallowness.

Reinhardt: “My apologies. I don’t know the reason why, but it looks like I wasn’t able to meet your expectations.”

Julius: “.....Huh, it should be us who say that. From your point of view that question must have seemed like an accusation. It is us who should apologise for presuming upon that consideration.”

It was Julius himself that took responsibility in replying to Reinhardt’s apology.

He masked the shock of being treated as a stranger by a friend. He looked around the shelter as he covered himself with words of calmness. And then,

Julius: “It seems like it’s almost time for the important people to have gathered. It’s high time to start the conference that included what to do next.”

Reinhardt: “.....I understand. You mean to say that we’ll talk about you too there, right?”

Guessing the intentions behind Julius’ words, Reinhardt lifted his chin. In fact, the valorous individuals of the defensive battle from earlier—— Those involved in the Royal Selection, along with the City Officials, were beginning to gather inside the shelter.

And right then, a young woman dressed in a kimono came back from outside that very shelter.

Anastasia: “Hmm, it looks like they’ve gathered before we told ‘em to. How convenient’.”

Anastasia, who’d finished looking around the outside, said that with a smile as she tugged on her scarf, Echidna. From within the surrounding shelter—— In her field of view, she obviously must have seen the figure of Julius standing next to Subaru, but it didn’t look like she was going to mention him.

Anastasia: “It seems like with Emilia-san ‘n y’all ‘n Felt-san we’re nearly jus’ about complete. If Priscilla-san comes after, then that’ll be enough. Then, I reckon we can start the conference.”

Anastasia made her suggestion as she clapped her hands together.

She said it with an air of composure, without even calling out to her *best knight* who should have been reflected in the corner of her eyes.

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The place that had been designated as the conference room in place of the lost City Hall was a meeting place near the shelter.

This meeting place was also a shelter, but due to its poor provisionings against flooding—— The disaster that had kept the city of Pristella on high alert, it seemed that the shelter hadn’t been used during the turmoil.

Anastasia: “To start things off with, it oughta be a good time for the people in the other shelters ta start goin’ back ta their homes, dontcha think? In truth, we also wanted ta go back to the inn.... But, it seems like the tidyin’ still hasn’ ended.”

When it came to tidying, was she referring to the inn or the people involved in the current turmoil?

Anastasia had probably made that comment so it could mean either one, so to take the initiative amongst those who had gathered at the meeting place.

Anastasia: "First of all, let me thank ya all for yer hard work. Luckily, the amount of damage which the Witch Cult's grand offensive caused was extremely low..... Includin' both the people who are here and those who aren't, that's what I believe. It was a battle like no other."

Those Present in the Conference: "————"

Anastasia: "Even without those grim faces, I too, understand. *The damage was low*, your faces say that you ain't convinced by those words."

The looks on those unsuspecting silent faces became harder at Anastasia's words, who in some regards seemed unconcerned. Anastasia shrugged her shoulders and looked around the room at that.

At the meeting place, not only were the original members who had undertaken the battle to defend the city assembled, but also the other collaborators who'd gotten involved had joined.

From the Emilia Camp, there was Emilia, Subaru and Beatrice. Both Garfiel and Otto were absent due to the gravity of their injuries.

From the Felt Camp, there was Felt, Reinhardt and Camberly, whose face was pale due to his out of placeness. Gaston and Larkins were absent due to their wounds and exhaustion.

From the Crusch Camp, the most important member, Crusch, was still resting in bed. So Ferris and Wilhelm were participating instead of their mistress.

From the Priscilla Camp, there was Al and Priscilla, whose face looked bored. Next to them was their attendant, Schult, safe and sound. It looked like Heinkel's safety had been confirmed, but he was an absentee.

And from the Anastasia Camp, there was Anastasia, who was standing in the centre like she'd taken the reins. There was Tivey and Ricardo participating as well, the latter of which had white bandages wrapped throughout his body. And Julius, who was seated away from them, on the Emilia Camp side.

Finally, there was Kiritaka, Liliana and the “White Dragon Scales” who’d joined due to their involvement.

Nearly 20 people in total who were involved one way or another had gathered in the room to carry out the post-war conference of the defensive battle.

And the one who got the ball rolling and spoke out a rebuttal against Anastasia’s initial speech was Ferris, his attitude unsettled.

His yellow eyes shook with irritation as he raised his hand up,

Ferris: “The post-conference is important..... I understand that. I understand that, but I wish to speak about how we’re going to deal with the Sin Archbishop. In the end, one of the top brass of the Witch Cult was captured alive, right? There are many things that we need to ask. I want to hurry that up.”

Anastasia: “.....Well, I knew Ferris-san was goin’ to say that. By the way, what’s Crusch-san’s current condition like? Has there been any change since?”

Ferris: “——I can just say she’s stable. We couldn’t get any information out of “Lust”, so right now she’s recovering her strength with my healing magic, and relying on her willpower. For a moment, her symptoms were relieved a bit thanks to Subaru-kun’s help, but.....”

Being looked at out of the corner of the eye from the frustrated Ferris, Subaru fixated his gaze on his own palm. A part of his palm had turned black, and it was in a state where it exposed an unseemliness like that of a burn or birthmark.

A similar change had occurred in Subaru’s right thigh which was covered by his trousers. Subaru didn’t feel any pain or the feeling of anything foreign in it, but it wasn’t like that for Crusch. The removal of that which was definitely eating up her strength was a matter of the highest priority to save her life.

That, and it was also rather tough for a woman to bear those black veins on her skin. That a beautiful woman like Crusch had been affected made her stand out all the more painfully.

Anastasia: "If I'm ta speak honestly, I ain't in agreement with keepin' that Sin Archbishop alive. That thing is a being that brings only trouble. If it's possible, killin' 'em in a hurry would definitely be for the best."

Ferris: "——! But then our leads would disappear!"

Whilst Subaru worried about the black veins, the argument between Anastasia and Ferris was reaching a boiling point.

In regards to the captured Sin Archbishop's treatment——Sirius, Ferris stubbornly shook his head at Anastasia who had suggested its execution. It was natural from his point of view.

However, Anastasia merely shook her head at Ferris who was getting fired up.

Anastasia: "I think what happened to Crusch-san is a pity. But, they're different mattas. Besides, that "Wrath" even knows anythin' about "Lust"..... No, I don't think they do in the long run. To me, it seems very unlikely that the Witch Cult was cooperatin' with each other."

Ferris: "If they're connected, then why!? Why did something like today happen!? The Sin Archbishops all gathered and came to attack the city, and yet, they're not cooperating!?"

Anastasia: "Of course, even I ain't sayin' that their actions overlapped by happenstance. But, their aims, retreat times 'n dispersion don't match, it'd be a little weird to call that cooperation..... The Witch Cult doesn't have any awareness of stuff like cooperation. "

Ferris: "That's just a deduction, right!?"

Raising his voice, Ferris completely denied Anastasia's words. It looked like Anastasia as well had realised that her suggestion was difficult to accept, and it didn't seem like she was going to give a rebuttal to that which she'd been denied by Ferris' sentimental argumental.

Thereupon, Subaru slowly raised his hand up.

Subaru: "May I say something? I also have an opinion, but if anything, an opinion that's close to Ferris'. I don't think it's pointless getting information out of "Wrath.""

Ferris: ".....What do you mean?"

Subaru: "It isn't a story I'm proud of, but a little while ago, I was allowed to speak with "Wrath" for a short amount of time, there I was able to hear a little bit about "Gluttony". Even if it was only about the length, depth and closeness of their relationship, it's too hasty to say we can't get any information out of them."

In fact, "Wrath" had thrown some words similar to a warning at Subaru about "Gluttony".

Thanks to that, there was a part in which Subaru had realised the possibility of "Gluttony" having several individuals, and had ended up not overlooking Julius when he'd tried to distance himself from the shelter. He couldn't close his eyes to this. Nevertheless, within Subaru's true feelings, he also had a part which agreed with Anastasia.

Subaru: "But, leaving aside whether we can or can't use them as a source of information, I also have a bad feeling in regards to keeping them captured.....Though all the Sin Archbishops are like that."

Right now, so that they could partake in the conference, Sirius' guard duty was entrusted to the "White Dragon's Scales".

She was in a condition where she was bound in chains without quarter, and had even been gagged so to stop her from talking. They'd also been instructed to take turns keeping guard, as their hearts had the potential to be manipulated were they stay near her for too long. Nothing should happen during this conference, but his anxiety was unending.

Subaru: "It's necessary to feel this anxiety whilst they are captured alive. I can't unconditionally make a decision about what to do about that."

Ferris: "Which side are you on.....!?"

Ferris pointed his eyes, which were full of hatred, towards the fence-sitting Subaru. Subaru grimaced at the heat of his gaze, and said,

Subaru: "I'm not taking sides. Honestly, I think both of you are right..... In the worst case, I will do something about the black veins in Crusch-san's body using the parts of my body which haven't turned black, if that solves the issue, then I think that'll be no issue."

Ferris: "——Ha"

Emilia: "Subaru"

Subaru's own judgement was a fairly extreme conclusion in regards to Crusch's black veins. Upon hearing those words, Ferris' face became flabbergasted, and Emilia looked at him with rebukeful eyes.

Everyone else also turned to look at him with shock, and complex emotions in their gazes.

Emilia: "I also heard about that, but that's truly as a last resort, right? Right now we don't know what'll happen even if it's nothing, but, acting like this is normal is....."

Subaru: "Well, it's not like even I want to put that seemingly unhealthy ink in my body for fun. But, we have a precedent with Crusch-san that it relieved her symptoms a little.

Emilia: "———"

Subaru: "What I mean to say is: don't hurry in drawing conclusions. I understand the feelings of impatience, but even if my back or my butt turns black, given that they're out of sight, I'm not reluctant to help out. That's what I'm on about."

Despite there being a way to be able to do something, letting it go by due to his own cuteness would leave him a bad taste in his mouth.

Crusch was a valued benefactor to him, and more importantly, there was a way that didn't involve his, nor any of the others life. He'd try and help as much as he could if it was something like darkening his skin which was out of sight.

Wilhelm: "Ferris, sit yourself. For the time being, Subaru-dono is right."

Ferris: ".....I know. I really know."

The one who pulled Ferris' sleeve, who was lost for words, and made him calm down, was Wilhelm. Ferris looked down and tried to say something to Subaru, but sat down without saying anything in the end.

Subaru let out a sigh on seeing his state; the mood around the then tensened meeting area went back to normal. Even so, the situation from before still continued.

Anastasia: "In any case, I understand that everyone's opinions regarding the treatment of the Sin archbishops are divided. It's worrying to keep 'em alive, 'n even the limits of mine 'n Natsuki-kun's instincts ain't comin' out.....In truth, if they'd killed 'em instead of captured 'em, our talk would have gone all the more quicka."

Priscilla: "——What, this worthless spiel has ended? No matter how much you gaze upon mineself, no rewards shalt be given to a show that lacks value. Cease that beggar's look immediately."

Priscilla replied with a yawn to the bantering Anastasia's look.

That misplaced reply was proof that Priscilla hadn't been listening to the conversation properly up until now. Her participating in this conference must also have been some kind of whim of hers.

Anastasia: "Don't speak so slyly. Though that attitude is unbecomingly for one who captured someone from the Witch Cult alive, more than anyone else, why did ya capture 'em? What led to this bizarre turn of events?"

Priscilla: "As if mineself knew whether she'd live or die. When I gave the final blow, the Yang Sword clouded over and its sharpness disappeared. Thus, she survived. The one who dragged her out from the canal was one of the rabble who'd drained the water in search for the songstress. It has nothing to do with mineself."

Anastasia: "It doesn't bother you that the one you'd tried to kill didn't die?"

Priscilla: "The contrary. Mineself drove the sword solely to kill. If she didn't die by that, then mineself has no intention to kill her again. Though she didn't die by mine hand, it seems to be all the more convenient as far as mineself is concerned."

Anastasia: "Haa, I don't understand, but aight."

Anastasia seemed to have given up trying to understand Priscilla, who as ever, had elaborated her enigmatic theory. Subaru didn't know her intentions either, but Priscilla's thinking probably wasn't understood by anyone else.

It was dubious whether even Al and Schult, who stood by her side, understood heads or tails of it.

Reinhardt: "At least, I am against judging "Wrath" in this place. I do want to respect Ferris' feelings of course, and it's also a unique opportunity for the Kingdom. On top of strictly keeping guard of them, I think that we should make an effort to get what they know out of them."

Felt: ".....I think it's better to kill 'em. Even just remembering those Sin Archbishops makes me sick to the stomach, I don't think they'd say anything that half makes sense. It's better to kill 'em before being dragged into something problematic, so that they won't cause any problems in the future, prob'ly."

Reinhardt: "Felt-sama....."

Felt: "For your information, I ain't at all saying this to get on your nerves this time."

And, coming from a different place, the opinions were split between master and servant.

Reinhardt, who had advocated that they should keep "Wrath" alive, and Felt, who had denied that. Although, Felt's opinion wasn't well grounded.

Felt herself didn't seem to think that her opinion would be accepted. In the end, "Wrath's" person would be given into custody to the Kingdom, it looked like it would end up like that. And in the worst case, in the eventuality that a conviction would need to be carried out too."

Anastasia: "When it comes ta bein' suitable for that, ya are it seems. But in this case, will Felt-san follow ya to the capital too? Or shall master and servant go their separate ways....."

Felt: "If Reinhardt's going, I'm going too. ——This time, it can't be helped."

Reinhardt's face changed to one of astonishment on hearing Felt's words. Felt caught a fleeting glimpse of his face from the side, and plastered a deep scowl on her lovely face,

Felt: "Don't get the wrong idea. The fact that I can't stand you ain't changed. It ain't changed, but there's times where I ain't gonna do that."

Reinhardt: "There are times where you aren't going to do that?"

Felt: "I don't know. Try ask that to your own chest. My chest ain't soft enuff to reply back t'ya."

Sticking out her underdeveloped chest for her age, Felt stuck her tongue out at Reinhardt. Reinhardt cast his eyes down seeing his master's attitude, and then quietly lifted his chin up.

Only they themselves knew what feelings there were between master and servant. At any rate, it looked like the Felt Camp too wasn't the same as it had been a year ago.

Camberley: "W-Well, in that case, I'll....."

Reinhardt: "Camberly, look after Larkins and Gaston. Once they can move about, they may first return back to the mansion. Bring them only in contact with Old Man Rom."

Camberley: "Y-yessir, I understand."

A look of relief came over the uncomfortable-looking Camberley on receiving his orders.

For now, thanks to Reinhardt volunteering they could feel at ease regarding "Wrath's" escort. What came after, that which they could get out of Sirius, would be the duties of the Kingdom's experts.

Kiritaka: "Then, may we move to the next issue? Ladies and Gentlemen."

The one who'd raised his hand up after he'd seen the matter of "Wrath's" treatment decided had been Kiritaka. He gazed at everyone's faces whilst he adjusted his slightly messy hair with his hand. And then, he spoke out,

Kiritaka: "First of all, regarding the battle to protect this city..... I'd like to thank you all on behalf of all of its citizens. If it wasn't for all of you, the city of Pristella would likely have fallen into the evil clutches of the Witch Cult. I offer my deepest gratitude for that."

Kiritaka hung his head low, and bowed, having taken responsibility for speaking of the general consensus of the city. Liliana, who was by his side, with a look of panic on her face, also bowed her head like Kiritaka had.

Putting Kiritaka aside, Liliana's earnest reaction was quite unlike her. Perhaps her fight against "Wrath", or something after that had caused a change in her attitude.

In any case,

Subaru: "We were already in the city, and involved, we didn't have the option to just watch on as a spectator, so you don't have to thank us to this grandiose extent. Dontcha think?"

