

## ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

### RE: ZERO DETAILED SUMMARY

This is a highly detailed 'summary' of Re: Zero chapters from the start of Arc 4 onwards, intending to proceed to cover all the way to Arc 6 or until I burn out, that I have made for a friend of mine so I can rant fervidly at/with her about happenings in Re: Zero past the ending of the anime, which I may or may not release to the general public. If you're reading this and you're not said friend, congrats! By my hand or another's, it got released to the general public.

This thing is a bastard child between a translation and a summary. What this means in practice is that the narration is almost entirely paraphrased and tenses are all over the place, while some effort is generally put in to the character dialogue. That is, I want said friend to get the same impression of the lines I thought were funny or cool or interesting that I did. It turns out that that's almost all of them and I have trouble finding where to paraphrase things out.

That said, I am taking full liberty to skim over things when I randomly feel like it or when the sentence overpowers my meagre Japanese skills. And my Japanese is pretty fucking meagre. If you are the general public, I would recommend throwing this 'summary' at someone who has a less meagre grasp of Japanese, an excess of free time, and a charitable personality and pestering them to rectify my fuckups.

If you happen to be a charitable, time-having Japanese knower and would like to contact me to keep my fuckups in check for the future, or otherwise would just like to contact me, I've made an email at [anaka.burner@gmail.com](mailto:anaka.burner@gmail.com) just for you!

Names and terminology will be coming from multiple sources but will ultimately be determined by what I feel makes the most sense or sounds most appealing to me (ie, Witch names use the English spelling of Greek/Roman mythical figures, Bishop names use the English spelling of stars, Puck is Puck and not Pack because I hate Pack, etc).

Accordingly, the words that appear in this document are incredibly up to my whimsy and occasionally clash with generally accepted fan nomenclature. Some I'll put out there right away are: I'm writing the name of the Bishop that ate Rem's name as 'Rai Baten-Kaitos' rather than Ley for Reasons. I'm giving Beatrice a verbal tic absent in the anime of 'in fact' to correspond with her なのよ. I'm calling the Great Waterfall the Great Cascade because I think it sounds nicer and also Reasons that would only matter if I was trying to translate arc 3. I'm calling the 大兎 the Sizeable Hare because Reasons. I'm calling the Bishops 'Cardinals' instead of Bishops because I think it sounds nicer and I am too punny to live.

Anything else will be mentioned in the text as a footnote.

I advise you read this document as if this is your asshole friend whose word may-or-may-not-be-legitimate telling you the story of Re: Zero around a campfire, since that's the mentality this was written with.

Okay enough Arc 4 Start.

# ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT

## PHASE 1 CHAPTER LIST (PHASE INCOMPLETE)

Chapter 1: In the Place we Have Returned	3
Chapter 2: Disparagement and Gratitude	18
Chapter 3: Reunion and Missed Paths	28
Chapter 4: The Next Place	37
Chapter 5: Team Emilia	49
Chapter 6: On The Road to Sanctuary	56
Chapter 7: The Test Site	68
Chapter 8: A Long-Awaited Reunion	77
Chapter 9: The Cemetery	87
Chapter 10: Thirst for Knowledge Incarnate	97
Chapter 11: Sloth in Wrath by Pride	110
Chapter 12: A Souvenir From the Tea Party	117
Chapter 13: Roswaal's Intent	128
Chapter 14: Questions and Answers	143
Chapter 15: Qualifications and Trial	155
Chapter 16: Morning in the Natsuki Household	167
Chapter 17: Love Story	177
Chapter 18: Kin	189
Chapter 19: Homework	210
Chapter 20: Test Results	219

## CHAPTER 1: IN THE PLACE WE HAVE RETURNED

The Arlam villagers have boarded the 6 dragon-drawn carriages that are prepared outside Crusch's mansion, on a day so overcast it seems to reflect Subaru's mental state. One carriage has been specially left empty for Subaru and Emilia.

Subaru and Crusch talk, with Subaru declining to stay at Crusch's any longer (though he knows that honestly, he should use some time to convalesce), and Crusch telling him that he's always welcome to stay at their place. However, Subaru's concerned that if their two factions don't clean up matters at home from the White While and Sloth incidents, Anastasia's faction will wind up reaping all the benefits—Crusch's faction had huge damages, including Crusch herself, and things look unpropitious for Emilia's faction with matters progressing without Roswaal. Though Emilia's faction didn't suffer as many damages as Crusch, as far as Subaru's concerned, a deep wound remains.

Anastasia, meanwhile, only lost a section of her mercenary squad. Anastasia herself, her knight, and her other military strength is still healthy—their damages aren't big enough to stop them from immediately going public with their contributions to the victory, a huge advantage for Anastasia.

If only to keep to keep a check on Anastasia, it's essential that Crusch's and Emilia's faction keep ties.

Crusch laments being unable to assist Subaru, who she owes a great debt to. Subaru tells her not to worry about it when she's in a bad state herself, and that he's already been repaid properly anyway—Crusch is giving him Patrasche, who is pulling the high-class VIP carriage at the front of the line.

Subaru considers Patrasche his partner, who he's skirted the line between life and death with more often than anyone else in his lifetime. Considering that being with him means getting into trouble, Subaru didn't think Patrasche could stand to put up with him anymore. Wilhelm reassures him and tells him that Patrasche has become especially attached to him, which is unusual for a Diana (Patrasche's breed of ground dragon).

Subaru says he didn't do anything that big, just picked the ground dragon that clicked. --so, another thing down to luck, since he didn't think he would've survived the White While and Sloth fights without Patrasche. Meaning,

Subaru: “No ground dragon except you will satisfy me any more! Oh, Patrasche, you minx!”

Subaru goes to pat her side. Patrasche is disgusted at his lovey-dovey behaviour and goes to slam her body against his finger.

Subaru: “Augh, close! Look, even if it's to cover up your embarrassment, trying to pull that is going too far! Ever since that time I put too much energy into classroom chores in middle school, this finger stuff makes my heart-rate go crazy! I'm so traumatized!”

Wilhelm: “The dragon is merely teasing. Such intimate banter in itself proves the unwavering trust between you two.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “Does this look like banter!?! Feels to me like I'm just prattling off at her, and she's rejecting me with body language!”

Tsun tsun but dependable Patrasche.

Subaru: “My name's acknowledged as part of the White Whale subjugation, and the SLOTH subjugation means Emilia-tan's safe and protected. And then I get a ground dragon that I like... it's unbeatable compensation.”

Wilhelm: “That you do not realise how momentous a feat it is to have slain the White Whale could be called part of your charm, Subaru-dono. The world will doubtless come to reward you in a more appropriate manner for the deed. I do await the day.”

Subaru: “Though, not like I think it was really anything that ridiculous. Running around waving food in a whale's face is a real thing, you know?” said Subaru, being humble but not.

Wilhelm's eyes took on a look as though he were seeing something rather pleasant. The warmth of the gaze made Subaru feel uncomfortable, and he shook his head to drive the feeling away.

Subaru: “Well, Patrasche aside... It appears I'll shortly be parting with you, Wilhelm-san. Please take care to look after your injury.”

Wilhelm: “Your concern is appreciated. —It seems some distance is between us now, as the bleeding has stopped. Someday, I shall surely stand alongside you once again. Until then.”

Now that Wilhelm's hemophilic wound, inflicted by the previous Sword Saint, Theresia, has opened, Wilhelm has set his focus on Cardinals of Sin GLUTTONY and GREED. Since they were nearby, if there's anything except the White Whale that was involved in Theresia's death, they're the most likely candidates.

While Subaru would rather not run into the Cardinals of Sin, GLUTTONY alone is an exception. Subaru absolutely will defeat him. So many things have to be taken back—Crusch's memories, and most importantly—

Felis: “Subaru-kyun. Rem-chan's secured, come check.”

Felis leans out from Patrasche's carriage, and Subaru runs over and peers in. A seating area has been destroyed to make room for a simple bed, upon which lies a sleeping girl—a blue-haired girl, wearing a thin, light-blue gown rather than her usual maid outfit, forgotten completely by the world around her so long as she remains asleep.

Though Felis has long finished treating her external injuries, he's had no success with getting her out of the coma. Though Felis reports this in his usual upbeat, innocent affectation, his expression is clearly different from usual—a painful awareness of his own sufficiency is slipping through. Though the cause of his awareness of his powerless likely wasn't Rem, but his Master, Crusch.

Felis: “You're *really* taking her home with you?”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: "I'm taking her back. Even if she convalesces here, it's not like she'll heal... Er, I mean, that wasn't me being sarcastic at you or anything."

Felis: "I knyow that. Subaru-kyun, you're nyot that mean of a person."

Felis: "Myore importantly,"

Felis: "It's true for Rem-chan too, but isn't the bigger problem here you, Subaru-kyun!?"

Subaru: "Me?"

Felis: "Uh-huh! ...is the joke set-up here. You pushed your gate too far again, didn't you? Forcing so much mana through it while midway through recovery means your gate's entrance should be myore than a little dyamaged. Is your body sluggish?"

Subaru does some light exercises. Nothing particularly notable in line with Felis' concerns happens. Subaru is rather unconcerned about his state of affairs re: magic, saying he'd never be able to use it as an everyday, routine thing anyway. Felis says that's just how someone who doesn't use magic would think, and that if Felis lost his magic, it'd be nothing less than an emergency. But ultimately, Felis gives up pressing the issue.

Felis: "But you're still nyot allowed to be pushing your gate, 'kay? I can try to get the toxins out of your body, but that wyon't heal your damaged, torn-up gate. Give it proper time for recovery, and... two months, gyoing by looks."

Subaru: "Two months. You know, that's a low hurdle for someone who went seventeen years without using magic."

...and such was how he wanted to joke around at that diagnosis, but then Subaru remembered that it hadn't even been two months since he had entered this world. His personal time had it closing in on four months, but still a month and a half in real time—and he felt he'd come *extremely* long way.

Thinking of all that had happened over that period, he could no longer tell how high that hurdle of 'two months of peace and quiet' really was.

Subaru: "Well, there's no way I could constantly be getting mixed up in commotions like that all the t—oh man, did I just trip a flag!? I feel like heard something go 'pyi-kon!'"

Felis: "I am afraid to say that treating the brain is outside of Feli-chan's expertise," said Felis to a Subaru stupefied at his own words, Felis' attitude incredibly colder.

Hearing that, Subaru judged that he should end the conversation about here. After a moment of thought, Subaru quietly held his hand out to Felis.

Felis: "Nywhat?"

Subaru: "Just, I feel like I haven't thanked you properly for all the help you've given me. There's healing my body, and, straight-up, if you weren't around for the White Whale and SLOTH, there's

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

lots of places where things wouldn't've gone right at all. ...And, I'm grateful to you for Rem.”

Felis: “...I dyon't think you're being mean or sarcastic, but that's all it turned into.”

Subaru: “That's me activating my skill, KUUKI YOMENAI. Please put up with it.”

He said the words with honest feelings of thanks, but they did not please Felis. But at least the feeling itself got through. Felis grasped Subaru's outstretched hand, and firmly completed the handshake. While feeling Felis' palm,

Subaru: “Thin fingers, tiny hands. Rugged, manly fingers... was the development I was expecting, but it didn't happen.”

Felis: “This perfectly dressed-up adorable Feli-chan couldn't pyossibly show everyone such a disappointing development. Nyot a single unwanted hair or patch of rough skin, entirely natural.”

Felis proudly raised his ungrasped hand and flashed a glimpse of the pale legs beneath his skirt, boldly exposing the inviting beauty of slender, womanly legs. Subaru's shoulders drooped in dejection,

Subaru: “But, he's a guy.”

Felis: “Yes, Feli-chan is a man in soul and body both.”

Subaru: “If you're that proud about it, what's with the outfit. What about this is a guy?”

Delicate clothes on men was impermissible—was not how antiquated Subaru's thinking was, but he could at least tell that Felis' behaviour plummeted far along a path antithetical to masculinity. Felis placed his finger to his lips at Subaru's question, and while seductively waving his hips,

Felis: “Cause Crusch-sama said this outfit suits Feli-chan soo weeell. That a visage that makes his soul shine brighter suits him. —All Feli-chan's doing is responding to Crusch-sama's words with full devotion.”

Subaru: “But that's something...”

*That the present Crusch wouldn't know*, was how Subaru was going to continue before he stopped himself.

Felis would already know that without Subaru having to say it. Purposefully voicing it would only hurt, but more importantly, it was preposterous to speak as if it was something bad done to Subaru himself in front of Felis.

If people talking about Rem as if they knew her irritated himself, then that meant Felis definitely didn't want to hear those words from Subaru.

“—I wonder what will happen to the Karsten clan now.”

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

“...Huh?”

Abruptly, those words hammered on Subaru's eardrums.

Quiet, cold, an intonation with emotions frozen. The question of 'Who was that?' carried enough strength that even though he heard the voice come from right in front of him, Subaru was slow to put it together.

His head drooped, Felis' bangs prevented his expression from showing through.

Keeping that posture, Felis' grip on Subaru's hand strengthened.

Felis: “Crusch-sama alone absolutely will I protect.”

Subaru: “Fe-Felis?”

Felis: “Sooooo!”

Felis' voice suddenly bounced back up and he raised his head. His eyes housed the same mischievous look as always, and as if that second of transformation was a lie,

Felis: “You hafta keep your promise too, Subaru-kyun! Don't, and I'll make the mana inside you go crazy 'till you go insane and die!”

Subaru: “Don't say that while smiling! Also don't threaten partners in your ally!”

Felis: “But more than a threat, it's a death sentence?”

Subaru: “That's worse! Geez.”

Subaru shook his hand out of the handshake and turned his back to Felis. He glanced over to see if their ruckus had brought any change in Rem—but it amounted to nothing more than a faint hope. Subaru let out a small sigh, forgot his betrayed hopes, and exited the carriage. Just outside was Emilia, holding some luggage from the mansion, who was speaking with Crusch and Wilhelm.

Emilia: “Ah, Subaru. Is Rem-san's bed properly set up?”

Subaru: “Yeah, Felis did it perfect. With me and Patrasche's exquisite combination, we could have a whole Kinoshita Grand Circus and she won't fall off.”

Emilia: “I don't really get it, but the hunch I have is sooo bad so let's not have a grand circus, okay?”

Subaru goes on to say some stupid shit about anticipating the tightrope to be a heart-stirrer (could the beating of this heart just possibly be love!?), but in reality is struck with a pain stronger than he anticipated at hearing Emilia call her 'Rem-san.' Emilia notices and is about to bring it up, but Felis comes back from the carriage to say that preparations are all done, and hands the conversation off to Crusch for any parting remarks. Subaru hops down from the carriage so as not to be rude, goes to

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

stand next to Emilia, and sees Crusch (Felis beside her) take a deep breath and place her hand to her chest.

Crusch: “Firstly, although I am unsure how many times I have restated this, I am deeply grateful to the both of you. I believe that the fact my life still remains although my memories are lost, and that I am still connected to the wish I held before my memories were lost, is explicitly because of my collaboration with you two. I thank you very much.”

Emilia: “N-no... I didn't do anything deserving your gratitude, Crusch-sama. I've been almost completely out of the loop on what's happened the last few days.”

Subaru: “Well, in real terms it's an empty achievement for Emilia-tan. But my efforts were definitely in there, so relax. My achievements are my Emilia-tan's achievements.”

Subaru cheerfully tapped his hand to his chest, backing-up an obliged Emilia. Hearing his words, Emilia glanced at Subaru and gave a small nod.

Emilia: “Thanks. —I don't remember becoming yours, though.”

Subaru: “Aguh. Someone saw through my plan to use the confusion to say that to a third party who couldn't deny it!?”

Emilia: “I'm always vigilant and don't leave openings. ...Ah, we've gotten completely off topic. I'm sorry.”

Sighing at Subaru, who leaned backwards and took a big step back, Emilia apologized to Crusch, who'd gotten completely left out. But Crusch watched on pleasantly at the pair's back-and-forth,

Crusch: “No worry, you two simply get along so well I feel jealousy. I'll also need to swiftly be open with Felis and Wilhelm-sama, as I was before.”

Felis: “Feli-chan's heart and body are always fully open to Crusch-samaaa.”

Hands to his cheeks, his body swaying to and fro, Felis. Ignoring the boygirl wobbling like an octopus in the background, and with her capacity to accept this situation alone unchanged, a feminine smile arose on Crusch's face.

Crusch: “Let us meet again soon. I desire that my relationship with you, Emilia-sama and Natsuki Subaru-sama, be both familiar and eternal.”

Subaru figured that not any fabrication, but her truest feelings.

She'd lost her memories, but not her purity. The trappings of lies and pretence suited her life, which radiated the word 'sincerity', not at all.

And her statement clearly conveyed that. Emilia's eyes shot open in surprise, and with her lips faintly trembling,



#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Emilia: “I... I'm an opposing candidate to you, Crusch-sama. Even if we're allied now, we'll definitely go back to competing with each other.”

Crusch: “Yes, that is right. With Emilia-sama as an opposing candidate, I will have to firmly endeavour so as not to lose.”

Emilia: “But even if you don't, I'm a half-elf. A silver-haired one. ...aren't you afraid?”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, that's...”

*Not something you need to ask*, Subaru intended to follow up with to stop her. But seeing and recognizing the seriousness and intensity in Emilia's eyes, he couldn't continue.

Emilia was asking that question with full earnesty. As someone who knew even a fragment of her emotions there, he couldn't frivolously butt in on that query.

And more importantly, Subaru knew the person being asked this question was Crusch Karsten. — And the lack of necessity to interrupt.

Crusch: “The manner of a soul's being determines the value of the being's existence. Both yourself, and strangers, should live in a manner that brings them more brilliance, that will bring their soul no shame.”

Emilia: “——”

Crusch: “...is what it seems I was fond of saying before. How to say... now that my viewpoint has become more objective, how high and above those words sound.”

A hand to her mouth, Crusch held back an unsurpressable smile at her past self. Hearing this, Emilia was stunned into complete silence.

Crusch: “Emilia-sama, would you yourself believe your manner of living embarrassing?”

Emilia: “...I would, not. I live believing that no matter what the people around me think, I can keep living without hating myself.”

Crusch: “Then there is nothing to lament or fear. You polish yourself, pile effort upon effort, maintain your own way of being without err—you are the possessor of a wonderful soul.”

Smiling, Crusch held the hand on her chest out to Emilia.

Crusch: “I am glad to have become your acquaintance. No fear is in me in the least.”

Emilia: “——hk”

Emilia bit her lips as if her chest was in pain, and looked down at the offered hand. Without any hurrying her along, Crusch silently waited for Emilia's response.

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Eventually, timidly, Emilia's fingertips met Crusch's palm, and the two shared a gentle handshake.

Crusch: "Stay in health. I will be awaiting the next, surely not distant, time we may meet."

Emilia: "I'll... No, next time I'll have become someone who can stand directly before you, too, Crusch-sama. Until then, stay well."

The two candidates for ruler pledged their will to fight between them, and the promise was shared.

Watching their exchange from aside, a sense of accomplishment welled up to fill Subaru's chest.

This was a manifestation of one of the things Subaru had suffered, struggled, been wounded for, and now finally acquired.

Although it was entirely because he hadn't gotten here while perfectly preserving every absolutely every single thing, that he felt it.

Subaru: "I don't want to make it your fault for me to have a reason to forget all I've accomplished and look all depressed."

Glancing back at the carriage, the image of the girl sleeping inside arose beneath Subaru's eyelids. He couldn't forgive himself for using Rem as a reason to look downwards during a situation that should've been a blessing. Rem wouldn't have wanted anything like that—though thinking like that, too, was more than likely his ego.

Crusch: "Natsuki Subaru-sama too, stay in health. I will be praying from my heart of hearts that your activities from now on will lead to her recovery."

Subaru: "I think it's better there aren't so many situations where I'm doing any big activity, though. ...straight up, I'm someone who's only useful as an absolute last resort. What happened to Rem isn't unrelated to you either, Crusch-san. I'll do something, no matter what."

She reached her hand out to Subaru as well. Accepting it with a handshake somehow felt shamefully awkward, so Subaru answered by slapping his palm against hers to obfuscate the feeling.

A small, dry sound rang out, and that was the end of the contact between Subaru and Crusch. Seeing their rebounded hands, a small glimmer arose in Crusch's eyes.

Crusch: "Absolutely, let us meet again."

Crusch and Felis give a dignified bow, seeing Subaru and his group off.

※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※

The carriages are on the way back to Mathers' domain, with Emilia, Subaru, and a sleeping Rem in

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

the leading carriage. Subaru is seated beside Rem, with no urge to move from her side, and Emilia shows her consideration for Rem by refraining to speak. The atmosphere is heavy.

Subaru considers what to do to get on topic and begin discussing the things they need to discuss, when—

Otto: “It almost seems like not broaching the topic is troubling things, maybe? I can't take this heavy silence anymore...”

Subaru: “Just butting yourself right in and what do you say? Or rather, you were here?”

Otto: “Isn't that too cruel!? Of course I'm here! Don't you remember on what condition I helped you in the first place!?”

Surprise, Otto is driving the carriage and speaks to Subaru and Emilia through the window between the carriage proper and the driver's platform.

Subaru: “I remember, I remember. Yep, it was that you wanted to meet Roswaal. ...But man, that's kinda, eh.”

Otto: “What is it?”

Subaru: “No, was just thinking it's no big deal if you're into guys, but when the partner's Roswaal... ...Ah, my preferences are normal, and since Emilia's here it'd be a problem if you put your sights on me.”

Otto: “That's not what the request is about! Just what exactly do you think I am?!”

Subaru: “A merchant who spices things up?”

Otto: “He's treating me like something bawdy!”

Subaru shook his head as if to say 'good grief' at Otto, whose eyes widened as if such treatment was sincerely upsetting. Emilia, who watched the exchange between the two, opened her eyes wide.

Emilia: “It's like... you two get along sooo well. I'm surprised.”

Subaru: “Hey hey, cut that out, you silly Emilia-tan. Lumping me in with this money-hungry dead man... You see, I'm a dead man hungry only for your love.”

Otto: “A dead man!? A dead man!? Or actually, I should mention that I'm not dead!”

Subaru: “Shut up, Otto.”

Subaru stands up, goes to the carriage's front, and grabs the cover to the diving window.

Otto: “Ah, wait, if you do that then it'd be like you're treating me like a nuisance--”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “Yup, shutting you out!”

He sealed the cover shut with a bang, and the face of the fussy, as-yet hollering man disappeared from view. Dusting his hands off each other while cloaked in the feeling of finishing off a job, he glanced back to find Emilia looking up at him blankly.

“Pfff.”

“Heehehe.”

During that period of looking at each other, the two inadvertently burst into laughter. They left themselves to their laughing for a while, until their voices slowly faded out into silence. And now that they'd had that laugh,

Subaru: “Wasn't like me to read the awkward mood and keep quiet.”

Emilia: “Nope, not like you at all. The Subaru I know is someone who's always energetic, unreasonable, noisy and chipper to the point it doesn't line up with my feelings at all.”

Subaru: “I kinda have a feeling you could translate that as 'puts on false bravado and is socially dense.'”

Either way, that Otto's existence had undone the atmosphere in the carriage was fact. Although he loathed to feel grateful for it, Subaru mentally thanked Otto as he went to sit next to Emilia. She smiled wryly at him as he naturally plunked himself down beside her,

Emilia: “You're already zipping over to sit beside me, Subaru.”

Subaru: “Well when you consider the thought of wanting to be close to a girl you like, this is natural or should I say obvious? I wanna be close as possible so I can suck up the air you breathe out, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “That was making me feel shy until halfway through, then it suddenly turned sooo uncomfortable.”

Her face red from his upfront goodwill, Emilia scrunched her face up at the highly perverted content of the second half. Tilting his head at her reaction,

Subaru: “No look, I just thought I'd be the same me as always and then that sentence just happened.”

Emilia: “Right, because that's the kind of person you are. That kind, which is why I can never grasp the things you say properly, so...”

Trailing off at the end, Emilia spoke while staring intently at Subaru.

Scratching his head, Subaru worried, figuring he should pick up from where she hesitated.

Subaru: “My mentality is that of a guy who can't even flirt seriously without dressing it up as a

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

joke. That I like you, and view you sexually, and want to help you are all completely true facts. It's okay to believe in that.”

Emilia: “I do believe that, but whether I accept it is another story.”

Subaru: “That's fine. Believe, and from there I'll work to make you accept it.”

Subaru dimly reflects on how fucking alpha male that sounded, both himself and Emilia blushing red as hell. Either way,

Subaru: “This is more like me than looking down and being depressed. Right, Rem?”

Emilia: “...What did you just say?”

Subaru: “I wanna pick up that pretty hair of yours and ogle the back of your neck so hard, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “And you immediately cover it up. ...You're worried about Rem-san, aren't you?”

Subaru smiles bitterly and gazes at Rem.

Subaru: “I'm worried. I'm super worried. I've been thinking this whole time I have to do something, and I'm sure I'll constantly be thinking about it. I do want to think of you as my number one, but... this isn't something I can put a number on. Sorry.”

Emilia: “Getting mad at that would make me a bad girl. I'm not going to be mad when it's something so important. ...You can tell just by looking that she's someone important to you.”

Just like Subaru, Emilia looked over at the sleeping Rem, and narrowed her eyes. Emilia's lips quivered, and after a moment of hesitation,

Emilia: “You love her, don't you?”

Subaru: “Love her, love her a lot. I love her as much as I love you, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “Saying this is a bit, but... Subaru, are you a cheater?”

Subaru: “I was planning to keep relatively to one path, but I don't think a guy who could receive so much devotion and not have their heart moved'd have blood or tears in them to shed anymore.”

Subaru recalled the loop of the past several days, and all the uncompensated love Rem had given him over that time. Receive all that, and how could a heart not be stirred?

Before he had even noticed it, Rem's existence had come to occupy a relatively oversized portion of Subaru's heart.

Emilia: “Even though you said you love me.”

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “Just saying, I do love Rem back, but it's Rem's love for me that's crazy. Completely head over heels, it's an utter mystery.”

Arms crossed, Subaru inevitably had to have some doubts about all that uncompensated love proffered to him. Did he really have enough merit to him for a girl as well-done as Rem to love him so much?

Even now he had to wonder it. That said, he was simultaneously thinking that he'd have to become a man who matched up to that merit.

Emilia's mouth loosened into a smile at Subaru's self-assessment.

Emilia: “I think I understand.”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Emilia: “Why Rem-san loves you sooo much. It's definitely 'cause whenever she was nearby, you only ever showed her how awesome you could be. Subaru, you're like a disease that sometimes does things that're sooo cool.”

Subaru: “A disease. ...Well, I can't refute that.”

Scratching his cheek, Subaru pouted in dissatisfaction. Emilia paid Subaru's appeal no head, and saying, “Mhm,” composed her face and closed her eyes,

Emilia: “You won't get me so easily.”

Subaru: “Wooing her did pay off, you know. One day I'll make you crazy in love with me too, Rem'll wake up, and I'll hold both your hands in a League of Nations ruling. Ahh, just thinking about it makes me grin!”

Emilia and Rem hanging off both arms, hand in hand with each. Wouldn't that be a scene to just put a smile on the face.

Which was why unconditionally, someday, he absolutely would--

Subaru: “Need to try 'till I'm torn to shreds.”

Emilia: “I don't know what you're thinking, but I have a feeling I have to tell you this now—don't be torn to shreds.”



The conversation in the carriage continues smoothly from there as Subaru and Emilia consolidate their information from the past few days, and let Otto join in as they then sort out what to do from thereon out. The journey is half a day so they have plenty of time. Ultimately, their plan amounts to

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

—  
Subaru: “In the end, we can't come up with a real plan without talking to Roz-chi.”

Subaru: “Well, we can probably expect that Ram and Roswaal've met up, and're on their way back to the mansion too. Though first I'd slap him across the face then start talking from there.”

Otto: “That's quite an aggressive stance to take towards your employer the Margrave, Natsuki-san.”

Subaru: “I'd say I have the right to get away with that much, and he's done that much wrong he can't be allowed to get away with.”

Emilia doesn't seem to disagree, allowing Subaru “Just one” slap. They continue along in the carriage as they talk, entering Mathers' domain and passing through the forest, to arrive at Arlam village—where they immediately notice something is off.

The village looks exactly like it was when they last left it, or perhaps even more deserted. There's no signs of anyone having returned.

Otto: “It doesn't look like anyone is here, Natsuki-san. It doesn't feel as if it's been attacked, but as if nobody's returned.”

The villagers, Subaru, and Otto disembark the carriages and split into groups to look around the village—they all come to that same conclusion. This presents a problem.

Subaru: “I think Ram said that Sanctuary is... seven, eight hours away from here. How is it that they didn't get back before us, when we stayed at the Royal Capital for three days?”

Otto: “Perhaps they're unable to gather that the Witch Cult subjugation is completed, and are being cautious?”

Subaru: “You're saying this about Roswaal, who sat back while his territory was attacked? My impression is that if Roswaal and SLOTH fought face-to-face, Roswaal'd win about eighty, ninety percent of the time. I don't think SLOTH really does things face-to-face though, but... even so, he could at least do recon.”

Roswaal can fly, so recon on his attacked territory should be easy for him. And if he did recon, he should've been able to tell that the Witch Cult in the area'd been repelled and things were safe. And if not, it mean—

Subaru: “He's playing it safe, or...”

Emilia: “Something happened at Sanctuary?”

Subaru and Emilia nod to each other. They'll have to figure out what's the status of Sanctuary before they can understand what the circumstances are.

This situation also worries the villagers. 60% of the village's population went with Ram's group, and

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

the 40% who went with Emilia were the children, their parents, and the members of the village's young men brigade. With only these people, the village's faculties have lowered considerably. The future is not looking good for them.

Subaru: "Either way, we have to do something. ...Let's go back to the mansion for now. I want to get Rem settled in. Otto, I bet you don't have anywhere to say, so come to the mansion too."

Otto: "Wuahgeuh!? I-Intruding on the Margrave's mansion!? If you're going to place me in such an outrageous position, it would be easier that I stay overnight in the carriage!"

Subaru: "Shut up, you're involved. We're already in the same boat. I'll be working you 'till you're practically dead."

Subaru, Otto, and Emilia have Patrasche pull them onward towards the mansion, splitting away from the villagers. The distance is 15 minutes by foot, but 5 by carriage. Subaru didn't have any leeway to give the mansion a good look around last time, and seeing the mansion again is pretty emotional.

Subaru: "Doesn't look like anything's changed, though. ...Doesn't feel like Ram's come back."

Emilia: "But, if nothing's changed inside, Beatrice should be there. I hope she knows where Sanctuary is."

Subaru: "Oh, right, crap. Neither of us know where Sanctuary is. Figure there's no way for us to check on Roz-chi's safety, either."

Subaru: "Ugh. Anyway, for now all we can do is pray Beako knows something."

Otto: "Why did you just say 'ugh' while looking at me?"

Subaru: "Ugh. You're being too self-conscious. No one cares about you as much as you think they do."

Otto: "How could you say that!"

Ignoring Otto, Subaru leaves the carriage in the front garden and heads for the mansion's entrance. First he'd call Beatrice, then look around the mansion, then get Rem's bedroom secured, then plan what to do next.

Subaru: "I'm back, Roswaal mansion. Now, how would my nostalgic old home be..."

Subaru pushes the door open and peers inside, choking on his words at the end. Because the inside of the mansion is not what he predicted. All the furnishings and stuff are the same, but the big difference from what he imagined is--

Subaru: "It's not disturbed... it's all orderly!?"

The carpets don't have a single wrinkle, the flowerpots beside the staircase are shining, the



#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

chandeliers have been adeptly maintained, making them more beautiful. Subaru is unsettled and dumbfounded, which makes his reaction slow.

???: “—Who's—!?”

Hearing this quiet, faint sound, Subaru's confusion leads him to look towards it. But by the time his consciousness catches up with the shadow being there, it's already too late—the shadow's rounded around behind him. With the figure towering in from behind, Subaru sees it—the shadow's monstrous, fanged mouth.

The next instant, Subaru's world goes black.

## CHAPTER 2: DISPARAGEMENT AND GRATITUDE

Subaru wakes up uncertain of what just happened, his mind firstly more focused on the fact that he recognizes where he is.

Subaru: “The mansion's living room...”

Emilia: “Ah, Subaru, you're awake?”

Right after Subaru has that little mutter, Emilia opens the door and pokes her head into the room. She has her hair in a plait and walks over to Subaru, who's rested on a couch, and kneels down to match his eye level. Her staring gets to Subaru a little.

Subaru: “Eerm, what was it that just happened again, Emilia-tan?”

Emilia: “We heard you scream right after you entered the mansion. Me and Otto were super shocked. And when we ran inside and looked around...”

Subaru: “I was sleeping?”

Emilia: “That's not really the right word... but, it's mostly not wrong?”

Emilia puts her finger to her lips and tilts her head. Subaru judges from her relaxed reaction that the situation isn't anything urgent, but that doesn't erase the mystery of what was the fanged creature he saw before losing consciousness.

???: “Emilia-sama, may I intrude?”

A woman's voice calls from outside and there comes a knock on the door. Emilia says “Yes,” and the door slowly opens.

Woman: “I have brought refreshment and additional handtowels. —Ah, it appears you have awoken.”

The speaker is a woman with long, blonde hair and perfectly straight posture. Her movements are fluid, with not a single one feeling wasted, and she's wearing the maid uniform of the Roswaal mansion. There is indeed a pitcher and handtowels on the tray she's carrying, which she places on the table in the middle of the living room without producing a single sound. Full marks.

—so long as you ignore her build and vicious smile.

She's just a little taller than Subaru and about as muscular, making her feel awkwardly burly for a woman. Her warm smile is ruined by a clearly visible swarm of sharp fangs. Her sharp, green eyes host a feline glint—predatory and carnivorous.

Woman: “It graces me to have made your audience. My humble station is to serve the mansion of Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers, Frederica Baumann being my...”

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “Freakface!”

Subaru interrupts her polite introduction with just a little too much honesty. Frederica's expression hardens, she blinks and blinks and blinks—and her eyes fill with tears.

Frederica: “Huu, euhu...”

Subaru: “Wha?”

Emilia: “Subaru, you idiot!”

Frederica turns her face away, Subaru is struck dumb, when he's suddenly hit with a painful attack pulling on both his ears. He yells in pain and shifts his gaze to find an angry Emilia.

Emilia: “How could you say that to a girl? Frederica's been so dedicated to your...”

Frederica: “I-I humbly request that Emilia-sama might desist. It is not anything. I-I would be the one who has done wrong. My being called to return to the mansion has rather elated me, and I have had become carried away. ...I have forgotten that my appearance is displeasing to people.”

Frederica tugs on Emilia's sleeve and shakes her head, using her other hand to conceal her mouth.

Frederica: “I offer my apology for having caused shock. I further request forgiveness for my previous discourtesy. To think that Natsuki Subaru-sama be mistaken for an interloper upon his return...”

Subaru: “Interloper? ...Ah, wait. I think I kinda get what the story is.”

Emilia releases Subaru from his punishment. He rubs his ears.

Subaru: “Frederica-san, who'd come back to the mansion, mistook me for an interloper and attacked. And then Emilia-tan came in, you two talked, smoothed out the misunderstanding, and now we're here... right?”

Frederica: “Exactly correct. ...You would appear to be rather the quick thinker.”

Subaru: “If I couldn't get that much from the gist of the conversation, it'd be... No, firstly.”

Subaru sees Emilia point to Frederica with her chin, Emilia being behind Frederica and out of her view. Subaru understands what Emilia means so much it hurts. So Subaru gets off the couch and goes to face Frederica.

Subaru: “I apologize for suddenly saying something so horrible to you as my first words on our first meeting. Even as a prank or while waking up, what I said was unforgivable for a woman. I leave it up to your choice... but I'd appreciate it if you please didn't make it hurt too much.”

Blah blah womanly feelings Subaru bows his head and is READY for PUNISHMENT.  
HOWEVER!

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Frederica: “—Huuuu. You are quite an interesting one.”

Frederica merely smiles and bows back.

Frederica: “It is myself who must apologize. In accordance with the words of Emilia-sama, I have made you to undergo a test.”

Subaru: “Test?”

Both Subaru and Emilia tilt their heads in confusion. That Emilia is also puzzled here doesn't exactly make sense. Frederica tilts her head as well, her smile deepening.

Frederica: “Regardless of my intention that I may protect the mansion, my actions towards Subaru-sama, a guest, were discourteous. I had already resolved that I might accept responsibility in the utmost by presenting you my neck.”

Subaru: “Er, resolving yourself for that is way too hasty. I'm someone who understands if you talk to him, okay?”

Frederica: “...Would be what Emilia-sama had firmly insisted. While she most fervently, ardency enough that it seemed my I might blush merely in listening, devoted to Subaru-sama lines upon lines of evocative rhetoric.”

Subaru: “Fwauhh!?”

Emilia seems about to try and cover up her blushing but—

Emilia: “*Fred. Er. I. Ca.*”

—doesn't, and glares at Frederica, hand on her hip, her gaze uncharacteristically dangerous. Frederica's like “My my, how frightening,” unphased.

Frederica: “Emilia-sama appears to lack in charm as always. And when your usual pattern of blushing and becoming flustered regardless of the veracity of my statements is so beautiful.”

Emilia: “I-is it? —but, you won't fool me today. I've learned from being fooled over and over and over. Frederica, you cross your eyes when you lie!”

Frederica: “I would surely think not. Incidentally, Emilia-sama, would you have noticed that your ears grow longer when you tell lies?”

Emilia: “No way!”

Emilia frantically grabs her own ears—inadvertently surrendering this match to Frederica. Subaru sighs and slumps his shoulders.

Subaru: “Feels like a perfect defeat. ...do I need to introduce myself to you by telling you my

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

name's Natsuki Subaru?"

Frederica: "Indeed, and of course I accept. So let us proceed in our acquaintance."

Frederica removes her hand, exposing her fanged smile. Between seeing this and her burly body, this time Subaru is for sure exhausted.



Subaru: "That reminds me, I think I heard about you. A maid who'd quit working a little before I'd come to the mansion. I came to the mansion a month ago... so you quit three months ago?"

Frederica: "That would have been the case. My resignation had been due to personal reasons. It was horrifically lonely, being separated from here. ...Although it happens that my return occurred sooner than I had expected it."

Subaru: "So three months ago means she's an acquaintance of yours, Emilia-tan?"

Emilia: "Harrumph. Seems she is."

Subaru: "Who says 'harrumph' anymore? Also sulking like that is so outdated it's cute, *man*."

So Emilia's there too, sitting on the couch, not even looking at Subaru much less Frederica. Seems she's only participating with her listening, otherwise not getting involved. She's been like this ever since she belatedly realised what Frederica pulled on her. Anyway.

Subaru: "And you've been here for two, three days. We left the village three days... no, if you count travel time it turns into four. Feels like we just missed each other."

Frederica: "It had surprised me as well, to return to the mansion and discover it unpopulated. Fortunately, a note had been left in the Master's office, which allowed things be settled with little confusion."

Subaru: "A note?"

Frederica: "Yes, from Ram. To have her summon me to the mansion, and then find she'd chosen *that* sort of non-committal means of getting in contact... To simply say that such a thing would be like her would be pampering her too much."

From that statement, Subaru figures that Frederica and Ram have known each other for quite a long time. Which means she should've also known Rem for quite a long time.

Subaru: "Ram called you back to the mansion, meaning?"

Frederica: "I am afraid the reasoning is not entirely clear to me, either. Although I believe that the

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

one concerned, Emilia-sama, may perhaps know.”

They both look at Emilia, but she stubbornly looks away, still indignant. But Subaru can tell that her gaze and attention is thinly, sporadically focusing on him.

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, cheer up... or, actually, I'm not even the one who got you angry this time, Frederica apologize properly.”

Frederica: “Please forgive me, Emilia-sama. I am sorry for what I have done. To see you again after such a time delighted me, and even I may be prone to temptation.”

Emilia: “...You won't tease me like that anymore?”

Frederica: “No, I shall not. Under no circumstance shall I tease Emilia-sama in the same form I did just then.”

It's a pretty half-hearted, Subaru-esque turn of sophistry Frederica uses to get out of it. Emilia ends up falling for it, and her peeved expression loosens.

Emilia: “All right. I won't be angry any more. Okay?”

Frederica: “Yes. My deepest apologies, Emilia-sama. —She's so easy.”

Only Subaru heard that little whisper at the end there, and he startles to look at Frederica, but her face is the picture of innocence. Unawares to her being 'easy', Emilia pokes a finger to her cheek.

Emilia: “Umm, the reason Ram called Frederica back to the mansion... right.”

Subaru: “Yeah, yeah. Rushing to call back someone you fired'd mean there's some kind of emergency business... or, at least that's one idea that comes to mind.”

And emergency business re: the mansion and Arlam village means the Witch Cult attack. Since she knocked Subaru unconscious in basically a second, she's definitely another one of the weirdly-military combat maids of the Roswaal mansion. Calling her over for emergency firepower would make sense, so—

Emilia: “It was because Ram's dismal at housework, so the mansion was in an awful condition. A few more days and the place would've been totally unlivable.”

Subaru: “A serious reason! Ram really is all talk and no results... no wait, she already knows she's hopeless! She's right, but at least try putting in some effort to improve!”

Emilia gives a wry smile at Subaru's screaming, then looks around the whole room.

Emilia: “But, thanks to Frederica being back, the mansion's all tidy now. I think Ram made the right decision to leave it to someone who could do it, instead of making the situation worse out of some weird stubbornness.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: "I'm sure you didn't mean it to but that hurts, that line! And I'm sure that that's also a reason for her to give up immediately!"

Frederica: "Ram aside, I have been given the pleasure of the first worthwhile job of mine in some time. Fortunately, as not anyone was present, I have been able to clean and tidy during hours which would usually be spent providing waiting service."

So Frederica's ability to work work work is fucking nuts. Subaru is simultaneously amazed and pained, seeing that Frederica's ability is compensation for the lack of Rem.

Subaru: "Ram can't keep the mansion going herself, so asking someone else to do it's the natural conclusion..."

This being why Ram called Frederica back to the mansion. Frederica's a substitute for Rem, who the mansion would otherwise collapse without. Only Subaru realises this sad truth.

Subaru and Frederica have a little back and forth with Subaru getting out of his funk by asking whether the maids in Roswaal's mansion ever end up doing anything sexual. Frederica's like '??? Did the Master say something to you when he hired you?' and Subaru is fucking blown by how perfect and awful the persuasiveness of that reply is. Frederica corrects her posture, saying "By the way," dropping her voice.

Frederica: "The driver of the dragon carriage parked outside the mansion has been left there for approaching an hour now... would you find this to your liking?"

Subaru: "Hm? Oh, you mean Otto. Huh, we left him for an hour. ...Eh, well, I'm sure it's fine, whatever. I do want to let Patrasche get a proper rest in the stables, but we don't have to worry like that about Otto."

Otto: "I'm supposed to be an ally who skirted the line of life and death with you, but you are just excellent at being heartless, Natsuki-san! I never would've thought I had lower priority than the ground dragon!"

And thus appears Otto, glaring at Subaru, shoulders heaving, breathing ragged. Subaru slowly stands up and shakes his head, sighing.

Subaru: "You're wrong. You've got it wrong, Otto."

Otto: "I have what wrong. If you think you can take back what you said, it's too late..."

Subaru: "You don't have lower priority than the ground dragon. You have infinitely lower priority than the ground dragon."

Otto: "So I just fell lower than the bottom!? That only makes things even worse!"

Extremely satisfied with Otto's reaction, Subaru looks outside the window. Patrasche and her carriage should be parked there beside the front gates. Picking up on where Subaru's going with this,

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Otto: “I brought Patrasche-chan into to the stables. She's a prideful, finicky girl, but it seemed like she didn't want to be any trouble to you, Natsuki-san, and behaved.”

Subaru: “Hearing that from you makes me doubt your Blessing of XENOGLOSSY works.<sup>1</sup> Man, as a human she'd be full-speed-ahead kuudere, that Patrasche. Just when did I hit that flag?”

Otto: “I... don't know what you're talking about. More importantly...”

Otto: “What would you like done with the girl sleeping inside? It'd be sad to keep her locked up in the carriage the whole time. If you're busy, I could bring her along to my room, or...”

Subaru: “—don't touch Rem.”

Otto offers without any ill intent, but Subaru replies with a voice so sharp and cold that he even surprises himself. A low, dark, heavy whisper. Luckily the girls didn't hear it, but the strangeness of his own voice there makes Subaru tremble slightly as he continues.

Subaru: “I'll bring her in, so you don't have to do anything. Wouldn't want your hips groaning from holding up a girl.”

Otto: “Let me just say, merchants have to carry heavier things as part of their work. I doubt I'm as weak as you think I am, Natsuki-san.”

Otto goes along with Subaru's joking after a second of hesitation. Subaru sighs, feeling grateful for it. He knows that he crazy overreacted, and that he hadn't intended to even say it—but the fact that it came out unconsciously is exactly why it's a problem. His nerves are so on edge that regardless of whether it's good- or ill- intentioned, he's regarding anything that tries to interfere with Rem an enemy.

Subaru: “This isn't a good trend... Shit, I'm pathetic. Why I am goddamn always like this...”

Get past one thing and immediately stumble on the next stone in the way. Why was he unable to hold on to something strong so that he could always stand up straight? So long as Rem was there, and he could gaze at Emilia—so long as he was together with them, he surely shouldn't falter at holding that something.

Subaru: “My just desserts.... no, Rem's the one paying for it. What a fucking gigolo I am.”

There had to have been a better path. There was a route out there for that loop, a perfect route, without a single gap that'd lead to the best, most desirable outcome. Instead all he did was compromise and follow a path that lead to an imperfect future. Sacrificing Rem was his reward.

---

1 Like fuck I can translate 言靈 so take this. Xenoglossy is the biblical, miraculous ability to understand languages that one has had no prior learning or exposure to. 言靈 more accurately is the concept that words in themselves hold power, and can in themselves actualize results. If you really wanted me to go wild I'd call it the Blessing of MEME MAGIC. If you wanted me to be more sensible I'd call it the Blessing of the ACTUALIZING WORD. ALTERNATIVELY alternatively you could go literal with Blessing of WORDSOUL.



#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

If he was smarter, he should've noticed it. The note that Crusch's envoys had delivered before Emilia and the others evacuated the mansion was blank—Subaru had put that down to interference from a witch cultist inside the envoys trying to stir chaos, but that didn't exactly make sense.

The cultists shouldn't have realised the threat Subaru's group presented at that point, and it was unlikely that they'd go with using such a roundabout method of swapping the letter to promote distrust inside Emilia's faction. And if they were going to do that, it'd be much more effective to alter the content of the message, rather than making it blank.

Why did the letter turn blank. If it wasn't because of the witch cultists, that left only one answer.

Subaru: “Rem wrote the letter. I requested the letter be sent, Crusch got the letter, and the delivery itself went though. Only the content disappeared.”

Just like what happens to existences with their names and memories eaten by way of GLUTTONY's authority.

If he'd stopped to more thoroughly consider what the blank letter meant, seen through to the truth of things more adeptly, he just might've been able to do something. The letter reached Emilia the night before the final day. If the letter was blank by them, then Rem was attacked by Gluttony around that time period. Not much time had passed since Subaru split away from Rem by then. The chance that he'd get back to her was minuscule, but there.

But Subaru'd overlooked that chance. And now he didn't understand why he had. Hadn't he felt something was off?

Ram and Emilia should've known that Rem'd stayed in the Royal Capital—so why had she never come up in conversation with either of them?

Subaru: “—ah.”

And he noticed it.

He slaps his hand to his forehead, approaches the wall, and slams his head into it as hard as he can. It hurts. But one time's not enough. He repeats it once, twice again.

Emilia: “Wh—Subaru!?”

Everyone else is stunned silent at Subaru's behaviour, Emilia the first to react. She grabs Subaru's shoulder from behind and forces him to turn around.

Emilia: “Why're you doing this all of a sudden? This isn't the first time you've done something strange, but this time it's... Ah, look, your forehead's all red.”

Subaru: “I'm so incredibly astounded at the limits of my own idiocy, seriously.”

Subaru: “Emilia-tan, a request.”

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Emilia: “Wh-what is it? Hold on, Subaru, your face's so close, your eyes look scary...”

Subaru: “Wondering if you could verbally abuse my stupid, unsalvagable self.”

Emilia: “Huh?”

Emilia's eyes go wide in surprise, Subaru firmly grabs her shoulders so she can't get away, and brings his face even closer.

Subaru: “Please. With no forgiveness for me, abuse me.”

Emilia: “I-I'm telling you I can't do that. I don't think anything's your fault at all...”

Subaru: “Do something about that!”

Emilia: “But even if you tell me to do something...”

Subaru: “Please! If you can do it, I'll sacrifice my soul to you, Emilia-tan!”

Emilia: “Hearing something that serious just makes it more troubling! Well, since there's no choice...”

Emilia clears her throat and looks up at Subaru.

Emilia: “Subaru, you idiot.”

Subaru: “Ughuh”

Emilia: “You stubborn, selfish, bratty, overenthusiastic, bad-tempered rascal.”

Subaru: “Ughuhhuhhgh”

Emilia: “Always worrying about others when they don't ask for it, don't know your place. So soft that you'd support a detested half-elf. You step forward instead of me when I get spoken down on and depressed, act rashly, denounced, reckless.”

Subaru: “Ughhu... huh?”

Emilia: “You don't give clear answers I ask you questions, you're a coward who uses vague words to escape. You're a moron who saves me when I'm having trouble even after our big fight. You're a scoundrel who gives me the answer I want when I'm hopeless and want to do something. You're a lazybones who slept while everyone else was running around cleaning things up after everything was over. Subaru, you dunderhead.”

Subaru: “Who says dunderhead anymore? ...I mean, Emilia-tan.”

These weren't the words Subaru'd expected. They weren't shredding his heart, leaving ugly wounds, but profoundly kind, and wounded both Subaru and Emilia. Emilia pouts.

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Emilia: “What?”

Subaru: “That's seriously how you think of me?”

Emilia: “Honestly, I feel my true feelings just jumped out. So much that I don't even know what I just said, I left myself to the momentum. ...Do you think they're my true feelings?”

Subaru: “Who knows. I think it's hard to judge whether things you say when leaving yourself to momentum are what you truly think or not.”

Subaru, at least, had experiences of regretting what he's said when going off momentum. Where those things his true feelings, or a divulging of his temporary emotions at the time? No one knows.

Subaru: “Thanks, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “All I did was complain about you. And you thank me for it... Subaru, are you a pervert?”

Subaru: “I'm a pervert specialized in Emilia-tan. If the words're from you and aimed at me, my pleasure centres get stimulated whether it's verbal abuse, slander, a haiku on driving safely.”

Emilia: “I don't know what that last one was, but I'm sooo sure it doesn't matter I'll ignore it. —So, are you satisfied now?”

They smile to each other at the answer, but in the end Emilia's eyes turn gloomy. Subaru gives a big smile.

Subaru: “Yeah, I'm fine. Ah, no, actually I might not. But if you give me a good-luck kiss to help me be brave, Emilia-tan, then maybe...”

Emilia: “Unfortunately, the wishing booth has been closed for today.”

Subaru: “Goddamn! A failure! Why am I always... too late...hk!”

Subaru breaks down to his knees in regret. He gets back up after a period of regretting and looks around the room.

Subaru: “Anyway, a little bit of business' come up. Sorry Emilia-tan, but I want just a bit of time. I don't think it'll take that long, but... what's with that face, Otto.”

Otto: “I feel as if I should make a claim for damages after being forced watch that exchange, but putting the price negotiations off for now... what are you going to do?”

Subaru crosses his arms and tilts his head. Oh yeah Otto doesn't actually know there's someone else in the mansion. So what's the best way to explain where Subaru's going off to? After a moment of deliberating, Subaru uncrosses his arms.

Subaru: “I'm going to a stinky mouldy room to see a shut-in drill loli.”

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

This flagrant abandonment of responsibility only unsettles Otto further.

### CHAPTER 3: REUNION AND MISSED PATHS

Subaru leaves Emilia and the others behind in the living room to stroll around the mansion by himself, stopping at the second floor hallway of the mansion's main building, where he finds a door faintly tugging at his consciousness. He opens it.

Subaru: “Hey, been a while.”

Surprise it's the Forbidden Archive. The lord of the library is sitting on a ladder's step, flipping through a book.

Beatrice: “Think the mansion's gotten noisy, and you come back, I suppose.”

Beatrice looks up at Subaru, immediately losing interest and turning her gaze back to the book.

Beatrice: “If you've come back, Bubby should be back too, in fact. Sensing that the girl and that other unnecessary pest've come along as well bothers me, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Puck's charging his batteries so he won't be showing up, and I don't like you treating Emilia-tan like an afterthought. I'll ignore how you're treating Otto though, he's a pest.”

Beatrice: “So irritating, in fact.”

Beatrice snorts at Subaru's shitty joke and repositions her crossed legs. Subaru slowly walks over toward her.

Subaru: “That aside, it's been ages since we've seen each other like this. Last time was when Betel... no, that didn't happen... so it'dve been right before I left for the Capital. That's like ten days.”<sup>2</sup>

Beatrice: “How it always is, I suppose. Betty has little interest in the passage of time outside during her time inside the room, in fact.”

Subaru: “I don't really get it. Also, look away from the book when you're talking to people. Though, I know you're so happy to see me again after ten days you're practically blushing.”

Beatrice: “I wouldn't mind making that loose mouth of yours puke up blood while your face goes pallid, in fact?”

Subaru can't help smiling slightly at her unconcealed irritation. Man Subaru just fucking LOVES stirring up Beatrice, it just happens.

Beatrice: “That you've come back means it's safe to say that racket's settled down, I suppose.”

Subaru: “So you noticed it.. Actually, duh, of course you did. Emilia-tan and Ram said they'd gone around looking for you too, so apologize to them afterwards.”

---

<sup>2</sup> The stuff Subaru's about to talk about got cut in the anime so you get to experience this exchange in Beatrice-vision.

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Beatrice: “Betty? Apologize? I haven't the slightest idea to whom and for what reason that is necessary, in fact.”

Beatrice closes the book and stands up. She returns the thick tome to the bookshelf, and reaches to grab the book beside it, having some problems due to her height. Subaru goes to stand beside her, and,

Subaru: “This one, yeah?”

Beatrice: “One next to it, I suppose. If you're going to meddle, meddle properly, in fact.”

Subaru: “Completely ungrateful loli... oop, don't drop it. Thing's heavy enough that if it falls on your foot, it won't be pretty.”

Subaru's a bit surprised at the weight of the book he goes to pick out one-handed. He happily and carefully hands the book over to Beatrice, who accepts it. Subaru glances over the title but is too illiterate to read it.

Beatrice: “I won't thank you, I suppose.”

Subaru: “That's the typical response for tsundere and reticent characters, but honestly when I hear that I think it's exactly the same as a 'thank you.’”

Beatrice knits her eyebrows in irritation and looks away. Subaru scratches his head at her stubbornness.

Subaru: “You absolutely don't have to apologize to me really, but do go and apologize to Ram and Emilia-tan. Since it worried them that you stayed in the mansion.”

Beatrice: “Worried, were they.”

Subaru: “Don't you say some tired line about not asking for it. Most people in this world get born without asking for it, and worry even when they don't want to. ...that second half's only an issue since the people around you are good people even if you're not.”

Emilia obviously gets full marks for 'good person' on her normal behaviour, Ram's normal behaviour is a failing grade but it's the insides man the insides. Beatrice is unconvinced by the wheedling and bites her lip.

