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A New Beginning.

“Am I going to be tortured to death?”

—Soren Rosenbaum

HE WOKE TO startling green eyes hollowing into his soul. They stared at him, and he stared right back.

“Your Highness,” called the voice before him, dragging as if every word was woven of hidden daggers.

The man, Ren Suzuki, closed his eyes again, deaf to the world. Pain probed through every crevice and cord of his brain that refused to open. In the back of his mind, a long nightmare lingered. The stench of fallen bodies bled into the decayed streets of the apocalypse, and shrieks tangled the air, clawing for dominance. They smiled at him.

He swallowed, his throat parched as if he’d wandered in a desert for eons. Wooden splints jabbed at his back, tugging his aching limbs and weighing down his bones. Gentle rays of light prodded his eyelids, and the youth’s voice urged him to wake.

Slowly, the pair of ghostly blue eyes opened once again.

The owner of the curious eyes continued to watch him. Careful brushes of raven strands framed the fathomless depths of the boy’s gaze, outlining the definition of his face. Two midnight teardrops hung under feline eyes, dramatic and daring as they mixed with his pale complexion.

The boy lowered his head, his shadow towering over Ren. Those blood-red lips carved a lasting frown, brows slightly furrowed at the lack of an answer. “Your Highness, Prince Soren?”

“Soren?” gasped the supposed prince through worsening, raspy. He cleared his throat and coughed violently to the side.

This voice, young and arrogant, littered with an accent of elegance layered beneath apathy, didn’t belong to him.

Sure, dehydration might’ve caused the cracks behind his tone, or that he could’ve just woken from a long sleep, but even those couldn’t introduce pretentiousness to his tone.

He dragged his hand against the splinters along the dusty floors and raised it before his adjusting gaze. Pale and slender, free of hard work and any struggles.

A hand of nobility, so unlike his.

“Yes, your Highness.” The boy bowed, and his head leaned closer, tilting at an angle. Shadows sharpened his scrutiny. “You are Soren Rosenbaum, the fifth prince of Qazia.”

Then, as if it were an afterthought, he added, “Aren't you?”

Ren—now Soren—jerked his head up. Calculating suspicion lined the teenager's shoulders, trailing down his prim and proper suit. Sunlight cast an eerie glow on his unblinking stare.

“You dare question your master?” Soren whispered hoarsely, with messy strands of white hair hanging loosely past his eyes, brushing his neck. He wanted to snip it off.

“...I apologize.”

“Don't do it again, or I won't let you off so easily.”

After the boy responded with a subtle nod, Soren's brain worked overtime. This wasn't his body; that much was clear. The burning sensation of death running down his spine, and the blaring pain that ached his mind haunted his recollections.

He died. And now, supposedly, he was the prince of some kingdom sitting in an abandoned shack in the middle of nowhere. Blurs of blue and green peeked through the tears in the wall, so unfamiliar from the red he'd slept under.

Soren Rosenbaum. The fifth prince of Qazia.

He knew that name. A name mentioned so briefly, a person like Ren, who often forgot the little things in life, should've forgotten. But he hadn't, and now he was hearing it again.

The foolish prince who had died at the beginning of a novel he'd read long ago. In the earliest chapters, the man's death set the stage for the miserable protagonist soon to enter.

[The Transmigrator's Last World].

He'd found it leisurely lying on the ground in the abandoned library he often frequented, pages open and words coaxing. Its simple summary ushered in a dramatic tale.

It portrayed the tragic tale of Raphael Han, a man forced to live through a hundred lifetimes and endure the rot of each world. The novel was his last reality, and the last end he'd have to endure.

A once hopeful hero who could save no one.

A life destined to bear witness to the dying wishes of the desperate, to lose himself in the seas of despair, and be dragged into darkness.

Soren's eyes dimmed as he lowered his head. The gust of wind sent chills up his arms, through his loose sleeves. The teenager's perpetual stare remained, and had Soren not known his identity, he would've thought the boy had fallen in love.

