

Re: Zero kara Hajimeru Isekai Seikatsu IF

Re: IF から始める異世界生活

Original Author

Nagatsuki Tappei

(長月達平)

Original Illustrator

Shinichirou Ootsuka

(大塚真一郎)

Translated by u/lemonwater123 @ https://remonwater.wordpress.com/, u/Trupin @ Reddit, and SummaryAnon @ https://bit.ly/3jBcXhl.

Compiled and edited by u/aXygnus (Phantaminum#0097)

Proofread by QuackTheDuck#0999

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Author and source of the translated part can be found right after the chapter's title.

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Prologue - The Beginning

Original translation by Remonwater

——A very heavy atmosphere was spreading inside the dragon carriage.

???: “————”

The atmosphere was not heavy because of nervousness or caution; it was just plain awkward. To feel like it was reality with her skin, the girl softly pulls up the blanket that was on her body.

The dog carriage was not being pulled by a land dragon, but a large Liger, and so it was not being shielded by a Divine Protection. The passenger carriage had a rough structure, and so it shook noisily. These circumstances were not very good, but since they weren’t in a position to spend all they wanted, they had to deal with this.

???: “————”

They already didn’t even have too much travel expenses left anymore. Even if their feelings of guilt made them hesitate from using that money at first, once their lives were at risk, they could not shy away from it. Still, even if they temporarily pulled through their difficulties, financial problems would always follow them around unless the origin of the problem was solved.

Plus, money wasn’t the only problem they had. There was an even more serious problem.

That was——

???: “A wife… but you look like you just had a nightmare, certainly.”

A voice suddenly calls out to the girl at the corner inside the cramped carriage. When she looked back with just her eyes, she saw a small—— no, a figure that was too small. It was maybe a child, or something smaller.

He had white hair and a lovely dog face—— it was a beast man kobold.

???: “I can see why you’d be cautious, but I don’t mean any harm, certainly. I was just curious, certainly.”

Rem: “…Thank you very much for your concern. But…”

The girl stiffened up, but the tone of his voice made her relax. He probably just had good intentions. However, the girl’s heart wasn’t strong enough to allow herself to be spoiled by his good intentions.

If she wasn’t tense, she’d become more and more corrupted. That was terrifying.

???: “You’re practically glass, certainly.”

Rem: “Like glass…?”

???: “Glass is hard, but fragile, certainly. That’s what you guys’ hearts seem like to me, too, certainly.”

His point truly made her heart crack like glass.

By “You guys”, it felt like he was saying that she wasn’t all alone. A black-haired boy was cuddling next to her in a blanket, sitting up and sleeping. She was leaning against him, and they were sharing warmth.

And so, this boy was the true reason why there was a heavy atmosphere in the carriage.

Subaru: “…I’m sorry… I’m sorry. I’m… so weak… so… everything’s my…”

Rem: “————”

Every now and then, feelings of shame leaked from the lips of the boy having a nightmare. The passengers felt something serious from his voice and tears that made it seem as if he carried the guilt of everyone in the whole world, and they couldn’t move an inch.

Rem: “Don’t talk about other people’s situations so bluntly…”

???: “Seeing everyone as a threat now is something you probably couldn’t avoid, certainly. It may have been unavoidable, but you can’t just never do anything about it, certainly.”

When she looked down with their arms linked, the beast man just looked like white fur. The fur that spoke as if she knew them irritated her just a little bit. She just didn’t want to make a big fuss about it.

Seeing her conflicted like that, the beast man gets a hat that he'd been hiding, and he took something out of it. And then, when he smoothly put his hand straight in there,

???: "Take this and go to Banan Town. A friend of mine will help you out, certainly."

Rem: "…Why… are you doing this?"

His voice sounded like he had good intentions. There was a place and a person's name written on the paper he forced her to take. It seemed this beast man's name was also included in the few lines. She didn't know why he was doing this.

The beast man smiles with a "It's obvious, certainly", in response to the girl's question and says,

???: "People should help out each other in times of need. As an adult, even more so when it's a child. «The more bonds you make, the more good bonds you get.» That's the Kararagian way I believe in."

He tells her that kindly, and the girl grasped the scrap of paper tightly. After that, she brought her knees together, put her head on the shoulder of the boy next to her, and she let out a sobbing voice.

The beast man stares at the girl and the boy with kind eyes, and he patted their heads.

Chapter 1 – Two Months

Original translation by Remonwater

1

——The Kararagi City State is a large western country that is one of the Four Large Kingdoms.

It's a country comparable to the other large countries, like the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko in the north, the Vollachia Empire in the south, and the Kingdom of Lugunica in the east, but it became what it is now in a very peculiar way in comparison to other countries.

The Kararagi City State's history is quite shallow in comparison to the other three countries. A few hundred years ago, a bunch of warlords of small countries fought in the west—— the rivalry between countries was an undying danger zone.

The west combined and became the Kararagi City State as a single country.

Each small country changed into towns, and the country managed those towns with the parliamentary governments of the town leaders. In this system, the Great Heir, elected by the town leaders, is the one who holds the final decision.

Kararagi, which contains such circumstances, has completely different values in comparison to other countries. It not only developed distinct politics, but distinct national characteristics and culture too. Wafuu[1] culture and Wasou[2] were some examples, but the most characteristic thing of all was——

Subaru: "Sorry, Rem. 'Twas awful. Tried my best, but it was just awful…"

The thick Kararagi accent—— it was a dialect that was particularly easy to understand in the Kararagi City State, and it was a part of the unique culture that spread.

[1] Japanese-style (see here).

[2] Japanese clothing (see here).

The one who demonstrated it was a person apologizing with his forehead on the floor.

It was a young man with black hair and sharp *sanpaku*[3] eyes. He was in a Wasou dyed deep blue, sitting upright in a room of tatami mats made of knitted grass, making a pathetic look.

——Natsuki Subaru was his name.

As you could tell from his terrible Kararagi accent, he didn't come from Kararagi. Although, Subaru didn't come from anywhere in this world anyway. He was suddenly summoned from a different world, went through various experiences, and as a result, he was now in Kararagi. ——That's all.

And so, Subaru was apologizing to the girl facing him sitting straight. As she smiled at Subaru's apology,

Rem: "——Please stop speaking like that. It doesn't suit you at all, Subaru-kun."

Subaru: "It doesn't?"

Rem: "It's horrible, to say the least."

Subaru: "That's too harsh! Ah, well, I'm sorry. Okay, I'll stop now."

She says that to Subaru with a smile, and he dejectedly stops with the poor accent. However, while showing the dissatisfaction he had inside by pouting, he rubbed two fingers together.

Subaru: "Well, I know I'm not good, but you know what they say, «When in Rome, do as the Romans do». I'm doing my best to fit in with everyone else as soon as possible."

Rem: "It's great that you're doing your best, and I could learn a lot of things from you. However, how should I put this… Subaru-kun's accent sounds like something you'd hear from someone who isn't from Kararagi and is making fun of the accent, and it's kind of irritating."

Subaru: "So that's why Kansai people get pissed off by Tokyoites' fake Kansai accents!?"

Rem: "Tokyo? Kansai accents?"

[3] *Sanpaku* is when the whites of the eyes are visible beneath the iris when resting, making the person look mad at all times.

The ruthless comment sinks Subaru instantly. A question mark showed when Subaru lamented as the girl shook her blue hair and tilted her head. Her hair that came to her shoulder and her pure eyes were both light blue. Looks that gave off a lovely and kind impression. It was a beautiful, pretty girl wearing a light blue *kimono* gracefully.

The girl's name was Rem—— or officially, Natsuki Rem. Although she had the same last name as Subaru, she obviously wasn't his sister or his relative. They were family in a different way.

Subaru: "But like, umm, yeah. It's not like my speaking has anything to do with work going wrong, okay. Work went wrong just because I'm incompetent…"

Rem: "Work went wrong? Like how?"

Subaru: "Agh… ghghgh you see, well…"

Subaru tried to beat around the bush, but Rem questioned him directly. Subaru thought hard about how he should respond to the fastball thrown at him, and he mumbled. Seeing Subaru worry like that, Rem smiles softly as she said,

Rem: "Tell me all about what happened. Don't worry. No matter how awful Subaru-kun was, even if you messed up big time at a work that doesn't fit you, I won't get mad."

Subaru: "I messed up big time at a job that didn't fit me, and I was god awful!"

Subaru gets crushed by Rem's kind lead-in, and he spread his legs on the tatami mat. Like that, he falls over sideways and timidly starts to poke the tatami mat with his finger.

Subaru: "I was too naive. I was beyond naive. From what I thought the basics of manual labor and day labor were, I was under the impression that anyone could do work that was in high demand…"

Rem: "So you were under that impression… and what else?"

Subaru: "Besides! I was reckless for trying manual labor with a crappy fish fry body like mine in Kararagi, where Demi-humans are hired! Actually, I tried to cover up the quality of my work with the number of rounds. However, I had to carry three times as much with one round and I didn't have enough stamina!"

While Subaru's voice cracked, he did his best to give an explanation as he looked back on what happened this morning.

He has been living in a different world for no less than a year now, and he was aware of the fact that he was way stronger than before, but it was still difficult to close the gap in specs between him and genuine different world people.

Incidentally, today's job was carrying goods, but he got mixed with muscular Demi-humans, and it was simply hilarious how Subaru was working with a bright red face without even carrying a large amount.

Rem: "Oh, I see… So, how'd you mess up? What did you do?"

Subaru: "I tried re-wrapping goods, and I threw out everything… The damage canceled out today's pay."

Rem: "…The people there didn't ask you to compensate out of kindness, huh."

Salt was inside the bag and some was put back inside, but most of it mixed with sand on the ground, making it impossible to get it back. As a result, they were forced to cut the schedule short, and so he went home. Rem sighed at Subaru, who gave an awkward report with a gloomy look, and said,

Rem: "I hope that you come across a pretty nice job, Subaru-kun."

Subaru: "It really pierces the hell out of me when you say that… Wait, what about Rem? Why are you at home right now? What about work?"

Rem: "Temple Elementary School is on break today. I told you this morning that it seems like the cold is spreading between kids… Subaru-kun, you shouldn't try and change the subject, you know?"

Subaru: "Agh."

Subaru admitted defeat and groaned pathetically at Rem, who glared at him with scornful eyes.

As you could tell from the daily labor failure story, Subaru didn't have a job. To put it accurately, he had the will to work, but he didn't have a job.

And unlike Subaru, who was job hunting, Rem got a job promptly. It was a job where she taught at a kind of school children institution, which was called "Temple Elementary School". Rem was very wanted for

general education in this world, as someone who has mastered all sorts of skills like arithmetic and etiquette, and she never stopped working this year.

You might as well say that Rem was contributing ten times more than him when it came to getting by, although they were in honest poverty. There truly was a wide difference between her and Subaru.

Subaru's self-awareness of that and his impatience were what made him blame himself more and reflect more.

Subaru: "Damnit… I'm really sorry again, Rem."

Rem: "Subaru-kun, you promised not to say that."

Subaru: "I mean, I did make that promise, but it's truly pathetic how it is a promise."

Subaru brings his body up from the floor, sits cross-legged, and bites his lip.

He was proud of Rem being needed by people around her and being useful. However, recognizing it and being spoiled by it was a different story. Not to mention, the one who wanted this—— the one who wanted to live while supporting each other was Subaru, after all.

By no means did he intend to let Rem do all the supporting and get spoiled as much as he wanted.

Rem: "It's okay, don't worry. They'll all realize how amazing Subaru-kun is eventually. You just haven't found a job that goes well with your great talents yet. So, keep trying. Because I'll work for money!"

Subaru: "That's exactly how someone becomes a typical gigolo!"

Rem: "Ah, Subaru-kun!?"

Subaru bestirred himself and stood up before he melted in the huge, spoiling aura. Subaru leaves behind Rem, who was surprised by his energy, and he ran towards the room's entrance. And then——

Subaru: "Just you wait, Rem! I swear I'll find a job! I'll support you!"

Rem: "Okay. Please come back before dinner."

Subaru: "Damn it! I will support you, you hear me——!!"

Rem waves Subaru goodbye, and he rushed out of the room—— out of the tenement house while being on the verge of tears.

He puts on his *zori*[4] and runs off to the streets of Kararagi. Job hunting—— even in a different world, it was extremely difficult for people who were unqualified and had a blank period.

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2

——Kararagi City State's Second Town, Banan.

The next largest town after Kyo, the First Town, located west of Kararagi—— that is where Subaru and Rem, the Natsukis, live.

The streets are made up of Wafuu architecture, which is culture characteristic of Kararagi, and it seems it is deemed the cradle of the Wafuu style, which spread all over Kararagi. But well, to Subaru, Wafuu architecture was something that didn't really make him feel like he was in a different world at all.

Because the streets didn't make him feel like it was a different world, but rather——

Subaru: "——It feels like the Edo Period, or going back a bit forward, the Meiji Era and Taisho Era."

As Subaru coughed, he saw buildings constructed with wood lined up nicely. Wafuu architecture, which stood on the streets, was also characteristic of the stores with open doors.

People walking down the road were wearing *zori* and *kimonos*, which were Wasou, but they were all true different world people. Among those that had hair color and looks that differed from Subaru's common knowledge, there were a lot of Demi-humans representing beasts.

Japanese culture that forced itself into another world—— Subaru had that impression of Kararagi customs, including the Kararagi dialect that sounded just like Kansai dialect.

[4] Japanese sandals, see more information here.

Subaru: “It’s like people in a fantasy cosplaying. Well, the material is nice, so it looks good on everyone, and it all comes together perfectly, though.”

It is very common for manga and games to have countries with Japanese culture in fantasy worlds in the first place. The problem was that it still felt weird actually being in such a situation; getting used to it actually took longer than he’d expected. Only after a about a year did Subaru finally accept this scene.

That being said, he still had doubts even if he gulped down the weird feelings. He couldn’t believe that Kararagi’s culture uniquely developed from zero. This culture had to have started spreading with people who came from the same place as Subaru. In other words, people who came from a different world like Subaru and that steel helmet guy, Al——

Subaru: “—— Stop it, just stop. Deal with the more realistic problems in front of you. Even if you solve the world’s mysteries, you still don’t have a job. I’m saying this to myself, talk about depressing…”

How much was this world’s history influenced by people who came from the same place as Subaru? He should worry about that when he had more room to think and live. He’d put it off for now. Right now, he had to focus on job hunting, and he had until dinner for that.

Subaru: “It’s already afternoon, so I actually don’t have much time…! Anyway, first I’ll go to the public employment security office and…”

???: “What’s wrong, Su-san? You’re walking with a serious look… what a scary face!”

Subaru: “Don’t be so rude about people’s serious looks…”

Someone made a rude point about Subaru’s face as he frowned and walked around town.

Once Subaru turned around to see whose voice it was, he saw a tall man right beside him. He’d seen his face before.

Subaru: “With that dog face, you must be Hal-san. Don’t startle me.”

Halibel: “«A dog face». Don’t put it that way. I’m a wolf of dogs.”

The one to open his big mouth and laugh at Subaru's words was a demi-human with a wolf face, not a dog face. A tall one with black hair and a black *kimono*, biting on a golden *kiseru*[5] with his back teeth.

A lot of ordinary dogs were petite, and he had the credibility to call himself a wolf as he was one head taller than Subaru. However, his eyes were always narrow slits, and so if we're talking about dogs, he looked more like a fox rather than a wolf.

The name of the wolf he called Hal-san was Halibel. He was Subaru and Rem's neighbor of the housing complex 'Tenement House' they lived at, and you could say that he was the first acquaintance they made at Banan.

Halibel: "You look like you want to say, «If you're not a dog, then you're a fox». Su-san, you just don't know when to stop, do you?"

Subaru: "Don't make complaints based off people's looks. I really was thinking that, though."

Halibel: "I am neither a Kobold nor a Fox. I'm a Wolf. We are a rare species on the verge of extinction, so don't make that mistake. It kinda feels like I'm carrying the pride of our kind, you know?"

Subaru: "If you're going to carry it, do it a little more seriously."

You'd obviously want to choose someone that could at least carry the pride. As for Subaru, pride—— or at the very least, the wolves' title, who were on the verge of extinction, wasn't something he'd leave in the hands of Halibel. He may be taking care of them, but that didn't mean he'd immediately trust him.

Subaru: "I can't chat with you right now. I'm burning with the will to work. Don't get in my way."

Halibel: "Come on, Su-san, that sure is a cold way to greet me. I'm really depressed, so stop it. Besides, even if you're burning with the will to work, you don't have a job. It's just cinders."

Subaru: "I'm also really depressed, so can you not!?"

Subaru's neighbor's counterattack makes his voice crack. Halibel shook the *kiseru* in his mouth up and down. After that, as he exhaled smoke that entered his lungs, he said,

[5] Japanese smoke pipe (see here).

Halibel: “Go ahead and get more and more depressed. A man that troubles such a good wife is hopeless. How brave of her to not complain once even though her husband has no job and indulges himself in drinking… I feel bad for Rem-chan.”

Subaru: “I don’t indulge myself in drinking! But it hurts how that’s the only thing I can deny! To tell you the truth, I’ve been troubling Rem… I really can’t compete with her.”

Subaru dropped his shoulders dejectedly as his current worthlessness was pointed out objectively. Halibel went “Harharhar” at Subaru happily while he was like that.

Subaru: “Did you come here to make fun of me? Or did you come here to cheer me up?”

Halibel: “We’re both jobless, and I thought we could have a pity party or something.”

Subaru: “No way! It would be too much to have a pity party with another unemployed person right after I almost became a gigolo!”

Subaru shakes off Halibel, who came closer to him, and he full on rejects being treated as his partner.

Besides, strictly speaking, Halibel wasn’t jobless. This glib talking neighbor was a tenement house manager—— whether he was actually doing manager like work or not, he had the title of a manager as a vocational worker.

Although he had only ever seen him napping, grooming, drinking, or using his *Kiseru*, he was employed.

Subaru: “Basically, Hal-san is a dazzling being out of my reach.”

Halibel: “Don’t say something so sad, we can be friends. It’s true that I can get money just by lying down all day and playing with the fray spots of my *kimono*, but putting that aside, I think it’s precious how Su-san is working hard to earn money, you know? Isn’t it just lovely?”

Subaru: “Shut up, you slacker! …Actually, who did you go to become a manager?”

Halibel: “Hmm, sorry to disappoint, but I just happened to be acquaintances with the owner of the tenement house. With that connection, I was able to be a couch potato… Sorry, Su-san, I’m a winner.”

Subaru: “Damn you!!”

Subaru hisses without hiding his anger as he listened to his shaky story.

In the end, personal connections meant everything in an environment where even academic backgrounds were useless. And Subaru didn't have any personal connections, even if you were to disregard the fact that he was in a different world.

A man that traveled two worlds and failed to create relationships—— that was Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: "Struggling alone, and to top it off, jobless… Looks like I'll just have to wait for my death."

Halibel: "You have Rem-chan. Struggling alone is an exaggeration!"

Halibel suddenly opens his large mouth widely, and he bursts into laughter as he looked up at the sky. Subaru, seeing that dog face in the corner of his eye, sighed deeply.

Subaru: "Look, you know my situation. I'll be going job hunting. My goal is a disposable income of 15,000, and the condition is that I pay for traveling expenses and put it into pension and insurance."

Halibel: "I don't have actual work experience, but how'd you come up with that condition?"

Subaru: "I thought I'd go for a dream that was just barely realistic. Now I want to apply this condition to the common knowledge here and find out the minimal requirements for landing a job…"

Freeing himself from being supported by Rem was his biggest goal at the moment. However, he wanted to avoid temporary measures, such as choosing jobs that won't last long and dead-end ones.

Subaru's goal was to get a job he could do for his whole life, one that he could be proud of as a family head.

Subaru: "——And so, I came to the public employment security office."

Out of the main area of Banan Town, at a place away from the crowded, thriving street, there was a store.

It was the employment agency which Subaru called a public employment security office. It was a place that acted as the bridge for interpersonal relationships with things like job arrangements and

introduction letters for people. There were several employment agencies in Banan, but Subaru always used the same one. Because of that, he was friends with the shop owner——

???: "——Ugh! It's dimwit!"

The moment he showed up at the reception desk, the man in the shop suddenly welcomed him harshly.

Subaru: "That's one rude way to greet a client, and you shouldn't use such a cruel nickname."

???: "You're the one that's rude! You screwed up at the goods carrying scene, didn't you!? I was told to never refer such a good-for-nothing!"

Subaru: "Aaa, the foreman told me to take care on the way home, I didn't want to know about this side of him…!"

Subaru collapsed as he was called incompetent, and a lizard faced man is what appeared before him—— he was a lizard man. Lizards weren't rare Demi-humans, but he was so fat that he had a strangely large width, and so he looked more like a frog, rather than a toad. It was characteristic of him to wear a cute apron.

Crane Donahue was his name, and he was the owner of this employment agency officially recognized by the town. Employment agencies officially recognized by the town were scarce, and it was known as conscientious work. However, the man that was supposed to be conscientious looked down on Subaru in an annoyed way as he said,

Crane: "How do you mess up at carrying goods? You're going to become a job hopper at this rate."

Subaru: "Er, well, you see, I was totally focused on trying to do as much work as others and…"

Crane: "Daily allowances have fixed rates. You could've made profit by sitting back and letting everyone else do the work."

Subaru: "…That would be unfair. I don't really want to do something unfair…"

Crane: "Why are you so insistent!? I don't care if you do a good job, good grief…"

Subaru grumbled to protest, and Crane folds his crest. Then, he suddenly noticed someone standing behind Subaru.

Crane: “Oh! It’s Halibel! Sorry for not contacting you for quite a while!”

Halibel: “Oh, it’s fine, don’t worry. I just came to check on Su-san’s future.”

Subaru: “Future… well, anyway…”

Subaru cleans off his knees, stands up, and compared Crane and Halibel. After that, he pointed at Halibel and tilted his head at Crane.

Subaru: “You know this playboy?”

Halibel: “Playboy! Playboy! Why does it have such a lovely ring to it? From now on, I’ll be calling myself ‘The Eternal Playboy’. Does it sound good? Does it sound bad?”

Subaru: “What’s bad is that you actually like it.”

While Subaru joked at Halibel’s name sense, he waited for Crane’s reply. Seeing that exchange, Crane groans as he folded his big arms.

Crane: “Dimwit… I mean Mr. Subaru, you made it big. I knew you could do it.”

Subaru: “You can’t just blatantly change the way you treat someone!”

Crane: “Well, of course I’m going to use ‘Mr.’. Who do you think Mr. Halibel i…”

With a look of shock and fear, Crane stopped when he was about to say something. Subaru raised an eyebrow at that unnatural reaction, but Crane went “Oh” while looking away as he said,

Crane: “Mr. Halibel is, you know… a—an eternal playboy.”

Subaru: “He got that name just a second ago.”

Crane: “Anyway! Moving on! So, what’s the matter? I can refer Mr. Subaru! But, don’t ask for a relaxing gravy train, alright? The goods carrying one was your best shot.”

Subaru: “It doesn’t have to be a relaxing gravy train. I just want you to refer me to a job with a future. The conditions are negotiable, but please give me one for a family head.”

Crane: “That’s the first time I’ve been given the condition «One for a family head», but…”

Crane briefly scanned the shop as he puzzled over Subaru’s request.

It was an employment agency approved by the town, but the store itself was neatly taken care of. The one floor wooden shop had minimal chairs and tables, and the bulletin board wall was filled with help wanted advertisements and wanted people forms. People searching for jobs would select a job from the posters, and the people who wanted a job done would ask Crane and he’d put up a form. That was the sort of system it had.

Subaru: “If I accept exterminating a dragon and fail, your reputation would be damaged as the one who got me the job.”

Crane: “I would never ask you to do that, and I’d leave the country once something like dragon extermination was announced.”

Halibel: “If it was in the Empire, I’d exterminate a dragon with pleasure. If you have a good plan to kill it, you might even defeat the Kingdom’s God Dragon. Then you could take the country and…”

Subaru: “Oh! Crane! That’s it! Let me check out that «Zarestia Bed Search»!”

Subaru’s voice interrupts Halibel, who lit his kisero and puffed it. Subaru approaches the wall dramatically, and once he tore off the poster, he read the contents aloud.

Subaru: “Let’s see… «Recruiting investigators for the bed of the Great Spirit Zarestia! The habitat of the Great Spirit that has been a mystery for many years—— the time has come to recruit members to explore it! Working conditions are negotiable, and the reward depends on results!» This! This… this doesn’t sound good at all…”

Crane: “Why are you talking so loudly to yourself?! Also, I’ll be putting that back. Give it here.”

When Subaru’s eyes turned lifeless from the absurdity of the recruitment details, Crane confiscated the poster. Then, when he looked at the details, he groaned an “Oh” as he said,

Crane: “I forgot to take this off. Applications closed quite a while ago. It’s just a crappy recruitment form I left on there just because I was told to do so. Just forget about it.”

Subaru: “Did it actually happen?”

Crane: “There are a lot more idiots in this world than you think.”

Subaru felt depressed when he heard Clane reply as he shrugged.

Involving yourself with Great Spirits would be nothing but a suicidal act. Just normally encountering them would be reckless. ——I just hope that those daredevils died peacefully.

That was Crane’s misinterpretation of Subaru’s facial expression, and when he touched his own apron he said,

Crane: “I now know that you’re so cornered that you’d jump at a job that’s pretty much suicide. So… I really don’t know if I should give you this…!”

Subaru: “So you’re saying you have a job that’s better than pretty much suicide!?”

Crane: “It depends. But well, you have to work for your cute wife…!”

Crane took out an application as if to say to him, “This is all I can do for you now!”. Subaru nervously accepts what he held out to him, and he looks at the application details.

Subaru: “…A maid at Riften Magoji’s place?”

Crane: “It’s a short-term job that lasts for one month. You’ll be doing subordinate work, but Mr. Subaru has the skills, so…”

Saying that, Crane shows off his apron as he pinched it. The apron was way too cute for a giant like him, but the flower pattern on it was what emphasized that impression in particular.

Subaru: “An old fart with a lizard face may be wearing it, but it still looks great.”

Crane: “You put it on yourself! My wife really liked it, though!”

Subaru: “That’s just because I was sewing buttons back on. How’s that related to this?”

Crane: “Take a good look at the guidelines. It says that it’s a workplace with a lot of women. Good thing you have a special skill to attract women.”

Subaru: “You’re just jumping to conclusions! Besides, I’m more worried about the point «Only taking young men».”

Only taking young men at a workplace with lots of women——he could not figure out what went on over there. According to the description, he just knew that it was subordinate work—— sorts of chores. They weren’t looking for special qualifications and inhumane manual labor.

If only he didn’t refuse being a manservant——

Subaru: “…Thanks, but would I even stop being a day laborer with this?”

Crane: “As if you could find a lifetime job out there so conveniently. Listen up. First you gotta start from the bottom, get your face and name out there, and then you’ll find your favorite after earning trust. Don’t you know that?”

Subaru: “You referred Rem to a job at Temple Elementary School at the start.”

Crane: “Well, that’s because Rem-chan is cute.”

It was an irrefutable argument. You could not argue against Rem’s cuteness. Stuff like Subaru’s poor excuses weren’t effective in society.

Crane: “Kararagi isn’t nice enough to recognize an unemployed man as a full-fledged man,”

Subaru: “I came here to look for a job, didn’t I!?”

He came to the public employment security office and was being treated coldly because he was unemployed. This was proof that, despite having the will to work, he was lacking the most important thing: trust from society.

That being said, Crane’s judgement was fair. Subaru dropped his shoulders in defeat.

Subaru: “Please make me a letter of introduction. I will do my very best to be liked.”

Crane: “Yep, do your best. Mr. Riften is a brave dealer, but he’s known to be a calm person.”

Subaru: “…Brave warrior[6]?”

Crane: “Brave dealer.”

Subaru tilted his head at the slight difference in nuance, but Clay wasn’t concerned about that as he finished writing the letter of introduction fluently, carefully put it into an envelope, and gave it to Subaru.

Crane: “On the morning of the day after today, go to Mr. Riften and tell him that you came from me.”

Subaru: “Okay. Thanks as always.”

Crane: “And lastly, be careful! Sheesh, don’t mess up this time!”

He puts the letter of introduction in his pocket and left as he waved goodbye to Crane, who went back inside the shop. Then, he went back to the main street with Halibel, who had been smoking his *kiseru* at the street.

Subaru: “But, damn… Hal-san sure has a lot of free time.”

Halibel: “Why say that all of a sudden?”

Subaru: “It looks like you’re jobless, gazing absentmindedly at other people job hunting. That’s too awful.”

Halibel: “When there’s someone below you, you cheer them on, right? I’m the group that gives you courage.”

Subaru: “Courage isn’t what I’m getting from this. It’s more like something dark, I think.”

Subaru replies to Halibel cracking jokes, and he sighs. Although, Halibel still was the employed person here, and so Subaru was the one who had a low position in society.

[6] Subaru thinks he’s saying “brave warrior” because “brave warrior” (in Kanji 猛将) and “brave merchant” (in Kanji 猛将) pronounced the same way – “moshou”.

Halibel: “Still, you’re having quite some trouble with job hunting. What did you do before arriving at this town?”

Subaru: “————”

Halibel’s casual questioning makes Subaru hold his breath for a moment.

However, he quickly smiles to hide his hesitation and he shrugs as he went, “Well”.

Subaru: “I moved from place to place in Kararagi with Rem. I’m glad we settled down this town. It’s all thanks to you that we were able to rent a tenement house. You’re a lifesaver.”

Halibel: “About that, you should thank Elder instead, the one who referred you. Connections are a way of life. If you’re blessed with them, that shows you have something to offer.”

Subaru: “…About that, I don’t contribute much at all. It’s all thanks to Rem.”

Subaru replies as he thought, “That’s the only thing I’m 100% sure about”, and he stretches lightly in the crowd. As he was temporarily relieved of the burden he had thanks to getting a job.

Halibel: “Moving from place to place in Kararagi… eh.”

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3

Subaru: “Sorry, Rem. I did ma best, but…”

Rem: “——Subaru-kun?”

Subaru: “Ah, yes, I’ll stop. I apologize. And my next job will be short-term.”

Subaru was sitting straight on the tatami mat. He showed the letter of introduction he got from the employment agency to Rem, who had been working in the room’s kitchen for the evening. Rem, who

stopped cooking dinner, points out Subaru's poor Kararagi accent, and when she took the letter of introduction, she looked over the details.

Rem: "It may be a short-term job, but it's still a step forward. Subaru's breakthrough begins here. I can see it. Subaru-kun will be respected by a lot of people, and they'll build a bronze statue."

Subaru: "I wonder if ophthalmology exists in this world…"

When he gave a bitter smile at the exaggerated statement, Rem went "Oh" as she got surprised while looking at the letter of introduction.

Rem: "This is a job at Riften-sama's residence."

Subaru: "Yeah. Do you know Riften-san?"

Rem: "No, we aren't direct acquaintances. Among the kids I teach at Temple Elementary School, there are also ones from merchant houses, so I sort of know about Riften-sama, the brave merchant."

Subaru: "There it is, «Brave Merchant»! He's not like a fierce shogun or anything, right?"

Rem: "Haha, fierce shogun… S—Subaru-kun, please don't make me laugh."

Rem chuckled, like she got a kick out of what Subaru said, and she breaks into a smile because of Subaru's question. Then, Rem said, "Listen" to Subaru as she held up a finger.

Subaru: "Oh, just like a teacher."

Rem: "Don't make fun of it. Brave merchant is a way to point out a merchant's rank in Kararagi. Excellent merchants are given the ranks 'Great Merchant', 'Wealthy Merchant', and 'Brave Merchant'. It's an honor."

Subaru: "'Great' and 'Wealthy' makes sense, but isn't 'Brave' kinda weird?"

Rem: "Because in Kararagi, where trade flourishes, achieving success in trade is practically like distinguishing yourself in a battlefield. Riften is also someone who's respected."

Rem replies like that, and she looks at the letter of introduction a bit nervously. Seeing Rem somewhat uneasy, Subaru knits his brows, and he called her name.

Subaru: “You seem kinda uneasy. What’s up?”

Rem: “Well, according to the rumors I’ve heard, there are a lot of women working at Riften-sama’s mansion… So a handsome, young man like Subaru-kun working in a workplace like that would be…”

Subaru: “You’re being pretty subjective!”

While Rem expressed her considerably subjective opinion, she folded and unfolded the letter of introduction. Subaru somehow sensed what Rem was worrying about, judging from her unease.

Subaru: “Silly.”

Rem: “Oww. S—Subaru-kun?”

Rem holds onto her head after suddenly getting chopped by Subaru. Subaru says “Good grief” to Rem, who had a surprised look, and he sighed.

Subaru: “Don’t worry about such odd things. Who do you think I am?”

Rem: “I’m sorry. But I’m worried now. Riften-sama, as someone who hires tons of women, will see cute ol’ Subaru-kun and he might not feel turned on…”

Subaru: “Ughhhh! That’s a little different from what I thought you were worrying about!”

Rem’s one-sided worrying dumbfounds Subaru, and he changes the topic.

Subaru: “But cute? Just look at my eyes. How are they cute?”

Rem: “I just can’t get enough of the manliness of Subaru-kun’s eyes.”

Subaru: “What exactly do I look like to you!?”

There were a lot of things about Rem’s assessment of Subaru that other people couldn’t really understand. In any case, Subaru held onto Rem’s shoulder, as if to tell her that she shouldn’t worry and to calm her down.

Subaru: “You don’t need to worry. Rem is the only one for me. That goes for when I’m at a place with a bunch of girls too, got it?”

Rem: “Fuwa… ye—yesh, got it. Subaru-kun…”

As he whispered while patting Rem’s head, her face turned red, and she nods. Then, Subaru also felt affection for Rem, who became submissive to him for a bit.

When Rem lifted her head slowly, her wet eyes met his up close. They get closer and closer, close enough to feel each other’s breath—— then, a pot whistled.

Subaru: “Owaa!” Rem: “Kyaa!”

The sound of a pot lid falling breaks the silence. Rem rushes to the kitchen in a panic. She turns off the heat of the cooking stove that used a magic crystal, makes sure the pot settled down, and rubbed her chest in relief.

Rem: “——Haha…” Subaru: “Haha…”

Then, they both smiled at each other at the same time. And so, they laughed for a while, and when that settled down, Rem clapped as she went, “Alright”.

Rem: “Let’s eat. Subaru-kun, please set up the table.”

Subaru: “It’s more like a low dining table, though.”

While still feeling slightly awkward, the two of them start to prepare the food. When he moved the low dining table against set against the wall to the middle of the room, Rem took off the lid of the pot vigorously.

A steamy pot and the smell of delicious, warm vegetables——today’s menu was *Mizutaki*[7].

Subaru: “*Nabe*. It’s nice to have every now and then. It’s the best when you have it with *Ponzu*.”

[7] Hot pot dish.

Rem: “I kind of wanted to eat something sour with assorted vegetables. Subaru-kun, are you fine with sour stuff?”

Subaru: “I like it. I’m surprised. You like sour stuff?”

Rem: “No, I really just kind of wanted to eat it, but…”

Rem curiously puts her finger on her jaw and tilts her head slightly. However, Subaru ignored her for now as her actions weren’t unexpected to him. Besides, Rem choosing a menu giving priority to what she wanted to eat was a good sign.

Since it was proof that she was slowly getting out of the habit of always prioritizing Subaru in one way or another.

Subaru: “Delicious! You did awesome today again!”

Rem: “My… for you to be happy that you have a cute wife who’s a good cook… I’m embarrassed.”

Subaru: “Well, I really was serious. I’m a such a lucky guy.”

No matter where they moved, Rem was always good at cooking. It was tough at the start with different kitchen utensils and different ingredients, but after living in Kararagi for a year, they were adapting nicely.

It’s just that there were a few parts they couldn’t adapt to, unrelated to tastes.

Subaru: “Uuu… my stomach hurts. I can’t move an inch…”

Rem: “I’m stuffed. Subaru-kun, my lap is free now.”

Subaru: “Yay! I’d like to make a reservation.”

Rem: “Reservation taken. A special seat, just for Subaru-kun. Hop on.”

Rem taps her closed lap, and Subaru falls onto it. When he left his head on her soft lap, he felt his whole body being wrapped in happiness. Their stomachs clearly took in more than a two-person meal, and their stomachs relaxed to whatever extent they wished for.

Subaru: “Haa… Rem’s amazing.”

Rem: “Yes. But Subaru-kun is lovely too.”

Subaru: “Those two things aren’t related.”

Rem: “To me they are. Closely related, that is.”

Unlike Subaru’s assessment, apparently to Rem, there was a tight knot linking trust and Subaru. He wasn’t so sure if he was living up to that assessment. “Rem is amazing” were, without a doubt, Subaru’s real thoughts, gratitude, and apology. Rem probably knew that too. ——He felt pathetic for that, again.

Rem: “After resting our stomachs for a bit, let’s go to the bathhouse. You have to rest up in preparation for work.”

Subaru: “But my job starts the day after tomorrow?”

Rem: “I know. So, Subaru-kun has to take it easy tomorrow. ——But not tonight.”

With Subaru on her lap, Rem brings her lips near his ears, and she warmly tells him that. The warmth of her voice makes Subaru feel the chills, and his ears turned red.

Subaru: “…R—Rem, you’re amazing.”

Rem: “Yes. Because I’m loved.”

Subaru lets out a whisper, and Rem replied to him while looking embarrassed.

——Although, Subaru didn’t notice that Rem’s ears were also bright red.

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4

——Two days later, Subaru visited Riften Magoji’s mansion with an introduction letter.

Subaru: “As expected of the rumored Magoji palace… it’s so huge.”

Subaru, who showed the letter of introduction at the residence’s main gate and was let in by the gatekeeper, shows his admiration like that.

A residence in the north side of Banan nicknamed ‘Magoji Palace’. Buildings of Wafuu architecture were usually one-story buildings, and Magoji Palace was no exception. The palace conspicuously built on vast land looked just like the kind of mansion belonging to a Daimyo that would show up in historical plays.

Subaru: “«Walk to work takes almost an hour. Uniform is covered in your payment».”

Thanks to the letter of introduction, Subaru was hired without problems. He had an interview just in case, but the mistress arranging the servants looked at Subaru and just gave him an OK—— the deciding factor was unknown.

In any case, Subaru was employed as a novice errand boy, put on the uniform given to him, feeling nervous about the new job and the coworkers he met with for the first time, and he stepped forward towards his workplace.

Magoji Palace was the place, but just like the guidelines said, there were an overwhelming number of women. At the very least, Subaru didn’t see any men at the place other than the gatekeeper. The gatekeeper wasn’t even inside the court, so Subaru truly was the only man at the residence. He couldn’t count the number of female coworkers on his hands and toes, let alone on just his hands. It sure was an imbalanced workplace.

Still, it had nothing to do with what Rem was worrying about. Subaru wasn’t trying to do anything to his female co-workers, and most of the women were married. However, that was if he overlooked the fact that there were other problems constantly coming up.

???: “Natsuki-kuuun! Hey, can you do this for meeee?”

???: “Oh, Subaru-kun, come here! Come oooon, help meee.”

???: “Kyaaa! Subaru-chan, you handsome man! That’s it that’s it! You sexy guy!”

Then, shrill voices—— he was a bit hesitant to call them that, but cheers like those came from all around the palace. They were all cheers coming from Subaru's co-workers that were working at the palace with him. Even Subaru liked getting attention from men and the opposite sex. He did, but——

???: "Hahaha, what a nice butt."

Subaru: "Dohyaa!!"

He gets his butt pat as he passed by—— no, he gets his butt rubbed relatively hard, and he shrieked. He immediately turned around as he held onto his butt, but the offender had already disappeared into the direction of the corridor.

Subaru was disgraced while not knowing what to do, and he broke down and wailed his heart out at the wall of the corridor.

Subaru: "I—impressive sexual harassment… that's an environment with Osaka grannies for you…!"

Yes, his face was covered with tears as he cursed his own bad luck of jumping into a place infested with demons.

Subaru's butt was rubbed just now by Osaka old ladies—— In Kararagi, they actually had nothing to do with Osaka, but the women were close to that in terms of their nature. Still, he didn't know who the offender was.

All the women at the Magoji palace were suspects, previous offenders, habitual offenders—— Subaru was thrown into a pack of hungry tigers, and sadly, he was nothing more than a shaking bunny.

Since, regardless of the humans and Demi-humans, this workplace was at the mercy of middle-aged women and no one else———!

Subaru: "What is he?! A cougar lover!?"

???: "That's a pretty close-minded judgement."

The wall listening to Subaru's complaints answered him… not. A rich, low voice came from behind, and it came from a man that appeared there. And, since it was a man's voice and as it was in the residence,

the candidates in the were narrowed down at once. If it wasn't the gatekeeper, then it had to be an intruder——

Subaru: "P—please! Someone get help!!"

???: "Unfortunately, you are the only one that can answer. Right now, you are the only one who can save yourself."

Subaru: "True! But what are the gatekeepers doing…"

Subaru, without nodding at the just opinion, faces the owner of the voice from the front. It was a thinnish middle-aged man with a mustache and thick eyebrows. He was wearing *kimono*, which you could tell was made out of high class material at a glance, and an aura of influence emanated from his whole body—— he immediately realized who he was.

Subaru: "Could you be… Riften Magoji… -sama?"

Riften: "Correct. I am your employer. Riften Magoji. Now, you don't have to be so respectful. I just came to see the newcomer after finally finishing my work outside."

The man—— Riften calmly nods at Subaru's point as he felt on his moustache. Just earlier, even though he didn't know his identity, he still had acted impolite, and he didn't even mention it. So, he must be a tolerant person.

Thus, Subaru talked about the doubts in his mind, making use of his tolerance.

Subaru: "Master, if I may call you that… I'd like to ask, are you into cougars?"

Riften: "You're pretty direct. However, that's a misunderstanding."

Subaru's suspicion that the work environment was too reflective of the employer's tastes makes Riften shrug his shoulders as he went, "Good grief". And then, when he took a deep breath,

Riften: "Women are delicate and beautiful. Just touching them makes me feel at ease. That sense of security is irreplaceable, and their open-mindedness gets more charming as they age—— don't you think so?"

Subaru: “My butt’s been touched close to 1000 times in the past few days!”

Riften: “That’s because you have a nice butt.”

Subaru: “You are too biased with your workers!”

Riften: “«Hit it, and you’ll hear it». I see, so that’s why Mr. Crane gave me the letter of introduction. I understand.”

He was gaining understanding without showing any concern for Subaru. However, Subaru, the main person, was not understanding anything.

Subaru: “Well, regarding the work environment, I’ve come to the conclusion that Master is a cougar lover.”

Riften: “That’s a sad misunderstanding. One day, I’ll clear up your misunderstanding and you’ll truly understand me… Actually, I’d like to see if you really will stay here until that time comes.”

Subaru: “That’s really suggestive. Why do you feel that way?”

Riften: “You think you’re the only man I’ve ever hired at my palace?”

Riften laughed lowly, as if the inside of his throat trembled. When Subaru looked at him, with his appearance he vaguely felt like he looked like an evil Edo-period prefectural governor. As he had that thought,

Subaru: “I just thought that all the men couldn’t take the sexual harassment and disappeared…”

Riften: “Although this is the first time I’ve heard «sexual harassment», I can roughly imagine what it means. And let’s just say that I won’t deny your guess.”

Basically, he was saying that Subaru was chosen as one of the periodic sacrificial scapegoats.

It was already bad enough that the workplace was full of girls, so it would surely be a rough environment for a man with no resistance to sexual harassment. The more one had pride as a man, the more devastating the mark would be.

Riften: “Still, in comparison with all the other men, you’re kinda… tough. I expect good things from you.”

Subaru: “Th—thanks…”

Once Riften tapped Subaru’s shoulder, he started to leave the corridor, leaving him with doubts. Subaru watches him leave, and he curled his lips as he thought about his employer’s eccentric nature.

Perhaps a human needed to sacrifice their human nature in order to become great. Or maybe, since he had senses that were different from others, his results were recognized as unique and he was able to move up in the world.

Subaru touches the shoulder Riften tapped as he said, “In any case”, and sighed.

Subaru: “…Even if he has expectations of me, he’s only going to be disappointed.”

Subaru’s listless whisper reaches no one, and it disappeared into the wooden floor.

???: “Subaru-chaaan! Come here for a seeeecond!”

Subaru: “——Okay! I’m coming now!”

When Subaru heard a yell from afar, he started to run as he changed his expression. As if to say, “There’s no time to stop moving”, to his job at this busy mansion and to his coworkers.

Chapter 2 – Three Months

Original translation by Remonwater

1

After that scene with his employer, Subaru spent a few days working at the palace. You could say that it was going smoother than one would expect. It seemed that the many men hired at the palace quickly gave up under the environment, but Subaru didn't falter.

A big part of why he didn't is because, first of all, Subaru got hired because they were taking anyone as long as the person was a 'young man'.

Knowing why he was hired, he was able to do his job while taking it rather easy. He was also fortunate to not have his pride hurt by his coworkers' somewhat excessive physical contact. The most fortunate thing of all was that women were attracted to Subaru, just like Clane had claimed.

???: "Subaru-chan is a hard worker. He's so great."

???: "He's super skillful, and he's considerate. Unlike my kid."

???: "I don't get tired of talking to him, and he's like a child since he smiles a lot."

These were the opinions of the women who were gossiping during break. He smiled a lot, talked a lot, cracked a lot of jokes, asked a lot of questions, and moved around a lot. Subaru had a mostly favorable reputation.

They also liked how he didn't awkwardly show off or try to cover up his mistakes. Even the sexual harassment that became a problem died down dramatically after he got through the first few days.

Subaru: "I guess this means I've been recognized as a coworker."

That's what Subaru understood since the butt rubbing damage became 1/10th of what it had been.

This was the type of treatment outsiders would get while they were one. However, once you were recognized as a colleague, you wouldn't get such treatment. All the men didn't have enough perseverance.

Subaru: "Well, I was confused about what the perseverance was for too… Ah, it's done."

Subaru threads the last needle, and he bit off the remaining thread with his teeth. And so, what Subaru made with his own hands were clothes that had flower decorations sewed on—— it was a palace uniform.

Subaru sewed flowers on the clothes for the employees working at the palace and for the spares. It was to distinguish the guests and employees at the banquet that was being held tonight at the palace.

Since Kararagi dresses were typically Wasou, it was possible to mistake guests, who wore *kimono*s, for servants. A plan was needed so that the atmosphere wasn't spoiled.

Subaru: "Can't have servants wearing maid clothes here."

Subaru took responsibility and added flower decorations with the hostess' permission, and it wasn't a part of his professional duties. Subaru's female coworkers did tell him, "You didn't have to do all that", though.

Subaru: "It's a banquet, right? The guests and I would be happier with everyone wearing cute uniforms."

Then, Subaru got everyone to leave as he made that response.

Instead, the women who wore uniforms with flower decorations at the banquet concentrated on their hair and makeup so much that you might think they were guests, and that caused a different commotion.

On top of that, someone other than Subaru's coworkers surprised him at the banquet——

Rem: "——Did I surprise you? Subaru-kun"

Subaru: "…I'm stunned."

Rem: "Then this was a huge success. Hehehe, Subaru-kun's uniform is lovely too."

It was Rem who said that and surprised Subaru at the banquet hall wearing a hair-pin and a *kimono* that had flowers drawn like morning glories with dark blue cloth. Rem, with her gorgeous dress, was so beautiful that all eyes in the hall were on her. However, she didn't react to her surroundings, and she just waited for Subaru to speak.

Subaru: "Ahh… My wife is soo cute."

Rem: "My… for you to say that you're a lucky guy for having the best wife ever… I'm embarrassed."

Subaru: "You sure said it… But why are you here?"

Subaru questions Rem, who wriggled her body and forth as she touched her blushed cheeks with her hand. Rem said, "Well you see", in response as she lifted the sleeves of her *kimono* and continued,

Rem: "I was actually invited by the parent of a child I teach at Temple Elementary School. I was going to decline at first, but it was at Riften-sama's residence. So, I borrowed a *kimono*."

Subaru: "So you came to see me work… Um, is this parent that invited you a man?"

Rem: "Please relax, it was a woman. Subaru-kun's such a worrywart."

She was invited to a banquet, which is a party, and she was even given a *kimono*. Of course Subaru would be cautious. Seeing Subaru like that, Rem smiled slightly as she said,

Rem: "I too would be an Oni if something ever happened. That's when I'd smash that person's abdomen into bits and pieces."

Subaru: "Doesn't that kinda sound like you're saying that you're not usually an Oni!?"

He'd never heard a phrase that was as convincing as «I'm an Oni». When Subaru got cold feet from imagining an abdomen being smashed, Rem fixed the position of her hairpin as she said,

Rem: "She was a dry-goods dealer and she said that she had plenty of *kimono*s, so I borrowed one gratefully. But the one thing I didn't get is what she meant when she said that it could be advertising if I wear it…"

Subaru: "It's just what it implies. It'll get publicity if a beautiful woman wears it."

The excitement of the surrounding looks not calming down despite knowing that they were married was proof of that. Seeing Rem in her *kimono* sure was a treat for Subaru, but his anxiety from male instincts was much stronger.

That being said, at least he was managing to not worry at all about Rem's feelings wavering. After all, he did now know that even if someone tried to carelessly do something to Rem, that person's abdomen would turn into bits and pieces.

Subaru: "Anyway, I really enjoyed the surprise. Rem, you go enjoy yourself, though I won't be able to look after you because I have work. The cooking will be as good as Rem's."

Rem: "Mm, you can't beat me. Subaru-kun's stomach is mine."

Subaru: "You make it sound like you're literally going to take it away…"

Rem: "Still, it feels kind of strange. I get to see Subaru-kun working his hardest. It's like…"

Subaru: "————"

That's when Rem paused. What was she going to say next? He could no longer tell since Rem just said, "No", as she shook her head and changed her mind.

Rem: "I'll be with the one who invited me. When I get the chance, I'll put food in Subaru-kun's mouth, so please look forward to it."

Subaru: "That's a pretty original way to enjoy a party!"

He wasn't planning on relaxing, but he gained one more reason to avoid doing so as Rem left. Subaru watches his wife mix in with the guests at the banquet, and he shrugged his shoulders as he went, "Good grief".

Suddenly, Subaru felt someone standing next to him——

Halibel: "——Rem-chan is such a great wife."

Subaru: "Wait wait wait wait, something's wrong here."

Subaru turns around to the familiar voice, and he glared at the wolf man that appeared—— He glared at Halibel. With casual clothes and casual behavior, he ate the food on the plate he was holding.

Halibel: “Mmm, this is excellent. Is there anything in this world that’s more delicious than free liquor and free alcohol?”

Subaru: “There is. It’s called food made by one’s beloved wife.”

Halibel: “Agh! You’re boasting about her! I have to drink some alcohol to get through this.”

Subaru: “Forget about that, why are you even here!?”

Subaru hit Halibel’s hand as he reached for the alcohol, and he pressed him for an answer. Subaru’s force makes Halibel open his slit eyes slightly, and when he made an evil smile he said,

Halibel: “Of course the gatekeeper would know me. It’s the power of networking which Su-san doesn’t have.”

Subaru: “You’re a trespasser!”

Although he wanted to fault the gatekeeper for letting a suspicious person through, Halibel being well known was what you’d call a mystery. Thinking back, he did remember Clane respecting Halibel.

Subaru: “You aren’t a feudal lord that came to check out the town or anything like that, right?”

Halibel: “‘Feudal lord’. You sure know some outdated words. That’s what the king was called before Kararagi settled down.”

Subaru: “Really? Not that I know anything about it, though.”

Subaru wanted to just talk, but it seemed like this was going to be another point connecting his former world and the different world again, so he gave a nasty look as he didn’t want to delve into it.

Riften: “——My oh my, it’s Mr. ‘Eternal Playboy’. I’m happy to see you.”

Halibel: “Oh, Rif-san, long time no see. Sorry for coming today even without being invited.”

Halibel replied to Riften, who greeted him, as he raised his bottle of wine which he got his hands on god knows when. Riften calmly nodded at that behavior, however Subaru quickly bowed his head to his employer as he said,

Subaru: “I’m sorry, Master. I will kick out this suspicious man right away.”

Halibel: “Hey now, that’s cruel, Su-san.”

Riften: “I like your hard work, but that would be unnecessary. It’s rare for Mr. ‘Eternal Playboy’ to show up at banquets like this. So rare that I’d like to apologize for not sending a written invitation.”

Riften acted gentlemanly while Halibel acted relaxed. Their relationship also was a mystery to Subaru.

But, if there was one thing he could point out confidently it would be——

Subaru: “Did that ‘Playboy’ nonsense actually spread?”

Halibel: “Taking what you like is the Kararagian way, after all. I’m happy that I was able to get a simple title thanks to Su-san.”

Subaru: “I—I see… hopefully you can become a sage someday.”

It might be difficult because of the ‘Eternal’ part at the front, but he couldn’t give up his hope.

Riften: “By the way, these past few days I’ve been carefully observing how you work…”

Subaru: “Oh, sorry. I’ve been talking to guests so much that… Wait, a few days!? Observing!?”

Riften: “I told you, didn’t I? I have high hopes for you. I’ve been receiving information from the hostess, and you sound different from the men I’ve hired. You’re more… feminine than all of them.”

Subaru: “Feminine!?”

Riften: “A truly intriguing word. I hear you’re the one that made it spread.”

The unexpected evaluation and the expression that said he’d brought it upon himself make Subaru’s eyes widen. He did remember saying ‘feminine’ with his female coworkers several times, but he had underestimated Kararagi people’s adaptability.

But, it still wasn't clear how that led to 'feminine' being the evaluation.

Subaru: "So why did Master end up pointing out me being feminine?"

Riften: "The hostess has mostly the same opinion as the other women, although your femininity isn't the only thing that's been recognized."

Subaru: "The same opinion…"

Riften: "Incidentally, I've heard from Mr. Clane that you've been looking for a place where you can have a long career."

Subaru blinks with surprise as the conversation made an unexpected turn. Seeing Subaru's reaction, Riften raised his thick eyebrows, and he reached out for Subaru's chest——and he touched the flower decorations.

Riften: "This is well done. And you did it quick. The girls like it. Keep this up for the rest of your work period. ——I'm hoping that I can tell you something good on your final day."

Halibel: "————"

When he nodded deeply, Riften and Halibel exchange a few words, and he went back to the middle of the banquet. He had an obligation to entertain the guests as the host of the party. Despite being busy, he spared time to tell Subaru something. As for what that meant——

Subaru: "…Hal-san, I should look forward to what he was talking about, right?"

Halibel: "If that was an indirect layoff notice, then I don't think I can believe anything in this world anymore."

Halibel answered Subaru's question while opening a sake bottle. The previous exchange had so much impact on him that he forgot to warn the uninvited guest about his bad manners. So, when Subaru took away the sake bottle from Halibel's hand, he said,

Halibel: "Oh."

Subaru: "Looks like you're out of drinks. I'll go get more."

Subaru collects the empty bottle as he hurried out of there. While stopping himself from breaking into a smile, he made up his mind to take the initiative and work harder than anyone else tonight at the banquet hall. He also had to deal with the uninvited guest now to do that.

——As he felt excited inside since it seemed he'd be able to give some good news to Rem.

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2

Rem: "——Oh, Subaru-kun."

It was after the banquet cleaning when he exited the main gate to go home.

Subaru gets his named called, and the slight surprise makes him raise his face. Then, it was Rem who was leaning against the palace gate, wearing her *kimono* which he'd seen at the banquet.

Subaru: "Rem? You didn't go home with the person you came here with?"

Rem: "I was going to, but I was selfish and said that I was going to stay here. I promised to return the *kimono* and hairpin I borrowed tomorrow."

Subaru: "That doesn't worry me, but… Actually, it does. If something happened while you were out this late…"

Rem: "Thank you. But the gatekeeper was there with me, so I was fine."

Rem holds Subaru's hand as he rushed up to her, and she smiled at him to calm him down. When Subaru turned around as he heard her words, he saw the gatekeeper he knew giving him a thumbs up. Subaru bows his head to show his gratitude towards him, and he considers not snitching on him to the hostess for letting Halibel through.

Subaru: "On another note, why were you waiting here? Did you have some urgent business to take care of or something?"



Rem: “It’s nothing like that. I’m wearing clothes that I wouldn’t usually wear, so I just wanted to walk home together.”

Subaru: “————”

Rem: “I rarely wear *kimono*s like this… Should I have not tried it?”

Subaru: “Erm…”

Subaru scratches his head with his hand that wasn’t being held, and he looked away from Rem. He saw the gatekeeper looking through the gap between his fingers. You know what, I’m going to snitch on him to the hostess tomorrow. Subaru puts off that thought for later, and while feeling his ears turn red, he said,

Subaru: “I’m happy that you said that. Actually, I’m lame for making you say all of that. I want to show off my beautiful wife while walking home too. Thank you.”

Rem: “Yes. Please show the whole town that I’m yours.”

Subaru: “Now that’s a lot of people you’re talking about here!”

While being surprised by Rem’s idea, Subaru waves at the gatekeeper, and the two of them walked back home.

It was deep at night in the town Banan. The moon and starlight were not the only things showing in the twilight; Banan was being illuminated by hanging paper lanterns. Magical stones weren’t blazing in them; they were candle flames.

A beautiful girl in a *kimono* walking next to him, and a street illuminated by the night sky and paper lanterns—— Subaru was not in a different world. He felt like he was seeing an optical illusion, as if he got lost in the past of his former world.

Rem: “——? Subaru-kun, what’s wrong?”

Subaru: “I just got lost in my thoughts for a little bit. I know I said that I wanted to show off as we walk, but I just remembered that I’m the type that wants to have everything to himself. I want to enjoy it at home.”

Rem: “I—it’s a borrowed *kimono*, we can’t do naughty things, you know…?”

Subaru: “But what if it’s just for a little?”

Rem: “Oh… I—if it’s just a little…”

Subaru’s naughty statement makes Rem look down with her face turned red. While loving her profile, Subaru said, “Still”, as he began to speak.

Subaru: “I didn’t expect Rem to be at the party… or I guess banquet. You must be close with that person to have been invited to go with her.”

Rem: “I don’t think we should be friends since I’m a teacher and she’s a guardian. But yes, we are.”

Subaru: “I see. I’m so glad. We’ve finally just barely managed to settle down in this town now.”

While responding to Rem, he remembered this year’s journey where they moved from place to place.

Although he’d talked about it with Halibel when he went job hunting the other day, Subaru and Rem continued to move all around Kararagi until they settled down in the town of Banan. It was because they couldn’t really find work and houses, however they finally were freed from their difficult problems at this town.

While wandering around, they visited Banan because of an introduction letter they got from a person they met, then they were introduced to Halibel, the tenement house manager, and they finally found a house. Rem got a job quickly, and even Subaru, who felt down because he was unqualified, was one step away from living the full-time employee life he’d dreamed of.

It was smooth sailing—— It seemed they were finally in a situation where they could say that.

Rem: “I had the time of my life tonight. Subaru-kun praised my *kimono*, and I got to see my husband work up close. My heart is full.”

Subaru: “I praised Rem in a *kimono*, not just the *kimono* alone, you know? Also, I’m full because of the treats you gave me during my break at work.”

Rem: “Everything was so delicious, so I thought you’d love it too…”

Subaru: “Yeah, that was very sweet, and I love you, but…”

Even before the banquet, for some reason women made Subaru taste a lot of food, so he was full and couldn’t carry any more weight. He was currently holding it all because of the naughty arrangement they made and his willpower.

Rem: “Plus, I was able to tell all your coworkers to take good care of you.”

Subaru: “I’m definitely going to be teased by everyone tomorrow…”

Rem: “——?”

He’s already treated as a toy as is, so of course the women would be so delighted to be asked a favor from his cute new wife. He was now terrified of how everyone would act tomorrow after work.

Subaru: “————”

The trivial but happy conversation stops. However, the silence was not something uncomfortable. It was just something that went between them naturally. Even though they weren’t talking, it wasn’t awkward. There certainly was a natural feeling of distance between them. If it was just the two of them, there wouldn’t be anything to go with the silence.

——Thus, the world that unnaturally fell silent was a matter unrelated to their silence.

Rem: “Subaru-kun.”

Rem called Subaru’s name about at the same time when he noticed that something was up.

Rem, who stood still and held onto Subaru’s hand tighter, stops him. That makes Subaru hold his breath for a bit, and he—— tried to look at her, but he hesitated. Since he knew why Rem stopped him and why she called his name.

Subaru: “————”

A small person was standing at the front of the street at night.

The shadow was in front of the moon, and its whole body was vague as it was under cover of night. It was shorter than Subaru and a little taller than Rem, and he just knew that it was a woman since she was thin and looked delicate.

She had on this sort of black dress that you'd mistake for darkness, and her hakama was boldly shortened to only cover half of her thighs, and he could very clearly see her white, long legs stepping on the ground.

It was an unarmed, young woman with a lot of revealing spots—— If she was just that, then she'd seem like a beggar or a prostitute. And although he was hesitant to say it, neither of those were rare in large towns. Poor people who lost their family and lived in the streets and prostitutes taking customers in back alleys were natural to encounter.

——Hence, it was the glitter of the eyes of the woman standing still that made him think she was different.

Starlight was in the background and a shadow was casted on her face, but the woman's eyes were shining in a penetrative way. That sharp light frightfully and violently directed hostility towards Subaru and Rem and——

Subaru: "Ah——"

The moment Subaru understood that hostility, he felt his hands and legs getting colder rapidly.

Subaru: "————"

He couldn't move. Subaru completely lost control of his consciousness with hostility before him. His eyes widen, he forgets to breath, and his knees tremble pathetically. And then——

???: "——What… are you doing…"

The presence deeply rumbling the atmosphere swept towards them as wind. He was despairingly too late to realize if it was a voice or just someone calling out to them. That's how much he forgot about the world, and the being was standing firmly as a foreign body.

It was a woman, but it wasn't. She had the shape of a person, but she wasn't a person. It was a repulsive enemy.

???: "——What… are you doing…"

The repulsive enemy repeats the wind, her words.

It was a question, a threat, an attack, and mercy. It was even mercy.

Because she could've made someone like Subaru disappear long ago if she wanted to. It didn't happen solely because the enemy had mercy. Could there be anything else to it?

If there was something besides mercy and pity, it would be to let Subaru live.

Rem: "Y—you…"

Subaru's voice was gone. Hence, that wasn't Subaru's voice. It was Rem's, who was standing next to him. She held onto Subaru's hand so tight that it hurt, and it woke him up. The pain made Subaru face reality. Rem also stayed aware.

Rem/Subaru: "——"

They were both overwhelmed by the being before their very own eyes.

Rem was the only one who was desperately looking for a way to escape while feeling pressured. Subaru's senses were also telling him that he had to do so. But his spirit wouldn't respond. He didn't have the strong spirit to respond. He couldn't do it with the enemy in front of him.

——Since Subaru couldn't choose to do something like fight an enemy as someone who ran from his enemies.

???: "——Die."

He was afraid.

The moment he came to that conclusion, the enemy expressed a very straightforward judgement. Right after that, the increasing pressure becomes so severe that it practically burns his skin, and the hostility sublimates into murderous intent.

Wind blows. As if the seasonal night wind lukewarmly and gently brushed against his skin——

???: "——Come here!!"

When that fatally connected to him, Rem jumped away to the side while holding Subaru. The space they had been in splits roundly within an instant. The space split, as if it was bitten off by the jaw of a beast.

Anything left at that place wasn't a living thing. And so, no doubt about it, it was the murderous intent of the women before their eyes that was left there.

Rem: "Hya——"

???: "Die."

Since the hostility was unavoidable, Rem summoned up mana to attack and defend. However, her opponent's murderous intent was fast and strong like a sudden gust. The wind's jaw attacks Rem continuously, and she had no choice but to concentrate on dodging it.

Rem: "Ku… u——"

The *kimono* backfired. It reached down to her ankles and it was elegant, but in exchange, it restricted her actions. Even if she concentrated on dodging, she would eventually lose the ability to do so. It was getting worse and worse.

???: "Die die die die die."

Her murderous intent gushes out again and again as the shortest chant using the smallest amount of words, leaving no way out. It was too tall to jump over for Rem, who was holding onto Subaru. And first, even if she were to jump high, they'd become easy targets. As for the option to escape to a place with lots of crowds, she wasn't so sure if the women had the mentality to hesitate in sacrificing people, so that would be the very last option——

Rem: "——"

Rem frantically racked her brain and struggled as much as she could to find one of the few chances of winning.

Subaru couldn't move since he was being held in her arms as he was swung around by the force of her jumping away. When the hostility turned into murderous intent and was acted upon, he even lost the willpower to act brave. Despite knowing that he had to move and think.

???: "Die."

Without budging an inch, the woman repeats a chant of death.

???: "Die."

The wind's jaw eats the sky, the ground, and the town.

???: "Die."

The enemy was so much stronger than him that it wouldn't even be an exaggeration to say that it was like a cat playing with a mouse.

A way to turn things around, a suggestion that'd turn the hopeless situation around, an attack to paint over the distress——

Subaru: "————"

He had no time to find all that, and he couldn't buy any more of it.

——I don't want to die.

Subaru's mind and body become chains, and that thought alone was what coiled around him, like a strong curse.

Rem: "If I could at least…"

Rem forces her voice out of her throat in response to the raging wind that was trying to kill them. Subaru knew what was going to come after her interrupted words. She was going to say this: "If I could at least——just save Subaru.".

Subaru: "————"

There's no way he'd let that happen. To show that he was against it, Subaru put a little strength into his hands that were holding onto Rem's *kimono*. He put in all the strength he could muster up into his fingertips. To say that even if he were ripped off easily by force, his heart is the one thing he'd never let someone rip out,

Rem: "But…"

Rem sensed that from Subaru's slight movements. However, Rem really knew just how bad the situation was, much more than Subaru did, who was restrained as someone was trying to kill them.

They were being cornered. Soon enough the jaw of the wind would take away her legs, slurp on her guts, and devour her life.

Before that happened, she just wished for the one she loved to live longer, even if it was just one second——

???: "Die——"

???: "——That's not happening. That's enough."

Right before the decision lead to action, there was the sound of the jaw of the wind biting on steel.

The bite attack changes the space that had been breaking up to this point. It didn't stop with one blow; a loud, sharp sound cut up the night in line with the consecutive bite attacks.

Rem: "————"

The change even makes the girl who continued to chant and chant death stop moving. Rem, who was holding Subaru, also stopped, and she blinked, wondering what just happened.

The one who came into their sights was a tall person with a black *kimono* that shook at its edges—— It was Halibel, who smoked the *kiseru* in his mouth and stood between them.

Rem: "Hali… bel…?"

Halibel: “Yes yes, this is the Ha-san you all know. That was a close one, huh, Su-san. That would’ve been bad if I hadn’t come. Rem-chan even looked like she’d made up her mind for good.”

Subaru: “Why… are you here…”

Halibe: “Ahh, I get why you’re curious, but I’ll have to postpone the explanation for now. Or else…”

Subaru could not comprehend the sudden appearance, and his trembling voice didn’t make Halibel act any different from how he usually would. It didn’t help relieve them, but rather it just increased the feeling that they were in an emergency. Without caring about those thoughts Subaru had, Halibel slowly turned around to face the woman and said,

Halibel: “It’d be hard to fight that girl.”

Halibel says that, sounding like he wasn’t even in the mood to fight, and he slowly stepped towards the enemy. Subaru tried to say, “That’d be reckless” from behind.

However——

Rem: “Let’s let Halibel-sama handle this.”

Subaru: “Rem? But she… she’s…”

A terrifying opponent. A being with unordinary strength. Halibel was going to fight someone like that. Subaru was trying to say, “We should at least try our best to run away”.

Rem: “——Halibel the Admirer.”

Subaru: “…Huh?”

Rem: “The one deemed the strongest in the Kararagi City State——that’s Halibel-sama.”

Rem’s quiet statement makes Subaru stiffen up, unable to use his voice. After that, he looked at Halibel’s back, as he closed the distance between him and the enemy, and it simply took his breath away.

The one who poured alcohol at the banquet. That guy was going towards the enemy, like it was just a walk.

Subaru: “This is…”

Halibel: “——Unbelievable, is what Su-san might be thinking. How about you?”

Halibel, facing the woman, takes the words right out of Subaru’s mouth, and he talked to her in an over-familiar voice.

He put aside Subaru and Rem, who were behind him, and stood in between them and the woman as if to say, “You have to get past me before you lay a hand on these two”, but the enthusiasm didn’t show on his face. Halibel was being aloof, just like he would be whenever he took naps at the tenement house.

The woman also kept the same attitude. The woman standing still didn’t show any interest in Halibel’s appearance, and she kept directing the unlimited hostility towards Subaru and Rem.

Anything standing in her way would get smashed—— Thus,

???: “Die.”

The invisible murderous intent becomes wind, and the attack cuts the space into the shape of a globe—— The bite attack went for Halibel. A threat at the end of death that went through defenses and relentlessly devoured its target.

There was only one way to protect himself against that—— Don’t let the bite attack reach him.

Halibel: “————”

Halibel puts his hand inside his *kimono*, and he threw something at lightning speed. An object that was thrown at such a speed that no ordinary person could’ve seen it—— that collides with the wind—— the bite attack didn’t crunch on Halibel’s guts; it stopped at a completely different place and crunched on the thrown object.

Halibel: “It doesn’t matter if I can’t see it. My nose is extremely effective.”

???: “————”

Halibel: “Oh, but don’t get me wrong, okay? I’m a wolf of dogs, and that’s one of our important aspects.”

Halibel would always say something to relieve tension whenever he first met someone. After that, she turned her head slowly, although it wasn't as if she'd understood him, obviously.

The woman looked at Halibel with her piercing eyes, and it was the first time she looked at someone other than Subaru and Rem.

Halibel: "Oh, so you finally look this way…"

???: "Die."

Halibel: "——There."

Halibel causes the bite attack to misfire yet again by throwing. However, the woman changed the priority of her murderous attack, and fire power focused on Halibel at once.

???: "Die die die die die."

Halibel waved his arms and demolished all the murderous winds wildly fired all at once. After brushing away the first gust of wind, Halibel went, "Alright" as he gained some momentum and said,

Halibel: "It seems you took interest in me, so how about I meet your expectations!"

???: "Di——"

Halibel: "Hoho. ——Which me would you like to get killed by?"

???: "————"

Halibel steps on the street with his *zori*, and he roughly shook his body left and right. An irregular feeling, and footwork that was captivating in a way. Right after that, a Halibel's body shook strangely——

Halibel: "Now," Halibel: "Which me would you like?" Halibel: "I'm the devoted type." Halibel: "And I'm like a bossy husband."

Subaru: "——Wha!?"

It was not the woman who raised a surprise voice upon seeing an unbelievable phenomenon, but Subaru, who was being protected in the back.

And it was just natural to do so since he saw Halibel say a bunch of words unanimously as four people.

Halibel: “By the way, my strength isn’t divided into fourths. I’m four people, and my strength is quadrupled.”

Halibel: “I begged and begged my parents for siblings, and then more came.”

Halibel: “Sorry, that was a lie.”

Halibel: “I saw myself in the mirror and pulled them out.”

Halibel: “Sorry, that was a lie too.”

The four Halibels crossed their arms, smoked their *kiseru*s, and randomly talked as much as they wanted. It was like coming into a bad dream. But, the four Halibels were not just illusions.

They were all there and felt real. The four Halibels, fighting power quadrupled.

Halibel: “————”

Halibel, who did not multiply, but cloned himself. Seeing that right before her made the woman stop acting for the first time.

It was doubtful whether the continuous bite attacks would work on Halibel, who could now act as 4. The possibility of having her invisible attacks defended against and getting hit with a severe counterattack increased immediately.

Whether or not the woman still had the sense to make such calculations was unknown, however——

???: “Die.”

Halibel: “…Is that all you can say? Seems like you have some pretty complicated family circumstances.”

The woman bent her knees and jumped. She easily jumps onto the roof of a building next to her, and she looked down on Halibel and the others while cracking the roof with her bare feet. The moon was in the background, not one bit of the light in her eyes weakened, and it looked so beautiful that it was beyond human understanding.

Halibel, who stood as four on the ground, and the woman dressed in black with the moon behind her glared at each other. It felt like time it was going to continue forever, but——

Subaru: "——Rem!?"