Beatrice: “But they did leave the mansion in the end, I suppose. ...They left Betty.”

Subaru: “What're you saying. Couldn't be, no way you're saying you didn't really wanna be left behind.” and something about distancing herself thorough 'Gate Shut-in' like a right nuisance.

Beatrice: “It's Gate Crossing, in fact. Don't change it to some pointless, stupid name, I suppose. ...and your speculation is an insult to Betty.”

Beatrice seems a different breed of dangerous than usual, which perplexes Subaru. He can't have

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

her getting pissed before getting onto the main topic, but that said it's not like he has a magical medicine on hand to cure her mood.

Subaru: “Well, whatever. If you're gonna be that stubborn, I'll tell Emilia-tan you cried saying 'thank you, thank you!' for you.”

Beatrice: “Don't make things up, in fact. I haven't shed a single tear in a long time, I suppose.”

Subaru: “What, is this you saying you think it's embarrassing to cry? If you go through your childhood thinking like that, you won't know how to express yourself when you're an adult. Get your shameless crying done while you're a kid.”

Beatrice: “Indicative words coming from the man who cried on the lap of the girl he loves, in fact.”

Subaru: “Could you please forget about that!?”

Just remembering that shit makes his face so hot it feels it's burning. That said it's an equally bright memory in the depths of his heart.

Beatrice goes back to sit on the ladder and starts reading the book Subaru gave her. She's obviously not interested in speaking which makes Subaru's coming here pointless.

Subaru: “Anyway, putting aside the topic of crying or not crying... could I ask you something?”

Beatrice: “Could or could not, asking is at your liberty, I suppose.”

She flips a page, basically saying 'Whether or not you get an answer is another story.' Subaru takes it as permission more or less and nods.

Subaru: “—You know, for noticing the racket that went on outside, you were pretty nonreactive.”

Which was not what he was supposed to say, and instead is just a rehash of a topic they just went over. Beatrice looks up from the book, her gaze piercing. Subaru gulps.

Subaru: “W-While you were pretending you didn't know about it, things outside got pretty serious, you know? A bunch of weird arcane guys surround the mansion...”

Beatrice: “Stop, in fact.”

Subaru: “If it weren't for me, who brought reinforcements in from the Capital, who knows what would be happening by now. And it's not like I had a smooth ride getting back here, either.”

Beatrice: “Stop, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Tearjerking to both speak and hear, I traversed the path of a crying queen bee...hk!”

Beatrice's shutting the book cuts Subaru off partway through. His face sours as he figures what's coming next, but faces Beatrice's piercing case.

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Beatrice: “Get to the real topic already, in fact. —you weakling.”

Subaru: “...ahh.”

He can't refute it. Beatrice saw right through Subaru's attempt to flee, flee from a question he should ask but is terrified of the answer.

Subaru: “Do you...”

His breath catches, he closes his eyes, he can hear his heartbeat pounding in his ears. He sees visage of a lovely, smiling girl beneath his eyelids.

Subaru: “Do you remember Rem?”



Subaru talked to Beatrice only once in a world after the White Whale subjugation.

He spoke with her intending to evacuate her away from the Witch Cult, was refused, and in the end left her in the mansion alone. He didn't remember all the content of their talk vividly, but there was one thing he noticed that he couldn't let slip.

There was one single time during that exchange where Beatrice mentioned her worry about Rem, who should've come back with Subaru.

By that point, the letter that had reached the mansion was already blank.

Meaning he had proof that it'd been after Rem'd been attacked by the Cardinal of Sin, and Beatrice still said Rem's name.

Subaru: “Please answer. You remember the Rem who was in this mansion, right?”

His words ultimately changed from a 'I want you to remember' to 'You should remember'.

Beatrice quietly looks at Subaru. Her eyes don't seem to hold any emotion and it's impossible to tell what she's thinking, even though it's usually so easy to understand her feelings. It's like time's stopped, and Subaru's heart starts to burn with impatience.

Subaru: “Hey...”

Why won't you say anything.

You know her or don't know her— it's not a hard question to answer. That said of course there's only one answer Subaru wants: for Beatrice to laugh at how dumb the question is and say of course she knows Rem.



#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Memories eaten, named consumed, erased from the world—what a ridiculous story. If she felt the same way about it as Subaru, and felt righteous indignation at the world's absurdity, good. And if she came to think she and Subaru search for the true nature of this common point between them, better.

So, please say you know her.

Please say that you haven't forgotten about her—about Rem—like Emilia, like Crusch, like Wilhelm, like everyone else.

He wanted to hear her answer. He didn't want to hear her answer. His heart twisted with the contradictory desires.

Beatrice: “I don't want to answer, in fact.”

And he gets back an answer that's neither yes or no. Subaru's thinking grinds to a halt for a moment, and he waves his hands around, panicked.

Subaru: “W-wait. What's with this 'I don't want to answer'. The question's only answerable with a 'YES' or a 'NO'.”

Beatrice: “I don't know what 'yees' or 'noh' mean, I suppose. So Betty's answer will be the same, in fact. I don't want to answer.”

Subaru: “I'm telling you that's not an answer!”

He swings his arms from up to down and takes one single, strong step towards Beatrice. She doesn't react. That stubbornness makes the unease in his heart escalate into an unstoppable blaze.

Subaru: “This isn't what I want to hear from you!”

Beatrice: “Why must Betty be the one to tell you what you want to hear, I suppose. ...I'd prefer you didn't get too rowdy, in fact. You'll disturb the library, I suppose.”

Subaru: “You...hk!”

Subaru approaches Beatrice with the intention to force her to look at him. But the second he touches her, Beatrice looks at Subaru, and her eyes are trembling with emotion, which makes Subaru's hand stop.

Beatrice: “Your question is inquiring about somebody eaten by GLUTTONY, in fact.”

Subaru: “—! So you really do...”

Beatrice: “If you know of Gluttony's authority, it's enough to make a rough guess, I suppose. Roswaal, Bubby, and Shaula would also know, in fact.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “Roz!?”

He wasn't expecting that name. Roswaal knew about Gluttony's authority—meaning there's a possibility he remembers Rem. But no before getting on that,

Subaru: “How much do you all know about the Witch Cult? Roswaal should've known that if Emilia, a half-elf, came out in public, the Witch Cult would get active. But if I hadn't acted, the mansion and the village would be gone. What's going on here?”

Beatrice doesn't answer.

Subaru: “Rem and Crusch both said there had to be some kind of countermeasure planned. I can't help but think that there wasn't. If there was, those horrible things wouldn'tve...”

Beatrice: “It's impossible for Betty to know just how far Roswaal has thought things through, I suppose. But... I doubt he had nothing planned in advance, in fact.”

But no matter how hard he scours his memory, Subaru can't come up with anything suggesting Roswaal's hand in the Betelgeuse fight.

Subaru: “I'm not misunderstanding here, right. Or overestimating. If Roswaal'd done something, my going through so much hardship wouldn'tve...”

Beatrice: “If you don't know, then surely nobody knows, in fact.”

Uncomfortable with Beatrice's disappointment at his lack of understanding, Subaru notices that they've gotten off topic.

Subaru: “Wait, more importantly the Witch Cult. If you know about the Witch Cult, how about telling me everything you know. About the Cardinals of Sin, and about GLUTTONY. I have a mountain of questions... about this, too.”

Puck dodged questioning on the matter, so he has some hope asking Beatrice. He takes a black tome out of his pocket, the cover and insides faintly stained with blood.

Subaru: “I know the Witch Cult's deeply connected to this thing. I can't read it, but seeing as you're the watchman of the Forbidden Archive...”

Beatrice: “—a gospel.”

Beatrice's eyes go wide. Her lips quiver slightly as she stares at the gospel, her gaze going over the unreadable text on the cover, looking as if she can't believe it.

Beatrice: “Why, how do you...”

Subaru: “Stole it. ...is not how much I want this book. Didn't I tell you? The Witch Cult surrounded the mansion, up to no good. I took this from the ringleader. Its owner... isn't in this world anymore.”

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Beatrice: “Took it... but, that's...”

Beatrice's voice shakes as she reaches out for the gospel. Subaru hands it over and she traces her fingers over the cover.

Beatrice: “The owner is... dead, you said, I suppose.”

Subaru: “...Yeah. Dead. Chewed up in a carriage's wheel. ...I killed him.”

Objectively speaking, Betelgeuse didn't die directly at Subaru's hands. But that his death came as a result of Subaru's actions, and that Subaru was more than likely resolved to kill Betelgeuse, was unavoidable truth. Subaru intended to kill Betelgeuse. If he didn't take his life, Subaru's soul understood that things between them would never be settled.

He undoubtedly did have INTENT to kill Betelgeuse. But he wouldn't say he didn't hesitate or regret dirtying his hands—he can't lie to his own heart. He wouldn't forget killing, or being killed. He wouldn't say anything sentimental, like he was living on carrying the life of the man he'd slain. Betelgeuse was a thing that should die. Subaru completely believed that and killed him. That's all there is to it.

But Beatrice doesn't react.

Beatrice: “You left Betty behind too, I suppose, Juice...”

Subaru: “—? Who?”

Beatrice: “You don't need to know, in fact. More importantly, if you're the one who killed SLOTH, what happened to the Witch Factor, I suppose.”

Subaru: “Witch, Factor?”

Subaru knits his eyebrows and tilts his head in confusion. Beatrice looks at him with some suspicion, narrowing her eyes as if searching for some emotion in his expression. Subaru has no idea why she's doing this. He clicks his tongue in annoyance.

Subaru: “Don't wave jargon around at a guy who knows absolutely nothing. What's this 'Witch Factor.' Doesn't sound like anything good.”

Beatrice: “You don't know? You really—seriously? Then for what on earth purpose did you kill SLOTH, I suppose. I don't understand, in fact.”

Subaru: “Was just clearing away some loose sparks! What is it you want to say?!”

He's getting tired of the conversation not meshing together while Beatrice in contrast starts getting silent. She puts the back of her hand to her lips, in thought, and stares down at the gospel's cover.

Beatrice: “You don't know. ...This reaches outside of Betty's jurisdiction to make any judgements, in fact.”

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “What're you just agreeing to yourself ab—uuoah”

Shaking her head, Beatrice throws the gospel at Subaru. He scrambles to catch it, succeeds, and breaths a sigh of relief.

Subaru: “Hell was that. I'm not gonna call it a dangerous book, but it's definitely still a creepy book. Treat it more carefully!”

Beatrice: “—It's proper that you be the one to hold onto this, I suppose. Will the Witch Factor choose, or not? Either way, the selection is closing in, in fact. If this helps you make your judgement then, I'm sure Juice will rest in peace, I suppose.”

Subaru: “A beverage resting in peace! What do you—me...”

Unable to understand even a single bit of this conversation, Subaru struggles to get the words out. Before he can say anything more, a feeling of unease runs down his spine. He instinctively guesses that he's hearing the sound of spacetime bending.

Subaru: “You're really kicking me out, huh. I haven't even asked you anything... Do you seriously think I'm going to leave!?”

Beatrice: “Why must you ask your questions, and hear responses, by speaking with Betty, I suppose. I'd prefer you stop your selfish... prideful behaviour, in fact.”

Subaru: “Pride! —If you could just tell me what you know, that'd be fine! I don't want anything more than that! So, I'm saying, you...”

Beatrice: “—Betty's...”

A force starts to pull Subaru backward out of the room. Surprise he's getting kicked out.

Subaru: “Beako... Beatrice!”

Beatrice: “What's instigating your exit is your body, and your soul, in fact.”

Subaru: “What're—”

Beatrice: “Your soul which desires to hear not the answers, your weakness which desires to avert your eyes from reality, your ego which desires not to gaze upon your sins, is distancing your body from the Forbidden Archive, I suppose.”

Subaru: “I—”

Beatrice: “Betty isn't... just a tool for your convenience, I suppose.”

Subaru: “—!?”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Beatrice: “I’m not a thing for you to ask questions you want to ask, when you want to ask them, tell you what you want you hear, as if I want to hear it, for your convenience, in fact.”

It’s a bullseye—except not, and it feels like he’s getting punched from a completely unforeseen direction. He’s shocked, and the hollow it opens makes Subaru’s resistance against the force pulling him out slip.

Subaru: “Cra—”

He manages to catch himself on the edge of the door out and hold firm, half-kicked out and half not. He breathes out, clenches his teeth, looks forward. Beatrice’s expression is sad.

Beatrice: “You should ask Roswaal the things you want to know, I suppose. —Neither Betty or Bubby will speak to you, in fact.”

Subaru: “...Why do you look like you’re gonna cry.”

Beatrice lowers her gaze. Her hands reach for Subaru’s fingers, and unhook them from the door. He is ejected from the Forbidden Archive, and Beatrice’s heart.

He gets dumped in the hallway, door closes behind him. He goes to open it again.

Subaru: “That drill loli...”

But it’s too late and the door opens to a guest room. He tries using his Forbidden Archive sixth sense to find it but gets no pulls. He’s not meeting Beatrice again today.

Subaru: “What’s with this. If you know something, why not tell it, you damn brat. A sulky shut-in like you is the picture of the Natsuki family’s eldest son.”

He kicks the door and lets out a long breath. He can’t get the image of Beatrice’s last expression out of his head.

Subaru: “If you’re that close on the verge of crying, don’t lock yourself up all alone. Idiot.”

After all, if he thinks that he’s the one who made her make that face, he can’t put the blame on her for it anymore.

## CHAPTER 4: THE NEXT PLACE

Subaru returns to everyone else, ashamed. Everyone's still in the same place he left them except Otto, who's sat down where Subaru was sitting and looks to have been talking with Emilia. Subaru pulls a displeased face at another man making contact with Emilia and doesn't try to hide it as he turns toward Otto.

Subaru: "If you're going to have cheery chipper talks with Emilia-tan while I'm away, just die."

Otto: "It's impossible for me to wait in silence doing nothing with my personality. Actually, why is that the first thing you say after coming back, honestly? I think I just got vented at, but it still hurt."

Subaru: "S-stop seeing through people like you know what's going on. We're never seeing each other again once we settle the promise for buying that oil. Don't misunderstand."

Otto: "Could you please stop talking as if we're a couple who've had some kind of misunderstanding!?"

Otto yells at tsundere mode Subaru, who instantly loses interest in Otto and resets his course toward Emilia.

Emilia: "Did you meet Beatrice?"

But what she's really asking is, did you achieve whatever that thing you left to do with Beatrice was. Technically the answer is yes, but in terms of Subaru's intentions it's no.

Subaru: "No, didn't work out."

Emilia: "Right. Well, there's no helping that. When Beatrice hides her location with Gate Crossing, you can't find her no matter what you try. Neither me or Ram have ever met her..."

Subaru: "No, I did meet her. She was being cranky or I guess in a fit of ennui and wouldn't answer my question. It's such a dumb episode."

Emilia: "... You met her?"

Emilia's eyes open wide in shock. Sensing her puzzlement, Subaru nods.

Subaru: "I've got some crazy instinct that always tells me what room she's in. Well, even though I met her my conversation skill's so low I didn't achieve what I actually went there for."

Emilia: "I've been thinking this for a while but, you and Beatrice... get along so well, Subaru."

She whispers in a low voice, a finger to her lip as if in thought. Subaru makes the sourest face he can, it's not even really unconscious, but an intentional effort.

Subaru: "Really rather not get along with Beako. She's my nemesis, has been ever since I came across her. You know she sucked out my mana the first time we met? Not enough time's passed for

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

me to change my impression of her.”

Emilia: “Even though you reconciled with Julius after everything? Subaru, sometimes you get sooo stubborn like this for absolutely no reason.”

Subaru: “Sticking through with pointless stubbornness makes a man! ...is the kind of misunderstanding someone painful like me keeps making. Also I haven't reconciled with Julius. I, hate, him, fooreveeeer.”

Emilia: “Yes, yes.”

Emilia gives a small laugh and ignores him. Subaru's mouth twists into a dissatisfied frown, but internally he's relieved that he successfully changed the topic.

Subaru: “Oh yeah, where'd Frederica go? Leaving my Emilia-tan alone with Otto... crossing the line for failures of judgement.”

Emilia: “Putting aside whose I am for another occasion... Frederica's in one of the guest rooms getting it organized. —She's preparing Rem-san's sleeping room.”

Subaru: “Ah, is she.”

Subaru's voice goes low, Emilia narrows her eyes as if pained. Even though he hates that he made Emilia make that face, he can't bear the keen pain in his chest when he thinks about Rem. He shakes his head once to dispel his emotional expression and smiles so that Emilia won't feel any further gloom.

Subaru: “Which means we have to get Rem out of the carriage soon. Leaving her in the carriage forever'd be sad... Which reminds me, sorry for before, Otto.”

Otto: “No, no need to worry about it. After all, she's your... ah, very many things to you, Natsuki-san. I won't go too far in saying anything while she's in that condition.”

Subaru: “I couldn't bear the thought of you touching my Rem with your money-grubby fingers. ...Honestly, sorry.”

Otto: “That's not something someone who's honestly sorry would say! And if I'm to add, don't you think that's a pretty rich line coming from someone who only just called a different woman 'my'!?”

Subaru: “It's my adorable love strategy where I use you to make Emilia-tan jealous. Don't make me spill it, idiot.”

Otto: “But you spilled it yourself!”

Subaru smiles at Otto as he overreacts and glances at Emilia. She's smiling a little and her gloominess is gone.

Emilia: “You two get along sooo well. Even though you've barely known each other long at all.”

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “Wait, you're jealous of him!? You know, compared to you, Emilia-tan, Otto's nothing but playtime, playtime. Me, I wanna get serious playing fire with you, Emilia-tan.”

Otto: “Why am I being dumped. It's completely irrelevant to reality, but it's still upsetting!”

Emilia puts a hand to her mouth, her shoulders shaking in laughter.

Emilia: “Sorry.”

Emilia: “I know now's not a good time to be laughing like this, but I can't hold it anymore. Don't you two think that maybe, you'll come to know each other for sooo long?”

Subaru: “Like, he's a travelling merchant? Once his business's done, he's gone in a flash. ...Or really, I can't stand a man other than me with no clear shipping targets getting close to Emilia-tan.”

Otto: “I have no idea what you're saying but I hate that I can tell it's something incredibly stupid when we've barely known each other!”

Though Subaru's phrasing was somewhat exaggerated, the sentiment was unmistakably his truest feelings. For a Subaru who'd been open with his feelings for Emilia and pursued her with force enough to knock birds out of flight, having other men interacting her set his heart ablaze with unbearable envy.

He surely had more envy, and more possessiveness, than most.



Frederica finishes preparing the guestroom and returns to the living room, upon which everyone leaves the room.

Otto: “I'm thinking about looking around the nearby village for a bit. I'm in possession of the deed to buy cargo for all the other merchants, and I can distribute some of it to the villagers at my discretion. I'll have the Margrave shoulder the cost for this afterwards, though.”

So Otto runs off to the village to do some merchanting, but that said what's he's doing is most definitely helping out the villagers in their people-power-insufficient village. He's only pretending to be naughty.

Frederica: “One of the rooms in the servant's quarters has been prepared as instructed. ...Mysteriously, it appeared that the cleaning in that room alone had been tended to with exceeding scrupulousness.”

Subaru: “Scrupulousness... Second floor, furthest room back?”

Frederica: “—Yes, indeed. That single room looked as though all except the bed had been



#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

discarded... would it happen that you might know why?"

Of course the reason is because it's Rem's room originally.

Subaru: "...No. Just a feeling, doesn't really mean anything."

Frederica is a really stupidly great maid. Rem and Frederica would've been the ones keeping the oversized Mathers mansion going all by themselves. Ram not included.

They go round to the back of the mansion, where they find Patrasche tied up in the stable. Subaru pats her snout.

Subaru: "Sorry for not telling you you did a good job, Patrasche. Lots's happened and it's really overdue, but I'll be counting on you from hereon, partner."

Patrasche licks his hand. Frederica tilts her head at their skinship.

Frederica: "It is rather attached to you, isn't it? I am impressed to see that you have tamed such a clearly excellent ground dragon."

Subaru: "It's not really that I tamed her though, yeah? If it's hard to get normal ground dragons to like you, then maybe Patrasche's emotions're just leagues deeper than others. Or maybe because I'm not very reliable she has no choice but to tag along with me."

It's been only three, four days since he met Patrasche—and she's saved his life so many times. He hasn't given her anything back. Just a blessing, meeting this dragon.

Patrasche licks Subaru's hand and bumps her snout against Subaru's cheek, catching him by surprise and making him give a wry smile.

Frederica: "I sense that I have come to understand your nature as well, Subaru-sama. —Thank you for your service."

Says Frederica with a tender gaze as she watches Subaru and Patrasche dick around. Patrasche stops moving for a sec to stare at her, then goes back to playing with Subaru. Subaru senses that the girls just had a moment of communion. Anyway.

Subaru: "Sorry for making you wait, Rem. It must've been cramped and dark in here. I'm taking you up to your room now."

So after he's done messing with Patrasche he goes to the inside of the carriage where Rem's sleeping. She doesn't pout at being left behind and say, 'Subaru-kun is such a mean person,' or smile or Subaru's apology.

Frederica: "—I had heard the circumstances, yet I am still surprised."

So Frederica can't hide her surprise at seeing Rem the first time. Subaru tilts his head at her, she shakes her head.

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Frederica: “Ah, no.”

Frederica: “Her appearance is perfectly identical to Ram's. The only difference looks to be in hair colour... the account of them being twins is true.”

Subaru: “I know it's dubious when your memories're gone, but I'm glad you believe it. If you could remember her as someone who doesn't pull mean-spirited bullying, I would be happy.”

Subaru reaches his hand out to touch Rem's cheek. He doesn't feel any warmth or cold—there's definitely signs of life, but the insides aren't there anymore. Reconfirming this makes the unhealing wound in his heart again reopen. He knew that would happen but he still had to do it.

Frederica: “Subaru-sama. I would believe it acceptable should the one tasked to carry her be me.”

Subaru: “I want to do it, please let me do it. Bringing Rem to the mansion... to her room is something I would like to do. I apologize for my selfishness.”

Frederica: “No matter, I simply felt my chest tighten for a moment. Your eyes look like a murderer's, but you truly are kind.”

Subaru: “My heart does feel pain when casually dissed!”

Subaru picks up Rem to transport her. She's light.

Subaru: “I'll wake you up soon. So come on and get mad at me for feeling how soft your body is right now.”

Frederica: “An admirable line, although it feels to have been soured.”

So Frederica's kind of fucking amazed at that line. Anyway they nod goodbye to Patrasche and leave her in the stables, Frederica taking the lead as they head back to the mansion, going to the servant's quarters on the east side, Rem's sleeping room aka Rem's original room.

Frederica: “It appears that you have spoken with Beatrice-sama.”

They're going up a staircase. Subaru looks up at Frederica's back, her eyes narrow and she looks down at Subaru with a gaze that definitely looks threatening. But Subaru, being someone who continually gets misunderstood in the exact same way due to his sanpaku<sup>3</sup>, understands she's not really being threatening.

Frederica asks if Beatrice was well, since Fred hasn't seen her ever since she returned to the mansion. Subaru's like well I told Emilia too but nah she wasn't really doing well, she was in a worse mood than usual so he didn't get to talk with her properly. Frederica responds like '...i see,' and seems concerned.

---

<sup>3</sup> Where the whites of the eyes are visible beneath the pupil when eye is at rest. Makes people look like murderers and those with the condition are rumoured to attract accidents and violence (source: Wikipedia). Like fuck I'm going to point this out every time so keep in mind that this is what sanpaku is.

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

This prompts Subaru to wonder just what exactly Beatrice's position in this mansion is. Her standing and history've never really been brought up to him. She sits in the Forbidden Archive all day, treats Puck like a big brother, acts like a kid when interacting with Subaru, and then there's that >deeply implying foreshadowy talk that just happened last chapter. Mysteries abound.

Subaru: “Uhh... Have you been working for the mansion long, Frederica?”

Frederica: “My my, could you be interested? Between Emilia-sama and the girl you are holding... and additionally Beatrice-sama, you would be quite the fickle man, wouldn't you.”

Subaru: “Don't just slip Beako in there, I'm not into younger girls. Isn't it apparent that my arms're already buried in Emilia and Rem? Frederica, you're... straight up, it hasn't been long, but I think you're a type I have trouble with.”

Frederica: “It seems I've accidentally come to be hated.”

Subaru: “See, it's this feeling where it feels like Roswaal's servants are leading me round the nose which's why it wouldn't work. Ah, I mean it's entirely a personality affinity problem, I don't hate you or anything.”

Frederica blinks and puts her hand to her mouth to hide her fangs as she smiles.

Frederica: “There is no need for such concern. You would be quite the worrier, Subaru-sama.”

Subaru: “It's because you hurt me when we first met. You laughed it off, but you were at least half-serious about it, right?”

Frederica falls silent, this time surprised indeed. Her smile vanishes and she stares at Subaru, her gaze seeming to read into him. She gives a small sigh.

Frederica: “It is not especially often that the insides of my heart have been discernible by others. I would be grateful should you refrain to intrude.”

Subaru: “Just putting some things straight after I wound up intruding and trampling around. My eyes're nasty too, not like I can fault you for it... well, I mean my whole family's that way.”

His parents had nasty-looking eyes and thus such was their child.

At dinnertime when the three of them sit around there in silence, eating their personal mayonnaise, it must look like nothing less than black magic at the dinner table.

Thinking objectively about the memory makes Subaru's expression sour. Frederica sighs again.

Frederica: “Uncomfortable—would not be how I would describe you, but you are a mysterious one.” something something I understand why Emilia-sama behaved like that.

Subaru: “Emilia-tan what?”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Frederica: “Nothing of note. I had simply truly angered Emilia-sama this time. Now, why would you have asked me as to the length of my employment?”

Subaru: “Uhhhh”

Subaru: “Basically, I wanted to talk about Beako... about Beatrice. If you've been a maid here a long time, I thought I'd ask you since when has Beatrice been here.”

Not like he asked, but Subaru figures Frederica's a little older than him—23, 24 or thereabouts. Assuming she's been a maid for 10 years-ish, being that Beatrice is like 12, Frederica should know the answer to this. But Frederica shakes her head.

Frederica: “My apologies, but I would not know. When the time first came wherein I had been enabled to service this mansion, Beatrice-sama had already been secluded inside the Forbidden Archive.”

Subaru: “Ahh, well. Time spent as a maid doesn't necessarily mean time spent working in Roz-chi's mansion. It's not like you got experienced working here exclusively...”

Frederica: “I am afraid you would be mistaken, Subaru-sama.”

Subaru knits his brows. Frederica straightens her posture, her expression noticeably gloomy.

Frederica: “The only mansion I have been enabled to service would be the Master's. My being brought here as a new servant would have been when I was twelve years of age. It has already been over ten years since then.”

Subaru: “...uh, isn't that weird? I mean, counting backwards, that makes it so Beako's been cooped up in that moldy stinky room since she was a toddler.”

Frederica: “Would you still be yet to understand it?”

Frederica shakes her head as if faulting Subaru's unreasonable stubbornness about this. Subaru can guess what this means. Basically,

Subaru: “Her appearance doesn't change. ...She really isn't a human.”

Frederica: “A librarian bound by covenant to oversee the Forbidden Archive since prior the Mathers family's conception—this would be her, the Great Spirit Beatrice-sama.”

It doesn't feel like a lie. Subaru's forced to accept it. That Beatrice is something on a completely different level from what he anticipated.

Subaru: “Great Spirit... is the same title Puck has, but man they look and whatever nothing alike.”

Frederica: “The absence of a contractor and her ties to the covenant... no, to say any more would exceed the bounds of what is acceptable territory for me to broach. I request you forget.”

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “Really no way that's happening.”

And this makes it how many times Subaru's been >implying >implied >implying by someone who clearly knows things? It doesn't look like he's getting any more out of Frederica though, and Subaru sighs. Then he remembers that they've been stopped here talking the whole time.

Subaru: “Frederica.”

Frederica: “Please forgive me, Subaru-sama. Even I am prone to slips of the tongue. That an individual has appeared who shows concern for Beatrice-sama had simply overjoyed me. I humbly request that I may be forgiven.”

Subaru: “That is fine, but my arms shall soon reach their limit.”

His arms are shaking as he stares up at Frederica, his face stiff. Rem's body's light and he'd acted tough by saying he'd be fine as long as he had love etc, but his failing arm strength and stamina of his back which he'd been ignoring now assault him.

Frederica: “Oh dear.”

Subaru: “Move aside promptly, please!”

Rather than hand Rem off to Frederica, he shoves her out of the way and races to the guest room. He hears someone running behind him, indicating Frederica's following. He reaches Rem's room.

Emilia: “—Took you a while.”

and Emilia's waiting there, looking bored as hell.



They settle Rem down in the bed and pull the blanket up to her chest. She's breathing and has a heartbeat. Just how much time will pass before she wakes up again?

Subaru: “It all depends on how hard I work.”

He brushes her bangs off her forehead and glances back at Emilia standing behind him.

Subaru: “Sorry for the wait. Splurged a bit talking with Frederica. The lactic acid in my arms's gone something crazy thanks to that.”

Wow fuck how I phrased that. Anyway Emilia says it's good to splurge on talking (fuck how I phrased that). Emilia: “What did you talk with Frederica about?”

Subaru: “Rehabilitating shut-in girls, but firstly tried for some info gathering. The way the shut-in

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

behaviour started and how long it's been going are deeply connected to the approach to take with them afterwards.”

Emilia: “Wow, really? Subaru, you know so much about SHUT-IN. It's amazing.”

Subaru: “Sometimes the things you say without ill intent do pierce me through the chest, Emilia-tan. Like right now.”

Subaru's face screws up. Emilia tilts her head and gives a wry smile, then a small shrug.

Emilia: “Which means you couldn't get anything out of Beatrice?”

Subaru: “Her mouth was firm and would not stir. By the way, I don't know how many times I've asked this but... how's Puck?”

Emilia: “—Nothing, he's not responding to me. This does happen sometimes, but the length this time is sooo bad. I'm seriously worried.”

Emilia reaches to her chest and pulls out a green, glowing crystal pendant. It's Puck's thingermajig where he usually hangs out, but he hasn't manifested for days. The idea of him being absent is weird, but at the very least he's not responding to Emilia's calls for him.

Subaru: “It happens sometimes? But this time it's got you worried, too.”

Emilia: “He'll come back when I really, truly need his strength. I'm sure it's not as if he can't see me. I've asked him before what he's doing when goes away, but he's never told me.”

Subaru can't hide his disappointment at this since it seems Puck knows things. Now everyone who seems to know something about what's going on has firmly sealed their mouth.

Subaru: “Puck and Beako too, everyone's gone and shut their mouths... I'm defeated.”

Emilia: “Seriously. ...Subaru, what do we do?”

Subaru puts his hand to his forehead in thought and looks at Emilia as she calls him, who is staring at him imploringly and with faith.

Subaru: “Now that everyone who seems to know something's shut up, I think all we can do next is leave. ...Well, even if where know where he is, who knows if he's gonna talk.”

Emilia: “You mean Roswaal.”

Subaru: “I figure now's a great time for a chat cutting all the underground circumstances loose.”

Subaru nods, confirming Emilia's guess. The two seem to be of the same mind in how to progress, and Emilia pats her chest in relief.

Emilia: “Thank goodness, it looks like you're in favour of it too. I was wondering what I'd do if I

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

got opposed again, like with Roswaal or Ram.”

Subaru: “I might oppose depending on the content, but you do know I fundamentally agree with you all the way, Emilia-tan? And even if I oppose, I want you to trust that it's because of my love for you.”

Emilia: “Oh, 'love' as if... Subaru, you just say things to make others happy sooo often.”

Emilia turns her head away in surprise. Subaru's cheeks go slightly red as he clenches his fists.

Emilia: “So, I have a proposal for Subaru, who's allying with me.”

Subaru: “Yup yup, let's hear it, say whatever you want.”

Subaru respectfully places his hand to his chest and bows, Emilia closes one eye and pouts as if to say 'you're just doing that because I want to see it' and looks back. She lets out a breath and stares into Subaru's dark<sup>4</sup> eyes.

Emilia: “We have to talk to Roswaal, and there's the refugees from the village, too. So I'm thinking of going to SANCTUARY.”

Subaru: “SANCTUARY...”

The name's come up a lot but unfortunately since Subaru didn't reach Sanctuary in that one loop (cut in LN/anime) he doesn't know where it is, although it's the destination for Ram's B group of evacuees fleeing the witch cult. But now that at least Betelgeuse's squad of cultists is down, the group that went to SANCTUARY should be out of danger, just like the mansion.

Emilia: “I was told I'd have to go there someday, and I think now's a good chance. Because it's certain that this time, Roswaal'll definitely talk about things.”

Subaru: “Wa-wa-wai, time out! You're not saying you're leaving me behind, are you?”

Emilia: “Huh?”

Subaru holds his palm out at Emilia, somewhat spoiling her enthusiastic talk. But he has to say this.

Subaru: “I know you're motivated too, and I agree with this plan but I'd seriously rather not be left behind. I know I'm powerless and stupid, but even so I'd hate not being at your side doing my best. I'm aware of how selfish this is, though, ha!”

Emilia's eyes go wide. But what he's saying is undeniably his true feelings. If he's not at her side, he can't protect her. He can't act for her. Not being conceited, his presence was almost certainly necessary to help her. He didn't want reward for this, it's just something Subaru himself wants to do. Emilia's expression is still shocked at his enthusiasm. He judges that she's still undecided, so,

Subaru: “You can't stop me. I'm stuck to you, Emilia-tan. Getting left behind is a no thanks. This

---

4 Black. The Japanese call their own eye colour black. It's not really black. But I must preserve the darkness.

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

SANCTUARY and Roswaal—in the face of my blazing love, all obstacles'll—”

Emilia: “It wasn't as though I was going to leave you. Come with me.”

Subaru: “Don't leave me behind don'tdon'tdon't—what did you just say?”

Subaru was on the verge of getting down rolling around on the floor like an autistic there. Emilia puts her hand to her mouth, still blushing slightly.

Emilia: “I said, come with me. I'd be so anxious I couldn't bear it, being all alone.”

Subaru: “E-Emilia-tan...”

Emilia: “I rely on you, Subaru. I don't think you're weak or stupid at all. I need your strength.”

This shocks Subaru beyond description. His jaw drops and he falls silent. Unease runs through Emilia's expression. Her hand meanders as if deliberating whether or not to touch Subaru.

Emilia: “Er, um, uh, what is it? Did, did I say something strange again...?”

Subaru: “You've got possession of my motivation switch, Emilia-tan. It turns on and off at your word on full automatic. Can't bear it.”

Subaru covers his face with his hands, toying with Emilia. Emilia doesn't get she's being toyed with and is in disorderly confusion. Subaru savours the feeling.

???: “—it appears you have concluded your talk.”

Subaru: “Huwawhegh!?”

And Frederica knocks on the door and enters, cutting the conversation off. Emilia's unsurprised, but Subaru's trying to hide his heart palpitations. Frederica more than likely guesses Subaru's emotions and without even a fragment of concern arising on her face,

Frederica: “I would present no objection to your venture to SANCTUARY. However, a period of two days would be necessary to finalize preparations.”

Subaru: “Preparations? So you're coming too?”

Frederica: “Due to my overseeing of the mansion, I'm afraid I would be unable to accompany you. Instead, I shall inform Subaru-sama's ground dragon as to SANCTUARY's whereabouts.”

Subaru: “Patrasche?”

Subaru's eyes go wide at the proposal.

Frederica: “Ground dragons are intelligent creatures. Should one tell them the way, they are fully capable of discerning the path regardless of a lack of guideposts. Further, your one is particularly



ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

intelligent. I doubt there will be any problems.”

Subaru: “You're just getting better and better, Patrasche. Seriously, how did I hit that flag?”

Frederica: “More importantly, there are several matters on which I must speak with you.”

Frederica: “Now that you are travelling to Sanctuary, there are several things I would desire that you keep in mind. Especially when considering Emilia-sama's lineage, do take caution.”

Emilia: “—Yes, I'm prepared. Since it's a place with some history.”

Emilia nods, her eyes filled with a strong will. Subaru goes to stand beside her.

Subaru: “Honestly, not like I know anything about Sanctuary except its name but... my ultimate goal is to be Emilia-tan's strength. Please, tell me anything.”

Frederica: “Your impurity is so pure it conversely becomes refreshing.”

She's pretty fucking blown at that line too, blinks once to push the emotion back, and raises a finger.

Frederica: “Then, I shall speak about Sanctuary. The first thing I would like you to keep in mind is...”

“You'd like”

“Us to keep in mind?”

Subaru and Emilia tilt their heads at the same time, Frederica nods with a “Yes”, and her tone drops slightly.

Frederica: “—Please be careful of an individual named Garfiel. Should there be anyone in Sanctuary with whom you must be most cautious during your interactions, it is him.”

## CHAPTER 5: TEAM EMILIA

So they end up departing for SANCTUARY two days later. Frederica's there at the stables telling Patrasche the route, and Subaru suggests that she tell him the location instead to lessen some of her workload, but she refuses by saying that SANCTUARY is a pretty important place for the Master and a servant such as herself couldn't possibly divulge that information of her own accord, and honestly she'd rather not even be telling the ground dragon.

Subaru's forced to accept this and spends those two days in boredom hanging out with the Arlam villagers and going back to his position as a servant doing odd jobs around the mansion.

Emilia's still disappointed at Puck's absence and spends her time timidly going down to the village with Subaru to try to close the distance between herself and the villagers, and reading documents and books Subaru can't understand, to bolster her knowledge.

A few changes happened over that period.

Otto: “Aaaah! How did the chaos and clutter even get this bad!? The documents which need full perusal, the documents which you can skim over, and the documents not worth skimming over haven't been sorted, and so this!”

And there's Otto arranging documents at terrifying speed. He's glancing over the documents to the point he gets the gist of the content, throwing it onto a mountain of papers stacked up on the desk, and continuing to do this one document after the other. Subaru watches on in wonder, hand on chin, at the dizzying speed of Otto's eyes and hands, his head looking to be running so fast it'll spout flames.

Subaru: “Man, amazing. Me, even if I look at the lines of text, what it says is nothing but gibberish.”

Otto: “I am not touching the content of these. Right now, my only intention is optimizing the processable ones related to account booking, processable petitions, and various miscellaneous ones. Or rather, this document filing truly should've been done once they were first received... or no, I'm sure that this sorting method has some law which only the one who regularly deals with them understands.”

Since the one who deals with these documents is Roswaal, Otto's laments are more than likely right. It's like Roswaal to have a bitch of a sorting system. But now that he's gone and others can't understand said system, all that's left is to start over resorting them from step one.

Otto: “Alright, that should be about finished. Now is to arrange them in chronological order... though maybe I should subdivide the ones awaiting processing and the ones already processed first...”

Subaru: “Methodical or perhaps it's neuroticism, either way you're definitely a type A.”

Otto: “What is that, that 'taeype ahye.' It doesn't sound like it means much good.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru silently wagagagaggles his hand at Otto's staring, denying him explanation. Not like Subaru believes in blood type personality analyses, but it's great conversation material. By the way Subaru's a type B. The whole Natsuki family is a type B. Doesn't feel that great to have everybody you tell that respond with an 'I knew it.'

Otto: "Actually, I just thought something."

Subaru: "What, your hands've stopped. You had a good pace there keep going."

Otto: "I'm not adverse to this, being an advocate of efficiency, but isn't there something off about this situation in the first place? Why is a mere travelling merchant such as myself inside the Margrave's office, brow sweaty, frantically sorting documents? Isn't my position here off?"

Subaru: "Sure took you a while to notice."

Subaru tilts his head and gives a meanyants smile. Getting Otto to sort the Margrave's documents is all part of Subaru's plans. Plans, to secure personnel for Team Emilia.

Emilia's position in the Royal Election isn't exactly favourable. Sure you have Subaru who's generally recognized as her knight who's succeeded with repelling the Witch Cult and the White Whale subjugation, but given how nasty the environment around Emilia is it's unclear how much effect those successes had. Emilia's starting point is way behind the other factions'. And then you have the fact that her backer, Roswaal, has kept his true plans invisible. Honestly as a backer, Roswaal is just a plain failure.

There's the fact he had no counterplans against the Witch Cult, and now the fact that even though they've got past the danger they still can't contact him. He's such a fucking pain it's no longer clear if he's enemy or ally. And then you have Ram who's Roswaal's devoted servant, Frederica who has great consciousness of her maidly position, and Puck and Beatrice who aren't talking to Subaru and Emilia.

So right now there's no one Emilia can talk to without worries. Of course Subaru wants to be that person, but the range of what Subaru can do is in fact less than a normal person.

So Subaru zeroes in on Otto.

Subaru: "Basically it's the strategy of 'if you have no allies nearby, why not just make one?'"

Otto: "I feel you just said something incredibly improper, but what you're talking about has nothing to do with me, yes?!"

Subaru: "Huh, I don't know. Hrm, really don't know. Oh, Otto-san. The documents here have yet to be sorted."

Otto: "Ah, sorry. Erm, let's see.. Mining Site for Magical Crystals and Reserves in Stock this... shouldn't this document be absolutely forbidden for outsider inspection!?"

Subaru: "Ahhh nooo, you saw it. Ugh, you saw it. Ahhhh. Alright. Mhm, well, I'll talk this over

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

with Roswaal *real good*, so you relax.”

Otto: “That there's nothing relaxing about this at all actually makes it amazing!”

Otto tears his eyes away from the document while Subaru grins super duper. Otto is fucking stunned at Subaru, and with his lips trembling,

Otto: “It couldn't be that you're not really supporting me, and are showing me forbidden documents to have me removed? To trample over and settle all my compensation from our deal?”

Subaru: “Ydungetit. I'm fully intending to pay for your stock and fulfil your request. So I'm thinking I'll drag you in deeper making your escape even less possible.”

Otto: “Isn't that excessively malicious!? Why are you trying to burden this simple greenhorn travelling merchant with such a heavy load, please stop!”

Subaru wonders if he's gotten too carried away, his expression vanishes, and he mutters a “Sorry.”

Subaru: “Feel I kinda pushed too far out of impatience. Impatience from all these packed-in affairs, where the tangled threads show no sign of unravelling. I'm sorry for not asking about your circumstances too.”

Otto: “Uh, no, seeing you can suddenly get so collected is also kind of unsettling. ...Um, I wonder if I should ask. Why do you have such high expectations of me?”

Subaru goes over to the table. It's true that from neither Otto or Subaru's perspective they've had a long companionship or done anything particularly trust-building.

Subaru: “Saying it straight up, the reason I'm so attached to you isn't anything like that. It's not as if I evaluated you personally, and the fact you mentioned the terms when we first bumped into each other is huge.”

Otto: “Frank, aren't you. —I understand, but, terms?”

Subaru: “That you're factionless, devoted to no one in the Royal Selection. That you're sharp with weighting profits and losses, and your views on winning over allies through business negotiations are easy to understand. And most importantly, that you don't look at Emilia, a half-elf, with a discriminatory view, I guess.”

Otto falls silent. All the terms are definitely important considering the conditions Subaru's in, and Subaru's judged that Otto clears them all. Otto waits for Subaru's response, the look in his eyes different from when he's joking, lit with a composed glimmer and wavering as if he's guessing Subaru's thoughts. Appraising Subaru.

Subaru: “And this one is just going off patten, but.”

Otto: “—Let's hear it.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: "I feel we'll do well with you. Honestly, I'm really not doing anything more than getting Emilia-tan more allies, but if that ally can get along with me too then that makes it even better. Ah, and there's also that you don't have any opposite-sex interest in Emilia-tan. Should you ever, even were you effectively an old playmate of mine, I would be forced to slay you...!"

Otto: "So it's only your rivals in love who get exterminated!"

Subaru: "Feel my chances of winning if a rival's there are straight zero! Don't you take my lack of faith in myself lightly. I can count all the people in my life who've given me approval on one hand."

His parents, Rem, Wilhelm, Emilia, and conditionally Julius and Reinhardt. And he realises that he's suddenly, somehow gone over one hand. That he's gotten these judgements passed on him makes him wonder if it's safe to think that he's progressing in a slightly more respectable direction. Not that there's been any visible changes to him.

Anyway,

Otto: "Grief, it sure is refreshing just how little you hide what's in your chest. Never let your poker face drop in front of a merchant as if, you realise that you're easy, exploitable game at the bargaining chair?"

Subaru: "If this chair were a bargaining chair I might've gotten myself into a bit of a hustle, but the people here aren't a merchant and his game, it's me and you. Though, if you're saying that you were intending to be in that position, I'll shift my gears and attitude."

Otto: "Which is you saying you'll be assessing my qualities as a merchant. This is exactly what you'd call 'doing something in the same breath'... what exactly to do here."

Otto sighs, his previous tense caution disappearing from his nonetheless troubled expression. He closes one eye at Subaru who looks completely indifferent to this.

Otto: "My bringing this up in this location sure is something though, Natsuki-san. My goal is... it isn't anything so outrageous as to tell people about it, but I do have a dream."

Subaru: "I have a feeling that a man's dreams are restricted to being either so ridiculous they sound like an exaggeration or so ridiculous they have to be kept secret but, could you tell me it?"

Otto: "I hate that I can agree with that. ...You see, I'm the second son of a well-to-do family of merchants. I was brought up in that affluence when I was young, but my position wasn't one where my family could particularly do anything for me when it came to eventually becoming independent."

Subaru isn't sure how much this place's sibling circumstances line up with those in the original world, but it seems like family businesses and nobility are hereditary, and generally the oldest son is the inheritor.

Otto: "I studied the fundamentals of commerce while helping my older brother in running the business, and became independent after saving up some foundation money. I bought a carriage with my ground dragon Frufoo and from there... well, I'd say the BLESSING I was born with made it go

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

reasonably well.”

Subaru: “Blessing'd be... Blessing of XENOGLOSSY, was it. Yeah, it definitely seems like you could make some easy money with a blessing to talk to animals, depending how you use it.”

Otto: “It isn't useful enough to be worth mentioning. I'm sure it comes with more troublesome problems attached than you think, Natsuki-san. Either way, that's how I ventured around for years, and over that time there sprouted what you would call a dream.”

Subaru straightens himself in his seat to listen properly. Otto smiles affably.

Otto: “It's truly mundane.”

Otto: “It's the same dream any travelling merchant would wish for. —to possess your own castle of a store in a single fixed place, and continue doing business while staying put. If you can achieve that in a large town somewhere, there's no greater joy for a merchant.”

Subaru: “And that's your dream?”

Otto: “It's a stupid wish. Because after all my travelling round and round, ultimately what I want is to reach the same place as the house I was born and raised. But well, if I go and mention it, then I'd have to say that that environment is a symbol of happiness to me.”

Otto scratches his cheek at the awkwardness, speaking quickly to hide his embarrassment. Subaru understands and agrees with his answer, and settles deeper into his chair as he considers whether he can come up with a good reply. But before he can,

Otto: “As a merchant's second son, as a merchant, as a future huge merchant, I couldn't possibly let the opportunity to have a player as big as the Margrave in my debt escape me. And that would be without mentioning the debt's connectedness to one who may become the future Ruler, it's an exceedingly gigantic business opportunity that would never come again even if I redid my entire life.”

Subaru: “Alright, then you're all good with helping us. Thanks, I'm glad. Knew you'd say this, Otto. Now keep sorting the documents.”

Otto: “What!?! You know I just said something rather neat just then? You don't think that reaction's too weak!?”

Subaru: “If I sincerely answered that with deep emotion I feel like I'd lose. ...Well, either way if an outsider were watching this it'd've been an Out! for you the second you touched those documents, no hope of escape. Kehkeheh.”

Otto: “He's terrible no matter what angle you look at him, this man!”

So they basically wound back in the same rhythm as where they started, but Subaru has to be thankful for Otto. Definitely would never say so though.

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Otto: “I will just be letting you know, I'm different from you, Natsuki-san, who is Emilia-sama's ally unconditionally. Our present arrangement is merely an acquaintanceship with conditions attached. Should a factional dispute come about between Emilia-sama and the Margrave, I will be choosing my side after properly considering the gains and losses. Please don't mistake me for a perfect ally.”

Subaru: “Which's why you deliberating on the scales balancing Emilia-tan and Roswaal is perfect I've got you in my hands. I'll drill Emilia-tan's goodness right into you sooner or later, relax. —Did you hear everything we just said good and clear?”

Subaru turns his head in another direction at the end there. Otto's expression goes dumbstruck, and he follows Subaru's gaze. And standing there is,

???: “Uh-huh... I mean, yes. I heard loud and clear, Subaru-sama.”

A girl in a maid outfit with chestnut-coloured hair, a smile on her lovable face. This was the second change that had occurred in these two days at the mansion.

Leaving Frederica to tend to the mansion alone (Subaru's also helping but his ability as a servant is equivalent to half a person and his body hasn't finished healing) seemed like it'd be physically impossible so they went to hire a helper from Arlam Village and surprise it's an enthusiastic Petra Leyte who's hired temporarily for now.

Subaru: “You're still so little, and you're already out of your house being a maid. You're amazing, Petra.”

Petra: “I'm already twelve, so I'm a grown-up who can work... I mean, adult. Subaru, -sama please treat me like a proper adult.”

Subaru something somethings telling her to get mastery of polite language from Frederica if her temporary maidiness is temporarily coming off. Also he's always going to treat Petra like she's a cutie.

He messes up her hair with aggressive headpats and she ends up clinging to him which wasn't what he expected but leagues better than her abusing or spitting on him. Subaru judges that Petra's affinity for being a maid with her unexpectedly solid upbringing is pretty high. It's probably safe to judge that she's better at cleaning and preparing meals etc than Subaru already if you include Frederica's backing her. Subaru fucking useless.

Anyway so she's been standing there listening in on the conversation from outside the door the whole time. Otto's face goes red as he realises he's been had.

Otto: “A-A set-up!?”

Subaru: “It's nothing to get that worried about. Just a third party's presence making your previous statements go down in the public record. A touching piece of craftsmanship made to secure the jury's conviction... is how I'd appreciate you to think of it.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Otto objects to the use of the term 'piece of craftsmanship' and questions what exactly is 'touching' about this.

Otto realises that all his paths out are already gone and is half crying as he yells. Subaru smiles and shoots Petra a thumbs up.

Subaru: “Great work, Petra. But won't Frederica get mad at you for using your time on this?”

Petra: “This time is the time when I am cleaning the hallways. If I am cleaning the hallway outside of the Lord's room, even if I spend more time than usual, she will not get mad.”

Subaru: “You're a crafty one. So even a little girl is still a woman...”

Subaru's kind of saved by Petra's presence, because she's one of his helpers who isn't being influenced by Roswaal. There isn't as much she can do for Emilia as Otto, and the influence of her presence might be less than Subaru. But she's not scared of Emilia. And that alone makes her a saving grace for Emilia, definitely.

Subaru: “Having lots of allies's the most ideal outcome. And questioning what you can do isn't the issue here. What's important is wondering what is it you want to do for her sake, and about progressively becoming able to do something. Besides, if we're gonna talk about the number of things we can do, it turns into something awful with me involved.”

Subaru is aware that if you balance him in terms of pros and cons, he's more cons.

Subaru: “You're still super super little, but you go do you best from here on. Now, this makes us the founding members of Team Emilia.”

Subaru engages fistbump mode. Otto and Petra fistbump back, then look at each other.

Otto: “I never said anything about joining this team, okay? Please don't misunderstand?”

Petra: “I wanna be on the lady's side, but I don't really wanna lose to her on anything important...”

So this isn't exactly the most promising lineup of allies but hey since they're all cool with fistbumping there is no doubting their goodness.

And this was how Subaru spent his two days.



## ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

### CHAPTER 6: ON THE ROAD TO SANCTUARY

Frederica bows as she sees them off on the morning of their departure, telling them to take care and to tell the Master that she's currently there taking care of the mansion. Her bowing is so fucking pro it intimidates you into correcting your own posture.

Anyway so Emilia and Subaru are there too, Emilia apologizes for leaving at such a busy time, and seeing as Roswaal's absent she thinks that honestly she's supposed to be acting as the regional Lord here, but...

Subaru follows in saying that both him and Emilia-tan are absolute rubbish at that kind of work. He can manage odd jobs but things with numbers are out of his league, and even with Otto's sorting it's not like that'll help things.

While they know that putting off all this document processing and shit is going to bite them in the ass later, their only option is to block their ears to it.

Subaru: "It feels like going back to school without finishing all your homework from summer break. I mean, I wasn't the type to fail to hand in my homework though."

Emilia: "I don't really understand, but isn't that a good thing? But my chest actually hurts sooo much. It's not that I feel guilty, but I know we're doing something bad just leaving this stuff behind."

Subaru: "It's not our fault. ...is how I can rationalize it, but might be difficult for you, Emilia-tan. I know that knowing things are visibly getting worse's really not comfortable."

Leaving things alone that really can't be left alone is fucking frustrating. But their power is insufficient. All they can do is call on someone whose power is sufficient.

Otto, who'd been talking with with Patrasche and Frufoo (who are leading the carriage) until then, casually joins in the conversation to say the carriage's all ready, commenting that even though it's only been a few days since all the stuff that happened in arc 3, Patrasche is rearing to go.

Subaru remarks that she's a good hardworking girl which she's probably getting from her original owner and not him, and asks Otto if it seems like the directions and all that seem good.

By the way as a casual observer to Otto speaking with a couple ground dragons he looks fucking insane but Subaru decides not to comment on that.

Otto says there don't seem to be any problems and Frederica's directions are all good. He predicts they'll be able to make the journey in half a day.

Subaru: "Right right... But you're seriously coming too?"

Otto: "Isn't it a given!?"

Otto: "Since it'll be my first meeting with the Margrave. My wish was to be introduced to him, but

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

imagining how you'll end up introducing me while I'm not present... augh it's terrifying so I really can't leave it up to you.”

Subaru: “Hey, all that trust's gonna make me blush.”

Otto: “Yes, for how little we've known each other I do trust you very much. Being that you're adept at succeeding precisely at doing the things I'd really rather not be done!”

Subaru frowns, Emilia laughs and again comments that Otto and Subaru get along sooo well, they're always having these friendly squabbles whenever she looks at them and she's jealous.

Subaru: “If it is what you wish, I'll be friendly as you want Emilia-tan but not squabbles, flirting. If I hand the argument dialogue patterns I have with Otto over to you, my friendly dialogue patterns with Otto won't be many.”

Otto: “All we'd have left between us would be jeering and fistfights then!”

Subaru's pretty confident in the good or rather bad efficacy of his mouth, but he has some unease at the prospect of physically fighting Otto. Since he knows that even though Otto looks kinda delicate, he's actually pretty fit. Since Otto's punched him before during a loop in arc 3. Subaru'd more than likely lose in a straight fight.

Subaru: “Thinking like that, my offensive worth really is low. I knew that but it's still depressing.”

He loses to Otto and can't win against magic-using Emilia either. Frederica one-shotted him beautifully. There's no point even bringing up his prospects against Rem or Beatrice. So in the mansion's rankings, the opponent Subaru can win against is—

Subaru: “Huh, now that I think of it the only-person-I-could-probably-win-against Petra isn't here, what happened?”

Emilia: “Just exactly how that turned into a thought of winning or not winning is scary, so I won't ask about it, but Petra-chan's been in the mansion for... ah, there she is.”

Indeed is Petra running over from the mansion, her new maid outfit flapping everywhere.

Petra: “Pl-please, wait. Suba, Subaru-sama...”

