

Chapter 9, 52: "Aldebaran I"

"—No one can defeat the you that I created."

Aldebaran could recall the **Witch** saying those words to him as clearly as if it were yesterday.

In real-time, it was nearly twenty years ago, but in terms of perceived time, it was far more than that. He could remember the number of times he'd re-challenged a single situation, but he had no idea of the total number of challenges, and he certainly didn't want to think about the unimaginable sum of all the time he had spent. Yet, it was certain that he had spent far longer than a single life of simply living and dying.

Nevertheless, to suggest that Aldebaran's mind, having endured all that time, had reached the same level of enlightenment as an ageless Elf who had lived for hundreds of years, would be false. If the human spirit matures from immaturity, eventually growing old and reaching a state of understanding, it is because the passage of time allows one to experience both the sweet and the bitter, giving room for mental growth.

However, the time Aldebaran spent outside of real-time was a continuous series of, so to speak, **stalled moments**, dedicated to overcoming the immediate obstacles before him. When a span of time—a mere few seconds to at most a few minutes—is repeated endlessly, no growth can be expected in a human. Therefore, Aldebaran believed that the accumulation of time repeated by his Authority only wore down his heart and failed to foster any growth, making it a **fruitless period**.

Even during such fruitless time, repeated tens, hundreds, thousands, millions, or billions of times, the brain naturally attempts to organize memories, trying to strip Aldebaran of his genuine recollections. Yet, there were certainly memories that would not fade—memories that seemed etched not into his brain, but into his **soul**—and the words quoted at the start were precisely one of them.

Of course, if Aldebaran were to say that he didn't remember all that time, nor did he want to, he could easily imagine the Witch, who was the very personification of insatiable curiosity, muttering, "Is that so? What a pity."

The Witch was adept at acting to manipulate others, even while claiming she couldn't understand emotions. Despite knowing this, Aldebaran couldn't defy the Witch's words or demeanor. To say he had been trained and reshaped in such a manner might put her on par with the inhuman behavior of the Shinobi Village, which he'd only vaguely heard about from Yae. In this scenario, it was hard to say which was more insane: the Shinobi Village being placed on the same level as the Witch, or the Witch being so dangerous that she could rival the entire history of the Shinobi Village on her own.

—In any case, the current Aldebaran was something **created by the Witch**.

"Even so, you have the right to live your own life. That is a domain which must not be unilaterally infringed upon, even by a creator. Therefore, if you ever feel that you cannot follow me from the bottom of your heart, you are free to withdraw from the plan at any time. That is your liberty."

From time to time, the Witch would say this, testing Aldebaran's resolve. It was an unusual consideration for the Witch. Her standard strategy was generally to maneuver in such a way that once she had a person's consent, that commitment could never be taken back. In fact, among the lessons and tasks the Witch had assigned Aldebaran, there were several nightmarish ones that would have made him hesitate unless he had first promised not to give up. When making him do those things, the Witch never asked if he wanted to stop after getting his initial nod.

And yet, she frequently questioned him about his fundamental, core, original resolve.

Aldebaran interpreted those moments as the Witch's own **guilt or internal conflict**, but he wondered. The Witch, who claimed to not understand emotions, surely wasn't ignorant of anger, sadness, or joy. If she could express those emotions, might she not also have been capable of feeling guilt or fear for the future? At the very least, in all the time Aldebaran spent with her, he thought of her as a Witch who didn't *understand* the human heart, but never one who *lacked* a human heart.

A completely different landscape lies between "**lacking**" and "**not understanding**." Could that difference have been expressed through the Witch's questions? If so, did the Witch hesitate as many times as she asked? Did she feel a conflict, worried about the harsh path Aldebaran would walk, and wish to respect his own will and let him choose that life?

If, by some chance, the Witch did harbor such feelings—ironically, that very fact would be Aldebaran's reason for never wavering in his resolve. So—

"—I see."

To Aldebaran's constant, identical reply, the Witch's reaction was always the same.