The two of them did not break the stalemate. It was Subaru, who could only be there as a spectator. Halibel looked back at Subaru, who held onto Rem as she became dead tired in his arms and his voice trembled.

Taking advantage of that chaos, the woman tries to blend in with the night sky——

Halibel: "Sh——!"

Three of the Halibels wouldn't overlook that.

The throws attack the woman from three sides, and two of the shots were repelled by the wind. However, the third shot drawing an arc slips through the wind, and the thrown object——the kunai pierces the woman's thin back.

???: "——"

The woman gets injured, lets out a slight groan, and she tries to flee.

Halibel: "————"

Halibel sharpens his hearing and looked out for the disappeared woman's movements for a bit. There was a possibility of her taking advantage of the darkness and continuing the fight. Still, it was apparent that the woman withdrew, knowing that she was at a disadvantage. As a result, Halibel was satisfied and——

Halibel: "Guess one should be fine for now. Anyway…"

Subaru: "Halibel! Hal-san! Rem is…!"

Halibel finally runs up to Subaru and Rem as he was called out to desperately. At the same time, his clones disappear, and he went back to his normal self like an illusion.

Still, there was no time to talk about that mysterious phenomenon. Subaru continues to desperately call out to Rem, who was dead tired in his arms.

Halibel: “Did that black girl’s attack hit her?”

Subaru: “I checked! But there are no injuries on her body! But she still fainted and…”

It was chaos. However, he was sure that Rem had no wounds. She also fainted suddenly. The woman most likely did something after she escaped to the roof. However, it misfired, and as a result, Rem collapsed instead. And that was——

Halibel: “Maybe she casted some strange magic or something… She does feel hot. It feels unreal, but it could be an illness.”

Subaru: “——”

Halibel: “That look sure makes me feel nervous. I’ll carry her back to the tenement house…”

Subaru: “N—no, I’ll… I’ll carry her! I’ll bring her back to the tenement house…”

Subaru interrupts Halibel, who stretched his arms, and picked up Rem as he tried to control his shaking legs. Subaru stood up, and for a just a moment, his words made Halibel ponder something in his slit eyes.

However, he quickly said, “Okay” with a deep nod.

Halibel: “Then you carry her to the tenement house. I’ll call a magic user, and we’ll meet up with you guys in your room. Use a light street with a lot of crowd to go back.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I’ll leave it to you!”

Subaru immediately began to run with Rem in his arms without any objection. He had a desperate look and his thoughts were covered with uneasiness, but he still had strength to walk. He wouldn’t run out of strength before getting to the tenement house.

Halibel looks at them go off, and he takes one deep puff of his *kiseru* as he said,

Halibel: “Anyhow… Anyhow…”

The wolf man gives out smoke, and he ran off to the street at night, searching for a magic user.

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3

——It's all my fault.

Subaru: "Haa… haa…"

——It's all my fault. It's all my fault. It's all my fault. It's all my fault. It's all my fault.

Subaru: "——!"

——It's all my fault!!

Subaru: "Haa…!"

Subaru rushed to the tenement house with rough breathing, wide open eyes, and a bright red face.

He couldn't feel Rem's weight in his arms. He was just one person holding another in his arms as he ran, and yet the burning heat of the blood flowing through his body wouldn't let Subaru stop, as if it had become magma.

Subaru: "————"

He sprinted as fast as he could. Even though he tried to not shake, it still wasn't perfect. There's no way it was comfortable. And yet, Rem, who was unconscious, had not reaction. That was way too terrifying.

Magic, illness—— Halibel's worries bound Subaru's mind with the chains called anxiety.

The black clothed woman that appeared—— his fear of that enemy was completely disappearing from his head right now at this moment.

Being targeted with hostility, being exposed to murderous intent—— they were all trivial matters.

Compared to the reality where he didn't know what was happening to this precious girl right now at this moment——

Subaru: "——Damnit!"

Subaru did not choose a direct route while dealing with his impatience; he chose the streets with the most crowds. Once he came out of the space that was unnaturally empty by crossing two streets, he saw everyday life, as if nothing had happened, and he felt everyone walking the streets at night looking at him.

A man changed his expression and ran through the street while holding onto a girl. It was a miracle that no meddlers with a weird sense of justice stopped him.

Still, he wasn't hoping for a miracle like that. Right now, there was only one wish he'd like to be blessed with.

Subaru: "Please… Rem…"

He just prays sincerely for Rem to be safe.

For her to open her eyes, call his name, and smile at him. That's all.

If Subaru, as someone who couldn't do anything back in that situation, had the right to shamelessly beg for a miracle, that would be the only thing he'd wish for. Nothing else.

Subaru: "————"

Subaru somehow made it back to the tenement house as he desperately prayed to the heavens. He forces the slide door open with his feet and puts down Rem in the dark room. He did not wipe his face dripping with sweat. When he turned on the light in the room, he spread a futon in a hurry, and he moved Rem onto it.

Subaru: "Rem… Rem… Answer me… Rem…"

Even though he called her name, there was no response from Rem, who kept breathing painfully. With a sorrowful look, Subaru gently loosened the sash of her *kimono*, and he took off her sleeves. The borrowed *kimono* was tangled everywhere, and it seems she had dropped the hairpin that she had on her hair.

It was as if the Rem he saw this night dressed up, smiling gorgeously, was just a dream.

Subaru: “Rem… Please…”

He scoops up water into a bucket and wipes Rem’s forehead and the back of her neck with a wet towel. He feels a fever from the forehead he touched. He couldn’t tell if it was a slight fever or a high fever. Currently, Subaru himself was in a condition where his anxiety and agitation wouldn’t die down, and he couldn’t say that he was at a normal body temperature.

Right now, he had no choice but to wait for Halibel to bring a magic user as soon as possible. Even here, there was not a single thing Subaru could do.

Subaru: “Rem…”

Subaru holds onto Rem’s hand as she laid down on the futon, and he prays at the girl’s thin fingers.

Nothing happen, please. Please, wake up, I beg of you. If you could just wake up safely, smile like nothing happened, and then call my name——

Subaru: “————”

Who knows how long his praying lasted. When Subaru heard a sound behind him, he was in a trance. It was the sound of a door opening. No doubt about it, Halibel had arrived with a magic user.

Hoping for that, Subaru turns around, and he was tried to say, “Take a look at Rem”——

???: “——Huh? What’s up with that pathetic look. I can’t bear to look at it.”

The woman leaning against the side door with her arms crossed says that in a contemptuous tone. That makes Subaru’s thoughts freeze completely for a moment.

It was a woman dressed in a *kimono*. She was wearing a pure white dress that was completely clean. She was wearing the white *kimono* with the right side over the left, and it looked like burial clothes. However, her dress’ hakama was shortened to the middle of her thighs, and he couldn’t find any sign of “death’s” shadow in her freely exposed long, thin legs and white skin.

The tips of her short, milky white hair were made into an uneven shaggy cut. Her sharp almond eyes were deep indigo blue. Although she had provocative facial features, they made an oddly beautiful face.

It was beauty created because it was unpolished and uneven. It was like an accidental beautiful face that was created as a result of a wild animals putting together whatever they thought was beautiful—— it was an uncanny work of art made up of truly beautiful things without even being particular about beauty.

An unordinary beautiful face that would take anyone's breath away and make them lose their sense of reality. Subaru looked at that with his very own eyes, but the woman's beauty wasn't why he stiffened up. He had a memory of the woman's face, although vague. And it was also a very recent memory——

???: "Hello? I'm talking to you. Do you even hear me?"

Subaru: "Y—you…"

???: "Oh. You can talk after all. Can you cut that out? It freaks me out when I get ignored. Cause, you know…"

After Subaru's trembling voice made the woman open her eyes wide, she put her hands together in front of her chest. And then, she had a slight smile on her face——a ferocious smile a carnivore would have upon finding its prey, and she said,

???: "——If you die before I kill you, that would dishonor the Shinigami name."

Subaru: "——"

The woman—— The second attack of the woman that had continued to chant death makes Subaru move on impulse

He grabs the water bucket near Rem's pillow and throws it as hard as he could at the woman. He wasn't expecting it to do damage. He just needed to keep her in check. In fact, the woman had dodged the thrown bucket and the water thrown out of it with a displeased look.

Subaru: "Ruaaa——!"

That's when Subaru tackled the woman from a low position in order to grab onto her waist. He'd have a chance if he pushed her down and got on top of her. He'd smash her head with all his might. He was going to do it. He was prepared to do that easily with all the anger and energy he had right now——

???: "——Can you not hug me just because I'm cute?"

Subaru: "Ga——!?"

The low charge at her stomach gets blocked. The woman backs away easily, and when she grabbed the back of Subaru's head with her right arm as he was bent forward, she immediately held him to the ground by brute force. Subaru's nose hits the wooden floor, and he sees sparks. His face gets crushed by such brute strength that you wouldn't believe that they were thin arms.

He grinds his teeth, and he bends the lower half of his body like a shachihoko[8] while having his face on the ground. He goes for the woman's head with his imperfect heel attack, and she brushed it away with her free hand in an annoyed manner. However, distracting her, even if it was just for a little bit, was good enough. He twists his body, forces the woman's hand off his neck, and jumped up.

???: "Yuck, you're covered… in sweat!"

Subaru: "Like I care!!"

He waves his right hand and jumps at the frowning woman yet again. He kept going for the lower half of her body. At least there wasn't a clear difference in ability for standing techniques[9]. He'd force her out of the tenement house and keep Rem away from danger, even if it was just for a little bit. Even if it really was just for a little bit.

Subaru: "——Dzu… raa!"

His spirit was superior, and he tackled the woman's waist before her arms could stop it. He holds onto her thin waist by force, throws her at the door vigorously, and she immediately rolls out of the tenement house. He instantly tried to get on her to get the upper hand, but——

[8] Animal in japanese folklore with the head of a tiger and the body of a carp (see here).

[9] Judo techniques performed from a standing posture.

???: “Don’t get so cocky!”

Before the woman fell to the ground on her back, she hit Subaru’s chest with her knee as he clung to her, and the impact of her long, beautiful legs sharply pierced Subaru’s body, as if gouging his intestines. He chokes, and all his bones crack. Even if he tried to hold onto her with his arms, the structure of his human body wouldn’t let him.

Subaru was the one who came off and fell to the ground. He immediately tries to get up to scratch off dirt. But the woman put her bare feet on his head and pushed it to the ground.

Subaru: “Go… o…”

???: “Don’t get up, stay down. You’ll dirty the air. Sweat will fly.”

He lifted his arms and grabbed onto the woman’s thin ankles. He strengthens his grip. She didn’t budge an inch. She snorts at his resistance, and once again, she swung down her foot that she lifted easily. She crushes his nose. Twice, thrice——

Subaru: “Ka… a…”

???: “Don’t touch me, pervert. I didn’t come here to fool around with you. Listen. Go to sleep.”

She steps on Subaru one more time for good measure, and he was silent. Seeing Subaru dead tired with his blood spreading onto the ground, the woman turns around with satisfaction, and she started to go back to the tenement house.

She said that her goal wasn’t to play around with Subaru. The woman’s goal was not about Subaru——

Subaru: “——What are you trying to do?”

???: “————”

Subaru was clinging onto the woman’s legs while having his nose crushed and dirtying the ground with his nose blood. Dirt and blood dirty her white skin. The woman’s eyes were getting colder.

???: “Get off of me.”

The woman's sharp demand was frank. Her breathing sounded suspicious, and Subaru couldn't respond with words.

He just put his other arm around the woman's ankle, which he was already clinging onto with one arm, to express his intent.

???: "Look…"

The woman brushes up her hair and looks at Subaru, who stuck onto her, in dumbfoundment. And then she sighed and kneed the man who was glaring at her with his face dirty with nose blood.

???: "I said get the hell off of me."

She knees his lower jaw, and the intense impact bounces the brain inside his cranium. The cerebral concussion even makes him feel like he was losing consciousness, and he saw blood from his nasal cavity get on her dress.

He falls. Still, he didn't let go. He was grabbing onto her, and he wouldn't let her go.

???: "You're going to die."

Subaru: "Hyaa…"

He shook his head disapprovingly. The pain… The pain was unusual; it was irritating his whole body, and his head was being affected the most. His crushed face, kicked body, kneed lower jaw, his whole body hit by unbelievable strength was having a big chorus of pain and powerlessness.

The danger alert was going off as loud as possible, and the fear that made him feel like death was near makes his hands and legs go cold. His vision was blurred by either blood or tears, and his shaking was getting worse and worse.

Death was right before his eyes. The woman Subaru was grabbing onto right now was the embodiment of death. She was a Shinigami.

Death is scary. Terrifying. Subaru feared death more than anyone in this world.

Doing as the woman said and begging for forgiveness was the right move if he wanted to avoid death and get away. But, but, but, he wasn't allowed to do it. She wouldn't let him do it. And he couldn't do it because——

???: "——You can't stop me. After all, you are a loser."

Subaru's resistance was all for naught; the woman started walking. She enters the tenement house without even pulling him off as if to say that he was nothing to her. She goes up, steps on the tatami mat, and heads towards Rem.

Subaru: "Gi… ga——"

He bites on the tatami mat and tries to stop her. The tatami mat tears off the floor. He stretches his legs to a pillar and hanged onto her knee. He takes him off by force. He gets dragged along, and he resists as he scratched the tatami mat. He resists.

???: "You just don't know when to give up, do you. You poor sport. Aren't you ashamed of struggling so much?"

Subaru: "Oooo! Oooo!!"

???: "So unsightly! So unsightly so unsightly so unsightly! So low! So lame! Are you stupid!?"

She harms Subaru with abusive language, but he still shook his head stubbornly like a child. Subaru would try to stop the woman, even if it meant bleeding, losing teeth, and having his limbs torn off. His unreasonable stubbornness makes the woman click her tongue irritatedly——

???: "This is retribution, but it still leaves a bad taste in my mouth! I am just…"

The woman grimaces with her beautiful face and she makes it to the futon with Subaru. Then, she looks down at Rem, who was sleeping there, and turned her palm towards her.

If that palm reached Rem, her sleep would end in an undesired way. Thus, Subaru called out to her woefully—— Right after, the woman stopped moving.

???: "——Ah?"

The woman's mouth was wide open with her hand reached out towards Rem. She then knits her brows and takes a long look at Rem, who breathed painfully. From top to bottom, slowly. Subaru swallows saliva with blood without knowing what that look meant.

Subaru: "What… are you…"

???: "Ahhh! Damnit! Are you serious!? This won't do! I can't do this!"

The next moment, the woman suddenly erupts, and she kicked at the tatami mat as she roughly clicked her tongue. And then, the woman shakes off Subaru, whose eyes opened wide because of her strange behavior, and he sends him flying towards the corner of the room.

Subaru: "Damni…"

Subaru's carelessness leads to her being released, and he completely regretted his mistake. He falls onto the tatami mat, immediately gets back up, and he tries to grab onto the woman. Then the woman attacked his face with her bare feet.

Subaru: "Ga…"

???: "Calm down. Good grief, what a noisy man."

With a dumbfounded look, the woman looks down on Subaru, whose shout was stopped by her kick, and he collapsed onto the tatami mat. After that, the woman points at her own nicely shaped nose as she said,

???: "Your face looks pretty ugly now. Can it be fixed?"

Subaru: "————"

???: "Sure sucks to be a human. Since if you get scarred, it stays there."

The woman says just that, and she alternates between looking at Subaru and Rem in an annoyed manner. He could tell that the emotion in her eyes wasn't peaceful. So, he had to get up and restrain her. However, his body wouldn't listen to him——

???: “Time is up, huh. Guess I have to go.”

Subaru: “————”

Stricken with a sense of helplessness, Subaru gets left behind, and he hears the woman let those words out. Her eyes were not looking at Subaru and Rem, but at the open entrance. She then went towards the entrance—— Towards the tenement house, just like she said, without doing anything to Subaru and Rem.

Subaru: “Wai…”

???: “Just curse at your bad luck. Tremble and regret as much as possible.”

He was unable to put together the words to stop her, and he had no clue what the woman’s sharp parting remark meant.

Subaru just stayed silent, stained the tatami mat with the blood coming from his nose, and he could only watch the woman leave. Then for a while it was just Subaru and Rem, who was breathing painfully, left in the room——

Halibel: “——Su-san? Are you okay? What happened!?”

Halibel arrives late to the chaotic situation. When he was called out to by the dog face that rushed up to him, Subaru moved to breath heavily from his nose clogged with blood and his mouth as he said,

Subaru: “…Take… care of… Rem.”

Subaru says that to the wolf man taking a look, and his consciousness disappeared.

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???: “With this, the treatment is over for now. Now you just have to rest.”

The old healing magic user says that, and he wiped off the remaining traces of blood on Subaru's face. The old magic user actually quickly finished the treatment after he examined Subaru, who was half alive.

Because of that, he went from having wounds all over his body to having serious body bruises, and the dull pain in his nose settled down to a level where he could ignore it. Now he'd have no trouble doing the very least: standing and walking.

Halibel: "Su-san, how are you? Think you're good? Think you're gonna die?"

Subaru: "When I bite with my jaw, I feel pain that feels like my body is getting joint locked, but I'm not dying somehow. Thanks… Thanks, but…"

Halibel: "Hold it hold it. I know that you want to prioritize Rem-chan. However, you can't just forget about your condition."

Halibel, who shrugged his shoulders, and he forced his opinion before Subaru could, who mumbled.

Halibel had returned to the tenement house, and the one he looked at was Subaru, who had stained the tatami middle in the middle of the room with blood and fainted as he said something like a will before doing so. Rem was sleeping on a futon, and if Subaru were to debate who was having more of an emergency, unfortunately he'd have no chance of winning. But, in Subaru's heart, he still wanted to prioritize Rem——

Halibel: "Rem-chan can't do whatever she wants, of course. However, that goes for you too. That's the decision I came to fairly with Sensei. You owe me, right? Forgive me in consideration of that."

Subaru: "Owe you…"

For letting them live in the tenement house, and for saving his life just now—— he kept getting more and more indebted to Halibel. Plus, he wasn't so shameless that he'd consider worrying him as paying off his debt.

Subaru: "Okay. But apart from that, Sensei, please take care of Rem."

???: "Leave it up to me. You guys are getting in my way. Leave to the front."

The old magic user responded bluntly and waved at Subaru, who bowed his head. Following his instructions, Subaru and Halibel leave to the front of the tenement house. On the way, Halibel stretched his long arms and helped prevent Subaru from almost losing his balance because of body pain.

Halibel: “Woah. You have to be careful, Su-san. You just started recovering two minutes ago.”

Subaru: “You start to worry too quickly… But you really did save me.”

Halibel: “Su-san being honest… This is just wrong. But it pains me to be thanked. After all, I really failed at predicting an attack in the tenement house.”

The two of them were sitting next to each other on a bench placed in front of the tenement house. When Halibel lit his *kiseru*, the smoke he inhaled went out into the night sky, and he said that.

Halibel: “I didn’t expect her to attack continuously. I thought that she wouldn’t act for a few days.”

Subaru: “It wasn’t even close to a few days. We met again within 10-20 minutes.”

Halibel: “I was really shocked when I saw you bloody in the room. I thought to myself, «I messed up by sending Su-san back home alooone. Let’s not make the same mistake next timeee.»“

Subaru: “That won’t situation won’t happen to me again.”

Halibel: “So, I was going to go attack the enemy, and then Su-san talked. I thought your heart had stopped beating. I thought you were dead.”

Subaru: “…Aah, right.”

Halibel: “————”

Halibel goes from looking at the sky to looking at Subaru’s profile. It was a brief exchange, but it was clear that Subaru’s thoughts were elsewhere. Subaru was not focused on his conversation with Halibel; he was thinking all about Rem’s well-being as she was being diagnosed in the room right behind them.

He trusted the old magic user’s skill in relation to external wounds, enough with his own body. However, Rem didn’t have external wounds. It was an illness, or perhaps——

Halibel: “I don’t think it’s magic, though I only took a glance. Incidentally, you can consider it to be different from a kind of black magic. Rest assured.”

Subaru: “How can you be so sure?”

Halibel: “Because I’m a black magic specialist. You can believe in my stamp of approval.”

Subaru: “A black magic specialist…? I can’t just let that comment slip by.”

Halibel: “There’s a long story to my past. For now, just think of it as one less thing to worry about.”

Although it was a pretty impactful reveal, Subaru didn’t object to Halibel’s statement. It was concerning. However, he wasn’t concerned about it right now.

Just like Halibel said, that was one less possibility of a threat to Rem’s life. Even if it didn’t make him feel relieved, it was enough to ease his mind.

And so, they waited for a while as the smoke Halibel gave out went into the night air——

???: “——Thanks for waiting.”

Subaru: “Sensei! Rem, how’s Rem!?”

???: “It’s night right now and there’s a girl sleeping, so quiet down. ——I have something to tell you. Come inside.”

Showing only his face outside, the old magic user beckons Subaru to come in. Impatience and the somewhat alarming atmosphere make Subaru catch his breath, and he slowly went back inside the room. The room was still in its disorderly stated caused by him raging at a woman. Only the futon Rem was sleeping in was fixed nicely, and it made him feel that the old magic user was somewhat thoughtful.

???: “Hey idiot over there, put out your *kiseru*’s fire. It’ll harm her.”

Halibel: “But usually you wouldn’t say anything unnecessary… Okay okay, fine I get it.”

Glared at sharply, Halibel obeyed the old magic user and put out his *kiseru*'s fire. He sat down heavily at the entrance, and Subaru's mind makes him come towards Rem's bedside. The old magic user sitting at the side opposite of Subaru beings speaking with a hoarse voice as he said, "Alright".

???: "Let's start with the good news. This girl is not unconscious because she's injured or has an illness. And I'm guessing you've heard from that idiot that it has nothing to do with a curse."

Subaru: "…Yeah."

???: "Basically, this means there is nothing wrong with her."

Subaru: "Huh? No wait…"

The old magic user's statement makes Subaru's eyes widen, as he couldn't understand what he was saying.

He said nothing was wrong. Rem collapsed. Her breathing sounding painful. These were all true facts. Although, her breathing was calm now, perhaps because of the treatment.

Subaru: "Sensei, Rem collapsed. She was in pain. Examine her more thoroughly!"

???: "You're an idiot, just like the one over there. You jump to conclusions too quickly. I'm not done talking."

Halibel: "You don't have to call people idiots…"

???: "Quiet, idiot. And I'm going to tell this idiot something. That was the good news… Now I'm going to tell you the better news."

Subaru: "The better news?"

There wasn't anything wrong with Rem, so what kind of unbelievable news did he have in store for him next? Subaru decided to keep silent in hopes that his next words would provide clarity.

And then, after a pause, the old magic user continued speaking to Subaru, who waited for his words.

???: "——Congrats."

Subaru: “Huh?”

Subaru was taken aback by the next word he said and let out a sigh.

——He didn’t fully understand the word «Congrats»[10]. Was it a name of a person? A name of a place? Whichever one it was, it was a different world proper noun that Subaru wasn’t familiar with. What did it mean?

Subaru: “Um, so you’re saying… Rem can be saved because of «Congrats»?”

???: “Hey, playboy. There might be someone who’s dumber than you are.”

The old magic user scratched his head with a dumbfounded look as Subaru questioned him with a stiff expression. Halibel scratched his head similarly as he went, “Well” and tried to make him see the matter his way.

Halibel: “Shouldn’t you have told him in a different way? I’m not surprised that this confused him.”

Subaru: “What do you mean «confused me»!? Please just tell me! What’s happening to Rem…”

Halibel: “You see, Su-san. By «congrats» he means congratulations. And I congratulate you too.”

Congratulations, or rather, «congrats»: the word that was repeated to Subaru, who was confused. That word meant——

???: “Your wife is pregnant. It’s your child.”

Subaru: “Pregnant… She’s pregnant!?”

The old magic user’s explanation shocks Subaru as his eyes opened wide.

Pregnant, congrats, congratulations—— All that goes around inside his head, beating up his brain. Subaru continued to be confused as the magic user looked at Rem with a serious expression.

[10] The word used here is “omedetaya” (おめでたや), which is the type of congratulations used for events like when someone is pregnant. However, it is written in katakana and Subaru thinks “omedetaya” is a name. Slang was used in the translation to make this exchange flow better in English.

???: “Don’t worry about her being unconscious. She just exhausted herself so much that she became light-headed. She’ll get up soon if you let her rest. Collapsing is not something that should be praised, though.”

Halibel: “She does push herself way more than your average wife, after all. We can’t learn anything from what happened tonight. That being said, this doesn’t mean that we could be completely relaxed, either.”

Halibel was murmuring about how Rem ended up exhausting so much that she fainted.

It’s true that they couldn’t learn anything from what happened tonight. They weren’t going to get attacked frequently like that. Still, it wasn’t like they had fought off the enemy; she just retreated on her own for some reason. He couldn’t possibly believe that everything was over now.

Halibel: “But she really didn’t kill you when she could have, huh.”

Just like Halibel said, the woman had plenty of chances to kill Subaru and Rem before he arrived.

She was hostile enough to make him tremble, and yet nothing happened with it. It was also true that she settled down. That’s how they escaped death by the skin of their teeth. Her true motive was still not clear at all, though.

Halibel: “——Su-san, are you okay?”

Subaru: “…Eh… Ah…”

Halibel taps Subaru’s shoulder, as he wouldn’t participate in the conversation, and he looks at his face. After doing all that, Subaru finally returns back to reality, and his eyes met the slit eyes in front of him. His mind and heart were a mess with chaos and confusion.

It seemed Halibel could tell, and so when he made eye contact with the old magic user and they nodded at each other he said,

Halibel: “Su-san, we’ll be leaving for the night. The girl from earlier shouldn’t come now. I have something I want to tell you, but that can wait until tomorrow… Sensei.”

???: “Let your wife sleep. You should get some rest tonight, too.”

Halibel: “So that’s that.”

Halibel and the old magic user take turns speaking to Subaru, and he nodded at them in silence like a doll. When he made that slow movement, Halibel grabbed onto Subaru's head, and then he forced him to turn around to Rem.

Halibel: "Su-san, you have to be the first one Rem-chan sees when she wakes up. Got it?"

Subaru: "—— G—got it."

He tells Subaru something else again, and his eyes finally vacantly settle on one place. Halibel makes sure Rem was in his black eyes, and he quietly gets up with the old magic user as they leave the room.

He was helped countless times in this night alone. Subaru really should've stood up and saw off the two of them, but he didn't have the energy to stand up, and they didn't want him to do that.

They put the fallen door back up, and the helpful guests leave the room behind. Left behind, Subaru silently reaches out for Rem's hot hand as she was lying down on the futon. Chaos and confusion were still heavily disturbing Subaru's mind. They told him to rest, but even if Subaru was shameless enough to sleep in a situation like this, he wasn't going to be irresponsible.

First, he was going to wait for Rem to wake up and make sure that she truly was safe. Subaru had to make sure of it before he could think about anything else.

Subaru: "——Rem."

Subaru shortly calls her name, and he continues to gaze at the girl's face as she slept.

Only the breathing of Subaru and Rem, the married couple, was left in the room.

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A few hours had probably passed since then. It was about to be the break of dawn when Rem nervously opened her eyes slightly.

Rem: “…Subaru… -kun?”

The color of the sky changes into signs of morning, and the dim light faintly shines on the room through the window. A weak light was in Rem’s bright, light blue eyes in this scene that was shaded a color between black and blue.

Subaru: “——Mm. Good morning, Rem.”

Rem’s voice, which made it sound like she was dreaming in a way, brings Subaru back to reality.

Subaru’s thoughts were engulfed in a swirl of stagnation in these past few hours he spent staring at Rem’s sleeping face.

The tumultuous day, the busy banquet at night, suddenly having his life threatened on the streets at night, getting severely hurt at his own home he arrived to, the opinion of the old magic user that came afterwards, his thoughts on all of that were put on hold.

It felt like he kept having recurring thoughts, and it also felt like he kept looking away from them. In any case, he waited for Rem’s awakening as an excuse to avoid wanting an answer. The time he could’ve used to run away ended, and it was now the time to face the situation.

Subaru: “Rem… umm…”

Rem blinks with her tired eyes, and she slowly moves her head while being half-awake. In the middle of doing this, she notices Subaru holding onto her hand, and she happily broke into a smile as she went, “Hehe”.

Rem: “What’s wrong, Subaru-kun? You were holding my hand while I was sleeping…”

Rem’s flower-like smile slowly stiffens, and she starts to open her eyes. Her consciousness gets freed from the cage of slumber, she puts her thoughts in order as the memory of last night came back to her vividly. Rem holds onto Subaru’s hand harder, and when she sat up in a panic she said,

Rem: “S—Subaru-kun, are you injured!? I fainted, and then… aah, why…”

Subaru: “Calm down, Rem. I’m fine. And I don’t… have any injuries now.”

Subaru hid the second disaster that happened in the tenement house, although he did hesitate a bit. If he made it clearer, the traces of Subaru getting physically abused in the room would become noticeable. However, she wouldn't be able to tell with the current dimness anyway. It was okay to cover it up, just for this moment.

Fortunately, Subaru's reply didn't make Rem suspect any chaos, and she was relieved.

Rem: "Thank goodness. If anything happened to Subaru-kun after that, I would be very…"

Subaru: "I hate to admit it, but it's all thanks to Hal-san… to Halibel. He fought off that suspicious person."

Rem: "Oh, I see. Halibel-sama did. I'll have to thank him later."

It seemed that her memory was clear to a certain extent, and that she remembered Halibel coming in to help. In fact, it seemed like Rem clearly remembered things that happened up to the point where she was about to faint.

Once she closed her lips tightly, she continued with a, "So" as she said,

Rem: "What happened to me…"

Subaru: "You…"

Rem: "What I remember is that Halibel-sama showed up, and then I focused on my forehead to protect you as much as possible. However, that's when my consciousness faded away and…"

With her free hand, Rem touches her forehead—— the spot where her horn appears, and she knits her thin brows. Her poor condition and fainting—— Rem had no idea what the cause of those things was.

Rem: "I've never fainted like that before… Umm, I'm sorry."

Subaru: "Y—you don't need to apologize. I should be the one doing that. You're always saving me… I wasn't able to move promptly in a time like that… That was really pathetic of me."

Rem: "No, that's not true…"

Rem's apologetic attitude hurts him inside. Subaru shakes his head at her apology, and harshly condemned himself. He could not be afraid anymore, and that also went for the powerlessness and cowardice he described to her. He was being spoiled by Rem's feeling of guilt and delaying important news for as long as possible.

After confirming Rem's safety, his thoughts would move one step forward—— he had to move forward.

Subaru: "Rem, listen. The truth is that you were examined by a magic user. After you suddenly collapsed."

Rem: "——Okay."

Subaru had a determined look, and Rem nodded with seemingly stiff cheeks.

With a serious look, he told her that she was examined by a doctor. It was natural for her to be nervous. However, Subaru, with how he was right now, really did not have the composure to show concern for her nervousness.

He hesitated many times and wet his dry lips. Seeing Subaru do that, Rem closed her eyes as she said,

Rem: "Subaru-kun, please let it out. Whatever the truth is, I'll accept it."

Subaru: "…Ah."

Rem: "Even if it's that I don't have much time left, I'd like to spend it with Subaru-kun and…"

Subaru: "——Apparently, you're pregnant."

He interrupts her with that.

Rem: "Huh?"

He's going to let me know that I have a serious illness. Rem was preparing herself for something like that, and so she was taken aback.

Rem opens her eyes, and she was looking at Subaru dumbfounded. Subaru nods at her, forgets about the dryness of his lips, pushes away his hesitation, and repeats himself.

Subaru: “Rem, you have a baby inside of you. ——A child, and it’s ours.”

Rem: “————”

Hearing those repeated words, with her eyes wide open, Rem rubs her stomach with her hand that Subaru wasn’t holding onto. She still couldn’t tell with how it looked. It could be a misdiagnosis. That’s how unreal it felt.

A new life was inside of Rem. And it was theirs.

Subaru: “Were there any signs? Something that seemed weird.”

Rem: “I had… a slight fever… for a bit… I just thought that maybe I was tired. After finally settling in one town and being relieved, my body was tired… That’s what I thought.”

Rem answers Subaru’s awkward question while choking.

He was bothered by the fact that Rem didn’t tell him about the noticeable symptoms of her slight fever, but he understood how she felt. It was when their lives were finally starting to settle down. She didn’t want to use her poor health as a reason to interrupt that. Subaru would’ve done the same thing if he was in her position.

Rem: “A child… inside of me… A child. Subaru-kun’s… and mine…”

Subaru: “You fainted because you’ve been acting different. You’re in this condition where you get tired more easily than usual, and you’ve been getting exposed to danger, getting tense, exhausted…”

Rem: “I—I’m sorry.”

Subaru: “Like I said, you don’t have to apologize. I’ve always been the one who should be apologizing.”

He made Rem overwork herself, which he shouldn’t have done. Even though he didn’t know that she was pregnant, that was no excuse. He selfishly brought Rem with him, and he was a burden to her because of his own incompetence.

They did not finally have an everyday life; even a dangerous situation like that was just like how they were before.

Subaru: "——"

He couldn't forgive himself for that. The one who couldn't even move in his last moment. The weak one who couldn't even accomplish his goal of not letting that person get close to Rem and was saved just because she was fickle. The one who was always hurting Rem, Natsuki Subaru——.

Rem: "Subaru-kun… Umm…"

Subaru: "What is it?"

The hesitation in Rem's words becomes clear. Subaru notices her agitation, and he spoke as kindly as possible with his voice to get her to relax.

As he did, he had only one thing in his mind, which was that he wanted to keep her away from him after all the times he's hurt her. Rem nervously beings to talk to Subaru as he felt that way.

Rem: "Subaru-kun… what do… you think?"

Subaru: "What do I… By that do you mean…"

Rem: "We… have… a c—child… About that, do…"

"You regret it?"—— Her next words were probably going to be something like that.

Rem's weakness for not saying it and his own stupidity for making her say it make Subaru tremble, as if he was struck by thunder.

He was an idiot. A complete idiot. There should've been other things he had to say to her other than the fact that there was a baby inside of her at this moment and that they were blessed with a child. There were things, but he was such an idiot.

Subaru: "I…"

Subaru speaks reflexively, and that's when he had trouble putting it into words. Rem's watery eyes were sincerely staring straight at Subaru, waiting for his answer.

Doing something like saying a thoughtless statement on the spur of the moment would be unacceptable. Now was the time to make his frozen thoughts move again in front of Rem and ask his mind a question.

——The new life inside Rem is Natsuki Subaru's.

The first emotions he felt when he imagined seriously facing their new life that was growing. That was——

Subaru: "Let's… see. ——I think I like it and I'm glad."

Rem: "————"

Subaru: "We have a child… a baby. And that… makes me…"

He faces the first, the very first deep emotions he had.

He felt surprised. He also felt anxious. But, more importantly, he felt passion. Natsuki Subaru defined that passion welling up in him as the first time he learned what it meant to be glad. Subaru was happy to have a child with a girl so precious to him.

Subaru: "——Rem!"

Rem: "Fua!?"

Subaru gives in to the urge hurting his chest, and he hugs Rem without thinking.

That sudden action surprises Rem, and the warmth she felt from Subaru, who was very close to her, makes her goggle in astonishment. Subaru brings his lips near her ears, and with everything he felt, he said,

Subaru: "Thank you, Rem. ——Thank you. Thank you, Rem."

Rem: "Subaru… -ku…"

Subaru: "I'm so happy. We have a kid… a family."

Rem: "——Ah."

Subaru cleared away his anxiety about the distant future, acted on the impulse he felt at this moment, and his words were his true feelings.

He had a baby with Rem. The two people who lived in Kararagi and called themselves a married couple, although it was just for form's sake—— They were going to become a true family.

Rem: "Oo… foo…"

Being hugged, Rem nervously put her arms around Subaru's back. While hugging each other on the futon, Rem lets out a voice from her lips that sounded like crying.

It had to be the relief brought by the needle of his words breaking up the anxiety that had been growing endlessly.

Subaru: "Thank you, Rem."

Rem: "N—no… no, wait. I'm the one that should be…"

Subaru: "Thank you, Rem."

Still hugging each other, Subaru expresses his gratitude again to Rem, who let out a sob. When Rem accepted it, her throat clogs up, and warm tears fell from her eyes.

The intense impulse inside Subaru's chest naturally goes to his throat, and then into his eyes, spreading all through his body, and he begins to shake.

Subaru: "Ah… haha… hahaha…"

He tries to hide it before that impulse turned into tears and then into sobbing. His laughter was also shaky, and as a result, he couldn't hide anything anymore, though.

This was the moment where he just simply wanted to share the joy of being blessed with life as a married couple. Because even if there were still things he had to think about, anxiety, and danger——

Rem: "Subaru-kun, thank you. ——I love you."

Subaru's gratitude and Rem's confession were, without a doubt, real.

Chapter 3 – Three Months

Original translation by Remonwater

1

Halibel: "——Still, that really surprised me. My heart almost stopped beating again."

Subaru: "About that…"

Rem: "We're sorry for troubling you."

Subaru and Rem were the ones who bowed their heads side by side in the room as it approached dawn. In front of them, it was Halibel who was making them apologize as he nodded calmly.

He puts his hand inside his *kimono*, moves his eyes while he scratched his chest, and stared at the wall of the room with human made dents and cracks. At the very least, these marks weren't there last night.

Habliel: "What's up with all that?"

Subaru: "They're the result of a ceremony to confirm a married couple being blessed with a new life… maybe."

Rem: "I'm sorry. I couldn't control myself very well, I guess because I was so confused."

Subaru wiped his face with a towel, while Rem hung her head, showing regret.

In short, the dents in the wall were from Subaru crashing into it, and Rem was the one who made that happen. It happened right after she was told that she was pregnant, and they shared the joy of being blessed with a child.

Subaru: "Yesterday was the continuance of shocking events. I wanted to make sure that having a child wasn't just a dream, so I asked Rem to hit me a little hard, and then that happened."

Rem: "Shrug."

Halibel: "…Well, I'm just glad you didn't die because of it. I wouldn't really be able to rest in peace if you did."

Halibel comments on the married couple's unusual sort of way they talked about their happiness with each other, and he looked away from the wall's dents. After that, he slightly opened one of his slit eyes as he said,

Halibel: "Anyway, let's talk about the cost of repairs for the wall later…"

Subaru: "Later?"

Halibel: "I have something I need to talk to you about, although it's nothing big."

Halibel, sitting crossed legged on the tatami mat, started talking as he shook the *kiseru* in his mouth up and down.

The way he entered the topic sort of made the nervousness from last night return to Subaru. Rem's hit filled with love proved that the tumultuous series of events wasn't just a dream. In short, all of it wasn't just a dream, including what Halibel did last night.

Halibel: "In short, saying that I'm a Playboy as a tenement house manager was just a disguise."

Halibel confidently made a confession about himself, as if supporting Subaru's thoughts. The first major event that happened in the morning, continuing from last night. There seemed to be a serious light in Halibel's eyes——

Subaru: "Wait, no there isn't. And he isn't even apologetic."

Halibel: "Why would I need to be apologetic? I didn't do anything wrong, and I also protected you guys."

After saying that there was more to it, Halibel responded to Subaru like he always would. It was very like him to be aloof and go at his own pace. He just accepted that, since he could even be confusing by suddenly starting to use an authoritative tone, like his personality had changed.

Anyhow, while Subaru fixed the position of Rem's futon blanket cover as she reflected upon herself, he said,

Subaru: “So about why you came out with that revealing, shocking truth…”

Rem: “Sorry, Halibel-sama. I, uh, kind of figured.”

Halibel: “Whaaat! How embarrassing! If you did, then that’s really embarrassing! How embarrassing!”

Subaru’s eyes were half-open, while Rem’s eyes looked down awkwardly. Listening to their replies, Halibel looks up at the ceiling, and he sighed dramatically as he opened his big mouth and said, “God daaaamn it.”

Subaru: “Hold on. You sigh stuff like, «God damn it», but aren’t you said to be famous? Actually, I did sort of figure judging from the reactions of people around you, but you didn’t even try to hide your name. So, being found out and being troubled are things you brought upon yourself.”

Rem: “I also heard a lot about Halibel-sama the Admirer… so I thought you were testing us at first when you said that you were a tenement house manager.”

Halibel: “Ah, so I’ve been found out since the beginning. Woe is me…”

Subaru: “Woe is not you.”

Subaru just now realizes that he had been left in the dark by the two of them as he made that joke.

How anxious did Rem feel for not telling even Subaru that they had suddenly met Kararagi’s strongest on the first day they moved? He was pathetic for being unaware of how much Rem had struggled, despite having peaceful days in this town.

Subaru: “You should’ve told me. Rem, why did you carry the burden all by yourself?”

Rem: “Subaru-kun…”

Rem is always like this. She always sacrifices herself more than others. Even though they were living together now, she sacrifices herself for Subaru. That’s why she put the burden on herself until the situation came to light, yet again.

Rem: “I’m sorry. I didn’t know Halibel-sama’s true motive and…”

Subaru: “And?”

Rem: “And you’re terrible at lying. I didn’t want to provoke Halibel-sama since it’d show in your behavior if I carelessly told you about his identity…”

Subaru: “So you thought very realistically and didn’t trust me!”

Subaru gets showered with Rem’s sharp words again and again, and so he raises his voice. Seeing Subaru do that, Rem waved her hands in a panic as she said, “Oh, you’ve got it wrong.”

Rem: “I do trust Subaru-kun. Really, words are not enough for me to describe how much I trust you. However, trusting you and making you do something you’re incapable of doing are two different matters.”

Halibel: “The more you speak the more I feel bad for Su-san, so let’s leave it at that, shall we?”

Rem tells her realistic opinion without hesitation as she put her unlimited love and trust into words.

In actuality, Rem was right to be concerned. Subaru wasn’t so sure that he’d interacted with Halibel in the same way after she’d told him about his nickname. Still, there was something he had to confirm in order for him to be convinced.

Subaru: “This may be a basic question, but is Hal-san really the strongest person in Kararagi? You sure it’s not someone else in your family, or a good little twin brother?”

Rem: “About that… Sorry. I’m not completely sure.”

Halibel: “I’m in a bit of an awkward position now that you’ve apologized for that.”

Rem apologizes in response to Subaru’s meaningless point, and it hurt Halibel.

Halibel: “I mean, do you have a problem with me being the strongest or something? Listen, I am the strongest. Or is it the kind of thing where you love the same old me too much, and not the real me?”

Subaru: “It’s not something disgusting like that. It’s something more idealistic. A strong person should have a strong person’s personality, something like that.”

Halibel: “Now you’re just insulting me!”

Halibel raised his voice unexpectedly because of Subaru’s reasoning. Still, somehow, he was the Kararagi City State’s strongest—— He was the strongest in one of the four large countries. Of course, he’d like him to have a fitting character. Like how that Sword Saint Reinhard van Astrea is an overwhelming warrior in the Lugunica kingdom.

Subaru: “…Well, I guess that’s just me being sentimental.”

Halibel: “It’s not like I don’t see your point, but this is what I’ve been doing for a long time. To be honest, I don’t care that much about being known as the strongest… and I don’t understand being proud by being strong in a head-on fight and having confidence.”

He skillfully moves the *kiseru* in his mouth and draws a circle at the tip. Halibel’s attitude makes Subaru knit his brows, and he tilted his head as he said, “Being strong in a head-on fight?”

Halibel: “I’m a shinobi warrior. My specialty is attacking around my opponent’s weak points. Oh, but the details on how we fight are classified information. It’d endanger our existence. Sorry, we’re all mostly dead now, besides me.”

Subaru: “I don’t really get your joke on getting wiped out. Also, a shinobi…”

Haibel: “Oh, people from outside the country might not understand it. As for shinobi, it’s like that. Like, how could I put this? They’re that. It’s a job where it’d be bad if I explained that part.”

Rem: “You haven’t been specific about anything…”

Rem mercilessly casts aside Halibel’s explanation that lacked the main point. Forgetting about the two of them, Subaru was correctly connecting ‘shinobi’ with ‘shinobu’ inside of his head——in other words, he connected it with ninja.

He went from being astonished by the existence of wasou and wafuu culture, from katanas to chopsticks, and now finally even ninjas. Because of this, Subaru didn’t have trouble understanding it. He didn’t, but because of that, Halibel’s confession now had a different meaning.

He was obscuring various parts of his confession by joking, but there was some truth in his main point.

——That is, there was going to be some catch after finding out that he was a ninja.

Subaru: "————"

Halibel: "Su-san, you look pale, are you okay?"

Subaru: "What do you want from us?"

Subaru, cheeks stiffening with caution and nervousness, questioned Halibel, who sat cross-legged. Next to him, Rem also gets affected by the nervousness, and she gripped tight onto the futon blanket cover. Halibel could become a foe or an ally, depending on how he acts next. And if he turned into their enemy, Subaru would have no chance of winning while holding Rem as she was pregnant.

Halibel: "If, say, in this situation, I said your lives—— what would you do?"

Subaru: "I would…"

Halibel: "————"

Subaru: "I would make excuses and say that we've been neighbors all this time, Rem and I are newlyweds, she's pregnant, and I'd shamelessly beg for our lives in desperation, appealing to your emotions… Probably."

Halibel: "I see."

Subaru's voice and facial expression were truly serious, and that was his reply to Halibel's question. After that, Halibel sighed, and his eyes open just slightly in surprise.

However, Rem, who listened to the same declaration Halibel heard, smiled at Subaru's reply. She reached out for her husband and held onto his free hand as proof of her trust.

Halibel sees the two of them unite like that, and he changed the way he held onto the *kiseru* with his hands. And then——

Halibel: "——Wahahaha! S—Su-san's so lame! So uncool! Making that face in front of your wife, «appeal to my emotions»… Ahahah!"

Subaru: “You’re laughing way too much!”

Halibel: “O—of course I’d… I’d laugh… ahh, hah… hah… hah… I’m gonna die of laughter…! S—so this is what you were trying to do… An ingenious scheme!”

Subaru: “That’s groundless, and I did reply seriously.”

Halibel: “I know I know.”

After laughing his ass off, Halibel wiped away the tears he had from laughing too hard. Then, being looked at by Subaru’s displeased eyes, the wolf man raises his hands as he said,

Halibel: “Hahh, man that cracked me up. Sorry for laughing. But, you can relax. The hypothetical situation was absolutely hypothetical. After all, even if I really did have a job where I’d get in trouble for getting found out, it would be horrible to act without changing my name.”

Subaru: “T—that’s true.”

Halibel: “Besides, it would be too counterproductive of me to get rid of someone I saved. If I was going to do that, I might as well not have bothered saving you yesterday.”

Subaru: “——”

He touches on the attack that happened last night, making Subaru tremble as he remembered the predicament.

In truth, if Halibel hadn’t come, Subaru wouldn’t be alive right now. The baby inside of Rem wouldn’t be alive, either. On top of that, the baby would have been lost without them ever finding out about its existence——

Subaru: “I’m really sorry for saying this so late. Hal-san… Halibel-san, thanks a lot for yesterday. You are a lifesaver. You saved me, Rem, and the baby inside of her.”

Rem: “Please let me thank you too. Thanks to you, we didn’t end up losing our, erm, child. Thank you very much.”

Halibel: “Wooow, how sincere. I’ll gratefully accept your thanks since it makes me happy, though.”

Seeing Subaru and Rem quickly bow their heads, Halibel cheerfully smiled. However, after that, while still having a smile on his face, he pointed the *kiseru* in his hand at Subaru as he said,

Halibel: “Okay, I accept your thanks. Still, you gotta quit it with that discomforting speech. It’s really embarrassing for Su-san to call me Halibel-san at this point. Rem-chan you too. If you could stop with the Halibel-sama stuff now and be more informal with me, that’d make me happy.”

Subaru: “…Yeah, got it. Thanks, Hal-san.”

Rem: “I’ll see what I can do, Halibel-sama.”

Halibel: “Your wife sure is stubborn!”

Halibel raises his hands to surrender to Rem, who stubbornly insisted on keeping the honorific. Then, Halibel lit the *kiseru* that he held with his raised hands, and he put it in his mouth. He then smokes it. Once Subaru saw the rising smoke, he made a sour look.

Subaru: “Hal-san. Tobacco can harm a pregnant woman’s body, so from now on, smoking is forbidden in this house.”

Halibel: “Ohh, don’t worry about it. Mine has no tobacco, unlike a normal *kiseru*. Mine is like medicine. It’s used by shinobis.”

Rem: “Medicine, you say?”

Halibel: “Yes. If I don’t smoke this regularly, I’ll die. Hahh, and then we’d all be wiped out.”

Subaru: “There you go again with jokes on getting wiped out…!”

His excuse sounded like a joke, but the wafting smell of the smoke made Subaru think otherwise. The smell of the smoke Halibel put out certainly was different from what you’d call tobacco, although Subaru wasn’t very knowledgable about it. It did not have the smell of tobacco, but the smell of medicine—— But it’s not like that’d be good for a mother’s body, either.

Subaru: “Anyway, refrain from doing it when Rem’s here. If there’s ever a time when you’re torn between decisions, you could help our child out by bravely dying out.”

Halibel: “You just said that I’m a lifesaver though!”

Subaru: “Being a lifesaver and being a smoker are two different matters. Go do it by the window.”

Halibel gets sent from the middle of the tatami mat to the side, and he gives out smoke out the window while being sulky. And then, with his slit eyes, he looked at Subaru, who protected his wife and child, and said,

Halibel: “Putting the matter of the child aside as something to be handled by the husband and wife… Let’s talk a little more about last night, shall we.”

Subaru: “Mm, alright.”

Halibel: “So, first I want you tell me about that person from last night. Do you have any idea who that girl is?”

Subaru: “————”

He starts talking about last night, and Subaru hesitates to answer his question about knowing who the culprit is.

He’d never seen that woman with a blade-like presence before. They truly weren’t acquaintances. Still, it wasn’t like he had no idea why she’d attack them. The woman was clearly going after Subaru and Rem. This wasn’t like something where they were unluckily dragged into an indiscriminate attack, since they were attacked not once, but twice, and she chased them all the way to the tenement house.

There could only be one reason as to why they were being chased someone with such bloodlust—— It had to be because Subaru and Rem were living alone together.

Subaru: “Wi…”

Halibel: “Wi?”

Subaru moves his stiff cheeks and his lips, and he tries to touch on who she might be. However, the fear Subaru should’ve forgotten about returns, and it continued to tear his mind apart as he tried to open the cover to his memory.

——Actually, he didn't forget it. He had never forgotten about it.

The fear was still coiled around Natsuki Subaru as the chains of regret.

Subaru: "————"

Even the two letters of the words he tried to speak were unbearable for his tongue. Seeing Subaru act like that, Halibel impatiently played with his whiskers with his fingers. And then,

Rem: "——Subaru-kun, last night's culprit isn't who you think it is."

Subaru: "Rem?"

Rem: "I know what you were feeling and what you were thinking just now. And I don't think you're right… Yes, that's what I'll say."

There was an unexpected difference in their opinions. Subaru instead opened his eyes wide at Rem, who made that statement. She nods at Subaru, and Halibel gave him a serious look. He takes that look head on, and Halibel slightly opened one of his eyes as he said,

Halibel: "You shouldn't lie to take care of Su-san. I know this doesn't sound convincing coming from someone who calls himself a playboy, but we aren't playing around here. This is a life-threatening matter."

Rem: "I'm not lying. I… I have the nose to sniff out that enemy. I couldn't sense it in the person from last night. So, the culprit is not related to what he thinks."

Halibel: "——How reliable is your nose?"

Rem: "I'm able to be with Subaru-kun right now because of my nose."

Those words did not justify anything. Still, they were declared so confidently that it didn't feel that way. As a result, Halibel's reacted a little late. Meanwhile, Rem brought Subaru's arms towards her, and she hugged them firmly.

Rem: "Here's proof."

Halibel: “Su-san and Rem-chan sure are quite the… troubling neighbors.”

Subaru: “…Says the guy who hid his identity.”

Halibel: “I wasn’t able to hide it, though. But you got a point. Then I guess we’re neighbors in the same boat. We’re friends at this tenement house, so let’s get along and work together.”

Halibel suddenly smiles, and he faced the two people who were close to each other as he suggested to work together. His words surprise Subaru, and then Rem and he look at each other. They didn’t understand his true motive.

Kararagi’s strongest was going to help them in this situation where they had no allies and were being targeted by an enemy of unknown affiliation. It was a charming proposal, but he still wanted to know Halibel’s intentions before jumping at it.

What did he have to gain from supporting Subaru and Rem in this situation?

Subaru: “I don’t get why you’d help us out so much…”

Halibel: “Don’t stress over complicated things. Elder asked me to take care of you guys, and plus you have no friends. Fussing over pros and cons is a part of Kararagi, however losing friends is an extraordinarily heavy loss. Isn’t it just natural for me to act so that I don’t lose any?”

Halibel says that, and he makes a gesture that looked like a wink as he normally would. He wasn’t completely sure if it was a wink because both of his eyes were always squinted like slit eyes.

Everything about his behavior lacks seriousness, and so it didn’t feel like there was an ulterior motive behind him doing it. Everything about Halibel’s character is aloof, and that makes him who he is. That’s exactly why he believed him and why he didn’t think he was just telling a lie he’d like to hear.

Subaru: “I understand. Thanks a lot for saying that. We’re going to rely on you so much.”

Halibel: “Yep, depend on me as much as you want. Once you become parents, you won’t be able to whine with the child there anyway. Now’s the time to depend on me before that happens.”

Subaru felt temporarily relief, saved by his generous response. Once Halibel nodded at Subaru, who was finally relieved, he continued by saying, “Still.”

Halibel: “We have no idea who the culprit is—— that’s our biggest problem.”

Subaru: “About that, how about you make around 1000 clones and overpower her by sheer force of numbers?”

Halibel: “You truly are going to depend on me a lot, huh… Also, cloning is pretty much my trump card. I can’t just use it recklessly. Using 1000 clones is impossible, and I’m bluffing pretty hard when I’m 4.”

Subaru: “How about your sense of smell as a wolf? Maybe you can go after the culprit’s smell or something with that.”

Halibel: “About thaaat, I did try it.”

Halibel snorted at Subaru, who had his clone tactic rejected and suggested an alternate plan. As he moved around his black nose and sniffed, he said,

Halibel: “How strange. I can’t smell that girl’s scent anymore. If you want to escape my nose, you have to get rid of your scent pretty carefully… I guess she’s just that skilled.”

Subaru: “This mean she’s taken countermeasures against Hal-san.”

In this situation, what’s terrifying is that woman’s meticulous planning. Regarding the sequence of events of last night, Halibel becoming Subaru and Rem’s ally was still unconfirmed information. However, the woman perfectly prepared for that uncertain factor, and she attacked.

A night attack after people were cleared from the street, and a surprise attack where she came after him at the tenement house—— In a way, both of these attacks weren’t matching in meticulousness, especially in the latter event where they exchanged some words to a certain extent.

Halibel: “Basically, right now we’ll just have to wait and see. No unnecessary sacrifices will be made this way, although I did talk about this with the town’s policeman just in case. It’d be problematic if the town became covered in bodies after picking a fight carelessly.”

Subaru: “It makes sense to clear out people. You think they’ll find her?”

Rem: “You shouldn’t expect much, I think. I should just take the initiative and act.”

Subaru: “You absolutely mustn’t do that.”

Subaru rejected Rem’s frail opinion with powerful words.

Although there still weren’t any changes showing in her appearance, Rem was pregnant. He wasn’t going to allow her to overwork herself. He even wanted to make her take a break from her job at Temple Elementary School and rest at the house. Then, Subaru suddenly had a realization.

Subaru: “…Crap. What am I going to do about work?”

Rem: “I have to go to Temple Elementary School too.”

Subaru and Rem, who were focused on the conversation, notice that it’s right around the time to leave for work, and their faces became pale.

This was a critical moment for Subaru if he wanted to keep his job, and of course, it also was for Rem, who was a fulltime worker. Absences from work without notice were inexcusable; ICD—— inform, contact, discuss—— is essential for a working adult.

Halibel: “Ahh, should you really be worry about that right now?”

Subaru: “Don’t be stupid. Don’t lump me with you when you have unearned income. We’re going to eat, whether there is an enemy or not. Money is needed for us to eat. We aren’t going to miss anything in our daily life.”

Subaru talked back to Halibel, who acted shocked, and he continued with a, “Besides.”

Subaru: “This is frustrating. It’s so outrageous how this keeps messing with the flow of our lives even though it’s all her fault. I’m not just going to sit back and let this happen.”

Halibel: “————”

Their daily lives were still waiting after the reasonable attacks by the enemy and repelling danger. Subaru and the others had lives to live even after their eventful story.

Therefore, he absolutely couldn’t stand breaking down what they’d built up.

Subaru: “Plus, we have a tight family budget.”

Rem: “And we’re going to have one more member, so we need to save up.”

Halibel: “What kind of threat is this!? You two truly are a ridiculous married couple.”

They used their lives and their new life as an excuse, and Halibel went into deep thought with a troubled look. The two of them were firmly determined. Understanding that, Halibel let out a deep sigh with his big mouth.

Halibel: “The enemy probably won’t attack today or tomorrow for now.”

Subaru: “What makes you say that?”

Halibel: “She took countermeasures while considering my nose, right? I came to this conclusion because I don’t think that she’d rush it and make a mistake.”

Rem: “I think he has a point.”

Rem also agreed with Halibel, who raised a finger. Subaru was convinced too as he said, “I see.”

They were thinking that the enemy wouldn’t do anything without enough preparation, precisely because she is smart. You could say that they trusted her meticulous style, although it wasn’t very fitting for someone who’d hurt him so much. As long as they followed the twisted trust that came from the right track——

Halibel: “I’ll stay with Rem-chan for today. That way, Su-san can also relax, and the doctor from yesterday can come too once it becomes fire time[11].”

Subaru: “…Got it. I’ll go to the palace and talk with Riften-san and the landlady. I’ll tell Temple Elementary School that Rem will be taking a day off, too.”

Rem: “…Yes. It’s unfortunate, but please do.”

[11] In the Re: Zero world, this means the latter 6 bright hours of the day. Basically, from noon to 6 PM.

Although Rem seemed bummed out, she nodded in agreement with Subaru's plan without opposing it.

As for Subaru's job, he had no choice but to reveal the situation and wait for Riften and the landlady's decision. It was depressing how the hinted path to being promoted to a full-time employee was undoubtedly far away, though.

However, once Rem moved forward in stages of pregnancy, she'd no longer be able to work at Temple Elementary School without being hindered by the enemy. That alone was a sure fact.

Rem: "Please let me continue for as long as possible, Subaru-kun."

Subaru: "…We'll have to have a good talk about that, too."

Rem: "Okay."

It was now Subaru's turn to support Rem, as she was dealing with two problems—— her job, and pregnancy. So that no other agonizing things would torment Rem's heart, even if they were justifiable.

Subaru: "Alright, although it's extremely hard for me to do this… I think… I'm gonna… go to work…!"

Halibel: "You should just quit if it's so hard for you."

Subaru: "Don't just say that so casually, undeserving noble. I'm going to be that, you know. From now on, I'm going to be the provider of my family."

He says that and somehow stands up after almost getting smashed by the weight of being a provider.

That… that's right. Rem has a baby. Subaru's going to be a father. He's going to become the provider in order to protect this place called the Natsuki home.

——These were the thoughts weighing very, very heavily on Subaru.

Rem: "Take care, Subaru-kun. I'll be waiting for you to come back home."

Subaru: "——Yep, I'm off now."

Rem, smiling slightly, gently relieves the pressure and reluctance Subaru had, and she sees him off. After that, Subaru took a deep breath, and then he goes towards the tenement house exit. He put his hand on the door, and he finally turned around.

Subaru: “Hal-san, please take care of Rem, seriously. If something happens, please sacrifice yourself.”

Halibel: “I never had a talent for dodging attacks, mind you.”

He waves, makes sure Halibel promised him, and he left.

The wind was cold, and the rising morning sun was slowly starting to brightly shine on the town of Banan.

Subaru: “So bright.”

He probably thought that the morning sun was brighter than usual because of his current state of mind.

While thinking that way, Subaru started walking towards his workplace to fulfill his duty.

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2

——The turmoil that continued from last night—— this series of events shocked Subaru significantly.

It was hinted that he’d be promoted to a full-time employee at his workplace, and then his life was threatened by an unfamiliar enemy on the streets at night. Once he got home, he was nearly killed by the enemy that followed him, and lastly, Rem’s pregnancy was revealed.

Honestly, the good and bad major events were too much for a single day. He even wanted to complain.

Still, there were plenty of happy realizations that happened because of the major events continuing.

——First and foremost, there was celebrating Rem being pregnant. That was a huge deal.

As usual with many men, the shock from unexpectedly finding out one's partner is pregnant is immeasurable. Subaru also was so shocked that he couldn't even tell that his surprise was surprise.

However, after the first wave of shock subsided, pure joy as well as gratitude towards Rem were left in Subaru's mind, so he was happy about it himself.

Children should be loved by their parents and born with joy and blessings. Even though Subaru knew that this rule didn't apply to all children, he wanted to believe in the ideal. Or at least, Subaru was raised in such a way that made him believe in it.

That's why he wanted to love his child. He believed that being loved brings happiness. That being said, always being worried about not being prepared enough is an entirely different matter.

——And then there was the second realization; they realized they were blessed with the people around them.

First, they were able to settle down in Banan Town thanks to the connection they made with the person they had met on their journey. News got around, they made connections with Halibel, and then that led to them escaping death by the skin of their teeth last night as well as his help this morning.

And then he even realized it in Temple Elementary School when he came to tell them that Rem would be absent from work.

???: "——Pregnant! Really! Wow, that's great!"

Subaru was blessed so much by the Temple Elementary School staff that he was the one who behaved modestly.

Frankly, it was a personal affair of a newcomer. He prepared himself for insults like, "The new female teacher doesn't know how to responsibly separate her private life from her job!" but it wasn't anything to worry about.

Another teacher covered for her absence, and he was told that a higher-up would talk about what would happen from here on out. He did nothing but thank them. In an unexpected way, he found out about his wife's popularity at her workplace, and it made him proud as a husband.

That's how things didn't go as he expected in a good way, and then Subaru went to his own workplace.

He had to tell his employer Riften and the landlady superior about the situation and discuss what they'd do from here on out. Of course, this was a personal issue. Subaru was planning on discussing it when the opportunity came.

He was going to, but——

???: "——Subaru-chan, your wife is pregnant?"

All his enthusiasm went to waste, as it seemed they'd already heard about it from someone somewhere. For some reason, in the palace it was already well known that Rem was pregnant, seeing how he was plied with questions at once.

His memory on what happened after that wasn't very clear, but it did end with a warm conclusion of, "Ooh, Subaru-chan may have a childish look, but I guess he really does get some, too."

After that, he did have another opportunity to have a discussion with Riften.

Riften: "I heard about your situation. That's a pretty tough spot to be in."

Subaru: "Y—Yes… Sorry. I've troubled Master with my private life…"

Riften: "What? I don't think it's a bother or anything. A new life means the birth of a new client."

Subaru: "You are so open-minded."

He reveals the situation to Riften in the tearoom, and the way he accepted it dumbfounded him, rather than surprised him. Seeing Subaru react like that, Riften continued speaking as he said, "Also."

Riften: "I heard about what happened last night from Mr. Halibel. If there's anything on your mind, feel free to talk about it. The ladies and I will listen to what you have to say."

Subaru: "Well… I, uh, appreciate it. However, why are you doing this?"

Riften: "Why am I being so nice? I told you, I have high hopes for you. I invested the asset hope in you. Of course, I'd try everything so that I could recover my shares."

Subaru's extremely understanding workplace and his employer's powerful words were starting to move him to tears. However, it was too pathetic of him to look like that. He was being spoiled too much.

Riften: "I'm sure that the ladies will respond nicely, too. That's the trust you cultivated."

Subaru: "…It's only been about two weeks."

Riften: "Two valuable weeks, that is. That's all there is to it."

He basically tells Subaru that it's no big deal, and now was the time when he had to look up.

Everyone at the Magoji palace became true lifesavers to Subaru in this moment. He was fortunately blessed with lifesavers, neighbors, and with people at his workplace.

The tumultuous day let him know that he was blessed with many things, including a child.

——All the more reason for the mysterious woman to cast a shadow on his happiness.

For Subaru and Rem, the enemy was too unpredictable. They had no clue as to why they were being targeted, according to Rem. Still, that beautiful, cruel killer would definitely show up again. Even with Halibel, the one renowned as the strongest of Kararagi, they couldn't achieve relief easily.

And so, Subaru quickly left home and hurried on home, depending on the kindness of everyone at the palace. He'd return the favor, no matter what. So, he'd depend on them, just for now.

Connections helped him out with one urgent matter. Subaru didn't have any bright ideas for the remaining problem—— for countermeasures against the woman, but with Halibel, someone who was familiar with the town, and Rem, who had extensive knowledge, perhaps they would come up with a solution.

While having hopes like that inside, Subaru ran through the street and——

???: "——You look like a fool walking around all alone. Are you even trying to protect your woman?"

——Right in the middle of the street, he was convinced that Halibel was quite off with his foresight.

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3

???: “What are you playing dumb for? Look, can you take your eyes off me?”

The woman showed up in front of Subaru in an extremely unashamed way, like it was no big surprise.

He was in town in the middle of going back from the Magoji Palace to the tenement house. He managed to leave work early in the afternoon thanks to the people around him being considerate, and so it was currently in the afternoon with the sun high up—— that was obvious. However, there were surging crowds walking past each other, and they were practically sticking out like sore thumbs.

In fact, the woman’s inhumanly beautiful face charmed people, and it wasn’t suitable for spying at all, for better or worse. If she had the same objective as last night, then perhaps the street being unclear was some sort of blunder by her.

Or maybe she was going to attack him despite all the attention.

Subaru: “————”

Subaru muffles his voice and looks at the street. Nobody could tell that this woman, who was standing in the middle of the street as if she owned it, was a dangerous person. If she attacked with as much force as she did last night, many people would get harmed—— especially if the attack was as vicious as her first one was. He could not imagine the amount of damage it’d cause.

Subaru: “I messed up… I thought you were cautious.”

Clear out people, prepare for the enemy, and find out where he ran. He was inclined to believe that she wanted to secretly accomplish her objective and was going to at least carry out those things cautiously.

This was the result. She had the whole town hostage, and he couldn’t act.

Subaru: “How cruel it is for you to be such a sharp woman.”

???: “Huh? You sure can be rude out of nowhere. How could you greet someone like that?”

Subaru: “Everyone around are hostages, and if I run away, you will show no mercy. That’s your plan, isn’t it?”

The woman squints, her eyes were cold, and she had on the same white clothes from last night. The well-dressed woman’s Wasou being pure white without a single stain—— although that wasn’t a very rare sight—— and her beautiful face being eccentric created this ethereal sort of harmony.

That’s what he’d think if Subaru never found out that this silent person standing, looking like a painting God drew, was actually a sadist who hurt him and made him suffer.

???: “Well, whatever. We can talk for a little while we walk.”

Subaru: “What?”

???: “It’s too noisy here, and we’re going to the same place anyway. You do know that you aren’t in a position to refuse, don’t you?”

Jerking her chin, the woman overbearingly tells him to walk with her. The people around were being held hostage. It was frustrating, but he had no choice but to do what she told him.

If only she hadn’t said those unforgivable words.

Subaru: “You’re going to the same place… Which means… No way, you bastard.”

???: “The home you and your woman live in. Some mutt is taking care of her right now, right? That’s why you’re here. If its owner is here, wouldn’t you feel more at ease if he had a collar?”

Subaru: “Don’t be ridiculous! Why would I let… As if I’d let you come with me! I won’t let a dangerous woman like you see Rem…”

???: “——Shut up.”

Subaru: “——”

The woman grumpily says those two words to Subaru, who firmly denied her request. Hearing the sharpness of her tone, Subaru feels an illusionary knife stab his throat, silencing him.

His blood was freezing because of the woman's sharpened hostility. It was the pressure from last night that very well might make one fall to their knees, practically disgracing themselves. However——

Subaru: "…Like hell anyone would let you see Rem."

???: "Wow. I'm kind of impressed. I thought you were gonna be a coward and freeze up."

The woman's slit eyes widen, and she said that to Subaru, who opposed her as he bit his lip. After that, she pointed a finger at Subaru, whose face turned red from anger and agitation, and said,

???: "Still, I won't listen to you. And besides, you've got it all wrong."

Subaru: "I've got it all wrong?"

???: "I'm not trying to kill you guys. Not right now, that is."

The woman shrugged her shoulders as she opened the hand she pointed at him, waving it. She had calm actions and calm behavior; however, this was the same way she acted last night when she beat up Subaru.

This woman is capable of beating Subaru to death while smiling, after all.

Subaru: "…How can I believe you?"

???: "I'm capable of killing anyone I want to kill. When I thought to kill you yesterday, I had plenty of time to do so. And yet, I didn't kill you. So, I have no intention of killing you."

That was some poor logic for proof. And yet, it had undeniable weight.

It was the sort of truth that was pride and a fact, and you could only call it a self-evident truth.

The woman was an enemy. She had both hostility and bloodlust. However, she left without taking Subaru and Rem's lives, showed up the next day, and told him that he was headed towards their home——

Subaru: "I have no idea what you're thinking."

???: “You want me to tell you right away… What are you, a baby? Doesn’t your female partner have a baby? If you’re gonna to be a parent, how about you be a little more independent and use that noggin of yours?”

Subaru: “Seeing as you’ve changed after overnight, are you taking me to the tenement house to apologize or something?”

???: “Hah, that’s rich. It’s a good thing I’m not planning on killing you, huh.”

The woman scoffs at Subaru, and she starts to walk with her back turned on him. She didn’t speak, but her shaking milky white hair was silently pressuring him to come with her.

Even if he resisted now, the woman would still head towards the tenement house. The town was also being held hostage.

Subaru: “How do you know Rem is pregnant?”

???: “Because I could tell by looking, obviously. Can you not assume that I’m similar to a slow male like you?”

Subaru: “Rem didn’t notice, either.”

???: “Okay, then can you not assume that I’m similar to slow males and females like you guys?”

The woman dutifully corrects herself and walks through the town with Subaru while humming. It was unfamiliar, messy humming that didn’t have a melody or anything really, but something about it sounded nostalgic.

That being said, Subaru didn’t stop being cautious of the woman one bit, and he kept thinking about how he’d have no way to tell the two in the tenement house if she ever let her guard down. Still, coming up with a dramatic idea in the mere 15 minutes it’d take to get there was highly unlikely——

Halibel: “——I did feel like your smell was coming back awfully quickly.”

Halibel, who was lighting his *kiseru* in front of the tenement house, let that statement out.

He came out to the front for a smoke break, and he happened to meet Subaru and the woman once they arrived. When Halibel stared at the two of them with imperceivable emotions in his slit eyes, he said,

Halibel: “The day after you discover your wife’s pregnant, you bring back another beautiful woman. What’s that say about you as a man?”

???: “I think it means he’s the worst, what do you think?”

Halibel: “I’ll have to agree that he is on the outside. But this isn’t the time to be joking around.”

???: “Hmm…”

Halibel, who took smoke into his lungs and breathed it out from his nose, ponders something. Then, he slowly stands up, and he looked at the women as he cleaned off his butt.

???: “Can you not get cocky just because you’re huge?”

Halibel: “Now that’s a new false accusation. You’re such a beautiful woman, so you could at least let me win in height.”

???: “One who enjoys being praised by a mutt is merely a mutt of a woman.”

There was no way to get along with this woman. The woman’s stern reply didn’t bring down Halibel, but as for Subaru, he was worried about this grim situation and Rem—— Who would have to get involved eventually.

Subaru: “Halibel, where’s Rem?”

Halibel: “I’m surprised you asked in this situation… She’s inside. She wouldn’t listen when I told her to at least let me do the housework. I gave in.”

Subaru: “Sounds like Rem.”

Although she was pregnant, you could actually say that she was still in the early stages of pregnancy. Since her stomach didn’t look all that different, at this point housework shouldn’t be that much of a burden on her, although this was just Subaru’s guess he made based off the little knowledge he had in health and physical education.

The woman next to him was 100 times more likely to be a burden.

Halibel: “So, really, who is that girl? She does have quite the foul mouth, but is she a friend of yours?”