Emilia: "Yeah. Besides, maybe the Witch Cult taking over the city was just a bonus for them judging by their aims. Whether we saved them or they saved us, maybe we don't know which one it is."

Emilia and Subaru insisted that it was hard for them to accept the praises at face value for the Witch Cult's attack. Certainly, the greatest part of repelling the Witch Cult had been down to the merit of the members gathered here. However, in the first place, the Sin Archbishops' aims were "Emilia", the "Artificial Spirit" and "The Book of Wisdom".

All of those things had been brought in by those involved from the outside, and the Emilia Camp had been responsible for gathering them all. They couldn't sincerely accept their praises.

Felt: “Wait up. It bothers me that you say that freely as if it were the consensus. Are you really saying that if we hadn’t been here, they would’ve slammed the door shut on those Witch Cult guys? I reckon we needa talk more clearly about that.”

Priscilla: “’Tis vexing, but I’m in agreement with that beggar girl. Don’t drag us into all of you commoner’s self-convenient diffidence. Don’t be so conceited, you half-witch and you philistine.”

However, the harsh duo stated their rigid opinions on hearing the words of Subaru and Emilia.

Felt and Priscilla looked at each other after they finished speaking, and immediately looked away, their faces looking disgusted. Ever since from the start, those two did not get along with each other. Only those in her camp were close to Priscilla, so it a pretty normal reaction.

Kiritaka: “Please settle down. I’m gladdened by Emilia-sama’s words, but as Felt-sama and Priscilla-sama said, the city’s defense was all of your merit. This I vow as a representative of the city. ——In the meantime, I’d like you to lend your strength just a little while longer.”

Subaru: “By strength.... You mean the next issue you mentioned earlier?”

Kiritaka: “Indeed. It’s about the inhabitants who were transformed by that wicked power.”

Everyone: “————”

Everyone there went silent at hearing Kiritaka’s sombre tone.

What he was about to point out—— Was something which everyone here understood. The staff of the City Hall who’d fallen into the evil clutches of “Lust” and had been transformed into inhuman forms.

One had been transformed into a black dragon, and the other dozen or so had been transformed into huge flies.

They still couldn’t do anything due to the effect of “Lust’s” authority, Variation & Change. For now they ought to have gathered them in one place and concealed their existence, though.

Kiritaka: “The culprit, “Lust”, has fled..... No, even if we could catch “Lust” in the first place, it’s doubtful whether or not they’d have any intention to turn them back to normal.”

Subaru: “That’s for sure..... But we can’t just leave them, right? Is there anything at all which we could do? Isn’t it even impossible for Ferris?”

The changes to the people who couldn’t turn back to their original form were fundamentally different from injuries or disease.

Seeing Subaru’s gaze, Ferris shook his head, and then bit his lips,

Ferris: “Even I simply can’t cure that. No, it isn’t about whether I can cure them or not. It isn’t an injury or disease, they were just transformed into those kind of creatures. Healing magic can only help you get back to being right as rain if you’re injured or sick. That’s why healing magic is futile against those transformations.”

Kiritaka: “To be frank, I can’t tell if the people who were turned into flies have awareness. I can’t make the distinction, and a fly the size of a person can’t even fly to begin with. They haven’t learnt how to move their wings properly, they’re in an incomplete state. But, if they have awareness”

Subaru: “If they clearly understand their circumstances, they’d end up going crazy I guess....”

They had lost their own figures.

It was a frightening change, even in just thinking about that. However, considering that they’d been changed into something inhuman—— into something repulsive, it made it all the more worse. When your body isn’t free, and you even lose the means to express your will, you could imagine pretty easily what they’d be thinking in the end.

For sure they would....

Priscilla: “Those who were transformed into vile insects would want to die, I’d imagine. If there is no chance to turn them back, then would it not be merciful to bestow that?”

Al: "Princess, that's....."

Priscilla: "Be silent, Al. There's no meaning in mere wishful lip service. Mineself has no mercy to dish out to slothful pigs, but killing those who revile fate by being trifled to absurdity with is also a kindness. In short, that's what it means."

With her harsh view, Priscilla dismissed Al, who had instinctively voiced his opinion. However, the reason why Al didn't make any more objections, was because Priscilla's opinion was also correct in some sense.

Of course, he didn't think they should die. But, they had been transformed into flies and there was no known way to get them back to normal; it was perfectly natural that they would want to die.

Subaru: "It's impossible to negotiate with the culprit, "Lust". Healing magic doesn't fix them. What do we do?"

Kiritaka: "I'd wanted to ask everyone about that. It doesn't matter even if it's a shot in the dark. Does no one have any idea on how to cure them?"

Still seeming to cling onto hope, Kiritaka's question was drenched in both expectation and resignation. No, the amount of resignation was stronger. And that was natural. If there'd been any possibility to cling onto, someone would have been bound to have suggested it by now.

In other words, at this point in time, where no allusions to a solution had been made so far,

Kiritaka: "——I understand. I profusely apologise for the inconvenience. Dealing with them is an issue for the City, we shall take the responsibility afterwards."

Subaru: "Take the responsibility? What will you all do?"

Kiritaka: "We'll consider the possibilities after this..... We have to check the will of those involved, and see each of their conclusions. No matter what the final opinions are, we shall see it through until the very end."

They sounded like strong words that implied the end in which they ended their lives instead of the one where they could return back to normal. Kiritaka's conclusion was inevitable in a sense.

It was inevitable, but it was too soon for that conclusion.

Emilia: "Wait. ——Erm, wouldn't you be able to leave it to me?"

Kiritaka: "Emilia-sama?"

Having realised that their discussion on that matter had reached its end, Emilia quickly raised her hand. She looked straight at Kiritaka whilst feeling his anxious and expectant gaze converging on her, and said,

Emilia: "A way to return them all back to normal right now.... Sorry, that I don't know. But, I want you to not make any hasty conclusions. We need more time."

Kiritaka: "I understand your feelings, Emilia-sama. But, it's about whether they have that time in them. The big issue is for how long their spirits can maintain their equilibrium in their transformed bodies....."

Emilia: "Yeah, I know. That's why I will make time to protect their minds. ——It may be a crude method, but it'll surely be able to do the job. A way of putting them to sleep."

Subaru: "I see.....*Cold Sleep*."

Realising Emilia's intentions, Subaru snapped his fingers and then raised his voice.

As he felt the people around him tilting their heads quizzically due to the unfamiliar words, Subaru nodded at Emilia, who was looking at him,

Subaru: "In other words, you mean the same way as with the brides in the church, right? With Emilia-tan's magic, we'll put the transformed people into a state of suspended animation. It may end up just postponing the inevitable, but it's sufficient to put off making a conclusion. In the meanwhile, we should find a solution."

Kiritaka: "Freezing them, and keeping them sleeping..... Is that possible? But won't they end up freezing to death in their sleep?"

Emilia: "They'll be fine. It was for a short while, but I used this on the bridges, so I understand the effects on one's health, and besides, I also slept for around 100 years by myself."

Kiritaka: "You yourself slept.....!?"

Although an undesired commotion spread throughout the meeting place, Subaru clenched his fist at Emilia's words.

It was unusual that Emilia was being positive about her magic and that she had insisted on trying to use it this way as well. That, and it was a *fine play* that even Subaru hadn't thought about.

It certainly wasn't a drastic solution to the problem, but they just needed time to find a solution from somewhere other than "Lust". At least, their possibilities should be increased in not having a set time limit.

In the worst case—— Yes, it was the worst case, but there existed a possibility.

Subaru would defeat "Lust" with his own hands, and take away the Witch Factor she held. Or perhaps, if it was him, it may not be possible that he could return them back to normal using the power of that Witch Factor.

He'd just taken in the Witch Factor of "Greed", and it was possible that reproducing the Sin Archbishop's was merely a pipe dream.

Kiritaka: ".....If that's possible, by all means I would like to ask that of you, but..."

Emilia: "Let me do it. You won't regret it for sure."

Emilia repeated her request to Kiritaka who was hesitating, at a loss for what to think. Kiritaka agonised about it before her earnest attitude. However, Liliana who was at his side, tugged at the cuff of his suit.

The brown girl looked up at Kiritaka and then flared up her nostrils,

Lilianna: “What are you worried about, Kiritaka-san? Why not? Let her try! After all that Emilia-sama said. It’s natural that there’s a chance of success!”

Kiritaka: “Of course, I want to believe that too, very much so, Lilianna. However, this is something that involves many lives. We can’t come to a conclusion so easily.....”

Lilianna: “There’s no need to worry! Emilia-sama will not fail. Because, BeeeeeecAAAAuuuSEEE! The great heroes of the future can all surmount such tribulations without difficulty! Those heroic tales where they surmount any wall standing in their way, no matter how tall or thick it is! Blood boiling and flesh raising, a tale which fascinates everyone is created like so!”

The gentle strum of the Lyulyre, unsuitable for the meeting place, resounded throughout.

None of Lilianna’s idealistic notions had any basis, but for some reason, they did have a strange persuasive power to them. Of course, it wasn’t so simple as to make their conclusion using just that.

Subaru: “At the least, let’s ask their families. If the staff of the City Hall are the victims, then their family should be in the same city, right? We should try and hear from them whether they leave open that possibility.”

Kiritaka: “.....In regards to that question, there shouldn’t be anyone who seemed to have abandoned their family.”

Subaru: “Then we can talk later about whether we will leave this to Emilia or not. And, regarding whether they will believe Emilia or not..... Well, I’d like to hear about that specifically from the consensus of the city.”

Kiritaka directed his gaze towards Emilia, showing signs of hesitation. If Emilia had cowered from that look, then perhaps the debate would dragged on even further.

However, Emilia nodded without fear at his clinging gaze.

Emilia: "Leave it to me. ——I will do it without fail."

Confidence and conviction—— Even though it was somewhat of a different feeling, Emilia had shown her willingness to face her own deeds with a strong sense of self-awareness and preparedness.

Kiritaka: "———"

Kiritaka was speechless in seeing the gaze in Emilia's eyes, and in hearing her assertion.

And it wasn't just that, the gazes of the people around which were pointed at Emilia also showed an infinite variety of reactions as if they were swaying in a wave of emotions different to the ones so far.

Finally, Kiritaka let out a deep sigh.

Kiritaka: "I und...erstand. For sure, I reckon we should endeavour to make our wishes come true rather than jumping to hasty conclusions. Since otherwise the battle to protect Pristella too had seemed reckless at first."

Kiritaka: "It's me who should be thanking you...."

Kiritaka smiled wryly at having lost his position. After the conference, and after they got permission from the victims' families, it seemed like the *Cold Sleep* from Emilia's magic would be realised.

Subaru replied to Emilia's nod by giving her a thumbs up.

Having cleared up the second point of dispute, what came next was their last topic on the agenda.

And that was——,

???: "So, the last issue.....There have been many reports of unconscious people of unknown identity that were found one after the other in various parts of the city. I'd like for us to discuss this matter."

Most likely, for the knight who had been forgotten and had remained silent until now, it was the most important issue.



???: “Right now, the number of “Nameless” people is reported to be 36. Amongst them for us, it includes six people who appear to have been part of the “White Dragon’s Scales”. Furthermore, it’s very likely that the number of “Nameless” people will increase in the future.”

The one who led the debate and gave the report was Dynas, the representative of the “White Dragon’s Scales”. With his fingers, he touched the dragon crest that was embroidered on his white garb, a strong expression of regret adorning his face.

Most likely, that was the crest that denoted that they were “White Dragon’s Scales”. The ambiguous testimony that he had said, “*Who appear to have been part of*” must have been related to that crest as well.

Felt: “It’s okay to say that the guys who were attacked by that Sin Archbishop are “Nameless”, right? Like, the guys who popped up out of nowhere suddenly defeated.”

Kiritaka: “Taking into account the situation, it’s reasonable to think that, I’d say. Their uniforms have matching embroidery sewn in..... It’s really frustrating that their identities are completely unknown.”

Dynas: “What’s more is that there’s 30 more people who are in a similar position.....It’s a complete mess. It’s unclear to say whether they were or not, it’s difficult to judge what the best thing to do is.”

The victims of “Gluttony”— Dealing with the people who had had their “Names” eaten, in some sense, were harder to deal with than the victims of “Lust”. After all, the victims had completely disappeared from the memories of those who knew them. On top of that, if the people in question weren’t conscious, then there were no clues left to find their identity.

Even with the people from the “White Dragon’s Scales”, it may be great that just their affiliation was known, but no one knew more than that. They didn’t know who they were caring for, or such.

Felt: “All of the “Nameless” that you found were unconscious, right? What was the healing arts user’s chic..... No, guy’s prognosis on that?”

Ferris: “.....It’s the same as with “Lust” as well. I don’t know why they are unconscious. The result of my prognosis is that I think they are just sleeping. But this too isn’t a certainty. Those who just sleep should keep keep weakening, but then there’s the case of Rem-chan.”

To the words of Felt, Ferris looked over at Subaru and then spoke.

A year ago, having suffered the same damage from “Gluttony”, Rem had been diagnosed from Ferris similarly as to the “Nameless” people. The result of the prognosis had been exactly the same. And still up until now, Rem hadn’t woken up, and yet her health hadn’t deteriorated.

Even though she seemed asleep, he had to say that her body wasn’t carrying out its functions for life support. Her hair wasn’t growing, and there wasn’t even any excretion. She was in an unfathomable state.

Subaru: “Putting aside knowing their identities or not, the care of those people is easy. It’s better to deal with bedridden people since they’re bedridden, we can just leave them sleeping in their beds..... Even though in truth, I’d like for someone who knows them to be by their side.”

Ricardo: “Since that ain’ possible, that’s the issue, ain’t it? It’s somethin’ arduous.”

Even though he knew saying that had been half-meaningless, Subaru had done it for Rem. In the real meaning, he had no other choice but to defeat “Gluttony” for Rem.

Even if he knew that, having offered a little bit of opposition was Subaru’s self-satisfaction.

Subaru’s naivety was denied by Ricardo, who’d raised his voice, his face showing no traces of ill will. When he turned to take a glimpse at his side, Ricardo was sitting on two chairs set side by side, having crammed his huge body in, and was taking part in the conference.

He still seemed to have his spirited attitude unchanged, but there was something that was different in just one place. And that was the hefty amount of bandages that were wrapped around him, and his right arm missing from the elbow down.

Ricardo: “Don’ make such a miserable face, bro’. It’s true that I screwed up, but I’m alive. When ya think about what happened now, it’s by far more preferable damage.”

Noticing Subaru’s gaze, Ricardo raised his severed right arm up and bared his fangs. It seemed like Ricardo had lost his right arm due to an attack from “Gluttony” during the fierce battle of the control tower.

He’d heard that from Julius, who had been fighting at his side. Julius had also told him that Ricardo had lost his arm protecting him, and that Ricardo himself didn’t remember it.

As if proving that, Ricardo shifted his gaze to Subaru’s side, and said,

Ricardo: “By the way, I see that handsome guy next ta ya is an acquaintance of yers bro’? Looks like ya met the guy ya were searching for, that’s a relief ain’t it. Truly thank ya for helpin’ me earlier.”

Julius: “————”

Calling Julius a *handsome guy*, Ricardo acted as if he was talking to a stranger.

From the flow of the conversation, it seemed that Julius had exchanged with Ricardo the same words as back when he had tried to smokescreen Subaru at first.

Julius should have carried the injured Ricardo to the shelter, so it could be presumed that Ricardo’s thanks in the end were for that.

Nevertheless, leaving this misunderstanding as is was far too agonising.

Besides, they’d come to the topic of “Gluttony”. It was time to cut to the chase it seemed.

Subaru: "I have something which I want to talk to everyone about. It's something important that's related to the dealing of the "Nameless"."

Standing up, Subaru got the attention of everyone in the hall to himself.

