

ReZero Extra: Natsuki Rigel

Speaker Color Code: Subaru, Rigel, Rem, Spica

“Rem’s birthday and Setsubun are here once more! By our powers combined, let’s make these days amazing!”

On February 2nd (self-decided), the first signs of a storm brew in the Natsuki household. And as usual, the one brewing it is the head of the household, Natsuki Subaru.

“We’ll do it as a family! You’ll help me won’t you, Rigel!”

Subaru gives a thumbs up, flashing a blindingly bright smile.
The young boy sighs deeply at his father’s pose, an unchildlike sternness on his face.

Bearing his mother’s beautiful blue hair and his father’s menacing eyes, nine year old Natsuki Rigel laments his very existence.
As he tries focusing on homework, Subaru anxiously shifts about, awaiting his reply,

“Dad’s lost it again....”

“That’s way too harsh! You skipped past ‘Huh, that’s kinda weird,’ and went straight to ‘My dad’s borderline insane’ territory! Plus, my request isn’t too hare-brained this time, is it? If anything, it’s brimming with love!”

“That blinding love of yours is what terrifies me. After living here for almost ten years, even *I* know to avoid it.”

With a cold stare and an even colder tone, Rigel pushes back an encroaching Subaru. “In the first place,” he continues,

“Mom’s birthday aside, all I’ve gotten out of that Setsubun thing is crippling trauma! Isn’t it just bean-tossing and sushi-eating? What’s so great about that weirdo fest....”

“Hey, don’t call it a weirdo fest. Yeah, on the surface it’s kind of a weird event, but like I said, there’s kind of a meaning and purpose to it. You could say it’s the Setsubun that’s kept our family safe from misfortune, afterall.”

“What about all *my* suffering? What about *that* misfortune?”

“That’s not misfortune, that’s called ‘daily life.’ You know, you’ll never get anywhere if you focus too much on all the bad things in life. Your stress’ll add up too.”

“Don’t say it like it’s my fault! I’m just a victim of my shitty Dad’s nonsense!”

Rigel slams the table and flies up. Fuming, he points outside the window with a finger. In front of their house, numerous flyers with the headline [Come Celebrate Setsubun!] are pasted onto a magic streetlamp. They list date and time, details, and the organizer’s name----

“That weirdo fest, you’re the one drumming it up into some bizarre town-wide event, right? Your name’s even listed as the organizer.... I-, I thought I would die of embarrassment at school today.”

“Well it’s a natural extension of my talents as a Producer. C’mon, now you can proudly boast something like ‘My Dad’s the **HERO** of my household!’”

“Maybe if the event wasn’t about smashing beans into my face!”

Rigel rips yet another flyer off a nearby wall. He points to a section below “Practices,” “Purpose,” “Details,” and the event date of February 3rd (self-decided). According to the flyer, [Oni] will run around the neighborhood being chased all day. And acting as their representative, will be [Natsuki Rigel].

“Don’t sell out your son without permission! What are you, an Oni!”

“You’re the Oni, and so is my wife. And well, I can’t let Rem do something this crazy. That’s why, I’ll swallow my tears and send off my dear son....”

“What are you, an Oni! No, you’re *definitely* an Oni!”

“Calm down. It’s not like everyone’s out for blood. Plus, you might be the representative, but there’ll be other Oni. I’ll be helping out too.”

Seeing Subaru’s bold, undaunted face, Rigel gives in.

In the first place, they’ve already fought this battle countless times since the event’s announcement. Each time, Rigel was utterly defeated, and the day of the event crept ever closer. Now, there was simply no running or turning back. While his role was forced onto him, Rigel felt obligated to fulfill it.

----Such is the level-headed Natsuki Rigel’s harsh way of life.

“An event’s an event. Just take it like a man. But that’s not what I wanted to talk about.”

“.....Mom’s birthday, right?”

“Exactly.”

As Subaru snaps his fingers, Rigel turns away.

By some twist of fate, the hectic Setsubun and the birthday of his mother, Natsuki Rem, are only a day apart.

---Grandly celebrating with his mother on the first day, then tasting a glimpse of hell on the next. This was their annual schedule.

“We can’t properly celebrate Mom’s birthday like this....”

“I won’t deny that it’s a jam-packed schedule, but enjoying two great days in a row is a blessing. Come on, be more optimistic. **POSITIVE THINKING!**”

“....We can’t properly celebrate Mom’s birthday like this....”

“Huh? *Déjà vu?*”

Déjà vu my ass.

Unmoved by his father’s speech, Rigel’s answer remains the same, right down to the syllable.