Subaru: “No, you must know who she is… She’s the woman who attacked us yesterday.”

Halibel: “Huuuuh?”

Subaru was disappointed by Halibel’s poor guessing ability as he thought about how slow he was to get it. He thought that he was having a pointless conversation to kill time, but apparently that was not the case. However, Halibel had an odd look after Subaru made that point, and he said,

Halibel: “She’s… the girl from yesterday? But wait…”

???: “What? Are you trying to say that it’s a lie? Are you trying to say that I don’t look like someone who’d do something like that? Can you not make me laugh? I threw this guy all over the room, beat him to a bloody pulp… Wait! Come to think of it, yesterday you disgusted me with all that sweat you were covered in! What are you going to do to make up for that!?”

Subaru: “Nothing! My body is shaky as hell now, be satisfied with that.”

The woman interrupts Halibel, and in the middle of talking, she heats up with anger as last night came to her mind. Seeing that unreasonable behavior, which was like an outburst of anger, Subaru tries to appease her rage by reasoning that he could still feel the pain from the bruises on his body. And then, once this ruckus suddenly began in front of the tenement house, it happened.

Rem: “——I’d like to talk.”

The tenement house door opened, and the one who step foot into a dangerous situation was a blue-haired girl—— It was Rem. Rem finished up the housework, and when she loosened the tied sleeves of her *kimono*, she smiled at Subaru.

Rem: “Welcome home, Subaru-kun. You’re quite early today. You really wanted to see me that badly?”

Subaru: “…Yeah, I sure did. To be honest, it hurts when I’m not with you, even if it’s only for one moment.”

Rem: “W—well… Yes, erm, I feel the same way. Oh no, now I’m blushing.”

???: “Can you not!?”

The married couple’s innocent exchange makes the woman’s displeasure explode in a different way. The woman pulls her own short hair out as she said,

???: “Sheesh, this is just wrong…”

Rem: “I’m sorry about that. How about we go inside and cool down first? I’ll make some tea, so please come on in.”

???: “————”

The woman was probably trying to say something you would never expect to hear from her.

The women looked stupefied. Subaru and Halibel also exchange looks. Seeing their three reactions, Rem tilts her head, and while softly making a happy look, she said,

Rem: “You shouldn’t startle the baby. Let’s have a good talk.”

So, she most definitely had mouthed, “The mother is strong.”

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4

Tia: “My name is… ahh, it’s Tia. Call me that for now.”

The woman—— Tia, who was let into the room and sunk onto the tatami mat, named herself in a discomforting way.

In front of Tia, Subaru and Rem were sitting next to each other, and Halibel was standing and leaning against a wall near the entrance. It was almost like a stressful interview in a meeting hall, but you couldn’t necessarily blame them once you considered the tension covering the room.

In fact, something like a stressful interview or a defense was about to begin—— It was a scene to get to the bottom of Tia's objective, as she went out of her way to come back to the tenement house.

Subaru: "I really hope this isn't the sort of thing where the culprit comes back to the scene of the crime just to double check things…"

It's possible that she named herself to further her relationship with them. Rem places the tea in front of Tia, perhaps in response to her compromise, and when she quickly bowed, she said,

Rem: "I'm Rem. Next to me is Subaru-kun, my husband. The one at the wall is Halibel-sama, who lives in the next room. Pleased to meet you, Tia-sama."

Tia: "Subaru-kun and Halibel-sama?"

Subaru: "Just 'Subaru' and 'Halibel' is fine. Anyway, Rem, you don't need to say this girl's name with a 'sama' honorific. She's like… like an enemy."

Tia was practically treated like a guest, but she was still someone who should clearly be classified as an enemy. Subaru was the one who insisted on that, but Rem shook her head as she said,

Rem: "I have to. Since Tia-sama has been invited, she's a guest. And you're treating someone who just came to talk poorly. She came here because she had something to talk about. Isn't that right, Tia-sama?"

Tia: "Humph, I think I like you a little more than that male. Rem, was it? I'll keep that in mind. As for the male and the mutt, they're a no-go."

Tia, being in a better mood because of Rem treating her politely, took a sip of her tea. She choked.

Tia: "Ouch! So hot! It's so hot."

Rem: "Oh, I'm sorry. Are you okay?"

Tia: "I—I'm impressed. I let my guard down, and then this happens. You're a tough one."

Subaru: "You just inflicted pain on yourself. Quit it, otherwise this conversation will go nowhere."

With his hand, Subaru stopped Rem from apologizing to Tia, who wrongly resented her as she displayed her inability to take in hot things.

It seemed like he'd misread Tia's character, as she's been having listless interactions. However, Subaru would never let his guard down. He was staying alert for when she'd strike like she did last night.

Tia: "The male seems to have a sickness of becoming tense and pointlessly marking his territory. Whatever. I'll finish this business quickly, just like you want. I don't have much time, either. In fact, I'm very busy."

Subaru: "Business…"

Tia: "Like I said, I didn't come here to kill you… That does depend on you guys, though."

At the end of Tia's statement, her voice turned cold, and once she put down her teacup, she looked at the front with her sharp eyes. And then——

Tia: "For mercy's sake, I'll assume you did it on the spur of the moment. So, don't worry about the whole retribution thing. Give back the Light Ball instead."

She declared that as she stared at Subaru—— No, she stared at Rem.

That was the first thing that confused Subaru. Tia's eyes fell on Rem and she literally thought nothing of people like Subaru who were right next to her. The next thing that confused him was the Light Ball Tia talked about, as he had no idea what that was. It seemed Rem didn't either, as she said,

Rem: "Light Ball…?"

She tilts her head, and a question mark appeared. However, Tia wasn't happy with that answer.

Tia: "Respond carefully. «Yes» is the only answer I want to hear. A wrong answer will cost you parts of your body."

Tia tells that to Rem as she stuck her hand out in front of her and pointed at her with a white finger. Her quiet voice sounded calm, but it was fake. There was anger hidden within her tone, and it was just counting to the time when it'd blow up.

Tia directs her anger at Rem by saying that her answer would affect the outcome, and she meant it. In this coercive negotiation, it was as if she was saying that people like Halibel wouldn't be able to deter her——

Subaru: "H—hold on."

Tia: "No. Choose your words wisely, and that goes for you too, not just Rem. Make one wrong move, and your female partner's fingers won't suffice."

Subaru: "What are you, a devil? Whatever, doesn't matter, just listen. What is this Light Ball?"

Tia: "Playing innocent, huh. It's what you guys stole. I don't know what you call it, but it's my Light Ball. I came to get it back."

Subaru: "What the hell is that…"

Subaru's answer makes Tia's mood worsen even more. But no matter how much anger she had inside, Subaru would not give her the answer she wanted. This is because Subaru truly had no idea what the Light Ball was, and of course, neither did Rem.

Even though she said they stole it, it was a bolt from the blue. Even if she ranted about it, they couldn't imagine how what kind of object it was or how important it was to Tia. But——

Tia: "I warned you. Choose your words wisely. You failed to do that."

Everyone: "————"

A wind blows by, going between Subaru and Rem, and it created a sharp mark on the wall in the back. Sharp cracks were vertically cut into the tenement house wall, as if it had been showered with slashes. The sharpness was so fierce that, had the target been a person instead of a wall, it could've easily torn them in half.

A kind of threat and warning. By using force, Tia demonstrated that they wouldn't get off next time.

Halibel: "————"

Halibel, watching in the back, couldn't move. Perhaps he had no chance to move because he didn't see the demonstration coming, which wasn't done to hit them. He wasn't sure.

In any case, for Subaru and Rem, this demonstrated that it was a force to be reckoned with. Afterwards, Tia posed the same question to Rem. Which was——

Tia: "——Where is the Light Ball? Give it back."

Rem: "…I'm terribly sorry. My answer is the same as Subaru-kun's."

Tia: "————"

Rem: "I can't return something I don't know about."

Tia: "I see."

Rem answered firmly as she stared straight at Tia. Hearing Rem's answer, Tia closes her eyes, and then she moved a finger on her right hand that she held out.

The wind blew. This time it intensely blew off the room's fusuma[12], splitting it into two.

Tia: "Are you still not going tell me?"

Rem: "It's not that I can't tell you about it. I have no clue what it is."

Tia: "You sure are stubborn!"

Tia's anger towards Rem. who still stood her ground, finally explodes.

Tia stands up, and she stuck her hands out left and right. The next moment, the terrifying wind devastates the room, and the room is cut up by kamaitachi[13]. Destruction demolishes the room. The wall, the fusuma, the shelves, the tatami mat, the tea table—— everything gets destroyed, falling in the room. Subaru was stiff and holding his breath, as the waves of the raging wind fell all over him.

[12] Japanese sliding doors (see here).

[13] Cut made from a whirlwind on which a Japanese folklore monster would ride (see here).

However, Rem didn't avert her eyes, and she didn't run away in fear.

Tia: "Gr… rrr…!"

Tia no longer had a main target for destruction in the room, and she finally roared. She looks at Rem, then Subaru, and then Halibel, and then she said,

Tia: "I—I'm going to kill that mutt. Are you still not going to give it back?"

Rem: "Nope, I can't."

Halibel: "I mean, there's kinda no other choice with how the conversation's going, but aren't you treating me too poorly here?"

Rem's strong will stubbornly pushes aside Tia's desperate threat. Now that it's turned out like this, even if Tia were to cruelly kill Halibel, her wish wouldn't be granted.

Tia: "Well, I guess it'll help my mood just a little bit."

Halibel: "Su-san, may I cry?"

Subaru: "I feel you. You say «little» because, like, when things don't really work out, you get deeply disappointed."

Halibel: "Not exactly the kind of support I was hoping for…"

Subaru, seeing Halibel sulk unhappily out of the corner of his eye, let out a brief sigh. Looking around the room, there were traces of destruction all over the place—— However, Subaru and the others were all uninjured.

Once one saw that, even Subaru could tell what was going on, no matter how slow on the uptake he was.

Subaru: "You really don't have any intention of killing us."

Tia looked at Subaru, who came to that conclusion, with her eyes filled with anger and hatred. However, her sharp eyes couldn't kill people, no matter how much bloodlust they had.

The room was cut up by Tia's anger, but that anger was not bloodlust. This is because she "has no intention of killing them", just like she has been saying from the start.

The threat was simply a threat and nothing more. In fact, it was like she was making an abnormal amount of effort to avoid harming them.

Subaru: "And yet, yesterday you nearly killed me…"

Tia: "I didn't know Rem had a baby at the time…"

Subaru: "——So that's why."

Tia: "Oops."

Tia let the cat out of the bag with a sulky look. It was too late for her to shut her mouth.

In other words, she——

Rem: "You didn't kill us because Subaru-kun and I have a child…?"

Tia: "You stole the Light Ball. A sin is a sin. However, that sin is yours. The baby has nothing to do with it. Taking its life would go against my beliefs as a Shinigami."

Subaru: "Shinigami…"

Hearing Tia express her thoughts, Subaru takes a brief look at Halibel. He felt like Tia had called herself a Shinigami last night, but he couldn't remember things very clearly from the time when he was nearly killed. Seeing Subaru give him that look, Halibel tilted his head slightly to indicate that he had no idea what she meant. It was a self-proclaimed name, and nothing more—— Even with that granted, her power was little too much for the name.

Subaru: "In any case, you won't kill us. You're even avoiding hurting us. So…"

Tia: "So «give it up»? There's gotta be a limit to how impudent a thief can be. I'm going to get the Light Ball back. If the baby gets in my way, then I'll just have to wait for it to be born."

Subaru: "That'd take too long, first of all…"

While being torn between her beliefs and anxiety, Tia shows that she won't give in one bit.

Seeing Tia's distress, Subaru looks at Rem, wondering what they should do. When Rem nodded at Subaru's look, she spoke while kneeling upright, not even breaking down within the wind.

Rem: "Tia-sama, like I've said many times, I have no idea what this Light Ball of yours is. I'll repeat myself again, I am not the one who stole it."

Subaru: "Rem was always with me. Rem had no time to do something so outrageous, and she'd never do such a thing, either. Why are you accusing us anyway? Was there some sort of deciding factor?"

Tia: "Isn't it obvious?——It's the nose."

Subaru: "——"

Tia answers Subaru's question confidently, pointing at her own nose. Hearing that answer, Subaru grimaces, and he lost his breath as his chest was struck by an unexpected force.

She found them by relying on her sense of smell. Chills and understanding were what welled up once he heard that—— Things that were expected. Tia sniffed out Subaru with her sense of smell and came here——

Tia: "Judging by that look, you must know something. Protect your female partner all you want, it's no use. Rem reeks of the smell of a thief!"

Subaru: "————"

Hearing Tia's triumphant words, Subaru loses his voice for a moment. Then, he thoroughly thinks about the words she said and says,

Subaru: "…Rem? Not me?"

Tia: "Huh? What's this, you trying to protect her with an awful tearjerker act? Sorry, but my nose can't be fooled. My nose tells me that Rem is the culprit!"

Tia sternly points at Rem, and she declared that once again with a triumphant look. She was aggressive in anticipation of Subaru feeling guilty, based off his reaction. However, it was not the kind of guilt Tia was hoping for.

Thus, a very complicated atmosphere started to spread between Subaru and the others.

Tia: "W—what… you people… Are you trying to belittle me with those looks?"

Subaru: "We're not…"

Rem: "There has to be some sort of misunderstanding…"

Tia: "I am not wrong! My nose is absolute! Hey, mutt! You have a dog like face, so you must get it, right?"

Halibel: "Why would you think that I'd take your side? Are you my wife?"

Tia: "Like hell I am——!!"

Tia's white face turns red, and she yelled as she stamped her feet. It no longer looked like she had the intimidating air that she had in the beginning; she was just a lone girl who dug herself into a hole. After Tia breathed heavily and glared at Subaru and the others one by one,

Tia: "You aren't returning what you stole! You're looking down on me! Who do you people think you are!? You're gonna regret becoming parents if this is how you act!"

Subaru: "Let's stop all this emotional denial. Also, how about you give it up already? You made a mistake. None of us stole whatever that Light Ball is."

Tia: "No I didn't! Rem had to have stolen it! There's no way I'm wrong…"

Rem: "Okay, well…"

Subaru couldn't figure how to deal with Tia, who finally started throwing a tantrum. Rem was the one who interrupted Tia, who was acting stubborn like a child, which was improper for how she looked.

Rem: "Tia-sama, it seems you think that Subaru-kun and I have stolen something."

Rem softly speaks to Tia, as if she was trying to reason with an unreasonable child. After that, Tia's face stiffened, and then she turned around to face Rem.

Tia: "For the record, you are the only one who did it. This male doesn't seem to know about it."

Rem: "Subaru-kun and I do everything together and go everywhere together. Understand?"

Tia I—I understand…"

Rem said, "Good" and raised her finger at Tia, who was quickly discouraged from acting the way she'd acted before as she nodded.

Rem: "I want to get back your stolen Light Ball. However, we don't know what it is. If you don't believe me… would you wait until you are convinced?"

Tia: "Until I'm convinced…"

Rem: "If your nose is correct, then we are the ones who are lying. If you keep an eye on us, eventually we might expose ourselves. That's what I mean."

Rem jiggles her finger as she says, "What do you think?", leaving the choice up to Tia. The suggestion would take up quite a lot of time, but Subaru thought of it was a temporary measure to temper a child. However, after Tia pondered the suggestion for a while,

Tia: "——Sounds interesting. All right, I'm in."

Subaru: "R—really?"

Tia: "It's as Rem said. She'll get busted eventually for sure, so I'll wait."

Tia sticks out her somewhat busty chest, and she answered Subaru's doubts confidently. But it was still hard for Subaru to believe her choice. She snorted as she saw his face.

Tia: "I'm not lying. I'm confident in my nose. Look, there's no way I can lose! If I'm wrong, I'll even give you the Light Ball to make it up to you!"

Subaru: "Attacking us to get it back creates an infinite loop!"

In any case, if Tia has accepted Rem's idea as a good one, then the problem was solved. Or at the very least, Rem and Subaru shouldn't have to worry about being hurt by Tia anymore.

Subaru: "That's if we could trust that she isn't lying, though."

Rem: "It's fine. I believe that Tia-sama really is telling the truth… I can tell since I watch plenty of kids at temple elementary school."

Subaru: "It's kinda worrying how that could be used as evidence to convince me."

Still, she really did sound like a teacher with the tone of that persuasive argument. In other words, Rem successfully convinced him because she was gifted with the skills of a female teacher.

Subaru: "Impressive, Sensei. That was well done."

Rem: "Of course. But when you're with me, I want to be called wife instead of Sensei."

Subaru: "——Good point. As expected of my wife. She's the cutest girl ever and she's so reliable."

Rem: "There you go, well done."

Rem praises Subaru, who corrected himself, as if she was playing around with him. Seeing her smile, Subaru scratches his head. He thought to himself, "I'm no match for her". Tia, who quickly noticed them whispering to each other, glares at them angrily.

Tia: "Hey! What are you two whispering about… is it about the Light Ball!?"

Subaru: "Even if we were the culprits, we wouldn't be so stupid enough to whisper about it in front of the owner. How long are you going to stay here anyways? If we've reached a conclusion, then…"

Tia: "What are you saying? I told you, I'm keeping an eye out until you slip up. I'm staying here."

Subaru tilted his head as he listened to Tia's tone, which made it sound like she was saying, "Why are you asking something so obvious?"

Subaru: "Staying here… for how long?"

Tia: "Until you slip up."

Subaru: "————"

Tia: "It's still pretty crowded with three people in this room, though. I better not be staying with that mutt. Not only would it be cramped, but I'd get covered in fur."

Subaru: "You're going to stay here!?"

She makes a threat from an unexpected perspective, and it causes Subaru to raise his voice as he practically screamed. Hearing that, Tia breaks into a smile in great delight.

Tia: "Ahh, that scream, oh yes… I finally get to hear it, makes me kinda happy."

Subaru: "I'm being serious here! As if we'd live with you! This is a house for a husband and a wife, use your head!"

Tia: "——? Isn't Rem already pregnant? What's wrong with me staying here?"

Subaru: "Well… Well?"

When she asked Subaru about his thoughts, something prevented him from replying, "Even so". It seemed Tia was not messing around, and she was saying that it was a genuine question. If they were having sex just to have kids, then Tia's viewpoint would be correct.

Subaru: "But then at night we'd be missing something needed to keep family happiness…"

Tia: "Stare…"

Subaru: "Stop! Don't look at me like that! Even if you do, you still can't live with us!"

Tia looked at Subaru doubtfully, but he still stood his ground while giving excuses. Besides, even if she disregarded the thoughts of the husband and wife, three people would be too much for the room, just like Tia said.

Subaru: "Hal-san, the manager and landlord, wouldn't even allow it anyways. Don't forget that you're the one who destroyed this room and beat me to a pulp!"

No landlord would be bold enough to negotiate deposit and key money after she destroyed the rent so much. Subaru hoped for that in his statement, and Halibel nodded with his arms folded.

Halibel: “Yeah, Su-san’s right. First we have to talk about compensating for the room.”

Subaru: “That’s not the point!”

Halibel did not listen to Subaru telling him that this wasn’t about the landlord.

Tia: “Me? Compensate for this room?”

Rem: “Tia-sama destroyed it, so that’s a given… That goes for our damaged household goods, too, if you could.”

Rem looks around the room devastated by wind that was now a mess, and she makes that request to Tia.

Things like shelves and furniture were destroyed by the wind slashes. Of course, the tatami mat and walls were, too. There was some cutlery that barely avoided being damaged, but the clothes in the wardrobe and the futon in the closet were probably different.

The daily necessities they obtained by managing with the little income they had were destroyed—— It was a bit tear inducing.

Rem: “I’ll help clean up, so Tia-sama, you can use this room. Halibel-sama, let Subaru-kun and I use another available room and…”

Halibel: “Yeah, that’s fine. As you know, the tenement house is full of free rooms. Pick whichever you want and move over.”

Rem: “Thank you very much.”

The broken tableware piles up, and the damage to the memories depress Subaru. Rem and Halibel, the realists, put aside his sentiments, and once a room was assigned, they set a plan for the future.

Tia, who had seized the initiative in the beginning, was left behind by the quick progress, and she scratched her cheeks while being taken aback.

Tia: “How should I put this… you guys are like… tough.”

Subaru: “I’ll have to agree with you on that.”

This was the only time Subaru agreed with the beautiful, unreasonable killer.

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5

Halibel: “Su-san, got a second?”

Halibel beckoned him and brought him out of the tenement house when Tia started to reluctantly obey Rem, who diligently worked on cleaning the room.

Rem seemed to be enjoying herself, sleeves tied as she completely focused on cleaning the room, and nobody could stop her now that she’d enter such an intense state. It actually seemed like Tia was weak to Rem’s pushiness, and she was helping her obediently, although she didn’t look like she was getting into it.

Subaru: “Looks like I can take our eyes off of them for a bit.”

Subaru sees that Rem has the situation handled, and he exits the tenement house as he stepped over the door that was out of place. It was already after sunset. The round moon was up in the completely dark night sky, bejeweled with the glimmer of the stars.

Halibel, looking up at the sky as he left a trail of tobacco smoke in it, first starts speaking by saying “Sorry”, and——

Halibel: “You were quite frightened during that conversation, right? Sorry for not doing anything.”

Subaru: “It’s not anything you should apologize for… is what I’d like to say, but I was really frightened. Especially when Tia started to destroy the room.”

Subaru shrugs and uses the conversation as a chance to talk about why they had to clean the room in the first place.

Halibel just watched things play out in the destructive wind without moving an inch. Rem didn't move to show that she'd stand her ground. So, as for why Halibel didn't do anything, stayed silent, and watched the mayhem——

Halibel: "She had no bloodlust. No hostility, either. So, I was able to tell that she wouldn't hurt anyone, even though she acted up like that… You might not understand my reasoning, though."

Subaru: "Of course I'd know once I could tell those things were missing. Although I was late to notice, I also came to that conclusion once I saw the end result. It's just that…"

Halibel: "Once you considered Rem's safety, you wanted me to stop her? Yeah, I had a feeling you'd think that, so that's why I thought I'd apologize."

Halibel knocks the ash off his *kiseru*, apologizes once again, and bowed deeply.

As long as it was rational, Subaru had no complaints for him. Plus, Halibel was helping him out of kindness. It would be too arrogant of him to blame him just because of that decision considering how he hasn't paid him back yet or rewarded him.

Subaru: "Although, I'd appreciate it if I had a say next time. It's not guaranteed that I won't move carelessly and almost get hit by the wind, you know?"

Halibel: "If 1-2 of your limbs fly off from the sharpness, the doctor can put them back on just fine."

Subaru: "Once I let my head fly off, I'm dead!"

Getting hit somewhere meant death. Considering how he didn't get hit, he got lucky. He felt very relieved knowing that he lived by the skin of his teeth.

Halibel: "I'm glad that you forgive me. I kinda felt down for arriving too late last night, too, when you were beat up."

Subaru: "Really?"

Halibel: “Forgetting about the title as Kararagi’s strongest, I do regard myself as a shinobi. And so, being outsmarted sure isn’t something to be pleased with.”

Halibel shows his pride, and Subaru tugs on his chin as if to say “So that’s how it is”.

When he heard of ninjas, things like information warfare, undercover agents, assassination, ninjutsu, and all sorts of roles came to mind—— But perhaps those were like characteristics of spies from ancient times. Messing up with counterespionage sure would be a failure for a ninja.

Subaru: “In that case, why don’t you let one of the people working for you handle it? Since you’re the strongest ninja in Kararagi, aren’t you the leader of Shinobi groups or something?”

Halibel: “Shinobi groups! We have no dangerous gatherings like that. I’ve never even seen any other ninjas outside of myself. How’d you come up with that idea?”

Subaru: “Don’t you have special educational institutes like shinobi villages or something?”

Halibel: “I’ve heard about some living in the middle of nowhere in hidden villages due to racial circumstances, but as for my wolf brethren, they couldn’t run and hide so they’re reaching extinction…”

Subaru: “An extinction joke!”

If ninjas were endangered, then so were wolves. Halibel’s culture and race were on the verge of dying out. They were also starting to decline because they knew their place.

Subaru: “Basically, don’t expect too much from your ninja side.”

Halibel: “Not sure what a ninja is, but yes, you certainly shouldn’t expect too much. So, I have a proposal that isn’t related to my apology from earlier.”

Subaru: “A proposal?”

Halibel: “——About Tia, don’t you think we should get rid of her while we can?”

He spoke those words with no hesitation in his usual tone. And so, Subaru completely froze. 5 seconds pass, then 10, slowly.

Subaru: “Hal-san?”

Halibel: “She has no bloodlust. Her hostility has settled down as of now, too. However, she is still dangerous. If we turn our backs on her defenselessly, she could get rid of us if we don’t do anything.”

Subaru: “Well… Still, even so…”

The emotions in Halibel’s slit eyes weren’t clear. But his statement truly did have a certain level of persuasiveness. This was the chance to free themselves from anxiety about the future. Even if it was now, right after Rem and Tia had explored the possibility of coexisting, although in a superficial way.

Halibel: “You see, my nose isn’t picking up Tia-chan. Not just yesterday, but right now, too.”

Subaru: “Even now? Is it because she got rid of her scent?”

Halibel: “Meticulously, yes. I’ve never heard of this Shinigami nickname that she spoke of, and she’s such a beautiful woman. Like it or not, she’d become the talk of the town should she show up. And yet, I don’t know who she is. That means pretty much nobody knows her.”

A mysterious woman with an unknown identity that took countermeasures against Halibel’s sense of smell—— Nothing about Tia’s position changed.

They were now able to have conversations and the time for them to part has been postponed. Those were the only things that have been accomplished. Not to mention, how effective would the arrangement be with this girl who tended to be moody?

Halibel: “If we act now, we could make it seem like she was never there. Rem-chan will have to lie, but I’ll deal with the girl.”

Signs of the cold smell of blood came from Halibel, who made a cruel proposal. The man before Subaru finally didn’t seem like just a lively playboy. It was the first time he could tell that he was a shinobi deemed the strongest in Kararagi.

But at the same time, he could also tell what Halibel was expecting as he gave off a cold, intimidating air.

Subaru: “…Sorry, Hal-san. For making you play the bad guy, leaving you to hold the bag.”

Halibel: "————"

Subaru: "But you don't need to play the bad guy. It's not that I'm not worried… But Rem already told Tia so much. So, I'll believe in her too."

Halibel: "Can you believe in that girl?"

Subaru: "I'm not talking about Tia. I'm going to believe in the eyes of my wife, the one who persuaded Tia."

In the back, they were working on tidying things and cleaning the room. The voices he could hear were having a conversation, and they were Rem who was gung-ho, and Tia, who was sulky—— It seemed things were going somewhat smoothly.

He wanted to see the light at the end of that tunnel. Given that the killer doesn't end up killing them, that is.

Halibel: "…Su-san, you sure aren't one to let things go, huh."

Hearing Subaru's reply, Halibel puts his *kiseru* back in his mouth once again, and he murmured.

Then, the cold air coming from his body vanished within an instant. Once that went away, all that's left was the same old sluggish wolf. He had acted the way he did out of consideration for Subaru—— he acted like a shinobi so that Subaru would feel less guilty if he ever wanted to eliminate danger.

Subaru: "You said that I don't let things go, but I feel like that should be said about you instead with how you were acting."

Halibel: "No way. Besides, you're the one who forgave someone who nearly killed you, and you don't even know if she'll change. This isn't just a matter of being softhearted."

Subaru: "Ahh, now that you mention it…"

Halibel tells Subaru that, and he remembered how Tia nearly killed him. Although he knew how strong she was, he had forgotten that he had been targeted by her violent nature. This explains why Halibel was worried about Subaru and Rem.

Halibel: “Did you really forget? Even with all the pain you still feel all over your body?”

Subaru: “Don’t remind me, now it’s coming back to me…”

Subaru remembers his joint pain, and he moves around his limbs as he said “Oww” with a pathetic look on his face. Seeing him act like that, this is when Halibel let out a long sigh in a dumbfounded manner.

Halibel: “If Su-san and Rem-chan insist, then alright. I won’t do anything.”

Subaru: “I owe you one… Actually, not sure if I should say that here. Well, I already owe you plenty anyway.”

Halibel: “You keep on indebting yourself. Looking forward to the day you pay me back.”

Halibel said that while smiling, though it wasn’t clear if he wanted to get paid back or not. Hearing his words, Subaru pouted, and he hung his head as if to say that he was absolutely correct. Ever since he came to the town of Banan, he’s just been depending on people’s kindness and being helped.

Subaru: “I gotta pay everyone back eventually.”

Halibel: “It’d be problematic if you died on us, so hang in there and stay alive until then.”

Subaru: “Damn, what a positive reason to avoid dying.”

Subaru smiles back at Halibel, hearing him say that, and he stretched his body. Just then, a voice coming from inside the room called out to the two people outside.

Rem: “Subaru-kun, please help me choose some clothes that would be fine.”

Tia: “You males are the only ones taking it easy… This is why you can’t trust males. They should just spend all of their time outside hunting, honestly.”

Hearing Rem and Tia call on them, Subaru and Halibel look at each other, and they both move. Halbiel knocks the ash off his *kiseru*, while Subaru stretched lightly.

——And with that, the night of day zero of the noisy days at the tenement house advanced.

Chapter 4 – Six Months

Original translation by Remonwater

1

Subaru and Rem's moving finished quickly. Because all they did was move the undamaged belongings to the next room.

The tenement house room assignment went smoothly. The room they had originally lived in was left to Tia, while Subaru, Rem, and Halibel lived to the left and right of it. They did propose the idea of leaving a room in between each of them, but——

Tia: "Suggesting keeping the rooms apart… So you're saying that you do feel guilty!"

Then, it had to be rejected because of Tia loudly suspecting them. After several nights, Tia would end up regretting the room assignments with a red face since voices could clearly be heard in adjoining rooms, probably because of the thickness of the walls.

In any case, the moving finished without any problems, and so began the life of the strange neighbors in the tenement house.

Tia: "I gotta make money."

Halibel: "That's the first thing you're gonna say in the morning?"

Gathered at the breakfast table, Tia suddenly started the conversation like that, holding a chopstick in each hand. The round tea table used as a dining table split into two last night, so they hurriedly forced the broken boards together for temporary use.

Two outsiders were sitting at the dining table for some reason—— They were Tia and Halibel. They were shamelessly enjoying meals together, even asking for seconds, taking advantage of Rem's kindness. Not to mention, Tia's was so bad at using chopsticks that her whole face was covered with grains of rice.

Tia: “Listen here. I may be allowed to live in that shabby room, but I don’t want to if it’s a mess like that. Screw that. Which is why I’m asking you to hurry up and fix it. And then…”

Halibel: “Maybe if Su-san and Rem-chan were paying for it, but there’s no way I’ll lend you money. Borrowing and lending money doesn’t work without trust. Like, you’ve already ruined any trust you had, how shameless can you be?”

Tia: “Hey, come on! What do you think?”

Subaru: “Your face caught my attention so much that I couldn’t join in on the conversation, riceling.”

Her rice makeup was too next level for Subaru to understand it.

His point makes Tia’s face turn sour. While she carefully picked the rice off it, Rem nodded at her as she said, “I see.”

Rem: “So Tia-sama is looking for a job. Well, that’s not our problem.”

Tia: “You know, lately I feel like your words have been hitting me where it hurts…”

Rem: “Subaru-kun’s just one step away from being a regular employee. He’s already far ahead of you. There’s no recovering from this. Subaru-kun won.”

Tia: “Forget about that male’s victory, I just wanna know what exactly you’re trying to say.”

Rem roots for Subaru, breathing heavily as she laughed “tee-hee”, and Tia urged her to go on as she raised her hand. Seeing that, Rem clears her throat, and then,

Rem: “I think you should use an employment agency. I highly recommend finding a job you’re a good at and earning money.”

Subaru: “So your best bet is to get referred at Clane’s employment agency… Hm. By the way, are you even good at anything? And do you have any qualifications?”

Tia: “My specialty is killing. I don’t feel like killing right now, though.”

Subaru: “There’s no way you’d find a killing job with that unmotivated attitude!”

Tia folds her arms, and she threw out her busty chest, rice still stuck on her face. Still, if they take her words into account and recommend murder, they very well might end up quickly regretting last night's decision. Subaru gives Halibel, who knew the town very well, a quick glance, seeking help.

Halibel: "Hmm, let's see. Requests for murder aren't posted on the employment agency bulletin board."

Tia: "M—Makes sense."

Halibel: "Stuff like that are hidden in the back. If he knows you, that is."

Subaru: "It's the dark side of the town I never knew about——!"

Perhaps even employment agencies recognized by towns have shady jobs. Subaru felt down, as he felt like he just found out about the good-natured lizard faced man's complicated circumstances.

Halibel: "No no no it's a joke. Just a joke. You shouldn't take it seriously."

Subaru: "Huh? A joke? Oh, I see, thank goodness. You really had me worried there. I don't know how I'd face that cute apron wearing lizard from then on."

Halibel: "Clane doesn't accept those kind of jobs. Unauthorized employment agencies handle that sort of stuff."

Subaru: "From now on, I will never use anything other than authorized employment agencies."

Rem: "Actually, if you get fully approved this time, Clane-sama will never have to help you again, so make that your goal."

Subaru: "Ohh, that's right!"

It's pointed out that his goal was being lowered by trying to keep things as they are, making him have a realization. While feeling thankful for Rem having his back, Subaru felt more motivated to work at the palace. Yesterday, the staff also cared about him. Starting today, he'd go full throttle.

Subaru: "My motivation went up now that I think about it that way. All right, let's go to work!"

Rem: "Yeah!"

Tia: “No! What about me!?”

Tia erupted when Subaru and Rem got excited and stood up hand in hand. With her hands, she threw the food left on her plate into her mouth, chewed on it and swallowed, and then

Tia: “Introduce me to this guy I don’t really know! And then I’ll do a killing job!”

Subaru: “You idiot! Who in their right mind would let you do a night job like that!? Hal-san, tell her!”

Halibel: “I kinda do classic night work as a shinobi… That said, I’m not too sure about letting you kill, so how about you try something else. Like suppression requests or bounty hunting.”

Halibel cracks his knuckles, and he gave those conditions, causing Tia to tilt her head. However, the adventurous ring to it made Subaru’s eyes widen.

Subaru: “Bounty hunting! Suppression requests! That sounds awesome!”

Rem: “What kind of work are they exactly? Can Tia-sama do them…?”

Rem had a pretty realistic reaction in comparison to Subaru, who thought adventurously. Rem sees Tia’s side of the dinner table, which she got extremely dirty—— She sees that she lacks things like the ability to do delicate tasks and etiquette and hoped that the job wouldn’t require those sort of skills.

Halibel: “The main jobs are catching evildoers popping up on wanted posters, sometimes beating them up. And then there’s also the evil mabeasts that show up every now and then.”

Tia: “Basically, hunting. My specialty!”

It was like Tia’s eyes shined for a moment. And then, when she energetically stood up from the tea table, she grabbed Halibel’s neck as he tried to have a quick smoke, having finished his meal.

Halibel: “Hmm?”

Tia: “Now, show me the way. I have no idea what to hunt, after all.”

Halibel: “Wait! Su-san! Rem-chan!”

Subaru: “See ya.”

Halibel: “Oh, come on!”

Tia drags away Halibel, and resistance was futile. Subaru had no reason to stop her, and he wasn’t so sure that he could stop her anyway. With the noisy neighbors leaving, only the married couple was left in the room.

Rem: “Ummm… Is it really okay for us to let Halibel-sama take care of Tia-sama?”

Subaru: “Hal-san shouldn’t have any problems. If Tia were to try and do something harmful, only Hal-san would be able to stop her, so it makes sense to have him near enough to keep an eye on her.”

Rem: “I see, that does make sense. Plus, moss might grow on Halibel-sama’s body if he doesn’t work like everyone else every now and then.”

Rem encouraged Halibel, understanding and moderate sharpness showing in her words. Letting Halibel handle Tia was actually already an established thing—— Halibel even gave his consent. That last interaction was just like something a play would regularly have, nothing more.

Fortunately, Halibel didn’t have to stay with Subaru and Rem anymore to protect them since he now had a good grasp of the tendencies of Tia, the attacker. Hence why he didn’t need to worry about working while being in constant fear of when she’d attack.

Subaru: “Now I just have to worry about if I’ll become a full-time worker and Rem’s stomach.”

Rem: “…As of right now, I believe that I could work without any difficulties.”

Subaru: “It’s going to be our first child. I don’t want anything to catch us off-guard. Although. From the little knowledge I have, I remember that most childbirths take 9 months and 10 days.”

Going off Subaru’s knowledge, it would take roughly 10 ten months to go from pregnancy to childbirth—— However, there was no way to find how long she has been pregnant. He guessed about three months since her stomach didn’t look all that different. Besides, there was another problem.

Rem is an Oni—— a Demi-human species, although they didn’t look like it. Could a normal human’s knowledge really be applied to having a feel for when she was pregnant and when she’d give birth? On top of that, there was also an irregular condition where it was a mix between a human and an Oni.

Subaru: “Is there anything else we can do on top of keeping in touch and seeing that healing doctor?”

Rem: “I’m sorry. I don’t know much about this stuff. In a time like this…”

Subaru: “————”

Rem: “I—in a time like this, maybe we should find an experienced midwife.”

Rem hesitates, unable to find the right words, and then she says that. The reaction was unnatural; however Subaru did not say anything about it and just nodded as he said, “Yeah”.

He knew what Rem was going to say. There was an unspoken agreement between Subaru and Rem to not never touch on that subject. Subaru says “All right” to pull himself together and put that matter behind as he continued,

Subaru: “Let’s just live like we always have until your stomach starts changing. However, if you aren’t feeling well, tell me right away. Even if it’s just a slight fever. I’ll get mad this time if you don’t tell me.”

Rem: “Understood. But if you do get mad, what would you do?”

Subaru: “You know. I’ll lock you in the room, and I’ll watch over you the whole time. Meanwhile, I’ll borrow from Hal-san for our living expenses, making us go into deep debt. It’ll be tough times once the child is born.”

Rem: “That’s… so… terrifying. I won’t let your idea become reality.”

Rem giggles, bringing herself close to Subaru since the fear was too much for her to handle. He embraces Rem’s slender body, and they hug each other in silence for a while. As they did that, it naturally got closer to the time when they both have to leave for work.

Subaru: “All right, I’m gonna give it my all today too. I’ll be praying for nothing to happen to Hal-san and Tia as well.”

Rem: “Praying, yeah.”

They smile at each other one last time, and then they left their new room at the tenement house.

——In the evening, they would find out that their praying was off in a good way.

Halibel: “This is actually a really good catch. Even I rarely come across them.”

These were the thoughts of Halibel, who came with Tia on her first job. Tia came back with a bag filled with her reward, and she proudly put her feet on the table, but Rem scolded her for her actions, disheartening her.

Food was set on the dining table, knocking the closed reward bag onto the floor. Subaru had doubts about the report, seeing Rem lecturing Tia on the side.

Halibel: “No, I mean, I see why you’d be suspicious.”

Subaru: “After seeing that, yeah. Well, as long as it went well, it’s a good thing. So, what is this good catch? Tell me about it in detail.”

Halibel: “Hmm, so, at first, as decided, we chose a job on a wanted poster to catch a petty thief. But then that suddenly fell to our feet… Obviously, I couldn’t just look. That became the reward we were dealing with, and then in the end it became a brutal arrest.”

Tia, who was brought to Clane’s employment agency, experimentally participated in bounty hunting with Halibel’s referral. Basically, they chose a random wanted poster on the store bulletin board, correctly tracked down the wanted criminal, and cornered him.

Halibel: “It was a petty crook committing theft at stores. But when we tried to break into his room, there were magic stones in it all over, causing a commotion. He ended up using them to try and suicide.”

Subaru: “So he was a really dangerous terrorist!”

Halibel: “Tia-chan socked him and tied him up. And then he said that he knew even more dangerous smugglers and that some of them are in town. We somehow got him to tell us their location, and we rounded up all of the idiots hiding in town, foiling their plan to destroy the city.”

Subaru: “That’s the feature film like incident that happened on your end today!?”

Subaru could only be amazed by the major event that happened behind the scenes and could’ve destroyed the town.

Subaru was completely unaware of the incident; he was even asking his female coworkers at his workplace what to do when the baby is born, and they laughed at him as they replied, "It's too early for that stuff".

Subaru: "Then, this heroine that saved the town got scolded because she put her feet on that dining table, and she's all quiet now."

Halibel: "Indeed, she is."

Subaru and Halibel nod deeply. In their eyes, they saw Rem hesitantly explaining the importance of manners to Tia, who was completely afraid. Rem did not scold people by yelling; the way she did it spoke to the heart, and so it was rather painful emotionally.

Rem: "And so, manners are important. That also goes for showing respect to the people you eat with and the food you are served. Do you understand?"

Tia: "Yes yes, I understand. I un-der-stand."

Rem: "Tia-sama?"

Tia: "I—I told you, I understand…"

Perhaps this was a result of knowing that she was going to be a mother. Rem had no mercy when it came to command, even with someone who was rather stronger than her. Overwhelmed by her force, Tia obediently sits down in front of the dining table girl-style[14].

Faced with Tia having downcasted eyes, Rem lets out a sigh, and then she said,

Rem: "Tia-sama, take this."

Tia: "What's this for…"

Rem: "I'm giving it since it seems you have trouble eating with chopsticks. Please use it with care."

[14] When you sit with your legs in the shape of a W. It's called girl-style since not many men can sit very well like this (see here).

A wooden spoon—— that's what gets handed to Tia at the dining table, and Rem's smile makes her eyes widen. Then, after she closed her eyes tight, she said,

Tia: "T—that's kinda smart. All right. I'll use it."

As she said that, she accepted the present spoon. She had a grin on her face.

Tia: "It's not feeding, but something like it…"

Halibel: "So, seeing her act like that, I guess Su-san wins the bet for now."

Subaru: "If the bet is that Tia won't cause any problems, then Rem is the one who won. And she still is."

Halibel: "Ahh, that's true."

When Subaru sneered, Halibel replied by suddenly smiling. Seeing those two men act like that, Rem, who finished her lecture, clapped her hands.

Rem: "Now, let's eat. Tia-sama had her first job today, and even Halibel-sama worked too, so the food should be delicious."

Halibel: "Great, but is there some for me?"

Everyone follows Rem's instruction and sits at the dining table. Subaru was curious as to why there was food for Tia and Halibel like it was the most natural thing, but the two of them had expectant looks on their faces, so he didn't say anything.

They express their thanks in unison (Tia did it reluctantly), and he stopped caring about his concern once they started eating. Tonight's menu was a fish focused Japanese style dish arranged by Rem. They dig in. They were greatly pleased. Tia especially was digging in.

Tia: "I'm impressed, Rem. The light texture of the fish and the taste changes with the slightly burnt part. I can't stop eating…!"

Rem: "Thank you very much, Tia-sama. There's actually white vegetable sauce in it."

Tia: "——! No way! T—the flavor is this refreshing!?"

It seemed like Rem was happily feeding Tia, who kept overreacting. It looked like a rare animal enjoying food that didn't exist in its habitat. It also seemed like the bloodlust disappeared and that she completely opened up to them, which made Subaru feel relieved.

Halibel: "Gotta bathe after eating. We made a lot with the reward, so you wouldn't get angry if I drank after taking a bath, would you?"

Rem: "As long as you don't make Subaru-kun and I drink, I have no complaints. Don't make Tia-sama do it, either."

Subaru: "You probably shouldn't for safety's sake…"

The three of them face each other, and they take a glance at Tia. She was focusing on picking the leftover grains of rice in her rice bowl, paying no attention to their conversation.

They were afraid of having no idea what she would do if they got drunk. Unfortunately, Halibel would have to drink alone tonight. Furthermore, Subaru prefers to not drink, as he didn't really like alcohol, and Rem has an extremely low alcohol tolerance for an Oni, thus they have never accepted Halibel's invitations.

Halibel: "Damn, I'm so sad."

In the end, nobody joined in to drink with Halibel, and he shook his whiskers in disappointment. Although his murmuring wasn't supposed to be a cue or anything, Tia, having finished destroying her grains of rice, tilted her head as she said, "What?" as she continued,

Tia: "What is this about? I'm stuffed, and I want to go to bed right about now."

Rem: "You can't. You worked the whole day, so you're probably covered in sweat. ——So you have to take a bath."

Tia: "…If it's like bathing in a river or a lake, then fine I'll do it."

Rem: "No! Let's go to the bathhouse!"

Rem leans forward, and she enthusiastically tried to convince Tia, who was uninterested. Her energy makes Tia's eyes widen, and she asks Subaru and Halibel for help. However, unfortunately——

Subaru: "——The bathhouse is pretty nice."

Halibel: "Sure is."

Nobody was on Tia's side.

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2

——About the "bathhouses" of this world, they're pretty straightforward, and are quite literally public baths.

A bathtub lies in a wide space, and the water stored inside of it heats up with the use of a magic stone at the bottom of the tub. The structure of the bathhouse was extremely simple, except for the fact that it used special tools. At first, Subaru was surprised by bathhouses with how common they were.

Subaru: "Well, in manga I've read that in ancient times there were already baths during Roman period. The existence of bathhouses isn't all that strange in comparison to that."

Plus, even ninjas finally showed up in Kararagi Wafuu culture. He definitely wouldn't be surprised by stuff like bathtubs and daikon radish.

Subaru: "I'm gonna act very surprised if I find a Japanese mascot."

Halibel: "What have you been mumbling about?"

Then, a ninja soaking right next to him in the bathtub spoke. The ninja soaked in the bath all the way up to his head. His whole body was wet, including his fearless face, and his hair was sticking together. Now he truly was a wet dog. With just his body and appearance, he could no longer find any similarities to when he was dry.

Subaru: “So I’ve been thinking about different world people, it’s a pain living in a combined culture with all the differences races have. Once you get out of a bath, sometimes you’ll have someone’s fallen hair all over your body.”

Halibel: “You just have to pour hot water on yourself before you get out. Or do you have some sort of interesting idea?”

Subaru: “Let’s see… Use the drain around the edge of the bathtub, control the flow of the hot water with a magic stone, and let the water run. Set a net for to catch the fallen hair that’ll get inside, and the hot water that passes through will come back.”

Halibel: “Hmmm? Can you draw a picture for that? I don’t really get it.”

It was kind of summer-ish. Halibel didn’t really care too much about his pool-based proposal as he looked up in the bathtub contentedly moaning, “Oh yeahhh.” However, he didn’t blame him.

Everyone reverts to a naked beast once they soak in warm bath. Which has nothing to do with the worries Subaru had about differences between races.

——Right now, he just wanted to soak in the motherly warmth of this bathtub.

Subaru: “Which is why I’d like to ignore the voice I can hear over the wall…”

Tia: “Hey, hey! Isn’t this cool!? Wow, oh my, I’ve never seen anything like it!”

Halibel: “Oh, Su-san, that’s probably not possible. See, look over there.”

Subaru was covering his face with a towel, but he heard a familiar high-pitched screech and was tapped on the shoulder by Halibel from the side, he couldn’t ignore it anymore. He takes off the towel, and once he looked in the direction Halibel pointed at, he saw a tall wall—— in bathhouses, the men’s bath and the women’s bath are separated. There was a wall separating them. Often, for some reason the baths are connected at the top of the wall, so——

Tia: “Oh! There they are! Hey, you two! Isn’t it amazing how the bath feels so nice?”

Subaru: “————”

Tia had crept up to the small hole at the top of ceiling and the wall, seeming to have climbed up the wall. She peeked through the hole, and their eyes met. She was nude, waving her hand innocently, but fortunately the wall was hiding the parts below her chest.

But still, her wet hair and the curves of her exposed nape and shoulders were quite charming, and to tell the truth, it was alluring. Also, the people at the men's bath were startled when they were suddenly peeked at by a heavenly beautiful woman.

???: "Kyaaa!!"

They weren't really shrill shrieks, but rough shrieks that resounded throughout the men's bath. There were people who fell over, people who ran into the dressing room, and people who dove into the bath. Tia looks down at everyone running in confusion, and it makes her blink in surprise.

Tia: "Don't really get what's going on, but it does feel nice seeing males running away…"

Subaru: "Like anyone cares about your fetishes! Get the hell down from there!"

Tia: "Aww, but I have such a nice view from here. Oh yeaaah. Are there any differences between this bath and that bath? Can I check it out for a bit?"

Subaru: "You idi…!"

Without any hesitation, Tia climbs over the wall and tries to join the men's bath. He tried to stop her immediately, but, unfortunately, he could not reach the top of the wall from the bathtub. Something happened immediately after Subaru gave up and decided to overlook Tia's reckless actions, when the people in the men's bath held their breath.

There was a high-pitched, tremendous scraping sound, and then Tia was no longer seen on the top of the wall. However, she didn't climb over. She had disappeared into the women's bath. And then immediately after that, there were successive sounds of large bodies falling onto the water, causing grand explosions in the bathhouse.

Rem: "——Everyone, my dearest apologies for all the trouble. Please continue to enjoy the bath."

Once the sound of the water completely disappeared, those polite words were forwarded from the women's bath to the men's bath. It was obvious who said those words.

Subaru: "Rem?"

Rem: "Subaru-kun, I'm sorry. I was in the middle of washing my body at the washing place… but it's fine now."

Subaru: "Oh, good call. But anyways…"

It seems Rem had fixed the situation over at the women's bath. He felt like praising his wife for her clutch assistance, but there was something else on his mind. That was——

Subaru: "That sounded like the nostalgic sound of chains, huh…"

Rem: "It's for self-protection."

Subaru: "But this is a bathhouse, and Rem should be naked…"

Rem: "It's for self-protection."

Her stubborn replies denied Subaru from any further questioning. Plus, since Subaru wasn't at the scene over the wall, he had no way of confirming it. The case was closed. It was unsolved.

Halibel: "Rem-chan sure is impressive."

Then, Halibel, who floated in the bathtub with his tray and sake and acted unconcerned the whole time, let out those carefree thoughts, and he was licking the sake with his red face covered by his hair.

Once that he finished, after getting out of the bath, they went to the bathhouse entrance to meet up with the two people who were at the women's bath.

The bathhouse entrance had a space that was like a lounge, and apart from the dressing room, visitors could relax as much as they wanted there. Most of the time it'd become a place where old people meet, and they'd wait patiently for visitors who entered the bath to get out. There was one dead tired woman slovenly lying down on a couch in that space——

Rem: “Apparently it was her first time at a bathhouse, so she went too nuts and felt dizzy after staying in too long.”

Subaru: “So that’s why she is using my special seat. I can tell that it’s her first time, though.”

As he grumbled, Subaru saw Tia, who was lying down while moaning “Oooh” and “Ahhh”, receiving a lap pillow from Rem. Her white skin glowed so much that at first glance you could tell she had a head rush. Had she been standing up with a serious face right now, she would’ve certainly looked charming.

Although, by lying down in a sad, exposed state, men lose interest in hitting on her.

Subaru: “Wow, you even borrowed a fan for this girl.”

Rem: “If she falls over on the way back, she’d get covered in mud after all that cleaning.”

Subaru: “Sounds better than trying to maintain her beauty… all right, hand me the fan. I’ll fan her. Whoosh… whoosh whoosh… whoosh whoosh whoosh!”

Tia: “Oooooooo… that feels so gooood.”

Subaru takes the fan from Rem, who had been gently fanning her, and then he creates a storm. Bathing in that storm, Tia seemed to be enjoying it, although she was still groggy. However, soon enough, his arms couldn’t take it anymore. His fanning slows down and stops.

Tia: “Come ooon, can’t you fan me more?”

Subaru: “Don’t be so spoiled. Besides, Rem’s lap is mine. And the fan is borrowed. Who do you think you are, a princess?”

Tia: “So annoying…”

Tia grimaces at Subaru’s point, and he takes the fan away from him. After that, while Tia started fanning herself, Subaru looked at the wrist of her right hand.

Subaru: “What’s that? A friendship bracelet?”

Tia: “Don’t know what a friendship bracelet is, but Hal gave it to me. He told me to put it on. Is it a charm?”

Rem: “A charm, huh. It’s a bit surprising to see Halibel-sama give Tia-sama a gift.”

Subaru: “Well, it can’t be Hal-san trying to put the moves on Tia…”

She pouted, and she looked beautiful fanning herself quickly, but she also looked childish. Halibel’s true motive was unknown, and there may be no particular reason behind his actions, but all he had to investigate and cool down.

He was warmed up now, so he was going to finish his business and leave before he caught a cold.

Subaru: “All right, it’s time for the last bathhouse ritual. You’re coming, too.”

Tia: “Ritual…?”

Rem: “Yes, a ritual. If you don’t do it, it’d defeat the purpose of coming to the bathhouse.”

Subaru and Rem, the married couple, confidently replied to Tia, who gave a dubious look. The firmness of their tones confused Tia, further increasing the surprise of the one who showed up afterwards.

The one who came was Halibel—— However, the hair on his dry head was fluffy, and he looked like a completely different person, despite them being familiar with how he looked.

Tia: “You’re the mutt, right?”

Halibel: “Yeah, it’s me. Also, here, take this. Gotta drink it before it warms up, or else it’d be a waste.”

Tia: “W—wait a second… what’s this? A beast’s milk?”

Halibel: “Watch how you put it!”

What Halibel brought over in his hands was a white liquid in a bottle—— what Tia said wasn’t wrong, but put in a more tasteful way it would be:

Subaru: “It’s milk for when you get out of the bath… it’s a universal ritual!”

One could call it “all worlds do it”, and it wouldn’t be an exaggeration. Or at least, if the stylistic beauty was common between the two worlds Subaru knew, you could call it a ceremony passed across worlds.

Strictly speaking, this wasn’t cow milk, and it wasn’t fruit milk either, which would have been ideal. However, there at least was a skill to keep bottled milk cold, and it would be best not to expect more than that.

Subaru: “Uncork the bottle! Put your hand on your hip! Then drink up!”

While Subaru enthusiastically explained the steps, he performed the ritual. Cold milk goes through his throat, flowing into his warm stomach. That refreshing feeling—— the strong counter for his body that warmed up inside from the bath, that is the best part of bathhouses.

Rem: “Mm!”

Shouting cutely, Rem also drinks milk like Subaru. Then so did Halibel, along with other people who got out of the bath.

Tia: “Ahaha! Y—your face! A mustache! It’s making a mustache!”

Subaru: “It’s part of what makes this beautiful!”

Tia: “Lame! So lame! You look like an idiot!”

Developing a white mustache after getting milk around your mouth was like proof that the ritual was a success.

Incidentally, it was hard for Halibel to get milk around his mouth because of its structure. After Rem sneakily finished drinking, she looked back and gently wiped her mouth without letting anyone see.

Dubiously gazing at the three of them, Tia uncorks the bottle with a suspicious look. Then, after she took a light sniff of the smell, she put her hand on her hip, and she drank——

Tia: “——It’s so good!”

Then, a white mustache developed around her mouth, and she said that as her eyes shined.

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3

The four of them were walking back in their yukatas as the refreshing night wind blew.

Tia: “Bathhouses aren’t as bad as I thought. Oh, just so you know, that’s just because I was surprised.”

Halibel: “It’s not like I’m listening anyway.”

It was Tia, who walked with light steps, and Halibel going home. Tia was humming happily, perhaps because she had enjoyed her experience at the bathhouse a lot.

Although she was off key and it sounded like there was no melody, it was the same thing Subaru had heard just yesterday. Since she was singing the same thing, it didn’t seem like she was singing randomly.

Halibel: “What song is that?”

Tia: “Hmm? A nameless song. If I had to name it…”

Tia puts her finger on her lip, and she went into deep thought for a moment. And then——

Tia: “It’d be the «Die Song»!”

Subaru: “Pick a better name!!”

The words were just too dangerous, so Subaru reflexively butted in from the back. That makes Tia irritatedly say “What’s wrong with it?” as she clicked her tongue.

Rem: “Subaru-kun’s right. It’s such a lovely song, after all.”

Tia: “This again… It’s not like you’d ever going to disagree with your male partner anyway, Rem.”

Rem: “Yes, that’s right. I pretty much agree with everything Subaru-kun says. Sometimes I do disagree, though.”

Tia: “Hey! So, I had this realization… I don’t think I like Rem’s bossiness!”

Overwhelmed by something that was neither stress nor praise, Tia runs away with her head between her hands. Rem was the one who took over the humming for Tia.

Having heard it once, Rem somehow starts humming the same song.

Tia: “…Not quite. That’s not it, haha… Hahaha.”

Rem: “Hmm, well I didn’t catch it very well. Tia-sama, please let me hear it again.”

Tia: “You wanna hear it that badly? Really? Well, I guess I have no choice.”

Pleased with Rem, who gave a low bow, Tia starts to hum the song once again. Had they not known that it was the «Die Song», it would just sound like an enchanting song with a nice voice.

Subaru and Rem naturally start to speak less. Halibel also walked the street without saying anything.

There was only Tia’s humming in the quiet street at night.

Stars in the sky, and below it, the light of the paper lanterns dimly lighting the street red. Considering only that, it looked very mystical, like a moment in a dream——

Rem: “Subaru-kun?”

Subaru: “——Yeah?”

Because he was immersed in the atmosphere, his response to Rem was a little late. Rem smiles slightly, understanding how Subaru felt, and her face turned red as she said,

Rem: “I was just thinking…”

Subaru: “About what?”

Rem: “If only this moment could last longer for our child to see it…”

Rem says that with a gentle smile, and she rubbed her stomach softly. Her gesture and words make Subaru feel really embarrassed, and he couldn’t put his feelings into words.

Subaru: "————"

He simply gently held onto Rem's free hand, combining their warmth, and they went home.

And that's how the night went.

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4

——The days went on slowly. Without any time to stop, like water flowing. They were busy, noisy days.

Ever since the night Subaru met with the strange neighbors at the tenement house, the days were eventful in a good way, and hardly any of the things he was anxious about happened.

It somehow became a habit for Tia and Halibel to accompany Subaru and Rem at the dining table in the morning, and they'd spend time together until work while talking about their plans for the day.

Tia: "They need me, or else crooks will be on the loose. Even Clane said so."

Rem: "Tia is as reliable as expected. I'm very thankful. Looks like you might get more food!"

Tia: "This is where you give me more! You don't mean «might get more», you will give me more!"

Tia decided on doing "bounty hunting" as her job after getting a taste of success with her first job. It seemed that it really was Tia's calling, and from what they'd been told, her arrest rate was quite something.

Jobs handled at Clane's employment agency are recognized by the town—— Because of this, a lot of the jobs are highly beneficial to Banan Town. Inevitably, Tia's efforts were making the town safer.

Halibel: "Put yourself in my shoes as someone who has to go with her. I haven't been able to take a lovely nap with the sun out for so many days. My internal body clock is going to get messed up at this rate."

Rem: “Isn’t this a sign that you’re getting closer to becoming a proper citizen?”

Subaru: “Rem’s right. Suck it up and follow Tia around. I’m sure you’ll even lose some of that stomach fat of yours that you’ve been worrying about.”

As a married couple, Subaru and Rem soothe Halibel, who took a barrage of criticism while frowning. Seeing that interaction out of the corner of her eye, Tia happily drinks her miso soup as she raised her bowl and said, “More please!”

Subaru frequently went to Magoji Palace at noon, even after the defined period of time.

He succeeded at obtaining the steady job that he’d dreamed of without any problems. This was all thanks to Riften and the landlady recognizing Subaru’s abilities, and it was the reward for living up to their expectations. However, if there was one thing that was different from what he’d expected——

Subaru: “——All right, today let’s review the basics of making youfuku (western-style clothes).”

???: “Yeeees, Subaru-chan.”

Subaru: “Good answer! However, I’m the Sensei now. Call me Sensei, okay?”

???: “You got it, Subaru-chan Sensei.”

Subaru was shrugging his shoulders as he smiled wryly at the playful women.

Subaru was officially hired at Magoji Palace, but he was no longer just a servant, he was also acted as a teacher in a little “class for lessons”.

The classroom was one of Magoji Palace’s tatami rooms. In it, you’d mainly learn about sewing, Subaru’s speciality, and a version of fashion related western-style clothing—— stuff you’d call embroidery. Even in Kararagi, where Wafuu culture was popular, it was hard for it to take root, even with fashion culture from other countries coming over. In this place, someone with the knowledge and the skills becomes a teacher, and people would get the help they have always wanted with the western-style clothes women usually wore.

Most of the students were female coworkers working at the palace and bourgeoisie wives around the same age. Once in a while, there'd be young women who would study the basics and planned on doing a job related to it in the future, but these were the kind of people that popped up, more or less.

If there had to be name for Subaru's job, you'd call it a cultural lecturer, the parallel universe version.

Riften: "I thought I told you that I have high hopes for your femininity."

Subaru: "Well, I don't have any complaints. I don't, but this is one of those things you're into, isn't it?"

Riften: "What a terrible misunderstanding. I just wanted to see my beloved girls in something other than wafuu clothing. I'm just trying to make that small wish come true, that's all."

Subaru: "For some reason you keep denying you're into cougars…"

Incidentally, Subaru's lessons are mostly popular, and they were talking about increasing his lessons from three times a week to four times a week. If the knowledge from Subaru's world was helpful at all, he'd like to use this cultural school as an excuse to spread it to others.

At night, after Subaru's work ended at the palace, he said goodbye to the ladies and the gatekeeper, who he was familiar with, and he went to the tenement house—— No, he went to Temple Elementary School to see Rem.

Ever since he found out that Rem was pregnant, he always made sure to walk home with Rem. Otherwise, he wouldn't know if something happened along the way, and it'd be too late after something did happen.

Subaru: "A stranger might suddenly attack for an unjust reason, after all."

Tia: "What? I don't get it, why did you look at my face when you said that? You got a problem, Su?"

In front of Temple Elementary School, which bathed in the sun, Subaru and Tia came across each other at a street, and they exchanged those words as they both grimaced.

Subaru going to meet Rem was a natural thing to do as a husband. However, Tia frequently going to Temple Elementary School to meet Rem sort of ruined the married couple's time together. That alone showed that she was attached to Rem, and sometimes it'd be too much.

Subaru: “Also, it doesn’t feel right when you call me Su.”

Tia: “What a pain. Hal calls you that, so there shouldn’t be a problem with me calling you it, too. Besides, I’m only here for Rem, you’re not needed.”

Tia pouted and acted intimidating, and Subaru also pouted at her. This was better than her calling them by their sex by saying stuff like “males”, but the arrogance of her responses wasn’t any different how it was in the beginning.

Subaru: “Then I’m going to tell Rem and you’ll get less food.”

Tia: “Y—you coward. You’re so heartless…!”

Still, their relationship was way more relaxed than before, just because they found a way to make her think twice.

Rem: “Subaru-kun, Tia-sama, thanks for waiting… You two didn’t fight, did you?”

Subaru: “We did.”

Tia: “Of course we did.”

Plus, the thing they both felt the strongest about was Rem smiling.

Given that people have time, everyone eats dinner together at night after coming home, and that even includes Halibel, who always goes off somewhere.

It seemed Tia was uninterested in the reward for her bounty hunting, and ever since she earned enough money to pay off the tenement house reparations with her first job, and all her rewards were handled by Rem.

Rem: “So, when all your work goes well, you can treat yourself. When it doesn’t, spend wisely.”

Tia: “I can’t just live large everyday with all the money I have?”

Rem: “If you do that, you’ll forget to appreciate how special it is, and most importantly, you’d hurt Subaru-kun’s pride as the breadwinner. This is my prudence as a great wife.”

Subaru: “But I’d be pleased if you don’t tell anyone about this great wife’s prudence!”

He forgave her since Rem looked cute apologizing with her tongue stuck out. It was also for the sake of his own pride, though.

Moving on, Tia worked hard to understand Rem’s point as she nodded and went, “Uh-huh”. Their relationship was a strange thing; Tia was the one who looked the most mature, but inside, she was like a child—— She acted like a wolf girl. Rem interacted with Tia, who didn’t act how she looked, affectionately, like how a mother or an older sister would.

Viewing her as a mother, this could be practice for the child. However, if Subaru viewed her as an older sister, that would be complicated, and it’d make him feel like he was walking on thin ice.

Halibel: “Su-san, what’s wrong?”

Seeing Subaru go into deep thought, Halibel, who was the only one drinking alcohol, tilts his head and asks him a question. In response, Subaru says, “No” as he tilted his head and continued,

Subaru: “It’s nothing. I was just thinking about how nice it’d be if we got treated tomorrow.”

Rem: “Halibel-sama would really have to go out on a limb for that. After all, Halibel-sama is the reason why we can’t be treated in the first place.”

Tia: “Really? Then I should spank him and make him work!”

Halibel: “Don’t you think you’re treating me too cruelly?”

And so, that’s how the night went the exact opposite way the morning did with loud laugher at the dining table.

After they finished eating, they went to the bathhouse, Rem watched over Tia, who acted a bit more responsibly than last time, Subaru and Halibel took their time enjoying the bath, and they went home after enjoying milk upon getting out of the bath.

Tia’s humming resounded throughout the street at night. Lately, it has been like a duet with Rem. In a way, listening to that added elegance to the time they spent going home, and Subaru loved it.

Their precious, busy, noisy time went on slowly.

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5

Tia: “Wooow, it takes a lot more time for a child to be born than I thought.”

Tia puts her arms behind the back of her head, and she said that in a carefree tone.

She was on the way home from Temple Elementary School walking with Subaru and Rem on the street during the evening, which became a daily thing. She was looking at Rem’s stomach.

Rem was slightly smiling in a *kimono*—— and her stomach was big enough to recognize it from afar.

Subaru: “Taking a glance, it’s probably been about 6 months… perhaps? So, like in the middle stage of pregnancy.”

Tia: “Middle stage? Still only halfway there!? Wow, animals would never take this long.”

Subaru: “I’m not an animal! I’m a human! It takes quite a long time.”

Tia brings up a ridiculous example, Subaru lightly flicked her forehead, and she groaned while her forehead was being pushed. After that, she took a side glance at Rem and said,

Tia: “Isn’t it rough having your stomach so big? It doesn’t look like you could jump or hop.”

Rem: “I can’t deny that it is rough. Often, it’s difficult sticking out my chest, and there’s no way I could jump or hop, so I’ll let you do it, Tia-sama.”

Tia: “If you insist. I’m good at jumping and hopping anyways.”

While Tia got carried away, full of herself, Subaru broke into a smile with that interaction.

They've had a baby for about 6 months now—— Meaning, they've been neighbors with Tia for 3 months. Although they were worried at first, it was a completely stable life now.

Rem wasn't in the stable period of pregnancy, but they were able to deal with Tia's temper pretty well now.

Tia: "I wonder if it's going to be a male or a female."

Rem: "Whether it's a boy or a girl, it'll probably be naughty like Subaru-kun. But it's acting up a lot in my stomach, so I think it might be a girl."

Subaru: "If it's acting up, wouldn't that mean it's a boy?"

Rem: "——? Would it?"

According to Rem's self-diagnosis, apparently the baby is a girl. The way she came to that judgement made Subaru look dubious, but Rem tilted her head, and even Tia had a question mark above her because of Subaru.

In this world, people might think that girls are naughty. Now that he thought about it, it did seem like a lot of the girls he got involved with in this world were active. ——That's when his thought was interrupted.

Subaru: "Well, people are delighted when their first is a girl. Back at my hometown, they say «First Princess, then Taro»[15], meaning it's best to first have a girl and then a boy."

Rem: "First Princess, then Taro?"

Subaru: "Princess is the girl, while Taro is the boy. It means the first is a princess, and the second is the eldest son. If I remember correctly, it means girls don't cry as much or something like that."

Kids being hard to take care of is common knowledge, and it's even been engraved in Subaru's limited knowledge. Obviously he's never had any real experience with it, but at any rate, it's a lot of work to

[15] The saying is "一姫二太郎" meaning «First princess, second Taro», a common Japanese last name literally meaning eldest son. In Japan, some think that girls are easier to raise than boys because they think they cry less and tend to get ill less often. So they think a girl first is best for learning.

take care of babies when they're highly prone to crying—— He was already being lectured a lot by his female coworkers at the palace.

Subaru: "By studying the fundamentals of childcare with our first being a girl, it will be easier to deal with the second one. It's like the wisdom of my ancestors, or more like advice they came up with from personal experience."

Rem: "I see… So I have to give birth to a girl first no matter what."

Subaru: "You don't have to put weird pressure on yourself because of what I said, even if it is a boy."

With a wry smile, Subaru scratches his cheek. To Subaru's side, it was unclear how seriously Rem took him, and she said,

Rem: "For Subaru-kun, do your best to be a… be a girl."

She was saying this to the child inside of her. However, he's heard that the gender of a baby is determined the moment fertilization happens, so Rem was all too late to speak to it.

Subaru: "If you're a boy, just come out healthy already. Cry all you want. If we learn the hard parts early, it might be easier later."

Rem: "Oh, that's right. First it must come out healthy… yeah, that's what's most important."

Subaru: "Yep, that's what's most important… Oh, it moved."

The baby responded to Subaru, who touched Rem's stomach and talked to it while stroking it. The new life inside of Rem was already focused on turning and pushing. Subaru really felt like it was a boy, but——

Subaru: "Maybe that's because I'm thinking too much about after it's born."

Thinking rationally, he'd have the easiest time preparing if he knew whether it was a boy or a girl before it was born. The kind of choices he had for play equipment would be settled, and that'd go for clothes too, of course.

Before he had a kid, that's actually what Subaru thought, but strangely enough, now he thinks otherwise.

He felt like the things that were unknown until it's born were like blessings invoked by the baby.

Tia: "Still, about 6 months to go? Hmm, that sure is a long wait."

Rem: "I'm sure that time will go by before we even know it. Would you prefer it be faster?"

Tia: "I don't mind… It's just that, at this rate, I'll never get a clue for the Light Sphere."

Rem: "————"

The words Tia spoke while she pouted and glared at the sunset—— Hearing «Light Sphere» made Subaru's cheeks stiffen, and Rem also lost her breath for a moment.

Light Sphere—— that's what Tia was looking for, and it was the very thing that started this life. Tia did not hesitate to say that Rem stole it for sure. However, the baby got in the way of forcing information out of her, she was let off the hook until childbirth, and they became good neighbors.

However, Tia really hadn't talked about the Light Sphere since the first few days, and she wasn't acting suspicious of Rem. Hence why the matter was kept in the very back of her mind.

She couldn't hide her shock from Tia still remembering it and going after it.

Subaru: "…In any case, suck it up until these 6 months are over. That was the deal."

Tia: "Yes yes, I know that. 6 months… 6 months, eh…"

Strictly speaking, a pregnancy period is about 10 months—— If this is the 6th month, then there has to be 4 months left. Subaru still not pointing out that she was off by 2 months showed how he hoped to postpone that moment.

It was not the same as when they had a terrible meeting. Tia was now an irreplaceable friend.

Tia: "If Rem gets pregnant again right after you're born, I'm going to be very troubled."

Tia talked to Rem—— No, she talked to the baby while saying those things.

She wouldn't hurt Rem while she had a baby. Tia was so attached to these days that she laughed off her own rule that she had made. Subaru felt that it'd be nice if that was the case.

Rem: “Subaru-kun…”

Subaru: “Man, Rem, I’m not sure what to do when you make such a determined look…”

Rem looked at Subaru with watery, serious eyes as she firmly clenched her fist, making him knit his brows. Were her cheeks red because of determination? Or were they red because of the sunset?

In any case, he shrunk back when Rem implicitly showed her determination to have a second child. Of course, Subaru was also in favor of having another so that the child would have a younger sibling, but family finances were a big problem.

They had their first one pretty haphazardly, so he wanted to be more careful with the second one.

Subaru: “But if Tia has a change of heart… Well, I don’t think that’ll happen anyways.”

Rem: “Maybe if we keep having kids non-stop until we die…”

Subaru: “That idea kind of sounds like a horror!”

In response to Rem seriously making scary plans, Subaru took her hand and guided her downstairs. Rem follows his natural guidance, and Tia was waiting at the bottom, as she went down the stairs a little quicker.

Going home in the evening, the usual affectionate time. 4 days left—— This might be the last of these times; it was a fleeting scene that made him feel regretful.

——Somehow that evanescence made Subaru’s heart ache as he squinted at the bright setting sun.

