

The Bloodline

Vol.01



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Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Chapter 1: The Girl in the Birdcage](#)

[Chapter 2: An Omen Carved in Blood](#)

[Chapter 3: The Two of Royal Blood](#)

[Bonus Textless Cover](#)

[Bonus Character Design Sketches](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Chapter 1: The Girl in the Birdcage

1

Nagi's heart pumped blood into his limbs. He was a commoner. His blood wasn't special. Thus, nothing more came from this.

Unlike noble blood, he couldn't turn it into a weapon.

Unlike noble blood, it didn't grant him everlasting life.

Regardless, Nagi's blood flowed through his body, granting his muscles strength. And with that strength, he could use the large knife clenched in his right hand to take a swing at the enemy before him.

The guard of the Forbidden Garden was a head taller than Nagi. His muscles were bulky and didn't look well trained. He reminded Nagi of a beast of the forest that stockpiled fat so it could brave the winter. The movements of this guard were far duller than the prey Nagi had hunted many times before.

But the guard's large build was a threat in itself. What's more, his standardized equipment, consisting of a sword and buckler, was far superior to Nagi's knife. Nagi was at a disadvantage just from the length of his weapon. He had a bow and a quiver of arrows on his back, but he didn't have the leisure to ready a shot with it.

Furthermore, Nagi wasn't used to fighting against people. He had never lost in a fight in his village up until now, but this was the first time he was fighting someone using a weapon. Above all else, however, Nagi was facing off against a noble.

Standing before the man, Nagi was but a hare in the presence of a lion. His heart quivered with fear. A commoner could never win against a noble... against a predator.

Even so, Nagi stepped forward. The guard likely never imagined a commoner would take a swing at him. The strike caught him off guard, and his shield didn't

make it in time. Nagi's knife definitely tore through flesh.

Still, the guard didn't panic. The corners of his lips rose into a sneer. The guard was a noble, whereas Nagi was a commoner. A blade wielded by a commoner meant nothing to a noble. Even if the blade itself could reach, there was no point.

Reality betrayed the guard's disdain, however. Blood sprouted from the wound on his shoulder. His face was now colored with confusion and a far-too-late display of shock. He didn't believe it. Nagi's knife was large and sharp, but it was still nothing more than a blade wielded by a commoner. Even if cut by it, the guard's noble body should've repaired the injury immediately. This was common knowledge.

But that common knowledge didn't apply here. Nagi knew as much. It was the work of the Halahala that coated his knife. The guard's shoulder tore apart, forcing him to drop his shield. The stiff sound of metal clanging against the hard floor rang in the air. After freezing up and standing there in a daze, the clang brought his consciousness back to reality.

He let out a meaningless scream. There was clear fear in his voice.

"Blood caliber? In the hands of a commoner? Impossible..."

The guard was unable to hide his agitation over the mystery of being dealt a wound by a commoner.

Nagi was also surprised by the effects of the poison. It seemed Keele had been telling the truth about its ability to wound nobles. Even though he was in the midst of battle, Nagi found himself remembering the past. He recalled why he had come to the Forbidden Garden in the first place.

A ghost had told Nagi about this place—the ghost of Nagi's older brother, Keele. His brother was supposed to have died several years ago. The still-young Nagi hadn't been told the reason at the time. He had only been told that Keele had died.

Thus, when Keele had secretly visited Nagi in the middle of the night a few days before the Blood Offering Festival, he'd thought it was definitely a ghost.

Rumors of ghosts abounded. People claimed they saw some villager who was supposed to be dead, which became gossip among the children. Nagi didn't believe the stories. He found such rumors to be rather irresponsible.

He wanted to believe an entirely different rumor altogether. It was a far more realistic rumor than ghosts, and a far more dangerous one at that.

Cobalt.

Just speaking of it could lead to imprisonment. Even though he knew this, Nagi couldn't stop listening to gossip about Cobalt.

The brother before his eyes looked a bit strange for a ghost, but Nagi's memory of him was a little vague. Keele's sharp gaze turned even more severe, giving off the impression of a rock exposed to the elements. The one thing that remained unchanged about him was his dark-gray hair. It looked the same as in Nagi's memories, but it was grown out, as if having it cut would've been too much trouble.

By contrast, his slender physique looked far smaller than Nagi remembered, but Nagi immediately realized that he was the one who had gotten taller. Nagi's body had grown quite a bit over the last few years, but Keele still had half a head on him.

"So, there really are ghosts," Nagi muttered.

"Don't be stupid. I ain't dead. I got kicked outta the village for certain reasons. It's a pain to explain this kinda thing to kids, so they just make us out to be dead. If anyone happens to spot us alive and kicking, they just make a racket about us being ghosts." Keele spoke as if it wasn't his concern, then flashed a smile. "Hey, Nagi. I've got some juicy info for you."

His brother's expression made Nagi think this was what an actual ghost would look like. It was a wicked yet fascinating smile. Confronted with it yet again, Nagi remembered that he had gone through hell as a child many times over after being tricked by this exact smile.

"The Forbidden Garden. That's apparently the name of the place. They call it a garden, but it's actually a huge mansion. There's a courtyard in the middle of it with a glass ceiling. You sneak in there, and you should be able to find the

treasure right away.”

“And what exactly is this treasure?” Nagi asked hesitantly.

“Dunno.”

“What?”

“All I managed to get is a rough sketch of the building and word that they’ve got some crazy treasure there. Also, this Forbidden Garden is pretty much unguarded on the day of the Blood Offering Festival.”

“Isn’t that a little suspicious?”

Keele let out a snort. His behavior was clearly telling Nagi, “You’re as much of a wuss as ever.”

Nagi remembered now. He detested being laughed at by Keele. He really hated his brother. Keele had always made fun of Nagi, beaten him in fights, and trumped him in any and all arguments.

But the story his brother brought him now was strange. What was this treasure? Who had told Keele about this? Where had Keele been, and how had he survived after being exiled to begin with?

Keele looked ferocious. His slender body was radiating a new ferocity, as though he had to violently defend himself on a daily basis. He hadn’t had such an air about him before. That made things all the more suspicious.

If Nagi said anything about this, however, Keele would just make fun of him again. Nagi hated that idea, so instead he asked, “Why are you telling me? Can’t you just go do it yourself?”

“I’ve got things to do that day. I’d go if I could.”

Keele said no more of his obligations. Even if Nagi asked him, his brother would never tell. This man was full of secrets.

“So, say I go get this mystery treasure... What’s in it for me?”

“Oh, come on. You don’t need me to tell you that, do you? There’s definitely a treasure there. We can sell it and buy *blood*.”

The allure of blood had Nagi’s heart astir.

“I’ve heard people say you can buy blood in the capital,” Nagi said quietly.

“It’s true. Well, it apparently costs way more than the poor could ever hope to make, though.”

Nagi kept silent at this.

“How old are you now? Fourteen? Fifteen?” Keele whispered, pressing him for an answer. “Whatever. It doesn’t matter. At that age, you can’t help but think about it, yeah? You don’t even have half your life to go. It’ll be over in less than ten years.”

Nagi didn’t reply. Keele’s words were so on the mark, they gouged at Nagi’s heart. His older brother was a talented man who knew everything about him. Keele’s behavior clearly demonstrated that he could easily read his little brother’s thoughts. Nagi hated this part of him. He had *always* hated this part of him.

“And how will I be able to tell what the treasure is?” Nagi spat, forcibly redirecting the conversation. “What if the treasure can’t be carried out of there?”

“I mean, in that case, you can just steal whatever looks valuable. You listening? We’re never gonna get another chance like this. The security around this garden is only gonna thin out on the day of the Blood Offering Festival.”

“Why?”

“The haves are gonna be just as busy as the have-nots. Even though they’re nobles, they ain’t no different. They gotta go to the ritual held at the royal palace for the Blood Offering Festival. Being able to meet and greet the bigwigs who gather there can change their long lives. Nobody wants to draw the short straw of guarding some treasure in the middle of a forest on a day like that. So, only one guard gets left behind while everyone else ditches work and goes to the palace. Nothing’s happened there for decades, maybe even centuries. Who’d think a thief would sneak into a place like that? The one guard left isn’t gonna be paying attention. It’ll be a cinch... so long as you have this.”

With that, Keele took out a small bottle filled with a red liquid.

“This is Halahala. Poison that can kill a noble.”

Nagi was appalled. “Huh? Where’d you get something like—wait, hang on. There’s no way that kind of thing even exists.”

“It does. Even most nobles don’t know about it. I can’t say where it came from, of course.”

“How do you know it’s the real thing?”

“You sure like to worry about some trivial crap. If you’re not gonna do it, I’ll just go ask some other guy and he can have the treasure. I’m getting the same cut no matter what, so it doesn’t really matter to me. You can just stay here shivering over your lifespan.”

Keele stared into Nagi’s eyes. Unable to stand the pressure, Nagi averted his gaze.

The sight of the village seniors from last year’s Blood Offering Festival came to mind. What remaining lifespan they had had been sucked away as an offering, causing their bodies to rapidly shrivel up.

Their deeply wrinkled dry skin.

Their hopeless eyes.

Nagi’s life was already half over. Was he going to look like that in ten years?

If he had money, he could buy blood. He could buy life.

“I’ll do it,” Nagi said upon coming to his senses.

The corners of Keele’s mouth curved into a wicked smile.

The land of Agarthia was essentially a large circle with the capital at its center. There were two main roads, which ran through the capital from north to south and east to west. Two other roads that formed concentric circles around the capital were referred to as the ring roads. These were the main avenues to traverse Agarthia. Strano Village was located off the second ring road.

Nagi had been taught this by the village chief, but as most villagers lived their lives without ever leaving the village, it was nothing more than simple knowledge for him. Nagi had only ever gone as far away as a one-day round trip. The only one who ever took longer journeys from Strano Village was the

chief, who had to go to the royal capital to fulfill his duty for the blood offering.

Just as Keele had said, the Garden lay within the forest a little off the second ring road. A small path led all the way to the mansion in the forest, but it was quite cleverly hidden by trees. Nobody would be able to find it if they didn't know it was there.

Nagi ran down what was practically an animal trail for a few hours. He was used to running through forests, so he wasn't bothered by this. Still, it wasn't an easy trip.

Before long, a mansion suddenly came into view. It looked like it was a condensation of the forest's darkness. The blackened mansion couldn't be seen just a few steps back, but upon drawing nearer, its eerie presence became apparent.

According to the rumors, this was the kind of mansion the nobles in the capital resided in. Or so Nagi believed, at least. It was far larger than any building he had seen before. Nagi didn't know this, but the Garden was a fair bit smaller than the noble mansions of the capital. In truth, this was very similar to a villa a noble would come to on vacation—excluding the fact it was thoroughly hidden deep within a forest, that is.

The door was probably locked. Not that Nagi was going to brashly march up to the front door, of course. He was here to burgle the place. Nagi looked up at the walls of the building as he began circling it. He then found what he was looking for: a protrusion from the wall which was just big enough to reach the rooftop.

The layout of the building was just as Keele had described. Nagi was starting to believe this dubious information his brother had brought him. Just maybe, this Halahala of his was the real deal. It was still hard to accept, though.

He took the rope he'd brought along with him out of his bag. He normally used it for hunting, and although it was thin, it was sturdy. After testing the hoop he made, Nagi threw it up at the protrusion. The hoop caught onto it without a problem. This was simple work for him, skilled with handling a rope as he was.

Nagi wrapped the rope around his hand and put strength into his arms,

beginning his ascent of the wall. He spent his days running through hills and fields while hunting, so his willowy body was well trained. He scaled the wall with the agility of a beast climbing a tree. His supple muscles brought him up to the rooftop in no time at all.

Nagi made his way across the roof toward the center of the building. Just as Keele had said, there was a glass ceiling there. Peering into it, he could see the courtyard below.

He went to break the glass to gain entry, but hesitated upon seeing the brilliant workmanship of the gentle arc the ceiling drew. How exactly had it been made? Glass was a valuable resource in Strano Village, so it was only used for the windows of the chief's house and the assembly hall. The glass used to make this ceiling must've cost a fortune.

Unfortunately, he couldn't take the whole ceiling back with him. Being unable to take something and breaking it wasn't all that different, so Nagi readied himself as he held his knife in a backward grip to break the glass.

"Who the hell are you?!" came a loud voice from the other side of the roof.

The lone guard had apparently come out onto the roof from within the building. He ran over while taking a detour to avoid the glass, during which time Nagi corrected the grip on his knife and stood at the ready. His blade was already coated with Halahala. It glowed red in the darkness as it reflected the light from within the building. Thus, the battle between Nagi and the guard began.

Nagi's consciousness was drawn back from memories of the past to the enemy before him. The battle had reached a stalemate. After being dealt a wounding blow, the guard grew wary of Nagi's knife and kept his distance. He didn't actively go on the offense.

"What is a mere commoner doing here on the night of the sacred festival? Offer up your blood obediently and die already."

His speech was typical of a noble, fanning the flames of Nagi's anger.

"Don't screw with me!"

He gripped his knife horizontally and charged in, driven by his rage.

“Tch!”

The guard leaped out of the way, and Nagi gave chase. Both of them had lost themselves to their emotions. As a result, they ended up moving in an unexpected direction: right toward the glass ceiling.

The guard was the first to notice. Upon realizing he was about to step on the fragile glass, he hesitated for a brief moment. Nagi didn't let this opportunity pass by. He kept his knife at the ready and charged in for a ramming attack, not worrying about the consequences.

Nagi slammed into the guard, sending the two of them hurtling into the ceiling. Nagi tried to stab him... but couldn't. As the glass shattered, both of them fell through. For an instant, it felt like he was floating in the air. Immediately following that came the intense crash against the floor.

Pain shot up Nagi's arm and his knife fell from his hand, clattering against the floor. He had hit the floor right hand first. Nagi stood back up, enduring the pain... and suddenly realized someone was there. He couldn't see them from the rooftop, but there was a person inside the courtyard.

He found himself staring unintentionally, his gaze fixed on the stranger. While he wasn't aware of it, this very moment would change his life forever.

It was a girl in white.

She was beautiful. So beautiful that Nagi thought he was hallucinating. She had fine silver hair cut evenly at shoulder length. Her snow-white clothes were tailored from modestly woven cloth. Her porcelain skin rivaled the shade of her clothes, and her large eyes shone like gems. Just as she opened those eyes wide in surprise at the two men who had just crashed through the ceiling, Nagi saw that her eyes were... a faint red.

The color was lovelier than every beautiful thing Nagi had seen in his entire life put together. He felt fascinated by those eyes, drawn into them, but before he could lose himself in them, he realized something else. There were several transparent tubes coming from the girl's white arms. They were filled with a liquid a far deeper red than that of her eyes. Nagi immediately understood

what this implied.

A blood offering.



Moreover, it was far harsher than the ones done at Strano Village. A normal blood offering was done on one arm in one place, but this girl had tubes in both arms in several places. Having so much blood stolen from her would place a tremendous burden on her body. It was surely ruthlessly reducing her lifespan.

He realized she was being held captive here. Tonight was the Blood Offering Festival, and this was a blood offering. Not only that, it was being done far more viciously than in the village. This girl had been brought all the way out here from her home and made into a sacrifice. A torrent of emotions gushed forth all at once from within Nagi's heart.

Stories of nobles using commoner women as their playthings were far too common. While he might have been spurred to save her because of desire, or a sense of chivalry, his primary emotion was anger. This girl, whose beauty surpassed that of anything he had ever known, was being made to taste a form of humiliation he knew far more of than he wanted to.

"I'm coming to save you!"

"Huh?"

Nagi ran toward the surprised girl, and in the next instant, he took a hit from the side and was sent flying.

"You filthy maggot!"

It was the guard who'd crashed through the ceiling with him. Nagi stood back up and observed him. The man showed no signs of injury. It was possible his noble body had healed any wounds he'd received from the fall in an instant. Nagi still didn't know much about how Halahala affected a noble's body; he had no idea how long it was supposed to last.

On the other hand, Nagi was covered in wounds. His whole body was racked with pain. His right arm was in particularly bad shape, still throbbing in pain from the fall. It wasn't broken, but it was pretty much useless for now. Additionally, Nagi's knife was still on the floor.

His opponent had also dropped his weapon after their fall, so it appeared that they were on even ground... but that was entirely wrong. Nagi's only weapon was his Halahala-coated knife. The bottle of poison was still in his bag, which he

had also dropped upon their landing. It was possible the bottle was broken. Even if it wasn't, it served no use if he didn't have it on hand.

The guard sneered at him. It was the face of a carnivore standing before its prey. He understood that Nagi was no match for him without his knife.

"You're just a commoner," he snarled. "I'll kill you."

"Stop!" the girl screamed.

But the guard only gave her a glance and ignored her plea.

"Die!"

He came down with a punch. While it was not a particularly skillful attack, Nagi couldn't dodge it. The pain and numbness assaulting his body made him incapable of moving freely. Leaning over and making the strike deviate slightly was the best he could do. Still, it wasn't enough to get out of the way completely. Nagi took the punch to his cheek. He was sent flying back while vomiting blood. The guard walked up to the now fallen Nagi and stomped on him with the heel of his boot.

"You lowly plebeian. You dare inflict a wound on *me*, a noble? Just killing you won't be enough. I'll break all the bones in your arms and legs and then tear out your bowels."

The guard's eyes were bloodshot, flickering with a cruel delight.

"Stop! He's still a child! Can't you hear me?!"

I'm not a child, Nagi thought to himself needlessly as pain staggered his mind. The girl looked about the same age as him. *I'm not a child anymore. I'm way past that point. As proof, I don't have that much time left to live.*

The guard continued to ignore her.

"That's why I hate this job," he said in a purposefully loud voice to nobody in particular. "Getting stuck here today of all days... Fuck me, I think my ears were done in by the fall. I can't hear a thing."

The girl realized the reason for the guard's act and clenched her teeth. He was planning on ignoring her completely. A cheerful smile took shape on his slightly dirtied face.

“Oh well. Guess I’ll distract myself by torturing this maggot! Playing with men isn’t really my thing, but I’ve got no other choice.”

The guard kicked Nagi hard in the belly, causing the contents of his stomach to lurch out of his mouth. His face was now a mess of tears, blood, and vomit.

“Haha. How filthy. Well, you *are* a commoner. Filth suits your kind. Now, now, you’ll dirty my boots.”

Am I going to be killed by a noble in a place like this? Without obtaining a thing? Being made fun of the entire time? Nagi thought to himself hazily.

“A low-born like you is no different from cattle. When you forget you’re only being allowed to live so that you can offer your blood, you need to be properly punished!”

Is this all my life amounts to? Nagi wondered, then suddenly realized something. *If I die, what happens to her?* He didn’t believe she would be all right after such a vicious blood offering.

“Run! Get away from here!” Nagi yelled.

“Run...?” The girl once more looked like she couldn’t understand what he was saying.

“Quit your yapping,” the guard said, grabbing Nagi by the collar and lifting him off the ground.

He chunked Nagi toward a large tree in the courtyard. Intense pain shot through Nagi’s back. As his body bent around the tree, he spotted a dim light. It came from his knife, which had fallen to the ground just a short distance away. It was the one and only weapon capable of defeating his enemy. The guard hadn’t noticed it yet, but it was still too far away. Nagi wouldn’t be able to pick it up in time with his wounded body.

“Shall I start by crushing that noisy throat of yours?” The guard moved in to torture Nagi some more.

“Don’t!” the girl cried as she began running toward them.

She was completely ignoring the tubes in her arms. After a moment of resistance, the needles at the end of the tubes were plucked out, scattering red

blood into the air. She threw herself between the guard and Nagi to block his path, but the guard frivolously thrust her aside, sending her down to the ground next to Nagi.

“Shit, I’ve really done it now. Well, guess I’ve got to seal that mouth of yours, too.”

Nobody noticed.

Not Nagi, still hazy from the pain.

Not the guard, who was trying to figure out how to hide the fact that he’d unintentionally hit the girl.

Not even the girl herself.

When she had fallen, a single drop of the blood coming out of her arm had stuck to the guard’s body.

“Hey,” the girl whispered to Nagi. “Is it really okay for me to run?”

He thought it was an odd question. There was nothing else to do *but* run. Defeat the enemy before him and run away.

“Of course it is. Let’s run away together,” he answered.

All for the sake of living.

Nagi unconsciously gripped the girl’s hand. He was surprised by the soft sensation against his palm. He had never felt anything like it in his life. That fleeting feeling caused him to reflexively entwine his fingers with hers.



“Run away... together?”

The moment their bloodstained fingers were linked, Nagi felt like he heard the sound of two hearts beating—something he shouldn’t have been able to hear.

Their hearts were beating in harmony. In rhythm to the pulse, the girl’s eyes turned a deeper and deeper red. A crimson mark manifested on the back of her hand, taking the shape of some sort of crest.

Suddenly, the guard’s shriek echoed all around them, and he immediately collapsed to the ground. Nagi had no idea why it had happened, but his body instantly reacted to the opportunity he’d been given. He jumped up, grabbed his knife with his left hand, and launched himself at the fallen guard’s body all in one fell motion.

The knife plunged right into the guard’s heart. Having been dealt an unhealable wound to his most vital organ, the guard belted out another animalistic scream and perished.

It was an instant death.

Nagi had killed him.

He had killed someone.

Not just anyone—he had killed a noble.

A voice brought his dazed consciousness back to reality.

“Are you all right?”

It was the girl.

Nagi’s entire body felt like it was burning with pain. Several of his bones might’ve been broken. Nevertheless, Nagi nodded. He was alive, so everything was fine.

He took another look at her. Her beautiful eyes were once more a faint red, and her pale hand no longer had a mark on it.

What exactly was that?

It was as if he had seen a hallucination from the pain. Moreover, why had the

guard collapsed? Nagi was about to ask the girl if she had any clue what happened, then realized he didn't even know her name.

"Um, you are?" he asked.

"Saya."

"I'm Nagi. Are you okay?"

"Okay?" she echoed.

"Erm... Did they do anything to you?"

The girl didn't look humiliated, but it wouldn't have been strange if something nefarious had been done to her considering she'd been held captive.

"No, no one did anything to me. Not ever."

For some reason, Saya looked far off into the distance. Unable to understand the meaning behind it, Nagi felt a bit troubled. He instinctively averted his gaze and took a look around.

Saya apparently interpreted this gesture as wariness. "This man was the only guard tonight. There's nobody else here."

Was such a thing possible? This man had nearly killed him, but he hadn't been skilled by any definition of the word. Regardless of the circumstances Keele had spoken of, was it really possible for such a man to be the only guard left to protect a treasure? This series of doubts racing through Nagi's mind was abruptly wiped away by a single word: treasure.

"Where's the treasure?" he asked.

Saya daintily cocked her head to the side. "Treasure...? This isn't that sort of place. There's nothing of worth here."

Her red eyes looked truly dispirited.

"You're kidding!"

All of Keele's information had been accurate, but the single most important part was apparently wrong. Nagi looked around in a panic. The courtyard beneath the glass ceiling was quite literally a garden. It was filled with well-trimmed vegetation, but that was it. There was nothing valuable worth taking.

“Did you come all the way out here looking for such a thing? Just for treasure?”

“Not just for treasure... If I had treasure or money, then I wouldn’t need to go through the blood offering. They say you can buy blood—lifespan—in the capital. It’s possible to live longer that way.”

“Do you want to live longer?”

“Doesn’t everyone? There’s no downside to living a long life.”

Saya shook her head. “Being granted a long life without purpose only brings suffering. Only when one acquires hope does their life become their own.”

Nagi didn’t know what she was saying, but he somehow grasped the meaning behind her words. “You mean just living a long life is painful?”

That was a novel way of looking at it, from his perspective. Nagi had only ever thought that he didn’t have enough life. He tried imagining it for himself. Say he was given a longer lifespan. For example, eternal life, just like a noble. He couldn’t even fathom it.

“Someone once told me that even if one lives a long life, if there is no hope there, it doesn’t belong to oneself. Is that truly living?”

Saya’s words were becoming more and more unintelligible. But this time, Nagi managed to imagine it just a little. He had never once thought of his life up until now as his own. A commoner’s life was for the sake of nobles, after all.

“You have a point. I kind of feel like I get it. Just extending that kind of life is meaningless.”

Saya gazed at Nagi as she listened to him. Upon suddenly meeting her faint red eyes, Nagi’s heart leaped. He quickly averted his gaze.

“Oh well. Shall we get going?”

“Get going? Where to?”

“Well, I guess there’s nowhere to go but Strano. Back to my village, I mean. I didn’t manage to get anything here, though. Where are you from, Saya? I’ll take you there.”

Nagi was under the impression that Saya had been brought here from some village for the Blood Offering Festival. He had never heard of such a thing before, but it wasn't unbelievable. It was possible that the noble who owned the Garden had long had his eyes on this otherworldly beauty and used the blood offering as an excuse to bring her here. She had spoken of some strange things too, so perhaps she was a resident of the rumored capital.

"I don't know," Saya said with a dark expression.

Evidently, she had her own circumstances to consider. It was likely that the noble who supervised her village had promised to reduce the village's obligations for blood offerings in return for Saya's surrender. If so, she couldn't possibly go back.

"I see. In that case, you can come with me to my village."

Nagi was excluded from this year's blood offering. He would likely get yelled at for skipping out on the festival, but that was all it would amount to. Nagi was now a criminal who would normally be executed for laying his hands on a noble, but Saya was the only one who knew of this.

"Is it okay for me to go there?"

"People come to the village from elsewhere all the time. Like, brides and stuff."

"Brides?"

Saya looked at him with a blank stare, and Nagi realized he had just said something with unthinkable implications. His cheeks turned bright red. It was as though he'd just proposed to a girl he had just met.

"We can think up the details later. Anyway, let's get out of here."

Saya looked up at the hole in the ceiling that Nagi and the guard had created. She then returned her gaze to Nagi, asking the same question she had during the fight. "Is it okay for me to run away from here with you?"

Nagi answered without hesitation, assuming she was uncertain because she didn't want to impose on him and his village. "Obviously. It's your life. You can decide for yourself." With that, he held out his hand.

“I can do something like that?”

Nagi didn't pay attention to the tremble in her voice. He thought little of what he was saying, after all.

“Well, yeah. Come on, I'll protect you until we get somewhere safe. I promise.”

There was no deep meaning behind his words. Nagi's mind was completely focused on the warmth of Saya's hand as she grabbed his, causing his heart to throb.

Saya cast her eyes to the floor and slowly nodded. Her pale cheeks were kissed by a touch of pink.

Neither the girl, bewildered by this unknown emotion, nor the boy, who was instinctively charmed by her, had any idea of how many would die because of the blood bringing that slight tinge to her cheeks.

They didn't know how much blood would be shed because of the feelings born between them in this very moment.

2

After taking a brief look around the building, Nagi and Saya left the Garden behind. Just as she had said, there wasn't much of value within. The only objects worth anything were too bulky to carry out, like large furniture.

Nagi pointed out her white clothes stood out too much and were too thin to go through the forest, so Saya brought along a somewhat oversized ocher hooded overcoat. It had belonged to the guard and was quite valuable considering the noble family crest embroidered on its lining, but it was spoiled by all the blood on it. Saya didn't seem to mind the blood as she put it on.

The boots they had nicked off the guard's corpse were too big for her, but after packing them with cloth, she could walk in them without any problems. Nagi was worried whether the dainty-looking Saya could walk through the forest, but she kept up with him surprisingly well. On the contrary, Nagi was the one slowing them down because of his wounds. Having said that, they weren't so bad that he needed to stop.

The return journey was long, but after a few hours, they came out of the forest and onto the second ring road just as the sun was rising. Saya found it blindingly bright and tugged her hood over her eyes.