“I know you’re pretty tense about the Setsubun. But that’s no reason to make light of Rem’s birthday. It only comes once a year, you know. Won’t Rem be sad? So let’s switch gears here. I know you can do it.”

“-----ahh.”

Rigel takes some time to accept.

But arguing won’t get him anymore, and dispiriting Subaru is borderline impossible. Rigel’s only choice is to obediently concede.

“So, you wanna talk about Mom’s birthday present, right?”

“Right. You see, this year’s a pretty big milestone. It’ll be ten years since we got married, afterall. We actually don’t have a specific day for the anniversary, so I wanted to celebrate it along with her birthday. That’s why, I decided to do something special this year.”

“Well, that sounds alright to me? Honestly, Mom’ll probably be happy no matter what Dad does. But for once, I’m pretty onboard with this.”

“Right? So, here’s the meat of it.”

With the smile of a scheming child, Subaru beckons his son over. Rigel frowns, an ominous feeling hanging over him. But while he hesitates, Subaru waves for him over and over. In the end, a reluctant Rigel sighs as he lends an ear.

“For our tenth anniversary, I’ve actually prepared something really special. I already ordered it too, so no worries there.”

“....hm, well, okay.”

“I’ve been steadily building up my secret stash, all for this day. And the result is something to behold. Listen and be amazed----It’s a gemstone!”

“----wohh, a gemstone.”

“Be amazed,” his father said. But with Subaru’s gift *actually* turning out respectably amazing, Rigel was doubly amazed.

As a rule, no matter what he does, Subaru always overcomplicates things and makes a great, chaotic mess. But for once, that doesn’t seem to be the case.

“A gemstone, huh....”

Looking back, Rigel’s mother, Natsuki Rem, doesn’t dress herself up very much. This wasn’t a matter of household finance, but rather, a matter of character.

Rigel has always been secretly proud of his exceedingly beautiful mother. But her reluctance to wear jewelry and fancy clothes was a source of his discontent.

They weren’t necessarily poor either. She just doesn’t particularly care to adorn herself. And yet, without any regard for dignity nor honor, Rem is shamelessly attached to Subaru. To Rigel’s dismay, if it’s a present from Subaru, Rem will always accept it. Thus, Rigel immediately approves of a gemstone as his father’s gift to his mother.

“That’s really great! Hell, you really *can* do it if you try!”

“Yeah, that’s right. I’m the type that just needs to try and.... huh? What the heck? Doesn’t it sound like *you’re* the parent here?”

“Forget about it. What’s important is Mom’s gift, right?”

“Oh, yeah, right. Yeah, of course! What’s important is Rem’s gift. Well I knew I had the right idea, but I’m confident now that you’ve approved.”

With a spirited fist bump, Subaru and Rigel nod to each other.

Rigels then wonders about his mother’s gift, especially with his father’s questionable tastes.

“So, what’s the gemstone like? Knowing Dad, I’m worried you found some weirdo craftsman to make it.

“Oh my god! My stock rose and fell within *seconds*!But about that. Now we’re getting to the important part. Listen carefully, my son.”

“Ughh....”

Rigel groans at his father's gravely serious face.

When Subaru has this serious look, and the playfulness in his voice vanishes, one must be extremely careful. He'll definitely spit out something troublesome----this was the "trust" cultivated between Rigel and his father for the past ten years. And once again, this trust will not be betrayed.

As a fearful Rigel wrinkles his face into a scowl, Subaru whispers,

"----The merchant carrying Rem's gemstone, his dragon carriage ran into some trouble and hasn't arrived. There's talk that he might even head back, so I'm going out to get it myself."

"....are you gonna make it by the end of the day?"

"Well, I'll be chasing after them full throttle, of course. ----But, honestly, I'm not sure."

Fingers twiddling, gaze dropping, voice lowering. Seeing his father like this, Rigel slaps his forehead,

"If you're that worried, why not forget the gemstone for now? Birthday present aside, if Dad's not here, Mom'll be way more sad."

"I know. I know that, but.... I have to give her this present today. It'd be meaningless otherwise, I think."

"That's just...."

Selfish, he wanted to say, but Rigel's words stopped short.

Subaru scratches his head, a pitiful, bittersweet smile on his face. But beneath, a maelstrom of hard, indescribable feelings swirls about. Just from looking, Rigel feels its pull sweeping him away.

From the depths of Subaru's soul, tucked away with the greatest of care, Rigel could feel the faint traces of an important *something*.

----It was the irreplaceable bond his parents shared.

"-----"

Cutting in would be wrong, Rigel decides.

