

Arc 6 "Memory Corridor"

Chapter 13: "Mockery of The Sand"



— Space distorted, the world broke, and they fell straight into the rift in reality that resulted from it.

As if it was made of fragile thin paper, the world was easily torn apart.

Swallowed by the distorted space, Subaru's eardrums heard no sound, which was in stark contrast to the magnificent visuals around him.

He only heard a voice screaming, as if someone was calling him.

Even that voice also faded away, and before long, he could not hear it.

The feeling of someone holding his chest also went missing, and the hands holding him were tore away from each other, drifting apart far away.

With no one around, abandoned in this empty place, it seemed like he became completely alone.

While being tormented by such loneliness and sadness, Subaru's consciousness began slowly emerging.

And then——

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Ram: "How long are you going to sleep? Get up, lazy Barusu."

Subaru: "aahk?"

Feeling something sharp poking at his side, Subaru got up screaming in pain at the shock.

Having jumped up reflexively, sand falls off from all around his body. Coughing, he spits out dirt which had gotten into his mouth.

Subaru: "ahk! thu! ptuu! Huh! What? What happened??"

Rubbing his eyes, he checks his surroundings as he stands up. With shaky knees and a poor foothold, he gets up comically. Beneath his feet, the fine grains of sand were laid just as before.

As his consciousness returns, Subaru could determine that this was an extension of the Augria dunes. However, the view around him was not clear. Because it was dark, really dark.

In the darkness where he can't even see his own hands, Subaru's eye caught the presence of a small artificial light.

Ram: "You can sleep so well in such an emergency, it's amazing. I'm speechless."

A bitter voice hits him, and the owner of the light snorts.

What is emitting the light is a type of manastone, and the light is made of processed ragmite ore and fashioned into a tool like a lantern. Looking at the face illuminated by the light, Subaru raised his eyebrows.

Subaru: "...Ram, is that you?"

Ram: "Who else can you see? Rem? I didn't expect such a lame answer."

Subaru: ".....You and Rem look alike, but it oozes from inside that you are not her."

In response to Ram, who seems harsher than usual, Subaru gives a bitter reply. He took the lantern out of her and looked around with the light.

Subaru: "This place, where is it? What happened?"

Ram: "Ram also wants to know the whereabouts of this place. As for what happened, it is three times worse than what Barusu can imagine."

Subaru: "Does that mean you expect me to be an optimist? Do you look down on pessimists?"

Ram: "In this case, I wonder which is better."

That reply was probably accompanied by a shrug.

Even if she is right next to him, it's hard to tell Ram's state in the darkness, as the space illuminated by the light is awfully large. Perhaps it seems that they are in some sort of hollow space.

Overhead, there was a slightly tall ceiling, joined with walls that indicated the extent of its depth.

Subaru: "Can't feel any air flow, can't see the sky. You mean we were thrown in somewhere...?"

Ram: "If Beatrice-sama's words before we were separated are true, the space distortion is the cause, right?"

Subaru: "Separated.....That's right, separated! Where are the others!?"

While listening to Ram's disinterested and emotionless demeanor, his understanding caught up with reality.

Subaru moved the light from right to left, seeking a figure other than Ram's in their surroundings. However, as he searched the illuminated space, the figure that he desperately wanted to see was not reflected.

Ram: "As you can see, we were separated. Barusu's nullification magic tricked the Watchtower... As a result, it's not clear, but maybe instead of going into the right path, we were trapped in a distorted space-time where we'll wander forever."

Subaru: "What are you saying!? Why are you so calm? The combination of me and you... It's totally randomly shuffled!?"

At Ram's calm expression, Subaru's face turns pale and he raises his voice.

Beatrice's cries, space breaking apart right before his eyes, and he instantly remembers it. The rift swallowed Subaru and the others' whole party and dragged them into another space.

At that time, Subaru and Ram were both travelling along, but they should have been in different groups. Subaru was riding Patrasche, and Ram was in the dragon carriage.

Ram: "It seems that this separation does not take into account who you are in contact with to determine who accompanies who. As soon as we entered the rift, Ram should have been hugging Rem... But it turned out like this."

Subaru: "I was also supposed to be clinging to Beako. And yet I can't find her I can't see her..... No way, there's only Ram here with me? What kind of grouping is this..."

If the condition of that separation was not contact, then is there any other reason?

This group was made up of eight. There is no particular common feature that only Subaru and Ram share... Again, is it completely random?

Subaru: "No, I'll postpone guessing the conditions for now! More than that, we have to hurry and join up with everyone..... No! There's something even more important! Rem!"

Ram: "————"

Subaru: "You and I are two, so it's still good. If any of the others who were separated were with someone else, there's still hope. But if there's someone who's alone, and if that's Rem..... That's awful."

Emilia and Julius, who single-handedly took on all the fighting power in this party, were no problem.

Meili and Beatrice could also manage to get by alone with their respective abilities. In terms of Anastasia/Scarf-dona, there is probably a trump card used to fight back against "Lust".