Raphael had long given up on the world, plagued by a depression normal means couldn't cure. Betrayal, death, and despair; he became so accustomed to it that his emotions numbed.

Was there any point in resisting fate, knowing its end? Any point in knowing people who'd turn their backs given the right motivation?

Those were the thoughts of the current Raphael in the novel.

However, things took an unexpected turn, and he was pulled back into the blinding light. Raphael's will to live returned as he grew tangled in the stories of many others. Until betrayal came crashing once again, and those he cared for withered at his feet, becoming a memory only he remembered.

The ending of the story remained shrouded in mystery since the last pages had been ripped out of the book. It had been old, with missing pages and blotted ink. Following the fate of Raphael's previous lives and the story's path, he assumed it would end with everyone dead.

The tragic mess should've resulted in Soren's abandonment. Why add misery to his already miserable life?

But maybe it was the way the betrayal occurred, like a stab in the back, the little details the world wove together, or the description of emotions that painted expressions in his mind. Soren relished those words. Mind already weary and exhausted from the apocalypse's daily destruction, these thrills from pieced-together words fueled him.

Therefore, Soren remembered the story well.

It started with Raphael Han waking to a bright green forest in the middle of nowhere. Used to such strange awakenings, he walked. And walked. And walked. After an eternity, he had realized there was something off about the forest.

There was no exit.

Later, he would learn of the 'Three Forbidden Forests,' and the one he appeared in went by the name of the Forest of Beginnings and Endings. Said to be connected to everywhere in the universe and nowhere at the same time. Entering was easy. Often, wanderers accidentally fell into its grasp, lost in its maze of endless turns. To exit, things grew complicated. One had to have a striking image in their mind of a location they could not only visualize but feel to the bone.

They had to inhale the layered scents that drifted by, hear the ache of silence or the thrum of noise, and feel the atmosphere so vividly, it kissed goosebumps to their skin. Only then could

they escape. Because of this, a warning spread across the continent, and it became a forbidden land.

Raphael, after stubbornly strolling for days, eventually found the way out with the help of a young teenager—

—What?

Soren licked his torn lips in rumination. The hero's explosive strength and faltering kindness revealed themselves in his introduction.

[The hero's dark gaze swept across the forest, falling upon a broken shack that pressed under a shelter of willowy trees. Cracks tore the aged wood, and shelves of leather-bound books peeked out of the shattered window.

A lost library in the woods.

With nowhere else to turn, he approached the door and sensed the presence of two individuals. One living and one dead. Narrowing his gaze, he reached a gloved hand to the handleless door while his other fell to his sword, which had tasted terrors beyond imagination.

The man strolled in, slamming the door wide open.]

Strolled.

Soren had re-read the sentence several times, flickering between the brilliant contrast between 'strolled' and 'slamming', labeling the protagonist a contradictory character. That, or an oddity.

The sort who behaved in a rough manner that left no room for protest, but also with disregard for the danger, he knew he'd survive. Raphael wasn't foolish and overconfident, but the strength developed over a hundred lifetimes wasn't just for show.

A pale corpse and a cold teenager had greeted his entry.

His boots creaked when the teenager's eyes snapped to him, and before he could blink, a dagger whirled past his cheek. The fight lasted half a chapter, ending in Raphael's predictable victory.

He'd leaned against a bookshelf as the teenager plucked himself from the broken wall. He nodded to the corpse and asked for his identity. In return, dripping disdain clouded the boy's emerald eyes, aching with disgust.

Curious, the hero asked for the corpse's story.

Then, the teenager retaliated with various methods of 'relieving anger' as Raphael watched indifferently. It was strange, considering his heroism, but Ren only knew how to read the lines, not between them.

Soren's lips tugged down into a frown. Death, mutilation, every horror known to man, he'd likely witnessed if he hadn't experienced it. But this corpse belonged to the fifth prince of the kingdom, Soren Rosenbaum.

The owner of his current body.

Was he going to be tortured to death?

