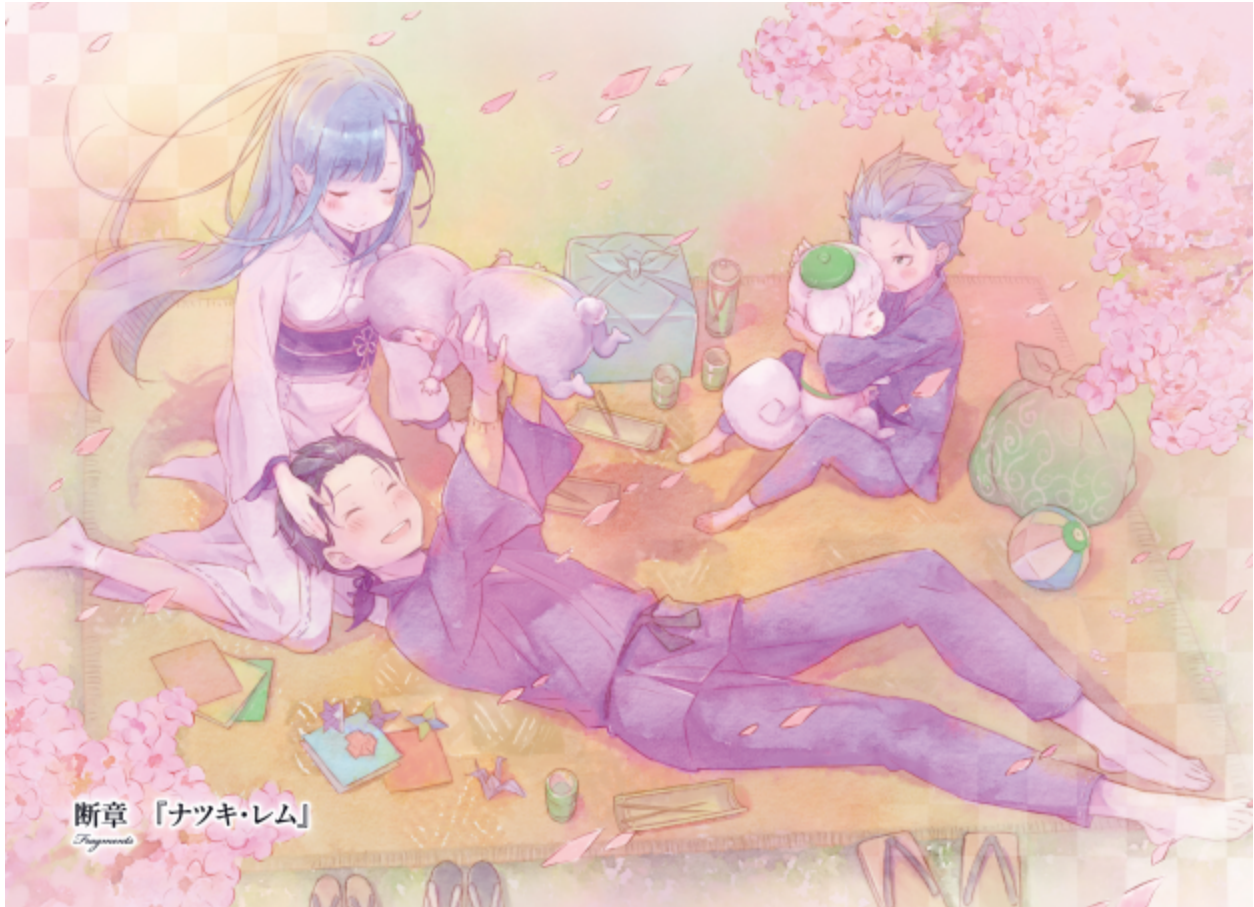


Chapter 5: 10 Months



[Rem: Thank you very much for your help again. I must be going now, Doctor.]

[???: Take care of yourself as best as you can. The baby might be born at any time, after all. If you get carried here like last time, I may or may not be available.]

[Rem: Yes, I'll take your words to heart.]

[???: Now go already.]

Rem bows, and the old magic user waved her goodbye while holding onto his blunt attitude.

At a glance, it did seem like a perfunctory response, but now that they knew the old magic user for a long time, the true intention of his blunt attitude was clear. Since there was sharpness in his words, you could tell that his skills and the care for his patients were genuine.

This relieved Subaru, and he didn't mind bringing Rem to the healing magic user.

[Subaru: Still, my heart was pounding like a drum. Like the doctor said, the baby really can be born at any moment.....]

[Rem: Jeez, you can't be like that, Subaru-kun. If you're always so nervous, your body won't be able to take it when the time comes. Keep it in check, and prepare yourself calmly.]

[Subaru: R—Right, keep things in moderation and act calm.]

With her hand on her mouth, Rem giggles at Subaru, who was so nervous that his legs and arms made it apparent it while he walked. Rem's stomach was now undoubtedly big, and she was approaching the last month of pregnancy.

There was a time when the mother and the child were in serious danger, but fortunately they were able to recover and the baby inside grew normally.

Without a doubt, that was all possible because of Rem's strong will and Subaru's constant support.

Ever since that night, Subaru has been even more devoted to Rem, and he did his best to support her by her side. His coworkers and friends said that he was great for it, but that wasn't true.

Doing something like this was just natural once you considered the fear and confusion he'd experienced that night, in that moment.

Just imagining the fear of possibly losing Rem and their child made his blood run cold.

[Rem: Thanks to you, I've been feeling so relaxed. I'm not sure if I'll be able to live the way I did before after being cared for so much by my husband and giving birth to our child.]

[Subaru: Right now, you have an important job of raising the baby with your stomach as the cradle. Until that's finished, leave all the little tasks to me. If something bothers you, don't take care of it yourself, be hard on me and teach me, like you always have.]

[Rem: Okaaay.]

Listening to Subaru's dramatic orders, Rem nods, acting playfully again.

Just like Rem said, Subaru has been doing most of the jobs in the house instead of her. Subaru's responsibility was to do as much cooking, laundry, and cleaning as possible.

Of course, at first he did make a lot of mistakes and it was clear that he was unskilled and lacked knowledge, but he was able to pull through with Rem's guidance and help from his female coworkers when he was having trouble.

And so now Subaru has attained house-husband skills that were good enough to Rem.

[Subaru: It's all thanks to Rem being an excellent teacher.]

[Rem: No no. Subaru-kun's already a fast learner and you're good with your hands so it was fun to teach you. I'm sure that you're suited for tasks at home, too.]

[Subaru: I just never had many opportunities to try them. I actually think I am, too.]