Perhaps he was being deceived. Perhaps the Witch had taken great pains to brainwash him from the moment of his birth until that day. Perhaps the Witch held absolutely none of the guilt or hesitation that Aldebaran was hoping for.

She might be that kind of **wicked Witch**. Yet, even if he were to ask her directly, the Witch would only offer that beautiful, black-and-white smile of hers and say,

"Of course. —I'm a **bad witch**, after all."

And in this way, with an answer that was neither clearly genuine nor false, she would toy with Aldebaran.



Aldebaran was in a rapid glide, battered by the howling wind. He figured his appearance—flying with **stone-crafted wings** spread across his back to catch the wind—must have been utterly ridiculous, but he couldn't afford to worry about appearances. While Yae held them back, he needed to cover as much distance as possible and eliminate the height difference.

"I can't believe they specifically targeted my '**Domain**'..."

Aldebaran muttered this, but the majority of his focus was consumed by forming and controlling the stone wings on his back. Creating the stone wings required an exquisite balance, with delicate adjustments needed for size and hardness. If they were too large, the wind would buffet him too much; if too small, they wouldn't serve their purpose. The variations in hardness and density were also related to weight, and either too much or too little sculpting would result in an inevitable crash.

"I really respect Icarus for succeeding on his first try...!"

Speaking of flying with artificial wings, the first name that came to mind was his great predecessor, **Icarus**, who made wings of wax. Regardless of his ultimate fate, Aldebaran genuinely marveled at the fact that he didn't just glide with the artificial wings, but actually flapped them and approached the sun. As for Aldebaran, how many times had he crashed due to his poorly made wings? —Realizing that each crash played right into the enemy's hands, the current stone wings were finally completed after countless retries. Even these were a difficult feat, requiring extreme focus and meticulous attention, but—

"I couldn't just keep falling."

That fact and his sense of urgency were the biggest reasons why Aldebaran rushed to 'level up' his stone wings from Level 1 to a barely flyable state. Aldebaran prided himself on possessing an invincible Authority, but his '**Domain**' **was not without flaws**. The enemy's surprise attack unintentionally struck two of these weaknesses at once. More precisely, it was an assault on the same weakness from two different angles.

Aldebaran's Authority, the 'Domain,' has an effective range. The teleportation brought about by the surprise attack cast him outside the area where Aldebaran had established his 'Domain.' Furthermore, the destination involved a fall from an **extremely high altitude**, which served as the second way to crush the 'Domain' and attack Aldebaran.

As a result, while falling at high speed, Aldebaran repeatedly chose to **kill himself** before flying out of his 'Domain' and then restarting from the middle of the fall. Through these repetitions, he judged that it would be impossible to break through the situation while falling from an unmanageable ultra-high altitude. After trying various other strategies, he finally decided to attempt an escape using the stone wings.

At the very least, this made the change in altitude more gradual and the maintenance of his 'Domain' comparatively easier. Just as Aldebaran had managed to undo one twisted knot—

"—All!"

A clear, bell-like voice sharply called out to Aldebaran, who was desperately trying to stabilize his body. A quick glance over his shoulder revealed the figure of an angel—no, **Emilia**—flying through the air from a significantly lower altitude but in the same direction. She had wings of ice on her slender back, and although she was using the same method as Aldebaran, she was closing the distance quickly, establishing an overwhelming difference in visual appeal.

"Unbelievable."

Please understand that the stunned, almost admiring mumble that escaped him was perfectly natural. As mentioned before, Aldebaran had struggled immensely just to complete his crude stone wings. It was that hardship that earned his respect for Icarus and his wax wings. But Emilia's sheer talent—succeeding with artificial wings on her first try, just like the mythical Icarus, and achieving the same result as the Aldebaran who had failed countless times—made him feel a decisive gap and even a sense of defeat, rather than mere respect.

"The fact that the better option is 'I'm a fool who crashed over six hundred times' rather than 'The girl is a genius' is just depressing."