Halibel: “Oh. You must be beat. You worked all day again.”

When they came back to the tenement house, they saw Halibel smoking his *kiseru* sitting on a bench.

Lately, Halibel has tended to skip out on going to work with Tia. It seemed he was taking advantage of Tia being used to her job now, and so the Eternal Playboy made his comeback.

In other words, he was headed towards becoming a bum. Naturally, the three of them treated him coldly now.

Tia: “How lucky you are, yet again. Even though you’re a mutt, you can’t be a watchdog when you’re staggering all over the place.”

Subaru: “Does the food taste good when you don’t work?”

Halibel: “Wooow, a storm of verbal abuse. That’s not nice. Rem-chan, say something about this.”

Rem: “Let’s see… I think food tastes the best when you’re fulfilled with work.”

Halibel: “It’s just the way you put it that’s gentle. You’re just as hurtful as Subaru!”

Halibel gets struck by Subaru, Tia, and then Rem with finishing blows, and he leaned back as he surrendered. After that, he slowly brought his bent body back into its original posture and said,

Halibel: “Yes, lately I haven’t been working and have been lazing around, but today was a bit different.”

Tia: “A bit different, and yet it seems your laziness hasn’t gotten any better.”

Halibel: “Let’s not talk about that. Also, I’ve done all these things for you today, so I’d like you to take that into account.”

Hearing Halibel’s statement, Tia pointed at herself with a blank look. Once Halibel calmly nodded, he pointed the tip of his *kiseru* towards the tenement house—— Towards the entrance to Tia’s room.

Halibel: “Come on, Su-san, reveal it.”

Subaru: “You act as if I’m an accomplice for your schemes, but you haven’t told me anything, either… oh?”

After the calming instruction, Subaru opened the sliding door to Tia’s room. Once he looked inside, the scenery made his eyes open wide. Inside, there was——

Rem: “Wow. Flowers, sweets… and even *kimono*s. Are these gifts?”

Rem, who viewed the Room like Subaru did, put her hands together, and she was impressed as her eyes sparkled.

As implied by Rem's words, Tia's room had a total make-over. This room, which Subaru and Rem previously lived in, had the minimum amount of furniture and was quite bland, even after the marks from Tia's rage were repaired.

And now, flowers were placed here and there in the room, as well as *kimono*s and candy boxes on top of the tatami mats; it was full of all kinds of gifts.

Subaru: "For someone like Halibel-san, these touches are quite nice."

Halibel: "Hehehe, what do you think? See me in a new light now, right? That's what I'd like to say, but these gifts aren't really from me. These are gifts from the townspeople."

Receiving praiseful words from Subaru, Halibel quickly gives away the truth. It was too thoughtful for someone like Halibel, so he was convinced when he was told that he didn't do all this, but to tell the truth, he was shocked. The people of Banan Town had sent gifts to the owner of room——

That is, they had sent gifts to Tia.

Halibel: "About Tia's work, I did say that her arrest-rate is impressive, right? But the employment agency job isn't the only job where Tia-chan is helping with all sorts of things."

Rem: "She has a job on top of her employment agency one?"

Halibel: "It's more like a helper sort of thing. She frequently goes around doing favors… They piled up, and this is how they've repaid her."

Listening to Halibel give an explanation with his arms folded, Subaru and Rem looked at each other, showing that neither of them knew about all this.

Strangely enough, this is exactly what they had thought about. There were many times when people in town said hi to Tia in a very friendly way when they were on their way back from places like Temple Elementary School or the bathhouse. Subaru thought that this was because of her achievements with her employment agency job, but that wasn't the case.

Tia had been deepening her exchanges with the townspeople without Subaru and Rem knowing about it.

Subaru and Rem were comprehending the situation, whereas Tia was silent in front of the presents she was given. Her cheeks were red, and she was just playing with her hair with her finger to show her confusion.

Without knowing what feeling welling up inside, as if it was too much to handle.

Rem: “Let’s have a feast tonight. We have all this food, after all.”

Tia: “Rem…”

Rem: “These presents are for Tia-sama. We can’t let it go to waste. I may not be able to finish it all myself, so will you help me?”

Tia’s eyes shook as she heard Rem’s proposal. Then, after pondering for a little bit, Tia nodded deeply at Rem without saying anything. Seeing her nod, Rem rolls up her sleeves—— And so began the preparations for the feast.

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6

Even though it was a feast, there was no clear thing they were celebrating. But still, if they were having this feast for something, it would be——

Rem: “——To celebrate Tia-sama becoming a member of the town.”

Then, Rem tells Subaru that with a smile, and this was enough to convince him.

Celebrating becoming a member of the town—— For Subaru and Rem, having the people around them kindly helping them out because they knew about their child was like proof that they were recognized by the town. If something similar happened to Tia, that truly would be wonderful.

Everyone: “————”

On top of the dining table, each and everyone one of the plates were empty. Only four people were having a feast, but it was still a feast. Rem had put in her full effort, and she attacked with an amount of food worthy of her reputation. However, Tia faced all of it head-on, and with Subaru and Halibel's help, amazingly managed to finish it off.

And so, she gave in to the fullness of her big stomach, and she was now breathing in her sleep.

Subaru: "She becomes a cow as soon as she sleeps after eating. And now her beauty is ruined."

Halibel: "Oh, Su-san, I'm surprised you're saying this when your wife is right next to you."

Subaru: "I'm always praising Rem 100 times as much as that. Besides, I have no intentions of harming Tia. Tia is like… hm… She's like a little sister."

Judging off their appearances, it wasn't clear who was older. However, by comparing their behavior and common sense, a whole audience would agree that Subaru was older than Tia. In fact, neither Rem nor Halibel disagreed, and they just made gentle looks upon hearing Subaru's statement.

Halibel: "But I don't think she fell asleep just because she got full. She secretly took some sips of that."

Subaru: "Some sips… Oh."

As Halibel chuckled, he pointed at somewhere behind Tia's butt while she lay down—— Hidden in the hem of her dress was an awfully expensive bottle of alcohol. This was probably one of her gifts as well. Although, Subaru and the others did come to the decision to not let Tia drink since it'd be risky.

Halibel: "Continuing to hide something just because you've already began doing it… Children find it intriguing. Eventually, it turned out like this."

Subaru: "…But you were still wrong to let it happen while knowing about it."

Halibel: "It's so cute how she sleeps right after having a taste of it. If she caused ruckus everywhere because of this, I would've had to take responsibility, but that didn't happen."

Subaru frowned when Halibel judged that everything turned out alright in the end. However, when he looked at Tia's calm sleeping face, he started to feel that he was wrong to be mad.

Even if Tia got drunk off alcohol, would she use violence on Subaru, like she did before, and get back her Light Sphere even if it meant taking Rem's life away?——It was very hard for him to imagine her doing that.

Halibel: "Um, about the Light Sphere…"

Subaru: "——! Learned something?"

Halibel: "I frequently went around investigating. Did you think I was just lazing around?"

Halibel opens one of his slit eyes, and he gave a wink that meant the opposite of what it normally would mean. Seeing him do that, Subaru raises his eyebrows in surprise as he said,

Subaru: "Yeah, I thought you were just fooling around… Now I think better of you!"

Rem: "Yes, I see you in a much better light now! Impressive, Halibel-sama!"

Halibel: "Here I was thinking about how skilled you guys are at acting normal as married couple…"

Giving a wry smile, Halibel scratches his own black-haired head. After that, in a low tone he said,

Halibel: "Sorry to get your hopes up. I haven't heard anything about what exactly this Light Sphere is or where it's at. The situation is still the same. I'm sorry."

Subaru: "Sigh…"

Halibel: "Can you hold in your sighs? Also, if I haven't heard anything about the Light Sphere, isn't that enough to give us some nice information? Such that even the existence of it is fishy."

Rem: "So you're suspecting Tia-sama made everything up?"

Hearing Halibel's words, Rem's voice tenses up, and she says that in a bit of a criticizing manner. Subaru also felt disgusted by his assumption, although not as much as Rem.

Tia truly was determined to get her Light Sphere back. Hence why she was constantly checking for it on the way home today—— There's no way she was lying and making stuff up.

Halibel: “There’s also the possibility that she just can’t think that it could be anyone else. Tia-chan isn’t normal. Su-san, Rem-chan, you must know that, right?”

Subaru and Rem: “————”

However, Halibel makes that assertion to the two of them who denied his hypothesis with emotional arguments.

Perhaps he calmly saw the truth objectively because these were the views of shinobis. Or maybe Subaru and Rem were simply too soft on Tia and they were just looking away from reality.

Halibel: “Once Rem-chan gives birth…”

This was the first time Halibel put the time they had left into clear words. The inescapable reality was coming closer. It was the time when a decision would be made, as well as the time to make a choice.

Will it be up to Subaru, Rem, or Tia?

Subaru: “There’s no need to give an answer right away.”

Halibel: “Maybe. ——But an answer will have to be given eventually.”

As Subaru replied, Halibel quietly said that with his head down. Subaru becomes silent and says nothing in response to is words, and when Rem slowly stood up,

Rem: “I can’t let Tia-sama catch a cold.”

Subaru: “Oh, I’ll do it.”

Subaru takes out a blanket instead of Rem, who was near the closet. In the last few days, nights have been remarkably chilly. Of course, Rem wanted Tia to be especially taken care of.

Rem: “Tia-sama, I will be moving the alcohol. Would you like the futon to be spread out?”

Rem steps up to Tia as she slept, and she talked to her affectionately. And then, she collects the bottle of alcohol Tia hid in her hem, and she started to loosen the sash of her dress so that she didn’t have trouble sleeping.

Suddenly, Rem's hands were caught in white fingertips.

Rem: "Tia-sama?"

It was the same old way she called out her name. Rem, who was looking straight at Tia's sleeping face, was the only one who was able to tell that something was wrong.

Subaru, who was carrying the blanket, did not notice it and neither did Halibel, who smoked his *kiseru* at the window.

——A trickle of tears was slowly rolling down Tia's cheeks.

Tia: "Give it… back…"

A frail, low murmur came from Tia's thin lips.

Rem says "What?" as she tried to hear that voice melting in the ephemera atmosphere, and then she brought her ears closer——

Tia: "——Give back… me."

That moment, a wind blew.

Subaru: "Ah!?"

Subaru screams, and he immediately unfolded the blanket he was holding. Rem was blown away into him. Unable to withstand the impact, he gets blown away to the back. Subaru somehow forcefully wraps Rem in the blanket, and he crash into the kitchen with his back.

The cooking utensils make a loud noise as they fell onto the floor, and the food left in the pot gets thrown out.

Subaru: "Ka… ha…"

While the pain disturbed Subaru's breathing, he looked forward with his eyes wide open, wondering what just happened.

He saw the room that changed within just a few seconds—— The dining table and the tatami mats flew off, and the magic gem lights hanging from the ceiling were violently turning on and off. There was an opening in the middle of the room, as if a beast had torn into it with its nails. Standing before it was Tia, whose wide dress waved in the wind as she shed tears.

Wind and a bite attack—— More than enough to remind him of the attack that had happened that one night.

Subaru: “Tia——!”

Subaru cries that. However, it didn’t reach Tia as she continued to shed tears endlessly while she held her head. Her eyes looked confused, and she was muttering something.

Tia: “My arms… my legs… my… body… where is it? Where did it go…?”

Her steps were unsteady, her eyes made it seem like she was dreaming, but the danger was so clear——

Halibel: “——”

So, a shinobi had to deal with such danger in a way a shinobi would.

Halibel evaded the first wind by clinging onto the ceiling. It wasn’t clear how someone tall like him accomplished that. However, after Halibel escaped danger, he got off the ceiling, and he free fell down onto Tia’s head, dealing a blow to her.

What hit her was a fist axe, where he put his big hands together. It was such a powerful hit that it could’ve smashed a large tree. The force he struck with had a chance to kill Tia if it hit her, as she was frail. Tia, shedding tears, dodged it, and she kicked up the broken dining table, repelling Halibel, who dropped down.

In this small room, Halibel, jumping around lightly as a tall man, and Tia, who was trying to get the upper hand, were clashing with magic.

It was the return of that night. Although the location was different, the situation was the same.

Tia's invisible bite attacks could not reach Halibel because of the kunai he threw. However, the aftermath had serious effects on its surroundings, and the tenement house got cut up again and again, destroying it.

Halibel: "This isn't good! Su-san and Rem-chan are going to get crushed!"

Perceiving the collapse of the tenement house as dangerous, Halibel screams and steps hard on the floor. Then, the tatami mats just barely left on the floor sprung up from below one by one. Tia, who was on top of one, gets sent flying by the unexpected impact, and she was being blown out of the tenement house.

Turning over tatami mats—— That is what Halibel pulled off, although it wasn't clear how he did it.

Subaru: "——!"

The moment Subaru realized that, he gave a jolt to his stiff lower half of his body, and he stood up. Inside his arms there was Rem, who was wrapped in a blanket. While holding onto her, he dashed out the back of the tenement house.

Subaru: "Rem, are you alright!? Rem!?"

When Subaru started to feel how cold the air felt, he realized that his whole body was wet with cold sweat. He ignored how nasty it was and called Rem's name as he held her in his arms.

Rem: "Subaru… -ku…"

Subaru: "Rem!"

Rem called Subaru's name as she wheezed. Subaru screeches because of it, and he slowly unfolded the blanket to check if she was injured.

From what he could see, there were no injuries. His blood ran cold when he was inside of Tia's wind up close. Had something gone wrong, Rem might have been cut into along with the space. It was a miracle that she just ended up getting blown away——

Rem: "What about… Tia-sama…"

Subaru: “Take it easy! Tia… Halibel-sama is doing something about Tia now! What’s more important right now is you. How’s your body…”

Rem: “I’m… fine… ku!? Ah… ahh!”

Subaru: “Rem!?”

Rem tried to smile bravely, but her body bent with an agonized look on her face. That makes Subaru’s eyes widen, and then Rem held onto her stomach before his eyes, suffering. The situation indicated the worst case scenario.

Subaru: “——!!”

Subaru hits his head, almost going into a panic, and he lifted Rem again with the blanket. There were still signs of Halibel and Tia clashing at the other side of the tenement house.

However, this wasn’t the time for that. It wasn’t, and yet——

Subaru: “Tia! Halibel! Stop! That’s enough!!”

He ran to the front and yelled at the two clashing people to stop fighting. Hearing that, Tia slowly looked his way while Halibel stayed cautious. Both had the same person in their eyes, and he didn’t know why they felt so moved.

Regardless, the madness in Tia’s eyes settled down, and Halibel really was no longer preparing for combat.

Tia: “Huh…?”

Tia let out a stunned and dumbfounded gasp, and when he looked at Subaru and the others, her surroundings made her think back. She thought back about the marks of destruction, Rem suffering, Subaru looking desperate, and Halibel fighting.

Tia: “Huh…?”

Tia just kept letting that out, looking like she didn’t know what had happened. Halibel quickly ran up to Subaru and Rem without paying attention to Tia.

Halibel: “How’s Rem-chan?”

Subaru: “She’s holding onto her stomach and it looks like she’s in pain! We have to get her to the doctor as soon as possible…”

Halibel: “I’ll carry her. It’ll be faster that way. Su-san, you hurry, too.”

Halibel immediately picked up Rem along with the blanket, as if snatching her, and he jumped across the street with an extremely light leap, going off to get the old family magic user.

Subaru sees Halibel jumping towards the moon, and he hurries after him.

Tia: “Wai… Wait…”

A shaky voice called out to him from behind. Subaru stops for a moment, and then he looked back.

He saw Tia standing alone, reaching her hand out for his back. She wasn’t close enough to reach. She just had the will to try to stop him.

Tia: “I…”

Subaru: “————”

Subaru couldn’t find the words to speak to Tia, who didn’t finish her sentence. He gave in to his impatience.

——Actually, he was probably feeling irritated as well. He had no time to stop moving. He had to run to Rem as soon as possible. The frustration makes Subaru’s feet move, and he starts running. Leaving Tia behind.

Tia: “————”

He felt like Tia’s hoarse voice faintly reached his earlobes. However, Subaru didn’t stop, and he didn’t tell Tia to follow him, either.

Was he angry at her? Of course, that was one reason.

Was he afraid of her? Of course, that was another reason.

However, the biggest reason he ran away is because he feared speaking to Tia, as he didn't know what to say.

???: "Your wife is fine. She's calmed down… That was pretty dangerous for both the mother and the child."

In the clinic he ran into, the old magic user said that after finishing the treatment, which took a few hours.

Hearing the calmness of Rem's breathing as she lay down on the bed, Subaru felt relief from the bottom of his heart, and words were not enough to express his gratitude towards Halibel and the old magic user.

And then, he went next to Rem as she slept, and he decided to wait as long as it'd take for her to wake up.

Even if Halibel returned to the tenement house and tells him that Tia isn't there, even if the old magic user tells him to take a rest, he was going to wait as long as it'd take for Rem to open her eyes.

Rem: "Subaru… -kun…?"

Rem woke up, he hears her voice, and he hugged her while shedding tears, confirming that she was okay. Peace within his heart was restored at last, and after that, they faced reality.

——Tia never returned to the tenement house again.

And so, the noisy, fun life of the strange neighbors at the tenement house met its end.

The three months after that went by within a blink of an eye.

——The predicted date for Rem to give birth was coming closer and closer.

Chapter 5 – Ten Months

Original translation by Remonwater

1

Rem: “Thank you very much for your help again. I must be going now, Doctor.”

???: “Take care of yourself as best as you can. The baby might be born at any time, after all. If you get carried here like last time, I may or may not be available.”

Rem: “Yes, I’ll take your words to heart.”

???: “Now go already.”

Rem bows, and the old magic user waved her goodbye while holding onto his blunt attitude.

At a glance, it did seem like a perfunctory response, but now that they knew the old magic user for a long time, the true intention of his blunt attitude was clear. Since there was sharpness in his words, you could tell that his skills and the care for his patients were genuine.

This relieved Subaru, and he didn’t mind bringing Rem to the healing magic user.

Subaru: “Still, my heart was pounding like a drum. Like the doctor said, the baby really can be born at any moment…”

Rem: “Jeez, you can’t be like that, Subaru-kun. If you’re always so nervous, your body won’t be able to take it when the time comes. Keep it in check, and prepare yourself calmly.”

Subaru: “R—right, keep things in moderation and act calm.”

With her hand on her mouth, Rem giggles at Subaru, who was so nervous that his legs and arms made it apparent it while he walked. Rem’s stomach was now undoubtedly big, and she was approaching the last month of pregnancy.

There was a time when the mother and the child were in serious danger, but fortunately they were able to recover and the baby inside grew normally.

Without a doubt, that was all possible because of Rem's strong will and Subaru's constant support.

Ever since that night, Subaru has been even more devoted to Rem, and he did his best to support her by her side. His coworkers and friends said that he was great for it, but that wasn't true. Doing something like this was just natural once you considered the fear and confusion he'd experienced that night, in that moment.

Just imagining the fear of possibly losing Rem and their child made his blood run cold.

Rem: "Thanks to you, I've been feeling so relaxed. I'm not sure if I I'll be able to live the way I did before after being cared for so much by my husband and giving birth to our child."

Subaru: "Right now, you have an important job of raising the baby with your stomach as the cradle. Until that's finished, leave all the little tasks to me. If something bothers you, don't take care of it yourself, be hard on me and teach me, like you always have."

Rem: "Okaaay."

Listening to Subaru's dramatic orders, Rem nods, acting playfully again.

Just like Rem said, Subaru has been doing most of the jobs in the house instead of her. Subaru's responsibility was to do as much cooking, laundry, and cleaning as possible.

Of course, at first he did make a lot of mistakes and it was clear that he was unskilled and lacked knowledge, but he was able to pull through with Rem's guidance and help from his female coworkers when he was having trouble.

And so now Subaru has attained house-husband skills that were good enough to Rem.

Subaru: "It's all thanks to Rem being an excellent teacher."

Rem: "No no. Subaru-kun's already a fast learner and you're good with your hands so it was fun to teach you. I'm sure that you're suited for tasks at home, too."

Subaru: “I just never had many opportunities to try them. I actually think I am, too.”

He just never had any opportunities. He knew that he had a high aptitude for things like cooking, laundry, and cleaning. At this point, it’s been proven that he has a high aptitude for being a husband on top of his sewing skills.

A group of Kararagi housewives had even surrounded him unexpectedly and confirmed that he was doing fine.

Subaru: “I wonder what we should have tonight. Rem, what would you like to eat?”

Rem: “Let’s see… I’d like to eat something sour.”

Subaru: “That’s a really classic request for a pregnant woman. Are you sure that you want to eat something sour?”

Rem: “Well, I was craving for it when I got pregnant, but not so much anymore. It’s why I snuck in a lot of sour food back then.”

Subaru: “The cats out of the bag with that shocking truth——!”

There were many times when they’d have sour fruits or vinegared food. That being said, at the time even Rem wasn’t aware that she was pregnant, so he was still a bit puzzled.

Subaru: “I’ve heard that morning sickness gets terrible and you start craving sour food. With that considered, you haven’t had much morning sickness.”

Rem: “Now that you mention it, that might be true. Maybe it’s the works of me really wanting to avoid showing myself being weak with you around.”

Subaru: “You’ve got strong nerves of steel. I’m just glad that we weren’t too late…”

It was discovered that Rem was pregnant when she lost consciousness and was taken to the healing magic user. If she’d never lost consciousness and kept everything inside, they might’ve never noticed that she was pregnant until her stomach became unnaturally large.

Rem: “And I’m sure I would’ve done everything I could to not have you think that I got fat, hiding how big my stomach was.”

Subaru: “And I’m sure I would’ve kept being fooled so easily. That really just isn’t okay…”

Come to think of it, it’s a good thing they had figured it out while they could still recover from mistakes. And on the night that sparked the realization there was——

Subaru: “————”

Naturally and unavoidably, his memory approaches that night.

That made Subaru’s expression turn sour, but it was something unavoidable. In the memories of the time he spent in the town of Banan, she was there in those three months, no matter where he looked.

In the funnest, loudest days that were still vivid in his memory, there was Tia.

Rem: “Tia-sama…”

Subaru: “She’s nowhere to be found. I put up a notice at Clane’s, and Hal-san’s searching for her too, but he’s found nothing.”

Hearing Rem’s melancholic murmuring, Subaru speaks quickly in response. This showed that he didn’t want to talk about Tia anymore if possible. However, Rem shook her head at his request as she said,

Rem: “Subaru-kun, are you mad at Tia-sama?”

Subaru: “——Yes, of course I am. Do you know how much danger you were in? You and the baby were in serious danger, and she’s the one at fault.”

Rem: “————”

Subaru: “And she even got the hell out before I could give her a piece of my mind, let alone hear her apologize. How could I not be mad after all that?”

——Ever since the final night, Tia completely disappeared from the town.

Subaru's last memory of Tia was him running to the clinic, leaving her behind and watching her cower like a child.

When he came back to the tenement house, which was on the verge of collapsing, after confirming that Rem was fine, Tia had already disappeared from the area. Afterwards, even Halibel helped out and they looked all over the town, but, in the end, they never found out a trace of her as months three passed by. Wondering where Tia ran off to, wondering where did that strange neighbor go——

All while never being allowed to see her as something more than a neighbor.

Rem: "If you ran into her and she apologized, would you forgive her?"

Subaru: "…Would you?"

Rem: "I definitely would. I love Tia-sama, after all."

Subaru: "————"

Rem's soft words were understandable. She'd forgiven Tia from the bottom of her heart.

Rem said the reason was that she loved Tia.

Subaru had nothing to say once she told him that. Even Subaru probably felt the same way as Rem did. He cared about Tia. He considered her a friend.

And yet, the unpleasant feeling Subaru felt inside was still there, and he didn't forgive Tia. Subaru felt the same way as Rem did and shared the same memories with her. Perhaps he didn't forgive because of their difference in tolerance. Or maybe there was a different reason——

Subaru: "————"

While talking, Subaru and Rem went back home.

Currently, they weren't living at the tenement house from before, but at a house near the town area through the courtesy of Riften. The tenement house had collapsed from the damage of that night. It never got rebuilt, and the spot was now a vacant lot of the tenement house.

Knowing that they'd lost their house, Riften was the one who put in a good word for them. He really did feel bad about depending on him all the time, but them having a baby made him forget about restraining himself.

The temporary residence was unexpectedly comfortable, and it was far more considerate of Rem's condition than the cramped tenement house. Perhaps this was also a result of Riften's thoughtfulness.

Rem: "But I feel it's still a bit too big for just the two of us."

So said Rem as she slowly sat down in the living room. Unlike the tenement house, which was pretty much one room as it was just divided, this house had more than enough of everything. But even if they had a living room, a bedroom, and private room for each of them——

Subaru: "It's probably a room for the child for when it's born. This is Riften-san we're talking about. I can see him thinking that far ahead."

Rem: "You have a lot of faith in Riften-sama, huh."

Subaru: "He's helped us out so much, after all. I'm not gonna lose trust in him just because he's got a thing for cougars. I've got tons of favors I have to repay."

Rem: "Yeah, me too. I need to repay the people at Temple Elementary School and the magic user doctor. And there's also Halibel-sama…"

Subaru: "Hal-san, huh."

Hearing Halibel's name, Subaru knitted his brows as he put luggage in the closet.

Ever since the tenement collapsed and they started living in completely different places, they had much fewer chances to meet with Halibel. The days when they'd see each other like a family were over, and it seemed Halibel wasn't a playboy anymore and was doing his best to fulfill his duty as a shinobi.

Subaru: "He must feel responsible for what happened to you."

Rem: "Well… it wasn't even Halibel-sama's fault though."

Subaru: “I mean, still. Tia suddenly changing… If there was something that triggered that, it had to have been the alcohol. He must feel down as the person that let it happen.”

Halibel especially was someone who’d jokingly say that he’d answer with his life if any problems ever came up. Even Subaru didn’t know if he blamed himself so much for him to do such a thing.

Honestly, it’s not like he blamed Halibel and wished that he’d stopped Tia before she poured herself alcohol. In reality, even Subaru wasn’t so childish that he’d blame him by telling him that, but it wouldn’t be strange if Halibel was frustrated with himself for it.

Thus, Halibel has been committed to finding where Tia ran off to.

Subaru: “…Rem, I’m gonna go shopping. Do you want anything?”

No matter what they did, talking about that night always made them feel depressed. Rem feeling down isn’t good for the baby. To avoid this, Subaru forced the topic to change.

His thoughtfulness should’ve been obvious to Rem, but she shook her head as she said,

Rem: “No, I’m fine. And you don’t have to ask every day. I’m not so selfish that I’d ask for this and that.”

Subaru: “But with how you are right now, I want you to be selfish more than anyone, y’know?”

Rem: “In that case, I want you to stay with me forever.”

Subaru: “I’m guessing this is what you came up with after perfecting the delivery.”

Subaru smiles wryly at Rem’s cute pestering, and he stood up once he was ready to go shopping. He thought about having sour food for tonight’s dinner, as Rem had requested.

Although it sounded like a joke, she probably had told him since she really did want to have it.

Subaru: “Okay, Rem, I’m leaving now. Behave and sit tight, alright?”

Rem: “Both the baby and I will behave.”

After that interaction, Subaru left the house to go shopping. He headed towards the town area—— However, he wasn’t going straight to the grocery store. He was going to Clane’s employment agency.

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Clane: “Unfortunately, I have no idea where Tia-chan is. Sorry.”

Clane, giving a reply that was now routine, bowed his head to Subaru, who showed up here on a regular basis. Subaru shook his head, letting him know that he didn’t have to act apologetic.

This also had become a completely normal exchange.

Clane: “Everyone’s worried about that girl. Goes without saying that she was loved.”

Subaru: “She was really skilled, right? Not that I still have any doubts or anything.”

Clane: “She was the best. A girl her age having bounty hunting as her calling isn’t something that should be told to everyone, though. Anyway, I’ll keep searching.”

Subaru: “I’m counting on you.”

The missing person poster posted on the wall—— The personal description on the request form was even edited by Subaru, and it captured Tia’s traits pretty well. But her beauty that defied common sense still wasn’t written on it.

Needless to say, Tia was so beautiful that one would think that she wasn’t from this world.

Subaru: “The pain from my nose being smashed begs to differ, though.”

Clane: “Nose being smashed?”

Subaru: “Nothing. Just talking to myself.”

Clane waves his hand at Subaru, and he leaves the employment agency. He was genuinely worried about Tia in his own way. He was feeling more and more on edge.

It was as if he was the only one in the world who cared about Tia.

Subaru: “Ugh. This is ridiculous. It’s not the time to be saying stuff like this… I’ll buy some green onions and forget about it.”

Brushing off his sadness, Subaru bought some green onions, or rather, green omions displayed on the greengrocer. He places them into the bag and starts constructing tonight’s menu inside his head.

Subaru: “I first bought green onions, so it should be the main ingredient… Actually, green onions are pretty flexible, so even if they aren’t the focus of the meal, things will come together just fine.”

With Rem and the ladies’ guidance, Subaru had mastered plenty of recipes. He picks the best out of the many good bargains displayed at the shopping district.

Lemom, tometo, cabage, cooking sake, fish, eggs, rice, soy sauce, Tia, wheat flour——.

Subaru: “——Tia?”

While carefully selecting ingredients, a shadow appeared in Subaru’s vision for just a moment, and he gasped. If he had he looked away thinking that he took her for someone else, her milky white hair would’ve disappeared into the crowd.

Although he saw it for just a moment, he was still sure of it. That was Tia’s hair.

Subaru: “Tia! Wait, hey, wait——!”

That moment, Subaru yelled, and he started running frantically

Subaru slips through a gap in the crowd of people, and he ran after her desperately as she became distant. Tia moved smoothly, as if there was no one in her way, whereas Subaru bumped into other people.

But still, the distance between someone who walks and someone who runs closes eventually. Suddenly, Subaru loses sight of Tia’s head in the surging crowd, and he looked everywhere while panicking——he saw the hem of her dress disappear into an alley.

Subaru: “Tia——!”

While praying that his eyes weren't deceiving him, Subaru tumbled into the alley. Then, after he kicked the hard ground and ran, he saw someone standing in the dark passageway.

She had a slender, delicate back, and she was pretty tall for a girl. That short, shoulder-length milky white hair couldn't belong to anyone else.

Subaru: "Hah… hah… Tia, I've been looking for you. Why'd you run away?"

Tia: "————"

Tia did not respond to Subaru's question. However, she had no intentions of running away anymore. Subaru understood that, so he dropped his luggage onto the ground while regaining his breath.

And then, he walks up to Tia as she stood in the darkness and reached for her shoulder.

Subaru: "Come on, I know it's hard for us to see each other. But at least look my way."

Holding onto her shoulder dressed in black, Subaru spoke to Tia in a somewhat blunt manner. The unpleasantness of the trouble from that night blackened out the happiness from seeing her.

If she at least had an expression that made it look like she was going through rough times, maybe he could be more honest. While hoping for that, Subaru turned her around and——

Tia: "——Die."

He was hit by a violent wind of bloodlust head on.

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3

Halibel: "Su-san! Are you here!?"

Rem: "Halibel-sama!?"

The door to the house gets thrown open, and Rem gasps in surprise upon hearing a voice that came in. And then she saw that it was a black-haired wolf man that entered the house—— Halibel.

It was a face Rem hadn't seen for a whole month. However, although it was the first time in a while that they'd seen each other, there wasn't a welcoming atmosphere. Halibel looked around the house as he said,

Halibel: "Rem-chan, I know it's been a while, but this is an emergency. Where's Su-san?"

Rem: "Subaru-kun is out shopping for dinner. He should be coming back very soon…"

Halibel: "Agh, so we missed each other! This is terrible! Not good, this isn't good…"

Halibe scratches his head and he couldn't calm down, making him sound antsy. Rem senses that he was acting unusual, and she stood up while holding onto her baby belly as she said,

Rem: "Halibel-sama, what happened? If it's something that has to do with Subaru-kun, please tell me."

Halibel: "Ah, Rem-chan, you really shouldn't push yourself too hard. I could've been clearer, but telling you straight up that Su-san's in danger would be… Or wait, maybe I could just tell you?"

Rem: "Halibel-sama?"

Halibel: "Rem-chan, I told you this before, right? Do you remember? Because of my nose, I know that there might be someone going after Su-san."

Halibel's question makes Rem's eyes widen. Although it wasn't entirely correct, most of the parts were accurate perceptions.

Someone might be going after Subaru—— That's what Rem told Halibel after guessing what Tia's goal was when she tried to harm her and Subaru.

She told him about the miasma surrounding Subaru—— That is, the possibility of having the Witch's scent.

Rem: "Yes, I did say. that However, that's irrelevant… and Tia-sama's actually going for me, not Subaru, and that's also probably a misunderstanding…"

Halibel: “No, that’s not quite right. It wasn’t a misunderstanding, and it was relevant. Dang it, I’m not being clear again. Right, we were mistaken. We were wrong.”

Rem: “Wrong? Wrong… about what…?”

Halibel: “About who the culprit really is, and about who Tia-chan really is.”

Rem gasps at the unexpected statement. When Halibel opened his eyes, which were usually closed like slit eyes, there was heavy regret in his revealed black pupils as he said,

Halibel: “It’s my mistake. I have no excuses. It’s a total failure. I miscalculated everything. Because of that, we might have a dangerous situation on our hands.”

Rem: “I—I don’t get it, Halibel-sama. Please explain everything from the top.”

Halibel: “——It all started approximately one year ago. The quest for Zarestia’s Bed was the beginning.”

Halibel listens to Rem’s question, and the details he talked about were like a bolt from the blue yet again. Zarestia—— Rem also remembered that name. It was one of the four powerful Great Spirits, known as The Four Great Spirits; an entity that lived in Zarestia’s Bed located in the west side of Kararagi. But as for what that quest started——

Halibel: “Zarestia’s Bed is a famous place wind blows, killing anyone near it. At first, the investigation team application was brushed off as a reckless challenge for daredevils, but…”

Rem: “But?”

Halibel: “Who knows if it was a miracle or something, but there’s one person who managed to return alive. If it had just been a survivor, then the story would’ve ended as someone who barely escaped death, but…”

Judging from the way Halibel recited the story, she guessed that it didn’t end there. And then she also guessed what Halibel was trying to confirm just earlier when he was feeling frantic. The moment Rem connected the dots in her mind, her eyes opened wide in terror.

Halibel: “The girl who survived was someone seeking revenge and she sought Zarestia’s power out of hatred for the Witch Cult.”

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——A wind blew. And it was probably sharp enough to easily shred Subaru's body into bits and pieces.

Or maybe being cut up by that wind and turning into bright red meat was Subaru's punishment as someone who turned his back on everything. Or at least, that's what he thought in that moment.

Tia: "——What are you spacing out for? Are you stupid!?"

Subaru: "Whoa!?"

He gets grabbed by the scruff of his neck, and he was flung back at once without being able to resist. Then, he bounced on the ground, and he rolled, rolled, and rolled without defending himself. And then, when Subaru looked in front of him while grimacing at the pain, he saw that the one who flung him was——

Subaru: "T——Tia, is that you?"

Tia: "Not like there could be any other beauties here right now other than myself… Well, that's what I'd like to say, but I'm not so sure if I could."

Bending forward lightly, Tia turns just her head back—— Both that rough tone and the way she treated Subaru rudely were just like her, no doubt about it.

And as for what Tia's statement meant, he'd find out immediately with the scene right before his eyes.

Subaru: "————"

Standing in front of Tia, who threw Subaru, was another Tia.

Two Tias with the same face and the same appearance were facing each other. Their looks were completely identical. The one difference between them was their dresses; they were clearly different in that one was black, and one was white.

The Tia dressed in black tried to kill Subaru, while the one dressed in white protected him. In other words,——

Subaru: “Black Tia is an enemy, and White Tia is an ally——!”

White Tia: “You aren’t wrong, but I don’t like the way you put it!”

Hearing Subaru shout with his face lying on the ground, White Tia stepped forward immediately as she muffled her voice. She shot her thin body like a bullet and came at the opponent who had the same face as her.

Using the power of her beast-like body, White Tia mercilessly strikes Black Tia’s face with her hand—— That instant, Black Tia put a smile on her incomprehensible, demonic, beautiful face.

Black Tia: “——Die.”

White Tia: “——!”

White Tia avoids the bite attack by quickly jumping up. However, the invisible attacks went after White Tia, shot into the sky one after another. White Tia kicks the wall, jumps diagonally, like jumping in a triangular motion, and she dodged, dodged and dodged.

White Tia: “Why you…! You’re persistent!”

Even if she jumped up walls, Kararagi buildings were short in general. White Tia quickly landed on top of the alley and angrily swung her arm at the ground. That moment, White Tia struck down with an attack similar to Black Tia’s bite attack—— however, it was clearly weak; White Tia’s wasn’t as good as hers.

Black Tia dodges it by quickly jumping away, as if it was inevitable.

White Tia: “Damn it! You’re me, and yet you’re stronger——!”

Black Tia: “——Die.”

Black Tia did nothing but speak bloodthirsty words to White Tia, who was furious with rage.

However, the difference in strength was showing in their few attacks. If they kept fighting like this one on one, eventually White Tia would be at a disadvantage. Even Subaru knew that as someone who almost got into danger just by watching. Therefore——

Subaru: "——Look at me, fake Tia!"

Black Tia: "————"

Subaru gets up, and he was close to the wall—— He jumped at his handbag that had been blown away onto the ground by the wind, and he was throwing things that were in it.

However, unfortunately the first thing that went flying parabolically was a green omion. The long, green vegetable spun, lost momentum, and fell to the ground before it reached Black Tia.

That pointless resistance makes Black Tia turn her attention towards Subaru. Above him, White Tia was also staring at Subaru, wondering what he was doing. Still, this was fine. This was fine. He wasn't hoping to damage her or anything. He had no weapons, after all. If he could at least create a situation where it was a superficial 2 on 1, if he could at least make up for White Tia's misses——

Subaru: "————"

Black Tia: "Goo… oo…"

Just from being stared at, Subaru felt his mind freeze as it creaked.

Black Tia's eyes were empty. There was nothing you could classify as emotion, and nothing you could classify as will. In them was darkness——nothing but jet-black bloodlust that embodied it.

Bloodlust, and that's it. As scary as it was, Black Tia had nothing but bloodlust.

So, Black Tia's actions were the very definition of simple. The best actions just to kill were simple. And at this very moment, she didn't want White Tia's blood, but Subaru's.

Black Tia: "Damn… you…"

Sensing death being wished upon him, Subaru swung his arm as he resisted the fear entangling his body. However, his resistance was all for naught in the end. The bottle he held onto couldn't do much. It didn't hit Black Tia; it felt onto the ground before him and broke loudly. Everything spilled out.

——That moment, Black Tia's expression changed.

Black Tia: "——!?"

Subaru: "What?"

Suddenly, Black Tia opened her eyes and stared at the bottle that fell before her. There was a broken bottle—— A bottle of cooking sake just rolling and spilling out everything.

Subaru: "It's just alcohol, you know?"

Black Tia: "——"

Black Tia couldn't respond to Subaru's dumbfoundment. Her cheeks stiffen. She covered her face with her hands, stepped back, and she was letting out a groan full of pain. Black Tia was so afraid of that abomination, so afraid of the alcohol that it felt like her heart was being torn apart.

White Tia: "——Now's my chance!!"

Swooping down from the building's roof, Tia strikes with a dynamic kick.

Black Tia, being defenseless, eats a direct hit from the kick, and she was blown away with a rough somersault. She rolls, crashes into the wall, and ended up sprawling on the ground in the alley.

Subaru: "Did that do it!?"

White Tia: "Hah! When she suddenly stopped focusing, though I don't know why she did, her fate was sealed! Now I will achieve retribution with my own hands… Ew!?"

Subaru cheered and White Tia spoke triumphantly at the same time. White Tia was going to go after Black Tia, who collapsed, but she suddenly stopped and screamed.

White Tia opened her eyes wide at the alcohol right behind her that soaked her feet.

Tia: "——!? What!? What's this!? Ew… Ewww!!"

Subaru: "Not you too! What's the big deal!? It's just alcohol…"

White Tia was showing the same reaction, or maybe an even stronger rejection, that Black Tia had. Judging from that unusual situation, Subaru understood that their rejection towards alcohol was not just a matter of disliking it.

However, before Subaru could investigate the matter, something unbelievable happened.

Black Tia: "Goo… ooo…"

Subaru: "Huh? Her face is disfigured… no, it's blurry…?"

Black Tia groaned and slowly got up——her looks slowly fell apart, and they were coming off. Under it, there was a face that didn't look like Tia at all. The harshness of her eyes was similar, but her unhealthy eye bags were what stood out more.

She had a pale face, and her hair color went from milky white to dark brown. Even her body shrunk; it was as if a spell had been casted on her, transforming her.

Subaru: "Hey…!"

That alone was enough to shock him quite a bit, however something even more shocking made Subaru's eyes widen.

——He saw two shining protruding objects sticking out on the kneeling girl's head.

Subaru: "Horns…? So you're… an Oni?"

Black Tia: "——"

That was the conclusion Subaru came to after seeing the two horns sticking out on her forehead. A former member, a descendant of the Oni race, like Rem. Although the woman seemed anguished over the conclusion, she let out a sharp sigh in vexation.

Black Tia: "——Die! Die! Die!"

Wrapped in a storm of overflowing bloodlust, Subaru immediately protected his face with his hands as he felt the pressure. However, she still focused on satisfying her bloodlust, and she spread her arms left and right, conjuring wind.

Buildings to the left and right of the alley were gouged by the wind she conjured making them collapse. Half of the buildings' supports were gone, and the buildings collapsed instantly. The alley was going to be buried soon.

Subaru: "Shit! Hey, Tia… ahh, damn it!"

Tia: "…What… what… what is this? It's on me… eek…"

Right after the buildings collapsed, Subaru called Tia's name. However, Tia was still shocked from having breathed in the smell of alcohol. Subaru was forced to carry her slender body, and he ran back.

Suabru: "Gaaaah——!"

Despite the collapsing noises nearing him and his back aching, Subaru ran straight through with all his energy. And right after he got out of the cramped alley, the destruction was over, and the alley was completely buried in scrap wood.

There were clouds of dust in the wind, and people in the main street rushed over to see what all the big commotion was all about. They immediately reached out for Subaru and Tia, who collapsed at the alley entrance.

Subaru: "She's…"

With help, Subaru stands up, and he looks back at the alley crushed by the destruction. Nobody other than Subaru and Tia rushed out to this alley. However, it was highly unlikely for the girl to have gotten stuck and crushed in the destruction in the first place.

She got away. The mysterious girl who could produce the same horn as Rem and had the same face as Tia.

Subaru: "Who… the heck… was that girl…?"

With his sleeve, Subaru wiped his face dirty with dust and sweat, and he muttered that while panting lightly. The girl who got away wasn't going to give him the answer to his question. If there were someone else who'd give Subaru an answer——

Subaru: "——I can count on you, right? Tia."

Tia: "…Whatever."

Tia, having finally recovered from the shock of the alcohol, replied unwillingly with a sour look.

Hearing a reply characteristic of her, Subaru let out a wry smile of inappropriate relief.

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5

Rem: "——Subaru-kun! Thank goodness you're alright!"

Subaru: "Woah, careful!"

Subaru arrives home, and he quickly caught Rem, who jumped at him at the entranceway. Even if she jumped at him with such force, hugging his wife was still a piece of cake. That being said, he did want her to keep her expression of love in moderation since she was in the last month of pregnancy.

Subaru: "Rem, I'm glad you're happy to see me home, but if you keep this up, my lifespan will be shortened every time I get back. Think about the baby a bit more."

Rem: "I—I'm sorry. It's just that I heard you were in danger and…"

Subaru: "You heard that I was in danger? From who?"

Although Subaru talked to Rem kindly, he grimaced at her reply. The news got around to her too quickly. It has been only about an hour since Subaru got in danger. She shouldn't be informed about the news.

In fact, Subaru had planned on telling her about it after calming down.

Halibel: “From me, Su-san.”

Subaru: “…So you were here, Hal-san, no wonder she found out about it so quickly.”

His suspicions vanished after Halibel showed himself in the corridor. As a shinobi, Halibel could know what the whole town is doing through adequate means. Subaru suspected that he’d have his clones lurk all around the town whenever push came to shove.

Subaru: “But don’t worry Rem by telling her so quick. This is a very important time.”

Halibel: “Sorry about that, but it was unexpected for me, too. I didn’t expect Su-san to get attacked at this exact time. You should tell her that you’re alright, since she found out that you got attacked. Don’t you feel bad for Rem-chan?”

Rem: “Subaru-kun, please don’t blame Halibel-sama. Halibel-sama stopped me when I panicked and tried to run over.”

Halibel: “Yep yep.”

Halibel made an expression that showed he was backing up Rem. Instead of detesting his behavior, for a while Subaru felt like he wasn’t being himself, and he missed the timing to go off on him.

Besides, this wasn’t the time to be angry. Rem has the best gift of all, after all.

Subaru: “Honestly, right now I have a bunch of things I wanna talk about, like about what happened…”

Rem: “Yes. Please tell us. We were very worried.”

Subaru: “But not yet. First, I have someone I want you to see.”

Rem, who had gotten ready to listen, had a question mark above her upon hearing Subaru’s statement. Subaru smiles at her, turns around to the sliding door behind him, and spoke.

Subaru: “How long are you going to hide? Come in.”

???: “————”

At first, there was no response at all to Subaru. However, after a few moments of silence, the person nervously showed their face, probably because they couldn't handle the tension. The one who slowly showed her head beside the sliding door was a girl who'd disappeared 3 months ago——

Rem: "——Tia… -sama?"

Tia: "Long… time… no see…"

Rem: "Tia-sama!"

Realizing that it's Tia, Rem jumps at her with an emotional look. Amazed by her energy, Tia panics and catches her, just like the catch from earlier. Then, when Tia slowly let Rem down at the entranceway.

Tia: "B—Be… Be more careful! Have you forgotten that you're pregnant!? If I'd stepped aside, it would've been terrible!"

Rem: "I had faith that you wouldn't do that."

Tia: "M—mmm… Mmmm…"

Tia let out a groan as she bit her lip in vexation over Rem's affectionate look. After that, she suddenly let out a sigh of defeat and looked down at Rem's stomach, which was right next to her.

And her stomach was far larger than what Tia remembered.

Tia: "…It's about to be born, huh."

Rem: "Yes. Our deadline with Tia-sama is coming."

Tia: "————"

Rem joked around in anticipation that Tia had already completely forgotten about the deadline. And, in fact, her anticipation was correct. There's no way Tia could kill Rem. Plus——

Tia: "Rem, about that, I have something to tell you."

Rem: "You… need to tell me something?"

Tia: “You, as well as Su and Hal.”

Tia said that not just to Rem, but to Subaru, who was next to her, and Halibel, who was in the corridor, as well. With a little anxiety showing on her serious face, she said,

Tia: “I… I finally figured out what I have to do. I want to have a good talk about that with you guys.”

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6

The four of them move to the living room of the temporary Natsuki house, and they each gathered at a desk, something that hasn’t happened in a while.

And so, for the first time in three months, everyone gathered in one room—— However, this wasn’t going to be a fun, noisy dinner.

This was a necessary meeting to discuss more important matters.

Tia: “I…”

Tia, sitting straight with her hands on her lap, was the first one to speak. Although she wasn’t sure how to continue, she said,

Tia: “I… for retribution… no, to get my stolen Light Sphere back, I came to you guys. You remember that, right?”

Subaru: “Yep, I do. You gave us a real bad time in the beginning, after all.”

Rem: “Yes, that’s when you attacked me and Subaru-kun in the streets at night.”

Subaru and Rem answer Tia, who sought a confirmation. However, half of their reply was right, while the other half was wrong; Subaru was right, while Rem made a mistake. He thought it was far too obvious, and there was nothing he’d confirmed directly, but——

Subaru: “Rem, Tia isn’t the one who attacked us in the streets on that night. Tia only beat me up at the tenement house.”

Rem: “What? But that would mean…”

Halibel: “Yeah, that’s the first misunderstanding… I was also far too careless.”

It was Halibel who nodded instead of Rem, as she was confused. It seemed Halibel had quickly realized the truth of this misunderstanding, being the one who actually fought with the attacker that night.

——He’d realized that on that night, it was Black Tia who attacked Subaru and Rem on their way home, and that they never came across the offender again up until today.

Subaru: “Black Tia is called Black Tia for convenience, and her face looks just like Tia’s. And it’s not just her face, that goes for her appearance too— Everything. That’s why there was a misunderstanding. Tia didn’t deny it, either.”

Tia: “I really did beat up Su, and even I had no idea there was someone out there with the same face as me.”

Hearing Subaru’s statement, Tia gave something that sounded like an excuse as she looked away.

Of course, this wasn’t all on Tia. If they’d talked to Tia more to confirm the truth, they would’ve immediately noticed the inconsistency.

That never happened because they ran away from seriously facing the issue of the girl from that night, using their fear of ruining their relationship with Tia as an excuse.

Halibel: “It’s not Su-san’s fault. I should’ve caught on faster with that Shinigami name.”

Seeing Subaru hang his head, Halibel said that with his unlit *kiseru* in his mouth. He wasn’t acting himself today; his ears were bent, as if he was feeling down.

Subaru: “So… Shinigami was a hint?”

Halibel: “Not a hint, but the answer. ——Sure, there’s no one here that goes by the nickname Shinigami. However, there is the most famous Shinigami. That was the missing piece to the puzzle.”

Subaru: “The most famous Shinigami…”

Halibel: “——The Most Beautiful Shinigami.”

Halibel said that as if he was mentioning someone revered.

The words he put together didn’t make sense to Subaru. Still, Rem, looking at Tia with her eyes opened wide, moved her lips with a surprised look.

Rem: “The Most Beautiful Shinigami, Zarestia…”

Subaru: “Zarestia? Zarestia… Wait a second…”

He’d heard the name before. As Subaru began saying that, the scene of the memory came back to him vividly. He’d heard of it a few months ago at Clane’s employment agency.

Before he was referred to his job at Magoji Palace, Subaru happened to find an application——the details written on it were “A Search For Zarestia’s Bed”. It was an application for challenging a Great Spirit. In other words, the name of the Great Spirit that lived in that bed was——

Subaru: “Zarestia, the Great Spirit.”

Halibel: “——That’s Tia-chan’s real name.”

Halibel’s level voice went over Subaru’s that sounded like it was forced out of his lips.

The conclusion was way too out of the blue. Even if this was the truth, even the false name was too simple to begin with. They should’ve laughed about it, and yet nobody in the living room was laughing.

Tia, the one pointed out to be a Great Spirit, wasn’t laughing, either. She simply let out a sad sigh as she said,

Tia: “I will say this now. I, as you guys have pointed out, am Zarestia.”

Rem: “Tia-sama…”

Tia: “However, I’m not all of Zarestia. I’m half… no, not even half. I’m merely a part.”

Subaru: “What do you mean by that?”

Tia, putting her hand to her chest, admitted that she was a Great Spirit. However, there were a lot of parts missing in her explanation that followed, so Subaru threw a question back at her in confusion. Rem was the one who dealt with the mind-boggling parts of Tia’s explanation.

Rem: “It’s related to the story about the investigation team Halibel-sama talked about, isn’t it?”

Subaru: “Investigation team… the application one? But Clane said that it was a failure.”

Tia: “A failure? Was it really? Those guys that snuck into my bed and stole what’s most important to me… they stole the Light Sphere so easily!”

Tia, raising her voice, firmly and emotionally denied Subaru’s statement.

Light Sphere—— that’s the name of the thing Tia kept insisting that it’d been stolen, and she went after Rem for it. Rem had no idea what the Light Sphere was, and even the very existence of it had been suspicious to her. And now, that finally would be a true key.

Subaru: “So what is this Light Sphere really? What are you looking for?”

Tia: “It’s my source of power. It’s a contained stone that stores my power.”

Subaru: “Stone? A stone… wait, but if you’re a spirit, then…”

Hearing Tia’s lacking explanation, the answer starts to form in Subaru’s head. A stone that is necessary in order to remain in the world for spirits who form their bodies by using mana——

Subaru: “——So an Anchor[16]! An Anchor is needed so that a spirit could remain in this world! That’s what the Light Sphere is!”

Now sure of it, Subaru shouted as he snapped his fingers.

[16] A vessel for a spirit. As a different example, the crystal Emilia keeps on herself and where Puck rests is an Anchor.

Mana is necessary for a spirit to materialize and act. If it's a Great Spirit, a vast amount of mana is needed. An Anchor, something that's needed to store it, is exactly what Tia's Light Sphere is.

Subaru: "That got stolen… So that's why Tia came to get it back."

Rem: "But how's that related to me? I… um… I have no idea what the Light Sphere is. I didn't know we were close to the place Tia-sama had lived in, either…"

Despite being told about what the Light Sphere really is, Rem's doubt deepened even further. However, unlike Rem, who knitted her brows in confusion, the conditions to guess the answer were satisfied for Subaru.

He remembered when Black Tia's looks came off and a changed person showed up in the attack from earlier.

Since Subaru now knew what the Light Sphere and Tia were, the unclear meaning of that scene lead to a guess forming in his head. If that girl who showed up in the end is the one who stole Tia's Light Sphere, then——

Subaru: "——Black Tia had horns. They were Oni horns."

Rem: "Oni… horns? Could that mean…"

Subaru: "It's why Tia said that she'd sniffed out Rem with her nose at first with a smug look on her face. Tia mistook Rem's blood… She mistook her Oni blood for another Oni and found her."

Tia: "That's how it is… I can't believe myself. That was pathetic."

Rem finds out the truth, and her eyes opened wide.

The complicated circumstances surrounding Tia introduced that girl to Subaru and Rem. And then that misunderstanding dragging on caused all the encounters that had happened up to this day.

They couldn't jump to a conclusion and blame Tia for it, calling her a troublemaker. Not if they didn't know just how desperate Tia was, as she'd lost something that made up more than half of who she was.

Subaru: “So basically, the Light Sphere, Zarestia’s Anchor… that was stolen, and if we punish that Oni girl, the problem will be solved… Oh, but wait…”

Right before reaching a conclusion, Subaru tilted his head thinking that something was off. Although his guess was pretty close to the truth, one important part was missing an explanation. Tia going after Subaru and Rem was a mistake by her, but why did Black Tia attack them first——?

Halibel: “About that, I have one more piece of information I’d like to provide.”

Subaru: “I can only feel like it’s something bad since you’re telling us now.”

Halibel: “I hate to break it to you, but you’re not going to like what you’re about to hear.”

Seeing Subaru with an uncomfortable look on his face, Halibel scratched his head as he gave a wry smile.

Halibel: “So, about the girl who stole something important to Tia-chan, while I was sneaking around behind the scenes, I kinda learned about the detailed circumstances.”

Subaru: “I take it you told Rem about this on top of investigation team thing in private, right?”

Rem: “I—I only heard about this just now. I’m not hiding anything from you. It’s already far too clear who matters the most to me between Halibel-sama and Subaru-kun!”

Halibel: “That… makes me sad, but I’m moving on. It’ll be quick.”

This was also going to be news to Rem, who’d been informed about this and that before she came home. After Subaru nodded at Halibel’s statement, he said “Go ahead” as he urged him to continue.

Halibel: “It’s about the Light Sphere. The girl who stole it joined in on the Great Spirit bed quest to obtain that… But she wasn’t in it for the Light Sphere as much as she was for the Great Spirit’s power.”

Subaru: “She wanted the power of a Great Spirit? Dang, that’s so reckless… For what purpose?”

Halibel: “Revenge, probably. ——Revenge on the Witch Cult, the ones who burned her home.”

Subaru: “The Witch Cult…!”

The words Subaru had avoided up to this point came up, making him tremble.

Although the group wasn't directly involved, they were directly connected to Subaru's worst memories. Not only that, but he had extremely mixed feelings after hearing that the girl viewed the Witch Cult as enemies. Desiring the power of a Great Spirit to get revenge on the Witch Cult, she easily got her hands on the Light Sphere. Using the Light Sphere in a certain way, she sought revenge on the Witch Cult——

Subaru: "——Ah."

Then, after thinking it over this much, he hit the answer to his previous question.

The offender's goal is to get revenge on The Witch Cult; she wanted the Light Sphere only for the power to do that. And then, having obtained the power, she looked for the Witch Cult and found the Witch's scent in Banan Town. Her target for revenge, the one she was actually going after on that night was——

Subaru: "——So it was me."

Halibel: "The avenger went for Su-san, whereas Tia-chan went for Rem-chan. We didn't know that, so all these complicated misunderstandings happened."

Halibel's conclusion cleared the doubt Subaru had in his mind, just like that.

A mixup in targets, and thinking that the two culprits were one person. That is what complicated all these problems and created an incomprehensible situation.

Subaru: "I knew things were getting mixed up. But with this, it all makes sense."

Subaru accepted the revealed truth, and he put words together as he cleared his mind.

He felt sympathy for the offending woman because of the Witch Cult, her target for revenge.

Subaru: "But it's a mistake for the offender to go after me. Her hatred for the Witch Cult… I get it. But killing me won't help her get over her grudge. Stealing Tia's Light Sphere also does nothing."

Halibel: "There's just something about the way you put it, but you're right. While I do feel bad for her, we're gonna punish her and get the Light Sphere back. For anything else that happens, we'll just let the situation play itself out."

Subaru: "I imagine that's what we'll have to do."

Subaru also nodded and agreed with Halibel's conclusion.

Even with all of his questions answered, he never gave up on arriving at a conclusion. Rem's safety and Tia's feelings were more important to him than the wish of an avenger whose name he didn't even know. In fact, now that the situation was clear, he wanted to come to a solution without any hard feelings.

Subaru: "If that happens, we can all…"

——After everything's taken care of, we can all eat dinner together, just like old times.

Tia: "——That's not possible."

His outlook was interrupted and denied by Tia, who stood up.

The cold obstinance of Tia's words brought everyone's attention towards her. When she crossed her arms as she saw their eyes on her, she looked away from all of them as she said,

Tia: "I'm sorry. I can't do it. Once I get my Light Sphere back, I must return to my nest. I can't live with you guys. Nothing can change that."

Rem: "But… why? I… Wait, if you're worried about what happened before, it's alright! I know about your circumstances now. So…"

Tia: "That's not it, Rem. I'm an entity that can't coexist with you all."

Tia shook her head disapprovingly at Rem, who stopped sitting straight and pleaded with her. Neither Rem nor Subaru could tell what the true intentions of her attitude were, as she seemed distressed. However——

Halibel: "Suspecting that Tia-chan is Zarestia, there's one part that just doesn't make sense. It's the one thing that doesn't make sense. It's inconsistent."

Halibel, crossing his thick arms, said that while squinting his slit-eyes even more than usual. Irritated by his suggestive way of speaking, Subaru got very angry.

Subaru: "What are you trying to say, Hallibel? Don't beat around the bush. Spit it out."

Halibel: "…Zarestia is a Shinigami, a murderous Great Spirit. Anyone who enters her hideout gets killed indiscriminately. Even all the anecdotes out there are stories about murder. So, what's that have to say about Tia?"

Rem: "Well… the stories told are just messed up, I mean, they have to be, right?"

Hearing Halibel's remarks, Rem shows a rare scene of her flaring up irritatedly. Even Subaru felt the same way as Rem. But——

Tia: "They aren't messed up. Right now, I am the one who's messed up."

Rem: "Tia-sama!"

Tia: "Hal's right, I'm a spirit that's only good for killing… no, it's not that I'm only good for killing; I'm a spirit that only thinks about killing. That's how I became this trash that got most of her power stolen, left with nothing but the thought of killing."

During those days, there were many times when Tia would say dangerous things. He never thought that they were her true feelings, but every now and then she did show that sort of Great Spirit part of her on her vicious face. ——But now, all she had left in her was envy.

Tia: "If I get the Light Sphere back, I will once again become a spirit that can only think about killing. I'll have to kill Rem, Su, Hal, the townspeople, everyone. So, I can't live with you all. So, this is the end. This is it."

Rem: "No… Tia-sama, can't we… Can't we… do something about it?"

Tia: "————"

Tia shook her head at Rem, who clung to her. Rem, becoming teary-eyed, looks back at Subaru and Halibel. However, Subaru had no words for her sorrow. Halibel had his eyes closed and was grinding on the *kiseru* in his mouth with his teeth, feeling sorry for his own powerlessness.

No one could do something for Tia. And even if Tia were to give up on the Light Sphere, the avenger is already set on going after Subaru. And so——

Tia: "I will get the Light Sphere back. I won't give up, no matter what."

Rem: "…Ah."

With Tia's very determined declaration, Rem grew weak and sank down on the spot. Tia looks down in a bit of a sad way, and she closed her eyes tight. After that, she gently put her hand to Rem's large stomach as she said,

Tia: "——Sorry to have kept you waiting."

She says those few words as she rubbed Rem's stomach. That was the only thing she did. An action that meant nothing at all—— Right after he had that thought, Rem's expression changed.

Rem put her hand on her own stomach, and she quietly let out a "Huh" in a broken voice.

Rem: "W—What… What did you just do… Tia-sama…?"

Tia: "Time's up, Rem. That's it for our promise… Although, maybe there never was any promise, since this was my mistake."

Tia murmurs self-deprecatingly, and Rem slowly crouched down in front of her. Seeing her hold onto her stomach that had been rubbed by Tia, Subaru jumps at Rem with a pale face.

Subaru: "Rem? Rem, are you alright!? Hey, Tia, what did you do to Rem!?"

Tia: "I just rubbed it. It's the truth. But, now that the shackles for Rem's mind are off, the child has realized that everything's ready."

Although nobody had known about Tia's involvement, even Subaru understood what had just happened.

Composure fades from Rem's facial expression, and she starts to breath a bit heavily. Her face clearly enduring pain and her holding onto her own baby belly meant that——

Subaru: "——She's going into labor!"

Tia: "Until the child is born, I can't lay a hand on her. That was our promise."

Subaru's eyes open wide, realizing that the time has finally come. In front of him, Tia tilted her head at Rem as she said,

Tia: “Because we had that promise, I delayed this moment for as long as I could… Both the mother and the child were way too stubborn.”

Rem: “Tia… -sama…”

Rem tried to stop Tia, who started to step back with a smile. However, her stomach pain didn’t let her, and Tia distanced herself without her fingers ever reaching her. Tia, who jumped back lightly, opens the sliding door, and then she ran out to the garden.

Subaru: “Tia!”

Tia: “I’ll deal with my unfinished business myself. ——If I fail, Hal-san, you know what to do.”

Tia looked back in the middle of the garden and said that with a smile on her face.

Hearing what sounded like one’s last words, Halibel curled his laps, as he was trusted with the matters to follow when his name was called.

Halibel: “It makes no sense for you to take a battle when you know you have slim chances of winning. You didn’t say anything about wanting help, either. Is this the pride of a Great Spirit or something?”

Tia: “It’s nothing big like that. ——I’m strong, and I don’t plan on losing.”

Tia responded to Halibel’s comments like that with a refreshing smile.

After that, Tia finally looked at Subaru, and then at Rem.

Subaru: “How should I put this… This isn’t very like you.”

Rem: “Tia-sama…”

Tia: “About that day… Um… I’m sorry. That was my fault.”

Tia awkwardly apologized to Rem while scratching her cheek with her finger. She said nothing more than that, and yet she looked even more nervous than when she revealed the truth about herself. And then, after saying that, Tia added one comment with a bright expression.

Tia: “A kid! Give birth to an energetic one. A very energetic one.”

Right after Tia said that, a wind surrounded her. It was not a raging wind; it gently wrapped Tia, who was in the middle of the garden, and it urged her towards the sky.

They had no time to stop her. Tia got on the wind, and she rose at once. And then, Rem reached her hand out for Tia—— For her friend as she faded away, and she desperately strained his voice.

It wouldn't reach her. Neither her voice nor her hand reached Tia while she faded into the sky approaching night.

Rem: "Tia… -sama…"

Subaru: "Tia——!!"

Subaru called Tia's name as she faded into the sky instead of Rem, whose voice died as it cracked. Still, Tia didn't look back. She didn't stop, either.

Then, Tia steadily went up in the sky, going out of their sights.

Tia: "————"

The wind blowing against the garden, against the house, against Subaru and the others, died out. This meant that Tia went far away. So far away that she couldn't be interfered with at all.

Subaru: "Damn it…! That fool!"

Rem: "Subaru… -ku…"

Subaru: "I know! Rem, I know how you… feel… but…"

I want to chase Tia. He understood those feelings of hers so much that it hurt.

However, there was something more important to deal with right now. He had to bring Rem to the clinic.

Rem: "——Ah… ku…"

When that crossed his mind, serious pain went across Rem's face. Subaru, with both of his hands, lifted Rem, who panted because of the endless waves of the pain of birth.

Subaru: “Hal-san! Please take care of all that stuff!”

Halibel: “Got it, leave it to me.”

It was an unspecific instruction that was far too vague. However, Halibel accepted it without putting in any objection, and he disappeared as if melding into the shadows. He needed to tell the old magic user about the situation before bringing Rem to the clinic. On top of that, there were mountains of things he wanted Halibel to do.

Subaru: “Rem, I’ll take you to the clinic as soon as possible. Please trust me with… both of your lives.”

Rem: “————”

Rem nods deeply in Subaru’s arms, and then he slowly stepped outside. Under the variegated sky approaching night mixed with blue and orange, Subaru ran as fast as he could with his pregnant wife in his arms.

Now… just for now he thought only about Rem and ran and ran along the road to the clinic.

——Without realizing that, in a sense, this was another form of running away.

Interlude - Death Anniversary

Original translation by Remonwater

1

——What erupted when she found that women were flames of unbearable rage.

Before the avenger became an avenger, she had lived in a village where “strays” gathered.

Onis are a race species. Rumors have it that their scarce kind created a hidden village somewhere, barely scraping by, but that was not the case for her. When she was born, it was a child and her parent, and after her mother died, she had nothing but her own life.

The place this girl arrived at was a village where “strays” gathered.

Demi-humans with baggage and people who committed crime and left human villages lived there; not many decent people lived there. Because of that, she didn’t get rejected, as she was a high and proud Oni, and was accepted as a member of the village, allowed to live on.

As someone that had never lived with anyone other than her mother, life at the village was full of confusing things. Although the villagers were not good people, everyone had their own circumstances and anguish to deal with. Nobody intentionally acted cold to her.

Once time went by, even she was able to make friends before long. She was no longer confused with life at the village, had a set way she went about her days, and accepted these ordinary but peaceful times. The girl went ahead and thought that this was like a sort of blessing. She had never seen what a blessing actually is. It might’ve been a misunderstanding. But still, she was glad.

——It was when she had these sort of thoughts that they all disappeared in a scene of flames.

The village she was familiar with was engulfed in flames, cruelly burning down.

The neighbor who would always greet her, the young man who taught her how to grow crops, the elderly who was kind to her now, someone of the same sex that she'd talked to for the first time just yesterday, the man she'd been talking with frequently as of late—— everyone burned.

She survived only because she got lucky.

But did she really get lucky? Could it be that she'd survived because she didn't have the best luck?

She brings out her horn, and it releases abominable power. Mana running through her body, she goes on a rampage to get rid of those who casted flames on the village. However, it wasn't enough. She gets overpowered by sheer numbers, and her body burns in flames. They loudly laugh at her for screaming from the pain and despair, and she gets crushed by their feet.

???: "Not too baaaad, I'd saaay. That's the kind of glare I like."

She heard a shrill voice nearby.

They stood next to her, and she poured something disgusting into her while she was down on the ground. It wasn't her body that rejected it; her soul rejected it. She let out a shriek. They wouldn't listen. Something slipped into her ears and was going into her body. Her insides get violated with moisture.

???: "Work's all done! Now, bastard, what do you like about this lovely lady?"

The voice of a crazy, insane woman who wasn't okay in the head goes inside her ears, and it wouldn't go away.

It wouldn't go away. It just wouldn't. She gets tormented endlessly by the fear of going crazy at any moment. It was only when the villages, flames, and those people were gone that it finally disappeared.

But her nose was still trying to find out where they went so that she could go after them. The thing that was poured into her—— The shock that violently went through her sniffs out their location.

???: "——I will… punish them."

She swears that in the face of the scorched village and became an avenger. Now that she was an avenger, she needed the power she lacked in order to do an avenger's job.

To obtain it, she did something rash that put her life in danger. She snuck into a Great Spirit's nest, a place people went to impelled by their own insanity, just like she was.

——She wanted the power to kill them, the power to punish them—— The power to slaughter them.

The blowing wind was turning her party into a pool of blood like a blade. Using a corpse as a shield, the avenger ventured inside. Whenever the shield became ineffective, she used a different corpse. She repeated that.

Before she knew it, the wind started sounding like a song to the avenger. The Great Spirit's nest lies deep within the cave. Somehow, the cave played the sound of mother nature along with the wind coming from its deepest part, and the song playing really wrung the heart.

The avenger was enchanted by the wind's song, and she moved further in while being in a trance.

She wanted power. She wanted to hear the rest of the song. This cave had everything the avenger wanted.

And then, when the avenger reached the deepest part of it, she heard a voice.

???: "——I want to… kill everyone."

——She remembered replying "I do too" to that voice.

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2

???: "I want to kill. I want to kill. I want to kill. I want to kill. I want to kill."

The power the avenger took in was endlessly pouring that intention into her.

Originally, it should have been a thirst for death that would make you go crazy, a torrent of bloodthirst, an impulse to destroy—— However, it went well with the avenger's wish; it was even like a pleasant singing voice.

Thus, the avenger demonstrated her power for retribution with joy.

She absolutely destroyed those who got caught by her sense of smell. There was nothing left of them. They couldn't even be buried in a grave. It was the same as disappearing without a trace.

And so, the avenger achieved retribution again and again, until finally she'd reached a large town.

On the street at night, the avenger went after the lingering scent that her nose strongly reacted to, and she ran through an alley with an insane smile on her face. Her destination was close—— right nearby.

This was her biggest target thus far. Maybe this was the target for the avenger—— she got excited over the possibility that this might be the one who had that scornful laugh.

A black wind blows. Whenever that spread, people would recede out of fear. The target didn't sense her with the wind. She waits at the end of the path the target walks on, looking forward to their face twitching in fear.

???: "————"

An enemy with an extremely unpleasant, strong miasma appeared in front of the avenger. She saw their face, but unfortunately, it wasn't familiar to her. Doesn't matter. She was still going to kill them. With that sole thought on her mind, the avenger adds bloodlust to the wind, and starts to bite her target whole——

???: "————"

A girl next to the enemy getting close to them caught her attention.

Somehow, at a glance, the avenger realized that this was a girl who had the same blood flowing through her as she did. For a moment, she's taken aback by the girl standing to protect the enemy beside her. And then, once the avenger's stiffness was gone, thick, dark anger violently ate away her mind.

What is the she doing there? That man is an enemy who should be punished.

Why is someone of the same position, same blood, and same race with that man without punishing him?

???: "——What… are you doing."

In anger, her voice comes out.

It was not an intent to kill that came out, but a question. Hearing that question, the girl did not choose to protect the avenger, but the frightened enemy, so her answer was clear.

The neighbor, the young one, the elderly, the person of the same sex…——The man who had hoped to bond——

She was going to protect the enemy that burned her happiness? Someone of the same blood, loving a man so happily?

In that case——

???: "——Die."

——Killing this girl will increase her self-esteem.

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3

And so, after experiencing failure twice, the avenger now had the right to face retribution for the third time.

???: "Damn… it…"

It was a white clothed woman who let out a cry of pain, hit the wall, and collapsed. That forced voice sounded familiar. Of course it did. Inside the avenger's cranium, a voice was still endlessly telling her to kill. The voices were the same.

The voice… was the same. And yet, it was too fragile. It desired something else. They weren't in agreement. That's why it was repelled.

This wasn't the power the avenger wanted. It was something foreign, and it was too fragile.

Humbly saying that it wanted to become one would've been fine, but it was too fragile to do something like loudly tell her to obey.

???: "——Die."

Thus, she demonstrated her power. She completely beat up the entity and reached for its core.

???: "Ah… oo… aah…"

Lifted by the collar, the woman moaned with her body. She squirmed and tried to escape from her arms, but she wouldn't let go. Then, the woman's existence slowly, slowly turned into light dust, and it was taken in by the avenger.