Subaru: “I'm not going to do anything as mean as suddenly drive off when you're in such a rush, I'm not Otto. I wouldn't, right, Otto?”

Otto: “Did you forget what you just said three seconds ago!?”

Petra puts her hands to her knees, her breathing ragged while Subaru jokes around waiting for her to catch her breath. She wipes her forehead and looks up, lets out a long breath to expel her fatigue, and smiles like an angel.

Petra: “I want you to please take this before you leave. Please hold on to it.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

And she presents him with a handkerchief. It's white with golden stitching around the edges, the delicacy with which it was made, and its high quality, clearly apparent. And on the other side,

Subaru: “Embroidery, huh. Wow, it's really good.”

It seems that Petra sewed the embroidery herself. Grey and pink with black outlines, it's a very familiar image to Subaru. Emilia leans in to peer at it and gives a small laugh.

Emilia: “Haha”

Emilia: “It's the Puck Subaru drew. It's amazing, you did it really well.”

Subaru: “I did do really well with my chibi Puck. I didn't think I'd get to see it again.”

Petra: “I make sure to get my stamps after radio callisthenics every morning.”

This is referring to the stamp cards that the village children have, which Subaru stamps after radio callisthenics every morning using a potato with a drawing carved on it. The one Petra's sewn is the most recent chibi Puck, GLOOMY MONDAY.

Subaru: “That said, you did really good. Even a sewing master such as myself could lose to this.”

Petra: “Can you please... no, could you please take it?”

Subaru: “Would you be able to accept it? Or abouts. —Of course, I gratefully accept. My heart kinda doesn't approve of using this to wipe off blood and sweat and tears, but I'll keep it in my pocket as a good luck charm.”

He carefully folds up the handkerchief and very, very seriously stows it away in his breast. He narrows his eyes with a look as gentle as he can possibly manage (objectively it looks pretty fucking nasty) and gives Petra a big, nasty-looking grin. Petra puts both her hands to her cheeks, blushing.

Petra: “I will be waiting for your safe return. Ah, and the lady and the noisy man too.”

Emilia: “I feel like an extra.”

Otto: “Isn't that assessment of me kind of horrible!?”

Frederica begins exuding extreme amounts of pressure from behind Petra. It seems that her maid lessons are going to become a lot stricter after this. Petra, live strong.

So anyway Subaru and Emilia note that if they keep talking like this it's going to get rid of the point of leaving early in the morning, so they get ready to set off. Subaru enters the carriage and reaches his hand out to Emilia.

Subaru: “Here you go, Emilia-tan. Right into my chest.”

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Emilia: “Maybe it'd be nice to look at the scenery from the driver's platform every once in a while?”

Subaru: “Aaah, cold! EMK (Emilia-tan Maji Koakuma)! —Dah, waaah!”<sup>5</sup>

Subaru goes to withdraw his hand, but Emilia forcefully tugs it before he can, and easily walks beside him into the carriage as he pitches forward. Her hair tickles his nose as she passes, and she goes to sit opposite him, staring at him as she tilts her head.

Emilia: “What is it?”

Subaru: “Uhrhumm, nothing?”

Subaru goes and plops himself down beside her. Emilia smiles at how he's treating the inside of this spacious carriage as if it's small. Otto mutters about this not being a date as he goes to sit on the driver's platform and grabs the reins.

Otto: “Well then, we'll be setting off. I'll be praying you don't bite your tongues, or anything.”

Subaru: “Hey, you should be the one keeping steady. I'm counting on you to slam the breaks when I give that signal we came up with beforehand. Don't and I won't get to push Emilia-tan down.”

Emilia: “That's what you're planning?”

Otto: “Me!? I'm not going along with this nefarious plot, and now I'm suddenly complicit!?”

Emilia looks at Otto and Subaru with something close to scorn, Otto has his yell, and Subaru idly thinks about how that kind of unreasonable yelling kind of suits Otto while he balls his hand into a fist.

Subaru: “Well, destination, SANCTUARY! Departure, engage!”

Otto: “Who are you to speak like that!?”

Subaru mutters about Otto not playing along while he pokes his head out of the window and turns to look at Frederica and Petra.

Subaru: “You two take care of the mansion. And... I'm counting on you for Rem.”

Frederica is like leave it to me, in exchange I'm trusting Emilia-sama and the Master to you.

Petra: “Be careful, and come home safely.”

And blah blah blah, thus ends their pre-departure tension release back-and-forth.



---

5 Emilia-tan is Seriously a Little Devil

## ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

FREDERICA and PETRA scene.

It's basically just Frederica grilling Petra for not having good enough consciousness of the master-servant relationship esp. re: Subaru. Getting touched is a no go. Gonna make Petra write lines on that. And can't slack off on cleaning and meals and providing Beatrice-sama service. Get back to work Petra or we'll run out of time for studying.

Petra enthusiastically runs off to finish her work. Frederica watches her go, smiling faintly and exposing her fangs. She hides her smile with a practices gesture as she looks towards where the carriage was—where Emilia and the others have departed from.

Frederica: “I have done exactly as ordered, Master. Whether or not Sanctuary is overcome will depend on Emilia-sama and Subaru-sama.”

She closes her eyes, bathing in the wind.

Frederica: “Will Emilia-sama be able to overcome it? Bound by witch's blood, that inescapable, deadlocked paradise.”



Subaru: “So Puck really hasn't shown up the whole time.”

Emilia: “No, he hasn't. I've called him so many times, and I can feel him inside the crystal, but... this is the first time he's gone so long without coming out, I'm a little worried.”

So they're sitting next to each other talking in the carriage, which is under the effects of the WINDBREAKER blessing and thus there's no annoying noises getting in or shaking.

Subaru: “Thinking back, he hasn't shown at all since we went back to the mansion. The last time we saw him was...”

Emilia: “For me it was in the Royal Capital, when we were at Crusch-sama's mansion. I thought everything was the same as usual, but for some reason I didn't see him from that morning on. He wouldn't come even if I called him... I thought I might've made him mad, and was kinda anxious.”

She fiddles with the ends of her hair as she bows her head, her face not visible to Subaru. Her hair's in a braid and has been the past three days. Subaru stares at it, and Emilia guesses what he's getting at, nodding.

Emilia: “The last contract I had on the day I talked with Puck was 'HAIR IN A BRAID.' He didn't tell me what to do with it afterwards, so I've been keeping this.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “That thing about you having a contract with Puck over your hairstyle was actually serious. That's crazy light.. or is it? They say a girl's hair is her life, so that'd mean your contract with Puck has your life in its grips.”

Emilia: “I think it's sooo light as compensation. I didn't know about this until I left the forest, but Roswaal was shocked at how light the conditions were, when I was contracting a spirit on Puck's level. That honestly there would need to be a more enormous amount of mana given, or more complex conditions.”

Emilia smiles without strength. Subaru nods and comes up with some bullshit to get rid of her weak smile.

Subaru: “Well, 'restricting a piece of Emilia-tan's time' in itself makes for outrageously heavy compensation, if we're saying how I'd go about it.”

Emilia: something about talking too friviously about this kind of thing = wind up being impudent “I kinda want to keep important things off for more important times.”

Subaru lightly raises his hands and shakes his head.

Subaru: “I've got all the lines to tell you in more important settings right in store, Emilia-tan. Right now what I'm doing is showering you with the sweet words that're safe for me to tell you.”

Emilia gets kind of flustered, saying Subaru's mouth is definitely in good condition seriously holy shit, no don't look I think I'm blushing. She hides her face in her hands, and Subaru smiles as he recognizes his goal as complete.

Subaru: “Either way”

Subaru: “Without Puck, we've really got some worries on our combat strength for this journey. We can't count on Otto as a fighter, and there's no need even mentioning how useless I am. But things'll be pretty dicey for you without Puck, right?”

Emilia: “Ah, so that's it. I'll just say, I can still use magic fine even without Puck. And it isn't just Puck, I'm contracted with the minor spirits, too. We don't have any problems understanding each other, so they can fight. No matter what happens, I'll protect you.”

Subaru: “Oh no he's so courageous. And wow I'm pathetic. Someday I'll be the one telling you that line Emilia-tan so just wait a little.”

Emilia: “I'll be waiting without expectations.”

A group of spirits start gathering and glittering around Emilia's fingertips—their existence feels slightly weaker than the lesser spirits that Julius uses: these are minor spirits. This is a wide departure from Puck but at least they're not powerless.

Subaru: “And if you start saying that, then my dependency on others hasn't changed at all since the White Whale. I relied so much on Rem, and before then... wait, have I never actually gotten through

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

anything by myself!?”

Subaru has a moment of fucking horrified amazement at this.

Subaru: “But, SANCTUARY. Wonder what it's like.”

He stares at the scenery out the window. He thinks he heard the word SANCTUARY during the loops in the mansion—somewhere in the middle of the second loop. He'd let the opportunity to talk about it get away and now this was the result.

Just going by the name, Subaru doesn't figure SANCTUARY's a dangerous place, but Frederica's warning is enough to make him raise some caution.

Subaru: “Be careful of Garfiel, huh.”

Emilia: “You haven't met him either, then. All I've ever heard of him is his name. Frederica wouldn't tell me anything more specific.”

Subaru and Emilia had tried to get more out of Frederica on this 'Garfiel' character, but she'd just stubbornly refuse by saying “I'm under pledge.” For some reason Emilia seemed to draw back on questioning further at that.

Subaru: “Man, we really should've gotten more out of her. Someone who knows this guy is someone dangerous, and then says all they know is their name is way too bipolar.”

Emilia: “There's nothing we could do, it's a pledge. Avowals are sacrosanct and divine, not to be infringed upon. Contracts and pledges and covenants, their firmnesses are identical even if their weights differ, and they should be treated evenly.”

Subaru can only think of this contract, pledge, covenant stuff as some kind of wordplay, and he suddenly has a thought come to him.

Subaru: “What ties you and Puck is a contract. Frederica's refusal to stop upholding her duties to Roz-chi is a pledge. And what the Kingdom and the dragon share is a covenant... right? I haven't got anything wrong here?”

Emilia: “There isn't that much of a difference in how you'd use them but, contracts are avowals made between individuals. A pledge is an avowal directed from one person to another. Covenants are binding in a way that exceeds the individual and even time. Is how I think of them, since that's how I was taught them.”

Subaru: “Got it. Yeah, if you have that it mind it does fit with the conditions.”

Subaru: “But you know,”

Subaru: “You sure decorated that with some really fancy lines. Avowals are sacrosanct and divine, was it.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Emilia: “Avowals... promises are important things. This is kind of obvious for pledges, but contracts don't have any kind of force that compels you to keep them. They don't, there isn't any, but you still keep the promise. You work hard to keep them. Even if no one sees you do it, even if nobody notices it, you keep the promise. You and your partner devote yourselves to that.”

She stares at Subaru as she speaks. Her tone is soft, and definitely not anything accusatory. That in itself causes Subaru's heart anguish.

Emilia: “And because you believe in that, you work your hardest to fulfil the avowal shared between you. Promises, are things made to build ties of trust between you, right?”

Subaru: “I cannot apologize enough for that time!”

Subaru gets down on his hands and knees, head bowed down and brow touching the carriage's floor. Emilia blinks in surprise, and after a few seconds of considering what she just said and how that lines up with Subaru's behaviour,

Emilia: “Ah, it wasn't like I was blaming you or anything. It's true you didn't keep your promise, and that because you went on speaking without apologizing for that properly I did get all 'aughhhhhh.’”

Subaru: “Ithurtsithurtsmyearstheyhurt!”

Emilia: “Maybe I have a part of me which considers avowals too heavily and deeply. Look, I'm a practitioner of spiritual arts, so contracts are more familiar to me than they are to ordinary people. Contracts with spirits are what spiritual arts practitioners should respect more than anything else, so they get oversensitive... uh-huh, to me promises are so, sooo important. Subaru, do some reflecting after all.”

Subaru: “Ithurtsithurtsmyheartithurts!”

Now Subaru understands clearly why Emilia got so pissed that time in the Capital. That wasn't just the anger of having a promise broken. For Emilia, promises in themselves held extremely heavy meaning. When faced with Subaru's casual breaking of them, even someone kindhearted like her couldn't keep calm. Because Subaru trampled over something important to Emilia's heart.

Emilia: “Did you reflect?”

Subaru: “I reflected. Deeper than oceans, taller than mountains, wider than sky, grander than space.”

Emilia: “Then alright, I'll forgive you.”

Subaru lifts his head, Emilia pokes him in the forehead. Emilia puts said finger to her lips and gives a thin smile. Relief from the fact she's not mad, and recognition that what she just did was adorable stops Subaru from saying anything further. He's sucking air in and out like a fish, Emilia oblivious to this turns her head in the direction of their travel.



#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Emilia: “SANCTUARY and Garfiel. And then Roswaal and the villagers... there's so many people we have to talk to, it's making my heart pound.”

Subaru: “What'reya saying, you're not gonna be exposed to any danger. Believe in me, shield #2.”

Emilia: “You're second? Where's the first?”

Subaru: “Sitting on the driver's seat flirting with my Patrasche.”

Emilia really does crack up at this one, smiling. Fully satisfied, Subaru goes to think about the various barriers waiting ahead of them.

Ever since he came to this world, problems have been arising consecutively leaving him no time to rest. The anxiousness he has swirling in his heart about going to this unseen Sanctuary is larger than he anticipated. There's the fact that Frederica kind of inspired that type of thought, and the many doubts including Roswaal and the villagers' failure to return. And Puck's lack of response to their calling him, and all the factors provoking anxiety which have been left behind in the mansion.

Emilia: “Were you thinking about Rem-san?”

Subaru: “...You can tell?”

Emilia tilts her head as she stares at a silent Subaru. Her silver hair spills from her shoulders, and she fiddles her fingers through the edges, the end of her braid swaying.

Emilia: “I can tell.”

Emilia: “You know, you're allowed to think that I'm paying as much attention to you as you're paying to me.”

Subaru: “So Emilia-tan, that's a 'please assume I'm watching you round the clock every hour of the day'?”

Emilia: “Ah, no call it a half of a half of a half of that.”

Subaru: “...Three hours....!”

Emilia: “From there a half of a half of a half of...”

Subaru: “Hearing the exact number'll hurt me that's enough!”

Subaru says that he's not worried, since Frederica and Petra are taking care of her, but there's still this feeling of anxiety that he can't really express. Emilia says that's a shouganai since it's what worry is after all, and that that's how important Rem is to him. It's enough to make her a little jealous. Subaru goes to tell her that he loves Emilia-tan just as much as Rem before he catches that that was what Emilia was dangling for. Emilia confirms that she was bullying a little and apologizes, sticking her tongue out, and Subaru winds up completely forgiving her over that.

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Emilia goes on to restart the topic, this time pointing out that the person Subaru's more worried about is Beatrice. Subaru asks Emilia if she can read his mind. Emilia points out that he hasn't been acting as if he isn't worried (like he usually does), so it's proof that he's soooooo worried.

Subaru says it's not anything serious enough to be 'worry', it's just because he never got to meet her again after ending that conversation like a couple breaking up. Leaving the mansion without seeing her again is just a little bad. Juuust a little. A tiny bit. A smidge. A crumb.

Emilia: “That sounds like a cowardly way of saying it, but perhaps I'm just hearing things.”

Subaru: “No 'hearing things' more like hearing me.”

Subaru hides his happiness that she focused on that part of what he was saying and smiles as he looks over Emilia, who tilts her head.

Subaru: “Leaving Beatrice's shut-in status to get worse kinda makes me feel as an original shut-in like I've sorta got an extreme responsibility here a little.”

Emilia: “Shut-in... Subaru, you really do know a lot about this. Do you think Beatrice will come out?”

Subaru: “It's a hard one, this. It's no good to just forcibly pull them out without having some big occasion for it, but just letting have their time is spoiling them way too much. Honestly every single goddamn shut-in out there is just a pain for... ah! And so was I!”

Subaru: “When we get back, I'll have to talk with Beako 'bout lots of stuff. Didn't manage to get her to talk about the things I needed to make her talk about.”

Emilia: “It feels like Beatrice and Puck both know things, but are hiding them.”

Subaru: “Agreed. Frederica's the same, but everyone connected to that mansion has this habit of dropping implications and leaving the answers for later. Call it a syndrome. A bad syndrome. That Beako, everything she said while giving back the gospel bothered me.”

So Subaru is still holding onto the gospel in his luggage, worst case scenario so that he can ask Roswaal about it. That said the gospel's creepy so he's keeping it in the very bottom of his bag, as if to hide it.

Emilia: “—Looks like we've entered the forest.”

Emilia suddenly says that, although she doesn't look outside the window to confirm it. Subaru does and behold yes it's certainly getting greener.

Subaru: “It's impressive you knew without even looking outside.”

Emilia: “It's mixed, but I do have Elf blood. Elves have an unbreakable connection to forests, to the point where we're called the race of the fore—”

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “—!? Hey, hold on!”

Emilia: “—”

And Emilia's body wavers, looking about to collapse, before Subaru swoops in and catches her. Emilia looks to be in anguish, her breathing shallow.

Subaru: “E-Emilia-tan? What happened, Emilia!?”

Emilia can't reply. Discounting her shallow, rapid breathing, she has no fever and isn't sweating. Subaru immediately determines he won't get anywhere dealing with this himself, so he runs to the front of the carriage and jams his head through the window connecting to the driver's platform.

Subaru: “Otto! There's trouble, Emilia suddenly collapsed! Do you have medicine, or...”

Otto: “Ah—Natsuki-san, I'm sorry.”

Sweat arises on Otto's brow, his voice devoid of strength as he turns to look at Subaru. Subaru notices two changes—the carriage has stopped, with Patrasche and Frufoo standing still between the trees. Subaru hadn't even noticed.

And the other, bigger change—

???: “Comin' so boldly face-to-face, pretty brave'f ya, outsider.”

Says someone, spoken as if they're spitting it at them, with not a speck of good will present. With that single line alone, it's enough to get a grasp of personality of who said it. And the appearance of the person standing before their carriage does nothing to betray that impression.

He has short, spiky blond hair, with a conspicuous white scar on his forehead. The sharp look in his eyes is enough to be neck-in-neck with Subaru's sanpaku, and his feline canines are frightfully white. His slouch makes him short for a man, but the ferocious aura exuding from his body would make any refrain from belittling his petite stature.

Guy: “Ain't like I care where yer from, but you sure're a case of BRITTLE AS A WHITTLED PICKET.”

Subaru: “Uh, wha?”

Says Subaru dumbly at this phrase he's never heard before. The guy gives a single short, breathy “Ha.”

Guy: “Hmm? Quit freakin' out, oi. Sure, yeah, yer luck's not good. Since right here where you tried sneakin' in, you would up runnin' into the amazin' me.”

He gives a ferocious smile, his fangs clicking together. His fists fill with further power and he takes a low combat stance.

Guy: “Yer run outta luck, showin' up in fronta the amazin' Garfiel. Yer wound up bein' a

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

BANZOMANZO SWEPT LEFT N' RIGHT!"

With that assertive but uninformative phrase, the punk stomps the ground. The next instant, a great impact comes rushing at Subaru, world turning upside-down.

## CHAPTER 7: THE TEST SITE

The instant the punk stomps the ground, Subaru gets the feeling the world is tilting. But this is of course impossible. So it has to be Subaru 'getting the feeling'. The ground beneath Garfiel's feet rips up and flies away, the attack doing nothing more than sending the carriage flying.

Faced with this see-saw of force, Subaru gets the sensation of being vigorously pressed upwards, the carriage sliding through empty air. All Subaru can do is keep holding Emilia close.

The carriage slams back to the ground, its entire frame creaking. This thing isn't a fuck cheap carriage either—it's built for liveability and durability, and it's still getting wrecked by this one strike. But now that it's been thrown almost halfway onto its side, it's in no condition for them to immediately start getting away.

Faced against something that can do this, they have no option of escape. They're forced to confront the punk.

His face sill poked out of the carriage window, Subaru puts his hand to his forehead in pain, having bumped his head with the fall. Luckily he's not bleeding. Emilia also looks unharmed.

Subaru feels relief at that, which instantly turns sour and hurried as he remembers what the present conditions are. Right in front of him as he looks up is,

Subaru: “Patrasche!!”

Who, fangs beared, leaps at the punk, having cleverly unbound herself from the reins. She's aiming for Garfiel's neck, intending clearly to tear it to shreds. But.

Garfiel: “Excitin' choice. Yer a good dragon... a good girl, aren'tya. Ya know how they say, THE SOUND OF BROKEN BONES'S JUST ANOTHER SIGN OF LOVE.”

And Garfiel catches Patrasche's bite by thrusting his arm into her mouth. But Patrasche's whole body, including her jaw, freezes completely still, rather than swallowing Garfiel's arm whole. The reason why soon becomes clear as the muscles of Garfiel's arm flex—his arm strength is simply strong enough to overpower Patrasche's jaw and prevent her from biting down, sealing her mouth shut.

Garfiel: “All good, you. Great thatya moved right away, better yer not givin' up even now. You pass.”

Her mouth still sealed, Patrasche whips Garfiel across the face with her tail. Subaru's taken hits from that thing before and knows the strike isn't going easy at all. But for all the force and hostility in the strike, Garfiel easily intercepts it with his left hand, grabbing hold of Patrasche's tail. He exposes his beastly fangs as he smiles.

Garfiel. “Won't hurt ya. Lights out.”

He gives a big wave of his arm, and Patrasche flies through the air in an arc so easily it seems like a

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

joke. After revolving through space she lands softly on her side on the ground. The attack isn't even enough to make the ground vibrate, a completely quiet attack on Patrasche. Subaru can't believe it, his throat going dry.

Subaru: "He-he flung away Patrasche...?"

Garfield: "I'mma completely honest guy. Threw her nicely so didn't hurt her. Now to end this 'fore she gets up!"

Garfiel leaps for the driver's platform of the carriage, where Otto is. Otto leaps up to face Garfiel.

Otto: "Guh... but, don't underestimate me! I am your everyday merchant, too, you see! Do keep in mind that I have had hoodlums attack me during my business before. Now, if you would rather not fall prey to the Swein family style of hoodlum repelling arts, I would advise you surrender immediately! ...would advise!"

Garfiel: "Shuddup, rookie. Ain't like some no-effect move'sve yers're gonna beat the amazin' me, lights out."

Otto strikes a high-spirits battle pose. Garfiel instantly gets over to him and calmly pokes him in the forehead. Otto crumbles. He goes flying back toward the driver's platform and faints without voicing even a single sound.

Garfiel: "Now, goin' from looks, guess you two're allth's left."

Says Garfiel, staring at Subaru with a gaze sharp enough to almost rip him to shreds. There's only four strides of distance between them. But considering how he closed range on Otto, the distance between them is actually no distance. Subaru can't come up with the conditions he needs to start searching for the solution here, and their only potential counter to this guy, Emilia, is still unconscious for unknown reasons. Most importantly, he has to protect her.

Subaru: "I..."

And the next instant, Garfiel's in front of him. Subaru fully expects Garfiel to claw him to shreds. All Subaru can do is offer his own body as the target, turning so that Emilia isn't facing Garfiel, protecting her.

Several seconds pass. The time feels longer than it really is, and Subaru nervously opens his eyes to see the five clawed fingers stopped there right in front of his eyes. Garfiel's expression looks as if he's seeing something fishy and he clicks his neck.

Garfiel: "Prioritizin' protectin' her without goin' feran'attack, what's with that. After you get done in she's gonna get the same treatment either way. Don't think it's a bad call?"

It's sound logic, and for various reasons Subaru can't speak up to refute it. Perhaps uncomfortable with Subaru's silence, Garfiel waves his clawed hand about.

Garfiel: "And then yer slow to come back. Ain't that I thought you'd be able't move, but... man, you

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

sure're nothin' useful.”

Subaru: “Y-you...”

Garfiel: “Hmmm?”

Subaru attempts getting some noise out of his frozen throat. Garfiel looks even less impressed with him, and draws his face even closer.

Garfiel: “Yer whisperin', now speak up.”

Subaru: “You're... Garfiel, right. The one Roswaal and Frederica know.”

Garfiel: “—Frederica?”

Garfiel's expression loses its aggression for the first time. For a second some animalistic charm shows through, then he instantly hides that with an unpleasant look.

Garfiel: “Why's that name comin'... no, hold on. That girl yer holdin'... 's the silver-haired... half-witch?”

Subaru: “She's a half-elf. Don't you dare call her that to her face.”

Garfiel: “—Haa. 'S with that, yer face's gotten all pumped all the sudden.”

The anger at hearing Garfiel diss Emilia is enough to make Subaru's fear disappear. Garfiel clicks his fangs happily.

Garfiel: “Which makes this the rumoured Emilia-sama, huh. Any *half-witch* comin' here 'round now'd have to be involved with Roswaal.”

Subaru: “You...”

Garfiel pointedly ignores Subaru, now stressing the 'half-witch' bit. Subaru moves to stand up, but is firmly blocked by Garfiel's outstretched hand.

Garfiel: “HORSES CHEWING MELTED IRON FEEL ONLY PAIN. You got no hope'a winnin' 'gainst the amazin' me. Behave 'n accept the strength gap 'tween us. —You know you could really get hurt?”

Garfiel balls his outstretched hand into a fist, his knuckles clicking. The wise decision here for Subaru is to hold back his anger, and wait for a chance afterwards to take vindication. Thus,

Subaru: “Get fucked.”

Garfiel: “Hmmm?”

Subaru: “I don't wanna get hurt. I'm sure you'll beat the hell out of me. But, you know. —That's no reason to let disparaging comments that'd sadden her slip.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

He gently settles Emilia on the carriage's luggage bed and brushes the hair on her forehead away with a finger. Subaru stands up and closes distance with Garfiel, coming so close they're almost butting foreheads. Close enough to feel each other's breath, within range of each other's arms.

Subaru: "Take back that bullshit moniker, and never use it again."

Garfiel: "...Don'tcha think yer lackin' in too many ways to say that to the amazin' me? 'Cross the face, to the guts, in the shins, want me to beat you everywhere you got pieces?"

Subaru: "Try it. You won't get to do it for free. I'll bite the fist coming for my face, grab the arm coming for my stomach, spit on the leg coming to kick me, give you some payback."

Strong emotion wells up in Subaru's chest as he threatens back to Garfiel's threats. That said, Garfiel's silent hostility makes a wave of terror run through Subaru. Garfiel could literally one-shot Subaru if he wanted.

Subaru judges that Garfiel is someone who of all the ridiculously strong people he knows, has put his efforts into keeping ridiculous combat ability. He's not quite at the level of Reinhardt, the peak, but somewhere around Wilhelm or Julius.

Even the tiny threats that Subaru's just voiced are not possible for him to actually enact. But even so, he meets Garfiel in a glaring match head-on. Knowing he would lose was no reason to retreat. And the reason it was no reason to retreat, was right there behind him.

Garfiel: "—Heehaha."

Subaru: "—Huh?"

Subaru is confused, Garfiel moves as if to answer Subaru's doubts.

Garfiel: "Heehahaha! 'S some pretty bitin' words, those, oi." something something so slurred I have no fucking clue.

Subaru: "What're you... ow! Ah, what, ow, wait, that hurts!"

Garfiel's shoulders shake as he laughs, and with extreme force, he taps Subaru on the shoulders. It's not an attack, but regardless it's enough to chip away at Subaru's stamina gauge.

Garfiel: "'S fine, you pass. Stuck through all the way. I ain't fond of the half-witch... half-elf, but I gotta give an exception t'you if yer gonna persist in protectin' her that much."

Subaru: "Since you corrected yourself, it's fine but... no, this really hurts! Stop tapping me forever, are you trying to kill me!?"

Subaru shakes Garfiel's arms away and backs off. Garfiel tilts his head and crosses his arms.

Garfiel: "Cold, aren't ya. Let's call everythin' up to now water under the bridge n' forget it. Y'know,



ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

havin' a small mind's proof the guy's gotta small *thing*?"

Subaru: "That's the first time you've used a saying I actually remember hearing, but there's nothing necessary about that second part! A! Ny! Way!"

Subaru: "You're Garfiel, so it's safe to say you know Roswaal, yeah? And I'm allowed to think that though that sudden run-in was a shock, you're not intending to fight us now, right!?"

Garfiel: "Stop makin' a racket, 's 'nnoying. Even if yer not panicked I ain't gonna eat ya."

Subaru: "With how violent you were being before, who could just believe that...?"

Garfiel sticks his finger in his ear in irritation, but agrees with Subaru's sentiment. Though it seems like there's part of Garfiel that isn't that easily read, Subaru's relieved that they can definitely communicate. Then he remembers,

Subaru: "Ri, ght... we don't have time for this! Emilia suddenly collapsed. Even though we were talking normally until just a minute ago."

Garfiel: "Collapsed, did she, that half-elf. Well, 's obvious. Where d'ya think you are? Ain't worth the panic."

Garfiel shrugs, Subaru furrows his brow in doubt.

Garfiel: "You woulda heard 'bout what this place is from Roswaal n' Frederica, yeah? Then of course this'd happen... what, seriously, you really didn't know?"

Subaru shakes his head. Garfiel clicks his tongue in frustration and mutters,

Garfiel: "That fucking pervert bastard..."

Garfiel: "So Frederica didn't tell you anythin' either. Go a while without seein' her and her personality winds up takin' after her owner. No savin' her."

Shaking his head, Garfiel snorts in irritation. He notices Subaru's questioning gaze.

Garfiel: "Got it, got it."

Garfiel: "Her condition don't look any good, but it ain't anythin' life-threatenin'. 'Said, if you don't wanna see her lookin' in any more pain, get away from here on the double. I'll guide you 'sfar as the village."

Subaru: "She'll come to if we get away from here?"

Garfiel: "Ain't that what I just told you? Let's get outta here, hey, you gonna be sleepin' here forever? Stand up."

Garfiel goes over to the driver's platform and kicks the fallen Otto. Otto, who's been fainted all this

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

time, whines.

Garfiel: “You the driver? After I get the carriage back upright, yer drivin' us to the village.” Take your time and I'll kick you so hard your ass caves in.

Otto: “Actually, what is even happening here, exactly!? Although judging by what I just heard, I would figure myself a casualty!”

Otto gets up and bitches at Garfiel. Which is pretty bold when directed at someone who just poked you into oblivion, but Garfiel seems to agree with it and looks back at Subaru.

Garfiel: “Hey. This guy always so energetic?”

Otto: “Even if you ask that man for a judgement of what I'm like, you're unlikely to get a reasonable estimate so I would prefer you please stop! Isn't it enough for you to judge this person known as me with your own eyes?! And apologize! Please apologize!”

Garfiel: “Hmm!? Lookit you, getting' all energetic n' feisty, 're you underestimatn' me!? I mighta gotten a bit 'head of myself and walloped someone who didn't need wallop'n', so now you go and get over it!”

Subaru: “Can the two of you shut up!? Emilia-tan's still suffering, so you go grab those reins! And you put the carriage upright!”

So thus starts the chaos as they get to this. Emilia still hasn't woken up, but her brows do faintly scrunch up, and she mutters as if sleeptalking,

Emilia: “...shutup.”



Garfiel: “Thinkin' back, I didn't introduce myself. My amazin' self is called Garfiel... eh, just Garfiel's fine. I'm the strongest man there is. Nice to meet ya.”

Subaru: “Right, I'm Natsuki Subaru... huh? What was that? You said you're the strongest? Seriously?”

So the two of them are talking in the carriage as it gets moving, shaking hands. Subaru is surprised and Garfiel is mystified.

Garfiel: “Well I said it, didn't I? Ain't like there's anythin' weird 'bout it.”

Subaru: “No, it's just that I didn't expect there to be anyone who'd say 'I'm the strongest' completely upfront. That aside, don't you think that title's just a little too big?”

Garfiel: “You really don't think my amazin' self's a fittin' match for strongest?”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “I recognize that you're crazy strong, but if we're debating whether you're the strongest... no matter how I think, there's already someone flitting through my brain.”

Reinhardt.

Garfiel: “Heh, well whatever. One day my amazin' self'll prove yer mistaken thinkin' wrong with my own two hands. Least for now keep A RED-NOSED TODNOZZ FEELS THE COLD in mind.”

Subaru: “Even if you tell me to keep that in mind, I don't know what it means...”

Garfiel seems uninterested in explaining his incomprehensible sayings. Subaru stares outside the carriage window, Emilia sleeping on his lap, using the opportunity to comb his fingers through her hair. Her expression's already getting more relaxed that it was before.

Subaru: “Well, I missed the chance to ask you about this before, but you know Roswaal... yeah?”

Garfiel: “You've at least heard my name before, yeah? 'S kinda a guess, but 's probably 'cause of all the people related to Roswaal, my amazin' self's blatantly the strongest.”

Subaru: “That wasn't really the point... I do remember you being called someone influential, though.”

No way he's being called influential because of his combat power, right? But Garfiel's clearly not the politician-type that Subaru expected.

Subaru: “This just gives me more questions to ask Roswaal about SANCTUARY. I'm supposed to be acting to find a solution to problems, but everything just points to the number of problems increasing, what's with this?”

Subaru's expression clouds over. Garfiel clicks his tongue.

Garfiel: “SANCTUARY.”

Garfiel gives a small wave of his hand and turns his head towards their destination—that is, SANCTUARY.

Garfiel: “Yer just callin' it that 'cause that's what Roswaal forced down yer throat. Nevermind you not knowin', but that he didn't let you know's bullshit.”

Subaru: “Honestly I agree with you, but there's a limit to badmouthing people while they're not around or being mean so let's stop. ...did saying that bother you?”

Subaru tries to capitalise on Garfiel's slip, but instead he gives a somewhat unbecoming, sarcastic smile.

Garfiel: “Think it's 'bout time Sleepin' Beauty got up. We're plenty far from the barrier.”

Subaru: “What's the barrier... ah, Emilia-tan?”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru notices Emilia fidgeting on his lap. Her eyes open dimly and she absent-mindedly looks around the carriage, her consciousness still not fully awoken, and fixes her gaze on Subaru.

Emilia: “Mornin', suhbaru...”

Subaru: “You're insane adorable when you're waking up but now isn't the time for this, Emilia-tan. Does anything feel weird at all, or does your head hurt or anything?”

Emilia: “Uhh, no? I don't feel anything strange, but...”

Emilia suddenly gets up with plenty of energy and Subaru hurriedly turns his face away from her, just barely dodging a headbutt. Emilia remains oblivious to this close call as she glances back at Subaru.

Emilia: “A-are you okay, Subaru? I, went and collapsed when I said I'd protect you...”

Subaru: “You don't need to worry, we somehow made it through! We got successful contact through dialogue. Human connections can come together through the tool of communication, and right here is where we managed to take that first step. I'm a total loner though.”

Emilia looks to be fine. And also, super cute. As always.

Garfiel: “See? Just like how I said.”

Garfiel smiles at Subaru, and Emilia is surprised to notice another presence inside the carriage. She immediately gets Subaru behind her and takes a protective stance.

Emilia: “—Who are you!? Letting you know, I won't allow you to lay a single finger on Subaru!”

Subaru: “It's okay, Emilia-tan! Also I'm begging you please stop doing things that validate me as the heroine! My gauge is really starting to get there!”

He gets himself out of this position of being defended and goes to face Garfiel again.

Subaru: “That's Garfiel. Right after you collapsed, he attacked... I mean, came to ride on the carriage. It's not like we've welcomed him into the group, but he'll be coming with us until SANCTUARY.”

Emilia: “This is... Garfiel? The one Frederica mentioned?”

Garfiel: “M int'rested in what she said 'bout me, but I'll put that off for later. We're gonna be reachin' the village soon.”

The forest opens up, and now they can finally see their destination.

Garfiel: “Most gracious welcome, dear companions of Emilia-sama.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

His tone is far more scornful than respectful. He spreads his arms open wide as Emilia and Subaru stare at him.

Garfiel: “To the place Roswaal so fancifully calls a fucking SANCTUARY—the decrepit ruins of a deadlocked test site, where a gathering of idiots live out their days.”

Subaru: “Test site?”

Emilia: “Idiots—”

Garfiel puts his hand to his mouth, and smiles as if to obfuscate his hideously complex feelings.

Garfiel: “Us residents call it the WITCH OF GREED'S CEMETERY, though. Ain't nothin' to laugh 'bout, ehh, oi.”

He laughs as if mocking himself. Quiet, low, like a curse, like a blessing, his laugh echoes through the carriage.

And hearing that, Subaru knows that if a Witch is again putting their sights on Emilia, the one to brush away those sparks has to be him.

SANCTUARY approaches.

## CHAPTER 8: A LONG-AWAITED REUNION

Subaru pokes his head out the carriage window to stare down at SANCTUARY, which is just a few hundred meters out from where the forest opens up. He sees wooden houses spotted around in the distance, and the place has nothing in particular that grabs the attention—it just looks like some needy village from this distance.

Subaru: “Place's thick with a depressing atmosphere...”

The old, stone gates at SANCTUARY's entrance only reinforce that impression, and the short fence around the village gives the place a closed-off vibe. Hearing that, Garfiel forcefully taps his knees.

Garfiel: “Sure is. 'S a depressin' place. Jussayin', the people inside're even more depressin'. Every fuckin' anybody's got this gloomy look, like they're livin' but they're dead.”

Subaru: “Pretty disparaging, aren't you. But, hearing that just makes this place sound even less like a SANCTUARY.”

Subaru reconsiders what he's about to say,

Emilia: “What would 'Witch of Greed's Cemetery' mean, exactly?”

But Emilia gets there first. Her expression's resolute, but her fingers catch on the hem of Subaru's clothing. Subaru is fully satisfied with this truth of being relied upon, but simultaneously has mixed feelings, having a guess as to why she's uneasy.

Subaru: “Witch—it's common knowledge that the being called the WITCH is the Witch of Envy. The existence of other witches for the other Deadly Sins is practically unknown to the masses.”

Emilia: “Wha, really? But wouldn't they have been well-known people for the last 400 years?”

Garfiel: “What yer sayin' ain't wrong, Emilia-sama. Yeah, think Subaru's got it. The Witch of Envy's too famous n' overshadowed the others. 'Most no records're still 'round 'bout the other witches eaten by the Witch of Envy. But well, still get some exceptions.”

Emilia: “And this place would be one of them?”

Emilia's eyes are wide, her knowledge on the witch cult somehow worse than Subaru's. Subaru suddenly gets a really bad thought that blows away his carefree feeling. If there's several witches,

Subaru: “T-there's no way there's a Witch Cult for every witch, right? Thinking of how much effort plucking off just one Cardinal of Sin took... augh just give me a break.”

Going off Betelgeuse's ramblings, it's safe to say there's at least one sect that worships the Witch of Envy, Satella. And the two Cardinals that Subaru would absolutely have to defeat someday, GLUTTONY and GREED, would fall into that same sect. But if there were adherents for the other witches as well—

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Otto: “That's a terrifying thought, Natsuki-san, but there's no need to worry.”

Different from the witch-ignorant Emilia and not-quite-trustworthy Garfiel, Otto's word has credibility and consciousness of the public thought. The things Otto knows are more than likely the things any normal person would know.

Otto: “The Witch Cult... isn't something I'd especially like to speak about but, the only figure they worship is the Witch of Envy. One would hesitate to speak of witches outside of the Witch of Envy.”

Subaru: “They'd prefer the Witch of Envy? What? You mean the others are even worse than the Witch of Envy?”

Otto: “I would mean people are terrified of what the Witch Cult might do if they hear the name of a witch that isn't the one they worship. Are you aware of the incident in the Empire of Volakia in the south where a city was annihilated?”

Subaru does remember hearing about this (from Wilhelm while looting Betelgeuse's body which got cut in the anime). If he remembers correctly,

Subaru: “The Archbishop of GREED destroyed an entire city in the Empire of Somethingorother all by himself. There was a hero but even he couldn't stop him.”

Otto: “What you just said is far too artless and gives a terribly thin impression of it but, the reason the Witch Cult did such a thing was terrifying. It was the single most flourishing city of business in the insular Volakia, but... it appears some rumours came about that witch-related items were appearing on the market.”<sup>6</sup>

Subaru: “Witch-related.”

Otto: “Even now it's unclear what it was. But, there are more than a few dilettantes out there who desire such items. If it had just been something related to the Witch of Envy, it could've been settled there as simply being bad taste, but... as a result, a whole city was destroyed.”

So GREED likely acted either out of desire for that item, or to remove it. The Empire of Volakia stimulated the Witch Cult, and such a result befell them.

Otto: “Ever since, it has been taboo to have any involvement with witches outside the Witch of Envy, so as not to stimulate the cult. ...Although, that didn't cut off some of the shameless back-alley dealing going on.”

Subaru: “Weird to hear that kinda spite coming from you. It's almost like you were involved in it.”

Otto: “...It wasn't anything so big. It's simply that I had some relatives in that city who were dragged into the mess. It would've been over 15 years ago now, and I would've been a child. It has nothing to do with me.”

---

6 Not clear whether 'items' is singular or plural.

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

It's clear Otto isn't going to go into this any further so Subaru gives up on trying anything more on the topic. Seeing that Subaru's had his chat, Garfiel touches his hand to his chin.

Garfiel: "All satisfied?"

Garfiel: "My amazin' self doesn't know the details. But the old gramps n' grans here keep sayin' the place is the Witch of Greed's Cemetery to the point it's a PEROMIO FESTERED FROM HEARIN' IT, so no way it's wrong."

Subaru: "You have no idea how interested I am in knowing what exactly's getting festered but, guess you don't know the specifics either."

Garfiel: "My only interest's in my amazin' self. 'F you want the specifics you gotta grab Roswaal by the collar'n get'im talkin'. Dunno'f you can do that now, though."

Subaru: "—? What's that mean?"

Otto: "Excuse me. We're just about to arrive, but is it alright for us to simply continue inside?"

Garfiel: "Nah."

Garfiel hops out of the carriage.

Garfiel: "Go in without sayin' what's goin' on, and all the jitterbugs'll see outsider's n' invaders n' go full on attack n' it'll be a straight PERFORATED MAGMARIN LAUGHIN'."

Subaru: "Okay, leaving it to you. Actually, thinking about it, that'd make your position here something like SANCTUARY's patrol. Going by conditions when you ran into us."

Garfiel just waves the question away, refraining to answer. Subaru knits his brows at this, but Emilia goes "Ah" in surprise which captures Subaru's attention. He follows Emilia's pointing finger with his gaze, to see someone standing.

???: "—You've returned, Garfiel. You certainly didn't take your time."

Garfiel: "Didn't hafta make a round through the forest. Not often I see you away from Roswaal, huh. Finally sick'a it?"

Ram: "Were such a thing to be truth, this place would surely be little more than burned-out ashes, set aflame by my desperate hands. Express your thanks to Roswaal-sama that no such thing has happened."

Garfiel: "S incredible logic, I don't get it at all!"

It's Ram. Garfiel's smiling happily at her, but Ram's expression toward him is cold and not particularly full of emotion. Seeing it makes Subaru's shoulders go lax in relief.

Otto: "Ahh, so she would be the older sister I've heard about. I see. This is kind of self-evident, but



#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

she looks exactly like the sleeping young lady.”

Since Otto's never seen Ram before.

Subaru: “—Ram!”

Subaru leans forward, waving his hand at her, and Ram notices him. Her eyes narrow as she stares at Subaru, and she shrugs, shaking her head.

Ram: “I would not know how far a territory your noble considerations have broached, Barusu, but your late arrival is certainly disappointing. Had you noticed the irregularity sooner... ahh, Barusu could never manage that.”

Subaru: “If you're going to say 'a territory your noble considerations have broached', stick with that tone the whole way, don't change it! Also this goes for Roswaal too but it's tough to figure out, you know, what it is you two want. I'm going to be complaining to him thoroughly, though!”

Ram droops her shoulders and then looks at Emilia, standing next to Subaru. Emilia's also relieved to see Ram's safe. But Subaru manages to catch a fleeting instant of pain that runs through Ram's expression, but the instant disappears into nothing.

Ram welcomes Emilia-sama as well and advises that Roswaal is waiting, so follow her to the building in the back. Garfiel you escort the driver to somewhere appropriate.

Garfiel complains about being turned into the errand boy and that there are ways of asking for things that actually make people motivated to do them.

Ram: “If you would like to eat my homemade cooking, endure it. Although I have nothing to say if you would rather squander this exclusive chance through your own actions and verbal errs.”

Garfiel: “Fine! Fine! You ain't a comprehensible lady, but that's a good thing. Oi, driver guy. Park the dragons n' the carriage at the end there n' follow me.”

Otto: “I am fairly certain I did introduce myself properly, so would you please stop with the humiliating moniker!? Or actually, being left alone with this man would place me in not insignificant danger!”

Subaru shoots Otto a thumbs up.

Subaru: “I'll pick up your bones!”

Otto: “That is unmistakably not a phrase you would use to convey anything positive! Seriously, if something does happen I'll be claiming for compensation!”

Otto goes and parks the carriage and accompanies Garfiel deeper into the village. Subaru rubs Patrasche's snout for a bit and watches her off.

Subaru: “Now,”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “There's lots of things I want to ask and talk about, but am I really going to get to have a conversation in that vein anytime soon?”

Ram: “...Permission has not been granted for me speak on matters. More desirable is that you converse directly with Roswaal-sama. I haven't an idea how far Garf let his mouth slip, however.”

Subaru: “Garf... oh, Garfiel. He's a lot different from the impression I had of him when all I knew was his name. Which reminds me, there's something kinda bothering me.”

Ram: “What is it?”

Ram's brows knit and her gaze is strict, but Subaru just crosses his arms.

Subaru: “Does he love you? That's sorta what it felt like from what he was saying.”

Ram: “...And just when I began to wonder what you'd say.”

Ram sighs, sincerely dumbfounded at that one. But since she didn't deny it, Subaru can't hold back a seriously out-of-place grin.

Subaru: “I won't say he's got strange tastes. You look cute. ...and I think he has the willpower to keep loving you over a long period of knowing you.”

Ram: “That there are males in the world captivated by my abounding intellect and beauty is unavoidable. Although, I have already devoted my all to the one I should devote my everything, so I wouldn't say I desire it.”

Ram turns her back to Subaru and begins escorting. Subaru is kind of thrown by how smoothly she crushed Garfiel's dreams, and terrified of bringing up the topic he really should bring up.

Subaru: “Being scared of bringing up Rem's name when it's this late already. Not like I'm expecting anything.”

He's terrified of confirming it. There was already Emilia and Petra, but now he's asking whether her biological sister has forgotten her.

Subaru: “Can't help being depressed at the assumption. Anyway, let's follow Ram, Emilia-tan. — What is it?”

Ever since Emilia'd gotten out of the carriage with him, she's been looking around the surroundings, seemingly unable to calm down.

Emilia: “Nothing,”

She shakes her head.

Emilia: “It's just kinda like, I can't calm down. What it call it... like I have a weird feeling, or... I

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

don't really know how to say it.”

Subaru: “Can't calm down. For me who kept home out of people anxiety, everywhere new has that kind of feeling, but... I don't really feel anything especially bad here.”

Subaru joins Emilia in looking around the place, but the only real impression he gets is one of some needy old village. The age and lack of repairworks on houses stand out more compared to Arlam village, but the difference is slight enough to be chalked up to measurement error. But that's not saying there's nothing uncomfortable about this place. Subaru doesn't understand what exactly it is either.

Subaru: “Got no choice even if we put our guards up, Emilia-tan. Ram and Roz-chi are here, so all we can do is say that there's probably no danger.”

Emilia: “It's not exactly putting my guard up... no, I'm okay for now. But honestly, I wish I could've talked about things with Puck.”

Emilia touches the green crystal at herself, seriously uneasy about Puck's absence. Subaru's not fond of her seeing her weakness, or himself for not being a presence than can be relied upon for her.

Emilia: “—Subaru?”

Subaru: “Let's go. No matter what happens, just leave it to meat shield #2.”

Subaru takes her hand she used to touch the crystal, turning his head away as he speaks, and starts walking before she can object. Emilia of course is forced to follow behind. Subaru figures that what he just did was something liable to make flames spout from his face with how embarrassing it was, but his emotions acted quicker than his thoughts. Funnily enough it seems not thinking is fine.

Emilia: “—Yeah.”

Emilia doesn't shake her hand free.



So the house the wind up going to is comparatively more preserved than the other buildings in SANCTUARY, made out of stone and about the size of an ordinary single-story house in the original world. Its rooms are divided in a simple floorplan and it's a comfortable enough place. But for Subaru, who's gotten accustomed to Roswaal's mansion and Crushe's mansion, it feels cramped.

Roswaal: “Heellooo, Emilia-sama, Subaru-kun. It feels as though it's been quiiiiite some time since we've last seen each other, hmmm?”

And there's Roswaal, smiling relaxedly and waving at Subaru. It's the first time Subaru's met Roswaal face-to-face since going to the Capital. Considering that he hadn't run into Roswaal at all during the last cycle of loops, that makes it closer to a month in Subaru time. Now Subaru has done

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

plenty of grumbling over Roswaal over that time, and had thought to give him that slap across the face as the first thing he'd do upon their reunion, but.

Roswaal: “Fiiiiirst of aaaall, that you're safe is more important than anything, Emilia-sama. I heard aboooouuut the problems around the mansion from Ram. Should anything have happened to you, I'd suuuuuurely have no will to go to on living.”

Subaru: “If that's what you think then you should've had less terrible preparations in... no, more importantly, what the heck's happened with you. What exactly is this.”

Roswaal's laid on the bed, his entire body covered in not-superficial wounds, bloodstained bandages wrapped around him.

Faced with Subaru's question and Emilia's silent gaze, Roswaal uses his relatively uninjured left hand to flip up the bandages over his left eye.

Roswaal: “Oooohh dear, you asked about theese? You are awaaaaare I am still a man? Simply exposing such a disgraceful sight is enough to wound my pride, so I'd appreciaaaaate it if you could understand my feelings and put this aside.”

Emilia: “There's no way we could do that. What really happened, Roswaal. To get injured like that... and especially, when it's you.”

Emilia's fingers trembles as she reaches out, hesitating to touch the wounded Roswaal. Roswaal gives her a bitter smile and looks up at the ceiling.

Roswaal: “Now,”

Roswaal: “Juuuust where to beeeegin. Weeeell, these injuries of mine could perhaps be called wounds of honour, although such would have a strong implication of being unavoidable by my dignity is how I would liiiiiike to answer.”

Emilia: “Stop trying to get away with roundabout speech. I'm asking you seriously. Roswaal, answer me back seriously.”

Roswaal: “...It appeeeeeeears even Emilia-sama is not in the best of tempers. Buuuut considering where we are, peeeerhaps there's no avoiding that.”

Subaru feels some discomfort at Emilia's stern tone at the exact same moment Roswaal points it out. Emilia's eyebrows raise slightly, and she frowns a little at the recognition that what he's pointing out is true.

Emilia: “I feel like I just can't calm down. What in the world is this place? We're calling it a SANCTUARY, but I can't think of it like that at all. Which would make this place...”

Roswaal: “A witch's cemetery, is a muuuuuch more easily agreed term for it.”

Roswaal's tone drops. Emilia looks toward Subaru, her emotions incredibly complex, and Subaru

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

nods to her in recognition of her confusion.

Subaru: “Wait, let's sort out all at once what we want to ask. If we keep talking like this, the conversation's going to go in some jumbled direction and we won't get anything coherent. We won't get even a single conclusion.”

Roswaal: “Oooooooh? In the short time I've gone without seeing you, you've become quiiiiite good at partitioning boundaries. Subaru-kun, cooould you have had some chaaaaange in your mental state?”

Subaru: “If we're going to talk about that the conversation's gonna go on for ages, so once I'm done asking you my questions I'll sum it all up and brag. Ah, right. Just one thing.”

Subaru lifts a finger at the joking Roswaal, glaring at him.

Subaru: “We're in an allegiance with Crusch now. You probably heard about it from Ram, but I hope this makes you feel satisfied for leaving me behind.”

Roswaal: “—I am deeeeeefinitely satisfied. You truuuuuly were a find.”

Subaru sighs and closes his eyes at a satisfied Roswaal. Subaru expected this, but it looks like his actions've just been going exactly with Roswaal's intentions. Anyway.

Subaru: “First, the people from Arlam village. Ram was fine so they're probably okay, but are the evacuees actually fine?”

Roswaal: “Yooooou can relax about that. Perhaps my current situation doooooesn't make this sound credible, buuuuut I do have my position as Lord. I wholeheartedly work myself to protect my people. Everyone's living in the village cathedral.”

Subaru: “The cathedral. Putting that off for now, the next point'd be...”

Relieved at this at least being confirmed, Subaru shoots Emilia a glance. She nods.

Emilia: “Tell us about this place. You called it SANCTUARY. But Garfiel called it the WITCH OF GREED'S CEMETERY. Which one is true?”

Roswaal: “Both are true, Emilia-sama. This is the site of the once-Witch of Greed's—of Echidna's end, and a place I personally should call Sanctuary.”

Subaru: “—Witch.”

Emilia: “Echidna...”

Roswaal's reply comes quietly, with none of the clownish behaviour he'd been showing up until then. What he's saying is unquestionably true. Emilia's breath catches, and after blinking several times,

Emilia: “Witch of, Greed... a witch destroyed by the Witch of Envy, a different witch.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Roswaal: “Yeeeeees, exactly. No matter where you look in this world's history, her name remains nowhere. Except narrowly, in the memories of those who knew her.”

Subaru: “Waitwaitwait, isn't what you're saying weird.”

Somewhat overpowered by Roswaal's gaze, which has one eye narrowed, Subaru continues,

Subaru: “If my memory's right, the Witch of Greed... was done in by the Witch of Envy 400 years ago. I can agree that this place is where the witch met her end 400 years ago but... there no way it doesn't sound like you knew her yourself.”

Roswaal: “Iiiii wouldn't say that Iiiii myself knew her. It's a kind of spoken legacy passed down through the Mathers family... through the Roswaals for geeeeenerations.”

Subaru: “Spoken legacy... then, the head of the Mathers clan from forever ago had some connection with the Witch of Greed?”

Emilia: “—Echidna.”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Emilia's eyes open wide. Her gaze fixes on Roswaal, and after muttering “Echidna” once as if in confirmation,

Roswaal: “Goooo ahead, refer to her by name. Doon't you think the address WITCH OF GREED has a nasty aura to it? And it's cumbersome.”

Emilia: “Er, right. So the site of Echidna's end is this village, which the Mathers family has been managing for generations... is that it?”

Roswaal: “Yeeeeees, that would be it. Although 'managing' implies more haaaands-on dealing with it than there is. Echidna's influence still remains here thickly, so entering without taking the proper methods is not possible. That you have been able to enter... means Frederica assisted you, I am sure.”

Roswaal nods. Subaru steps forward to get the conversation moving.

Subaru: “I get that this is Echidna's cemetery, and that it's under your management. What I don't understand from there is its purpose, and why you and the villagers haven't left.”

Roswaal: “This may sound strange coming from me, but you suuuure accepted that eeeeeasily. And just when I'd been keeping this place's being a witch's cemetery coooooonfidential.”

Subaru: “The Witch of Envy's another thing, but I don't know about whatever this witch Echidna did. Being frank, it's probably something that even people who aren't me barely know about either. I think it's way too simplistic to suppose someone's evil just off the word 'witch'. Do you think it's possible just going off the word 'half-elf' to imagine how cute Emilia-tan is?”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Emilia: "...hk. D-Don't you say anything unnecessary. Surprise attacks are off-limits."