He just never had any opportunities. He knew that he had a high aptitude for things like cooking, laundry, and cleaning. At this point, it's been proven that he has a high aptitude for being a husband on top of his sewing skills.

A group of Kararagi housewives had even surrounded him unexpectedly and confirmed that he was doing fine.

[Subaru: I wonder what we should have tonight. Rem, what would you like to eat?]

[Rem: Let's see...I'd like to eat something sour.]

[Subaru: That's a really classic request for a pregnant woman. Are you sure that you want to eat something sour?]

[Rem: Well, I was craving for it when I got pregnant, but not so much anymore. It's why I snuck in a lot of sour food back then.]

[Subaru: The cats out of the bag with that shocking truth—!]

There were many times when they'd have sour fruits or vinegared food. That being said, at the time even Rem wasn't aware that she was pregnant, so he was still a bit puzzled.

[Subaru: I've heard that morning sickness gets terrible and you start craving sour food. With that considered, you haven't had much morning sickness.]

[Rem: Now that you mention it, that might be true. Maybe it's the works of me really wanting to avoid showing myself being weak with you around.]

[Subaru: You've got strong nerves of steel. I'm just glad that we weren't too late.....]

It was discovered that Rem was pregnant when she lost consciousness and was taken to the healing magic user. If she'd never lost consciousness and kept everything inside, they might've never noticed that she was pregnant until her stomach became unnaturally large.

[Rem: And I'm sure I would've done everything I could to not have you think that I got fat, hiding how big my stomach was.]

[Subaru: And I'm sure I would've kept being fooled so easily. That really just isn't okay.....]

Come to think of it, it's a good thing they had figured it out while they could still recover from mistakes. And on the night that sparked the realization there was—

[Subaru: ——]

Naturally and unavoidably, his memory approaches that night.

That made Subaru's expression turn sour, but it was something unavoidable. In the memories of the time he spent in Banan town, she was there in those three months, no matter where he looked.

In the funnest, loudest days that were still vivid in his memory, there was Tia.

[Rem: Tia-sama.....]

[Subaru: She's nowhere to be found. I put up a notice at Clane's, and Hal-san's searching for her too, but he's found nothing.]

Hearing Rem's melancholic murmuring, Subaru speaks quickly in response. This showed that he didn't want to talk about Tia anymore if possible. However, Rem shook her head at his request as she said,

[Rem: Subaru-kun, are you mad at Tia-sama?]

[Subaru: —. Yes, of course I am. Do you know how much danger you were in? You and the baby were in serious danger, and she's the one at fault.]

[Rem: ——]

[Subaru: And she even got the hell out before I could give her a piece of my mind, let alone hear her apologize. How could I not be mad after all that?]

—Ever since the final night, Tia completely disappeared from the town.

Subaru's last memory of Tia was him running to the clinic, leaving her behind and watching her cower like a child.

When he came back to the tenement house, which was on the verge of collapsing, after confirming that Rem was fine, Tia had already disappeared from the area. Afterwards, even Halibel helped out and they looked all over the town, but in the end they never found out a trace of her as months three passed by.

Wondering where Tia ran off to, wondering where did that strange neighbor go—

All while never being allowed to see her as something more than a neighbor.

[Rem: If you ran into her and she apologized, would you forgive her?]

[Subaru:Would you?]

[Rem: I definitely would. I love Tia-sama, after all.]

[Subaru: ——]

Rem's soft words were understandable. She'd forgiven Tia from the bottom of her heart.

Rem said the reason was that she loved Tia.

Subaru had nothing to say once she told him that. Even Subaru probably felt the same way as Rem did. He cared about Tia. He considered her a friend.

And yet, the unpleasant feeling Subaru felt inside was still there, and he didn't forgive Tia.

Subaru felt the same way as Rem did and shared the same memories with her. Perhaps he didn't forgive because of their difference in tolerance. Or maybe there was a different reason—

[Subaru ———]

While talking, Subaru and Rem went back home.

Currently, they weren't living at the tenement house from before, but at a house near the town area through the courtesy of Riften. The tenement house had collapsed from the damage of that night. It never got rebuilt, and the spot was now a vacant lot of the tenement house.

Knowing that they'd lost their house, Riften was the one who put in a good word for them. He really did feel bad about depending on him all the time, but them having a baby made him forget about restraining himself.

The temporary residence was unexpectedly comfortable, and it was far more considerate of Rem's condition than the cramped tenement house. Perhaps this was also a result of Riften's thoughtfulness.

[Rem: But I feel it's still a bit too big for just the two of us.]

So said Rem as she slowly sat down in the living room. Unlike the tenement house, which was pretty much one room as it was just divided, this house had more than enough of everything.

But even if they had a living room, a bedroom, and private room for each of them—

[Subaru: It's probably a room for the child for when it's born. This is Riften-san we're talking about. I can see him thinking that far ahead.]

[Rem: You have a lot faith in Riften-sama, huh.]

[Subaru: He's helped us out so much, after all. I'm not gonna lose trust in him just because he's got a thing for cougars. I've got tons of favors I have to repay.]

[Rem: Yeah, me too. I need to repay the people at Temple Elementary School and the magic user doctor. And there's also Halibel-sama.....]

[Subaru: Hal-san, huh.]

Hearing Halibel's name, Subaru knitted his brows as he put luggage in the closet.

Ever since the tenement collapsed and they started living in completely different places, they had much fewer chances to meet with Halibel. The days when they'd see each other like a family were over, and it seemed Halibel wasn't a playboy anymore and was doing his best to fulfill his duty as a shinobi.

[Subaru: He must feel responsible for what happened to you.]

[Rem: Well.....it wasn't even Halibel-sama's fault though.]

[Subaru: I mean, still. Tia suddenly changing.....if there was something that triggered that, it had to have been the alcohol. He must feel down as the person that let it happen.]

Halibel especially was someone who'd jokingly say that he'd answer with his life if any problems ever came up. Even Subaru didn't know if he blamed himself so much for him to do such a thing.

Honestly, it's not like he blamed Halibel and wished that he'd stopped Tia before she poured herself alcohol. In reality, even Subaru wasn't so childish that he'd blame him by telling him that, but it wouldn't be strange if Halibel was frustrated with himself for it.

Thus, Halibel has been committed to finding where Tia ran off to.

[Subaru:Rem, I'm gonna go shopping. Do you want anything?]

No matter what they did, talking about that night always made them feel depressed. Rem feeling down isn't good for the baby. To avoid this, Subaru forced the topic to change.

His thoughtfulness should've been obvious to Rem, but she shook her head as she said,

[Rem: No, I'm fine. And you don't have to ask everyday. I'm not so selfish that I'd ask for this and that.]

[Subaru: But with how you are right now, I want you to be selfish more than anyone, y'know?]