“I’ve only ever bathed under the sunlight through the glass.”

Ever, she had said. Perhaps Saya had been in that building longer than Nagi had imagined. But he didn’t have the time to dwell on it. The pain and fatigue he was feeling were horrible. He had lost too much blood. It was difficult for him to think of anything other than getting back and falling asleep.

“It’s just a little farther to the village, so hang in there,” he said.

Saya was far more energetic than he was, though. “So beautiful,” she said as she gazed at the scenery painted by the morning glow, regardless of how bright she found it.

Fields stretched out from the road where lush wheat swayed in the wind. Wheat grew quickly and could be harvested several times a year, so this type of crop was cultivated all over Agarthā.

It was a blessing bestowed upon them by the Intelligence. The land of Agarthā was surrounded by a circle of enormous mountains, but there was nothing beyond them. The land, the crops, all of this had been given to them by the Intelligence.

“It’s a plain old wheat field.”

“I’ve never seen one before. Or maybe I saw one long ago but have forgotten now.”

“Hmm. Oh, by the way, keep your hood on and don’t talk until we get to my house. There’ll be trouble if they find out you’re a girl.”

As Strano Village finally appeared on the horizon, Nagi focused as he threw Saya some vague instructions.

Now then, how to dodge the question about Saya? he thought to himself as they walked toward the village.

Suddenly, a voice called out to him. “Nagi! Where’ve you been?” It was Nerthe, a villager who was about the same age as Nagi. “I didn’t hear anything

about you skipping the festival to go hunting. You should've called me."

Hearing this, Nagi was relieved; his absence apparently hadn't become a serious matter.

"So, who's that?" Nerthe asked.

"Just someone I met while out hunting. Well, a lot happened."

Nagi's explanation wasn't really an explanation at all. Saya lightly bowed her head while still wearing her hood low over her eyes.

"Sorry about the festival. Was the chief pissed?"

"Not at all. He didn't have time for that. The village is going nuts over a ghost."

"A ghost?"

"Seems like Jozu saw a dead person walking around or something, so he's been making a fuss."

"Hmm, whose ghost?"

"Dunno. The chief went pale and took Jozu away when he heard it... Things turned weird, so the festival is done. This year was basically just the blood offering itself. It was super boring."

Nagi realized this had to do with Keele. Someone had seen him. There were those in the village who truly believed he was dead.

Nerthe then took a close look at Saya beneath her hood. "A girl?"

"Y-Yes," Saya blurted.

It was too late by the time Nagi noticed. Saya realized her own mistake immediately after. Nerthe began yelling upon hearing her feminine voice.

"Dammit! Really?! That's so unfair! *That's* what you meant by hunting?! You went to another village's festival to hook up with girls?!"

Nerthe's interpretation was somewhat unexpected, but Nagi decided to leave it at that. It was better than the truth: that he had killed a noble and brought the girl who was being held captive along with him.

“Sorry. Hey, keep it a secret, will you?”

“Only if you introduce me to another girl. That’s my condition.”

“Fine.”

So he said, but Nagi didn’t have anyone to introduce him to.

“Deal. Honestly, I’m finding it pretty hard to forgive you, but get home and start flirting already. Gah! What a pain!”

Setting aside Nerthe, who started mumbling, “Why only you?” to himself with downcast eyes, Nagi turned to Saya.

“Let’s leave this guy be.”

Saya silently nodded back. She was apparently reflecting on her earlier mistake.

By the time they arrived at the entrance of Strano Village, the sun was high up in the sky and the villagers were already up and about. Nagi had wanted to sneak back in during the night if possible, but it was way too late for that.

The person he least wanted to see right now was standing before him. It was the village chief, Badrino. He was the oldest person in the village at twenty-five. His skin was like the bark of a dead tree, covered in deep wrinkles. His voice was hoarse and his eyes were hazy. He had aged considerably. Having said that, his mind was still sound, and he commanded the respect of the entire village.

“What’s this about you missing the festival? Even if you’re not responsible for the blood offering this year, you should still be present.”

“No, I... Erm...”

“Besides, who’s this you’ve brought back with you?”

Nagi needed to think of an excuse for not participating in the village festival and for bringing Saya along. He couldn’t figure out an answer to either of these problems himself, so he decided to use Nerthe’s misunderstanding.

“I went to another festival and met her there. I mean, it’s about time I start thinking about this kind of stuff, right?”

Currently, there were a few more young men in the village than women. It was guaranteed some would be left without partners, which was a bit of an annoyance for Badrino. Naturally, Nagi was one of them. He had realized a while ago that the girls of the village avoided him for some reason. It had all started when Keele vanished.

“Is that so? Where’d she come from, though?”

Nagi mentioned the name of a village that wasn’t unnaturally far away. It wasn’t at a distance which he could visit frequently, but it was still within the range of a day trip. It would eventually become apparent that a girl named Saya had never existed there, but it would be enough to fool the chief for now. Saya kept up her silence all the while.

“You went all the way there? I’ve about had it with you. You brought her from that far away, too?”

“That’s how it is, yep. Look, we’re pretty tired. Can I go now?”

“If she’s here as your wife, then you have to register her.”

That word had Saya wide-eyed and Nagi in a panic.

“Hang on! Don’t be hasty! We’re not like *that*!”

“I see. That honestly saves me some trouble.”

Badrino looked dead serious. Apparently, his professional duties had already filled his head to the brim. In short, he had to manage how many villagers there were, keep them alive, and distribute who took part in the blood offerings.

“By the way, there’s something I want to ask you. It might sound a little strange. It’s about your brother.”

Nagi was glad he’d met Nerthe earlier. He’d known that the chief would ask him about this, so he managed to keep his composure. In a cold voice, he said, “My brother is dead.”

This was Nagi’s normal response when suddenly asked about Keele. He was the completely common little brother of a man who had vanished despite his promising talent.

“Dead... You’re right. Sorry for bringing it up.”

Faced with Nagi's quiet irritation, he couldn't possibly say the ghost of his brother had appeared. This was just an act, but the chief didn't seem to sense anything out of place in Nagi's behavior. There was no way he would. Nagi's icy feelings toward Keele were the real thing. In any case, judging from Badrino's tone, he probably knew Keele was actually alive.

"That man we just met, is he in poor health?" Saya asked after they had entered Nagi's house and shut the door.

Nagi tossed his bag aside and took off his bow and quiver as he said, "No, I don't think so. Well, he's pretty up there. It's rare for someone to be that energetic over twenty-five."

"Twenty-five?" she echoed, dumbfounded.

"Surprised? He looks younger than that, right? The chief's business apparently made a killing when he was younger. He managed to escape the blood offerings multiple times using that money."

Badrino didn't speak of it much, but Nagi remembered this clearly. He'd been floored when he'd first heard of it, thinking that maybe one day he could extend his own lifespan in the same way. That feeling still smoldered within him, and it was what Keele had used to get Nagi to act so recklessly this time around.

Saya sank into a gloomy silence, but Nagi didn't know what had her making such a grave expression. He decided to brush it off as perfectly reasonable. Saya had practically been sold by her hometown as a sacrifice and made to go through that harsh blood offering before getting narrowly saved from it.

Nagi himself had fought until he was in tatters and killed someone for the first time. His fatigue was reaching its limits.

"You can use that bed over there. Sorry it's a little dirty," he said as he spread out an old blanket on the floor.

"I'll be fine with that," she replied, pointing at the blanket, but Nagi would hear none of it.

"Don't worry, just take the bed."

Nagi was a little curious as to what kind of expression she would make if he suggested getting in the bed together. On any other day, that would have been a very attractive proposition for a boy of Nagi's age. Nagi had never known someone so beautiful existed in this world until now, and that person was in his bed. It was only natural that his mind would entertain such idle thoughts.

Saya had looked dazzled when the word "wife" had been mentioned earlier. Would such a thing be possible? If Saya had been driven out of her hometown, then wasn't it possible for her to live here together with Nagi?

Just imagining it sent a sweet sensation through Nagi's heart. But unfortunately, Nagi was in far too much pain and far too tired. He wanted to lie down on top of the old rag immediately. Getting some rest was far more attractive an idea to him than any strange desires.

"Good night."

And as he listened to his own voice, Nagi's consciousness rapidly drifted away.

Saya gazed at his defenseless sleeping face, at the boy who had broken through her glass birdcage and had fallen from the sky. The boy named Nagi looked terribly innocent like this. Saya couldn't believe he'd managed to accomplish something so outrageous.

In truth, he had brought her out of the Forbidden Garden—her prison. What exactly had happened there? Saya's captivity, which had been unchanged for hundreds of years, had suddenly come to an end. All because this boy had fallen through the ceiling and opened a hole in it.

Even though it had been the day of the Blood Offering Festival, it was strange for only a single guard to have been on site. They had always taken turns keeping her under surveillance, so at least two guards had needed to be present at all times. But now that she thought about it, there had only been one guard for the last few Blood Offering Festivals. Several decades ago, it had been two, and before that, there were three. Going even further back, there had been four guards. Evidently, the guards placed to keep an eye on her had grown fewer in number over time. Was such a thing possible? Had someone been preparing for years upon years to get Saya out of there? If so...

Saya once more looked at Nagi as he quietly slept. Had he been sent to her by that same person? The thought sent a slight pain through Saya's heart, though she didn't really understand why.

But Nagi hadn't known that Saya was in the Garden. He'd said that he had gone there searching for treasure. What exactly *was* this treasure? Saya knew every nook and cranny of that building. There was no such thing.

It was all a mystery to her. Why had that guard suddenly collapsed? Certainly, it had been Saya's doing, but how? At that time, she had felt something unusual: heat overflowing from within her body. It felt like something had been born from this heat.

It's Nagi. When I touched Nagi, I... I wonder what happened exactly? The feeling had vanished in an instant, but she knew it was something important.

There was so much she didn't know. What was with that man, the village chief called Badrino? His face was covered in wrinkles, and his eyes were clouded white. Was he not afflicted with some sort of disease? And twenty-five years old at that... It had been Saya's first time meeting someone so young.

Incidentally, how old was Nagi? No matter where her mind wandered, it always drifted back to the boy sleeping before her eyes.

She couldn't do anything but gaze at his face.

"You can run away," he had said.

"Come with me."

"I'll protect you."

Saya looked at her right palm. She felt like the warmth from Nagi's hard and rugged hand was still there. Something within her had changed upon feeling the sensation she had never known before. She didn't know what it was, but there was one thing she was certain of.

I want to be with this boy.

How much time had passed since he fell asleep? Nagi was woken up by the sound of banging on the sliding door to his house.

“Nagi! Hey, Nagi! Get up! It’s a noble! A knight is here!”

It was Nerthe’s voice. His words tore Nagi from his sleep in an instant. Nagi leaped up in a panic and opened the door, causing sunlight to pour into the room. He had apparently slept until just past noon.

“What’s going on?”

“I dunno. A knight suddenly showed up and started talking to the chief. You can’t just stay in your house with a noble here, right?!”

An unannounced visit by a noble didn’t even happen once a year. When one did happen to stop by, it was customary for the villagers to greet the visitor in the square.

“Thanks, you saved me.”

“Hurry up. The chief’s gonna gather everyone soon.”

With that, Nerthe ran off. Nagi closed the door in a hurry.

A knight? The day after the Blood Offering Festival?

It was abnormal. Nobles were always busy around this time, which was why they left the village chiefs in charge of carrying out the rituals and bringing the siphoned blood to the royal palace. Nagi had a clue as to what had brought about this abnormal situation—it was him. There was no mistaking it. The knight had come to find Nagi, a major criminal who had killed a noble.

“What’s the matter?” Saya asked as she got up.

“It seems a noble is here.”

“A noble?” Saya cocked her head to one side as though she didn’t even know what a “noble” was.

But now wasn’t the time to address it.

“We have to get out of here. They might already know.”

Saya seemed to understand; her expression hardened.

“For now, put that on,” Nagi said, opening the door just a crack to take a peek outside. There was nobody around. “Now’s our only chance to run. Let’s hurry up and get out of here.”

Nagi grabbed his bag as Saya put on her overcoat. Fortunately, he hadn’t unpacked, so everything he needed was already inside. He picked up his bow and quiver, then quietly opened the door. Saya timidly took Nagi’s hand. He gave her hand a firm squeeze as if to put her mind at ease. Despite their grave situation, his heart leaped.

They left the house and circled around it. No one was there to witness their departure. Nagi’s backyard led directly into the woods. It wasn’t as dense as the forest where the Forbidden Garden was, but there were enough trees to obstruct the view. An outsider like a noble would have an even harder time noticing them. Nagi’s only option was to get through these woods and run away from Strano Village without being spotted.

He’d managed to make it through the denser forest, so traversing this one would be nothing. Nagi and Saya quickly ran through the trees. Even as the village vanished from sight, the two of them did not slow their pace.

What was he going to do afterward, though? Nagi drove that thought to the back of his mind. Things would work out one way or another. It was possible he could return to the village once things had calmed down, but first he had to get away from here.

Suddenly, a voice called out, “You two, stop!”

Still running, Nagi turned to look behind them. In the distance, he could see someone in a military uniform. This was likely the knight in question; they had already been found.

“If you do not stop, I shall judge you guilty of treason!” the knight yelled in a dignified voice.

Nagi realized that the knight was a woman. Was she implying she would show mercy if he stopped? All commoners knew such nobles didn’t exist. Fortunately, Nagi was more familiar with running through outdoor paths than she was. There was no way a noble could catch up to him in a place like this.

However, this belief proved to be naïve.

“I’m telling you to stop! Don’t think you can get away!”

The moment she yelled, the knight leaped through the air with astonishing force. She flew up over twice the height of an average man and kicked off the thick branches. Her physical strength was unfathomable.

Nobles were so strong that commoners could never hurt them. In fact, no attack had worked on the guard of the Forbidden Garden aside from the sting of the Halahala. Nagi knew this as well. But what was this farce before his eyes?

At last, Nagi understood that nobles were genuine monsters. But there were still many things he *didn’t know*. He didn’t know that the nobles who normally came by Strano Village were not, in fact, soldiers. He didn’t know that the guard at the Garden had been an underling who’d drawn the short straw. He didn’t know that the knight before him in this very moment was an elite among the elite. He didn’t know she was a life-form on a completely different level, having honed her noble body for many long years, which already far surpassed those of humans to begin with.

The knight jumped off the branches with terrifying vigor, passing overhead and landing in front of Nagi and Saya. Her beautiful face was accentuated by glamorous blonde hair tied in a weave. Had he not seen it for himself, he would’ve never believed that a woman could just leap from trees like that.

“Don’t waste my time. There’s no need to run if you aren’t guilty of—” Her eyes opened wide as she looked at Saya, whose hood had come down while she was running. The knight’s gaze was fixed on the silver hair which was now out in the open.

“Silver hair... Red eyes... Lady Saya, you’re safe!” Evidently, she knew Saya. Her attitude left Nagi rather confused.

“Lady” Saya?

“It is an honor to make your acquaintance. My name is Jubilia Erste lu Listeta the Third. I have been ordered to see to your safety, Lady Saya.” The knight, Jubilia, bowed reverently before continuing. “I didn’t think you’d escape to this manner of village. Judging from how your guard was killed, I was under the

assumption the culprit was a noble. I thought it was the work of one discontent with the present regime, so I had my troops head to the residences of nobles in every region.”

It seemed she still didn’t know Nagi was the actual culprit.

“What exactly happened? It seems you got away on your own, but what happened to the killer?”

Saya maintained her silence.

“Oh, pardon me. You can inform me of the details at a later date. For now, I shall see you safely to the royal palace.”

“I’m not going with you,” Saya told her bluntly.

“Uh... What?”

“I’m running away. I’m going with Nagi.” Saya suddenly grabbed Nagi’s left hand.

“Nagi? Do you mean this commoner boy?”

Jubilia shifted her focus to Nagi for the very first time. A commoner was completely worthless to a noble, but she didn’t treat Saya that way at all. Nagi could no longer suppress his suspicions, which had been taking shape within him ever since he’d heard Jubilia speak. Was Saya a noble? He couldn’t believe it. He didn’t want to believe it. But that was the only conclusion he could come to after listening to their conversation.

“Who is he?” Jubilia asked.

“Nagi saved me.”

“What?”

“He freed me. I won’t go back there ever again.”

Jubilia knit her brows. The air about her changed as she looked at Nagi. She now gave off the same impression as the forest’s many carnivores.

“What do you mean? This plebeian freed you?”

Nagi somehow overcame his fear and returned Jubilia’s glare.

“Do you mean to say you’re the one who killed that guard? That can’t be.” she asked him.

Nagi wasn’t stupid enough to say yes, but Jubilia could infer the answer from the atmosphere around them.

“I don’t believe it.”

Nagi couldn’t even believe it himself. Halahala was just that outlandish. Jubilia, however, was an outstanding knight. She sternly admonished those who would make light of an enemy by stubbornly adhering to what they believed was possible. Therefore, she recognized Nagi as her enemy.

Jubilia smoothly drew the slender sword at her waist. Her bloodlust sent a shiver down Nagi’s spine.

“Step away from Lady Saya. Now.”

In that moment. Saya tightened her grip on Nagi’s hand. The warmth he felt from her made him remember.

That’s right. I promised to protect Saya until we got somewhere safe. For now, he could leave the matter of her being a noble for later.

“I refuse.”

Nagi squeezed out those words as he drew the knife at his waist with his free hand. It was wounded, but he had recovered enough to at least use a knife. The poison that had coated the blade had long since dried up, though. Even Nagi thought this was rather foolish of him. He was bluffing. Not only that, he was bluffing to a noble.

“Then I shan’t show mercy.”

It happened in an instant. Jubilia was still a few paces away, but to Nagi, it looked like she suddenly appeared right before his eyes. She charged in at once with the overwhelming strength she had put on display earlier. Nagi brought his knife forward on reflex, which clashed with Jubilia’s sword and let out a shrill ring.

“Hmm, so you stopped it.”

Nagi swung his hand, still stinging with numbness. At this range, a knife was

faster, but Jubilia frivolously dodged his attack and jumped back. Her movements made it seem as though the natural laws binding her body differed from his.

“I see. Rather impressive for a commoner. Compared to the norm of trembling and freezing up in fear, that is.”

Jubilia approached with a leisurely slash, which Nagi barely managed to evade. It was just as she said; Nagi had only just realized it himself. The man he’d defeated at the Garden had been mere small-fry. *This* was a noble. *This* was a vampire.

His instincts were screaming at him, telling him this knight was an apex predator. Her piercing glare was enough to urge Nagi to drop everything and run away. The only thing stopping him from doing so was his petty pride and his promise to protect Saya.

He could tell that despite saying she would show no mercy, Jubilia wasn’t serious at all. She was chipping away at Nagi’s fighting spirit without actually hurting him. This was likely out of consideration for Saya. Even so, it took everything he had to dodge her attacks. He was rapidly being driven into a corner.

Just when he thought all was lost, Saya challenged Jubilia. She had a branch gripped in her hands. It was nothing more than a branch, but Jubilia was forced to dodge and momentarily stop her onslaught.

“Lady Saya, you know such attacks are meaningless against me. You couldn’t possibly believe otherwise.”

Jubilia was perplexed. Saya said nothing and simply glared at her.

“I don’t understand,” Jubilia muttered as she looked back at Nagi. “Nagi, was it? How did you defeat the guard?”

It had been thanks to the Halahala, but he had no reason to tell her this. He still had some left in the bag he was carrying. So long as he had that...

“I did it. I defeated the guard,” Saya interjected, brandishing the branch.

“That’s a lie. If so, you wouldn’t be holding that thing in your hands right

now.”

Nagi recalled that at the time, Saya really had done something. However, there was no way to tell what that *something* had been.

“No, it’s true. I don’t remember how, but I did it. I’m sure of it. So, I might be able to defeat you after all, even with something like this.”

“That would be impossible. Considering you believe something so ludicrous, it seems you have yet to awaken.”

There was too much about this conversation Nagi didn’t understand. All he knew was that the power Saya had used back then wouldn’t be of use here. More importantly, Jubilia’s attention had been drawn away from him. Nagi rummaged through his bag with one hand and removed the lid from the bottle of Halahala. Gripping the bottle tightly to keep it hidden, he carefully slipped it out of his bag.

“In any case, I must report this matter to Lord Lernaean. You need to come with me to the royal palace.”

“I’m not going anywhere!” Saya yelled vehemently.

Jubilia’s eyes widened; her momentary surprise presented Nagi with a brief window of opportunity. He sprang forth with his knife at the ready. With an angry cry, he moved into a flashy strike that seemed like it would never reach her. Jubilia easily dealt with it.

“Too soft.”

Regardless, Nagi didn’t give up. He swung his knife to and fro with small, sweeping motions, and Jubilia lightly hopped back. In that instant, Nagi threw the bottle in his left hand. The knight was unable to react in time, and the bottle struck her. Poison spilled out and stained her clothes.

“And what exactly is this supposed to accomplish?”

The poison had no effect. Nagi was taken aback. This was impossible. Halahala was supposed to be highly effective on nobles.

Crap. How do I get out of here now?

“This isn’t the time to be playing around,” Jubilia said, shaking her head. “Lady

Saya, you'll be coming with me."

"No," Saya replied.

"Please do not oppose me. Your wounds will heal even if I cut you with this blade. Thus, the option of cutting off your limbs and dragging you along remains open." Letting these terrifying words hang in the air, Jubilia turned to Nagi. "If Lady Saya was the one to defeat the guard in the Garden, that makes you nothing more than a commoner. You have no value. If you say you kidnapped Lady Saya, then the death penalty awaits you. As such, I can execute you right here. Your death will be much easier that way."

"Stop it!" Saya cried.

"If you come along with me obediently, I will make it so this boy was never here to begin with. You escaped on your own. Without anybody's help."

Both Nagi and Saya instantly understood what she was getting at. If Saya obeyed her, she would show Nagi clemency. Saya looked clearly shaken by this.

"I..."

"Whatever you choose makes no difference to me. Either way, you will be coming with me to the royal palace."

"That's not gonna fly," a voice said as a shadow suddenly fell from the trees.

The shadow swung a large sword at Jubilia. She managed to block the attack with her slender blade on the spur of the moment.

"Who goes there?!"

The interloper had long hair and thin cheeks. His gaze was like a blade sharpened to its limits.

"I don't got a reason to tell you... But you sure are a beauty, huh? I'll tell you if you tell me your name," Nagi's older brother, Keele, said as he sneered at Jubilia.

"Don't mess with me!"

"Ain't you supposed to declare your names at times like these? Come on. It's part of that whole honor code bullshit you nobles like to wax on about, yeah?"

Jubilia was enraged by Keele's teasing as she roared back at him. "I am Jubilia Erste lu Listeta!"

"Hah. You really told me. Well, I'm Keele."

"A commoner," she huffed. "If you are here to obstruct me, then I shall eliminate you."

"I can't let that happen." Keele put his weight into his front leg, then aimed his sword over his left shoulder. "Let's get it on!"

With that, he charged at Jubilia.

"You couldn't possibly land such a wide swing!"

"You'd think so, yeah?"

In an instant, Keele's sword suddenly changed directions and chased after the bewildered Jubilia as she dodged.

"What?!"

Unable to get away from the blow completely, the sword grazed her shoulder.

"Augh!"

Jubilia's face was steeped in anguish.

"Sorry. I didn't learn no fancy swordsmanship like some noble brat. I've got some pretty nasty habits. But man, you're good. Didn't think you'd dodge it. That's a knight for you."

Jubilia held down the wound on her shoulder as she groaned. Her voice couldn't hide her agitation. "What... What is going on?"

"Hurts, don't it? A wound that doesn't heal, that is."

"You're saying that's a blood caliber? Impossible. There's no way a commoner could use one!"

"Of course not. This here's Halahala. But that's not the important thing here. You nobles—you fucking vampires—can be killed by this."

"Don't you dare use that word!"

Keele's provocation, using what nobles considered to be the worst slur, was

quite effective. Jubilia was now enraged. Keele took this chance to dart toward her, catching her off guard and delaying her reaction. She just barely managed to evade his attack.

“Looks like my idiot little brother misunderstood how this stuff works. This here saps a noble’s ability to regenerate. There’s no point in smearin’ it on somebody.”

Realization washed over Jubilia. “That liquid did this?!”

Keele was strong. In his current state, he couldn’t even be compared to the Keele who had lived in the village. His sword skills looked rough at a glance, but that was a lure to skillfully guide his opponent into a trap. Jubilia was a first-class warrior in terms of technique, but having only experienced proper training, she was a poor match for Keele. Thus, he continued to trifle with her.

Regardless, Keele lacked the means to deal a decisive blow. The difference between their physical abilities was far too great. No matter how much stronger Keele had gotten, it would be impossible for him to duplicate such feats of strength as leaping to and from treetops as she had done earlier. The only ones capable of doing so were nobles like Jubilia, and even then, only the best among those chosen as knights.

Despite being put on the defensive, Jubilia used her astounding jumping ability to maintain some distance between them. Keele had no way of attacking her, so it was a stalemate. At least, it would’ve been, if only the two of them were involved in this fight.

“Nagi! Shoot the wet spots!” Keele shouted.

Nagi quickly readied his bow and loosed an arrow. His fast and efficient movements were those of a skilled hunter. Jubilia dodged the arrow, as she had no other choice.

He was aiming for the areas dampened with Halahala. According to Keele, the poison stole a noble’s regenerative abilities. So, what would happen if an arrow pierced through a spot covered in the stuff? The arrowhead would surely pierce her body, poison and all. Unable to heal, the resulting wound could prove fatal.

Jubilia now understood why Keele had gone out of his way to tell her how it

worked; it was so that he could make use of the opening born when she was forced to dodge Nagi's arrows. She narrowly avoided Keele's slash, and in the next instant, another arrow came flying in at her.

With the scales now tipped in her enemies' favor, Jubilia's demeanor changed. For some reason, she sheathed her sword, but the nearly tangible bloodlust radiating from her only grew. Upon seeing this, Keele grew giddy.

"Oh man, you're gonna use it? I ain't no noble."

"You know what I'm about to do?"

"Not my first time fighting a vampire."

"It can't be... Are you a noble-killer? A member of Cobalt?!"

"So what if I am?"

Jubilia hesitated for a moment, then said, "Sorry, but I'll be postponing this bout."

The knight then turned and escaped deep into the forest. She was so fast that by the time Nagi noticed, she was already gone.

"Tch. You'd rather go pass on this intel, huh?" Keele spat as he sheathed his sword. "That's some skill she's got. Without a blood caliber, too. Things would've been bad for us if even one little thing had gone wrong." In contrast to the gravity of his words, his lips twisted into a smile. "Next time, I'll fucking kill 'er."

Nagi was still in a daze. All he knew was that he had been saved.

"Thank you very much," Saya said to Keele.

"Hmm, what a cutie. So, you're Saya?"

"Yes."

"I'm Keele, this guy's older brother."

"You're brothers?"

"Oh, it's weird for nobles, ain't it? Siblings, that is."

At Keele's words, Nagi remembered their conversation with Jubilia earlier.

“Saya,” he said quietly, “are you a noble?”

Keele raised an eyebrow at this. “Ain’t it obvious? She look like a commoner to you?”

“I saved her because I thought she was.”

“Your eyes are rotten.”

Keele did have a point. The clothes Saya was wearing combined with the fact that she had been at the Garden clearly implied she was the daughter of nobility. So, why did Nagi think she was a commoner?

Right, if she’s a noble, then why was she hooked up to all those tubes?

“Do you hate nobles?” Saya asked him while he was trying to get his thoughts in order.