The strength of Aldebaran's 'Domain' lies in its **war of attrition**, allowing him to persist through infinite attempts until a single fragment of victory appears. The maximum advantage is being able to keep turning over cards until the opponent makes a mistake and a favorable situation for Aldebaran arises. However, as was the case with his fight against Reinhard, there are rare individuals in the world who consistently draw the correct answer. The nature of that 'correct answer' varies depending on individual abilities and victory objectives, but the commonality is that, unlike Aldebaran, they are **loved by fate**.

—Aldebaran is **hated by fate**.

Whether Aldebaran hated it first or fate hated Aldebaran first was no longer clear, but that much was an undeniable fact. Regardless of what else loved or hated him, fate was Aldebaran's **absolute enemy**.

Therefore, he must kill it. —Even if it means turning the world against him, he will **kill fate**.

To prevent this, fate continuously sends those it favors as assassins. Here and now, that meant **Emilia and Rem**.

"—. What a karma."

Who exactly suggested choosing Rem as the initial attacker? Regardless of who proposed it, she was the most suitable candidate for the purpose of creating a blind spot in Aldebaran. When

she was a victim of the Authority of 'Gluttony,' Aldebaran, who was under its influence, failed to notice the strangeness of her existence and unintentionally formed a genuine relationship with her. Therefore, at the moment of the memory-flash-grenade—when he realized Priscilla had died and Rem had also been freed from the yoke of 'Gluttony'—he suffered a greater void than anyone else.

—Because he had encountered a person who should not have been there, a person who should have been dead.

"-----"

There was no room to debate what method had led to this outcome. Without a doubt, he had done it. **Natsuki Subaru** had defied fate and overcome it. Natsuki Subaru possessed that power. The proof of this was Rem's very existence.

But, despite all that—he did not save **Priscilla Barielle**.

"—If that's what you're going to do, I won't hold back either."

The tears he shed, the fists he used to hurt himself, and the kindness he showed in trying to comfort her were all meaningless. What he wanted was not tears, not wounds, not comfort. It was the **life of just one person**.

"—!"

Clenching his teeth until he tasted blood inside his helmet, Aldebaran turned his head back. Simultaneously, he altered the angle and thickness of his wings, minimizing the drop in speed and maneuverability, and his gaze locked with Emilia, who was rapidly closing in. The beautiful ice wings suited Emilia well, but no matter how lovely she looked, like an angel, she couldn't gain speed or altitude by flapping her artificial wings. While her initial speed was boosted by the recoil from Rem punching the ice disc, her subsequent pursuit was achieved by a different method—

"Ya! Ta! Tei!"

Emilia's shouts were as simple-minded as when she attacked, but with every shout, her speed and altitude increased another step. The method was simple and clear: she was using magic to create **ice pillars** in the air as footholds, and continually kicking them to gain acceleration and momentum. After a moment of stasis, the created ice pillar would be kicked down towards the ground by Emilia's leg strength, but it would immediately dissipate into mana, return to the atmosphere, and be reborn as a new foothold. She would kick that again for momentum. She was closing in on Aldebaran by repeating this process.

"This is ridiculous...!"

It was a brute-force solution only possible because she possessed an exceptional magical talent and could exhaust an enormous amount of mana. Even though Aldebaran could borrow the power of the 'Divine Dragon'—an external mana tank—thanks to his connection with 'Aldebaran,' he couldn't possibly do what Emilia was doing. It wasn't a matter of mana capacity; the difference in talent and physical ability was too vast. —While talent could be compensated for with infinite attempts, the gap in physical ability could not be closed.

The canyon stretched long and wide, and the rocky walls flanking the two flyers continued just as far. As they were moving in the same direction, Emilia's pursuit would not stop. Seeing this, Aldebaran watched as Emilia kicked another ice pillar, matching his altitude while maintaining a distance. Balancing with her ice wings, she then—

"—Al! Please, let's talk! I promise I'll listen properly!"