[Rem: In that case, I want you to stay with me forever.]

[Subaru: I'm guessing this is what you came up with after perfecting the delivery.]

Subaru smiles wryly at Rem's cute pestering, and he stood up once he was ready to go shopping. He thought about having sour food for tonight's dinner, as Rem had requested.

Although it sounded like a joke, she probably had told him since she really did want to have it.

[Subaru: Okay, Rem, I'm leaving now. Behave and sit tight, alright?]

[Rem: Both the baby and I will behave.]

After that interaction, Subaru left the house to go shopping. He headed towards the town area—however, he wasn't going straight to the grocery store. He was going to Clane's employment agency.

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[Clane: Unfortunately, I have no idea where Tia-chan is. Sorry.]

Clane, giving a reply that was now routine, bowed his head to Subaru, who showed up here on a regular basis. Subaru shook his head, letting him know that he didn't have to act apologetic.

This also had become a completely normal exchange.

[Clane: Everyone's worried about that girl. This goes without saying, but she was loved.]

[Subaru: She was really skilled, right? Not that I still have any doubts or anything.]

[Clane: She was the best. A girl her age having bounty hunting as her calling isn't something that should be told to everyone, though. Anyway, I'll keep searching.]

[Subaru: I'm counting on you.]

The missing person poster posted on the wall—the personal description on the request form was even edited by Subaru, and it captured Tia's traits

pretty well. But her beauty that defied common sense still wasn't written on it.

Needless to say, Tia was so beautiful that one would think that she wasn't from this world.

[Subaru: The pain from my nose being smashed begs to differ, though.]

[Clane: Nose being smashed?]

[Subaru: Nothing. Just talking to myself.]

Clane waves his hand at Subaru, and he leaves the employment agency. He was genuinely worried about Tia in his own way. He was feeling more and more on edge.

It was as if he was the only one in the world who cared about Tia.

[Subaru: Ugh. This is ridiculous. It's not the time to be saying stuff like this.I'll buy some green onions and forget about it.]

Brushing off his sadness, Subaru bought some green onions, or rather, green onions displayed on the greengrocer. He places them into the bag and starts constructing tonight's menu inside his head.

[Subaru: I first bought green onions, so it should be the main ingredient.....Actually, green onions are pretty flexible, so even if they aren't the focus of the meal, things will come together just fine.]

With Rem and the ladies' guidance, Subaru had mastered plenty of recipes. He picks the best out of the many good bargains displayed at the shopping district.

Lemom, tometo, cabage, cooking sake, fish, eggs, rice, soy sauce, Tia, wheat flour—.

[Subaru: —Tia?]

While carefully selecting ingredients, a shadow appeared in Subaru's vision for just a moment, and he gasped. If he had he looked away thinking that he took her for someone else, her milky white hair would've disappeared into the crowd.

Although he saw it for just a moment, he was still sure of it. That was Tia's hair.

[Subaru: Tia! Wait, hey, wait—!]

That moment, Subaru yelled, and he started running frantically

Subaru slips through a gap in the crowd of people, and he ran after her desperately as she became distant. Tia moved smoothly, as if there was no one in her way, whereas Subaru bumped into other people.

But still, the distance between someone who walks and someone who runs closes eventually. Suddenly, Subaru loses sight of Tia's head in the surging crowd, and he looked everywhere while panicking—he saw the hem of her dress disappear into an alley.

[Subaru: Tia—!]

While praying that his eyes weren't deceiving him, Subaru tumbled into the alley. Then, after he kicked the hard ground and ran, he saw someone standing in the dark passageway.

She had a slender, delicate back, and she was pretty tall for a girl. That short, shoulder-length milky white hair couldn't belong to anyone else.

[Subaru: Hah...hah.....Tia, I've been looking for you. Why'd you run away?]

[Tia: ——]

Tia did not respond to Subaru's question. However, she had no intentions of running away anymore. Subaru understood that, so he dropped his luggage onto the ground while regaining his breath.

And then, he walks up to Tia as she stood in the darkness, and reached for her shoulder.

[Subaru: Come on, I know it's hard for us to see each other. But at least look my way.]

Holding onto her shoulder dressed in black, Subaru spoke to Tia in a somewhat blunt manner. The unpleasantness of the trouble from that night blackened out the happiness from seeing her.

If she at least had an expression that made it look like she was going through rough times, maybe he could be more honest.

While hoping for that, Subaru turned her around and——

[Tia: —Die.]

He was hit by a violent wind of bloodlust head on.

[Halibel: Su-san! Are you here!?!]

[Rem: Halibel-sama!?!]

The door to the house gets thrown open, and Rem gasps in surprise upon hearing a voice that came in. And then she saw that it was a black haired wolf man that entered the house—it was Halibel.

It was a face Rem hadn't seen for a whole month. However, although it was the first time in a while that they'd seen each other, there wasn't a welcoming atmosphere. Halibel looked around the house as he said,

[Halibel: Rem-chan, I know it's been a while, but this is an emergency. Where's Su-san?]

[Rem: Subaru-kun is out shopping for dinner. He should be coming back very soon.....]

[Halibel: Agh, so we missed each other! This is terrible! Not good, this isn't good...]

Halibe scratches his head and he couldn't calm down, making him sound antsy. Rem senses that he was acting unusual, and she stood up while holding onto her baby belly as she said,

[Rem: Halibel-sama, what happened? If it's something that has to do with Subaru-kun, please tell me.]

[Halibel: Ah, Rem-chan, you really shouldn't push yourself too hard. I could've been more clear, but telling you straight up that Su-san's in danger would be.....or wait, maybe I could just tell you?]

[Rem: Halibel-sama?]

[Halibel: Rem-chan, I told you this before, right? Do you remember? Because of my nose, I know that there might be someone going after Su-san.]

Halibel's question makes Rem's eyes widen. Although it wasn't entirely correct, most of the parts were accurate perceptions.

Someone might be going after Subaru—that's what Rem told Halibel after guessing what Tia's goal was when she tried to harm her and Subaru.

She told him about the miasma surrounding Subaru—that is, the possibility of having the witch's scent.

[Rem: Yes, I did say. that However, that's irrelevant.....and Tia-sama's actually going for me, not Subaru, and that's also probably a misunderstanding.....]

[Halibel: No, that's not quite right. It wasn't a misunderstanding, and it was relevant. Dang it, I'm not being clear again. Right, we were mistaken. We were "wrong".]

[Rem: Wrong? Wrong...about what.....?]

[Halibel: About who the culprit really is, and about who Tia-chan really is.]