“Yeah,” Nagi replied automatically.

He regretted it immediately after, but Saya didn’t seem to pay it any mind. Her red eyes were serious.

“Why?” she pressed.

“Nobles... err, vampires steal from us commoners.”

“What do they steal?” Saya didn’t react to the slur.

“Life. They steal ours so they can live for ages in the lap of luxury while we die quickly without them.”

Saya looked appalled. “Is that so? Commoners die so that nobles can live a long time?” Her surprise appeared genuine, which left Nagi quite shocked himself.

“Are you kidding me? You didn’t know about all this even though you’re a noble?”

“I don’t know anything. I’ve always been in that place, after all. Hey, Nagi. I’m a noble... right?”

Her question left Nagi somewhat troubled. He hadn’t even realized this himself until just now.

"Aren't you? That knight was treating you with so much respect. It'd be unthinkable for anyone but a noble."

"I see. That means you hate me." Her voice was tinged with loneliness.

"That's not the case either," Nagi said quickly.

"Why?"

Why? Uh, why is that? I think it's because she's like a child. Perhaps that was actually the case. If she truly had been trapped within the Garden all this time and therefore knew nothing, then she was no different from an infant. When he thought of it that way, bringing up his grievances with nobles and making her worry seemed rather pathetic.

"I didn't know you were a noble. Even if you are, you're still you."

Saya broke out into a relieved smile. "Thank goodness. I don't really know much about nobles, but I wouldn't be able to bear it if you hated me."

Nagi's pulse quickened upon seeing her smile. His mind completely blanked out.

"Hey, let's get moving," Keele said, bringing Nagi back to reality. "It ain't safe here. You probably get this, but Strano's no good. You two're comin' with me."

"Where to?" Nagi asked.

"Oh come on, why d'you gotta ask? A safe place. I've come up with a safe route and everything, so relax."

Keele's mockery got on Nagi's nerves. His brother had always been like this. Just now, for instance, Nagi had been saved by him yet again. No matter what he did, he couldn't live up to Keele. Regardless, that attitude of his that screamed *"I'm definitely not wrong"* was intolerable.

"Tell me where we're going. Your intel on the Garden was wrong, you know?"

"Huh?"

"Most of it was right, but the all-important treasure wasn't there."

"Oh, that. I made that up. A little noble lady was there, so I figured there'd be at least one treasure. Ah well." Keele showed no remorse and remained calm.

“Well, maybe it wasn’t complete bullshit? I mean, look, you’ve got your treasure right there, don’tcha?”

Keele gestured with his chin.

“Me?” Saya asked.

“Those effin’ nobles are in a mad rush to get you back, so that makes you a treasure. There’s gotta be a way we can use that to our advantage.”

“Quit splitting hairs!” Nagi yelled.

“Don’t shout, man. We don’t know when the other ones’ll come after us.”

“You tell me about this safe place of yours right this instant!”

Keele sighed. “You’re the same spoiled brat as always, huh?”

Nagi flew into a rage. “A spoiled brat? I was almost killed because of you!”

He had only gone through so much peril because of Keele pressuring him to sneak into the Garden. Keele was being far too cold.

“I know. So what? You’re the one who decided to go, so hold yourself accountable. I’m surprised someone who spouts such naïve bullshit managed to get out of there alive. I thought you’d be nothing more than a decoy, but you really hit the jackpot.”

Nagi now knew that Keele had dared to send him to his near death on purpose.

A decoy? Don’t screw with me.

“Whatever, I’ll just tell you. You two are going to Cobalt.”

4

“Hey! Look, look! That thing is huge! What is it?”

“It’s a windmill.”

“What’s it for?”

“It turns wheat into flour.”

“Why turn it into flour?”

“Flour can be kneaded into bread.”

“Why can’t it be eaten as it is?”

“Huh? Good question. Maybe because it’s tastier that way?”

Saya seemed satisfied with his answer, so Nagi let out a sigh. He was getting a little worn out by the never-ending questions. Every time she spotted something “curious” like this, she would ask him about it. What followed was a storm of whys. No matter how thoroughly he responded, her questions kept coming. When he finally managed to sate her curiosity, she would spot something else and repeat the process. What’s more, everything in sight was a mystery to her.

The only relief he had was that he didn’t have to walk. Nagi and Saya were being shaken about by an old cogwagon Keele had arranged for them. Nagi’s thoughts drifted back to when they’d first boarded the vehicle. Once the three of them had gotten out of the forest, the cogwagon Keele had waiting for them appeared. His next words had baffled them.

“You two take this and head off to the capital. I already told the driver the way.”

“The capital? Isn’t that the nobles’ headquarters?! The royal palace is there too!”

“I bet you’ve never been. The capital is big. Nobody’s got a grasp of every nook and cranny, trust me. A forest’s the best place to hide a tree, so the best place to hide is somewhere with a whole lotta people.”

Keele had been composed at the time, but Nagi couldn’t even believe that Cobalt truly existed. He had only ever heard rumors. Cobalt was an organization which raised the standard of revolt against nobility. However, there was no way the nobles were so lax that they’d allow such an organization to exist. If the gossip were to be believed, those who merely spread *rumors* of Cobalt were immediately arrested and imprisoned. Regardless, it was impossible to shut the mouths of the public and stop the rumors themselves. That was how a rural hunter like Nagi had gotten wind of them.

Some of the rumors were even more unthinkable. For example, one claimed that Cobalt wasn't only rebelling against the nobles, but against the Sovereign himself. A commoner like Nagi had obviously never seen the Sovereign; it was rare enough for the nobles to meet him. To everyone who knew of him, the Sovereign was practically a phantasmic being.

The daily prayers offered up to the Intelligence, which had once existed in these lands, were carried out in the name of the Sovereign. He was the Intelligence's chosen representative of humanity. Thus, the commoners revered the Sovereign despite their hatred of nobility. To Nagi, he was a force of nature much like water or wind. The mere thought of rebelling against him was unfathomable, yet Cobalt was apparently doing just that. It was also difficult for Nagi to believe that Cobalt, whose very existence was dubious to begin with, had its base in the capital.

"I don't want to go to the royal palace," Saya had protested.

Keele had laughed scornfully at this. "Of course we're not going to the damn palace. Seems like you've never been to the capital. The palace is there in the center, but it's just a small part of the whole city. The rest is way bigger and chock-fulla people. We'll meet up and hide out there."

"We..."

Nagi's brother claimed to be a member of Cobalt. What exactly had happened to him after he vanished from the village? One part of Nagi wished to know, and another didn't. In any case, he hadn't had time to ask Keele any questions before they had parted ways.

"Nagi, you're making a weird face," Saya said, bringing Nagi's mind back into the cogwagon. "What're you thinking about?"

"Keele," Nagi replied honestly. For some reason, he was unable to hide anything from her. "I thought he was dead."

Even though he had really hated his brother, Nagi had done his best to make peace with his memories after Keele's disappearance. But now that he was alive, Nagi's heart was in disorder. Thinking back on it now, this was why Keele had been able to manipulate Nagi into taking on something as outrageous as stealing from the Garden.

“But he’s alive. I’m jealous.”

“Why?”

“I feel like I had a little brother. I don’t really remember him. He died a long, long time ago. I’ve been alone ever since then.”

“I heard it was normal for nobles not to have siblings.”

Nobles lived long lives and rarely had children. They required the Sovereign’s permission to do so. Thus, having more than one child in the family was uncommon. When he’d first learned of this, Nagi had been quite surprised there was someone even those haughty nobles had to obey.

“Commoners have it better because they’re not so lonely.”

“No way. We all die before we can accomplish anything in life.”

Nagi normally would’ve taken offense to Saya’s words, but he was gradually getting used to her eccentricities. Moreover, he was far too tired from all her queries to get heated about it.

“Is that because the nobles steal your lives away?”

Nagi suppressed the urge to comment on the fact that she didn’t know this basic truth. “We have a duty to offer them our blood. Blood is life. The more blood they steal, the shorter our lifespans. The nobles use that blood to make medicine, and they extend their own lives by drinking it.”

“Can’t you just stop offering them blood?”

“No, we can’t. Nobles are strong; disobeying them will just get us killed. It’s impossible to win against them.”

“But you won against a noble. Twice.”

“It’s because of the poison I got from Keele.”

Nagi pulled a bottle out of his bag. Keele had given him another one.

“So, as long as you have that, you don’t need to offer blood anymore?”

Their current reality wasn’t kind enough to permit such a thing. Keele had already scolded Nagi about wasting his last bottle; Halahala was invaluable, after all. The whole thing wasn’t meant to be used as a projectile even in the

worst of times. But what if it was possible to acquire a large amount? A chill ran down Nagi's spine just from imagining it.

A world without blood offerings.

The cogwagon came to a stop with a clatter. Before them, rows of citizens had their goods spread out over straw mats. It was one of many small marketplaces which dotted the sides of the road. Even in Strano Village, there were merchants who did business with passing travelers. The driver informed them that they would be taking a break here.

"Nagi, what is this place?"

"It's a rest area. There are several places like this along the main roads. Let's go buy some food."

Nagi's finances were doing fine. Keele had given him five bloodpence coins to cover travel expenses, which was quite the sum for Nagi. He couldn't shake the feeling he was dancing in the palm of Keele's hand, though.

The merchants were selling bread and smoked meat, so he went with that. There was some other junk being peddled alongside the food. It seemed like anything with even miniscule value was up for sale.

Nagi pulled out a bloodpence, which caused the woman selling the bread to make a troubled expression. "Do you have anything a little smaller? I don't have enough change."

"This is all I have."

"Hrm, then how about buying this necklace while you're at it? I'll give you a discount." She held up a stylish pendant. "Look, you put your lover's blood in here. That's how you swear your eternal love to each other. Seems it's quite a fad among nobles. This one's just a cheap little thing, though."

To the people of this world, the giving and taking of blood was quite common, so such an idea came naturally to them. Nagi felt that frankly, this sales pitch sounded like it was meant to trick children. The necklace was probably worthless.

Saya, on the other hand, seemed to be of a different opinion. She hummed

with interest, her eyes aglitter.

“My neighbor John bought it in the capital for his fiancée, but she ended up getting pregnant from another man while he was working away from home.” The merchant giggled.

“How pretty,” she murmured, staring at it with rapt attention.

Well, if she liked it so much, Nagi couldn't help but buy it for her. There was nothing else he wanted here, and it would've been troublesome if he couldn't buy bread. It also felt a bit thrilling to squander the money Keele had given him.

The two went back to the cogwagon to have their meal. The driver wasn't back yet.

“This is bread.”

“I at least know *that*,” Saya replied, puffing out her cheeks. But as she sat on the edge of the wagon and took a bite, she looked quite surprised. “It's so hard.”

“You think?”

Nagi chewed through the bread easily. There were far tougher breads out there that needed to be soaked in liquid before eating. This was actually quite fresh for bread, and it didn't smell weird either. It was a good treat to satiate his hunger.

“Here, lend me that.”

Saya looked to be having a tough time with her bread, so he took it from her and split it apart by force. The crust was particularly hard, but the inside was still soft.

“Thank you.”

Saya began eating the light-brown bread by nibbling off bits from the inside. She reminded Nagi of the squirrels he often saw in the forest. Saya was wearing a brown hood deep over her head, hiding her silver hair. Upon realizing she actually *did* look like a large squirrel, he snorted.

“What's so funny?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re lying. You’re definitely laughing.”

Seeing him stifle his laughter, Saya pouted once more. But that just made her look even more like a squirrel.

After finishing the bread, she moved on to nibbling the crust in small bites. Saya glared back at him when he stared, so Nagi focused on his own food. The smoked meat wasn’t bad either. It seemed to be venison. It was well salted, which his tired body was grateful for.

Once Saya was done eating, Nagi handed her the necklace.

“Thank you,” she said quietly. She lowered her head, put on the necklace, and let it dangle on her chest.

Nagi felt completely entranced by her actions and averted his gaze in a hurry.

5

The driver returned, and after he’d confirmed Nagi and Saya were there, the cogwagon got moving. Nagi gazed out of the shaking vehicle in a daze; he’d felt somewhat out of it for a while now. At some point, Saya drifted to sleep. Before he knew it, the cogwagon had turned off the main road and was approaching a narrow mountain path just about the size of a single vehicle.

Did they have to go down such a path to get to the capital? Nagi thought it over. The two of them were fugitives. It made sense to use a less traveled route to avoid prying eyes. Nagi could feel fear in the pit of his stomach. He had been taught as a child to never use such paths because bad things would inevitably pop up there.

Like ghosts, for example.

And also...

“Stop!”

It was as if reality was tracing Nagi’s thoughts. People poured out one after the other from the trees and stones on either side. They wore leather armor

and were armed with spears, axes, and hatchets. Their faces each had a spotted birthmark on them.

Bloodmarks.

The driver, as if reading Nagi's mind, shouted, "It's the Tainted!"

Nagi had a bad feeling about this. "Saya, wake up!" he yelled.

According to what Nagi had learned from the village elders, the Tainted weren't a peaceful bunch. They lived hidden within mountainous regions and attacked travelers. It was said that their homelands couldn't grow wheat and were inhabited by ferocious, wild beasts. That was why it was easiest for them to make a living by attacking people.

Saya jumped up at Nagi's voice. The Tainted warriors were quickly boarding the cogwagon. Nagi drew his knife from its sheath, but it was too late. Saya had a spear thrust before her.

"Drop your weapon."

Unexpectedly, it was a girl. She looked a little older than Nagi. Her chestnut hair was tied up behind her. She had a sweet and innocent face, but that impression vanished the moment he saw her big, black eyes. The light within them was far too strong, making her seem more beast than human.

There was something like a spotted, dark-red birthmark on her throat. The spots drew a complex pattern along the side of her neck all the way up to her ear. This was a bloodmark, proof she was one of the Tainted.

Her quick and sharp movements betrayed no hesitation. She was sure to mercilessly slit Saya's throat if Nagi moved. He shot a quick glance over to the driver, who also had a similar blade pointed at him.

"Don't move. You move, she dies," the Tainted girl said.

Nagi obediently dropped his knife. After tying them up, the Tainted took them and the cogwagon. The bag he had with the Halahala and money in it was also stolen.

They were brought to a settlement within the forest. It was larger than Nagi's village, but he didn't see it at all until they were pretty close. It was concealed

by the terrain. This was apparently a Tainted village. They likely hid here and attacked those who passed by, just as they had done to Nagi.

He despised them, deep down. Much like the rumors, they were a bunch of ruffians. What he hated most, however, was that they didn't fulfill the duty of blood offerings that caused commoners like Nagi to suffer so.

Although he couldn't see Saya's face very well because of her hood, she seemed calm. The three of them were forced to stand in a line in the village square with their hands tied behind their backs. They were surrounded by armed Tainted warriors. It didn't look like they'd be able to escape. There was a small figure in the center of the Tainted who Nagi guessed was the village chief.

His skin was covered in wrinkles and his hair was completely white. Nagi knew this was proof that he was nearing the end of his lifespan; that was what it meant to age. These people were called elders. This man looked to have aged far more than Nagi's chief, Badrino, showing how close he was to death.

The Tainted girl held her spear up threateningly at the driver. "Answer only what I ask. Why do you know of that road? Who are you people?" she asked.

"I can't say," the driver replied in a stiff voice.

"You don't tell me, you die. I'm not bluffing."

"I still can't say."

Nagi believed it was likely his loyalty to Cobalt which kept the driver from disclosing his secret.

"Then I'll send you to the next world," a Tainted man growled, stepping forward.

He was big enough that Nagi had to look up at him. His body was slender, yet buff. He was clearly a well-trained hunter.

Raising his enormous axe, the man lopped off the driver's head in one fell swoop. It fell to the ground with a thud, causing Saya to gasp.

They're insane. Both the Tainted and the driver. Why did they have to do such a thing?

"Right, I forgot to tell you. I'm Bandore, Garuga Village's number one warrior.

I'm sure you at least want to know the name of the man who killed you."

The man who called himself Bandore spoke to the tumbling head, then brought his axe down once more. Flecks of blood and gray matter spattered everywhere, including Nagi's body. The stench of gore washed over him.

Then, the girl pointed her spear at Nagi. "If you don't want to end up like that, then talk. Who are you people?"

There was no way Nagi had the same loyalty as the driver.

"Will you let us go if I tell you?"

"We'll release you if you're not our enemy. We don't want to take any lives unless we have to. The same goes for stealing, of course."

"Didn't you just kill someone?"

"We had no choice. This man called us a grave insult."

"What was that?"

"The Tainted... We're not tainted. We are the Crestfolk."

That simple utterance was all that had brought about the driver's brutal demise.

"I'm Nagi Strano."

"Strano? You're from Strano Village?" the girl asked, apparently familiar with the name of his village. "Why are you out here?"

Her high-handed manner irritated him.

Why do I have to put up with this kind of attitude from a bunch of damned Tainted?

"Before that. Now that I've named myself, isn't it proper for you to do the same? Or is that something you only tell people *after* you kill them?"

Nagi's suddenly provocative behavior fanned the girl's anger.

"I'm the one asking questions here!"

She swept at Nagi with the handle of her spear.

"Nagi!" Saya screamed.

“Tess, stop.”

“But, Chief, he—”

“Calm yourself. You cannot accomplish anything with a disturbed heart. This boy has not treated us with the same level of disrespect as the driver. Perhaps it was too soon to entrust this investigation to you,” the elder said in a calm voice. He turned to Nagi. “My name is Zamin. I serve as the chief for the Crestfolk of Garuga Village.”

He had a deep and gentle voice that seemed out of place here. Zamin and Tess. Nagi carved their names into his mind. His cheek was throbbing with pain. The taste of iron spread throughout his mouth. Nagi could feel himself getting more and more heated up.

“Nagi, was it? You must also calm down. We do not wish to thoughtlessly hurt anyone.”

Nagi looked down at the driver’s head. Zamin understood what he was thinking.

“I shall apologize for what Bandore has done. But that man was also at fault. Calling us that word is unforgivable. So, for what reason have you come here? Depending on the cause, we may well release you safely.”

Nagi was reluctant to talk to the Tainted, but that didn’t apply to Saya.

“Zamin, we have simply been running away.”

“From whom?”

Crap.

Saya answered Zamin before he could stop her. “From nobles.”

The fact that they were running away from nobles meant the Tainted could hold them captive and turn them in for a bounty. The Tainted Nagi knew of were the type to do anything for money. And just as he thought, Saya’s words had them astir.

“You two are being chased by nobles?” Zamin asked.

“That’s right.”

Something dawned on Nagi at that moment. It felt like the animosity the Tainted had toward them had abated a little.

“Why are you headed to the capital, then?”

“We have allies there. I can’t say anything else about them,” Nagi cut in.

He felt like Saya was guaranteed to mention Cobalt if he didn’t. That would be really bad. Besides, now that he had cooled down, he was thinking much more clearly. Perhaps there was a way for them to get out of this predicament. To that end, he couldn’t allow Saya to continue speaking with foolish honesty.

“Why are you being chased?” Zamin asked.

This was the question Nagi had been waiting for. Knowing his answer would be a turning point, he steeled himself for what was to come.

“I killed a noble.”

Immediately, the Tainted were in uproar.

“Nonsense! A noble?!”

“You can’t kill a vampire!”

“Cut the crap!”

Nagi was ready for Tess to hit him again, but this time she simply grabbed him by the collar. She glared at him head-on, staring into his soul with her deep, black eyes. A sweet smell gently wafted over him, reminding Nagi that Tess was a girl. She was more violent than the ones he was used to, though.

Waving these idle thoughts away, Nagi chose his next words carefully. He spoke slowly, making sure everyone could hear him. “I’m not lying. If you let us go, I’ll teach you how it can be done.”

The commotion grew louder. Zamin held out his hand to stop them, and silence fell over the square.

“Nagi, do you have proof that what you say is true?”

“The overcoat this girl is wearing belonged to a noble. It’s got a family crest embroidered in its lining. Is that proof enough?”

Nobles treated goods marked with their family crest with extreme care. They

would never hand them out to others. This was the best proof he had.

“How do we know it wasn’t just stolen?” Tess asked.

“It should be stained with a fair bit of his blood. Doesn’t that prove how big a wound he was dealt?”

“You could’ve just stained it with someone else’s blood, or that of an animal.”

“And why would I do that? I wasn’t expecting to be captured.”

“You... have a point there.” Tess unexpectedly cocked her head and accepted Nagi’s explanation. “Well, I guess we can take a look. Hey, undo her ropes.”

A Tainted man followed Tess’ orders and untied Saya’s ropes.

“You’d better behave. You do anything funny, and I’ll stab her. This spear can go right through a beast’s bones. A girl like her will die in a single thrust,” Tess said as she held out her weapon.

The tip of her spear had the dull shine of steel. Taking a closer look, the large axe Bandore and the rest of the weapons the Tainted carried were all made of the same metal. They were of far better quality than the weapons in Strano Village.

How did they get these?

Nagi had heard that the Tainted lived like beasts. As he pondered over these curious details, Saya calmly removed her overcoat, paying no heed to the blade pointed at her.

Her silver hair spilled out as she removed her hood. The Tainted men began murmuring. Nagi could even hear someone gulp. He suddenly cursed himself. The Tainted were known to kidnap women and use them as playthings. He shouldn’t have shown them Saya’s figure. Her beauty was likely to stir up lust in these savage men.

Unaware of Nagi’s inner turmoil, Tess accepted the overcoat with more than a little surprise and spread it open. There were indeed a noble family crest and bloodstains on the inside.

“Please inform us of how you accomplished this,” Zamin said.

“Take off these ropes first. I won’t struggle.”

“We cannot—very well. If you promise to remain obedient.”

“I promise. I wouldn’t have gotten caught in the first place if I were strong enough to fight off this many people.”

Zamin signaled a man over with his eyes and had Nagi’s rope undone.

“Do you have my bag? Return that to me, too.”

One of the men brought over the bag at his request. Nagi searched through it and took out the bottle of Halahala.

“This is Halahala. It’s a poison that takes away a noble’s regenerative abilities. A blade coated in this stuff can wound them.”

The Tainted gaped at the bottle in shock, their voices picking up once more.

“I would like you to yield that to us.”

“I can’t give you all of it. We’re being chased by nobles, after all; I’ll need some if worst comes to worst. But if you let us go, I’ll give you half. Do you have something to put it in?”

“Very well. In return, I would like you to promise that you will never disclose the location of our village to anyone.”

“I promise.”

Did he even have anyone to talk to about it? Nagi exchanged glances with Saya, who nodded back at him.

“Okay then,” Nagi said as he held out a hand to Tess.

It was common in Strano Village to seal a contract with a handshake. Nagi was actually negotiating with Zamin, but he was a little farther away.

“What’s this?” Tess asked, tilting her head to one side. It seemed she didn’t know about it.

“A handshake. We grip hands to seal our deal. Come on.”

“Uh, right.”

Nagi had forgotten that commoners avoided physical contact with the

Tainted. It was impossible for anyone to request a handshake from them. Tess timidly gripped Nagi's hand and he squeezed back tightly. The sense of relief he felt from escaping this dilemma made him inadvertently put too much strength into it.

"Ow."

"Oh, sorry."

"N-No... It's fine."

Tess looked down at their joined hands. Her cheeks were ever so slightly red. Zamin walked up next to her, his gaze fixed on Saya. There was something strange about that look in his eyes. Now that Nagi thought about it, Zamin had become strangely courteous partway through their conversation. When had it been, exactly?

Right, it was ever since he had seen Saya's face.

6

After being seen off by Tess and a group of villagers, Nagi and Saya returned to the mountain path where they had been attacked and went on their way. They had left the cogwagon back in Garuga Village, seeing as the driver was dead. According to Tess, the main road was a two-hour walk away. After that, it was a straight shot to the capital. This was much closer than Nagi had expected; it would take *days* to reach the capital from Strano Village, according to the chief. The dangerous mountain path was apparently quite the shortcut.

Some time after they reached the main road, the sun began to set. Fortunately, the weather was good, but Nagi and Saya decided to sleep against the trunk of a tree just in case it rained. Nagi, who didn't have the leisure to worry about who would keep watch, dozed off in no time at all. His fatigue had long since reached its limits, and he was swiftly conquered by his drowsiness.

The following morning, as he opened his eyes to the rising sun, he found Saya's defenseless, sleeping face in front of him. The sight of her long eyelashes made his chest tighten. They were the same silvery shade as her hair and shone under the light of dawn like dandelion puffs.

Nagi wanted to keep gazing at her forever, but he was brought back to his senses by a sudden gust of wind. He was then struck with terror at how careless they were being and shook Saya awake in a panic.

The heat passing into his hand, the soft feeling of her shoulder, the sweet scent wafting his way... Like a solitary flower growing in a field, she seemed completely out of place on this roadside. And yet, he felt like he wanted her to freely bloom here.

Saya let out a soft groan, then opened her eyes. "Morning," she said, smiling like a pampered child.

"Come on, we should get moving."

Willing away his earlier thoughts, Nagi hurriedly prepared to leave. He had to reach his destination soon and make her feel at ease. Sleeping outdoors wasn't easy on Nagi, so it was probably worse for Saya.

They continued down the road, taking breaks at rest areas along the way. By the time the sun began to set, the scenery around them had changed. They could see more buildings now.

"Is this the capital?" Nagi wondered aloud.

Saya cocked her head; surely *she* had no idea. He found it strange how, despite being a noble, she had apparently never been to the capital. If this was the right place, then he figured it probably wasn't that big a deal.

However, Nagi was sorely mistaken.

The buildings grew increasingly clustered together the closer they drew to the city. Eventually, there was no space between them at all. Along every single street and alley, houses were crammed tightly against one another.

Eventually, they laid their eyes upon an astonishing sight. Far beyond all the crowded streets of the capital stood an enormous structure which loomed above all else. This was the royal palace, where the Sovereign resided.

"It's my first time seeing so many people," Saya commented.

She was as surprised as Nagi was. He finally understood the meaning behind what Keele had said; it would be pretty much impossible to find a single person

within this overflowing sea. They could definitely hide here. His chest began to swell with hope.

When he stopped to buy some drinking water, Nagi asked about the place Keele had mentioned—a bar somewhere in the capital. Fortunately, they knew at least a little bit about it; with their driver dead, they would've been at a complete loss otherwise.

The water vendor informed Nagi that it was somewhere near the city outskirts, although the bar itself was a bit of a mystery. Nagi figured he could just ask someone else once they got closer. Eventually, he and Saya ended up in a jumbled-up district full of stone buildings.

"This looks like the place," Saya said as she pointed at one signboard in particular.

With that, Nagi realized that Saya could read. He timidly opened the door, revealing a bar inside, just as they had expected. Still, he had never been to such a place before. He simply knew they existed within the capital, and it matched the description he'd been given. There was a heavy-looking wooden counter lined with liquor bottles and cups. Seated there were two people: one he recognized and one he didn't.

"Well, aren't you late? Where's the cogwagon?" Keele asked.

"We were attacked on the mountain trail. The driver was killed. We left the cogwagon behind."

Keele raised an eyebrow. "I didn't think those guys were the type to go *that* far. Did he piss them off?"

"He called them Tainted."

"Aah. Yep, that'll get you killed." Keele let out a sigh as if he were making fun of the driver.

Nagi swallowed his urge to say "Then you should've told us about it beforehand." This was just the kind of person his brother was.

"Hmm, so this is your little brother?" said the unfamiliar man at Keele's side.

He looked to be around the same age as Keele, or perhaps a little younger. He

had the general air of a kindhearted young man, but his expression was quite bitter.

“That’s right. But rejoice, he’s a commoner,” Keele replied sarcastically.