"Easy for you to say. You're trying to freeze me solid without a thought for mercy, or even a question. If I had kept falling all the way to the bottom, you would've frozen the whole river and finished the job, wouldn't you?"

"But! That plan already failed!"

"The King's Selection Candidate is too honest for their own good, I tell you!"

Folding his arms, the route where he had dropped to the valley floor was one that would have fallen completely into the enemy's trap. To escape that, he had chosen the path to avoid the ice disc's trajectory in an all-or-nothing gamble, but should he count it as a win just to have separated Emilia and Rem, rather than dealing with both at once?

The answer to that was—

"I'll show you now. —My attitude hasn't changed since the Capital!"

Raising his hand, Aldebaran created a mass of stone fragments in the air and launched them in a bullet-screen barrage, forcing Emilia to plunge straight into it as he tried to shake her off.

Unexpectedly, a scene like a genuine shooting game unfolded, and Emilia, shining with her ice wings as she was greeted by the stone shrapnel, cried out loudly,

"I'll say it as many times as I have to! I don't want to cry anymore, thinking that there was nothing I could do for anyone who's gone!!"

The sound of Emilia's fervent plea diving into the barrage, coupled with the screams of shattering ice and freezing air, echoed piercingly through the Augzard Canyon.



—Aldebaran had never worried much about the meaning of his existence as a '**Following Star**' (Oikageboshi).

Everyone supposedly, once in their adolescence, questions why they were born, where life comes from and where it disappears to, or feels a baseless rebellion toward their parents, but all of these were largely irrelevant propositions to Aldebaran.

In Aldebaran's case, it was difficult to designate who he should rebel against as a parent, and due to the nature of his Authority, he couldn't grasp the reality of a lost life simply disappearing. He had been given a clear answer as to why he was born, and as to *how* he was born, he supposed the answer could tentatively be "love." Therefore, Aldebaran never had to confront the typical adolescent questions.

He did not view this as a failure or a missed opportunity. There is a saying that one should buy hardship while young, but there is no value in experiences that become embarrassing "dark history" once you've grown up. Experiences you don't need to have should be avoided. —Just as no one needs to die more than once at the very end of their life.

"I see, I can't expect adolescent emotions or impulses from you, can I? That's a little disappointing. I had prepared a lot of ways to deal with whatever form your rebellious phase might take."

This was the lament of the **Witch** who, while he didn't believe she lacked a heart, often made heartless comments to Aldebaran, who had grown up so well and without causing trouble.

The Witch was the person Aldebaran had spent the longest time with since his birth, but she possessed a wicked habit of wanting to witness every human choice, every emotion, and all countless possibilities. Furthermore, it was the Witch's nature that these desires often went unchecked. Aldebaran had met the other Witches, but the fact that they all, to varying degrees, could not defy this nature felt deeply blasphemous to him.

Therefore, the Witch's attitude of waiting for Aldebaran's adolescence with an air of disappointment had an unavoidable side, if he considered it a result of a nature she could not resist. That said, performing adolescence just to please the Witch also made no sense. —In a way, that very act of defiance felt like the truest adolescent impulse.

"Perhaps it's too convenient for me, who is not even your parent, to try and superficially trace the experience of a parent. ...If I had created Beatrice, perhaps I could have experienced it with her."

The feeling of loneliness Aldebaran felt toward the Witch, who questioned herself like this in a monologue, he thought was something entirely separate from adolescence. However, defining the specific form of that feeling was difficult, as their relationship was too complicated for that. Therefore, just as the Witch had defined it, the relationship between Aldebaran and her was—

"—Sensei."

When he called her that, the Witch, who had been enjoying her exploration in the labyrinth of thought, looked up. Every time he saw her black eyes meet his, and her pure white hair fall over her tilted shoulder, he was forced to think what a **cheating Witch** she was. She was always absorbed in her own affairs, honest with her desires, and never tried to consider the hearts of others, yet whenever Aldebaran called her, she would always meet his gaze.