Rem gasps at the unexpected statement. When Halibel opened his eyes, which were usually closed like slit-eyes, there was heavy regret in his revealed black pupils as he said,

[Halibel: It's my mistake. I have no excuses. It's a total failure. I miscalculated everything. Because of that, we might have a dangerous situation on our hands.]

[Rem: I—I don't get it, Halibel-sama. Please explain everything from the top.]

[Halibel: —It all started approximately one year ago. The quest for Zarestia's bed was the beginning.]

Halibel listens to Rem's question, and the details he talked about were like a bolt from the blue yet again.

Zarestia—Rem also remembered that name.

It was one of the four powerful great spirits, known as The Four Great Spirits; an entity that lived in "Zarestia's Bed" located in the west side of Kararagi.

But as for what that quest started—

[Halibel: Zarestia's bed is a famous place wind blows, killing anyone near it. At first, the investigation team application was brushed off as a reckless challenge for daredevils, but.....]

[Rem: But?]

[Halibel: Who knows if it was a miracle or something, but there's one person who managed to return alive. If it had just been a survivor, then the story would've ended as someone who barely escaped death, but.....]

Judging from the way Halibel recited the story, she guessed that it didn't end there.

And then she also guessed what Halibel was trying to confirm just earlier when he was feeling frantic. The moment Rem connected the dots in her mind, her eyes opened wide in terror.

[Halibel: The girl who survived was someone seeking revenge and she sought Zarestia's power out of hatred for the Witch Cult.]

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—A wind blew.

And it was probably sharp enough to easily shred Subaru's body into bits and pieces.

Or maybe being cut up by that wind and turning into bright red meat was Subaru's punishment as someone who turned his back on everything.

Or at least, that's what he thought in that moment.

[Tia: —What are you spacing out for? Are you stupid!?!]

[Subaru: Whoa!?!]

He gets grabbed by the scruff of his neck, and he was flung back at once without being able to resist. Then, he bounced on the ground, and he rolled, rolled, and rolled without defending himself. And then, when Subaru looked in front of him while grimacing at the pain, he saw that the one who flung him was—

[Subaru: T—Tia, is that you?]

[Tia: Not like there could be any other beauties here right now other than myself.Well, that's what I'd like to say, but I'm not so sure if I could.]

Bending forward lightly, Tia turns just her head back—both that rough tone and the way she treated Subaru rudely were just like her, no doubt about it.

And as for what Tia's statement meant, he'd find out immediately with the scene right before his eyes.

[Subaru: ——]

Standing in front of Tia, who threw Subaru, was another Tia.

Two Tias with the same face and the same appearance were facing each other. Their looks were completely identical. The one difference between them was their dresses; they were clearly different in that one was black and one was white.

The Tia dressed in black tried to kill Subaru, while the one dressed in white protected him.

In other words——

[Subaru: Black Tia is an enemy, and white Tia is an ally——!]

[Tia: You aren't wrong, but I don't like the way you put it!]

Hearing Subaru shout with his face lying on the ground, white Tia stepped forward immediately as she muffled her voice. She shot her thin body like a bullet and came at the opponent who had the same face as her.

Using the power of her beast-like body, white Tia mercilessly strikes black Tia's face with her hand—that instant, black Tia put a smile on her incomprehensible, demonic, beautiful face.

[Black Tia: ——Die.]

[White Tia: ——!]

White Tia avoids the bite attack by quickly jumping up. However, the invisible attacks went after white Tia, shot into the sky one after another. White Tia kicks the wall, jumps diagonally, like jumping in a triangular motion, and she dodged, dodged and dodged.

[White Tia: Why you.....! You're persistent!]

Even if she jumped up walls, Kararagi buildings were short in general. White Tia quickly landed on top of the alley and angrily swung her arm at the ground. That moment, white Tia struck down with an attack similar to black Tia's bite attack—however, it was clearly weak; white Tia's wasn't as good as hers.

Black Tia dodges it by quickly jumping away, as if it was inevitable.

[White Tia: Damn it! You're me, and yet you're stronger—!]

[Black Tia: —Die.]

Black Tia did nothing but speak bloodthirsty words to white Tia, who was furious with rage.

However, the difference in strength was showing in their few attacks. If they kept fighting like this one on one, eventually white Tia would be at a disadvantage.

Even Subaru knew that as someone who almost got into danger just by watching. Therefore—,

[Subaru: —Look at me, fake Tia!]

[Black Tia: ——]

Subaru gets up, and he was close to the wall—he jumped at his hand bag that had been blown away onto the ground by the wind, and he was throwing things that were in it.

However, unfortunately the first thing that went flying parabolically was a green onion. The long, green vegetable spun, lost momentum, and fell to the ground before it reached black Tia.

That pointless resistance makes black Tia turn her attention towards Subaru. Above him, white Tia was also staring at Subaru, wondering what he was doing.

Still, this was fine. This was fine.

He wasn't hoping to damage her or anything. He had no weapons, after all. If he could at least create a situation where it was a superficial 2 on 1, if he could at least make up for white Tia's misses—

[Subaru: ——]

[Black Tia: Goo...oo.....]

Just from being stared at, Subaru felt his mind freeze as it creaked.

Black Tia's eyes were empty. There was nothing you could classify as emotion, and nothing you could classify as will. In them was darkness—nothing but jet-black bloodlust that embodied it.

Bloodlust, and that's it. As scary as it was, black Tia had nothing but bloodlust.

So, black Tia's actions were the very definition of simple. The best actions just to kill were simple. And at this very moment, she didn't want white Tia's blood, but Subaru's.

[Black Tia: Damn...you.....]

Sensing death being wished upon him, Subaru swung his arm as he resisted the fear entangling his body. However, his resistance was all for naught in the end. The bottle he held onto couldn't do much. It didn't hit black Tia; it fell onto the ground before him and broke loudly. Everything spilled out.

—That moment, black Tia's expression changed.

[Black Tia: —!?!]

[Subaru: What?]

Suddenly, black Tia opened her eyes and stared at the bottle that fell before her. There was a broken bottle—a bottle of cooking sake just rolling and spilling out everything.

[Subaru: It's just alcohol, you know?]

[Black Tia: —]

Black Tia couldn't respond to Subaru's dumbfoundment. Her cheeks stiffen. She covered her face with her hands, stepped back, and she was letting out a groan full of pain.

Black Tia was so afraid of that abomination—so afraid of the alcohol that it felt like her heart was being torn apart.

[White Tia: —Now's my chance!!]

Swooping down from the building's roof, Tia strikes with a dynamic kick.

Black Tia, being defenseless, eats a direct hit from the kick, and she was blown away with a rough somersault. She rolls, crashes into the wall, and ended up sprawling on the ground in the alley.

[Subaru: Did that do it!?!]