“Hmph.”

The man seemed irritated by this. They didn’t seem to be on friendly terms.

“You two, this way. Senak, keep an eye on the front.”

“Fine.” The man called Senak sounded dissatisfied, but he still agreed.

Nagi and Saya followed Keele through a door at the back of the bar, which led to a sort of storeroom. It was far more spacious than the bar out front, which came as a surprise to Nagi. There was a large quantity of boxes and bags here. They didn’t look like liquor or food to Nagi, but he didn’t know what was actually in them.

A man was waiting inside for them. “Nice to meet you. I’m Crow,” he said in a gentle voice.

There was something unfamiliar on his face. Nagi wondered if they were glasses. He had heard of them before, but he had never seen them in Strano village. It was said that one’s eyes could go bad from reading too much, and these were used to correct that. Strano Village had no books, so the villagers never needed to worry about it. Badrino was just about the only person who could read in Strano to begin with.

Crow wore a cordial smile, but there was a fierce light in his eyes.

“Nagi Strano.”

“I’m Saya.”

“I’ve heard all about you. Welcome to Cobalt.”

“This guy’s the head honcho here,” Keele said.

Nagi was shocked. It meant Crow was the one leading the rebellion against the nobles.

“Could you please not make it sound like we’re a bunch of thugs?” Crow murmured as he scratched his head. He really didn’t look like one.

“Thank you very much for saving us.” Saya politely bowed her head.

Seeing this, Nagi followed suit in a fluster. He didn’t know what was going on, but he was definitely indebted to these people. Thanks to them, he and Saya had managed to escape from the nobles and get this far.

“There’s no need to thank me. We did it with an ulterior motive in mind, after all.”

“What is it?”

“We’ll answer all of your questions later. Shall we start by getting the whole situation in order? I’m sure you two are quite confused.”

This was the first time Nagi had met someone who spoke like this. He was different from a noble, but different from the villagers. He wasn’t as overbearing as the nobility, but there was something about him that made it impossible to object.

“We are Cobalt, an organization that works to oppose the tyranny of nobles. You’ve heard the rumors, I assume?”

Nagi nodded, while Saya shook her head.

“Well, just think of us in the way I described for now. Unfortunately, our current situation cannot exactly be described as ‘good.’”

Crow’s way of putting it was rather roundabout. In short, things were bad.

“Do you two know the ratio of nobles to commoners in Agarthia?”

Nagi shook his head. He had never even thought about it.

“Just give it your best guess,” Crow added.

“About... ten commoners to each noble?” Saya answered.

“I’m afraid there are far fewer nobles than that. There are about a hundred commoners to each noble. The commoners are the overwhelming majority.”

Nagi didn’t understand what Crow was getting at.

“Don’t you find it strange? Why must commoners suffer under the tyrannical rule of the nobles when there are so many more of us?”

“Isn’t that obvious? We can’t win against nobles,” Nagi said.

“Exactly. But why is that?”

Why, why, why. It reminded Nagi of Saya. Crow was nowhere near as endearing, though.

“Nobles can’t be hurt.” At that moment, Nagi realized something. He was here right now because that assumption had been overturned. “But it’s a different story with Halahala.”

“Precisely. In fact, that is the very reason Cobalt was born. Once upon a time, a certain man discovered the way to make Halahala. It was nothing but a byproduct of some other research, though. He didn’t realize it himself, but this was something which could uproot the very structure of this society. That’s when Cobalt was born.”

“So you use Halahala to defeat nobles?”

“Yes. Even if we do not crush them, we can prove that defeating them is possible. Once commoners are armed with the strength to oppose them, the nobles should no longer be able to steal from them unconditionally.”

That might be true. Nagi could’ve never even imagined being able to fight against a noble before, but it was certainly possible with that poison in hand. So, what if everyone in Agarthia knew of this?

“But it isn’t going well? That’s what you said,” Saya commented.

“Indeed. A special ingredient is required to synthesize the poison. It’s tremendously difficult to acquire and extremely valuable.”

“And you went and threw a whole damn bottle of the stuff,” Keele spat, causing Crow to look rather startled.

“That’s... quite extravagant of you. A whole bottle is very expensive.”

Crow looked at Nagi somewhat reproachfully through his glasses. Feeling awkward, Nagi averted his gaze.

“Well, setting that aside... what do you think is the difference between commoners and nobles?”

Crow apparently liked talking entirely through questions. Was this just how people were in the capital? Or was this a peculiarity to Crow himself? In any case, Nagi found it rather annoying.

“Nobles live long lives. Commoners die quickly.”

“There’s that. What else?”

“Nobles can heal their wounds right away. Commoners stay wounded.”

“Very good. What else?”

“Umm... Nobles have monstrous strength.”

“Indeed. Now then, what do you think it is that makes all this true?”

Nagi finally understood what Crow was getting at. “Blood. The vampires drink blood.”

“Correct. To be precise, they drink a drug made from blood: Amrita. By taking it at regular intervals, they obtain eternal life and wondrous powers. To put it more accurately, Amrita is absorbed into the drinker’s blood and grants them supernatural powers. Regenerative abilities, enhanced strength, and one other. A power called blood caliber.”

Nagi recalled hearing that term several times before. The first was in the Garden. After that, the knight named Jubilia had mentioned it. Then it had come from Keele. Nagi’s eyes met Saya’s. Having also heard the term, she cocked her head.

“Blood calibers are weapons born from noble blood. A noble is considered an adult when they first manifest their blood caliber. That’s how important it is to them. Fights between nobles take place using blood calibers. In other words, those who don’t possess one are simply unarmed children.”

Nagi was starting to get dizzy from the constant stream of new information. What did this man really want to say? What did any of this have to do with Nagi and Saya?

“Blood calibers take on a different shape for every noble, but all of them are powerful weapons. And that’s not all. There’s one other important property all blood calibers possess. A noble’s blood rejects another noble’s blood. In other

words, blood calibers nullify a noble's regenerative abilities."

Nagi now understood why nobles fought one another with their blood calibers. A fight where neither party could hurt each other didn't make any sense. That's why they used their own blood as weapons.

"Now, does this sound familiar to you?"

There was only one thing Nagi knew of that could nullify a noble's regenerative abilities.

"Halahala..."

Crow smiled. "Exactly. Halahala has an effect similar to that of blood calibers. That's because they use the same ingredient."

"A noble's blood," Saya muttered, realizing the answer a little before Nagi did.

"A very *special* ingredient. Rather extreme, don't you think?"

"Where did you people manage to get such a thing?" Nagi asked.

Crow shook his head. "I can't tell you the specifics. All I'll say is that we have a collaborator. That's also how we learned of the Forbidden Garden's existence."

"Hey, come on, you didn't even believe it. You gave me other shit to do, so I got *him* to go to the Garden instead," Keele cut in.

Nagi finally realized that it was Crow who had sent Keele to provoke Nagi into entering the Garden. Even so, he kept quiet about it. He wanted to hear the whole story first.

"Making use of the opportunity presented by the Blood Offering Festival was a major factor. I needed you for something else, Keele. I admit misevaluating the worth of the information, but it all ended well. Saya, you are a noble. Correct?"

"I don't know. I've always been in the Garden."

"For how many years?"

"I'm not sure. It was a long, long time."

"Over a hundred years?"

“Probably longer than that.”

Nagi was shocked that Saya was over a hundred years old.

“So, that definitely makes you a noble. That’s precisely what we’re looking for.”

The dots quickly began to connect in Nagi’s mind. The conclusion he came to was repulsive.

“Don’t tell me you’re planning on using Saya’s blood? You people are sick!” Nagi roared. “I won’t let you lay a hand on her!”

“I’m not asking you. Saya will be the one to decide.”

Saya cast her eyes down. “I don’t know. I’ve always been in that place... I don’t even know what a noble is. I also don’t know about commoners or the Crestfolk. That’s why I can’t tell if what you’re saying is right. Besides, I don’t believe my blood possesses such power. Didn’t you see it for yourself? I couldn’t do anything.”

Saya was referring to the fight against Jubilia.

“That’s true. The little princess here didn’t use a blood caliber. Actually, it didn’t look like she could,” Keele confirmed.

Crow pushed up his glasses and sank into thought. At that moment, the door blew open and something flew into the storeroom. It was Senak, who was supposed to be standing watch outside.

“Knights... Run!” he gasped.

The knights surged into the room as if to substantiate his words. Nagi recognized one of them.

“We meet again,” Keele said.

Jubilia glared back at him as someone else stepped inside.

“Allow me to intrude,” came a gentle voice unbecoming of the situation.

Something about it sent a terrible chill up Nagi’s spine. The man who had spoken was enormous—not just tall, but well muscled without any excess body fat. It was as though his entire body were tempered steel. His long, glamorous

tresses fell in waves past his shoulders. He had finely chiseled features. The symmetrical bridge of his nose was accompanied by deeply set eyes, whose powerful gaze looked upon those in the room.

His clothes identified him as a noble at a glance. They were embellished without seeming gaudy, and they showed he was of a higher social standing than the knights. The moment he had entered the room, nobody had been able to look away from him. That was just how strong a presence this man had.

“Stand down! You are in the presence of His Excellency, Lord Lernaean Edel Trouta lo Granapalt!”

A high-ranking noble. Nagi just barely kept himself from falling prostrate on reflex. If a commoner like him didn’t immediately do so upon meeting a noble like this, they could easily be slain on the spot.

“Lord Granapalt... Quite the honored guest we have here,” Crow said. He appeared calm, but his fists were clenched.

“Lady Saya,” the man named Lernaean said, looking in her direction. “It has been a long time. I could not be more grateful for the opportunity to gaze upon your beauty once more.”

“I don’t know you.”

“We have met just once before. You were sleeping at the time, so I’m sure you do not remember.” Lernaean acted as if nobody but Saya were there.

“First, I would ask that you return to the royal palace.”

He held out his hand to Saya, but she ignored it.

“Return? I don’t have anywhere to return to.”

“It will be troublesome for me if you insist on acting so selfishly.”

As Lernaean took a step forward, Nagi stepped in front of Saya to protect her.

“Seems like Saya won’t be going with you.”

“You plebeian! How dare you speak to His Excellency like that!”

Jubilia drew the sword at her waist, but Lernaean stopped her with his gaze.

“She is of the highest class of nobility. Normally, you would never even have

had the chance to meet her. There was a bit of trouble, and she ended up wandering into a place like this. We have simply come to pick her up and bring her back to where she belongs. I assure you, she will be dearly taken care of.”

His words were benign, but Lernaean was making light of Nagi. The boy couldn’t help but tremble in the face of this man’s power. He had thought he understood the dread nobles could inspire from his fight against Jubilia, but this man was on an entirely different level. There was absolutely no opposing him. Obey or run—there were no other options. It took everything Nagi had to suppress his urge to do either one.

Nagi somehow pushed through his fear and objected, “You call locking her up in that kind of place ‘taking care’ of her?”

“Hmm? You have some determination, little one. I see; you’re the intruder who snuck into the Garden.”

Nagi nodded.

“May I have your name?”

“Nagi Strano.”

“Nagi... Are you perhaps the one who killed the guard in the Garden?”

“That’s right.”

“Quite impressive, even though he was a fool who couldn’t even have hoped to become a knight. Jubilia, was this the boy you lost to?”

“Yes, he and the long-haired man over there,” Jubilia answered, vexed.

“Do you desire the opportunity to regain your honor?”

“I do.”

Lernaean looked into Jubilia’s eyes, then nodded slightly. “Capture them all.”

“Draw your blades!”

At her command, the other two knights drew their swords in unison, to which Keele and Senak reacted in kind. The sheen of their blades proved they were already coated in Halahala.

“Good grief, I’m not well suited to fighting, but I suppose I can at least provide

support,” Crow said as he stood at the ready. He wielded a strange tool that somewhat resembled a bow.

Nagi also drew his knife while keeping Saya behind him.

“Charge!”

The knights leaped into action. However, because they needed someone to block the exit, only Jubilia and one other knight charged forward. Keele and Senak each blocked a knight. Lernaean observed the fight from behind with a composed expression, smiling as if he found something about this enjoyable.

“Their weapons are coated in poison! Fight as if they’re blood calibers!” Jubilia yelled.

The other knight looked startled by this as Senak slashed at him. The fight between Jubilia and Keele looked even. He blocked her strikes while she parried his counterattacks.

“I so wanted to meet you again!” Keele shouted.

“Cut the drive!”

Senak, on the other hand, was having a hard time. His skills were far inferior to those of the knight he was facing. This was actually the norm; Keele was abnormal for being able to put up a proper fight.

“Crap... Crow!” Senak cried.

“I suppose I have no other choice,” Crow answered, fiddling with his weapon.

Nagi had never seen this sort of weapon before, but it was apparently something like a bow. A thick arrow flew out, accompanied by a dull *thwack*, and the knight fighting against Senak collapsed with a scream.

“Even the arrow was coated in poison?!”

“Keep your eyes on me, dammit!”

Keele came swinging in at Jubilia while her focus was momentarily drawn to the collapsed knight. She managed to block the blow on reflex, but she ended up dropping her sword from the powerful attack.

“Halahala... I see. It’s quite effective,” Lernaean murmured to himself.

Nobody had the leisure to answer him. Even though Senak had defeated one knight, the other came rushing in at him right away.

“Hey! Crow! Hurry the hell up!”

“I don’t have any more ammunition. This is just a prototype.”

Senak was left in despair as a sword came ruthlessly down at him. Nagi jumped in promptly and blocked the blade.

“Whew. Thanks.”

“Save it for later. We’re taking this guy on together.”

Senak nodded to Nagi and fixed the grip on his sword. Meanwhile, Jubilia continuously dodged Keele’s attacks.

“I find it hard to believe you’re a commoner.”

“I look like a commoner to you?”

Keele jeered at her, but she didn’t respond. Jubilia came to a stop, retrieved her sword, and sheathed it. She then twisted the ring on her thumb, triggering a blade to come out of it. The tip of the blade plunged into her own index finger.

“Oh man, seriously?” Keele said as he watched the blood pour out of her finger.

“I’ll be making full use of this. Excitation: Blood Blade!”

Blood burst from her finger as she yelled. It dispersed into the air in red crystals, then took on the shape of a slender, red sword.

“Blood caliber!”

The imposing pressure brought about by the sword silenced the chaotic battlefield.

“Dame Jubilia, you would wield your blood caliber against a mere commoner? Are you insane?!” the knight in front of Nagi said.

“I’m fully aware that this is a disgrace, but this man is formidable.”

“B-But—”

“I ran away from him once already. I don’t believe that choice was a mistake; I

had to report the information on Cobalt. However, the knight in me recoils at my actions. He was an opponent I should've faced with all my strength from the very beginning."

Jubilia held her red sword at the ready. Keele licked his lips as her palpable bloodlust washed over him. His eyes were sparkling like an innocent little boy's.

"Well ain't that amazing," he remarked.

"This man is dangerous. Your orders were to capture him, but I'll be striking him down here."

"Do as you like," Lernaean replied.

With that, Jubilia charged in at Keele once more. The speed of her blade was clearly on another level. Keele somehow managed to block the blow. But...

"Whoa, you kiddin' me?"

Keele's sword was cut clean in two, showing how terrifyingly sharp Jubilia's red sword was. However, Keele's sword style was one of deception. He was always doing the unexpected.

"Haha! You're the best!" Keele yelled with a laugh as he gripped his shortened sword and dove toward Jubilia.

"Wha—?!"

Keele had judged that he couldn't win through swordsmanship, so he instead challenged the noble to a close-range slugfest. Meanwhile, the knight facing off against Senak and Nagi took heart from Jubilia's spirit. It took everything the two of them had to fend off his relentless blows.

Then, the balance was broken. The knight's sword struck Senak in the abdomen. It came in at a poor angle and didn't cut him, but the blow to the stomach was enough to send Senak to the floor. The knight immediately turned to face Nagi.

Crap, I can't hold out one-on-one.

"Lady Saya, shall we put an end to this farce?" Lernaean said, "If you come with us, I do not mind overlooking these people and their misdeeds."

His voice was frighteningly calm and as cold as a strong winter wind. It was enough for Keele, Jubilia, and the knight who was attacking Nagi to freeze in place.

“Don’t fuck with me!” Nagi yelled, but Lernaean paid him no mind.

“Thank you. You’ve truly done well in showing me something magnificent. You’ve made good use of Halahala, I see. You will all surely play an appropriate role in the times to come. If you survive, that is. But at this rate, that would be impossible, no matter how hard you try. Allow me to show you.”

Lernaean moved his finger in the same way Jubilia had when she’d brought out her blood caliber.

“Excitation.”

In the next instant, an intense pain shot through Nagi’s shoulder. He screamed as his shoulder was torn open. His clothes were drenched in blood in the blink of an eye.

“Nagi!” Saya screamed.

“Hmm, I suppose I cannot scold Jubilia for this... I, too, have used my blood caliber against a commoner.”

Nagi hadn’t even seen it happen. The only traces that such an attack had transpired at all were Nagi’s wounded shoulder and the small amount of blood dripping from Lernaean’s palm.

“The hell was that?” Keele blurted.

Lernaean’s ability was of an entirely different dimension.

“Do you understand now, Lady Saya? I missed on purpose. I am fully capable of consigning everyone within this room to death in an instant.”

They all knew he was telling the truth. Even Jubilia and Keele couldn’t hope to compare.

“However, I am reluctant to kill you all; it would truly be a waste. I’d much prefer to let you all go. As such, Lady Saya, I would like for you to come with us.”

Keele, Crow, Senak, and Jubilia looked at Saya, who continued to glare at Lernaean in silence. Her trembling lips showed her hesitation.

“If you refuse, then someone’s head will fly next... Perhaps his, to start.” He gestured casually toward Nagi.

After hearing such a cruel declaration, Saya finally opened her mouth and said, “I’ll go, so don’t kill anyone.”

Lernaean smiled. It was perfectly arranged on his statuesque face, making his expression seem excessively arrogant.

“A truly wise decision.”

“You can’t!” Nagi protested.

Lernaean looked down on him with cold eyes. “If you plan on making a fuss, I don’t mind silencing you.”

The man’s violent aura enveloped Nagi, and for a moment, the boy stopped breathing.

“Stop this at once! If you hurt Nagi, I’ll stab this through my own heart!” Saya shouted as she picked something off the ground and held it to her chest.

It was the piece of Keele’s sword that Jubilia had cut off. Seeing that, Lernaean righted himself and relaxed his muscles. Feeling as though he had narrowly escaped danger, Nagi broke out in a cold sweat.

“I have no interest in that boy to begin with. You should not injure yourself over something so trifling.”

“I told you I’d go with you. Before we leave, though, I want to say a few words to Nagi.”

“Very well.”

Saya walked up to Nagi’s side. She put a finger to his lips as he tried to say something, hushing him. Saya’s finger trembling. With Saya directly in front of him, nobody but Nagi could see anything in between. This tiny space was the only one in the room that belonged only to them.

She discreetly lifted something out from beneath her clothes. It was the phial

adorning the necklace Nagi had bought at the rest area. Saya tugged on the phial, easily breaking the cheap chain. She then opened the bottle and gripped her hand over the naked blade she was still holding.

Though she grimaced in pain, Saya didn't raise her voice. A few small droplets of blood ran down the blade and fell into the vial. She closed the lid, then pushed the necklace into Nagi's hand.

"Thank you for taking me out of there. This is the first time I've ever had so much fun."

Saya's wound closed before his eyes and quickly vanished. Nagi watched this in a daze as he took the necklace.

"Goodbye," she said. With that, she stepped out of the storeroom.

Nagi was unable to do anything but stare at her back as she did.

Chapter 2: An Omen Carved in Blood

7

“How long are y’all planning on moping around?”

The first to stand up and speak in Cobalt’s bar was Keele. The door to the back room had been destroyed, and the storeroom beyond it was left in a disastrous state from their skirmish. Surprisingly, the establishment was otherwise untouched. Nagi and the two injured members of Cobalt were seated at the counter. Not a single one of them had said a word until Keele stood up.

No, they *couldn’t* say a word. Not only were they fatigued and in pain, but being so utterly defeated by a noble’s tremendous strength had shattered their hearts.

“I mean, they really got us,” Crow said to Keele. His tone was as light as usual, but there was disappointment hidden behind it.

“Why didn’t you make more bolts?” Keele asked.

“This crossbow is nothing more than a prototype. I planned on making more once we had the Halahala to spare.”

Crow looked down at the strange weapon in his hands. Keele was about to say something else, but Crow cut him off.

“You’re being a sore loser.”

“You’ve got a point there.”

“What the hell was that, anyway?! How are we supposed to defeat a monster like that?!” Senak shouted, dispelling the curse hanging over their conversation.

“That was a vampire. Besides, we killed one, didn’t we? The poison worked,” Keele said.

“We only killed a grunt!” Senak refuted.

“Eh, true. That guy really was a chump compared to that Lernaean bastard.”

“Lernaean Edel Trouta lo Granapalt. He’s a big shot of the Sovereignty Faction,” Crow added.

“What’s the Sovereignty Faction?” Nagi asked.

“You sure are ignorant of the world. Hey, Crow, fill this dumbass in,” Keele said haughtily.

“You don’t even know all that much about it yourself, do you? Politics here in the capital have been rigid for centuries. The members in charge have pretty much been all the same, after all. However, the past three hundred years are a different matter. A young—well, he’s far older than any of us—but a young noble is spearheading a faction who’s of the opinion that the Sovereign should be returned to the center of government.”

Crow’s story was rather strange to Nagi.

“Isn’t the Sovereign already the center?”

The Sovereign of the royal capital was an eminent figure. Didn’t that make the Sovereign the very center of the government?

“No. The Sovereign was only at the center of Agarthan politics in the early days of the country’s history. After that, Congress took control of all political matters. The current Sovereign is nothing more than a figurehead. However, the Sovereignty Faction wants to change that. Leading the opposition is Chairman Gratos, who seeks to protect the current order. They’re called the Traditionalists.”

The Sovereignty Faction and the Traditionalists. Apparently, there was discord among the nobles. This was the first Nagi had ever heard of such a thing.

“Lernaean, the man we met earlier, is the leader of the Sovereignty Faction,” Crow concluded.

“I heard high-ranking nobles were genuine monsters, but I didn’t think it’d be that bad,” Senak said, trembling as he recalled what happened.

“Did anyone see that guy’s attack?” Keele asked. Everyone shook their heads. “I couldn’t bump off that knight, either. Seems we’ve been fightin’ nothing but

chumps until now.” Keele paused with a joyful smile. “Things are gettin’ fun.”

“Let’s stock up on Halahala-coated bolts. It’s far too dangerous to engage them in close combat. Senak, please make the arrangements.”

Senak let out a sigh. “You guys are nuts.”

“What, you wanna jump ship?”

“Don’t be stupid. Like hell I can run away. I’ve got to get revenge for everyone who’s been killed up until now.”

Senak’s voice was burning with passion. Their conversation gave Nagi a glimpse into Cobalt’s daily battle against nobility.

“Let me join Cobalt,” Nagi said after steeling himself.

Keele immediately shook his head. “No can do.”

“Why? I can fight too! I even defeated a noble!”

“Huh, he can’t? I’d be dead if Nagi hadn’t covered for me. He’s pretty good. Sure seems like a brother of yours,” Senak said.

“He certainly has a point. Commoners capable of standing off against nobles are valuable warriors. Many freeze up on instinct, after all,” Crow chimed in.

“When I say no, I mean no,” Keele declared. “I don’t wanna fight alongside this kinda naïve brat. Why do you wanna join Cobalt anyway?”

“Because I made a promise to Saya.”

“That little princess? What about?”

“I said I’d protect her.”

“So, you wanna take her back? That’s pretty selfish. You’ve got no place here. Right, Crow?”

“I’m the leader here, remember? But you’re right. The one we needed was Saya, not Nagi. Moreover, Nagi is opposed to Saya offering her blood to make Halahala. If we were to retrieve her, our interests will be misaligned. However...” Crow turned and stared intently at Nagi. “It’s true we’re wanting for trustworthy companions. We need more allies.”

“Huh? Weren’t you spouting off about how having fewer allies was better all this time?”

“That’s because the quantity of Halahala available to us was limited. But the situation has changed.”

“Yeah. It seems like we’ll be able to gather up a good amount,” Senak added.

Keele made a face. “Hey, nobody told me that.”

“The company caved. Those guys were hiding a goddamn stockpile from before Dr. Dimitri got caught. I’m talking three hundred bottles.”

“With such a quantity, we can move on to the next stage. In other words...” Crow paused as he gazed into Keele’s eyes. “We need to help our good professor escape.”

“I see. So next we need soldiers, you mean.” Senak nodded, but Keele still looked dissatisfied. “If so, then we don’t need the little princess’ blood, do we?”

“That’s a different matter. If we manage to free Dr. Dimitri, we’ll be able to manufacture more Halahala. So long as we have the ingredients, that is.”

“Yeah, yeah. I guess that ol’ egghead can see the effin’ future. But this guy’s no good. He don’t got the resolve, nor the strength.”

Nagi couldn’t say a thing in his defense. He had been incapable of doing anything when faced with Lernaean’s power—the power of a noble. That bitterness had taken away all of his will to object.

“If you wanna convince us otherwise, you’ve gotta prove your strength. If you can, I’ll accept you. Anyway, I’m outta here.”

“I told you, *I’m* the leader here. Where are you going?”

“I’m the same as him in that I don’t got enough strength. First, I’m gonna hone my skills by killing nobles till I can kill Jubilia. After that, I’ll move on to high-ranking nobles.”

“I’d rather you refrain from acting independently. The Halahala I gave you wasn’t meant to be squandered.”

“Oh, come on. You’re gonna get a whole lot soon, yeah? Don’t be stingy. I told

you off the bat, didn't I? Don't get in my way."

Keele's eyes glimmered dangerously.

"Please keep your distance from Ronadyphe Prison so as to not get in the way of the main operation," Crow said, giving in.

"I know, I know. Somewhere far from Ronadyphe, huh? Guess I'll go to Leshva. When should I come back?"

"In one month."

"That should be good for three—no, five nobles." After saying so, Keele left the bar.

Senak let out a sigh of relief. "Man, that guy's scary. He's out of his mind. Oh, sorry. I guess he's your brother."

"It's fine. He's always been like that."

"You have my sympathy. Hey, he said all that, but I'd welcome you as our ally, Nagi."

"I feel the same. But what do you think will happen if we let Nagi into Cobalt after Keele so strongly objected?"

"Someone's going to die. Us, Nagi, maybe both."

"Prove my strength..." Nagi muttered to himself.

"Hm?"

"That's what Keele told me to do. What did he mean by that, though? Do I just have to get stronger than him?"

When he heard himself say it out loud, Nagi recognized that it was impossible. Keele's strength in combat, which allowed him to fight on par with a noble knight, was abnormal. Nagi couldn't even imagine how much training he had endured, and how many times he had cheated death, in order to reach that level.

"There is more than one kind of strength. For example, if you were to bring us a large number of allies, that would be another form of strength," Crow told him.

“What do you mean?”

“Our next objective is an attack on Ronadyphe Prison. Currently, we have around fifty people on our side.”

Nagi was shocked. Fifty? Cobalt apparently had a lot of members. According to the earlier conversation, they were supposed to be starving for allies. Regardless, they had a lot of people ready to throw themselves into a fight against the nobles.

“Do you think that’s a lot? That’s how many we would have if we gathered everyone who is currently in hiding all over the place. As I said before, we’ve been suppressing our head count. If we go around inviting people from areas we’ve been avoiding, I think we should be able to gather a hundred people or so. That’s our limit, however.”

Crow paused there, then put things as bluntly as he could.