It was only natural that no adolescent rebellion would arise towards that Witch. Fundamentally, the motive was weak, and his mind and body had long ago succumbed, recognizing that defiance was futile. Under the guise of performance tests to master his Authority, the Witch had inflicted **over a million 'Deaths'** on Aldebaran, and the hierarchy had already been established. However, no matter how many times he brought up the subject, the Witch herself was unconcerned, replying, "Since it has never remained in my memory, I'm troubled if you ask me to feel a sense of guilt."

At any rate, Aldebaran understood the reason why the Witch would go to such lengths. After all, at this time, the only Witch still alive, besides the one before him, was the one who had been the direct or indirect cause of death for the other Witches. The contact Aldebaran had with the other Witches was not with them during their lifetime. He could only meet them in a limited space provided by the Witch. The individuals he met there were already dead, existing only as collected souls. And under the Witch's instruction, Aldebaran was meant to—

"—**Kill** one of them."

That was the **meaning of existence** given to Aldebaran, the 'Following Star,' without even needing to reach adolescence, and the life's purpose he had to fulfill even if he died a million times. The Witch had supposedly been criticized by the other Witches and broke ties with her companions just to create Aldebaran for this purpose, showing her extreme resolve.

"—No one can defeat the you that I created."

To be told this was Aldebaran's **pride** and the **basis of his existence**. Frankly, he thought the Witch's personality was awful, and there were many aspects of her discipline and direction that he wanted to object to, but he still had no hesitation in meeting the Witch's expectations.

He believed he could do it. At that time, when he still had his left arm, Aldebaran could believe that because, even though he knew '**Death**,' he had not yet known true **defeat**.

He never had an adolescence—but it was, beyond a doubt, an unforgettable and **foolish dark history**.

△▽△▽△▽△

"Tch—!"

Aldebaran suppressed his inner hesitation and unleashed his maximum, unreserved firepower on Emilia, who was flying straight into the barrage of falling stone shrapnel.

Just as in the conflict at the Capital, Aldebaran was instinctively **weak to Emilia**. This was now a fundamental weakness that life inherently carried, and it was partly why he couldn't employ the decisive measures he could use against other opponents in the Capital. At that time, he used the power of '**Aldebaran**' to drop a huge boulder, stopping Emilia's pursuit in exchange for protecting the Capital, but here, there was nothing to involve as collateral. In that sense, dropping them into a massive canyon showed that the previous battle had been carefully considered.

"I don't have the luxury to appreciate that kind of growth!"

Unfortunately, Aldebaran's heart was not generous enough to be happy about his own or his enemy's growth. For a moment, he felt resistance to defining Emilia as an enemy, but he fiercely ignored it. He had already made that resolution long ago, even before meeting Priscilla. Strictly speaking, even if the person he made that vow to face wasn't Emilia standing before him—

"Even a used resolve can be useful as a scarecrow."

Holding up this resolve, which he consciously viewed as a scarecrow, he moved to cut off Emilia's pursuit.

Straightforwardly, Emilia dove into the storm of fist-sized rock fragments, her ice wings shining proudly. Aldebaran's attack was meant to delay her actions by forcing her to adopt a stance of evasion or deflection, but just as he feared, Emilia chose a head-on, shortest-path confrontation. She fired **ice stakes** from her wings and ice-pillar footholds to counter the barrage, and for the shrapnel that broke through the interception, she used the **twin ice swords** grasped in her hands to bat them away.

The Witch had taught him that the simultaneous activation of multiple spells was difficult even for skilled mages. Even with the same attribute, it required the skill to perform complex, impossible feats, like holding a pen in each hand and writing an essay with the right while drawing an illustration with the left. When dealing with different attributes, it was apparently a feat as drastic as installing extra brains, and Aldebaran had once seen the Witch handle five attributes simultaneously. He genuinely wondered if the Witch's smaller-than-average head actually contained five smaller brains.