Originally, the woman's existence had been a part of the power the avenger took in. She held down the entity that had parted from her once before, making it hers for good this time.

???: "——em…"

It sounded like the girl said someone's name the moment she disappeared. However, the avenger didn't hear it, and she gets scattered by the blowing wind, vanishing.

The nuisance was gone, and her power was complete. She wasn't missing anything anymore.

???: "——Die."

Now all that's left is to achieve retribution. An avenger carrying out her revenge. With that woman's death.

???: "——"

That woman is the one who's wrong. That woman is crazy for protecting the enemy that ought to be punished.

The enemy with the scent of the Witch, and her abominable kind that got close to him.

Kill both of them. Both of them have to be killed. Kill. Kill, kill them.

Killing is the only thing that can comfort her for what she'd lost. This will be atonement.

——This isn't hatred; it's a duty. Because of this sense of duty, that woman must die!

Chapter 6 – The Last Month of Pregnancy

Original translation by Remonwater

1

The old magic user looked at Rem, who was brought into the clinic, and made a very unpleasant look with his pale face.

Doctor: “Is it really possible for the breaks to be this short right off the bat? What’s going on!?”

Rem: “…Hau――”

The old magic user put his hand on Rem’s stomach as she breathed with difficulty, and he mentions how short the intervals of pain were. The old magic user clicked his tongue at Subaru, who was only confused by his point, and said,

Doctor: “Normally, the breaks between the pain during birth are long. It’s a sign that the baby will be born, though the pace will pick up little by little. But your wife’s reactions are odd. Hey! Go call her over!”

The old magic user raises his voice in the middle of his explanation, and he shouts at the helper to call over the midwife. Meanwhile, the old magic user left the room in a hurry, and tension was starting to fill up the whole clinic.

Rem: “Subaru… -kun…”

Subaru: “Rem! Rem are you alright… of course you aren’t. Damnit, ahhh, damnit, I’ll be here for you.”

Subaru gets angry at himself for being unable to say anything useful, and he spoke to Rem as he held her hand. Rem held his hand back so tight that it made him feel pain, but it wasn’t nearly as much as the amount of pain she was feeling.

Subaru seriously thought to himself, if crushing his hand would comfort Rem, then she can go ahead and do it.

Rem: “I won’t… do that. It’s my husband’s precious hand, after all…”

Reading Subaru’s inner thoughts, Rem slightly smiled. The way she was clearly pretending to be tough made Subaru choke up. Subaru was the one who had to do everything he could—— say everything he could—— to comfort Rem. So, why was Subaru being taken care of by Rem?

Rem: “Tia… -sama…”

Subaru: “…Rem, don’t think about Tia right now. Focus on yourself.”

Rem: “That’s… not it… Tia-sama said this before, right? That the baby inside my belly is trying to come out now because… the shackles of my mind… have been removed…”

Subaru: “She did… say that…”

Hearing Rem saying that falteringly, Subaru looks back on what Tia had said just before she bid her farewell. The deadline of the promised made between Rem and Tia—— Until the child is born, Tia wouldn’t do anything to Rem and would quietly watch for any slip-ups.

It was actually a pointless promise and a misunderstanding by Tia, though.

Rem: “Then, the promise became pointless, and so now… the baby is finally coming out…”

Subaru: “…You might not believe me on this, but that’s just a coincidence. The events just happened to occur at the same time. It’s nothing to stress out about.”

It may be possible for one’s condition to be affected by the mind. However, it’s quite unlikely for that to even affect the timing of birth. It is true that Rem giving birth happened later than the magic user had predicted.

However, giving birth isn’t so simple that you could just repress it through sheer will.

Rem: “It… it does stress me out. Because… I…”

Subaru: “I? What is it? Tell me anything. Right now, I’ll listen to anything you have to say.”

Rem: “…I… was scared. I was scared of the child… being born.”

Rem held Subaru’s hand tight, extremely tight, and said that while tearing up.

When Subaru’s breath was taken away by her words, Rem closed her eyes tight again, and she continued to shed tears.

Rem: “I was so happy that you were glad that we have a baby. I really was. I was really happy. But, I was really scared. Because…”

Subaru: “————”

Rem: “Because… I… I wasn’t able to be a good child… when I was one myself. I let… my parents down… and the villagers… thought I was a… hopeless child…”

Uncontrollable tears trickle down rapidly from Rem’s eyes. And Subaru couldn’t even wipe them away, as he was captivated by the beautiful, sparkling teardrops.

She was unable to be a good kid. That regret bound Rem’s mind with anxiety.

Rem: “Despite all that, I have a child… and I was so worried, I couldn’t stop being worried. Being a good child… a good little sister! I couldn’t be either of those… and I wondered… could I really be a… parent…?”

Subaru: “Rem…”

Rem: “I didn’t… want to part with Tia-sama. I thought that, if there hadn’t been a deadline, we would have spent our days at the tenement house like that forever… and ever… But, I was wrong.”

Rem shakes her head disapprovingly and reveals the piled up inner thoughts she had kept hidden. As if she was punishing herself for being far too sinful.

Rem: “I was… scared of becoming a parent. I was scared of… meeting face to face with the child. I was actually scared this whole time. I thought I couldn’t be a good parent!”

Subaru: “————”

Rem: “Because, I’ve always… disappointed all the… precious people… around me…”

Rem breathes heavily, and her face is red from agitation and grief. Using the hand that wasn’t holding onto Subaru’s, Rem wipes her face that had tears trickling down on it, and then covered it with her arm.

Rem’s heartbreaking outburst hits Subaru, and it was tearing his heart into shreds.

It was a very intense, a very natural, and a very sad outburst.

Subaru: “————”

Subaru swallows his saliva, and choosing his next words throws his brain into chaos.

What should he say? He didn’t know the answer. “Sorry for making you worry”? “Sorry for not picking up on your worries?” Criticize her by saying “Don’t be so pathetic”? None of them seemed correct.

Because Rem revealed what she felt deep down. She made up her mind to reveal that she was hated and disappointed others.

That’s right. Rem said that she has always disappointed those who were precious to her. She confessed after she decided to make Subaru reveal his own true feelings.

And so, after that confession, what did he think? Was he actually disappointed by Rem?

Subaru: “Rem.”

Rem: “————”

Rem, who had her name called for a moment, shakes with her face covered. Birth pains and probably disappointment with herself were tormenting her chest. Her mind was a mess, no doubt about it.

Subaru was also worrying about what to say in this situation, right here right now.

So, Subaru held Rem’s hand, and with his other hand, patted her head as he said,

Subaru: “I understand how you feel… I really do.”

Rem: “Subaru… -kun…?”

Rem slowly raised her arms, as if she was surprised by the gentleness of Subaru's tone. Just how pathetic did Subaru look in her eyes? Rem's worry truly was the same as Subaru's, as if they were mirroring each other.

Subaru: "You see, I… I'm the same way. No, I was even worse. I wasn't able to be a good kid. I couldn't… look my dad… or my mom in the face, either…"

Rem: "————"

Subaru: "They were such great parents. My dad and my mom really were the greatest parents in the world. They loved each other, were nice to me… told me that they loved me…"

Just like Rem did, Subaru started talking about himself as the tears trickled down.

He's lived with Rem for a year and a half, and was summoned to this world just under 2 years ago. In all that time, Subaru had never spoken about his past to anyone—— not even once. Because it was related to the memories Subaru never wanted to reveal. And they were in this precious place that was so wonderful and beautiful to Subaru that he was scared to even touch it.

Subaru looked up to his parents… From the bottom of his heart, he felt sorry that he had to be their child. His parents were so kind, strict, gave him joy, sadness, anger, gifts, and yet their failure of a son couldn't give anything back. It was truly pathetic.

How could Natsuki Subaru, someone who was raised by such good parents and still couldn't be a good son, become a parent? That's what he was afraid of this whole time——

Subaru: "But, I can't… show you that I am. I… I brought you with me. I'm the one who brought you with me. I wanted to give you everything I had to make you happy. I told myself that I had to do it…"

That's why he hid his anxiety and eagerly waited for this day to come. He worked hard at his job, devoted himself to supporting Rem, and tried his best to be a good husband.

Believing that if he tried to be good husband, in the future he could become a good father too.

Subaru: "But, it wasn't that simple. Of course it wasn't. I'm going to be someone's parent, you know. I can't just get the right answers by thinking logically. So, I'm still…"

At the last minute, he threw everything out there, as if to repent his ignorance of Rem's anxiety.

Subaru and Rem both knew that neither of them was perfect. And they were afraid of whether they'd be able to fulfill their responsibilities as parents for the child that was on the way.

They were scared. So scared. And they were even scared of confessing that they were scared, but——

Rem: "Subaru… -kun… do you regret it?"

After listening to his confession, Rem broke the silence by asking Subaru a question. Subaru impulsively lifted his head, and he looked straight at Rem's eyes that were right there. Her light blue eyes were switching between despair and grief and were staring at Subaru. Inside her baby belly, there was their child. Labor pains have already started, and birth was just around the corner.

With all that happening, she had this confession… Did he want this child to be born?

Subaru: "————"

Subaru knew that Rem's eyes were asking him that, and he rubbed his eyes hard.

He wasn't clear enough. Subaru made it this far regretting his lack of clarity, regretting his lack of action, running away from the problems before him and going to the more comfortable path—— to the less painful path.

He made it this far by running away from his parents, running away from reality, running away from initiating into this world, running away from his promise that he made, running away from those who were precious to him, and running away from the fear of losing what he had.

Did he run and run and run and come this far, just to lose everything?

Subaru: "That's not… it. Rem, I don't regret it. I… I've been saved."

Rem: "Subaru-kun…"

Subaru: "I've always been running. I threw away everything and ran away with you… But, when I heard that we had a child, I was happy, and that's when I was saved. Even after running and running with my back turned, there was something I could have. And that was… our child."

He was worried. He couldn't lie. Subaru, as someone who couldn't look at his parents in the face, always had a fear of becoming a parent. He still does. It wasn't gone. It probably would never go away.

But, at the same time, Subaru knew something. He knew the love of the best role model parents in the whole world.

Subaru: "I was a… terrible son. I wasn't able to be a good kid. But I had the best parents in the whole world. I know I had the best parents, and I know I was the worst child ever too. So, no matter what happens, I'll love our child."

Rem: "————"

Subaru: "My parents loved a hopeless failure like me. I know that. I do… That's why I'll be able to love my own child—— love my family."

In Subaru's mind, he saw their smiles—— copying his father and his mother, he smiled. He threw his chest out with confidence, bragged that he knew the best role-models, and was proud.

Natsuki Subaru was raised by the world's best parents—— the world's best role models—— for 17 years.

Rem: "————"

After Subaru declared that with a smile, Rem was speechless. Her teary eyes open wide, her red face becomes even more red, and her facial expression slowly changes. The overflowing tears turned into just one teardrop, and with a slight smile Rem said,

Rem: "…You're fanatical like an Oni."

Then, with the same smile from that one moment, she said an awfully nostalgic line to Subaru.

Did Subaru nod back at that smile with the same smile he had on that day? Then came——

Doctor: "…The midwife's here. Birth preparations will begin. Get out. Go pray."

The old magic user came back to the clinic room with a middle-aged woman. Subaru thought the timing was too perfect, but the old magic user had his usual sour look, so he couldn't tell what he was thinking.

Anyhow, it was time. Subaru looked back at Rem, and took her hand once again as he said,

Subaru: “Rem, all these feelings I’ve let out are the truth. Please believe me.”

Rem: “…I’ll… always… believe Subaru-kun.”

Subaru: “Ohh, that’s right.”

The helper who came in quickly brings in the necessary tools into the room. The midwife gives instructions for what to do with them, and the old magic user jerked his chin at Subaru with a stern look. He was telling him to get out.

Subaru: “I can’t stay for its birth?”

Doctor: “You really think men staying here would be helpful? Everyone I’ve called over are woman, including the midwife and the helper. I’m here just in case, but in this situation even I’m just a figurehead.”

The old magic user snorted to drop him a hint that he didn’t need to do anything. He felt like his continuously blunt attitude was telling him that he trying to be more helpful than needed.

Subaru: “Doctor, please take care of Rem.”

Doctor: “Tell that to the midwife.”

He was waved at perfunctorily, and he gave a wry smile. After that, now was when he let go of Rem’s hand as he said,

Subaru: “Rem, I’ll be waiting… My wife and kid are in your hands.”

Rem: “Yes, your Rem’s got this, Subaru-kun… About Tia-sama…”

Subaru: “I know.”

Hearing those words, punctuated with a smile, Subaru nodded to indicate that she didn’t have to continue. Rem sees that, and after she closed her eyes approvingly, starts to breath heavily.

A fight only Rem could face was going to begin.

???: “Get out!”

The midwife speaks to him, and Subaru was forced to leave the clinic room. When he was about to leave the room, he heard Rem’s cries of pain. Her long, long fight was beginning. The truth is that Subaru wanted to watch over her fight outside the clinic room too, but——

Halibel: “…Su-san.”

Just as Subaru appeared at the aisle, Halibel spoke to him. He’d been planning this and that after he informed the clinic that Rem was going into labor. He was also the one person who understood the situation besides Subaru and Rem.

Halibel: “How’s Rem-chan?”

Subaru: “She’s at the stage where birth really begins. They said that men will get in the way and kicked me out… I really am useless in situations like these.”

Halibel: “That includes me too. It’s Rem’s job and her job only. Also, we’ve got our own things we need to do… Su-san, you know that too, don’t you?”

Subaru gave a wry smile, and then said “Yeah” to reassure Halibel, who lowered the tone of his voice.

With the expression Halibel had, and above all, with what had happened just before, he could imagine what he was talking about.

Subaru: “The person who stole Tia’s power is coming to town to kill me. What about Tia…”

Halibel: “Look at this.”

To answer Subaru’s question, Halibel took out something from his *kimono*’s sleeve. At first, this thing knitted with black thread looked like something you’d wear around your arm… Then, he had an idea.

Subaru: “That good luck bracelet is something you gave to Tia.”

Halibel: “Good luck bracelets are magic items because of the black braiding. I’ll be skipping the details on how it’s made, but two of these make a whole magical item, and if something ever happens to the owner…”

As Halibel spoke, he shook the black braids. It snapped while he did it.

Subaru: “Which means that Tia…”

Halibel: “She lost a fight she picked herself. Even she knew that she had a low chance of winning. She realized it when she was about to leave it up to me to finish the job. What a ridiculous girl.”

Halibel put the snapped braids into his pocket and laughed loudly with his fangs showing. It probably seemed sad somehow because he was mourning Tia in his own way. And so, he took out his *kiseru* instead of the black beads, put it to his mouth, and lit it.

Halibel: “I’m going to take care of Tia-chan’s request. Su-san…”

Subaru: “I know.”

Subaru interrupted Halibel and answered. Just like he had done to Rem.

Subaru’s eyes lit up with determination and readiness, and then said this.

Subaru: “…There’s no running away anymore.”

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2

Halibel: “About that girl… let’s call her the enemy. About the enemy, she was outside of the town. I sort of tried getting a hit on her, but that wasn’t a good idea. Doing it half-heartedly would just lead to more death.”

That was Halibel’s opinion as he lit his *kiseru*. After that, Subaru racked his brains with a serious look, and he tilted his head as he said, “A hit”?

Subaru: “By «a hit», do you mean that you got in a fight? You fought?”

Halibel: “If I did, don’t you think I would’ve gotten hurt? By I, I meant my team. Or in your words, I used a Shinobi squad.”

Subaru: “So Shinobi squads do exist! You really are a leader! You said they didn’t exist!”

Halibel: “A Shinobi can’t leak his secrets, you know? Nothing wrong with that, is there?”

Halibel tells Subaru, who wouldn’t let the issue go, to calm down as he put his hand on his forehead. In this situation, he didn’t have the time to ask about hidden shinobi villages in Kararagi in detail. The information Halibel gathered and a plan were what were important——

Halibel: “She looks just like Tia-chan, but her skin is clearly black. We can stop her by attacking with a bunch of stalling tactics, but that won’t work for long. What should we do?”

Subaru: “What would you do? Do you have some sort of idea in mind?”

Halibel: “The simplest method would be to confine you outside town and then accomplish our goal.”

Halibel put up his finger and presented the most reliable and simple plan possible. However, before Subaru could say something, Halibel bent the finger he had held up as he said,

Halibel: “But, that’s not an option. I wouldn’t want to lose a friend, and I’d feel terrible if I let Rem-chan’s husband die and left her child on the way without a parent. Plus, it goes against my promise with Tia-chan.”

Subaru: “You sure do have a strong sense of duty. For a Playboy, that is.”

Halibel: “You can’t play without rules. So, an Eternal Playboy also has to stick to the rules that go with playing.”

Halibel responded to Subaru’s joke with a joke of his own, and he shrugged. That gesture makes Subaru break into a smile, and he slapped his cheeks out of relief that he didn’t have to worry about being sacrificed for now.

Subaru: “Let’s discuss a little more… What do you know about Zarestia?”

Halibel: “I told you most of it at the house. She’s said to be one of the Four Great Spirits, a murdering spirit, a Phantom Slasher, the Most Beautiful Shinigami, and she is always sleeping in her nest in the west side of Kararagi. Sometimes she cuts up those who come into her bed… Also, she might have an old song.”

Subaru: “An old… song?”

When he raised an eyebrow at the unexpected word, Halibel said “Yes” as he nodded deeply.

Halibel: “I don’t know the details, but those who know it will recognize it. If I remember correctly, what was it again… it’s like a lullaby.”

Subaru: “The song of the wind? The lullaby of the wind?”

Halibel, Oh, that’s it. Su-san, I’m surprised you knew. Even though you’re not even a Kararagian.”

Subaru: “Well, of course I do. What kind of people do you think I’m surrounded with every day at work?”

Subaru responded to Halibel, who acted impressed, and inside he was grateful—— Grateful for the nosiness of the ladies he worked with at the Magoji Palace. Those ladies were the ones who taught Subaru, as he was going to become a dad soon, from general housework to babysitting. Among the things he learned, there was a song called the lullaby of the wind.

It was something that sung the story of when people defeated a certain large beast during ancient times.

Subaru: “…Hal-san, you mentioned stalling tactics, right? How long can we stop her for?”

Halibel: “…With sacrifices, half a day. Without sacrifices, 6 hours.”

Although Halibel hesitated for a moment, he looked into Subaru eyes and gave that answer. He did it because, right now, there was strong determination in Subaru’s eyes.

He thought about the lullaby of the wind, all of his enemies, Tia, and then came up with one idea.

He was going to need time, money, and help.

And then there also was——

Subaru: "…I'll have to go around with my head down, ready to live to return favors for the rest of my life!!"

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She waves her hand, conjuring wind. A slaughterous wind that cut up everything and turned things into dust.

???: "…Die."

A brief order, then quick execution. In less than a second, the bite attack flew and devoured the sky.

A flash went through the sky, and steel was repelled by the wind that was following it. Throws delayed her, attacking her from all directions non-stop. It was depressing. The wind repelled the steel. No matter how many times she was attacked, it didn't matter.

???: "…Die."

She attacked her opponent who threw steel with wind. The effect was unclear. This was one of the flaws with the wind; the flurry of wind would turn into fangs and fade away after opening a space. She had to see the result for herself.

However, it was currently nighttime. The surrounding enemies were elusive and innately skilled at lurking in the darkness.

???: "…Die."

It was impossible to tell if any of the flurries of wind caught the black shadow. Even if they hit, they didn't even let out cries of pain and act shamelessly when they died. They were horrible enemies in every way.

???: "Kill kill kill kill kill kill kill."

I hear a voice in my head. I know. I feel the same way. I want to kill everything.

But before that, I must kill someone. There's an enemy who needs to be punished. I sense their presence with my nose. I know where they are, but the dark shadows are getting in the way.

???: "————"

Suddenly, in her vision of hatred, she saw the black shadows move altogether. Her eyes opened wide, wondering what this was all about, and then all the presences surrounding her started to disappear, as if the wind had scattered them.

They withdrew. Suddenly. Without any changes in the situation. She thinks about what happened, about what they were doing. Her instincts were telling her to take this lucky chance to go towards the Witch scent. However, if this is a trap or a plot, jumping into this would be the height of stupidity. What are you thinking? You have the power to scatter them now.

The differing conclusions in her mind and her heart collide with each other. I want to kill them. I should kill them carefully. While they kept fighting each other, she came to the conclusion that she should settle down——

???: "————"

The next moment, she was disgusted by a foul, strong stench.

Her eyes opened wide, and the stench that reached her via the wind makes her nose react. Without a doubt, this wafting stench, which slipped into her nose even if she didn't want it to, was an evil scent, the Witch's scent, a miasma that needed to be punished——

The smell was quickly getting stronger, her senses and instincts cheer her on, and so she blasted the ground with the bottom of her foot.

???: "Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill!"

???: "…Die die die die die die!

The cheer in her skull and her own cheer overlap. She jumped on the ground lightly and went after her target. She went into town, smashed roof tiles, jumped over buildings, and went deeper and deeper until finally——

Subaru: "…About your face…"

She landed with her limbs and looked up. In front of her, there was a man standing in a blue dress. A stench that pierced her sense of smell and disgusted her nose and mind.

The face with the Witch's scent that she'd seen before——the evil face that had cowered in fear and trembled as it was hunted was smiling in a very provocative manner. And then——

Subaru: "…It's cuter when you smile. Almost as cute as my wife and my child."

???: "…Die!!"

She was greeted with a spiteful smile, and her bloodlust makes her strike. The wind goes straight towards the man standing upright, and it scraped off his existence from the earth along with his stench… or at least, it should have.

Halibel: "Unfortunately, I won't let you do that."

???: "————"

With that flat voice, all flurries of wind came to nothing. The winds were shot down by steel thrown from the darkness. Wind arose where the enemy wasn't, and the man opened his arms, unharmed. It was like he was saying that he was the one who did this.

???: "…Diee!"

Inexcusable. She conjured even more wind, let her increase in bloodlust control her, and struck with her power. She produces a blast. The ground was gouged out roundly, as if to draw a circle in the middle of the explosion. However, the man wasn't inside of the damage. Neither was the demi-human who interfered with by throwing things.

She looked up. She stepped onto the roof tiles, and on top of the building, there was a man. He was being carried by a demi-human on his shoulder, and he was trying to run.

——I won't let you get away. I want to kill you. Like I'd let you get away. I want to kill you.

???: "…Die!"

She chased after the stench and the demi-human running away while the night approached dawn, jumping and running through the streets. It becomes wind, she attacks with wind, swirls wind, rides wind, and——

???: "…!"

Inside the wind, a different smell was mixed with the stench. And her body was having a strong reaction to it. This was a person's smell, and a strong one at that. There were a lot of people. A premise… she sees a premise down there. The man and the demi-human fled into it. Peoples' presences… a stench that has another stench.

She was very hesitant about going in. But the man was in there. Retribution was in there——

Subaru: "…I can Return by——"

???: "…!!"

After that inaudible utterance, her instincts went wild from the stench that became tremendously strong. Her cautiousness was blown away along with her reason. When she stepped in, she jumped towards the sky and looked for the demi-human running through the garden.

She aimed at him and the man he was carrying on his shoulders and attacked with absolutely unavoidable wind from all sides.

Halibel: "Sorry, Su-san!"

Sensing the inescapable wind coming close, the demi-human yelled right before it trapped them. He grabbed onto the body of the man on his shoulders and threw him as hard as he could. The man's body went through a gap in the wind and escaped its cutting range… However, that wasn't going to happen for the demi-human that was left behind.

???: "…Die!"

The wind cruelly cuts up the demi-human who closed his fingers and was left inside. The demi-human died. She starts to feel joy from killing him, and at the same time, realizes that this wasn't over yet.

The man had been thrown into the sky. She jumped towards it and opened her arms.

Let's tear his body limb from limb, take his remains, and bring them to her. Let's teach this woman who gave birth and snuggled up to the sinful enemy a lesson.

This is revenge. This is retribution. This is atonement for their blood.

——This is revenge for having the happiness that I was never able to have!

???: "…D——"

Subaru: "Now…!!"

When her hatred and joy crossed each other and she tried to strike with death, the source of the stench shouted.

Subaru: "Ready… Gooo!!"

Right after that, she sensed that something was being thrown at her from all directions—— At the edge of her vision, she saw something that looked like an unfolded cloth. It was thrown at her.

???: "————"

Think. The stench is right before me. I can reach him and kill him. But, if I prioritize that, the thrown unfolded cloth will reach me. I can still get away from it. I can conjure wind, get on it, and foil the enemy's plan.

???: "————"

That's right. No need to panic. Do what's safe. There's no need to go with the enemy's plan——

???: "Kill kill kill kill kill kill kill"

Control the thirst for death that keeps echoing in your head, and you'll get out of this situation.

Listen to me, just this once. If you do, you'll be able to quench your thirst——

???: "…I want to kill. But, I can't."

???: "…!?"

???: "…Because I don't want Rem to hate me."

Something inside her said that in the same voice that was telling her to kill. Her hands and legs freeze. She couldn't move. She couldn't run or kill.

???: "…Dieeeeeee!!"

???: "…Ahh, I can't get enough of that scream."

When she heard a very cruel voice, her body was also hit by something that she was unable to dodge. It was the wet cloth. It wrapped around her. It wasn't attacking her. It just wrapped around her over and over.

Water… I'm wet. It's not water. This has a sharp smell.

???: "…!! …!! …!!"

Then, she screamed as if her skull was breaking, and the rejection threw her brain into chaos. The entity that should've been shut inside went wild; it couldn't take it anymore, and it tried to come out and escape.

???: "————"

Her head was aching. Her skull was being torn apart violently from the inside. It was strange pain that went beyond her imagination. She had never experienced this sort of pain. She had never experienced this sort of suffering. She had never imagined this sort of pain. No, no, no, no… I don't want to die.

It comes off. It came off; the power that made up her body fell apart. She lost the figure that had been the basis for her body—— The figure that made her look formidable to demonstrate power——

——As if melting like ice.

Her body shrunk. Her hair color changed. She went from having inhumane beauty to being an ugly village girl. She went from having eccentric power to being a mere incomplete Oni.

And so, she even lost her power to get revenge, was abandoned by her bloodlust, and——

???: "I"

Halibel: "…I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

She hears the voice of a demi-human that should have been cut up earlier. She shook off the cloth that was on her. She could now see the black shadows jumping at her.

A small blade stabbed a part of her body—— The center of her chest.

——That was the end.

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4

In the palace's garden, he was looking down on a girl that had collapsed.

She had a light brown pigtails and an ordinary but charming face. However, she was so pale that it looked like she could faint at any moment, ruining it, and she had awful bags under her eyes.

Halibel: "Her wounds are fatal, and she was hit with a curse that made her unable to get away… Now, she's done for."

Next to Subaru, there was Halibel looking down on a girl, half-naked without his *kimono* on. Listening to his statement, Subaru knitted his brow and tilted his head as he asked, "A curse?"

Halibel: "I told you before, didn't I? I'm an expert on magic… Killing with curses is my trump card. Stuff like my fur and nails are fused into the kunai I have, so if it gets stolen, it will cast a curse."

Subaru: "What the hell, that's really dangerous. Is it even okay for you to tell me about this?"

Halibel: “It’s totally fine. If you expose it to people, I’ll just make you completely disappear.”

Subaru: “That sure is a crazy way to deal with it.”

Halibel acted relaxed, but Subaru couldn’t hide the chills he had from his killing scheme.

Sorcery is said to be one of the arts in this world that are branches of magic. Since sorcery is an art that specializes in taking someone’s life, there is a rule that the caster must touch his/her opponent, and even Subaru has had experience with this before. Sorcery is very hard to use because of this, but Halibel has solved it by mixing in parts of himself with his weapon.

Halibel: “On the first night we met, the kunai stabbed her. Her movement slowed down because it was effective. Even while harnessing a Great Spirit’s power, you can’t stop the curse from working.”

Subaru: “So she came to kill me before she would die?”

Halibel: “It might be why she rushed things. Honestly, I don’t know myself.”

Shrugging his shoulders, Halibel took his *kiseru* out of his belly band, and put it in his mouth. It seemed that he had no intentions of being involved with what was going to happen now. He was being both kind and strict.

Subaru took a deep breath, and then looked into the face of the girl who was on the verge of death.

???: “————”

Slowly, her eyes opened, as if she had felt his presence. They were light blue eyes. That common feature made Subaru feel some unnecessary guilt. However, he didn’t stop.

Subaru: “It was… It was a mistake for you to go after me. I have nothing to do with the Witch Cult. But I can see why you still couldn’t stop.”

???: “————”

Subaru: “I won’t ask you to forgive me. I’d like to, but there’d be no use in asking. I won’t tell you to not hate me, so go ahead and hate me. But I’d like you to hate just me.”

He didn't want her to hate his child that was being born, and of course, not Rem, either. That also went for Halibel and the other people who helped him out. In this situation, it was Natsuki Subaru who thought about killing her, made a plan, and carried it out.

It was Natsuki Subaru who wished to kill her; it was him who filled her with hatred until the very end.

Subaru: "My name is Natsuki Subaru. That is the name of the man who killed you."

???: "————"

Subaru: "I'm sorry. I'm very sorry. Even though I told you that you didn't have to forgive me… I'm sorry for apologizing."

Ideally, he would listen to no complaints if possible, the dying girl would be left with no regrets, and he'd take her life. However, that didn't happen, and Subaru was being a helpless wimp faced with death.

Death is scary. Death is not salvation. Subaru knew that.

Subaru knew death better than anyone in this world, so he felt very bad for the girl.

Subaru: "I have a child on the way. Rem is doing her best. I'm going to be a father. So, I couldn't die. I'm sorry. That's why I killed you."

They were nothing but selfish excuses. And if their views became so conflicted that they decided to kill each other, there would be no time to understand one another.

Subaru's words weren't going to comfort her or enlighten her. In response to Subaru's words, the girl stopped her distressed breathing for a moment and said,

???: "I…"

Subaru: "————"

???: "I… hate… that… girl."

The girl said that in a voice full of hatred as if she was coughing up blood—— as if she was looking into heaven from hell.

Subaru immediately realized that she was talking about Rem. He realized it, but that realization made things inconsistent. She should have been going after the Witch's scent. That's how they came up with the plan to use Subaru as a bait. All her hatred should've been directed towards Subaru.

???: "That girl… has… everything… I want… everything…"

Subaru: "That's…"

???: "I was going to… with him… and yet… I…"

Tears flow from the girl's eyes. Her eyes were no longer looking at Subaru, or at anywhere in this world.

They were looking somewhere else—— They were looking at a scene with happiness that she yearned for so much, enough to tear her heart out and drive her to get revenge. Happiness that she was supposed to have too. She had that taken away from her, became an avenger, and now she was going to die.

What she held onto at the very end were her hatred and jealousy towards Rem, who had the same blood in her veins and reached a kind of life that was different from the one she had… No, it was probably envy.

Subaru: "What's your name?"

???: "————"

Subaru: "What is… your name?"

He asked, crouching down and moving his face close. To his side, Halibel tried to stop him, but Subaru prevented him from doing so with his hand. The girl no longer had the energy to do something to Subaru as he got close.

He listened to the girl's last spark of life that was running out even in this moment.

???: "…ize"

Subaru: "Reize."

Subaru picked up the name he was quickly told and said that. He didn't have the time to confirm if he was correct.

Reize: "————"

Light fades away from the girl's eyes. The girl envied Rem, cursed her fate, and breathed her last.

He saw that with his own eyes… No, it was Natsuki Subaru who put an end to her.

He'd never forget her name. Subaru would never forget the fact the girl had once lived—— That Reize had once lived. He sacrificed Reize to protect himself; to protect his family; to protect his life.

And he would never tell anyone what this girl Reize had truly wished for. Subaru, who was hated by her, was going to carry that to his grave.

So that neither Rem nor the child on the way would ever find out about it.

Subaru: "…It's over."

Halibel: "Yeah. It wasn't done in a very satisfying way, though."

Upon hearing Subaru's statement mixed with a sigh, Halibel responded while giving out smoke. He helped with everything for this plan. Because of that, Subaru bowed his head to Halibel.

Subaru: "Thanks for going with my selfish, uncertain plan. I really appreciate it."

Halibel: "I was the one who made the final call, and we got her just like you planned, so I have no complaints. The Substitution that I hadn't done in a while worked. It all went fairly well."

He had said that he wasn't very good at Substitution, but in the very end, it worked out.

After Halibel let Subaru get away from the girl's max firepower, he used Substitution and survived by pulling a classic: switching with a log.

Subaru: "That sure showed the finesse of a ninja… Also——"

Halibel wasn't the only one who helped out with this plan. He had the help of many others.

Looking around, this was the Magoji Palace—— After preparing a trap, he used the premise to guarantee the necessary space. And that was not the only thing he used; he used people and money too. To prove it, there was Riften Magoji standing on the veranda of the palace. While touching his mustache, he bowed deeply to Subaru and said,

Riften: “I’m glad that things went according to plan without any problems.”

Subaru: “I sincerely apologize for the trouble I’ve caused you, Master…”

Riften: “Culture School has only just begun. You still have to guide all these women with your feminine abilities. It’s an essential investment. I love investments, you see.”

He had asked Riften, who chuckled, to supply the alcohol that was absolutely necessary for the plan on top of providing a place for it. He had used Riften’s name, as he was a brave warrior, to literally gather strong alcohol from the town and get them to bring it all into the palace.

Subaru: “The lullaby hint, and Tia being poor with alcohol. And then there was the overreaction to the cooking alcohol.”

Those things led to the inference that Zarestia isn’t fond of alcohol. The old anecdotes of an entity with extremely strong power drinking excessively and being slain were endless.

The lullaby also had details related to that. If there really were existences running rampant in this world that are like the ones in the legends, then it wouldn’t necessarily be wrong to act out those legends.

A blanket with a large amount of alcohol was actually thrown at the Zarestia that was captured in Reize, and she came out after her body was soaked in alcohol.

With Riften’s wealth and reputation and the traditions of the ladies at the palace, he won. Afterwards, the people who helped him with the alcohol soaking plan——

Subaru: “…Clane’s employment agency.”

Clane: “After you said «avenging Tia», I had to come too. Also, everyone loved that girl.”

Said Clane, in armor—— not an apron—— with his large arms folded. He and a lot of other non-regular employees came rushing over when they heard about avenging Tia.

If the plan fails, there will be an all-out war with a being that has a Great Spirit level of power. Even though they had declined at first like that, many people did this for Tia.

Clane: “And if push came to shove, Halibel would’ve done something.”

Halibel: “What the heck? You expect way too much from me.”

“Give me a break, man” Halibel said as he shook his head at Clane, who scratched the nose on his lizard face. That behavior makes soft smiles go all around.

He had seen a harsh ending. However, having no victims other than the girl was the best conclusion among all the ones he thought of. It was the best one where he didn’t lose anything. So, all that’s left was——

Halibel: “…The final payback, huh.”

Subaru looked up, and Halibel knocked the ash off his *kiseru*. Riften firmly sat down at the veranda and picked up the weapons that Clane and the others deployed.

A wind slowly comes down towards the palace’s garden covered with tension, battle preparations, and caution.

Milky white hair, a pure white dress, and a face that had reached inhumane beauty via the hands of God. She had a rude side, which didn’t go with the way she looked, and childish parts about her and was surprisingly friendly and sentimental.

It was the girl that had the title of a Great Spirit, which didn’t suit her at all, who everyone here knew.

???: “————”

Overwhelmed by the presence coming closer, Subaru stopped his feet from stepping back.

In his mind, he decided that he wouldn’t run away. Believing that If he gets away from her—— away from Tia——

——He’d also get away from those boisterous, noisy days of happiness.

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5

Long, long ago before the world—— Before Witches and dragons became this and that——

I was always free. I enjoyed my freedom without having anyone get in my way.

I conjured wind, spread fires, whirled up water, and dug up dirt, doing whatever I wanted.

Everyone approved of me. Everyone asked all these favors of me, who lived freely. I felt nice and they were well-mannered, so I did their favors.

I conjured wind, spread fires, whirled up water, and dug up dirt, doing what they had asked for.

After that, everyone was happy. Everyone praised me. Everyone smiled.

So, my mood got better and better, and I did everyone favors. Of course, sometimes I'd miss being free so much that I wouldn't do their favors, but in most cases, I still helped everyone out whenever I wasn't sleeping.

Eventually, everyone started bringing things whenever they asked me for favors.

They were things like vegetables, animal meat, sparkly gems, and burnished *kimonos*; they were all these sort of things that had "value". I wasn't really hungry, nor did I have any interest in gems, and the cloth had some unnecessary fur on it, so I wasn't happy with the things they brought.

But I appreciated their thoughts, so I decided to work hard.

I conjured wind, spread fire, whirled up water, and dug up dirt. That's what I loved to do. By doing what I loved, everyone was happy. So, I did it over and over again.

However, eventually everyone's favors started to get weird. Even though they were asking for favors, they kept bringing things with them. Before, I was happy doing what I wanted with fire, water, and dirt, but now I was being told what to do.

I loved being free. I loved doing what I wanted.

But I liked being praised by everyone, and I also liked getting attention.

So, I reluctantly did everyone's favors. I conjured water, spread fire, whirled up water, and dug up dirt where they wanted me to.

Afterwards, everyone was happy again. My mood improved, and I forgave them.

Then, a lot of their favors were asking me to do what they told me.

Eventually… eventually it happened when I was getting used to doing what people told me to.

This favor was really weird. They didn't need wind. They didn't need water. They didn't need dirt. What they wanted was fire.

I didn't like it. I wanted to start with wind. I didn't want to use just wind. I loved being free. For a very long time, I have always started with wind.

I didn't like how they weren't letting me do that. I said "No", refusing to do their favor.

When I did that, everyone left. I was left alone.

I was free. I thought to act freely like before, without caring about anyone. But it was lonely being free. When everyone's gone, I feel lonely, I thought.

I went to see everyone. I said, "If fire's what they want, I'll give it to them."

Everyone was happy. I decided to bring fire, just like everyone asked for. However, fire isn't the only thing I conjured; I snuck in wind. I wanted wind with the spreading of fire, and wind was the one thing I had to have. Wind was my symbol of freedom.

There was no water. There was no dirt. There were only wind and fire. Everything became bright red.

I was glad that everyone was pleased. After pleasing everyone, they called me over and treated me warmly.

I didn't really have any interest in food, dancing, or gifts. But it felt nice having everyone treat me warmly. Also, the water that wasn't actually water was amazing.

Water that became hot when you drank it. Water that had a weird smell. The more you drank it, the more you wanted another.

I was having a blast, and drank water as recommended by everyone. I drank lots, got sleepy, and then fell asleep at a place that wasn't my nest for the first time.

——When I woke up, my limbs were gone, and my neck was about to get cut off.

I had always been free. I had always, always been free. I enjoyed my freedom.

Where did my hand that spread fire go? Where did my tail that whirled up water go? Where did my feet that dug up dirt go? Where did my freedom go?

When everyone heard my voice, they yelled with angry looks on their faces. They were yelling.

You tell me that fire burned the country, but I don't understand. You tell me that wind made it spread, but I don't care. You shout at me for not putting out the fire with water and dirt, but I don't get it.

Where did my freedom go? Why are people mad at me?

I said, "I want my limbs back." Nobody listened to me. Instead, I was showered with water that smelled weird. It was the water that put me to sleep. The water was on fire. My body was burning. "Hot, hot, hot!" I screamed.

Everyone was happy about it. Everyone was happy that I was burning, like how they were happy when I did what I'd always do.

I didn't have the hands to spread fire. I didn't have the tail to grow water. I didn't have the feet to dig up dirt.

——But, I had the head to conjure wind. I had a mouth. I had a tongue. I had fangs.

Give me back my freedom. Give back me… Don't laugh at me. I'll kill you.

My mind was dyed pitch black. I killed everyone besides myself. I killed everyone—— everyone who was happy, everyone who was crying, and everyone who was mad.

I killed everyone… I killed them and slaughtered them, but I still wanted to kill people.

Even though pleasant things happened, I wanted to kill. Even though sad things happened, I wanted to kill. Even if there were things that angered me, I wanted to kill. Even if there were things that bothered me, I wanted to kill. When I became sleepy, I wanted to kill. After I woke up from a dream, I wanted to kill. After wind blew, I wanted to kill. After the sun set, I wanted to kill.

Kill kill kill kill kill kill kill kill.

I want to kill everything. My bloodlust was everything to me.

I was free. So, I wanted to freely kill everything. I will kill.

I'm free. The last ones I killed called me a Shinigami.

I'm free. Back when everyone was smiling, they told me I was beautiful.

I'm free. Freer than anyone. I am the Most Beautiful Shinigami.

——I am the Most Beautiful Shinigami, Zarestia.

——I'm free. I want to kill everything. I want to kill.

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6

Death is what Natsuki Subaru was feeling.

His instincts understood that what had manifested before him was an entity that brought along intense death with her.

Subaru: "————"

Subaru was afraid of death. He was scared of it more than anything. Many people feel the same way. But, for Subaru, death didn't have the same meaning as it did for others.

Death meant the end. However, for Subaru, death wasn't the end.

——It was the beginning of hell.

Subaru: "Since you're in a white dress, should I assume that you are the Tia we know?"

The girl dressed in white lands while conjuring wind in the middle of the palace garden. She definitely looked like the Tia Subaru knew. Her appearance was exactly the same. The same went for her clothes; the white dress—— For some reason, it was black when she became one with Reize, so it was easy to recognize the difference.

Subaru: "I would appreciate it if you'd tell me which one you are right now. Depending on your answer…"

Tia: "Depending on my answer what? What'll you do, Su?"

Subaru: "————"

She called his name. A nickname he got used to hearing. He couldn't believe that she'd call him that in an affectionate way—— No, maybe she was calling him that with affection in her own way.

Subaru was called by that nickname, and he blinked.

Tia: "What's up with that dumbfounded look? Could you not get charmed just because I'm cute?"

Subaru: "…I only care about my wife. If my child is a girl, then I will only care about my wife and my daughter."

Tia: "Hah! Well said! Also… I see there's quite a lot of people here."

Tia's lips curled as they had an exchange of banter, and she slowly looked at all the people that had gathered for this battle. They were all very familiar faces to her.

Surely Tia also knew that they were here to save her.

Tia: “Hal and the other males working hard late at night, huh. Apparently, grown men are idiots.”

Halibel: “You’re gonna make me depressed by being that harsh. Adults gotta stay up late like idiots every now and then, you know?”

Tia: “Ohhh, so did anything come out of staying up late?”

Halibel: “Actually, that’s what we want to ask you. Tia-chan, how’d it go?”

When Tia was asked that question, she held out her arms and gently opened and closed her palms. And then, when she went “Mm” as if purring like a cat, she said,

Tia: “…I got my Light Sphere back. I got me back. It’s like the Great Spirit Zarestia has been completely revived here.”

Subaru: “Completely revived… But you’re…”

Once Tia returns back to normal, she won’t be able to control her bloodlust anymore. She certainly did say that.

However, even after regaining the power that had been taken away from her, the Tia before them wasn’t causing any havoc that they had been worrying about. Perhaps she was the same girl with a slight attitude from before.

In that case, maybe the things Tia said would happen weren’t going to happen after all.

Tia: “Stop, Su. You shouldn’t get your hopes up.”

But Tia shook her head at Subaru’s hopes with a stern look. When Subaru held his breath unintentionally, she sighed and said,

Tia: “Immediately thinking of things that sound nice is something that males do. But, it’s not happening. I told you, didn’t I? You guys are the reason why I got my Light Sphere back. I’m grateful for that.”

Subaru: “Then…”

Tia: “Yeah, I’m grateful… I’m grateful, so I want to kill.”

Subaru: "————"

Bloodlust intense enough to give one the chills filled the whole palace, went outside the premise, and then swallowed half of the town. The smell of death was felt so much by his skin that, for a moment, he had the illusion that his vision might've been covered by a black mist.

After it sunk its claws into his soul, he understood that it came from Tia, who was standing still before him.

Tia: "This is who I am. This is who Zarestia is—— the Great Spirit that only kills."

Subaru: "T—Tia… Even so…"

Tia: "You're still not letting it go? You're still saying this to me?"

Subaru was overwhelmed by bloodlust, had his throat caught by fear, and his heart went out of control. Even so, he wouldn't let go. As if irritated by it, Tia kicked dirt at him.

If Tia acts, there will be total war. But, would it even be total war? Wouldn't it just be a one-sided slaughter fest? That's how stronger the abnormal power felt to him.

Tia: "This… weird water… alcohol, was it? I remember now. I… hated… this stuff."

Subaru: "————"

Tia: "A long time ago… I was forced to drink this… and my head was cut off when I was sleeping. My limbs were cut off too. This was thrown on my face, I was put on fire… After that, I always wanted to kill."

Tia voiced her grudges to Subaru and the others, expressing just how cruelly she had been treated, revealing the reason why she hated the alcohol that became trump card for victory.

However, she still had a smile on her face. There wasn't any anger on it. There wasn't any resentment either. There was only bloodlust with her smile that came from the heart.

Tia: "I want to kill everything. Whether I'm smiling, angry, crying, frustrated, in agony, or happy. Whether it be bitter or delicious. Whether it feel great or bad. Whether it be cold, hot, sweet, sour.

Whether it be at night, in the morning, or in the afternoon. Whether it be a child, an adult, an old person, a baby, a man, a woman, a dog, a cat, or a wolf."

Every feelings, every emotion, every situation, every time, every target, every being—— Everything was connected to bloodlust for Tia.

Tia: "I want to kill. I want to kill everything. That's the kind of creature I am."

Subaru: "Then… What about… us?"

Tia: "————"

Upon hearing Subaru's forced out question, Tia directed her silent murderous intent towards him. She just looked at him. An action that small had murderous intent. The embodiment of bloodlust, a being that has every conclusion lead to bloodlust.

There were no lies on that billboard. Tia was trying to kill Subaru and the others. Even though she wasn't killing them, she was trying to. Even though she didn't want to kill them, she wanted to kill.

Tia: "I…"

Tia tried to say something. Words full of bloodlust come out.

Clane and his employees took defensive postures, Halibel put his hand in his pocket, and Subaru quietly clenched his fists. And then——

Tia: "…I——"

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7

——Inside the clinic, there were intense energy and the spasms of a life.

Doctor: "Push down…!"

Rem: “Oo… Ooooo…!!”

She tightly clenched her teeth and grasped the rail of the bed propping her up with all her strength. The iron rail squeaked, and clear fingerprints were left on it. Still, the pain didn’t go away. She couldn’t hide from it.

The feeling of her insides being pushed out and the pain from a life struggling bash her consciousness again and again. Rem had never experienced pain like this in her whole life.

Rem: “Goo… Eeee…!”

——Actually, with the time length considered, this was more intense than any other pain she’s ever experienced. Even if she concentrated on her forehead, she could not feel her horn coming out. Right now, the Oni Rem was completely dead.

As if she had put all of her life force into the baby in her belly.

Rem: “————”

Rem’s horn has made her suffer a lot, and at the same time, has been beneficial.

Being an Oni has made Rem go through cruel, painful things. As she has confessed to Subaru, she wasn’t able to be a good kid. To her parents, she was a failure of a daughter… To her sister, she was a bad little sister until the very end.

It has also caused her to never think that she was given blessings and not benefits.

Whenever was tormented by pain, suffering, or powerlessness, she would realize that she was an Oni, that she had Oni blood—— that she had power. Once she could no longer feel that for the first time, she realized that she was blessed.

Blessed by being an Oni. By being born as her parents’ child. By being her sister’s little sister.

She met Subaru, got married, had a kid, and in this moment when it was being born, realized it for the first time. Surely, her parents too, had felt——

Rem: “…Oo… Ahhh! Ooooo!!”

Breaks from the pain become shorter and shorter, and now the pain was swarming her non-stop. Every time it felt like she was going to lose consciousness, the dull pain shook her awake. It happened again and again.

And Rem couldn't hear the midwife desperately cheering her on. She couldn't hear anything.

???: "…!? Hey, do you realize where you are!? Looking like that…"

Rem: "——?"

Rem felt a strange, surprising presence, and she opened her eyes. In her field of vision blurred by tears, she did not see the midwife looking at Rem with an earnest expression.

The midwife was sinking down next to the legs of the bed. Instead, the one right next to Rem looking into her face was——

Rem: "Tia… -sama…?"

Tia: "Sorry to do this at a time like this, Rem. Also, I said we wouldn't see each other anymore, but I was wrong. This… This will really be the last time."

In her open eyes, she saw Tia smile in a lonesome fashion. It was Tia's smile that Rem has seen many times… and yet, dark thoughts seemed to be appearing and disappearing.

Bloodlust… It was bloodlust. There was bloodlust in Tia's smile. It wasn't a fake smile, but there was bloodlust.

Tia: "This is the real me. So, I can't be with you guys. I… When I see you struggling, I just want to kill."

Rem: "————"

Tia's words were apologetic, sincere, and held bloodlust. It made total sense. She understood what she was saying. Tia's true feelings and her nature were always in conflict. She couldn't live with her. That's the kind of existence she is.

Rem: "You got yourself back…"

Tia: "…Yeah, I did. It's all thanks to Su and Hal's hard work. I want to kill."

Tia played with her hair in an embarrassed manner, and she voiced her murderous intent while blushing.

Seeing her friend like that, Rem closed her eyes. A tear ran down her cheek.

Rem: "Tia-sama, I'm going to be a mom."

Tia: "Yeah, I know."

Rem: "Tia-sama, I… love Subaru-kun."

Tia: "Yeah, I know that too."

Rem: "Tia-sama… I… love you too."

Tia: "————"

Rem: "So, I can't… live with you."

Even though she loved her, she couldn't be with her. Her being unable to associate with others was an insurmountable wall. There was someone Rem loved and prioritized over Tia.

Rem: "————"

It was after she told her feelings that Rem noticed how Tia looked for the first time. Tia, who had run over in a white dress, had someone in her arms. It was a senseless girl who wasn't breathing.

Someone's dead body… A girl's dead body. She somehow knew who it was and——

Tia: "I will bring her with me. I killed her. My other half… the fake me wanted to become one and loved me, so I killed her."

Rem: "…Tia-sama, did you… come to kill me?"

Tia: "I…"

Tia going back to normal meant that Subaru made things work out somehow. Subaru wasn't here. Only Tia, who wanted to slaughter everything, came back.

Logically thinking about it, this was a hopeless situation. It wouldn't be surprising if Rem was heartbroken and sobbed as she begged for her life.

However, Rem didn't do that, and she knew there was no need to.

——The days she spent together with Tia wouldn't let her.

Tia: "I…"

Tia says an incomplete sentence once again.

Tia's milky white hair shook, and, with Rem in her clear eyes, she broke into a smile as she said,

Tia: "…I… love you guys… so I won't kill you."

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8

It was dawn when he arrived at the clinic after running from the palace without any breaks.

Subaru: "H—how is Rem!?"

Doctor: "Still in the middle of fighting. Why are you guys barging in with stupid looks on your faces? You're just going to get in the way. Don't enter the waiting room either. Go wait outside!"

The old magic user acted so cold towards Subaru who was out of breath and checked if his wife was alright.

Although, that was understandable; because of Subaru and Halibel's negligence, they had an unexpected intruder at the scene of the childbirth. Taboo things must have happened one after another in terms of professionalism for the one responsible for the clinic and watching the childbirth.

Halibel: “But man, more than half a day… Giving birth to a child is no easy task.”

Said Halibel, sinking down onto the waiting room chair and giving a long sigh. Influenced by seeing him relaxing, Clane and the others who accompanied him also all sat down. The ones who intruded included almost all of the people who had been at the palace; there wasn’t nearly enough room in the clinic.

In the end, more than half of them left the building, falling over on the way out, then they waited for morning and the baby’s first cry.

Of course, Subaru was waiting inside the waiting room, but he really couldn’t settle down. He was just impatiently and restlessly walking around.

Halibel: “Su-san, I understand how you feel, but shouldn’t you calm down a little bit?”

Subaru: “…I get what you’re saying. But, sorry, even though it’s pathetic, I just can’t stay still. If I don’t move, it feels like I’m suffocating.”

Halibel: “Makes sense. Well, I just wanted to say that. I did say I understand how you feel, but this is something I can’t understand. Your worries are none of my business. It was just painful to watch, that’s all.”

Although it sounded really irresponsible, he tried to get his mind off things even if it was just for a little while, and he appreciated the thought.

However, Subaru used up all the relief he got from Halibel in mere seconds, and once again started to wander around. Halibel gives a wry smile.

Halibel: “At times like these, men can only watch in silence… No matter how many times I go through it, it’s still rough.”

Halibel bit on his unlit *kiseru*, said just that, and went silent this time.

Deep inside, he agreed with his words. At times like these, men could only wait in silence. He looked up at the ceiling and continued to wish with his whole soul, like he was praying. An awfully stale wish. A wish anyone would make too if they were put in this situation.

Subaru: “Please, God, Buddha, Christ, Jehovah, Mohammed, Angra Mainyu…”

It didn't matter if it was a good god or an if it was an evil god. Even call a devil's name if you feel inclined to do so.

Subaru called the names of every supernatural existence he knew of and prayed.

Subaru: "…Tia, please."

And lastly, he prayed with a name that was neither a god's name nor a Great Spirit's name, but his friend's.

I pray——

Subaru: "…That both the mother and the child are all right."

It was right after he gave a prayer when there was a disruptive change in the atmosphere.

Inside the clinic, a voice—— the first cry of a bawling rang out, going through the clinic room door.

Subaru impulsively lifted his face, and Halibel also rose from his chair. Everyone who had been sleeping jumped to their feet one by one, and they waited eagerly for the clinic room door to open.

Halibel: "Have you decided on a name?"

Halibel asked that to Subaru, who was standing still and raising and lowering his head. After that, Subaru pulled himself together and said,

Subaru: "Y—yeah, I got one. I have one. If it's a girl, Spica."

The "Subaru" in Natsuki Subaru is a name of a star. It's what his parents named him as they prayed. Imitating them, he'd name the child after a star while praying that he'd become a father who'd live up to his parents.

The door to the clinic room slowly opens. Beyond it, he saw Rem holding the baby——

Subaru: "If it's a boy…"

Epilogue – Anniversary

Original translation by Remonwater

1

Rem: "…Rigel."

When the child had its named called by a gentle voice, it slowly stood up.

It was a child with light blue hair, and eyes that had the same color as its hair. It was turning six years old and was still at the peak of its adorableness… but the sharpness of its eyes didn't make the future look too bright.

Natsuki Rigel—— That was the name of this child, a fitting leading character for the ending of this story.

Rem: "Rigel, where are you? It's time to go to Temple Elementary."

Rigel: "Mom, I'm right here. I'm already ready."

When he responded to the voice that came from inside the house, a woman with long blue hair appeared all of a sudden. The lovely, beautiful woman suddenly smiled as she stared at Rigel, who was standing in the garden.

Rem: "Oh, you got ready quickly today. Good boy."

Rigel: "Unlike Dad, I don't want to trouble you."

Rem: "Hmph, don't say that, Rigel. You shouldn't bad-mouth your dad. Besides, I'm into taking care of your dad, so I don't mind. Hahh, it makes me so happy; I think the second one is coming now…"

Rigel: "Could you not?! That's not funny!"

Listening to Rigel's voice crack, the woman—— Rem, the mother, giggled. She had a baby belly, and inside of it there was Rigel's little brother/little sister in the making.

Although he was honestly anxious about having a sibling being born, Rigel had high hopes. Surely it'll be a cute little sister. No doubt about it. I vote for a little sister.

Rem: "So, even if it ends up being a little brother, don't bully him, and be his friend, okay?"

Rigel: "Well, that won't be a problem if you do your best to give birth to a little sister."

Rem: "Oh, my. You really do seem to resemble someone…"

Dealing with Rigel's sass, Rem put her hand to her forehead as if to say that this was unfortunate. It's true that in the neighborhood Rigel was known to have a smart mouth. He was so quick-witted that you wouldn't believe he was a 6-year-old, and it was acknowledged by the kids in the neighborhood.

However, Rigel knew that some other people had a big influence on this situation; he knew things were like this mainly because of his father and his workplace.

Rem: "It's great that I got my maternity and parental leaves approved as suggested by your dad, but now that I don't have work, I'm very bored…"

Rigel: "What are you saying with that baby belly of yours? You should just do housework."

Although Rem sighed with boredom, Rigel had nothing but respect for his mother's boldness.

This may not be her first childbirth, but how could a pregnant woman be this calm her second time? Rigel wanted to go around the whole town bragging about it, but his father was already doing that, so he held back.

Rem: "It was quite rough when I had you. This isn't so bad in comparison."

Rigel: "Was it really that rough?"

Rem: "Yep, it sure was. It was a breech delivery, and I almost died."

Rigel: "It was that rough!?"

Rem: "It was rough. Your dad and Uncle Halibel almost died too."

Rigel: "They were going to die!?"

Rem: “They weren’t the only ones. Had it taken a little longer, the whole town of Banan might’ve gotten annihilated…”

Rigel: “Just how difficult was my birth!?”

Rigel was told that his own birth put the town in danger, and it surprised him. I can’t possibly imagine this happening, but is it going to be a difficult birth like that when my sister is born?

Rigel: “Will I stay alive and meet my sister…?”

In his mind he promises to use the Substitution Halibel taught him on his father to sacrifice him if push comes to shove. In any case, while they were having that conversation, the bell tower rang.

Rigel: “Ah, dang it. I’m actually going to be late!”

Rem: “That’s not good. Here, take this bento. Also, Dad forgot to bring his bento, so give this to him please.”

Rigel: “Alright…”

Rigel takes the two packages and knits his brows at the difference between the two. One was kid sized. He could see that. That one’s his. But, what was up with how grand the other one was?

Rem: “They’re the same.”

Rigel: “Are they now!?”

Rem: “I packed the same amount of love in each. For you to worry about such a thing… Rigel, you’re still such a baby, huh. Your sister’s going to be disappointed with you.”

Rigel: “Why am I always at fault!?”

Rigel pouted at what Rem said, and after that he put the two packages into his bag. Then he waved at his mother, started to leave the house, and——

Rem: “…Rigel.”

Upon hearing his mom's voice, he stopped and turned around. His mom gently waved while smiling and said,

Rem: "Take care."

Rigel: "I'm off!"

After having that exchange, Natsuki Rigel started running to Temple Elementary.

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2

???: "You sure are energetic again today, Rigel."

???: "Ri-chan, good morning."

???: "Good morning, Rigel."

Rigel: "Good morning! Good morning! Good moooorning!"

Running towards downtown, Rigel was spoken to from every direction. To Rigel, this was the town he was born and raised in; the environment he was familiar with. But if he were to say that this was something totally natural, his classmates at temple elementary school would be surprised, so apparently he was just a little strange.

Rigel: "Mom and Dad seem to have done a lot of things…"

He'd overheard the adults conversate as if they were talking about an amusing story. His mom and dad may have been involved in a serious event that shook Banan Town.

Rigel honestly thought that it was fake. Would his mother, someone who acts reserved other than with his dad, really get involved in a serious event like that? As for his dad, it would not be surprising if an uproar was centered around him. While having such thoughts, Rigel——

???: "…Oh, Rigel. Come here."

He hears a voice that didn't sound like it was greeting him. Rigel stops upon hearing that familiar tone of voice and turns around. Then, right behind him, there was not a black wall… but a person in a black *kimono*.

Rigel: "Uncle Halibel!"

Halibel: "Ohh ohh, long time no see eh, Rigel. Have you been well? Have you been skipping your training?"

Rigel: "No I haven't! In fact, I wanna go onto the next training already! How about you, Uncle? Why have you been gone from town for so long?"

Rigel had his hair tousled by him and broke into a broad smile from the rough way he handled his hair.

Halibel was his parents' friend, and to Rigel he was like an uncle. Though he may not look like it, he works as a shinobi and jokes that he's always finding those who bring the seeds of trouble into the Kararagi City State, purging them behind the scenes, assassinating.

Still, he really was like a shinobi, and he was secretly giving training.

Halibel: "You're pretty good at this. So good that you should even follow my footsteps if Rem-chan lets you."

Rigel: "Like, following your footsteps to become an Eternal Playboy? No way. I'm going to support Mom and my sister and get a job that I can be proud of as a family head."

Halibel: "I feel like I've heard this before, and what about your dad?"

Rigel: "Dad's a man. He's old enough to wipe his own butt. He'll be fine."

Halibel: "Dahahahaha! What the hell, Su-san has no respect going for him!"

After shrugging his shoulders, Halibel bursted into laughter while covering his face. Then, once Halibel's momentary laughter settled down, he said,

Halibel: “Hee… hee… A—anyways, I’m gonna go see Rem-chan. I’m on break for a while, so I’d like to be there to see your little brother/little sister being born if possible.”

Rigel: “It’s a little sister.”

Halibel: “Hm?”

Rigel: “It’s going to be a little sister.”

Halibel: “Y—yeah, right…”

Overwhelmed by an alarming sense of intimidation, Halibel nodded dubiously in response to Rigel’s comment. And then, he put his *kiseru* to his mouth, and lit it as he gave out smoke.

Halibel: “You’re going to Temple Elementary now, right? Take care. When you get back, I’ll train you.”

Rigel: “It’s a promise! Lie, and I’ll make you swallow 1000 needles!”

Halibel: “Ohh, how scary. A Su-san type of phrase. I’m so scared.”

Rigel: “You’ll be swallowing them from the bottom!”

Halibel: “Does that kind of stuff even happen!?”

Halibel shrieked and laughed loudly upon hearing Rigel’s reminder, and he left as he waved goodbye.

He was ecstatic to have met him again unexpectedly, but now he had very little time left. Was he going to have enough time to give his dad his bento? He wouldn’t care if not giving it would just mean that his dad would suffer, but he didn’t want to make his mom sad. It was a dilemma. So, as a solution——

Rigel: “…Be sneaky about it.”

Rigel concentrated on his forehead, jumped very high, and went over the streets.

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3

Jumping high and bathing in the wind in the sky felt good.

Inside the horn grown on his forehead, mana gathered from the atmosphere, filling his body with strength. In this state, Rigel felt like he was wrapped in a sense of almightiness, and that he could do anything.

However, since his mom would make a lonely look whenever he grew his horn, he tried to avoid doing this as much as possible. Of course, using it in an emergency like this was different, though.

Rem: "I'm sorry… that you could only grow one horn…"

His mom had said that once when she was patting Rigel's head while he was pretending to be asleep. Rigel couldn't understand why she was apologizing for that. Judging from the way she had said it, it seemed having one horn wasn't enough, but wouldn't 5 or 6 of them look lame?

He thought there was a nice balance with having one horn in the middle of his forehead, and that it looked cool.

Rigel: "Well, it's not like I can look cool anyway with how much my face looks like dad's."

Rigel steps on the roof tiles, being careful not to break them, and hops over the town.

His dad's workplace is called the "Banan Culture Promotion Group", which was in the east side of town, and it seems they plan all sorts of festival and events, and it is up to them to pump life into the town, or something like that. Apparently, it used to be a Culture School that his dad had worked at, but he didn't know any details about it.

Anyways, his dad's workplace was annoying all year round, and it was tiring to explain to his friends that it was "a job that spread the ritual where you hit Onis with beans" whenever they asked him about it.

That being said, it was true that he was supporting the household with his earnings. Thinking that this was the time as a son to thank his efforts for the family, he focused on bringing the bento and——

???: "…Hey, you there."

Rigel: “Ooe!?”

He was called out to while jumping in the air and it freaked him out. Rigel looks right beside him, sees that someone is there, and was taken aback.

It was a very beautiful person. Milky white hair, a pure white dress, eyes attractive enough to leave you unable to speak.

???: “Wow, I can already guess whose kid is this. Isn’t that something?”

Rigel: “Wh… ugya!”

Rigel, surprised by the beautiful faced getting near him and smiling broadly, lost his balance in the air. He lost control, and at this rate, was going to hit the ground.

???: “Careful. You should stop jumping around if you’re incapable.”

Rigel: “Ah.”

He was grabbed by the neck and was forced to stop. Then the person swooped down at once while holding onto Rigel—— They silently landed at an empty street.

Rigel: “U—umm…”

After landing, the woman and Rigel faced each other while she held him up. Rigel was stared at by a beautiful person he’d never seen before that smelled nice, and it made him nervous. Seeing Rigel act like that, the woman sighed contentedly and said,

???: “I really enjoyed that. Yep, that’s a face that says you want to kill.”

Rigel: “What’s that supposed to mean!?”

???: “Ohh, just like Su. I guess that should be expected. Given that your face looks that similar to his.”

The woman laughed foolishly and let go of Rigel, freeing him. While timidly looking at the woman, Rigel had no idea how to respond and had a question mark above his head.

Since she talked about his face, she's most likely someone Dad knows. A lot of the people Dad knows are weirdos, but this woman in front of me is pretty fine woman. A beauty. No, but still——

???: "Hey, don't get mesmerized just because I'm cute."

Rigel: "No matter how much of a beauty you are, I have my little sister, so…"

???: "Oh, okay then. So, you've got a girl in mind… wait, little sister!? Won't karma get you for that!?"

Karma… wonder what that means. I don't understand complicated things. I'm just a kid, after all.

???: "Karma is when you have to live your life in a way that can never be changed. You'll understand soon enough. Anyways…"

Rigel: "Anyways?"

???: "You're Rigel, aren't you? Su and Rem's kid. Right?"

Rigel: "Uh, if by Su you mean Natsuki Subaru, then yes."

The woman mentioned Rigel's mom and dad's names, and he nodded while being careful of her. The woman seemed very friendly. He also had a hunch that there was something else about her that was off putting, but he ignored it for now.

It was probably one of those hunches that wouldn't be worth worrying about after Rigel interacted with her.

???: "…I'm surprised. You're an interesting one."

Rigel: "Isn't that your karma? I don't really get it, though."

???: "Aha, you got me. Well done… You're the hero that slayed a monster."

The woman smiled and exaggerated that he had slayed a monster. If this girl was a monster, then the world must be a pretty peaceful place.

???: "And so, I offer this as a reward for the hero that has slain the monster."

Rigel: "…? What's this?"

What the woman held out to him was something like a bracelet made with white thread. The woman made a devious look and went "Hehehe" in response to Rigel's reaction of tilting his head.

???: "This is a small gift. I actually said I was going to give you my Light Sphere, but that's hard to do. So, I'm giving you a special white, not black, binding made by myself."

Rigel: "What do you mean?"

???: "If something ever happens, I'll come rushing over to save you. That's what the tool is for. It's an amazing treasure. What do you think?"

"Come rushing over", she says, but what can this slender girl even do if she does come?

Those were Rigel's thoughts, forgetting about how he had been saved from jumping in Oni form. There was also the gift, but——

Rigel: "Mom said not to accept things from strangers, so…"

???: "Huh!? … Y—you're turning down my gift? I—I'll kill you, you know?"

Rigel: "That's a threat!"

The woman starts tearing up slightly, says something dangerous, and Rigel screeched at her.

This girl was wack. She looked way older than him but was talking like one of his classmates. Or maybe something closer would be… a little sister. It was like he was talking to a little sister. Plus, he knew that she had no ill intentions. Looking at her eyes, he could tell. She stared at Rigel so seriously that it felt uncomfortable, and she was putting words together.

???: "But… I… love you. I want to kill you, though."

Rigel: "…I have a little sister, so…"

???: "You already said that earlier! Besides, she shouldn't even be born yet!"

She says that to Rigel and rejected her for almost mesmerizing him for a bit. The women stamped her feet and tore her hair out, maybe because she was irritated by that, and said,

???: “Fine. Fine. F-I-N-E! If you insist, then fine! I was actually going to leave, but not anymore! I’m going to talk about this with Su!”

Rigel: “With dad? I don’t mind, but Dad’s quite a pain in the butt.”

???: “I know. So is your mom. Let’s go, Rigel.”

The woman said just that, and then started to walk. However, she was going in the wrong direction to get to his dad’s workplace.

Rigel: “It’s this way.”

???: “I—I knew thaaat. Aren’t you being kind of bratty? Just how involved do you think I was with your birth? The town almost got destroyed, you know?”

Rigel: “Seriously, what the heck happened on the day I was born!?”

When Rigel felt like this was a story that he had just heard about from his mother, he loudly threw a question. After hearing that, the woman put her finger to her lips and said,

???: “It’d take a looong time to tell you the story. Longer than the time it’ll take to get to your dad.”

Rigel: “Then just come to our home. I’m sure Mom would welcome you.”

???: “————”

When Rigel put his hands behind his head and told the woman that, her eyes widened. After that, she chuckled and said,

???: “O—of course she would. I bought that house with the goodbye presents that I earned, after all!”

Rigel: “What are you to my family… You haven’t even told me your name.”

Tia: “My name? Oh, I’m Tia. I’m… hm…”

The girl that seemed to be deeply involved with a bunch of stuff in the Natsuki family—— Tia was messing with Rigel. However, he didn't mind it, and he was charmed by Tia's smile as she looked back.

Tia, with her broad smile, cheerfully said,

Tia: "…I'm like… a part of your family."

She finally said those words, and they both slowly moved towards his dad's workplace, standing side by side. Before she knew it, the girl started humming in a good mood, and it sounded like something Rigel had heard before.

Rigel: "————"

It was a lullaby his mom had put together long ago, before he was even born.

She had said that the name of the song was "Tia".

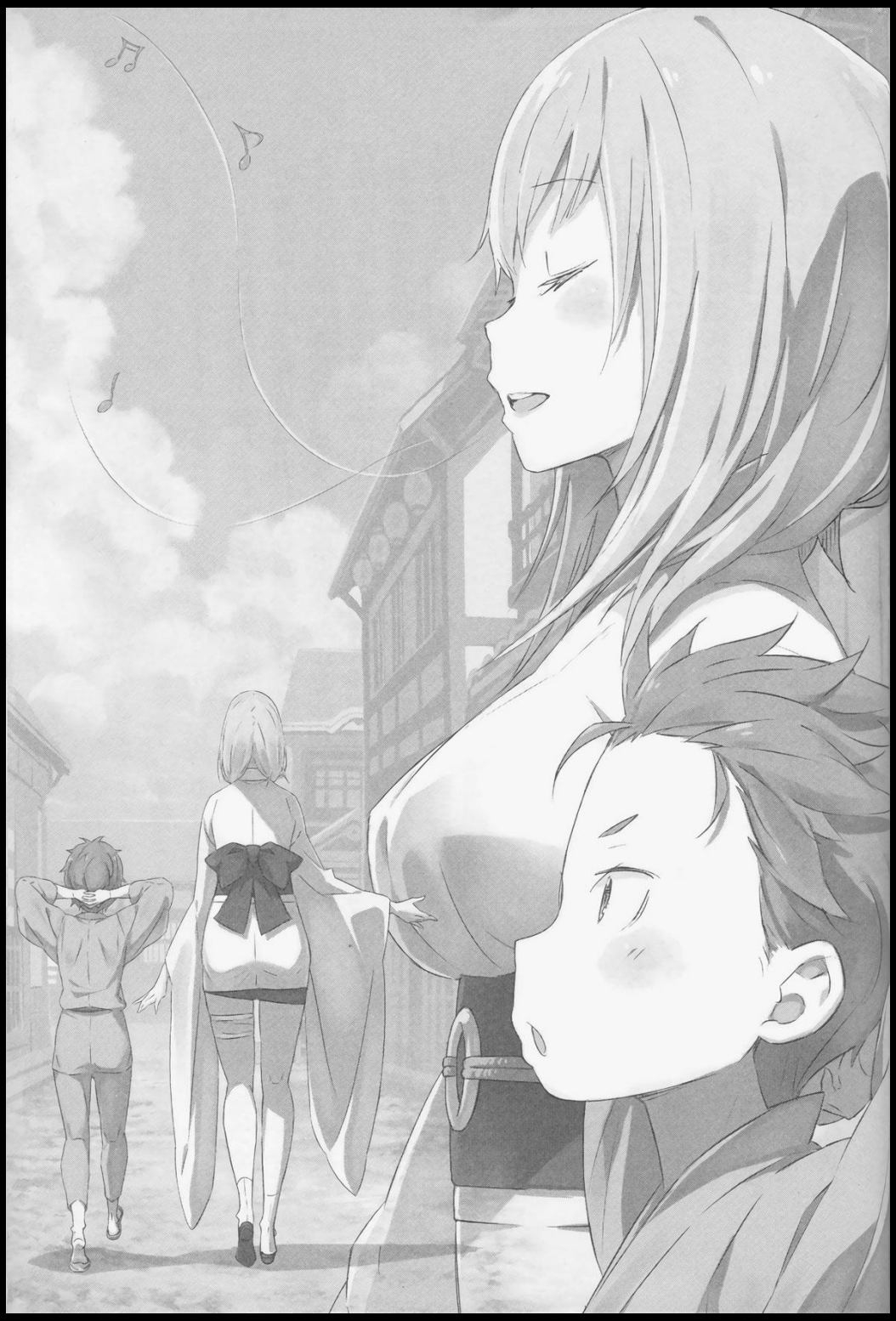
——So, well, I guess I'll accept the fact that she said she's family.