“This is nowhere near enough. Ronadyphe Prison is garrisoned by ten knights and a hundred commoner soldiers. Even if we manage to match their numbers, they have the advantage of being on the defensive. And taking into account the nobles among them... I’d like double, if not triple their numbers. So, if you can bring maybe fifty—no, even *thirty* people who can fight, then I will recognize your strength as being sufficient.”

“You’re being unreasonable, man.” Senak complained.

“Freeing Dr. Dimitri is the very definition of unreasonable. We won’t be able to do anything if we can’t at least accomplish that much. On the contrary, if we can get over this, we should be able to gather a tremendous number of allies all at once.”

“Not that. I’m saying you’re being unreasonable for asking Nagi to do this when you just met him today. You’re also leaking way too much intel on us. It’s like you’ve already decided he’s an ally.”

“He said he wanted to join Cobalt; I don’t think he’ll oppose us. Besides, I have my reasons.”

“You’re quite the softhearted fool for a guy leading this organization, you know? Sorry to put it this way, but what if he betrays us? What if he squeals to

the nobles about everything you just said?”

“We’ll abandon this base, then. Our plan to attack Ronadyphe Prison is already self-evident. Actually, we’re planning on announcing it, so there’s no problem there. I did say too much regarding our headcount, though.” Suddenly, Crow faced Nagi with a grim expression. “Nagi. What I told you earlier is a lie. Cobalt is composed of well over fifty members.”

Senak rolled his eyes. “Oh, come on.”

“Well, that’s going too far. I don’t think I said anything disastrous. The source of our Halahala is more important. Incidentally, you’re the one who mentioned that, Senak.”

“Oops.”

“I won’t tell anyone. I don’t get any of this to begin with,” Nagi told them.

Crow shook his head. “No. If you’re going to gather allies, then you *need* to tell them. That will serve as propaganda. I don’t mind if you talk about Cobalt’s existence, the plan to attack the prison, and the existence and effects of Halahala. You can’t mention our numbers, and you definitely can’t mention the source of our Halahala.”

“Got it.” Nagi nodded.

“Hey, are you seriously telling Nagi to go gather allies?” Senak asked.

“Can you think of any other way to convince Keele?”

Senak fell silent. Nagi couldn’t think of anything either.

“The problem is how to contact us... We’ll be abandoning this base, so please use this password at the location I’m about to tell you. Don’t write it down. Memorize it.”

“I can’t read,” Nagi said, feeling like his face would burn up from the shame.

He had heard that people in the capital could all read and write. From what Crow just said, it was normal for members of Cobalt to be literate.

He didn’t possess enough strength. Perhaps this was what Keele had meant.

“Is that so? That’s a relief.”

It felt like he was saying it out of consideration, which made Nagi feel even more pathetic. Crow told him the location of the capital's Marinera district's fifth block. The bar there was called the Wild Rose. The password was...

"Captured Princess."

Nagi didn't think he was going to forget that password anytime soon.

"Did you just decide on that?"

"Of course. I expect good things from you," Crow answered with a pleasant smile.

8

Nagi started by heading to Strano Village. His motivation was simple: he had hardly ever left the village before, so he had no other ideas. He had been told to go search for members for Cobalt, but he didn't actually know how to go about finding them. In any case, he had accepted the task, so all he could think to do was to return to the village and ask the chief about it.

Badrino had traveled beyond the village many a time, so Nagi thought he might know how to gather allies. This was a natural extension of how villagers always looked to their chief first whenever they had a problem. As one such villager, Nagi had no way of knowing how naïve this was.

He arrived at the capital's north gate, asking for directions along the way. Apparently, he could reach the second ring road by heading north up the main road. Once there, he could turn west, and there would be the path to get back to Strano Village. He had the option of using the shortcut that passed by the Tainted's—or rather, the Crestfolk's—village, but he didn't like the idea of being attacked again, so he stuck to the main roads. After walking for an hour, the atmosphere of the capital faded away and was replaced by rural scenery.

A communal cogwagon rode up beside him. The driver called out, "Hey, buddy, where you headed?"

"Strano Village."

"That'll be five bloodpence."

“That pricey? I’ll just walk.”

Nagi didn’t have that much money on him to begin with.

“Don’t complain if you get attacked while walking on your own. The Tainted are out there, y’know. Ah, fine. I’ll give you a discount. Three bloodpence. Come on, get in.”

Nagi still found this expensive, but now that he had been given a discount, he felt like he had no choice but to accept. There were two other customers on the communal cogwagon. After lightly bowing his head and boarding the vehicle, Nagi was soon lulled to sleep by its rocking motions. Saya’s absence was palpable; it didn’t feel right without her by his side. Even though they had only spent a short time together, her existence had taken root deep within his heart.

The cogwagon only stopped at one rest area along the way. By the time evening came, they had reached the second ring road. Apparently, this was as far as it would go for today.

“You gonna go to an inn?” the driver asked after parking at another rest area.

When Nagi gave him a look of puzzlement, the driver explained that customers usually stayed in inns at these rest areas and got back on the next morning.

“Sometimes, people without any cash sleep inside the cogwagon, too.”

“I’ll do that, then.”

He only had one bloodpence left after paying the boarding fee. Nagi didn’t know whether or not he could even stay at an inn at that price.

The cogwagon departed again in the morning. Nagi spent the day in the same way, stopping at another similar rest area. Another day passed, and Nagi got down from the cogwagon the following afternoon. The driver was going to keep following the second ring road, so he let Nagi know that Strano Village was down a narrow path just a short ways off the road, and it wouldn’t be too long a journey on foot. Now that he thought of it, the scenery around him looked familiar; Nagi realized he had come this far before.

“Whoa! What the hell are *you* doing here?!”

As usual, Nerthe was the one to call out to him as he walked in a daze.

“Oh, hey, Nerthe.”

“Don’t ‘hey, Nerthe’ me! Just hide already!”

Nerthe pulled Nagi along and hid behind a tree. Clearly, this was no laughing matter.

“Why did you come back?” Nerthe hissed.

“Why? I mean, I want to ask the chief something.”

“You came back to *consult* with him? You dumbass! You’ll get arrested if you set one foot inside the village!”

“Huh?”

“Another knight came by. Said you’re wanted for treason. You come back, and you’ll get handed to them on a silver platter.”

Nagi was initially taken aback, but it made sense the more he thought about it. He felt himself quite the dunce for not realizing it earlier.

“What the hell did you do?”

“I killed a noble.”

“Hwuh?” Nerthe’s jaw dropped.

Now that he was here, Nagi figured he could find his first comrade in Nerthe. “There’s a poison that can kill nobles. Want to fight them as part of Cobalt?”

“I don’t understand a thing you’re saying.”

Somehow, Nagi managed to walk him through the situation. He told Nerthe all about the poison, about Cobalt, and about how they were looking for new recruits.

Nerthe looked back at him with a bitter expression. “In short, you want me to join this Cobalt group?”

“Yeah.”

“You lose a screw?”

“I haven’t. Everything I said is true.”

“I don’t believe you. There’s no way you can win against a noble!”

Nerthe had a point. That much was common sense, even to Nagi.

“Do you think you can win?” Nerthe asked hesitantly.

Nagi was at a loss for words. If there were multiple high-ranking nobles like Lernaean, then no matter how much Halahala they had, wouldn’t it still be impossible? Regardless, Nagi had to fight. He had promised to protect Saya.

Nerthe interpreted Nagi’s silence as an answer. “Even *you* don’t think it’s possible. But still, you’ve got nowhere else to go other than Cobalt. That’s why you’re trying to get others caught up in this crap.”

“You’re wrong! I’m—”

“How am I wrong?! I can keep on living so long as I stay out of this... Unlike you,” Nerthe said with a sour expression.

Nagi finally understood what he was getting at; his life was now decisively different from Nerthe’s.

“Please. Just... get lost. I can’t be seen with you. If you get going right now, I won’t tell anyone I met you here. If you don’t, I’ll have to report that I found you.” His voice was equal parts desperate and sincere.

“Nerthe, I—”

“Don’t say anything else! Please, just get going... I’m begging you.” Nerthe lowered his head.

Nagi, at a loss for words, turned and fled. He ran in the opposite direction of the village, down the path he had just come from.

9

It was almost mysterious how the scenery never seemed to change. The same fields Nagi had seen since birth spread out before his eyes. Nagi knew now that similar sights went on and on along the roads all the way up to the capital.

But Nagi’s world had changed. He now knew of things that were far and away from such scenery. Cobalt, Keele, Lernaean... and Saya. Despite all that he had

gained, Nagi had lost a place to return to.

Feeling defeated, he walked down the main road toward the capital without any particular destination in mind. There was no point in going back there, but he didn't know of anywhere else. If nothing else, he was going somewhere with a lot of people. He should never have returned to Strano Village.

Another communal cogwagon passed him by. "Hey, kid! Need a ride?"

Evidently, people walking down the main road by themselves looked like easy customers. Unfortunately, Nagi only had one bloodpence left. He couldn't afford it, so he shook his head in silence.

"Where ya headed?" the driver asked.

That's what I want to know, Nagi thought to himself.

The driver continued to call out to him as Nagi walked on. "It's dangerous out there. They say the Tainted have been comin' out all the way to the main roads lately."

When he heard the word "Tainted," Nagi was reminded of the girl he had met. With that came the realization that he *did* know of one other place to go: Garuga Village.

"Hey, is there a shortcut to the capital around here? Something like a mountain path?" Nagi asked all of a sudden.

The driver looked quite surprised. "There is, but..."

"I want to go there."

"Don't be stupid! It's way too dangerous. They say nobody gets through there 'cause the Tainted always get to 'em first."

That was exactly what Nagi was looking for; there was no mistaking it. He knew the way there from the capital, but it would be roundabout using that path from where he was now. He had to get directions from the driver.

"How do I get there?"

"No way, bud. Too dangerous."

"Just tell me where it is. I'll walk." Nagi pulled out his last bloodpence and

showed it to the driver.

“Are you nuts?” Still, the driver couldn’t defy the allure of incidental income. “Go that way for a bit, and you’ll see the northwest road. It gets cut off by the first ring road, but if you go northeast from there, you’ll find a mountain path. Goin’ through there is a pretty quick shortcut to the capital. That’s probably what you’re thinkin’ of.”

Apparently, it would take half a day to reach the entrance to the mountain path by cogwagon. That coincided with Nagi’s memories. After catching the bloodpence Nagi had tossed his way, the driver got his cogwagon moving in a fluster. It seemed he didn’t want to get involved with this foolhardy boy any further.

Nagi continued walking without even taking a meal. Hunger clawed at his stomach, but he didn’t let it bother him. He had spent many hunts walking around without a meal, so he was accustomed to having to endure. At present, he was entirely preoccupied with other thoughts.

When he considered Nerthe’s reaction, Nagi found it to be quite reasonable. Every single commoner had animosity toward nobles—against vampires—but that didn’t mean they hated them enough to throw away their lives to join Cobalt.

Nagi and the other villagers had been taught by Badrino since their infancy that the commoners allowed to live under the nobles’ patronage were blessed. If the nobles weren’t there, public order in Agarthia would plummet, and they would no longer be able to live in peace. Badrino had often said that living a short yet happy life was the way of the commoner.

While Nagi had always opposed this idea, Nerthe didn’t necessarily feel the same. Why had Nagi stopped believing what the chief and the others told him and wished for a longer life? It was vexing, but Keele had in fact been a major factor.

“Life is too short to do what I want.”

Keele had always loved to say that. When Nagi had heard that Keele was dead, it occurred to him that his older brother had possessed such a burning desire for life, yet it had been taken away from him so easily. Therefore, Nagi

had ended up wanting to live a long life for himself. To that end, he had wanted to acquire more money. In truth, Keele had still been alive the entire time.

Commoners were the type to wait and see how the wind blew. They tended to fear change, so it would be difficult to get them involved with Cobalt. But what about the Crestfolk? They weren't supposed to exist in the first place. Nagi recalled what little knowledge he had about them. It was all fragmented, but this much he knew.

They were people who had been infected by an illness called "bloodmark disease." It started with a sudden high fever, which lasted several days. Then, a dark-red, spotted pattern appeared on the body. The severity of this marking differed on a case-by-case basis. In some cases, it extended throughout the entire body; in others, it only covered a small portion. For many people, it materialized on their faces. Regardless of how the disease manifested, none of the afflicted could escape the spotted markings, and these never vanished after the fever was gone.

The visible signs of bloodmark disease easily identified those who had it. Its cause was unknown. There was evidence that it was contagious, but it could only be transmitted through blood. In other words, contagion only occurred because of blood offerings or intercourse.

On the other hand, there were those who considered it more of a curse than a disease. There were many interpretations of why this would have come about, ranging from incest among ancestors to having killed a sacred beast. The reason everything was so unclear was because it was rare for people to openly talk about the disease. Nevertheless, it was well known that the disease itself existed, and that those who were infected possessed a bloodmark.

There was one other thing everyone knew about the disease: almost universally, it was not tolerated. Those with bloodmarks weren't permitted to live in villages, and this law was strictly enforced.

Originally, this law meant that anyone who showed symptoms would be killed and disposed of. However, it was far too harsh to sentence one's own family, lovers, and friends to their deaths. There were many whose bloodmarks could be hidden beneath their clothes, so their families would try to shelter them.

Therefore, the government had taken a different approach to the problem: exile.

All those who showed symptoms were to be exiled from their villages. So, what happened to them after that? They became the Crestfolk. The exiles were said to hide in the mountains and live as bandits.

Nagi's destination was one such hidden village. With no current place in society, there was a high probability they would lend him their cooperation. In fact, they had already shown interest in Halahala and a desire to rebel against the nobles. Their interests aligned with Cobalt's.

He hadn't noticed it while riding the cogwagon last time, but it was quite the treacherous path. The road was so thin it felt like he could be swallowed by the mountain at any moment. There were myriad places for bandits to hide themselves.

Just as expected, a shadow suddenly jumped out from cover. Nagi threw up both his hands to show he had no intentions of resisting as a spear quickly flew at his throat. Before it could pierce him, however, the spear came to a halt.

"It's you!"

Fortunately, this was someone who recognized Nagi.

"Please take me with you. I want to speak with Zamin."

The one who had sprung at him looked familiar; she had chestnut hair and a bloodmark running up her throat and jaw. Her large, black eyes were far more memorable, however. When he had last seen them he had thought she was like a ferocious beast, but now they were colored with bewilderment. Looking at her expression, Nagi could tell this innocent-looking girl was indeed around the same age as him.

"Why did you come back?"

"Didn't I just tell you? I want to speak with Zamin." Nagi kept his hands up as he spoke to show he meant her no harm.

The Crestfolk girl, Tess, nodded. "Fine."

Tess escorted Nagi all the way to Zamin's house.

"I can't let you speak with him for too long. The chief's body is in poor condition," Tess said, and Nagi gave her a nod. "Hey, Chief, I'm coming in."

She then opened the door, revealing Zamin sitting in bed. Nagi was once again astonished upon seeing this man's skinny body. The deep wrinkles running along his dried skin made him look like a dead tree. They were so deep, Nagi couldn't tell them apart from his eyes.

"You're... Nagi, was it?" Zamin asked with a hoarse voice.

"Yes, sir. I came to ask something of you."

He went on to explain everything to Zamin. He talked about Cobalt, revealing that they had been the source of the Halahala to begin with, and explained that the organization needed more members in order to launch an attack on the prison.

"Are you saying you want to involve the citizens of Garuga Village in that fight?"

"Not just Garuga Village. There are other T—Crestfolk, right? I'd like as many of them to participate as possible."

"We cannot fight alongside those without crests."

The reply he had gotten felt far too cold, especially after Cobalt had requested he find help.

"Why? I thought you hated nobles?"

"Indeed we do."

"So what's the problem?!"

"Nobles are strong. We are weak."

"Didn't I tell you already? We have Halahala. With that, we can beat them!"

Zamin shook his head. "It cannot be. We only stand next to the bearer of the True Crest. We shall continue to wait for that day."

Nagi didn't understand what he was saying, and his expression was unreadable beneath the creases and folds of his skin.

“By ‘crest,’ do you mean the bloodmark?”

“Indeed.”

“So you’re saying that I’m no good because I don’t have bloodmark disease—I mean, because I’m not one of the Crestfolk?”

“That is not so. Our crests are not the True Crest.”

“I don’t get what you’re saying at all.”

“I cannot reveal more than that to one who does not bear a crest.”

Nagi wasn’t getting anywhere. He had no idea what to say to this.

“Nagi... We should get going,” Tess gently interjected.

He quietly did as she said.

Once the two of them had left Zamin’s house, Tess asked, “Are you going to fight the nobles?”

“Yeah. That’s why I need allies.”

“Even if they’re ‘Tainted’?” Tess’ large, black eyes peered right into Nagi’s. He could make out the details of the pattern spread across her cheek.

“Well...”

Nagi was at a loss for words. He did, in fact, think the Crestfolk were a dangerous and savage bunch. His opinion of them still hadn’t changed. However, Nagi had no one else he could rely on.

“Look.”

Tess untied her hair, letting it spill out. As she did so, Nagi caught a slight whiff of her sweet scent. He was all too conscious of the fact that Tess, whose speech was often sharp and boyish, was a girl around his age.

She turned around and lifted up her hair, showing him the nape of her neck. Nagi gulped—not because he found the gesture enticing, but because her bloodmark extended even this far.

“I was exiled from my hometown because of this. Everyone here is like that.”

“Me too. I’m not allowed in my village anymore.”

“Because you killed a noble?”

“Yeah.”

“You killed a noble of your own accord, so you were driven out of your village. You didn’t have to make that choice, but you did it anyway.”

“That’s not true! I was tricked by Keele! I didn’t think I would end up having to kill a noble.”

“It’s your fault for getting tricked,” Tess coldly declared. “You’re different from us. I can’t fight alongside you.”

“Is this because of what Zamin said?”

“I don’t understand what he’s thinking. I have my own reason, and I believe everyone in the village thinks the same way. Nobody here will help a crestless like you. We hate nobles, but we hate you commoners just the same.”

Nagi was taken aback. To the Crestfolk, commoners were the ones who had driven them out of their homes.

Regardless, Nagi asked, “What can I do for us to fight side by side?”

“You’re asking me? Someone you looked down on as Tainted?”

“Sorry.”

“It isn’t something you can just apologize for.”

“Right.”

“The only reason you came here is because you can’t go back to your village. Because you can’t gather allies there.”

“Yeah.”

“You thought the Tainted would help you because we hold a grudge against nobles.”

“Yes.”

For some reason, Tess was enraged by Nagi’s answer. “Why have you just been admitting all this?!”

“I believe what you’re saying is right.”

“Then kneel down before me and beg. Beg me to be your ally.”

Nagi slowly began lowering himself to the ground. He detested the humiliating feeling, but he had long since lost the will to overcome it.

Tess suddenly grabbed him by the collar. “Do you not have any pride?!”

“None. I have nothing now. No pride. No village. No strength.” Yes, he had lost everything in such a short amount of time. “All I have left is a promise.”

“A promise?”

“I promised to protect Saya, but I couldn’t. She was the one to protect me.”

“Is that little princess so important to you? Did you throw away everything for a woman?” Tess gave him an interrogating glare, then asked him with a terribly serious expression, “Do you want to make children with that woman?”

It was a very abrupt question.

“Huh? What?”

“Do you love her? That’s how commoners are, right? They fall in love and want to make children, right?”

Nagi could only speak his honest feelings in the face of Tess’ threatening aura. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know? It’s not that hard.”

“I won’t know for sure until I meet her again.”

The time Nagi had spent with Saya, from their meeting to their parting, had been far too short. It had taken everything he had just to deal with the barrage of circumstances pushed on him during that period. He believed he was attracted to Saya, but there was far too little time to truly ascertain what he was feeling, let alone whether he wanted to have children with her.

“*That’s* why you want to save her?” Tess asked, then grew quiet.

Nagi had no idea what to say to that.

She stared at him a little longer before continuing. “The chief is stubborn; there’s no way he’ll change his mind. But there’s one person who can convince him otherwise. You just need to persuade that guy first.”

“Who’s that?”

“Probably someone you know.”

Nagi doubted this. He didn’t have a single clue.

“Keele Strano. You came from Strano Village, right? You also mentioned his name earlier.”

It was far too unexpected. Did this mean Tess and Zamin knew Keele?

“Keele is... my older brother.”

Tess’ eyes widened in shock. “Is that so? Then just have him ask for you.”

“Seriously?”

That was the very definition of putting the cart before the horse. Nagi was trying to find allies for Cobalt so that he could convince Keele. Asking Keele to convince them *for* him would be far too convoluted.

“Well, first off, I don’t know where you can find him.”

“I do. A town called Leshva. He said he was going there.”

“Aah, then you’ll be fine. I know where that is. There’s a hidden village around there, so that’s probably where he went. Let’s go!”

Tess was acting like it had already been decided. Nagi couldn’t keep up with her sudden motivation and instead stood there staring at her.

She seemed to interpret this another way. “Oh, do you want a meal before we go?”

“Why did you know Keele would go to such a place? How do you know him?”

With a confused expression, as though it were Nagi who wasn’t making sense, she answered, “I mean, he’s one of the Crestfolk, right?”

10

Even though Saya’s bedroom was heated and illuminated by warm light fixtures, it felt chilly. She was lying in a soft, comfortable canopy bed with lush curtains and an excess of ornaments. Nevertheless, the room gave her a terribly

cold impression.

This was a prison, something she was well accustomed to. It had simply changed from the Garden to the royal palace. The enormous structure she was in now had many more people moving around inside, however. It was a far cry from the Garden, hidden away in a forest no one would traverse

Still, this place was nothing more than a lonely prison to her. Like always, Saya had a guard watching over her.

“Lady Saya, I’ve brought you your meal,” Jubilia said as she entered the room.

Jubilia had once failed to apprehend Saya. Being defeated by a commoner was a great disgrace to a knight, so in the best case, her title as a knight would have been stripped. In the worst, she could have been executed. However, thanks to Lernaean’s mediation and Saya’s successful retrieval, she had managed to escape with her status intact. In fact, Jubilia had received a promotion. She was now Saya’s personal guard.

The selection of such personnel came from a dearth of female knights to begin with, but it was more correct to say that Lernaean had wanted someone under his influence to take up the position. Having been given an opportunity to redeem herself, Jubilia’s attitude toward him was nothing short of reverent.

Even as Jubilia set down the meal, Saya had no intention of touching it. “I don’t want it.”

“It shall affect your body if you do not eat,” Jubilia told her with a troubled expression.

Saya wanted to trouble her more. The knight was one of the people responsible for shutting her in here, after all.

“I don’t want it!”

She violently pushed back the bowl, and some of the soup spilled out from it. Jubilia wiped off the stains in a panic.

“At least have some bread... Please.”

Jubilia held out some white bread wrapped up in a napkin. It pained Saya’s heart to look into the woman’s worried eyes. Jubilia really did seem to be

worried about her, as complicated as that made Saya feel. This woman was sincere and persistent. She believed she was doing the right thing—in her mind, Saya *belonged* in the royal palace under protection. As a noble, she likely couldn't even imagine that Saya saw this place as nothing more than a prison.

Saya timidly took the bread and tore off a piece with her fingers. It was surprisingly soft. The scent of wheat tickled her nose as she carried it over to her mouth.

"It's bad."

"Does it not suit your tastes?"

"Something harder is better. Hard enough so that the outside can't be broken by hand."

"Understood. I shall arrange for that next time."

"It doesn't really matter."

Even if she said that, Saya knew that they would never bring out such hard bread. What she desired did not exist here—the hard bread, the boy who had split it for her, the wheat field she had seen while eating. Saya let out a sigh as something suddenly came flying into view.

"We have come to make your acquaintance!" a boy yelled as he opened the door.

The boy had well-tailored, gold-and-violet clothes with gaudy decorations, showing he was quite the high-ranking noble. He was just about the same height as Saya. His blond hair was evenly cut above his ears, and the hair at his back swayed about in a braid. A lively light glimmered in his large, golden eyes. The lines drawn by his body were slender and feminine, but he gave off the impression of a cheerful boy.

"What in the name of—?!" Jubilia was shocked by his abrupt entrance.

Saya secretly felt queasy upon witnessing this woman's usually wise expression break. "Who are you?" she asked the boy, who quite literally leaped through the door and ran all the way up to Saya as she sat in bed.

"Please call Us Kyou, dearest sister!"

“Sister?”

“We are your little twin brother!”

Saya’s mind was reeling. She vaguely remembered having a younger brother, but that brother had died before she had become aware of the world. He pretty much didn’t exist within her memories. Apparently, he was actually this boy before her very eyes.

Kyou then went on to say something even more outrageous. “You are to be married to Us.”

Saya was having an increasingly difficult time keeping up with his words. The room grew even noisier as two more people came in. One was Lernaean, which made Saya feel unpleasant. He was the most detestable person there was to Saya. He was the one responsible for hurting Nagi and using his life as collateral to imprison Saya here.

The man who came in with him said, “My liege, it’s troubling for you to suddenly disappear on us.”

Saya knew this man, too. He was a little shorter than Lernaean, with a firm body; he looked to be in the prime of his life. His abundant beard and carefully combed hair exemplified his dignity.

He was Chairman Gratos, the largest influential power within the royal palace. When Saya had been brought here, he’d been the very first to greet her. Saya had ignored him at the time because of her heartache, however.

Gratos was referring to Kyou as “my liege,” which could only mean one thing. He was the Sovereign.

Saya hadn’t had the slightest idea that the Sovereign was this sort of person. She was pretty unclear on everything to begin with, seeing as she had spent her whole life in the Garden. All she had known was that the Sovereign was an absolute being even above nobles.

The Sovereign is... my little brother?

Seeing her reaction, Kyou turned to Lernaean. “Lord Granapalt, does Our sister still not know anything?”

“We believed it was necessary to explain everything in due time. Lady Saya is still bedridden from the distress of her kidnapping.”

“Hmph. A youngster filled with excuses,” Gratos spat at Lernaean before turning to face Saya. “Lady Saya, you are the elder sister of Lord Kyou here. You are kin to the one and only Sovereign.”

Jubilia let out a gasp. Saya was reminded once more that there was so much she didn’t know. She had never given it much thought. Who *was* she, exactly? She didn’t even know herself. The shock of this deeply shook Saya’s heart.

“Is there anything here you find inconvenient?” Gratos asked in a firm yet gentle voice.

Feeling very far away from this scene, this conversation, she could only murmur in response.

Gratos interpreted this as bewilderment. “I suppose it is difficult to be asked that all of a sudden. Lord Granapalt, do be sure to answer all of her demands. Understood?”

“As you will,” Lernaean said with a bow.

Gratos then urged Kyou on. “Come, my liege. Let us be off. Your next appointment awaits. Please excuse us, Lady Saya.”

“Hmph! Until we meet again, sister! We shall grant you whatever you wish for, so please feel free to ask anything of Us!”

Pressed by Gratos, Kyou left the room. A certain emotion welled up within Saya as she watched him walk off. She desperately wanted to know who she was.

“Wait! I’d like to ask you something.”

“I do apologize, but we must get going,” Gratos replied, his back still turned to her. “Aah, you, the guard. Inform Lady Saya of anything she wishes to know. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

To Gratos, Jubilia’s name wasn’t even worth remembering. He treated her like a simple object.

After they left the room, she asked Lernaean in a trembling voice, “W-Will this do? I am nothing more than a mere knight!”

Lernaean’s tone, on the other hand, was icy. “It was His Excellency’s command. Fulfill your duty.”