Even putting aside those extreme exceptions, the simultaneous activation of four types of magic—wings, ice pillars, ice stakes, and twin swords, all of the same ice attribute—was a remarkable feat. On top of that, she was exhibiting athletic performance beyond that of an Olympic athlete in order to utilize her outrageous tracking technique, making him feel like he had already used up all his capacity for surprise today.

"So, I'll greet you with less astonishment!"

Against the storm of shrapnel, Emilia chose to break through with courage and physical strength. But what if he provided a threat that couldn't be overcome by strength, regardless of courage?

"———"

Emilia's cheek stiffened as she eagerly prepared for the next move to close the distance. Spread out suddenly and inescapably before her was a net of **gravel**, even smaller than the shrapnel, making the damage easy to overlook. Diving into it was like plunging into a downpour, and unless she possessed the absurdity to avoid rain mid-air, a zero-hit count was impossible. Of course, he hadn't just scattered sand to obstruct her view—

"—It's heavy!?"

Emilia cried out in surprise as she swung her arm to brush away the clinging sand. The grains of sand that touched her limbs and white clothes began to coalesce with the surrounding particles, hindering her movement with weight and hardness. This was a debuff attack he had also used against Reinhard in the Sand Sea—though Reinhard had been able to shake it off with his supersonic momentum, that method was impossible even for Emilia. Furthermore—

"The wings—"

The gravel's main target was to interfere with the **ice wings** supporting Emilia's flight. The ice wings, invaded by the sand, could not perform their original function of catching the wind. Emilia immediately lost balance and started to fall straight down to the ground—to prevent this, Emilia quickly discarded her hindered wings, narrowly escaping disaster by reverting from an angel to an angel-like girl.

"—You jettisoned them!"

But forcing her to do that was Aldebaran's main objective. Even if she abandoned her ice wings once, Emilia could immediately re-deploy the same ones and restart without losing her upward and forward momentum. However, no matter how exceptional her physical abilities were, she couldn't catch up to an impromptu hang glider traveling over a hundred kilometers per hour. Therefore, Aldebaran pressed his attack to prevent Emilia from redeploying her wings.

With a roar, stone **giant arms** emerged from the cliff face, trying to snatch Emilia from the side as she traveled through the canyon air. If they managed to kill her momentum, even if Emilia gained a second pair of wings, she wouldn't be able to pursue the still-speeding Aldebaran. Moreover, the giant arms confronting Emilia were not just one or two. —The rocky arms jutting out from the cliff face numbered nearly a hundred.

"Less 'Thousand-Armed Kannon Respect' and more 'the back side of a haunted house.'"

The scene was similar to that haunted house staple where hands suddenly burst out from a shoji screen. However, unlike that mere scare, these giant arms were seriously trying to capture

Emilia. If even one arm grabbed her foot, this chase would be completely over, and Aldebaran would have successfully escaped. This was the moment of truth—

"Can you—"

The words he was about to speak were drowned out by her sheer will.

"—I'll do my best!!"

He didn't think it was something that could be overcome just by "doing her best," but the frightening thing about Emilia was that she might just manage to pull it off. Emilia, having lost her wings, displayed that frightening quality to its fullest—she spun the ice sword in her hand, used it to cut off the fingers of the first giant arm, and then leaped high, using the neutralized fingers as a foothold.

Her momentum was not dead. Her altitude was also quickly regained.

But even if the giant arms didn't reach a thousand, there were still over a hundred lying in wait—

"—Soldiers, lend me your strength!"

Following Emilia's call, the ice soldiers with the cursed appearance reappeared. The ice soldiers, who should have been helplessly crushed during the ice disc's fall, valiantly faced the earthen giant arms trying to swarm Emilia, using them as footholds. They exhibited various roles: some stopped the arms with their bodies, some deflected their trajectory with a punch, and some were destroyed while striking a dramatic pose. What particularly irritated Aldebaran was the individual who took Emilia's hand, helped her escape the giant arms, and practically threw her forward to aid her advance.