[White Tia: Hah! When she suddenly stopped focusing, though I don't know why she did, her fate was sealed! Now I will achieve retribution with my own hands.....ew!?!]

Subaru cheered and white Tia spoke triumphantly at the same time. White Tia was going to go after black Tia, who collapsed, but she suddenly stopped and screamed.

White Tia opened her eyes wide at the alcohol right behind her that soaked her feet.

[Tia: ~~!?! What!?! What's this!?! Ew...ewww!!]

[Subaru: Not you too! What's the big deal!?! It's just alcohol.....]

White Tia was showing the same reaction, or maybe an even stronger rejection, that black Tia had. Judging from that unusual situation, Subaru understood that their rejection towards alcohol was not just a matter of disliking it.

However, before Subaru could investigate the matter, something unbelievable happened.

[Black Tia: Goo...ooo.....]

[Subaru: Huh? Her face is disfigured.....no, it's blurry.....?]

Black Tia groaned and slowly got up—her looks slowly fell apart, and they were coming off. Under it, there was a face that didn't look like Tia at all. The harshness of her eyes was similar, but her unhealthy eye bags were what stood out more.

She had a pale face, and her hair color went from milky white to dark brown. Even her body shrunk; it was as if a spell had been casted on her, transforming her.

[Subaru: Hey.....!]

That alone was enough to shock him quite a bit, however something even more shocking made Subaru's eyes widen.

—He saw two shining protruding objects sticking out on the kneeling girl's head.

[Subaru: Horns.....? So you're...an Oni?]

[Black Tia: —]

That was the conclusion Subaru came to after seeing the two horns sticking out on her forehead. A former member/descendant of the Oni race, like Rem. Although the woman seemed anguished over the conclusion, she let out a sharp sigh in vexation.

[Black Tia: —Die! Die! Die!]

Wrapped in a storm of overflowing bloodlust, Subaru immediately protected his face with his hands as he felt the pressure. However, she still focused on satisfying her bloodlust, and she spreaded her arms left and right, conjuring wind.

Buildings to the left and right of the alley were gouged by the wind she conjured making them collapse. Half of the buildings' supports were gone, and the buildings collapsed instantly. The alley was going to be buried soon.

[Subaru: Shit! Hey, Tia.....ahh, damn it!]

[Tia:What....what...what is this? It's on me.....eek...]

Right after the buildings collapsed, Subaru called Tia's name. However, Tia was still shocked from having breathed in the smell of alcohol. Subaru was forced to carry her slender body, and he ran back.

[Suabru: Gaaaah—!]

Despite the collapsing noises nearing him and his back aching, Subaru ran straight through with all his energy. And right after he got out of the cramped alley, the destruction was over, and the alley was completely buried in scrap wood.

There were clouds of dust in the wind, and people in the main street rushed over to see what all the big commotion was all about. They immediately reached out for Subaru and Tia, who collapsed at the alley entrance.

[Subaru: She's.....]

With help, Subaru stands up, and he looks back at the alley crushed by the destruction. Nobody other than Subaru and Tia rushed out to this alley.

However, it was highly unlikely for the girl to have gotten stuck and crushed in the destruction in the first place.

She got away. The mysterious girl who could produce the same horn as Rem and had the same face as Tia.

[Subaru: Who...the heck...was that girl.....?]

With his sleeve, Subaru wiped his face dirty with dust and sweat, and he muttered that while panting lightly. The girl who got away wasn't going to give him the answer to his question.

If there were someone else who'd give Subaru an answer—

[Subaru: —I can count on you, right? Tia.]

[Tia:Whatever.]

Tia, having finally recovered from the shock of the alcohol, replied unwillingly with a sour look.

Hearing a reply characteristic of her, Subaru let out a wry smile of inappropriate relief.

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[Rem: —Subaru-kun! Thank goodness you're alright!]

[Subaru: Woah, careful!]

Subaru arrives home, and he quickly caught Rem, who jumped at him at the entranceway. Even if she jumped at him with such force, hugging his wife was still a piece of cake.

That being said, he did want her to keep her expression of love in moderation since she was in the last month of pregnancy.

[Subaru: Rem, I'm glad you're happy to see me home, but if you keep this up, my lifespan will be shortened every time I get back. Think about the baby a bit more.]

[Rem: I—I'm sorry. It's just that I heard you were in danger and.....]

[Subaru: You heard that I was in danger? From who?]

Although Subaru talked to Rem kindly, he grimaced at her reply. The news got around to her too quickly. It has been only about an hour since Subaru got in danger. She shouldn't be informed about the news.

In fact, Subaru had planned on telling her about it after calming down.

[Halibel: From me, Su-san.]

[Subaru:So you were here, Hal-san, No wonder she found out about it so quickly.]

His suspicions vanished after Halibel showed himself in the corridor. As a shinobi, Halibel could know what the whole town is doing through adequate means. Subaru suspected that he'd have his clones lurk all around the town whenever push came to shove.

[Subaru: But don't worry Rem by telling her so quick. This is a very important time.]

[Halibel: Sorry about that, but it was unexpected for me, too. I didn't expect Su-san to get attacked at this exact time. You should tell her that you're

alright, since she found out that you got attacked. Don't you feel bad for Rem-chan?]

[Rem: Subaru-kun, please don't blame Halibel-sama. Halibel-sama stopped me when I panicked and tried to run over.]

[Halibel: Yep yep.]

Halibel made an expression that showed he was backing up Rem. Instead of detesting his behavior, for a while Subaru felt like he wasn't being himself, and he missed the timing to go off on him.

Besides, this wasn't the time to be angry. Rem has the best gift of all, after all.

[Subaru: Honestly, right now I have a bunch of things I wanna talk about, like about what happened.....]

[Rem Yes. Please tell us. We were very worried.]

[Subaru: But not yet. First, I have someone I want you to see.]

Rem, who had gotten ready to listen, had a question mark above her upon hearing Subaru's statement. Subaru smiles at her, turns around to the sliding door behind him, and spoke.

[Subaru: How long are you going to hide? Come in.]

[???: ——]

At first, there was no response at all to Subaru. However, after a few moments of silence, the person nervously showed their face, probably

because they couldn't handle the tension. The one who slowly showed her head beside the sliding door was a girl who'd disappeared 3 months ago—

[Rem: —Tia...-sama?]

[Tia: Long...time...no see.....]

[Rem: Tia-sama!]

Realizing that it's Tia, Rem jumps at her with a emotional look. Amazed by her energy, Tia panics and catches her, just like the catch from earlier.

Then, when Tia slowly let Rem down at the entranceway.

[Tia: B—Be...Be more careful! Have you forgotten that you're pregnant!? If I'd stepped aside, it would've been terrible!]