Right now, the one who had the most information on how to deal with the "Nameless" was Subaru. Subaru felt everyone's gazes naturally filled with anticipation of a solution for this state of affairs, however he shook his head.

Subaru: "I'm sorry for having caused anticipation, in all honesty, this isn't something which will yield hope immediately. But I have to talk about this."

Anastasia: "Ya know, if ya give it an extravagant preface, yer bound ta make us fret. What are ya plannin' to say?"

Anastasia threw a few joking words to Subaru so to try and relieve some of the tension in the place. However, it was her who should be the one most prepared for this.

Otherwise, the fact had the potential to turn her current state of mind inside out from the roots.

Subaru took a quick breath, and then looked at everyone's faces. And finally, he looked at Julius, who nodded despite looking tense.

Seeing that, Subaru then pointed to the neighbouring Julius with his hand, and asked his question.

Subaru: "Is there anyone who knows the name of this man here?"

Everyone: "————"

Silence prevailed in the meeting place to Subaru's question.

The time that was kept in silence wasn't out of a lack of understanding, though. It was because everyone sensed the intent of Subaru's question, and were contemplating about Julius' position.

And on that basis, if nobody said a word, it meant that there was no one who had any idea about Julius' identity.

Subaru: "Al! What about you? Don't you remember his face?"

Al: "Ah? What's up, Bro. Why are you nominating me all of a sudden?"

Having had his name abruptly called out, Al raised his voice in sheer surprise. That behaviour was enough to prove that he had memories of Julius inside of him, but, even so, he had to make sure.

Subaru placed his hand on the roundtable and posed his question to Al, whilst leaning forward towards him.

Subaru: "Do you really not know why? It's what you and I have in common. So, do you not remember this guy? Well? Reply to me."

Al: ".....Ah, so that's why. Sorry, bro. I know what you mean, but I don't think I can help you. That guy's nowhere to be found in my head."

Subaru: "Are you completely sure? If you think a little more seriously....."

Julius: "That's enough. ——That's plenty enough, Subaru"

As an isekaier—— Al presumed the intention behind those series of questions based off of that, but he hadn't nodded his head. Nonetheless, it was Julius himself who stopped the unrelenting Subaru.

Julius clapped Subaru's shoulder with a forlorn smile on his face, and bowed at Al.

Julius: "I over-expected, I'm sorry. We apologise for our impoliteness."

Al: "You have no reason to apologise. I don't know..... If there was such a reason to or not, but you don't need to apologise to me."

Waving his sole arm, Al turned his gaze away from Julius.

There were no signs of falsehood in his reaction. It was probably true that Al didn't remember Julius. Then, that meant part of Subaru's conjecture was incorrect.

The world you originated from had nothing to do with the effect of "Gluttony's" authority.

If it was like so, then after all, the most likely reason was the Witch Factor inside Subaru's body. And it seemed to be limited to isolation with the outside world according to Beatrice's "Door Crossing".

Wilhelm: "Judging from the story, Subaru-dono. This young man was involved with us..... And in addition to that, I also think it's someone who was in a fairly important position?"

Wilhelm spoke out his deduction after observing the trio's exchange. Others would have most likely come to the same conclusion which the wisened swordsman did.

Subaru nodded at Wilhelm, and then he turned to look towards Julius,

Subaru: "This is Julius. Julius Euculius. Like all of you guessed, his "name" was eaten by "Gluttony", and ended up as one of the "Nameless" people. But the process is different than the others who were unconscious. ——His consciousness remains."

Ferris: "We have such a case? He's forgotten by those around him, but he himself remembers..... So, is this person one of ours?"

With disbelief on his face, Ferris swept his gaze from Subaru to Julius and then back again many times over. To the shivering Ferris' words, Reinhardt tucked his chin in and said "It seems so."

The "Sword Saint" gazed at Julius with his tranquil eyes, and said,

Reinhardt: "Before the conference, Subaru asked me the same question as well. He..... Julius was likely an acquaintance of mine or Ferris. Or maybe the word "acquaintance" isn't sufficient to describe our relationship. A friend, perhaps."

Julius: ".....At least, I thought of you both as friends. If you both consider me a friend in the same way, nothing would make me feel more honoured."

Ferris: "Friends..... Then, Julius you're a knight as well? One of the Royal Guards?"

Both Reinhardt and Ferris were bewildered at having been called a *friend* by a stranger. Their reaction couldn't be helped, thus Julius corrected them half in resignation.

Subaru's insides were burning in anger as he watched the trio's exchange.

What a warped, nauseating scene it was.

Subaru didn't know in detail how the three of them had met, how they ended up becoming friends, and what their friendship was like.

Even so, as colleagues, as friends, the three of them should have interacted with each other in a close, naturally familiar manner. Now there wasn't even a trace left of those certain bonds.

When Rem's "Name" had been eaten, and everyone had forgotten her existence, Subaru had thought there was nothing that existed in this world that was more sorrowful than that.

But, what about Julius' current condition? The sensation of complete loss that invaded him from being abandoned by everyone in the world; if that wasn't sad, then what was?

Sadness wasn't something you could compare. But, even if it was, this was far too cruel.

Anastasia: ".....I guess it ain't somethin' like him bein' a plain ol' Royal Guard."

Out of the blue, Anastasia's words butted in between the painful first meeting of those friends.

She put a thoughtful expression across her gentle features, and licked her lips as she touched her jaw. Then, she pointed at Ricardo before then pointing at Julius,

Anastasia: "Julius-san was the one who brought back, on his shoulders, the grievously injured Ricardo. Straight afta we talked a bit about Ricardo's treatment, he immediately left sayin' that he had ta go 'n search for someone..... But, about that reaction, that's whatya did, wasn' it?"

Julius: “Anastasia-sama.....”

It was their second first encounter which between master and servant, should not normally occur.

Recalling the bitter memories of that time, Julius spoke out the name of his master with anguish on his face.

However, Anastasia didn't even take notice of the presence of the quivering devotion that he'd put into those words. She thought for a moment, and then raised one of her fingers.

Anastasia: “Julius-san's “Nameless” case is a ratha' unusual one. We don' know how many people in the city are in the same state, but mayhaps there's a possibility of confirmin' that for others too who are like the unconscious “Nameless”.” There's no doubt that this too is a serious situation. Ain' that right?”

Moving her gaze away from Julius, Anastasia directed the theme to the outline of the debate. It looked like the matter of Julius' identity had been postponed as one of the problems that couldn't be resolved.

That was pretty unjust treatment for the current Julius, but Subaru was the only one in this place who could feel outraged by it.

Anastasia: “In light of these problems..... I have a proposal, though, is that okay?”

Subaru: “A proposal?”

Subaru's innermost feelings were put aside, and the attention of the conference was once again directed at Anastasia.

At the centre of attention, Anastasia looked around the surroundings, before finally settling her gaze on Subaru and Julius.

Anastasia: “The victims of the Witch Cult..... The victims of “Lust”, and those “Nameless” from “Gluttony”. Askin' the Sin archbishop in question for a solution for each of these is hopeless, are we in agreemen' with that?”

Kiritaka: "It would be difficult to force them to speak, in that sense, you're right I guess. But, an overly pessimistic opinion could on the contrary result in clouding our view."

Anastasia: "That doesn't mean I'm thinkin' about the worst either. But, there isn't just one way to get an answer, I jus' wanted to say that."

Subaru: "There's a different way to get an answer?"

Subaru ended up parroting back Anastasia's words without comprehending the meaning of her words.

A different solution to asking the corresponding Sin Archbishops who were the culprits behind the damage—— If there existed such a way, it would probably be close to a Witch's deal.

For a split second, a choice which Subaru mustn't make crossed his mind, in that if it were the "Witch of Greed", she'd maybe know the answer.

Emilia: "So, what do you mean? Please tell us clearly."

However, Emilia asked Anastasia about the true meaning of her words in place of Subaru, who was busy shaking his head denying that idea. And then, whilst drumming her head with her fingers, Anastasia said,

Anastasia: "If we can't get the information out of those crooked Sin Archbishops, then we oughta ask it ta another person who may know. ——There is such it seems. Someone from this country who may know a way."

???: "There's no way....."

Having guessed the meaning of Anastasia's words, someone spoke that out in a hoarse voice.

However, unlike everyone else around him who'd realised what she was on about, Subaru had no idea what her statement meant.

Felt: "I don't understand. Don't put on airs, and say it clearly."

Felt sulkily demanded that from Anastasia, her understanding the same as Subaru's. Anastasia gave a wry smile to Felt's words, and apologised with an "I'm sorry, I'm sorry"

Anastasia: "——The Sage Shaula"

Felt: "Ah?"

Anastasia: "The Pleiades Watchtower, if it's the "Sage" who should be there..... If they're the person of legend who can see everythin' about the world, it wouldn' be strange if they knew, right?"

She said that, and revealed the true intentions behind her proposal.

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Chapter 79 - The Sage's Watchtower



Anastasia: "The Sage Shaula....."

When Anastasia mentioned that name, a stir spread throughout the meeting place.

Whilst everyone exchanged glances with each other, and put on expressions like they couldn't believe what they'd heard, only Subaru was left behind from this situation.

Subaru patted Emilia's shoulder beside him whilst he put on a troubled expression, and said,

Subaru: "Um, is this Sage Shaula someone famous?"

Emilia: “.....Subaru, you didn’t read the story of the “Witch” when you studied the alphabet? I thought that nursery-tale was in the book that you were reading a lot.”

Subaru: “The nusery-tale’s “Witch”..... Ah, in that picture book. Now that you mention it, I’d thought that the “Witch’s” story was listed as well for sure.”

That which was pointed out by Emilia brought up old memories of a year ago in him.

Though he had been buried by the memories of those hectic days, a year ago, he’d studied the alphabet in a picture book for children——That was during the time when he’d just started to help out at the Roswaal Mansion.

It was a collection of classics that compiled the popular nursery-tales in this world, amongst them, there had been an illustrated one about the “Witch of Envy” for sure. However, in that tale...

Subaru: “In all honesty, its contents weren’t that detailed, so I didn’t fully understand everything. The most I got out of it was that long ago, at a certain place, the Witch did something terrible.”

Emilia: “Was is really that vague.....Ermmm, let me think.”

???: “The “Witch of Envy” is the symbol of terror that once brought chaos and ruin to this world.”

When Emilia had sunk into thought on how she would have had to explain it to Subaru, who had displayed his ignorance, Julius, who was sitting opposite to her, opened his mouth instead of her.

Julius: “All that was recorded was that she was a half elf with an infinitely cruel and ruthless personality, and that she had tremendous magical power which she controlled shadows with. Other than that, her name..... we only know that her name is Satella. Even now, the scars that being left behind on the world remain strong.”

Subaru: “.....Eeeh”

Subaru lifted his chin up at Julius’ explanation, who’d kept his emotions in check as best as he could.

He focused on giving a neutral explanation, but the change in his state of mind was painfully shown regardless, even though no one around them mentioned it. In the meantime, his explanation continued.

Julius: “At the Great Waterfall at the far east of Lugnica, there’s a shrine made from Magical Sealing Stones. Even now, that Witch is sealed up in that shrine. Whilst she spews out a huge amount of miasma.”

Subaru: “.....I’d heard that she couldn’t be destroyed. But, how could they manage to seal such a powerful Witch?”

Julius: “That’s where the name of the Sage from before comes into play.”

Julius nodded after he heard Subaru’s question.

The Knight touched the sword at his waist, and looked towards the end of the roundtable—— Right at the red-haired youth.

Julius: “Four hundred years ago, three great heroes contributed to the sealing of the “Witch of Envy”. One of those was the “Sword Saint”, Reid Astrea—— The sword’s heaven-sent child who was the first to acquire the “Divine Protection of the Sword Saint” and the title which Reinhardt inherited.”

(TL Note: The concept of a heaven-sent child is one that’s seemingly common in Japanese tradition. It refers to a child that was given as a result of a prayer to a deity. Many such exist in legend, folklore and I believe religion too, in Japan.)

Reinhardt: “There’s also records that show that Reid Astrea, the first “Sword Saint”, did not have the Divine Protection. Not all known legends are unconditionally true. Of course, it’s a fact that Reid-sama built the current Astrea family and the name of the “Sword Saint, though.”

Reinhardt, who was said person’s descendant, supplemented what Julius, who was looking at him, had said.

However, considering it regarded his ancestor who'd accomplished great deeds that had been left behind in history, Reinhardt's expression when talking about it was somewhat brooding. He also seemed to be worried about Julius when it came to that. It didn't look like he was going to insist on the subject regarding the inherited Divine Protection.

In any case,

Subaru: "So, the Sage was a companion of that Sword Saint, that's the gist I'm getting."

Emilia: "More accurately, the Sage Shaula, and the Divine Dragon Volcanica..... You know, the dragon that protects the Kingdom of Lugnica. It's said that it started with a promise whereby Volcanica joined forces in battle to seal "The Witch of Envy" and now even to this day still watches over the Kingdom."

He'd heard the name of the "Divine Dragon" Volcanica many times back at the place where the Royal Selection candidates expressed their determination.

In his memories, the blood of the dragon had always been heralded as something able to bring fertility to ravaged earth, let one overcome any disease, and make one either immense or unrivaled.

Julius: "It's customary to call the "Sword Saint", "The Sage" and the "Divine Dragon" as the Three Great Heroes. You ought to remember that."

Subaru: "Whoaa, don't get fired up..... I get it, thank you for the explanation."

Subaru raised his hand at Julius and Emilia, before then taking a glimpse at Beatrice. When she noticed Subaru's gaze, she slowly shook her head.

Unfortunately, Beatrice didn't seem to be familiar with the legend from 400 years ago.

Beatrice was an artificial spirit created by Echidna, but other than the necessary information to maintain the Forbidden Library, she'd been completely estranged from it. He got the impression that she didn't know the behind the scenes circumstances around that matter because she'd been fairly impervious to the ways of the world due to shutting herself in for such a long time.

Subaru: "I'm sorry for bringing the debate to a standstill. Let's continue talking. But, this Sage Shaula...."

After he apologised for interrupting the discussion, Subaru took the initiative to try and bring the conversation back to its original course. But, he noticed something strange whilst he talked, and he couldn't help tilting his head at it.

He understood the background of the "Sage" Shaula, a hero from 400 years ago, but——,

Subaru: "Eeh, What? She's still living? After 400 years?"

Emilia: "Is that so strange..... I'm around a 100 years old as well in reality....."

Everyone Else: "——!?"

On hearing Subaru's mutter, a mystified look appeared across Emilia's face as she put one of her fingers to her lips. The meeting place stirred a little at that murmur, but Subaru on the contrary only replied with a "You have a point."

If he slowed down and thought about it, the half-elf Emilia's real age was in excess of 100 years, and Beatrice was a Loli who was around 400 years old. It felt to him like Puck too had mentioned that he was 400 years old; in that case, didn't that mean the average age of the Emilia Camp was about 100 years old, perhaps?

Subaru: "Putting aside that pretty shocking fact.....What about the Sage's current state."

Julius: "They're alive. ——On that, it seems that there's no doubt."

Subaru: "Seems.....?"

Subaru frowned at Julius' unclear response.

But, Julius was not the only one who couldn't answer clearly, everyone around was the same. Especially, those of the Royal Guard, Ferris and Reinhardt, who looked troubled.

Subaru: "Well, what does that mean?"

Julius: "Their whereabouts are known, and I dare say that them being alive is confirmed too. However, no human being has managed to exchange words with the Sage.....That's the meaning of it, I guess."

Subaru: "Once again, what does that mean?"

They knew their whereabouts, and even though it was vague, they'd been able to confirm her as being alive. But, getting in contact with them was impossible.

He thought he could put all of those impressions together, but...