“I, Jubilia, shall take responsibility and answer any questions Lady Saya has! Erm, is Lady Saya truly Lord Kyou’s sister? I was completely under the impression she was the daughter of high-ranking nobility.”

“Indeed she is. It was kept from you because there was no need for you to know. You will not say a word to anyone, of course.”

“Understood!”

“I must get going. I’ll leave things here to you.”

With Lernaean gone, Saya finally felt at ease.

“So, will you answer my questions?” she asked Jubilia.

The knight seemed to have calmed down. “Yes. As you will. I cannot defy His Excellency’s command, after all.”

“Is there anything I shouldn’t inquire about?”

“His Excellency said to tell you anything you want to know. I do not possess boundless knowledge, but I will answer what I can.”

“Is that so? Still, there’s just so much I don’t know...” Where would she even begin? “What are nobles?”

“That is a difficult question... Nobles are the exalted, who lead long lives. Superior beings... That is what they say.”

“Superior to commoners, you mean?”

“Yes. We possess more strength than commoners. More valor. More knowledge... So they say.” Jubilia made a strange expression. It was as if she didn’t have much confidence in her words. “This may sound strange coming from me, considering I couldn’t beat a commoner,” she added. It seemed her loss against Keele still weighed heavily on her mind.

“How are nobles different from commoners?” Saya asked, recalling the similar

conversation she had had with Crow.

“First, our lifespans are different. Unlike commoners, who live short lives, nobles receive eternal life from Amrita. While receiving doses of Amrita, our bodies, um... retain a certain age, so they say.”

“And what age is that?”

Jubilia seemed hesitant for some reason. She understood Saya was looking for clarification. So, she answered, even though she found it difficult to say aloud. “The outward age of a noble’s body is said to reflect the maturity of the mind.”

“In other words, the reason I look younger than you is because my mind is still young?”

“Yes.”

Saya now understood why Jubilia found it awkward to touch on this subject; it was close to calling Saya immature right to her face.

“You don’t need to fuss over that. I know better than anyone how ignorant I am. That’s why I need to learn these things.”

Jubilia’s eyes widened a bit in surprise. “I believe that is a splendid attitude to have.”

“I don’t want you to praise me. So, Amrita. It’s a drug made from commoner blood, right? That’s why commoners participate in blood offerings.”

“Precisely. You’re aware of this, I see.”

Saya didn’t mention that she had learned of it while speaking with Nagi and the others. She simply nodded. “So, what happens if a commoner drinks Amrita?”

“That’s...” Jubilia trailed off, her brow furrowed.

“You said you would answer anything you can.”

“I have not seen it for myself. Before I was born, during the chaotic dawning of Agarthia, there were apparently such cases. It is likely that a commoner who drinks Amrita could obtain a longer lifespan and power, much like a noble. However, I do not believe the effects would be nearly as potent.”

“Why?”

“There is a difference in the effects of Amrita even among nobles. Such affinity is hereditary. The effect of Amrita is much stronger on the high-ranking nobles... or perhaps it’s the other way around.”

“The other way around?”

“Put simply, the families chosen by Amrita *became* high-ranking nobles.”

“Then commoners are people who weren’t chosen by Amrita.”

“Just as I said before, it occurred during a time of chaos in history. There are no official records to draw from. By the time history was being documented, society had already begun to split into nobles and commoners.”

“It hadn’t split completely?”

“Indeed. It is said that, though small in number, there were commoners who obtained Amrita and became nobles, and that there were also nobles who could no longer obtain Amrita and thus degenerated into commoners.”

“Hang on... Nobles become commoners if they don’t drink Amrita?”

“Yes. Without Amrita, a noble will age the same way a commoner does and revert to a human without any special powers.”

“That means nobles and commoners are the same, right? It’s just a matter of whether or not they have Amrita.”

Jubilia was momentarily stunned. Even though she had explained it herself, she had apparently never thought of it that way. “That is in fact what this implies.”

“So, why do commoners not drink Amrita?”

“Amrita is far too expensive for commoners to acquire. Moreover, it requires a periodic intake; there’s no point in procuring any without a stable supply. This is impossible for a commoner.”

“But isn’t Amrita made from commoner blood? Can’t they make it for themselves?”

“The formula to synthesize Amrita is a secret known only to a select few

nobles. Only the five supreme leaders of Congress are privy to it, including the chairman. Moreover, there's nowhere near enough of it. It takes the blood offerings of around a hundred commoners to keep a single noble alive. That's why the nobles levy the commoners with the duty of blood offering."

"Nagi said nobles steal the lifespans of commoners."

"The commoners believe so. Blood offerings reduce their lifespans, after all. The reason for this is unknown, but it is believed that some sort of life force is taken along with their blood in the process."

This meant that nobles didn't actually possess eternal life—they simply extended the time they had by sucking away the lives of a hundred commoners. When those hundred people were sucked dry, they moved on to stealing from the next generation. That was how they continued to live on.

"Vampires"—that was what Nagi had called them.

"What if... What if Amrita no longer existed? What if the blood offerings stopped?"

"It's difficult to imagine. I suppose the difference between nobles and commoners would vanish, and everyone would possess the same lifespan. It should be somewhat longer than the lifespans commoners currently possess. Having said that, it wouldn't be all that much longer. Perhaps... fifty or sixty years? There are theories that this was the case in the unrecorded eras. But never mind that; it's a heretical theory. Please forget about it."

"Heretical?"

"I mean, um... I rather fancy such history, so I read many books about it."

It was an unusual expression coming from Jubilia. Now that it had come to this, Saya's hunger for knowledge had increased tenfold. But where would she go from here?

"Who first created Amrita?"

"The Intelligence."

"Born of man yet wiser than man. Many, yet one. Recursive, yet multifaceted. That which is known only by name and existence."

Even Saya knew this prayer.

Jubilia continued for her, “‘In the beginning, there was man. Man gave birth to words. Words gave birth to the Intelligence. The Intelligence brought man to the birdcage and poured Amrita upon them.’ Such is how the land of Agarthā was created. It is believed this legend took shape during the dawn of Agarthā when all records of what came before were lost. For example, analysis of these legends reveals that the ratio of blood offerings needed and the system of bloodpence was born in this period.”

It felt like Jubilia would go on forever if left uninterrupted, so Saya decided to change the topic. There was a mountain of things she wanted to know that had to do with the *now*.

“Why don’t commoners stop the blood offerings? All it does is shorten their lives.”

“If the blood offerings stop, the very foundation of Agarthā will collapse. Nobles do not simply steal from commoners; we protect them. If not for the peace brought about by nobles, the age of endless strife that is said to have existed before Agarthā’s creation would return.”

“Jubilia, why are you looking away?”

“I’m not confident. About the assumption that nobles are superior to commoners, that is.”

“Because you lost to Nagi and Keele.”

“Yes.”

There was no point in teasing her about it, so Saya moved on. “So, what’s the Sovereign? Is he different from a noble?”

“The Sovereign is the one who inherits the Sovereign’s Blood.”

“What is that?”

“Special blood that only the Sovereign possesses. He is the only one who doesn’t require Amrita to live an eternal life. Actually, it’s the opposite; Amrita requires the Sovereign.” The seriousness in her tone gave Saya a glimpse into her devotion to the Sovereign. “I said earlier that the formula to synthesize

Amrita is only known to a select few, but there is one truth about it which is widely known among nobles. Amrita is made through the refinement of commoner blood and the Sovereign's Blood... In other words, the Sovereign is the one who possesses a necessary ingredient to create Amrita. The Sovereign shares his blood for this purpose. It isn't just the commoners who take part in the Blood Offering Festival—he bestows his blood upon us as well. His pain and love allow all in Agarthia to live.”

“And he was the one we met earlier.”

“Lord Kyou.”

“He called me his sister. Is he really my younger brother?”

“I haven't been informed of your personal history... I was surprised to hear it for myself. I never imagined the Sovereign would have any relatives. There was once royalty—those who shared the blood of the Sovereign—but that was a long, long time ago.”

“Don't nobles live forever?”

“The world at the time was in a state of chaos, so there are almost none who survived that era. If anyone experienced it firsthand, it is likely Chairman Gratos. I personally had no idea that royalty such as yourself even existed.”

Jubilia looked apologetic. She didn't seem to be lying; she truly hadn't been informed. Nevertheless, she definitely knew far more than Saya did.

Saya felt dizzy. Even though she had lived for so long already, she had truly been living in the dark. She didn't even know anything about herself.

“Jubilia, I have one more question.”

“Yes?”

“What about those who are neither nobles nor commoners? What are the Crestfolk?”

11

“We are the abandoned ones. We're even lowlier than commoners. In the

past, we weren't allowed to exist," Tess said as she walked alongside Nagi.

The two of them were headed to Leshva. More specifically, they were going to the hidden Crestfolk village where Keele was supposedly staying.

As it turned out, Keele was a Crestfolk. Now that Nagi thought about it, this made plenty of sense. After contracting bloodmark disease, Keele had been taken away. Rather than explain it to the young Nagi, the villagers had simply told him that his brother had died.

"So, when people say they've seen the ghost of someone who's supposed to be dead, that's what's going on?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Never mind. At any rate, I want to know more about the Crestfolk."

"I see. How much do you know about bloodmark disease?"

"Well, when someone contracts it, a bloodmark suddenly shows up on their body. Then, they have a fever for several days, but even when it breaks, the bloodmark never goes away. Those who catch it are exiled from their villages and become Crestfolk."

"You're unexpectedly well informed. I'd have punched you if you said it was sexually transmitted or something."

Nagi felt extremely awkward speaking about sex with a girl his age. With her weapon and bloodmark concealed, she didn't look like anything more than a sweet girl.

"So it really doesn't?"

"Bloodmark disease isn't contagious. Not through touching, and not through sex." Tess was being even franker about it, causing Nagi to squirm. "For example, nothing will happen to you if you touch me," Tess added as she held her hand out.

Nagi gripped her hand, and Tess shook him off in a fluster.

"Hey! Why are you touching me?!"

"I mean, you said it'd be okay."

“That’s not the point!” Tess’ cheeks flushed crimson, and she resumed speaking to gloss over the moment. “However, there are many cases where a blood offering is the trigger for catching the disease. That’s probably why people got the idea that it can be transferred through blood.”

It occurred to Nagi that Keele might have vanished around the time of the Blood Offering Festival. He wasn’t entirely sure, though; it had been many years since then.

“What happens when a bloodmark appears?” he asked.

“You get driven out of your home. Doesn’t matter if it’s a village like the one you came from, the royal capital, or wherever else. After that, you get arrested right away.”

“Huh?”

“When a bloodmark appears, the one responsible for blood offerings in the area makes a report. Once they do, the officials decide on a date for the exile. Once someone gets exiled, they’re always arrested immediately afterward.”

“Why do such a thing?”

“You’d think it’d be way faster just to come arrest us directly, right? They probably don’t want people to go into hiding out of fear. In the past, they used to mercilessly hang anyone who caught the disease, so a ton of people apparently hid the fact they had it. Even if they executed the whole family upon finding out, it’s perfectly natural for relatives to be unwilling to send their own family members to death just because of a disease.”

“That must be why the nobles compromised with an exile so that people don’t go into hiding.”

“Exactly. It’s easier for people to accept an exile. That’s just how much they hate the idea of Crestfolk hiding among them. They go that far because they want to kill us all.”

“What do you mean? The Crestfolk don’t get killed, right? I mean, you’re still here.”

“I’m alive, but I’m as good as dead. After we’re caught,” Tess said, her voice

icy, “we get neutered.”

“Neutered? Like, what they do to animals?”

“That’s right. They call it ‘sterilization’ or something.” As she spoke, Tess sounded terribly detached. “If you don’t believe me, then I can show you my scar tonight. It’s not something I can show you out here.”

“Uh, you don’t mean...”

“I’m all skin and bones, so don’t get your hopes up. I was sterilized before my butt and breasts started to grow, so my body looks more like a man’s. The all-important part is marred with a hideous scar. A commoner like you would surely puke if you saw it.”

Tess’ lips curved into a self-deprecating smile, but her eyes were as cold and dark as a winter night. Nagi could feel the tip of her deep despair. He was suddenly reminded that there had been no children in the hidden village.

“After mutilating both the men and women, the nobles release their captives in a state where they can no longer have children. That’s when our fellow Crestfolk seek them out and bring them to one of the hidden villages. There are villages all over the place. One in every hundred people has bloodmark disease, after all.”

“How do you all survive in the hidden villages?”

“Banditry, of course,” Tess replied with a laugh. “I’m kidding. Banditry is way too dangerous. The knights would come kill us right away if we resorted to that. In just a few cases, there are those who do that kind of thing as a last resort, but there’s no way we could survive off of it. We secretly sow fields in the mountains, we hunt... Well, we pretty much do the same things as you commoners. The only real difference is that we don’t do blood offerings.”

“You don’t?”

“Seems they can’t use our blood. That’s why they call us ‘Tainted.’ It’s also the reason the nobles hate us.”

“Without blood offerings, do you have longer lifespans?”

“Yup. The Crestfolk live for a long time. Our lifestyles are pretty harsh, so a lot

of people die from sickness or injuries. Those who die of old age live far longer than any commoner, though. You remember the chief?"

Zamin certainly *did* look older than anyone Nagi had seen before.

"He hasn't told me his actual age, but he's apparently over fifty. Just so you know, he's not a former noble."

Nagi was shocked by this. It was impossible for a commoner to live that long.

"Still, it doesn't do us any good. We can't leave behind children," Tess added sadly.

"Isn't it better to have a long life?"

"Our dreams can't be fulfilled. A short life where you can fulfill your dreams, or a long one where you can't... Which do you think is better?"

An image of a girl in white suddenly came to Nagi's mind. He grasped at his chest over his clothes. After confirming the feel of the necklace within, the phantom of the girl who had given it to him posed a question.

"“Being granted a long life without purpose only brings suffering. Only when one acquires hope does their life become their own. Even if one lives a long life, if there is no hope there, it doesn't belong to oneself. Is that truly living?”"

"Hm?"

"That's what Saya said when I first met her."

"How did you answer her?"

"I said I could kind of understand how pointless such a life could be if it just went on and on."

Tess stared at Nagi seriously. Her pretty black eyes seemed so full of depth. The chestnut locks swaying about pulled him in even deeper.

Strangely flustered by this, Nagi continued, "Saya was imprisoned there. I didn't know it back then, but since she's a noble, she was there for an unimaginable amount of time. I didn't think that was all there was to Saya's life, so I wanted to set her free."

Tess held her steady gaze. Then, as though snapping out of a trance, she

blinked and slapped him on the shoulder.

“You’re not a bad guy. I’m jealous of her.”

“Huh?”

“I would’ve loved to make kids with a guy like you.”

Tess was being far too candid. It was bad for his heart. Nagi couldn’t look her in the eyes anymore.

“She sounds like a real good girl. Mm, I’m starting to feel like I want to save her too,” she declared in strangely high spirits. “Okay. After saving Saya, you two make a kid. Then, give that kid to me.”

“Uhh...”

Nagi didn’t know what to say. Were all Crestfolk girls this way?

“You can make a whole bunch if you want. Well, we can worry about that later. Give it some thought.”

“How the hell did you find me?! Oh, that you, Tess?”

“Long time no see, Keele.”

“How’d you guys end up together?”

After walking for an entire day, Nagi and Tess had arrived at the Crestfolk village near Leshva and found Keele.

“I have a request,” Nagi said.

“No,” Keele answered immediately.

“At least hear me out?”

“Why’re you with this punk, Tess?”

“Nagi promised to give me kids.”

“The fuck?” Keele’s jaw dropped.

“People will get the wrong idea, so stop putting it that way. Also, I didn’t promise anything,” Nagi cut in.

“Wait, kids? But...” Keele, regaining his composure, gave Tess a sympathetic look.

She nodded as if to assuage his concerns. “It’s okay. I told him about the sterilization.”

At that moment, Nagi made an unpleasant connection. “Did it happen to you too, Keele?”

A dark light shone deep within Keele’s eyes.

“That’s right. They fucked with all our bodies. Did you notice the guys back in the village? Almost none of them have beards. Everyone’s also pretty short. I look like this ’cause I didn’t catch it until my body was fully grown. Anyway, that’s how things turn out when they take it away.”

Nagi instinctively lowered his gaze, then looked back up in a panic.

Keele laughed. “Wanna see?” His teasing tone was the same as always, but there was a gloominess in his expression that Nagi had never seen before.

“Why are you so eager to show it off? Both you and Tess.”

Keele’s eyes lit up with surprise, or perhaps exasperation. “You wanted to show him too, Tess?”

“Mhm. I told Nagi I’d be fine with showing him. He probably doesn’t want to see it, though.”

“N-No, I, umm...”

“You always been such a playboy? Tired of the little princess already?”

“Like hell I am. I’m here so I can save Saya.”

The air about Keele changed. “Hmm, that so? But I said no, pipsqueak.”

“I need the strength to convince you. According to Crow, I just have to gather a bunch of comrades for the fight.”

“Sounds like Crow, all right. Well, yeah, I’d be fine with you joinin’ if you can do that much. We *are* plannin’ a big ol’ attack and all. Go on, then.”

“That’s why I went to Zamin and the Crestfolk.”

“No way that’d work. The stubborn ol’ rock gave you some bullshit reason, yeah? Went on about the crest or whatever, I bet.”

“You asked him too?”

“That old fart was all up my ass about joinin’ Cobalt. Well, I somehow got him to accept that.”

“That’s what I’m here for. How did you do that?”

“You came all the way here just to ask me?”

Nagi nodded.

“Oh come on,” Keele said with a serious expression. “You needed to convince that stubborn old rock to convince me, so you came here to ask *me* how to do it? Aren’t you a little *too* stupid?”

“Even I think it’s kind of silly,” Nagi replied. “Regardless, I can only do what I’m capable of.”

He was going to save Saya. He had promised to protect her, after all. To that end, he didn’t care if he had to kneel before Tess or endure Keele’s mockery.

Keele took his little brother’s glare head-on, then gave a vicious, serpentine smile. “In that case, you could’ve just convinced me in the first place, yeah?”

“No way you were going to give in to anything I had to say.”

Nagi’s instincts, built up from years of hunting, were sending off alarm bells in his head.

“Yeah, you’re right. So try and do it with somethin’ other than your mouth!” Keele yelled as he drew the sword at his waist.

His slash was serious. Nagi managed to dodge it because he was already on guard, but he had to jump with all his might to get out of the way. He briefly wondered where Keele had gotten the sword.

“So it really did come to this,” Tess muttered.

She had mentioned beforehand that a fight was likely, considering this was Keele they were dealing with. Now wasn’t really the time to be thinking about that, however. Nagi drew his favored knife from its sheath.

“Hey, I like the face you’re makin’? Even though you’re still a brat who cries and pisses his pants.”

“That was years ago!”

Even though Nagi knew this was bait, he still charged at his brother. Keele easily dodged the swift strike.

“You get a little better than before?”

Nagi had, in fact, improved his combat skills. It was all thanks to Tess. Nagi’s usual battle tactics were meant for hunting, so Tess had taught him how to deal with a human opponent—and Keele in particular. It had made things easier for him, but his brother was no normal human; after all, this was a man who nearly equaled a knight.

“That ain’t gonna be enough to do me in, though. Your aim’s not bad, but you’re way too predictable. Your blows ain’t that sharp, either. But you know what you lack the most?” Keele continued to evaluate Nagi while casually dodging his attacks. The gap in experience between them was far too large. “It’s resolve.”

Keele’s strikes grew more and more forceful.

“What you need to fight against nobles is resolve. It doesn’t matter what for. You just need serious willpower. They’re monsters. Simply lookin’ at one is enough to make you tremble. That’s why you need to be able to handle that fear before you can *really* fight.”

“And you have that?” Nagi asked, barely dodging Keele’s attacks.

“I’ll never forgive those fuckin’ nobles for laughin’ at me while they screwed with my body. I’m definitely gonna butcher the lot of ’em.”

The darkness in Keele’s eyes was endlessly deep. Did Nagi have such resolve himself? Of course he did.

“I’m going to keep my promise with Saya!”

“Now’s not the time for such naïve bullshit.”

Keele’s swinging longsword was like a violent gale. It would surely take Nagi’s life if it struck him. However, compared to Lernaean’s sudden and

overwhelming attack, this was far easier. Nagi fearlessly stepped in and slashed at his brother.

“Atta boy! That one wasn’t bad,” Keele said with a slight trace of admiration.

In the next instant, a chill ran down Nagi’s spine.

“But lettin’ your guard down makes it all worth shit!”

Nagi reflexively leaped to the right just as Keele’s sword swung down on the spot.

“Haha! You dodged?!”

Keele laughed heartily. He only looked this way when he fought against strong opponents, like Jubilia. This battle maniac was beginning to enjoy his skirmish with his little brother.

“I see. Seems like you found some kinda grit, huh?”

“Admit that I’m strong.”

“You fend off this next one, and I will.”

With that, Keele took a stance. He bent his forward leg and extended his back leg while holding his sword over his right shoulder, pointing its tip at Nagi. The pose was familiar—indeed, it was the same move which had delivered a wound to Jubilia.

“Get some!”

The contour of Keele’s sword seemed to blur. It was a dreadfully sharp thrust. If that was all there was to it, Nagi could manage, but he knew there was more to come. It would be impossible to dodge without seeing through the mix of truth and deception behind the strike.

Nagi didn’t move from where he was standing. He simply tilted his neck ever so slightly. In the next instant, he heard a click of the tongue as Keele’s sword sliced off a small piece of his ear. Pain seared through his head. It was fortunate he had seen this move beforehand being used against Jubilia; if not, he definitely would’ve taken a direct hit. Even though he’d known the nature of the attack, dodging it like this was pretty much a one-in-ten gamble.

A split second later, Nagi was sent flying by Keele's powerful kick.

"Too bad. You didn't block it."

"Hey! That's unfair!" Tess yelled.

"'Unfair' my ass. I said I'd acknowledge him if he fended it off. He's the dumbass for letting his guard down 'cause he thought it was over."

Despite the painful churning of his stomach, Nagi managed to get back to his feet, once more holding his knife at the ready.

"No. You couldn't block it. We're done."

"Please..."

"Puppy eyes ain't gonna change my mind."

Tess ran over to Nagi. "Hey, Keele, isn't this going too far? You were completely intent on killing him just now! Nagi's your brother!"

"Dammit, y'all are such whiners. Fine, I'll at least tell you how to convince that stubborn old rock."

"Really?!" Tess exclaimed.

"It's simple. You just smash shit in his house until he accepts."

"Wow."

"When I did, he told me to get out, so I got out and joined Cobalt."

"Hang on, that doesn't sound like you convinced him at all."

"Like I care. I haven't seen the old fart ever since."

"Weren't you just kicked out?"

"Maybe."

Tess, exasperated by Keele's answer, then turned to Nagi. "Sorry... Looks like I misunderstood."

"It's fine."

Tess looked apologetic, whereas Keele began haughtily lecturing Nagi.

"If you're serious, then think of more ways to take on vampires. Their physical

abilities are fundamentally different from us commoners. Not only that, but they've also got those damned blood calibers. Well, at least you've got luck on your side. I mean, you're still alive after seeing a vampire get serious and show off his true abilities." Then, Keele laughed, clearly in good humor. "Those assholes rarely ever use their blood calibers. It's supposed to be their ace in the hole in a fight between nobles, so they like to keep those things a big secret from each other."

12

"I want you to show me your blood caliber again."

After Kyou and the others left, Saya continued to assail Jubilia with questions and demands as they occurred to her. She wanted to know what she was, which naturally led to inquiries concerning nobles and their blood calibers. Crow had mentioned that they were powers unique to nobles, but she knew nothing beyond that. Jubilia's slender, red sword and Lernaean's mysterious power that had injured Nagi were both blood calibers.

"That's... I can't possibly bring it out here," Jubilia muttered as she took a look around.

"Then you can show me somewhere else."

"I suppose the palace guards' training ground should be vacant at this time."

"Okay, so let's go."

"Erm, you aren't supposed to leave this room."

"Didn't you agree to answer *all* of my questions?"

"That's certainly true, but—"

"Did your commands include keeping me from leaving this room?"

"It is forbidden to bring you out of the royal palace, Lady Saya. It's too dangerous."

"Isn't this training ground within the bounds of the palace?"

"It is."

“Then it should be fine, right? You can just say you were acting in accordance with the chairman’s command.”

Saya realized she was special to the other nobles, probably because she was the older sister to the Sovereign. Apparently, they weren’t capable of forcibly restraining her. That was why Lernaean had used Nagi’s life as collateral to get her to obey. Even though they were imprisoning her here, they were doing so under the guise of protecting her. It seemed that it wasn’t possible for Lernaean to order her to be confined to this one room. Using the chairman’s command as a shield to force the issue was likely to succeed.

Just as Saya had planned, Jubilia caved and brought her out of the room. They didn’t meet a single person on the way there. Both the room Saya was being held in and the training ground were apparently quite deep within the palace. She was on the lookout for any windows she could use to escape along the way but, unfortunately, found none.

Indeed, Saya had been thinking of how to escape from this place the entire time. However, something within her had begun to change.

There was her little brother, Kyou. Then, there were nobles, whom she knew nothing about and had never even *attempted* to learn about until now.

Saya was far too ignorant of both herself and the world. She felt that this needed to change, and what better place to acquire such knowledge than this very palace? All things considered, maybe it wasn’t such a bad thing that she was here right now. Having said that, her feelings of revulsion from being held prisoner hadn’t faded.

Above all else, she wanted to see Nagi. Her heart continued to waver between wanting to know more and yearning for him.

The training ground for the palace guards was a large, open space. In this area of the palace, the ceiling was about three times higher than those of the other rooms, which were already higher than those in the Garden to begin with. Regardless, there were still a few rooms in the royal palace that were even bigger.

There would be no problem swinging around a sword or spear in such a large room. The walls were soiled and scuffed—likely a result of countless sparring

matches.

“Oh, the stains...”

“My apologies for not cleaning this room thoroughly enough. I really shouldn’t have brought you to such a place.”

“That’s not my point. I was just wondering what kind of training would leave marks all the way up there.”

Dark, messy stains went up the walls to a ridiculous height.

“A noble is able to jump to such heights with ease.”

“I don’t feel like I would be capable of the same, though.”

Saya didn’t possess any transcendent physical abilities like Jubilia did. Her strength was actually lacking compared to Nagi.

“That is simply because your powers have yet to awaken. Young nobles gain the qualifications of an adult upon obtaining their blood caliber. During this time, they also draw even more strength from the Amrita in their bodies.”

“In other words, I’m not an adult yet?”

“You’re not recognized as one in noble society, but...” Jubilia hesitated to speak any further.

“But?”

“This applies to the common noble. I don’t know how it works in the case of royalty. Most nobles aren’t even capable of conceptualizing royalty, aside from Lord Kyou. I am the same in this regard.”

“Does Kyou possess a blood caliber?”

Jubilia was shocked at how Saya showed no hesitation in referring to the Sovereign so casually, but she immediately regained her composure. Saya was the Sovereign’s elder sister, and Jubilia knew he would want Saya to address him accordingly.

“I don’t know. I forgot to mention something important. Blood calibers are not meant to be shown off to others. Nobles avoid letting others know too much about their blood calibers. Doing so might endanger their lives; after all,

there was a time when nobles constantly fought among one another.”

“Blood calibers are the only weapons capable of wounding a noble, so it’s better to keep them a secret from the others in case they become your enemies?”

“Precisely,” Jubilia affirmed with a nod.

Suddenly, something dawned on Saya. “Oh, was it rude of me to ask you to show me your blood caliber?”