A red-faced Emilia lightly pinches Subaru's side at how that serious talk casually turned into flirting. Subaru smiles wryly at this adorable counterattack, and Roswaal laughs disgustingly.

Roswaal: "It seems yooou two closed quiiiite some distance between yourselves while I wasn't watching. I wondered what on earth you'd do about that break-up you had at the Capital, but seeeeems you did well."

Subaru: "It's a sorta-love that came at the end of a lot of ups and downs, though. I've got mountains of things to brag about, but let's get back on topic and get those answers. What this place's purpose is, and why you haven't left."

Roswaal: "It feels you've lost your immaturity and become dependable, gosh. Noooow, the reeeason the villagers and I haven't returned... Speaking plainly, perhaps you'd say we caaaan't go back to going back."

Subaru: "Can't go back to going back?"

Subaru's brows knit, Roswall nods and smiles.

Roswaal: "Currently, eeeeeveryone of us, all the villagers are in a state of confinement. Aaaaand, the moment you entered here, you two wound up in the saaaaaame position."

## CHAPTER 9: THE TOMB

So the word 'confinement' isn't exactly a nice one and considering the circumstances it's unlikely to be one of Roswaal's shitty jokes. Subaru and Emilia ask if Roswaal was injured by the villagers, then, with Subaru reflecting that if there's someone in the village who can actually hurt Roswaal like this it's seriously bad. Since Roswaal is like OP and eradicated a whole forest of Ulgarm on his own.

Roswaal say it seems they've misunderstood and he didn't get attacked by anyone, so they don't need to be so cautious or try to get revenge for his sake.

Subaru's like relax you haven't earned a favourable enough impression for us to recklessly risk our lives for you, then points out what he's saying doesn't mesh with the fact that he's 'in confinement', but Roswaal says some bullshit vaguely explaining nothing, and Subaru puts together that Roswaal being injured has nothing to do with the people of SANCTUARY.

Roswaal: “It isn't strictly that there's nooooo relation but, if you were to ask whether the direct cause was due to them I would answer nooooo. So, thaaaaat's the sort of thing it iiiiiiis.”

Subaru: “So, there's an indirect connection.”

His head tilted, Roswaal blinks at Subaru, looking somewhat daunted. Roswaal gives a small sigh.

Roswaal: “It feels like I'm seeing a child who's all grown up.”

Subaru he's touched on what the root of what the situation is, and thinks of what words to use for his next question BUT

Ram: “—Barusu, would you care to display some sympathy for Roswaal-sama?”

Ram comes in with a tray of some steaming hot, fragrant tea which she sets down on the table. Subaru also suddenly realises how nasty this interrogation of Roswaal is when he's like actually hurt.

Ram: “Have you satisfied yourself with your so thorough interrogation of this wounded Roswaal-sama? In pain, in agony, on the verge of tears—Roswaal-sama's countenance is drained.”

Subaru: “You're telling me to reflect but that phrasing kills any motivation to do it. And what's with this pained, anguishing, crying personality you've set up? Doesn't fit him at all.”

Roswaal: “Uu, it huuuuurts, I'm in anguiiiish. Your words pierce scars into my thoughtful, considerate heeeeeart.”

Subaru furrows his brows in irritation at Roswaal's stupid little banter play. Emilia clears her throat to get the mood back on topic.

Emilia: “Anyway,”



#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Emilia: “It's plain to see that Roswaal's physical condition is less than good, so let's finish our talk quickly. You haven't had any healing magic done?”

Ram: “As healing magics are outside of my area of expertise...”

Roswaal: “I'm aaaaalso specialised in destruction. I can do generally anything proficiently when it comes to demolishing, afflicting, bewildering, but not a speck of recovery.”

Subaru: “Man, terrible. This's one of those 'make sure you train your support moves as well as offence' cases.”

That said when Subaru plays games with skill trees he tends to spec entirely into crazy offence, so he can't exactly be too hard on Roswaal here, and is stuck having a weird kind of understanding of this situation. Emilia sighs.

Emilia: “Puck isn't here so it won't be at my usual level, but I'll administer healing magic for you. I'll need to concentrate for it, so it'll kinda have to be after we're done talking.”

Roswaal: “The Great Spirit isn't here?”

Roswaal's eyebrows raise, and his eyes narrow. His expression is somewhat cold and definitely an uncommon look for him.

Subaru: “Seriously never see you with that face. You're that surprised that Puck's not here? I didn't realise you were a secret fluff connoisseur...”

Roswaal states that the only time he's ever been in contact where he's been close enough to potentially touch Puck was during the mayonnaise fiasco, since Puck is terrifying. After that little digression, his brows crinkle and he stares at Emilia with his yellow eye, and asks her if her being off is something coming from a point different than usual.

Emilia is confused and said that there's nothing really different except Puck being missing. Her feeling off started happened around the time she entered the forest before getting to SANCTUARY, where she felt the reactions from the spirits as being dull. And whenever she's been outside, she's been feeling a weird kind of gaze on her.

This is apparently the reason her expression's been clouded ever since they parted with Garfiel.

Emilia says it feels like she's being stared at, and that it feels sooo bad. She thought she might've just been imaging it, so she didn't tell Subaru.

Roswaal says that Emilia's not mistaken, that this place is uncomfortable for spirits, and that the people living here have nothing but negative feelings toward Emilia.

Roswaal's ruthlessness in saying this makes some pain flicker through Emilia's eyes, and Subaru opens his mouth to bitch at Roswaal, BUT

Garfiel: “Well, 'say 's 'bout there to leave't off. Don't push someone all wounded 'round t'hard. THE

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

SPOTTED BEAK THAT RAN NOWADAYS IS HOT.”

Subaru: “Probably unfortunately, my level of comprehension isn't high enough to be able to agree with that.” Something complaining about there being no proper translation of what the hell Garfiel is saying half the time.

Anyway Garfiel's there leaning on the door, showing his fangs and looking around the room.

Garfiel: “Gran's house's meant'a be the widest, but with so many people here's cramped up 'n stuffy, oi. Made the right choice leavin' that noisy guy behind after'll.”

Subaru: “Now that you mention it, Otto's not here... did he go home? Did you eat him?”

This question startles Emilia, but Garfiel gives a big smile and slaps his knees.

Garfiel: “F'sure my amazin' self'hs some carnivore blood but nah he ain't eaten. 'Specially when it seems he'd just get noisier right when I'd go to eat'm. 'S worried 'bout the carriage'r the dragons'r, somethin'... eh, he came up with some random reason'n left.”

Garfiel waves a hand dismissively, plops himself down in a chair, and looks up at Ram.

Garfiel: “Tea.”

Ram: “I'll go outside for a moment to gather the leaves, would you wait for me?”

Garfiel: “I kinda got an idea where this's going, but what exactly are you planning to with those leaves?”

Ram: “I have no intention of wasting precious tea leaves on someone who will not recognize either their fragrance or flavour. Would be my answer.”

And Ram seriously leaves the building. Subaru looks at Garfiel, Garfiel stares at Ram's exit.

Garfiel: “'S worth'n goin' after a strong-willed lady. Ain't weird for a male 't get drawn in by a strong, excellent female either.”

Subaru: “Males and females, we're not sexing chickens here so you can stop with that chirp-chirp-chirping at her. She might be like that, but she's definitely a young maiden, that Ram. Which means...”

Garfiel: “Hmmm? Hell'r you sayin'. 'M givin' her proper lady treatment yer ain't gonna find better. 'Sayin, first'a all, we're...”

Garfiel's eyebrows raise as he realises something, his face sours, and he glares at Roswaal.

Garfiel: “Y'bastard, you ain't told'em yet.'F'd been just you getting' beat up'd be a story t' laugh at. But since th' half-elf's... since Emilia-sama's here, it'sanother story.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Emilia: “—Huh?”

Garfiel's expression just get more pissed as he snarls at Roswaal.

Garfiel: “You knew th' problems here'd wrap us in too the second Emilia-sama entered SANCTUARY. So th'hell's this. You still ain't even got t' the main point yet. 'You assholes just come here to have a play?’”

Half of his anger is directed not at Roswaal, but Subaru and Emilia. And the anger he aims in Emilia is particularly furious. Subaru goes to stand before her to protect her as she shrinks her shoulders up slightly.

Subaru: “Wait. I understand that you're angry, but it's not apparent to us why you've gotten angry. Isn't talking with someone who doesn't understand anything nothing but annoying?’”

Garfiel: “This's what'm sayin' I don't like. That the people involved don't even...”

Subaru: “The ones looking down on the people involved and pushing things forward would be you and Roswaal. If you're agonising over some problem and want to do something about it, then follow through properly with your accountability here. Asking people to understand you without telling them anything, that's on par with past-me for shamelessness.”

The pressure radiating off Garfiel strengthens. Despite the height difference between Garfiel and Subaru, and the fact Garfiel's seated, the pressure is so immense that Garfiel may as well be an enormous boulder to Subaru. And considering that Subaru is naturally timid, it's inevitable that he would avert his gaze and take a step back here, faced with this. BUT

Emilia: “...Subaru.”

Subaru feels dainty fingers gripped on the hem of his clothing. Emilia's voice is laced with reliance, and it confers his knees with strength.

Emilia is standing behind him. She's uneasy, and depending on Subaru.

As if he could do something as pathetic as have his knees give out in front of her.

Garfiel ends up being the first one to break the glaring match between him and Subaru. He clicks his tongue, leans back in his chair, and furiously runs his fingers through his short, blond hair.

Garfiel: “Fine! Yeah, I getit! 'S jus' lashin' out b'fore! Yer sayin' I lost my cool, 's my bad, okay, oi!”

Subaru: “Nah, I'm not telling you that. But have you never had anyone tell you your personality's a damn pain?’”

Garfiel's emotional vantage point narrows just a little, and he immediately becomes objective again and can admit his faults. Subaru thinks this is such a difficult personality to deal with that he ends up smiling bitterly rather than being indignant. Garfiel gives a punctual sigh.

Garfiel: “Shutit. My amazin' self'll shut up, so you get the conversation movin'. Since the talk's gonna go nowhere'f I come'in 'n ain't that goddamn annoyin'.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “That you can do that much self-analysis and then make a full revolution without changing at all is amazing.”

Garfiel: “No point'n praisin' me, 'm too dumb to understand it.”

Subaru is just completely fucking blown away at Garfiel, who snorts. And then Ram comes back and presents a steaming cup of black tea to Garfiel.

Ram: “Here is the very essence of terrible tea.”

Subaru: “Isn't that line more normally used when you're being self-deprecating?”

Ram doesn't give a shit and Garfiel accepts the cup, downing the hot tea in one gulp. Ram gives a deep sigh.

Ram: “As always, you're a man for whom brewing tea is worthless. Not someone suited to me.”

Garfiel: “S just tastes like leaves. If yer gonna wet yer throat 's just th'same 's water. Yeh?”

Subaru: “I agree that tea's just the taste of leaves, but even I'm reluctant to agree with that out-there logic. Ram, are you gonna give him the other cup too?”

Ram gives the other cup of tea she has to Garfiel, the tea having the faint colour of 'dead leaf.' Subaru notices this but doesn't stop Ram. In fact he endorses this.

Garfiel: “What, yer pretty on th' ball. 'Pressed you knew one cup wasn't enough.... Gak! Augh!? Oi, you asshole this's just leaf soup!”

Ram: “If you're going to wet your throat, water, tea, and leaf soup would all be the same, yes? You've tasted some, so do drink the rest. I'll twist it off if you leave any.”

Says Ram as she glares at Garfiel's crotch. This is enough to make Subaru unconsciously cross his legs. Garfiel's face twists in anguish as he reluctantly drinks down the cup. Roswaal cracks up.

Roswaal: “Ahaaaaa. Are you all worried about myyyyy condition and giving me a rest? Oooooo are you plotting to make me laugh so that my wounds reopen? If the latter, yooooou've certainly succeeded!”

He's actually not bullshitting and some blood's oozing out from beneath the bandages on his chest, which he lightly presses down on. The relaxed atmosphere changes instantly and a pale-faced Ram goes over to Roswaal's side, placing her hands over Roswaal's hand pressing the bleeding down.

Ram: “My deepest apologies, Roswaal-sama. And while I was even present...”

Subaru: “Or really, you know this's because of your joking around?”

Ram's glare shoots through Subaru which shuts him up. He zips his lip and looks over Roswaal—

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

the bleeding's there but it's nothing serious. But probably, his wounds had only just been closed up, making this the most essential time for Roswaal to be recuperating.

Emilia: “Roswaal, I'll have to heal..”

Roswaal: “Noooooo, that will not be necessary, Emilia-sama.”

Emilia summons spirits but Roswaal stops her. The spirits waver, seeming kind of lost. And Subaru notices that Garfiel is staring at Emilia with eyes so intense it's eerie.

Roswaal says that Emilia has more important things to be doing right now, since he's not in any life-threatening condition or anything. So she should prioritise those other things.

Emilia's like there's no way I could do that, leaving behind someone injured to do something else, as if.

Roswaal asks if she'd say such a thing even when the matter he's referring to is something necessary for her to secure the throne in the Royal Election.

Emilia's face goes stiff and her eyes open wide. Roswaal's yellow eye gleams bewitchingly, as if peering into Emilia.

Roswaal: “This SANCTUARY is nothing more than a plot of land passed down through the Mathers family for generations, but as far as it concerns your future, Emilia-sama, it holds great... yes, greeeeeeat significance. I had always intended to one day invite you here. —Aaaaalthough your visit wound up happening somewhat sooner than I'd planned.”

Emilia: “It's necessary...? But, what do you mean when you...”

Roswaal: “The problem this Sanctuary possesses is exquisitely close to the problem you possess. Thus, it is possible you might find it here. Your foundations, that is.”

Subaru sees Emilia's expression go stiff, Roswaal seeming to anticipated the reaction. Subaru gets an itchy, impatient feeling, but before he can say anything, Roswaal points at Garfiel.

Roswaal: “A role for you, Garfiel. Escort these two through SANCTUARY—no, escort these two to the cemetery.”

Garfiel: “—Wow, sure 'bout that?”

Garfiel laughs, his voice low. Roswaal nods and lightly pats Ram's hair as she goes to change his bandages.

Roswaal says that it's essential Subaru and Emilia know what the present conditions are, and that explaining can be done after sunset, but not the tomb.

Garfiel notes that the sun will set soon, but also that this makes the story complicated. Either way he'll do the escorting.

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Garfiel urges Subaru and Emilia to come along, but Subaru resists since they've gotten nothing out of their convo with Roswaal and wants to keep talking. Ram objects saying that Roswaal's wounds have opened and that the priority is to have his bandages changed and let him recuperate, so Barusu you go to the tomb. She follows up by telling Subaru to calm down since they'll talk once it's nighttime, Roswaal won't be running away. But, if you don't go to the tomb by sunset, it'll escape.

Subaru: "Never heard of such a mobile tomb before."

Subaru feels Emilia's gaze pierce through him, her eyes devoid of strength and wavering with emotion. She's leaving the decisions of what they should do to Subaru.

Subaru decides the answer's obvious and they're going to the tomb. It's necessary after all. But afterwards they'll definitely be getting a proper conversation with Roswaal.

Roswaal's okay with this and hints that after they've gone to the tomb, they'll have more to talk about.

So Roswaal's satisfied and Ram and Garfiel agree, with the two of them moving to start getting to their respective businesses. But before they can, Subaru raises a finger.

Subaru: "Just one more thing,"

Subaru: "There's something I want to ask you before we go to the tomb."

Roswaal: "Mmm, alright? So long as it's something eeeeeasily answerable, go on and ask anything."

Subaru: "Then I'll oblige. —Does the name 'Rem' sound familiar to you?"

The first one to react to the question is Ram. And not in the way that Subaru desired.

She tilts her head, as if she's never heard the word before. While Subaru's in the middle of being dejected with this result, Roswaal mutters the name to himself in rumination.

Subaru: "...So?"

Roswaal: "Hm. Sorry, buuuut I don't think it sounds too familiar. It resembles Ram's name, but I'm suuuure that wasn't you making a slip of the tongue."

Subaru: "Is that... right. No, it's okay. If you don't remember, that's inevitable. In, evitable."

And thus did Ram and Roswaal casually destroy Subaru's faint hopes. These are the two people who knew Rem the longest. And both of them forgot her.

This truth smoothly settles itself in to the cavity inside Subaru. And once again, stronger than ever, Subaru becomes conscious of this:

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

He really is the only one in the entire world with memory of Rem.

Emilia: “Subaru, are you okay?”

Says Emilia with a concerned voice as she touches Subaru's sleeve. Subaru savours the feeling of her fingertips as he closes his eyes once, and forces his face into a smile so she won't see him looking depressed.

Subaru: “I'm fine. Not like I had any weird hopes, and I did know this could happen. —My resolve that I have to do something is firm.”

Emilia: “Right. We'll do something. I'll be helping you.”

This firm promise heals Subaru's fractured heart. He shrugs.

Subaru: “Restoring Rem means the feelings of love I pour wholeheartedly onto you, Emilia-tan, will get split. Not envious or anything?”

Emilia: “If it means the volume of the feelings you give me goes down, then I might be. But that isn't going to happen. Since you said you already had my portion and Rem-san's portion properly set out.”

Subaru didn't expect that comeback and winces, unable to reply. Emilia smiles, her face faintly red.

Emilia: “Let's go, Subaru. I want Ram and Rem-san to meet each other soon too.”

Subaru: “Uh, uhuh. Right. Yeah, you're right.”

Perhaps having Ram see Rem again would call back her memories, or stir Ram's lost love for Rem.

Ram: “Barusu.”

And right after Emilia follows Garfiel out of the room, Ram calls him to stop before he can follow the two. She's suddenly standing right beside him with replacement bandages for Roswaal in her hand.

Subaru: “What is it? If you're looking for bandage play, after I'm gone you can have all the time you want with Roswaal...”

Ram: “The only one to enter the tomb will be Emilia-sama. You are absolutely not going in.”

Says Ram, so quietly even Roswaal wouldn't hear it. Subaru's brow furrows.

Ram: “—If you don't want to be imprisoned by the spuriousness of a witch, absolutely do not enter the tomb.”



#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

The air inside the tomb is cool and clear, with a refreshing atmosphere different from what the word 'refreshing' implies, as it welcomes Subaru.

His footsteps echo through the tomb with each step he takes, asserting his presence in this place whether he likes it or not. However, the sound of his footsteps in fact brings his heart comfort.

Amid a darkness where even just a few meters ahead is invisible, inside a miasma where your own existence feels to be wavering, those footsteps become a kind of rescue.

Unaware of where he is and leaning on the tomb's wall for guidance, he walks and walks without getting anywhere, Subaru feels the illusion that he's standing in place. But his footsteps alone defied that, and assured him of his forward advance.

He couldn't hope to guess how long he'd spent in the darkness already. His thoughts are vague, and his throat is frozen. Despite how far he's walked, no exhaustion besieges him, the sensation in his limbs far too dulled for such a thing.

But he keeps walking. He has to keep walking. He must not stop. To stop still was impermissible. As was to fail to move forward. Even when it might seem the weight of the burden upon him may force him to crumble, he absolutely must grit his teeth and continue walking. Because if he doesn't, how could there be anything for her—

???: “—I see, so this forms your basis. How precisely intriguing.”

And with the echoing of this voice, the eternal darkness abruptly comes to a close. This void which seemed a boundless pinnacle far beyond the edge of the world transforms into a narrow, stone hallway. Beneath his feet is a pile of dust which mutes any noise of footsteps, and most critically, the filthy atmosphere which seems to be worsening his chest now spreads.

Completely different from the dark world he had just been in, this was place was an old ruin firmly possessing a sense of reality—the exact surroundings Subaru had predicted just before he entered the tomb. Subaru is speechless.

Someone is there, walking toward him. And that someone is—

???: “Sorry that this welcome turned into a bit of a tease. I hadn't planned so, but quite haplessly am I a creature of greed. It's impossible for me to escape what is called the 'thirst for knowledge.’”

A woman, as perfectly white as a field submerged in virgin snow. Her hair is long enough to span down to her back, pure white as frost. The few areas where her skin is exposed reveal her flesh to be so beautiful as to be nearly transparent. Her eyes host an intelligent gleam, and only her simple outfit is pitch-black—a woman symbolising dichromaticism and adorned with beauty.

Most anyone would be charmed by her at first sight—but Subaru, standing directly before her, has



#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

his entire body assaulted with an overwhelming terror of a like he's never experienced before. Even more intense than when he'd first encountered the White Whale.

The woman's hair sways as she narrows her eyes, and she immediately gives a small, perfunctory nod.

???: “Excuse me. I haven't given you a single introduction of who I am. Sorry for these piling discourtesies. It's been a long time since I've had contact with people, so it seems I'm not quite back to form.”

Different from the tone of her voice, her expression barely changes at all as she shakes her head. She looks at Subaru, who continues to suppress his shivering, as she places her hand to her chest and quietly introduces herself.

???: “My name is Echidna. But maybe you'd understand it better if I introduced myself as the Witch of Greed?”

## CHAPTER 10: THIRST FOR KNOWLEDGE INCARNATE

About 15 minutes after leaving Roswaal's recuperation hut. Garfiel announces they've reached the tomb, which is an old ruin made of primitive stone construction, with some shallow cracks along the walls and dense thickets of ivy growing over it. Definitely over 100 years old.

The entrance faces out toward the forest, but half the structure in itself is swamped by the forest so it's hard to gauge how large the tomb is. If this tomb is dedicated entirely to the WITCH OF GREED, then perhaps it's safe to consider it something like a pyramid in the original world.

Subaru: "Guess important people wanting to sleep in giant tombs is the same, no matter what age or world you're in..."

Subaru tilts his head at the huge scale of the tomb as he rubs his chin. Subaru, being someone who lives in the moment, doesn't have much interest in what his value will be after death. There's also the fact that he's not the kind of gigantic person to have their name applicable for remaining in history. Anyway.

Emilia, standing beside Subaru, looks up at the ruins and asks Garfiel what exactly they're supposed to be doing here. Subaru, having the same question, also looks at Garfiel, who clicks his teeth as he turns to face them.

Garfiel says they can get the details from Roswaal after they're done here, but for now he wants Emilia to enter the tomb.

Emilia asks if that's okay, and tries to get confirmation that nothing will happen if she does enter.

Garfiel says that the sun's up. Even if you go to the back of the tomb, the TRIAL won't start. Preparations aren't ready yet either, and first they have to check whether Emilia is qualified or not.

It seems Garfiel could just forcibly push Emilia inside, and Subaru interrupts to stand between them before he can, and hurriedly asks that Garfiel slow down and explain what the hell is this 'trial' and 'preparations' and 'qualifications'.

Garfiel scrunches his nose up and is like, you really think that's a good idea, you'll understand everything if you go back to Roswaal after she enters the tomb. Garfiel admits he's bad at doing logic and shit so if he does the explaining it'll turn into a mess.

Subaru tells Garfiel he's pressuring them to sign a contract without reading the contents, no way they're not gonna be terrified. He goes on to say that if Garfiel's bad at talking about things in an organized way, then all he has to do is politely answer Subaru's questions one at a time.

Garfiel accepts this but advises they keep it short so the sun doesn't set on them.

Subaru: "This is the CEMETERY... meaning, it's safe to call this the Witch of Greed's tomb, right?"

Garfiel answers that it is, but honestly, no one knows if there's actually any bones buried here. That it's the Witch of Greed's cemetery, at least, is what both he and everyone in the village were taught.

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru asks what the TRIAL is. Though honestly after the past several weeks he's had, the word doesn't leave him with a very good impression.<sup>7</sup>

Garfiel: “Relax, I hate gettin' tested too. So, well, the TRIAL... I dunno the content.”

Subaru: “Hey now.”

Garfiel: “Don't get mad. It ain't like I'm messin' with you. 'S just, I dunno what'll happen inside the tomb. 'F you don't bust through that Trial, you ain't gonna be released from this deadlocked testin' site.”

Subaru: “Released... who exactly?”

Garfiel: “This's where th' QUALIFICATION's is. Guys with the qualifications can't leave the testin' site. 'Long as the TRIAL ain't over, you ain't getting outta the witch's possessive hands.”

It's not exactly the best explanation, but it doesn't seem like Garfiel's trying to be misleading on purpose. That he's failed to give his information more cleanly might just mean his understanding of all this is also vague. Subaru puts the pieces of what Garfiel's said together.

Subaru: “So only people who're qualified can enter the tomb, and if those qualified people don't pass the trial, they can't leave SANCTUARY... is about right?”

Garfiel: “Ehh...? 'S sorta like that... maybe?”

Subaru: “I had it pretty succinct and you're really saying it's still not good enough?”

Garfiel tilts his head. Subaru looks at Emilia, she picks up in voicing her conclusion in the wake of the answer they've reached.

Emilia: “I fell unconscious before when I entered SANCTUARY... was that what was happening then?”

Subaru: “So that was the boundary line, and you fainted because we crossed over into entrapment range? No but, me and Otto were lively as anything right then...”

Garfiel: “'S 'cause you ain't qualified.”

So looks like they've figured out the answer as to why Emilia mysteriously fainted back then. Garfiel points at Subaru with one hand, then at Emilia with the other.

Garfiel: “Half-elf Emilia-sama's qualified. Full pure-blooded human Subaru ain't. So yer free to go in n' out as ya want. But it means you can't take the Trial.”

Subaru: “Waitwaitholdup. So basically, thinking about what you just said, then it'd mean this?”

---

<sup>7</sup> The 'Ordeal' Betelgeuse talks about in arc 3 uses the exact same word that I'm translating as 'Trial' here.

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “That the people who can take the trial are half-elves... no, people who are half-human and half-demihuman. Which'd mean everyone living in Sanctuary fits that description.”

Garfiel: “—Yeah, 'guess I didn't tell you.”

Garfiel nods and blinks, satisfied. The next instant, his eyes turn golden and his pupils narrow to slits. His canines elongate and his fingernails sharpen into daggers. His petite body seems to enlargen—wait no that's not a 'seems.' Short golden fur sprouts down to cover his back, and covers the entirety of the exposed flesh on his legs.

Garfiel: “My amazin' self's still got alotta blood left. 'V got my own speciality of ANCESTRAL RETURN.”

Subaru: “...Wow. Can I pet you?”

Subaru forces back the excited shaking in his fingers. But Garfiel returns back to his original form, thoroughly declining the request. Emilia takes a step forward.

Emilia: “So this village really is a gathering of demihumans...”

Garfiel: “More accurately, 's a gatherin' of demihuman n' human mixed *things* who came here. 'S a just goddamn bunch of random races n' similar standin's who're here by choice. 'F you wanna bring up that bastard Roswaal's DEMIHUMAN FANCY then that's probably part'a it too.”

Emilia descends into thought as Subaru considers it too. The people here would understand the anguish that the scorned, ostracised Emilia has suffered. That might just be nothing more than licking each other's wounds. But what did Emilia think about there being something out there for her that could possibly turn into a thing of licking each other's wounds?

Subaru has no idea how to heal Emilia's wounds without worsening them, having not tasted the same pain as her. This truth grated on him and vexed him greatly.

Subaru gets back on topic by saying they more or less understand what's up with the 'qualification', so next is the trial. Subaru acknowledges that Garfiel said he didn't know the content, but at least the trial starts after sundown.

Garfiel affirms that and again says that he doesn't know the details. The only reason they're here right now it to check whether Emilia's qualified to take the trials. The trial will start at night, so if they try then they'll wind up seriously doing the real thing.

Subaru nods at this and stares at the tomb's open maw. Bound in thick ivy, the tomb waits for them, its darkness beckoning. The weight of the word 'TRIAL' also tips this off, but it's highly unlikely this is going to get settled just with your average spelunking of an old ruin.

More than anything else, sending Emilia into a place that might be dangerous is extremely difficult to bear for one Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: “Sorry, Ram. Doesn't look like I'll be able to stick by your warning.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Garfiel: “Whattyou said?”

Subaru: “Shunting Emilia-tan in there's ripping my chest apart with anxiety. So why not shunt you in Garfiel, as validation and a sacrifice?”

After a second of being dumbfounded, Garfiel gives his knees a hard slap.

Garfiel: “That's somethin' yer'd us'ly say when offerin' yerself up t'go!”

Subaru: “There's mountains of things I wanna do and say to look cool, but just for example let's say something happens here, then after considering probabilities of survival I'd say this'd be suited to not-me and instead you. You can stomp the ground to bits and stuff so looks like you've got plenty of leeway to live. You're the strongest.”

Garfiel is pleased and agreed with this assessment of being the strongest, nevermind the trial, no matter the danger it's a PENNY-PENNY DOESN'T SURRENDER.

But his good mood immediately vanishes.

Garfiel: “But,”

Garfiel: “Sorry 'cept I can't go in. Contract.”

Subaru: “...Contract?”

Garfiel: “Yeah, 's a pain. 'N toppa that ain't like I even made it.”

Garfiel kicks the ground, clicking his tongue. Honestly doesn't seem like he can go in. So things aren't looking great. To send Emilia in alone is not happening, but the plan of having Garfiel scout it first is also a no-go. Subaru can see only one remaining option.

Subaru: “Could you wait here for a sec while I go look for Otto?”

Emilia: “The sun will set while you're off doing that. —It's okay. I'll go.”

Emilia's resolve looks to be hardened as her gaze turns to the tomb's entrance, her eyes hosting caution for whatever may happen inside. More than likely, she's expecting nothing gentle. Embracing the same anxiety and fear, that Subaru lacks the strength to pull her hand back truly is pathetic.

Subaru: “Just a little ways inside... no, if it's just the entrance area then me going in ahead to check should be—”

Garfiel: “Fine, 's what yer thinkin'? You ain't qualified. Someone who ain't invited tries enterin' the witch's tomb, and they turn out like Roswaal.”

Subaru: “Like Roswaal... you mean, his wounds were because he went inside?”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru forces down his shock at this as he turns back to Garfiel. Arms crossed, Garfiel nods.

Garfiel: “S what happens to unqualified guys who go in at night. 'Cuz it was him that's all that happened, but wouldn't be weird fr a normal unqualified person to just burst 'f they went in.”

So Subaru finally understands what Roswaal was getting at with all his roundabout talk. He said he wasn't hurt by any specific person, which in other words meant this. But that gives rise to a new question. Why did Roswaal enter the tomb?  
He's unqualified. And he surely should've known that.

Subaru: “...Yeah, I'm going in first.”

Subaru puts the Roswaal question aside for now. Emilia and Garfiel are stunned silent for a moment.

Garfiel: “Oioi, 'd ya hear what I just said? 'S dangerous t' go in without qualifications. Roswaal turned out like that 'since it was night, but that doesn't make it safe just 'cus it's afternoon.”

Emilia: “Exactly. It's dangerous so you're stopping, right, Subaru? It'll definitely be fine if I go. It's not something I'm grateful for, but being half-elf could be helpful here...”

Subaru: “You know, it still does make me happy you're worried for me.”

Emilia pulls back on Subaru's sleeves, but Subaru unhooks her fingers.

Subaru: “If you calm down and think about it, this is just the obvious outcome for our roles. That it might be dangerous inside's the same no matter who goes in. We barely have any information in advance, but enough to know that it could be dangerous for me. So then it turns into a story of what we all can do afterward.”

Emilia: “What we can do?”

Subaru: “On the million to one chance something dangerous happens inside and someone gets injured, I can't heal Emilia-tan. If Garfiel's a man of incredible surprises and he's really a crazy-skilled healing magic user then it's another story, but...”

Garfiel: “Can just spit'n most wounds to heal'em.”

Subaru: “...is the suspect's testimony. Regardless if it's me or Emilia-tan, if there's a chance one of us is getting hurt, I'd like to keep healing magic user Emilia-tan leftover as insurance.”

Emilia seems to get somewhat swayed by this, but shakes her head, not giving up the central point.

Emilia: “A serious injury... or a life-threatening injury wouldn't be something I could heal. Puck isn't reacting, and I have a limit. Roswaal's injuries are settled down right now, but...”

Subaru: “Well, those wounds of his sure did look pretty nasty. ...But y'know well, try believing in

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

the dirtiness of my living and see what happens. I'm more than pretty sure that I rank near the top in this world for tenaciousness.”

He smiles at Emilia, his words here being not a joke at fucking all. In complete honesty, Subaru doesn't think it's that common for there to be people as bad as giving up as him. If given infinite chances to challenge something, he'd surely challenge it infinitely.

No matter how many times he breaks, shatters, he'll keep struggling to reach the answer he desires. For Natsuki Subaru, this was—

Subaru: “If you wanna, promise? Then you can rest easy. I absolutely am going to return to you, Emilia-tan. I won't be leaving your side.”

Emilia: “—It's a promise.”

Subaru holds out his little finger as he speaks, his tone somewhat joking, and is surprised at how she bites at his proposal more than he expected. She holds her pinky out too and tilts her head slightly.

Emilia: “Um, what do we do with the fingers?”

Subaru: “Er? Ohh, we link our fingers together like this... uuhwuah, Emilia-tan your fingers're so dainty and white and cute and...”

The look in Emilia's eyes urges him to continue. Subaru clears his throat.

Subaru: “Pinky promise if I lie swallow a thousand needles.”

Emilia: “Pinky promised!”

They release the pinkies. THE PROMISE IS MADE. This time with the understanding of how serious promises are for Emilia, so no way he's going to treat this one lightly.

Subaru: “Alright, I'll go take a quick look inside. I'll be trying to look around while calling out, please keep calling back from outside so I don't get lonely.”

Garfiel: “Seriously can't tell'f yer cool or yer awful.”

Subaru: “Just an advocate of cautiousness.” And he notes how easily he's totally destroying Ram's warning.

Mentally, Subaru humbly apologizes to her. Spuriousness of a witch—not peaceful-sounding vocab, but not something he wanted to voice to Emilia. She'd almost certainly end up stressing that she be the one to go in even harder.

Emilia: “Subaru. If you think it's dangerous, come back straight away.”

She doesn't look happy about it. Subaru shoots her an original kind of thumbs-up using his pinky and flashes her a smile, then peers forward—into the tomb.

He scales across the ivy underfoot and strains his eyes as he stares into the tomb, where the dark

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

makes everything more than a few meters in invisible. But it doesn't look like there's any signs of anything disagreeable living here.

Subaru fires himself up by using the Japanese version of 'nothing ventured nothing gained' which has to do with catching tiger cubs and shit. Not like Subaru wants a tiger though.

HOWEVER in terms of fluffy a tiger cub is a very desirable target BUT too dangerous to try for so Subaru wouldn't say he'd attempt it.

And, the instant he steps on the cold floor of the tomb—

Subaru: “—huh?”

He feels a sensation as if the ground under his feet is fading. Stupefied, Subaru looks down. The floor is disappearing.

With the floor beneath him going out of existence, he has no way to support his body as he falls forward. He reaches his arms out but they don't touch either the walls or floor, and Subaru proceeds to fall into the darkness below, screaming.



The falling goes on for a fucking while. And at the end of it and after his walking around, he meets the girl. Which is where he is now.

Subaru: “Which makes you the one I found after all that falling, walking around helpless, trembling in hunger. ...I sure hope you're all satisfied.”

Echidna: “Yup, definitely satisfied. It doubtless seems you're a someone far beyond what I expected.”

The back of her hand pressed to her mouth, she laughs like kukukuku as Subaru stares back at her with a cautious gaze. He forces strength into his legs so that he's always ready to run, and opens and closes his hands, prepared to grab her at any moment. It's a pretty shitty attack plan.

Echidna: “You don't really need to be that on-guard. And besides, I'm pretty sure you can judge yourself that even against me, you're not too likely to win? Bravery and recklessness are easily confused things.”

Subaru: “Sorry, but giving up after losing isn't in my character. And telling me not to be on-guard... do you really think I can do that when I'm talking to someone who introduced themselves as the Witch of Greed?”

Echidna: “I see. You're exactly right. That was my mistake.”

Subaru's filled with rebellion and irritation, but Echidna's attitude doesn't falter. This could be



#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

because she has room to be so lax, or amusement at Subaru's struggling. That kind of completely unimaginable, transcended aloofness. Her gaze is that of someone reading a manga, looking down at the characters. To her, Subaru's no different.

Which is why Subaru keeps on maximum caution when facing her. She exerts pressure leagues above the White Whale. And introduced herself as the WITCH OF GREED. This wasn't some kind of trifling problem of her legitimacy. It's the fact that she's so overwhelming that even Subaru can sense she's not someone who can just be laughed off. But she shoots Subaru, sweat arising on his forehead, a glance.

Echidna: "Though, it really does hurt that I'm being treated so cruelly. You know I am just what I appear, a weak little girl? When a man looks at me with eyes like that, it's definitely not that I don't get ideas."

Subaru: "You know that 'little girl' of yours has DEATH FLAG written all over it? Just saying, my sense of caution hasn't been anything ordinary for quite a while."

Thanks to dying so fucking much. Going by Subaru's honed danger judgement, this chick is on par with Betelgeuse.

Echidna: "So I guess we can't have a real conversation. That was unavoidable. —Alright, then how about we do this?"

She raises her hand before her forehead. Right after Subaru swallows his breath at this action, she clicks her fingers. And the world changes completely.

The cold stoneworks of what felt like the tomb's bottom disappear, and in its place comes a field of green grass, swaying in the wind—and a little hillock, atop of which the two are standing.

Subaru: "Wha—!?"

Echidna: "If you didn't want to play back there, how's this?"

Subaru looks around the surroundings in surprise as Echidna smiles at him and seats herself at one of the chairs arranged beside the white table atop the hill. She indicates Subaru take the seat opposite.

Subaru plonks himself down at the recommended seat. Steaming cups of tea are arranged atop the table, which Subaru looks at speechlessly.

Echidna: "Don't worry, there isn't really anything dangerous in there. If you want I could drink one first. Though I don't have anything I could show you if you doubt me, and ask whether or not poison works on witches."

Subaru: "...I'm bested. Now that we're here my sense of normalcy is just thrown. How did this place happen? Can you use teleportation magic or something?"

Beatrice has used such magic on Subaru before to dump him in barn in Arlam village from the

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Forbidden Archive. Julius said that's some crazy magic shit but since Echidna's a witch her being able to use it wouldn't be surprising.

Echidna: “Teleportation... ahh, yin magic. Nope, you'd be mistaken. There's lots of flaws in that magic. I don't really prefer to use it. What this is is just a tiny bit of an extra kind of entertainment. Since here, I've got some workable freedoms. This place is my castle.”

Subaru: “Your, castle?”

The field goes on, disappearing without end past the horizon. Yup this sure is something like a fantastic rather than realistic place. Recognizing this, Subaru swallows his own saliva, shrugs, and lets a smile rise on his face.

Subaru: “Sorry, but no matter how far I look there isn't a castle or even a shed. So what? Are you in the middle of rebuilding this castle of yours? Or did you lose everything except the table and chair to loan payments?”

Echidna: “Huhuhu. You truly are interesting. If you exclude other witches, it's easily countable how many people could joke around in front of me like that without it deteriorating. I really didn't think that after death, that count would increase.”

Echidna smiles as she counts off on her fingers, extremely satisfied that she can add Subaru. Subaru's face scrunches at a phrase he can't just overlook here. After death.

Subaru: “If you're really the Witch of Greed, then going by my memory, you're supposed to be dead. Even the reason I came here in the first place was to stop by your grave.”

Echidna: “And I thank you graciously for that. I would like for someone to leave some flowers for me at the entrance. But I'm not quite the most favourable toward liquor, so if my offering could be something sweet, that'd be great.”

Subaru: “So there's a culture of giving offerings here, in this world... I haven't got any souvenirs and I completely forgot to buy flowers. So I hope you're satisfied with just getting my smile.”

A smile like a field of blooming flowers. Poisonous ones.

Echidna cheerfully hums at this, picks up one of the cups on the table, and wets her throat.

Echidna: “Even when I was alive, I've never had so much fun drinking tea. Mmhm, even in death there's things to see. The new discoveries never run dry.”

Subaru: “Whether of not the two of us can have a conversation yet is still dodgy, you know. ...Goddamn it, I'll drink it. I'll drink it!”

It being absurd to keep going while so on edge when speaking to someone with completely no guard up, Subaru snatches a cup of tea and swallows it all down.

It tastes not like water, or tea or black tea—a mystery flavour. But nothing unpleasant.

Echidna: “You certainly are brave, drinking up something offered to you by a witch.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “Haa. As if something like this could frighten me. Sides, if you wanted to kill me I'd be nothing but ashes by the next panel. A cup of tea's nothing to be on guard about.”

Subaru places the emptied cup back on the table.

Subaru: “It wasn't good or bad, but what kind of tea was that?”

Echidna: “It's something produced inside this castle of mine. If forced to say, it's my body fluids.”

Subaru: “What the hell did you just make me drink!?”

Subaru kicks down his chair as he stands up and desperately tries to puke up the bodily fluids he just drank. Echidna laughs.

Echidna: “That does hurt. I didn't think it was so bad, going by how you looked.”

Subaru: “There's lots of hot girls out there whose bodily fluids I don't have the resolve to drink so no! Or really even if I had the resolve I don't want to drink anything called 'bodily fluids!' My fetishes are vanilla!”

Subaru is not excited by spit or sweat or whatever excretions. He thinks. If they were Emilia or Rem's, he might just think otherwise. His heart quietly hides the thought.

Subaru: “Fuck, I can't puke it. —Hey, this isn't going to do something bad to my body or anything, right?”

Echidna: “You relax now. The body absorbs it unfathomably easily. Well, they're body fluids.”

Subaru: “You didn't say anything so clever, stop smiling!”

Says Subaru, kind of fed up with Echidna's self-satisfied grin. Looking refreshed, Echidna takes another sip from her cup.

Echidna: “Either way,”

Echidna: “You really are a mysterious character. That you're standing in front of me normally, like this, is proof of that.”

Subaru: “How. Are you saying that you're too much of a hottie so normally people have their eyes implode? Let me tell you, my eyes're constantly feasting on my ideal for hot girls. So even when I look at you I don't really think you're super cute that often.”

Echidna: “Nope, normal people who stand in front of me puke. Isn't that interesting?”

Subaru: “Um, no!?”

During this exchange, Subaru sits back down in his seat and stares at Echidna. Hair and skin white

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

as snow. Black clothes which looked like a mourning dress, and her somewhat childish looks which convey her a subtle, spicy kind of beauty.

Echidna: “Now—”

Echidna sets her emptied cup of tea down on the table and traces her finger along its lip.

Echidna: “Talking like this is definitely fresh and delightful for me, but... I'm sure it's not the same for you, right? Don't you have things you want to say, to ask?”

Subaru: “...Yeah I, do. Yeah, I do! I got consumed by the atmosphere and completely forgot, but exactly. You... no, first of all where are we? Are we really inside the tomb?”

Echidna lightly strokes her hair.

Echidna: “Your question's half correct and half incorrect. There's no doubting that your body's inside the tomb, but your mind's inside my castle. If I were to tell, this place is a dream.”

Subaru: “A dream? I haven't got your face down nearly well enough to be dreaming about it.”

Echidna: “A dream, but that doesn't really mean it needs to be your dream. This is my castle—so, it's my dream. Don't you know somewhere similar to this?”

Subaru's breath catches. He gives a small shake of the head.

Subaru: “O-On what basis are you...”

Echidna: “Nothing definite. I just kind of thought you would. Your attitude resembles someone who's averting their eyes from something they know, is just what I'm thinking.”

Subaru: “...I honestly don't know. But, what you're saying's not wrong.”

Echidna's phrasing wasn't exactly harsh, but Subaru ends up feeling accused anyway. And in complete honesty, Subaru can't control the conflicting waves of emotion fighting in out in his chest. Echidna isn't saying anything incorrect, but Subaru's reply isn't a lie either.

When Echidna told him this was a dream, Subaru both understood and accepted that simultaneously with his surprise. As if such a sensation was something he already knew well, that his heart understood.

Why did he think like that? No matter how hard he searches his memories for the reason, he finds nothing.

Subaru: “I'm accepting that this is your dream for now at least. So how can I get out?”

Echidna: “I'd say waking up from the dream, or being woken up from outside. But I don't have a body to do anything to you from outside, and waking up yourself from inside someone else's dream is tricky. If I don't think to wake up, I suppose you wouldn't be awoken.”

Subaru: “—! Then, you...”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru shivers. The term 'Echidna's castle' now gains a more vivid feeling of truth to it. Subaru's soul, trapped here, is in the palm of her hand. The spuriousness of a witch—the truthfulness of these words multiplies.

Subaru: “Aren't... planning to let me out?”

Echidna sighs.

Echidna: “I mean, whatever? If you want to go back I'll let you go back? It wasn't me who called you here, you came all by yourself, sooo.”

Some banter about Serious-san which is far too beyond me.

The time they've known each other is short, but Subaru hasn't got a grasp of her character. Though you could also say you shouldn't be able to understand someone called a witch in such a short time.

Subaru: “Anyway, if you can let me out then do let me out. There's a girl up there who I'm sure's worried about me. If I've got the time to be drinking your bodily fluids, I want to be helping her relax.”

Echidna: “I'm fine with that, but are you?”

Subaru: “With what.”

Echidna: “Going back when I'm right in front of you. —Getting a chance to talk with the Witch of Greed really isn't something anyone but you could get so easily, even if it's their desire.”

Right. She's right. In regarding her entirely as a threat, Subaru overlooked something huge. If she's the Witch of Greed, and truly is the existence that was called as such in life,

Subaru: “You... know the answers to the things I want to know?”

Echidna: “Asking me for the whereabouts of knowledge—are you?”

Echidna gives her kukukuku laugh again, her smile this time notably more cheerful than before. A pressure even more intense than what she was radiating before hits Subaru. The atmosphere warps, and the atmosphere of blue skies and green fields instantly starts collapsing. The sky shatters, the field catches flame, the world beyond the horizon progressively collapses.

Feeling a non-existent jolting, Subaru hurriedly reaches his hand to the indeed existent table. The second he touches it, it breaks apart in his hand like grains of sand.

Echidna: “You really are an interesting being.”

The scenery around Echidna morphs, terrifying patterns embracing the world. The darkness expands, coiling around Subaru's legs and proceeding to his whole body. Subaru frantically moves to escape, but the world's collapse has already expanded to the area nearby the couple. There's

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

nowhere to run to. And the world's still disappearing.

Echidna: “If we're just trading questions and answers, this space is plenty. Knowing the things you want to know. A thirst for such a thing—greed for such a thing, is something I approve.”

All that remains is the two chairs that Subaru and Echidna are seated in. Within arm's range of the other, a world of two chairs dedicated for a conversation. There's no visible end to the darkness beneath them. Probably not a joke, if they fell they'd never return.

Subaru's spine freezes. Echidna's in good spirits.  
She claps her hands, and while staring at Subaru, her eyes glimmering,

Echidna: “So, what do you want to ask? If you're doing it to acquire knowledge, I'll answer any question. Is it about the WITCH OF GLUTTONY Daphne, who created godforsaken beasts to save the world from hunger? About the WITCH OF LUST Camilla, who sought to fill the world with love and gave emotion to those without others? About the WITCH OF WRATH Minerva, who punched all people into health while lamenting the strife-filled world? About the WITCH OF SLOTH Sekhmet, who drove the Dragon beyond the Great Cascades just for some peace and quiet? About the WITCH OF PRIDE Typhon, who brought judgement upon criminals with the innocence and ruthlessness of a child?”

None Subaru's heard of before—no. This was a list of information almost certainly not present in the world's existing history. Overwhelmed by the information load, Subaru doesn't speak. Echidna's smile widens.

Echidna: “Is it about the WITCH OF GREED Echidna, thirst for knowledge incarnate, whose vestiges even now linger posthumously in this world, desiring all wisdom there is?”

Echidna: “Or,”

Echidna: “The one who destroyed all the witches, making enemies of the world she marked as her feed, the WITCH OF ENVY—is it about her?”

CHAPTER 11: SLOTH IN WRATH BY PRIDE

So Subaru's fucking terrified of Echidna.

He can't breathe. He can't register the beating of his heart. Not even sweat rises on his brow, and he can't blink without Echidna permitting it. Absolute isolation.

Echidna: “Crap, guess I overdid it on the menacing. It's always been that when I get so excited, I wind up saying too much. Sure is a pain, this witch's nature.”

Even if she realises she overdid it, that doesn't reduce the overwhelming pressure she's exerting in the slightest.

Their friendly back-and-forth is fucking gone. The girl standing before Subaru now is not a girl. In the truest meaning, she is only a WITCH.

Echidna: “This happened every so often when I was alive. It did when the royals of every country came to me to borrow my wisdom and... well, I suppose you have to have some caution while looking at me.”

Echidna shakes her head and looks at Subaru with her black eyes. Subaru trembles at his emotionless self reflected in her eyes, Echidna smiling.

Echidna: “Then, maybe this'll suit your fancy?”

The change happens abruptly.

Simultaneous with Echidna's muttering, Subaru crinkles his brows, uncomprehending. Echidna's smile melts into the darkness, and right after Subaru blinks—

???: “What're you lookin' at—you?”

Subaru: “...Wha?”

???: “You're staring.”

Says a girl now there before Subaru, kicking her legs and puffing up her cheeks. Her dark green hair is shoulder-length, her cheeks as red as an apple. Her tan skin goes well with her white dress, and her sweet, youthful loveliness scatters freely about her surroundings. She has an artificial barette of a blue flower which looks to be her characteristic.

A harmless, innocent little girl—now sitting where Echidna was, staring at Subaru.

Subaru: “Eh, uh, ah? Wa, wait. E-Echidna? Where'd she go?”

Girl: “Chidna? I dunno where 'Chidna went—but what's with you.”

Subaru: “M-Me? My name's Natsuki Subaru. A lost man neither invited nor summoned, just in the

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

middle of going home after some tea... currently troubled by the sudden disappearance of the landlord...”

Girl: “Ehhh. So—you're 'Baru.”

The girl smiles happily at Subaru's honest self-introduction, which even in this situation makes Subaru's chest go all warm and fluffy.

The situation is complete chaos, but the instant Echidna disappeared, Subaru got released from all that crazy pressure. Thinking about it more calmly, this girl sitting before Subaru could just be another victim dragged here from somewhere else. Have her cooperate to escape from here—though Subaru doesn't know how much help she'll be, Subaru goes to raise his head.

Subaru: “Okay, first we'll pull a while the cat's away mice will play and work out a plan for getting out of here. Since there's so little footing to work with the room for thought is pretty narrow but, first of all would your name...”

Girl: “By the way—'Baru. Are you a baddie?”

Subaru: “...be something you could tell me... what?”

The girl's legs sway and the chair rattles as she goes back and forth. She pouts.

Girl: “Iiii saaaaaiiid,”

Girl: “Are you a baddie—or not a baddie. Which?”

Subaru: “Every human is a creature of sin, for which living cannot proceed devoid of victims. Thus, we may have become criminals upon the very instant of our conception in this world. But even so, people live. They are aware that although it produces victims, they cannot acquire things of worth without creating those victims... or such kind of philosophical banter feels pointless with a little girl but, is that what you mean?”

Girl: “Hnnn—I listened but—I don't get it. Ehhh—whatever—just to check...”

Subaru tilts his head. The girl tilts her head at an even deeper angle. She grabs Subaru's outstretched hand. Feeling how soft it is fills Subaru with new resolve to get her out of here safely.

Subaru: “I think about this when I'm dealing with Petra too, but man I'm unexpectedly fond of kids. Even though I hated them for being so noisy before...”

Girl: “SINSCOSTNOTHINGBYPAINALONEATONED”

Subaru: “Nuh?”

The girls whispers to herself quickly. Subaru, unable to catch it, raises and eyebrow and goes to look at her when he gets hit with a light shock. Alongside the feeling of his arm being tugged comes



ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

a feeling of liberation as if letting go of a heavy load.

Subaru turns his head, looks around to see what happened, but there's no changes to the world. Just him and the girl, no sound or wind. But in the girl's hand she grasps a man's arm, severed from the shoulder.

Subaru: “—!?”

Girl: “It doesn't hurt—so you're not a baddie—good.”

And so Subaru realises his right arm's been plucked off. He feels no pain and there's no bleeding. The bone, veins, arteries, and pink muscle enveloping them is plainly visible dangling from the points of severance and looks like something edible you could get at a butcher's. If you removed the unacceptable reality that it was all protruding out from his own right shoulder.

Subaru: “Uawh, aaaaaaaaaaaaaah! A-arm... my aaaaaaaaaaaaaarm!?”

Girl: “But it doesn't hurt—stop yelling. It'll fall if you move too rough—you won't get it back.”

Subaru: “Y, you, youu!? Putting aside you severing people's arms, what, what the fuck are you saying! G-give it back! Give it back!!”

Subaru glares fucking daggers at this kid while touching and screaming at his open flesh. Give me my arm back fuck. It doesn't even occur to him that such a thing is impossible.

Girl: “ERRSACTASFETTERSNEVERUNBOUND”

This time it's his legs as he goes to step forward, which shatter like glass from the knees down. Unable to stop this, he leaves his body to momentum and falls forward into the little girl's lap.

She catches him gently as he shivers, and slowly pats him like a mother soothing a beloved child.

Girl: “You're not a baddie—but you think you're a bungler. You're a kind—good boy. You're so sad—you're suffering.”

Subaru: “Wh, what the hell.. a-are you...”

Neither his right arm or is shattered legs are giving him any pain. Not bleeding either. She tilts her head.

Girl: “Typhon's the WITCH OF PRIDE.”

Subaru: “Pri...!?”

This shock again brings Subaru's thoughts to a stop. There's anger and fear, but he has absolutely no consciousness of either. He only just met the WITCH OF GREED, Echidna. And now he's suddenly making contact with the WITCH OF PRIDE. These witches who were destroyed, and supposed to be dead, are—

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

???: “—*huu*. Looks like I'm up next. *haa*. No choice but to do it.”

And down comes a tired-of-the-world voice from above, Subaru's shock making him moan with absolutely all his might. All he did was blink, again. The world hasn't changed at all. He's still missing his arm and legs. But despite that—

???: “*haa*, You're pretty heavy. Even though those missing limbs should be lightening you up a bit. *huu*. That's a man for you... though don't you think it's better when men and women in themselves are meaningless, are we're just souls?”

The person supporting Subaru has changed from Typhon to a different woman.

Her magenta hair stretches extremely longer than average, and she gives the impression of being extremely fatigued but beautiful. Her skin and lips are abnormally pale. Her eyes are narrowed more with a deficiency of will to live than with sleepiness, and the way that she makes every breath seem like a pain spreads her environs with a gloomy atmosphere. She's wearing a black robe, but the filth and frayed patches scattered around it give an incredible impression of this seriously being the only thing she wears.

She sighs as she looks down at Subaru.

Woman: “*haa*, You're quite the luckless one too, aren't you. Tossed around by Echidna, then me and Typhon... *huu*, having face-to-face meetings with three witches in turn, that's something you'd only get with say, that moron Flugel or Reid, swisher of sticks.”

Subaru: “Are you, a witch too? That kid before, and Echidna...”

Woman: “*haa*, I'm Sekhmet. *huu*, It's really a chore but I guess you could call me or not call me the WITCH OF SLOTH. *haa*, Not that I'm asking to be called on at all, it's really all a bother. *huu*, Chatting makes me listless, so can you stay quiet?”

Subaru: “Give me a break. I think I'm gonna go crazy. If I don't talk with somebody I'm going to see what my reality is right now and that is bad. Please, tell me what to do here.”

Subaru has his only good limb, his left arm, grip onto Sekhmet's dress as he cranes his head up to look at her. Sekhmet sighs with the unconcealed emotion of 'this is a fucking pain'.