A light blue sky, a town that looked ordinary in every way—— The scenery of a family's ordinary life.

That common, irreplaceable happiness definitely existed in one corner of the world. There were things that were lost, things that were abandoned, places that were ran away from, memories that couldn't be forgotten even if they tried——

Despite having all these feelings, they would still live in this world that went on.

——And that was also an ending for one of the loves of a lost boy that wandered into another world.



EX Chapter 1 - Natsuki Rem

Original translation by SummaryAnon (has WN Arc 3 Interludes)

—Beneath a pristine sky of blue, Subaru squints up at the downpour of daylight.

He hears someone crying.

A girl crying. Crying with all her might, using all the strength in her little body. Seeing her pour all her soul into showcasing her emotions, Subaru idly wonders how it is that kids have so much energy. And after thinking it, he's stunned at himself for how geriatric it is to think such a thing.

Subaru: “I already knew that I'd gotten old, but realizing it was an unconscious thing and not conscious sucks. And when I was trying be still full of youth and boundless energy.”

???: “The hell is this about youth and boundless energy. You ever take a damn objective look at yourself?”

What sounds like some insults come from Subaru's side. The familiar, crude voice makes Subaru sigh as he lazily turns to look at the speaker. Subaru is seated on a chair, and a boy stands next to him at even eye level. The boy frowns in response to Subaru's silent staring.

Boy: “But anyway, do something about Spica's crying already! Seriously can't handle it.”

Subaru: “But I'm done for. Your heartless words have torn my tender soul to shreds. I've reverted to the mind of a child like Spica and I'm gonna start bawling. Forgive my done for self.”

Boy: “There's nothing forgivable about a grown man doing that in public!”

The boy gesticulates vigorously as he retorts to Subaru's immature manner of sulking. The action prompts the baby cradled in Subaru's arms, Spica, to take a deep breath. The two guys give useless statements of “ah” and “ouh” and—— There comes the emotional explosion.

Spica: “A——hk!”

Subaru: “Aaaaugh! She's crying! Spica's crying! Look’ere Rigel, you better do something 'bout this, you're her brother!”

Rigel: “If you're gonna say that, then aren’t you the one who's gotta do something if you don't wanna be terrible!”

In a corner of a main street of a lively townscape, two guys pass the responsibility around as they cradle a baby. Passersby look over at the noisy three, wondering what's going on. But after seeing the two of them running about in circles, they look away like “What, just the same as always”, and ignore it.

So, the two's pattern of running around continues undisturbed. Could call it charming, or just as easily call it riotous and unpleasant.

Subaru: “We've got a little girl bawling her whole soul out over here, and not a single person's giving us a hand… Shit, what's wrong with society?! Have people's souls become so barren?”

Rigel: “This isn't the time to whine about the world! If we don't stop Spica's crying, what'll she say when she gets back—”

???: “When who gets back?”

Rigel: “Well, who else—”

Rigel crosses his arms, nodding, and glances behind him. When his face stiffens and he falls stupefied, his mouth gaping open in dumb shock. Following Rigel's gaze, Subaru also catches sight of this new character, and his eyebrows spring up.

Subaru: “Oh, done shopping?”

???: “Yes, without problems… It seems you two've had some trouble.”

Subaru: “Nope, Spica's just super energetic. I'm raising her so once she's running circles like this, she'll be running circles around guys. She's got a future as a bad girl, heart's pounding here!”

Spica's eyes open slightly as she notices the woman and opens her hands before reaching out to her. Her uncomfortable posture dictates her demand for swapsies, the alienation wounding Subaru's poor paternal heart.

Subaru: “That said, I ignore what she wants and make her cry again then this's just winding up where we started. Oui, all yours.”

Woman: “She's all mine.”

Subaru's tone is pretty reckless, but he is awfully gentle as he hands Spica over. A smile rises on the woman's face as she sees his fingers, cradling the babe like something ephemeral and precious. The woman accepts Spica and cradles her securely to her chest, before gently rocking her.

Woman: “No, your father and brother are just no good. It's essential for you to swiftly grow larger and scold them as well.”

Subaru: “Hey now, don't go implanting things in her head while she's still an infant.”

Subaru imagines himself, having just done or said something stupid, stuck between the two angry girls with their arms akimbo. And then adding Rigel to that picture,

Subaru: “What, that's not as bad as I thought. Actually, that's such a happy fantasy that I might start crying maybe.”

Rigel: “No damn thanks. Getting yelled at by my little sister'd completely crush my dignity as a brother.”

Subaru: “There's no dignity out there that stays uncrushed after running in circles with me. I see, I see it… loving your sister and constantly spoiling her, your future is one of being whipped.”

Rigel: “Don't push this on me just 'cause you're whipped yourself! I'm never gonna be like that.”

Subaru twiddles his fingers in a mysterious fashion as Rigel gives his objection. The one to furrow their brows at Rigel's refutation isn't Subaru—— but the blue-haired woman who had been watching happily over the two's back-and-forth. In a calm, but firm tone, the woman calls Rigel's name.

Woman: “Rigel. Is that any way for you to have been speaking in public? It is not tolerable.”

Rigel: “Eurh, but I mean…”

Woman: “Your mother hates «but I means». And, your previous statement was incorrect.”

The woman gives the calmed Spica, cradled in her arms, a tender smile.

Woman: “Your mother does not have your father whipped. Because your mother, always puts your father in number one.”

Spoken with her cheeks flush, a statement more embarrassing than bawling like a baby in public.

Rigel throws his arms up in surrender. Feeling something akin to an itch, Subaru smiles. The woman softly brushes her hair back as she blissfully watches over the family scene.

Rem's long hair, blue as the sky and caressed by the wind, sways in the breeze.

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They're in a corner of a city in Kararagi—— a spot that you could maybe or maybe not call a park. Subaru spaces out as he sits on one of the benches there.

He watches the blue, short, spiky-haired Rigel run about to and fro with his somewhat brattish friends. The way he talks with his dad is impermissible but watching him playing like this makes him seem like something cute.

Subaru: “If only we could do something about those nasty serial killer eyes of his.”

Rem: “We mustn't. Those nasty eyes are who Rigel is. Even if he is enjoying himself, no matter how gleeful he is, strangers seeing him for the first time will think him nefarious and displeased because of his face. That is who Rigel is.”

Rigel: “I can hear you, and mom your backing me up actually really hurt!”

Screams Rigel, who has been caught by the oni and is in a state of being frozen, in this game that Subaru popularized, called Freeze Oni[17]. Subaru gives him a casual wave and so does Rem, hers small and careful so as not to disturb a sleeping Spica.

[17] A variant of tag.

Rigel pouts with his sharp *sanpaku* gaze dissatisfied. He looks like Subaru did in his childhood photo albums, and unbearably so.

Subaru: “Which means it's already decided that his future'll end up like this. I'd shudder if I were him… Being told that I'd tun into me in 20 years.”

Rem: “Skilled at cooking and incredible at housework. Will acquire an ideal, wonderful wife who is respectful and devoted to her valiant husband… Would be what you meant?”

Subaru: "What’s with that normie outburst? Wait, I’m the normie!"

Subaru puts his hand to his head and pokes out his tongue. Rem gives a small laugh and puts her hand to her mouth, before clicking her throat and glancing at Subaru.

Rem: “If you don't deny that and adorn me so in compliments, you do realize that I will get carried away?”

Subaru: “Where did I adorn you with compliments, in that exchange. All I did was purposefully not deny you praising yourself. Eh, that said it's unmistakable truth and there's nothing deniable about it.”

Actually, if you let Subaru get away with unrestrainedly, unabashedly talking about Rem, things turn into something horrible with all the compliments flying around. Being that it's midday with kids scuffling in the park, lots of their family members and neighbors are around.

If Subaru starts with the lovey-dovey talk even once, the entire thing will escalate and inadvertently be the main topic of all the neighborhood gossip tomorrow.

That doesn't sound so bad, is a tempting poison in Subaru's thoughts, but he consciously ignores it and immerses himself in peace and harmony.

He closes his eyes while basking in sunlight, creating the illusion that he is floating upon the light's warmth. Something begins to drag his consciousness away, his exhaustion after consecutive late nights overpowering his attention. His head grows heavy, wavers. And,

Subaru: “Wha-”

Rem: “If you are tired, take my shoulder. As Spica is currently monopolizing my arms.”

Subaru opens his eye to find Rem, who has scooched over to his side and is propping him up. With their height difference, his head will fit perfectly in the crook of her shoulder if he leans over. Feeling some embarrassment, he looks down at Spica as she sleeps in Rem's arms—— She has her father's black hair, and her mother's adorable face. A sweet, innocent life yet ignorant of the world.

Subaru: “Ohhh, that damn Spica. You might be my darling daughter, but you're a bad girl for monopolizing my sanctuary. You're sentenced to tickle torture later.”

Rem: “You will have to wait until nighttime to monopolize my breasts.”

Subaru: “We're in a park in the middle of the day right now so could you please watch what you say!?”

Hearing that incredible line prompts Subaru to jerk far, far back. He glances over, to find that Rem is blushing beet red. How to put it,

Subaru: “My wife is mega cute.”

Rem: “Only because I am so loved.”

The two share a smile. Rem's being beaming, Subaru's being kind of ghnekk—— but it's still a smile.

Getting embarrassed at their prolonged mutual gazing, Subaru scratches his cheek to collect himself. “Then, I'll oblige” he says as he boldly rests his head on Rem's shoulder.

Her long hair feels strangely nice as it tickles his cheeks in the wind. While sniffing its scent, Subaru rubs his cheek against Rem's shoulder.

Rem: “That tickles, darling.”

Subaru: “Ah, sorry. Did something and it felt good and I got super excited. Now I'm following Spica's example and'm all settled down. I'll leave the being unsettled up to Rigel. Ewww, Rigel's suuuch a kiiiiid!”

Rigel: “I can hear you, stupid dad! Stop bringing me up all the time!”

Rem: “Rigel. Your sister is sleeping, please be more considerate.”

Rigel: “This isn't goddamn right!”

Screams the frozen Rigel, but no one in the family is going to back him up. Actually, nobody is going to help Rigel. His role is one of being teased.

Subaru finds that Rigel's personality, speech and behavior coincides a lot with his own, but Rigel's peers' neglect to shun him might be the only point where his luck outstrips Subaru's. That said, Subaru also felt that he was part of the community when he was a child. Rigel's future isn't looking so bright.

Subaru: “Gotta make sure Spica doesn't turn out like that. Rigel's unfortunate, but you take after Mom and have a bright future awaiting you. I'm just praying you don't get caught in the grips of a useless guy like me.”

Rem: “There is nobody who could substitute for you. You are the only darling in the world, to me.”

Subaru gives a small smile, and the two fall into silence. With the gentle wind tickling him, and Rem's body heat on his skin, this world of innocence could about swallow him.

Days of manual labor have built up some physical strain in Subaru. These occasional instances of family time are where he delights in the happiness of daily living. Basking in sunbeams, watching his son get teased by his friends, napping while cuddling up to his wife, while she cradles his daughter.

—Was this not sweet happiness?

Rem: “Subaru-kun—”

Subaru opens his eyes at the sudden address. He glances over to see Rem, her head tilted slightly towards him. Her pale blue eyes reflect Subaru, her lips trembling, suggesting that she has something to say.

Subaru: “That name…”

Rem goes silent.

Subaru: “Been a while. You've only been calling me «darling» or «your father» lately.”

Subaru closes his eye, his mouth relaxed, but Rem's tense. Her attitude makes Subaru think of several years ago, back when they had just run away, where this kind of thing was incredibly common. She'd been trying to keep Subaru from noticing, but Subaru paid more attention to Rem than she thought.

Subaru closes his eyes. Feels the breeze. Rem was the one who proposed they all go shopping today. Subaru has a bit of a guess as to why.

Subaru: “It's been 8 years since that day, now.”

Rem: “So you noticed…”

Subaru: “Well, it's a huge turning point for me… No, for us. I noticed, remembered, didn't forget—— Would never forget.”

The day he knelt before fate. Abandoned everything… and ran away. He had meant to give up on everything. But there was one thing he couldn't surrender that day. Their decision that day, and her love—— Because that was there, Subaru was now here.

Rem: “Subaru-kun, do you…”

It's a nostalgic form of address, and one that Rem consciously phased out of using shortly after they fled to Kararagi. Partly to indicate their status as a couple to those around them, but also to make a change from the past. Subaru had purposefully never referenced this fact until today, and Rem had never told him her reason for it either.

A whirlpool of complex emotion churns in Rem's eyes.

Rem: “…Have any regrets?”

Subaru: “Regrets?”

Rem: “Yes. About running away. About giving up. About throwing so much away. About, me being what you…”

Subaru: “If you say «settled for», I'll get super mad. I get to come home hand-in-hand with Rigel and Spica! Oh, nah, don't really need Rigel. Just leave him behind.”

Subaru sees Rigel's face turn sour, but he feigns ignorance while shooting him the «I'm having an important discussion right now» look to send him hurtling down into the abyss. He turns back to Rem.

Subaru: “Y'know, this is seriously super late to mention, 8 years down the line and all, and I really have no idea how much effect this'll have after saying it tens or hundreds or thousands of times, but…”

Rem: “Yes.”

Subaru: “I love you more than anything in the world. You're my only wife, and I'm your only man. You're not the kinda cheap woman a guy like me could get by making compromises.”

He gets himself upright and bounces his finger off Rem's forehead. Rem looks surprised as Subaru brings his face closer to hers.

Subaru: “Just as I pledged that day, everything I am belongs to you. I devote myself to you, give myself to you, live only for you… Though now, also for our children.”

Subaru brings his face closer and steals a kiss, nothing more than fleeting contact. While close enough to feel the other's breath, Subaru makes a mischievous face, the one that never changes no matter how much he ages.

Subaru: “So, that ease you?”

Rem: “…I'm sorry. I am always uneasy. Because I continuously fall more deeply in love with you, Subaru-kun. I believe that there could be nothing happier than this, and then it happens that I experience even greater, further happiness. Happiness, and love, and so unease.”

Tears well up in Rem's eyes while she speaks of happiness, simultaneously shaking her head. She puts her forehead to Subaru's, each sharing the other's warmth.

Rem: “It feels as though one day, my darling who I touch like this, will disappear.”

Subaru: “Relax. I'm not leaving you, and I'm never gonna disappear. So long as your love for me hasn't exhausted, we'll never be separated.”

Rem: “Subaru-kun, my love for you would never be exhausted—”

Subaru: “Well then, together forever. I love you, Rem.”

Again, Subaru kisses Rem. Teeth meet soft lips, her face frozen in surprise as Subaru plunges in deeper. Their tongues intertwine, her saliva hot on his tastebuds.

There is where he separates. Rem takes a little breath, her breathing now longer and heavier. Subaru raises his finger.

Subaru: “And besides,”

Subaru: “Don't say stupid things about it being a compromise or whatever. What's a compromise? You mean we had Rigel and Spica out of sympathy, not love? Spica's the embodiment of our planned love, and Rigel's a kid born from the recklessness and flaring passions of the love in our youth.”

Rem: “…It certainly was a time when Rigel was born.”

Says Subaru with hand on hip in lecturing posture. Rem smiles and counting the memories off on her fingers——

Rem: “We had moved to Kararagi and finally found jobs and a residence, and what we needed to do was slowly, carefully prepare our foundations to live, and yet…”

Subaru: “No well look, I was young and impatient.”

Rem: “You were supposed to be exhausted after work, Subaru-kun, and yet bedtime certainly saw you lively.”

Subaru: “No, well, look, I was young and had stamina.”

Rem: “The time that we acquired formal employment and the time I became pregnant were almost simultaneous. How paled my face turned then.”

Subaru: “Sure are hard to accept, those follies of your youth.”

Rigel's face sours at getting treated like a mistake, but he appears to read the mood and manages to control himself. Pretty good son. Subaru gives him a nod, and Rem also turns her gaze to him.

Rem: “But, honestly, I was happy when I was pregnant with Rigel.”

Subaru: “And I was too. When I first found out, my nose leaked and I pissed myself a little, and after I got you to punch me to make sure I wasn't dreaming, man it got bloody.”

This probably happened because she had been inches from exploding in rage, but she punched him hard enough that when he slammed against the wall, the whole of their temporary residence slanted. If Subaru hadn't managed to brace himself, he feasibly could have died. That one aside, Subaru remembers everything from when Rem told him she was pregnant, and all the warm feelings that surged through his chest back then.

But Rem shakes her head. Subaru tilts his head, not getting it. A slight shadow comes over Rem's smile.

Rem: “My happiness was surely different from your pure one, Subaru-kun. What made me happy… was my delight that I would never lose you.”

Subaru goes silent.

Rem: “Rigel is the bond between you and me in tangible form. The phrasing is not nice, but with a baby being born between us, we would be bound together by something that could never be severed. …That is why I was happy.”

Maybe this was what was making her so anxious back then. They had abandoned everything and fled to a new land together, with only each other to cling to. Meaning that Rem was constantly terrified that she may lose Subaru.

Rem's self-esteem is low enough to put up a good fight with Subaru's. Considering how Rem undervalues herself, life with Subaru meant constant exhaustion between the extremes of happiness and the extremes of terror.

What ended those extremes was the new life born between them.

Subaru: “You didn't believe?”

Rem: “No, I did. I believe in you more than anyone in the world, Subaru-kun.”

Subaru: “Not that. I don't mean not believing in me… You didn't believe in yourself?”

Rem's breath catches, and she gives a small nod. Her mental image of Subaru is inordinately grand. Her own presence, in opposition to that, must feel unnervingly minuscule.

— She must not have noticed that Subaru had always held the exact same unease. Even though Subaru had always considered Rem a girl far, far too good for himself.

It makes Subaru smile. Seeing that, Rem puffs out her cheeks.

Rem: “Fine. I was stupid. Of course you would laugh.”

Subaru: “No no no. I just had that thought again. That you and I have the exact same character, but despite that my wife truly is the cutest in the world.”

Subaru's sneak attack makes Rem freeze for a moment in surprise, and she blushes. Seeing her reaction makes Subaru feel vividly that yes, I love her. He loved Rem more than anyone in the world. Was in love with her. He could scream it from the top of lungs. And in reality, he occasionally did. They're a pretty famous, fiery couple in the neighborhood.

Rem: “—Rigel, Spica.”

Subaru: “Hm?”

Subaru tilts his head. Rem looks up at him.

Rem: “They are both the names of stars. The names of stars from the place where you lived.”

Subaru: “Yup. My dad was fundamentally a crazy, unfortunate kind of man who'd spell «common sense» as «common cents», but I think him naming me Subaru was a good decision. I really like it, my name. Subaru's a star name too[18], see.”

An assignment in primary school required that the students investigate the origins of their names, which was how Subaru came to learn the history behind his own. Upon learning that he was named after a cluster of the stars that painted the night sky, he felt uncharacteristic glee.

[18] Subaru’s names comes from the Japanese name for the Pleiades, the Seven Sisters from Greek mythology, and a well-known star cluster in the constellation of Taurus (see here). The kanji (昴) also has the meaning of “to combine”.

Ever since, despite his tendency to drop hobbies quickly, perusal of manuals and indexes about stars alone remained a long, long-standing custom. He knew the names of most stars, and whenever he had the opportunity to name something, his selection would of course be,

Subaru: “A star name, basically. My online usernames were star names, and if I ever needed an alias or a fake name it'd probably be from a star. In some sense, aren't these sparkle names!?”

Rem: “I would not know in what sense you mean, but I think it's wonderful to take names from stars. When we have our third, let's do the same.”

Subaru: “Talking about a third right now's kinda pretty hasty. Like, Spica's still an infant.”

Rem: “I believe it would be fine to entrust her to Rigel once she's no longer breastfeeding. Why do you think I cautioned you that we couldn't have another child until Rigel was larger?”

Subaru: “It doesn't really stand out since I'm around, but you're pretty damn harsh on Rigel too, Rem!”

Subaru stands up, brushing off his behind. He turns his back toward Rem, revolves his hips,

Subaru: “Wanna put our shopping down, so say it's ‘bout time to go home. Outside we have the public eye bothering us and we can't get as lovey-dovey as we want.”

Rem: “Indeed. I am in the mood for full-strength full-power lovey-dovey for the first time in a while.”

Subaru: “C-can my libido really keep up with an Oni's stamina…?”

Subaru mutters to himself in terror, then holds his hand out to Rem, still seated on the bench. Rem leisurely takes his hand and pulls herself up, simultaneously pulling Subaru into her arms. Subaru takes his time relishing the warmth of hugging both Rem and Spica, then——

Subaru: “Right, off we go then. To our home.”

Rem: “Yes, darling.”

Subaru holds the shopping bag in one hand, Rem's hand in the other. Subaru walks a half-step ahead of Rem, who huddles up close behind him as she follows. They go over to their son, still frozen in the middle of the square.

Subaru: “Hey, my son presently enjoying the Sapporo Snow Festival. This game of Freeze Oni isn't going anywhere and watching it is the peak of boring, so me, mom, and your sister are going home. You go stay overnight at a friend's.”

Rigel: “Aren't you just plain goddamn throwing me out!? Or no, actually, let's talk about how my parents were there in the middle of a park in broad daylight, kissing.”

Subaru: “That's what you get, Mister Jealous. Too bad, Rigel. This Rem's for my use only.”

Rigel: “Shut up!!”

Rigel screams in anger, setting his sharp *sanpaku* gaze on the chortling Subaru. But Rigel sees that Subaru seems to enjoy all this, and gives a long, deep sigh. Rigel shakes his head.

Rigel: “Cool it, cool it, me. Don't get caught up in dad's pace. Cool it, cooool it. Right, cooled it. So, what were you talking about with mom?”

Subaru: “Hmm? Stuff like how your name's a star name. Actually, the first candidate for your name was Vega, but…”

Rigel: “That's badass! Why didn't you!?”

Subaru: “Uh, because it's badass? Felt like you'd be hard to deal with in your rebellious age, so we stopped on that one. I knew that age would pass eventually, but this father's heart of mine didn't wanna get bested by its son.”

Rigel: “That's how far you imagined the future of a just-born infant!?”

Rigel jumps up as he retorts to Subaru's clever joking. And——

???: “Ahh, Rigel moved! Rigel broke the rules of Freeze Oni!”

Rigel: “Ah!”

The Oni verbally assaults Rigel at this critical juncture. Rigel's throat freezes. Subaru gives Rigel's shoulders a slap.

Subaru: “Guys who break the rules of Freeze Oni play a penalty game. Oni's gonna get tickled 'till he can't laugh or cry anymore. —Good luck.”

Rigel: “Don't say something so stupid with such a serious expr… Hey, what, you guys! Sto— Wait! Don't take this man's words seriously! Wa, wuahaaaaaaaaaaa—!”

Children appear one-after-another to chase Rigel around. Rigel flees. But they capture him. They push him to the ground, his limbs restrained, and assault his body with their merciless fingers.

Subaru: “Farewell, my son. You were a good boy. Your father was the one at fault.”

Rem: “Rigel. Your mother and father have important things to discuss, so stay overnight at a friend's house for today. Also, you are forbidden to use your horn. So as not to tear your clothes.”

Rigel: “I, I'll remember this, you heartless parents—!!”

Spica sees her big bro getting tortured by scores of tickly hands and makes a happy-sounding noise. Looks like she's got a promising kind of personality to her. She'll probably become a bigger fixture in the Natsuki household than Rigel.

With his somewhat twisted exhibition of love for his darling Rigel conveyed, Subaru takes Rem's hand and starts walking. Towards the tranquility and happiness-filled abode in which his precious family live.

Rem: “Subaru-kun.”

Subaru: “Hm?”

Rem tugs on his hand, prompting Subaru to stop walking. He glances back.

The moment he does, a strong wind blows past the two. Subaru unwittingly closes his eyes, slowly opening them again once the wind's noise subsides. The wind caresses Rem's long, blue hair, which glimmers so much as if to melt into the sunlight. Rem, with her hair grown long. Subaru more or less knows in counter to whom she had done that.

When Subaru now thought of long-haired girls, the first image to arise in his mind was that of the most precious woman in the world, right here in front of him. Cradling their beloved daughter, her long blue

hair gently tousled in wind, Rem smiles at Subaru. For Subaru, that was the smile of his most beloved, which evoked adoration in him paralleled by no other.

Rem: “I, right now, am happier than any in the world.”

EX Chapter 2 – Oni and Happiness

Original translation by Trupin

Subaru: “N-no way… Is this for real…!?”

Amongst the crowded plaza, Subaru raises his voice in disbelief.

Eyes rife with excitement, he can’t help but make a scene.

In his line of sight was a single market stall. The brown-clothed shopkeeper handling it widens his eyes at Subaru’s sudden overreaction.

But Subaru, overwhelmed, doesn’t even notice the shocked shopkeeper. Lips trembling with excitement, he even neglects to wipe the sweat dripping from his forehead, causing Subaru to taste some oddly bitter saliva. Caught like a deer in headlights, Subaru’s feet stop squarely in front of the stall.

???: “Hey, what’s the matter, standing around like a mook all of a sudden? If we don’t get home soon, you’ll end up buying some useless crap again.”

The child walking ahead grimaces as he reluctantly stops for Subaru. Folding his arms behind his head, the boy’s sharp, dagger-like stare makes his displeasure seem very obvious.

And yet, while his leering suggests he’s out to kill, Subaru knew he wasn’t necessarily in a bad mood. After all, Subaru, with his own set of sharp eyes, was practically a veteran in accidentally scaring off strangers.

Subaru: “Live strong…”

???: “What the hell are you suddenly pitying me for! Ah, wait wait wait! I don’t wanna hear it! I know it’s just gonna depress me! Don’t tell me! I said don’t tell me, goddamnit!”

Subaru: “Seeing you all worked up like this, I’m really looking forward to the future. Really, you’re the best for bullying like this. You might seriously be a prodigy. Blessed by the very Gods with this divine gift.”

Rigel: “Like hell I want a gift like that! If the Gods have the time to be giving out useless crap, then at least give me something more useful damnit!”

The boy shouts back at Subaru’s taunts, his face twisted fiercely. The boy with short blue hair looks up to the sky as if grieving. Subaru merely nods at his usual overreaction, then proceeds to face the shopkeeper who had been watching their useless banter with a blank face.

Subaru: “Hey, how much are these?”

Shopkeeper: “H-huh?”

Subaru grins mischievously at the shopkeeper who was obviously taken aback. Subaru’s evil glare and exposed teeth puts a lump in the shopkeeper’s throat as he tries his best not to shriek. Although considering the exchange just then, his own reaction seemed rather trivial.

Subaru clears his throat and points at a particular item in the stall.

Subaru: “I want these. Give me some. I’ll take, say, three bags of them.”

Shopkeeper: “Y-yes! Thanks for ya patronage!”

Rigel: “Hey! Wait, wait a sec! What the heck are you buying all of a sudden… if we buy unnecessary stuff on the way home, we won’t just be wasting money, we’ll be punished within an inch of our lives!”

The second the shopkeeper accepts Subaru’s purchase, the boy’s face fills with fear. He pulls sheepishly on the hem of Subaru’s coat, practically begging him to reconsider. Taking hold of his hand, Subaru crouches to the boy’s eye level and reassures him,

Subaru: “Don’t worry, I’m not using any of our shopping money. This’ll come out of my own personal pocket money. It’s my hard-earned allowance that I’ve slowly, slowly been saving up. I’m sure you know how restrictive I am about using it.”

Rigel: “Uh huh, yeah, well… you don’t spend on alcohol or smokes, so that just leaves… I guess splurging it all on women?”

Subaru: “Hey, you’re definitely trying for a serious misunderstanding here, aren’t you. Who the hell did you get this awful personality from, huh? I’d really like to know—”

Rigel: “I’m pretty much certain it’s hereditary. Sadly.”

Subaru shakes his head with grief at the boy’s callous declaration. As he brandishes the Bird with his left hand, Subaru grabs the exposed finger by the joint, and the boy mutters a short “Ah” before wailing in pain.

As these two carry on, the shopkeeper dutifully fills the bags and gives a brief, nervous laugh.

Shopkeeper: “You boys sure are friendly. Whatcha, father and son?”

Subaru: “Hey, hey, after all that, you really think he’s my son… Man, merchants sure have some useless eyes. What do you think Rigel?”

Rigel: “After looking at our faces, it’d be harder not to figure it out!”

Still locked in a death grip, Rigel shouts rebelliously against the pain. Hearing that, Subaru admits defeat with a casual “Well, I guess that’s true”. At that point, the bagging was finished. The shopkeeper brings forward three small sacks while Subaru pulls out the pouch holding his allowance.

Subaru: “Alright, how many Yen will that be?”

Shopkeeper: “Dunno what Yen ya talkin’ ‘bout, all togetha’ it be sixteen coppers.”

Subaru: “Hm, then three silvers should do… I don’t need the change. Keep it.”

Shopkeeper: “Shoot! Generous ain’tcha! I’ll take ya up on it. Thanks.”

The shopkeeper makes big, dramatic gestures as he happily accepts the silvers. Watching the exchange and their carefree smiles, Rigel grimaces. Between Subaru’s Death Grip and the fact they were giving up the change, it was obvious that Rigel was upset.

Subaru: “Don’t worry, it’s all good. Today I got a hold of something really nostalgic. Just consider it a bonus for bringing me a little excitement. Besides, being too stingy will get you punished someday.”

Rigel: “…Excitement and nostalgia, what are you even talking about.”

Rising up, Rigel, while still clearly discontent, asks curiously about the purchase. In response, Subaru ruffles his short hair with full force. “Guaaaaah”, Rigel roars with further discontent.

Subaru: “It’s got a little something to do with the missus. It reminds me of an old custom from my hometown.”

Subaru replies, a mischievous smile emerging on his face.

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Rem: “—And so, you two somehow ended up spending how much?”

The blue-haired maiden sighs lightly at Subaru’s explanation. The second Subaru and Rigel had returned, she came out to welcome them both home. She apparently came from the kitchen, as her white apron had faintly wet splotches, showing where she had hurriedly dried her hands.

In his spare time, Subaru covered her apron with decorative patches and embroidery. Seeing the wet splotches all a careful distance from his handiwork, Subaru is struck with a surprise attack of embarrassing affection.

Rem: “Geez, what are you laughing about. Rem still hasn’t received a satisfying answer.”

Without really thinking, Subaru’s face loosens at the sight of her.

—Yet, the long, blue-haired Rem was thoroughly upset. Looking ready to dish out a frightening punishment, she lays her eyes on Rigel who stands beside Subaru.

Rem: “Rigel too. You know your father is erratic like this. If you don’t keep it together, what is Rem to do?”

Rigel: “Yes, I’m incredibly sorry for… Wait a sec, this is just weird. Even if I calm down and think carefully it’s still just plain weird!? Why is the child being scolded for his careless parent? Isn’t it supposed to be the other way around?”

Subaru: “Wait a minute, Rigel. Take a deeep breath, now exhaaale… Yeah like that, slooowly. Repeat that five more times, and make sure to close your eyes. One, two, three… yeah, there you go. Have you calmed down? Yup, you’re calm now. Alright so now that you’re calm, go ahead and apologize to your mother…”

Rigel: “I freakin’ meditated till I hit my zen state and reflected on my actions, but I still don’t see how I’ve done anything wrong!!”

Rather than calm down, Rigel goes red in the face with anger, raging toward his room. “Rigel!”, Rem calls out his name as he rushes past her, but he keeps moving. Or so it seems until he had run up to the end of the corridor.

Rigel: “…What?”

Rigel’s feet stop. Despite everything else, Rigel always listens to what his parents had to say to the very end. Rem, fully aware that Rigel would stop for him, carries on with her usual cool demeanor,

Rem: “Snacks have been prepared for you up in your room, so please have them after washing up. And don’t forget to let Spica know you are home.”

Rigel: “…Got it. Thanks for the food.”

As part of Subaru and Rem’s lessons on mannerisms, it was an ironclad law in the Natsuki household to say “Thanks for the food” before meals. No matter how frustrated or rebellious he was, Rigel would always remember this rule. Seeing the rare child in him, the couple looked toward him with fond eyes.

In an act of petty rebellion, however, Rigel still slams the door as he heads upstairs. Rem turns back toward Subaru.

Rem: “Do you, do you think we teased him a bit too much?”

Subaru: “Nah, in terms of mother-and-son conversations, that was par for the course. Even though he acts like that, at his core, he at least doesn’t hate it. That brat, he really is just like how I was as a kid. I can basically see right through him.”

Subaru affectionately pets Rem, comforting her as he removes his shoes and enters his home. He collects the day's purchases that Rigel had tossed haphazardly (though in reality, he let it prop up against the wall so it wouldn't fall over) and, practically by habit, Subaru walks side by side with Rem to the living room. As he props the three small bags onto the table alongside the groceries, Rem sneaks a peek at their contents.

Rem: "They really are… completely normal beans."

Subaru: "Yeah, that they are. What, did you think when I said beans, I was somehow hinting something naughtier and more erotic? Man, my dear wife might seem calm and level-headed, but she's actually pretty active and aggressive after all."

Rem: "Rem simply doesn't hesitate with giving and receiving love. Furthermore, when it comes to embarrassing displays of affection, Rem thinks Subaru-kun is just as guilty."

Subaru: "Oh? When has a *shy* and *naïve*-natured *nice guy* such as me ever done something so shameless?"

As Subaru poses flamboyantly, his chin on his fist and exposed white teeth flashing a smile, Rem briefly gazes at him with a charmed yet somewhat dumbfounded face. With her face still red with embarrassment, she averts her eyes,

Rem: "W-when we celebrated our anniversary, Subaru-kun bought a huge number of bouquets, and for Rem's birthday Subaru-kun and Rigel put up decorations all over the house, and when Spica was born, Subaru-kun convinced the townsfolk to hold an entire parade… Subaru-kun always spends way too much on other people."

Subaru: "I use my allowance to make my wife and family happy. Isn't that basically spending for myself? In the end, I'm spending my allowance for the sake of my own *happy life*, aren't I?"

Rem: "——!"

Subaru's earnest answer paints Rem's white face red with shyness and embarrassment. The sudden wave of emotions is too much for Rem, as happy tears faintly well. Raising her face, Rem quickly grabs Subaru's sleeve to mop her moist eyes.

Her sudden movements surprise Subaru. He lets out a small “Uwah!” as he loses his balance. Rem stands on her toes to support his weight, facing him as if there just to catch him.

Rem: “———”

Subaru: “…What’s up with you all of a sudden?”

And then for a brief moment, they let their lips meet, their tongues entangled in a sweet embrace before finally parting.

Subaru’s heart beats feverously after Rem’s sudden display of affection, but he somehow manages a facade of calmness on his face. After savoring his tongue with her soft, sweet lips, Rem, with a faintly sensual look on her face, answers,

Rem: “Subaru-kun… is the one at fault here. Saying such embarrassing things so suddenly like that.”

Subaru: “Did I really say something that embarrassing?”

Rem: “Subaru-kun doesn’t realize how much his words and actions affect Rem. Subaru-kun should be more careful. ——Rem doesn’t mind if it’s at home, but if Subaru-kun does this to Rem outside, Rem will be troubled.”

As a blushing Rem mutters back sheepishly, Subaru’s facade of calmness and his very last threads of reason seem ready to snap. Subaru anxiously sneaks a glance at his wife. He definitely wasn’t alone in his hot, unsteady breathing. As the atmosphere between the two lovers reaches a boiling point,

??: “————Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

Rigel: “Whoa!! Spica’s crying—! Someone! Anyone—! Heeeelp—!!”

The cries of their beloved son and daughter shook the house like a small tremor. Subaru and Rem look each other in the face, and then automatically dash off. Without even a word, the two take each other’s hands as they rush over to their crying baby daughter.

Rem: “By the way, what were those beans for? Subaru-kun said they were for a custom from his hometown…”

Subaru: “Oh yeah, did I not say?”

With Rem wrapped around his arm and her weight pleasantly pressing against him, Subaru casually answers with an innocent laugh,

Subaru: “—So back in my hometown, there was this tradition where we’d throw beans at bad Oni to get rid of them, you see.”

—At that moment, the bright smile Rem had shown Subaru seemed to freeze in shock.

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Subaru: “You got it all wrong! Completely, utterly wrong! That wasn’t my intention at all, I swear!”

Rem: “He’s horrible isn’t he, Spica. Your father, oh it must be that your father has come to hate your mother. If not, then why in the world would he buy beans for getting rid of Oni… It must be some roundabout way of telling Rem something. To Subaru-kun, Rem is just, Rem is just—”

Subaru: “There’s no way that’s true! If someone asked me to choose between Rem and Rigel, I wouldn’t hesitate for even a second to choose Rem!”

Rigel: “You shitty Dad!!”

The family of four makes a huge commotion, its members chasing after each other in circles around the room. In the lead, a sulking Rem cradles Spica in her arms and traces circles, cheeks puffed to their max. Second in line, Subaru desperately chases after her, apologizing profusely. And at the end of the pack, Rigel, who isn’t heartless enough to leave outright, yells after Subaru with his face twisted in anger.

Subaru: “Wait I get it, stop for a second! I’ll admit that what I just said wasn’t quite right. Okay so, if someone asked me to choose between Rem and Rigel, I’ll waver for a little while and then choose Rem!”

Rigel: “It’s not about how long you took to get to that decision goddamnit! Don’t get me involved in your lover’s quarrels!”

Rem: “Rigel, what kind of language are you using against your father. Also, if you keep angrily thrashing about, Spica will start crying again. Please keep quiet.”

Rigel: “I don’t want to hear that from the angriest person in this house right now!”

Rigel continues to roar rebelliously. At once, Subaru and Rem both put a finger to their lips and make a “Shhh” sound. Mortified, Rigel drops out of their absurd chase. The remaining two, Subaru and Rem, seem to chase after each other’s backs endlessly, circling around an agitated Rigel sitting in the middle.

Subaru: “«Chasing out Oni» was just an expression. Back in my hometown they were, let’s see… Oni were sort of like a collection of bad things. Things like disease and poverty and unpopularity were all bundled together and called Oni. The Bean-Tossing was a tradition for getting rid of those bad things, so it’s not like we were antagonizing actual Oni.”

Rem: “Horrible, just horrible. Subaru-kun, you even once said things like being «fanatical like an Oni» and «I love Oni» just to woo Rem… Seems that Subaru-kun fully forgot the feelings from that time.”

Subaru: “I’m telling you that’s not true!”

With that final retort, Subaru suddenly stops and turns around. Having not expected their circular chase to suddenly end, Rem falls into Subaru’s breast with a startled look. Bringing her face even further into his breast, Subaru uses both arms to grab her in a bear hug, preventing Rem’s escape.

Subaru: “Forgetting my feelings for you? That’s just plain impossible. Rem, you’re my number one favorite person in the entire world. Don’t tell me you forgot that?”

Feeling his passionate gaze on her, Rem’s eyes soon grow moist. It has been nine whole years since the first time the two had met. In that time, Rem became a mother, and the young weakness in her was shed away, revealing the fortitude of a strong woman.

And yet, when she falls into Subaru’s arms like this, Rem can’t help but revert to that time long ago when she was brimming with love and longing for him. Embarrassed with herself, Rem closes her eyes as a sweet sensation tickles her lips.

Rem: “Subaru-kun… —Oh yes, Rigel. Please take Spica for your mother.”

Rigel: “Err, uhh, yeah okay.”

Rem: “—Subaru-kun.”

Between Subaru and Rem, Spica had been experiencing a rather claustrophobic situation. Now with both hands free, Rem flings them towards Subaru’s chest and rubs her soft cheeks against him.

Rem: “In Subaru-kun’s eyes, is Rem still Subaru-kun’s number one favorite person?”

Subaru: “Is that even a question? I wouldn’t even be exaggerating if I said that half my entire existence was my love for Rem and the other half was my devotion for Rem.”

Rem: “Geez, Subaru-kun is always spouting such nonsense…”

Embracing each other, Subaru and Rem exchange their deepest feelings. Witnessing the scene of his parents making up, Rigel deftly plugs Spica’s ears,

Rigel: “----What a faaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaarce!!”

Rigel screams with the force and strength of his entire body.

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Rem: “Hmm, the Bean-tossing festival… Rem has never heard of such a tradition.”

Subaru: “Well I guess around here that’s gotta be the case. To be honest, I can’t seem to match the local calendar with my hometown’s, so I’m not actually sure when it even is around here…”

To properly celebrate the festival, they would have wanted to wait until February 3rd. But, while this world had the same four seasons, and a year lasted for 365 days all the same, the names of the months were so outrageously different that, even after nine whole years, Subaru still couldn’t figure out which was February.

All he knew was that since it was mildly cold out, it had to be somewhere between January and March.

Subaru: “Anyway, without further ado, let’s get the Bean-Tossing Festival started! Oh, but rather than chase away actual Oni, we’ll be chasing away all the bad stuff that gets referred to as Oni. Let’s do it for our family’s future happiness!”

Rem: “Well, Subaru-kun says that, but three out of our family are actual Oni…”

With the inkling of a bitter smile on her face, Rem protrudes a single white horn from her forehead, appealing for the Oni.

Just as Rem said, Rigel and Spica are indeed half-Oni. Having inherited Oni blood, horns have even sprouted on their foreheads. Rigel can consciously bring his out, while Spica’s tiny horn occasionally emerges from her particularly enthusiastic crying.

As the four sit in a circle for their family meeting, Subaru can feel a lack of enthusiasm in his Oni family members. Dismayed, he tries for a diversion—

Subaru: “Tei—!”

Rem: “Ahn!”

Subaru extends his hand toward Rem’s horn, gently rolling his fingers about the white protrusion. While the structure of the horn was quite rigid, its surface was surprisingly lukewarm and smooth to the touch. And above all else, apparently the horn was a sensitive spot of sorts. As Subaru’s fingers play with Rem’s horn,

Rem: “Ahn, mngh… Wa—, wait, Subaru-kun… The children, they’re still, they’re watching… Uu~”

Subaru: “You’d be a little more convincing if you weren’t snuggling up to me right now…”

As Rem lovingly brings her body towards Subaru’s, she feels more reminiscent of a small, affectionate animal than a sexy housewife. Subaru brings Rem to his lap as he continues petting her horn. Turning to Rigel,

Subaru: “Hey Rigel, what do you think?”

Rigel: “Aside from «You normies should just go explode»!? Well, I dunno but… Dad, I don’t really get why you wanna do this so badly.”

Rigel glares harshly at Subaru as he comforts Spica in his arms. To his son's criticism, Subaru gives an audible "Heh" and makes big, exaggerated nods.

Subaru: "The reason's very simple actually. This is really the only holiday about Oni I could think of. Also, I didn't mention it before, but there's a bit more to this festival. As we chase away the bad things we call Oni, we'll also be inviting happiness into our home. Basically, it's a sort of ritual where we do away with the bad while praying for a safe, happy future."

At that point, Rem had curled up into a ball on Subaru's lap. While softly stroking her small back, Subaru points his finger upward,

Subaru: "To Natsuki Subaru, family is the most important thing in the world. And the fact that we have ties with Oni isn't something I can or want to ignore… Besides, it's not like Oni have to always be antagonized."

Rigel: "…Meaning?"

Subaru: "Technically we're supposed to say «Out with the Oni! In with fortune!» while we throw beans around. But lately it's been popular to bring both Oni and fortune into the household."

Rigel: "That's just putting the cart before the horse! Bringing in good and bad things, what happened to the stuff from earlier?"

Subaru: "The way of thinking must have changed. And I don't think it's really a bad thing either."

Subaru explains as his fingers gently trail through Rem's long hair. Rem's back faintly quivers at the ticklish sensation, melting Subaru's gruff face into a fond smile.

Subaru: "Chasing them out because they're Oni is just unreasonable. After all, it might just be possible to befriend an Oni. And then do erotic things with an Oni, and then marry an Oni, and then build a loving family with an Oni. Yeah, somehow, I think they're all possible."

Rem: "————"

Subaru: “If the world changed its way of thinking like that, I think it’d be great. I’ve always really liked Oni, and now my wife is an Oni, so I’m in paradise! Maybe people have started accepting the good with the bad, and this change in the Oni’s treatment reflects that.”

Just as good and bad fluctuates in the world and day-to-day life, perhaps the way people feel about Oni is changing. Some even declare Oni as *moe* characters. Having experienced Oni firsthand, Subaru knows them better than anyone. In his mind, there isn’t even a shred of doubt. His wife is the cutest.

Subaru: “In with the Oni! In with fortune too!”

Rigel: “Say what?”

Subaru: “«In with the Oni! In with fortune too!», let’s bring them both in! To me, Oni and fortune are both signs of happiness. Being a bit greedy and going for both… How’s that sound?”

Seeing Subaru shrug casually, Rigel shapes his mouth to say something back, but eventually couldn’t find anything to say and slinks back down. As Subaru laughs at his son’s speechlessness, a smiling Rem, still nestled in his lap, giggles with a “fufufu~” sound.

Rem: “That peculiar way Subaru-kun thinks, Rem loves it. —Let’s do it, the Bean-Tossing Festival.”

Subaru: “Oh, finally up for it I see. Alright, let’s strike while the iron’s hot. Maybe after this we can share the Festival with everyone else too.”

Rem tilts her face toward Subaru as he lifts her up. She gives him a puzzled look, to which Subaru answers,

Subaru: “You know, like back when I showed the kids how to play freeze tag, and it spread like wildfire. Kararagi just feels kind of intimate and familiar. I always get the feeling it’s just like my old hometown.”

Rem: “Subaru-kun does say that occasionally. Is the feeling really that strong?”

Subaru: “I said it a few times without really thinking much of it, but the villages here also elect their leaders by popular vote… Or something like that. And there are even holidays just like April Fools and Christmas.”

Rem: “Because having many events and holidays keeps things exciting and interesting… Rem thinks.”

Subaru: “That’s definitely part of it, but I feel like there’s also more to it than that… Well, it doesn’t really matter right now.”

Kararagi was undeniably a wondrous place to live. Together with Rem, it has been nine years since they immigrated here. Indeed, without the flood of support and kindness from its inhabitants, Subaru and Rem could not possibly have done as well as they did.

Even now though, they still had their difficulties with the tricky Kararagi dialect, which was reminiscent of Kansai dialect.

Rigel: “Hey, I brought the beans. If we’re doing this, let’s get it over with already.”

Subaru: “Aha, finally coming around are you, my son. Even though you were being all negative earlier, deep inside you just couldn’t help getting all crazy and excited. Wow, Rigel’s suuuch a kiid~”

Rigel: “I’m still better than a stupid dad who worries his wife and kids to death!”

Rigel roughly forces a bag into both Subaru and Rem’s hands, keeping one for himself. Now facing each other, the two Oni look toward Subaru for what to do next. Nodding, he stuffs his hand into the bag and pulls out a single bean.

“It’s simple. Just chant «Out with the Oni! In with fortune!». Well, except we’ll be bringing the Oni in. Yeah, let’s do that instead.”

Rem: “Umm, so the beans… Does Rem throw them at the Oni?”

Rigel: “Umm, Mom? That violent look you’re giving your son is genuinely terrifying him!”

Subaru: “Well technically, but don’t do it so seriously, alright? Actually, please be gentle.”

After ensuring everything was set, the Bean-Tossing Festival begins. Facing off against each other, a bean in each hand,

Subaru: “Alright, take that! In with the Oni! In with fortune!”

Rem: “Umm… I—in with the Oni! In with fortune!”

Rigel: “In with the—, hey wait, Spica don’t cry! I said don’t cry! Hey, stop for a sec—, wai—, stop with the beans!”

Back and forth, the room is filled with such exchanges as beans fly chaotically all over.

Subaru bears a refreshing energy and gusto. Rem, who felt embarrassed at first, quickly casts off her shame and laughs innocently. Rigel, who for some reason bore the fatal handicap of handling Spica, fights against an almost desperate struggle.

Subaru: “Yeah! In with the Oni! In with fortune!”

With the Oni themselves as family, and a home filled to the brim with happiness, this is the way the Natsuki household celebrates the Bean-Tossing Festival. With a loving Oni wife by his side and yet more Oni as children, Subaru enjoys a truly new form of the Festival with his precious family.

This is just bliss, he thought.

Rogue beans scatter about the room, the corridor, all over the house. Just thinking about the ensuing cleanup would put a serious damper on the soul. ——But anyone moping about cleanup instead of enjoying this chaotic moment wouldn’t be quite right in the head.

They laugh, and laugh, and laugh some more as beans shoot across the room. For the sake of being together with the beloved Oni, and for the sake of everlasting happiness, they toss beans.

Rem: “Subaru-kun”

Before he realized it, Rem’s face had closed in on Subaru.

As Subaru drops his gaze towards her, Rem approaches him, her flushed face showing him a brimming smile.

Rem: “Today and every day from now on, will Subaru-kun please happily embrace both Rem and fortune?”

Saying that, Rem jumps into his open arms. Subaru hugs her in turn as he replies,

Subaru: “—I told you didn’t I? Building a future together, hand-in-hand with an Oni, that’s always, always been my life-long dream.”

With the happiness of this moment, as well as the promised happiness of tomorrow, unshakably rooted in his heart, Subaru whispers back his reply with a limitless passion.

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Rigel: "…Damn, he sure just does whatever he feels like."

Spica: "Adaaa—"

Rigel: "What, you're hungry? But no, you can't eat them. Dad said you're supposed to eat your age in beans. Spica's not even 1 yet, and you don't even have teeth to eat them with anyway. I'll eat them in your place."

Spica: "Udaaa—"

Rigel: "Don't look so sour… You know, when you make that face, you look just like how Mom does when she's sulking to Dad. Damn, once Spica starts walking around and stuff, I'm not looking forward to my place in the family hierarchy."

Spica: "Au, baa—?"

Rigel: "Go back inside? Don't talk crazy, we can't go back right now. All that stuff about Bean-Tossing and the Festival, and after trying to look cool in front of Mom, they're definitely still flirting around in there. «Out with the Oni», my ass. I bet he just wanted me out so he could flirt to his heart's content."

Spica: "Aau! Aaah, adaaa—!"

Rigel: "What, are you backing him up too? First with Mom, now with Spica, does Dad emit some sort of Oni-attracting pheromone or something? I don't believe this shit."

Spica: "Aah—? Ada, adauuu—. Uuu—"

Rigel: "Huh? Why are you petting my cheek like you're trying to comfort me? No, you got it all wrong, it's not like I like Dad or anything. Even among the Oni, even among the outsiders of the Oni, I'm still an

outsider. It wouldn't phase me even if all the Oni in the world fell for him. I'd still be a member of the Anti-Shitty Dad faction."

Spica: "Aahh— buaaa—"

Rigel: "Agh, damn! Screw this! C'mon, we're going Spica. I figure if we take a short walk around the neighborhood, even those two will eventually finish their flirting. And I'm saying this now, but it's not like I'm doing this to give them some time for themselves… I told you that's not it!"

Spica: "Aadaa! Aadaa!"

Rigel: "Ahhh, damnit."

Rigel: "——The weather sure is nice today."

EX Chapter 3 – Fortune Roll Rhapsody

Original translation by Trupin

When Rigel sees what awaits him in the living room, he suddenly wants nothing more than to turn and run. Deep in his soul, there burns an intense desire to abandon everything and run home. Unfortunately, this is his home. There is simply no running from his cruel destiny.

Subaru: “Fugafuga?”

Rigel: “————”

Subaru: “Fugafugafuu—ga, fuu—gafuga”

Rigel: “Shut it with your fugafuga’s! What crazy cult ritual is it this time! Do you ever think how your son feels? When he comes home, and his Dad is running around fugafuga-ing with a pole of all things stuffed in his mouth!?”

As Subaru stands and ambles toward Rigel, mouth still stuffed, Rigel rants, spit flying everywhere. As the target of his son’s rebellious tantrum, Subaru slinks his shoulders.

Subaru: “Fugafuga…”

Rigel: “Would you quit it with the fugafuga’s already!”

Subaru: “Fugafu… Geez, what a brat. You know, if you’re always this uptight, you’ll eventually regret it. Kids need to play while they’re young. Once you’re an adult, you’ll worry about people’s opinions and start restraining yourself….”

Rigel: “When you say that, it sounds completely unconvincing! How old are you! How much longer are you gonna keep playing! When will you gain this so-called ability to worry about people’s opinions!”

Despite approaching his thirties, Natsuki Subaru doesn’t show any sign of slowing down. He even plays with kids Rigel’s age, causing the comparatively mature Rigel intense embarrassment. This boy wishes

more than anything for his father to act his age. Then again, if he actually did, Rigel would worry that his father was gravely ill.

Rigel: “So, what sort of weird festival did you come up with this time?”

Subaru: “Hold on, my son. Are you actually an Esper? So, you’ve somehow gained the ability to read my mind. If not, then how could you ever see my actions as part of a festival…”

Rigel: “It’s more like I’m praying it’s for a festival. My sanity couldn’t take it if you casually welcomed me home with a thick pole shoved in your mouth for no reason. Just tell me what’s all this about…”

Rife with complaints, Rigel picks up the mysterious object Subaru was carrying in his mouth. He finds it surprisingly soft and flexible. Rigel quickly uncovers its identity.

Rigel: “…A sushi roll?”

Subaru: “Yup, a sushi roll. You look like you want one. I got it, if you want it so badly, go ahead and chow down. Luckily, that’s just one of the prototypes. I’ve already set aside the rolls for the main event, so you can have that one as a snack.”

Rigel: “Even if I was hungry, I’m not gonna eat something that spent any time in my Dad’s mouth… Maybe if it was Mom or Spica.”

Subaru: “Hey, isn’t eight years old a bit early to hate on your old man this hard? At your age, even I respected my Dad… Wait, did I? Did I?”

Rigel: “How would I even know! Anyway, what’s this festival already! And what main event!”

Hounded by an impatient Rigel, Subaru shrugs his shoulders and laughs. He points out a plate on the living room table with homemade sushi rolls stacked neatly on top.

Subaru: “Isn’t it obvious? After the Bean-Tossing Festival,——*Si*, it’s the Ehomaki Challenge!”

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Rigel: “Ehomaki, is it? What kind of festival would that be?”

Rem, after coming home from shopping, listens to Subaru’s explanation. She tilts her head curiously as she cradles a drowsy Spica in her arms. As Rem speaks, Spica’s small hands lightly grasp at the fair maiden’s long blue hair.

With all members accounted for, the Natsuki household sits in the living room, surrounding the plate of rolls.

Subaru: “Remember the Bean-Tossing Festival? By tossing beans, we took in happiness while getting rid of misfortune.”

Rem: “Of course. Rem thought Subaru-kun was trying to throw her away… Rem’s maiden heart was deeply, strongly afflicted. This incredible sadness, it will not heal easily. Please take Rem on a date.”

With upturned eyes, Rem pretends to sulk as Subaru smiles wryly. His cute wife’s request. As her husband, accepting is both his natural-born duty and his happiest privilege.

Subaru: “It’ll be my pleasure. Let’s see, I’m free tomorrow, so let’s do it then. Speaking of which, they just finished remodeling the spirit shrine at the edge of town. It’s really something now.”

Rem: “Yes. And after Subaru-kun started embossing couples’ vows onto its walls, visitors started flocking to the shrine from all over. With her husband’s work going so well, Rem can hold her head high.”

Subaru: “We’re married already, but how about we go add our vows too. It’ll be just the two of us. Ah, don’t worry, Spica’ll be fine. She’s got her siscon-afflicted brother to watch over her.”

Rem: “Subaru-kun… Rem is so happy. Rem will look forward to tomorrow’s date.”

Rigel: “Can we get back to the main topic already!?”

As his parents plan out their date, an impatient Rigel finally explodes. But despite his sudden outburst, Subaru and Rem, used to his tantrums, hardly react at all. Even Spica seems unfazed, her sleepy face unchanging. Rigel’s yells echo pointlessly throughout the house.

Subaru: “Hey Rigel, don’t shout so suddenly like that. You know, if you’re too hot-blooded while you’re young, once you’re older, the veins in your head might explode from stress.”

Rigel: “Shaddup! They’ll explode even if I hold it in! So I might as well shout!”

Rem: “Rigel, what sort of language are you using against your father. Your mother hopes you don’t speak like this outside as well. If Rigel always act so angry, everyone from friends to strangers will avoid you. You need to become a more wonderful person like your father. Oh, but Rigel could never possibly hope to win against Subaru-kun. Try not to be too depressed about it.”

Rigel: “Your comforting is depressing me! What did I ever do to you!”

Bullied by his own parents, Rigel throws himself at the floor and collapses into a heap. Subaru and Rem giggle as Rigel falls into complete sulking mode. As Rem readjusts a sleeping Spica in her arms, Subaru clears his throat to resume—

Subaru: “Well anyway, with it being Rigel’s dying wish and all, let’s get back to the Ehomaki. For the Bean-Tossing Festival, we invited happiness and chased out misfortune. This Ehomaki Challenge and the Bean-Tossing Festival are both part of a holiday called *Setsubun*[19]. The Ehomaki Challenge is a more minor event though.”

Rem: “A different event from the same holiday?”

Subaru: “Exactly. Back home, the East and West did things totally differently, you see. The Bean-Tossing Festival and the Ehomaki Challenge were part of those differences. The East celebrated the Bean-Tossing Festival while the West did the Ehomaki Challenge. But there’s no such thing as too much of a good thing, so I thought we’d try both.”

Rem: “Yes, as expected of Subaru-kun. The way Subaru-kun unhesitantly takes the best of everything is wonderful as well.”

Rem praises Subaru, clapping softly to avoid waking Spica. Then, putting a finger to her cheek as she tilts her head to the side,

[19] *Setsubun* is the day before the beginning of spring in the old Japanese calendar (see here). Details on both the Bean-Tossing and Ehomaki tradition can also be found in that link.

Rem: “So if we needed beans for the Bean-Tossing Festival, the Ehomaki Challenge uses these sushi rolls?”

Subaru: “Well, we actually could’ve used a few more things for the Bean-Tossing Festival. I already got that shop to stock more beans for next year. But I also want to make some more elaborate preparations like getting an Oni mask and Oni pants for me to wear.”

When it came to enjoying festivals to their fullest, Natsuki Subaru’s energy and dynamism knew no limits. A spellbound Rem gazes fondly as her husband exhibits his needlessly hot passion. After briefly letting his thoughts run wild, he shakes his head.

Subaru: “Nononono. We’re talking about Ehomaki right now. Just as Rem says, instead of beans, we have these sushi rolls. Where I call from, this kind of sushi roll is called an Ehomaki. Rem, just from looking, what do you notice?”

Rem: “Hm, well. It’s very long and thick and black.”

Subaru: “One more time please.”

Rem: “——? It seems to be very long and thick and black.”

Subaru: “My cute, honest wife can sometimes be unknowingly erotic…”

Deeply moved, Subaru struggles to keep a straight face as Rem returns an innocent, puzzled look.

Seeing as this wasn’t particularly wholesome education, Subaru puts on a serious face and gets back to the sushi rolls.

Subaru: “These thick sushi rolls are called Taimaki. Unfortunately, Kararagi doesn’t have any customs about Ehomaki, so I made them myself. They’re actually pretty easy.”

Rem: “This faintly sour scent, this is vinegie, yes?”

Subaru: “Vinegared rice. It’s definitely the ideal rice for sushi. Next time, we should try it with some raw fish. Putting that aside for now, the recipe’s really simple. You just take dried seaweed and vinegared rice and wrap seven different fillings inside. That’s it!”

Rem: “Is there any special meaning attached to having seven fillings?”

Peering at the Ehomaki’s rainbow-colored fillings, Rem asks a natural question.

Subaru: “Glad you noticed, as expected of my wife! Yeah, that’s an important point. Ehomaki are meant to be a festive food. Back home, we held festivals every year to celebrate the Seven Deities of Fortune, you see.”

Rem: “My, such festive deities.”

Subaru: “Yeah, they’re a real festive bunch. The seven different fillings represent the Seven Deities, and when we wrap them into Ehomaki, it’s like we’re capturing their luck. A food filled to the brim with good luck. That’s Ehomaki!”

As Subaru explains this last point, his foot dramatically planted on the table, Rem once again claps modestly. Finished listening, Rigel raises his face. With delinquent's eyes that rival Subaru’s in sharpness, Rigel glares at his festive parents.

Rigel: “So after all that fanfare, we’re just gonna eat sushi rolls? I don’t see what the big deal is…”

Subaru: “Foolishly foolish fool!”

Rigel: “Yeow! How’s a finger-flick so strong!?”

After chastising his cheeky son with a whip-like finger flick to the forehead, Subaru grabs the agony-stricken Rigel and forcibly gives him a shoulder ride.

Rigel: “Why are you suddenly carrying me!?”

Subaru: “Just felt like it, really. Anyway, I’ll admit that compared to the Bean-Tossing Festival, the Ehomaki Challenge seems a bit plain. But actually, I neglected to mention a few more points. Forgive me my son.”

Rigel: “Don’t bow while I’m on your shoulders! Cut it out! I’m falling!”

With the flailing Rigel's very life at his mercy, Subaru makes purposefully dizzying laps around the dining table. As father and son engage in such lighthearted roughhousing, Rem looks on with an affectionate, motherly gaze.

Rem: "So then, what else is left to explain, Subaru-kun?"

Subaru: "Well first of all, what do you think the «Eho» in Ehomaki means? I haven't explained that yet, afterall. The way it's written, «Eho« means «the compass of fortune». Every year, we have a lucky direction, like north or south. So, they're called Ehomaki because we face that direction while we eat them."

Rem: "Rem sees now. A «compass of fortune», what a fun idea."

Subaru: "Also, you can't speak while you eat an Ehomaki. It's just a saying though, so don't split hairs over it. They also say you should eat it with a smile but… actually, that sounds like a good one. They do say «fortune comes to those who smile». Besides, you naturally smile while eating something good."

As Subaru grins widely at his own explanation, Rem cheerfully adds,

Rem: "When Subaru-kun eats the food Rem makes, Subaru-kun always has such a big smile."

Subaru: "Delicious food and a cute wife. Spending time at home with my beloved family, how could I not smile? It's like I'm hogging the entire world's happiness for myself."

Rem: "With Rem, it would be two people hogging… Actually, the whole family is hogging the world's happiness."

Subaru: "Rem…"

Rem: "Subaru-kun…"

Rigel: "Don't flirt around with people riding on your head! Mom too! Restrain yourself a little while holding Spica!"

As Subaru and Rem flirt, totally oblivious of their children, Rigel's impatience boils over and explodes.

In the Natsuki household, conversations tend to sidetrack and go nowhere fast. Almost like another festival, it's a regular event that simply can't be helped.

After Subaru finally puts Rigel down, Rem hands Spica over to her son. An astonished Rigel watches as his parents lovingly take a seat beside each other. Tightly holding Subaru's hand, Rem lets her small body rest against his shoulder.

Rem: "By the way, if the Ehomaki… If it's the «compass of fortune», which direction should it point in this year? Does Subaru-kun know?"

Subaru: "Nah, I honestly have no clue. Even now, I wonder how they figured it out every year. It might've had something to do with Feng Shui, but that's way beyond what I know."

Leveraging his knowledge from before being summoned, Subaru makes a living as a successful producer of sorts. Though he can take a smattering of knowledge and somehow stretch it thin, he can't do anything when completely clueless.

While Subaru prepared the Ehomaki successfully, the all-important "lucky direction" eludes him. Tilting his head in puzzlement, his eyes wander toward Rigel and Spica. Suddenly, an idea forms in Subaru's head, and he claps his hands together.

Subaru: "I got it. This year's lucky direction, we'll let Spica decide it."

Rigel: "Huh? Let Spica decide? Think a little before you speak. Spica's still small and cute, and you already want to corrupt her? God, it's just too pitiful. Hey you, are you going to take responsibility for Spica's tarnished future, huh!?"

Subaru: "Man, whenever the conversation turns to Spica, you act like the world's most obnoxious delinquent."

With Rigel violently opposing his father's idea, Subaru thinks of how to pacify him.

Subaru: "Listen. What would you say is the clearest symbol of happiness in our home? Of course, Rem's very existence is happiness itself, and your natural-born talent as a verbal punching bag is like a blessing granted to me by God, a fateful meeting of fortune and destiny…"

Rigel: “Waitwaitwaitwait, I just heard something I can’t ignore, hey!”

Rem: “Rigel, please calm down. Just as Rem is a symbol of happiness to Subaru-kun, Subaru-kun is a symbol of happiness to Rem. Your mother doesn’t have any sort of misunderstanding about that, so please don’t worry.”

Rigel: “Anyone with eyes would know not to worry over that!”

Rigel plugs Spica’s ears as he shouts at his parents, his so-called secret technique. Born and raised in the Natsuki household, in Rigel’s short lifetime of a mere eight years, much like a one-trick pony, he developed potential in but a single talent.

——Yes, his natural “straight man” act and his prodigious “victim” character.

Subaru: “Doesn’t that make him a two-trick pony?”

Rigel: “What kind of monologue are you having! Get back to the topic!!”

Subaru: “Well what I mean is, Spica is the clearest symbol of happiness we have. That’s why, whichever direction Spica chooses will definitely be lucky. How’s that?”

Rigel: “Shit, compared to Dad’s usual nonsense, that’s a pretty flawless, watertight argument… Tch!”

Subaru: “Whenever Spica gets involved, you completely lose your sense of judgement, don’t you…”

Frustrated, Rigel ruffles his short blue hair. But with his eventual approval, the specifics of the Ehomaki Challenge were finalized. Since Subaru prepared the sushi rolls in advance, the last task was to divine the lucky direction.

Rem: “Having Spica decide seems fine, but how should we go about it? Spica probably won’t understand anything we tell her.”

Subaru: “Hmm, let’s see… How about we let Spica sleep on the table, and when she wakes up, we’ll go with the first direction she looks.”

Rem: “When she wakes up…”

Rigel: “First direction she looks…”

Considering Subaru’s impassioned speech from before, it was a rather casual way of deciding. Rem and Rigel look at each other, then down at Spica. They seem to be mulling over something.

Rem: “In other words, we decide based on… who Spica loves the most… Is what Subaru-kun means, yes?”

Subaru: “…I—I guess?”

Rem’s overthinking startles Subaru, but he realizes she’s not exactly wrong. The first person Spica lays eyes on.

—In other words, the person this defenseless baby depends on most.

Unexpectedly, the lucky direction will be decided in a battle for Spica’s love!

Subaru: “Well, unfortunately for you two, it’s obviously going to be me. I’m the breadwinner of this household, after all. Spica must realize it’s thanks to her amazing Dad that she enjoys the necessities of life. Even though she’s still a baby, I’m sure this clever child is already dreaming of becoming my wife someday.”

Rem: “Please wait a moment. While Rem does indeed plan to teach Spica about Subaru-kun’s greatness and splendidness, this and that are two different matters. Afterall, from whom does Spica receive her milk, and in whose breasts does she so peacefully rest? This child surely knows. Rem is clearly the winner here.”

Rigel: “You two just butt out. I’m obviously the one Spica relies on the most. In this weird, unreasonable household, I’ve abandoned anything and everything to protect her. Spica, loves, me, most, definitely.”

A three-way standoff, with no one yielding Spica’s love.

They stare each other down fiercely, daggers in their eyes as they compete for her. The peaceful mood from before feels like a lie.

Rem, Rigel and Subaru: “——Ooh—”

As sparks fly, Spica rouses in Rigel's arms. With the baby about to wake up at any second, the trio look each other in the eyes,

Subaru: "Ehomaki moved!"

Rem: "Pillow set!"

Rigel: "Spica set!"

Subaru takes the Ehomaki off the table, Rem places a cushion onto it, and Rigel plops Spica onto the cushion. From there, the three nod, splitting off in different directions. On top of the cushion, Spica rouses from her slumber, her head shaking gently, her small hands rubbing at her eyes. So cute. Like an angel.

Spica: "——"

Holding their breath, they wait to see who Spica turns to. Eventually, her eyes pop open, and her light blue eyes dart around the room.

Spica: "Aah——"

Rigel: "Oh yeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!"

Seeing Spica extend her hand out to him, a victorious Rigel falls to his knees in dramatic cheer.

The chosen Rigel yells with pure joy. Meanwhile, the forgotten Subaru and Rem fail to hide their disappointment as they snuggle up to each other,

Subaru: "Well, when you think about it, the person who rests most peacefully in your breasts is me. I guess this match was over before it started."

Rem: "Even if Spica wanted to be Subaru-kun's wife, that spot is already Rem's territory, and she will never budge an inch from it. It was an expected result."

Rigel: "Would you guys just celebrate my victory! Don't get all mushy in front of your damn kids!"

Rigel scolds his parents as Spica mischievously pulls on his face. Seeing his usual attitude, his parents burst into laughter. Eventually, Subaru takes note of where Rigel stood,

Subaru: “Looks like Rigel was in front of the entranceway. Alright, that’s our lucky direction. Everyone, take your Ehomaki and let’s go.”

Rem: “Yes, Subaru-kun. But which Ehomaki is Rem’s? Did Subaru-kun prepare one especially for her?”

Subaru: “This one’s yours, Rem. I made it with a sakura filling that forms a heart shape when it’s rolled up. I went through a lot to pull it off, and I had to eat the failures, so I’m already stuffed.”

Subaru’s belly appears noticeably rounder than usual. Rem extends her hand toward it and rubs it lovingly.

Rem: “Subaru-kun looks so wonderful when he does his best for Rem.”

Rigel: “Alright, alright, to the entranceway damnit, the entranceway. As for mine, I’ll just take whatever. Also, what are we doing about Spica’s? She barely even has her baby teeth. It’ll be no joke if she chokes on the seaweed or something. Did you even think about that?”

Rigel searches for a roll that the young Spica could possibly eat. However, the overprotective brother fails to find anything. To Subaru as well, being unable to prepare anything for her was a major regret.

Subaru: “I tried a lot of things like melting the seaweed, but the tests didn’t go too well. It’s unfortunate, but Rigel will just have to eat twice as much to satisfy the Seven Deities.”

Rigel: “How the hell am I supposed to eat two of these gigantic things. You’re expecting way too much from me.”

Subaru: “Oh, I see. Yeah, I get it now. I guess even with Spica’s happiness on the line, you’re the kind of brother who can’t even make the effort to push his stomach a tiny little bit. That’s okay, I’ll do my best. You just keep deceiving Spica with your shallow, superficial love….”

Rigel: “I get it! I’ll eat them both! No, please let me eat them both!”

Subaru: “Hey, don’t pop out your horn over something like this…”

After taunting him with Spica, a short horn protrudes from Rigel's forehead. He quickly grabs two Ehomaki and makes for the entranceway. Subaru and Rem laugh heartily as they follow after him.

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Subaru: "――――――"

Rem: "――――――"

Rigel: "――――――"

Spica: "Aahh――"

Silence dominates the entranceway. While many rules about Ehomaki exist, the most popular, widespread rule is undeniably "one may not speak while eating Ehomaki".

Since Ehomaki is eaten to take in fortune, opening your mouth would be like letting that fortune escape――Is probably the case, Subaru decides.

To that end, the trio sit in their entranceway, nomming at their Ehomaki while staring blankly at the front door. Determined to finish their rolls, they eat in complete silence.

???: "Knock knock. Pardon Natsuki-san, I'm comin' in."

While they sit in the entranceway, their front door suddenly opens.

Perhaps due to old Kararagi customs, since long ago, this rural town had a culture of being shockingly laidback and neighborly.

Almost no one locks their doors, and people would suddenly come inside to greet each other like it was perfectly natural. The voice from just now belongs to a middle-aged woman, one of their many neighbors.