Although less honourable than other ones, Subaru and Ram's combination was still manageable.

— But, Rem was a different story.

Unlike the others, Rem is unable to perform any independent actions by herself.

Even if there is someone with her, protecting the perpetually sleeping girl would turn any kind of undertaking into a Herculean task. And the worst of all, if Rem was completely isolated from others, then "death" would be the only thing awaiting her in this lonely sand sea.

Subaru: "It's important for us to meet up with everyone else, but the top priority is securing Rem! I can't leave her in such a lonely place. That much is sure....Not at all. Absolutely not.....!"

Ram: "..... Barusu."

Subaru: "Cause I said I'd bring you here.....Thinking that you might be able to wake up if you meet "The Sage". It's useless. Absolutely, shit, just Rem.....!"

Ram: "Barusu, calm down. Even I will lose it now...."

Subaru: "Why are you telling me to calm down? Are not you worried because Rem is missing from your memory!?"

Ram: "- huh! There is no such thing!"

Imagining the worst possibility, Subaru starts mumbling desperately about the future, and counting up his regrets. Hearing Subaru speak, Ram could not stand it and exploded.

She grabs the confused Subaru by his collar and presses him hard against the sand wall behind him.

Ram: "Do you think you're the only one who cares about Rem? Don't push it too far, Barusu. Even without my true feelings, Ram is still Rem's older sister. Don't make a fool of me."

Subaru: "————"

Ram: ".....I can still slightly feel my connection with her. So, at least for now she is ok. That much is certain, so settle down for the time being."

It's not like that face expresses any emotion. However, seeing the unbearable unease and sadness in her eyes as she tried to appear calm, Subaru loosened the tension in his shoulders. Ram also moved her hands. Released from being pushed on the wall, Subaru looks down in shame.

Subaru: "..... My bad. I'm sorry. Really, I was the worst idiot right now."

Ram: "Just about, as usual. If Barusu starts to reflect on his life, it'll take a whole day. Stop wasting our time."

Subaru: "..... Uh, my bad."

Experiencing Ram's sharp tongue and emotional testimony, Subaru finally lets out a single apology. Then he slaps his cheeks with all his strength, getting back his fighting spirit.

Although Ram assured him that Rem was safe, the fear of her being alone couldn't be dispelled. Their situation will not change if they don't reunite with the others soon.

Subaru: "Anyway, let's rush this reunion. Ram, can't you use your connection with Rem to work out her location?"

Ram: "It's difficult. That girl is asleep, so the only thing transmitted is her heartbeat. There are other means of "clairvoyance", but...They're not too reliable."

Subaru: "Why?"

Ram: "This sand dunes, it's full of mabeasts, and there are almost no ordinary animals or plants around. "Clairvoyance" is not able to borrow their sights if its wavelength does not match with Ram's. It doesn't synchronize with the Demon Beasts. And at this time, Ram is only able to borrow the eyes from Barusu's earth dragon."

Subaru: "Patrasche? No, that should be enough. I want to check if Patrasche and Gyan are with someone, especially if we can rescue the whole dragon carriage."

Ram: "..... That, wouldn't be very useful."

At Ram's disinterested attitude, Subaru feels frustrated and tilts his head, deep in thought. Now was the time to collect as much information as they could to get reunited again.

And yet, he couldn't understand why Ram was hesitating here.

However, before he could touch on the subject of her true intentions, an answer appeared in front of them both.

Subaru: "...?"

Subaru sees a light pass by from the corner of his eyes, different from the lantern he was holding.

Subaru shivered as he had a bad experience with light passing through the edge of his sight, but the light that appeared was shaken by a gentle movement, totally different from that.

The light gradually comes closer, and slowly the figures become clearer,

Anastasia: "Ram-san and Natsuki-kun, it seems that your discussion is over?"

Subaru: "- Anastasia and Patrasche?"

Hearing the familiar Kararagi dialect, Subaru's head slightly lifted up in surprise. In front of him, holding the lantern from which the light that Subaru saw emanated, and straddling Patrasche's back, is Anastasia.

At Anastasia's question, Ram bows as she lifts the hem of her robe on the spot.

Ram: "Thank you for your consideration, Anastasia-sama. May I ask, how are the surroundings?"

Anastasia: "I just checked all the way back, but I could not see any of the other children. There are only three of us out here... and this sort-of-girl."

Ram: "Is that so?"

Annastasia: "There is no use worrying about it. Although it may be a pitiful fact."

Ram: "Thank you for your concern. Oh, I see... I shall do so."

To Anastasia on top of the Dragon, Ram responded politely. From the course of the conversation, Subaru vaguely understood that Anastasia had been looking around.

But even convinced of that, there was not enough information to understand what was going on.

Subaru: "Hey, Ram. Weren't we the only ones here? What does this mean, can you explain?"