Sekhmet: “You've got nothing from your right shoulder, *haa*, or your knees down. *huu*, By that style it looks like Typhon? That girl doesn't understand others' pain. *haa*, She's exactly a child made ruthless through her innocence. *huu*, it's sure something to pity. *haa*.”

Subaru: “Will, my arm and legs... r, return to normal?”

Sekhmet: “*huu*, Nothing I can do... ahh, actually this works fine, *haa*. This was a pain for me too, *huu*, so I'll just leave the rest to her and go to sleep. *haa*, breathing's such a damn chore. Do you ever think like, if we could get out lifetime's supply of air into our lungs all in one go, we could settle things there without breathing our whole lives, *haa*.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “If that happened our lungs'd burst and we'd die, more importantly what about my situation he...”

Still looking as entrenched in ennui as ever, Sekhmet bewilders Subaru with her fucking ridiculous proposition. Subaru goes to tell her off since he wanted a more serious talk with her after pleading with her, but,

???: “—Did you really just say 'die' in front of me?”

Comes a bloodthirsty voice.

Again, the person before Subaru has changed. That old thicket of hair is gone, and the thing to replace her in Subaru's gaze is,

Subaru: “...Boobs?”

???: “—! Wh-where are you looking! Where!?”

Subaru tries to look up to see the face of his new conversation partner, but his vision is interrupted by protruding masses of flesh around the beast region and he doesn't reach the face. The feeling of this person's lap is plumper than Typhon or Sekhmet's, and her build over all is abundant in womanly curvature.

She lifts Subaru up easily, one handed—despite his missing arm and legs, Subaru should still have quite some weight for a woman to carry.

Woman: “You look in the person's eyes when you're talking to them, the eyes! I swear, men are always like this, unbelievable!”

And viola she's a blue-eyed beauty with wavy blonde hair. She's wearing a short skirt with clothing that looks easy to move in, and even considering that she's sitting right now, she's pretty short. But her big chest and abundant curves give her a salacious air.

She glances at Subaru with some anger.

Woman: “Right arm missing. Legs missing from knees down. No bleeding or pain... you got punished by Typhon! That girl... she went off doing whatever she likes again, she's just awful!”

Her eyes cloud over with fury. Her speech is filled with anger, her attitude with fury, her actions with violent passion, but tears well up in her eyes.

Subaru: “A-are you crying?”

Woman: “Of course I'm not crying! I'm just mad! Right, I'm mad! At that Typhon, making these wounds and just leaving them there! And at this world that lets her do these awful things! And at people fighting and hurting each other and making each other suffer, the craziness of it all!”

And she tosses Subaru into the air.

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “Whu?”

Woman: “I won't forgive it! Not pain! Not fighting! Not wounds! As if I could leave it like this!!”

The next instant, a flurry of blows from the woman's fists assaults Subaru. The punches come with extreme speed and force, and Subaru is jettisoned away. BUT

Subaru: “Bhuh—?”

The blows should've been enough to send him flying, but he immediately hits the end of the world. It's barely any distance at all. The shock of slamming against an invisible wall penetrates Subaru's whole body.

Woman: “—Safe! Don't you dare think you're getting away!”

Just as Subaru's about to slide down the wall, another hail of fists pounds down at him, sandwiching him between her punches and the invisible wall. The force of all her punching transfers through him into the wall and the foundations of the world start to shake.

Battered around so thoroughly he has no idea what's up down left right anymore, Subaru's consciousness goes white. All that fills his vision are the fists, and the girl with a torrent of tears rolling down her face. At he watches the tears scatter into space, he goes to try and complain that he's the one who wants to cry here when once again a fist pays a visit to his face.

Endless torture in the deepest ring of hell—which ends suddenly.

Woman: “With my fists, I'll restore the world! With my anger, I'll purify the world! My wrath, my healing fists, are how I answer!”

The next instant, the world shatters, broken to pieces by the force transferred through Subaru to the wall. The rain of punches stops, and next comes the feeling of something soft. He's back in the field with the tea party.

Subaru gets up and looks around, dumbstruck. The girl strides over to his side, patting her hair down, and glares at Subaru.

Woman: “Right arm!”

Subaru: “Hweh!? Uh, yesmaam!”

Subaru unconsciously raises his right arm at him being called, to find that his arm is properly back in place and everything to his fingertips is back and restored.

Woman: “Legs!”

Subaru: “Are there too. I can stand, walk, moonwalk!”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

He hops up to his feet and indeed does a confirmatory moonwalk. The girl crosses her arms and nods with full satisfaction as she watches Subaru slide away across the field. Subaru burns that picture, which emphasises her breasts, well into his memory.

Subaru: “Y-you really helped, thanks. But, just going with the conversation, you'd be...?”

Woman: “I'm the WITCH OF WRATH, Minerva! Nothing worth introducing myself!”

Subaru: “Really now!”

Minerva: “Nope, it wasn't a big deal! I just can't permit there being people being injured, or injured people where I can see them! It's nothing worth being passed down to the hereafter!”

Subaru: “And yet you still go ahead with working for your own great exploits! You're one of those people who doesn't listen to what others say, a type I am not very good with!”

Minerva turns her back to Subaru, who's waving his healed arm around.

Minerva: “Anyway, if your wounds are healed then I've got nothing to do here! Now don't you get hurt by even the tiniest bugbite! That's a promise between you and a witch!”

Subaru: “I couldn't do that even living in a sterilized room! And don't just make these promises! Breaking a promise with a witch sounds like comes with a seriously heavy penalty!”

Minerva: “No it doesn't. Just, when it happens... Everyone will be healed.”

Subaru: “Don't say that like you're gonna kill everyone, it's scary!”

But seriously it's true Subaru's injuries are healed now. She really does heal people by punching them.

Echidna: “—Now,”

So Minerva dashes off, but before she disappears she turns around and blam now she's Echidna. She tilts her head, looking at Subaru cheerfully.

Echidna: “I let you meet some other witches to prove to you how harmless I am, but how did it go? If your attitude towards me softened a little, then waking them up from their sleep was worth it.”

Subaru gives a deep sigh, and slowly raises his head.

Subaru: “No mistake, you are a witch. ...Humans don't think anything like this.”

Is what his spits at her with all the intensity he can muster.

## CHAPTER 12: A SOUVENIR FROM THE TEA PARTY

Echidna: “That space I went through all the effort of readying's completely shattered. This sort of violence... probably Minerva. That girl's just a little bit quick to put up her dukes.”

Subaru: “A little? I'd say it's immediate. She's a new experience of the violent tsundere iyashi oppai loli. Jamming in that many character traits just makes her bloated.”

Echidna's still exerting her pressure but either way her plan to calm Subaru down seems to have worked.

Subaru: “Well, now I'm in a mood where I can talk face-to-face with you. Yeah, compared to the other witches you're somewhat more rational.... no, Miss Witch of Sloth seemed like someone you could have a conversation with, kinda...”

Echidna: “I don't know how this'll sound with me saying it, but Sekhmet's the oldest and most rational of the witches. When she's angry it's nothing half-baked, though.”

Subaru: “Nothing half-baked, so she's scary when she's mad?”

Echidna: “Well, we'd be no match for her even if we faced her together. I don't really think we could beat her even if we got the other five witches in on it.”

Echidna sits back down in her chair as Subaru stares at her doubtfully. Looks like Sekhmet stands out as strong even among the witches.

Subaru: “Actually, I've been getting the feeling you're leaving the WITCH OF ENVY out in the cold.”

Echidna: “—Just one bit of advice for when you're talking with me.”

A smile rises on Echidna's face as she raises a finger, points at Subaru, and tilts her head.

Echidna: “I consider the other witches my friends, and I think they deserve respect. Since my personality has so many flaws. My long relationship with them gives me somewhere to turn to, and was a saving grace for me. So I've gathered up their souls without missing a single one.”

Subaru: “...I feel like I just heard something I really can't let slide but, go on.”

Echidna: “Their destroyer was the WITCH OF ENVY. —Can you smile happily while you talk about the being that gruesomely murdered your friends?”

She's still smiling, but the nature of it changes. Fear runs down Subaru's spine, and Subaru nods several times in agreement before he even realises he's doing it. Echidna nods.

Echidna: “The mood's got a little bit bad. How does another cup of tea sound for a pallet cleanser?”

Subaru: “...I'm not brave enough to drink another cup of 'Chidna Tea. If you're not going to put actual tea in there, my urge to eat or drink anything here is zero.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Echidna: “Now, being invited to tea with a witch, back in my day that was something to feel jealousy about... ahh, the generations and the people do change.”

Echidna refills her cup and brings it to her lips. That is to say she's drinking her own bodily fluids.

Subaru: “It's like you're a rabbit or something, where you can live forever by eating your own crap.”

Echidna: “Being equated to that is kinda humiliating but... hm? Was that you indirectly saying you want to hear about the Sizeable Hare?”<sup>8</sup>

Subaru: “Sizeable Hare?”

Subaru tilts his head. He's heard the term somewhere before, and trawling his memories he places it as being when he was riding Patrasche along the Refaus Highway (pre-White Whale fight, cut in the Anime).

Subaru: “One of the witchbeasts on par with the White Whale... I think. The Sizeable Hare, and the Blacksnake?”

Echidna: “Daphne's unpropitious legacy. They're all unmanageable problem children. Nevermind the Blacksnake, you always hear about the White Whale and the Sizeable Hare causing trouble somewhere.”

Subaru: “By the way about the White Whale, it happens that because of my efforts it was slain the other day. Because of my efforts.”

Braggs Subaru. For the first time, Echidna's black eyes open wide in surprise.

Echidna: “Wow, really? That's amazing, that is. Looking at you, you wouldn't seem to have any skill in swordsmanship or aptitude as a sorcerer... but you must've got the surroundings moving extremely well.”

Subaru: “It's really disappointing that you instantly saw through it not being a solo effort! You know I just might've blasted through it all by myself?”

Echidna: “Whether the White Whale or Sizeable Hare, it's pretty hard to envision there being someone who could singlehandedly kill either. Even in my generation, the only one who could probably manage that'd be Reid.”

Subaru raises his eyebrows at the unfamiliar name. Echidna sets her finger to her lips.

Echidna: “Hmm,”

Echidna: “Maybe it hasn't been handed down to your era? I thought his achievements were pretty considerable. At least, I seriously doubt there's anyone not on his level who could single-handedly fell a fully-developed 12-dragon.”

---

8 Alpha Leporis is a hare.

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “Nnywell, my understanding of everyday things or I guess you could say general knowledge is just slightly shockingly shallow. Or I mean, that's amazing, that guy. Incredible.”

Echidna: “—Reid Astrea. I'm more than sure that he's been given the title of Sword Saint, but maybe that's not around anymore?”

Subaru puts the pieces together. Astrea—like Wilhelm and Reinhardt. Most likely, Reid Astrea was the line's progenitor.

Subaru: “Okay, got it. It's still around, the Sword Saint. Dunno what number it's on now, but the current Sword Saint's my buddy. He's a monster who most likely matches up to this ancestor of his you know.”

Echidna: “What a way to speak about a friend... is what I'd like to say, but knowing how Reid didn't line up with normality, I can't laugh at what you're saying. So, were we going to talk about the Sizeable Hare?”

Subaru: “Hrmm, nah. I mean, my interest in information about the Sizeable Hare and the Blacksnake is endless, but...”

He has so many questions he wants to ask, that if he gets all the answers at once he won't be able to keep up with it. So he'll sort out what he really wants to know and get details on those topics first.

Subaru: “Uhhh, kay. You're Echidna. The deceased WITCH OF GREED. Is what I'm saying here all good?”

Echidna confirms this is correct, that they're inside her dream, and she'll let him out whenever he wants so long as he tells her he wants out.

Subaru's like thanks for the consideration, and thinks about what his first question should be.

Subaru: “I'm thinking we should get this confirmed first... what the heck about you is deceased. You're here frolicking about having a wonderful day-to-day.”

Echidna: “...ah, I see. No, I didn't explain anything about this at all, did I. You hadn't touched on this topic until now, but neither had I.”

Echidna claps her hands and nods in assent. Between everything that happened since meeting Echidna, they had completely lagged on bringing up this extremely obvious question.

Subaru: “If it's that you're a ghost haunting a tomb, well I guess that's fine too. After getting meddled with this much it's impossible to say this's all my imagination or however you'd put it.”

Echidna: “‘Ghost,’ isn't something I can deny. That I've lost my physical body and am now a mental body is fact. Now, if you were to ask why I'm like this... right. I'd say the most accurate answer would be to act as a deterrent.”



ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “Deterrent? For what pur... no, in opposition to what?”

Echidna: “Sharp.”

Echidna gives a satisfied nod and a small clap of the hands.

Echidna: “The one who bound me to the earth like this was Volcanica—the Holy Dragon Volcanica. I'm sure you've at least heard of him before?”

Subaru: “...He'd be the dragon the rulers of Lugnica have a covenant with, I think. I heard the name before in the hall for the royal selection.”

Echidna: “It's the same Volcanica. That dragon's power seals me in this tomb. The reason why Volcanica's done this, exactly as you've guessed, is as a deterrent against the WITCH OF ENVY.”

Every time Echidna says 'WITCH OF ENVY,' a sharp emotion flashes across her eyes for nothing more than an instant. She is probably really not on good terms with the Witch of Envy.

Echidna: “The Witch of Envy's sealed in the witch-sealing stone, but the seal on her isn't completely ironclad. Volcanica's lifespan isn't infinite, and it's not impossible her seal could be undone if given some chance. There's more than a few beings which exalt that thing, and you can't fully assert that a natural disaster won't damage some part of the stone. —So, Volcanica keeps me in existence.”

Subaru: “As combat power for when the Witch of Envy's unsealed... huh.”

Echidna: “Though even me being the one to remain, I don't think I can really answer to Volcanica's expectations. If he was going to keep anyone he should've kept Sekhmet. But the problem there's that Volcanica himself has some gripes with Sekhmet. Getting that beatdown seems to have made him aware he doesn't deal with her too well.”

Subaru isn't sure to what extent he should believe this story about Sekhmet apparently getting a beatdown on Volcanica of all fucking things.

Echidna: “Anyway,”

Echidna: “Myself, who is a witch, and the Holy Dragon Volcanica. Then'd be the SWORD SAINT and the... Sage. Anyway if all these parties did assemble, we might be able to oppose the WITCH OF ENVY even if she hypothetically does get revived. Would about be Volcanica's flickering hope. I'm here exposing my shameful posthumousness even right now, but that's the principle of the background behind it.”

Subaru: “So basically, it's okay to say that your being bound here as a ghost is because of the dragon?”

Echidna: “More accurately, it's that Mathers' algorithms are tied to Volcanica's will. If you've come here, then I'm sure you know of the Mathers? Or maybe that family name isn't around anymore...”

Subaru: “No, the Mathers are still around. Roswaal L Mathers is the Lord of this region, which

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

includes the tomb. And he's also my boss or I guess my patron or I guess a pervert or..."

Echidna's eyebrows twitch and quiver as she mutters, "Roswaal?"

Echidna: "Sorry but did you just say Roswaal?"

Subaru: "Hm? Yeah, I did. Roswaal. What, you know him?"

Echidna: "Things would certainly be strange if I did. I'm from 400 years ago. If he's someone from the same generation as me, the story ends up going just a little bit funny."

Subaru agrees with this. Echidna puts a finger to her lips.

Echidna: "Ah, right,"

Echidna: "Is the Roswaal you mean someone with long, dark-grey hair? His eye colour... I think it might've been yellow."

Subaru: "—Nope, they're different. The Roswaal I know has navy-blue hair orrr actually it's exactly the same colour as the jeans I'd wear. And the eye colour's wrong too. He's got two eyes different colours, one blue and one yellow."

Subaru sighs in relief at these minute differences. Subaru knows that Roswaal's managing of this land is something inherited down the Mathers family. So that means the family's also inheriting the covenant with Volcanica to seal Echidna. So considering this inherited role,

Subaru: "Maybe the name 'Roswaal' is professionally inherited down the line too. You see it a lot in manga when you get girls with blatantly male names."

Echidna: "'Roswaal' being something inherited. If so, that's kinda a nightmare."

She nods in agreement with Subaru's speculation, and shrugs, some exhaustion peeking through. Subaru knits his brows at the uncharacteristic behaviour.

Echidna: "The character I know as Roswaal had just a tiny bit of an excessively focused disposition. He'd be well prone to offering up his everything for a given goal. So then, if he hadn't changed at all after my death..."

Subaru: "Unsatisfied with using only his own life, he might offer up his whole family's time?"

Echidna: "That'd be it. Ah gracious, just thinking it makes for something horrifying."

A smile rises on Echidna's face, which looks like one of a parent watching over a child who is bad at the things they do. Or that impression is probably just Subaru being mistaken.

Subaru: "I understand why you're in this tomb, and who's putting you here. I'll grill present-version Roswaal about what's going on with this after I wake up."

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Echidna: “At your liberty. ...so, other questions?”

Subaru: “Course I have 'em. Next thing I want to ask about is the Trial. The Trial I've heard happens in this tomb. Can you tell me the content of it. Also please tell me what's on the answer sheet.”

Echidna: “Asking the examiner for the questions and the answers in the same breath, just how truly merciless, you.”

Subaru: Archaic grammar something. “There's no reason not to use the shortcuts you can. I'm the kind of person who plays games while reading walkthroughs.”

Because it's a fucking pain to have to replay an event after failing it.  
Echidna closes her eyes in thought, opening them after five seconds.

Echidna: “So, the Trial.”

Subaru: “Yeah, that. We're stuck with taking it. It doesn't get cleared, and it's a problem for an important girl of mine. Now she can't even leave SANCTUARY if she's homesick. The option to leave her behind and go home, of course, doesn't exist for me.”

So while Emilia physically can't exit the barrier around Sanctuary, Subaru also has no intention of leaving so long as she's stuck here. This is a wall they'll scale together. Subaru will do anything he can to achieve that.

Subaru: “Even if it means cheating!”

Echidna: “Sorry for this just when you're all fired up, but I don't know about the Trial. I haven't participated in it. So I don't know the contents.”

Subaru: “But why!”

Echidna shakes her head.

Echidna: “Do you know where we are? This's my tomb, right? That being, this place was made after I died. And then the Trial you're talking about would take place inside the tomb? So then the trial in this tomb was something made after I died. Surely there'd be no way for the deceased like me to get involved with it?”

Subaru: “With how lively you've been this whole conversation there's no way I'm just agreeing with that one!”

Echidna: “Either way, I wouldn't've had any place in the questions. So I can't answer you on the Trial. Actually, it's so much so that I'm interested in hearing about the trial, from you. My curiosity in the content, questions, answer choices, and of course the answers to the problems is endless.”

Echidna's eyes sparkle with thirst for knowledge. Subaru sighs at her, and judges that this is about all he's going to get on the TRIAL. Which means,

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “Man, I don't really have much I want to ask you.”

Echidna: “...huh? You're kidding, right? There's no way that's possible. I mean, you know I'm the WITCH OF GREED? Every person in the world came to me desiring knowledge. And you're saying that with me right here in front of you, with full freedom to ask what you want, there's really nothing you want to ask me...”

Subaru: “I mean, you're deceased so you wouldn't know much from after you died, yeah? The stuff I want to ask's mostly in present-continuous tense, so there's no real point asking my questions to someone ignorant on the topic...”

Echidna: “Nononono, let's calm down a sec. I'll give you that yes I'm not familiar with the world of the present day, but in exchange there really is nothing about the past I don't know. Pages of history eroded over 400 years of time not even preserved in anyone's memory. You don't think this's a chance to learn? And it's the same with the witches from before. Is there really even a record of any of them still left anywhere out in the world?”

Subaru: “But, I'm not really interested in the witches. They're all deceased and I'm mulling over lots of things already, so even if I hear about them it's not really...”

Echidna: “Eeeehuee...”

Subaru enters into full-throttle leisure-time mode while Echidna's face scrunches up in dissatisfaction, the couple's roles perfectly reversed.

That said, as far as Subaru's concerned this is truth. If forced to answer whether he had any interest in just how far the witches' feats and misdeeds went, then no he would have no interest. Nothing would happen even if he did ask about them—with this point as the foundation of it, he just is uninterested.

Subaru: “Ah, actually now that I think of it I just remembered a question.”

Echidna: “Yuppyup! Good, exactly. Yes, of course you have one. Anything you ask is absolutely fine. If it's something I can answer then won't I just go and answer it, pahaa!”

And she snaps it up. Subaru thinks that even if you call it a witch, fundamentally the root still stinks of human.

Subaru: “The residents of the SANCTUARY where this tomb is call the place a test site. The phrase 'WITCH OF GREED's test site' feels pretty significant, and then there's the barrier so halfbloods can't escape, so if you could tell me what kind of test...”

Echidna: “Can't.”

Subaru: “...s you were doing that would be...”

Subaru shuts up halfway through at how unapproachable that reply was. Echidna notices how cutting what she just said was, and her expression turns awkward.

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Echidna: “Sorry for that. But there are some things I can't answer. I'm unable to answer that question. Not that I can't answer it, I don't want to answer it.”

Subaru: “...It doesn't exactly give a good impression, 'test site.' But you aren't denying it.”

Echidna: “I'd like you to stop there. I wouldn't want to be scorned.”

Echidna looks down, her shoulders scrunched up small. Subaru has no choice inside him but to give up, seeing something as overpowering as a witch entreating him like this. So instead what his brain comes up with is,

Subaru: “That reminds me... I've heard your name somewhere before I came here.”

Echidna remains silent. Subaru trawls his memory for where he'd heard Echidna's name before coming to Sanctuary, and finds the first time he heard it was from—

Subaru: “Puck.”

Loop 3 of arc 3 when Puck killed him, during Puck's conversation with Betelgeuse.

Echidna raises her head at Subaru's muttering.

Echidna: “Puck? You don't mean, that cat spirit?”

Subaru: “—!?! Yes, that one! He's a cat spirit. You know Puck?”

Echidna: “That isn't even a question... he came here? Then just how much has he remembered?”

Echidna's surprised, and Subaru's surprised at that reaction. She prattles on quickly but immediately shuts up. Faced with this, Subaru can't say anything, and Echidna closes her eyes in deep thought.

What should he say, thinks Subaru as he looks up.

Subaru: “—ddaah!?”

When something hot in the pit of his stomach asserts its existence, robbing Subaru's attention.

Subaru: “...eu, ah?”

An incredible heat scorches through Subaru's gut. He puts his hand to his chest as he whines, his gait tottering as he stumbles. This agony is absolutely nothing ordinary. Stomach aches or whatever couldn't even hope to compare to this mysterious pain, himself drooling in the face of it. Unable to stay standing, he falls to his knees and immediately collapses onto his side.

Echidna: “Ahh, looks like it's finally taking effect.”

Says Echidna as she looks down at Subaru, her eyes cold. She slowly walks over to the anguishing Subaru, bends down, gets her face in close, and brushes

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

away his bangs as his mouth flaps open and closed.

Echidna: “When a witch invites you for tea, you mustn't simply put anything presented in your mouth. —Maybe this'll be a lesson for you?”

Subaru: “Yo, u... did, y... poison...”

Echidna: “Surely I didn't. Didn't I say? What you drank was my body fluids. A piece of a witch, a being that differs fundamentally from humans. That's what you drank in.”

Subaru now realises that he took the word 'bodily fluids' far too lightly before. And now he was writhing in agony for it.

His eyes open wide, Subaru glares at Echidna. That friendly demeanour of hers from up until now is completely gone. Just, what the hell was her motive he—

Echidna: “I'd like you not to misunderstand. It isn't that I did this while holding any hostility or malice toward you. In fact, I regard your existence very favourably. That I made you drink a part of me, was also due to that.”

Subaru: “Ta, lking as if, you know...”

Echidna: “If I were to explain it simply, I applied treatment so that it'll be easier for you to harmonize with the Witch Factor sleeping inside you... or abouts.”

Subaru: “Witch, Factor...?”

The blaze inside him only intensifies further as he frantically repeats the term back at Echidna.

—Witch Factor.

He's heard the term several times before, now.

From Betelgeuse. From Beatrice.

Echidna: “Well you killed an adherent of the WITCH OF ENVY, didn't you? When that adherent died, the Witch Factor slipped inside you. ...Though, it seems there's something else inside you as well.”

Subaru: “When it's ha, rmonized what, ha...”

Echidna: “Nowww, indeed what will happen? Honestly, even I don't know. But, this is the triggering of a bomb keyed to explode at some unknown time, so that the detonation happens before it'll cause any big causalities, a case of empathic consideration... or something of the likes. If it's all settled inside a dream, then maybe that'll give just enough leeway to stop it from detonating outside?”

Says Echidna, in a tone that suggests Subaru's suffering, which is making his vision flicker in and out to black, has absolutely nothing to do with her. But even despite his condition, Subaru slowly lifts his arm and points at Echidna.

Subaru: “Just, thought this...”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Echidna: “Mhm?”

Subaru: “The way you, talk... is exactly, like Puck. That oh so great cat spirit, can't read tone, casual, so fucking cavalier...”

Echidna blinks once in surprise.

And her face immediately twists up, as if she's been caught off guard by a good joke, and she slaps her hand to her stomach as she bursts into laughter.

Echidna: “Haha! Hahaha! Ahhh, what to say, beautiful! You're amazing. I truly do think that. Mhm, mhm, aah, ahahahahaa! I see, I'm like Puck. Mhmmhm, I sure am. Sure I am. Call it natural and it's a natural result. If he'd done it, I'm sure there wouldn't have been anything to be a model except Puck.”

Subaru: “What, are—”

You saying, is what Subaru was going to continue with, and couldn't.

It wasn't that the pain searing his entire body stole his attention. It was that the seemingly endless pain instead lessened slightly, and he started to see the end.

But, instead of conquering the pain, it's rather that,

Echidna: “Time's over for our meeting, is how it looks.”

The edges of the objects in the world in Subaru's vision steadily blur, losing focus. The blue sky, the green field and hill, the white table and chairs, all start to disappear.

Subaru: “You said, it doesn't end unless you try to...”

Echidna: “Time is still passing in the real world. It looks like we wound up with this thing you call the TRIAL starting on us. It starts on us, and all the tomb's facilities end up diverting towards that. It won't care about a single ghost anymore.”

Echidna strokes her finger across Subaru's forehead. Subaru can't resist or react.

Echidna: “Now, you're going back home from the witch's tea party. How much are you going to give me?”

Subaru “...Just saying, I am an unconditionally unconventionally penniless broke.”

Echidna: “Not money. Compensation will be... ah, right. You're forbidden to talk about this place, should be fine. It looks like you're bound by a similar contract, so surely it's not asking much?”

He doesn't even have the time to ask what that means.

Her finger still on Subaru's forehead, Echidna whispers something. Heat seems to collect at her fingertip gradually, when it flashes into Subaru's entire body in an instant, and confers Subaru with a mysterious kind of understanding. That is, of the contract's content and the invasive one-sided avowals, and his binding to them.

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “Don't just, do these things...!”

Echidna: “Talking about the past, and establishing the Witch Factor. I would say this is more than just cheap as compensation. Also, this really is just something I might as well do while we're at it, a freebie.”

She smiles at an indignant Subaru, and the fingertip contacting his forehead transfers him another, new warmth.

Echidna: “I'm giving you the qualifications to take the tomb's Trial.”

Subaru: “—!?”

Echidna: “If you have this, you'll be able to take the Trial at night in the tomb. Whether or not you take the Trial's all up to you. You can also not take it. But, now you have the option to take the Trial instead of that important girl of yours. —If you're questioning what to do, do whatever you'd like.”

The world begins crumbling, the land underfoot gradually melting into darkness. This time the end of the world truly seriously is coming.

Still laid on the ground in this ending world, Subaru stares up at Echidna.

Subaru: “—Yeah, you really are a witch.”

Echidna: “—Yes, I certainly am. Right here is a damn wicked sorceress.”

Subaru's consciousness falls and falls, fades and fades. Floating up, out of the dream—and from the witch's dream, he is released.



## CHAPTER 13: ROSWAAL'S INTENT

The first thing Subaru feels when he wakes up is the touch of someone's fingertips stroking his forehead.

Subaru: "With how dainty and soft these fingers are and how careful this stroking is this is Emilia-tan."

Emilia: "—You're right, is it just me that the way you guessed that was sooo terrifying?"

Subaru opens his eyes, but the palms of Emilia's hands are blocking his view of the world. Subaru's cheeks loosen into a smile at the glimpses of Emilia's beautiful face peeking through the gaps between her fingers.

Subaru: "Nywhat. I just figured that the only person who'd be peppering me up in this context'd be Emilia-tan and I went with my gut. Of course I don't actually recognize people by the touch of their fingers."

This relieves Emilia a little. She asks if he thinks he can lift himself upright.

Subaru, lying on a bed, uprights himself. He looks around to find he's in an unfamiliar building. The bed he's on is shabbily built, not even comparable to the beds in Roswaal's mansion that Subaru's used to. Anyway Subaru thinks back on what happened before he fell unconscious.

Subaru: "How much of that was imagination, and how much of that was reality?"

Subaru puts his hand to his forehead and he puzzles over his somewhat indistinct memories of what happened inside Echidna's supposed dream, and looks at Emilia. She's sitting on a chair beside the bed quietly waiting for Subaru to gather his thoughts.

Subaru: "Ummm,"

Subaru: "There's plenty of things I wanna ask and wanna talk about, but... well, first there's something I have to say."

Emilia: "Mhm, what?"

Asks Emilia as she tilts her head. —But, there's no smile in her eyes. Her gaze pierces through Subaru, who scrunches his shoulders up.

Subaru: "I can't describe how sorry I am for making you worry. I got kinda carried away."

To the extent that he was conceited enough to think he could be Emilia's vanguard. And as a result he crumbled on the first step. A light sigh escapes from Emilia's lips.

Emilia: "Auugh. I was really, really worried. You screamed and fainted right after you went in."

Subaru: "Nevermind the screaming, I fainted?"

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Emilia: “Dead away. You were even convulsing so I really didn't know what to do. It didn't look like you'd been injured, or effected by any kind of strange magic...”

Subaru now figures that when he had that sensation of falling immediately after he'd stepped inside the tomb, he was already inside the WITCH OF GREED's dream. What Subaru's instantaneous collapse had really done was force an unneeded burden on Emilia.

He'd gone in there to check there was nothing dangerous, for Emilia's sake. What a fucking laugh. Subaru's face screws up with self-loathing.

Garfiel: “—Eh? Ohoh, well now ain't you up finally.” I have no idea how to phrase this jab.

So anyway Garfiel's there and comes in through the room's creaky door. He glances over Subaru's set-up on the bed before turning his gaze to Emilia.

Garfiel: “See, ain't it right like how I said, there ain't anything weird goin' on with his body. 'S just what it looks like.”

Emilia: “...but still, of course you'd be worried. When someone collapses so suddenly for no apparent reason. Maybe you're used to seeing that, but I don't think getting used to it is a good thing.”

Garfiel: “*Ha*, stop th' blusterin'. Yer're goddamn 'bout'a cry with how panicked yer were seein' him all collapsed. PALER THAN A PALEMIGRO's what yer were.”

Emilia: “Wha—!?”

Emilia's face goes super fucking red and she stands up, her chair clattering as she does.

Emilia: “I-I wasn't crying. I mean I was worried and panicked, but I wasn't really...”

Garfiel: “Mhm, yeahyeah. 'S was a secret, eh, 'n secret. Real sorry. But ser'sly don't think it matters anythin'. It ain't somethin' t' hide.”

Emilia: “But it is. If he heard I was worried, that... that I was about to cry, he'd...”

Emilia glances at Subaru.

Subaru: “Hm? Ah, you can keep going. Go on, go ahead, uheehee. Mmhm, really, man. Emilia-tan was crying with how worried she was about me. Uh-huh, uehehheh.”

Emilia: “...somehow, I just knew you'd react like that.”

Emilia's shoulders fall, devoid of strength. Although indiscreet Subaru can't hide his joy about having made his honey bunches of oats sincerely worry about him. Seeing the couple's reactions, Garfiel mutters a very meaningful, “Ah, got it.”

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Garfiel: “My bad. Man, ain't this rare. Me sincerely recognizin' my screwups.”



???: “If you train it properly, even a dog will practice enough self-restraint to eat only after receiving permission.”

Says a voice sharp enough to cut. Each word is well-punctuated, but laced with a ghastriness that prevents Subaru from interjecting between the breaks.

???: “Meaning, you could say that abiding by an order, something achievable even by a dog, is the absolute minimum form of a promise.”

High-pitched footsteps sound out from the wooden floor at an even rhythm, pacing left to right to left to right, whittling away at Subaru's mental stockpile.

???: “Now then—”

The speaker's emotionless gaze pierces through Subaru.

???: “What to call a creature that cannot keep the promises even a dog can abide? Do you know, Barusu?”

Subaru: “I am so sorry for not listening to your warning!”

Screams Subaru as he gets to his knees and bows his head deeply. But the speaker just tilts their head.

Ram: “Did it sound to you as though I desired an apology? It almost seems that you didn't hear my question, or even what I'd been saying just beforehand. Considering that you didn't listen to my warning, it's certainly not impossible to agree with that assessment.”

Subaru: “Could you please stop with this prickly, indirect sarcasm!? I reflected, and I seriously think I did wrong, and now here my heart's still getting crushed! It'd be less awful if you just told me off straight!”

Ram: “Why couldn't you have just died.”

Subaru: “Too straight!”

But considering what he did, Subaru has to accept being content with Ram's merciless scolding. She went out of the way to warn him, and he completely betrayed it, and because of that caused lots of people lots of problems all over the place.

Roswaal: “Aaaaalright now. Aboooooout there is where to forgive him, Ram. I'm sure you've already received a veeeeery similar lecturing from Emilia-sama? Repeating it wooon't do anything

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

eeeeexcept delight Subaru-kun the masochist.”

Subaru: “I’m not a masochist. That I keep stepping on landmines is just my nature!”

Social stupidity, is another thing to call it. Subaru puffs out his chest, and Ram gives a fucking deep sigh as if she’s sincerely fucking dumbfounded at this. She silently turns her back to Subaru as she goes over to Roswaal, who is still in bed.

Roswaal: “Nooooow then,”

Roswaal: “Fiiiiirst of all, that you’ve returned safely is more important than anything. Lots of arrangements have goooooone awry because of your stumbling before the Trial. Although all your actions are, is juuuust some callow bungling.”

Subaru crosses his arms and gives a small snort. Emilia, standing next to him, chides him by pinching his side.

Subaru: “Ow. Owie, Emilia-tan.”

Emilia: “Usually I’d want to defend you, but you were bad today. ...If I knew Ram had told you that, I wouldn’t...”

Have let you gone first, is what it seems like she’s going to continue with, when she stops. Subaru shoots her a wry smile as he internally mutters, “That’s why I didn’t tell you.” If Emilia’d known about Ram’s warning, she wouldn’t have let Subaru stubbornly take a dangerous role. But on the flipside, if Ram hadn’t warned him, Subaru wouldn’t have been so insistent to be Emilia’s vanguard. So basically,

Subaru: “Your warning made nobody happy, Ram.”

Ram: “To speak as if I was the instigator of these events is to be a dog. ...Or actually not. If I don’t amend that to ‘lesser than a dog’, it would be an insult to dogs.”

Is Ram’s counterattack, packed with so much scorn that Subaru actually kind of finds it admirable. Anyway Roswaal loosely rearranges the posture of his legs on the bed.

Roswaal: “Incidentally, Emilia-sama... how was the cemetery?”

Emilia: “...There was Subaru, so I didn’t get to look around very carefully. But I do remember the nasty smell in the air and the uncomfortable prickling on my skin.”

Emilia’s brows scrunch up slightly. Fundamentally, she’s the type to get ambiguous when giving negative appraisals of things. Roswaal gives a small laugh at this notably candid appraisal Emilia’s made, before looking at Garfiel who’s leaned with his back against the wall.

Roswaal: “Garfiel. Have the QUALIFICATIONS been confirmed?”

Subaru raises his eyebrows and looks at Garfiel. Garfiel aggressively scratches at his hair, exposing

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

his sharp canines,

Garfiel: “My amazin' self didn't go any further thn' the fronta the entrance but... the cemetery's lights turned on all good n' right. Emilia-sama definitely's qualified t'take the TRIAL.”

Subaru: “The cemetery's lights?”

Garfiel: “S a bunch of candle-lookin' things inside the cemetery. They got some trick where they catch fire'n light up when qualified guys go in the cemetery while sun's up. Guys who get that welcome safely're qualified t'take the TRIAL at night.”

Roswaal: “And if something lacking those qualifications forcibly enters the cemetery, theeeeeey turn out like me ooooo Subaru-kun.”

Roswaal spreads his arms out, indicating his own physical state, the bandages covering his entire body even now stained with blood.

Subaru: “Man, really feels like there's a difference in how heavily our penalties were. Did you get up to more mischief than me, who just entered the place?”

Roswaal: “Mischief, suuuuch as?”

Subaru: “Pissing across the tomb's entrance or something. That'd get the cemetery's manager mad.”

Roswaal: “If I diiiiid, then that would mean that yooooo collapsed in a place tiiiiinkled with my wee.”

Subaru briskly brushes off his whole body at that, his face disgusted. Roswaal smiles at Subaru's behaviour and shakes his head.

Roswaal: “Buuuuut,”

Roswaal: “Faced with the same refusal but met with differences in severity... is soooomething I'm impressed you noticed. The difference in the wounds that Subaru-kun and I haaaave indeed is large. But the reason is simple.”

Emilia: “...Mana Gate frenzy.”

Emilia: “When I entered the cemetery, it felt sooo bad. I think it's because something was meddling with my gate. I didn't have problems with any of the conditions, so it looks like it let me go... but for people who don't match the conditions, it bares its fangs.”

Emilia: “The interference goes through the gate to attack its target. ...Which means, the more gates the person has, the more damage the interference will do.”

Roswaal: “Correct. Aaaaand when you're me... well, it's a miiiiiracle I didn't burst.”

Roswaal closes his eyes and looks at Subaru like, “Good thing you're untalented.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “So basically, a mage overflowing with ability would be near-death. All I got was a loss of consciousness. Man, it's a good thing I've got such little potential as a mage.”

Emilia: “I, I mean yes, but... Doesn't that judgement of yourself hurt?”

Subaru: “I'm relatively accustomed to being made aware of the things I can't do and can't achieve. It's okay, Emilia-tan, it's by things only I can do that I show my love for you. So for now are we good to start that list with 'whispering you husky loves'?”

Emilia: “After the Royal Selection's over and things've calmed down I'll think over it for you.”

Subaru: “So at least three years away!?”

Subaru: “But,”

Subaru: “Leaving the qualifications or whatever aside, that place kills mages. No idea who set that up, but all there's to say about them is they're a dick.”

Roswaal: “Considering that the Mathers family has managed the cemetery for generations, you realise the one who constructed the algorithms woouould have been one of my ancestors.”

Subaru: “Er, sorry... or not really. The hell. That fits way too well with my image of your ancestors. It's like they're reincarnating all over, Roz-chi's family.”

Behold, the theory of the previous generation's head dying and using the next generation's head as a puppet for their will. Just thinking it is fucking terrifying and Subaru shakes his head to deny it. Roswaal smiles as if caught off-guard by a joke.

Roswaal: “There was a clan that researched such magic buuuuut they were almost definitely plucked to nothing quiiiiiiiiiiiite a long time ago. ...And, though you're saying the cemetery's environment kills mages, theeeeeeere's a more accurate way to describe it.”

Subaru: “Being?”

Roswaal: “It's simple. —That place is filled with witch's miasma. It's a nightmarish environment that makes people passing mana through their gate go insane. Thaaaat's what you call miasma.”

Subaru knits his brows at the word 'miasma.' He trawls his memory to find where he's heard to before, and if he's right, it was when talking about—

Subaru: “The Witch of Envy. If I remember correctly, the place where she's sealed is full of that miasma or something or other...”

Roswaal: “Hooow impressive that you knew. Weeeell, that's because it's a well-known story. Even now, the shrine with the witch-sealing stone where the Witch of Envy sleeps is filled with miasma thick enough to distort everything in the observer's view. If the miasma in the cemetery rejects things unfitting to the conditions, the shrine's miasma is an indiscriminate mind-invading, flesh-

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

destroying, soul-degrading phenomenon of genuine malice. It's rumoured that even followers of the Witch Cult, with their machinations to revive the Witch, caaaaan't get anywhere near it.”

Subaru: “So even the cultists can't get in... no, actually that's apparent. If they get in and can unfasten the seal, they'd win by distracting public attention somewhere else and rushing into the shrine.”

Subaru thinks of Betelgeuse, who screamed that reviving the Witch was his ultimate goal. Even that love-shrieking madman hadn't started enacting any plans to free the Witch through direct methods. Considering that he was actually a spirit, maybe the better way to think is that he'd be powerless when faced with miasma.

Roswaal: “Aaaaanyway, the Witch's own miasma prevents anyone from approaching the Witch's seal, so no one can unseal it. And that's without touching on that you'd have to sneak by the Sage Shaula, guarding over the land from the Watchtower, iiiiiiiiiiif you want to approach the shrine.”

Subaru: “I've heard that somewhere before, that Sage Shaula. That makes her the second Sage I know. Flugel, and this Shaula.”

Roswaal: “Flugel, the tree Flugel? Iiiiiit's true that he's called a Sage, buuuut to compare him to Sage Shaula is just a liiiiiittle rough.”

Subaru: “What. They're both Sages, don't play Sage favourites. You won't get away with slighting Flugel-san in front of me, when I kinda owe him.”

Either way, Flugel seriously helped out for the White Whale subjugation. Mr. Flugel likely couldn't have possibly thought that the tree he planted would help exterminate a monster 400 years in the future. Whether or not he'd be happy about that is another story.

Subaru: “With a tree that gigantic, the felled portion can definitely be used for lots of different... actually no, maybe there's a chance it all blew up during that commotion with the time bomb?”

Roswaal says some bullshit and calls Emilia's name in a low voice, getting the focus back on her. Emilia raises her head.

Roswaal: “To return to the topic, that you're qualified is moooooore important than anything. Now you can take the TRIAL in the cemetery. And in saying, there's something I have to ask.”

Roswaal says solemnly, in a low voice devoid of any clownishness. Emilia's gaze turns serious as well.

Roswaal: “It is a simple question. —Will you be willing to take the TRIAL?”

Subaru: “I got something to ask before she answers. Why exactly does she have to be taking this TRIAL?”

Says Subaru before Emilia can answer, taking a step in front of her and raising his hand. Ram's eyes take a dangerous glint, but Roswaal puts her in check by also raising a hand.

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Roswaal: “Sooooounds like a question yooooou'd ask. If the TRIAL isn't taken, those with the QUALIFICATIONS can't leave Sanctuary. Perhaps you've heard this much frooom Garfiel?”

Subaru: “Yeah. But that's no reason for Emilia-tan having to do it. That Witch of Greed's cemetery goddamn reeks of mould. We don't know if something dangerous'll happen in there. How could Emilia-tan, important person and Royal Selection participant, be forced to go in there? The heck is up with that?”

Roswaal: “Hmmm. Weeell, call it sensible and it iiiiiit's sensible logic. Iiiiif we're just looking for someone to take the TRIAL, then a different qualified person... that alone, theeeeen I wouldn't care if Garfiel did it.”

Garfiel: “Eh? The amazin' me, seriously? Ain't like I really mind. I challenge the TRIAL n' blast right through n' it'll be a BARBARMOA'S RIGHT-RIGHT-LEFT.”

Garfiel points to himself with his thumb and smiles wide. Subaru ignores what he's saying and focuses more on whether what he's saying can be trusted. If the Trial's something that only has to be beaten by one person, then there's no need for Emilia to do it. It's better that someone else qualified, who has a more certain chance of getting through does it. Even if that meant, worse case, that it be the qualification-granted Subaru.

???: “Nyerr, that'd be a tidge'r a problem.”

Says a voice Subaru's never heard before from the entrance of the room. Subaru glances back in surprise and looks at Garfiel, leaned against the door, who waves his hand in front of his face.

Garfiel: “Ain't the amazin' me. 'S this old hag.”

Says Garfiel as he uses his hand to indicate to the space beside him. Subaru lowers his gaze to find someone even more petite than Garfiel there, standing beside him.

???: “Who'ser old hag. Were yer raised as er ferl-mouthed, stinking little brat?”

Says a tiny, tiny little girl with long, wavy pink hair, her attitude that of an adult. Her facial features are well organized, and she's a cute little girl. About as old as Petra, so around 11 or 12. Her hair is fine and fluffy. She's wearing a white robe where the sleeves are so long that they dangle, her hands only just peeking out. Going by how she speaks and how Garfiel addressed her,

Subaru: “I thought it'd be coming someday but seriously how is this where it shows up, the loligranny!”

???: “I gotter feeling I just gert called something innerpropriate, er is it just me?”

Emilia: “Uhhh, I think he uses 'loli' a lot with Beatrice... it means small, right?”

The little girl looks up unsatisfied at a stunned Subaru, who hears Emilia's muttering, which shows



#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

clear proof of her high experience points in knowing Subaru. Subaru raises a finger.

Subaru: “Yes, correct Emilia-tan. To be more specific, it means 'too young to be in my conquest range'. By adding the words 'loli' and 'granny' together, we complete the miraculous combination of a youthful exterior and a granny's interior! Personally loli characters are out of my reach anyway so you have *that*, but I can understand the excellence of gap moe!”

???: “Gyahp moay?”

Subaru: “Girls who usually act like the chivalrous older sister type, but some tiny parts of childishness or lack of everyday knowledge or sincere gullibility show through, that is yet another form of gap moe!”

Emilia puts her finger to her lips saying, “So there are girls like that...”, her face showing assent. That Emilia didn't notice that those traits all applied to her is unbearably adorable for Subaru, but the little girl doesn't look so pleased.

???: “So? I dern't know what this loli yer talking abert is, but yer mean me with that 'granny granny granny' yer doing. We gert someone even ruder than Lil' Roz on their ferst meeting here.”

Subaru: “Oop, excuse me for that, mademoiselle. My name is Natsuki Subaru! Heartthrob witchbeast hunter. Well, but I mean I wasn't the one who got the finishing blow on either of them though.”

He says with an energetic thumbs up, and his introduction comes to a somewhat disappointing close. He points his palm at the little girl, who looks suspicious about all this.

Subaru: “Now I've given my name, so time for you to please introduce yourself as well. Give a simple profile of hobbies + skills. If you could throw in your most attractive feature too then that's even better.”

???: “...Lewes Meyer. I'm sermething like the representative erv this Sanctuary, more er less.”

Her fingers alone peeking out of her sleeve, Lewes scratches her forehead.

Lewes: “Didn't nertice it when you werr sleeping, but yer really a sad boy who goes past just being rude. Feel it wers a waste giving yer the bed.”

Subaru puts together that the bed he was sleeping on is the one Lewes is talking about, so that means...

Emilia affirms that this is Lewes' house. It's close to the cemetery, and Garfiel carried Subaru here. She thanks Lewes for everything.

Emilia bows her head, Lewes shakes her head loosely. It seems that the two have become acquaintances while Subaru was asleep. And if it's true that Lewes was looking after him,

Subaru: “I'm sorry for being rude and inconsiderate of what you've done for me. That you lent me

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

the bed sincerely helped me out. And my apologies came late too, sorry for all this piling **up!!**”

Lewes: “...What, I'm surprised. So yer not like Lil' Gar and can give an honest apology. Yer were Natsuki... yer Subaru. Lil' Su, then.”

Subaru complains a little about that form of adresss sounding like a sibling giving a weather report but it's fine, he'll be calling her Lewes-san.

Lewes loses her dissatisfied expression.

Subaru: “By the way,”

Subaru: “You said before that it would be a problem, but why is that? Is there some kind of problem that would happen if Garfiel cleared the TRIAL?”

Lewes: “Quick ter change gears, aren't yer. Yearh, yer right. It's a problem. A big problem. Anyone from Sanctuary tries challenging the TRIAL, and it goes against the contract.”

Subaru: “Contracts again...”

Subaru's face sours and he looks at Roswaal. Roswaal shrugs.

Roswaal: “Uuuuuunfortunately, that contract is completely unrelated to the Mathers family... is not how unrelated it is to cleeeeeearly assert that, but the Mathers aaaaaren't the main culprit. My family is eeeeeextremely auxiliary in it.”

Subaru: “Your defence proclamations are whatever so get explaining. Details of the contract's contents, in three sentences.”

Roswaal: “Striiiiiiict. Weeeell, putting it simply, the TRIAL must be overcome for the residents of SANCTUARY to be released, buuuut the one to challenge the trial needs to be someone from the outside wiiiiith qualifications. Sooooo, with the current situation...”

Emilia: “I'm the only one who can do it, is what it is.”

Roswaal nods and looks at Lewes.

Roswaal: “Aaaaand, all the residents of SANCTUARY have aaaaaalready agreed. They're expecting that Emilia to challenge the TRIAL, and coooooonquer it.”

Emilia: “I don't want you to think I'm shying away by asking this, but... just for example, what would happen if someone other than me challenged the TRIAL?”

Lewes: “Nobody, er at least nert since I've been erround, has challenged the Trial. So I can't say anything to yer example. That no-one's challenged it is the same fer both residents and outsiders.”

Subaru: “No one at all until now? I'm terrified to ask but, Lewes how old are you.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Lewes: “Well at least I don't know abert the time when this place wers made. I think it's been erround one hundred and something-teen yeers, but...”

Subaru: “Way more than enough! You're the oldest person I've met until now, at least.”

If you ignore spirits and witches with mental bodies. Subaru then glances at Emilia with concern, but even so, Emilia's expression doesn't lose its darkness.

Emilia: “Anyway, I understand the circumstances.” And she boldly accepts the challenge of taking the trial.

Subaru: “You're really attractive when you're brave and determined, Emilia-tan, but shouldn't we look for a slightly more careful plan? We search for a backroad or a sidepath or something, and I don't think we'll be too late to do the challenge afterwards.”

Emilia: “I think it's sooo not good to rain on people's parades when they're motivated.”

Subaru: “It's just, there's something suspicious or I guess we're being forced onto this ride or I guess, something but I can't get rid of this uncomfortable feeling, honestly. Things seem a little too organized, like preparations were in place for us to go on this path and now it's even going as far as controlling the traffic lights.”

Emilia: “I have no idea that means. Subaru, sometimes you say things that're sooo bamboozling.”

Subaru: “Who says bamboozling anymore?”

Emilia's gaze only gets sharper. Subaru frantically waves his hands about.

Subaru: “Nonono,”

Subaru: “Nevermind that, I mean that this situation feels way too set up. Being called into a place where mixed races can't leave means you have to endeavour to get out, Emilia-tan. And on top of that, everyone's already gotten everything explained and understood.”

Emilia: “Set up, by who.”

Subaru: “Who? There's only one person who coulda.”

In response to Emilia's question, Subaru does a turn on the spot. Once he reaches the end of his rotation, he jabs out his finger straight ahead.

Subaru: “You!”

Garfiel: “Ehh? My amazin' self?”

Subaru: “Er, no, sorry, I turned too far. Thiswaythiswaythisway—there, you, Roswaal.”

Roswaal: “Nooooothing could've been sloppier.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Roswaal immediately closes one eyes, and with Subaru reflected in his yellow eye,

Roswaal: “Buuuut, your guesses are as good as always. These circumstance aaaaaare something I desired and created. Oooooof course, I didn't go as far as contributing the stage itseeeelf.”

Subaru: “You know, I think I've got it.”

Subaru: “First, I thought your injuries were strange. You should've known that you're not qualified to challenge the TRIAL. This land is under the Mathers family's management, and you're acquaintances with Garfiel so this's apparent.”

Roswaal: “That's... correct. Mhm, you're right.”

Subaru: “So, you should've known that your unqualified self'd be rejected if you tried going in. But then why did you enter the tomb? Some kind of arbitrary rebellion against the world? Or you crossed the limit of how long you could suppress your masochism? Both ideas are likely, but I think it was neither.”

Roswaal: “Myyyy gooodness. Iiiii is this the image of me that's inside you, Subaru-kun?”

Subaru: “Meaning,”

Subaru: “If being injured like this is exactly what Roswaal intended, there's significance to it. And I'd wager that significance, probably, is connected to the Royal Selection.”

Roswaal goes silent.

Subaru: “Also by the way something I wanna ask real quick. The Arlam villagers are gathered inside the cathedral right now, yeah?”

Off Subaru goes doing a high-speed topic change, aiming his question this time at Ram. She nods.

Ram: “Yes, they are. The civilians are all together in the cathedral... which would place them in confinement by the residents of Sanctuary.”

Subaru: “There you go, confinement. Before, our talk wound up getting cut off to go see the cemetery, but... what exactly is with this 'confinement'. Why is it necessary for these guys from Sanctuary to confine Roswaal and the villagers?”

This time, Subaru points the question at Garfiel. His sharp gaze narrows further.

Garfiel: “Ain't it obvious?”

Garfiel: “Sayin', this ain't us try'na getta way outta some troubled times. It don't feel good for'r problems t'be left lyin' there n' then have the Lord n' his tag-alongs come 't use our circumstances nicely.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “And your problems are of course...”

Lewes: “That we can't leave Sanctuary fer the outside werld, 'd be it.”

Some gloom runs over Lewes' face, her voice thin.

Lewes: “Just like how I said befer, it's already been a hundred and some decades since I wers born. But I've never gone ertside Sanctuary. I've been bound ter this land by contract ever since my berrth. Which's why I'd half but given up, but... I haven't let go'er hope.”

The mood of the room changes. Lewes and Garfiel have just given the reason why Subaru and the others are confined here—that is, they just confessed motive for the crime. Subaru hadn't been consciously aware of this until now, but his relationship with these two is one of detainers and detainees. An assailant and a victim.

Subaru: “So then it's *that*. You're taking the villagers as hostages... and your demand's to be released from SANCTUARY.”

Lewes: “Dersn't bother me if that's how yer take it. And, the person who can ferfil that condition is...”

Lewes glances at Emilia.

Emilia: “Me. —That's what's happening here.”

Emilia accepts this with understanding, and closes her eyes for several seconds. When she opens them again, there's not a trace of doubt. Her resolve is firm.

Emilia: “You haven't done anything bad to the villagers, have you?”

Garfiel: “F course not. Treatin' them nasty when's like this's 'same 'xact thing as lashin' out. 'D rather die than be that dishonest.”

Emilia's ability to put herself second trully is amazing. That her attention turns to the villagers and strangers when she's also deciding to challenge a maybe-dangerous Trial is good proof of that. Perhaps it's that strength and weakness of hers is why Subaru never stops being allured to her.

Roswaal: “Yooooou don't look satisfied.”

Subaru: “...Of course I'm not. None of this changes that we're just going along with your intentions. All that's changed is us going from not realising we're going along with it, to us knowing that even though we realise we're going along with it we have no choice but to go along with it.”

Subaru grits his teeth to hold back his frustration and clicks his tongue at Roswaal, who's looking at him with a smile in his eyes. Subaru then suddenly glances back at Roswaal as if remembering something.

Subaru: “I forgot to mention this, but about the motive behind those injuries.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Roswaal: “Mmhm mmhm, do go on. Iiiii won't be grading you.”

Subaru: “It's a performance. No, it's an opening gambit.”

Roswaal's expression hardens slightly. Subaru closes one eye.

Subaru: “I doubt the Arlam villagers'd accept being in confinement so easily. Some backlash must've happened. To settle that, I think something indicating action was necessary. If you the Lord could've got violent and driven Garfiel away or something, that would've been fine, but... the people of Sanctuary are under your governance too. You can't do something like that.”