???: “We’re passin’ around this week’s neighborhood notice. Was hopin’ you could take a look…”

—says the woman, flyers in hand. But upon seeing the entire household sitting in their entranceway, nibbling at Taimaki while silently staring at her, the woman’s eyes grow wide like saucers. But, quickly nodding, she leaves the flyers on their shoe cabinet.

Woman: “Well, looks like ya’ll are busy, so maybe later. Take a look and pass it on will ya? Oh my—, Spica’s such a cutie today.”

Smiling at a waving Spica, the woman leaves with a brief “toodle-oo”. They wordlessly see her off with nods and hand waves. Once gone, the four return to sitting in complete silence——

Rigel: “What the hell was that scene!!”

Unable to bear it any longer, Rigel suddenly jolts up, shouting against the absurdity.

Rigel: “Why did our neighbor accept it like it was totally natural! Do the neighbors just assume we’re a bunch of nutcases! I feel like an idiot for freaking out over Dad’s shenanigans! Am I the weird one here!?”

Subaru: “Fuga. Calm down Rigel. I know how you’re feeling right now. Sometimes, when something feels off, you wonder if the problem is with you or the world itself. But you know, it’s almost always the case that you left home with right shoe on left foot or something…”

Rigel: “No! You’re wrong! I’m not a nutcase! It’s the world that’s gone mad!”

As Rigel raves on, a giggling Spica excitedly claps her hands together. To Spica, the sight of her brother writhing in frustration is her greatest plaything. To already recognize the best way to enjoy Rigel at such a young age, this girl’s future feels extraordinarily bright.

Subaru: “Also, because you started talking, I failed the Ehomaki Challenge too. Damn, I really want to succeed at least once. There’s plenty of rolls left, but at this rate.”

Rigel: “That’s weird too! You said I only had to eat two of them, but now you and I must finish off them all off ourselves? What about Mom?”

Subaru: “You idiot, we can’t let Rem force herself like that. What are you going to do if these carb-heavy bombs of rice and sugar destroy Rem’s figure!? Even after having two kids, the fact that she’s as slim as ever is a bonafide miracle. Compared to her, our weights are just mere numbers.”

Rem: “Nomnom… Rem is finished. Also, if Subaru-kun says it like that, Rem will get shy.”

With a flushed, embarrassed-looking face, Rem declares her completion. With her serious, goal-oriented attitude, Rem’s chances of clearing the Ehomaki Challenge were exceedingly high. On the other hand, with their whimsical, impatient natures, Subaru and Rigel fail over and over.

Finally, one massive roll and one smaller roll remain.

Subaru: “These Ehomaki are our very last chance. After all that squabbling and prep work, we can’t let it all go to waste. Let’s do our best, Rigel.”

Rigel: “Urp… I’m almost at my limit. I’ll remember this, shitty Dad… Ugh.”

Subaru: “Good luck.”

Subaru gives a thumbs up as Rigel faces off against the smaller Ehomaki. Rem, having finished long ago, snuggles up to Subaru,

Rem: “By the way, this event doesn’t seem to involve Oni. Rem has many objections to the Oni abuse in the Bean-Tossing Festival, but not involving them feels somewhat lonely.”

Subaru: “Hmm, they don’t have to be completely uninvolved, do they? The seven fillings represent the Seven Deities, but you could also say they’re like sealed Oni. Maybe the red filling could be the Red Oni, and the blue filling could be the Blue Oni.”

Rem: “Do the Ehomaki even have a blue filling…?”

Subaru: “Well, you know, sometimes vegetables are called blue-green and… is that too much of a stretch?”

Hearing about the Blue Oni and thinking it was her, Rem wears a somewhat dissatisfied face. Then again, with nothing blue to use as filling, it simply couldn’t be helped. Smiling wryly at Rem’s scornful eyes, Subaru spins the last Ehomaki in his hands.

Subaru: “But if we think of the fillings as Oni instead of deities, it’d be like exterminating the Oni by eating them. I guess even here, the Oni get antagonized.”

Rem: “Does Subaru-kun’s hometown hold some sort of grudge against Oni?”

Subaru: “Well a bunch of stories talk about rampaging Oni and such. But it’s not like I feel that way. The story about the Red and Blue Oni is my all-time favorite. And of course, my wife is an Oni too. So it’s the same deal as the Bean-Tossing Festival.”

Rem: “The same deal?”

Rem asks with a curious look on her face.

“Yeah, the same deal. For me, «eating the Oni» is the same as taking in happiness. If anything, they’d become my flesh and blood, in a sort of «I won’t let you go» way.”

Rem: “Will Rem be caught?”

Subaru: “I’ll catch you for sure.”

While Rem’s face beams with happiness, Subaru’s looks explicitly lewd. To their side, Rigel ignores them as he finishes his Ehomaki in silence.

Rigel: “Alright, I ate it! I ate it all, damnit! Hey, did you guys see that?”

Rem: “Deepest apologies.”

Rigel: “Don’t apologize so honestly! Damnit, I already knew, I was watching while I ate!”

Sulking, Rigel picks up Spica and rubs cheeks with her. Seeing her brother so heartbroken, Spica pats his back as if comforting him.

Subaru: “Well then, for the finale, the family head will show what he’s got.”

Rem: “Yes. Rem looks forward to seeing Subaru-kun’s cool side.”

With Rem cheering him on, Subaru challenges the final sushi roll, a true monstrosity,——Ehomaki Grande!

Subaru had slapped together all the remaining ingredients into this last roll. While it technically still had seven different fillings, frankly speaking, it was less an Ehomaki and more like a biological weapon.

Subaru: “No—mm—”

Practically unhinging his jaw, Subaru bites into the Ehomaki, taking the first blow in their epic battle.

Having already failed numerous times, Subaru’s stomach is dangerously close to its limit. It could burst apart at any moment, a truly cruel and miserable death. Even then, as a man, as a father, there comes a time when one must fight.

Rem: “Nom—”

Subaru: “————!?”

While Subaru takes on the battle of his life, Rem circles around to assist him.

Smiling slightly, she noms at the opposite side of the Ehomaki. In accordance with the rules, Subaru has no way to stop her. Rem had anticipated this, intent on waging war against the final Ehomaki right alongside him.

With his wife’s support, Subaru felt the strength of ten thousand allies pushing him on. But even while borrowing Rem’s power, as a man, Subaru has to show her his own strength. He pushes himself to lighten her burden by eating even just a tiny bit more.

As Subaru and Rem press on, the Ehomaki between them grows shorter and shorter. Before long, their faces close in, then finally their lips——

Rigel: “Hold it! Bammmm!!”

At the very last second, Rigel splits the sushi roll with a karate chop.

With his horn protruding, Oni powers massively amplify the sharpness of Rigel’s chop. It wields more than enough strength to cleanly cut into the Ehomaki’s rice and seaweed. With the sushi roll suddenly split in two, Subaru and Rem part their startled faces. Quickly finishing off their ends of the roll, they confront their son.

Subaru: “Hey, Rigel! We were about to have a beautiful finale right there!”

Rem: “That’s right, Rigel. Subaru-kun and Rem were working on a very important collaborative effort. Does Rigel have some sort of complaint about his mother and father getting along?”

Rigel: “Hell yeah I do! You’re always «getting along» waay more than necessary! And I’m always trying to tell you too! Get across, my feelings!”

Subaru: “Sorry, deflected!”

Rigel: “Don’t deflect them!”

As if swatting away Rigel’s projected thoughts, Subaru cheekily slaps at the air. On the other hand, an indignant Rem presses rather forcefully against Rigel’s horn. With a pitiful yelp, he collapses in a heap.

Rem: “Karate chopping food, Rem doesn’t remember raising such a bad child. And to not only interrupt, but to interrupt at the last second. Rem hardly thinks this is sufficient punishment.”

Subaru: “I wonder if all the demi-humans have weak points like this. Spica, if your horn grows in, you can’t let anyone but your precious person handle it, alright?”

Retrieving Spica from a collapsed Rigel, Subaru lectures her in his arms. Spica blinks at his words and rubs her forehead. As if to say that even if they did grow, her family would still love her.

Subaru: “As expected of Spica, our family’s greatest treasure. With a single move, she puts us all in bliss.”

Oddly enough, her simplest actions feel even more effective than the Ehomaki. Subaru kisses Spica’s forehead, then hands her off to Rem. He then slings the agony-stricken Rigel over his shoulder and proceeds to spank him.

Subaru: “So, after we clean the kitchen, how about we go back to talking about our date?”

Rem: “Rem agrees. Also, while there’s still quite some time left, what would Subaru-kun like for dinner?”

Subaru: “I’ve had my fill. I’m totally stuffed.”

With a strained laugh, Subaru heads to the living room. Rem walks alongside him with a heartfelt smile.

——On this day as well, they enjoy a rather uniquely-shaped happiness.

Today is *Setsubun*.

A sightly special day that comes every year, once a year.

EX Chapter 4 – Natsuki Rigel

Original translation by Trupin[20]

Subaru: “Rem’s birthday and *Setsubun* are here once more! By our powers combined, let’s make these days amazing!”

On February 2nd (self-decided), the first signs of a storm brew in the Natsuki household. And as usual, the one brewing it is the head of the household, Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: “We’ll do it as a family! You’ll help me won’t you, Rigel!”

Subaru gives a thumbs up, flashing a blindingly bright smile.

The young boy sighs deeply at his father’s pose, an unchildlike sternness on his face. Bearing his mother’s beautiful blue hair and his father’s menacing eyes, the nine-year-old Natsuki Rigel laments his very existence.

As he tries focusing on homework, Subaru anxiously shifts about, awaiting his reply,

Rigel: “Dad’s lost it again…”

Subaru: “That’s way too harsh! You skipped past «Huh, that’s kinda weird», and went straight to «My dad’s borderline insane» territory! Plus, my request isn’t too outlandish this time, is it? If anything, it’s brimming with love!”

Rigel: “That blinding love of yours is what terrifies me. After living here for almost ten years, even I know to avoid it.”

With a cold stare and an even colder tone, Rigel pushes back an encroaching Subaru. “In the first place,” he continues—

[20] The original translation by Trupin omitted the last 1500 characters of the chapter. I have used a mix of machine translation services and a couple of dictionaries to produce an intelligible translation, but it’s most likely far from accurate.

Rigel: “Mom’s birthday aside, all I’ve gotten out of that *Setsubun* thing is crippling trauma! Isn’t it just bean-tossing and sushi-eating? What’s so great about that weirdo fest…”

Subaru: “Hey, don’t call it a weirdo fest. Yeah, on the surface it’s kind of a weird event, but like I said, there’s kind of a meaning and purpose to it. You could say it’s the *Setsubun* that’s kept our family safe from misfortune, afterall.”

Rigel: “What about all my suffering? What about that misfortune?”

Subaru: “That’s not misfortune, that’s called daily life. You know, you’ll never get anywhere if you focus too much on all the bad things in life. Your stress’ll add up too.”

Rigel: “Don’t say it like it’s my fault! I’m just a victim of my shitty Dad’s nonsense!”

Rigel slams the table and flies up. Fuming, he points outside the window with a finger.

In front of their house, numerous flyers with the headline “Come Celebrate *Setsubun*!” are pasted onto a magic streetlamp. They list date and time, details, and the organizer’s name——

Rigel: “That weirdo fest, you’re the one drumming it up into some bizarre town-wide event, right? Your name’s even listed as the organizer… I-I thought I would die of embarrassment at school today.”

Subaru: “Well it’s a natural extension of my talents as a Producer. C’mon, now you can proudly boast something like «My Dad’s the *hero* of my household».”

Rigel: “Maybe if the event wasn’t about smashing beans into my face!”

Rigel rips yet another flyer off a nearby wall. He points to a section below “Practices,” “Purpose,” “Details”, and the event date of February 3rd (self-decided).

According to the flyer, «The Oni will run around the neighborhood being chased all day. And acting as their representative, will be Natsuki Rigel».

Rigel: “Don’t sell out your son without permission! What are you, an Oni!”

Subaru: “You’re the Oni, and so is my wife. And well, I can’t let Rem do something this crazy. That’s why, I’ll swallow my tears and send off my dear son…”

Rigel: “What are you, an Oni! No, you’re definitely an Oni!”

Subaru: “Calm down. It’s not like everyone’s out for blood. Plus, you might be the representative, but there’ll be other Oni. I’ll be helping out too.”

Seeing Subaru’s bold, undaunted face, Rigel gives in.

In the first place, they’ve already fought this battle countless times since the event’s announcement. Each time, Rigel was utterly defeated, and the day of the event creeped ever closer. Now, there was simply no running or turning back. While his role was forced onto him, Rigel felt obligated to fulfill it.

——Such is the level-headed Natsuki Rigel’s harsh way of life.

Subaru: “An event’s an event. Just take it like a man. But that’s not what I wanted to talk about.”

Rigel: “…Mom’s birthday, right?”

Subaru: “Exactly.”

As Subaru snaps his fingers, Rigel turns away. By some twist of fate, the hectic *Setsubun* and the birthday of his mother, Natsuki Rem, are only a day apart.

——Grandly celebrating with his mother on the first day, then tasting a glimpse of hell on the next. This was their annual schedule.

Rigel: “We can’t properly celebrate Mom’s birthday like this…”

Subaru: “I won’t deny that it’s a jam-packed schedule but enjoying two great days in a row is a blessing. Come on, be more optimistic. *Positive thinking*!”

Rigel: “…We can’t properly celebrate Mom’s birthday like this…”

Subaru: “Huh? Déjà vu?”

Déjà vu my ass. Unmoved by his father’s speech, Rigel’s answer remains the same, right down to the syllable.

Subaru: “I know you’re pretty tense about the *Setsubun*. But that’s no reason to make light of Rem’s birthday. It only comes once a year, you know. Won’t Rem be sad? So let’s switch gears here. I know you can do it.”

Rigel: “——. ————. ———————. ——————————Ahh.”

Rigel takes some time to accept.

But arguing won’t get him anymore, and dispiriting Subaru is borderline impossible. Rigel’s only choice is to obediently concede.

Rigel: “So, you wanna talk about Mom’s birthday present, right?”

Subaru: “Right. You see, this year’s a pretty big milestone. It’ll be ten years since we got married, after all. We actually don’t have a specific day for the anniversary, so I wanted to celebrate it along with her birthday. That’s why, I decided to do something special this year.”

Rigel: “Well, that sounds alright to me? Honestly, Mom’ll probably be happy no matter what Dad does. But for once, I’m pretty onboard with this.”

Subaru: “Right? So, here’s the meat of it.”

With the smile of a scheming child, Subaru beckons his son over. Rigel frowns, an ominous feeling hanging over him. But while he hesitates, Subaru waves for him over and over. In the end, a reluctant Rigel sighs as he lends an ear.

Subaru: “For our tenth anniversary, I’ve actually prepared something really special. I already ordered it too, so no worries there.”

Rigel: “…Hm, well, okay.”

Subaru: “I’ve been steadily building up my secret stash, all for this day. And the result is something to behold. Listen and be amazed——It’s a gemstone!”

Rigel: “——Woah, a gemstone.”

«Be amazed», his father said. But with Subaru's gift actually turning out respectably amazing, Rigel was doubly amazed. As a rule, no matter what he does, Subaru always overcomplicates things and makes a great, chaotic mess. But for once, that doesn't seem to be the case.

Rigel: "A gemstone, huh…"

Looking back, Rigel's mother, Natsuki Rem, doesn't dress herself up very much. This wasn't a matter of household finance, but rather, a matter of character.

Rigel has always been secretly proud of his exceedingly beautiful mother. But her reluctance to wear jewelry and fancy clothes was a source of his discontent.

They weren't necessarily poor either. She just doesn't particularly care to adorn herself. And yet, without any regard for dignity nor honor, Rem is shamelessly attached to Subaru. To Rigel's dismay, if it's a present from Subaru, Rem will always accept it. Thus, Rigel immediately approves of a gemstone as his father's gift to his mother.

Rigel: "That's really great! Hell, you really can do it if you try!"

Subaru: "Yeah, that's right. I'm the type that just needs to try and… Huh? What the heck? Doesn't it sound like you're the parent here?"

Rigel: "Forget about it. What's important is Mom's gift, right?"

Subaru: "Oh, yeah, right. Yeah, of course! What's important is Rem's gift. Well I knew I had the right idea, but I'm confident now that you've approved."

With a spirited fist bump, Subaru and Rigel nod to each other. Rigel then wonders about his mother's gift, especially with his father's questionable tastes.

Rigel: "So, what's the gemstone like? Knowing Dad, I'm worried you found some weirdo craftsman to make it.

Subaru: "Oh my god! My stock rose and fell within seconds! …But about that. Now we're getting to the important part. Listen carefully, my son."

Rigel: "Ughh…"

Rigel groans at his father's gravely serious face.

When Subaru has this serious look, and the playfulness in his voice vanishes, one must be extremely careful. He'll definitely spit out something troublesome—— this was the trust cultivated between Rigel and his father for the past ten years. And once again, this trust will not be betrayed. As a fearful Rigel wrinkles his face into a scowl, Subaru whispers,

Subaru:——The merchant carrying Rem's gemstone, his dragon carriage ran into some trouble and hasn't arrived. There's talk that he might even head back, so I'm going out to get it myself."

Rigel: "…Are you gonna make it by the end of the day?"

Subaru: "Well, I'll be chasing after them full throttle, of course. ——But, honestly, I'm not sure."

Fingers twiddling, gaze dropping, voice lowering. Seeing his father like this, Rigel slaps his forehead,

Rigel: "If you're that worried, why not forget the gemstone for now? Birthday present aside, if Dad's not here, Mom'll be way sadder."

Subaru: "I know. I know that, but… I have to give her this present today. It'd be meaningless otherwise, I think."

Rigel: "That's just…"

Selfish, he wanted to say, but Rigel's words stopped short.

Subaru scratches his head, a pitiful, bittersweet smile on his face. But beneath, a maelstrom of hard, indescribable feelings swirls about. Just from looking, Rigel feels its pull sweeping him away. From the depths of Subaru's soul, tucked away with the greatest of care, Rigel could feel the faint traces of an important something.

——It was the irreplaceable bond his parents shared.

Rigel: "———"

Cutting in would be wrong, Rigel decides. With a sigh, he too scratches his head,

Rigel: “So, after revealing all this, what do you want from me?”

Subaru: “Will you hear me out, Rigel!”

Rigel: “You’re practically forcing me to! Spit it out or I’ll look like some scumbag who can’t read the atmosphere!”

Subaru: “I’m saved!”

With Rigel’s reluctant acceptance, an ecstatic Subaru grabs him by the hands, swinging up and down, to and fro. Rigel scowls, but Subaru just keeps smiling back,

Subaru: “I’m going out to retrieve the gemstone. I’ll definitely be back in time, but you need to give Rem some excuse while I’m gone. Even if you screw up, don’t talk about the present. It’ll ruin the surprise.”

Rigel: “…If Dad’s not around for Mom’s birthday, I think that’ll be more than enough surprise.”

Subaru: “Even then. Anyways, I’m heading out now. The rest’s up to you!”

After forcing his trust onto Rigel, Subaru grabs his luggage and rockets out the front door.

Like the wind, he furiously tumbles down the street, making for the town gate—— from there, he’ll likely mount an Earth Dragon and chase after the jeweler.

Rigel: “Is he gonna make it back in time?”

Just barely, according to Subaru. But Rigel figures he’s more likely to fail than succeed. In his absence, it’s up to Rigel to defend the Natsuki household from devastation. But with Rem’s endless devotion to her husband, Rigel can already see his mother shaking and trembling.

Rigel: “Is-is this gonna be a bloodbath…?”

Trembling with fear, Rigel anxiously waits for his mother’s return, all the while praying for his father to come home even a second sooner.

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Fortunately, Rem's reaction wasn't nearly the catastrophe Rigel imagined. Compared to the worst-case scenario, she was utterly composed.

Rigel: "So y'see, there was some trouble at work, or something. They needed Dad over because, y'know, they really depend on him and… Wait, do they? They do, right? Well, assuming they do, he apparently went off to sorta help them, I think."

Rem: "Why does Rigel sound so uncertain? Really, at almost ten years old, you should at least house-sit and relay messages properly. Honestly."

Returning from shopping and the local neighborhood meeting, Rem is welcomed home by her son. With no time to prepare, Rigel clumsily explains Subaru's absence. Luckily, Rem doesn't particularly doubt him, nor does she pout.

But on the other hand, she clearly disapproves of his shoddy explanation. Despite appearances, Rem is actually quite the despotic mother. It's a well-kept family secret that Subaru is in fact the more lenient of the two.

Rem: "So Subaru-kun had to go out… That's too bad. For lunch today, Rem planned to make all of Subaru-kun's favorite foods."

Bearing her shopping bag, a slightly lonely Rem droops her eyebrows. Suddenly, a sense of duty burns and rages within Rigel. No matter what, he can't let his mother be sad. As a man, Rigel puts his all into everything, even roles forced onto him. You could say his very nature was a tragedy.

Rigel: "Dad's favorites, huh. That's a shame… Wait, didn't you say the same thing yesterday? I feel like we had all his favorites yesterday too…"

Rem: "Yes. And tomorrow and the day after, and the day before yesterday and even the day before that, it's all Subaru-kun's favorite foods."

Rigel: "Home cooking aside, that's some extreme favoritism!"

Day in, day out, Rem dedicates every single meal to Subaru's tastes. Realizing this, Rigel can't help but cry out. "No, no," Rem replies, shaking her head,

Rem: "Please don't worry. Subaru-kun's favorites are also Rigel's and Spica's favorites. Afterall, has Rem ever made anything that you two didn't like?"

Rigel: "Well… now that I think about it, I guess not. But is it even possible for a whole family to like the same things? I mean, doesn't everyone have different tastes?"

Rem: "That's because when Rigel was just a baby, Rem endlessly whispered Subaru-kun's favorites to him as he slept, brainwashing him into liking them too."

Rigel: "Please tell me you're joking!?"

Rem: "Yes, that was just a joke. Rigel should take better care not to fall for things like this."

Rigel's eyes are wide as saucers from this devastating truth. Seeing him, a giggly Rem playfully sticks out her tongue. Then, smoothing down her long, blue hair,

Rem: "Rem calls them Subaru-kun's favorites, but the truth is that Subaru-kun always says «delicious» to Rem's cooking. So Rigel doesn't need to worry."

Rigel: "Well alright. But doesn't that make your efforts kinda pointless…"

Rem: "Not at all. Subaru-kun always says «delicious», but when he really loves something, his tone changes, and his cheeks move a bit differently. They're cuter than usual. Fufu."

Rigel can't decide whether his mother's detailed observations make her charming, or a little scary. He lets out a vague, strained laugh as Rem smiles blissfully.

She then hands Spica over and carries the groceries to the kitchen.

Rigel: "Seriously, your big bro's drowning in anxiety over here, but you're as carefree as ever, huh."

Spica: "Aaahh——?"

Rigel: "Don't «aaahh» me, you… Ohh, you're too cute, Spica!"

With the goofy affection of an older brother, Rigel rubs cheeks with Spica. While naïve to the world, Spica still loves his doting and affection. She smiles and giggles as if being tickled. After savoring Spica's smile to his heart's content, Rigel takes her with him to the kitchen. Before them, Rem is putting away the day's groceries.

Rem: "So then, Rigel. When did your father say he'll be home?"

Rigel: "Oh, uhh… Well, I think he said he might take a while? But he said he'll try his best to hurry back. Since, y'know, he's got a reason to hurry today."

Rigel immediately regrets saying too much. Subaru's trip and Rem's birthday are topics he desperately had to avoid. And yet, with every clumsy step, a dumbfounded Rigel digs his grave ever deeper. Woefully unaware of his «can't tell a lie to save his life» personality, Rigel quickly covers his mouth.

Mimicking him, Spica puts her small hands up to her own mouth. So cute. But this isn't the time to dote.

Rem: "Is that so. «He might take a while»…"

Rigel: "———"

Rem: "How troubling. Though Rem understands why he would hurry."

Without turning around, Rem continues stocking the shelves. But Rigel looks on in worry. Her voice is the same as always, but she might actually be on the verge of tears, ready to fall to her feet from the shock.

In Rigel's mind, Rem is a strong woman, but she has some very fatal weak points. And those weak points invariably have to do with Natsuki Subaru. In the first place, from her words, she's probably already realized that Subaru's preparing for her birthday. Unlike Subaru, Rem is unusually perceptive and actually capable of reading the atmosphere. Rigel wonders if there's really any point to all this deception.

Rigel: "Umm, Mom, listen…"

The more he thinks it over, the more it wears on his nerves. Honest to a fault, Rigel's resolve grows weaker and weaker.

Rigel: "It's about Dad but, well, don't think too badly of him."

Rem: "——? Isn't that obvious? Rem would never think badly of Subaru-kun for going out to work. He's working hard for his family, after all."

Rigel: "But well, the situation's a bit different this time, y'know?"

Rem: "…Ahh, as expected. Rigel was also worried about that."

Turning around, Rem finds her son with an uneasy expression on his face. She smiles back fondly, as if understanding everything from that one look. Feeling he's been completely seen through, Rigel silently apologizes to Subaru.

But to think that, in a mere thirty minutes, he would already taste defeat.

Shamefully coming to grips with his loss, Rigel realizes he no longer needs to lie. The guilt of keeping secrets from family dissipates, the thought of coming clean lightens his heart.

In the end, you just have to be honest. There isn't a shred of doubt.

Rem: "Please don't worry. Rem is a little uneasy as well. But if it's Subaru-kun, there's nothing to worry about."

Rigel: "I don't know if I believe in him that strongly, but… Yeah, I guess that's good."

Rem: "Yes. Rem doesn't exactly understand his intentions, but she did her best to prepare to Subaru-kun's instructions. If anything, Subaru-kun entrusting Rem with this task is a sign of his faith in her. Rem feels inspired to do her best."

Rigel: "…Huh?"

Tightening her hands, Rem makes a guts pose. Rigel secretly likes this childish habit of hers, but right now, it stirs a sense of anxiety in him.

Their conversation, it seems to flow, and yet it doesn't.

"Hold on a sec?" Rigel asks, his head cocked in puzzlement,

Rigel: "What're you talking about?"

Rem: "——? Well of course, preparations for tomorrow's *Setsubun* event. Rigel will be representing the runaway Oni, afterall. An appropriate outfit… Subaru-kun asked Rem to prepare one for Rigel. Rem was hoping Subaru-kun could review the final result."

Rigel: "——Ahh damnit! I knew it!!"

With both sides of their conversation finally meshing, Rigel's guilt gushes back in full force. Realizing that nothing he's said has made it across, he can't help but wail in frustration.

Spica, still held carefully in his arms, looks to her brother's wrinkled, anguished face. "Awuu—" she chirps, mimicking him as she laughs so happily.

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——A few minutes later, standing before a mirror is Natsuki Rigel, newly reborn.

Rem: "As expected, Subaru-kun's judgement was flawless. Rem is so moved."

Spica: "Upaa~♪"

Rem nods, deeply satisfied with her work. In her arms, Spica gazes at her brother with a pair of sparkling eyes. The being standing before them is a perfect reproduction.

Rigel: "——"

Pants made from a yellow fabric, spotted with black lightning bolts coming down in vertical stripes. For his upper body, a vest sewn from the same yellow fabric. On his feet, a Kararagi specialty, wooden clogs.

In his hands, he grips a metallic-looking club made from papier-mâché. In his mouth, a pair of fake fangs borrowed from the costume store. And with his hair ruffled a bit more wildly than usual, Rigel was the spitting image of an Oni.

With her son perfectly embodying the classic Oni style, a delighted Rem looks on admiringly. Meanwhile, Spica's eyes brim with heartfelt wonder at her brother's magnificent form. With these two watching over him, the newly reborn Rigel studies himself in the mirror,

Rigel: “God, this is awful!”

Rem: “My, what is Rigel saying? Doesn’t this costume match perfectly with Subaru-kun’s sketch? For her fine work, Rem is ready to sing her own praises.”

Rigel: “This is an Oni? I look more like a barbarian! Mom, as one of the last surviving Oni, doesn’t this costume piss you off?”

Rem: “No matter how the world perceives Oni, it won’t control Rem and Rigel’s lives. It will be okay. With that said, such a breathtaking costume… Especially those eyes, so wonderfully Oni-like.”

Rigel: “That’s the only part that’s real!!”

His parents may have given him this body, but having it praised by those very parents only annoys Rigel.

His unexpected reaction vexes Rem, but in all honesty, the one most vexed is Rigel. Delighted by his agitation, a cherry-cheeked Spica rolls and tumbles with laughter, her voice resounding like bells throughout the house.

An Oni vest and Oni pants. An Oni’s club and an Oni’s eyes. Truly a work of perfection.

Rem: “No, not yet. As the finishing touch, please grow out your horn. With this, the costume will be complete.”

Rigel: “Th-, that’s not your business…”

Rem: “Not true at all. Rigel is Rem’s child. And when it comes to Rigel, Rem’s thinking is always serious and sincere.”

At Rigel’s doubtful eyes, Rem speaks back with an utmost seriousness. Overpowered, a reluctant Rigel concentrates his senses to his forehead.

As a successor to the Oni bloodline, Rigel possesses the horn of the Oni clan. However, rather than the usual pair, only a single horn grows from his forehead. According to Rem, this was probably due to Rigel’s half-Oni blood. Frankly, it didn’t bother him very much. However——,

«For only being able to give Rigel a single horn, Rem is sorry». His mother's apology from so long ago. In Rigel's mind, it remains vividly clear. Her apologetic face, that regretful voice, he could never forget them.

But Rigel doesn't care how many horns he has. Whether there's one or two, a horn's a horn. When he grows it out, his body feels light and easy to move. Rigel considers it a true blessing.

«Yes, thank you very much». When he answered this way, his mother made a lonely, bittersweet smile. From time to time, Rigel helplessly thinks back to that moment. But since then, he could never find the courage to bring back the topic. They never spoke of his horn again.

Supposedly, his mother also has just one horn. Rigel wonders if she ever suffered because of it.

Rigel: "———"

Putting those thoughts aside, Rigel concentrates on rousing his Oni blood. From his forehead, the white, pointed tip of a horn begins to emerge.

A sharp sensation courses through his forehead like lightning. As it flows to the rest of his body, Rigel feels his limbs brimming with strength. At the same time, a powerful urge throbs deeply within his chest. According to his mother, this was the Oni's natural battle instinct. The instincts roar louder and louder, assaulting his mind.

As he basks in this strange but empowering sensation, Rigel holds back the equally powerful battle instincts. In the mirror, his appearance has undergone a clear transformation. Confirming the growth of his horn, Rigel turns back towards Rem and Spica——,

Rigel: "How is it…"

Rem: "Pfft… it-, it's very, splendid… splendid, indeed, Rigel… pfft."

Rigel: "Could you give me back my concern!?"

Turning around, Rigel finds his mother desperately stifling her laughter. After witnessing his perfection of the classic Oni style, Rem's cheeks are puffed red. She falls to her knees in a giggling fit.

Just moments ago, Rigel was wrought with worry and concern. But with the growth of his own horn turning him into a laughingstock, he realizes it was time and energy wasted. As Rigel droops his shoulders in exhaustion, Rem somehow manages to get back up. Pulling herself together, she wipes away a stray tear,

Rem: "I-in any case, Rem thinks it's wonderful. Subaru-kun will surely be satisfied, and all the participants will love it too. ——Pffft."

Rigel: "Fine, I'll make you all regret choosing me to represent the Oni! For the first time in my life, I'll unleash these savage fight instincts sleeping within me——"

Rem: "Of course, Rigel is forbidden from causing harm to anyone. If he resorts to violence, Rem will take responsibility and personally subjugate him. Is that clear?"

Rigel: "For the first time in my life, I'll unleash these savage flight instincts sleeping within me——"

Adjusting the wording ever so slightly, Rigel corrects his declaration. Seeing a satisfied Rem nod back, he sighs.

Rigel: "Looking in the mirror, I can see why you'd like it, but… is this really okay? Won't this just make the Oni look bad?"

Rem: "As a race, the Oni have almost all perished. Even if someone insults us at this point, there's little use in worrying over it. Incidentally, the setting for this event has Rigel as the chieftain of a ferocious, bloodthirsty Oni tribe. If the townsfolk fail to repel them, the tribe will instigate an atrocious mass killing, painting the town ruins into a true scene from Hell… is the planned development."

Rigel: "They really are barbarians! Do they even need to be Oni!?"

Rem: "Oni are excellent for playing the villain role… is what Subaru-kun said."

While indifferent to the Oni's dignity, Rem seems reluctant to continue their talk. The near-eradication of the Oni clan is common knowledge. And yet, Rigel has never heard Rem talk about it in any real detail.

Thinking back, he's never heard much about his parents' romance and past either.

Rigel: "…Well, hearing about it will just wear me out anyway."

Sometimes, from his parents—— from Subaru and Rem, he has this strange feeling, as if something's off or out of place.

Whether it's helping with his homework, or celebrating weird festivals, scraps of knowledge from some unknown place would pop up from time to time. There were all sorts of mysterious odds and ends. Every time he catches a glimpse at his parents' past, Rigel feels oddly vexed. At any rate, between his parents, there were traces of an education that they couldn't quite conceal.

Rigel guesses that these two received a respectable education from somewhere. As their son, the thought fills him with pride. And yet, seeing his parents hide their secret at all costs, this pride is tangled with resentment.

Rigel wonders if, someday, he'll be able to hear their story.

Rigel: "But well, I doubt they'll tell me any time soon…"

Coming to this conclusion, Rigel sets aside his suspicions for now. Oblivious to her son's inner turmoil, Rem clasps her hands with an enthusiastic "Now",

Rem: "Let's put away the costume and prepare for tomorrow. It's too bad that Subaru-kun couldn't personally check on it, but Rem will leave that for tomorrow as something to look forward to."

Rigel: "Am I really running around in this tomorrow…"

Rem: "Other Oni besides Rigel will be wearing the same outfit, so there's nothing to be embarrassed about. Though the only real Oni will be Rigel, of course."

As he pulls his arms out from the vest and changes his pants, Rigel grows anxious over tomorrow's event. Wanting to encourage him, Rem gently brushes her beloved son's shoulder—

Rem: "It will be okay. Rigel is Rem's and Subaru-kun's proud son, afterall."

Rigel: "Well, being Mom's son is fine, but having to be Dad's son is…"

Rem: "If anything, that part should be a source of relief. On the other hand, Rem's blood flowing in Rigel's veins, Rem worries and worries that it'll cause him nothing but trouble…"

Rigel: “Aren’t you undervaluing yourself here?”

It’s a bad habit of hers. Rem loves Subaru and sees him in almost too good of a light. And yet, while not quite self-deprecating, she’s undeniably too hard on herself.

Rigel: “I don’t know how convincing it is coming from me, but I don’t think Mom’s blood ever caused me any problems. Like I said, it’s Dad’s blood that’s got me worried. These scary eyes aside, I feel like I’m inheriting his evilness.”

Rem: “Those eyes are wonderful.”

Rigel: “But sometimes girls cry just from looking at me…”

Rem: “They’re just too young to understand a boy’s charm.”

That stubborn, unyielding faith in others, why does it weaken so much when it comes to herself?

Actually, Rigel suspects that Subaru has the very same flaw. But he rarely sees weakness in his father, so he can’t quite compare. Putting those thoughts aside for now,

Rigel: “As your son, I honestly have no idea why you’re so unconfident… I guess, I’ll just have to prove it to you?”

Rem: “Huh?”

Rigel: “Tomorrow’s event, if I pull it off perfectly, completely, and without a single incident… then as both Mom and Dad’s son, I’ll make you see that there’s nothing to worry about.”

Rem: “——”

Rigel: “It’s been bothering me for a while now. So, I’ve always wanted to prove it to you.”

Staring back at his wide-eyed mother, Rigel makes his bold declaration.

As the loving wife of Natsuki Subaru, and the doting mother of Natsuki Rigel and Natsuki Spica, Natsuki Rem is a woman who lacks self-confidence. Yet in Rigel’s mind, no other woman is so deserving of respect.

Rigel: “You’re always worried that you can’t match up with Dad, but I’ll show you that that’s not even the tiniest, slightest bit true!”

Rem: “Rigel…”

Rigel: “My… My Mom is the greatest Mom in the entire world. I just wanted you to see that.”

Unconfident, yet living so blissfully, but at times, shrinking back in hesitation. Rigel has watched over his mother all this time, wishing that she would live more proudly.

Just as she loves her husband and her son and daughter, Rigel wishes she would love herself.

Because Subaru and Rigel, and Spica as well, they all love Rem. Because just as Rem loves them all, they all love Rem back,

Rigel: “Looking down on my Mom, I won’t let anyone do that, not even my Mom.”

Burning with a feverish vigor, Rigel finishes his declaration. But suddenly, he’s struck with an awkward situation.

What the hell am I saying, looking like this!?

Having removed the Oni vest and pants, he stands there in nothing but his underwear. Like this, no matter how serious he is, he’ll just be treated like a comedy show. After all this time, he finally blasted out everything he wanted to say. But there had to have been a better time to do it.

Rigel: “Ahh, uhm, just now, that was——”

“A mistake”, he wanted to say, but before he could,

Rem: “————”

Suddenly, Rigel’s head is entangled between two outstretched arms and abruptly embraced. A tender feeling envelopes his head as a bewildered Rigel darts his eyes about in confusion. He quickly realizes, this is his mother’s embrace.

Hearing the intense pounding of his mother’s heart so close, Rigel’s face immediately turns red.

He's at the age where being spoiled by his mother is unbelievably embarrassing. The days when she'd hold him like this should be long past. He instinctively wants to pull away. However——

Rigel: "…Mom?"

Rem: "———"

Feeling the tremble and quiver of the arms cradling him, Rigel freezes in place. He calls out to his mother, but Rem doesn't answer. That's when he realizes,

Rem: "…Uu, fu, eh-"

The sound of crying meets his ears.

But it isn't the familiar crying of his adorable little sister. While so very similar, this crying comes from someone Rigel has never seen cry before.

Quickly realizing its owner, Rigel turns a pale white.

What if something he said was unimaginably hurtful. His forceful, impassioned words, if they hurt her, it'd be a mistake that Rigel could never take back.

He frantically wrings his brain for the right words to say. But he soon realizes that all his fretting and worrying was unnecessary.

Rigel: "————"

Shaking her head, a small Rem firmly embraces her even smaller son. The emotion packed into those trembling arms, it wasn't displeasure, nor was it grief. There was only loving affection. Caressed by this affection, Rigel is the first to understand.

Returning his sobbing mother's hug with his own, Rigel gently strokes her back.

Rigel: "Don't cry, Mom… If Dad sees, he'll kill me."

Rem: "…That, isn't possible."

Rigel: "Why?"

Rem: “Rem is this happy, yet the tears won’t stop falling.”

To think that the mother he’s known for almost ten years is, unexpectedly, such a crybaby. Rigel sighs.

Still held by her mother, Spica looks to her mother and brother embracing, tilting her head. And then Spica, with her small, autumn-colored hand, as if mimicking her brother, starts stroking her mother’s back.

Slowly, slowly, with a tenderness that could soothe even the biggest crybaby.

——As happy tears fall from their mother’s eyes, the siblings continue stroking her back.

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——In the end, Subaru, who went out to retrieve the gemstone, didn’t return while Rigel and Spica were awake.

Rem: “Tomorrow will be very busy, so Rigel should go to sleep now. Don’t stay up too late since we start early tomorrow.”

His mother spoke in her usual tone, as if she already forgot how hard she had cried. However, as Rem kisses his forehead to say goodnight, Rigel notices her expression has somehow changed from yesterday’s.

In the end, they never spoke about her birthday, but at least he kept his promise with Subaru. Rigel decides to leave the rest to his father.

In the first place, he didn’t have the courage left to spout any more embarrassing words. After all, he just finished blasting out a whole ten years’ worth.

Rigel: “———”

Staring at the magic crystal, Rigel counts down the remaining minutes on his fingers. Will Subaru return home in time for Rem’s birthday? In Rigel’s experience, Subaru will go to absurd lengths to prove his love and devotion to his wife. That’s probably why. Even with just ten minutes left, Rigel isn’t at all worried.

And in the end——

???: "——Rem, I'm home! Sorry I'm late!"

Subaru rolls and tumbles into the house, a mere five minutes before the date changes. ——Though they technically had just five minutes left to celebrate, he still managed to keep his promise.

Rem: "Subaru-kun, welcome home. But please don't make so much noise. Rigel and Spica are already asleep. It wouldn't be good to wake them."

Subaru: "Ahh, sorry, sorry. I was just in such a rush…"

The sound of Rem welcoming, then scolding Subaru, and the sound of a flustered Subaru apologizing back. From his futon, Rigel hears footsteps make their way into the house.

Since he went to bed a few hours ago, Rigel has just been tossing and turning. But with this last worry cleared from his mind, he finally feels sleepy.

Considering tomorrow's event, just as his mother said, he really should sleep already. Yesterday, he dreaded the *Setsubun* event, despairing as it came ever closer. But now, Rigel feels like he can look forward to it, just a little. It must be because of the promise he made with his mother——

Subaru: "Rem, I'm really sorry for being late, but there's more I have to say. The work I was out for today, it was more like a personal errand. A really important one."

Rem: "A personal errand, is it? Was there something special going on?"

Subaru: "There is. Though you probably don't think it's too special."

Tilting her head, Rem seems to honestly have no clue. Neglecting herself, another bad habit of hers. Frankly, hiding the present from her might've been totally unnecessary.

That's just how indifferent Rem is towards herself.

Subaru: "There's only two minutes left, but here, take this. ——It's your birthday present."

Rem: "Birthday… Ah."

At Subaru's stiff words, Rem's cheerful voice abruptly pauses. Finally understanding, she's met with two conflicting emotions. Unsure which to embrace, she stands in bewilderment.

Rem: "———"

Rigel guesses that his mother's eyes are darting about in confusion as his father hands her something. And with Rem still vexed, it's probably Subaru who opens the small box lying in her hands. At the sound of the box opening, Rem peers inside and lets out a small gasp.

Rem: "This is…"

Subaru: "A garnet… At least, I think that's what you'd call it. I've been steadily building my secret stash all for this day. But seriously, I was so worried. Even though it's only meaningful if I gave it to you today, that dragon carriage started heading back halfway."

Rem: "———"

As Subaru recounts his trials, Rem stands wordlessly. Noticing her silence, a wryly smiling Subaru roughly scratches his head.

Subaru: "I wanted to give you something definite, something permanent. We've been together for ten years now. And with your birthday, and *Setsubun*, I thought this'd be a fitting way to ask, «Once again, please take care of me»."

Rem: "…Is it really okay, for Rem—"

Subaru: "Hm?"

Rem: "For Rem to be this blessed, is it really okay?"

Hearing her trembling voice, Rigel shifts about, his weary eyes now looking towards them. His parents are in the neighboring room, but Rigel can see them through the half-open sliding door. Subaru and Rem face each other, with Rem's eyes fixated on the red gemstone in her hands.

Rem: "Rem's birthday… She completely forgot about it. Because… Rem always believed she had no right to celebrate it."

Subaru: "———"

Rem: "Rem left behind Nee-sama, who was born on the very same day… Even though she knew it was such a terrible thing, but…"

Subaru: "Yeah, tell me anything. I'll listen to you."

Rem: "——n. Rem was always worried, if she's allowed to be this happy."

That tearful voice, the same one Rigel heard just hours ago. Yet this time, it feels strained with a deep guilt. And from his mother's mouth, the surprise of an unfamiliar word. Nee-sama. But what truly surprises Rigel is that, far beyond what he imagined, his parents' past is heavy and painful.

Subaru: "I won't tell you to stop feeling guilty. I know all too well that it isn't possible. Because, I feel the same."

Rem: "…Yes."

Subaru: "But even then, I don't want to think that anything and everything has been bad. Even though we gave up, even if we ran away, the things we obtained after running, I don't want to think badly of them too."

Rem: "…Yes."

Unimaginable from his usual tone, Subaru's truly serious voice shocks Rigel. And as Rem nods over and over, her voice carries something different as well. Separate from her reliability as a mother, different from the extreme love and favoritism she shows her husband.

Right now, they were merely a man and a woman, sharing in their precious bond and memories.

Subaru: "Coming to this town and having Rigel and Spica. After all sorts of things happened, now you and I are here. All of that is connected to our happiness. I wanted to prove that to you and give it shape. And that's this gemstone."

Rem: "———"

Subaru: “If it’s still too painful for you to accept it, I won’t ask you to immediately wear that gemstone. I won’t even mind if you put it away somewhere. But please, don’t throw it away. I feel like that’s the one thing we shouldn’t do.”

Appealing, Subaru takes a step towards the wordless Rem.

Carefully reaching out his arms, he embraces Rem and pulls her towards him. Holding her close, Subaru tenderly strokes her head.

As he does so, Rem buries her face into his breast, and says with a small voice,

Rem: “Today, Rigel told Rem.”

Subaru: “Yeah?”

Rem: “He said that Rem is… the greatest mother in the world.”

Subaru: “Yeah. You didn’t know?”

Rem: “…Yes, Rem did not know.”

Rem carefully repeats Rigel’s words, but Subaru swiftly answers back, as if they were the most obvious words in the world. At his immediate reply, Rem wrinkles her face and smiles.

Tears were overflowing from the corners of her eyes, running down the white cheeks. Along with those tears, came emotions lying inside her heart, born of conflicting feelings of guilt and happiness.

Rem: "I told you once before, Rem was relieved when Rigel was born."

Subaru: “—”

Rem: “I was relieved that I had a connection with Subaru-kun that would never disappear. I was relieved to think that we could become a family. How unpleasant.”

Subaru: “You’re not unpleasant, you’re being normal. I won't let my wife slander my wife.”

Rem: “…Fufu. Rigel said the same thing.”

Subaru: “What? Is he talking about Rem as his wife or something? That is some serious Oedipus complex, and a little gross…”

Rem: “No. Rigel says Spica is his wife.”

Subaru: “He's a such a siscon.”

Despite being insulted in this exchange, Rigel silently went with the flow. He smiled at himself for a while, and then, with a long breath, Rem looked up from Subaru's chest.

Rem: "Of Rem’s own accord, I thought I would love you unilaterally. Devoid of confidence as I am, I always tried my best to show that I loved you."

Subaru: “That’s so stupid!”

Rem: “Yes, it’s stupid. That’s what Rigel told me.”

Embarrassed, Rem laughs and holds her breath. Then Rem put her hand to Subaru's chest, and gently pushed his body away, and, taking a step, created distance between them.

Rem: “Thank you, Subaru, for your birthday present. —Can you put it on?”

Subaru: “…Okay? There’s no need to hurry, you know?”

Rem: “No, there is not. It’s the other way around. Rem had already reached a conclusion. So I just want to be rewarded for it, and to show proof of it.”

Subaru: “Proof?”

Rem: “—That Rem is the happiest woman in the world, surrounded by the world’s best husband, the world’s best son, and the world’s best daughter.”

Rem, who had been uncertain of herself, said this with a confident face and voice. Subaru snorts at the reply, and immediately breaks into a broad smile.

Subaru: “Ehhh, Rem is so excited.”

Subaru nodded satisfied at his wife's attitude, picking up the jewel on her palm, and the pendant in which it was embedded. And,

Subaru: "I love you, Rem."

Rem: "Yes, I love Rem too. Subaru-kun."

With the pendant around her neck, the red jewel gently glitters on Rem's chest. When they saw it, they laughed at each other, and then, softly, their faces approached—

Rigel: "—Oh, geez."

At that point, Rigel turned around and went back to the next room. To watch the parents after this exchange would be both sickening and tactless. My father and mother are happy and in harmony today. That's fine.

And that is the everyday life of the Natsuki family, which has never changed.

Spica: "—"

While lying in bed, Rigel sees Spica's bed, which should be sleeping in the same room.

According to Subaru, Spica, when sleeping in a crib, turns away and does not cry at night, as if reading the atmosphere, and so continues to sleep without disturbing her parents' meeting.

Is it still my mother's birthday right now, or has the date changed?

Even so, tomorrow or today is *Setsubun*—— A day where the Oni plays the lead role, though the format is slightly different. As far as my mother is concerned, yesterday, today and tomorrow are days when the Oni play the leading role. So, let's make her feel happy and loved. Now——

Rigel: "At the *Setsubun* event, do I have to prove that I am the best son in the world?"

Rigel sighed in his futon, as he upped the stakes on himself.

However, it's a different kind of sigh, compared to the ones you usually get when you're feeling down or depressed, uninspired or demoralized.

——I fell asleep in a good mood, thinking that I should play the best demon under tomorrow's clear sky.

EX Chapter 5 - Fortune Fish-Head Tree

Original translation by Remonwater

It was a yearly thing —— well, he disliked how it was yearly, thinking that it was annual in his mind, but that annual day approached this year too.

Rigel: “I feel some serious hatred because of this day coming closer…”

Then, the person who let out that listless murmur along with a sigh was a boy that had tiredness and insightfulness on his face, unfitting for his age. He had short, blue hair swaying in the wind, *sanpaku* eyes to sharply look through the world, and traditional Kararagi Japanese clothes.

It was the Natsuki Rigel, the *Setsubun* King, admired by the people at Kararagi City State’s second town, Banan.

Rigel: “Too disgraceful…!”

The *Setsubun* King folds his short arms, and he looked up at the sky as if in grief.

The *Setsubun* event that started to root in the town a few years ago changed every, every year, swooping down on him. The continuation of that suffering made him grow, and when he realized it, it even pushed the lone boy up to the *Setsubun* King.

As of now, Rigel was merely walking in Banan Town, and even on days unrelated to *Setsubun*, he would occasionally have to deal with the shower of beans from kids. It seemed he didn’t understand the point of it. If he overlooked it pleasantly by reasoning that it couldn’t be helped because they were kids, then his father who’d seen it would laugh at him in an extremely pompous way, and he’d feel discomfort.

Anyhow, the *Setsubun* event already became an essential part of Banan—— If he put his emotions aside, Rigel could say the same for him.

Rigel’s own father was related to why that began, but the biggest reason was because of a family matter —— *Setsubun* was an event related to Onis. Thus it is inseparable from Rigel, his beloved younger sister and also his mother, who have Oni blood.

Therefore, *Setsubun* was an event that involved Rigel, and it was essential to the Natsuki family.

So, Rigel came to accept the Bean-Tossing, being a target, being silent until he was done eating the lucky direction roll Ehomaki, and running all over the whole town dressed as an Oni. However,

Rigel: “Can Dad run out of ideas already…”

Subaru: “——Hey! Rigel! Just how long are you gonna stand there lost in your thoughts!? I’m really counting on your fighting power! Come over here! Help out!!”

It was right after Rigel dropped his shoulders weakly and grumbled like that. Rigel heard a faraway voice call him, which also sounded quite cornered, and so he reluctantly turned his head.

——His half-naked father was waving his hands frantically around the water of the large Mogolade geyser.

He was completely soaked, his usual upright black hair now clung to his forehead, and it was as if they were taking a bath together. His father threw away his ruined jacket, and while hurriedly bleaching his built upper body, he called out to Rigel and said

Subaru: “A school is coming! What Elder said was right! There won’t be another chance if you let this one go! Rigel! Hurry!”

Rigel: “Fine! I got it, sheesh!”

It would have been better if Rigel just abandoned it regretfully, but he recklessly and violently scratched his head, and he finally ran towards his father.

Rigel went towards the Grand Mogolade Geyser that spouted water while having his head being bathed in the spray of water coming down from the cloudless sky.

——This year’s *Setsubun* was somewhat different from the usual.

Rigel: “No wait, being a nuisance to me is the usual!”

Subaru: “Rigel! Rigel-san!? Hurry! Bring out your horn! Grab onto the net! Grab onto it hard and don’t let go!”

Rigel: “Shut up——!!”

Rigel follows his father’s orders, unsure of if he was being serious or not, and when he stood on the deep pool of the grand geyser, he stared at the swirling water, seeing myriad of fish shadows.

Rigel: “————”

He grabs tightly onto the edge of the net. Heat gets produced on his forehead. He blanks out for a second, and he felt an excessive amount of exhilaration.

The overflowing power swells up endlessly by taking in the mana in the atmosphere. The short 11-year-old Natsuki Rigel had the brute strength of an Oni God inside of him, unfitting of his childishness.

Rigel: “Urwaaaa——!!”

He puts in unfathomable strength into his thin arms, and pulls up the net at once. The net made of thin iron thread fulfilled its role of not being torn down by demonic strength.

Subaru: “There it is! Rigel did it! We won’t lose either! Everyone, give it all you’ve got and pull——!!”

Everyone: “Heeaaaaaaaaaveee hooooooooooo!!”

The father continues after Rigel, who became the previous counterattack —— No, it wasn’t just his father. All the people of Banan he brought along ran up to the net at once, and each of them pulled up the net with their entire soul. He turned his head towards the outside of the net to make sure the fish shadows didn’t escape, but they were already in the middle of a devilish strategy. They couldn’t escape. They wouldn’t let them.

Subaru: “You guys… behave, and become sacrifices for Setsubuuun!!”

They were comrades having unwanted suffering forced upon them by *Setsubun*. They didn’t understand the other people’s — the adults’ feelings. However, at the very least——

——At the very least, I’ll sympathize with you guys from the bottom of my heart, and I’ll take you with me!

Subaru: “Uwoahhhhhh——!!”

He bites his molars, each of them fighting for their lives, putting in absolutely all of his strength. His palm that grasped the net was hot. He didn't know if the drops of water from his forehead were sweat, or if they were drops of water from the grand geyser.

The only thing he thought of was him not letting go of his grip.

——To understand why it became like this again, we'll have to backtrack a few days.

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It was early afternoon of a day off. The father and son entered the same kotatsu, faced each other, and began having a pleasant interaction.

Neither of them had school or work, and it was a rare day when they had no plans. They spent their time leisurely in the kotatsu since morning, had the same old conversation of "How's school?" "Nothing new". Having these kind of days every now and then —— What a time of negligence it was.

Subaru: "Ah, Rigel-kun. It's gonna be that day soon. What do you think about that? Hm?"

Rigel: "Go catch a cold."

Subaru: "That's a roundabout way of being offensive, oi."

The person who responded to those words by curling his lips unhappily was this man that saw his eyes, that looked exactly like Rigel's, every day in the mirror.

He had short, black hair, unusual black eyes, and he was the center pillar of Natsuki, Rigel's family name. He was Natsuki Subaru, Rigel's father. He should almost be turning 30, so to the best of Rigel's knowledge, it wouldn't be strange for him to have things like suitable composure and dignity as an adult. However, his father —— Subaru, he didn't really seem to be that way, and he had composure that might make you think he'd be 5 or 6, or even younger than that, perhaps being related to emotional matters, or his everyday behavior.

Incidentally, currently in the Natsuki Family there was Spica who was having special education for the gifted as the youngest child, and things like dirty words and offensive words were forbidden for the sake

of her emotional development. Thus, it was necessary for him to pick expressions that would soften the abuse of his father down to things like “Go catch a cold”, while still carrying what he intended.

But, Subaru was not discouraged at all by Rigel’s original complaints, and he said—

Subaru: “Well, it’s not like I don’t understand your feelings, either. I’ve also reflected on this year. ——There’s no way you’ll be hit with more beans during *Setsubun* than the amount of beans used at Banan in a month.”

Rigel: “Last year I didn’t think I’d hover between life and death because of something like beans. I’ve seen it for a while in my dreams, and even now I make noise while having nightmares.”

Subaru: “But don’t worry. The number of Onis has increased even more this year, and it’s been converted into a plan to distribute and reduce the burden on your shoulders. Nothing similar to what happened last year will happen again!”

Rigel: “Stop building a unit with me in the center without warning!”

In response to Subaru’s words, him acting like he cared but not actually caring at all, Rigel hit the kotatsu, and he raised his voice. However, he was relatively quick to feel like he was probably wasting his breath, which is what he started to feel in particular a few days after last year’s *Setsubun*.

Anyhow, everywhere he went, every man he met, and finally, even any infant would know about Rigel’s achievements. If the townspeople whose faces and names didn’t match continued to call out to Rigel by saying “Looking forward to next year as well!”, he wouldn’t have something like a way to escape, as he was timid.

Rigel: “The kneading from last time wasn’t good enough too. Also, about the decorative club, were the thorns filled with cotton properly? It’s not like I’m going to hit people, but if by some chance I hit them, there’s a good chance the event can get canceled…”

Subaru: “Considering how you’re saying this and that, and how you handle things positively, I feel like I’ve raised you well. That’s a relief.”

Rigel: “What are you saying!? Also, isn’t the first time you said that when you started getting everyone involved!? And putting my right to complain to you aside, don’t you feel bad about disturbing the people who are mere participants!?”

Subaru: “Seems like you’re kinda getting old already…”

Rigel sighed without saying anything at Subaru’s unreasonable thoughts.

Subaru’s words being incomprehensible was also just the usual. Trying to understand all of them little by little would just tire him out. Unlike Rigel’s mother, he gave up on trying to understand his father ever since he had an umbilical cord.

Rigel: “So, is it safe to say that you wanted to talk about *Setsubun*? I’ll have you know that the size of last year’s Oni pants and vest won’t fit me. I’m growing.”

Subaru: “Well, compared to last year you have grown 5 centimeters, after all. It makes me feel good too seeing the height marker starting to get higher at a quick pace. However, I’ve also had my growth halted temporarily, and there was a lot of time until the next big result. Look at it in a long-term point of view.”

Subaru laughs, and he reached out for Rigel’s head, who was at the opposite side of the kotatsu. He was probably trying to pat it, but he couldn’t reach it because of his laziness of not coming out of the kotatsu. It couldn’t be helped. Rigel brought out his head, and it got pat. It tickled.

Subaru: “Anyhow, don’t worry about the Oni pants. Rem will proceed to secretly work on that. The outfit that is remade every year for your growth… I thought to put visible decorations for the people that come to the ceremony when you get married, but what do you think?”

Rigel: “Go catch a cold.”

While getting his head pat, Rigel wished relatively seriously for a cold that would make his dad breathe painfully. Subaru continues with a “And then you see”, as he accepts that with a wry smile and says,

Subaru: “Yes, Oni pants are important too, but the Bean-Tossing Event Committee are the ones that pursue that issue, so we have to groan “Uh-huh” by ourselves. Apart from that.”

Rigel: “Wait wait wait wait, you mentioned the name of a committee I’m unfamiliar with!”

Subaru: “Apart from that, what’s important is the upcoming new experiment for *Setsubun*. Bean-Tossing is easy with Ehomaki, but we must cultivate the unknown that to avoid getting tired of it. The times always walk fast. If you cling onto the past, you’ll get left behind.”

Rigel: “Catch it…! Go… catch a… cold…!”

The voice that sincerely made a wish didn’t even reach his father in front of him, and it got repelled. Rigel hanged his head heartbroken in response to that reality. Subaru nods at his son’s situation, listens, and he leaned forward as if telling him to be surprised.

Subaru: “I wracked my brain, and I worked out what the *Setsubun* event left behind. That being said, in addition to the Bean-Tossing, let’s put that thing into practice too this year.”

Rigel: “…What kind of strange festival will it be this year?”

Subaru: “Don’t call it a strange festival. Strange festival… is what I want to call it, but I’m ready for that type of slander towards this event too…”

In response to Subaru’s way of speaking, him being gloomy, Rigel had the chills run through his back.

From an outsider’s point of view, it wouldn’t be strange for them to think of things like festivals to scatter beans and hit Onis, events in which people would stay silent, eating Ehomaki while facing the lucky direction, all as a strange festival, even if they seemed like a family gone mad. However, with the way Subaru put it, maybe they seemed like something more than that.

Rigel: “N—noo! You’re just gonna end up making me suffer again anyway! Right? Isn’t that right!?”

Subaru: “Why have you become such a cynical child… Just what changed you?”

Rigel: “90% of it was because of Dad, and 10% of it is because of Mom!”

Subaru: “…Hehe, for you to understand the influence of your parents at that age, you’re amazing, eh. To be frank, I’ve truly recognized that ever since you were born.”

Rigel: “Why are you flattering me with a distant look, I’m angry, you know!?”

He rubs the bottom of his nose, and Rigel was seriously appalled at Subaru, who seemed to be satisfied in a way. However, Subaru waved his hands with a “Calm down calm down”, and he said —

Subaru: “Stop, since the conversation won’t get anywhere. Allow me to announce what we’ll be doing in this year’s *Setsubun*.”

Rigel: “What about the next Oni pants…”

Subaru: “No need to worry, since they’re ones that won’t hurt your heart or body. ——A new custom will be added to the Natsuki family, starting with this year’s *Setsubun*!”

He claps once, and meanwhile, Subaru hit the table with his fingers with fast rhythm. When he urged him with his eyes to imply that he was taking too long with his introduction, his father said “Tada!” to create an opportunity for himself, and he said——

Subaru: “——We’ll be doing *Hiiragi Iwashi*!”

Then, he said that.

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Rem: “So, what type of event is this *Hiiragi Iwashi*, Subaru-kun?”

A few minutes after the awfully grand announcement, a woman came from the kitchen and returned to the living room —— It was a person with long, blue hair, and beautiful, soft looks. She wore a *kimono*, had a lovely, black haired baby held in her breasts, and she was next to Subaru in the kotatsu. Needless to say, it was Rigel’s mother, and Subaru’s wife, Natsuki Rem.

Rem had been cleaning up the lunch in the kitchen, and while caressing her daughter —— while caressing Spica so that she wouldn’t wake up, as she was full and was taking a nap, she tilted her head in a lovely way.

She was listening to the father and the child’s conversation, but it seemed like it was also the first time she heard anything about the *Hiiragi Iwashi* that Subaru brought up. It wasn’t like the Natsuki married couple to talk about basically anything.

Subaru: "You listened well, Rem. *Hiiragi Iwashi* is the third *Setsubun* plan to go with the Bean-Tossing and Ehomaki. I can't deny that it feels a little plain and minor compared to previous ones, but for that, it seems like there's some real, well, things like blessings, so it's recommended for religious people."

Rem: "I see, as expected of Subaru-kun. Woman and the elderly certainly do expect participating in the events like Bean-Tossing and Ehomaki to be difficult. It's not easy to clean up the beans and eating all of the Ehomaki… you have an eagle eye!"

Subaru: "Ah, yeah. Now that you say it, that is true… Ahh, that's right. That's exactly the eye I was aiming for!"

Rem: "Yes! So, what is *Hiiragi Iwashi*? What type of suffering will you put Rigel through?"

Rigel: "With this, I feel like making Mom catch a cold now too…!"

In response to Rem's words that linked *Setsubun*, Rigel, and harm with an equal sign, Rigel held his head with his hands and lamented himself. However, Subaru swung his raised finger back and forth, saying "Tut-tut-tut" at Rem's words, and replied—

Subaru: "Rem, don't jump to conclusions like Rigel. Zero harm will be done to Rigel this time. *Hiiragi Iwashi* is simple, quick work, after all. Don't worry."

Rem: "I—I see… Yes, I understand."

Rigel: "Why do you seem a little sad? Hey, Mom, Mom?"

Rem: "Just kidding. Please don't take things so seriously, Rigel."

His mom's despondent look restored to her usual one, and Rigel made an indescribable profound look at her. Subaru responds to the interaction between the mom and child by clapping his hands as he said "Okay okay, attention please".

Subaru: "It's bad of the Natsuki family to get off track so easily. So, let's reflect and do this again. About the essential *Hiiragi Iwashi*[21], it's something that's even simpler than things like Bean-Tossing. It's a

[21] *Hiiragi Iwashi* is also a *Setsubun* custom (see here).

custom where you impale the head of a fried *Iwashi*[22] onto a *Hiiragi*[23] twig, placing it at the front door. Easy peasy, right?"

Rem: "*Iwashi*?"

Rigel: "*Hiiragi*?"

Rem and Rigel tilt their heads, respectively, at Subaru, who gave an explanation with pride.

The *Iwashi* and *Hiiragi* words Subaru said were both unfamiliar vocabulary to them. The original name was *Hiiragi Iwashi*, so he thought it'd be simple. Subaru puts aside convincing Rigel for now, and he folded his arms as he nodded saying "I get it".

Subaru: "If this was the old me, I would've said some foolish remark like «D—damn it! People don't get *Hiiragi* and *Iwashi* here too!», but that's no good. I'm learning, too. I've anticipated it not getting through. So, let me simplify it. *Hiiragi* is a tree, and *Iwashi* is fish. In other words, it's a custom where you impale grilled fish onto a tree's twig!"

Rem: "Grilled fish… onto a tree's twig… Why do that?"

Subaru: "To be honest, I really have no idea… This event is left at the edge of my sea of knowledge, but it's about enough bean knowledge to make me want to praise myself…"

Rem: "I see. Bean knowledge just for *Setsubun*… Subaru-kun, well done!"

Subaru: "That wasn't what I was aiming at just now!"

To the side of Subaru getting hurt by Rem's assistance, her being innocent, Rigel puzzled as he said "Hmmm". An event where you impale grilled fish onto a tree twig —— Out of all the strange festivals that have happened, it certainly did surpass them in eccentricity, but it's an event that didn't require any particularly active activities. He nods, as there was no need for Rigel to be harmed.

Rigel: "But…"

[22] Sardine.

[23] Holly tree.

Subaru: “And then Rigel felt like just a little something was missing…”

Rigel: “Don’t start a weird monologue! That’s not it! I thought your quietness was off, since you’re Dad, but those are two different things. Bring it on. I’ll impale a fish on a twig. Let’s get this over with.”

Subaru: “Ohh, positive, aren’t you. You’ve finally come to accept that *Setsubun* is a custom imperative to the Natsuki family… I have nothing more to teach you.”

Rigel: “Yeah yeah, I’m thankful I’m thankful. So? What do we have to do?”

Subaru: “Well, hold on. I may look like this, but I am the boss of this Banan Culture Promotion Committee. We’ve went through a lot of work since last year, and the preparations have been made.”

Subaru smiles in a way that suggested he was going “Heh heh”. Rigel responds to that behavior by letting out a “Really?”, seeming to be impressed.

The Banan Culture Promotion Committee was a group of people that would spend useless efforts day and night to introduce the many new strange festivals that Subaru proposed for whatever reason as culture, spreading them throughout not only Kararagi, but throughout the rest of the world as well. For some reason it was surprisingly popular, and the amount of promotion committee people was increasing beyond Rigel’s expectations, but him breaking because of that was another story.

Anyhow, should there be people cooperating with the Banan Culture Promotion Commitee, maybe he really wouldn’t need the few helpers from his family, Rigel and Rem. Whether it be for preparations or events, help would be essential to all of it.

Last year’s Bean-Tossing event that used the town only happened because of working together with the people around, too.

Subaru: “And so, ever since last year, I’ve been absorbed in watching for an opportunity, and looking for fish and trees similar to *Iwashi* and *Hiiragi*. Although it’s difficult to look for things that are exactly the same, it would be sincere to the custom if the things are as similar to them as possible. Having the effect change, and having the celebration turn into a curse would be problematic, after all.”

Rem: “So, based off the flow of the conversation, you’ve found fish and trees, right?”

Subaru: “Exactly. They’re all fish nearby… Also, it’s a place where they’re easy to catch.”

Then, Subaru put his hands around the bottom of his back, as he got out of the kotatsu, and he slowly brought out something that was put on his trousers. He spread it out on top of the kotatsu.

It was a map. The map that had the Kararagi City State drawn on it had moderate precision, though it was off-putting with its handwriting, and it had Natsuki Subaru signed at the bottom right. After that, he thrust his finger at the middle of the map and said——

Subaru: “We’ll be going to the Grand Mogolade Geyser. This is where the fish surge in schools. Plus, when they try to burst out, they’re the size of the Cragrel Moving Forest. Believe in the seniors, spread the roots here, and net a hall of fish. ——That’ll be the mission of the Natsuki family.”

Rigel: “Don’t just involve us like it’s nothing!!”

Rem: “Ah! Rigel, you can’t! Spica is going to wake… Ah, ahhh.”

Spica: “Waaaaaaaaa!!”

Rigel yells in response to Subaru’s declaration, him looking proud, and Rem was already too late to panic about that voice, as Spica’s crying resounded powerfully, having been woken up forcefully.

——That was the Fish Head Tree Strategy prologue.

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——Let’s talk about the Grand Mogolade Geyser.

Even though it has nothing to do with “the inner sea of the planet, the platform of the watchtower, from the edge of paradise”[24], the Grand Mogolade Geyser is a place in the Kararagi City State country with an extremely favorable environment.

[24] This is a Fate Grand Order reference, for more info see here (may contain FGO spoilers).

What stood out about the Kararagi City State's climate were the deserts that were generally dotted around the country, and the abundance of arid regions that were scarce by nature, though you couldn't go as far as to say those regions were deserts.——Basically, unlike the Kingdom of Lugunica abound with nature and the Vollachia Empire, it was a country with a harsh natural environment, although the type of harshness was different than what the Holy Kingdom of Gusteko covered in perpetual snow had.

Therefore, before Kararagi settled as a single country, each of the small countries competed with each other, scrambling for fertile land. A single hero brought them together, but that didn't mean the natural environment would have any dramatic improvement.

Things were the same. The land was still harsh, and it was still an environment where not everything was rich in this rich land. People could only look for some way to manage living. As a result of being in an unreliable natural environment, the way of life chosen for Kararagi City State was promoting business activity all over the country —— This was how Kararagi City State became specialized in trade.

Alright, let's go back to talking about the Grand Monoglade Geyser.

The Grand Monoglade Geyser surrounding area in Kararagi City State has already been described as having a special environment, but to say what exactly would be special about it, it would be that this is the only area with fixed, periodic rain. ——The intervals were also definitely fixed.

That was the only very big thing in the country Kararagi.

The Grand Mogolade Geyser did seem to be a huge lake. However, that entity was not something like a lake, but a large hole that was deep, deep enough to penetrate the bottom of the earth, and the water that fills that hole leads to the Great Waterfall. And the arising water spouted out towards the sky at fixed intervals in the Great Geyser, tossing dozens of, sometimes several hundreds of kilometers of rain. Thanks to that blessing, a nature unexpected of Kararagi burgeoned around the Grand Mogolade Geyser, and it was treasured.

You could say that the towns like the Fourth City Fusumi near the Grand Monoglade Geyser were the ones that benefited from that blessing the most.

And now, the Banan Culture Promotion Committee that Subaru ran received backup from the head of the Fusumi city, and they took the challenge of an *Iwashi* Gathering Mission at the Grand Monoglade Geyser.

It was rumored that behind this cooperation, there was a rumor according to which getting Fusumi involved with the Banan activities had been a tough battle, the latter of which has been rapidly increasing its event-related achievements in recent years. However, this haggling happened between the higher-ups, and neither Rigel, a child, nor Subaru, an adult, had heard about it.

It was long, but this was the beginning —— It was the outline of the Banan Culture Promotion Committee's fight below Rigel, who struggled at the Grand Mogolade Geyser.

——In other words, the story will resume from here.

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Rigel: "Ahhhhhhh——!!"

He throws the net at the Grand Mogolade Geyser, grabs onto it, having succeeded at catching a large amount of shadows of fish, and Rigel roared with everything he had, having unleashed his Oni strength.

It was long, way too long of a fight. After Rigel grabbed the net, he felt like a lot of time passed since he came here, but he didn't have any time to think about useless things, as he twisted desperately.

He went fishing with Subaru before. It wasn't that Subaru and Rigel were particularly interested in fishing, but Rigel brought Subaru along, as he was whiny about wanting to do parent and child sort of things, so he guided him reluctantly to the rumored pond at school.

Rigel ended up having a showdown with the chief that was there for some reason, and he spent no less than 2 hours with it as it tried to snatch the bait. He didn't underestimate fish. Their survival instincts lit up even more than Rigel and Subaru, whose bodies were, incidentally, several times larger than theirs.

It was the same as the silver fish trapped inside this net —— no, they of course couldn't be compared individually to that chief, but the amount was too different. The shadows of fish, a hundred, twice that, or even more sparkling lives had tremendous power, absolutely not a step less than that of the Oni grating his molars.

Subaru: "Hang in there! Hang in there, everyone——!!"

Adults: “Heave-ho! Heave-ho! Heave-ho!”

And behind Rigel, him being desperately determined, there was Subaru, pulling onto the edge of the net like he was, and the promotion committee that came along. Not knowing if their yells were serious or not was the one thing that hurt Rigel’s concentration.