Ram: "I don't remember telling you that Ram and Barusu were alone. Barusu was the one who made that rash judgment of his own accord. Unsightly."

Subaru: "You were so worried about Rem you failed to mention it, is what you mean, charming Nee-sama."

Ram: "huh--"

Hearing Subaru, Ram snorted her nose with her usual tone.

Subaru walks towards Anastasia while recovering from that attitude.

Subaru: "Regardless of any deception, it's good news that Anastasia is safe. I'm relieved."

Anastasia: "Are you not confusing this "deception" with a misunderstanding?? I would be relieved to learn that I am not alone. Besides, Natsuki-kun's earth dragon Patrasche-chan was a very helpful good girl."

Stepping on the saddle, Anastasia carefully tries to get down off of Patrasche. And Patrasche immediately crouches down to help her descent.

As expected, a proper earth dragon. It's a handsome earth dragon. But it's a female.

Subaru: "No one else is hiding, right? It's genuinely just the four of us?"

Anastasia: "Including Patrasche-chan, there is no doubt that we are four people. Emilia-san and Julius would have no reason not to come forth...but, I don't know about Meili-chan."

Subaru: "She might have taken advantage of the commotion to run away, huh... You don't have to say it.."

Picturing the girl with braided hair in his mind, Subaru thought about Meili's options.

Just before being separated, Meili's secret insurance for having a demon beast accompanying them was exposed by Subaru. Subaru who "Returned by death" actually knows that Meili's monster served to protect the dragon carriage, both from the Watchtower and flocks of attacking Oiran bears.

However, since that was an event that didn't happen in this loop, essentially, the only one who knows Meili's reason for having the sandworm follow them is the girl herself.

In this particular situation, having Meili escape the group and try to leave the sand dunes alone wouldn't be strange.

Subaru: "But, she won't do that..... is what I want to believe."

Anastasia: "Expectations? Or should it be trust?"

Subaru: "Make what you will of it. Leaving that aside, how are the surroundings?"

Setting aside the topic of Meili, Subaru asks Anastasia for a report on her inspection. She put her hands in the sleeves of the robe and tilted her head, saying, "About that, huh."

Anastasia: "Judging from what I saw, we are certainly in the sand dunes, but... perhaps this place could be the underground."

Subaru: "Underground? How could there be an underground in sand dunes?"

Anastasia: "Under the sand of the dunes. A cave... More of a cavity, so to speak, but the temperature is obviously lower than above ground, and the air also feels heavy."

Subaru nods as the girl swings her robe in an appealing gesture, joining the front parts to keep out the cold.

Certainly, the chilliness of the atmosphere felt here is far stronger than the earlier setting. In a space with a tall ceiling where you can't see the sky, it was a suitable guess.

Subaru: "Underneath the dunes... I've got a bad feeling about this. I pray that this isn't a sandworm's lair."

Anastasia: "Uh..... That's....."

It's a possible scenario.

In fact, they have witnessed the existence of sandworms inhabiting the ground, and given the enormity of the individuals employed by Meili, this cavity is just large enough for it to be possible. Considering the ecology of eyeless sandworms, this dark space devoid of any light would be an exact fit.

Subaru: "I mean, this team seriously lacks combat power..... Me, Ram and Anastasia, is this a special front of non-combatants!?"

Ram: "Emilia-sama's own knight, proudly describing himself as a non-combatant... This is hopeless."

Subaru: "I'm just stating the reality. Without Beatrice, I can't be so conceited and rely on my whip skills alone."

In terms of everyone's self-defense measures, this really was a group that lacked fighting power. Restrained Ram and Subaru without Beatrice, to name a few.

Ram: "By the way, what about Beatrice-sama? Do you feel any connection relating to your contract?"

Subaru: "Unfortunately, my and Beako's heart are strongly tied, but not in a realistic sense... No, Beatrice said before that she could feel me, but I can't."

Ram: "Useless"

Subaru: "Shut up."

As Ram sighs and looks away, Subaru discreetly zoomed his face closer to Anastasia. As he murmured at her calm composer,

Subaru: "So, can you fight? What do you say?"

Anastasia/Scarf-dona: "If it comes to it, of course I'll fight no matter what. But it will shorten Ana's life. I'd like to avoid it as much as possible. I would be relying on you guys."

Subaru: "Those expectations will probably not be met. I don't know if that's a good thing or bad."

For a moment, Subaru snorted at Anastasia, who appeared as Echidna.

Then, looking at Patrasche, who quietly awaited for instructions, Subaru stroked the tip of her nose with his palm. The jet-black dragon kept silent and nuzzled Subaru with her hard scales.

Subaru: "It hurts, it hurts, but... It's a relief. Without Emilia or Beatrice..... But I'm relieved to have you. Except, it still doesn't make a complete group reunion."

Ram: "- Barusu."

As he was sharing his anxieties with Patrasche, at Ram's call he looked back at her. Then, Ram crossed her arms while facing Subaru and jerked her chin towards Anastasia.