[Rem: I had faith that you wouldn't do that.]

[Tia: M—Mmm.....mmmm.....]

Tia let out a groan as she bit her lip in vexation over Rem's affectionate look. After that, she suddenly let out a sigh of defeat and looked down at Rem's stomach, which was right next to her.

And her stomach was far larger than what Tia remembered.

[Tia:It's about to be born, huh.]

[Rem: Yes. Our deadline with Tia-sama is coming.]

[Tia: ——]

Rem joked around in anticipation that Tia had already completely forgotten about the deadline. And, in fact, her anticipation was correct.

There's no way Tia could kill Rem. Plus—

[Tia: Rem, about that, I have something to tell you.]

[Rem: You...need to tell me something?]

[Tia: You, as well as Su and Hal.]

Tia said that not just to Rem, but to Subaru, who was next to her, and Halibel, who was in the corridor, as well. With a little anxiety showing on her serious face, she said,

[Tia: I.....I finally figured out what I have to do. I want to have a good talk about that with you guys.]

6

The four of them move to the living room of the temporary Natsuki house, and they each gathered at a desk, something that hasn't happened in a while.

And so, for the first time in three months, everyone gathered in one room—however, this wasn't going to be a fun, noisy dinner.

This was a necessary meeting to discuss more important matters.

[Tia: I.....]

Tia, sitting straight with her hands on her lap, was the first one to speak. Although she wasn't sure how to continue, she said,

[Tia: I...for retribution.....no, to get my stolen light sphere back, I came to you guys. You remember that, right?]

[Subaru: Yep, I do. You gave us a real bad time in the beginning, after all.]

[Rem: Yes, that's when you attacked me and Subaru-kun in the streets at night.]

Subaru and Rem answer Tia, who sought a confirmation. However, half of their reply was right, while the other half was wrong; Subaru was right, while Rem made a mistake.

He thought it was far too obvious, and there was nothing he'd confirmed directly, but—

[Subaru: Rem, Tia isn't the one who attacked us in the streets on that night. Tia only beat me up at the tenement house.]

[Rem: What? But that would mean.....]

[Halibel: Yeah, that's the first misunderstanding.....I was also far too careless.]

It was Halibel who nodded instead of Rem, as she was confused. It seemed Halibel had quickly realized the truth of this misunderstanding, being the one who actually fought with the attacker that night.

—He'd realized that on that night, it was black Tia who attacked Subaru and Rem on their way home, and that they never came across the offender again up until today.

[Subaru: Black Tia is called black Tia for convenience, and her face looks just like Tia's. And it's not just her face, that goes for her appearance too—everything. That's why there was a misunderstanding. Tia didn't deny it, either.]

[Tia: I really did beat up Su, and even I had no idea there was someone out there with the same face as me.]

Hearing Subaru's statement, Tia gave something that sounded like an excuse as she looked away.

Of course, this wasn't all on Tia. If they'd talked to Tia more to confirm the truth, they would've immediately noticed the inconsistency.

That never happened because they ran away from seriously facing the issue of the girl from that night, using their fear of ruining their relationship with Tia as an excuse.

[Halibel: It's not Su-san's fault. I should've caught on faster with that "Shinigami" name.]

Seeing Subaru hang his head, Halibel said that with his unlit kiseru in his mouth. He wasn't acting himself today; his ears were bent, as if he was feeling down.

[Subaru: So..."Shinigami" was a hint?]

[Halibel: Not a hint, but the answer. —Sure, there's no one here that goes by the nickname "Shinigami". However, there *is* the most famous "Shinigami". That was the missing piece to the puzzle.]

[Subaru: The most famous "Shinigami".....]

[Halibel: —"The Most Beautiful Shinigami".]

Halibel said that as if he was mentioning someone revered.

The words he put together didn't make sense to Subaru. Still, Rem, looking at Tia with her eyes opened wide, moved her lips with a surprised look.

[Rem: "The Most Beautiful Shinigami", Zarestia.....]

[Subaru: Zarestia? Zarestia...wait a second.....]

He'd heard the name before. As Subaru began saying that, the scene of the memory came back to him vividly. He'd heard of it a few months ago at Clane's employment agency.

Before he was referred to his job at Magoji palace, Subaru happened to find an application—the details written on it were "A Search For Zarestia's Bed". It was an application for challenging a great spirit.

In other words, the name of the great spirit that lived in that bed was—

[Subaru: Zarestia, the Great Spirit.]

[Halibel: —That's Tia-chan's real name.]

Halibel's level voice went over Subaru's that sounded like it was forced out of his lips.

The conclusion was way too out of the blue. Even if this was the truth, even the false name was too simple to begin with. They should've laughed about it, and yet nobody in the living room was laughing.

Tia, the one pointed out to be a great spirit, wasn't laughing, either. She simply let out a sad sigh as she said,

[Tia: I will say this now. I, as you guys have pointed out, am Zarestia.]

[Rem: Tia-sama.....]

[Tia: However, I'm not all of Zarestia. I'm half.....no, not even half. I'm merely a part.]

[Subaru: What do you mean by that?]

Tia, putting her hand to her chest, admitted that she was a great spirit. However, there were a lot of parts missing in her explanation that followed, so Subaru threw a question back at her in confusion.

Rem was the one who dealt with the mind boggling parts of Tia's explanation.

[Rem: It's related to the story about the investigation team Halibel-sama talked about, isn't it?]

[Subaru: Investigation team...the application one? But Clane said that it was a failure.]

[Tia: A failure? Was it really? Those guys that snuck into my bed and stole what's most important to me.....they stole the light sphere so easily!]

Tia, raising her voice, firmly and emotionally denied Subaru's statement.

Light sphere—that's the name of the thing Tia kept insisting that it'd been stolen, and she went after Rem for it.

Rem had no idea what the light sphere was, and even the very existence of it had been suspicious to her. And now, that finally would be a true key.

[Subaru: So what is this light sphere really? What are you looking for?]

[Tia: It's my source of power. It's a contained stone that stores my power.]

[Subaru: Stone? A stone.....wait, but if you're a spirit, then...]

Hearing Tia's lacking explanation, the answer starts to form in Subaru's head. A stone that is necessary in order to remain in the world for spirits who form their bodies by using mana—

[Subaru: —So a Yorishiro¹! A Yorishiro is needed so that a spirit could remain in this world! That's what the light sphere is!]

Now sure of it, Subaru shouted as he snapped his fingers.

Mana is necessary in order for a spirit to materialize and act. If it's a great spirit, a vast amount of mana is needed. A Yorishiro, something that's needed to store it, is exactly what Tia's light sphere is.

[Subaru: That got stolen.....So that's why Tia came to get it back.]