Julius: "Currently, the Sage Shaula is in the tower near the "Witch's Shrine", and has always secluded herself there so to stop those who plan to revive the "Witch of Envy". Always, since that time."

Subaru: ".....For 400 years?"

Julius: "For 400 years."

It was an absurd story.

Beatrice, who had kept herself secluded in the Forbidden Library for 400 years was already quite a case, but that Sage Shaula, or whatever, was also quite a stubborn individual.

Ferris: : "The tower which the Sage Shaula lives in—— That's the Pleiades Watchtower, right? There, the esteemed Sage continues to toil night and day so to prevent the Witch's Revival."

Subaru: ".....Mhm, the tower's name makes me think of something, but it's of no importance, do continue."

Ferris: "Even if you're telling me to continue, that's pretty much it y'know? The Sage Shaula gives it their all and continues to watch over the Shrine to ensure the peace of the world, that's what is said."

And that is that, Ferris said whilst clapping with a sullen look on his face.

Even if he said that that was the end, it was clear from his attitude that the story hadn't completely finished there, considering that what he'd said couldn't explain the funeral-like mood around the meeting place.

Naturally, there must be some reason why they were like that——,

Subaru: "Then, by any chance are they a troubling individual?"

Anastasia: "To ensure peace in the world, the Sage Shaula continues to watch over the Witch.....Their name is known far and wide throughout the world. I've known about 'em too since the time I was in Kararagi. But, at the same time, the Sage Shaula is also known in this other way."

Subaru: "——?"

Anastasia smiled gracefully, pausing between her words for a second.

And then, whilst looking at Subaru, who had a bad feeling about this, she spoke.

Anastasia: "The Sage Shaula is someone with extreme trust issues who can't trust a single soul. ——No matter what the purpose of those approaching the Watchtower 'n the Shrine may be, she massacres all of 'em, or so I hear."

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——They were like that according to Anastasia's explanation.

The Sage Shaula built the Pleiades Watchtower and continued to watch over the "Witch's Shrine".

So far there had been many people who had tried to get in contact with the Sage, but all their plans failed and they gave up.

That was because of the interference of no other but the Sage Shaula herself.

Anastasia: “The Great Waterfall in the far east of Lugnica..... It seems that the “Witch’s Shrine” ‘n the Watchtower are near there, but the Sage doesn’ know which of the two people are aimin’ to approach, wouldn’cha think?”

Therefore, the Sage killed indiscriminately regardless of whether it was a wretched Witch Cultist who was trying to find the “Witch’s Shrine”, or a person who was trying to get in friendly contact with the Sage of the Watchtower.

The subject’s good or evil, their likes and dislikes, their righteousness or malintent all didn’t matter, since that was the best way forward.

As a result, there weren’t any reports or records left behind of anyone being able to get in contact with the Sage Shaula in all of these 400 years.

Ferris: “Buuuut, since the situation where they attack anyone approaching has been going on and on, we can just be sure that the Sage Shaula is still in the Watchtower even nyow.”

Subaru: “They sure are a damn annoying Sage....”

Ferris: “It’s nyot like that. In fact, there are many Witch Cultists who try to get near to the Shrine, more than you can imagine, Subaru-kyun. The Sage-san deals with every single one of them, they’re just steadfastly keeping by their goal of preventing the revival of “The Witch of Envy”.

Even though he had stated his positive opinion, Ferris’ expression didn’t clear up. All the Royal Guard members had the same unrestful look on their face, for that to have happened, there may have been an experience where the Sage had dished out a painful lesson to the extent of the Royal Guard.

On the other hand, Subaru nodded at Ferris’ sugarcoated opinion.

Certainly, if you looked at it from the “do whatever it takes to achieve the goal“ point of view, it would be incredibly annoying, but if you took into account the evil nature of a Witch Cultist, it was a natural precaution.

Rather, it was *because* there was someone who continued to keep guard over the “Witch of Envy” that it was conceivable to even think that this world had some sort of security system in effect against the “Witch of Envy”

Priscilla: “Fleeting is the night, mineself cares not about the true colours of the hermit who lives in trepidation insofar as time permits them to. What’s important is the fact that they are borrowing mine limited time. Mineself will return post-haste to the inn if you continue with this useless prattle. I have to get Schult to massage my feet.”

Schult: “Y-yes ma’am. Priscilla-sama has worked hard and is greatly fatigued! I appreciate that with all my heart.”

Having been embraced and buried in her huge breasts, Schult had replied with a red face. Priscilla, who’d stroked the boy with the smile of a villainess on her face, hadn’t found much worth in this conference in the first place.

It was something of a miracle that she’d come all the way here without throwing a tantrum.

Felt: “Even though like I’m not on that Princess’s side, I also agree that we gotta get back on topic soon. Tell us, about the Sage.”

Felt demanded that they cut back to the main topic, a look of impatience adorning her face.

Agreeing with that state of affairs, Subaru turned to look back at Anastasia.

Subaru: “Though we’ve kept interrupting you over and over, what did you say is up with this reclusive Sage?”

Anastasia: “Sooo, the story finally goes back ta the start.”

Anastasia clapped her hands. And then, she looked over at the faces of everyone sat at the roundtable whilst still gently touching her fox scarf,

Anastasia: “——Like everyone knows, the Sage Shaula helped with the sealing of “The Witch of Envy” with their unparalleled wisdom ‘n magical power. As well as a wide range of insight that’s said they see through the world with, and knowledge that’s said they know everythin’ about this world. If both of those are true without exaggeration..... Then doncha think they should know someway ta do somethin’ about what the Witch Cult left behin’ as well?”

Subaru: “.....But, isn’t what you’re saying just wishful thinking really?”

Anastasia: “Does that mean yer against it Natsuki-kun?”

Even though it seemed like she’d returned his question with another one, an answer for Anastasia’s one was difficult.

Trying to rely on it if he simply just looked at their title of “Sage” was the honest recourse. In respect to that, Subaru didn’t think it was even a bad idea. If they were someone who’d accomplished achievements that went as far as remaining in legend, then maybe they really did know a way to counteract the Witch Factors of Sin.

But, a different anxiety had taken ahold of Subaru.

The name of the “Sage” Shaula, and the Pleiades Watchtower where they lived. Those two keywords didn’t allow him to obediently accept her proposal.

Because Shaula and Pleiades were both words which Subaru was familiar with.

Subaru: “————”

According to Subaru’s modern knowledge, Shaula was the name corresponding to the second brightest star of Scorpio.

The Pleiades from the Pleiades Watchtower was far more explicit, in that it was the name of the star cluster known as the Pleiades Cluster—— Its name in Japanese was “Subaru”.

Of course, he didn't think it was anything that denoted "Natsuki Subaru", but the name of the celestial bodies which he knew about cropping up in this world was enough for his alert levels to rise to the MAX.

The Witch Cult's Sin Archbishops——Petelgeuse, Regulus, Sirius, Capella, Alphard, Batenkaitos.

Currently, all of the Sin Archbishops whose names had come to light bore the names of stars from Subaru's world in their names; it was impossible to not hold preconceived notions towards the Sage Shaula and the Pleiades Watchtower.

Ferris: "Putting aside Subaru-kyun's dissenting opinion....."

Ferris cut into the conversation in place of Subaru, who'd remained taciturn without coming up with a successful objection. He placed his finger on his cheek, and whilst he assumed his normal attitude with the exception of a stern look in his eyes, he said,

Ferris: "The view itself of visiting the Sage Shaula may be good, but isn't it an issue on how we will do it? Is there any way? Even when no one has managed to reach the Watchtower."

Felt: "The reason no one has is 'cause the Sage is too strong, that's the story right?"

Felt raised a question at Ferris' tantalising words, whilst she crossed her legs on top of her chair. She gave a fleeting look in Reinhardt's direction.

I see, if it just meant simply not being a match for the Sage's powers, then...

Felt: "We could manage it if it's Reinhardt, right? He has no other use except being strong, but when it comes to jus' that, he's insaaaane."

Reinhardt: "It's unusual that Felt-sama gives me praise, thank you very much."

Felt: "This is what I meant."

Felt sullenly *tch'ed* at Reinhardt's response. However, immediately after that, Reinhardt lowered his eyebrows as if he were troubled.

Like that, he spoke out with a "But....", prefacing it apologetically,

Reinhardt: "Unfortunately, I couldn't reach the Watchtower. I lacked the strength."

Felt: ".....This guy lacking strength..., isn't that a lil' alarming?"

Julius: "He doesn't mean a lack of combat power, Felt-sama. There's no area in this world that Reinhardt's true strength wouldn't reach, I'd say. But, the Pleiades Watchtower is a different problem to such impediments."

Ferris: "So you know the details..... Though, if you were a Royal Guard, that's natural I guess."

Ferris's face turned to one of discomfort on hearing Julius follow up Reinhardt's words. Looking at the strained relations between between the three Royal Guards from the corner of his eye, Subaru spoke out to Reinhardt, and said,

Subaru: "What was your purpose in trying to meet the Sage?"

Reinhardt: "It was an order from the Kingdom. For a cure for the disease, that it was. ——It was about two years ago."

Subaru: "Two years ago....."

The phrases *disease* and *two years ago* allowed Subaru to understand the circumstances.

Two years ago from today, the members of the Royal Family fell ill one after the other to an unknown disease, right at the Royal Castle. It was an epidemic where no cure was known—— Most likely, they ordered Reinhardt to get in contact with the Sage so to learn a cure for that disease.

But he didn't accomplish it, that explained the gloomy faces of the three Royal Guards.

Reinhardt: “The Watchtower and the Shrine, they’re at the Great Waterfall at the eastern edge of Lugnica—— Surrounded by the Augria Sand Dunes. The Watchtower can be seen in the distance from the entrance of the sand dunes. So you shouldn’t lose sight of that place, but.....”

Subaru: “But?”

Reinhardt: “There are many strange phenomenons that occur frequently in the sand dunes, so that you can’t get closer to the Watchtower. One theory says that it’s due to the miasma that’s seeping out from the Shrine.”

Reinhardt: “On top of that, the Augria Sand Dunes have turned into a haunt for Witchbeasts who are drawn in by the miasma. In that land full of miasma, the ferocity and strength of the Witchbeasts is off the charts. Even in that sense, going there in the first place is considered to be suicidal.”

Subaru: “So it’s a wayward desert WITH a haunt for Witchbeasts. For sure it’s hell.....”

In addition to the troublesomeness of the Sage themselves, there was a desert which not even Reinhardt could cross, and a metric ton of Witchbeasts which roamed the desert—— Regarding this, the factors for abandoning the ploy were too many.

It was understandable that getting in touch with the Sage hadn’t been achieved even once over the period of 400 years.

Anastasia: “——Yes, but what if there was a way ta cross that hell?”

Everyone: “———”

Everyone raised their faces up at her sudden words just as a gloomy atmosphere had begun to enshroud them.

Anastasia smiled in satisfaction on account of having butted in at precisely the right moment. Then, she nodded so that everyone could see,

Anastasia: “There is, that’s why I even bothered ta mention the Sage’s name.”

Ferris: “Anastasia-sama from Kararagi, you know a means to reach the Sage whose been in seclusion for 400 years, at this time?What sort of means is it?”

Anastasia: “Ya ruin yer pretty face. I’m goin’ ta explain it ta ya even without that bristly face.”

Carelessly turning aside Ferris, who’d gotten himself worked up, Anastasia removed her scarf from her neck.

And then, she unrolled her scarf on top of the roundtable and lifted the head part,

Anastasia: “I mentioned her before the defensive battle, my artificial spirit, Echidna. This little’n knows a way ta the Pleiades Watchtower. ——That’s why we can go ‘n meet the Sage of the Watchtower.”

Subaru: “———”

Subaru’s breath caught on hearing Anastasia’s declaration.

The artificial spirit Echidna, that being that disguised itself as a fox scarf was the key to reaching the Sage.

???: “——I’m receiving so much attention, huh. You’re making me blush!”

Saying that, the fox spirit lifted her neck.

Subaru didn’t know how much he could trust her, just like the Witch which she’d borrowed her name from.

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Chapter 80 - Leaving Behind Ripples on the Water's Surface



???: “——So, let’s start shall we.”

Emilia let her beautiful, crystal-clear voice echo throughout the room as she tensed her face slightly.

She spoke to everyone in the room with her bell-like voice—— Or perhaps she’d said it to persuade herself, either way, she raised both of her slender arms.

Emilia: “———”

Closing her eyes, Emilia started to concentrate her mana to both of her raised hands.

Great magical power swirling around, and the utmost concentration to handle it with precision. If she lacked either of those, she'd be unable to achieve her goal, this was an endeavour which only she could do.

Emilia: "————"

Countless gazes poured down on Emilia who met her great sorcery head-on with a serious expression on her face. The women and children were huddled together, watching over her actions with bated breath.

Some were holding each other's hands, while others had closed their eyes as if in prayer or wishing; they shared only hope and anxiety as they trembled.

Subaru: ".....It must be tough on them."

And, at the tail end of the same room, Subaru was silently observing Emilia, who was being showered in many complex emotions.

The area they were in was a part of the underground facilities in the City of Pristella.

Originally, it had been a cellar that had stored emergency provisions. Its current almost empty state was ideal for their intended purpose. There wasn't anything placed in the stone cellar, and its spaciousness seemed to emphasise its bleakness and chilliness.

But, it ought to be suitable for their current purpose, precisely because it was that kind of place.

Subaru: "Though, I wouldn't say that's a good thing."

Beatrice: "Quit muttering sentimentalities, I suppose. It wouldn't be good if someone heard you, and you'll also end up messing up Emilia's concentration, in fact."

Standing beside Subaru, who'd let that mutter accidentally slip out, Beatrice gave him her advice.

The girl, who held Subaru's left hand with one hand and played with her drill curls with her other, stared at the white ritual that was being held in front of her eyes.

Her pale blue eyes seemed like they were holding back pain in some respect to Subaru.

Subaru: "Since it's Emilia, it will be okay. Don't worry about it so much."

Beatrice: ".....Don't get the wrong idea, I suppose. Betty is not worried about Emilia, but about Subaru, in fact. Empathising with the emotions of literally everybody is a bad habit, I suppose."

Subaru: "I see."

The strength of her hand holding his grew stronger, and Subaru bent his lips into the shape of a ^ at the girl's concern.

He knew what Beatrice wanted to say, as well as what she was worried about. However, his decision after he'd understood that was based off his current determination.

On that point, he couldn't yield. Even though he knew that it'd just be troubling.

Emilia: "————"

Away from Subaru and Beatrice's hushed exchange of words, Emilia's ritual continued on.

Emilia, who was concentrating with all her might, had beads of sweat trickling down her forehead as she panted out misted breaths. She was giving it her everything in mind and body to control the enormous amounts of Mana.

A pale blue light originating from in between Emilia's hands began to faintly envelop the cellar.

Although the cold air was cold enough to fog up his sight, the chill did not pierce into his skin, it was gentle as if it were embracing his heart exposed.

He'd heard that people who fell into hypothermia and were on the verge of death forgot about the cold.

Extreme cold took away from people the ability to tell the temperature correctly, and granted them warmth as a parting gift before snatching their lives away, he'd heard.

Subaru vaguely thought about whether something near to that was happening in this white world, but he immediately shook his head, dismissing it as plain stupid.

Pale blue light filled the room, and the cold air converged to its centre.

And, in the middle of the light, there was...

???: “————”

A huge black creature, curled up with its wings folded—— A black dragon that was lying down.

The strange creatures didn't stop there, there were also flies roughly the size of people gathered around the black dragon. In all they gave you the impression of a nightmarish scene.

However, Subaru didn't feel any revulsion at this scene.

——No. To be precise, he was strongly aware that he shouldn't feel revulsion towards the black dragon and the human flies.

They were victims, innocents without any fault.