“No, that’s not the case. You have already witnessed my blood caliber, and I serve as your guard. It is not something for me to hide from you. However, it would help if you refrain from asking other nobles the same thing. It’s just, how to put it... It’s terribly rude.”

“Got it.”

“In any case, I know nothing about Lord Kyou’s blood caliber. Will seeing mine be enough to satisfy you?”

Saya nodded.

“Please take a look at the ring on my thumb,” Jubilia said, holding out her right hand.

The ring was a heavy-looking thing that extended from her first knuckle to the second. Judging by its dull luster, it clearly wasn’t meant to be ornamental. Saya could tell at a glance that it served a far more practical purpose.

As Jubilia bent her thumb, a blade snapped out of the ring. It was slightly longer than her thumb, the tip of it peeking just past her nail. Saya gulped as Jubilia pushed the tip of the blade into her own index finger. Blood began to flow.

“At this rate, the wound will seal itself. Therefore, you need to excite the blood before that happens. Excitation: Blood Blade!”

The flow of blood coming out of Jubilia’s finger grew more vigorous and took on the shape of a sword.

“This is my blood caliber.”

Her slender sword solidified and sparkled with a crimson light. Its blade even felt elegant. Jubilia herself gave off an imposing air as she wielded it, making the scene all the more impressive.

“So pretty!” Saya blurted.

“I... Um, thank you,” Jubilia said, blushing.

“You’re quite shy about it, huh?”

“It is said that a blood caliber reflects a noble’s wisdom and everything within them. A blood caliber is the very embodiment of a noble’s pride.”

“So this sword can hurt a noble?”

“Yes. That’s not all, either; this is the embodiment of my heart. So long as my spirit is not broken, it shall never shatter or crumble away.”

Jubilia drew the sword at her waist with her left hand, then threw it into the air. A single slash followed.

Her movements were so smooth, Saya forgot to breathe. How much devotion to training did it take to reach this level? A high-pitched, clear tone rang in the air as the sword Jubilia had thrown was split clean in two.

“It cannot be compared to a normal weapon made of steel.”

“Amazing. You must’ve practiced a great deal.” Saya felt both admiration and envy toward Jubilia. She possessed no such strength herself.

“No... I lost to that man despite my being a noble. My skills are still sorely lacking.”

“Oh, right,” Saya said. She then recalled the one other blood caliber she had witnessed before. “What is Lernaean’s blood caliber? Oh, I guess I’m not supposed to ask.”

“I do not know for myself, but Lord Lernaean’s blood caliber is said to be a whip. It moves at such a speed that it cannot be captured by the eye. Lord Lernaean does not hide it and has freely spoken about it before. I’m sure it’s an indication of how confident he is.”

“A whip, huh?”

At that time, Lernaean had suddenly launched an attack from a distance. If it truly had been an invisible whip, it must have been moving at an unbelievable speed and with devastating destructive force.

“I want to be stronger too. Hey, could you teach me how to use a sword?”

“Of course,” Jubilia replied, but quickly changed her mind. “Forgive me, but with all due respect, allow me to state my opinion. Everyone has their own role to play. I was born as a knight; therefore, I lived to push my sword to its very limits. Lady Saya, you should have a role of your own. There is more than one kind of strength.”

“A role for me? Do you know what that might be?”

“I do not, unfortunately. The only ones who would be those of a higher rank than me. I believe they are the ones who brought you here.”

“Meaning?”

“I’ve been wondering if your escape from the Garden and eventual arrival at the palace was all plotted by someone beforehand.”

“How so?”

It was Nagi who had taken Saya from the Garden. He had done so of his own will.

“I think it was unexpected for you to escape the Garden on your own. However, I feel like... his intrusion was well within somebody’s plans.”

“Why’s that?”

“Do you remember when we first met?”

“You came looking for me at Nagi’s village.”

“That’s right. And that was within a day of your escape. Do you not find that strange? The Garden was hidden. Who informed the capital that an incident had occurred there? The one and only guard was killed.”

“Keele was the one who told Nagi about the Garden. Does that mean Keele instigated Nagi into doing it for some noble’s sake?”

“It probably wasn’t his doing. His resentment toward nobles is very real.

However, there was likely someone who fed him the information.”

“Cobalt.”

Saya recalled Crow’s face. That man was terribly well informed about all kinds of things. How had he come across such knowledge? Had it perhaps come from the nobles he claimed to oppose?

“Where in Agarthia did they manage to obtain that liquid? ‘Halahala,’ they called it. They say some heretical scholar made it, and a noble’s blood is the core component.”

“Meaning it couldn’t possibly come from anyone but a noble?”

“Yes. Noble society is always in conflict—a den of vipers waiting to pull the rug out from beneath their rivals. It wouldn’t be strange for someone out there to try to make use of you as royalty.”

“You’re saying someone like that brought me all the way here?”

Jubilia nodded. “The original plan was likely to have the guard in the Garden defeat the intruder. After that, a rescue squad would arrive and bring you back to the royal palace because of the attack. Even with Halahala, I believe it was unexpected for a noble to be defeated by a commoner. I still can’t believe it, even now. The one who was stationed there was sluggish, and that commoner boy had rather deft movements. Regardless, it’s hard to believe he defeated a noble.”

“I might’ve done something,” Saya said quietly. She remembered that feeling of exaltation, of omnipotence, of something being born.

Saya looked at the crystallized sword in Jubilia’s hand. The color was vibrant, yet somehow ominous. Its light was dull, yet it shone beautifully.

“Why are you telling me about all this? Your loyalties lie with Lernaean, don’t they?”

Without hesitation, Jubilia replied, “Yes. I owe Lord Lernaean a great deal for saving me.”

That was precisely why Saya found it strange.

“You’re trying to avoid mentioning it, but I believe Lernaean was the

mastermind behind all of this. He was suspiciously well prepared. Don't you think it would be to his detriment for you to tell me all about his plans?"

"I do, but I couldn't just stand by and watch." Jubilia averted her gaze. "Lady Saya, it was... it was as if you had lost the will to live. You weren't even taking a single meal. But ever since Lord Kyou came by, you have been an entirely different person."

"I wanted to know what I am."

"And I would like to answer you as best I can. That is why I've told you all this."

"Thank you."

Jubilia was kind, though it was hard for Saya to consider her an ally. The knight had pledged her allegiance to Lernaean, after all. If Lernaean was the one who had plotted to bring Saya here, then everything had played out in the palm of his hand. Additionally, there could be others who were scheming along with him.

But who? It would be someone overjoyed by her coming here. One such person came to mind.

"Hey, Jubilia. There's someone I'd like to talk to."

"And who is that?"

Saya apologized to Jubilia in her heart. She was planning to take advantage of her kindness.

"Kyou. I'd like to meet with my little brother."

13

"You came back?" Zamin asked as he lay in bed, watching Tess and Nagi enter his house.

After meeting with Keele, the two of them had returned to Garuga Village once more. Zamin's expression was as unreadable as ever, but his voice contained an air of exasperation.

“I’ve come to ask you one more time. I want you to fight by my side.”

“It cannot be. Not with you.”

“It’s true that I don’t possess a crest. I’m no Crestfolk. I’m just one of the commoners who forced you to live in this place.”

Zamin stared at Nagi from deep beneath his wrinkles.

“I thought the Crestfolk were frightening,” Nagi continued. “The adults of the village told me they were a bunch of mountain bandits with a weird disease, calling them ‘the Tainted.’ I believed them.”

Tess looked at him. Her eyes were criticizing him, demanding to know why he was saying such a thing.

“But now, I don’t really know. Tess taught me that was wrong. Bloodmark disease isn’t contagious, and you aren’t mountain bandits.”

The village elder nodded gently.

“From your point of view, I may be an enemy. However, I’d still like all of you to fight by my side. It seems we’ll be able to obtain a large quantity of Halahala, so we’ll use it to give the nobles a big scare. By doing so, we can get them to rethink their ways. We might be able to get them to stop the blood offerings—and I’d like to get them to stop the sterilizations too.”

Tess suddenly held her breath.

Zamin turned toward her. “You informed a crestless of this?”

“He’s Keele’s little brother. It concerns his family. Isn’t it fine to tell him?”

“The crestless are not our family.”

Furious, Tess shot back, “This is what I hate about our village! Yeah, we were cast away. But the family I had back then is still my family!”

“They do not think so.”

“There are those who do. Just like Nagi here. Right?”

“Yeah. I still consider Keele to be my older brother.”

He still hated him, too, but he kept that part to himself.

“I figured it out after talking with Nagi. It’s obvious that the commoners would fear us because they know nothing *about* us. I mean, we don’t tell them anything about ourselves.”

“Staying hidden is the only way we will be allowed to exist.”

“‘Allowed?’” Nagi repeated, feeling the weight of the word. “The nobles were the ones who decided that, right?”

Zamin kept silent.

“Listen, Zamin, I know you’re thinking of what’s best for the Crestfolk. You’re doing what you can to keep them from being murdered by the nobles, which is why you’re keeping your word. So long as you stay hidden, they won’t kill you. But is that really for the best? Tess said you had all been killed because being sterilized is the same as being dead. Not that I’m of the same opinion.”

Zamin shut his eyes. It wasn’t clear whether he was even awake when he did so. However, he was surely listening to Nagi, so the boy continued.

“To Tess, it’s as painful as dying. I’m sure more of your people feel the same way. We need to get them to stop the sterilizations.”

“So, you’re saying that is why we should join the fight. Your brother said the same. Still, it cannot be. The only one we stand by is the bearer of the True Crest. It has been decided.”

“Fine, then.”

In the face of Zamin’s stubborn attitude, Nagi resolved to handle this another way.

“Wait, you’re giving up?” Tess asked.

“I’m not. I’m going to convince the people here one by one.”

“Huh?” She gave him a look of bewilderment.

“First is you, Tess. Please fight by my side. Let’s stop the nobles from performing sterilizations. Let’s get them to acknowledge the existence of the Crestfolk. Last time, you said you couldn’t join my fight. You said I was different from you. That’s true. All of you were driven out because of this disease, made so you can’t have children, and forced to live in these hidden villages. Your lives

were stolen from you. You're different from an idiot like me who's just acting on impulse. But I know of one other girl who had her life stolen from her."

The image of a girl with silver hair and vivid crimson eyes flickered in Nagi's mind.

"I want the Crestfolk to fight alongside Saya. I want to retake her life from the nobles."

"That girl is Lady Saya?" Zamin uttered, his sunken eyes flying open. When Nagi nodded, he murmured, "Then she really is the one..."

Seeing him like this, Tess cocked her head. "Chief? What's wrong?"

Zamin faced Nagi, paying no attention to her. "Do you seek our strength for Lady Saya's sake?"

"That's right. I can't leave her all locked up."

Zamin trembled. He was hesitating tremendously. His mouth opened, then closed again. Nagi and Tess exchanged glances; both of them were befuddled by Zamin's current state.

After some time, the wrinkled man finally spoke. "Tess, what do you wish to do?"

"I think... it's fine for us to fight alongside Nagi. I hate commoners, but he's all right. He's different from other commoners. I feel like it's okay to trust him."

Zamin nodded slowly and deeply.

"Very well. Nagi, you may gather whoever wishes to fight with you. A fair number are sure to join. However, you must absolutely not pressure them into it."

"Really?!" Tess yelled in shock. "No way! You really convinced the chief."

"What are you saying? I'm not *that* obstinate."

"That's not true. Everyone says your head is harder than stone."

Nagi stood there in a daze, unable to believe his ears. Why had Zamin suddenly changed his mind? It was immediately after Saya's name had come up.

“You did it, Nagi!”

Nagi’s thoughts came to a complete stop when Tess hugged him. Her body was far softer than he imagined, which made him feel like he was going numb.

After leaving Garuga village, Nagi and Tess quickly made their way to the capital. He asked a passerby about the bar Crow had told him to look for, which was in the fifth block of the Marinera district.

“Marinera?” the stranger asked, giving Nagi a dubious stare before looking awkwardly at Tess.

“The red-light district?” Tess mumbled.

Marinera was the pleasure district of the capital. It wasn’t a place to openly ask others about, especially not with a female companion in tow.

“Cobalt’s in a place like *that*?”

“A convenient spot to hide, don’t you think?” Nagi replied.

The Wild Rose was a bar on one of the seedier streets in Marinera. Cobalt seemed to prefer having bases in these sorts of areas. After passing through the front door, Nagi was greeted by Keele and Crow.

“Hey, ya made it.”

“Hello there, Nagi. What’s the password?” Crow asked.

“Is there a point to that?”

“I suppose not,” Crow responded with a grin.

“That’s the kinda guy he is. You’re better off not talkin’ with him too much. It’ll just piss you off,” Keele added with a bitter expression as he knocked back a shot of liquor. “So, how’d it go?”

“I convinced Zamin. Fifty Crestfolk warriors will take part in the attack.”

Keele’s eyes bulged wide as he lowered his glass back to the table. “You shittin’ me?”

“It’s true,” Tess replied.

After speaking with Zamin, Nagi and Tess had gone around speaking to the Crestfolk. Once they knew Zamin had given permission, the villagers' reactions had been dramatically different from before. Many of them wished to take part in the fight. The excitement written on their faces had shown Nagi just how much the Crestfolk were being oppressed.

"You've got some real cozy vibes goin' on with Tess now, huh? You done with that princess? There's plenty of places you can shack up around here. How 'bout you go teach him your lady bits still work?"

Tess angrily glared back at Keele. "Quit joking about that stuff."

"All it's good for is jokin' now," Keele muttered bitterly.

"At any rate, the Crestfolk, huh?" Crow interjected.

"You have a problem with that?" Tess asked in a sharp voice.

"None. Keele's the same, right?" he answered, lightly sidestepping the issue. "Cobalt doesn't worry about that sort of thing. We don't have the leisure to."

"There're guys who hate the Crestfolk, though. Like Senak."

"Isn't he fine with it now? You hold too much of a grudge, Keele."

"I wonder 'bout that."

"I'm actually quite impressed, Nagi. I did think of looking to the Crestfolk for help, and I even asked Keele to convince them, but we haven't had any luck until now."

"The old rock hardly budes. I never thought you'd actually win him over."

"Splendidly done. Even if Keele objects, I would like you to join Cobalt."

"I ain't opposed no more. A deal's a deal," Keele cut in with a click of the tongue.

Crow ignored him. "Nagi, it seems you don't understand how big a deal this is. There are many Crestfolk in exile. If they were all to join us, we would far outnumber the nobles."

Nagi was shocked. He hadn't realized that there were so many Crestfolk. He had heard there were many hidden villages aside from the one Tess came from,

but it was far beyond what he had imagined.

“We’ve also secured more Halahala. Everything is ready for the attack on Ronadyphe Prison.”

“I didn’t ask you since you said I wasn’t coming last time, but what’s Ronadyphe Prison?”

“Oh, I didn’t tell you about it? Ronadyphe Prison is where they keep the most deadly criminals in the capital. At the moment, there is a scholar named Dimitri imprisoned there. He’s a noble, but he was arrested because of his research. We want to release him and make him our ally.”

“What kind of research?”

“He was studying Amrita. In doing so, he created an unbelievable byproduct,” Crow said with theatrical gestures as he peered into Nagi’s eyes. “Halahala.”

“So you’ll be able make more Halahala if he’s with you? I won’t let you use Saya’s blood, you know.”

“It’s okay. We haven’t been sitting here twiddling our thumbs since the last time we spoke. We have a different prospect regarding that matter. Oh, but don’t worry; that doesn’t mean we won’t save Saya. The royal palace is still our final target.” Crow paused, holding out his hand. “Welcome to Cobalt, Nagi.”

After that, they quickly discussed the details of the attack.

“The operation will take place in a week. There’s a relay station about a kilometer west of Ronadyphe Prison—the Silver Doe, another one of our bases. Please meet us there at sunset. Tess, I’ll send you over to your village with a cogwagon tonight, so please inform anyone who’ll be participating. Feel free to relax here until then. We’ve taken down the signboard, so nobody should come in.”

With that, Crow and Keele left the bar. Nagi and Tess were now alone.

“Thanks,” Nagi said.

Looking depressed, Tess murmured, “I’m sure many people will die. I mean, we’re storming into a prison full of nobles.”

“Do you think we’ll lose?”

“I don’t know. Crow seems awfully confident, but that actually makes me more anxious. Even if we win, there’s no way everybody will live through it.”

Nagi was in complete agreement. He had gotten the Crestfolk involved just because he wanted to see Saya again; he had never thought of the sacrifices that would be made as a result.

Tess watched him for a moment. “Don’t make that face. We’re the ones who chose to do this.”

She faced him directly and leaned in. A smell like summer grass hung in the air. It seemed terribly out of place considering the seedy bar and their somber conversation.

“I might die, too.”

With a strange look in her eyes, Tess hopped off the barstool and came right up beside Nagi. She was so close that he felt like he could almost hear the swishing of her hair, and the scent coming off of her grew even stronger.

He couldn’t look away from her eyes. They were like polished black stones. At that moment, Tess pressed her lips against Nagi’s. The feeling of her warm, moist lips paralyzed him. He couldn’t even close his eyes. With Tess’ gaze locked on him so closely, he could see his own reflection.

Tess’ lips separated from his. They had only touched for a short moment, but the soft sensation lingered.

She might die, Nagi thought to himself. *This girl might die because of me.*

“Tess...” Muttering her name was the best he could muster.

“Did you hate it?” she asked.

“I didn’t.”

“Then it’s fine.” Tess smiled. She was like a single flower blooming in a wasteland.

“You can’t die,” he said.

“I don’t plan on dying so easily, but I don’t want to be afraid of death, either. I’ve decided what I want to do with my life.”

After that, the only sound audible in the bar was the wind howling against the walls.

The Silver Doe was a cheap, inconspicuous inn a short distance from one of the main roads connected to the capital. Its primary patrons were travelers without much coin to spare.

As evening approached, more and more people congregated at the inn. The only other time this place was so lively was during the Blood Offering Festival, when deliveries had to be made to the capital. Were any outsiders to witness the crowd, they would surely be shocked.

However, no such spectators existed. Everyone gathering at the inn tonight was doing so with utmost discretion.

“Fifty warriors from Garuga Village under Bandore are here to join the fight.”

“Thank you for coming. We welcome you wholeheartedly.”

Bandore was the man who had killed the cogwagon driver. He was also the strongest warrior in the village. Nagi could spot Tess hidden in his large shadow.

A mix of men and women had come from Garuga. The men lacked beards and were rather feeble-looking overall. Some of the warriors could not be determined as male or female at a glance. Compared to them, Bandore was gargantuan. Nevertheless, even if their bodies were small, the Crestfolk warriors were like honed blades.

Crow looked upon them with satisfaction. “I’m grateful to have you all as our allies. Now then, that makes everyone. Let’s begin the strategy meeting. It’s pretty simple, though.”

“Man, it’s cramped as hell in here,” Keele complained.

“Please put up with it. I’m still uneasy about capturing Ronadyphe Prison, even considering our numbers now. The prison is garrisoned by ten knights and ninety commoner soldiers. On the other hand, we have our original fifty members of Cobalt and the fifty Crestfolk warriors who just arrived. We’re even in terms of numbers, but so long as they have nobles on their side, we’re at a disadvantage. What’s more, they hold the prison as a base. Anyway, here’s our

plan.”

Crow’s voice was very matter-of-fact, but it resonated in the hearts of those who heard it.

“Our primary objective is to break Professor Dimitri out of prison. He’s being held in the underground dungeons. Our secondary objective is to release the other political prisoners being held down there. The ideal outcome would be full occupation of the prison. First, the majority of our forces will attack straight from the front. We’ll allocate eighty people to this force. I would like the Crestfolk warriors to make up the bulk of this assault. While the defenses are drawn to the front, the remaining fifteen members will infiltrate using the back door.”

“In other words, we’re a decoy?” Bandore asked, knitting his brow.

“Frankly, yes. The infiltration squad is composed of people who’ve received specialized training in fighting against nobles. We unfortunately don’t have the time to give all of you such training.”

“What about the poison? With that, even *we* should be able to kill nobles.”

“Even with Halahala, there’s no winning against a noble in a proper fight. We’ve worked out weapons and tactics to overcome this. We’ll teach you once the operation is over. Our current strategy is limited on this one occasion.”

“Hmph. Fine,” Bandore said with a nod, more or less convinced.

“Here’s the layout of Ronadyphe Prison.”

“Where’d you get this?” the warrior asked.

Bandore had a point. They had surely gotten it from the same source who had provided the rough sketch of the Forbidden Garden. Crow continued to keep this source a secret, along with his source of Halahala.

“That can be discussed another day. Let me reiterate: we simply don’t have the time. With all these people in one place, there’s a risk everything has already come to light.”

“You’ll tell us after this fight, you got that? As for now...” Bandore flashed a ferocious smile. “We just gotta slaughter some fucking vampires using this

Halahala of yours.”

Crow then hammered out the finer details of the operation, which mostly concerned the elite forces he had mentioned. About the only detail left for the Crestfolk was the signal for retreat.

“Nagi, you come over here,” Keele said suddenly.

“Keele, please.” Crow seemed troubled, but he didn’t try to stop him.

“How many guys here have actually killed a noble?”

The members of the elite force remained silent. Only three of them raised their hands.

“Thought so. Nagi here offed a noble without much of a weapon. Not only that, he staved off a blow with a knife *and* a crazy attack after that. I’m sure he’ll be useful in the rear squad.”

“But he hasn’t been properly trained to—”

“In a fight against a noble, all logic goes out the window. Only the guys who’ve faced ’em head-on know it. You just don’t get it, Crow. Fighting is my territory. You’ll do as I say.”

“Very well.”

Crow reluctantly accepted Keele’s opinion while pushing up his glasses. Nagi felt strangely removed from the situation. He couldn’t believe Keele was vouching for him.

“Use that,” Crow said, pointing to a longsword. “And bring a bundle of arrows with you.”

The surface of the sword had a dull shine to it and a minute groove carved into its surface.

“Supposedly, this thing was made so Halahala trickles down it. Crow came up with it,” Keele explained.

“What about the arrows?” Nagi asked.

“They’re the same arrowheads I used the other day. There’s Halahala inside them. You’ve seen how effective it is already,” Crow answered.

“I’m fine with the arrows, but I’ve never used a sword. Don’t you have a knife?”

“Aah, we do have a prototype.”

Crow handed a knife over to Nagi, who gripped it tightly. It had the same groove as the sword, but this one felt better in Nagi’s hand.

“I’ll use this.”

“Whatever. It’s your archery we’re puttin’ our hopes in,” Keele said.

This made sense to Nagi. He didn’t have Keele or Bandore’s strength to swing around a large weapon. Instead, he had great confidence in his skill with a bow.

“All right, then. Let’s go butcher us some vampires!” Keele’s grin was like a crescent moon hanging in the sky.

14

Bellows and screams erupted from the front gate of Ronadyphe Prison. They reverberated within Tess’ body, lighting a fire inside her, and her heretofore-suppressed resentment kindled the blaze. After licking her lips to taste the heat, she unleashed her emotions with a roar.

The front gate was made of a stone arch tall enough for a wagon to pass through with ease. Beneath the arch were dozens of tightly packed commoner soldiers and the knights commanding them.

Cobalt’s attack on the prison started with thrown rocks and flaming arrows. These projectiles did little to damage the prison’s stone walls; rather, they had been intended as provocation. The assailants could have kept it up all night without putting more than a few chips and cracks in the building. Seeing that they didn’t possess any siege weapons, it would be pretty much impossible to capture the prison, which was essentially a small fortress.

But the situation changed as soon as the defensive force opened the gate and sallied out. In doing so, the prison guards threw away their advantage of holding a defensive position, but that was simply a matter of the pride and standards characteristic of nobles.

Honor was extremely important in noble society. It would be unforgivable for them to hole up in a fortress just to deal with commoners and Crestfolk. They would be branded as cowards and lose their standing.

The force that had marched out was composed of five knights and around thirty commoners. So long as the knights were with them, defeat was impossible.

One of the knights stepped forth and shouted, “You Tainted filth! What manner of jest is this?! You dare attack this prison?! Face your judgment!”

The prison guards were under the assumption that this attack was the work of the Crestfolk. This was surely because a large number of attackers bore bloodmarks. The moment she laid eyes on the knight, Tess’ body shook with fear. It was the fear prey tasted when faced with a predator, the absolute sense of terror when victory was impossible. That was what it meant to face a noble. But there was one among the attackers who overcame such fear ahead of everyone else through unbridled rage.

“You conceited piece of shit! You’ll be nothing more than rust on my axe!”

Bandore charged at the knight who had spoken. The knight swung his sword in a large arc, and it collided with Bandore’s axe.

“It’s time to put an end to that conceit.”

“Shut your filthy mouth.”

The knight was wearing heavy armor. His sword, although not as large as Bandore’s axe, was enormous. It looked to be tremendously heavy, yet the knight’s movements were swift. This was the technique born of a noble’s strength.

Bandore showed no hesitation and began pushing forward. But upon blocking a blow from the sword head-on, his posture crumbled completely.

“Not bad for scum with tainted blood... But this is all you amount to!”

Tess could feel her blood boiling from the noble’s insults, giving her the power to conquer her fear.

Even nobles are human. I mean, Nagi said he killed a knight. I have the same

weapon in my hands. Did I come here just to put my tail between my legs? Have I really been alive up until now? No!

Just as the knight was about to bring the finishing blow down on Bandore, Tess jumped into the fray. After blocking her attack, the knight made a vulgar smile.

“Well, look at that—a woman! Hey, can I take this one?”

“Give it up. She’s Tainted; your dick will rot,” another knight said with a sneer.

“But the tighter the better, don’t you think? They don’t get stretched out by having children. I’ve always wanted to try one.”

The knights cackled in a carefree manner like a bunch of vulgar drunks. Tess was seething. Her anger turned into a violent charge. The knight casually raised his arm to catch her spear, assuming it would be fine if he took the hit. Normally, a spear couldn’t do a thing to a noble’s body. There would be a slight amount of pain, but the wound itself would heal immediately. Knights trained themselves to endure such pain. They relied on their strength and regeneration to dominate and suppress the commoners.

Naturally, this knight was doing the same. He grinned as the spear stabbed his arm—no doubt because he planned on seizing Tess and tearing off her clothes. Basically, he thought it would be a waste to counterattack and potentially damage the pretty thing he was after.

Contrary to his expectations, however, Tess’ spear pierced through his arm and caused him to let out a shriek. Her spear was coated in Halahala, after all. This pain was beyond what he had endured in his training. He screamed in true agony.

“You rotten bitch! What the hell did you do?!”

The impossible sound sent waves of agitation through the defenders while inspiring the attackers. As the knight twisted in anguish, Bandore saw an opportunity to go in for the kill.

He regained his footing and took a big swing with his Halahala-laced axe, then chopped off the knight’s head with a single blow. The knight’s headless body collapsed to the ground with a thud. Bandore grabbed it and held it aloft.

“Behold! We can kill these knights! We can kill these fucking vampires!”

A battle cry erupted from the attackers. It was then that the defensive troops realized these weren't common enemies they were dealing with.

“What's going on? Are they using blood calibers?”

“Impossible!”

“But they just killed a knight!”

“Gather our forces! Soldiers! Close the gates!”

Fear rippled through their ranks, and the warning bell echoed throughout the prison. This was the emergency signal for all forces to focus on the front.

“Don't let them close the gate!” someone from Cobalt shouted.

Thus, the battle over the main gate of the prison began.

The sounds of destruction and the tolling of the bell from afar indicated that the plan was progressing smoothly. Nagi and the elite Cobalt forces had been lying in wait in the woods behind the prison, waiting for the plan to reach the next stage.