Ram: "We can't stand here forever. Let's move to meet up with others. Fortunately, thanks to Anastasia, we have light. Ram and the rest will proceed."

Subaru: "Oh.....I didn't know, the light was brought by Anastasia."

Anastasia: "Just before the dragon carriage was swallowed, I could only grab the emergency bag that was prepared by Natsuki-kun. Thanks to you, I was able to bring in the light, a knife, and some emergency food."

Anastasia pointed at Patrasche, where a small emergency bag was hanging on the saddle. It is literally the equipment that Subaru had prepared for the dragon carriage as an "emergency take-out".

Even if such opportunity doesn't occur to use it, he felt relieved that he had thought of it.

Subaru: "You shouldn't have made fun of the wit I have in hand, after all... From now on, let's not forget to check the emergency door at any place where we will stay for the first time."

Ram: "Jokes aside, it is Barusu's hand. So, I will give you a light as a reward, please lead the way at once."

Subaru: "Huh..... This is reward?"

Passing him the lantern, both Ram and Anastasia get on Patrasche's back.

This scene, regardless of how you see it, puts Subaru in the position of a servant.

Anastasia: "As a matter of fact, it's easily a three-seater...there would be plenty of room if Ram-san and I cramp in, wouldn't it?"

Ram: "Let's stop there, Anastasia-sama. If he can get close, you can imagine Barusu would happily try to touch my body."

Subaru: "You are imagining stuff all your own, but if you go that way I'll imagine a lot more than that! Don't mess with me! I'll give you a taste of puberty"

He strongly argues with his middle finger up, and Anastasia smiles bitterly, as one would expect. Ram reacts as usual, as Subaru continues walking the cave with one lantern in his hand.

Subaru and Ram's light skirmish made it seem like they had forgotten the circumstances - but it surely hid their anxiety in each other's heart and brought just a bit of relief to their minds.

Perhaps they both realized it, but didn't say anything.

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Although walking anxiously, Subaru and the others were advancing through the Great Cave of the sand.

As expected, Patrasche is used to it, and there won't be any problem with her movement even if you were to put two heavy stones on her back. Apart from the feeling of sand entering his boots, Subaru had learned the technique for walking in the sand sea these past few days, and was able to proceed without much difficulty.

Subaru: "The wind..... I can kind of feel it, and also can't."

Ram: "I feel it. But given the wind's thinness, it's still a long way from being connected to above ground."

Along the way, wetting his finger on his tongue, Subaru tried to examine the airflow, but it wasn't quite clear. On the other hand, as the wind-sensitive Ram feels it out, she concludes that the exit is still far ahead.

The way to this exit was what he wanted to give priority to, looking to meet up with his companions. Unfortunately, though, there was no indication that the signs of wind would be very reliable.

Ram: "Emilia-sama and Julius-sama shouldn't get lost due to the guidance of the lesser spirits. And that's why I doubt that there is a malicious intent in the selection of this grouping."

Subaru: "Well, it is quite useful to be guided by a lesser spirit. Damn, in my case Beako is so strong that she keeps away the lesser spirits. She's far beyond their capacity."

To be clear, this was something beyond Emilia and Julius's exceptional fighting power.

Even when setting out to look for a lost member, things may not proceed as you would expect. You can only try not to overlook anything around you as much as possible when you proceed.

Anastasia: "Ram-san, before Natsuki-kun woke up..... seemed considerably shaken. Looking for Rem now, she seems to be hiding behind her attitude."

Subaru: "..... Is that so."

Secretly, Anastasia shares this story, which made his fight with Ram after waking up feeling more and more awkward.

Subaru had spent the past year alongside Ram, after having the memories of her sister completely erased. Any connection those two previously had must have left behind some remains after being erased. If no one else, Subaru at least had to believe so.

Anastasia: "Well, ain't fun seeing you huddled up all gloomy and miserable like that, so why not look ahead if you're so down about it? If you don't, you might miss something important."

Subaru: "..... Don't throw me off like that. You, stop giving me those nice words. I'm stuck in the exact same situation as the one you came from."

Anastasia: "Sooner or later, I wish you would start thinking of me separately from my originator. Your distaste for that girl is excessively obstinate. This is something I've picked up with time."

Subaru: "I don't know any other approach. I'll keep it in a corner of my mind."

The tongue-in-cheek talkative exchange seemed to distract from the impatience and anxiety of not making any progress.

In the midst of that conversation, the party advances through the Great Cave. Nothing really changes, the sand path and the sand walls --- walking along that path there were few things to think about. That was,

Subaru: "Might be a mabeast nest, we have to be quite careful..... There's a chance we'll run into one."

Ram: "That's what Ram is concerned about."

Kicking the sand under his feet, Subaru grumbles at Ram as she expresses a similar opinion.

They continued into the Great Cave, and soon an hour had already passed. With no one and nothing around, their anxiety, impatience and bad premonitions continue to grow.