——Your postures are already bad. Drop your hips more. Ahh, but Liggins-san has back pain, so he can’t strain it. Wait, why even come? Get some rest at home.

Liggins: “You guys, just faking it won’t cut it.”

Adults: “Li—Liggins-san…!”

Liggins: “Hehe, we’ve still got more to show… Gwaaaa! My baaack!!”

Adults: “Liggins-saaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!!”

He gives a refined smile, and the moment Liggins changed his posture, he collapsed and withdrew from the front.

This basically happened because of the defeat of getting old. Most of the promotion committee members were old people that wanted to strengthen the bonds in the area, connecting with youth through events. Young members were chosen as carefully as possible, and the average age was around 60.

And well, at this battlefield where they were fighting violently for each of their lives, the people were half dead.

Subaru: “No! You can’t push yourself more than this! Elder! Take the casualties and fall back! People will die at this rate!”

Subaru takes into account the grimness of the situation, and he fires off his voice as if he made a tough decision.

If the wounded weren’t going to die, then it would be better and necessary to save them, rather than having them die. Casualties were kept away, but even then, two people were needed. In other words, if one person collapsed, a downward spiral of two helpers falling out would develop, and the front would finally collapse completely.

Now, there was only Subaru and Rigel, safely grabbing on the net, as well as three old people.

Subaru: “Di—didn’t think that it’d come down to a battle like this… My bad, Rigel. I wasn’t thorough at all with my judgement. I even got Elder involved…”

Chamov: “There’s nothing to worry about. We’ve known each other for a long time, and I knew that a time like this would pop up.”

The person that shook his head at Subaru’ murmuring, him being bitter, was a senior that had his white fur wet with water, and yet still maintained his charm —— It was the puppy person Chamov-san.

The senior Chamov, who traveled the world and boasted about having conquered the 7 deserts, was the one who provided the information about the wanted schools of fish that passed through the Grand Monoglade Geyser. He had that responsibility for the information, and he was also participating in the fishing, but——

Chamov: “But, what’s regretful is that… I won’t… be able to be with you guys until… the… end…”

Subaru: “El—Elder? Elder——!”

Subaru looks back, and he was greatly surprised at Chamov, who he called out to. Rigel also looks back, getting lured by the sound, and he had no words for Chamov, who was no longer in sight. The puppy person Chamov was only 50 centimeters tall, which meant he was the same size as the waves that were caused by the raging fish in the midst of the Grand Monoglade Geyser battle —— Just how many times has he stayed with them until the end, even after being washed away?

His diligent resistance and his toughness of not making himself noticeable to the others until this moment symbolized his hard-boiled way of living that didn’t match his appearance.

Chamov: “I—I can’t go on…”

Elder —— He was a friend, and a person that visited their home many times.

Rigel sees that Chamov had withdrawn from the front, and he quickly starts to lose strength. The horn on his forehead loses its light, and the boy’s body turns into one of a mere 11-year-old boy.

That was also of course him raising a white flag to the sparkling of the fishes’ lives.

Subaru: “——Rigel, it’s fine. Withdraw.”

Rigel: “…Dad?”

When he sought to let go of the net, Subaru said that to Rigel, being right behind him. That voice’s tone catches his attention, and his hands that tried to let go for a second were hesitant. When Rigel looked back, he saw Subaru having the net tied to his wrist, even while being soaked, and he nodded at him, not letting go no matter what.

Subaru: “I have responsibility. So, I’ll stay here until the end. Go back. Go back, and take those people collapsing over there with you.”

Rigel: “Bu—but… You can’t do it! Give it up! Let’s replace the net later!”

Subaru: “It’s not like I’m holding out because I care about the wickerwork. I told you, didn’t I? I have a responsibility. It might be a little embarrassing to the Banan Culture Promotion Committee and you, but this is also a part of my job. ——As if a parent would screw up a job in front of his kid.”

Rigel: “————”

Rigel could not respond to that assertion. His enthusiasm was excellent. So excellent that he lost the will to snap at him.

However, he had no chance. Could Subaru do something about the failure that happened even with all those people pulling, not even having Rigel, who for some reason was the main force? It was impossible. This battle was already——

Subaru: “Also, you’re not taking someone seriously.”

Rigel: “Dad… you mean daddy?”

Subaru: “Even if you aren’t taking me seriously, I’m a hopeless adult, so that’d be fine. But, the one you aren’t taking seriously isn’t me… It’s Rem.”

Rigel: “Mom?”

Rigel was stumped with why Rem’s name came in this situation.

Rem hasn't participated in fishing with the Grand Mogolade Geyser as a stage, something you'd also understand if you followed the battle up to here. Of course, she came with him to Fusumi, which was called a family trip, but it was not fishing that had the possibility of danger; it was like Rem and Spica were sightseeing, participating from the Cragrel Living Forest by tearing off twigs.

Rem: "Spica and I will be taking our time, so Subaru-kun and Rigel, please be careful not to skin your knees."

They each swore to do their best, which was a bit of a calm interaction, but considering that conversation, the mom and the younger sister not being here was a self-evident truth. Therefore, Rigel could not see Subaru's words as anything but preposterous nonsense, but——

Rem: "——Subaru-kun, you understand me as well as always. I'm blushing."

Rigel: "——!"

That voice made Rigel jump, who was trying to make Subaru give up in one way or another. It was a voice that shouldn't have been heard, a being that shouldn't have been here, and yet they calmly appeared.

It was a women with long blue hair put together simply, and she stood alongside Subaru, pulling onto the thread connected to the net so that the sleeves of her *kimono* didn't get in the way —— It was Rem.

Rigel was dumbfounded by that entry, but Subaru immediately gave a broad grin and said,

Subaru: "Sorry, Rem. We're in a pinch."

Rem: "Yes. It's always like this whenever I take my eyes off Subaru-kun. Just another reason why I can't take my eyes off Subaru-kun."

Subaru: "Your love is heavy! But that helps."

The married couple grab onto the net together, and Rem puts strength into her shoulders, her lips closed tightly. Just from that, the net's force that lost to the fish pulled the fish towards them splendidly.

However, even then, they were still outnumbered. Even with Rigel, that inferiority in numbers wouldn't be overturned. They were already at an unmanageable difference in fighting power from the beginning. Even if a miracle happened when Mom joined here, this battle would——

Rem: “Rigel, hold onto this rope, and stand still please.”

Rigel: “Eh?”

Rem: “Meanwhile, Subaru-kun and I… Dad and Mom will hold up the net with the two of us, and hope that Rigel won’t miss an opportunity. ——It’s a chance for onii-chan to show his cool side to Spica.”

Without being able to hide his confusion, Rigel did just what Rem said. He did not pull onto the net; he held onto the rope connected to the net, and he looked around the area restlessly.

What in the world did chance and opportunity indicate?

Chamov: “This is a man’s opportunity. We won’t be defeated.”

Rigel: “El—elder…!”

Liggins: “We’re here too…!”

Rigel: “Liggins-san! And the other bunch!”

Once again, the assembled comrades grab onto the net simultaneously to wipe away that uneasiness of Rigel, as he was worrying about his parents’ limits, and they put in their strength. Even if they were described as half dead people, if they were half alive, then there was meaning in bundling their power. Now was that time to do it.

Adults: “Heave-ho! Heave-ho!”

Adults: “Heave-ho! Heave-ho!”

Rigel frantically opens his eyes while having his concentration disturbed by their yelling. He gets lost in the loud adults’ voices, and he feels something —— Yes, he feels something like a tremor.

Perhaps it was an omen of the Grand Mogolade eruption, when the water would spew out. ——No, that wasn’t it. The tremor was not inside of the grand geyser, it came from outside and it was coming towards them. That was——

Rigel: “Th—the Cragrel Moving Forest…!”

It was the Cragel Moving Forest that moved, seeking water.

——It was a quake. Clouds of dust rose into the air, and as for what was approaching, it was a march of green that was passing right next to the grand geyser. Rigel belatedly determined what he'd aim for upon seeing the front — that large tree advancing at the very front.

Rem: "Rigel, now!"

In response to his mother's yell, Rigel used the tip of the rope as a loop and threw it without question. That loop entangles the tree's thick branch, and the net pulls it.

——The sparkling of the fishes' lives suffered defeat in front of Mother Nature.

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——Let's talk about the Cragrel Moving Forest.

The inner sea of the planet, and so on. The Cragrel Moving Forest is a special feature that produced the Kararagi City State's harsh environment, as well as the river source that is Grand Mogolade Geyser —— it's the name of the many trees whose roots don't stick to the ground.

It's already been explained how the water that spews out from the Grand Mogolade Geyser acts as river's source around this area, but the water that spews out at fixed intervals doesn't always rain on land.

The wind has a particularly big effect, and the lands' respective precipitation becomes sparse because of the season's wind direction. Apart from that, the living things that were managing were people and animals, but the plants that relied on water could not do that. Naturally, the Grand Mogolade Geyser's water was a lifeline to them, as they were things that would have no choice but to wither if water wasn't thorough.

Having said that, plants weren't things that could make direct appeals, as they didn't have mouths. Therefore, as a result of the influence from not knowing what to do to survive, the trees went through evolution.

It was them saying "If the land lacks water, then why not just walk to a place with water?".

And thus, the moving forest that was born —— The lively trees that were called the Cragrel Moving Forest, picking up the name from the humans that first discovered it, were in the middle of the Magolya Plateau that had the Grand Mogolade Geyser water rain on it, and they continued to move all year round without rest.

The moving forest's trees' wood were known to be of very fine quality, perhaps because of how they were full of vitality, but they wouldn't stay in one place, so it was difficult for them to gather. To make matters worse, if you stood in their route, you'd get run over recklessly, so they were famous as forestry that put lives at risk.

That special characteristic of the moving forest worked as a plus, just for this one time.

That was when they did something with the force of nature, given that they couldn't win with human power.

Rem: "The moving forest was going for the grand geyser, so it seemed that I could take my time to join Subaru-kun and the others. That's what I said at the start."

Subaru: "Then, if Rem sees withdrawn people collapsed at the base camp, she'll do something about it, having noticed it… Actually, that's the truth of my strategy, eh."

Rigel: "Strategy? How is that a strategy? It's a German hold of relying on Mom!"

Subaru: "Don't put it that way. Well, this is love winning in the end."

Rem: "Subaru-kun…"

Rigel: "That was a good line!? Mom spoils you too much!"

They raised a big catch flag, and the group went back home.

The soaked family talked about this time's cause of victory on the way back, but the one who wasn't quite satisfied with that explanation was Rigel, who wasn't overcoming it.

Rem's participation and pulling the Cragrel Moving Forest with a net brought them success, and the large amount of fish that were in the great geyser was pulled out splendidly (Subaru called them pseudo-*Iwashi*).

Actually, after that, the dashing moving forest took away the fish with the net, and there was an act of them chasing the moving forest to get back the net back, but that was left out. Anyhow, they obtained the fish safely, and they replaced *Hiiragi* successfully by cutting down one of the moving forests, so enough of that was secured.

With this, the preparations for *Hiiragi Iwashi* that Subaru talked about were complete.

Rigel: “That was a lot tougher than stuff like Bean-Tossing and Ehomaki. We went far too, plus I’m tired.”

Subaru: “Yeah, people like Elder were about to die, after all. You shouldn’t do things you aren’t used to.”

Rigel: “You said it, I’ve had enough of that. I definitely won’t do things like that again.”

Rigel sighs, and Subaru smiles wryly at him, agreeing with his feelings.

Although, the two of them saw Chamov chewing on a sweet leaf carefully.

Even though it was a lot of work, fortunately there were no casualties, and there was no damage. They were all somehow intoxicated by the atmosphere, but their injured backs were also recovering through Rem’s healing magic.

Like that, everyone triumphantly returned to Fusumi, and they should’ve been talking about distributing things like the fish and the wood now, but——

Subaru: “That’s out of my control. Let’s share the hardships of this trip as a family.”

Rem: “Yes, the best part of the trip.”

Rigel: “The best part of the trip is sharing hardship…?”

While experiencing a slight feeling of a common sense crisis, Rigel gets mad as he cuddled his beloved sister, his reward for returning from the jaws of death. Spica was one year old, and recently, she’s been frequently standing up and trying to walk on her own. She was an angel that also called Rigel “Nii-ni” on very rare occasions.

Rigel: “Her first calling me Nii-ni will be my lifetime treasure.”

Subaru: “You are an extreme siscon…”

Rigel: “Uh-oh, kinda seems like you’re saying “Daddyy” after “Nii-ni” and “Mommyy”, Spica. The grumbling of a loser does make me feel good. Hahaha.”

Subaru: “Grrrr…”

Rem: “Calm down, Subaru-kun. You have to let Rigel feel superior sometimes too. Also, Subaru-kun is my number one.”

Rigel: “Spoiling him again…”

Rem kindly comforts Subaru, who was depressed. Rigel pouts in a displeased way at that usual interaction. Then, seeing that, Rem let out a little laugh.

Subaru: “Oh, what happened, Rem?”

Rem: “No, it’s just… we’re always together wherever we go… That made me a little happy, and I thought it was funny.”

Subaru: “…I see I see. If you thought of it that way, then it was right to have you on the family trip. Well, forgive me for having it kinda feel like bringing my family come on a company trip.”

Subaru seeing Rem put her hand on her mouth smiling happily makes him also smile again. Seeing that smile makes Rigel feel like he somehow saw through Dad’s expectations.

They went far to prepare for the new celebration of *Setsubun*.

Of course, they really were necessary procedures needed to celebrate *Hiiragi Iwashi*. That’s why fish, wood, and twigs should have all worked as alternatives. So, as for why they still had plans of going far away like this——

Subaru: “The culture promotion committee was happy to tackle promoting culture. Being able to study the ways of Banan made Fusumi’s great men happy. And, we’re happy that we were able to make a family trip. It was a good attempt at finding a solution throughout struggle. No, it wasn’t a complete struggle, but 3/8ths of a struggle.”

Subaru laughs nonchalantly. The main thing was the very last part of his speech; if he was familiar with spending everyday together with family, he could see the light.

It probably was the truth that he couldn't ignore the two goals in front of him. Not appropriately declining favors was very inconvenient, and it was the nature of a man who saw much of life. That's what Rigel nonchalantly thought.

Rem: "————"

Rem was looking at Subaru's smile, her smiling with a kind look in her eyes.

Mom also definitely was able to see through Dad's heart. That's why Mom did not even oppose Dad's absurd speech from the start, but instead happily went along with it.

Rigel: "Elder, Elder, can you hear me out for a bit?"

Rigel separates himself a little from the flirting called parents' pleasant chat, and he calls out to Chamov, who was drying his body's fur in the sun. Chamov turns around saying "Certainly?", and he looks at Rigel with his round eyes as he said —

Chamov: "What is it, certainly? Rigel and I are good friends, certainly. Ask me anything, certainly."

Rigel: "Anything special happening in Fusumi this season?"

Chamov: "Hmmm…"

He asks that question, and Chamov closes one of his eyes, seemingly going into deep thought, just for a little bit. After that, Chamov glances at Subaru and the others, and he immediately nods.

Chamov: "Subaru has asked me that question too, certainly. Like father like son, certainly…"

Rigel: "No, I don't need to hear about that."

Chamov: "Don't be a party pooper, certainly. This season at Fusumi, famous flowers will… the White Snow Sakuras will bloom."

They were plants that were extremely difficult to take care of that could grow precisely because of how it was Fusumi, land blessed with plenty of precipitation from the Grand Mogolade Geyser.

It was a scene of all the huge trees' leaves becoming petals that were white like snow —— Rigel had never seen snow, but he imagined that it was definitely a stunning scene. It was also a family trip Subaru planned, as he wanted to show it for somebody's birthday that was coming up very soon, using *Setsubun* as an excuse to go.

Chamov: "Calling him out would be unromantic, certainly. It will be kept secret, certainly."

Rigel: "I won't say it… but Mom probably knows."

Chamov: "Like I said, it'd be unromantic, certainly. You too, if you're going to marry, you'll take that child too, certainly."

Rigel: "I'm against raising Spica exactly like Mom…"

Chamov: "The madness of you wanting to marry your sister like it's no big deal makes me tremble, certainly."

He makes Chamov's small body tremble, and Chamov looked at Rigel with eyes that seemed to be frightened. Just when he shrugged his shoulders, indicating that he was annoyed with that look, Spica pulled onto his cheeks. Cute.

Subaru: "Hey, Rigel, Spica. Come here. I have something to talk about."

Then, just when the conversation ended, Subaru called out to Rigel and the others. Chamov jerked his chin in response to that voice.

Chamov: "It's okay, I'll go, certainly. I won't be unromantic by butting into a happy family get together, certainly."

Subaru: "Th—thanks, Elder. Okaay, then we'll see you later."

He waves goodbye, and when Chamov let out a charming smile, while swinging his butt's tail left and right, he walked off in a way that was filled with only love and respect, nothing more and nothing less.

Rigel sees that with his own eyes, and then he went back to his parents. When he did, he saw the same old Rem, her cheeks slightly red, and the same old Subaru, him being his reckless and self-confident self.

Subaru: “Ahem. You see, Rigel. I want to show something to Rem and you guys.”

He imagined what it was from the pretentious expression, and the wording that came out after that.

Rigel:“————”

There was a pause after Subaru’s announcement, and Rigel glanced at Rem.

Subaru faced the children, his eyes sparkling, and he did not notice his wife next to him. When Rem noticed Rigel’s look, her having a faint smile, she put a finger on her lips, saying “Shh” as a signal.

Starting to talk would be unromantic. Pointing it out would be unromantic. That was greatly understood. Rigel reluctantly shrugged his shoulders. Spica also shrugged her shoulders, copying him.

Subaru: “This time’s family trip isn’t for mere fishing and work. The truth is——”

The clownish mastermind gets surrounded by the children and his wife, thinking that his secret hadn’t been found out, and he magnificently announced the final plan of the family trip.

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The details of the White Snow Sakura appreciation meeting will not be talked about.

Let’s just say that they were able to enjoy the truly splendid scene of the flowers that colored the many mountains of Fusumi.

Well then, the family trip was used as groundwork, and they still had to accomplish the new nominated custom of *Setsubun*, *Hiiragi Iwashi*, but——

Subaru: “Hmm, I didn’t see through this unexpected thing happening, even with my amazing eyes.”

Rigel: “That’s because you’re blind as hell! Come on, use your hands, Dad.”

They pant, and the big figure and small figure that ran about in the streets of Banan —— putting it frankly, they were the men of the Natsuki Family, Subaru and Rigel.

They had green and red wigs that were like perms, and vests with black and yellow stripes. They had clubs made of soft material in their hands, the thorns filled with cotton. It was a style of the good old days, and a style of the new era of the Oni. As for what those two were frantically doing in what were clearly Oni outfits——

Subaru: "Trying to do *Hiiragi Iwashi* was fine… but I didn't think it'd cause an outbreak of cats and mice downtown!"

Rigel: "If you think about it, it was inevitable! Of course, the strays would eat all this bait if we hung them up for all to see!"

Rigel takes decorated fish again from an established point with their branches while raising an angry voice, and it gets thrown into the bag to collect them. They were now at 20. There was still a long way to go.

That was because branches and fish were distributed throughout town, and the whole town was practicing this weird festival.

Subaru: "Oi, Rigel, don't treat them so carelessly! This is like a sacred ritual, so the *Hiiragi Iwashi* would be thankful. You should dispose of them kinda like this, filling them at a proper place. You have to do it like that."

Rigel: "What a pain! Plus, don't implement disposal laws arbitrarily! And anyways… Ow!"

Rigel continued to feel impact on his little back, as he raised his voice pointing out the lack of progress. When he turned around to see what it was, what fell at his feet were small beans——they were beans.

And the ones who threw them were kids chasing him with smiles on their faces——.

Kids: "It—it's hunter! Hunter found them!"

Rigel: "Crap! We're gonna get covered in beans! Hey, you over there! How can we escape to the other side from here… shit! Damn, he's nibbling on Ehomaki!"

When Rigel was cornered at the street, trying to look for a way out, he was at his wits' end. The old person that he asked on a porch was looking at the lucky direction of the Ehomaki that he was nibbling on. A person in that situation would not speak. He would continue gazing at the lucky direction until he was done eating.

Subaru: "I feel like damage like this breaks out even at Fusumi, but who will be responsible? Me? What you think, Rigel?"

Rigel: "At the very least, ow! Right now, oww! I've lost a way to escape, ow! So it's your fault that I'm getting hit with beans ow ow ow! Why only me!?"

He had just seen him in a new light for a little, and yet Subaru still did an unsatisfactory job. The parent and child ran their Oni pants through the town of Banan while crying because of the rapid succession of beans.

Surely his mom and sister were waiting at home, eating Ehomaki while facing the lucky direction. Would they collect all the *Hiiragi Iwashi* and return home safely——?

Subaru: "Hehe, Rigel. You're pretty fast now. I'm happy."

Rigel: "Shut uuuupp!! Go catch a coooldd!!"

That parent and child quarrel resounded into the sky.

This was also, once again, a shot of the daily scenery at one part of Kararagi City State.

EX Chapter 6 – Fortune *Setsubun* Hollow

Original translation by Remonwater

Let's get right into it without any introduction. ——*Setsubun* season is here this year again.

Setsubun is the most feared day in the year for the *Setsubun* King Natsuki Rigel. In Banan, the Kararagi City State's Second Town, it was culture that was now well established, and you'd call it a strange festival.

——Throw beans should you come across an Oni, eat rolls should you face the good luck direction. This is where the idea of *Hiiragi Iwashi* comes from.

Dunno who said that, but that's what *Setsubun* is like — the new culture in Kararagi.

Rigel: "I wonder what they'll make me do this year…"

On the way back from the school Temple Elementary, Rigel, while clasping his hands behind his head, sighs about the upcoming misfortunate event in which he'd probably be attacked.

Wear outfits like Oni underpants and run through the whole town to get away from the hunters that'll be hot on your tail to try and hit you with beans. ——Rigel does have that sort of role as the King, but that's if we assume the standard turn of events of just the original bean throwing.

Every year, *Setsubun* culture goes downhill thanks to Natsuki Subaru's — Rigel's father's — ideas, and now the damage doesn't stop with just the bean throwing.

An event called Ehomaki where you eat Ehomaki in silence while looking in the good luck direction.

An event called *Hiiragi Iwashi* where you stab a fish head onto a tree branch and hang it at the entranceway to your house.

As a representative of the Kararagi Culture Promotion Society, Subaru had a very influential voice, and over the years the amount of those devilishly intricate revamps has increased.

On top of that, since they had an agreement to keep these sort of displays as vague information, occasionally the descriptions people give of the events are from off from what they actually are as a result of word being passed down like a telephone game.

Thus, *Setsubun* went through changes, and for Rigel it's an event where stuff like beans, Ehomaki, and fish heads are thrown at him while he runs around town dressed as an Oni.

Rigel: "Nobody gets what *Setsubun* is all about! Plus, they all treat food so recklessly! If it were just beans it wouldn't be that bad, but other things can't be eaten once they fall to the ground…!"

While looking back at memories of *Setsubun*, Rigel showed his anger as he grinded his teeth. This has been said before before, but Rigel doesn't like the event *Setsubun*.

Every single time he just takes all the hits. Still, he had no intention of being a tank that likes it.

No matter how cruel the events may have been, the one thing we can say is that Rigel's father started this. It really irritated Rigel how the original idea was changing into something different. Letting them do whatever they want with no boundaries as a way to have fun in an event was the worst idea ever. And it's supposed to be an event that considers tradition and hearts of the people——

——Though he did hate it from the bottom of his heart, Natsuki Rigel insisted on earnestly making *Setsubun* a success since he was born with the ability to be a hard worker.

Going off the subject, when it gets to the season near *Setsubun* when people cut back, in Banan Town every family starts to stock up on beans. As a result, there are kids who misunderstand the point of *Setsubun*, and oftentimes they bring out beans from their home and throw them at Rigel a day prior.

There was also one act on the way back from Temple Elementary where kids saw Rigel and determinedly threw his beans at him which they'd found. However——

Rigel: "——Woop, oh, oop."

The beans thrown, the size of them, the amount… Rigel knew the trajectory inside out, and dodged all the beans with the minimum amount of movement needed to do so.

If it were only one or two beans being thrown at him, perhaps it wouldn't be anything to freak out about.

However, this time each kid was throwing a handful of beans at Rigel —— Even though they were kids, 21-30 beans a throw was rough.

In short, Rigel dodged a storm of over 100 beans without even looking at them.

???: “No way…”

???: “Without even taking a glance…”

???: “D-Does he have eyes on his back…?”

In response to them being stunned, Rigel looked back as he shrugged his shoulders.

Rigel: “Too naive, brats, try again. Just how many times do you think I’ve cheated death every year?”

Said Rigel as he faced the kids with a twisted smile on his face.

That instant, the kids trembled, shrieked as if to curse at themselves for just casually challenging the *Setsubun* King, then ran away in all directions.

???: “Eek! We’re gonna get killed!”

???: “My god, those eyes!”

???: “The *Setsubun* King is a heartless demon!”

Rigel: “Hop off with the eyes comment! Also, listen to what your parents said about the rules of *Setsubun* — participate using the right amount! Now I’ma throw them right back at you!”

Rigel threatened the kids running away on the verge of tears and sighed as he looked at the beans at his feet.

Having more of these misunderstood bunches pop up when *Setsubun* comes near would be troubling. When one does it, everyone else will too, no matter where he goes. Things can’t keep going on like this. He’ll always sense danger whenever he goes out to do a little shopping, or even when he’s taking a walk, and that also goes for when he comes back from Temple Elementary, of course.

Going off the subject again, apparently this is the only time when there are bean-gatherer jobs for a short period, since oftentimes beans will be scattered all over town when *Setsubun* approaches. That's what he'd heard from Clane, a mediator whom he knew. He vaguely remembers being told that they make a fair amount of money and are appreciated.

That being said, this also leads to Rigel's senses being really sharp during this time.

Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to go out with cute little Spica in peace. This was probably one thing he developed as a result of having his life in danger. As long as he's with Spica, this whole bean thing won't get him, even if they come at him at the speed of light.

Rigel: "Nothing with bean in its name can even touch me now, huh."

???: "——Saying weird things while looking far in the distance I see. You're just like Su-san."

Rigel: "Oh."

Rigel, who picked up a bean and was listlessly murming, raised an eyebrow upon hearing that voice.

He'd heard this voice before. A Kararagian speaker that had a low tone and sounded somewhat witty —— The moment he realized who the owner of this voice was, Rigel broke into a smile as he turned around.

Rigel: "Uncle Halibel!"

Halibel: "Aye, glad to see you're full of energy, Rigel."

Patting Rigel's head with his big palm as he said that and ran up to him was a tall man who wore a *kimono* and had a dog face —— no, it was a demi-human with a wolf face.

This man who was a wolf man — a race that was considered to be extremely rare — put a golden *kiseru* to his big mouth that had a full set of sharp fangs, and laughed as he looked at Rigel with his narrow slit eyes.

Halibel was a friend of his dad and mom, and to Rigel he was like a relative to him, too.

Halibel: “Kids around your age grow up so fast when you take your eye off them for a second. So fast that I want you to succeed me if Rem-chan lets you.”

Rigel: “I told you this before, didn’t I? I need to find a stable job and support Mom and Spica. Can’t have myself walking around aimlessly like you, Uncle.”

Halibel: “Huh, you sure are harsh. For you to sway me that easily… The way you talk big is too much for me.”

Halibel laughed wildly with his big mouth open, and Rigel also was acting spoiled with a smile that was appropriate for his age.

Rigel was someone who was often pushed around by all the shackles in this world, too. Sometimes you can’t look and act like a child when you’re exploring the hardships of life.

So, that’s why you gotta have times when you’re just being spoiled, like how he was right now.

Rigel: “Guess that’s the least bit of peace you can get as a child whose parents have all their hopes on them…”

Halibel: “You’re getting super deep. Doesn’t sound cool for a child to say that.”

Rigel: “I don’t care about that! Anyway, where have you been, Uncle? You promised to train me, but you were gone for so long that I thought you’d fallen dead on the street or something.”

Halibel: “Haha, got me there. If I ever died or something, that’d be a serious concern for this country. It’d also seal my endangered kind’s fate; I’ve got big responsibilities.”

Rigel: “Yeah. And you’re my master.”

Halibel: “Yep. That’s an even bigger responsibility.”

When he was told something clever, Rigel also smiled at Halibel, who laughed in delight.

Rigel was fond of Halibel, as he was a sociable person and he’d be intimate with him like this.

Although he had a reputation of being an irresponsible person because of his behavior and the fact that he called himself an Eternal Playboy, it seemed that he was good at his job, and whenever he walked through town with him, he could tell that a lot of people loved him — So much that he couldn't help but feel happy for him.

Rigel didn't really know what his job was, though.

Rigel: "Even after you told me that shinobis fight dangerous people day and night to protect the country. You also said that you're a wolf, an endangered race, right? You must be exaggerating!"

Halibel: "Well, in your case, you had no choice but to throw away your childish innocence to get through the days. It's a bit unfortunate, but that's the uncertainty of life for ya."

Halibel puffed out smoke from his *kiseru* into the sky and gave a wry smile.

Halibel: "Oh right, have you been practicing the Substitution I taught you? It's fine if you got tired of it."

Rigel: "Of course I have. Why would I get tired of it? Can I show it to you? Though, the *Hiiragi Iwashi* that was thrown at me on my way back is the only thing I can use Substitution on."

Halibel: "I see those fish heads every now and then. Su-san must have something to do with it."

The *iwashi* head that had been thrown at him was very nice, so he thought to bring it home and show it to his sister for a memory. When he took it out from his shoulder bag, Halibel nodded over and over as if to approve of it.

This wolf man has been friends with Subaru for a very long time, and just because of that, he was quick at figuring out what was going on.

Halibel: "He works for the Banan Culture Promotion Committee, right? I hear about him quite a lot in other towns. He's gotten pretty famous. I'm proud of him."

Rigel: "Hehe, dad may be how he is, but I mean, it is my parent's job. I guess him being praised is kinda nice. Oh, but please don't get carried away and tell my dad!"

Halibel: "Kids sure are complicated."

Halibel, who put his hand in the front of his *Kimono* and was scratching his stomach, had a bit of a wry smile on his face. Saved by his understanding attitude, Rigel started walking as he went “Oh yeah” and said,

Rigel: “Since you came over here, that means you’ll be staying in town for a little while, right?”

Halibel: “Yep, for sure. I’m gonna go say hi to people I know for a bit, and then I’ll show up at your house at night again. Tell Su-san and Rem-chan I said hi.”

Rigel: “Uncle.”

Halibel: “Hm?”

Rigel: “What about Spica? Nothing for her?”

Rigel frankly asked, smiling with his head tilted. Upon hearing that, for some reason Halibel’s face stiffened up as though he’d been overwhelmed and said,

Halibel: “O-Oh, right. Tell Spica-chan to be a cute girl and wait for me.”

Rigel: “Ahh, gotcha, I’ll let her know! Oh, but I dunno… Spica is already as cute as an angel as it is. If she consciously tries to be cute and wait, she might just reach an unfathomable level of loveliness.”

Halibel: “That part of you really shows how you are Rem-chan’s kid…”

Rigel blushed and worried as he imagined his cute little sister waiting at home. Halibel, faced with this scene, scratched his cheek with a dumbfounded look on his face.

Rigel: “Hah! I can’t be doing this! I have to come home and see Spica ASAP! Uncle! See you tonight! Don’t forget to bring Spica a present!”

Halibe: “Oh, okay, gotcha. I’ll pick something out and bring it home.”

Rigel waved goodbye with his small hand, turned around as if to say “My work is done here”, then started to zoom through town.

As Halibel watched him fade away while making clouds of dust, he smoked his *kiseru* and,

Halibel: “You were a sister lover before your sister was born, but after she was born, it’s gotten even worse, huh, Rigel.”

He muttered while giving a wry smile.

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Ignoring Halibel’s murmuring — though, even if he did hear him, Rigel would be doing the same thing — he fiercely ran through town, and was rushing home.

Rigel: “Spica, Spica, cute li’l Spica.”

While excitedly humming to himself, Rigel ran faster than the wind.

Just by picturing my cute little sister in my mind, endless amounts of energy flows from my body. How about I call this the Everlasting Spica Engine?

The world ought to acknowledge Spica’s endless potential. If everyone in the world were to see Spica, all kinds of things would come to an end through stuff like fighting.

While being possessed by such grand fantasies, Rigel repelled the beans that were thrown at him, waved at his neighbor who was nibbling on a Ehomaki to practice for Ehomaki, and when he put a fish head he’d been carrying on a *Hiiragi* that had had only its fish head stolen by a cat, he’d made it back home.

Feeling that he couldn’t waste another second, Rigel opened the front door, and rushed in at once.

Rigel: “All riiiright, I’m hooome! Spica, Nii Nii’s home! I’m going to wash my hands and gargle right now, so be a cute girl and wait for me please!”

Rigel, with a big smile on his face, announces that he’s home while bearing with his urge to hug Spica right this instant.

Washing his hands and gargling was an obligation that he’d been taught since he was a baby. He’d been told that he had to do it so that he didn’t get sick or something. And Rigel has actually never gotten sick before, though he wasn’t sure if it was because of that.

He had a feeling this was simply his healthy mom's blood being just that tough, but in any case, he had to get to washing his hands and gargling. If he didn't do that, he won't even be able to touch Spica and——

???: "You're real different indoors compared to when you're outside."

The one who greeted Rigel as he rushed into the bathroom, however, was neither his mom nor his sister. It was the voice of a woman that wasn't in his family.

Rigel gulped, and then stopped himself from going to the bathroom. After that, he headed towards the living room while being more cautious, slowly put his hand on the double door shoji, and then opened it. Inside there was——

Spica: "Oh, Nii Nii."

???: "Welcome back. You sure are late."

Rigel gazed in wonderment at the scene in the living room beyond the shoji.

A kotatsu was placed in the middle of the tatami-matted room, and it was an essential for the Natsuki family during cold seasons.

There was a woman with her feet in the kotatsu, and she was cradling a smiling angel in her arms. The woman shook her milky white hair whose ends were uneven and was furtively giving Rigel a sidelong glance with her almond eyes. Her light pink lips slackened, and she made a very provocative smile.

???: "Can you not be charmed just because I'm cute?"

Rigel: "——I mean, it doesn't matter if there's a beautiful person in front of me, I have my sister."

???: "Look, you liking your sister is all fine and dandy, but people will think you're an idiot if you're always like this. Be careful."

That moment, he came back to his senses upon hearing those words. What came back to him just then were the indescribable, mixed feelings he had about seeing that woman in her white *kimono*.

It was a frightening but well-groomed woman.

In her case, well-groomed may not be accurate, but it's appropriate if beautiful is what's meant by the phrase. She was not a result of a doll maker pursuing beauty; she was more like a natural beauty that was miraculously created by things that had been put together by animals that followed their instincts.

Beauty with a hint of crudeness… frankly speaking, that was all she was, but even Rigel, who still didn't have much interest in women, was moved by just how much of that had to come from a miracle.

Although, that'd only be the case if this were his first time seeing her.

This was not the first time Rigel has talked with this girl.

Rigel: "Tia! What are you doing here!?"

Tia: "Huh? No reason, no reason at all, obviously. When I want to be somewhere, I'll be there. It's not like anyone has the right to tell me not to. Oh, there there, you're so cute, Spica. ——I really want to kill you."

Rigel: "You're gonna teach her bad things, stop that!"

While sweetly smiling at Spica, the woman —— Tia uttered some really bloodthirsty words.

Rigel thought that she was actually serious when she suddenly said that remark, and when he panicked and took Spica away from her, he made sure that she was alright as he gently patted her black hair.

Rigel: "Are you alright, Spica? She didn't do anything weird to you, did she? Sorry for coming home late so much… What the heck is Mom doing!?"

Tia: "Rem let me take care of Spica and went shopping. I was thinking of going too, but this, uh, kotatsu, was it? It seems I can't get out. To fascinate me this much… even humans do cool things every now and then, huh."

Tia pouts over having Spica taken away from her, but she settled down with the kotatsu. She looked happy, resting the upper half of her body on the table as she moaned "Ahh" while smiling.

She looked to be around 20 years old, but the way she talked and acted were completely different. This beauty was also pretty friendly for how stingy she was — not the type of woman Rigel was very good with.

——He didn't really dislike her, though.

Rigel: "Plus, look at how much of a bum she is, I'm dumbfounded…"

Spica: "Nii Nii, Nee Nee."

Rigel: "Yeah, you're right, Spica. Don't know how I feel about Tia being «Nee Nee», but we shouldn't fight. I'm sorry."

Spica closed and opened her hand and pushed on Rigel's cheek. Sensing that his sister was emotionally appealing to him with that, Rigel decided to stop fighting for now.

While watching that interaction, Tia took advantage of this and said "That's right that's right."

Tia: "Reflect upon your actions. Be sorry. Since you've hurt me, I'd like to eat sweets."

Rigel: "Don't get carried away now. Besides, my kind mother must've already left sweets. Where'd they go?"

Tia: "Where, you ask? In my stomach."

Rigel: "Then you'll have to hold out until supper."

Rigel had no words for Tia's bossy behavior who was acting outrageous at another family's house.

Tia is another one of Dad's and Mom's old friends, and she's also someone Rigel has known for a few years. According to Dad and Mom, she's apparently more like family than a friend.

But honestly, Rigel still had some doubts. And that's because——

Rigel: "Families live together. If you only show up every now and then like this, doesn't that mean you're a relative or a friend or something?"

Tia: "What's this? Getting all pouty because I don't come to see you very much? Your face does look just like Su's, but I guess you have some cute points after all. I want to kill you."

Rigel: "Don't say such dangerous things!"

He also didn't like how she would keep on randomly saying "I'll kill you" and "I want to kill you" as if it was a routine that she just had to do at the end of her comments. The way she spoke, the way she behaved… Those aspects were ruining a lot of things.

If only she didn't act that way, she'd look quite——

Tia: "…? Did you get taller when I wasn't looking?"

Rigel: "Gulp."

Tia got out of the kotatsu, instantly closed in, and stood in front of Rigel. She smelled pretty good. She nonchalantly reached her hand out and touched Rigel's short blue hair.

Rigel's silky hair was patted by her thin fingers, and he couldn't move a muscle. Meanwhile, Tia, who seemed to be very pleased with how much Rigel has grown,

Tia: "Kids grow up so fast. Just a little while ago, you were a drooling little shorty, and now you're only somewhat of a shorty."

Rigel: "…That stuff again, huh. People always tell me stuff like you and Halibel-san were there when I was born."

Tia: "It's the truth. I was there, and Halibel was there, too. I may have not been there during the most important part, though."

Rigel: "————"

That's when Tia squinted, and it seemed as though she was looking at something far away. It felt like those eyes that were looking far away were not looking at what was in front of her, but at the past, and it made Rigel kind of upset.

Rigel couldn't reach that place. Rigel didn't like thinking about that place.

Rigel: "That stuff sounds too much like bull. Who'd believe that Banan Town was going to be destroyed when I was being born?"

Tia: “Oh, it’s the truth. The map was this close to being rewritten. I wanted to kill you so badly at the time, by the way.”

Rigel: “You make it sound like you were going to destroy the town yourself.”

Rigel shrugged at Tia, maybe because she wasn’t careful with her word choice. Seeing that, Tia’s eyes widened as if she’d been caught off guard, and then she said,

Tia: “The way you do that kind of stuff, it arouses my sadism. Ahh, if I keep looking at you being bothered, I can’t imagine how much I’d be pleased. I want to kill you.”

Rigel: “I hate that part of you.”

Tia: “——But, even though you don’t like me, you’ve kept my present for all this time.”

Said Tia as she broke into a smile and looked at Rigel’s left wrist. Upon hearing her point, Rigel choked, his cheeks became slightly red, and he looked away. On Rigel’s wrist, he had a bracelet ornament made from a beast’s white fur.

This was something Tia gave to him a few years ago when they first met. When she gave this to him, he said something.

Tia: “Do you remember? Do you remember what you said to me when I gave that to you?”

Rigel: “Id-! W-Well, umm… I-I have Spica, so…”

Tia: “That again? You’re so much like Su in that regard.”

Rigel gets teased, and he grinded his teeth hard. Spica, who was in his arms, innocently watched Nii Nii and Nee Nee[25] glare at each other.

If I back out here, I lose my pride as a man. I can’t let Spica see me being pathetic.

Rigel made up his mind, and he pierced Tia with a sharp look. And the——

[25] Nii Nii is a baby-like way to say big brother. Nee Nee is a baby-like way to say big sister.

Rigel: “That you love…”

Tia: “That as long as you have white bracelet, I will come running over whenever you’re in danger…”

They both speak at the same time, and the things that came out of their mouths were completely different.

Tia’s eyes widen in surprise, then her expression slowly turned into a mischievous one, then into a ferocious one a carnivore would have when it plays with a mouse.

Tia: “Hey, what did you just say? Hey Rigel, what did you say?”

Rigel: “Shut up! It’s not like that! It’s nothing! I lost myself! Dad set this up!”

Tia: “Ahaha, it’s okay. I love you. But I want to kill you.”

Rigel: “Goddamnit!”

With Spica in his arms and with a red face, Rigel turned his body and tried to run away from Tia, who was in front of him. However, Tia quickly prevented Rigel from doing so with quick movements, and when she got in front of him, she kept poking his red cheek with her finger.

Spica: “Owoo, Nii Nii. Nee Nee.”

Spica was the only one who was happily laughing and watching them act that way.

And their little act continued until Rem came home after she finished shopping.

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???: “And so, here’s to Hal-san and Tia being back again!”

???: “——Cheers!”

At night in the Natsuki home’s living room, everyone at the kotatsu made a toast.

However, the cups they made a toast with did not have alcohol in them, but tea and a kind of fruit juice. Due to various reasons, nobody was drinking alcohol at this gathering. Halibel, who would even bring alcohol with him to the bathhouse, was no exception either.

Subaru: “But man, coincidences really do happen. Who would’ve thought that Hal-san and Tia would come back simultaneously at the perfect time?”

Rem: “It really was unexpected. Thanks to that, we’re all here together at the dining table. It made me so happy that I’m worried about whether I was able to cook as well as I usually do.”

Subaru: “Oh, so you weren’t able to focus on doing your best, and you’re a bit worried?”

Rem: “Well, I’m always giving it my all to cook meals for our family.”

Seeing Rem smile slightly while being dreamy-eyed, Subaru scratched his head as he blushed. Frankly, seeing his parents like this was bad for the eyes, but for Rigel this has been the usual since he was born, so at this point it was no big deal.

Rigel: “Uncle, hand me your plate. I’ll get some for you.”

Halibel: “Ohh, as smart as expected. Can you give a lot of meat? Also, don’t put too many vegetables.”

Rigel: “Aye-aye. But it’s not healthy if you don’t eat your vegetables, you know.”

While taking Halibel’s order, Rigel skillfully used his chopsticks and dished out hot pot ingredients into the bowls.

Tonight at the Natsuki family house, they were having hot pot, and there were also many side dishes arranged by Rem who’d been fired up and made them with her skills.

Subaru: “It’ll be a lot of people, and we’ll be using a kotatsu. We have to have a hot pot!”

Rem: “Yes, that sounds great Subaru-kun! I’m convinced!”

This was what his parents were saying before they had the hot pot. He didn’t really disagree, so he let that be. Also, Rigel liked hot pot. He liked being able to have lots of vegetables, though he wasn’t really a big fan of them.

Tia: “Hey, Rigel. Aren’t you giving me too many vegetables? Like Hal, I like to eat a lot of meat. Though, I did tell you to give me vegetables.”

Rigel: “What are you talking about? Eat your vegetables. You don’t want to get fat by eating only meat. Meat, vegetable, vegetable, vegetable, meat, vegetable, vegetable. Gotta go with the meat rhythm.”

Tia: “I can barely even eat my meat!”

Tia was served tons of vegetables, and she screamed in displeasure. Still, considering that she wasn’t putting stuff back into the hot pot, it seemed that she was being taught properly, and that’s more important than anything else.

Satisfied with what he saw in her bowl, Rigel served the next bowl, and then the next bowl, and continued to serve.

Subaru: “Man, it really helps that we have a someone taking charge. Just watching him makes us happy~, and the hotpot running smoothly makes him happy. It’s a win-win situation.”

Rigel: “Stop being ridiculous. I want some hot pot too. Don’t make me do everything…”

Rem: “I feel bad, so… Here, open wide, Rigel.”

Rem pointed her chopsticks at Rigel, who was neglecting his own stomach because he was too focused on serving the hot pot.

It was a bit embarrassing, but everyone here was his friend. Rigel wasn’t going to care about being embarrassed, and he contentedly accepted Rem feeding him.

Subaru: “Hey hey, what the hell are you making my Rem do? All right, I’ll feed you too.”

Halibel: “Oh, huh, Rigel, you haven’t been eating at all. I’ll feed you too.”

Tia: “Oh, okay then I’ll do it too. Here, eat this. Hey, c’mon, eat it!”

Rigel: “Nom nom! I can’t eat all that!”

Rigel accepting Rem's food lead to all the adults stuffing his mouth with more food. Although Subaru and Halibel were horsing around, they were still choosing things properly, so it could've been worse, but when Tia started doing it, she was only giving him vegetables from her bowl that she didn't like.

Rigel: "Stop messing around! You're all adults, so do it properly! Fooling around in the middle of a hot pot… Respect hot pot more! Tremble with fear at the power of hot pot!"

Subaru: "Wow, look at what an expert you are at being a hot pot governor. As your father, I'm proud of how you get into things so easily."

Rigel: "Shut up! You'd never praise me, Dad!"

Rigel roared loudly and whacked the adults, starting with Subaru. However, the adults laughed and ignored it, irritating Rigel quite a bit.

There really was no one on Rigel's side besides Spica.

Rigel: "And yet I still got Spica taken away from me by Tia!"

Tia: "Ahh, okay okay, don't get so moody. Like, you, her brother, are the one Spica likes. I've only met her twice, you know."

Rem: "She's right, Rigel. Usually you keep Spica all to yourself to the point of being stubborn, so let Tia-sama have her for today. Instead, why don't you just pet Halibel-sama?"

Halibel: "Am I still in that low of a position to you?"

Judging from the way Rem bluntly expressed who she had a better relationship with, it seemed Tia had won her support and not Halibel.

An easy to talk to, beautiful, proud mother. That's who Rem is, but it's rare for her to be this friendly to someone, so Rigel wouldn't say anything if Tia were to stick his tongue out at him.

Subaru: "Hey, don't feel down now, Rigel. Seeing Spica is a matter of life and death for you too, isn't it? You won't be seeing Spica for a little while. Don't forget about Tia."

Rigel: "…You can't call her family."

Subaru: “Hmm?”

Rigel: “Aren’t families family because they live together? She only comes over occasionally, so it’s kind of weird to treat her like family.”

Rigel whispered what he had said to Tia in the evening to Subaru.

That’s when it felt like Rigel was ratting her out, and he was disgusted with himself. However, Subaru ruffled Rigel’s hair and said,

Subaru: “You’ve got a good point… is what I’d like to say, but that’s not quite right. She doesn’t necessarily need to live with us to be family. Tia has her own circumstances. So, she can only show up every now and then. But she always comes when she can.”

Rigel: “——”

Subaru: “Well, for now just spoil yourself with this awfully popular beauty that occasionally comes over to tease you. You’re so blessed.”

Rigel: “What are you talking about!?”

The sound of his tone changed. Once it clearly fell into the banter category, Rigel yelled. After that, he brushed away his father’s hand that was above him, then he thrusted his finger at Subaru.

Rigel: “Are you really being serious when you say that I’m blessed? I’m definitely going to have a bad time tomorrow at *Setsubun*, you know. I’m already so depressed… I won’t be able to sleep without Spica!”

Subaru: “What are you trying to demand here? The right to sleep with Spica is given by rotation, and tonight it’s supposed to be mine. And I’ll be giving it to Tia, so even in the worst case, you will have no right to sleep with her.”

Rigel: “Goddamnit!”

Rigel tried to take advantage of the mess and win some sympathy, but Subaru has known him for a long time; since he’s known him since he was born, his shallow plan was seen through immediately.

Then, while the father and his son loudly chatted with each other like that as if it was just the usual,

Tia: “Hm? What’s up? Need something from Rigel tomorrow or something?”

Tia, who was having her finger bit by Spica who’d heard the ruckus, tilted her head. Rigel wasn’t sure how to respond, but Rem took over, nodded, and said “Got it” with a smile.

Rem: “Tomorrow is *Setsubun*, and it’s actually the day of a festival Subaru-kun proposed. And, Rigel will represent the Onis as he runs around town dressed as an Oni while having beans thrown at him.”

Rigel: “That introduction’s so misleading!”

Tia: “Oh my, what the heck, that sounds like so much fun…”

Rigel: “Don’t get all enthusiastic about!”

Tia listened to Rem’s rough introduction, and her eyes shined. Though you may be able to tell from the fact that she said something dangerous, Tia clearly liked the bean-throwing part. She liked the part about being able to annoy Rigel, and like she says herself, the sadism in her was very strong. In short, *Setsubun* is——

Tia: “——A festival for me.”

Rigel: “This is why I didn’t want you to ask about it! Who was careless and started talking about *Setsubun*!? Was it me!? It was me! I’m sorry!”

Subaru: “You have a lot on your plate…”

Tia looked at Rigel, who was crumbling with his head between his hands, with eyes that were like those of a young girl who was dreaming. Seeing Rigel’s self-destructing, Subaru nodded as he said, “Alright.”

Subaru: “Hey, listen up, son. I really understand how you feel. It’s true that the *Setsubun* event hurts you to a very rough degree. As your parent, I can’t bear to see it.”

Rigel: “Chomp, this taste like lies!”

Subaru: “That’s when you’re supposed to lick. Don’t bite!”

Subaru got a bite mark on his hand from his son, and he had no idea what to do with Rigel and his distrustful remarks.

Subaru: “What made you become this much of a monster…”

Rigel: “Bad parenting! And bad treatment from the town!”

Subaru: “I’ll have you know I do dress up as an Oni too during bean-throwing. You’re not the only one getting hit by kids throwing beans while walking outside!”

Tia: “Wait, I can throw beans at Su too? I don’t know if I’ll be able to take this…”

Rem: “Tia-sama, Tia-sama, the meat is cooked now. Say «ahhn»—”

Tia: “Ahhn.”

Tia, who couldn’t hold in her sadism, teased him, but in the middle of doing so, Subaru’s good wife splendidly saved him, and he continued as he cleared his throat.

Subaru: “Anyway, don’t interrupt me. What I’m about to tell you is the most important part. It’s rough that you suffer too much every year during *Setsubun*. So, I’ve come up with an elaborate plan this time!”

Rigel: “I’m guessing you’ve added another strange festival aspect to *Setsubun*…”

Subaru: “You really just don’t trust me at all! Still, I’m sure you’ll be surprised and you’ll accept it!”

Said Subaru, and when he got out of the Kotatsu, he looked for his work bag that had been placed at the corner of the living room. Then, he started taking out a round cloth from it.

Subaru: “Hal-san, hang on to that end! We’re unfolding it!”

Halibel: “Oh, what’s this, a banner? What’s in it?”

Accepting Subaru’s request, Halibel got up and held the end of the cloth. When they unfolded it in one go, some letters drawn with a writing brush came into his vision. Written on it was——

Halibel: “«*Setsubun* Hollow»…?”

Subaru: “The only thing is it’s written in I characters so that kids can read it. I actually wanted to write it as «*Setsubun* Ghost». This is the 4th part of the *Setsubun* plan I produced. Makes you excited, doesn’t it?”

Rigel: “Makes me gets the chills.”

The phrase “Ghost” didn’t give him a good impression. It wasn’t something that sounded very familiar to him, but Subaru did tell him about them before——

Rigel: “Ghosts are Hollow, right? I don’t like the sound of it at all.”

Subaru: “Well, I get that. But, you see, this ghost is another kind of concept. With regard to that, *Setsubun* Oni have to take on another role…”

The Oni in *Setsubun* don’t represent actual Oni. Instead, they give an «Oni = disaster/misfortune» sort of impression, and the purpose of the event of driving away Oni is to keep misfortunate away.

Honestly, as someone who’s descended from the Oni, I really feel like Oni being treated as the symbol of disaster is unacceptable, but now that the idea has taken root so deeply in this town, we have no civil rights even if we push for them.

Subaru: “There will be no more of that chasing away evil-doers sort of thing, and now the Oni are the protagonists of *Setsubun*! That’s how it is now, so just let that go.”

Rigel: “And because I’ve let that go, now every time *Setsubun* approaches life gets hard.”

Subaru: “You’ve had to pull through despite life getting hard, but I’ve got good news for you. The *Setsubun* Ghost event is going to save you.”

RIgel: “Oh really?”

Rigel looks at Subaru with dubious eyes. Halibel, perhaps because he saw that this conversation was going nowhere, put lit his *kiseru* and said,

Halibel: “Come on now, let’s let him finish. The only knowledge of *Setsubun* I have is stuff I’ve heard from other people who also heard about it from other people, but how are they different from Hollow?”

Subaru: “About that… This time, they’ll be allowed to disguise themselves as Oni.”

Rigel: “What!?”

Subaru raised his voice as if to say “I have an announcement”, and Rigel’s eyes widened.

The disguise part is what emphasized his surprise. This is because up until now, Rigel had only been allowed to wear yellow clothed Oni pants that had black vertical stripes, a red padded sleeveless coat, as well as a tremendously bold, bright green wig.

Subaru: “By putting on clothes that are different from the ones we usually wear, *Setsubun* ghosts can go through their *Setsubun* day without getting found by Oni — that’s the train of thought I had to come up with this.”

Rigel: “There you go making Oni the bad guys again!”

Subaru: “Like I said, I tried to switch them around this time. Basically, I got something in store for the *Setsubun* costume contest. I indirectly let the town know about it, so tomorrow all the guys, girls, old and young — everyone will flock to *Setsubun* in costumes. You’ll slip in and it’ll be like a game of «Where’s the Oni?» Whatcha think, sounds thrilling, doesn’t it?”

Rigel: “Kind of sounds like it’s become an even dumber festival…”

Subaru’s face was practically asking him “Doesn’t it sound awesome?”, and it irritated Rigel. Still, he pondered.

With this, surprisingly, he felt like Subaru’s idea wasn’t so bad. In fact, maybe it was good. Dressing in a way that makes him stand out will be the reason for tons of people chasing after Rigel.

However, if he’s going to look nothing like a normal Oni —— Rather, if he’s going to have an appearance that doesn’t resemble Natsuki Rigel, perhaps he’ll be able to go outside with Spica in peace.

Rigel: “What happened to you, Dad? Has the father within you finally awoken?”

Subaru: “You say that as if the father within me hasn’t been awake until now. The father within me has been in bloom for a good 2 years now.”

Rigel: “2 years… But that’s when Spica was born!”

Subaru’s teeth glistened as he gave a thumbs up, then Rigel gave a well-delivered comeback.

Anyhow, this was rare, really rare —— In fact, this was the first time Rigel agreed with his dad regarding *Setsubun*.

Rigel: “A disguise! Alright, I’ll make it through tomorrow somehow!”

Subaru: “That’s the spirit! But well, it won’t be that easy, Rigel. To prepare for tomorrow, I’ve taken pics of what you normally look like with a Meteor and sent them out. In other words, if you have a half-assed disguise, the town’s Rigelists will see through you easily, and you’ll be dead.”

Rigel: “Aren’t you going a little overboard!?”

Just when he started thinking better of him, he made him change his mind again.

However, Subaru went “Tsk tsk” to Rigel as he waved his finger back and forth as he said,

Subaru: “Don’t be ridiculous. If this becomes a one-sided game, that would be downright disrespectful towards the bean throwers who’ve trained their wrists up until today for *Setsubun*. They go all out, we go all out — only then will it be sportsmanlike. Yeah?”

Rigel: “Shut up! Then what!? In the end, this is just the same old *Setsubun*!”

Rigel’s appearance is actually even more well-known in town now than it was last year. Rigel was ruled by that sort of sense of despair, having a feeling that he’d be killed by beans tomorrow.

However, Rigel was——

Rem: “——No, Rigel. It won’t be like that. Leave it to your mother.”

The one who gallantly got up and came to the rescue was none other than Rem.

She was in a light blue *kimono*, and when she tucked up her sleeves, she clenched a fist with her game face on.

Rem: “Subaru-kun told you something. That they’ll be going all out, and we’ll be going all out. That’s exactly what’s going to happen. So, all we have to do is give it all we’ve got and play along.”

Rigel: “But Mom, what are we going to do? Wearing costumes is one thing, but I’ve never disguised myself before. They’ll easily recognize me, and I’ll be dead…”

Rem: “You’re so silly, Rigel. You don’t have to take on everything all by yourself.”

Rigel: “Huh?”

With a smile, Rem nodded at Rigel who was confused. She gently reaches her hand out, then Rigel’s mom’s hand touched his cheek. Then, their blue eyes met each other.

Rem: “Listen, Rigel. Leave this to me. Subaru-kun… Your dad thought hard to come up with this idea for your sake. So, it’s only natural for me to do my part as his wife.”

Rigel: “Mom…”

Upon hearing those words, something warm started to fill Rigel’s chest. Then, Rigel thought for a little bit, and——

Rigel: “——Alright. I’ll trust you, Mom.”

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This was after Rigel, who believed in Rem, left it up to his mother to handle the matter.

Rem: “What do you think, Rigel? I did the best I could.”

Said Rem as she firmly nodded while appearing to be wiping the sweat off her forehead. In response, Rigel took a good look at himself in the full-length mirror. In the tall mirror that reflected his whole body, there was a brand-new Rigel.

Rigel: “This is me[26]…?”

Reflected in the mirror was a pretty girl who was the same age as Rigel.

She had a *kimono* that was based around a dark indigo blue color, and a distinctively light red hair ornament. Her light blue hair was put up nicely, and she kind of looked like a rich girl. She did have a sharp look in her eyes, but her long eyelashes and lightly rouged cheeks coupled with her slightly embarrassed expression created quite the charm that’d sway a man.

She turns around. Rem nods.

She turns around. Halibel breathed a sigh in amazement.

She turns around. Seeing that girl, Subaru grinned and said,

Subaru: “Let’s name this you Natsumi Rimmel!”

Rigel: “Shut up!! I was an idiot for trusting Mom!”

Rigel hated Subaru’s expression as he held in his laughter, so he stomped his feet with all his strength. Of course, the pretty girl reflected in the mirror was a magnificent transformation of Rigel done by Rem. To be honest, it was so perfectly done that it made Rem’s skill scary.

Rem: “I saw nothing wrong with it. Rigel, I think you almost have the same potential as Subaru-kun… It’s a masterpiece.”

Subaru: “Yeah, it’s pretty cute. I was worried about your future when I saw that you were born with eyes just like mine, but in the worst case, something can be done about the eyes…”

Rigel: “As if there are! What do you mean «this’ll open a door in the future»!? And what’s this about me almost having the same potential as Dad!? Dad’s going to crossdress too!?”

Subaru: “Natsumi Schwartz… Look forward to tomorrow.”

[26] Rigel uses the feminine version (あたし, atashi) of his usual pronoun (オレ, ore).

Rigel had no choice but to yield to Subaru's vaguely confident reply.

Halibel taps Rigel's shoulder. When the slit-eyed wolf man let a sigh out of his large mouth, he said,

Halibel: "You might not be very happy about it, but isn't it well done? I mean, that kind of outfit may be useful for sneaking into places if you're going to succeed me in the future."

Rigel: "Stop trying to cheer me up… In fact, just knock it off, Uncle. I have to do this."

Halibel: "You're getting pretty into it…"

Perhaps he just liked to laugh at himself. Perhaps he's just the type to get totally immersed in whatever he did. Or, perhaps he was just used to it.

While wryly smiling at how quick Rigel switched to accepting reality, Halibel scratched his head as if to think for a bit, and he said,

Halibel: "Then how about I teach you the Clone technique for tomorrow? Dunno if it'll go well if you only learn it on the spot, but you've got a feel for it, so maybe you'll be able to make like one more of yourself."

Rigel: "Is Clone the thing you used to make four of yourself?"

Halibel: "Yep, yep. I become 4 times the trouble, so it's super strong. The thing I have to be careful of is, although I become more troubling the more clones I have, the wounds are shared. So if I get hit, I take 4 times as much damage."

Rigel: "I can't see anything coming out of it other than me being hit by two times as many beans…"

Halibel: "Wow, even your voice is higher…"

If that's how it is, maybe I really do have a higher chance of surviving if I nail acting like a woman. I should forget that I'm Natsuki Rigel and be so girly that they'll hesitate to throw beans at me.

Rigel: "So I'm being a *Setsubun* Ghost to keep the Oni away…"

Halibel: "It's not really like you're going to fight against your own blood."

Rigel: “Uncle, I won’t lose.”

Halibel: “Yeah, okay then. Go ahead and try your best. I like how you go all out in everything you do.”

Since Rigel was fired up, Halibel threw away his thought and was about to pat his head, but then he tapped his shoulders, perhaps out of worry that his hair would get messed up.

The way he cared about his hair made his heart skip a beat.

Rigel: “This is bad. My doubts about this being me are already fading away…”

Subaru: “The way you get influenced so easily is both one of your strong points and one of your weak points.”

Rigel didn’t touch on who that someone that influenced him was and just stuck his tongue out.

Anyway, if we disregarded Rigel’s own shyness, the Natsumi Rimmel — previously Natsuki Rigel — strategy surely will be effective. If there was a problem, it’d be——

Tia: “——Pant, pant, I’m going to die. I’m going to die. T-they’re going to try to kill me, what the heck, ahaha—”

Rigel: “It’s not that funny! I’m going to get hurt too, you know!”

Tia: “C-c’mon, stop being so into it. Ah, my stomach hurts, it hurts…!”

Tia had been laughing ever since Rigel’s makeover had been finished. Although, it’d be kinda weird if she were to just accept it as if nothing was odd, so he was thankful that she was laughing at him.

Rigel: “…Do I really look that weird?”

Rem: “I’m proud that it is pretty perfect. But at the same time, when I look at you now, I do get the feeling that I may have created an absolute monster…”

He turns around to the mirror, and makes a quick pose. He thought it was cute. Even though Rem was satisfied with how Rigel was doing, she was starting to break into a bit of a cold sweat.

Seeing his parents' reactions in the corner of his eyes, Rigel laughed inside, delighted with how things were going.

Of course, he didn't actually like crossdressing. Well, he did think that it was pretty perfect, and he was surprised that he was pretty cute, but that was different. When they realize that their own actions are going to put their son in danger, surely then his parents will learn to not have their ideas get out of hand.

By no means was he enjoying this cross dressing, since this chance doesn't come all that often, and letting out his daily frustrations by intimidating his parents.

Rigel: "Heeey, Spica. I'm going to do my best tomorrow."

Spica: "Aooo?"

Spica, who was playing around, going in between everyone's legs under the kotatsu, turned around upon hearing Rigel's words. Then, she stared at her completely unrecognizable pretty brother, and put her finger in her mouth. After that, she said——

Spica: "——Nii Nee?"

And she had a crisis from perceiving his identity, making her sink.

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——The boisterous dinner came to an end, and the night went on at Banan Town.

Tomorrow's *Setsubun*. Tonight is the night before the final battle.

Rigel's the type that usually can't sleep when he has plans the next day, so on the night before *Setsubun* he was especially nervous.

Apart from *Setsubun*, there's also family birthdays. Still, my heart's pounding.

Halibel, who had an evening drink with his dad after dinner, has already returned to the tenement house. Subaru has gone to the Kararagi Culture Promotion Society for one last business meeting for tomorrow's *Setsubun*, and Rem went with him too.

She probably requested "Please take good care of my son tomorrow." She's a conscientious and meticulous mother. Because of that, Rigel knew that he was going to be protected by a lot of adults.

Since they were pushing *Setsubun* so much, the adults, including Subaru, have probably made sure that Rigel won't get into trouble. They were thorough with the festival's participation guidelines too, so they probably have some sort of means to prevent Rigel from being mistaken for an enemy in tomorrow's *Setsubun* Ghost plan.

He should be ready for the worst scenario, which is a paper sticking on his back saying «This guy's an Oni».

And so, his parents were not at the Natsuki home at night. This is when Rigel would become the backup family head and steel himself to protect Spica the cute angel.

???: "——Can't sleep?"

A voice spoke to Rigel while he was sitting on the veranda, gazing at the blue moon in the sky.

The person sat straight down next to Rigel before he could turn around. A warm shoulder unreservedly touched Rigel, and he released a small breath.

Tia: "I'm not really sure about this, but don't human children sleep around this time? You're going to be busy tomorrow."

Rigel: "That's true, but it's fine. In my case, a little lack of sleep puts me on edge, and I can move better."

Tia: "But won't your disguise be ruined if you get eyebags? Won't it, Natsumi Rimmel-chan?"

Rigel was told that in a mocking tone, and his cheeks suddenly had a tinge of red.

He was being led by the nose and played around with. Rigel turned away, not wanting to realize that. However, Tia chuckled, and gently pushed her nose onto Rigel's nape.

Rigel: “Dawa!”

Tia: “Relax… Mm, the smell of nervousness. Can really smell embarrassment too. You’re so dishonest and cute. To the point that I want to kill you.”

Rigel: “…That again? If you wanna kill me, just do it.”

Rigel sighed as if to send the message “Not like you can anyway.” Then, in response, Tia’s eyes opened widely.

After that, she bit her lip just for a moment, looked down, and said,

Tia: “You’re… right. I want to kill you, but I can’t.”

Then, Tia’s lips slackened, and with a smile continued and said “Because…”

Tia: “I love you, after all.”

Rigel: “————”

They were the words Tia had said when he first met her. Upon hearing them, it really stirred his heart.

This was probably the first time he had someone that wasn’t in his family say “I love you” to him. On top of that, it was from a stunning beauty. He’d be crazy to not think anything of it.

Rigel: “————”

Rigel fiddles with the bracelet on his left hand’s wrist, unwilling to acknowledge the turmoil in his mind. A bracelet made of white beast’s fur; another thing Tia has given to him.

She had said that as long as he has this, she will always come running to save Rigel.

Tia: “You’ve never used that. You’ve never called me over.”

Rigel: “…’Cause, it’s kinda… pathetic. Calling you over just by crying for help… I don’t wanna do something like that.”

Tia: “Really? Doesn’t your dad Su tend to be quick to ask for help from others?”

Rigel: “Dad does do that, but Mom loves him for it so it’s fine. But I’m not like that. Thanks to Mom’s blood, I’m different from Dad. When I want to see someone, I don’t call them; I go see them.”

Tia: “Hmmm.”

Though it did take a lot of courage to say this, Tia had a negative reaction. She snorted as though she was ignoring him, and played with her milky white hair that was on her shoulder.

Tia: “What a cold night it is. I wonder when Rem and Su’ll be back.”

Rigel: “It’s the day before *Setsubun*, so they’ll probably drink a bit and will take a little longer to get back.”

Tia: “Is that so? Then I guess we should get to bed, since we wouldn’t want to catch that drunk smell.”

Tia stood on her tiptoes and got up from the spot.

The Natsuki family has a rule such that, at night, everyone must put their futons together and sleep in one room. Even on days when Tia stays over. The one thing that changes every day is who gets to sleep with Spica——

Tia: “Tonight, I get to sleep with Spica. You jealous?”

Rigel: “Yeah, I am. Who cares about *Setsubun*.”

Tia: “That was such a fast reply. You really are scary…”

This was about Spica, so he couldn’t possibly lie, and he couldn’t come up with a reason to lie either. Tia squinted her eyes at Rigel, who had those sorts of thoughts as he curiously tilted his head.

Tia: “Earlier I’d figured this out by the smell, but… You’re nervous, and you’re only acting tough, aren’t you?”

Rigel: “…Well, if I say you’re wrong, that’d mean I could be lying about a ton of things.”

Tia: “Tons of things or not, stop being stubborn. Here, come with me.”

Rigel: “——?”

Tia, who'd gotten up earlier, pulled Rigel's hand and made him stand up. Slender fingers, and the feeling of her smooth skin. Rigel, who was unexpectedly forced to stand up, was taken by surprise.

Then, Rigel, still shocked, had Tia's smile coming close to him. She was right there, smiling at him, almost close enough for both of their noses to touch, and—

Tia: "I'll help you be brave. Today, I have the right to sleep with Spica, so I'll give you the right to sleep with me."

Rigel: "H—Huh!? If I do that… If I do that… What's up with this?"

Tia: "You, me, and Spica can sleep together. I don't want to give up being next to Spica, but I do feel bad for you, and when I look at your poor ol' face, I'm itching, just dying to kill you…"

Rigel: "I get it! I'd like to go with your idea!"

Rigel, with an entranced look on his face, surrendered to the danger of Tia as she blushed.

In response, Tia nodded saying "Very well."

Tia: "C'mon, if you've decided, then hurry up and get ready. I like to get some sleep without nightmares on my good days every now and then. I'll even sing a lullaby for you, which I haven't done in a while."

Rigel: "A lullaby…"

Tia: "Yep, the «Kill'em Song»!"

Rigel: "Tia!"

It seemed the lullaby that his mother had hummed to him long ago came from Tia, and clearly the girl herself was a dangerous.

Still, even though she was so dangerous, she's never changed, and her presence has always saved Rigel. If she could just stay the same as she was when she first met Rigel and left an impression on him, then maybe someday he'll catch up to her.

Tia: "Rigel?"

Rigel: “I know, I’ll be there!”

As Rigel heard Tia’s wondering voice, the night sky hit his face, cooling down his hot cheeks and ears. When he gets in the futon, he might be hot again, but by that time, he’ll be already be snuggled in the futon anyway. It didn’t matter. So——

Rigel: “——Agh, goddamnit. Be quiet, heartbeat.”

While muttering, Rigel started walking to the futon where cute lil’ Spica and Tia awaited him.

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Incidentally, the next day, *Setsubun* incorporated with *Setsubun* Ghost turned out to be a huge success.

Setsubun Ghost was well known throughout the town thanks to Natsuki Subaru suggesting it. So, many dressed up people got mixed together, even travelers from out of town came to enjoy *Setsubun*, and the bean throwing ended up being a big event.

As a result, with the *Setsubun* Ghost contest suddenly being held, events and such were done to judge everyone’s customs, and——

——The Natsuki Family taking the victory stand remains as a photographic record taken with a Meteor.

On it were a lovely little girl, a somewhat bewitching beauty, and a beautiful woman dressed as a dashing, gallant man.

With those three who stood together on that victory stand were a big wolf man, and a smiling beautiful woman carrying a baby.

Other Volumes

Main Story (Root folder at https://bit.ly/3sUbM1t)

- **Arc 1** (Single volume)**:**
  - **Volume 1 -** https://bit.ly/3ilbMNw;
- **Arc 4** (Full arc at https://bit.ly/311w8te)**:**
  - **Volume 10** - https://bit.ly/3qlw5NF;
  - **Volume 11** - https://bit.ly/3iDFa7E;
  - **Volume 12** - https://bit.ly/399hQeP;
  - **Volume 13** - https://bit.ly/3pf1Ayi;
  - **Volume 14** - https://bit.ly/39VSpwt;
  - **Volume 15** - https://bit.ly/367hfIN.
- **Arc 5** (Full arc at https://bit.ly/2P9kc5Z)**:**
  - **Volume 16** - https://bit.ly/3pbWovm;
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  - **Volume 18** - https://bit.ly/2MjEEj6;
  - **Volume 19** - https://bit.ly/3sStZfN;
  - **Volume 20** - https://bit.ly/3qJn1be.
- **Arc 6** (Full arc at https://bit.ly/38X9re4)**:**
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  - **Volume 25** - https://bit.ly/3c2zkeN.
- **Arc 6** (Full arc at https://bit.ly/3s4Tj1D):
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Side Content (Root folder at https://bit.ly/39bjoop)

- **Side Stories:**
  - **Heroic Tale from Zero** (Arc 2 spoilers) – https://bit.ly/3zcuaVZ;
  - **Oni Sisters of the Hidden Village EX** (Arc 4 spoilers) - https://bit.ly/3ySWRa2;
  - **Artbook Short Stories** (various) - https://bit.ly/3elRxEt.
- IFs:
  - **Rem IF** (Arc 2 spoilers) – https://bit.ly/3yX9PDJ.