[Rem: But how's that related to me? I...well...I have no idea what the light gem is. I didn't know we were close to the place Tia-sama had lived in, either.....]

Despite being told about what the light sphere really is, Rem's doubt deepened even further. However, unlike Rem, who knitted her brows in confusion, the conditions to guess the answer were satisfied for Subaru.

¹ Vessel for a spirit

He remembered when black Tia's looks came off and a changed person showed up in the attack from earlier.

Since Subaru now knew what the light gem and Tia were, the unclear meaning of that scene led to a guess forming in his head.

If that girl who showed up in the end is the one who stole Tia's light gem, then—

[Subaru: —Black Tia had horns. They were Oni horns.]

[Rem: Oni...horns? Could that mean.....]

[Subaru: It's why Tia said that she'd sniffed out Rem with her nose at first with a smug look on her face. Tia mistook Rem's blood.....she mistook her Oni blood for another Oni and found her.]

[Tia: That's how it is.I can't believe myself. That was pathetic.]

Rem finds out the truth, and her eyes opened wide.

The complicated circumstances surrounding Tia introduced that girl to Subaru and Rem. And then that misunderstanding dragging on caused all the encounters that had happened up to this day.

They couldn't jump to a conclusion and blame Tia for it, calling her a troublemaker. Not if they didn't know just how desperate Tia was, as she'd lost something that made up more than half of who she was.

[Subaru: So basically, the light sphere, Zarestia's Yorishiro.....that was stolen, and if we punish that Oni girl, the problem will be solved.....Oh, but wait...]

Right before reaching a conclusion, Subaru tilted his head thinking that something was off. Although his guess was pretty close to the truth, one important part was missing an explanation.

Tia going after Subaru and Rem was a mistake by her, but why did black Tia attack them first—?

[Halibel: About that, I have one more piece of information I'd like to provide.]

[Subaru: I can only feel like it's something bad since you're telling us now.]

[Halibel: I hate to break it to you, but you're not going to like what you're about to hear.]

Seeing Subaru with an uncomfortable look on his face, Halibel scratched his head as he gave a wry smile.

[Halibel: So, about the girl who stole something important to Tia-chan, while I was sneaking around behind the scenes, I kinda learned about the detailed circumstances]

[Subaru: I take it you told Rem about this on top of investigation team thing in private, right?]

[Rem: I—I only heard about this just now. I'm not hiding anything from you. It's already far too clear who matters the most to me between Halibel-sama and Subaru-kun!]

[Halibel: That...makes me sad, but I'm moving on. It'll be quick.]

This was also going to be news to Rem, who'd been informed about this and that before she came home. After Subaru nodded at Halibel's statement, he said "Go ahead" as he urged him to continue.

[Halibel: It's about the light gem. The girl who stole it joined in on the great spirit bed quest to obtain that.....But she wasn't in it for the light gem as much as she was for the great spirit's power.]

[Subaru: She wanted the power of a great spirit? Dang, that's so reckless.....for what purpose?]

[Halibel: Revenge, probably. —Revenge on the Witch Cult, the ones who burned her home.]

[Subaru: The Witch Cult.....!]

The words Subaru had avoided up to this point came up, making him tremble.

Although the group wasn't directly involved, they were directly connected to Subaru's worst memories. Not only that, but he had extremely mixed feelings after hearing that the girl viewed the witch cult as enemies.

Desiring the power of a great spirit to get revenge on the witch cult, she easily got her hands on the light sphere. Using the light sphere in a certain way, she sought revenge on the witch cult—

[Subaru: —Ah]

Then, after thinking it over this much, he hit the answer to his previous question.

The offender's goal is to get revenge on The Witch Cult; she wanted the light sphere only for the power to do that. And then, having obtained the power, she looked for the Witch Cult and found the witch's scent in Banan town.

Her target for revenge, the one she was actually going after on that night was—

[Subaru: —So it was me.]

[Halibel: The avenger went for Su-san, whereas Tia-chan went for Rem-chan. We didn't know that, so all these complicated misunderstandings happened.]

Halibel's conclusion cleared the doubt Subaru had in his mind, just like that.

A mixup in targets, and thinking that the two culprits were one person. That is what complicated all these problems and created an incomprehensible situation.

[Subaru: I knew things were getting mixed up. But with this, it all makes sense.]

Subaru accepted the revealed truth, and he put words together as he cleared his mind.

He felt sympathy for the offending woman because of the Witch Cult, her target for revenge.

[Subaru: But it's a mistake for the offender to go after me. Her hatred for the Witch Cult.....I get it. But killing me won't help her get over her grudge. Stealing Tia's light gem also does nothing.]

[Halibel: There's just something about the way you put it, but you're right. While I do feel bad for her, we're gonna punish her and get the light sphere back. For anything else that happens, we'll just let the situation play itself out.]

[Subaru: I imagine that's what we'll have to do]

Subaru also nodded and agreed with Halibel's conclusion.

Even with all of his questions answered, he never gave up on arriving at a conclusion. Rem's safety and Tia's feelings were more important to him than the wish of an avenger whose name he didn't even know. In fact, now that the situation was clear, he wanted to come to a solution without any hard feelings.

[Subaru: If that happens, we can all.....]

—After everything's taken care of, we can all eat dinner together, just like old times.

[Tia: —That's not possible.]

His outlook was interrupted and denied by Tia, who stood up.

The cold obstinance of Tia's words brought everyone's attention towards her.

When she crossed her arms as she saw their eyes on her, she looked away from all of them as she said,

[Tia: I'm sorry. I can't do it. Once I get my light sphere back, I have to return to my nest. I can't live with you guys. Nothing can change that.]

[Rem: But...why? I.....Wait, if you're worried about what happened before, it's alright! I know about your circumstances now. So..]

[Tia: That's not it, Rem. I'm an entity that can't coexist with you all.]

Tia shook her head disapprovingly at Rem, who stopped sitting straight and pleaded with her. Neither Rem nor Subaru could tell what were the true intentions of her attitude, as she seemed distressed.

However—

[Halibel: Suspecting that Tia-chan is Zarestia, there's one part that just doesn't make sense. It's the one thing that doesn't make sense. It's inconsistent.]

Halibel, crossing his thick arms, said that while squinting his slit-eyes even more than usual. Irritated by his suggestive way of speaking, Subaru got very angry.

[Subaru: What are you trying to say, Halibel? Don't beat around the bush. Spit it out.]

[Halibel:Zariestia is a "Shinigami", a murderous great spirit. Anyone who enters her hideout gets killed indiscriminately. Even all the anecdotes out there are stories about murder. So, what's that have to say about Tia?]