Seconds ago, he stood as the infallible strongest. Now, he inhabited the body of a useless prince, with more enemies than money. Soren's judgments were rare, since he believed in equality and thus hated everybody, but the prince's actions had only been terrible.

Stealing from the royal treasury and draining it dry, picking fights with citizens under his own rule, abusing his power to manipulate girls or boys despite their interests...

A long list of things. Truths and lies intertwined. The only one who could confirm those was dead. Dead men told no tales, and words forgotten buried secrets in their ink. How much of a story could he trust when even the heroes weren't privy to the truth?

Right now, Soren wasn't dead. He was very alive, though rather unwillingly, and none of those crimes belonged to him. Where was the justice in that?

'Why couldn't I have died in peace?' complained the now-prince. He slumped further against the tattered wall, curling one leg up to his chest.

He melted backwards, sighing as he glanced at the calm teenager, coldly scrutinizing his actions. The boy, who held contempt and killing intent toward the prince, would continue feigning to be a normal butler so long as Soren lived. Although the possibility of being killed out of disgust wasn't nonexistent.

The turn of events was anything but pleasing. The original owner of the story had been drinking the night before, drugged, and then murdered after being lured to this place where nobody could enter. Lost memories left his mind in a haze; he couldn't remember the culprit or how they entered the forest, confident they'd escape.

Although the teenager who loomed in the shadows to spectate the murder was the scarier one.

Soren shook his head. *'Little creep.'*

The boy noticed his stare and quirked up a brow. "Your Highness?"

Damien Black.

A butler in name, and the leader of the Fox Tribe in truth. An organization specializing in assassination and stealth, possessing a vast range of knowledge from across the continent. Additionally, he became a key member of Raphael's journey, whose help only came occasionally, and after extensive discussion. Raphael only succeeded in obtaining the teenager's support due to Damien's respect for the protagonist.

Damien respected the strong but hated being leashed.

He lived to the dangerous beat of his drum, mingling with humans out of curiosity about their reactions. Soren's life disgusted him—a life of debauchery and senseless arguing. Soren wasn't powerful, nor were his actions treacherous enough to make it to Damien's to-kill list, but the teenager harbored a murderous intent for anybody he didn't favor.

The current Soren solemnly contemplated knocking himself out. Then, with consideration of the unknown actions that had been taken on his corpse, he decided otherwise. He disliked this body whole, much less in pieces.

The prince pushed himself into a staggering stance, leaning against the oaken wall. Rows of old bookshelves lined against one side, and a strange number of pillows piled in a corner. He admired the pillows.

"Damien."

"Yes, Your Highness?"

He almost sounded polite. Expected of a member of the deceitful Fox tribe, Soren wouldn't have guessed the indifferent character despised him had he not read the book.

Soren rubbed his sore neck. "Help me back to the castle."

"Do you need assistance to walk?"

"No, but I need your help leaving. Unless you want to stay here with me, forever roommate?"

The boy's eyes turned sharp, and he tipped his chin. A stiffness straightened his posture. "Of course, Your Highness. What help do you require?"

A drifting smile lazily tilted Soren's lips as he sluggishly tried to stand. "You already know. This is the Forest of Beginnings and Endings."

How could Damien not know? His knowledge exceeded most other existences, information-wise. There wasn't a place on the continent the Fox tribe didn't have information on, and Damien had the right to muddle through whatever reports he wanted.

But how could Soren Rosenbaum, this useless prince, know?

From the days he skipped his lessons to mess around with citizens, or avoided others because he thought less of them?

The teenager's shoulders stiffened more as he swayed, his eyebrows knitting and expression darkening, mulling over thoughts Soren didn't care to guess.

Damien Black had a crucial weakness.

His unyielding curiosity had been the very thing that made him explore the kingdom and landed him by Soren's side. Soren knew the type—the intelligent sorts that chased curiosity and loathed ignorance. So long as he decided there was something he wanted to know, he rushed

towards it after determining there were no disastrous consequences. Of course, his actions were always careful and precise.

Damien wasn't the youngest leader for nothing.