Seven ice **Natsuki Subarus** shattered after fulfilling their role, only to be instantly reborn to support Emilia, repeating the cycle of breaking and reviving. They continued to protect and assist Emilia from the hundreds of incoming rock monstrosities without ever breaking the rule of a maximum of seven individuals.

—Magic is the shaping of one's thoughts and wishes, the Witch had said.

He had thought that was a surprisingly romantic thing for that Witch to say, but when one considered transforming the wind into a blade to carve up an opponent or generating crimson flames to incinerate them in one's anger, it could still be argued as the materialization of thoughts and wishes.

If so, what kind of wish was being materialized by the sight Aldebaran was now witnessing: ice soldiers taking the form of Natsuki Subaru and assisting Emilia? His stomach churned. This was not figurative; it was literal and real.

Aldebaran channeled that surge of negative emotion into his next attack.

It was—

"—Sorry for the repeat, but the trump card is back."

Saying that, a massive, powerful **boulder**—the full width of the Augzard Canyon's chasm—fell straight down above Aldebaran and Emilia.

It was the return of the inescapable, mass-based crushing trap he had set in the Capital.



What he had wanted—no, what he had **needed**—was a single victory in his lifetime.

It was no exaggeration to say that Aldebaran's life existed solely for that victory. Everything he had been given, showered with, and blessed with since his birth were signposts prepared for him to achieve, seize, and win that victory. Aldebaran fully understood—or so he thought—the meaning and the grave responsibility of it all.

However, when the opportunity finally came to test that meaning, the resolve he should have possessed, the plan that should have been prepared, and the soul he should have polished all came to naught.

"—No one can defeat the you that I created."

That phrase, given to him by the **Witch**, was the guiding principle of Aldebaran's life. As long as he believed it, no obstacle could stop him. And he thought it was an impossible notion—though he would never tell her or let her hear it—that he could ever lose faith in the Witch. Therefore, he firmly believed that, just as the Witch had said, he was unbeatable.

—When that faith was shattered, Aldebaran must have truly died once.

He had experienced '**Death**' so many times that counting it felt ridiculous. Although he thought counting was ridiculous, he counted because he was told to, and he experienced it so much that recording the actual number didn't lessen the absurdity one bit. But the true meaning of '**Death**' was, he believed, experienced on that day, at that moment.

It was the Witch's deepest desire, one she went so far as to create Aldebaran to fulfill: a single, absolute, must-win battle in his lifetime. Yet—

"—You lost where you absolutely could not lose."

Seeing the Witch in a familiar grassy field, enjoying the scent of tea at a white tea table, Aldebaran was crushed by despair over the magnitude of his sin. The Witch, a peak of beauty that could be expressed in just two colors, black and white—the fact that her hatefully beautiful figure was completely unscathed was proof that this was a dream world.

Because in reality, the Witch, having sheltered Aldebaran after he failed to win the battle he should have won, had lost all her limbs and was reduced to a miserable state, merely waiting for death. Staring blankly at her figure, Aldebaran vaguely thought the terribly obvious thought that this Witch, too, had **red blood** flowing through her.

The heat, the smell, the sensation of that blood could not have been a lie. If so, then this world, where all of that was gone and the reality that should have been was painted over with fiction, was clearly, undeniably a massive lie.

"I don't particularly like the term 'fiction.' Even though I know it's a different word in the strict sense, it always reminds me of someone I despise."

Whether that was the Witch's idea of a joke or just a genuinely out-of-place comment, Aldebaran never fully understood the Witch's true intentions until the end. He only felt that he was **hated**. Or perhaps, that he had been **disappointed** and completely abandoned.

However—

"It looks like your arm can't be retrieved."