With a sigh, he too scratches his head,

"So, after revealing all this, what do you want from me?"

"Will you hear me out, Rigel!"

"You're practically *forcing* me to! Spit it out or I'll look like some scumbag who can't read the atmosphere!"

“I’m saved!”

With Rigel’s reluctant acceptance, an ecstatic Subaru grabs him by the hands, swinging up and down, to and fro.

Rigel scowls, but Subaru just keeps smiling back,

“I’m going out to retrieve the gemstone. I’ll definitely be back in time, but you need to give Rem some excuse while I’m gone. Even if you screw up, don’t talk about the present. It’ll ruin the *surprise*.”

“...if Dad’s not around for Mom’s birthday, I think that’ll be more than enough *surprise*.”

“Even then. Anyways, I’m heading out now. The rest’s up to you!”

After forcing his trust onto Rigel, Subaru grabs his luggage and rockets out the front door. Like the wind, he furiously tumbles down the street, making for the town gate----from there, he’ll likely mount an earth dragon and chase after the jeweller.

“Is he gonna make it back in time?”

Just barely, according to Subaru. But Rigel figures he’s more likely to fail than succeed. In his absence, it’s up to Rigel to defend the Natsuki household from devastation. But with Rem’s endless devotion to her husband, Rigel can already see his mother shaking and trembling.

“Is-, is this gonna be a bloodbath....?”

Trembling with fear, Rigel anxiously waits for his mother’s return, all the while praying for his father to come home even a second sooner.

※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※

Fortunately, Rem’s reaction wasn’t nearly the catastrophe Rigel imagined. Compared to the worst case scenario, she was utterly composed.

“So y’see, there was some trouble at work, or something. They needed Dad over because, y’know, they really depend on him and.... wait, do they? They do, right? Well, *assuming* they do, he apparently went off to sorta help them, I think.”

“Why does Rigel sound so uncertain? Really, at almost ten years old, you should at least house-sit and relay messages properly. Honestly.”

Returning from shopping and the local neighborhood meeting, Rem is welcomed home by her son. With no time to prepare, Rigel clumsily explains Subaru’s absence. Luckily, Rem doesn’t particularly doubt him, nor does she pout.

But on the other hand, she clearly disapproves of his shoddy explanation. Despite appearances, Rem is actually quite the despotic mother. It's a well-kept family secret that Subaru is in fact the more lenient of the two.

“So Subaru-kun had to go out.... that's too bad. For lunch today, Rem planned to make all of Subaru-kun's favorite foods.”

Bearing her shopping bag, a slightly lonely Rem droops her eyebrows. Suddenly, a sense of duty burns and rages within Rigel. No matter what, he can't let his mother be sad. As a man, Rigel puts his all into everything, even roles forced onto him. You could say his very nature was a tragedy.

“Dad's favorites, huh. That's a shame.... wait, didn't you say the same thing yesterday? I feel like we had all his favorites yesterday too....”

“Yes. And tomorrow and the day after, and the day before yesterday and even the day before that, it's **all** Subaru-kun's favorite foods.”

“Home cooking aside, that's some extreme favoritism!”

Day in, day out, Rem dedicates every single meal to Subaru's tastes. Realizing this, Rigel can't help but cry out.

“No, no,” Rem replies, shaking her head,

“Please don't worry. Subaru-kun's favorites are also Rigel's and Spica's favorites. Afterall, has Rem ever made anything that you two didn't like?”

“Well.... now that I think about it, I guess not. But is it even possible for a whole family to like the same things? I mean, doesn't everyone have different tastes?”

“That's because when Rigel was just a baby, Rem endlessly whispered Subaru-kun's favorites to him as he slept, brainwashing him into liking them too.”

“Please tell me you're joking!?”

“Yes, that was just a joke. Rigel should take better care not to fall for things like this.”

Rigel's eyes are wide as saucers from this devastating truth. Seeing him, a giggly Rem playfully sticks out her tongue.

Then, smoothing down her long, blue hair,

“Rem calls them Subaru-kun's favorites, but the truth is that Subaru-kun *always* says ‘delicious’ to Rem's cooking. So Rigel doesn't need to worry.”

“Well alright. But doesn't that make your efforts kinda pointless....”

“Not at all. Subaru-kun always says ‘delicious,’ but when he *really* loves something, his tone changes, and his cheeks move a bit differently. They’re cuter than usual. Fufu.”

Rigel can’t decide whether his mother’s detailed observations make her charming, or a little scary. He lets out a vague, strained laugh as Rem smiles blissfully. She then hands Spica over and carries the groceries to the kitchen.