Roswaal: “Hmm. Aaaaand what happens then?”

Subaru: “They have no choice but to swallow down the conditions Garfiel's side puts out. That is, the release of the mixed-races from Sanctuary. But for that, Emilia-tan's cooperation is entirely essential. But, neither the residents or the villagers would just accept that. Which means the story's simple. —If you go to challenge the TRIAL, which shows intention to follow the residents' demands, as well as displays a will to release the villagers from confinement, everything works.”

Roswaal goes silent.

Subaru: “I don't know if you predicted how much damage you'd take from the miasma, but if you estimated it wouldn't kill you, it'd be unfavourable for you not to challenge it. Ultimately, the more damage you take, the more serious your attempt appears and the more sympathy you earn. And this arrangement also puts expectations on the next big challenger.”

So basically, fucking everything about him being wounded is exactly according to Roswaal's intentions, and exactly how he played the whole scene out. The villagers know how strong Roswaal is. And the Trial can wound him this badly. So what would they think of someone who could come along to scale this wall and save them?

Subaru: “That's all. It's just an impression built off a bundling of malice and prejudice, but how's the answer sheet look like?”

Roswaal: “—Myyyyy, I aaaaaam surprised. I am truly, sincerely, sincereeeeerely surprised. Juuuust what on earth has happened to yooooou over the past few daaaaaays?”

Roswaal laughs from the back of his throat, claps his hands, and pulls his face back into a cheery smile.

Roswaal: “Wooooonderful. You certainly reached what's almost peeeeeeeerfectly the correct answer. I didn't believe you'd be able to read this far. Iiiiiindeed, you truly weeeeeere a find.”

Subaru: “Lovely, thanks. Makes me wanna puke.”

Unable to hide the bad feeling in his chest, Subaru shifts his gaze aside. Roswaal's intentions are clearly for Emilia's benefit, and that Subaru internally does approve of them just makes his chest

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

feel worse.

Emilia hasn't noticed this little chat going on between the two, and Subaru has absolutely no intention of telling her about it.

But if Emilia is always facing only forward, then good.

Subaru didn't want to inform her, who desires purity and nobility, of the dark background dealings going on. If Subaru covering himself in mud can get Emilia to receive showers of praise, then good.

As of yet, Emilia has no achievements recognised for the Royal Selection, and no firm stance.

Subaru again resolves to work as hard as he can to help her.

Behind Subaru's back, with his weight leaned onto the bed, is Roswaal.

Roswaal: "...Almost, the correct answer. That waaaasn't the only reason I entered the cemetery."

He mutters so quietly that it only reaches the ears of Ram, who lowers her pained gaze.

## CHAPTER 14: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Roswaal: “The White Whale has fallen, and the Cardinal of Sin targeting the mansion has been repelled. We are now allied with election candidate Crusch-sama. Any one of these battles alone is a considerable achievement—HmMMMM.”

Says Roswaal, still in bed, as he rubs his chin and closes his eyes. Subaru's told him all that's gone on while he's been absent.

Ram: “...To be blunt, these activities sound braggartly and suspect. When did you become a character in an action play, Barusu?”

Subaru complains that it's kind of irritating hearing her say that but he can't exactly disagree he thinks it sounds unbelievable too. Both by his own and by others' estimates its just SLIGHTLY crazy levels of doing shit.

Roswaal: “This is uuuuunmistakably an unexpected result. Even I... no, not anyone coooooould have predicted that you would have done thiiiiiiiis much.”

Roswaal nods, seemingly over his surprise. His expression is still weirdly serious for him as he stares at Subaru, who is seated in a chair at Roswaal's bedside.

Roswaal: “First, allow me to convey you my gratituuuuuude. —I thank you for protecting my land and people. And, being her backer, I cannot thank you enough for the great services you have devoted to Emilia-sama.”

Subaru: “O, oh. Huhhah. Ummhuh, I hear that and even I might just maybe slightly wind up curling up a little. I didn't do anything that...”

Ram: “It seems you don't quite understand the weight of Roswaal-sama's thanks, Barusu.”

Ram takes a step forward and looks down at Subaru, who is attempting to get Roswaal to stop, with her penetrating gaze.

Ram: “To interrupt your superior when he is speaking, and evenmoreso to fling denials at an expression of gratitude, are fundamentally unforgivable acts. That is without mentioning that Roswaal-sama commands the station of Margrave, an important individual who bears full authority over a section of the Kingdom of Lugnica. —His words of gratitude are infinitely heavier than what you believe, Barusu.”

Subaru goes silent.

Ram: “Considering Roswaal-sama's superior position, it is no simple act that he may bow his head or proffer words of gratitude to an inferior. Do understand more prudently that he is doing so.”

Subaru has no refutation to this and lowers his gaze. Roswaal casually raises a hand like oh lol no big dealio.



#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Roswaal: “Ram's making a sliiiiiiiiiightly tremendous exaggeration. My words don't nearly have soooooooooo much worth.”

Ram: “Roswaal-sama.”

Says Ram concerned. Roswaal gives a nod.

Roswaal: “Thaaaaat said,”

Roswaal: “Leaving aside the weight of gratitude given from my position, the weight of what you've done, Subaru-kun, is obvious to anyone's eyes. Aaaaaand I can easily imagine being the recipient of much disappointment and grumbling for not giving appropriate compensation, soooo.”

Subaru: “...Then, you mean you're conciliating?”

Roswaal: “Through appropriate compensation. —Subaru-kun, do you remember what happened in the hall for the Royal Selection?”

Subaru's throat catches, Roswaal narrows his eyes. Even now remembering what happened then makes Subaru's chest burn with shame and self-ridicule.

Subaru: “I remember. Wouldn't forget it. ...Better I don't forget it, I think.”

Roswaal: “Then, here is how I would like to reward your achievements. Let us make when you said then become the reality. —The morning we leave here safely, I will appoint you as Knight.”

Subaru raises his head, for a second unable to comprehend what he's hearing. He blinks, still shaking, as Roswaal gives him a nod.

Roswaal: “Someone who has preformed great deeds of participating in the White Whale subjugation alongside the Duchess, and slain one of the Witch Cult's Cardinals of Sin, should not be anonymous. Your name should both receive the honourable title of KNIGHT Natsuki Subaru, simultaneous with the nation speaking of you with such honour. —No longer would anyone be able to laugh at what you said then.”

Subaru thinks over the loops of arc 3.

His immature daydreams folded before reality, he despaired, sank into lunacy, scorned everything as he succumbed to lust for revenge, was saved by love—and now was here.

And with this 'HONOUR' that Roswaal's talking about, everything from that time will be undoubtedly proven as valuable.

—Including, remaining inside not a single person but Subaru, Rem's achievements.

Subaru: “...I accept, gratefully. That is, so long at it gives those battles significance.”

Roswaal: “Let no one mock your prideworthy achievements. You acquired the right to stand, chest high, at Emilia-sama's side. By your own power.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: "...Really, not my power alone."

Subaru mutters to himself, Roswaal's brows crinkle, apparently unable to catch what Subaru said. Subaru closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and after opening his eyes again gives a light shrug.

Subaru: "Man, that was a serious little talk. Go too long like that and we'll have a character breakdown, then it'll be embarrassing when we go back to normal so let's reign it in. My face's already burning hot."

Roswaal agrees that they've been incredibly unlike themselves in this little chat, having an actual serious talk and all.

Roswaal relaxes his expression too to match Subaru's grinning and the atmosphere of the room changes. Ram gives a small sigh.

Ram: "Now then,"

Ram: "Next would be that you have questions you would like to ask Roswaal-sama, correct, Barusu? You even distanced Emilia-sama from this conversation for that purpose."

Subaru: "Your being prickly's speeding the conversation ahead but that's actually a help. ...I'm not treating Emilia-tan like she's a nuisance, just if she was here Roz-chi'd probably clam up."

Indeed Emilia is not in the room.

Ram: "Which was why you made her accompany Lewes-sama for a survey of Sanctuary. Although Emilia-sama seemed rather discouraged when she heard you would be staying behind?"

Subaru: "I'm glad she's counting on me, but considering what's coming up I can't just run full-throttle off cravings for what's right in front of me. She'll probably meet up with Otto somewhere, so worrying about her being alone isn't... what if that bastard Otto makes a move on Emilia-tan. Emilia-tan's super crazy cute now I'm worried."

Roswaal: "I doooooon't quite think it's good to make yourself worry midway through talking? Regardless, your ideas aren't iiiiiiiincorrect. —If the content was something I diiiiiidn't want Emilia-sama to hear, I definitely wouldn't voiiiiiiice it."

Subaru: "Knew it."

Subaru: "You're intentionally limiting what information gets to Emilia-tan. ...what the hell are you thinking, doing that?"

Roswaal: "You doooooon't think it's necessary I be selective with information? Royal Selection Candidate Emilia is infinitely aaaaaaabove me in importance. However, her knowledge hasn't been polished enough to befit her qualifications. Pushing too much oooooon someone midway through their leaning would merely be forcing them, soooo..."

Subaru: "From the guy who can and did set Emilia-tan up with that carefree learning environment,

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

some nice platitudes. That the people who know things aren't saying anything, when the situation's stuck due to lack of information, doesn't make any damn sense. It can't be a positive for you either.”

Subaru clicks his tongue, holding himself in as he speaks quietly. Roswaal closes an eye at the quiet Subaru and silently stares back.

It's pretty often that Roswaal stares at Subaru like this—with just his left, yellow eye. Subaru fidgets in discomfort at the gaze, which is making him uneasy for no particular reason. Roswaal smiles.

Roswaal: “Weeeeell, I did figure that one day I'd be proooooobed rather intensely with questions? Which is precisely why I've preeeeepared my resolve for just this time.”

Subaru: “Resolve?”

Roswaal: “Resolve to answer your questions, with only mooooderate evasion. Wouldn't you say the fact I can't run away and am seriously wounded makes rather greeeeeat seasoning for it?”

Subaru: “...Seriously, a blue moon.”

Roswaal: “Iiiiiit's rather sad hooooow little you trust me. Although, considering how our relationship has been until now, I think this was unavoidable.”

Subaru: “I'm sorry for being so blatantly wary, but with everything that's happened, yeah. You're just slightly excessively secretive. ...Is it really safe to trust you this time?”

Roswaal: “Naturally.”

Roswaal nods and spreads his arms.

Roswaal: “Your achievements over the past several days have given me more than enough proof to open my sealed heart. You can relax. I now believe in you, aaaaaaand you've made my deepest of hearts recognize and welcome you inside, as a co-conspirator.”

Subaru: “Hold it. I'm feeling signs that I'm about to get burdened with a kinda heavy cross here. You don't have to open your heart up that much, let's just kinda touch it a little.”

Roswaal: “Goodness, I'm so enthused but he just puuuuuushes me aside.”

Subaru: “No, I mean like I said when you suddenly shove everything out at me, it's kinda heavy or I ...”

Subaru stops himself with this stupid conversation that sounds like a new couple having a rocky start and clears his throat.

Subaru: “Anyway,”

Subaru: “Nevermind that co-conspirator stuff or whatever, for now let's have you answer what I want to ask. —Why are you keeping information from Emilia-tan. Let's start there.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Again, Roswaal closes one eye and stares at Subaru.

Roswaal's limitations on Emilia's information feed had an immeasurable influence on what happened last loop. If Emilia knew that her Half-Elf lineage would stimulate the Witch Cult, she might've been able to take better countermeasures to Betelgeuse's attack on Arlam Village. And unpacking that, it'd influence Subaru's efforts that loop well, and the circumstances around Rem would—

Subaru: “Answer, Roswaal. You should be like me in that if you want Emilia-tan to be Ruler, her dropping out halfway through'd be a problem. Then why are you purposefully hiding information to Emilia-tan's disadvantage? It doesn't make sense.”

Roswaal: “Here is how I will answer that question. —What you're saying is exactly correct, and because it is exactly correct, I am keeping information from Emilia-sama.”

Subaru: “...!?! I don't gettit. Are you saying that hiding information and disadvantaging Emilia's something necessary for her to win the Royal Selection?”

Roswaal: “Precisely. You doooon't think there's value in that?”

Subaru's brows knit in clear confusion. Seeing that reaction, Roswaal shifts in the bed, making it creak.

Roswaal: “Subaru-kun, I'm sure thiiiiis is what you're meaning to saaaaaay. If the Witch Cult heard of Emilia-sama's participation in the Royal Selection, they might move. The Witch Cult in reality did move, and attacked my lands. I should've planned that this attack may happen, and should've set countermeasures in place for it.”

Subaru: “...That, that's it. Exactly it. Anyone would think it, it's plain as day. Maybe I didn't know about it, but it's self-apparent, everyday knowledge that the Witch Cult and Half-Elves are related, right? And you should've known that too. So then, why weren't any preparations... no, even before that, why did you leave the mansion and hole up in SANCTUARY?”

Roswaal: “I've been in confinement here, so it isn't as though I left the mansion unattended for several days on...”

Subaru: “You can drop the semantics. You got injured like that by challenging the cemetery to settle the Arlam villagers. That is, it's a result of me getting people out of the village to counter the Witch Cult... That you didn't come back before then was intentional.”

Roswaal: “Arguing with someone who gets angry at logic does pay off. Truuuuuuly, a good trend.”

Roswaal gives an unexpectedly carefree shrug. Subaru takes a step forward, not pleased with this result, BUT

Subaru: “...Ram.”

Ram: “Roswaal-sama is burdened with injury. Even so, he surely could burn you to nothing with

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

just one finger... but I will not permit any violent action in my presence.”

Subaru: “Do you seriously agree with this. You're exactly the same as me in getting treated like a throwaway pawn, here. He knew they'd be coming for the village, and ran away just by him-fucking-self. Do you really forgive that?”

Ram: “Forgiving or not forgiving doesn't come into it. Ram permits every one of Roswaal-sama's actions. How he chooses to treat me, and how he chooses to throw me away, are the same thing.”

Subaru: “You—!!”

Faced with Ram's incomprehensible loyalty, a surge of extreme emotion clogs Subaru's throat. That Subaru doesn't immediately turn to violence is either because Subaru's rationality manages to make the judgement that he couldn't be a match for either of these two, or—

Subaru: “...You've fallen victim to this unintelligible crap because, Rem.”

Ram: “—? I don't know who you're talking about, but I have no connection to this stranger's name. Roswaal-sama is everything to me, all except him is trifling.”

While Subaru knows that Ram's loyalty for Roswaal's always been abnormal, it's now turned into something different and borderline-insane. And a big cause for that was Ram's forgetting of Rem's existence.

Subaru don't know the details of Ram and Rem's past together, by going by the scraps and pieces he got from Rem, the two had a codependant relationship. Subaru knows about Rem's guilt and inferiority complex, and how dependant she was. And though it's not so obvious in Ram, sometimes fragments of it peek through in her interactions with Rem.

Just like how the majority of Rem's world was comprised of Ram, Ram's world was comprised of Rem and Roswaal. Subaru's interference began welcoming new factors into Rem's constrained world for the first time, and she started to change. But Ram's world is still one of dependence, and still constrained.

Now that Ram's forgotten the existence of half of what filled her, Ram's world is now entirely comprised of Roswaal.

And that's the root cause of her extreme, overly-loyal behaviour toward Roswaal.

Roswaal: “Dooooon't provoke Subaru-kun too much, Ram. Subaru-kun doooooesn't really intend to do anything violent wiiiiiiith me. His foot juuuuust came forward a little.”

Ram: “As you say, Roswaal-sama.”

Roswaal: “Mhm. All calm, aaaaaall calm. Right, Subaru-kun? You might look angry, but yooooou aren't completely enraged right now. You certainly woouououln't lose control and punch me, and would neeeeever choose the option of wasting this conversation.”

Subaru: “What, are you goddamn getting at...”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Roswaal: “Iiiiiit's very simple. Until rather recently, you would've had an outburst somewhere during our conversation up until now, started raving, and ruined this chance for conversation. You haven't done that, and although swallowing down your anger, you can proceed in the argument... yooooou've grown up.”

Roswaal give a stupid little bullshit clap as Subaru's reward for this, and Subaru feels the violent urge to start fucking raving burn hotter and hotter. But giving in to that urge would be exactly what Roswaal wants. Subaru exhales deeply, pushing back the wave of fury. Then Subaru realises that what he's doing is just affirming what Roswaal's saying and can't help but be unsuppressably annoyed with himself.

Roswaal: “Nooooow, it wouldn't be very adultly to bully someone young any further than this. Since you've shooooown me signs of your maturation, I should display more of my capacity as an adult prooooooperly.”

Subaru: “...Do go ahead. Anyway, give a precise answer to my question. Answer without any dodging. Why did you hide information on the Witch Cult from Emilia? Why, knowing that the Witch Cult were coming, did our biggest combat asset—you—leave the mansion!?”

Roswaal: “Both your questions are answerable with one response. —I acted as I did so that I would not face the Witch Cult.”

Subaru: “Wha—?”

Subaru's slow to understand what the fuck he's hearing.

Subaru: “I don't get it. So that you wouldn't fight the Witch Cult... what for? You know this can't be some bullshit about them being physiologically unpleasant for you, right!? You... if you were there, we would've gotten them all in one swoop. And the casualties...”

Roswaal: “I see. I dooooo believe that if I'd been there, the casualties from this ruckus woooooould've decreased. I do try to accurately understand my own ability, and I'm aware of my position as one of the ten most powerful persons in the country. I'll assert it clearly. If I had been there, the Witch Cult's attack would've been smoothly repelled.”

Subaru: “If you knew that then why the fuck—!”

Roswaal: “Because I knew.”

Roswaal holds Subaru, who's spitting everywhere, in check by pointing at him, and then points with that same finger up at the ceiling.

Roswaal: “If I had acted, the achievement would've gone to neither you or Emilia-sama, correct? Even if I receive fame, that's nothing to do.”

Subaru: “——wuh.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru honestly doesn't understand what he's hearing. He quietly prays for this to be a shitty joke of Roswaal's and waits for his reply, but Roswaal only tilts his head.

Roswaal: “You realise I'm not going to deny it? It was a disaster I knew was going to happen. Is there any reason at all for me nooooo to use it well?”

Subaru: “Y-you... do you even understand what you're saying?”

Roswaal: “—? Iiiii don't know what about it you have a problem with, Subaru-kun. Or maybe it's *that*. The damages from the villagers who left Arlam, or the soldiers from the mercenary group or Crusch-sama's private army who helped to repel the Witch Cult... is it about you wondering whether you could've done something about those losses?”

It's like Roswaal plucks it straight out of Subaru's heart and throws it back at him as if Subaru doing such a thing is completely obvious. This time, Subaru truly does feel something well up in his heart of hearts.

Before, when talking with Puck, the spirit's remark to the sleeping Rem of “It's thanks to her that Lia's saved,” enraged Subaru.

That incident made Subaru painfully aware of the indescribably huge trench between his his feelings and the spirits'. Otherwise said, the rage Subaru felt then made him understand that the two of them were fundamentally creatures of differing origin.

This doesn't pass for Roswaal. Roswaal understands why Subaru's mad, and knows what Subaru wants to say—and knowing that, he can make cruel judgements. However, that was,

Subaru: “Hindsight bias, isn't it. I basically understand what you're trying to say. I can understand that whoever took command of the activities counter to the Witch Cult's attack would secure an achievement with not insignificant effect on the Royal Selection. ...and I also understand that if that person was you, we wouldn't have gotten the result we wanted. But!”

Subaru bares his teeth, and while giving a big swing of his arm,

Subaru: “How many people do you think died because you disappeared without telling them anything!? No, they weren't big casualties. They weren't, but they weren't zero either. People did die. And not just us, the Witch Cultists were...”

Roswaal: “If I was there, nothing would change about the Witch Cultists being dealt with. All of them would turn to ashes. I'll accept your reproaches for the losses on our side, but complaining for the enemy's side is raaaaather absurd.”

Subaru: “—hk. But, there must've been a more peaceful... no, that's not the problem here! Every goddamn thing you're saying is just fucking hindsight! Oh you're right that it went well. Few casualties, cult wiped out. Emilia-tan safe, the Arlam villages evacuated without trouble. ...But this and that and this, all of it was just timing. Being honest—”

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Being honest, before Subaru could do anything—the villagers, the mansion, Emilia...

Subaru: “They should've, died. Unlike this time, without things going well... Everyone in suffering, traumatized, cruelly... killed.”

Covering his face, Subaru frantically strangles the teariness out of his voice before it can leak out. Beneath his eyelids, Subaru sees the scene of that hell he couldn't forget. The village burned down. Cadavers scattered about. Corpses of children. And Rem's body dumped in the mansion's garden. A freezing, ending world.

—If not for Subaru's RETURN BY DEATH, that world would've never been overwritten.

Subaru: “If you were there, that wouldn't have happened. ...You knew, and you let everyone die. So many times, you killed them...”

Roswaal: “It's bothering to be put in an incorrect position. The attackers were the Witch Cult, nooooooot me. And you prevented that attack with your very own hands—these casualties you're referring to don't exist. —You're speaking merely blather upon blather.”

Subaru: “—Am I now.”

Subaru answers Roswaal's indifferent words in a low voice, dropping his shoulders. Blather—If that's what it's determined as, then Subaru can't do anything to overturn that judgement. So long as he can't bring up RETURN BY DEATH, there's no way for him to fault Roswaal for something that realistically NEVER HAPPENED.

Subaru: “...What if I'd stayed a useless, good-for-nothing wreck, what would you've done then. You're the same as me in wanting Emilia to be ruler. The odds were too one-sided, it wasn't even something to gamble on. ...It's infinitely more likely that everything would've ended there.”

Roswaal: “But, you defied that probability. —Are you perhaps unsatisfied?”

Subaru: “I am unsatisfied. You don't look like the kinda guy to leave everything up to uncertainties.”

Some people go into battle wielding only their luck. Some people work as hard as they can to ready the circumstances to their advantage, and leave only the final scrap of the battle to luck. And some people prepare everything from start to finish, deciding their victory from the outset.

Subaru: “You're not the type to make a bet in the first place. Why did you make one here?”

Roswaal: “—Because I believed. In you.”

Says Roswaal, his voice low.  
A snicker slips out from Subaru's throat.

Subaru: “So you're not gonna answer me seriously.”



#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Roswaal: “Putting aside whether or not I believe in you, I really am being sincere. After all, I decided that for tonight and in this room, I woouooooouldn't deceive you. I'll say when I can't tell you something, and I won't speak if you ask something inconvenient. But I pledge that what I am saying is not falsehood.”

Subaru is sceptical of how far he can trust Roswaal's words here. Being that his amicability toward Roswaal has dropped unanimously thanks to this conversation, Subaru doesn't have leeway to just accept it at face value.

Subaru's gaze sharpens even further than just his sanpaku. Roswaal tilts his head.

Roswaal: “I will say it again. —The reason I made the judgement I did, is because I believed in you. I believed that if you saw Emilia-sama in a poor state of affairs, you would work frantically to secure an alliance with Crusch-sama, proceed then to pour effort into repelling the Witch Cult, succeed, and achieve.”

Subaru: “Even saying for argument that this's true, how the hell could you believe in me! What do you know about me!? Did I look like someone who'd done anything over the month we've known each other to make me worth trusting?”

Subaru: “Of course I didn't. When we last saw each other, I was bona fide garbage. That that garbage became less awful in any way was because of what came after. And that 'what came after' doesn't exist anymore, except inside of me. —What the fuck about me were you believing in!?”

Roswaal closes one eye, looking at Subaru with his yellow eye, making him uncomfortable. Subaru stomps the floor to shake off the gaze.

Subaru: “It's fucking ridiculous. You're saying you believed that a braindead little idiot brat would do well for you, abandoned all your subjects and ran off to go piss around. I can't even describe how fucking frivolous you were, staking your reputation and future on this!”

Roswaal: “...It seems our conversation for today will be eeeeeeeending here.”

Mutters Roswaal kinda sadly. Subaru catches the muttering, and his annoyance only compounds.

Subaru: “Aaauhg!”

Subaru: “If you're not in the mood to have a proper conversation, everything you said's useless. And even if you tell me anything after this, I already don't trust you anymore.”

Roswaal: “I sincerely do regret that your opinion of me has declined soooooo far. ...I don't believe it's necessary to confirm this, but when it comes to what we spoke about tonight, Emilia-sama.”

Subaru: “Course I'm not telling her. Whether I say exactly what we talked about, or play it up, there's no benefit in telling her about it.” Something something bitchy.

No matter where Roswaal's true intentions lie, having discord bloom between him and Emilia isn't desirable for the Royal Selection going forward. And then you have Emilia challenging the trial, which'll boost her reputation—all exactly as Roswaal planned.

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Roswaal: “You understand most everything, and harbour unbearable anger toward me... but even so you're incapable of flipping tables or any such thing. Yooooou are indeed exactly what I had anticipated.”

Subaru raises his head, Roswaal's expression twists into something truly repulsive.

Roswaal: “You truly are worthy as my co-conspirator—Mmhm.”

Subaru: “...The death you're getting won't be anything nice.”

Roswaal: “I am aware. Unmistakably, I will go to hell. Which is why I must devote myself into abusing my power now, before that happens.”

Subaru shoots Roswaal a sharp glare, silently turns his back to him, and storms out of the room. There's no point talking with Roswaal any further. If he's not going to speak of his true intentions, then any conversation with him will be fruitless.

But.

Subaru: “—Do you really fucking think everyone and anyone's going to dance how you want them to?”

His hands balled tight into fists, Subaru renews his resolve.

Roswaal wants Emilia to challenge the TRIAL, to overwrite the scorn the villagers and people of SANCTUARY have toward Half-Elves. And perhaps that will happen, but Roswaal isn't considering the burden he's placing on Emilia. Just how hurt, and how whittled her heart will be at the end of it, is probably also in line with Roswaal's desires. Then,

Subaru: “I won't let that happen. She... Emilia, will I protect.”

It might've just been a witch's caprice, but with the qualifications Echidna gave him, Subaru'll overturn Roswaal's plans. Subaru'll stop the pain, the tears, the everything that could come about from Roswaal's devices.

Subaru: “—That's what I have to do in this SANCTUARY.”

Floating in the sky, beyond the reach of Subaru's outstretched hand, is the pale moon. Subaru clenches his fist, hard, as if to grasp it. The image of a lovely, silver-haired girl rises in his mind as he resolves to smash straight through that FUCKING CLOWN's plotting.



Ram: “—Was that truly to your liking?”

Subaru has left the room, but Ram and Roswaal are still there. Roswaal shakes his head, devoid of strength.

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Roswaal: "I did anticipate that he'd react liiiiiiiike that. And although I understood this, how truly depressing it feels to gouge into the heart of someone young."

Ram: "There is no need to speak lies before me."

Roswaal is like thanks for the consideration, but I was being absolutely honest right there. What did it look like I was having a jolly old time doing that, to you?

Ram readjusts the disturbed bedsheets, and in doing so, feels something hard around Roswaal's chest. Ram pulls the hard object out from under the sheet.

Ram: "Roswaal-sama. Here."

Roswaal: "Aah, soooooorry sorry. I suspected something cooooooocomplicated'd happen if Subaru-kun spotted iiiiiiit. But spreading it out beneath my behind'd be well deserving of punishment. Need to be careful."

Roswaal accepts the object, treating it valuably, and lightly strokes the cover. He puts a finger to his chin.

Roswaal: "Anyhow,"

Roswaal: "Emilia-sama's confirmed to be qualified, and Subaru-kun's kindled up. When the TRIAL begins tomorrow night.. what do you believe will haaaaaapen, Ram?"

Ram: "I could not ever hope to infer entirely your thoughts, Roswaal-sama. ...Would you have knowledge of how events may proceed?"

Roswaal: "It's not convenient to thaaaaat extent. It is superior compared to the uncompleted ones the Witch Cult possess, but it's still merely a counterfeit unable to reach what she desired. How far could its writ possibly determine that conversation with Subaru-kun?"

Roswaal sighs. Ram's eyebrows raise slightly.

Ram: "Then, what you said to Barusu was..."

Roswaal: "To some extent it was a performance... but the majority was my sincere feelings. Ahya but, naturally, I did know about Subaru-kun becoming so angered. I knew, but I'd still have some comment I'd like to make as well, woooooouldn't I?"

Roswaal cradles in his arms, so so tenderly, a black tome.  
His fingers brush the tome, slowly, slowly, stroking it endlessly.  
Lovingly, so lovingly, slowly, so slowly—.

## CHAPTER 15: QUALIFICATIONS AND TRIAL

Early the next morning, Subaru goes to the old, ruined tomb again. He hadn't had the time to do it yesterday, but now looking at the tomb more thoroughly, it's clearly in surprisingly good repair. There's the ivy reaching over the entrance, but otherwise the ruins have been carefully weeded and the tomb itself shows signs of damage and degradation to the walls having been mended.

Subaru: "I kinda don't get how the people here really feel about this tomb."

I mean Garfiel and Lewes want Emilia to take the trial, which'll get them out of Sanctuary.

Subaru: "Thinking like that, the witch's just some big nuisance for Garfiel and the others, but they're treating the tomb so importantly like this..."

Otto: "It might just be the opposite. This tomb would be what's binding everyone to this land. Then, they surely musn't let the tomb collapse before anyone can complete this TRIAL they have here. If tearing it down would release them, it feels as though Garfiel would've done it long ago."

And Otto's there too.

He'd slept in the dragon carriage last night, got startled awake by Subaru and forced into this early-morning tour of the tomb. With much complaining.

Otto: "But in saying, receiving a chance to plead for some uncommon item at the WITCH OF GREED's cemetery, of all things... it was worth being brought along. Perhaps there wouldn't be some kind of, WITCH OF GREED-ish something around here. It could be a profit."

Subaru: "You start advertising you've got a witch-related item up for sale, and won't the Witch Cult hound you endlessly? Send off the announcement from here and the place'll be a sea of flames, I'm sorry about waking you up give me a break."

A quiet falls over the surroundings, the only noise being the chirping of insects in the trees and the rustle of wind through the leaves. Perfect, fresh atmosphere for a morning stroll.

Otto: "Although, we're not just here to breathe in this pleasant air and leave, are we? If you really wanted to enjoy a morning stroll, you wouldn't have called me, you would've called Emilia-sama."

Subaru: "Emilia-tan's surprisingly not a morning person. She's dangerously adorable when she's all spaced out and still waking up but... eh, I'll get to that after thing'sve calmed down. That talk from yesterday's gotten me weirdly stressed which's probably playing into it, so I'm giving her a little more sleep."

Otto: "So, while the Princess is sleeping, us men will get up to some nefarious plotting. How naughty of you, Sire."

Otto narrows his eyes and shrugs, playing along, but honestly what he's saying is the truth of it. If Emilia or anyone else saw what they were doing at the cemetery here it'd be inconvenient.

Otto: "Alright, so will we be doing? I'm not especially confident in my magical skill, so the

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

majority of what I do is utilizing water and wind for things such as, silencing the noise of footsteps or making myself disappear for an instant behind a flash of light... ah, I can also make footsteps sound out from an entirely different location..."

Subaru says that this magic utilization profile sounds like it'd be incredibly useful for a robber.

Otto asserts that he is not a robber no sirree. Although he has no compunctions on eavesdropping.

Otto is in HIGH ENERGY and GOOD SPIRITS. Subaru points at the tomb.

Subaru: "I'm thinking of popping inside the tomb for a sec. If things go like I expect, the lights inside the tomb'll turn on and my outlook's looking good. If it's no good I'll probably just dead collapse so could you pull me out then."

Otto: "Do I seem like someone who'll just nod and say, YES, UNDERSTOOD, after hearing that explanation!? 'Dead collapse', what is that, please stop, that's terrifying."

Subaru looks at Otto with a gaze suggesting he's talking to an uncooperative child.

Subaru: "Listen now, this is the Witch of Greed's cemetery. Actually, people who go in without the witch's permission get their consciousness tugged right away. I got done in sound asleep yesterday. It's a dangerous place, so don't you go in."

Otto: "If yesterday didn't work, Natsuki-san, then it just shouldn't work for you. Why are you going inside knowing that you'll collapse, if you're just doing it to be a bother then let's stop here. Or rather, if that does happen, how am I meant to help you?"

Subaru: "Just one after another with the questions... If you think you can get answers to everything, you'll devolve into a man of spoiled character."

Otto: "Please do tell me, Mr. Obfuscates-Explanations-With-Tenable-Words!"

Subaru clicks his tongue and his face sours at Otto's accurate reading of what he was doing. Looks like Otto's got the knack of dealing with Subaru.

Subaru: "Look. Here's a rope I've borrowed from the carriage. It's tied around my waist, so if I hypothetically do faint then could you gently, peacefully, lovingly pull me out."

Otto: "I suspect that no matter how gentle, peaceful, and loving I am you'll wind up covered in dirt, dust, and scratches."

Subaru: "Circumstances are circumstances. Here I'll lend you the rope."

Otto: "But I'm the one lending you!?"

Anyway Subaru hands Otto the rope, Otto gives the knot around Subaru's waist a good check and a strong pull, confirming that it all looks fine. Otto's a dependable man, even if he's complaining the whole way about it.

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “He's a trader but manipulating him's so easy, right in my hands... How I wonder if this boy'll be okay.”

Otto: “He's forgotten that I am literally holding his lifeline, this man.”

After sharing some wry joking, Subaru heads for the tomb's entrance. It's perfectly dark inside the tomb and he can't barely see shit and it still feels like the ground'll crumble out from under him the second he steps inside.

Subaru: “Well, not like the ground actually crumbled, and if I do collapse it'll be on the very first step so that actually makes it easier.”

Otto: “Natsuki-san, go whenever you'd like, but please give a signal saying when you are going.”

Subaru: “Right, going.”

Subaru is READY. Worst case and he'll just be invited back to the witch's tea party. That said the party involved losing his arm, getting punched into health, drinking bodily fluids BUT—

Subaru: “Compared to being on the brink of living and dying, this is so much less awful—!”

He steps inside, and—

Subaru: “My foot is, properly, on the ground. It didn't crumble.”

So at least he doesn't fail on the first step. Feeling some relief at this, Subaru takes a second step inside, getting swallowed completely by the tomb's darkness. Probably, Otto can't see him anymore.

Otto: “Are you still there, Natsuki-san? Just like when you entered, when you collapse please give a signal saying that you are collapsing.”

Subaru: “That might be kinda tough. I'd hate to accept that I'm collapsing, so if it seems like I'm collapsing I'll scream 'I don't wanna collapse!’”

Otto: “He stresses a complex and unnecessary pride, this man!”

Confirming each other's positions with this back and forth gives Subaru relief. The relief pushes Subaru on to the third step, then the fourth—

Subaru: “—oh”

Otto: “Oh...”

And the inside of the tomb dispels its darkness, revealing itself. The lights installed along the corridor walls at even intervals, coming about to Subaru's shoulders, are alit with wavering flames. The corridor's made of the same material as the tomb's exterior, and is wide enough that if two Subarus stood side-to-side with their arms outstretched it'd be pretty cramped. Height is such that if Subaru jumped he'd hit his head. If Rom was here, he'd have to slouch or he'd be dragging his bald

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

head across the ceiling and start a fire from the friction of it.

Otto: "...The lights have turned on. What are the conditions for this, exactly?"

Subaru: "People who can take the Trial at night get this kinda welcome. ...Worst case, I thought I might've just spaced out and been daydreaming, but..."

Subaru touches his forehead, recalling the sensation of Echidna's fingertips touching him there in the dream.

Subaru: "I got my souvenir from the tea party all set. Kinda feels like she went off and took the compensation for it herself, but anyway I'm not planning on telling anyone about it."

Otto: "I can see inside as well, but judging by what you've said, what will happen to me if I enter too? Do you think I could rob the WITCH OF GREED's tomb?"

Subaru: "An evil magician I know tried going in and his whole body got busted up, he's recovering now. Got nothin' on what'll happen to you."

Otto: "That's incredibly terrifying!"

So Subaru could try going further but he'd probably end up dragging Otto inside too so Subaru gives up on that idea. Either way, Subaru's got the qualifications for the Trial, and Subaru judges it safe to regard everything Echidna told him as credible. Including the stuff about the witches.

Subaru makes some 2ch jokes to himself putting together that 400 years ago the witches were off doing whatever the fuck they liked and terrorizing the populace and he is so glad he got transported into this century and not that one.

Thinking about the Witches of Sin and the mess with the Witch of Envy makes this generation feel very nice. But then he thinks about the wickedness of the Cardinals which counterbalances that. Everyone titled as Witches is just fucking unbearable.

Anyway Subaru recognizes preparations as all set, and decides they'll wait until night to see what happens with Emilia-tan's trial. Now that Subaru can take it, he'll be taking advantage of their higher flexibility of options and adapt to how the situation sees fit. It's kind of a shitty haphazard plan.

Subaru returns to the tomb's entrance and meets back up with a worried-looking Otto, unfastening the rope around his waist and dumping it beside the tomb's entrance.

Subaru: "It could be useful for something, or I guess you'd say I might suddenly use it tonight so let's leave it here. Sorry for forcing you into this, Otto."

Otto: "No, so long as you're safe it's all fine... but, more importantly, you look very empty-handed. You go into a tomb and don't procure anything, then what on earth were you doing in there?"

Subaru: "It's really hard to tell how much of what you're saying is serious, is this just your acting

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

style? I don't belong to any faith but I am religious, I'm not gonna do something like robbing tombs.”

He doesn't believe in any God in particular, but pays respect to the many many gods out there ala secular nation Japan. The narration makes a little jab about how you could call that a bunch of cowards overworried about the existence of inconvenient ghosts and curses etc.

Otto: “Of course every word of it was a joke. More importantly, if this was all it was, I wasn't really needed, was I? Why did you bring me along?”

Subaru: “No, whether or not I could get in itself was kinda dicey, and if I collapsed it'd be a burden to somebody, and if I popped it'd be burned into their souls forever, and I figured the best one to be the victim was you.”

Otto: “What kind of selection is that!? It certainly feels like you picked through process of elimination!”

Subaru: “You idiot, when I consider who to burden the first name that comes up is yours. Don't make me say it, it's embarrassing.”

Otto: “As a human being you should be embarrassed by that, that logic!”

Garfiel: “Ain't y'two bein' a damn racket right early in the mornin', oi. Havin' a shoutin' match smack above where the witch's sleepin's YOOHOROROI CROWS BECAUSE DAWN 'xactly.”

Subaru: “He sure is a pain, that Yoohororoi. When I next see him I'll be sure to let him know.”

Subaru separates his gaze from the tomb's entrance and looks to the forest at his side, seeing the INTERLOPER to the conversation aka Garfiel, who rubs away the sweat on his brow.

Garfiel: “Just sayin', 's coincidence we bumped into each other. My amazin' self was off doin' my daily runnin' round the outskirts of Sanctuary, and here ya were. Y'don't needta be so wary.”

Subaru: “We're not wary. Sides, we weren't talking about anything that'd be that problematic for you to overhear. Right, Otto. Absolutely nothing would've been problematic if he heard it!”

Subaru aggressively taps Otto's shoulders.

Otto: “Wueeeuh?”

Otto: “Ah, ahh, exactly, we weren't particularly doing anything problematic or suspicious? Just a little graverobbing rehearsal or I suppose um, a quick look around or, well that's all we were up to!”

Subaru: “Amazing, Otto. I've never seen someone so good at digging their own grave before a grave before.”

But it looks like Garfiel masterfully tuned out Otto's somewhat-confession.



ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Garfiel: “Nwhat, ain't like 'm gonna tell or get mad or anythin'. If yer not bustin' things up, doin' anythin' that'd be a drawback for SANCTUARY, then I ain't gonna do anythin'.”

Subaru: “Really, now. I'm sincerely grateful for that guarantee. Most unfortunately, if I got into a fight with you I feel I'd have absolutely no chance of winning.”

Garfiel: “Yer pathetic even 'fore the fight's started... 's what I'd liketa say but, I'll stop here. Ain't a surprise you see my amazin' self 's an opponent. After all, I'm the strongest!”

Garfiel's eyes sparkle, full of confidence. And honestly trying to refute him here would just be stupid. Even though Subaru kinda wants to bring up the topic of supermonster Reinhardt. He swallows the urge down.

Subaru: “Well,”

Subaru: “It's about time for Emilia-tan to be waking up, and I wanna have our daily morning routine so I'm thinking of heading back. You're still halfway through your jog. Then we'll...”

Garfiel: “Yer goin' back to the cathedral. Then, I'll see ya off 'till there.”

Surprised by Garfiel's proposal, Subaru goes to decline it before Garfiel interrupts him yet again.

Garfiel: “Jus' listen 't what people tell ya. Or, in the first place your lot sh'better stop wanderin' round SANCTUARY. Ya don't know what'll be out there.”

Subaru: “—? Heck is this. That's a pretty weird thing to say to someone. I mean it almost sounds as if there's something dangerous here.”

Garfiel: “That's what'm sayin' I'm tellin' ya.”

Garfiel clicks his teeth and approaches Subaru and Otto, lowering his voice.

Garfiel: “Pisses me off shamin' my group, but the people livin' in Sanctuary ain't a single monolith.”

Subaru: “What do you mean by that?”

Garfiel: “The village chief granny's ideas, takin' Roswaal n' the humans hostage, n' getting' Emilia-sama t' take the trial n' break th' promise with the witch's all completely legit. And most people here're takin' th' granny's side and goin' with those ideas... but some people ain't.”

Garfiel's tone drops.

Garfiel: “Fer the guys who wanna stay holed up'n Sanctuary forever, yer bein' here's a problem. Ya dunno what they'd do to mess up Emilia-sama takin' the TRIAL.”

Subaru: “You mean... there's a chance they could aim their designs at me and Otto?”

Garfiel: “Thinkin' there's a chance they could slap Emilia-sama herself 'round too, though. Eh, it's

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

EVEN BREATHING GETS RAGGED OUTSIDE THIS HOLE. While yer with me, that bunch ain't gonna try anything annoyin'."

Garfiel speaks cheerfully, but now Subaru's uneasy about having left Emilia behind. So uneasy, that it's really more like loathing for his own idiocy at not realising that possibility himself.

There was a divide between people of SANCTUARY and the Arlam villagers when they first met. So then, why had it not occurred to Subaru that there could be factions?

There was no way everyone would approve of the way things were going. There had to be some people who didn't want their situation to change the way Lewes' plan would make it.

Subaru: "I have to get back now!"

Garfiel: "Oop, scared ya bit too much. You don't gotta be that panicked, they ain't gonna do anythin' while it's still light out, and Emilia-sama's back in the cathedral right now anyway. You really think they're gonna pull somethin' where there's other people loiterin' about? 'F they're gonna pull anythin', they're gonna pull it on people like you and that noisy guy, putterin' bout in small numbers."

Subaru: "Ghuhm... that, right. If they go against the majority's will, it worsens their position, so they can't act rashly."

Subaru lets out a sigh and gets his frenzied heartbeat under control. Then he suddenly notices something, eyebrows raising.

Subaru: "Did you maybe think it'd be dangerous for me and Otto to be walking around alone, and come out here to help us?"

Garfiel: "...Eh?"

His face still averted from Subaru and Otto, expression not visible to them,

Garfiel: "'S no way that'd be it. Coincidence. 'S coincidence, 'm sayin'."

Subaru: "Behold, Otto. This is a correct *tsundere*. When we met him yesterday was his incredible *tsun*, and now here we're getting some more lovable *dere*."

Otto: "Hmm, being someone who experienced that *tsun* to the forehead, I have some difficulty accepting parts of what you're saying, but I can't deny that there is a masculine instinct in me which wonders whether this man is trying to manipulate us into thinking perhaps he surprisingly isn't that bad of a person."

Subaru: "Holy hell you're so easy."

Otto: "He got me!!"

Otto's scream echoes through the morning forest, startling birds into flight. Rowdy Otto on one hand, and impossible-to-hate amicable Garfiel. While with these two, Subaru feels for the first time in this world that he's gotten, in the truest meaning, a couple of partners in crime he can treat

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

equally.

Subaru: “But I'm pretty damn easy too.”

And his cheeks loosen into a small smile.



The atmosphere while standing outside the tomb waiting that night is clearly different to what it was that morning.

Emilia: “Night comes, and it really does feel like a tomb. It looks creepier than yesterday.”

Says Emilia, who fiddles with the end of her braid. She glances at Subaru.

Emilia: “Do you think it's fine to go in yet?”

Subaru: “It'd be easy to tell if it had 'Opens 7:00pm' written across the front, but it really doesn't have anything there.” Subaru figures that if the Trial just kinda starts 'around' night, then the surroundings being dark would be enough of a sign.

Emilia: “Right. Then, I suppose I'll go.”

She gives a small sigh, apparently not yet fully determined. While waiting for her to get herself all emboldened up, Subaru tilts his head to look behind them. You have SANCTUARY team of Garfiel and Lewes, Roswaal Representative Ram, and for some reason Otto. Thinking in terms of Team Emilia, if you add on Emilia and Subaru to Otto, they're suddenly the majority.

Subaru: “Or you think in terms of who's left back in SANCTUARY, and we're immediately the smallest team here. It's a hard world, or I guess it will be with what's coming up.”

Emilia: “What're you mumbling about? It's kinda making me sooo curious.”

Subaru: “Talking to myself. You get yourself and your heart all set and prepared for what's next, Emilia-tan. Though since we didn't get to hear about the TRIAL's content, the unease here is amazing...”

Emilia: “But everyone until now who's challenged would be the same in that. I couldn't be so sneaky as to be different. With the same conditions, I'll do my best.”

Emilia balls her hands into fists, getting pumped, and Subaru puts his hands to his eyes, feeling the radiance. His own self who tried to get a witch to help him cheat now just looks sneakier. My god is Emilia straight-laced and fair.

Subaru: “Auuugh it's too EMK (Emilia-tan Maji Kishidou).”<sup>9</sup>

---

9 Emilia-tan is Seriously Chivalrous

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Emilia: “Ah, I feel it's been a while since I've heard you say that.”

Emilia gives a small laugh, Subaru's usual line getting a good smile out of her. Subaru nods, deciding there is yet some worth in his joking.

Subaru: “Anyway, we don't know what could be inside, so if you feel any danger say so immediately. You call my name, and I'll be there in an instant.”

Emilia: “But you'll swoon if you come in.”

Subaru: “Who says swoon anymore?”

Emilia pouts.

Emilia: “But,”

Emilia: “Thank you, for worrying about me. ...Puck hasn't shown up at all, and I really am sooo anxious. I feel like I'm completely leaning on you right now, Subaru.”

I have no idea what the fuck Subaru's referencing here but he's referencing something, COME REST YOUR BODY AGAINST ME, also Emilia-tan is light as a feather so if he's not touching her he gets anxious over whether she's really there or not.

Emilia: “The way you're wiggling your fingers's creepy so no.”

That said, Emilia's stress has now unravelled and she does a little stretch.

Emilia: “It kinda feels like my shoulders've gotten a little lighter. Subaru, has this been your aim even since we first met?”

Subaru: “If I could do that kind of therapy, I wouldn't've been a lonely boy who made things like the peak of origami DRAGONSOULMOBILE in his overwhelming free time all by himself.”

And how did he brag about his mastery of the fingercrafting arts. Of course that said the only people he had to show it off to were his parents.

Emilia tilts her head at Subaru's ludicrously shitty tale of the past, not understanding shit. But it's cute so Subaru crosses his arms and nods, judging everything as good. Still not looking like she really gets it, Emilia turns toward the tomb.

Emilia: “—This time, I really am going. Pray that I'll come back safely.”

Subaru: “I'll be praying so hard the Bhudda's ears spurt blood.”

And she disappears into the tomb, the lights in the corridor turning on.

Lewes: “Yer look down, squert.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru indeed looks anxious. Lewes gives a granny-esque smile unfitting to her youthful features.

Lewes: “Yer don't have to worry, it's alright. It has this osterntatious name erv TRIAL, but it's nerrthing life-threatening.”

Subaru: “You know the Trial's contents?”

Lewes: “I've taken it befer. If yer a half-breed and it judges yer qualified, it's natural to do. In the end I wern't able to beat it, but... lookiere, I'm still 'round'n kicking.”

Lewes does a little hop to prove her healthiness. It's charming and it looks like she's doing it to sweep aside Subaru's anxiousness, which Subaru appreciates.

Subaru: “Were you hit with a curse that keeps you a loli on the outside but super-accelerated your insides into a granny? Emilia-tan'd still be lovable if that happened to her, but it's the real Emilia-tan that I like, personally.”

Lewes: “Dersen't that reply make my seriousness look stupid. Yer like Lil' Gar, dunno how to respect yer elders, Lil' Su.”

Subaru: “That's not it though? Honestly, I am feeling a little better now. I'm sorry for making you worry.”

Subaru bows his head, Lewes is shakes her head like like “But why didn't yer do that to begin withhh” and makes a show of wiping away tears with her sleeves. Meanwhile, Garfiel's there with his arms crossed and expression serious, quietly glaring at the tomb. And surprisingly, Otto and Ram are talking about something, and even look to be hitting it off well. Subaru barely ever gets that with Ram.

Subaru pledges to himself to have Otto give him lessons on how to talk to Ram without pissing her off, then turns his attention back to the tomb. He realises that at some point, his hands had come before his stomach in a praying position, thumbs together.

The waiting's hard. If he's going to have to wait so long, then maybe it would've been easier that he take the TRIAL. At about the same time he has that conceited thought, the change comes.

Everyone swallows their breath. It's an instinctive reaction to losing their light source and the world plunging into darkness, AKA

Subaru: “The cemetery lights're out!?”

Lewes: “They're meant ter stay on while the TRIAL's going, but...”

Subaru: “Then this's an irregular development?”

Lewes looks kind of lost too, even though she should know what's going on, and Subaru judges that things aren't going as anticipated. Garfiel's uncrossed his arms and is running over. Neither Ram,

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

brows furrowed, or a panicked Otto, look like they could give an answer either. And thus,

Lewes: “Lil' Su!? Yer won't get ter enter without the qualifications...”

Subaru: “I took the training course and am properly qualified. —I'm going in. No matter what, I'm dragging Emilia-tan outta there and coming back!”

As fucking if he could just stand here waiting doing nothing.

The second Subaru steps inside the tomb, the lights come back on. Subaru senses Lewes and Garfiel catch their breath at this from behind his back, and he races into the tomb before anyone can speak to stop him.

The air in the corridor's dusty as ever, and every breath seems to degrade the lungs. Putting all his power into each step, Subaru rushes to the end of the corridor—to the back of the tomb.

Subaru: “Fuck, I messed up. I shouldn'tve had this weirdly trumpcard-esque mood, and just gone in with Emilia...”

Subaru says as he runs, until the lights in the corridor expand, and he realises he's reached a small chamber. He slides to a stop and looks the place over. It's really nothing more than a rectangular space with four walls. There's nothing else in there, except a door in the very back bordered by pale-blue lights.

And on the floor before the door, Subaru sees a silver-haired girl, collapsed prone.

Subaru: “—Emilia!!”

He runs straight for her, intending to pick up her delicate body and get her out of here WHEN—

<—first face your past>

Subaru feels a whispering at his ear jolt his consciousness. He has no time to wonder what's up with it.

He falls to his knees, collapses gracelessly, and tumbles like a doll. He rolls along the floor with the momentum, coincidentally coming to a stop beside Emilia.

At an unconscious Emilia's side, Subaru's is too pulled into unconsciousness—



—Whenever Subaru wakes from sleep, he always feels a choking sensation as if lifting his face from a pool of water. The feeling resembles rising up from the sea known as slumber, desiring to breathe in the air known as reality—

???: “GOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOD MORNING, SON!!”

Subaru: “hdmfsiudfmhdsifhsjdfk!!”

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

That poetic awakening comes on this morning in the form of Subaru receiving a ruthless, destructive attack.

Relishing the feeling of a weight pressing down on his body and agonisingly squeezing the air out of him, Subaru pushes the weight aside as hard and he can, coughing violently.

???: “Heyheyhey now, whatwhatwhat's this. Waking up in the morning to my love-filled diving press's regular thing. Negligence Is The Enemy flaring up in here!”

Subaru: “Ghak, eughgkk, expecting way too... much of a sleeping opponent... or, what.”

the hell just happened? Subaru seems to ask as he raises his head, teary-eyed. And, gazing down at a Subaru half-ejected from the bed, is somebody standing before him who rolls his neck.

???: “Once again I ask, what's this. It almost looks as though you're seeing your naked middle-aged dad early in the morning!”

Says Subaru's half-naked middled aged dad—Natsuki Kenichi—as he takes a pose, laughing heartily, blessing his son with wakefulness.<sup>10</sup>

---

10 菜月賢一 / Vegetable(&Rapeseed. Energy, brightness)-Moon Wisest. / The 'Ken' in Kenichi's name is the same 'Ken' in the word 賢人 'Wise Person' translated here as 'Sage.'

## CHAPTER 16: MORNING IN THE NATSUKI HOUSEHOLD

Subaru can brag that whenever he wakes up naturally, he instantly wakes up fully. But when he's woken up by an external factor, this isn't the case. Drowsy and sluggish, with a dull ache in his eyes as he rubs them, he looks around his surroundings—the familiar territory of his room.

Bookshelves stuffed full of manga and light novels, as well as discarded shirts and jeans scattered about, adorn this room. Piles of half-read books occupy the desk, which has long been forsaken of its proper role, an old television set now converted exclusively into a game station being the finishing touch to this scene.

Subaru clicks his neck as he sits atop his futon, which gets aired barely fucking ever, but for some reason feels unease at this extremely obvious environment. —Call it something in his chest, jabbering and astir.

Kenichi: “Heeeeeyhey, ignore him like this and this finely-aged pops of yours's gonna cry! The morning's bright, sunny, fresh as anything, so you follow the mood and leap right outta that bed.”

Subaru: “You mean, greet the day refreshed after being woken up by a diving press? Please do not speak silliness. My bones feel creaky and so I shall now return to slumber.”

Subaru flops back down on the futon, turning his back to Kenichi, declaring the lack of room for negotiations.

Kenichi: “Whaaaaat iiiiiiis thiiiiiii!”

Kenichi: “His rebellious age! It's his rebellious age! I knew it was gonna come someday, but not even my heart had been prepared for that day being this very morning! I should've skimped on preparing breakfast, and made better preparations to converse with my son. Goddamn, my powerlessness's stunning...”

Subaru: “What're you doing grabbing someone's leg while sayin... hey, wa- ahh! Agugughguh!”

Kenichi: “Aaaaall right, today you and me are gonna talk all through the dawn. First comes body language! Figure four, figure four! Look'ere, this wakeup-wrestling move works good!”

And Kenichi catches Subaru in a figure-four leglock, transmitting incredible damage to Subaru's knees and shins. Unable to counter the pain, Subaru cries out in agony, Kenichi again giving the most fucking lively laugh in the entire world.

Kenichi: “Oho, whatnow whatnow. You're body's gotten big and you work out every day, don't think it's embarrassing for your fight against a single middle-aged man to be so close? Mwahahaha... ah, no wait, ahh! Agugughguh!”

Subaru: “Imbecile! For you to have chosen the easily-reversed figure four as your surprise attack shows even you've grown old, dad! Just by flipping myself over, I rebound the damage back at the foe who set me in this figure fo... ah, wait, don't flip over my flip over... aguhow! Owow!”



#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Their wrestling goes on, the assailant and victim continuously switching between the two of them as they cry out in pain. Their boisterous jostling about knocks some books off the desk, the games stacked there falling down. WHEN

???: “—Just a mo, you two. Mom's getting hungry, I kinda wanna have breakfast.”