Soren rationalized that a few discrepancies would suffice to garner interest.

"Have you been busy gossiping, Your Highness?" The boy straightened his collar, taking a step against the creaking wood.

"I haven't."

"Then," Damien watched as Soren completely stabilized his body, brushing away the aching pain in the back of his head. "How do you know of the Forbidden Forests?"

Soren waved him off dismissively. "It's none of your business."

The protagonist's dazzling arrival was unfortunately due. With the Damien issue settled, a new one arose. Raphael Han had been likeable in fiction, but differed in reality. There was also the small matter of Soren's disinterest in humanity.

However, escaping Raphael was impossible, and reasoning with him was even more so. Raphael wouldn't attack Soren, but the depressed protagonist was unpredictable. Perhaps once he'd been stable—an attractive, charming young man who seduced even the most insistent loner.

Damien offered a customary hand. "Your Highness."

Soren staggered forward, smearing a line of dirt against the wall. He ignored it. "What?"

"Are you ready to leave?"

Soren took a final glance at the broken shelves buried in rows of books. One lingered by his feet, its pages open with blotted ink. He recalled his little library kept to his privacy. Its edges blurred in his memory, as many things often did.

Damien bent down, brushing the dust off the pages. His gaze lingered, and the book snapped shut, stirring the floating dust against streams of light. He rose. "Do you want to take this back?"

Soren shook his head. "No. Let's leave."

He'd sacrifice Damien when the protagonist entered, leaving them to battle it out as he found a place to crouch and rest his heavy eyes. The teenager's admiration for Raphael's strength would come, and he'd help the hero leave, following the storyline. Soren only had to peacefully pretend to be air.

The door slammed open, and splinters danced across the air. Soren pivoted and squatted far away in a corner.

'I'm air, I'm air, I'm air.'

"What a surprise." Arrogance and magnetism spun in his amused voice as each heavy step weighed against the world. "I didn't think there'd be people in this endless forest."

Damien leaped back before the door crashed, wide-eyed.

The blinding sunlight illuminated the tall figure, outlining his sharpened features. With a lazy and relaxed posture that still embodied the arrogance of a leader, raven strands swayed with the wind, brushing past sharp cheekbones. A black shirt—customary for all cliché male protagonists—clung to his muscles as a sword hung heavy at his belt.

He took another step, and Damien lowered his body into a pounce.

Raphael's dark eyes, carved in a deadly slant both cold and unforgiving, raked across the room. The careless curl of his lips added to the rippling murderous intent as if he were gazing at mere insects before him. Scars decorated his arms, left as an unfortunate trophy of all the battles lost and won.

The protagonist who lived a hundred bloody lives—

—Raphael Han.

In his old world, before the depression brainwashing Raphael likely embodied a charming demeanor that drew people close.

Authors loved conventionally attractive characters to abuse. But were characters like Raphael and Damien born especially handsome, or made so in the way they were described?

A powerful hero corrupted by despair, and a thief who traversed the entire continent.

Soren peered at his current body, pinching soft flesh between his fingers. His eyes flicked up and then back down. Then, Damien lunged.

Damien's feet ricocheted off the floor as shards of wood splintered from his trail. Raphael jerked, narrowly evading glints of metal as his body shifted, eyes narrowing curiously. A smile stretched on his lips.

He twisted, slamming his fist forward. Damien leaped back, and Raphael pressed his palms to the ground, flipping over and swinging his long legs around. Damien sucked air through his teeth. Raphael's legs drove into Damien's torso, and the fox threw up his elbows to deflect a second hit.

Raphael raised his eyebrows and whistled, but sweat beaded the boy's round forehead.

The hero's movements came in sequence, one flowing into the next. Damien relied on sudden lunges, utilizing his flexibility as he arced backwards, a feline on the loose. He gritted his teeth and persisted, a teenager's pride provoked.