They were victims of the malice from the Sin Archbishop of “Lust”, victims who had been transformed into inhumanities.

Subaru, and everyone else, currently didn't know a way to restore their re-moulded bodies back to normal. That's why they'd chosen this measure.

Subaru: “It may be that we're just postponing the inevitable, but.....”

Beatrice: “It will get us time, and even just that can be a salvation, in fact. Since you're trying to hurry things up, your outlook is getting narrower, so you can't see the options that you'd normally be able to.

Not being aware of that, or realising it later..... both of those are cruelties, I suppose.”

Beatrice replied with something of a monologue to Subaru's mutters.

Her small, feeble sigh contained an insightfulness and sentimentality which only those who'd spent a long, long time thinking could have.

Feeling that at the end of her words, Subaru just silently stroked her head without saying a single word back.

Beatrice: “.....What is it, in fact.”

Subaru: “It’s nothing.”

No matter how much time they took, they wouldn’t necessarily be able to make the right choice.

Sometimes, even if you give it some time, there are cases where you wouldn’t be able to pick the right choice.

Nevertheless, you can act so that the option you choose is the best one.

The answer which Subaru had produced to Beatrice’s 400 years had been like so.

And so he hoped that time which would be brought to the tragedy that struck the city, would also be like so.

Subaru: “————”

The climax of the cold air that filled the cellar overlapped with Subaru’s strong emotions, and finally a sound like the air cracking, or so he thought, resounded throughout——,

Emilia: “.....It ended up going safely.”

Emilia turned around whilst breathing out misted breaths.

She quickly bowed her head at that place, a little out of breath——Behind her, with their whole bodies covered in white crystals, were the lives of all of the souls who had been encased inside of ice.

Subaru: “——*tch*”

The members of their family were weeping, and their significant others were sobbing in tears.

Their sorrowful wails came out before any thanks, and they cruelly echoed throughout the cellar.

For a very, very long time, their wails continued to echo throughout, as if their sorrow had no end to being separated until goodness knows when from their loved ones.

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???: “For now, it seems like Emilia-sama’s proposal turned out well..... Would I be okay to feel relieved by that?”

Having been informed about the conference at the meeting place, as well as Emilia’s subsequent work to freeze the mutation victims—— Otto nodded, looking relieved.

They were somewhere away from the shelters, in a private room at a hospital, where he’d been carried to.

His condition on top of his bed still hadn’t changed, with both of his legs painfully wrapped in bandages. Even so, at least he’d managed to leave from the Field Hospital’s treatment, and it was possible to say that his cramping legs looked like they’d improved quite a bit.

In fact, Otto’s position was as one of the valorous people who’d contributed to the City’s Defence, so it would have been nice if he’d gotten higher quality medical treatment. However, Otto hadn’t told them that, so Subaru opted not to say anything, since he’d probably been considering those around him.

Subaru: “Hospitality that is presumed without saying anything..... That’s the true meaning of Wabi-sabi.”

(TL Note: For what Wabi-sabi means, read: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wabi-sabi>)

Otto: “Although you’re here, Nasuki-san, your mind is elsewhere; it’s the same as always, so it’s fine, but anyways..... Thank you for your hard work, Emilia-sama.”

Disregarding the nodding Subaru, Otto thanked Emilia for her hard work, who’d come to visit him. She drew her eyebrows down on hearing his thanks, and said,

Emilia: “Nah, it’s alright. More importantly, I’m sorry for going through with it on my own without consulting with Otto-kun. But, it was because I’d thought it was something only I could do.”

Otto: “Ah, it’s fine. I’m not angry since your actions were undoubtedly precious, good deeds. Besides, they were very valuable actions even in a calculating sense.”

Emilia: "Calculating.....?"

Otto: "It probably would have been better if you understood what I meant, but if you don't, even if you don't..... No, how can I put it. Regarding that, honestly, it's really difficult for me to decide which would be better."

Subaru: "Don't think about it, *feel it*. That is E.M.T"

Emilia wasn't quite aware of the result of her own actions. With some magic words, Subaru serenely brushed Otto aside, who lay perplexed at Emilia's attitude. He then continued by saying "More importantly,"

Subaru: "Your legs, they seem like they won't be usable for a while, right?"

Otto: "With Pristella's current state, it'll be difficult to treat them more than this, won't it? The number of Healing Arts Users in the city isn't enough to take care of all of the injured. I think it may be better to move to a hospital in another city, but it seems that Kiritaka-san sent out as many messengers as he could to the neighbouring cities, and requested for Healing Arts Users. That's why quietly waiting here for a Healing Arts User from one of those places to come by would perhaps be more prudent than going back to the mansion."

Laughing weakly with a *Thaha*, Otto would be forced to withdraw from the frontlines for a while.

Wounds as severe as Otto's couldn't be so easily cured without a Mage who could use healing magic fairly proficient. They had to be at Ferris-level or Beatrice's when she was in the Forbidden Library.

Subaru: "Ferris is constantly attending to Crusch, and our Healing Special Attack Corps Leader is going around Pristella.....The reason being is that family of course."

Emilia: "Those three, the mother and two siblings, right? That person who had the form of a dragon is the father, so it was a family of four, I think."

Their Special Attack Corps Leader wasn't here right now—— No, he shouldn't refer to him like that, Garfiel is what he meant.

Currently, he was going around the city which was short of working hands, and working as hard as he could on the repair work. By nature, Garfiel was a kind, well put together young man. Even if he'd felt nothing for the city, if there were people in need, he'd end up helping them without hesitation.

But, even so, his commitment to Pristella was second to none. And Subaru could more or less imagine the reason why.

Subaru: "That he didn't tell us must mean that there are various complex circumstances, I guess."

Emilia: "Yeah, that's gotta be it..... Indeed, changing the subject, but don't you think that Garfiel and that family resemble each other a bit? Their hair colour and eye colour are completely identical."

Subaru: "Emilia-tan, you know that the subject hasn't changed right?"

Emilia: "Eh!?"

Putting the surprised Emilia to one side, Garfiel was in such a condition.

Under normal circumstances, he himself should have sustained damage that wouldn't be possible to call minor throughout his body, but due to his "Divine protection of Earth Spirits" and his boundless physical strength, he had no intention of resting.

In addition, Mimi, who'd been a pain to her little brothers with her wounds reopening, was also tagging along with him, so there hadn't been any ruckus around.

Otto: "Well, in regards to Garfiel's true feelings, one day he will reveal them on his own I'd imagine. We don't need to try and get it out of him. More importantly....."

Emilia: "Hmm?"

Otto: "Ah, no, since both of you didn't mention it at all, I didn't say anything either, but why does Beatrice-san look so moody?"

Inclining the top half of his body, Otto turned the flow of conversation to a corner of the hospital room——Beatrice was there, puffing out her red cheeks, visibly shaking her head from left to right with a sullen look in her eyes.

Subaru nodded and responded with an “Ah” to that question.

Subaru: “It’s because of *that*, you know. She’s in a bad mood because we went to the Restoration Artist on your errand and ended up being turned away……. When you look at it from multiple perspectives, wouldn’t it be your fault?”

Otto: “No! You’re going too far there…….Isn’t that right, Emilia-sama?”

Emilia: “Mhm, you’re right. It’s a contractor’s natural obligation to take care of their spirit. So, the one who needs to cheer Beatrice up has gotta be Subaru.”

Subaru: “You mentioned *cheering up*, but even when you say that, I don’t have many memories of Emilia-tan taking care of Puck.”

Emilia: “Don’t nitpick with that! Besides, I’ve done tons of stuff when Subaru wasn’t there to see. Like grooming his fur, cleaning his claws, cuddling him to sleep…….”

It was doubtful whether that could be referenced as a format on the way of associating with spirits, but Emilia’s expression when talking about Puck had turned cheerful.

Ever since his sudden parting back at the “Sanctuary” had stabbed her, she’d had a strong expression of grief whenever she recalled Puck, but it seemed that stage had passed too.

——A crystal stone made of colourless Great Magic Stone adorned Emilia’s chest.

The same design that she always wore before she was separated from Puck, combined with the beauty of her expression, she had gone back to looking like the same old Emilia.

She touched the crystal stone with one of her slender fingers, and said,

Emilia: "I still don't have enough power to bring Puck back right now, but..... Mine and Puck's contract hasn't been severed, so we can meet again when I accumulate enough Mana so that he can manifest. So, just a little bit more patience, eh."

Subaru: "That too was thanks to one of Beako's achievements, and..... Well, thanks to Kiritaka's kindness."

The reason why Subaru and the others had come to the city of Pristella in the first place had been to obtain a Great Magic Stone.

The reality should have been that he'd turn it over or not after some negotiation, but the negotiations had ended up taking an inconceivable detour. In any case, they'd gotten one at present, and were very satisfied.

Subaru: "So you cheer up too, Beako."

Beatrice: "I'm not moody, I suppose. It's your misunderstanding, in fact. Hmph."

Emilia: "Oh, Beatrice, how adorable....."

Going all the way to letting out an easy to understand sound effect, Beatrice turned her face away from Subaru who was trying to get her to cheer up. Subaru too was in agreement with Emilia, who was feeling the butterflies behind him; however, whether they could talk about her cuteness or not was yet another matter.

Otto: "It seems that Mr. Darts is a person with a craftsman's temperament, doesn't it? He can't leave a job half-done once undertaken, I understand that sort of thing."

Subaru: "But, still, let's think about how his professionalism has been taken to too much of an extreme. It seems like this guy was working in his workshop all throughout the chaos, doesn't it? He's too much of a workaholic."

Otto: "That's the craftsman in him, you see."

Subaru: "The craftsman in him, huh?"

He didn't really know why Otto seemed to be proud, but when he said that, it seemed to make him feel good; boys were such simple creatures. A craftsman's temperament was cool.

However, Beatrice directed an angered look at the nodding Otto and Subaru, and said,

Beatrice: "Yes, but that doesn't mean he should completely ignore his client's words, I suppose. Even when I said I'd pay him double, he didn't say a single damn word, in fact."

Subaru: "Giving any indications of listening to what a little girl is saying as she slaps your cheeks with a roll of bills would only work as a reward for those who aren't professionals that are well versed in their trade. You tell her too, Emilia-tan."

Emilia: "Yeah, you shouldn't think like this, Beatrice. If you are going to waste money, I'm going to have to end up confiscating your pocket money."

Beatrice: "What rude treatment I'm getting from both of you, I suppose!"

The indignant Beatrice grabbed one of the curtains, wrapped herself in it and hid herself behind it.

Following that, Emilia couldn't resist anymore, and hugged Beako IN the curtain, making her yell out, "GNNNYYYA, IN FACT!"

Putting aside their cheerful intermezzo, it wasn't like he didn't understand Beatrice's feelings.

That which Otto had commissioned to the Restoration Artist Darts, and Subaru and the others had tried to recover was the damaged "Book of Wisdom". It was the origin as to why its owner, Roswaal, had tried so hard to interfere with the future in advance of Subaru—— It was natural to be interested in its contents.

Subaru: "Although his interference's subtle, it's since the slippery nature of that guy goes hand in hand."

Even though his sabotage had been discovered, Roswaal's attitude on the surface hadn't changed from before.

Of course, since he had schemed behind that easygoing attitude, remaining alert was essential.

However, it was also true that he had an air to him that seemed like the poisonousness had slipped out.

Nonetheless, it wasn't the same as going as far as being able to call him a collaborative ally who'd take the role of a bystander.

Subaru: "If we can at least see what's lying ahead with the "Book of Wisdom"....."

If they were able to hold belief that Roswaal was not planning anything, regardless of the past, it would be safe to walk the road ahead together. It'd probably also have a bit more of a positive effect for the future of the Camp.

Subaru: "That's why I want to insist on it."

Otto: "Even when I don't endeavour to make such excuses, I and Emilia-sama have more or less the same opinions as Natsuki-kun, so on that point we're fine. Just Garfiel, well..... He has his personal enmities, so even if he knows the facts, his attitude may not change."

By *personal enmities* was he really referring to the "Sanctuary" or Ram?

Without touching that subject, Subaru gazed over at Emilia and Beatrice, messing about...

Subaru: "That book is no stranger to Beatrice either. So, I think I would like to confirm it if it's even possible. Taking her out from the Forbidden Library, and leaving the past behind are different problems."

Otto: "Did you know that many times I'd thought about trying to consult with you?"

Subaru: "I ain't blaming you for that y'know."

He thought that recovering the “Book of Wisdom”, trying to restore it back to normal and trying to do it all on his own was a good judgment on Otto’s part.

And fundamentally, it was hardly ever that Otto’s considerations failed. He was fully aware that he was not a person who acted in self-interest.

Subaru: “You really ain’t suited to be a merchant....”

Otto: “Could you leave me alone!? More importantly, what about Mr. Darts?”

Subaru: *“It may be my greatest job yet, he said. You can defer the fee, so I would like you to let me work on this properly until the end, he said.”*

It was worrying that the deadline hadn’t expired, but that guy was a craftsman, so he couldn’t possibly say it was impossible.

He wanted to believe that he was not the type of craftsman who’d grumble even after the deadline passed.

Otto: “So in the end, I’ll also have to collect the “Book of Wisdom”, I feel like me staying behind in Pristella has already been decided, don’t you?”

Subaru: “Garfiel also plans to stay for awhile for the repair work and the city defence. Them having been driven away is settled, but what if that’s a feint for them attacking again! Since they never quit, those shits.”

They looked like the sort of guys that’d make the same mischief over and over.

It seemed like Subaru wasn’t the only one who’d recognised that, everyone who was involved hadn’t let their guard down either. It was also possible that their aims were to force unnecessary feelings of tension so to torment them.

Subaru: “Even if I bring that up, nothing more can be done about it.”

Otto: "In any case, I think we need to wait and see how things go. As soon as my legs are in a better state, I will go around to check up on various things. However....."

Otto broke his words off there, as he discussed his future plans.

He strenuously lifted the upper part of his body up from the bed, and looked up at Subaru, who'd closed one of his eyes. And, as he struck his temple with one of his fingers, he said,

Otto: "I shall say this clearly, I'm against this."

Subaru: ".....Well, I thought you'd say that."

Subaru gave a wry smile at Otto's declaration.

That he would say that and be against it, was an attitude which Subaru had predicted.

After all, Otto Suwen had evaluated Natsuki Subaru correctly.

Subaru himself was more aware than anyone of his own helplessness, but there weren't many who clearly understood his shortcomings.

At best, it was Beatrice and Otto. Perhaps Patrasche a bit. And although now wasn't the time for him, Ferris mayhaps too.

Therefore, he had anticipated that Beatrice and Otto, from their camp, would have been against it. He believed if Patrasche could speak, then she'd have probably been similarly against it.

However...

Subaru: "If you know me that much, then you should know my answer."

Otto: ".....In truth, Beatrice-san's moodiness isn't only because of Mr. Darts, right?"

Subaru: "Weeeeell, I'm not so sure. As you might expect, even I don't understand what's in the depths of Beako's heart."

When Subaru feigned his innocence with a shrug of his shoulders, Otto's face turned into one of exasperation.

Of course, when it came to him and his sharp hearing, he shouldn't be lacking in knowledge of legends/rumours. He must know all too well the riskiness of Subaru's choice.

Adding onto what he'd said, Subaru prefaced what he was going to say to Otto with an "I'm sorry," Subaru; "I will go to see that Sage or whatever they are, with that White Fox Guide for a little while." He smiled as he said that.

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???: "——Come in"

When he knocked on the door as a courtesy, just in case, a calm voice replied to him from the inside. It was a familiar voice, but one that lacked in spirit. Subaru felt excessively annoyed at it.

???: "It's you, Subaru?"

Subaru: "Is it bad that it's me?"

???: "It's strange, now when I see your face, I feel terribly relieved."