“Seriously, your big bro’s drowning in anxiety over here, but you’re as carefree as ever, huh.”

“Aaahh----?”

“Don’t ‘aaahh’ me, you.... ohh, you’re too cute, Spica!”

With the goofy affection of an older brother, Rigel rubs cheeks with Spica. While naïve to the world, Spica still loves his doting and affection. She smiles and giggles as if being tickled. After savoring Spica’s smile to his heart’s content, Rigel takes her with him to the kitchen. Before them, Rem is putting away the day’s groceries.

“So then, Rigel. When did your father say he’ll be home?”

“Oh, uhh.... well, I think he said he might take a while? But he said he’ll try his best to hurry back. Since, y’know, he’s got a reason to hurry today.”

Rigel immediately regrets saying too much. Subaru’s trip and Rem’s birthday are topics he desperately had to avoid. And yet, with every clumsy step, a dumbfounded Rigel digs his grave ever deeper. Woefully unaware of his “Can’t tell a lie to save my life” personality, Rigel quickly covers his mouth.

Mimicking him, Spica puts her small hands up to her own mouth. So cute. But this isn’t the time to dote.

“Is that so. ‘He might take a while’....”

“-----”

“How troubling. Though Rem understands why he would hurry.”

Without turning around, Rem continues stocking the shelves. But Rigel looks on in worry. Her voice is the same as always, but she might actually be on the verge of tears, ready to fall to her feet from the shock.

In Rigel’s mind, Rem is a strong woman, but she has some very fatal weak points. And those weak points invariably have to do with Natsuki Subaru.

In the first place, from her words, she's probably already realized that Subaru's preparing for her birthday. Unlike Subaru, Rem is unusually perceptive and actually capable of reading the atmosphere. Rigel wonders if there's really any point to all this deception.

“Umm, Mom, listen....”

The more he thinks it over, the more it wears on his nerves. Honest to a fault, Rigel's resolve grows weaker and weaker.

“It's about Dad but, well, don't think too badly of him.”

“-----? Isn't that obvious? Rem would never think badly of Subaru-kun for going out to work. He's working hard for his family, afterall.”

“But well, the situation's a bit different this time, y'know?”

“....ahh, as expected. Rigel was also worried about *that*.”

Turning around, Rem finds her son with an uneasy expression on his face. She smiles back fondly, as if understanding everything from that one look. Feeling he's been completely seen through, Rigel silently apologizes to Subaru.

But to think that, in a mere thirty minutes, he would already taste defeat.

Shamefully coming to grips with his loss, Rigel realizes he no longer needs to lie. The guilt of keeping secrets from family dissipates, the thought of coming clean lightens his heart. In the end, you just have to be honest. There isn't a shred of doubt.

“Please don't worry. Rem is a little uneasy as well. But if it's Subaru-kun, there's nothing to worry about.”

“I don't know if I believe in him *that* strongly, but.... yeah, I guess that's good.”

“Yes. Rem doesn't exactly understand his intentions, but she did her best to prepare to Subaru-kun's instructions. If anything, Subaru-kun entrusting Rem with this task is a sign of his faith in her. Rem feels inspired to do her best.”

“.....huh?”

Tightening her hands, Rem makes a guts pose.

Rigel secretly likes this childish habit of hers, but right now, it stirs a sense of anxiety in him. Their conversation, it seems to flow, and yet it *doesn't*.

“Hold on a sec?” Rigel asks, his head cocked in puzzlement,

“What're you talking about?”

“-----? Well of course, preparations for tomorrow’s Setsubun event. Rigel will be representing the runaway Oni, afterall. An appropriate outfit.... Subaru-kun asked Rem to prepare one for Rigel. Rem was hoping Subaru-kun could review the final result.”

“----*AHH DAMNIT! I KNEW IT!!*”

With both sides of their conversation finally meshing, Rigel’s guilt gushes back in full force. Realizing that nothing he’s said has made it across, he can’t help but wail in frustration. Spica, still held carefully in his arms, looks to her brother’s wrinkled, anguished face. “Awuu---” she chirps, mimicking him as she laughs so happily.

※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※

---A few minutes later, standing before a mirror is Natsuki Rigel, newly reborn.

“As expected, Subaru-kun’s judgement was flawless. Rem is so moved.”

“Upaa~♪”

Rem nods, deeply satisfied with her work. In her arms, Spica gazes at her brother with a pair of sparkling eyes.

The being standing before them is a perfect reproduction.