An uneven knock comes at the door alongside that carefree voice, and the pair's hectic movements stop. Standing at the doorway is a woman with nasty-looking eyes, mantled in an absent-minded kind of air. The sharpness of her gaze makes her seem a little displeased, but Subaru knows from his 17-year relationship with this woman that actually she's not thinking about anything in particular at all.

Immediately obvious as family by the nasty-looking eyes inherent between them, is Subaru's mother Natsuki Naoko.<sup>11</sup> Kenichi sticks his tongue out as he jumps to his feet.

Kenichi: “Sorrysorry, suddenly fell into a skinship trance with Subaru. Though you coulda just got to eating before us.”<sup>12</sup>

Naoko: “—? Today's a morning where we can all have breakfast together, why would I eat before you? It's better to eat while everyone's all together.”

Naoko tilts her head. There's no sarcasm or anything in it, she's just seriously wondering and that's why she asked. Kenichi gives several vigorous nods.

Kenichi: “Right, ain't that it exactly. Just what you'd expect of my wife, she gets it. Breakfast's tastier when everyone's eating together!”

Naoko: “I don't think the flavour really changes whether it's breakfast or lunch or dinner, though? When everyone eats together you can do all the dishes at once.”

Kenichi: “Oh, you meant dishes. Right, sorry. I got myself just a little pumped up.”

Kenichi's shoulders slump. Naoko looks at him a little perplexed before switching her gaze to Subaru, who's still sprawled out in a heap.

Naoko: “You come to eat too, Subaru. I worked hard on today's meal for you, after all.”

And she gives a happy smile so faint that only someone who knew her very well would see it.



Still kinda sleepy, Subaru rubs at his eyes as he reluctantly goes down to the dining table on the house's first floor, feeling the attacks from Kenichi guiding his dull consciousness into proper

---

11 菜月菜穂子

12 Kenichi and Naoko refer to Subaru using his kanji writing, 昴. The narration continues to use the katakana version, スバル. A font change indicates that the kanji writing has been used.

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

sobriety.

Subaru: “Mom. I know you said you worked hard on this for me, but...”

Naoko: “Yup. Mom worked hard on this for you. It was lots of trouble getting it ready early in the morning.”

Braggs Naoko. Subaru sighs, Kenichi arriving at the table via the bathroom, looking things over and giving an 'ohhh!' in surprise.

Kenichi: “Amazing, Subaru. Your plate's got a special menu. You gotta green forest.”

Subaru: “Thanks for saying it. Yeah, really feels like that. ...What exactly is this? Why does only my plate have a horde of peas piled on it?”

Subaru points at the plate set on the table before his usual seat. The peas are piled so thick that it's impossible to tell whether they're drowning the other foodstuffs out or whether there was just no other food on the plate in the first place. By the way Subaru hates peas.

Naoko: “Well, aren't you always saying that you hate peas, Subaru? I don't think it's good being picky. So, I wondered if using this opportunity to eat lots of them'd help you defeat that.”

Subaru: “So relying on that vague maybe-that-happened-sometime memory, you decided to fix my pickiness. And saying 'this opportunity'... there isn't really anything special about today, though?”

Kenichi: “Huhu, tenderfoot, Subaru. See, whenever and no matter what the time, you never get to experience this very present instant of the day called 'today' except for now. You might see it as just another identical day coming to visit you, but in actuality you're overlooking countless 'PACKED' instants which...”

Subaru: “That's enough for now.”

Kenichi literally dances into the conversation and Subaru pushes him back, giving a deep sigh as he seats himself before the peas. He pushes the plate away.

Subaru: “Anyway, I gratefully accept that you prepared this for me, but I'll hold back on the peas. I don't wanna fill my stomach with something I hate first thing in the morning.”

Naoko: “There you go with that again. Alright, then what'd you do if all the food in the world except peas disappeared. You'd eat them then.”

Subaru: “If that happened I'd die of starvation soon, and eating some peas wouldn't change that. So I absolutely would not eat them.”

Subaru crosses his arms and pushes out his chest.

Subaru: “Even if Armageddon came, I absolutely would not eat peas.”

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Kenichi: “I swear, going on hating foods without trying them's a waste of life. Ah, Mom, these tomatoes you've put in my salad. I hate'em so you eat them.”

Subaru: “There's my father... contradicting himself beautifully in the first and second halves of one damn statement.”

Kenichi picks the tomatoes out of his salad and puts them in Naoko's, nicking Naoko's boiled eggs in return. Watching this established secret couple mutual understanding, Subaru presses his hands together, intentions aimed at the two things set out on the table that aren't peas—a steaming miso soup and toast caked in honey.

Subaru: “I always wonder this, but what's with the east-west blend?”

Naoko: “I have wakame for the soup, and I love honey on bread.”

It's not an answer but trying to probe into that would be a fucking pain. Subaru, Kenichi and Naoko itadakimasu and go for their soups in perfect sync.

Kenichi: “Oh, this soup... Say, Mom, did you get better while I wasn't looking?”

Naoko: “You can tell? I recorded a three-minute afternoon cooking show yesterday.”

So what.

It's more than likely that Naoko is in fact saying the exact truth here and 'recorded' a cooking show. Without watching it. And has yet gone without watching it. And besides,

Subaru: “Dad's here in the morning, so he's probably the one who made the soup and toast.”

Kenichi: “Ohoho, sharp eyes, my son.” Then he makes a phoenix wright reference and Subaru bitches at him not to play outdated games that said it's a masterpiece.

Subaru: “Oh, yeah,”

Subaru: “It's seriously way late to be mentioning this, dad why are you barely dressed? I know it's warmed up, but a tanktop and boxers's way too casual.”

Kenichi: “But you're wearing boxers too, aren't you? Your dad had a bit of *that*, woke up just a little early had some high energy went in the garden and rubbed himself down with a dry towel, some of *that*.”

Subaru: “Isn't doing that pointless when it isn't cold out?”

Kenichi: “That's just a problem of motivation. You worry about something that useless before you get running, and are you really ever gonna reach your destination? Mom you say something here too.”

Naoko: “That's right, Subaru. It might not've been chilly out, but Mom was watching your dad rub himself down with a properly freezing gaze.”

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Kenichi: “Wha!? My wife's not backing me up!?”

Naoko: “Huh... but I did back you up. I said it was properly cold.”

Kenichi: “That's not backing up that's a death blow!”

Kenichi rattles the chair as he sways back and forth, displeased. Naoko sees this and is like 'that's kicking up dust, gotta clean it later.'

Eyes lowered, Subaru watches them go at it as he continues with breakfast. He pushes the plate of peas over to Kenichi, Kenichi pushes it on to Naoko, and Naoko pushes it back to Subaru, the cycle continuing.

Subaru: “...We're in a perfect pattern of nobody eating these. The heck do we do with this giant load of peas. Mom take responsibility eat them.”

Naoko: “But your mom hates peas...”

Subaru: “Weren't you just trying to make people overcome their pickiness!?”

Naoko: “Ah, don't misunderstand. Your mom doesn't just hate peas, it's... more like small, round things in general. Putting them in my mouth makes me feel sick.”

Subaru: “I'm not misunderstanding anything here, you're just getting less and less credible!”

Subaru vaguely thinks that actually oh yeah he can't remember ever seeing his mom eating beans, as he pushes the plate over toward Kenichi.

Subaru: “Nnywell, the wife's responsibility is the husband's to take, so dad eat these.”

Kenichi: “Don't say such sad things, Subaru. Our family's one of the few close and friendly ones out there nowadays. Meaning, if you and Mom hate something I hate it too.”

Subaru: “This's some concern that made nobody happy, this green plate!”

In the end the Pea Issue is solved by Kenichi proposing to bake them into a pilaf, a pilaf so thick the peas disappear. Subaru's fine with that but Naoko is stubborn that the things she hates are the things she hates. The men are left with cleaning the peas up.

Subaru: “Thanks for the meal.”

Kenichi: “Oui, gobbleguts. Alright, time to swoosh-swoosh-swoosh the dishes, and get going with some digestion exercises until school, Subaru!”

Subaru: “Tired of hearing this pattern of pressing me to go to school. Sides, I don't remember being raised as some cheeky brat who goes running straight after eating.”

Kenichi flashes a smile as he dumps the tableware into the sink, Subaru shrugs and stands from the

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

dinner table. Subaru quietly leaves with a, “I’ll sleep until afternoon,” scratching his head as he heads for his room on the second floor—when his legs suddenly freeze.

Subaru: “Wh, at?”

An ache runs through his temples, Subaru lightly presses down on his head and squeezes his eyes shut. Lights flicker beneath his eyelids, something hot fizzles in the back of his throat. Something's strange. Something is strange.

Glancing back, Subaru catches sight of his parents' faces. His invitation rejected, Kenichi pouts in discontent. Naoko's wiping the dining table down with a cloth, looking back at Subaru with a sad gaze.

Faced with his parents' gazes—registering the emotion packed in each, a heat he can't ignore ravages his chest. Subaru feels his face blaze hot, and he quickly turns away so his parents won't see his expression, and as if running he—nah, he really does just run back into his room.

Subaru: “Why? Why, why did that turn strange?”

Putting a hand to a chest, he surprises himself at the speed of his own pulse, and breathes in. He plomps down onto the futon as if collapsing, and unable to calm it down, his gaze darts around the room.

Room's the same as when he woke up. Hasn't changed a bit since he went to sleep yesterday night. Endlessly, endlessly, same unchanging stagnant room it's always been. As if it's displaying the stagnancy of its master, Subaru.

He glances at the clock, and it's just about to turn 8AM. School starts at 8:30, and it's about 20 minutes away from his house by bike. He can still make it. But Subaru doesn't go to get changed, and instead just sits there on the futon, hugging his knees as he stares at the hand of the clock. The minute hand quietly makes ten rotations—the deadline's breached. Now, he will no longer make it in time for school.

Subaru: “So, there's nothing I can do. Right, there's nothing.”

If he had just a little more time for him to gather his resolve, perhaps he could've gone to school. But reality heartlessly conveyed upon Subaru a time limit. That said, the usual selection for today no longer pressed on Subaru. Even so,

Subaru: “...Usually, this'd calm me down. So why?”

His pulse still unsettled, his ragged breathing shows no sign of clearing. Confused at his irregular physical state, even the chattering of his own teeth scares him.

—For Subaru, this time every morning is the most terrifying time the day.

Subaru: “Calm down, calm down... time's already up. It's okay to calm down now. It's okay.”

Pushing down on his shivering body, Subaru entreats himself. What's accidentally become his daily

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

ritual of fear is already over. He knows he's going to slam straight into the exact same fear tomorrow morning, but for today he's passed that juncture.

No one's rushing Subaru, and no one's cornering him. So who's driving his heart into a panic has to be, no other option, Subaru.

Go to school—the time when that option alone forces anguish on Subaru.

This is the time when Subaru faces his own weakness, regardless of the long time he's spent truanting, at being unable to start anew. Ravaged by self-loathing and complexes as he merely waits for time to move, freed only from that pit once he confirms the deadline for school starting has passed.

It's exactly because he suffers it every day that Subaru knows better than anyone the relief that comes with that freedom. He also knows his weakness, for clinging to that relief, and the repulsiveness of his inevitable, continuing excuses.

Being permitted absolutely all of that, he should've passed the target hour, but—

Subaru: “Why, just today...”

The guilt, self-loathing, and clinging discomfort isn't disappearing.

His unease makes him want to shred away at his own chest. His breathing still faulty, he sweats as he writhes atop the futon.

His parents' faces when he left the dining table aren't getting out of his mind.

The same behaviour as always, same conversations as always, same back-and-forth as always, same betrayals as always, same sloth as always—that's what it was supposed to be.

But for some reason, just today, those same actions as always are making his chest suffer.

—Thinking back on it, something was off about today from the instant he woke up.

It's a routine thing that Kenichi comes up with various ways to torment Subaru awake. Even after becoming a parasitic truant, his dad's behaviour toward him hasn't changed. That is, the back-and-forth with him this morning was exactly the same as it had been for the past 17 years—so why was it that today, something other than the diving press was painning him?

Naoko's misdirected thoughtfulness more often than not ends up being completely unhelpful, but even so she prioritizes Subaru. That shut-in Subaru and housewife Naoko end up spending a lot of time together is inevitable. Even so, as though she's leaving it to time, she continues watching over Subaru with warm eyes. —It's often at the dining table that he accidentally ends up registering that gaze.

But even now, with the time for school to start already passed, the panic in his chest continues its burn.

Subaru: “Something's strange. What is it? Did something happen? Yesterday I...”

He goes to look back on what he did yesterday—when a numbing sensation interrupts him. Heat runs through the back of Subaru's eyes, as if rejecting his attempt to touch the memory. He goes to

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

again challenge the sea of his memories—and stops. The answer's the same.

Yesterday, the day before, the day before that, Subaru spent the day doing nothing. The aching pain in his chest has nothing to do with anything special happening. Today was just a day where he'd be feeling that guilt and pain. He simply hadn't seen his parents' sincere faces, and now seeing them overlapping had to be it.

Kenichi: “—Miiiiind if I come in, Subaru?”

At about the same time Subaru's getting sick of his as-yet erratic pulse, a voice whacks him over the head from behind his room's door. Subaru looks over in that direction to see Kenichi with his upper body peeking through the doorway slip sliding his way into the room, his clever footwork being extremely reminiscent of the King of Pop (This isn't me paraphrasing).

Subaru: “Doesn't entering someone's room before hearing whether it's okay to come in defeat the purpose of asking?”

Kenichi: “Heyhey, a parent and child tied together by solid bonds as you and I, have no reason to parley over something small like knocking when... no, actually we do. Yup, when you're a boy going through puberty sometimes you just wanna hole up in your room. Got it. I'll be coming back after I've given you plenty of time.”

Subaru: “Don't just come up with these ideas and set aside realistic time for them! And I'm fine!”

His voice getting ragged at the unwanted concern, Subaru honestly feels relief at having an out to obfuscate the raggedness of his breathing. Kenichi gives a suspicious “Reallyyyyy?” and moonwalks back into the room (This isn't me paraphrasing).

He faces his son staring up at him, and takes a pose as he jabs his finger up toward the heavens.

Kenichi: “Now, Subaru. I'm sure this's pretty obvious, but turns out I have a day off today.”

Subaru: “Yeah, kinda noticed. When you're helping with chores on a Monday morning even I'd notice. So, what?”

Kenichi: “Hey now, don't rush to the ending. There's just a couple things I wanna talk about, so huuuh maybe we could use this opportunity to talk about them all together.”

Subaru: “Talk? You mean, telling me to at least wash my own dishes?”

Kenichi: “That too. Your dad hates doing dishes. I like making stuff so the preparing and cooking itself's fun, but once that's gone I lose motivation.”

Kenichi wobbles and sways down, crumbling. Subaru knits his brows at his until-then overactive father, sensing that his dad's kinda hesitating. He's giving the two of them time to get themselves readied for the coming conversation by joking—Subaru can't do it well, but that he does do similar things is just personality. It's a natural resemblance.

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “—Ow.”

The second he thinks that, a sharp pain again assaults Subaru's head, needles stabbing his temples. While feeling a creaking in his skull as if his bones are shaving away, Subaru lowers his head to conceal his pained expression.

Subaru: “S, so? My unmotivated dad's here to talk with me.”

Kenichi: “Mhm, right. Subaru, is there... somebody you like?”

Subaru: “—This's middle school!!”

The topic's so stupid Subaru forgets he's in pain. His cheeks pulled back in anger, Subaru raises his head.

Kenichi: “Oohhhohhh”

Kenichi: “That kinda overreaction's a confession that there is somebody you like.”

Subaru: “Hell are you saying looking so satisfied. I'm too dumbstruck and anguished and lamenting to speak.”

Though honestly, Kenichi's off the mark.

Subaru as of present has no interest in girls. Doesn't have one, won't get one. Might just be his presuppositions though.

Kenichi: “Whaaat, that's boring. Didn't your dad give you some good advice when you were little? Girls're weak to years-long promises, so if you set the flag with whatever prime girl for ten years down the line, it opens that story route for you when you're a teen.”

Subaru: “And then I went and sincerely accepted that, pressed girls all over the place for pinky promises, and now the whole region's got a ban on pinky promises. Because there were too many cases of scary-faced little kids going to force little girls to swallow needles!”

Kenichi: “...It's a good thing your dad's lovable mask is hereditary. You got short legs, Mom's eyes, your dad's tension and Mom's carelessness, the status allocations when you came out of Mom's tummy were way too screwed up.”

Subaru: “You said that when I was still attached to the umbilical cord...”

The two of them sigh, losing some of their tension.

Subaru: “So?”

Subaru: “What were you actually talking about? I have the important duties of going back to sleep and also going back to sleep again after that, so please leave your business after the beep, quietly leave the room and go chat with mom.”



ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Kenichi: “Don't you drive me away with a natural flow. And even if I talk with Mom she wouldn't get it. My wife and your mother's the lifeform with the worst suppositions in the world. I mean it's cute though.”

Subaru's expression gets tired at this natural flow into going on about your lover.  
Kenichi hmms at he looks up, cheekily touching his nose.

Kenichi: “Eh, what. The weather's good—let's go have an open-hearted father-son talk outside.”

## CHAPTER 17: LOVE STORY

???: “Oh, Ken-san. Funny seeing you out so early. Got sacked?”

Kenichi: “Don't be stupid, the whole place breaks down without me. It'd be bad if my working stole everyone's jobs, so I'm taking out my gas and injecting everyone with some motivation.”

The bicycling owner of the neighbourhood bakery addresses Kenichi happily, but Kenichi responds by shooting him the middle finger. They go on having their bawdy little chat for a while before parting.

Kenichi: “I swear, any goddamn everyone sees a guy on a day off and it's all 'unemployment, unemployment'. Me, having a family to support, wouldn't mess the hell up like that. That's why even if I did do something that'd stain my hands in a way that'd get me fired, I'd do it in a way that wouldn't leak, hehheh.”

Subaru: “...As someone you're supporting, I pray from my heart that you don't use methods that'd stain your hands in the first place.”

Hands buried in his jersey pockets, Subaru, who had gone to the side of the path waiting for the conversation to end, shrugs. Kenichi shakes his hands and head at his son, who is standing in shade and bathed in wind.

Kenichi: “Lose your spirit of adventure and you'll never fully mature as a man or a person. And of course doing anything bad's not in the picture, but it's fun to probe the limits of that line or I mean...”

Subaru: “You're way past the age for jokes, calm down. A guy over 40 can't always be talking like a little brat.”

Kenichi: “Man, I think all men have a brat somewhere in them even as adults. Or actually, it's cause you, who's fundamentally meant to do these stupid talks, didn't join in the conversation in the first place that your dad has to have this stupid talk. What's with that, yooooou.”

Subaru: “As if I could have a friendly chat with some old stranger.”

Kenichi: “He's not a stranger. He's the owner of the bakery I always stop by when I sometimes buy bread coming home. Also he was one of my underclassmen in high school.”

Even knowing that now, not like Subaru'd get it.

He'd never taken a hard look at the bread's packaging, and he'd probably never stopped by the bakery once. Subaru wordlessly exerts an aura of wanting to end this conversation, and Kenichi clicks his tongue.

Kenichi: “Don't you think it's a slight to the Mighty Sun to look so fed up on such a bright, sunny, fresh as anything day? You look like you're getting interrogated.”

Subaru: “If I'm getting interrogated, it'd be thanks to my dad who dragged me outside at this hour...”

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

even though I said no, and he forced me.”

Kenichi: “That rebellion's just for show you followed along nicely. He loves his dad, Subaru does. Now relax, I love you too. You're in second to Mom though!”

Kenichi starts walking again, laughing and giving Subaru a rigorous slap to the back. His face scrunches up at the force of it, and Subaru feels some unease at how high Kenichi's tension is. That said Kenichi usually has this kind of tension even in quiet, peaceful times, but considering he has some moodiness to him too, he should've stayed sulky for longer after that conversation with the baker.

It looks like Kenichi's overflowing with excess emotional reserves today.

—In complete contrast with Subaru, whose chest feels so pained it may collapse, just by walking beside Kenichi.

Subaru: “So...”

Kenichi: “Hm?”

Subaru: “So, you dragged me outside because you wanted to talk about something. Even though you'd never go that far that usually... what're we talking about. Something you couldn't talk about at home?”

Something you didn't want mom hearing, is the nuance of Subaru's question. Either way, he has a bad feeling about it. Probably gonna be a scolding about his apathetic lifestyle.

Usually Subaru'd pull his futon's cover over his head and ignore it, but that's not gonna work so well outside. Otherwise he'd yell and interrupt what Kenichi was saying. If Subaru did something so shameful outside, even Kenichi'd once again, find Subaru—thinking that far, Subaru shakes his head.

Subaru: “When it's my father, there's a chance he might even find that shame funny...”

Kenichi: “I got no idea what kind of crazy thing you just imagined, but it's nothing that wild and funny. Sometimes I just wanna go out and have a normal family talk out beneath the sun.”

Subaru: “Really now, don't believe it at all. ...I guess, I'll pass it though.”

Kenichi: “Yupyup. By the way, Subaru, do you... want a brother or a sister, which?”

Subaru: “When you're 17 hearing that question is nothing but terrifying!!”

Kenichi: “Kidding, kidding.”

Kenichi: “While yes your Mom and I do still flirt, at our age of course we don't do any kind of 'becoming one' stuff anymore. Meaning, you are the one holding all of my and mom's love. Rejoice.”

Subaru: “Ahh, right right, happy happy. ...You really are just joking though, right?”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Kenichi: “Heyhey, cut that out. You get nasty like that and I might take it as a set-up and get all pumped up.”

Now that this's looking less and less like it'll end as being just a joke, Subaru ends the conversation by staring wordlessly at Kenichi. Kenichi gives a wry smile, getting the point.

—Subaru and Kenichi are walking along a path barely ten minutes away from their home. It's a region that a river well-known in the neighbourhood flows through, with sakura trees planted across the bank, making a sightseeing spot in springtime. It's not spring anymore though, and instead of pink cherryblossoms it's green leaves bathed in the sunlight.

This was where they were headed. Subaru'd worried that Kenichi might've been dragging him to school at first.

A strong wind scented with foliage blows over the embankment, and if Subaru stretched a bit he'd probably be able to see the river flowing lazily on the other side of the dividing fence.

Kenichi: “There didn't used to be a fence here. Me 'n my buddies always came here together to play in the river. Say, you remember Ikeda? He came here one day when there was a typhoon to look at the crazy flow, and got swept away... If this old qualified-lifeguard guy hadn't happened by I suppose he woulda died.”

Subaru: “Sounds like this fence is your and Ikeda or whoever's fault.”

Kenichi: “You can say whatever you want, but... no, hold on? The timing kinda does overlap, huh.”

Kenichi goes over to the fence and stares down at the river, tilting his head. Subaru stands behind him, looking bored, and restlessly glancing around the area.

It's morning on a weekday so of course not many people're around. Or more precisely, Subaru and Kenichi are the only people around. That said it's a tricky place for people to get to in the first place. Only people who'd be around at this time would be the place's caretaker or those driven by whimsy. Suddenly, Subaru hears the sound grass crunching beneath someone's feet.

???: “Ohh? Wonder who it is, and turns out it's Lil' Ken. Now aren't you at just the age to be playing in rivers.”

Kenichi: “Who's calling me... The old man from the caretaker's hut, you're seriously still doing this job? Or actually you'll be the one surprised here, I'm not wearing my swimtrunks today so I'm not getting in the river.”

???: “Lose the idiocy. You're the guy who went saying boxers and swimtrunks're same thing at a glance and jumped in wearing his underwear. That said, gosh has it been a while.”

This guy is a short, old man wearing a green uniform. Going by the conversation and the logo on his back, he's probably the embankment's caretaker.

And if he knew Kenichi back when he was playing in rivers, he's a bit of a veteran.

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

The two laugh and the caretaker claps his hands.

Caretaker: “Right, now if you're here where's Ikeda? Thanks to him getting washed away all the time, I've gotten to be the leader in 'times you picked up someone in a net.'”

Kenichi: “Ikeda won big in the horse races ten years ago, flew to Thailand rich, and disappeared off the map. Still get cards for New Year's and summer, winter and Obon and Christmas, Father's Day and Mother's Day though.”

Subaru: “Someone who sends cards that incessantly's hardly off the map...”

Mutters Subaru who unconsciously slips into tsukkomi mode. The caretaker hears the muttering and, as if noticing Subaru's existence for the first time, his eyebrows shoot up.

Caretaker: “Oop, you've brought someone along.. hm? Could he just happen to be...?”

Kenichi: “Yup, he is. My son. Nope, I should change that to my beloved son.”

Caretaker: “Ahh, I knew it! His face does look like yours when you were... actually no, it doesn't really. Doesn't take after you. Takes after his mother... maybe?”

Subaru: “Haha. I would get that a lot. Especially about the eyes.”

Subaru's face is exceedingly plain except for his stupidly characteristic sanpaku, which are very obviously from his mother. The caretaker approaches Subaru.

Caretaker: “I see I see, but still, it's surprising. Lil' Ken's had a child for this long. Well, I've gotten old too. Not strong enough to go save a drowning Ikeda anymore.”

Subaru: “I doubt that Ikeda-san would be playing and drowning in rivers anymore either, at his age...”

Caretaker: “That's what I'm hoping, but... this bunch never really could settle down. Specially your father, was nothing but causing ruckus all over. Suppose you could tell that just by walking around town?”

Subaru: “...Yes, I suppose.”

The caretaker knits his brow, puzzled, at Subaru's vague response. Then the wrinkles deepen.

Caretaker: “Hm? Fine that you're Lil' Ken's son, but... today's meant to be Monday. What're you doing at the embankment out here with your father?”

Subaru: “—hk!”

Showered in a question he didn't want to be asked, Subaru's expression stiffens in pain. Next comes the sharp, stabbing headache identical to the one he got in his room. Subaru closes his eyes at the pain, so intense he feels he might unconsciously wind up grabbing his head in his hands,

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

and turns away from the caretaker with a, “Please excuse me,” running away.

Kenichi: “Ah, oi, hey, Subaru! Sorry, pops. We'll meet up another time so let's talk then.”

Caretaker: “Ah, yes... looks like I said something I shouldn't've. Apologize to him for me.”

Subaru doesn't hear this exchange.

For now he's running, away from the creaking pain in his skull, toward a place where his hammering pulse can settle down, leaving the embankment behind.

Kenichi, following behind him,

Kenichi: “Nothing to apologize for. —Next is his problem.”

He mutters.



Kenichi: “Here. A nice, cold, love-filled cola. Shook it so it's good and tasty. ...Is what I wanna say, but doesn't look like this's the time for it.”

Subaru: “...There's no such thing as a vending machine that fills things with love. Thanks.”

Subaru savours the feeling of the can's coldness on his palm as he puts his finger to the tab. Then he closes his eyes for a second in thought, points the can in a direction empty of people, and pulls the tab. A huge stream of cola bursts out. Subaru feels the can he's holding get a third lighter as he watches the spray.

Kenichi: “Heyhey, what's this, that was supposed to get you. I even used my two-layer make-it-sound-like-I-did-it-then-say-I-didn't-but-I-actually-did-it technique.”

Subaru: “I know your patterns. How long do you think I've known you, dad? Me thinking there's no way you wouldn't do it is a kind of trust in itself. Ah, my hands're sticky.”

He takes a sip of the cola. This does nothing to dislodge the weight in his chest.

Kenichi: “So, calmed down?”

Subaru: “...Tricky to say.”

Subaru seats himself deeper on the bench, gives a long sigh and slumps his shoulders. Kenichi's standing before him, sipping his cola, one eye closed in thought.

They're in a children's park now. No one's here, and no dads sneaking in during summer vacation to play on the swings either.

Kenichi: “In some sense, right now, I'm getting the feeling that if I go play on the swings I'm not

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

going to smile at it. What'd you do, Subaru. If your dad played on the swings on the way back from the convenience store.”

Subaru: “Take a picture with my cellphone and upload it on Twitter. Tweet, MY DAD PRESENTLY FREE FROM GRAVITY.”

Kenichi: “Ah, Twitter. Your dad's got an account too. I'm following and getting followed by everybody, screen's a complete mess.”

Subaru gives a languorous sigh and searches for a topic. Just, something, anything other than what they talked about at the embankment—and again the creaking pain returns to Subaru's skull. Anxious at how the pain's coming at progressively more frequent intervals, Subaru stifles his reaction and stubbornly ignores it.

Subaru: “...You were just buying drinks at a vending machine, but it sure took you a while. Did something happen?”

Kenichi: “Hm? Nothing big. Was a high-school girl hanging out truanting in front of the vending machine. Told her to go to school, gave her a drink and swapped email addresses with her.”

Subaru: “I seriously can't believe you can get email addresses that fast.”

Subaru has no words for Kenichi's power of getting high school girls' email addresses in the timespan of a toilet break. Kenichi tilts his head.

Kenichi: “Really?”

Kenichi: “If it's just email addresses they hand'em over quick. My phone's contacts list's getting near three digits of high school girls.”

Subaru: “Add up all my contacts and you'd wonder if I'm gonna hit two digits, and you've got three digits of just high school girls. ...Dad, don't get in some nasty relationship with a high school girl and wind up in the newspaper, okay?”

Kenichi: “What're you saying, you.”

Kenichi: “I'm not gonna get in a saucy mood over some bratty highschool girl. My love's already all aimed and set, got none of those passionate cravings for anyone outside my family.”

Subaru: “Categorize it like that and I'm a target too!”

Kenichi: “...Well, I do have love for you. You wonder if it's not entirely off the table?”

Subaru: “I don't, no! You're the one who should be getting asked what the heck they're saying!!!”

Kenichi laughs at Subaru's flipping out. The way he laughs is vulgar, but for some reason doesn't make people uncomfortable. No, actually that describes all of Kenichi's actions. Everything he does unmistakably diverges from normalcy, is over-the-top, overdramatic, and the

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

kind of thing that makes people recoil, but for some reason everyone receives it favourably.

Walking around with Kenichi, first time Subaru's done it in a while, makes that assessment feel poignant and real. Subaru's run out of fingers on his hand to count how many times Kenichi's been spoken to just by walking down the street. No matter where they go, there's someone who can remember some tale of the past with Kenichi, and if it's someone just meeting him for the first time, he cheerfully and casually responds back to deepen the friendly bond between them. And he doesn't hide any of it.

His temples throbbing in pain, Subaru's breathing turns more ragged with every breath. The sharp headaches aren't just an interval thing anymore, but on-and-off intermittent. Needles seem to stab through his skull, unlikely to heal if simply left alone. But it's nothing to go to the hospital for.

Subaru doesn't know the cause of the pain, but he likely does know the reason for it.

Kenichi: “You aren't looking good, Subaru. Want me to piggyback you back to the house?”

Subaru: “Don't piggyback me, don't haveta go back. ...Since if I do go back, it'll be with you.”

And going back to the house where Naoko is will only make his condition worse. Subaru's starting to understand what this pain is, and what it is that makes it compound. If it's what he's imagining, then returning back home to Naoko alongside Kenichi exactly is going to make that pain spike to its absolute limit. Meaning,

Subaru: “I'm getting lectured by my own damn body.”

His body's now wailing at his guilt for his constant running away.

The period of terror spend in his room hugging his knees, staring at the clock. The restless pain, panic, and sharp headaches that came regardless him crossing that junction.

The discomfort's almost as if someone is screaming, ranting, scolding Subaru from inside his own skull.

—Don't know who you are, but what the hell do you think you know about me?

Kenichi: “You know what, Subaru. —Is there somebody you, like?”

The topic suddenly changes. It's the same unfunny joke Kenichi asked back in Subaru's room. The first time Subaru just laughed it off and gave a reply, but this second time is vaguely irritating him. The endless pain in his head also factoring in, Subaru goes to give a displeased reply when—

???: <—Subaru>

Suddenly comes to him is the illusion of a voice, clear as a silver bell, swaying his heart.

Subaru: “—huh?”

Subaru lifts his head, looking for the source of the voice. But no matter where he looks he can't find the voice's owner—the only other person in the park is Kenichi, whose brows jump up in surprise.



ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Kenichi: “What? You look as if a hot girl who shouldn't exist suddenly called your name.”

Subaru: “It might actually be exactly that so I really have no reply but... You didn't call my name just then? Dad, you haven't been practising how to sound like a hot girl, have you?”

Kenichi: “Your dad's the master of lotsa little tricks, however not that one. Alright, I'll practice it as conversation stuffing so ask me that question again in about a month.”

Subaru: “It's not conversation stuffing... seriously, what was that?”

Kenichi looks dumbfounded. Subaru averts his gaze and ruminates over that voice he just heard. The silver-bell voice was awfully gentle, but filled with a spark, so much so that Subaru forgot his headache for that second alone.

A saving voice of which he knew not the source—with his headache calmed by the voice of a goddess, Subaru's expression slightly loses its edginess. And, with Subaru's breathing now somewhat organized,

Kenichi: “Alright, so the question. There somebody you, like?”

Subaru: “...What've you been on about. What're you getting at by asking this. Supposing there was, you wouldn't know her even if I told you her name.”

Kenichi: “Well that's exactly why I don't know her. Maybe the girl you like just happens to be in my phone's contact list.”

Subaru: “If this hypothetical girl I like gave you her email address, well even centennial loves do fade.”

Kenichi pouts. Subaru downs the rest of his cola.

Subaru: “You don't have to be indirect about it. You can just ask it straight-out. ...Why aren't I going to school.”

Kenichi: “You're being considerate of people for once, but man you still can't read the mood, son.”

Kenichi: “Well,”

Kenichi: “I did want to talk about that, so you're not wrong.”

Subaru: “I do think... it's bad of me.”

Kenichi: “There's no real need to think. Just absent-mindedly think about whatever ideas you have, and if you've got no ideas then eh, well to a certain extent you've got a body where you can overlook that.”

Kenichi finishes his cola too and sits down next to Subaru, the wooden bench creaking. The two go

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

on looking ahead, neither seeing the other's face.

Kenichi: “Dunno what the world at large believes, but I don't really think school's everything. I'm saying this as someone who didn't go to school seriously in the first place. I ditched my highschool graduation ceremony, and my little sister had to get my diploma for me.”

Subaru: “I've heard this story so many times already. My second aunt went to the same high school, so when she graduated they handed her your diploma too. Ears're blistered from hearing it.”

Kenichi: “Well, let's keep going 'till they're whiskered, too. So, I don't think you have to go to school if you don't wanna. Now that I'm my age, looking back I suppose I do sometimes think yes that not seriously going to school was a loss but, that's not a clear thing in your case yet.”

Kenichi seems to be staring off somewhere in the distance, looking serious. Subaru glances at this, and thinks that yup, my dad really is unfair. Goes around usually showing nothing but stupid crap, and then puts it all away in a setting like this.

Kenichi: “Don't think it's alright? On average, humans live for 80 years now. You've got 80 years, so I don't care if you waste one or two. You'll recover while you're still young and shape up fine. Fortunately, you have my earnings helping out on that one too.”

Kenichi: “If you're living you're gonna crash into problems you can't really answer. When I crash into those problems, I run around 'till I get the answer but, maybe rolling around inside your room's a way to get an answer too. I won't complain while you're deliberating. But if you're starting to give up, then ehh well maybe I'll butt in.”

Subaru: “...Why.”

Kenichi: “Hm?”

Subaru: “Why did you suddenly get in the mood to talk about this today. ...There's nothing really special about today. Today is just, the Peas Day.”

Kenichi: “Plate full and overflowing.”

Even though he's just had a can of cola, Subaru feels his throat rapidly go dry. While taking harsh, gasping breaths, Subaru waits for Kenichi to answer his question. Seeing Subaru's situation, Kenichi tilts his head.

Kenichi: “Hrmmm,”

Kenichi: “Why was it. It happened to be my day off, and just while I was having my towel rubdown this morning I thought, the morning horoscopes said Aquarius's in perfect form, and your expression today was... it's really only a teensy bit, but I felt it'd gotten better.”

Subaru: “My face, got better?”

Kenichi: “Your expression. Your face's the same as always, only takes after Mom's eyes, a bad guy's

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

face.”

Kenichi: “Dunno what happened, but your face didn't look like one of a guy who just stays holed in in his room all day. Though going from what Mom said, sounds like yesterday you didn't go out and you should just be some guy who stays holed in his room all day.”

Subaru: “...That's, what it should be. I did surf the grand waves the internet yesterday though.”

Kenichi: “If people could mature doing that, then I wouldn't get a straight rise of lost girl lambs coming to me with their problems on Twitter, I'd get a straight decrease.”

Subaru: “So you're even doing that...”

What Kenichi's saying isn't really clicking for Subaru. It should really be exactly like his mother said, the Subaru of yesterday should just be the same slothfully-indulgent time waster he'd always been.

It's only been a day, but saying that that aura about him's suddenly changed is,

Subaru: “Dad's mistaken or stuck on some idea, otherwise he doesn't understand me properly.”

Kenichi: “That last one really does sting! But even still, waiting here on my cellphone's a hardlocked picture of baby you and your lovely devil smile.”

Subaru: “Lovely's fine, but the devil part's coming from how you can tell my eyes look nasty even when I was a baby.”

Yesterday's still yesterday, today's still today. Subaru's still spending his time changing absolutely nothing.

And he thinks that's okay, and he thinks he'll go ahead and do that. And if he continued doing that, Kenichi and Naoko would surely eventually realise it.

—What Subaru truly desires, that is.

Subaru: “—gghuahh!”

The second he thinks it, a pain slams him like fireworks going off in his face. The creaking of his skull is so intense it feels his brain's going to burst out. Subaru, still seated on the bench, breaks down.

His heartbeat again turns into an alarmbell, the sound of blood rushing through his veins and arteries clearly audible to him. The world before him blurs, splits into two, into three.

The rising feeling of nausea, and the arcane core of heat in the back of his chest asserting its existence.

Tormenting the being known as Subaru in their different ways, as if screaming their complaint.

Kenichi: “Hey, this seriously looks bad. Are you okay, Subaru?”

Concerned, Kenichi puts his hands on Subaru's shoulders. Subaru raises his head, and even while

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

the sweat rises on his brow,

Subaru: “Ahh... yeah, I'm okay. Just, a little dizzy...”

???: <—It was tough, wasn't it?>

Subaru: “—!?”

Again, the silver-bell voice sends goosebumps down Subaru's entire body. A voice filled with affection and sympathy. The voice seems to melt Subaru's strained heart, directly interfering with the screams of the suffering, the pain, the creaking, the heat—all uniformly weakening.

What was this voice. Why did this pain and suffering retreat from this voice. He had a feeling he knew this voice. That he'd always been seeking it. Yearning and yearning, pursuing and pursuing, clinging, releasing, but again getting it back—

???: <Thank you, Subaru.>

Subaru: “You're...”

The image of silver hair dancing in the wind burns itself beneath his eyelids. Sparkling amethyst looking at Subaru from straight ahead, every sound from her lips filling him with affection.

???: <You saved me.>

What, what, what, what, what was this.  
Who, who, who, who, who, who, who, who, who was this.

—The reason for his suffering was probably this girl. That he had pained, suffered, faced experiences so bitter he seemed about to puke, was probably this girl's fault.

???: <—Subaru.>

His breath catches. His throat burns. Something builds up behind his eyes.

???: <There's no helping it, so...>

His fingers tremble. His legs lose all strength. His throat cramps, his lungs seeming to spasm.

???: <You're always covering things up like that, Subaru...>

Covering his face with his trembling hands, holding back a sob from his cramped throat, spilling the gathered heat from his his eyes, Subaru—

???: <Why did you save me?>

—The answer was already inside him.

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

The second he found it, the whirlpool of every little unpleasant thing inside him vanishes. The creaking in his skull, the welling nausea, the dizziness blurring the world, the ringing of his frantic heartbeat signalling a selection closing in, all of it resolves back to normal as if guiding Natsuki Subaru ahead.

He lifts his head, wipes away his tears with his sleeve. He stares at his dampened sleeve, rotates his arm to shake off the vestiges of the tears, and clenches his hand into a fist.

Subaru: “Sorry, for worrying you. I'm okay now.”

Kenichi: “Really? It's good if you're calmed down, but I was pretty dang worried.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I'm sorry. And, about that question from before.”

Subaru unhooks Kenichi's arms from his shoulders, and looks him straight in the eye. Thinking about it, despite all the times the two had talked today, Subaru had never once looked at his father's face directly. Inside his chest, Subaru laughs bitterly at his own weakness.

Subaru: “—There is somebody I like. So I'm, okay now.”

Imaging that silver face burned into his eyelids, Natsuki Subaru's resolve to face his past becomes definite.

## CHAPTER 18: KIN

—Subaru feels his head clearing.

The chorale of pain and suffering fades down to nothing, Subaru's thoughts focusing on only one thing—his resolve to face his father, standing right before him.

Subaru: “I've got somebody I like. Even though it's me.”

He repeats his answer. In voicing it again, Subaru recognizes that his heart is beginning to walk. Kenichi blinks at the confession, realising that what Subaru just said diverges from the flow of how that conversation was going.

Kenichi: “...Do you now.”

Kenichi says quietly, lending Subaru his ear. That attitude's a lifesaver for Subaru. He must've known all along that he had people who would listen to him like this, and yet he'd kept his mouth shut for so long.

Now, Subaru thought, was time to end that.

—Because if he did, there was someone there who'd push him forward.

Subaru: “I do. I'm not some brat who just curls up into a little ball in his room anymore.”

Even Subaru doesn't know how much he's really changed. Even while insisting he's not a brat, he has enough self-awareness to recognize that he is.

He hadn't taken notice of his courage to lift his head, his resolve to face his weakness, his resolution to not flee from something unpleasant, nothing.

He used to be worse than a brat. Now, he had just finally accepted that he was one. That was all. And even that was something he certainly hadn't achieved by himself.

The silver face drifting in his mind tickles at Subaru's chest. That face was the light which gave a motionless, stagnant, frozen Subaru heat.

Silver—fundamentally a cold colour, but here it transmitted Subaru an incredible warmth, the strength to step forward. And as if floating on that heat,

Subaru: “I remember what I was scared of, why I withdrew into a ball, everything. —No, it's that I already knew everything. I knew, and pretended I didn't... While I feigned ignorance about my weaknesses that only I noticed, there was someone...”

Someone who he couldn't fool. He knew who.

Subaru: “I wanted you or mom to slap me.”

Kenichi goes quiet.

Subaru: “I wanted you two to slap the useless, minuscule, paltry, idiotic, complacent garbage that I

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

was. ...I wanted to make you give up.”

Kenichi's silent gaze doesn't waver. Subaru sees himself reflected in irises the colour of his own, his fundamentally sharp eyes looking weaker than ever.

Subaru: “I used to just be good at doing everything well. There was running, studying... I could immediately do the things my friends couldn't, I was actually mystified why nobody else could do them.”

Call it a child's conceit, or an adorable feeling of omnipotence.

Young Subaru improved more quickly than his peers at athletics, studying. He ran faster than those around him as if it was obvious, was cleverer than kids his age as if that were natural, became the centre of his surroundings as if it was agreed—

<Yup, you definitely are his son.>

That was the appraisal he heard from adults and people in the neighbourhood, endlessly. Knowing that 'he' was his dad, those around him had recognized him as being his father's son. — For a young Subaru, hearing those words was a point of pride.

Even from his son's eyes, his dad—Subaru's father, Natsuki Kenichi—was a character of great allure.

Laughed a lot, talked a lot, cried a lot, angered a lot, moved a lot, worked a lot.

Never afraid to publicly declare his love for Subaru and Naoko, people who adored his father were always in his vicinity, him constantly standing in the middle of a crowd of people's smiles.

His father was Subaru's greatest pride, and being that the people said father treated most dearly was his family—himself and his mother—inspired in Subaru a sense of superiority so strong as to be Hubris.

—I want to be like my father. I want to be being like my father.

As far as young Subaru was concerned, the size of his father's back was the size of the world itself, the world being something he viewed only from atop his Father's shoulders.

And so Subaru spent his days with happiness inside happiness.

But,

Subaru: “When did it start... Don't really remember, but I think it when I lost to someone in a footrace. Since then, I stopped being the best at things I was best at. People faster than me started showing up, people who solved problems quicker than me started showing up. I knew I was gradually, but definitely falling, and I thought that was peculiar.”

The glittering stars in the sky inside Subaru's heart had become distant.

Reach out his hand, run circles beneath the sky, but the stars shining their light down on Subaru's surroundings were disappearing, and the night darkness and silence which enveloped him, compounding.

But even amidst this arcane sense of unease,

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

<Yup, you definitely are his son.>

Hearing those words was Subaru's salvation, a hope to cling to.

Even if he wasn't the fastest, wasn't the smartest, those words were what supported young Subaru's dignity.

Rather than train his running, rather than devote himself to his homework, what he ended up prioritising was doing stupid things.

Sneaking into school with his friends at night, drawing a white line all through the town, chasing a famous and dangerous stray dog out of everyone's hangout spot—doing that would stop everyone from tiring of him, and Subaru protected the stars that yet remained.

Subaru: “Putting effort into study's ridiculous. What's so boastworthy about running fast. What I'm doing, smiling with everyone, is infinitely greater, infinitely stronger.”

For the sake of preserving that mistaken pride, he had to keep running.

He did what everyone feared, he challenged what everyone hated, following through to the end so, so carefully, so as not to lose where he was.

Subaru: “But, if I was going to protect myself like that, I always needed to make the next thing bigger. I couldn't do something smaller than what I'd done before. People'd think I was someone small if I did, and that'd be something terrible.”

Thus Subaru's actions had to get steadily more extreme.

And if anyone asked why he did such things, he answer was because he was Natsuki Subaru.

—Yes, because that had to be Natsuki Subaru.

Natsuki Subaru was braver than anyone, wilder than anyone, freer than anyone, and had to keep being an existence everyone admired.

So he strained himself, continued through the strain, concealed that he was straining, and so that even himself wouldn't notice it, he fooled both himself and the people around him that he could do more, much more.

After all, he was son of Natsuki Kenichi, Natsuki Subaru.

Subaru: “I thought I could do anything. I made myself believe I would do everything. And doing that, the things I did and things I achieved turned stupid, turned into nothing but mindless ruckus...”

Like an insect lured to a flame, unaware of the burn, desiring the heat.

Had he truly been a bug, Subaru would've been so enchanted by the fire he would've burned to nothing.

But Subaru wasn't an insect, and his friends around him were infinitely more human than him, too.

—Probably, there wasn't any particular trigger for it.

Subaru had a group of similarly brattish-faced friends. Like teeth falling from a comb, their numbers began to decrease.



#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “I thought they were stupid. You'll never get to experience these fun things if you're not with me. They can regret and do whatever, spend their time in uselessness, that's all fine. I'm looking someplace higher.”

If he continued to search for the stars' whereabouts, he would settle everything without losing sight of the stars above his head. But the supposedly-boundless stars which blanketed that sky disappeared, until only one single twinkling light remained, which Subaru stared at, ran toward—and suddenly, when he looked down from the starry sky to the ground,

Subaru: “I was the only one left around me.”

Of course this happened.

Subaru, never looking back to what was around him, endlessly pursuing stars invisible to everyone. The friends who thought it fun at first couldn't keep up with the—still no ending point in sight—escalation of inhabitation.

Unaware of this, and mocking those who left as idiots, those who remained felt anxiety and doubt towards Subaru's thinking.

One by one the friends at Subaru's side disappeared, and before he had even realised, the only one remaining beneath the starry sky was him.

Disgruntled and displeased, when he looked up at the sky to forget—

Subaru: “That shining, shimmering star supposed to be over my head, was already nowhere I could find it.”

Having lost sight of the starlight, having lost the friends around him, left all alone in the darkness of night, Subaru finally realised it.

—I was never anyone special.

<Yup, you definitely are his son.>

Those magic words which inspired young Subaru such pride, which brought such vitality to his heart.

At some point, they turned into a curse.

Subaru: “You can tell just by going outside and wandering around town. Wherever you go, wherever you look, traces of my dad remain. ...Well, of course they would.”

Subaru's constrained world was surely the exact same scenery he had seen from atop his father's shoulders.

For a Subaru who sought to reach the same heights as his father, no matter where he looked in this constrained world, he could find not a single place untouched by his father's lingering scent.

The world consequently transformed into a terrifying place for Subaru.

What simultaneously chewed at Subaru's heart was his own unfortunately-recognized banality, and the shame keeping him from wanting his parents, and those who knew his parents, to know about it.

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Favoured by everyone, relied upon by everyone, smiled upon by everyone.

That the son of Natsuki Kenichi, Natsuki Subaru—worried by people's opinions of him and curled timidly in a little ball—was a tizzied coward terrified at the wideness of the word, was an impermissible thought.

Negative judgements passed on him were a disgrace to the father who asserted his love for Subaru, and surely would bring him disappointment from same father. Nothing was more frightening for Subaru.

For elementary and middle school, Subaru successfully kept to his plans to end the years without standing out.

The classmates who had known him back in early primary did tilt their heads at this quietened Subaru—but, being children in a delicate period, they went spending lively days without noticing a single scrap of the darkness harboured in their classmate's heart, and forgot such trivialities. What Subaru got truly skilled at during his entrenchment in that time, most probably, was passing in the shadows when among his classmates, while playing to completion the role of the same mischievous son as ever when among his family.

As submissive as a weed in the shade at highschool, yet recovering his old wildness when back home, was how Subaru acted, as if he were two different people.

Tales of his war stories after coming back from school made his mother grin as she did her chores, and brought a smile to his work-tired father's face.

—Perhaps his parents had noticed that every single word from his mouth was bullshit. Even now, Subaru wasn't sure that they knew.

Painting over his elementary and middle school years—the majority of his life—with lies, the human known as Natsuki Subaru crafted a false image.

Everyone forgot about the old Subaru's misdeeds, and his existence became recognized as a classmate who didn't stand out and who people knew the name of, but nothing more.

Although feeling a tinge of loneliness at that frail connection, what more encompassed Subaru's heart was fear. This name he held of 'Natsuki' itself held a certain power, and awe devoted toward it.

Subaru: “Thinking of it now, that was a pretty dark way to live. But by doing that, I got through primary and middle school. And getting through middle school, I became a highschooler... local high school, but guess there were standard grade score problems. Barely any of my classmates went on to that same high school, so...”

Even though Subaru had acquired a habit of thinking about everything backwards, he still had one fragment of courage left to urge him forward towards this chance at a sudden change in environment.

Mustering up that minuscule drop of courage, Subaru gritted his teeth and raised his head.

Entering highschool, a new place. A mass of unknown faces, yet-uncertain relations.

There, even if people judged Subaru as Natsuki Subaru, there would surely not be a single person simultaneously judging him as NATSUKI KENICHI'S SON. And there, then maybe—just maybe he would again see the light of the starry sky he had lost.

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

The way Subaru used that courage definitively brought him stumbling off that path.

Subaru: “Even I have to say that was an incredible failure of a high school début. I mean, of course. When you have someone who didn't establish any real human connections through elementary and middle school, and they're breathing ragged and nasal in a room full of unknown faces, forcing away their tension, and they do something ridiculous... even an idiot would know what would happen.”

He didn't know what an idiot would know would happen, which upon reflection meant Subaru hadn't even been on an idiot's level.

He didn't want to discuss the details. Results are speculation.

Regarding human relations, Subaru had no models of behaviour greater than his father, so when he went to build connections with new people in a new environment, his only available reference was his father.

—Even the actions which would earn smiles when he was young, now when preformed in a school appropriate for persons welcoming their secondary sexual characteristics and accordant mental changes, were nothing but poison.

Subaru: “Poison's poison. Deadly poison. And it was one of those real conspicuous, red-and-white speckled mushroom 'I AM DEADLY POISON, EAT ME AND YOU DIE' ones, too.”

The foot he lifted to tread into this new environment slipped on the first step, and Subaru plunged into the Abyss. Spending his time with a social position established at some socially dense, incomprehensible, random guy, he suddenly thought it one day.

—Ahh, I don't wanna go to school today.

Subaru: “I think it was a morning where dad and mom were both out of the house with things to do. I was thinking it'd be a pain, and laid there through the time when I usually woke up... and when I did rush to get myself up, shocked that it was already noon, and I went to stand up to get dressed, that was when.”

He noticed that his heart, and body, were terribly calm.

When attending class, sitting at his seat beside the window, pretending to sleep and wordlessly letting time pass, fear and anxiety constantly tormented Subaru's heart.

All he ever thought about from the second he arrived was how he didn't want to be there, and going back home. Actually no, it was from the moment he woke up that he spent his time thinking only of coming back home from school.

It wasn't that he was being bullied. It wasn't that he was being ignored.

It was simply that Subaru had built up a wall from his side. The thought of touching someone's kindness, and winding up embracing hope terrified him. Whenever he thought of possibly seeing the starlight again, unease took him.

One day finished without spending those hours in pure agony. Enchanted by the feelings of liberation and relief, and lethargy, Subaru's feet steadily grew further and further away from school.

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “Then I'd be skipping three days a week, and then even skipping one of those two days too... it didn't even take two months before I stopped going to school completely.”

He didn't want to talk about what his days were like after that.

No longer going to school, Subaru's heart filled with relief. There was liberation at being distanced from school, where he had to pass time in agony, but the more prevalent things filling Subaru's heart were a kind of resignation and affirming acceptance.

No big reason for it, persistently complacent and now a truant, Subaru.

Highly doubtful there'd be anyone who'd see that Subaru and think YUP, YOU'RE DEFINITELY HIS SON, and most importantly—if his parents could just be disappointed in seeing that pathetic Subaru, both his mother and father would surely stop LOVING him.

If an unloved son received valuations as being useless, that would be insignificant to them.

If a beloved son was deemed as something useless, then that would surely anger them. Sadden them. People seeing them would know their circumstances were pathetic, and they would further look down on them.

The thinner the relationship between Subaru and his parents became, the more that concern would disappear and things would surely improve.

And so, Natsuki Subaru—

Subaru: “I don't goddamn love you. I goddamn hate you. You're... not my goddamn son. I wanted you to do that, say that, and throw me away. I wanted to make you give up on me.”

Anticipating the presence of stars which shouldn't exist, a hope still flickering, he looked up at the sky.

That pathetic, unmanly human called Subaru—that idiotic being unworthy of being Natsuki Kenichi's son—wanted to be freed.

—Not even Subaru himself had realised that this was what laid in his heart.

Facing and exposing the innards of his heart, putting it into words, Subaru for the first time realised the ugliness of his own heart. How minuscule he was, in his unwillingness to recognize his weaknesses and idiocies, in his averting his eyes, in his attempts to push even this onto someone else, made him feel sick.

That Subaru nevertheless would complete things without giving up on himself, without abandoning himself, was because had a support.

???: <Well, I love you, Subaru-kun!>

A dim, flicking blue light now overlapped with the silver face beneath his eyelids.

A gentle breeze blew into Subaru's heart, filling his chilled limbs with warmth, restoring him.

???: <Let's start from here. From step one... no, from zero!>

Saying that, she pushed forward a Subaru who was supposed to have ended.

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

She made a Subaru who could no longer walk and now faced downwards raise his head, took his hand, embraced his chest, kissed his forehead, and gave him courage.

With the silver light enchanting him and conferring him heat, with the blue warmth pushing his back and prompting him to walk forward, a Subaru who was supposed to have ended once again started from zero.

Since he could realize that, since he could remember that, since he resolved to start walking again from zero—the past, what came before zero, had to be settled.