Subaru: "Bleeergh"

He walked into the room, wrapping up the reproachful words that he'd exchanged at the start with that action.

Even while he showed that attitude, there was consideration in the way Subaru closed the door behind him. Closing the door without making a sound was the minimum amount of courtesy for those who slept inside.

???: "If they would wake up because of the noise, it'd be so much better."

Subaru: "If so, would you give me a round of applause or something? That'd be a priceless scene.

"Gluttony" who was let to be at large would get more and more pissed off."

???: “Hmph”

Giving a relaxed smile, Subaru inclined his head without meeting his eyes. Then he looked around the room and narrowed his eyes at the row of beds.

A simple bed, and a thin blanket: that was all the charity given to the people who slept there. And Subaru knew that more than that wasn't even necessary.

The people who slept here were forgotten from memory, cut loose from daily life, and only remained left behind as imperfect beings that just weren't dead.

Subaru: “Julius. I'm not one to say it, but you shouldn't spend so much time here.”

Julius: “————”

Subaru: “Even if you keep looking at them, you can't remember that which you can't remember. That applies to both a beloved little sister, as well as someone who is truly like your other half.”

Subaru called out to the young man—— Julius, without using any words of comfort.

He was sitting at a corner of the bed rows, at one of the bedsides located the furthest away. He lifted his face up, him still full of sorrow which he couldn't conceal from his handsome features,

Julius: “Knowing that in my head and knowing that with my heart are completely different things. I don't mean to be conceited, but so far I'd never thought of myself as an emotionally-driven, big-headed person. Me not realising that until this happened is a lack in my self-awareness.”

Subaru: “————”

Whilst he spoke, Julius looked down at the bed right next to him.

Naturally, one of the victims of appetite who'd lost their “Name” was sleeping there as well, and their consciousness and memories had been completely cut away from the world.

That's why Julius Eculius didn't remember this person—— The slender faced young man with long purple hair who was his own little brother, Joshua Eculius.

Julius: “Joshua, eh?”

He can call his little brother’s name because Subaru had told him his name, and the relation he had to him.

The victims of the authority of “Gluttony”—— When it had been reported that many unidentifiable, comatose people had been found, Subaru had been convinced that they had suffered the same damage as Rem.

And he himself may have not forgotten those forgotten. Relying only on that slim hope, he’d gone to the hospital room and discovered the sleeping Joshua.

Julius: “It’s strange. Although there’s enough in common to be able to conclude he is definitely a blood relative after listening to your story, within me there’s not a single memory of my little brother.”

Julius closed his eyes without showing any emotion on his face.

Joshua was the only he knew from those who were found. Amongst the victims of “Gluttony”. He couldn’t find the other 30+ victims even in his memory, and thus they continued to sleep without anyone even mourning for them, or worrying about their wellbeing.

If you thought about it, you could probably say that Joshua, who had his big brother worrying about him, was one of the lucky ones.

Even in these circumstances, where he was forgotten by the big brother he loved so dearly, and said big brother went to the hospital room so to cling onto his brotherly love in name only, and called out to his little brother without true emotion.

Even if he was forgotten, even if he forgot him, even if he wasn’t there in his memories, even if there were just facts, it was just heart-wrenching.

Subaru: “.....Fucking hell.”

He should have known. He really should have.

That the Sin Archbishop of “Gluttony’s” authority was the most despicable evil in this world.

Along with “Wrath”, who twisted people’s emotions at will.

Along with “Lust”, who broke people’s dignity as well as their form, before then trampling over them.

Along with “Greed”, who denied everything besides himself, imposing his egocentric sense of omnipotence.

Along with “Sloth”, who indulged himself in using the word *diligence* to paint over the lives of others with his selfish love.

They were the worst evil without doubt, not a single one of them deserved to live.

How could he stand those beings that profaned the lives of absolutely everyone like “Gluttony” did.

Subaru: “——Staying here will only make you feel depressed. Don’t make me keep saying it.”

Only unpleasant things passed through his mind.

He had put that irritation into words, and called out to Julius. When he heard those words, Julius stood up, and touched his forgotten little brother’s slender chest, and said,

Julius: “He’s... breathing. He’s alive. It’s strange.”

Subaru: “Yeah that’s right. But he doesn’t eat, nor does he need to go to the bathroom. He also doesn’t need to take a bath..... He doesn’t laugh either.”

Julius: “He doesn’t feel the sorrow of being forgotten.... either. ——That may be a blessing.”

Subaru: “A blessing.....?”

Subaru raised his eyebrows in response to that word which Julius spilled out.

Looking back at him, Julius slightly curved the crooks of his lips up, and whilst giving a weak smile, he said,

Julius: "If you don't realise you've been forgotten, you needn't fear the anxiety of being left behind. It's really hard to bear having what should have been close relationships with people..... being cut off from one side.

Subaru: "————"

Julius: "Subaru. Being forgotten, and forgetting..... I wonder, which of those is the most painful?"

Subaru: "How....."

Subaru's throat clogged up at that question.

It didn't clog up due to the answer. He'd had the answer ready in an instant. So what had obstructed Subaru's words hadn't been bewilderment. It had been fury.

Subaru glared at Julius who had a cynical smile on his face.

Subaru: "How would I know? Don't mess about, stop absorbing yourself in these things."

Julius: ".....Subaru?"

Subaru: "*Forgetting, being forgotten*, TO HELL WITH BOTH! DON'T TRY AND ORDER SUCH PAINFUL THINGS, ARE YOU THAT NEGATIVE!? MAKING THAT DAMN FACE LIKE YOU'RE THE MOST UNFORTUNATE PERSON IN THE WHOLE WORLD. WANT TO TRY AND COMPARE YOUR MISFORTUNES WITH MINE SO FAR? WHATEVER THE CASE, I WOULD WIN!?"

Julius: "————"

Julius became speechless at the sudden change that took over Subaru, who had raised his voice, jabbing his finger at him.

Opening his eyes wide in surprise, he couldn't say anything to Subaru who'd suddenly become enraged. And as he looked Julius keeping his silence, Subaru lowered his finger and shrugged his shoulders,

Subaru: "Don't make such a despairing face. I know you're suffering, and I know that you were forgotten and you have nowhere left to go..... But, I'm sorry but I won't let you show your weak side."

Julius: "————"

Subaru: "Have you forgotten, Julius? ——No, do not forget, Julius."

Subaru glared at Julius whilst he bit his lips in frustration. He placed his hand on his chest, and once again made a declaration like the ones he'd done.

Subaru: "My eyes know your strength. My shame knows it. Even if everyone has forgotten."

Julius: "————"

He couldn't breathe, the feeling of his blood going up to his head didn't vanish.

Really, how long had it been since he'd gotten this pissed off? Since Regulus. He was astonished that not even half a day had passed since then.

How much had this turmoil in Pristella burdened his heart and lungs?

Julius: "Hh, Haha....."

Subaru: "Haah?"

Julius: "Haha..... No, you truly are a one of a kind man. I've realised that once more....."

Getting rid of his startled he'd had up until now, Julius suddenly bent over in laughter.

Giving in to the urge to laugh, Julius continued to laugh before the disgruntled Subaru. And when the urge gradually settled, Julius let out a long sigh.

Julius: "I see, you're right. It doesn't mean that absolutely everything was left behind, right?"

Subaru: "Rather than saying being left behind, I'd say you're in front by around three horse lengths."

Julius: "Is three horse lengths enough?"

Subaru: "I'm gonna fuckin' beat your ass! If it's me and Beako as a team, it'll be completely different for you!"

He flipped him his middle finger, and spat at Julius who was starting to get back to his usual manner.

Julius gracefully dodged his spit, and gave him a bow, whilst saying “I see,”

Julius: “Then, I will try to have faith in those big words.”

Subaru: “.....Mhm, do so. As much as you can too, do great deeds so that you surprise everyone when their memories come back.”

This time at that smugish attitude, Subaru raised his thumb up and then turned it down in provocation. Faced with that coarse gesture, the “Finest Knight” that only Subaru knew, smiled gracefully,

Julius: “——So, first of all, more so than anyone else, I will try to strive to surprise you. You, who remembers me.”

Saying that, he fortified his intent of accompanying him to the “Pleiades Watchtower” that awaited them.

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Chapter 81 – Arc 5 Finale: One Who Fills The Vessel of Greed



——A series of “Witch Cult Riots” arose in Pristella, the Watergate City.

The scars of the battle remained throughout the city, along with the tragedy that struck its inhabitants. There were numerous functions of the city that had yet to be fully restored to compensate for the loss of personnel.

Those problems still remained, yet the situation was settling down and beginning to move towards the next story.

For Natsuki Subaru too, the many problems of the city ached his heart.

Nevertheless as he observed the city after the withdrawal of the Witch Cult, he felt that he could presume that perhaps he'd been able to contribute a little to that conclusion.

Subaru: "Although there are still many unresolved problems..."

The scars that were left by the Sin Archbishops, especially amongst those left by "Lust" and "Gluttony", were enormous.

The inhabitants who'd had their bodies mutated by the Authority of "Lust". Their bodies had been placed in a "Temporary State of Death" by Emilia and were awaiting the moment to awaken in a shelter deep within the city.

And most of the people who had been attacked by the appetite of "Gluttony" even now found themselves in an endless sleep, and even their bonds with those who would expect their awakening from the bottom of their heart had been snatched away

Emilia's expression, who had proposed a way of postponing the solution to the problem of the transformed citizens, was painful.

Julius's anguish, who had lost his place and had suffered with how things were, was beyond imaginable.

And there was no need to mention the wounds in the hearts of the city's people who were the ones most affected.

Everybody had been hurt.

It was Subaru's duty to do everything he could to heal those wounds...

And,

Subaru: "There are still problems I have to take care of."

To solve the final unsolved problem, Subaru nodded.

Only this, was what Subaru had to do.

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Subaru: "Julius will go with us."

Anastasia: "I see, then I can feel more calm 's well."

After he'd finished with his various discussions, Subaru returned to the conference room and was welcomed by Anastasia.

Anastasia was the only one left at the roundtable in the conference room. The discussion on the main topics had been held there several hours ago.

Some of them had already returned to the inn, and others were preparing to leave Pristella. Even without that, it had been a tiring day. There was no need to rest on the hard roundtable and spend your time in the darkness of the empty shelter.

Subaru: "——What?"

And yet, she had stayed here, waiting for someone to arrive.

It wasn't that he had been sure of it. But, Subaru too had vaguely thought that she would have been here.

After all, right now she shouldn't have felt comfortable anywhere.

Subaru: "With this, those who are aiming for the Pleiades Watchtower are Emilia, me and Beako. In addition to that, if we add Julius and you, there are five of us in total."

Anastasia: "Aren't 'cha makin' a mistake in the number of participants? After all, there aren't five of us, there are six of us. It would be a problem if you forgot my 'dorable Echidna.'"

She unrolled the scarf from around her neck and spread it over the roundtable whilst making her dance. The white fox scarf was obedient towards her master's harmless game, just like a doll.

She didn't just look like it, though.

Subaru: "I didn't forget. —That is why... we're five"

Anastasia? : "————"

As he leaned his back against the door of the conference room, Subaru told that to Anastasia, who was hoisting out her scarf.

Hearing those words, Anastasia's smile froze. Her elegant smile vanished as if it had melted, and then she tilted her head slowly.

Pulling the scarf to her lips, accompanied by a mystified look on her face,

Anastasia: "Oh, that's weird. How did you know I'm not Ana?"

Anastasia's tone changed completely, so much that it was clearly noticeable.

It was terribly amicable and familiar, but the essential part was completely vacant. Although her voice was the same, it was clearly different.

Subaru: "If you want to hide it, you should do a better act of doing so. Surely, as far as I know, Anastasia is the most rational and realistic of the candidates, but... She doesn't have an attitude as lacking in humanity as you do, nor is her way of speaking like that."

Echidna: "I've been observing Ana for some time, so I should've been able to imitate her, but it didn't go as well as I had thought. You are the second one to notice."

Subaru: "The second?"

Echidna: "Al-kun also noticed. He called me a "Witch", how could he do such a cruel thing?"

Subaru: "That's....."

That was quite the fitting term, Subaru felt admiration for Al.

Anastasia's Echidna and the "Witch" Echidna were essentially different, but it was impossible that they were not related, there was no doubt in that.

Perhaps it had been Al's insight, something only he could have noticed.

He was someone summoned to this other world, just like Subaru. If the power of the "Witch of Envy" was connected to the other world summons, Al could also be related to the "Witch".

Usually, he would have talked to him more about it, but——,

Subaru: "Anyway, that doesn't matter now. The most important problem is you, who hijacked Anastasia's body and tried to make it yours."

Echidna: "Saying "hijacked" sounds pretty drastic. At a glimpse, the current situation is bad, that appears to be a fact, but I must say that it is unfortunate that you misinterpret it that way. Seriously, it's painful."

Subaru: "That way, you make it sound like it's not the case."

Echidna: "In actuality, it's not true, even if you can't see it. I only borrowed Ana's body, it was inevitable. If I hadn't, it would have been the end for the both of us. After that, I continued to use Ana as a vessel, not out of my free will."

Subaru: "Too long. In summary?"

Echidna: "It was fine to borrow her body, but I can't get out..."

I see, this is Scarfdona—On this occasion, he'd put it as Eridna, but he'd never thought that Eridna had been unrelated to Echidna, yet in their interaction now he'd sensed no clear traces of Echidna.

Even though the way she lengthened things was the same as the original.

Subaru: "For now, I'll try to listen to your story."

Moving his back away from the door, Subaru positioned himself to talk with Eridna.

Now that he had uncovered her identity she couldn't leave him alive, it seemed safe to assume that the danger of her setting that trap had gone.

Subaru sat on the other side of the roundtable, facing Eridna.

Subaru: "To begin with, borrowing her body? What kind of situation is that?"

Echidna: "To put it simply, I overwrite my existence in Ana's Od, and I borrow her freely, that's the situation. In this state, I can control Ana's body at will, I can also manipulate Ana's gate, which is defective from the start, and use magic."

Subaru: "What do you mean it is defective from the start?"

Echidna: "You're quite curious, aren't you? I understand the greed of wanting to know something so I won't blame you, but wanting to know so much about another girl and another spirit, won't it make your Emilia-sama and your Beatrice jealous?"

Subaru: "I don't need your concern, even if they get jealous, they'd be cute anyways, so that's fine. Stop stretching things out and tell me."

When Subaru tried to slam the roundtable with his fingers in displeasure, Eridna shrugged. Then, she folded the removed scarf carefully and said "Ana is..."

Echidna: "A girl who was born with a defective Gate. I think you already know that the Gate is an organ that absorbs mana from the atmosphere and emits the mana into the body, but the ability to absorb mana doesn't work quite well in Anastasia. She's someone who suffers from chronic mana deficiency. There is a person who has this defect of not being able to release mana, although you should already have an idea of who I am talking about."

Subaru: "I don't know if that's bad or not, and I don't know who you're referring to either."

Echidna: "Oh really? That is unexpected. By the way, the one who has the deficiency of not being able to release mana is the descendant of the "Sword Saint". Although in his case, the amount he absorbs is unusual, and it adds to his physical ability apparently, so there is no real harm."

Subaru: "Reinhardt?"

Subaru raised his eyebrows in surprise at the words of Eridna. But, on second thought, he also felt that Reinhardt had said something like that somewhere before.

Reinhardt couldn't use magic, only in that aspect was he inferior.

But instead the power of his Gate to absorb was strong—I see, so that was the reason why it was bad for him to approach spirits, including Beatrice.

Subaru : "Well, even without magic, it's not that he doesn't have ways of attacking from a long distance, to begin with, in his case it wouldn't be surprising if he defeated his opponents with the pressure of his sword, so it doesn't seem like a disadvantage at all. But, let's talk about Anastasia..."