[Rem: Well.....the stories told are just messed up, I mean, they have to be, right?]

Hearing Halibel's remarks, Rem shows a rare scene of her flaring up irritatedly. Even Subaru felt the same way as Rem. But—

[Tia: They aren't messed up. Right now, I am the one who's messed up.]

[Rem: Tia-sama!]

[Tia: Hal's right, I'm a spirit that's only good for killing.....no, it's not that I'm only good for killing; I'm a spirit that only thinks about killing. That's how I became this trash that got most of her power stolen, left with nothing but the thought of killing.]

During those days, there were many times when Tia would say dangerous things. He never thought that they were her true feelings, but every now and then she did show that sort of great spirit part of her on her vicious face. —But now, all she had left in her was envy.

[Tia: If I get the light sphere back, I will go back to being a spirit that can only think about killing. I'll have to kill Rem, Su, Hal, the townspeople, everyone. So, I can't live with you all. So, this is the end. This is it.]

[Rem: No.....Tia-sama, can't we.....Can't we...do something about it?]

[Tia: ——]

Tia shook her head at Rem, who clung to her. Rem, becoming teary-eyed, looks back at Subaru and Halibel. However, Subaru had no words for her sorrow. Halibel had his eyes closed and was grinding on the kiseru in his mouth with his teeth, feeling sorry for his own powerlessness.

No one could do something for Tia. And even if Tia were to give up on the light gem, the avenger is already set on going after Subaru.

And so——

[Tia: I *will* get the light sphere back. I won't give up, no matter what.]

[Rem:Ah]

With Tia's very determined declaration, Rem grew weak and sank down on the spot. Tia looks down in a bit of a sad way, and she closed her eyes tight.

After that, she gently put her hand to Rem's large stomach as she said,

[Tia: —Sorry to have kept you waiting.]

She says those few words as she rubbed Rem's stomach. That was the only thing she did. An action that meant nothing at all—right after he had that thought, Rem's expression changed.

Rem put her hand on her own stomach, and she quietly let out a "Huh" in a broken voice.

[Rem: W—What.....What did you just do...Tia-sama.....?]

[Tia: Time's up, Rem. That's it for our promise.Although, maybe there never was any promise, since this was my mistake.]

Tia murmurs self-deprecatingly, and Rem slowly crouched down in front of her. Seeing her hold onto her stomach that had been rubbed by Tia, Subaru jumps at Rem with a pale face.

[Subaru: Rem? Rem, are you alright!? Hey, Tia, what did you do to Rem!?!]

[Tia: I just rubbed it. It's the truth. But, now that the shackles for Rem's mind are off, the child has realized that everything's ready.]

Although nobody had known about Tia's involvement, even Subaru understood what had just happened.

Composure fades from Rem's facial expression, and she starts to breathe a bit heavily. Her face clearly enduring pain and her holding onto her own baby belly meant that—

[Subaru: —She's going into labor!]

[Tia: Until the child is born, I can't lay a hand on her. That was our promise.]

Subaru's eyes open wide, realizing that the time has finally come. In front of him, Tia tilted her head at Rem as she said,

[Tia: Because we had that promise, I delayed this moment for as long as I could.Both the mother and the child were way too stubborn.]

[Rem: Tia...-sama.....]

Rem tried to stop Tia, who started to step back with a smile. However, her stomach pain didn't let her, and Tia distanced herself without her fingers ever reaching her.

Tia, who jumped back lightly, opens the sliding door, and then she ran out to the garden.

[Subaru: Tia!]

[Tia: I'll deal with my unfinished business myself. —If I fail, Hal-san, you know what to do.]

Tia looked back in the middle of the garden and said that with a smile on her face.

Hearing what sounded like one's last words, Halibel curled his lips, as he was trusted with the matters to follow when his name was called.

[Halibel: It makes no sense for you to take a battle when you know you have slim chances of winning. You didn't say anything about wanting help, either. Is this the pride of a great spirit or something?]

[Tia: It's nothing big like that. —I'm strong, and I don't plan on losing.]

Tia responded to Halibel's comments like that with a refreshing smile.

After that, Tia finally looked at Subaru, and then at Rem.

[Subaru: How should I put this...This isn't very like you.]

[Rem: Tia-sama.....]

[Tia: About that day...well...I'm sorry. That was my fault.]

Tia awkwardly apologized to Rem while scratching her cheek with her finger. She said nothing more than that, and yet she looked even more nervous than when she revealed the truth about herself.

And then, after saying that, Tia added one comment with a bright expression.

[Tia: A kid! Give birth to an energetic one. A very energetic one.]

Right after Tia said that, a wind surrounded her. It was not a raging wind; it gently wrapped Tia, who was in the middle of the garden, and it urged her towards the sky.

They had no time to stop her. Tia got on the wind, and she rose at once. And then, Rem reached her hand out for Tia—for her friend as she faded away, and she desperately strained his voice.

It wouldn't reach her. Neither her voice nor her hand reached Tila while she faded into the sky approaching night.

[Rem: Tia...-sama.....]

[Subaru: Tia—!!]

Subaru called Tia's name as she faded into the sky instead of Rem, whose voice died as it cracked.

Still, Tia didn't look back. She didn't stop, either.

Then, Tia steadily went up in the sky, going out of their sights.

[———]

The wind blowing against the garden, against the house, against Subaru and the others, died out. This meant that Tia went far away. So far away that she couldn't be interfered with at all.

[Subaru: Damn it.....! That fool!]

[Rem: Subaru...-ku.....]

[Subaru: I know! Rem, I know how you...feel...but.....]

I want to chase Tia. He understood those feelings of hers so much that it hurt.

However, there was something more important to deal with right now. He had bring Rem to the clinic.

[Rem: —Ah...ku...]

When that crossed his mind, serious pain went across Rem's face. Subaru, with both of his hands, lifted Rem, who panted because of the endless waves of the pain of birth.

[Subaru: Hal-san! Please take care of all that stuff!]

[Halibel: Got it, leave it to me.]

It was an unspecific instruction that was far too vague. However, Halibel accepted it without putting in any objection, and he disappeared as if melding into the shadows.

He needed to tell the old magic user about the situation before bringing Rem to the clinic. On top of that, there were mountains of things he wanted Halibel to do.

[Subaru: Rem, I'll take you to the clinic as soon as possible. Please trust me with...both of your lives.]

[Rem: ——]

Rem nods deeply in Subaru's arms, and then he slowly stepped outside.

Under the variegated sky approaching night mixed with blue and orange, Subaru ran as fast as he could with his pregnant wife in his arms. Now...just for now he thought only about Rem and ran and ran along the road to the clinic.

—Without realizing that, in a sense, this was another form of running away.