“-----”

Pants made from a yellow fabric, spotted with black lightning bolts coming down in vertical stripes. For his upper body, a vest sewn from the same yellow fabric. On his feet, a Kararagi specialty, wooden clogs.

In his hands, he grips a metallic-looking club made from papier-mâché. In his mouth, a pair of fake fangs borrowed from the costume store. And with his hair ruffled a bit more wildly than usual, Rigel was the spitting image of an Oni.

With her son perfectly embodying the classic Oni style, a delighted Rem looks on admiringly. Meanwhile, Spica’s eyes brim with heartfelt wonder at her brother’s magnificent form. With these two watching over him, the newly reborn Rigel studies himself in the mirror,

“God, this is awful!”

“My, what is Rigel saying? Doesn’t this costume match perfectly with Subaru-kun’s sketch? For her fine work, Rem is ready to sing her own praises.”

“*This* is an Oni? I look more like a barbarian! Mom, as one of the last surviving Oni, doesn’t this costume piss you off?”

“No matter how the world perceives Oni, it won’t control Rem and Rigel’s lives. It will be okay. With that said, such a breathtaking costume.... especially those *eyes*, so wonderfully Oni-like.”

“That’s the only part that’s real!!”

His parents may have given him this body, but having it praised by those very parents only annoys Rigel.

His unexpected reaction vexes Rem, but in all honesty, the one most vexed is Rigel. Delighted by his agitation, a cherry-cheeked Spica rolls and tumbles with laughter, her voice resounding like bells throughout the house.

An Oni vest and Oni pants. An Oni’s club and an Oni’s eyes. Truly a work of perfection.

“No, not yet. As the finishing touch, please grow out your horn. With this, the costume will be complete.”

“Th-, that’s not your business....”

“Not true at all. Rigel is Rem’s child. And when it comes to Rigel, Rem’s thinking is always serious and sincere.”

At Rigel’s doubtful eyes, Rem speaks back with an utmost seriousness. Overpowered, a reluctant Rigel concentrates his senses to his forehead.

As a successor to the Oni bloodline, Rigel possesses the horn of the Oni clan. However, rather than the usual pair, only a single horn grows from his forehead. According to Rem, this was probably due to Rigel’s half-Oni blood. Frankly, it didn’t bother him very much. However---,

[For only being able to give Rigel a single horn, Rem is sorry.]

His mother’s apology from so long ago. In Rigel’s mind, it remains vividly clear. Her apologetic face, that regretful voice, he could never forget them.

But Rigel doesn’t care how many horns he has. Whether there’s one or two, a horn’s a horn. When he grows it out, his body feels light and easy to move. Rigel considers it a true blessing.

[Yes, thank you very much.]

When he answered this way, his mother made a lonely, bittersweet smile. From time to time, Rigel helplessly thinks back to that moment. But since then, he could never find the courage to bring back the topic. They never spoke of his horn again.

Supposedly, his mother also has just one horn. Rigel wonders if she ever suffered because of it.

“-----”

Putting those thoughts aside, Rigel concentrates on rousing his Oni blood. From his forehead, the white, pointed tip of a horn begins to emerge.

A sharp sensation courses through his forehead like lightning. As it flows to the rest of his body, Rigel feels his limbs brimming with strength. At the same time, a powerful urge throbs deeply within his chest. According to his mother, this was the Oni's natural battle instinct. The instincts roar louder and louder, assaulting his mind.

As he basks in this strange but empowering sensation, Rigel holds back the equally powerful battle instincts.

In the mirror, his appearance has undergone a clear transformation. Confirming the growth of his horn, Rigel turns back towards Rem and Spica---,

“How is it...”

“Pfft.... it-, it's very, splendid.... splendid, indeed, Rigel.... pfft.”

“Could you give me back my concern!?”

Turning around, Rigel finds his mother desperately stifling her laughter. After witnessing his perfection of the classic Oni style, Rem's cheeks are puffed red. She falls to her knees in a giggling fit.

Just moments ago, Rigel was wrought with worry and concern. But with the growth of his own horn turning him into a laughingstock, he realizes it was time and energy wasted.

As Rigel droops his shoulders in exhaustion, Rem somehow manages to get back up. Pulling herself together, she wipes away a stray tear,

“In-, in any case, Rem thinks it's wonderful. Subaru-kun will surely be satisfied, and all the participants will love it too. ---pfft.”

“Fine, I'll make you all regret choosing me to represent the Oni! For the first time in my life, I'll unleash these savage fight instincts sleeping within me----”

“Of course, Rigel is forbidden from causing harm to anyone. If he resorts to violence, Rem will take responsibility and personally subjugate him. Is that clear?”