The Witch's gaze fell on Aldebaran's left arm, which had been taken into shadow from the shoulder. There was no pain. That, too, was proof that this was the Witch's dream sanctuary—because when he returned to reality, unimaginable pain would scorch his brain. And not just any pain, but a real, indelible pain that could not be undone by 'Death.'

"You lost an arm and lost the battle you absolutely should not have lost. It seems my plan is going to fail. I can already imagine what my friends will say. —In the end, I'll have to entrust things to those who try to carry on Flugel's will. How frustrating."

It was overwhelmingly sad that his defeat would strip the Witch of everything. She had sought no one's understanding, parted ways with her fellow Witches and her travel companions, and yet, the wish she had struggled so much to achieve had been ruined by Aldebaran. And the most pathetic thing was that even knowing this, the resolve and fervor he had before the defeat refused to return to Aldebaran's hollowed soul.

By losing the battle he should not have lost, Aldebaran's spirit was broken. The only battle in his life where defeat was unforgivable had utterly shattered his heart. Witnessing the unavoidable death of the Witch, his closest companion, would inflict a truly irreparable wound upon Aldebaran.

"—No one can defeat the you that I created."

That's why Aldebaran couldn't understand the meaning of her repeating those words again.

"At this point, we can't afford to worry about appearances. Let's change the victory condition. We'll leave her to them... and we'll prevent the secondary damage."

The Witch was clever, and selfish. She completely disregarded Aldebaran, who was still left bewildered and unable to think clearly due to the self-blame and guilt, unilaterally drew a conclusion, and tried to proceed with the conversation without allowing any objection. The altered victory condition, the newly presented goal of preventing secondary damage—but he didn't even think he could achieve that. After all, Aldebaran had already failed.

Yet—

"—No one can defeat the you that I created."

Aldebaran didn't know what it was that made the Witch say that. Without saying much more to the stunned Aldebaran, the Witch stood up, slowly approached him, and faced him directly. The face of the Witch, which he had looked at the most and for the longest time in his life—it held an expression he had never seen before.

"—**The stars were against you.**"

It was then that he understood her words meant that **it wasn't Aldebaran's fault.**

Without being able to conclude the surging emotions, the dream sanctuary suddenly ended. A violent conclusion, like tearing apart the stage of a picture-story show, and beyond it, the brutal reality appeared. Instantly, his brain was dominated by pain and a sense of loss; noise and fresh blood eroded his understanding. Heaven and Earth were stained pitch black to the point where he couldn't even tell the time, and Aldebaran's wailing was drowned out by the screaming of the breaking world, failing to even reach his own ears.

Yet, in that completely chaotic world, amid a noise so loud he couldn't hear his own voice, he distinctly heard her faint, weak, and dying breath. It was the Witch's final chant, one he couldn't bear to miss—

"—**OI Shamak.**"

xxx

The next time Aldebaran regained consciousness was after everything had ended—or rather, it had ended, begun again, that beginning had ended, and then it had begun and ended again. It was a world that seemed to be after such a countless repetition, a world devoid of the Witch's traces.

Whether due to a difference in premise or because the magic was wielded by a Witch of immense power, he was momentarily stunned by the differing effect of the magic compared to when he used it—

"—You. Where did you come from? Who are you?"

The question came from a completely unknown person's voice. The man, dressed in rags no better than the tattered and miserable Aldebaran, looked at him with a mixture of fear and caution.

He understood the language. Although his experience with people was sparse, in a sense, that wasn't an issue. The important thing was to know where he was, and when it was.

"Ginunhive... It's **Gladiator Island**. The 'Witch'? That's a story from hundreds of years ago, isn't it?"

Aldebaran sighed at the man's words, who looked bewildered at being asked such a strange question. Seeing this, the man's expression changed from suspicious to startled. This was because the breath Aldebaran exhaled turned into a sob, and he collapsed, weeping profusely.

—No one can defeat the you that I created.

The Witch's words, left behind hundreds of years ago, clung to his soul and wouldn't leave. Aldebaran wanted to die for the sin of having made that person a liar.

He couldn't die.