Kenichi closes his eyes and goes quiet after hearing Subaru's long monologue. Seeing that, Subaru desperately forces his coming weakness and spinelessness back down his throat.

Given the time to reflect like this, it's exactly because his mental state has changed at least even slightly that Subaru can now recognize the ugliness of his true heart.

Both now and before, Subaru pushed the consequences of his own actions onto others to clean up. He didn't have the courage to give up on himself. He didn't want to scream that he was the worst person in the world. He wanted to be the protagonist of a tragedy, so he silently waited for someone to be the villain.

Subaru believed that by not attending school, by spending his days in sloth in his room, by having his imbecilic self continue in this—then, one day Kenichi would break down the door, and end Subaru's world for him.

Unconsciously, from the bottom of his heart, Subaru expected that conclusion from his days of sloth.

It was in that deadlocked mentality that he came to this parallel world. And even here, Subaru exhibited his complacency, and eventually—

Kenichi: “—Subaru.”

Kenichi opens his eyes. This draws Subaru out of his sea of meditation and back to the reality around him—to his father's face before him. And,

Kenichi: “Father Headbutt!”

Subaru: “Adauuadh!?”

Subaru eats a terrible strike to the forehead, whining as fireworks flash across his vision. He pushes down on the sharp pain on his brow, to find Kenichi standing up off the bench and looking down at him.

Kenichi: “See that, Subaru. That was my love-filled Father Headbutt, a strike of anger.”

Subaru: “You're calling it a headbutt but that was a kick! Getting your face close as a feint, this's crazy elaborate!”

Kenichi: “It's cause you're sitting and I'm standing that I pulled it off. But man, my body really has gotten stiffer. Absolutely can't get like before. Been slacking on my after-bath stretches.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

And so Kenichi starts doing some callisthenics. Subaru rubs his stricken head, half in tears, unsure how to react to this expectedly unexpected reaction. What Subaru'd anticipated was—

Kenichi: “But, Subaru. You're, man... you're kinda an idiot.”

Subaru: “Uuueguh”

Kenichi's point-blank words split Subaru in two, a sobbing-sounding noise coming out of his throat. Kenichi crosses his arms and snorts.

Kenichi: “You're damn worrying like nuh-nuh-nuh-nuh-nuh... Where from me and Mom did you manage to get that timorous thinking? You're inheriting that straight from your Mom's little brother. You know, the tiny bald fat one, the one who always looks so worried.”

Subaru: “That's going too far.. no but I mean yes, uncle is the reason I decided on not going bald or getting fat as benchmarks for my life.”

Kenichi: “Lotsa things you just said're getting at me, but the biggest one's *that*. Ain't fond of you thinking you're trying to get me to hate you, and then being so passive about it. Holing up in your room, never going to school, turning into an Apathy Syndrome patient... and thinking that doing that your dad's gonna flip out and scold you's absolutely nrrrrrooop. ...Are you an idiot? You wanna get told off? You a girl with the wrong idea who didn't get enough skinship? All that wrestling we did this morning, and that's really still not enough for you?”

Subaru: “The phrasing you used in lots of places there's so wrong but the point of it's right so I can't actually refute it..”

Kenichi: “If you want me to throw you away, put more effort into it. Just who do you think could throw away their own kid closed up in their shell? You wanna be hated, then go slaughter half of humanity for no real reason. Then I'll hate you.”

Subaru: “You don't even get villains like that in shonen manga anymore! That's ridiculous!”

Kenichi: “—For me, what you said is just as ridiculous as that.”

Subaru goes speechless. Kenichi bends down to match Subaru's eye level.

Kenichi: “Even if you're slow as a snail, or too dumb for times tables, or go bragging on some self-harm blog for attention...”

Subaru: “I'm not that slow or dumb or idiotic...”

Kenichi: “Even if you were that slow or dumb or idiotic, I wouldn't hate or abandon you. Isn't that obvious? After all, I'm your father, and you're my son.”

Kenichi straightens back up.

Kenichi: “Anyway, you sure do treat me like some superman. From what you were saying, I'm like

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

some high-tech mega-giga perfect-flawless super-ultraman.”

Subaru: “Redundancy.”

Kenichi: “You don't know this, but my worrying, regretting, failing, crying, wailing, getting rejected... doesn't happen very much. Cause my face's good. You didn't get my looks though.”

Subaru: “Presumption.”

Kenichi: “I was inexperienced too, when I was your age. I mean yes my name did get pretty big, but that didn't mean I was anyone special. Just that I was a bit of a time-stopper.”

Subaru: “Then you should've stopped time last year when you got hit by that car.”

Ba-dum tssh.

Kenichi offers his hand out for a high-five, which Subaru has to reciprocate. And Kenichi grabs Subaru's arm tight.

Kenichi: “Now, I suppose it's fine to keep twisting my stupid idiot pain-in-the-ass son's wrist to knock that personality out of him, but...”

Subaru: “Ow! Aaaugow! Wai, my wrists's.... Owwww!”

Kenichi: “...looks like you've already been broken and gotten back up enough that this'sn't necessary.”

Kenichi releases Subaru's arm. Subaru stands up while shaking his pained hand, Kenichi staring at him with one eye closed. Kenichi gives a small snort.

Kenichi: “Thought it this morning too, but you suddenly changed a lot from just a moment ago again. What's going on with that face.”

Subaru: “...I told you. I've got somebody I, like.”

That silver light pulled Natsuki Subaru's hand ahead.

Subaru: “And, there's someone who told me that they, liked, ones like me.”

That warm, blue light gently pushed Natsuki Subaru's back forward.

Subaru: “They don't know anything about me being Natsuki Kenichi's son. When I'm with them, I'm just Natsuki Subaru. ...No.”

Subaru shakes his head, and looks his father straight in the eye.

Subaru: “No matter who I was with, I was Natsuki Subaru. Burdening myself and bothering myself with some weird outer show, and crushed beneath an imaginary weight. I finally understand that now.”

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Kenichi: “Took you damn ages. Y’know, I’m the backbone of a family, here. You haven’t got an inheritance and you’re off burdening yourself and bothering yourself before you’re even a member of society. The bills’ll slap you hard.”

Subaru: “You only just did something more painful to me than a slap!”

Kenichi: “Sorry sorry”

Kenichi: “Anyway,”

Kenichi: “What’s this about you saying you have somebody you like, and somebody who says they like you? You’re two-timing them? With your social position, Subaru?”

Subaru: “Don’t talk about my social position! Even I know it’s way too much luxury! But that’s what it is! What’s so wrong about having two stars in number one!?”

Not that he was trying to get the conversation sobered up, but they were Subaru’s sincere feelings. He loved Emilia. He also loved Rem. Those two made him stand, made him walk, and even though before Kenichi, even though facing his past, they gave him the strength not to flee.

The sky of stars which once covered the whole of the heavens above—and the glittering starlight he saw then.

The two of them beamed down upon Subaru’s head with their light, strong, in no way inferior to the old others. And surrounding those Number One stars shone the glow of those supposedly-disappeared, different stars.

This was the sky of stars he had gained in a world outside his shut-in room, where he frantically suffered, sorrowed, cried and wailed, screamed and raged, smiled and ran, rejoiced and advanced.

Kenichi: “Well, ’s all fine. Do what you want. So long as you sort it out without breaking the law, I ain’t really gonna object. Like me, you’ve got some talent to you when it comes to duping others.”

Subaru: “If I really did then I wouldn’t’ve messed up my high school début slipped out of place worrying and been friendless. I can’t pull it off like you can, dad.”

Kenichi: “You know I really think that’s not the case? I mean, you’re my son. And also, I think you’re misunderstanding lotsa things, but that’s the worst one right there.”

Subaru: “Right there?”

Arms crossed and wagging a finger, Kenichi nods at Subaru, who’s tilted his head.

Kenichi: “Yeah,”

Kenichi: “I’m this fulla energy when I’m with you or Mom, but yknow your dad does know proper TPO? Maybe you don’t know this since this’s what I’m always like when I’m with you, but if your dad does these things with everyone they’re gonna recoil, oi.”



ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “Wait, wait, wait...”

Kenichi: “Isn't it obvious? See someone this high-energy on the first meeting and you're not gonna approach. This stuff's off limits until we're already friendly. Since I wait 'till it's a little hotter to unbutton. I endure from an April start to a June end.”

The shocking truth. Turns out, Subaru's dad was a sensible guy who properly adapts his behaviour to who he's talking to all along.

Ignorant of this, referencing off his regular dad, *If I act like my dad everyone will definitely absolutely no mistake like me!* Was Subaru's shallowness.

Subaru: “Then what even was all that time I spent stagnant...”

Kenichi: “Eh, well I don't think it was useless. It's because you had that, that you are who you are now. Do those stars you found really not make up for that time?”

Subaru raises his head. The reply comes to him instantly.

Subaru: “—Yes, they do. No matter how many chances I have, I'm going to keep wanting and running for the sky of stars I have now. So, I'm glad I am who I am now.”

Kenichi: “Right. ...Well so, wasn't it all good then?”

Kenichi smiles in relief. Seeing that smile, something hard, heavy and swollen inside Subaru's chest drops. He senses the darkness he harboured clearing, his melancholy being cleansed.

It was a pretty selfish and complacent feeling, but for Subaru, having it right now was a lifesaver. He got to face his past, separate from the person he had been until then, and while still holding who he had been until then, walk forward with pride as who he was now.

Subaru: “I'm sorry, for keeping quiet on so much. I was full of feelings I couldn't even sort out myself, and caused problems for you with my truancy. I truly do regret it. Truly.”

Kenichi: “I'm saying dunworry. It's my mistake for not noticing you were so into that too-super me. I'm who should be sorry, for being too big of a presence for you!”

Subaru: “It's completely true but it's amazing how little I wanna accept it now!”

Kenichi: “Ha ha ha, don't be shy. You're my son with my blood in you. Definitely, you're an amazing genius who has it in you to be half as cool as I am.”

Subaru: “Just half? Genius's something that gets more refined with each generation.”

Kenichi: “Cause half of you's from Mom. Considering my coolness and negotiation skills, feels like the counterbalancing negatives from Naoko're way too strong.”

Subaru: “I'm sorry mom, I have no counter to that!”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Kenichi: “But, this took some of the load off your shoulders. Nothing to do 'bout your getting stuck, everything's from here on out, here on.”

Subaru: “Ah, yeah. Umm, I caused so much trouble for you and I'm..”

Kenichi: “If you're thinking 'sorry', then just take the time to properly pay me back. You look after me and Mom well in the future, first-born son.”

—Hearing that, Subaru goes still.

He had the resolve to apologize for the whole of the conversation until then, and the determination to confess to Kenichi his feelings. In doing so, Subaru thought he would finally melt the malaise he had held for so long, and get to face his mother and father with cheer.

Subaru: “—guueh,”

Thus, the second he heard the words 'from here on out,' what surged up though Subaru's entire being was—

Subaru: “...I—I'm so sorry.”

Kenichi: “Subaru?”

Subaru: “I'm sor—sorr, so, sorry—I, sorry, s-sorry—soh, ree... hk,”

A torrent of tears blots out Subaru's vision, turning the world blurry. He covers his face with his hands and frantically wipes at the flowing tears. But no matter how hard he does, the tears don't stop. They don't stop. They won't stop.

Subaru: “I'mso, sorry... I—I... you two, any more... so—I'm so, sorry...”

—He realised it.

Somewhere within his heart, he had realised it long ago.

From the instant that he narrowed his eyes at the brilliance of the new world's sunlight, Subaru knew it as if it were absolute revelation.

—He would never be able to return to the old world.

He had conveyed his deepest of hearts to his father, confessed the dark feelings lodged in his chest, nevertheless gained forgiveness, and received support for his resolve to start walking—and had been raised well enough to be capable of it all.

Subaru: “But despite that, I... without, repaying anything... I'll never, see, you again... I'm sorry. Sor—sorry. ...I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry.”

The tears don't stop. The emotion's so intense he might fall into a squat at any moment. But even so, Subaru remains standing upright—and what's keeping him from collapsing is the body

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

holding him in an embrace.

With his large, firm hands, about the exact same height at his son, Kenichi holds a bawling Subaru tight and soothingly taps him on the back, saying,

Kenichi: “—You always were such a difficult son. I swear.”

Soothingly, lovingly, Kenichi maintains the embrace indefinitely.



Kenichi: “Calmed down?”

Subaru: “—Yeah. Sorry. I really, just cause so many problems.”

Kenichi: “Seriously. Just look at my shirt. Chest bit's gotten all flaky with snot and tears. So embarrassing I can't go prowling round the neighbourhood right.”

Subaru's stopped crying. Kenichi bounces his finger off Subaru's forehead and laughs. Subaru watches Kenichi, his own face thoroughly cried-out, his gaze sorrowful and apologetic. Kenichi sighs.

Kenichi: “Don't know why you started bawling, but I bet that was embarrassing so I'll keep it secret for you. Now, express to me your gratefulness.”

Subaru: “...Yeah. I am grateful. I sincerely, from the bottom of my heart, more than anyone in the world, am grateful.”

Kenichi: “Even I'm gonna blush hearing that one.”

Kenichi scratches his cheek and smiles embarrassedly. Subaru can't keep looking at Kenichi's face there for long, and winds up averting his gaze. Kenichi shrugs and waves his hands as if flicking a bug away.

Kenichi: “Now, home and home you go, blubberbug. Your dad feels like strolling a little longer, so I'll take a bit of a detour back. Some weird rumours're gonna start circling if I go walking around with a crying you.”

Subaru: “...What a parent and child our age were up to together'd be a story in itself.”

Kenichi: “Seriously. We go home together now, and your friends's rumours'll embarrass you hard.”

Subaru: “That line can be fatal depending who you're saying it to so be careful how you use it.”

Unintentionally entering straight-man mode, a lash of homesickness spears Subaru's heart. Subaru grits his teeth to stifle the feeling dead and turns his face away.

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “So,”

Subaru: “I’ll be going home ahead. Try not to get interrogated or whatever.”

Kenichi: “Sorry to crush your expectations, but all the policemen 'round here are my buddies. They’re not gonna give me anything even if I prompt them.”

Subaru: “Don’t prompt them.”

Same Kenichi as ever. Subaru again feels Kenichi's attitude save him, and feels thoroughly sick of his same old weakness as ever. Just how far was he going to go feeling satisfied with relying on others to protect him? Hopeless.

And further, he didn't want to expose his weakness before Kenichi. Subaru gives a sharp sigh, turns around, and starts walking. Quickly, to soon disappear from this scene.

Kenichi: “—Hey, Subaru.”

Subaru's feet stop.

Kenichi: “I’m sure you’ve got a lotta stuff too. So I’ll keep it down to just one thing.”

Subaru says nothing.

Kenichi: “Do your best. I’m expecting things from you, son.”

Subaru feared others having expectations for him, others being disappointed in him. The unease of possibly betraying his father's expectations constantly gripped Subaru and never let him go. Which was why, in the face of his father's expectations, a symbol of terror for Subaru—

Subaru: “—Yeah. Leave it to me, dad.”

His back still turned to Kenichi, he jabs his finger to the heavens.

Subaru: “My name is Natsuki Subaru. Son of Natsuki Kenichi. —So I can do anything, and will do everything. Your son's damn amazing.”

Kenichi: “Yup, I know that. After all, half of you's from me!”

Kenichi's hearty laugh pours over Subaru's back. A smile rises on Subaru's face.

Back still turned, Subaru starts walking.

His knees shake not. His heart wavers not. He simply looks firmly ahead, and walks.

—With the owner of the back he had always stared up at now staring at his back, he walks.

And see how much power that fact alone gave him, thinks Subaru.

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Never stopping, Subaru walks on.

## CHAPTER 19: HOMEWORK

Subaru heads for home through the familiar townscape while sorting out his heart.

There's several strong emotions in Subaru's chest as he walks.

He'd never gone wandering around like this, while the sun was up, since he became a truant. That this scenery, which he was supposed to have walked through many times, appeared different was probably not entirely due to the sunlight.

Subaru: “Well, not like truants go walking around under the dazzling Mighty Sun often.”

Couldn't bear becoming the subject of rumours or being taken in by the police.

Even if Subaru's unnoticed true desire was for his parents to hate him, he didn't want it to be from doing something that'd get the police involved.

There's memories all along the path back home. Feeling the ground under his soles in confirmation, he walks through the quiet—more rather, unpopulated—townscape. Around the time he stops noticing the dried tears on his cheeks is when he reaches his house's front gate.

He takes a breath, and stops.

Eyes closed, he swallows down all the multitude emotions in his heart.

Subaru: “—I'm home.”

He opens the door and waits for a reply. But the reply he absolutely should be getting isn't coming. Furrowing his brow in confusion, Subaru takes off his shoes and goes inside, scanning his gaze about for his supposedly-present mom.

Naoko: “...Welcome home.”

—Says Naoko as she glances back at Subaru, herself standing before the refrigerator, a bottle of mayonnaise in her mouth.

Subaru: “...I'm home.”

His stress gone elsewhere, Subaru's shoulders slump as he smiles wryly and gives that reply.



Subaru: “When I didn't get a reply after saying 'I'm home,' I was worried something'd happened.”

Naoko: “Nothing happened, silly. Look, mom's mayonnaise was all empty. So I was just sneaking a sip of Dad's mayonnaise when... Lately, I've been feeling that you and your dad's voices sound alike, Subaru. I can't tell you apart over the phone.”

Subaru: “That conversation kinda jumped, but so it's because you couldn't tell me apart from dad

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

you were hiding. Or I mean, if you were trying to hide I think you'd want to be stealthier about it.”

Meeting his mom face-to-face in the living room, Subaru sucks up some of the contents from the mayo bottle and casually sets it on the table. Naoko tilts her head.

Naoko: “We'll keep it a secret from Dad. Drinking Dad's mayonnaise... Look, don't you think it's economical to taste the great flavour of mayonnaise and the flavour of Dad at the same time?”

Subaru: “There's no good way to respond to what sounds like some recorder-licking weirdo's court testimony! And saying that putting two things you like together's the best, are you in middle school?!”

Naoko: “So, what happened to Dad? You left him behind? Subaru, when did you become fast enough to leave your Dad behind?”

Subaru: “It's not like I could ever win in a footrace with dad anywa... or no, actually...”

Last time Subaru and Kenichi had had some kinda footrace, Kenichi left Subaru faaaaar behind. But that had been years ago. Comparing them now, Subaru definitely wouldn't be left behind so far, or even lose.

Subaru: “In the end, I was taking half-measures with damn everything.”

Leaning back on his chair so that it squeaks, Subaru gives a big stretch. Naoko puts her hand to her mouth and smiles.

Subaru: “What? Something funny?”

Naoko: “Just thought you looked exactly like Dad when you did that. He's always stretched his back while leaning on the chair-back. Then he'd put too much force into it and topple over.”

Subaru: “So not just our voices, even our mannerisms are alike. Can't tell whether that's a good or bad thing.”

Naoko: “I think it's good. —Yup, you definitely are his son.”

Subaru's heart gives a single, hard thump and he desperately manages to keep himself from groaning. Naoko blinks in surprise at seeing Subaru's face stiffen and eyes jolt open. Subaru quickly manages to settle the throbbing down.

Subaru: “Feels like I'll wind up staying if I keep being here too long, so...”

Subaru stand up and scratches his cheek.

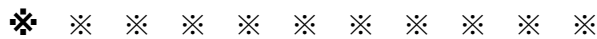
Subaru: “So hey, there's sorta something I wanna ask you.”

Naoko: “Yup, go ahead.”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Looking as if she's feigning ignorance about not recognizing Subaru's hesitation, Naoko casually glances back and forth between Subaru and the mayonnaise. Probably she wants some mayo just as much as she wants to hear her son go on with this. Completely dumbfounded by his mom's same-as-ever attitude, his face breaking out into a small smile, Subaru,

Subaru: “—Do you remember where I put my school uniform?”



—Subaru puts on his ironed white shirt and neat, clean slacks. He fastens his belt as he stands before the mirror, and with some struggling, gets his deep-green tie on. Then he puts on his navy blazer, and,

Subaru: “Student Natsuki Subaru, complete... Been like three months.”

Subaru gives a sigh at a job all done. This blazer outfit was mandatory every day, and tying the tie was a fucking pain, so he hated it for eating away at his precious sleeping hours. Even though he'd been tying it for two-and-a-bit years he still hasn't gotten good at it, which is pretty fucking uncool. But since this is his last time, his feelings about it are complicated.

Subaru: “It's the last time, so should I have it perfect, or just have it how I always do it?”

The answer's already inside him. He ties the tie shittily and just leaves it like that, turns around, looks over his room and grabs his schoolbag. Now matter how you looked at him, this was an exemplary high-schooler all ready to go to school.

Subaru: “But unfortunately forget homeroom, feels like third period'd be starting now. Nothing goddamn exemplary about setting out when the sun's already this high.”

Subaru goes to leaves his room. But right before he exits, he glances back as if remembering something. For a Subaru who had never moved houses once in his life, this room was the only place he could ever call 'My Room'. The place where, ever since he'd been given it after entering middle school, he'd spent almost six years waking and sleeping. Likely, this would be the last he'd ever see of it.

Saying nothing, Subaru silently bows his head.

After he ends that long, long bow, Subaru raises his head and in good spirits turns his back to the room. He clicks the door shut. He goes back down to the living room to see Naoko waiting there, and her sharp eyes open wide in surprise.

Naoko: “My. When you asked where your uniform and shirt was, I thought you might want to burn them and got everything ready... but that's all wasted now.”

Subaru: “When your son asks you where his uniform is your thoughts turn to immolation? Or I mean, when you say 'got everything ready' for the burning, those potatoes and those skewered



ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

franks and stuff are...?”

Subaru shivers as he looks at the cooking ingredients lined up on the table, at a loss for words. Naoko looks a newly-dressed Subaru once over.

Naoko: “Mhm, looks good. That outfit makes you feel like an adult, and right now balances your eyes so they look slightly tempered down.”

Subaru: “My mom's robbing me of said temper with that 'right now'!”

Naoko: “Why are you being so touchy? Want some mayonnaise to calm down?”

Subaru: “Right now, I'm not really in the...”

Naoko: “Well of course you're not.”

Naoko holds out a bottle of mayonnaise with an 'S' written on the cap, demarcating it as Subaru's personal stash. At hearing Subaru's rejection, Naoko nods as if she expected that response.

Naoko: “After all, you don't really like mayonnaise.”

Subaru goes silent.

Naoko: “You just drank it with us because me and dad love mayonnaise.”

Naoko sets the Subarunaise on the table and idly spins it around as she speaks. Subaru's throat clamps shut in surprise. Panicked, swallowing his breath and with his lips shaking,

Subaru: “Wh, what makes you...”

Naoko: “Okay Subaru, which would you choose, the world or mayonnaise?”

Subaru: “Um, that'd be the world...”

Naoko: “You see?”

Subaru: “That example's awful!! How're you getting all 'you see' and satisfied at that! Anyone who'd pick mayonnaise there doesn't really like mayonnaise they just hate the world!”

Subaru glares at the mayo on the table, then gives a small snort.

Subaru: “...How long have you been thinking that?”

Naoko: “Since forever. If me or Dad had no mayonnaise we'd be depressed like the world was ending, but that doesn't happen with you, Subaru.”

Subaru: “I'm despairing at the height of this hurdle you're asking.”

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

That said, Subaru's status as a Mayolover is not in question. Whenever you ask what seasoning he's going to go for it's mayonnaise. Mayonnaise for all fried foods. Snacks are mayonnaise flavoured with extra mayonnaise spread on them.

But if you were going to ask why was so attached to mayonnaise—

Subaru: “You two looked like you were savouring it so much, and I wanted to savour it the same way. Man my father complex-mother complex resulting family complex was intense...”

Naoko: “Can you add a super to that?”

Subaru: “Thus dubbed Super Family Complex aka Super Famicom—ugh just shut up.”

Subaru gives a sigh and reaches for the mayo on the table.

Naoko: “Ah,”

Subaru: “—phhhfah. Ah, it's good! Authentic mayonnaise really is different! The other replicated-ingredients mayonnaise is fine too, but yes it's the unhealthy uses-synthetic-colouring mayonnaise that's the real thing! Theirs is mayonneeze.”

He swallows down the once-full bottle of mayonnaise in one go, savouring the sour taste burning down his throat. This, was the mayonnaise that mayonnaise junkies couldn't ever stop loving.

Subaru: “Maybe I lose to two you when it comes to mayonnaise love, but I still am an adherent to the mayonnaise I can't ever stop loving. I swear it on every cap of every bottle I've drunk.”

By the way Subaru keeps a personal collection of all the caps of all the mayo bottles he's eaten in his room. There's 776. And with this new guy, it's 777.

Subaru: “Triple sevens. Mind putting this cap in my closet afterwards?”

Naoko: “Ooh, three sevens is lucky. Dad was overjoyed a little while ago when he got four sevens, too.”

Subaru: “Literally love in a different multitude!”

Naoko happily takes the cap. Subaru can't just accept what he's just heard, his sense of accomplishment being spoiled, but he immediately fixes his face anyway.

Subaru: “Now... well, bout time to go.”

Naoko: “Ah, if you're going to the convenience store, I'd like a cream puff so buy one.”

Subaru: “Looking at my outfit could you please use your imagination a little before speaking!?”

Subaru spreads out his arms, indicating himself. Naoko smiles.

Naoko: “Kidding, kidding.”

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Naoko: “You're going to school this late? It makes your mom happy, but... won't you stand out in a bad way? Isn't it something you could do tomorrow?”

Subaru: “Stop crushing your son's fledgling motivation. I'm already neck-deep in a willpower shot down by others harshly and by myself well.”

Naoko: “If you really were that kind of boy, Subaru, then your mom wouldn't have had so much trouble.”

Naoko: “Now, your mom's gonna get her jacket so wait here a mo.”

Subaru: “Wait here... wait, you're seriously coming too? Getting outta being a shut-in then going to school with your parents is something you'd do in a punishment game!”

Naoko: “I won't go as far as school. I'm just going to the convenience store to buy some mayonnaise and cream puffs. Can't impose that much on you.”

Subaru: “Wha!? But this feels like you're asking me to come with you!?”

Naoko gives an apathetic 'yeah yeah' at Subaru's yelling and goes off to her room. Indeed she will be accompanying Subaru halfway to school.

Subaru: “Nonono... give me a break here. Come on.”

Says Subaru as his cheeks loosen in relief.

—At the fact the time until he would have to say his farewells to his mother had lengthened, and that even when confronted with his weakness he had the resolve for such a thing.



Naoko: “It's been a long time since we've last walked together like this, Subaru.”

Subaru: “Really? Feels like we go to buy things at night together like all the time.”

Naoko: “Haaa. Okay so, going from the conversation's flow I obviously mean at daytime. You need to read between the lines of what people are saying.”

Subaru: “When I'm hearing the rights and wrongs of making suppositions like that from you, I can't just agree with it!”

Even though Naoko's a complete fanatical like a demon tier airhead, and is unaware of being an airhead, and you have to explain everything to her if you want to communicate with her, and stress builds up as you talk with her, Subaru loves talking with his mom.

Naoko: “I'm glad it's warm out today. What did you talk with Dad about?”

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “Ah, there's some basic level mom-talk stuff—first and second parts don't tie together at all. Well there wasn't really a theme so you had *that*, but, uhhhh...”

Subaru tilts his head. If he's going to get detailed about his talk with Kenichi, he's going to have to mention his embarrassing inner feelings, and complexes, and that he cried. It was necessary to get that all out, but it was exactly because he thought he'd only be doing it once that there was that huge wave of emotions, so doing it again here would not be great.

So,

Subaru: “The big points were... the story about Ikeda-san, and some tales of the past I guess.”

Naoko: “Ahh, Ikeda-kun. Won in the horse races and moved to Thailand, was swindled by his young wife there and lost all his belongings, and now shunted into physical labour while getting scorched black.”

Subaru: “Uh that's kinda the first time I'm hearing of the tragic development in that second half!?”

Naoko: “He sent a letter saying, 'I could not get used to dirty money after all. My body may be in a poor state, but my heart is fulfilled.’”

Subaru: “Your experiences in some unknown place meant you got to take your mask off, Ikeda-san... That's not personally insignificant here!”

Ikeda-san only went to a different country rather than a different world. That said, finding a fellow comrade out there in a place he hadn't expected, Subaru casually prays Ikeda-san good luck.

Naoko tilts her head.

Naoko: “Hmmm,”

Naoko: “So, did those tales of the past make you feel like going to school?”

Subaru: “Ahh, yeah, well I mean if you're putting it simply. It was a chance for me to look back at how ridiculous everything I was thinking of then was. And so,”

Naoko: “You decided to stop doing absolutely everything like your Dad.”

Subaru goes silent. Naoko gives a big wave of her arms as she walks.

Naoko: “You always tried so hard, Subaru, and completed lots of things non-committally. You had lots of opportunities for that since Dad's got so many random interests... You must've been exhausted.”

Subaru: “M, mom... how much about me, do you...”

Naoko: “Okay so, Subaru.”

Even Subaru hadn't known his own true feelings. Subaru's stunned silent at Naoko's talk which

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

>implies she knew about it all along. He raises his head at her calling his name. Naoko circles round to stand before him, and looks Subaru straight in the eye.

Naoko: “They say it all the time. That children pay more attention to their parents than their parents think.”

Subaru says nothing.

Naoko: “But you know, the opposite's also true. Parents pay infinitely more attention to their children than their children think. I'm your mom, I've been paying infinitely more attention to you than you think I have, Subaru.”

Subaru's just fucking stupefied. All of his efforts in ever hiding his true condition were actually completely pointless.

Naoko: “I put a suppository in you when you were small, so I've even paid attention to your bumhole. Subaru, the only part of your body I haven't seen is your internal organs.”

Subaru: “Uh please excuse me. That conversation had been heading somewhere nice, your airheadedness truly didn't need to show up there.”

And besides nevermind family it's pretty fucking rare for anyone to ever get a chance to see their internal organs. Although that said Subaru has been blessed with a few chances to do so. Anyway,

Subaru: “The mayonnaise, and why I was a shut-in, too...”

Naoko: “Your mom would've done something if she could. But it seemed like no matter what I'd do, it definitely wouldn't work out. But,”

Naoko gives a small smile and stares into Subaru's dark irises.

Naoko: “It looks like somebody, not me or Dad, did do something for you. I think that's extremely great. I'll have to thank them.”

Subaru: “...Yeah, you're right. They taught my hopeless self that I was hopeless. They told my hopeless self that I wasn't hopeless. That's why, like I am right now, I'm able to walk.”

Who made him realise his foolishness, who gave his foolish self acceptance.  
Ah, hell.

Subaru: “They're amazing girls. They seriously are wasted on me.”

Naoko: “But you're not going to give them up to anyone, right?”

Subaru: “Well of course not. Whether they're appropriate for me or not isn't a problem. And if it's so bad that I'd be handing them down to someone else, even with them being inappropriate for me, I'd make them mine. I'd be raising my worth from thereon out, see.”

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Naoko: “Mmhm. —Yup, you definitely are his son.”

Considering Naoko knows Subaru's true heart, she probably also knows how significant those words are to Subaru. And while knowing, she's telling them to him.

Subaru: “Am I really, made from him properly? Can I really, be his son properly?”

Naoko: “Don't worry. After all, half of you is from me, Subaru. You'll fill your quota by becoming half as cool as Dad.”

Subaru: “So you know your genes making up my body are inferior!?”

Naoko: “If you become half as cool as Dad... then why not have other half just be Subaru?”

Subaru goes motionless, dumbstruck, stupefied.

Naoko: “Not all of you is going to be like Dad. I mean, if all of you is the same as Dad, Subaru, there'll be two of Dad and your mom'll be lost.”

Subaru: “A woman's heart sent wavering by her husband and son, is this erotica?”

Naoko: “Noo, you stop, aughh!”

Subaru: “Guh—bwaaah!?”

Naoko socks Subaru with a surprisingly sturdy right-hook to the face in embarrassment and turns her back to a pained, teary-eyed Subaru.

Naoko: “So, Mom thinks it's good for Subaru to do his best to be like Subaru.”

Subaru: “That was full of good vibes, but I'm kinda bleeding, here.”

Naoko: “Speaking of blood, don't iron pipes taste like blood when you lick them?”

Subaru: “Situations extreme as that don't really happen much... oh man, it's middle class mom-talk stuff, suddenly off-topic questions.”

Even if you try explaining to her that it's because the iron in blood and an iron pipe are made of similar materials, it's hopeless. She'll just ask you why you're talking about something off-topic. So,

Subaru: “Me being like me, huh.”

Naoko: “Yeah. While thinking to become like Dad, become Subaru.”

Naoko, a little ways ahead of Subaru, suddenly stops walking and glances back to him, pointing at the right path of the split in the road just ahead.

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Naoko: “So, the convenience store's this way so Mom'll be stopping here... will you be okay on your own?”

Subaru: “Scars deep enough to warrant that worrying... actually were there, yeah.”

Naoko's concerns aren't superfluous.

Subaru: “I'll be okay. The things I have to do and want to do overlap perfectly. I don't have any reason to close myself up anymore.”

Naoko: “I see. Then good. Do your best.”

Naoko nods in relief, and with a spring in her step, starts heading down the right-hand path. Subaru will be going down the left-hand, so this is where he and his mother part. Their goodbye. One certainly much, much longer than his mother thinks.

Subaru: “Mom!”

Naoko stops and turns around. The sight of his same old mother as always burns into Subaru's eyelids.

Subaru: “Ah...”

Subaru hesitates.

If Subaru doesn't say anything here, his mom will continue on without knowing how long this goodbye is going to be. Also, she'll lose the chance to see Subaru break down crying. If he doesn't his face to be stained with tears seeing his mother for the last time, perhaps it's better he keeps his mouth shut.

That self-deceit wearing the veneer of being considerate,

Subaru: “There's something I have to do. This goodbye'll be a long one.”

was not something Natsuki Subaru would permit.

Naoko says nothing.

Subaru: “I'll be going kinda far away, and I don't think we'll be able to contact each other. I think, it'll cause a lot of worries for you. I won't do anything dangerous... isn't something I can assert. Since I have to save a girl in peril from situations which're entirely dangerous.”

Subaru: “I think it'll worry you and Dad. Since it'll be different from yesterday where I was somewhere you could see me, it'll be somewhere your eyes can't reach. But, no matter where I am, I'll be thinking of you two, and I'll never forget you...”

Naoko: “Subaru.”

Subaru: “I don't want to not be your child anymore, and I don't want to do things that'd make me

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

hate myself. Definitely do know that this isn't a case where I can say, 'relax and see me off'. But I..."

Naoko: "Subaru."

Even Subaru's starting to not understand what the hell he's saying until Naoko's calling snaps him out of it. Subaru raises his head to find his mother standing directly before him.

Naoko: "Subaru. —It's okay."

Subaru: "...I-it's okay?"

Naoko: "Because I know what it is you want to tell me, Subaru. You don't need to work that hard to search for the words."

Subaru: "You know? ...how? ...hk"

Naoko: "Because I'm your mother, after all, Subaru."

There's absolutely no logic in it, but it probably has some completely irrefutable basis to it.

The back of Subaru's eyes turns hot. He only just experienced this sensation like an hour ago. Just how many times does Subaru have to cry like a child here? If he drains out all his tears like this, will he be able to acquire an unshakable heart of iron?

Subaru: "T-this... childish... so, lame..."

Naoko: "If crying when you want to cry is lame, then that means every baby born is lame."

Subaru: "Not what I... mean..."

Naoko: "Uh-huh, I know, silly. In front of me or Dad, you're a child no matter how old you are... when you want to cry, do cry."

The world blurs. The tears well up. Subaru wipes and hides his face with his sleeve, concealing his face from Naoko. Naoko respects his stubbornness by not trying to peer in or anything. But she does stretch herself up and slowly pats his short hair.

Subaru: "...I'm sorry, mom. I'm, ultimately, still without doing anything for you..."

Naoko: "It isn't that I had you because I wanted something, you know? I had you because I wanted to give something. It's because I wanted to give love, that I had you, Subaru."

—Then, Subaru had already received that love an uncountable number of times.

Naoko: "If you want to do something for me and Dad, then it's fine for you to give that feeling to someone else. If that someone is the girl you love, Subaru, and you also make a child which you want to give love to... isn't that just the greatest?"



ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: "...Yeah, it is."

Naoko: "Right? Not a single thing your mom says is ever incorrect."

Smiling, Naoko tousles Subaru's bangs and gives his chest a push. Subaru takes a step back thanks to that and raises head, to see his mom looking up at him.

Naoko: "When your face gets messier from crying, it looks even weirder and more like your mom's."

Subaru: "...I'm impressed you can say that while referencing your own face."

Naoko: "I'm confident that it's the face Dad loves. So it's safe for you to be just as confident as me that Dad loves you, Subaru."

Subaru: "We're just talking about faces here though but okay!"

Subaru forcefully wipes his face with his sleeve, his eyes red but the tears stopped. Bawling like crazy, showing off his true feeling and getting consoled, and then feeling refreshed at the end of it all, weirdo.

Subaru: "Ahhhgeez, all this crying's so damn pathetic."

Naoko: "But crying's good. Subaru, you cried a heap when you were born. At first you cried so much anyone would find it disgraceful. At lots of things, in lots of places, you cried."

Subaru says nothing.

Naoko: "But if you can smile at the end of all that crying, then everything's okay. What's important isn't the beginning or the middle, it's the end."

Subaru: "You mean, if the results're good then everything's okay?"

Naoko: "Interpreting it like that is incorrect. Here, take it as homework from Mom."

He would never get to check the answers.

A farewell taking the name of homework. One day he would find the answer, and there it would come to him naturally.

Both his mother and father, rather than complain at their son as he goes off somewhere unknown at the end of being a shut-in, sent him off with smiles.

Subaru had loved his parents, his environment, and this place completely.

Subaru: "—I'll be going, then."

Naoko: "Yup, do that."

Subaru forces his cheeks into a smile, leaving his mom with that before turning his back on her, and starts walking.

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

They've already gotten through most of the path to school. All that's left is to get to the end of this street, then up the hill, to where the school's waiting—

Naoko: “Ah, right. Subaru, Subaru, I forgot.”

Hearing this makes Subaru lose some of his mettle. He glances back, unable to conceal how he's been dispirited.

Naoko raises her arm.

Naoko: “—Take care.”

She gives a small wave, and smiles.

—The night before he'd been summoned to the parallel world. When Subaru was going out to the convenience store, Naoko surely said the exact same thing to him. But back then, Subaru had simply wordlessly pushed the door open, and,

Which made this his last chance to wipe away his regret from that day.

High class mom-talk stuff—no matter how many sideroads it takes, in the end it always ends up reaching the correct answer.

The second the thought rises in Subaru's mind, a real, non-forced smile spreads over his face.

Subaru: “—See you later!”



An unpopulated school building. Subaru heads for the shoeboxes at the entrance, opening the shittily-installed doors, swaps out his outside shoes for his inside ones, and takes a breath as he heads for the hallway.

The third-year's rooms are on the first floor. Subaru shoots the stairs a glance as he continues down the hall, his footsteps resounding off the linoleum floor and down the silent, empty corridor. He soon arrives before his classroom. Deep breaths.

He slides the door open.

And then, a mob of reproachful gazes aimed towards the extremely-latecoming Subaru—

???: “That was a lot faster than I thought.”

—are nowhere to be found.

Most all the seats inside the classroom are empty, the only occupied chair being the one in the very middle. The person sitting there turns around, with the chair, to look back at Subaru.

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

???: “Welcome. —Did you maybe get something from facing your past?”

Says the WITCH OF GREED, her white hair swaying, her eyes brimming and brimming with curiosity.

## CHAPTER 20: TEST RESULTS

—Seated in the middle of the classroom, the white-haired girl tilts her head.

Subaru quickly checks that there's nobody else in the classroom, then leans out of the doorway to check there's no one down the halls either. There isn't, and he sighs, scratching his head.

Subaru: “First, got something I just wanna say.”

Echidna: “Yup, let's hear it. You're thinking something, considering something, going to talk about something. I'm incredibly interested in every part of that.”

Subaru: “That uniform looks great on you.”

Echidna blinks, puzzled, and then cracks up.

Echidna: “Ahaha, thanks. You thinking that means there was worth in me reconstructing this from your memories. This is the clearest, most often-seen outfit inside your memory. Did you maybe fancy it?”

Echidna stands up from her seat, grips the hem of her grey skirt, and does a little, quick turn on the spot. Her hair sways following the movement, making her look like nothing more than a girl of an age fitting her appearance.

Grey skirt, navy blazer. The red ribbon on her chest demarcates her as a fellow third-year, and gives dazzling contrast to the white shirt underneath. But if there was anything to be unsatisfied about,

Subaru: “I like long skirts better than short ones. When it takes longer to strip them off you can work your imagination more.”

Echidna: “Aha. Then, to meet to your expectations for stripping, I see I'll put on a long skirt next time.”

Subaru: “Won't be a chance for that! And, it's not like everyone's wearing the uniform because I love it. That outfit's just what you wear here. Like the Imperial Knights and stuff probably.”

Echidna puts her hand to her mouth as she laughs. Subaru shrugs and goes to the back of the classroom—to the window seat, second from the back, pulls out his chair and plomps himself down.

Hard, wooden seat. Desk with the alphabet etched into it by some previous owner. Legs that squeaked whenever you leaned on said desk. Rusted drawer. A fragment of Subaru's extremely distanced daily life.

Echidna: “I sorta thought you'd be more surprised.”

Subaru: “If you wanted to hide it, you should've put more effort into the background. Not common that there's nobody around on the way to school, or the entire time until I got to here.”

Even considering that it was a weekday afternoon, there were way too few other people around.

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Almost as if the world'd been cropped of any information unnecessary for Subaru.

Subaru: "This world was way too convenient for my interests. I really have nothing to say except 'serves you right' about you not getting the reaction you wanted."

Echidna: "Nonono, that's part of the fun too. Testing, receiving results in itself is happiness to me. How those results came about doesn't really matter by this point. Though of course, if you start considering whether or not they connect to what comes after, then that kinda changes the story a little."

Looks like she's really not bothered at her plans supposedly going awry. Subaru endures through the feeling of wanting to click his tongue.

Subaru: "So, what's this world? If I'm remembering right, I went into your tomb while it was midway through the TRIAL or whatever, and..."

Echidna: "You went in, qualified. So I'd say the TRIAL started up for you too, wouldn't it? Didn't you hear it? First, face your past."

Echidna folds her arms behind her back and slowly walks over to Subaru, beautiful in the refreshing wind breezing through the classroom, no need for any unease about her. Subaru gets the feeling that he's getting pulled into a trap and averts his gaze from her.

Echidna: "Everyone has regrets about their past. There's surely no existence out there who has never had a regret, assuming they live through their days. Today they regret yesterday, yesterday they regretted the past, and tomorrow they'll definitely regret today. —All because people have the function for regret."

Subaru: "Stop being so pessimistic. Humans've also got the function for, instead of reflecting on regret, using their reflections on yesterday to do something today, and using their reflections on today to make a breakthrough tomorrow."

Echidna: "—Precisely!"

Echidna gives a sharp clap and lunges her face in toward Subaru, who leans back unconsciously. Heedless, Echidna just brings her face in closer, close enough for them to feel each other's breath.

Echidna: "It's just simple wordplay, just a slight difference in thinking. But whether you view the past optimistically or pessimistically greatly changes how you get your answer. Most view the past pessimistically, looking back entirely on bad memories, and end up rejecting the path they've walked. And they loathe to lay their eyes on what they rejected, and end up not placing a lid on it."

Subaru: "Um, your face... close..."

Echidna: "But it's inevitable. The you of yesterday, absolutely, knows less than the you of today. The you of today, absolutely, knows less than the you of tomorrow. The breadth of what you knew in the past, even if just by one single memory, will be inferior than what you know in the present and future. That is reality!"

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Echidna suddenly leans back and forcefully slaps her hands on the desk.

Echidna: “Supposing they face their past, or perhaps even meet the past they should face, people are lost, confused, lamenting, suffering, anguishing, pessimistic, and from their they find their answer. So long as they do find an answer, no matter what it is, I will approve of it. Even if it's an answer they reached with their back turned, or answer they reached with their arm reached forward, either is indisputably proof that they overcame their past.”

Subaru: “And that's, the point of this TRIAL?”

Echidna: “Exactly. For you to face your past, and reach some answer regarding that past. If you merely just fear, loathe, ruminate over reaching an answer, then you will eternally be unable to overcome it. But if you can fully affirm, or otherwise reject that past, then I will see you off with my praise. That's what the first TRIAL is.”

Echidna nods at Subaru, and then suddenly seeming to come to her senses, blushes slightly and coughs.

Echidna: “I-it looks like I got just a tiny bit excited. I'm sorry for showing you something unpleasant.”

Subaru: “Whatever don't worry 'bout it. If your breath'd been bad well there's *that*, but fortunately it's more tachibana citrus. Anyway...”

Getting to see Echidna embarrassed for once gives Subaru some intense emotions as he pulls out his chair and shifts his posture to lean forward.

Subaru: “Is it really safe for me to think, taking what you're saying as the conditions for clearing the TRIAL, that I actually did overcome the TRIAL?”

Echidna: “I got to see every bit of it, and... I'm thinking the results are more than satisfactory.”

Echidna puts a hand to her chest, takes a deep breath, and with a horribly satisfied expression,

Echidna: “You reached an answer for both the symbol of your past trauma, and the representation of your past guilt. I want to see you off with my praise for that.”

Subaru: “Every bit of it.. then, you saw me crying with snot trailing out my nose, too!?”

Echidna: “I'm so sohrhee... was about where my eyes almost started tearing up too.”

Subaru: “Shut up!! Don't tell anyone, it's too embarrassing!”

Knowing there was a peeping tom going on to his goodbye with his dad was an insult to both his and Kenichi's emotions then. Echidna, either aware or unaware of this, gives a cheerful laugh.

Echidna: “Though, if there's anything to regret, it guess it's that the agony of facing your past

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

couldn't have been anything deeper.”

Subaru: “Huh?”

Echidna: “I like people reaching answers, but I imagine my praise being for the deliberating they do to reach that answer or otherwise said their knowledge. I was looking forward to you deliberating, struggling, and from there finding an answer, but...”

Echidna glances at Subaru, narrowing her eyes, seeming to peer into his dark irises.

Echidna: “Unfortunately, this TRIAL to enjoy that exact thing, seems to have been just a little too late. Looks like you already found an answer to your negative feelings toward your past beforehand.”

Subaru: “Ah... so that's it. If that's it, then yeah my condolences.”

Seems like Echidna wanted Subaru to realise how weak he was during his time spent living with his parents, agonize over it, and either run away or find an answer. But Subaru'd already,

Subaru: “There was someone who told my hopeless, useless self that I was a hero. I didn't have to face my past for it, I'd already accepted how useless I was.”

Echidna: “Resignation in a different form, or so. So much that it went astray from my expectations and it wasn't amusing. When you meet that someone outside, please tell them that a witch had some complaints to say about them.”

Subaru's about to joke back at Echidna, when he realises that Echidna had said something he couldn't let slide.

Subaru: “You said that you relied on my memories for this reconstruction, but... If you can look inside my head, shouldn't you know who that someone was?”

Or perhaps rather than 'noticing', it's 'clinging'. If she can peer into Subaru's brain, perhaps she could also find out about Rem's existence. But,

Echidna: “Sorry, when you've just got your hopes up. My greedy self does know the boundary between doing wrong and right. I did suck up the information needed for this TRIAL, but I didn't touch anything else. Is there anything really so interesting about sneakily robbing a glance over knowledge? I've got no urge go and to throw away the fun of getting to talk and listen.”

Some kind of incomprehensible witchly sense of self-respect.

Subaru: “If you only took out information needed for this TRIAL.. then why take out the uniform...”

Echidna: “Naturally, it's something I retrieved since it was necessary information for reconstructing this so-called high school building. You can be damn sure it definitely wasn't some case of 'now I know of this mysterious 'parallel world' environment, and what the girls living there wear, and won't it just look great on me,' or whatever kind of anticipation that I withdrew this.”

ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Subaru: “Are you one of those idiot geniuses?”

Looks like Echidna let it slip. Subaru shakes his head. But hearing that's giving him more confidence that—

Subaru: “Really doesn't need asking though. This world really is...”

Echidna: “Yup, it is. This is a fabricated world reconstructed off your memories, modelled faithfully after reality. Which naturally means—your real parents still don't know where you are or what you're doing, and are probably worrying over where their missing son is.”

Subaru goes silent.

Echidna: “There might've been some information you didn't know... but did you really, truly not know it? Can you firmly say you've never read a single letter sent by this acquaintance your mom and dad both knew? Have you never met face to face with the old man your dad knew when he was young? Have you really, truly never imagined an image of your father different from the one you thought?”

Echidna: “Or otherwise,”

Echidna: “Maybe you were actually just capable of persistently hiding the insides of your heart you believed you didn't know about? Are you maybe confident you could seal away your true desire for knowing to be easy, without it spilling into daily life at all? Could you even then state that you didn't desire the selfish emotion known as love from your fabricated mom and dad?”

Echidna brings her face close to a silent Subaru, speaking that last part in a bewitching whisper.

Echidna: “Did you never think it was too ideal, too convenient for your interests?”

While tenderly gouging Subaru's heart with her soft fingers, Echidna smiles beautifully. This one belonged to no schoolgirl, but was the ominous smile of a WITCH. Subaru closes his eyes hard. The visages of his mom and dad arise beneath his eyelids.

Subaru: “Don't look down on my parents out of petty revenge, witch.”

Echidna: “...What?”

Subaru: “I communicated all of my answer. My mom and dad both received it. I said everything I hadn't said, and they told me to do my best. They told me to take care.”

Subaru stands from his chair, puts his hand to the desk, and butts his forehead against Echidna's. Echidna's black eyes open wide in surprise.

Subaru: “Their voices, smiles, everything, way exceeded my imagination. —My parents aren't in some dimension my imagination could hold. Don't underestimate them.”



#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Echidna goes quiet.

Subaru: “My mom and dad communicated me everything. I came back settling it all with that. — Nothing you say is going to trick me.”

Subaru sits back down in his chair, crosses his legs as aggressively as he can, and looks up at Echidna. Echidna had looked dumbstruck, but,

Echidna: “Seriously... you didn't even let me see you worry over the answer you found, aren't you just a human who can make a witch cry. Seriously, excellent.”

Subaru: “Praise me and I'll blush.” Untranslatable joke about being an indigo child equivalent except not or some shit.

Echidna: wow you never miss a beat. “Ahh, but it's enough. Much more than enough. It's a delightful thing, finding an answer so firm you won't tolerate any wavering.”

Echidna shakes her head and smiles in give-uppyness and sits down in the chair in front of Subaru, turning back toward him.

Echidna: “The TRIAL's done in the true meaning. You escaped narrowly from the wicked hands of a witch. As my praise for that... maybe I could answer any questions you have before you go?”

Subaru: “Right then, do have one.”

Echidna: “Yup, let's hear it.”

Echidna nods. Subaru jabs his finger straight at her.

Subaru: “You said you had no connection to this Trial. ...Like hell! You're not just even involved, aren't you just the straight-up the mastermind of it. What about this is 'haven't participated in it', how the heck can you spout all those complete lies!”

Echidna: “To accept a witch's words at face value—I'd say even lack of guard and subsequent lack of caution have limits. I did say it when we parted, too. Right here's a damn wicked witch.”

Subaru: “Yeah, that right? Then I got nothing I wanna ask the mighty Wicked Witch whose words have not even one speck of credibility. ...Does this mean SANCTUARY's unsealed now?”

Echidna: “It's truly pleasant how little you care how you look, going back on your statements with that second half. Unfortunately, the TRIAL isn't something so simple as to end with just this. The TRIAL's three parts in all. But I think if you can overcome this first TRIAL, it's not really that hard.”

Echidna holds up three fingers. Subaru mutters 'three' to himself.

Subaru: “Either way, we have to unseal SANCTUARY. It'll unseal fine even if I'm the one to clear the TRIAL right? I can be sure about that one?”

#### ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Echidna: “That's why I gave you the qualifications. Of course you can. Whether it's you, or another qualified half-breed who overcomes the TRIAL, I give the liberation of SANCTUARY my blessing. In exchange, I wonder how you'll overcome the remaining two TRIALS. Since I'll sure be looking forward to seeing the answers you find.”

Echidna nods. Subaru stands up, having no more questions for Echidna. There's nothing to gain by staying in this fabricated world anymore. A kind of homesickness tugs at the hair at the back of his neck, but he's already finished with his more regretful duty of saying his goodbyes. Even if they were, just as Echidna said, only transient and empty ones.

Subaru: “Say, Echidna.”

Echidna: “What is it? Could it be, you're going to punch me? Ah, well I'm aware I've done things enough to warrant that. If that's what you want, then don't think that I haven't resigned to accept it. But that said, I am still a young girl. I'd kinda want you to avoid the face if you could, but...”

Subaru: “Thank you.”

Echidna's stunned silent, unable to comprehend what she just heard. Subaru feels some satisfied delight at his rendering her speechless.

Subaru: “Even saying they weren't the real thing, and I didn't really tell my true parents anything, that I managed to tell them what I wanted to convey was thanks to you. It was a result of your shitty gossip-column curiosity, but I got to see people I thought I'd never see again, and say my farewells.”

And show them a slightly less pathetic, slightly prouder version of himself.

Subaru: “And I'm grateful for that. So, thank you.”

Echidna: “...This human you are is beyond comprehension, and profoundly interesting. To the extent it's frightening.”

She's not joking or spouting bullshit, she actually does seem perhaps even threatened. Subaru smiles at her.

Subaru: “The Mighty Witch sure is weak-kneed, getting caught in the grips of a tiny little man like me. Well whatever. So, where's the exit.”

Echidna: “That's simple enough. This world's already begun disappearing. Everything except this building isn't constructed sincerely. —Leave the building, and you should return to being inside the cemetery.”

Subaru: “Isn't that convenient. —Well, see you next TRIAL then.”

Waving his hand, Subaru stands from his seat and heads for the classroom's exit. He feels Echidna's gaze on his back as he starts walking away. The scenery of the blue sky outside the windows has already started fading, the world disappearing into somewhere.





ARC 4: ETERNAL CONTRACT: PHASE 1 (INCPL.)

Sekhmet: “With most of your power sealed, *haa*. And while inside a castle made by that mean-spirited Echidna, *huu*. In a condition inferior to your true strength, *haa*, you've no chance of beating me, *huu*.”

Sekhmet stifles a yawn. The attacks stop and the shadow falls to its knees—when a merciless blow from above crushes it. Sinking into the pool of shadow, ENVY looks up at Sekhmet.

Envy:

“Whywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhyinterferewithinterferewithinterferewithinterferewithinterferewithinterferewithinterferewithmeandmeandmeandmeandmeandmeandmeandhimhimhimhimhimhimhim?”

Sekhmet: “*Haa*. —Even answering'd be a pain.”

Sekhmet gives a small flick of the hand. Half the school building collapses, ENVY's shadow being swallowed down into the pit of the earth. Considering the world's already disappearing, falling that far down would guarantee no return.

Sekhmet: “Even when dead, *huu*. Why is it I have to meet with that thing again, *haa*.”

Sekhmet ass-slides over to a relatively nicer corner of this half-destroyed-and-yet-disappearing room. She leans back against the wall and looks up at the sun through the broken window.

Sekhmet: “It won't go how you'd like, *huu*. Neither for the Witch—or the one entranced by the Witch, *haa*.”