“For the first time in my life, I'll unleash these savage *flight* instincts sleeping within me----”

Adjusting the wording ever so slightly, Rigel corrects his declaration. Seeing a satisfied Rem nod back, he sighs.

“Looking in the mirror, I can see why you'd like it, but.... is this really okay? Won't this just make the Oni look bad?”

“As a race, the Oni have almost all perished. Even if someone insults us at this point, there’s little use in worrying over it. Incidentally, the setting for this event has Rigel as the chieftain of a ferocious, bloodthirsty Oni tribe. If the townsfolk fail to repel them, the tribe will instigate an atrocious mass killing, painting the town ruins into a true scene from Hell.... is the planned development.”

“They really are barbarians! Do they even need to be Oni!?”

“Oni are excellent for playing the villain role.... is what Subaru-kun said.”

While indifferent to the Oni’s dignity, Rem seems reluctant to continue their talk. The near-eradication of the Oni clan is common knowledge. And yet, Rigel has never heard Rem talk about it in any real detail. Thinking back, he’s never heard much about his parents’ romance and past either.

“....Well, hearing about it will just wear me out anyway.”

Sometimes, from his parents---- from Subaru and Rem, he has this strange feeling, as if something’s off or out of place. Whether it’s helping with his homework, or celebrating weird festivals, scraps of knowledge from some unknown place would pop up from time to time. There were all sorts of mysterious odds and ends. Every time he catches a glimpse at his parents’ past, Rigel feels oddly vexed. At any rate, between his parents, there were traces of an education that they couldn’t quite conceal.

Rigel guesses that these two received a respectable education from somewhere. As their son, the thought fills him with pride. And yet, seeing his parents hide their secret at all costs, this pride is tangled with resentment. Rigel wonders if, someday, he’ll be able to hear their story.

“But well, I doubt they’ll tell me any time soon....”

Coming to this conclusion, Rigel sets aside his suspicions for now. Oblivious to her son’s inner turmoil, Rem clasps her hands with an enthusiastic “Now,”

“Let’s put away the costume and prepare for tomorrow. It’s too bad that Subaru-kun couldn’t personally check on it, but Rem will leave that for tomorrow as something to look forward to.”

“Am I really running around in this tomorrow....”

“Other Oni besides Rigel will be wearing the same outfit, so there’s nothing to be embarrassed about. Though the only real Oni will be Rigel, of course.”

As he pulls his arms out from the vest and changes his pants, Rigel grows anxious over tomorrow’s event. Wanting to encourage him, Rem gently brushes her beloved son’s shoulder,

“It will be okay. Rigel is Rem’s and Subaru-kun’s proud son, afterall.”

“Well, being Mom’s son is fine, but having to be *Dad’s* son is....”

“If anything, that part should be a source of relief. On the other hand, Rem’s blood flowing in Rigel’s veins, Rem worries and worries that it’ll cause him nothing but trouble....”

“Aren’t you undervaluing yourself here?”

It’s a bad habit of hers. Rem loves Subaru and sees him in almost too good of a light. And yet, while not quite self-deprecating, she’s undeniably too hard on herself.

“I don’t know how convincing it is coming from me, but I don’t think Mom’s blood ever caused me any problems. Like I said, it’s *Dad’s* blood that’s got me worried. These scary eyes aside, I feel like I’m inheriting his evilness.”

“Those eyes are wonderful.”

“But sometimes girls cry just from looking at me....”

“They’re just too young to understand a boy’s charm.”

That stubborn, unyielding faith in others, why does it weaken so much when it comes to herself? Actually, Rigel suspects that Subaru has the very same flaw. But he rarely sees weakness in his father, so he can’t quite compare. Putting those thoughts aside for now,

“As your son, I honestly have no idea why you’re so unconfident.... I guess, I’ll just have to prove it to you?”

“Huh?”

“Tomorrow’s event, if I pull it off perfectly, completely, and without a single incident.... then as both Mom and Dad’s son, I’ll make you see that there’s nothing to worry about.”

“-----”

“It’s been bothering me for a while now. So I’ve always wanted to prove it to you.”

Staring back at his wide-eyed mother, Rigel makes his bold declaration.

As the loving wife of Natsuki Subaru, and the doting mother of Natsuki Rigel and Natsuki Spica, Natsuki Rem is a woman who lacks self-confidence. Yet in Rigel’s mind, no other woman is so deserving of respect.

“You’re always worried that you can’t match up with Dad, but I’ll show you that that’s not even the tiniest, slightest bit true!”

“Rigel....”