Echidna: "I'm not trying to pretend, but it's my habit to want to talk about what I know. So, the conversation... Right, it was about Ana's constitution. When it comes to Ana's Gate, its function to

draw in is underdeveloped and doesn't work well.. Therefore, she can only use magic by absorbing the mana that was initially in her body. If she's exhausted, she would have to use her Od, which is the source of life. I can't let her commit such madness, can I? That's why Ana can't use magic."

Subaru: "But, that you can use magic after borrowing her body makes no sense. The fact that the mana that originally was in her body was scarce doesn't change. Or is it that you can use the minute amounts of Mana?"

Echidna: "————"

Subaru: "Don't be quiet, answer."

Echidna: "I couldn't save her life in the first place without cutting down her life, I had no choice. However, the discussion between Ana and me on this matter is over. Someone like you, who has nothing to do with it, has no right to say anything about it. You wouldn't want me to say anything about your contract with Beatrice either, would you?"

She'd hit the mark.

Subaru and Beatrice's relationship, along with their contract, belonged only to them.

He didn't want others to intervene in that, and even if they did, he would reject them.

If Anastasia and Eridna claimed the same condition, Subaru couldn't say anything.

That was an absolute connection between the contractor and the spirit that must not be disturbed by others.

Echidna: "On this occasion, I borrowed her body out of Ana's own will, it was an emergency after all. You know that a Sin Archbishop came to the City Hall, right? To drive her away, it was necessary for Al-kun and me to use all our strength. It was necessary to make a decision under pressure."

Subaru: "And what's that about you not being able to get out?"

Echidna: “Yes, there’s the current problem...”

At Subaru’s words of concern, Eridna clapped her hands and smiled. Although her appearance was that of Anastasia’s, her smile clearly showed that her contents were different.

What a strange thing, Subaru thought, but he immediately put that sentiment behind.

At last, their talk was about to cover the main question.

In front of Subaru, Eridna touched Anastasia’s thin chest.

Echidna: “This is not the first time I’ve borrowed Ana’s body this way. It hasn’t been many times, though. Ana and I don’t have an official contract. That’s also because of the problem with her Gate, I didn’t want to put a constant burden on Ana. Although even among spirits, I pride myself for being someone who consumes little energy. When it comes to just being there, I don’t need mana from a contractor.”

Subaru: “I see. My Beako wants to hold my hand three times a day.”

Echidna: “Two of the times is just because she wants to take your hand, probably. It’s all about intimacy—— So, about our talk, there weren’t many occasions where I borrowed Ana’s body in such circumstances. At most, this must be the fourth or fifth time. My relationship with her has lasted for almost eleven years now, so it’s not so surprising, is it?

Subaru: “Well, who knows? Considering that you say it’s at a pace of once every two years, isn’t that as low as the rate you catch flu at?”

Echidna: “That’s harsh.”

Eridna let out some stifled laughter, her laughter was the same as that of the Witch Subaru knew. In that moment, he’d become scared that Anastasia’s figure seemed like a double of Echidna’s.

Echidna’s existence left a weight inside Subaru that wouldn’t disappear. If possible, he never wanted to see her again because of Beatrice.

In addition to that, it would hurt Julius a lot to know that the real Anastasia had disappeared. He also wanted to avoid that.

Subaru: “Then, what happened, Echidna-san, who’s as annoying as a flu?”

Echidna: “I don’t know what that *flu* is you’re referring to, but in any case, I don’t have much experience. So, without any precedent, I don’t know why this happened either... I can’t separate my consciousness from Ana’s body. As a result, Ana is sleeping deep within her Od.”

Eridna spoke as she touched her chest, as if the Od were inside her, and then she looked at her scarf lying limp on the roundtable.

As long as Scarfdona’s consciousness was inside of Anastasia, her scarf should truly just be a fox pelt, but...

Echidna: “I was able to do pretty well as a puppeteer in the conference room, wasn’t it?”

Subaru: “There were many people who were deceived by the impact of your appearance. Though, there were also several people besides me who thought it was strange...”

Or so he thought.

Perhaps only Subaru, who was familiar with Artificial Spirits, had felt that strange sensation.

Subaru: “Even if you didn’t notice it in that place, people who are deeply related to her will immediately realize that you’re not Anastasia.”

Echidna: “And yet, only people with a superficial relationship like you and Al-kun could tell. Doesn’t that mean that my imitation of Ana went well?”

Subaru: “Right now, Ricardo and the kittens are busy with their own problems. Julius too.”

Echidna: “————”

At those words, Scarfdona narrowed her eyes.

In response to her reaction, Subaru made a suspicious face, but Scarfdona sighed immediately,

Echidna: “After all, Julius is Ana’s Knight? From the flow of the conversation in the conference room, I thought it was most likely, but... the Authority of “Gluttony” is terrifying. It could even steal my memories, and I am supposed to be an existence that’s outside the norm.”

Subaru: “You... What do you want to do with Anastasia?”

Echidna: “——?”

Subaru: “On the question of whether or not you intended to hijack Anastasia’s body, honestly, even if we talk on this, nothing can be done about it, so I won’t hound you. I will say it clearly, even if you say it’s not like that, I have no basis to believe you, but...”

That she could not return Anastasia’s body... was unacceptable.

For the “Finest Knight”, it meant losing one of his hopes.

The spiritual death of a candidate ——He did not want to use that in the battle for the Royal Selection.

Subaru: “I won’t give up on bringing that person back to normal, Echidna.”

Echidna: “You can rest assured. I am not so arrogant to think that I can take over Ana’s body and live in her place.”

Faced with the enraged Subaru who moved forward with determination, Scarfdona said that with pessimism. With a sad expression, she embraced Anastasia’s small, thin body.

Echidna: “Y’know, I like Ana. The more than ten years I spent by her side without a contract weren’t mere observation cravings. I don’t know if these are the right feelings, but I have feelings similar to that of a guardian or family, I’m aware of that. If possible, I want her to be well, and more than anything, to be happy.”

Subaru: “————”

Scarfdona spoke fluently and indifferently as always, but in her appearance as she spoke and touched Anastasia's delicate body in which she now found herself, there seemed to be affection.

Just as Puck felt love and affection for Emilia, and Beatrice for Subaru, Scarfdona may've felt the same for Anastasia.

If so,

Subaru: “So, that's your real reason for wanting to meet the Sage.”

Echidna: “That's very perceptive of you. I don't care about the people that had their names eaten by “Gluttony”. I just want to know a way to return this body back to Ana. That's why for that I will make use of you all as well.”

Subaru: “Is there even a guarantee that the Sage knows a way for that.”

Echidna: “There's no guarantee. But, when it comes to the Sage which is said to see everything, and know everything, there's a chance. I'll wager on the chance that they can is the most likely, that is all.”

No words of immediate rebuttal came out from Subaru to Scarfdona's words, full of iron-clad determination.

Without a doubt, it was a terribly egocentric, selfish conclusion she came to. However, Scarfdona was acting to attain her goal in her own Scarfdona-like way.

Thus, what Subaru needed to confirm was...

Subaru: “Do you really know a way of reaching the Sage in the Pleiades Watchtower?”

Echidna: “Of course.”

Subaru: "You ought've had a character description saying *I have no memories of the past*. Why does someone like you know a way to get to the Watchtower that no one else knows? It makes no sense."

Echidna: "I know only what I know. It's bothersome that you ask me for a basis for that, but it's like so. If you want to adorn those words, then it's because getting there is fate, I guess."

Subaru: "Fate? Fate decided by whom?"

Echidna: "My Creator, perhaps."

Scarfdona's reply was lofty, but as far as Subaru was concerned, it was the worst kind of reply.

If the Creator she spoke of was Echidna, then the one who'd scorched the way to the Watchtower into the Spirit's memories could only have been Echidna.

That meant that there was something related to Echidna in the Pleiades Watchtower.

For sure, that gave him a bad presentiment and a certain expectation towards the Sage's knowledge.

Echidna: "I wonder, did that convince you?"

Scarfdona enquired this of Subaru, who'd remained silent, having come to that one conclusion.

Whilst hesitating on whether to agree immediately, Subaru let out a long, deep sigh.

Subaru: "Not that I'm extremely convinced, but at least I do understand. You have your own goals and things you need to do, and it doesn't interfere with our own goals."

Echidna: "Indeed. We both have things we want to ask to the Sage. That's why we will cooperate in getting down to them. There's nothing strange about that."

Subaru: "Stop it. You became sketchy as soon as you said that."

Echidna: "That's rather harsh."

It seemed like he'd go crazy if he kept talking with Scarfdona with Anastasia's form for any longer.

In any case, they'd end up having plenty of time to keep each other company whilst they headed off to the Pleiades Watchtower. The Augria Sand Dunes, where the Watchtower was, were at eastern end of the world map—— It was a long journey.

Subaru: "I'm slowly getting used to you, so give me a bit more time."

Echidna: "It's a'ight, even if ya don' like this. Really though, Natsuki-kun is too cold aroun' such cute girls. You've hurt my feelin's. Jeeeee."

Wrapping the scarf around her neck, Scarfdona mimicked Anastasia's behaviour.

Indeed, it was a performance well done, but...

Subaru: "Your intonation of "I" is wrong. Also, your Kansai dialect is too smooth. Compared with the people that I know from Kararagi, it lacks authenticity."

Echidna: "Authenticity?"

It was an extremely small difference. Scarfdona rightfully croaked out those words to confirm what Subaru had told her, and eventually let out a sigh as if she'd given up.

From Subaru's side, there was nothing he needed to confirm to Scarfdona. And, concerning returning Anastasia's body back to her, that would depend on the Sage of the Pleiades Watchtower's attitude.

However,

Subaru: "Don't tell Julius..... or any of the others about the fact that you're borrowing Anastasia's body."

Echidna: ".....I don' mind, but Natsuki-kun's request is unexpected."

Subaru: "I don't want to cause an unnecessary uproar in this situation that is already enough of a mess. Also, if they find out it was really you, and not Anastasia, that proposed this idea, Ricardo, and some of the others, may oppose it immediately. It'll be a bother for me too if we can't go to the Watchtower. Albeit the selfishness of it."

There was a chance that Ricardo, Mimi and the others would be anxious about Anastasia's body and stop her.

In that case, they may be forced to give up their journey to the Watchtower, even if it was an excellent solution to their problems. That would be a problem for Subaru and his group as well, as they wanted to save the victims of the authorities.

Subaru: "It would be great if the victims of "Gluttony", "Lust", and of course, the issue with you and Anastasia could be solved by the Sage. If all goes well, then Ricardo and the others wouldn't be able to complain afterwards. No, even if they do complain, I won't listen to them."

Echidna: "Like Hoshin's saying, *"The account books are balanced in the end."*

Subaru: "I agree with Hoshin-san on that."

As expected of Hoshin, who may have come from the same place as he did, saying fine things.

Subaru: "Well then."

On that note, their discussion was over for now.

In the worst case, if Scarfdona had intended to exploit Anastasia's body, there would've been the chance that last battle in Pristella would have unfolded here; that it didn't happen made him relieved.

It was for that reason alone that that question came at the time which Subaru had let his guard down.

Echidna: "By the way, Natsuki-kun"

Subaru: "Hmm?"

Subaru turned around just as he'd put his hand on the door to try and leave the conference room.

Still leaning on the roundtable chair, Scarfdona cutely tilted her head like Anastasia would towards Subaru.

Echidna: “——There's someone else, isn't there? Someone else, who you want to ask the Sage about a way of getting them back.”

Subaru: “———”

Echidna: “One way or another, in Pristella there are people with similar symptoms, right? It's best to take around about one person along who exhibits those symptoms so to inquire on how to get them back to normal.”

With his hand still on the doorknob, Subaru's throat, Subaru's breathing, froze.

Scarf-dona, in the end, continued to look on indifferently at Subaru, whose expression had stiffened, his eyes wide open.

Echidna: “What would'cha like ta do? This depends entirely on ya, Natsuki-kun.”

Subaru: “I.....”

Echidna: “In any case, we're stoppin' by the Margrave Mathers' Mansion, right? If we don' prepare for the trek across the Augria Sand Dunes, we won' get the approval ta be able ta go to the Watchtower. When we do that, your sleepin' beauty oughta be there.”

Subaru: “———”

Echidna: “I don' think it's a bad thing. We'll save everyone, it's just about who'll be the first amongst 'em.....It'll be okay if Natsuki-kun allows this sorta' luxury.”

Scarfdona's indifferent voice, for some reason, seemed like a terribly demonic temptation for Subaru.

He understood what she was trying to say. And though, without a doubt, he wanted to follow with what she'd said, he wasn't able to reply back to her immediately.

Surely that was because——,

???: "Subaru!"

Subaru: "——*hk!*"

On hearing his name being called out, Subaru looked up in surprise.

Emilia and Beatrice stood in front of Subaru, whose breath had caught inside his throat. The two of them widened their eyes at Subaru's reaction, and Emilia tilted her head and asked him, "What's the matter?"

Emilia: "You said you would go and see Julius-san..... You said that, but since you weren't at the hospital ward, I ended up getting worried. What have you been doing?"

Subaru: "No, nothing really..... You know, with that guy, he was pulling such a long face that I couldn't bear to see him for long. So, it wasn't a change of atmosphere, but a change of view."

Emilia: "Really? I think Julius has a handsome face though....."

Subaru: "Emilia-tan thinks that too?"

Emilia: "Ah, but, Subaru's face is great too, I think it's a fine face. You know, the kind where the more you look at it, the more you like it, or, yeah, I think that sort of thing."

Subaru: "That follow-up is so painful!"

Emilia fretfully corrected herself, but the way she said it was an issue too. With a bitter smile, Subaru dropped his shoulders. This time, Beatrice, who stood silently by Emilia's side, had something on her mind.

Beatrice kept looking behind Subaru, towards the shelter behind him. Just as if she had an inkling about the conversation that he'd had there.

Beatrice: "Subaru, if you're going to do something dangerous, you should call Betty, I suppose. If I were to leave you alone and it got dangerous, Betty would be beside herself, in fact."

Subaru: "That's the same affection I always feel for you. Since you're so cute, I get uneasy thinking about how long it will be before you are carried off by a kidnapper who was looking to steal some candy."

Beatrice: "Betty is not such a cheap-looking spirit, I suppose! Don't make fun of me!"

Getting rather angry, Beatrice approached up to him to slap him over and over again. As she did, Subaru hoisted Beatrice up into his arms, who let out a surprised "Fwaaaah", and walked towards where Emilia was.

Beatrice: "Re-release me, put me down, I suppose! Ah, but, put me down without scooting off, in fact."

Subaru: "That's pretty difficult, so you'll have to stay like this for now."

Beatrice's body was light, but strangely warm. It was the prevailing view that children have higher body temperatures, but with Beatrice being a little girl, was she also like that? Even though she was a spirit.

Emilia, who was by his side, stared at Subaru's face from the side, who was smiling wryly in that manner. As she watched him with upturned eyes, Subaru asked her, "What's up?"

Subaru: "Is it so unusual that me and Beako are playing?"

Emilia: "No. In this last year, it's no longer unusual at all, but....I think the current you is making a disconcerted face that was pretty unusual for this last year."

Subaru: "——. Is that so? Although I can't say that everything is MUY BIEN, most of the problems have been resolved, and for me now, my facial muscles have relaxed well enough, or so I think."

Emilia: "If you say so, I'll believe you, but...."

Emilia cast her long-eyelashed eyes down at Subaru who was moulding his cheeks into shape as if they were like rubber. Then, she slowly continued her words that she'd cut off.

Emilia: "When you decide what to do, absolutely let me know. And, if you don't find the answer no matter what, make sure to consult with me, okay? It would be nice if you promised me just that."