Of course, not having enemies show up is a welcome situation, but the extensive silence couldn't be any help to wipe out the bad feelings regarding this place. —As if, it was detached from the whole world—

Subaru: "No way, we couldn't have been swallowed by a hyperspace that does not connect to anywhere, right?"

Anastasia: "Well then, would you tell me where the wind we're relying on is coming from? Do you think it's the heavy breathing of an unusually big and ferocious beast who owns this cave?"

Subaru: "That's not even funny, it's rather scary."

In fact, it would be no wonder even if that happened. They had already seen it with their own eyes that even the world could be broken apart. Whatever this rift is connected to, it would not be worth a surprise.

Ram: "Regardless of the maliciousness of this selection, it is hard to believe that whoever set it up had considered it could be broken. We weren't aiming for it with the negation spell, it was just a coincidence."

Subaru: "What do you mean, precisely?"

Ram: "It is useless to imagine the worst scenario that this road, as it is, is connected to the monster's stomach. - Look, see."

The lack of progress was leading to pessimistic theories, which Ram rationally denies. Then, at the end of the explanation, she urged Subaru as he stopped to look ahead.

Following her indication, Subaru holds out the lantern to look forward. Then, the illuminated passage of the cavity gets narrow, in front of their eyes—

Subaru: "It's a crossroad."

Anastasia: "Right or left, we have to make a choice. What do we do?"

Subaru: "According to my knowledge, Kurapika* said to choose right when the time called for it." [TN: Hunter x Hunter reference.]

Anastasia: "Who's that?"

Looking at it practically, he remembered hearing that people tend to unconsciously choose to proceed left when they get lost. Perhaps it had to do with dominance, as for the dominant hand, dominant leg, and other complicated factors like those, or that's what was said and thought of it at the time.

For that reason, Subaru wanted to follow the theory of a skillful character he once knew and chose the right path which he thought was correct, but -

Ram: "So, Barusu, which way do you want to go?"

Subaru: "..... Honestly speaking, left."

Ram: "What happened to Kurapika?"

Anastasia: "Who's that?"

Subaru replies, Ram asks question after question, and just Anastasia just pokes fun.

If you look only at those words as written, the exchange may appear to be as such

— But in reality, the three people who exchanged words had a stiff expression and worrisome looks on their faces. On top of that, even Patrasche who can't speak, was staring at the right path with stern eyes.

The cause was the overwhelming negativity they were feeling from the right path.

Abstractly speaking, a detestable premonition. If you choose more words, it was almost a dread.

"It's deadly to select the right path", their instincts were ringing the alarm bell.

Subaru: "The right..... I think it's dangerous. I have a feeling it's not going to be pleasant."

Ram: "Surprisingly, I agree with Barusu. What you think Anastasia-sama?"

Anastasia: "According to the Kararagi rule it goes to the majority, by the support of two votes..... Besides, I am honestly lacking the courage to choose the right side."

As no sleeves would swing, Anastasia made the gesture of swinging both hands as the answer for all.

Subaru is not the only one. Both Ram and Anastasia were having a strange sensation from the path at the right, as well as Patrasche. Therefore, the right road couldn't be chosen.

Subaru: "Then, left?that also feels like choosing a terrible option though."

Ram: "So, turning back? There's nothing we can get that way."

Subaru: "There's nothing to lose is what you're saying, I might just be overly negative."

As Subaru failed to make a decision, Ram and Anastasia seemed ready to jump in.

As he can not help but shrug his shoulders, Subaru steps forward to walk in front of Patrasche. Straight towards the road on the left.

Embracing their hesitation as they advanced, it seems they grew their distance from the right path in this great cave. He found that the pressure that he felt through the walls of sand kept getting farther away, and the stiffness in his shoulders was naturally released

Ram: "—What an unpleasant place."

She felt the same thing, and as he heard Ram murmuring, Subaru agrees in silence.

At this crossroads, the right path caused overwhelming negative thoughts. They chose the left road out of something like instinct to avoid the other, but there was one more reason.

— Inside the Subaru's chest, he felt the presence of something shouting in joy towards the right path.

It would be horrible to obey what it said.

It was also undeniably a major factor on why Subaru didn't chose that road.

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The team of "non-combatants" went through the cavity, and a few more hours passed by in the way.

Subaru: "————"

Anastasia: "————"

Ram: "————"

As they slowly advanced their search on the great cave, the number of words spoken between them dropped drastically .

With their fatigue, and not to mention the darkness, any sense of time was fuzzy, but what was wearing down their spirit along the walk was silence.

In fact, Subaru felt like that several hours had passed, he didn't know if it was true.

There is a possibility that they had utilized the time better than they thought, or even that they had completely wasted it.

What they knew for sure was that there was no progress, no more than that.

Subaru: "..... At that split, I wonder if we should have gone right."

Ram: "After that much silence, you can only think to complain? Stop it. Shameful."

Murmuring, he moved his dry lips to complain, and Ram bitterly pierces back.