“My.... my Mom is the greatest Mom in the entire world. I just wanted you to see that.”

Unconfident, yet living so blissfully, but at times, shrinking back in hesitation. Rigel has watched over his mother all this time, wishing that she would live more proudly.

Just as she loves her husband and her son and daughter, Rigel wishes she would love herself.

Because Subaru and Rigel, and Spica as well, they all love Rem.
Because just as Rem loves them all, they all love Rem back,

“Looking down on my Mom, I won’t let anyone do that, not even my Mom.”

Burning with a feverish vigor, Rigel finishes his declaration. But suddenly, he’s struck with an awkward situation.

*What the hell am I saying, looking like **this**!?*

Having removed the Oni vest and pants, he stands there in nothing but his underwear. Like this, no matter how serious he is, he’ll just be treated like a comedy show.

After all this time, he finally blasted out everything he wanted to say. But there had to have been a better time to do it.

“Ahh, uhm, just now, that was----”

“A mistake,” he wanted to say, but before he could,

“-----”

Suddenly, Rigel’s head is entangled between two outstretched arms and abruptly embraced. A tender feeling envelopes his head as a bewildered Rigel darts his eyes about in confusion. He quickly realizes, this is his mother’s embrace.

Hearing the intense pounding of his mother’s heart so close, Rigel’s face immediately turns red. He’s at the age where being spoiled by his mother is unbelievably embarrassing. The days when she’d hold him like this should be long past. He instinctively wants to pull away. However----,

“....Mom?”

“-----”

Feeling the tremble and quiver of the arms cradling him, Rigel freezes in place. He calls out to his mother, but Rem doesn't answer. That's when he realizes,

“.....uu, fu, eh-”

The sound of crying meets his ears.

But it isn't the familiar crying of his adorable little sister. While so very similar, this crying comes from someone Rigel has never seen cry before.

Quickly realizing its owner, Rigel turns a pale white.

What if something he said was unimaginably hurtful. His forceful, impassioned words, if they hurt her, it'd be a mistake that Rigel could never take back.

He frantically wrings his brain for the right words to say.

But he soon realizes that all his fretting and worrying was unnecessary.

“-----”

Shaking her head, a small Rem firmly embraces her even smaller son. The emotion packed into those trembling arms, it wasn't displeasure, nor was it grief. There was only loving affection. Caressed by this affection, Rigel is the first to understand.

Returning his sobbing mother's hug with his own, Rigel gently strokes her back.

“Don't cry, Mom.... if Dad sees, he'll kill me.”

“....that, isn't possible.”

“Why?”

“Rem is this happy, yet the tears won't stop falling.”

To think that the mother he's known for almost ten years is, unexpectedly, such a crybaby. Rigel sighs.

Still held by her mother, Spica looks to her mother and brother embracing, tilting her head. And then Spica, with her small, autumn-colored hand, as if mimicking her brother, starts stroking her mother's back.

Slowly, slowly, with a tenderness that could soothe even the biggest crybaby.

---As happy tears fall from their mother's eyes, the siblings continue stroking her back.

※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※

----In the end, Subaru, who went out to retrieve the gemstone, didn't return while Rigel and Spica were awake.

“Tomorrow will be very busy, so Rigel should go to sleep now. Don't stay up too late since we start early tomorrow.”

His mother spoke in her usual tone, as if she already forgot how hard she had cried. However, as Rem kisses his forehead to say goodnight, Rigel notices her expression has somehow changed from yesterday's.

In the end, they never spoke about her birthday, but at least he kept his promise with Subaru. Rigel decides to leave the rest to his father.

In the first place, he didn't have the courage left to spout any more embarrassing words. After all, he just finished blasting out a whole ten years' worth.

“-----”

Staring at the magic crystal, Rigel counts down the remaining minutes on his fingers. Will Subaru return home in time for Rem's birthday? In Rigel's experience, Subaru will go to absurd lengths to prove his love and devotion to his wife. That's probably why. Even with just ten minutes left, Rigel isn't at all worried.

And in the end----

“----Rem, I'm home! Sorry I'm late!”

Subaru rolls and tumbles into the house, a mere five minutes before the date changes. ----Though they technically had just five minutes left to celebrate, he still managed to keep his promise.

“Subaru-kun, welcome home. But please don't make so much noise. Rigel and Spica are already asleep. It wouldn't be good to wake them.”

“Ahh, sorry, sorry. I was just in such a rush....”