Subaru: "A promise, huh?"

Emilia: "Yes, a promise that Subaru is not good at keeping. You are good at making them, don't you think?"

Subaru: "Woah, that's unusually venomous for Emilia-tan."

He received a scathing evaluation from Emilia due to the results of his past promises up until now.

Then, Emilia, with a faint grin on her face, held out her pinky finger. Seeing that, Subaru instantly slung Beatrice across his shoulder, and joined his own pinky finger with her's as Beatrice screamed out, "WHAT ARE YOU DOING, I SUPPOSE!"

Subaru: "Pinky promise, Cross my heart and hope to die. Stick a 1000 needles in my eye."

Emilia: "Cross my heart and hope to die."

(TL Note: So, I've anglicised this part a bit more, because Pinky Promises are slightly different in Japanese. In Japanese, the literal thing Subaru said was: Finger cut-off, ten thousand fist-punches, whoever lies has to swallow a thousand needles. And Emilia replies with Finger cut-off. Obviously this would sound like nonsense in English, hence the localisation.)

Their fingers separated from each other's.

Whilst sticking out her finger, Emilia grinned at Subaru,

Emilia: “Subaru, how many needles will it be in total with this?”

Subaru: “Well, I don’t think it reaches up to 10,000.”

Emilia: “In which case, make sure you really don’t get up to 10,000 of them, okay?”

Subaru replied with a curt “Yeah” to Emilia’s prayer-like words.

With that answer, she’d feel an absolute sense of security——Such a thing for Emilia would probably be impossible. She hadn’t even planned to make the promise in the first place.

That’s why her promise now was a warning to Subaru.

Echidna: “——It’ll be okay if Natsuki-kun allows this sorta’ luxury”

Scarfdona’s final temptation floated back into his mind.

Could Subaru allow this sort of luxury, could he really allow it?

Who would allow that to him? To him, who depended on such things.

Subaru: “I will have an answer. ——By the time I return to the mansion, I definitely will.”

Even so, it is what you would expect from someone who had the same name as that “Witch”.

In truth, taking advantage of the weakest parts in people was her forte.

Subaru: “Truly, how odious.....”

Beatrice: “You said something right now, I suppose?”

Subaru: “No, with the way I am carrying you, I can touch or slap Beako’s bum as much as I want.”

Beatrice: “KYAAA, IN FACT! L-let go of me, I suppose! Put me down, in fact! Slowly and gently, like you were admiring a flower, I suppose!”

Subaru: “Hahahaha”

Beatrice: “Stop slapping my buttocks whilst laughing, in fact——!!”

With Beatrice kicking up a fuss over his shoulder, Subaru set out after the slender back who’d gone up ahead of him. Turning her face back every so often, Emilia seemed like she wanted to join them.

Although he had been blessed, although he had been saved.

If only she was here, he thought, marvelling at his own “Greed”.

The curtain fell on Natsuki Subaru’s battle in the Watergate City.

——And now, it silently turned to the next story that led to the Tower of Sand.

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Joshua Juukulius' Careful Encyclopedia Second Verse



SAMPLE

Re:ゼロ

Re: Life in a different world from zero

から始める異世界生活

Re:ゼロから始める異世界生活 18

とらのあな限定特典
書き下ろしショートストーリー

『ヨシュア・ユークリウスの油断大敵慎重二百科』

長月達平

The author
Tappei Nagatsuki

ILLUSTRATION 大塚真一郎

Shinichirou
Otsuka

——As a breeze flew through the sky, it took a letter with itself.

???: "W-wait! Please wait!"

Shouting, the boy raised his hand into the sky, aiming for the floating letter. However, the letter left him behind and flew away, as if flapping wings, with utter grace.

Chasing it down the slope was an elegant faced youth.

His tied purple hair, his clear face, and his bright twinkling yellow eyes, along with glasses on just his left eye, were features characteristic to him. Wearing a well fitting dress of black, it could be safely said that he came from a noble household.

That was also another factor that made his dash down the slope look like there was something wrong.

???: "Kh ~hk.....! If only, I had taken a look, at the content..... Ah! Ah ~hk!"

Sitting beside the window in a quiet room, immersed into the world of literature. ——That was the kind of scenario befitting the youth, but here he was, looking upwards and shouting.

People in the surroundings wondered what he was doing, as they witnessed the youth fall flat in the middle of the slope. And, where the letter, which was sought after by the youth, had landed was visible.

——The letter hung onto a dragon ferry travelling in the waterway, and went along with it.

After borrowing the power of wind, this time it borrowed the power of water. Rather, it would be more appropriate to say that it borrowed the power of the water dragon, but that was not the issue here.

???: ".....Hey you there, are you alright?"

Passing by the fallen down youth, who gave off the impression of being asleep, was a huge man who asked that question. Seeing the lack of response, the passerby looked at his face, sensing that the problem here may be severe——

???: "——Darn it! I cannot just stay fallen at this place!"

???: "Huh!?"

Forcefully swinging his long legs, the youth sprang and stood up. At his sudden movement, the passerby was visibly surprised, to whom the youth responded to with a "Kindly excuse me", bowing gracefully.

???: "Though I have shown you an unpleasant sight, I assure that there is no need to worry. I have

been given the responsibility of completing a certain task, and I will surely complete....."

???: "I-Is that so. So then, what should be done?"

By the end of the energetic youth's words, the passerby pointed towards the waterway.

Where he pointed to, there was visible a swimmer swimming leisurely, a ferry carrying a letter, and a street.

???: "W-Wait! Please wait!"

Changing his expression, the youth continued his chase for the letter.

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——Reaching the age of 17 this year, was Joshua Juukulius, the younger brother of Julius.

The Juukulius household has been a noble family and had a long history with the kingdom of Lugunica. Traces of the family's prominence and the outstanding members of the household go back to several generations.

Although there are several noble households who do not do so, in the Juukulius household, being born as a male directly meant that you must become a royal knight. Naturally, the child also received the necessary education for that, following the words 『the correct way of life for achieving elegance』 that have been passed down the generations since ancient times.

However, Joshua's body betrayed the expectations of his parents, who also held the same belief.

When he merely held the sword in simple playful imitation when he was a child, just that affected his breath, before even receiving any proper training. His education plans were changed, after he got bedridden due to a fever.

——As far as he could remember, he could only see most of his days and time being spent sitting on a bed, reading a tome.

"———"

Turning the pages, he looked outside the window, where he could see the garden of his mansion, and his brother practicing the way to uphold the sword.

He was under the same teacher that Joshua was supposed to be under, had received the same education as what Joshua was supposed to receive, and had taken the responsibility upon himself

which Joshua was supposed to take. —Seeing his figure, young Joshua narrowed his staring yellow eyes.

—At a great distance from him, in the garden, red spheres hung onto the trees.

Joshua: "Hah, hah....."

With both his hands on his knees, Joshua panted hoarsely in a desperate attempt to regain his strength, making an expression as if he was on the verge of death.

It had been a total of five minutes since he had started his pursuit for the floating letter— and his body had already reached its limit. On top of that, instead of flying, the letter was now on a ferry, distancing itself away from Joshua further and further.

Joshua: "If I, am unable to, get hold of it, again..... it'll be, quite a, problem."

Joshua shook his head, as he tasted a bit of blood in his saliva accompanying his immense breathlessness.

The letter was important. He cannot just lose it, and his apologies will not be accepted either.

The content of the letter included instructions that will have a severe impact on the future of someone who may become the ruler of the kingdom. —And he knew, that person was also waiting for the letter.

He did not believe in something like hope, but in what was spoken in jest was the undeniable strength in the tone. The letter surely held sincere, heartfelt feelings.

—For a year and a half now, Joshua had been working with his master, Anastasia.

Not just her being a royal candidate, but even ties to the supreme council that she represented. Being able to help someone like her with housekeeping was an honour for him. However, the stimulus for fascination and joy for Joshua, was stepping into the outside, unfamiliar world.

Unlike when reading books, he could feel the true essence of the reality that was this world— and had witnessed the scene of a person's life transforming with his own eyes in the Chamber of Commerce.

And, in those scenes, the person was somewhat having the exact the same expression always.

The heartbreaking belief of the young Joshua, was that this was an expression of sincerity.

Henceforth, no matter how discomfiting the other party was, they would not tolerate such an attitude.

Moreover, using your own mistake to cause harm to the opposing party was simply unspeakable.

Joshua: "So, if the letter gets away now....."

???: "——Mister! Please, take this!"

Joshua: "Eh?"

Joshua tried to lift his eyes and head with his further strengthened determination. What was in front of him was the letter he swore to chase till the edge of the world.

Eyes widened, hands shivering, Joshua held the letter. He was not dreaming. It really was there.

Joshua: "Ah, ah, a~h."

???: "Very well! If this made you happy then my spirits have also been uplifted, that is!"

Joshua: "Yes, yes! Thank you very much! If I was to lose it, I would..... I would, be unable to face anyone in future!"

???: "Then I am truly glad! It is an honour I could be of help!"

Hugging the letter to his chest, Joshua bowed his head. A smiling young boy stood in front of Joshua. With soft, pink hair, and two cute large, round eyes. Perhaps around ten years of age. Despite his youth, he was well-dressed in robes, and though his nature and disposition was unknown, he gave off a friendly aura.

This young boy had recovered the letter. He could be called nothing but impressive.

Joshua: "By the way, how you did you come to understand that this letter belonged to me?"

???: "I saw mister dashing down the street shouting about the letter with his hand raised to catch it, that is! That is why, I realised that I must not let it go."

Joshua: "You are right, this letter is indeed important..... And I was running behind it, though I was not fast."

He had been running slowly due to his heavy breathing, feeling sincere embarrassment when the young boy said that he was "dashing".

???: "Afterwards I hurriedly called out to the master of the ferry. I asked for it politely, and I was able to receive the letter, so I was simply fortunate!"

Joshua: ".....No, that is simply your modesty. I am truly grateful."

The young boy had a modest attitude, and he was quick to point out how what he did was not his feat.

Regardless, Joshua wanted to truly show gratitude to him for his help.

Joshua: "However, I must thank you for this....."

He had nothing on himself right now, but he was just heading to the inn. However, taking the young boy that far with himself would not be good either.

Joshua: "If there is something I can help you with, then please ask anything."

???: "Ah, then....."

On Joshua's suggestion, the boy blushed in embarrassment.

And, hesitating for a moment, said.

???: "The truth is I, seem to have lost my way. As embarrassing as it is, I am currently a vagrant child, that is!"

And, explaining his position, provided the perfect opportunity for Joshua to pay back his favour.

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Walking down the street was the unusual and perfectly matching pair of the young boy named Schult and Joshua.

Schult: "——That's why, I am trying my hardest to serve the one who showed the grace of taking me in! I am working hard, just so that I am not crushed by my debt to them!"

Joshua: "That is really splendid! It's truly splendid, Schult-kun!"

Schult: "Y-Y-Yes, thank you very much for such words."

Schult turned his head downwards and smiled at Joshua's praise. Seeing him, Joshua was sincerely awestruck.

He was surely a well-natured young boy. From what he said now, it could be said that he had not been brought up in a favourable environment. However, fatefully encountering someone, he was now striving to accept the happiness and fortune he was blessed with at face value.

That was somewhat not like Joshua.

Joshua: ".....It seems Schult-kun highly respects that person."

Schult: "Of course, that is! So much so that respect is an understatement, that is! Ah, but, I truly do

respect Al-sama and Yae-sama too. Heinkel-san, I am unsure about him.....”

He was usually smiling like a flower, but now he made a difficult face. Shaking his head and doing away with his tired expression, Schult glanced at Joshua.

Schult: “Mister must also be having someone he respects. Is there someone like that?”

Joshua: “——. Huhu, I awaited that question.”

Schult: “Oh! How cool!”

In front of Schult, who widened his eyes, Joshua raised his face and his pointed his palms forwards. The sun was visible through the gaps between his fingers, making him narrow his eyes and inhale lightly. That was because——,

Joshua: “When you look at the sun, you become unable to see the beautiful wind flowing by. To me, my elder brother was a similarly dazzling existence.”

Schult: “Mister’s brother huh! He really seems to be someone amazing, that is!”

Joshua: “Ha~h, you are right! Nii-sama is truly amazing. He is always working hard, as if he can do anything and will try to do anything. His form, his mindset, he is truly the 『greatest』 !”

Schult: “Greatest! He really does seem like someone amazing!”

As Joshua clenched his fist, Schult clapped.

It was not rare for Joshua to talk about his brother, but it was rare for him to hear about his brother.

Joshua’s heart experiences an unexpected warmth, as it gets charmed by him.

Joshua’s brother, Julius Juukulius, was unquestionably a person who deserved to be respected.

The will to live was strongly etched onto his soul. He had a habit of underestimating himself, but was able to sincerely and objectively acknowledge his own effort and was fully capable of helping himself.

If nobody tells you that you are an amazing person, you will inevitably stop believing in that.

Henceforth, for Joshua, who was only cheaply imitating Julius——,

“———”

An incident that happened, that negative incident, and calling back to it, Joshua sealed his lips.

As soon as he heard those words of praise, Joshua stopped his footsteps. The walking Schult looked backwards and glanced at his face. And,

Schult: “——It really seems like mister truly likes that onii-san!”

“——”

Schult: “Hearing this about him, even I have gotten excited! If there happens to be a chance, I would love to meet mister’s brother!”

Seeing his smile, he sighed.

Doing away with the conflicting feelings in his heart, Joshua smiled and blankly nodded.

Joshua: “Yes, you are correct. Nii-sama is perfect, so he will surely treat Schult-kun well. If there happens to be an opportunity, then please do.”

Schult replied with “Understood” energetically.

He really wanted to meet his brother. The sight of Schult, who heard the praise of his brother and his desire to meet him, was heartwarming indeed.

Behind his eyes, that observed that soothing sight--

???: “——Hmm. Though it’s between all this work, something calming.”

An eccentric feeling ran up his spine. They were on a street. With a number of people passing by, with a number of voices sounding by, that voice alone shook up Joshua's eardrums with a complete lack of constraint.

Regardless of even that, he could immediately make out the fact that those words were directed at him.

Joshua: “——Schult-kun, listen to my instructions and dash ahead with all your strength, please.”

Schult: “Mister?”

Looking back at the street and glancing at the owner of that voice, said Joshua as he patted Schult's shoulder. Schult was puzzled, but he had no time to explain the details. ——No, even he himself did not know any details, including the opponent's identity.

However, staring at exactly that place among the crowd filled street, the petite youthful boy's aim was Joshua, and it could be understood at a single look that the boy was not someone harmless.

Joshua: “Here, please take this. Please convey it to my nii-sama or Schult-kun's master.”

Gently handing over the letter he held, Joshua stepped forward. Schult, who had received that letter,

was confused on what he should do. But, before even that,

Joshua: "Run!"

As per how he was instructed, Schult turned and started running. The little boy did exactly what Joshua told him to, swimming between the crowd of people. Seeing his back, Joshua then turned his head forward. —The one standing on the other side of him was now directly in front of him.

Joshua: "—Kh ~hk."

???: "Sorry for the surprise, onii-san. Even we wanted to play around a bit more. The time promised to mama is coming close. At this point, let's just wrap this up."

Joshua: "I don't even have anything to say regarding that....."

A sound was heard. Joshua, who had received those words, unfortunately had no way of stopping the youth. Swordsmanship, magical talent, body handling, everything would be ineffective in his body.

However, the safety of the letter, and Schult was—,

Joshua: "Truly....."

???: "Well then, deepest apologies, but there's no time. —Thank you for the treat!"

Insanity could be felt within that voice, as a shout echoed through the street. Hearing it, above all.

—He unclearly thought whether he had managed to do something even minimally substantial for his

『Greatest』 brother, right before his consciousness left him.



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