However, her poison also lacked ambition. Not being able to find anything like this, it caused her to also be slightly dominated by anxiety.

Although the foothold in the sand path was bad, there was some confidence after already walking a few kilometers on it.

So if you couldn't see any end to the cave, you couldn't help but be swept over by a bad feeling. It is natural that you would doubt that you made the wrong choice.

Even more, if you reach a dead end, you'd have to give up.

Subaru: "The rapid fire of those lights above ground..... What do you think it was?"

Subaru changed the direction of the topic, for fear that the negative conversation would continue as it was.

The topic that turned up was the light of the Watchtower — the defense mechanism of the dunes, which seemed to have been prepared by the sage.

Ram: "It was a needle."

Subaru: "Needle?"

To that question, Ram responded with a few words. She spilled a sigh at Subaru's following question and gently stroked her pink hair,

Ram: "I don't know the small details, but it was firing long and narrow needles enchanted with magical powers. The needles carried high heat, probably the effect of

firing magic. But the needle itself seemed to be specially made. As it was repelled and fell on the sand, it disintegrated and disappeared."

Subaru: ".....In that uproar, to see so properly."

Ram: "If you just looked at it, you would know about that much."

Without a doubt, it seemed Ram's observation power was not as ordinary as she said so.

When Subaru just kept staring, Anastasia shook her head in amazement.

In Ram's case, she was aware of her own talents, but was still speaking sarcastically.

Subaru: "What do you think was the purpose?"

Ram: "Kill those approaching the Watchtower... It's a mystery why it relentlessly aimed at Barusu. It's standard practice to take down the weaker enemies first, so that might be it."

Subaru: "Shit, I can't deny it!"

If you look at it from afar, you couldn't help but arrive at the same conclusion. Nonetheless, because of that they had no casualties.

The conclusion you reach is, it's good to have a weak, invincible, magical Subaru.

But in that case——

Subaru: "It means, a friendly encounter with "The Sage" would be difficult"

Anastasia: "I think it's premature to say so. If I'm not mistaken, did we not set out with the intention of challenging these setbacks knowingly? There is a chance for a discussion to occur, it's what I think."

Ram: "At worst, our business is with the Sage's knowledge, and not their personality. If they don't talk, you can just tie them up and give 'em a good shaking until they do."

Subaru: "Nee-sama, was that your villainous side talking!?"

Ram: "If there is something you want, take measures. It's not a child's play."

As Subaru becomes dumbfounded, Ram remains strangely calm. Just hearing those statements, he felt he was being reminded of how sweet and shallow his own resolutions were.

Regardless of whether it's actually done, there is no doubt that Ram is prepared for it. That only is a proof that she is serious about Rem.

Subaru: "————"

To touch Ram's resolve, Subaru might have to make some decisions regarding his own resolutions.

He haven't thought of getting his hands dirty for Rem. Rem is not to be blamed for that either.

What he has to do is to be prepared to rip off the results.

When confronted with the existence of the Sage, no matter what kind of opponent that is, he has to be absolutely determined, such resolution...

Patrasche: "----tsu"

Subaru: "Patrasche?"

At the same time, Patrasche holds her breath and Subaru bits his lips.

The dragon glares at the path with stern eyes and groans a little. Subaru, who noticed that stare, also stopped his feet and returned to calm the earth dragon. He stroked her neck and called out, "What's wrong?"

Subaru: "Did you saw something? What.....?"

Ram: "- Cause, that is..."

Ram said on behalf, interrupting Subaru. Anastasia frowns and looks at the passage like Patrasche.

Of course, nothing could be seen anything in the extended darkness, but a different feeling that appealed rather than seeing. — Seeping inside the nose was a smell of something burning.

Anastasia: ".....Do you think it's a smell of fire?"

Ram: "I can't think of anything else. But I don't think something like a kitchen could possibly be here."

Subaru: "If this is a fire... The cause behind this smell is civilized people, right ?"

Ram & Anastasia: "————"

At Subaru's clinging question, neither Ram nor Anastasia could just easily nod.

He could also understand the girls judgment. But the smell that was drifting was clearly a scent of something supposedly burning. Ram said like cooking something, but also the aroma was close to it.

It's a bonfire, or a stew for a meal. If that's the case,

Subaru: "Do you think there's a possibility of that being Emilias?"

Anastasia: "If the premise was skipped to the same place, there is enough possibility. Nevertheless, whether it's rational or irrational to use fire in such situation, I would leave that judgement to the rest"

Subaru: "————"

Even if it's discussed here, the answer won't come as for who lays ahead of the road.

If so, you should call out and check what your partner's intention is,

Anastasia: "Even people who are ahead of the road are not always friendly"

If not Emilias, could it be it's the "Sage"? It's hard to believe that the sages who should be in the Watchtower would come down, or not.

In that case, if the sage continues to be hostile, a corresponding attack is also to be expected.