A sob wailed through the trembling walls, cracks splintering along the wood. Soren peeked up as dust drifted down. Suffocation by burial in the ruins of the house wouldn't be fun. But upon glancing at the colliding bodies moving at inhumane speeds, he abandoned escape. He'd be flattened into a crepe within seconds. Crepes.

It'd been a long time since he'd eaten those.

The prince curled his legs into himself, angling his chin on his knees with a soft sigh. Occasionally, a sharp piece of debris skimmed his face. But rather than flinch, he blinked indifferently. Was that on purpose?

Alcohol disrupted his blood, reminding his body of the original's last night of drinking. His head pounded. Irritably, with the rapid attacks straining his eyes, he closed them and took a short nap.

Raphael's abilities were restricted in every universe he entered; otherwise, it'd disrupt the natural laws of the world. He maintained a limited amount of power, but not his full potential. The most valuable thing was his brain. This knowledge was carried and gathered from a hundred lives, and the experience was carved into bone.

His suffering wasn't just for show; his existence was proof.

Suddenly, the house shook violently again as wood splintered to carve a teenage-sized hole, with Damien's body as its model. An excessively dramatic performance. Who sent people flying through perfectly good walls these days? Dark liquid spilled from the boy's red lips, clutching his stomach against the rustling trees. His lifted gaze showed no signs of surrender.

Soren rested his head on his knees, yawning. *'Stubborn idiot.'*

Raphael's dark gaze flitted over to meet Soren's. He raised a brow. "There's another one."

Soren lazily shook his head. "I'm not a fighter."

"Are you sure?"

"Very."

The man laughed. "Are you scared?"

The blank face blinked. "Not scared, smart."

Compared to hordes of monsters with rows of teeth and dozens of eyes, Raphael's pretty face was boring. His transmigrations were unique, but not enough to be frightening.

But it *was* enough for the man to kill him.

Soren didn't care about life or death, but corpse mutilation would take dreadfully long. He needed to grasp his current situation further before jumping into death's unwilling embrace.

Raphael stood languidly with a hand on his hips, and his eyes, mirrors of black, reflected the broken library and the frowning figure curled by a shelf. Flecks of dust darted past Soren's swaying white hair, bangs hanging low over a high nose.

Their gazes met unyieldingly. Wind gusted through the wall's gape where a block of wood dangled pitifully. One powerful gust fluttered the pages across the room, and the wood clattered to the ground. Soren took the opportunity to examine his hazy appearance in the mirrored gaze, a

pathetic fool robed in filth and an indifference marked by death circling his pale blue eyes. Dark circles and a sickly demeanor asserted his frivolity.

Raphael took another step, and in his lowered face, Soren recognized curiosity. Akin to the gazes of those in the apocalypse. Invasive and prodding, seeking definitions from his appearance. His eyes narrowed sharply, disdain lining the angles of his glare.

He wasn't a specimen to observe, and he gave no consent to a staring contest. "What?"

Raphael blinked, followed by three in rapid succession. He cocked his head and leaned against his broadsword. "Nothing. Has anybody ever called you—" A lazy smile lifted his lips, humming leisurely in thought. "Aesthetically pleasing?"

Soren stiffened. The hero was indeed talented. He only opened his mouth, and all of Soren's respect hurriedly fled. "No."

"A liar, then?" Raphael sheathed his sword with a powerful sweep of his arm.

"Speak properly or shut up."

"Not a fighter, you said," Raphael mused, then nodded outside. "Do you know the way out of the forest?"

"No." Raphael's eyebrow quirked before Soren nodded to Damien, who'd quietly entered to stand by the cobwebbed walls. He patted his clothes. "He does. To make up for our bad luck in running into you, I'll make up for my karma and let you follow us."

"Karma?"

"The karma of meeting you."

Raphael shrugged with a half-hearted smile. "I'd say it was brilliant luck."

"You'd be wrong." Soren passed him carelessly, stepping through the hole without waiting.

One of the raven eyes twitched, and Raphael dug his hand into his trench coat. A branch broke under his feet as he followed, ushered into the maze of trees. "Lead the way, Mr. Liar."