The sound of Rem welcoming, then scolding Subaru, and the sound of a flustered Subaru apologizing back. From his futon, Rigel hears footsteps make their way into the house. Since he went to bed a few hours ago, Rigel has just been tossing and turning. But with this last worry cleared from his mind, he finally feels sleepy.

Considering tomorrow's event, just as his mother said, he really should sleep already. Yesterday, he dreaded the Setsubun event, despairing as it came ever closer. But now, Rigel feels like he can look forward to it, just a little. It must be because of the promise he made with his mother----

“Rem, I'm really sorry for being late, but there's more I have to say. The work I was out for today, it was more like a personal errand. A really important one.”

“A personal errand, is it? Was there something special going on?”

“There is. Though you probably don’t think it’s too special.”

Tilting her head, Rem seems to honestly have no clue. Neglecting herself, another bad habit of hers. Frankly, hiding the present from her might’ve been totally unnecessary. That’s just how indifferent Rem is towards herself.

“There’s only two minutes left, but here, take this. ----It’s your birthday present.”

“Birthday.... ah.”

At Subaru’s stiff words, Rem’s cheerful voice abruptly pauses. Finally understanding, she’s met with two conflicting emotions. Unsure which to embrace, she stands in bewilderment.

“-----”

Rigel guesses that his mother’s eyes are darting about in confusion as his father hands her something. And with Rem still vexed, it’s probably Subaru who opens the small box lying in her hands. At the sound of the box opening, Rem peers inside and lets out a small gasp.

“This is....”

“A garnet.... at least, I think that’s what you’d call it. I’ve been steadily building my secret stash all for this day. But seriously, I was so worried. Even though it’s only meaningful if I gave it to you today, that dragon carriage started heading back halfway.”

“-----”

As Subaru recounts his trials, Rem stands wordlessly. Noticing her silence, a wryly smiling Subaru roughly scratches his head.

“I wanted to give you something definite, something permanent. We’ve been together for ten years now. And with your birthday, and Setsubun, I thought this’d be a fitting way to ask, ‘Once again, please take care of me.’”

“....is it really okay, for Rem-”

“Hm?”

“For Rem to be this blessed, is it really okay?”

Hearing her trembling voice, Rigel shifts about, his weary eyes now looking towards them. His parents are in the neighboring room, but Rigel can see them through the half-open sliding door. Subaru and Rem face each other, with Rem’s eyes fixated on the red gemstone in her hands.

“Rem’s birthday.... she completely forgot about it. Because.... Rem always believed she had no right to celebrate it.”

“-----”

“Rem left behind Nee-sama, who was born on the very same day.... even though she knew it was such a terrible thing, but....”

“Yeah, tell me anything. I’ll listen to you.”

“----n. Rem was always worried, if she’s allowed to be this happy.”

That tearful voice, the same one Rigel heard just hours ago. Yet this time, it feels strained with a deep guilt.

And from his mother’s mouth, the surprise of an unfamiliar word. “Nee-sama”. But what truly surprises Rigel is that, far beyond what he imagined, his parents’ past is heavy and painful.

“I won’t tell you to stop feeling guilty. I know all too well that it isn’t possible. Because, I feel the same.”

“....yes.”

“But even then, I don’t want to think that anything and everything has been bad. Even though we gave up, even if we ran away, the things we obtained after running, I don’t want to think badly of them too.”

“....yes.”

Unimaginable from his usual tone, Subaru’s truly serious voice shocks Rigel. And as Rem nods over and over, her voice carries something different as well. Separate from her reliableness as a mother, different from the extreme love and favoritism she shows her husband.

Right now, they were merely a man and a woman, sharing in their precious bond and memories.

“Coming to this town, and having Rigel and Spica. After all sorts of things happened, now you and I are here. All of that is connected to our happiness. I wanted to prove that to you and give it shape. And that’s this gemstone.”

“-----”

“If it’s still too painful for you to accept it, I won’t ask you to immediately wear that gemstone. I won’t even mind if you put it away somewhere. But please, don’t throw it away. I feel like that’s the one thing we shouldn’t do.”

Appealing, Subaru takes a step towards the wordless Rem.
Carefully reaching out his arms, he embraces Rem and pulls her towards him. Holding her close, Subaru tenderly strokes her head.
As he does so, Rem buries her face into his breast, and says with a small voice,

“Today, Rigel told Rem.”

“Yeah?”

“He said that Rem is.... the greatest mother in the world.”

“Yeah. You didn’t know?”

“....Yes, Rem did not know.”

Rem carefully repeats Rigel’s words, but Subaru swiftly answers back, as if they were the most obvious words in the world.
At his immediate reply, Rem wrinkles her face and smiles.