Subaru: ".....Hide the light and move forward? What I mean is, if they are using fire then there is light on their side. We, at least, should hide."

Anastasia: "It's funny to keep speculating about it, we also have to check what's the cause is, so I think it's a reasonable idea."

Anastasia nods to Subaru's proposal, and after that Ram also quietly agrees with it.

When the lights of the two lanterns were turned off, the party went back to the path where the smell of fire was drifting from, relying only on the Subaru's light.

Ram: "Barusu"

Subaru: "What?"

Ram: "If anything happens, just leave it and run straight away. Don't hold a grudge."

Subaru: "Curse me if I do that."

In the light held by Subaru, Ram slightly loosened her lips, and Subaru led straight through the passage. When the scent of the fire gradually increased, he felt Patrasche's breath on his back,

Subaru: "...! It's the light."

Beyond the passage, he found a slightly shimmering red light.

Subaru immediately dropped his own light and instructed the three behind him to be silent. Then he squatted down and stepped on the sand stealthily to confirm the state of the light.

One step, two steps--as they moved forward, they could see that the light was somewhat coming across the corner. The passage was slightly bent to the left, and the fire was from there.

"_____"

Quietly reaching the turning point, and slightly peeking on the other side while leaning against the wall. At that moment, the wind carrying a slight heat tickled Subaru's forehead and unintentionally closed his eyes.

— Immediately after, Subaru's foot gouged down unexpectedly, the sand slid and it rolled his body diagonally.

Subaru: "What the...?!?"

He couldn't bear the surprise attack, and Subaru forgot to step and he rolled down the slope. The fine particles of sand couldn't and he slid long down all the way to the bottom.

Thrusting down from the top of the sand hill, Subaru rolled down from a steep slope of sand about ten meters high, again spat out sand and raised his body.

Subaru: "Ugh! thu! Again sand..... No, that then."

Subaru shakes his head and looks around. In this sudden surprise he dropped his lantern. If it was somewhere nearby, he started searching for it stretching his hand, and he touched something hard.

For an instant, he thought he had found the lantern, but it felt different compared to the hardness of that he was holding. The surface was crisp and pleasant to touch, like a wooden stick. When he lifted it up it was lighter compared to its thickness and length.

Subaru: "What is it... ?"

Even if you looked closely, you wouldn't know what it was in that pitch black darkness.

When he timidly smelled it, it felt like the smell of charcoal——

Subaru: "————"

The next moment when he was thinking that, a light came right behind him suddenly.

The wisps that appeared in the back were red, shimmering and primitive, and they were called flames. Then, as the flames began to light up the world, Subaru saw the identity of the thing he grabbed.

- That's probably a creature's foot.

Things that were animals, burned down until it turned into charred remains, as a result.

Around the place where Subaru was sitting, the remnants of former creatures that became these charred remains were scattered, and Subaru had slipped right into the middle of countless burned dead bodies.

Subaru: "Oh! Oh! Wow!?"

Throwing away the charred waste in his hand, Subaru aimed to retreat. However, there was a terrible flame that existed behind while he tried to retreat back, and his neck was burned by the heat wave, and this time he fell down just on his face. And finally, he turned back and looked at it face to face.

Monster: "---- _____!"

Subaru was thrown out of reality facing a tremendous roar from his front.

Why all the demon beasts roars are so disgusting that they irritate human beings to the limit of their disgust.

With such a high-pitched roar, it was like countless babies were crying all at once.

It is a blasphemous creature that Subaru had never seen, it burns red in a place full of burned bodies - it is truly a devil beast, but the fur color is different from what he has seen in the past.

As far as Subaru knew, all of the demon beasts were distorted and ugly, but they were often in such a form that they resembled an existing creature one way or another.

Same for the White Whale or the Great Rabbit. In any case, there was a basic foundation of an animal.

However, this time, the monster that exists in front of him, he doesn't want to apply the same concept.

Monster: "---- _____!"

The monster cries again. At first glance, some similarities could be found with a horse.

Thin, but strong four-legs that exist to charge over the earth. It is the same as a horse that has a trunk supported by its four legs and a long tail swaying from behind.

However, there was a human torso in the part where the horse's neck should normally be, leading to the head. The human torso has two more arms, in addition to the four legs. And there was no head above the neck of the human torso. As from the neck to the top, the "horns" were growing.

The proof of the devil makes it easy to understand that it's different from other animals.

The horns were growing in place of the head. It doesn't have a head. Speaking of where the mouth raised the cry, from the chest till the belly of the human torso was torn vertically, and in the oral cavity, the fully grown horizontally aligned fangs were insuring their existence.

Subaru: ".....It's a monster."

Even calling it a "Magical beast" was sort of absurd, rather it was a profanity of life.

To Subaru's knowledge, it was close to a fantasy creature called Centaur, a half-man and half-horse, but that was a distorted figure as if it had been thrown out of production half way.

And the centaur, the mane of the flame was forming from the back human torso part, burning the sand cavity with incredible power, surging up the red light.

If you look at the fires' strength, it's obvious that who created all the burned dead bodies lay around there. Using fire meant civilized people or whatever, was a mistake to embrace such expectations.

"_____"

The arms of the centaur was the human arm itself with five fingers.

The foot of the horse part of the centaur was the legs of horse itself which formed hoofs too.

The figure was about six or seven meters long, and it could be said that it was just the right size to walk in this hollow. — That's, the Lord of this cavity is in front of you —

Subaru: "..... It was a trap."

Holding his breath, Subaru despairs.

There was nothing he could do. He quickly turned his hand to the back of his waist and grabbed the handle of the whip, but he didn't think he could do anything with it.

And to the breathless Subaru, the Centaur tilts his eyeless head. Hearing it from its mouth, bathing in its roar, fueling his fears.

"....."

For the moment, Subaru moved to create a gap.

He turns around on the sand, roughly kicks one of the charcoaled debris that hits the centaurs. The corpses that went through the fire were well burned and too light, and that there was no strength even if it hit. But still, it's good to be in control. Clinging to the steep slope, trying to return to the upper aisle. He would go back the road he came, but that didn't mind it. The problem was he didn't know how far this Centaur was going to go. It's dubious how much appetite that thing had, as it burns its prey this way. Of course, as far as he heard that the demon beast had the nature to kill humans instinctively, though it does not always work according to that. Still, if it was possible to turn the situation a little....

Subaru: "Ka fu——"

When he was thinking about it, Subaru noticed that his body was not trembling.

Trying and create a diversion by kicking a charred debris, or climb the steep sand slope and turn back or could reach out to the whip, Subaru could do none of this.

— Because before he could get to it, the breath of the monster burned Subaru.

Subaru: "Ahh."

As soon as the conception reached that his whole body was being burned, Subaru screamed in pain and suffering. Perhaps because his throat was burned, his lungs were burned, as he could not raise a bit of his voice.

When the burned skin formed bubbles, they swelled and burst instantly. The fluids that had flown inside the body, which had never been seen before, instantly evaporated, and the blood boils for real.

Subaru: "————"

Never mind, rolling over on the ground in this suffering.

The muscles and fat were burned to the ground, melted and lumbered. The pain faded far away, and Subaru experienced an illusion being drowned in flames.

Burned and burned. He've read somewhere about the depth of the burn.

He heard that there were stages of the burn, and when it went to the third stage, the scars would remain, and the skin would have to be transplanted. He also heard that when a person burns 30% of the body's skin, that alone makes breathing difficult and leads to death.

Subaru: "————"

Short hair burns till the roots, and the eardrum and brain matter melted and flowed out from the earlobe. The lips and gums evaporated and the teeth were peeled off, and the tongue was gulped by the suffering of the heat wave. It doesn't matter. He had already drowned. If it was burned, could it be healed? Even though he was not confident with his face, if it gets burned will it give him some kind of fancy appearance? To Emilia, to Beatrice, to Rem.

Subaru: "--Ruh!"

Burning, the field of vision was burning. Everything is burning, turning red, and going white.

Blood was eradicated by the tremendous heat, the eyelids melted away, the fluids of the eyeball evaporated, it turned white and cloudy, and nothing could be seen.

He just heard something. He heard someone calling. He heard the baby crying. Someone came down beside him. Idiot. Why? I told you to run away. Why did you come down here? But he didn't know what it meant to go down. Moreover, what's left or right?

A horse, a person. It melts and burns and sleepy.

Melts and disappears.

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Ram: "How long are you going to sleep? Get up, lazy Barusu."

Subaru: "guah uh!?"

Subaru was pulled back to reality with a sharp poke, as his hands and feet were unable to move, and his scorched thoughts collapsed.

Suddenly rising up his body, Subaru wipes cold sweat from his sand-laden forehead.

Subaru: "Oh, oh ... what?"

Looking around.

Dark, He couldn't see anything. There was something that evoked fear just a few seconds ago.

Subaru: "huh?"

Ram: " ... I am stunned. How frightened are you in the darkness? You are not a child!"

Subaru: "....."

Unwillingly shivering his body, Subaru had his eyes open wide to her voice.

In the light of the lantern, Ram spills a small sigh. Then, when she quietly kneeled down on the spot and stroked Subaru's cheeks with her hand.

Ram: "What a pitiful face"

Subaru: ".....has my face melted?"

Ram: "- Except in front of Emilia-sama, I have never seen such a pitiful sight."

The heat of the palm touching the cheek was so warm but it does not get even close compared to what Subaru has just experienced.

Thanks to that feeling, the flames and the other warmth, Subaru finally understood the situation.

Again, he have "Returned by death" and came back.

And here is the another save point other than the two "deaths" that he met in the sand dunes.

So it's said, you can't challenge the labyrinth of the sand without risking your own life.

— he felt like the cold sand flowing on the sand sea silently mocking the scorched Subaru.