Ronadyphe Prison's back door was much smaller than the main gate. There was a single guard standing by a wooden palisade. He was, of course, aware of the attack on the main gate and was clearly restless. The guardroom was right next to him, but pretty much all the soldiers there had gone to the main gate.

“Let's get going,” Keele said, licking his lips.

“Okay. Our objective is the underground dungeon. We'll take the shortest path there. As I said earlier, I'd like you to cover us from the rear, Nagi,” Senak explained. He was also part of the squad. “Everyone ready?”

The other members of Cobalt raised their voices in acknowledgment, and Nagi gave him a nod.

“Then let's get going. This is the starting signal for our counteroffensive!”

“Yeah!”

Keele dashed forward on his own while laughing like he was having a ball.

Everyone else ran after him.

The guard noticed them, and opened his mouth to yell, “Who the—”

Keele slit the guard’s throat, then let the body drop to the ground.

“Somebody come get this open.”

Senak reached for the door while Keele held his sword at the ready.

“It’s locked,” Senak reported.

“Gautsch!”

When his name was called, the largest man among them stepped forward. Gautsch was even bigger than the Crestfolk Bandore. He wielded an enormous hammer, which was longer than he was tall. He silently lifted his weapon, then brought it down upon the door.

The wooden door endured three heavy swings—as if protesting such unreasonable violence—before it cracked and the metal fittings snapped off.

“Kick it,” Keele ordered.

Gautsch sent an enormous boot flying into the broken door. It was forcibly pushed inward, eliciting a yelp from the other side, where a guard had been holding it shut. Keele sprang into action, causing the guard to scream his last.

“Get in.”

Everyone followed Keele’s command. The back door was only big enough for two people to pass through at a time, so it took a bit for all of them to enter.

“This is way too easy,” Keele muttered, sounding bored. “Let’s move.”

As it turned out, the guardroom was pretty much empty. There was only one soldier left.

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Senak asked.

“The knights haven’t come out yet. This is lame as hell. They didn’t *all* go the other way, did they?”

The melee going on at the main gate was about even. One could even say

Cobalt was putting up a good fight. There were eighty people on Cobalt's side and about the same number of prison guards. Pretty much all of the prison's forces had been thrown at the gates.

Despite the even numbers, the defenders had a clear advantage. The gates themselves had been forced open, but the very structure of the prison worked in favor of its defenders. To top it off, there were four knights among them. Even if they could be wounded by Halahala, they still had supernatural abilities. What allowed Cobalt to put up such a good fight despite this fact was that the knights' movements had lost their luster.

The knights were afraid of the Halahala. They balked in the face of these enemies who, against all odds, were capable of killing them. However, their initial astonishment was beginning to fade.

"Calm down! They're still nothing more than a mob! Rally together!"

If the knights fought with composure, nobody stood a chance against them. Little by little, they were slaughtering the invaders.

Tess was fighting by Bandore's side.

"Eat this!"

"Too slow."

A knight casually evaded Bandore's hefty swing. Tess kept the knight in check to prevent a counterattack. The two Crestfolk were gradually coordinating their movements, and thus just barely managing to fight on even ground.

"You impertinent savages! You leave me no choice..."

Suddenly, the look in the eyes of the knight Tess was fighting changed completely. An ominous chill ran down her spine.

Just then, another knight yelled at his comrade. "You mustn't! Just try and use it against some filthy Tainted! I'll have you executed!"

"But at this rate, they—"

"Unacceptable! That's an order!"

Relief washed over Tess. As she had expected, the knight had likely been on

the brink of bringing out his blood caliber. If he had done so, they would've been annihilated in no time. However, Crow had told them it wouldn't happen.

"Making use of a blood caliber against anything other than a noble is a disgrace the nobles fear more than death," he had claimed.

"Don't take on the knights one-on-one! Surround them in groups!" one of the Cobalt members yelled.

This was also something Crow had told them beforehand, but it wasn't easy to accomplish when the knights moved in a way to avoid getting surrounded. Coordinating movements to prevent them from getting away wasn't something Cobalt and the Crestfolk could learn in the span of a single day. The knights also refrained from fighting in their usual reckless manner. The situation wasn't falling apart all at once, but the scales were gradually tipping in the defenders' favor.

The infiltration squad made it all the way to the entrance of the underground dungeon. They had a rough map of the place already, so they had made their way straight there. The operation looked to be a success. They hadn't bumped into anyone on the way, but the entrance to the jail cells was a different matter, as they had expected. There were two knights standing on guard. One appeared quite young, while the other looked to be in the prime of his life. Both were wearing heavy armor and looked well trained.

"The bandits have made it this far in?"

"Was the commotion at the front just a diversion?"

Keele charged in, causing the two knights to whip out their swords.

"Bingo!"

The other squadmates rushed in after Keele. Nagi held up his bow so that he could loose an arrow at a moment's notice.

"This one's mine! Don't get in my way!" Keele roared as he swung his sword.

The older knight easily blocked the blow.

"You filthy Tainted... Don't underestimate me!"

Keele didn't falter from having his strike blocked; instead, he chained into his next attack. It was his ever-changing, unpredictable fighting style.

"Not bad. But it won't be enough!"

The knight counterattacked. His intense slash gave rise to a whirlwind, yet Keele dodged it by simply shifting his body.

"Now that's what I'm talkin' about! Your sword reminds me of that other lady's."

"Cut the nonsense!"

Keele was getting excited. The man fighting against him was using the orthodox sword technique of a knight, which was all too familiar.

Keele thought of Jubilia, whom he had fought twice now but hadn't managed to strike down. He had developed a fervent obsession with her sword that was comparable to passionate love. As he had been polishing his skills in preparation for their next encounter, this man would be a perfect practice opponent.

"Use your blood caliber, coward!"

"Never! That is only for nobles!"

While the fierce battle between Keele and the older knight unfolded, the elite members of Cobalt swooped down on the younger one. Rather than attempt a one-on-one duel, as Keele had, three of them charged in at once. Senak was among them. Nagi observed their battle with his bow at the ready.

Nagi realized that these three Cobalt members were the ones who had killed nobles before. All the others were too frightened to act, overwhelmed by the knights' palpable bloodlust. Senak's group was weaker than the knight, but their coordinated movements made sport of the young noble.

"Tch! Quit scurrying around!" the knight yelled in frustration.

"We got this, men!" Senak shouted to encourage his comrades.

However, his voice was lacking in vigor. Even Senak, who had fought nobles before, suffered a major mental burden when facing one directly. That was just how deeply ingrained a noble's superiority was in his mind.

For some time, neither side was capable of dealing a decisive blow. The younger knight far surpassed the commoners in strength, but the members of Cobalt compensated for that weakness with their teamwork. Was this the tactic they had learned for dealing with nobles? Nagi hadn't gone through any training himself, so he couldn't join the fray.

Then, the decisive moment finally came. Nagi spotted an opening to attack the younger knight and immediately loosed an arrow. The arrowhead plunged into the knight's eye and straight into his brain, and his scream resounded in the air. Senak held his sword ready for a thrust and lunged forth, piercing the knight's neck and putting an end to his screaming as blood gushed out into the open air.

The older knight was shaken by this. "Impossible! Why did those attacks get through?!"

"Unfortunately for you, that's just how it is."

The knight's agitation was reflected in his blade, heavily tilting the fight in Keele's favor. Although the noble just barely managed to block Keele's next attack, he was unable to dodge the follow-up strike as it landed squarely in his chest. He was unable to scream as blood overflowed from his lungs and poured through his lips.

"That's why I told you to use your fuckin' blood caliber. Ugh, how boring. That dame was way stronger," Keele spat. He had already lost interest.

Nagi ran over to the corpse of the knight Senak had been fighting and pulled out his arrow. He thought it could be reused if it wasn't broken, but the arrowhead came off and remained inside the knight's cranium. All that remained on the shaft was an eyeball. Nagi tossed it aside, eyeball and all.

"You're an amazing shot!" Senak shouted as he slapped Nagi's shoulder.

From Nagi's perspective, it had gone so well thanks to the Crestfolk warriors. From them, he had learned of both the weaknesses of a knight's equipment and the idiosyncrasies of humans locked in combat. The outstanding hunter was slowly becoming an outstanding warrior.

"Let's get moving," Keele said, pulling his sword out of the knight's body. He

then headed down a nearby staircase into the underground dungeon.

The others followed him in a hurry. After their descent, they ended up in a dimly lit corridor lined with jail cells on both sides. Their footsteps echoed through the damp, gloomy chamber.

There were prisoners within the jail cells. A sour stench filled the air. There was also some other stench which had Nagi's heart strangely disturbed. He took a look into one of the jail cells, and upon realizing what was within, he nearly vomited.

There was a naked woman inside tied up with chains. She had swollen wounds like earthworms all over her body. Some were festering, while others were half rotten. The wounds around her groin were particularly deep.

Once his eyes had gotten accustomed to the darkness, he could see that the cells around the entrance to the underground dungeon were all occupied by women like this. The first woman he saw was actually on the better side of things. There were those with their breasts cut off, those without limbs, and those with patterns drawn on them with puncture wounds, probably words of some kind. Nagi couldn't read, but there was no way anything good was written on them.

It was so ghastly that it was questionable whether many of them were still alive. Those who looked like they were conscious all observed their visitors with glazed and emotionless eyes. Nagi couldn't even avert his gaze. If he did, he would simply be met with the sight of another pitiful woman.

"They're probably women arrested from villages who didn't fulfill their taxes of blood offerings and bloodpence..." Senak said in a cold voice. "They get used as playthings for the knights."

"Aren't we saving them?" Nagi asked.

"After."

That was all Senak had to say as he marched on. Nagi followed him. He wanted to get away from here as quickly as possible.

"Are you Dimitri?" Keele asked, peeking into one of the cells.

“Hmm, how unusual for me to have guests. May I ask who you are?”

The man answering Keele spoke in such a calm voice, it was disquieting. He peered at the group from behind his mop of gray, straggly hair as if appraising them.

“We’re Cobalt. We’re here to save you.”

“Save me? That sounds lovely, but unfortunately, I don’t know you.”

“Well, we need you. We’ve got Halahala, and you’re the only one who knows how to make it.”

“Halahala, eh? That stuff is nothing but a failed product.” Dimitri seemed offended by what Keele had said. He looked rather uninterested.

“We can chat later. For now, we’ve gotta get out of here. Open the lock, Senak.”

Senak had pilfered a key from the young knight they’d defeated above, which he used to unlock the cell door.

“How dull. I have no interest in that lousy poison. It was a mistake to sell that crap. I got thrown in here for it and had my research stolen from me.” Even though the door was open, Dimitri showed no intentions of leaving his cell.

“Our leader has a message for you,” Senak said. “We’ll cooperate with your Amrita research. When the fighting is over, we can supply you with Sovereign’s Blood.”

“What?!” Dimitri’s eyes flew open, suddenly filled with a light that hadn’t been there before. He closed in on Senak. “Sovereign’s Blood?! Really?!”

“I’m not lying. We managed to ally with a blood relative of the Sovereign. The nobles took her back, though.”

Nagi immediately understood that he was talking about Saya. *Saya’s a blood relative to the Sovereign?* He didn’t know much about the Sovereign, but he at least knew they were a great figure who ruled over Agarthia. Evidently, Saya was related to them. Strangely enough, Nagi could understand this. Lernaean and Jubilia’s attitude toward her suddenly made sense. He finally understood why a high-ranking noble like Lernaean had acted so reverently toward Saya.

“A blood relative to the Sovereign... So royalty really exists?! If what you say is true, then I’ll do more than cooperate. I’ll make as much of that useless Halahala as you want! Let’s get going already! What are you dawdling for?!”

After hearing what Senak had to say, Dimitri was in a rush to get out of the prison, urging the others to get going.

“What’s with this guy?” Keele murmured as he witnessed Dimitri’s sudden change of heart.

“Wait a bit,” Senak told him. He then addressed everyone in the prison. “We’re going to open all the cells. We are Cobalt! We fight to defeat the nobles! All of you who have the courage to fight by our side, come along!”

Noise filled the underground dungeon. Once the cells were unlocked, there were some who came out and others who stayed put. Many of the women continued to cower expressionlessly as if they hadn’t heard Senak. Watching this unfold, Keele turned to the rest of the squad.

“All of you, go on ahead. You too, Nagi.”

It wasn’t up for debate. Seeing this, Senak looked extremely uneasy. “But Keele...”

Keele’s next words had enormous weight. “I’m Tainted. It’s better for me to do it. Same as always.”

Senak hesitated, but made his decision. “No, I’ll do it too. You’re not Tainted. The Crestfolk are our allies now, remember? I can’t just push everything on you.”

Keele’s eyes widened in surprise. “I see. Do as you like. Everyone else, get the hell out of here.”

Nagi and the others waited outside the dungeon. There was a strange tension among the others waiting with him. He wanted to ask what was going on, but the atmosphere didn’t really allow for that. A few minutes later, Keele and Senak emerged.

“Let’s go.”

They smelled horrible, like a boiled-down concentration of the rot that had

been down there. Senak was pale, whereas Keele looked composed.

“What did you do?” Nagi asked as he walked up to his brother.

Keele answered with a question of his own. “You think a woman with no legs can survive after getting out of here?”

Coming to an understanding as to what these two had done, Nagi couldn’t say a single word.

With the inclusion of the prisoners who were capable of fighting, an attack from within the prison threw the defensive forces at the main gate into disarray. Even the knights were surrounded and brought down one by one by the elite squad. The boost in morale from their successful operation had largely eradicated their fear of nobles.

Nagi searched for Tess in the middle of the chaos, but was unable to find her. He did, however, find the large man, Bandore, surrounded by a knight and two soldiers. Nagi immediately loosed an arrow. He aimed for the knight’s head, but missed, instead hitting him in the shoulder. Bandore took advantage of the shaken knight and drove in his axe. The knight blocked the axe with one hand, but the blow brought him to a stop. Nagi fired another arrow, which pierced the crown of the knight’s head.

“Hey, if it isn’t Keele’s little brother! You have my thanks!”

“The name’s Nagi!” he shouted back.

That knight had apparently been the commander. The defensive force routed immediately upon seeing their officer fall, and thus the battle ended in Cobalt’s victory. Even though Keele had contributed greatly by personally defeating three knights, he seemed displeased.

“None of them used their fuckin’ blood calibers... Talk about lame.”

“Tess! Thank goodness you’re okay!”

Nagi ran over upon seeing Tess safe and sound within the occupied prison. Her chestnut hair was disheveled, and her black eyes were unfocused. Mud dirtied her face all the way up to the bloodmark on her cheek and neck.

Nevertheless, Nagi felt like Tess' figure was brighter than everything around her.

"Nagi!"

Apparently, Tess had also been looking for Nagi. She ran over to him without slowing down and embraced him. The warmth he felt finally reassured him that both of them were alive.

Tess was trembling. Sobs escaped her lips as she burst into tears. "Lots of people died."

"Yeah."

Nagi noticed that the other members of Cobalt were high on victory, whereas a heavy air hung over the Crestfolk. It was natural. Even though they'd won, Cobalt's side had suffered major casualties. The deaths at the main gate had been particularly numerous. In other words, many of the dead were Crestfolk. In fact, of the ones who came from Garuga Village, over half of them had lost their lives. Nagi was the one who had gotten the Crestfolk involved in this fight, as was Tess. He felt they were both complicit.

"Tess, let's go," Bandore said in a deep voice.

"Nagi too," Tess said.

Bandore thought it over for a bit. "Okay, you can come along as well."

He began walking off. His attitude gave no room for debate. Nagi looked at Tess' face as she silently nodded back to him. The two of them followed Bandore through the prison. Their destination was the back door Nagi's group had come through. After exiting the prison and walking into the woods, they were greeted by an assembly of the Crestfolk. Judging by the atmosphere and the large hole dug in the ground, he realized it was a burial rite for the Crestfolk. The dead warriors were being laid to rest within the hole.

"Let's begin," Bandore declared in a solemn voice.

"He's joining, too?" one of the Crestfolk men asked. "He's not our comrade. He's a commoner."

"He's—"

Bandore started to say something, but Nagi held out his hand to stop him.

“Please allow me to pray for them as well. If you’d rather I not participate in the funeral service, then I’ll do as you say. But these people died because of me, so I at least want to pray for them.”

“It’s not just your fault. I’m the one who gathered everyone.”

“You’re their comrade, right, Tess? I’m different. I came from the outside and dragged everyone into this fight.”

“Yeah, it’s your fault!” the same man yelled, his eyes dark. “My brother died because of you commoners. You left the dangerous parts to us Crestfolk. Barely any of you died.”

“Sorry. I know every one of you had your own lives. Your own joys and sorrows.”

Nagi looked down at the corpses in the hole. Was this man’s brother among them?

“These people also had those dear to them, but now they can’t see them anymore. Because of me.”

“Do you truly believe that?”

“Yeah.”

“You commoners look down on us.”

“That’s right.”

“That includes you.”

“Nagi’s not like them!” Tess yelled, but Nagi shook his head.

“That *included* me. I didn’t know anything about you people and simply believed what I was told... But I’m different now.”

“Do you regret it? Calling us into this fight, I mean,” Bandore cut in.

Nagi thought it over for a moment. Did he regret it?

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “We won thanks to all of you. Yes, there were sacrifices. I feel sorry, but I don’t regret it.”

“You said we had our own joys,” Bandore said in a deep and trembling voice, “but you’re wrong about that. We have no happiness. We don’t have anything of the sort so long as nobody out there approves of us. We came here of our own will to break those chains. We don’t regret anything, either. Neither do the guys who died.”

Several voices murmured in agreement.

“I want to see my comrades off together with this guy. He’s not a Crestfolk, but his anger is the same as ours. His eyes are the same as ours, the eyes of someone who was stolen from and is standing up to take it all back!”

Bandore’s speech rendered the other Crestfolk silent.

“Can you swear to the dead here? That you’ll fight alongside us?”

“I swear,” Nagi answered immediately.

All was quiet.

The first one to break the silence was the man who had been opposed to Nagi’s presence. “You’re saying we should accept this guy?”

“This guy *saved* me. If you’ve got a problem with him, you can say it to my face.”

Bandore would accept no argument. The man fell silent.

“I acknowledge this man, Nagi, as a guest of Garuga Village! Any objections?”

“None,” several voices said in unison. They were the voices of those who had been saved by Nagi’s arrows during the fighting.

The service was a simple ritual.

“Born by man, yet wiser than man. Many, yet one. Recursive, yet multilayered. That which is only known by name and existence. That which granted us this miniature garden from the depths of ruin. Oh, Intelligence, we pray that our brethren parting with us in this moment are reunited by your side. Grant those who have been given short lives and fulfilled their hopeless time here peace at last.”

After reciting the standard prayer, they began burying the corpses. As Nagi

listened to those familiar verses, he thought of their meaning in a daze. If the Intelligence was the one who had granted them this world, then why was it so unfair?

Chapter 3: The Two of Royal Blood

15

“An opportunity has come,” Jubilia reported. “Some incident has sown chaos throughout the palace, and all the superior officers are meeting in the assembly hall. As things are now, I can guide you to the Sovereign.”

Saya nodded. Jubilia had been looking for an opportunity to grant her request to meet Kyou all this time.

“This way.”

She quietly followed the knight through the palace. Just as Jubilia had said, there were far fewer people around than usual. They kept walking for a while without meeting a single soul. After ascending a complex staircase, they arrived at an impressively decorated door.

“Within lies one of Lord Kyou’s living rooms.”

The soldiers standing guard next to the door looked at Jubilia and Saya, then gave them a silent nod.

“I have come to an agreement with them. The royal guards are not a monolithic group.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let us talk after we enter.”

Jubilia opened the door, revealing a violet-carpeted staircase. They began ascending the staircase as Jubilia spoke.

“The guards there are soldiers appointed directly to the Sovereign. They are well aware of Lord Kyou’s desire to meet his elder sister, so going through them was simple. The reason we had to wait until today is because Chairman Gratos’ subordinates had been protecting the passage leading here. However, they aren’t present today. Something dire must have happened.”

“What was it?”

“I have yet to be informed. There seems to have been some manner of insurrection, but information on it is being suppressed.”

Saya was curious as to what exactly an insurrection was, but there was something far more important to her right now. She had to ask Kyou about herself.

“We cannot remain here for long, but we should have enough time for you to speak with the Sovereign a little.”

Another door awaited them at the top of the staircase. There were guards posted outside this one as well. How many doors did they have to place before they were satisfied? What exactly did they have to keep sealed away so deep within this building?

“This is Lady Saya.”

The guard nodded back to Jubilia. “You may enter.”

“It’s Our dear sister!”

Kyou jumped to his feet the moment he saw Saya. His blond hair, which was immaculately well kempt, swayed in the air behind him. His golden eyes sparkled. It was as if there wasn’t a single sorrowful thing in this world.

“You came to play! Ivara, prepare some tea.”

The girl called Ivara gave an elegant bow before leaving through a door further into the room. She was a noble daughter chosen to be the king’s handmaiden because of her tremendous beauty. Her porcelain skin almost made her look more like a doll than a human, however. Perhaps this was an effect of her perfectly combed hair and the uniform that covered her entire body.

“Hello, Kyou.”

“Come now, sit over here.”

Kyou took Saya’s hand with a spring in his step. His hand was soft, much like her own. This was her little brother.

“I came because I have something I want to ask you,” Saya said.

“We shall speak of anything you wish to know.”

His golden eyes bore into her, causing Saya to avert her gaze. For some reason, she felt a little guilty about this.

“I don’t know what I am.”

“That makes sense. We had heard you were bedridden somewhere all this time.”

Saya nodded back ambiguously. Kyou truly appeared to be in a great mood.

“You are Our elder sister. Thus, you are one who possesses the qualifications of being the Sovereign,” Kyou said.

“What’s the Sovereign?”

Jubilia had already taught her about this, but Saya wanted to know what this boy thought of it himself. His answer was far too simple, however.

“Huh? The Sovereign is the Sovereign. The king. The one who rules over the land of Agarthia.”

“Why? Who decided this?”

“Who...? Hmm... Maybe the Intelligence?” Kyou answered as he cocked his head to one side.

It was like he had never even tried imagining it for himself. His handmaiden, Ivara, came in with a tray of tea and set it down between Kyou and Saya.

“The tea leaves are from Leshva,” Ivara said, not that Saya knew anything about tea.

Saya took a sip as a mellow aroma filled her nose. The scent was extremely familiar—it was the same smell as the tea she had drunk in the Garden.

“I feel like I’ve had this before.”

“Leshva houses fields exclusive for the use of royalty,” Ivara replied. Her voice was rather thorny for some reason.

“They must have delivered them out to you as well, sister.”

Saya nodded, then returned to the topic at hand. She hadn't come all the way here just to talk about tea.

"The Sovereign possesses the Sovereign's Blood and was taught by the Intelligence how to make Amrita. There is Sovereign's Blood in Amrita. Is that correct?"

"Yes. If not for the Sovereign's Blood that We have inherited, Amrita cannot be made. If We were to die, you would surely inherit the Sovereign's Blood. We are the only two members of royalty in this world, after all."

"The only two?"

"The bloodline of the Sovereign died out in the chaos a long time ago, after the Intelligence left our world. We were the only two to survive. Although We do believe both of us were too young to remember any of it."

"I don't remember much of my life before the Forbidden Garden."

She had repeated the same never-ending days in the Garden, far surpassing the lives of the commoners. During that time, Saya had completely forgotten what she was. No, until recently, she hadn't *been* anything to begin with. That endlessly stagnant cycle of days sealed within a birdcage was all there had been to her life. The one who had broken that cycle was the boy who'd fallen through the glass ceiling.

To Saya, Nagi himself was her future. But right now, she was once more locked inside a cage—a prison filled with the rich scent of tea.

"We knew nothing of your existence either, sister. Everyone was hiding you from Us. But one day, someone let it slip."

"Who?"

"It was Lernaean. He didn't mean to, but We didn't let it slide."

Kyou puffed out his chest in pride, but Saya's instincts told her that wasn't the case at all. He hadn't let it slip; Lernaean had said it on purpose in order to make sure Saya was brought here. Her conviction that he was the mastermind behind all of this was solidified.

"We pressed Lernaean for answers and learned of your existence. We wanted

to meet you, but Gratos wouldn't allow it. He said you were bedridden in the Garden, so We couldn't see you."

So, Gratos had been opposed to the idea. Lernaean and Gratos were apparently in disagreement over how to handle Saya.

"However, a bandit entered the Garden and kidnapped you, and Lernaean brought you back here."

Saya instinctively grimaced at the word "bandit." Kyou misinterpreted her reaction.

"Our apologies, sister. We heard you were safe, but you must have been terrified."

"No, that's not the case."

"What happened to the bandit, anyway?" Kyou muttered. "A simple execution wouldn't suffice for the crime of frightening Our dear sister. We must inflict as much pain upon him as possible before bestowing a gruesome death. Those filthy commoners are truly repulsive."

"Don't call them filthy commoners," Saya spontaneously said in a strong tone.

Kyou's eyes grew to the size of saucers, and Ivara's narrowed. The loyal servant was apparently unaccustomed to her lord being reproached like this.

"You are very kind, sister."

"Aren't the commoners your people?"

"Precisely. A king must protect such weaklings. Such is the Sovereign's duty."

There was no malice in his tone. Saya was unable to understand exactly what Kyou thought of the commoners. As such, Saya brought up exactly what was on her mind.

"What about the Crestfolk?"

"Lady Saya!" Jubilia interjected, but she didn't make it in time.

"How dare you?!" Ivara bellowed.

It was unforgivable to mention that detestable name in front of the Sovereign. Saya didn't know that it would be punishable by death if not for her

special position. In contrast to those panicking around them, Kyou himself only tilted his head. He didn't know. The Sovereign had no idea the Crestfolk even existed.

Suddenly, Saya realized that this king knew pretty much nothing about the world he ruled. Setting aside her discouragement, she continued asking her questions. There had to be *something* Kyou knew.

"Kyou, can you use a blood caliber?"

A vein bulged on Ivara's brow at Saya's tremendously rude question, but Saya had stopped paying attention to her by now. She was being allowed to ask, so she was going to ask everything she could.

"No. Royalty do not possess blood calibers."

"Is that so?"

Saya found this unexpected and gave Jubilia a look.

"I don't know," Jubilia responded with a shake of the head. "This manner of question is beyond my status to begin with."

Saya secretly believed that her blood caliber was what had killed the Garden's guard when she was with Nagi. Was she mistaken, though? Just remembering that moment was chaotic and squeezed at her heart. She couldn't think about it with a cool head.

"There's absolutely no need for royalty to fight. It is our role to rule from the very moment we are born. The reason nobles possess a blade is because it is their duty to protect the Sovereign," Kyou said, letting out a small chuckle. "If not for that, it would be like insinuating neither of us are adults yet, wouldn't it?"

Kyou was apparently joking, but his words left a strangely strong impression on Saya. Kyou knew nothing. He was just like a child. Jubilia had said that a noble's outward appearance reflected the maturity of their mind. Kyou's childish figure certainly did, just like Saya's.

"Only the two of us were born for the sake of ruling this world. So, if we are to wed, we shall rule this world for eternity."

His words were endlessly innocent.

“Umm, what do you mean by wed?”

“Getting married. You, and Us.”

Now that he mentioned it, she recalled him saying something similar before.

“I feel like that’s a little strange, though. What do you think, Jubilia?”

“With all due respect, marriage between siblings is avoided by both commoners and nobles.”

Kyou glared at Jubilia. “That is surely because of the effects it can have on children. We have no need to have any children. Even without Amrita, royalty lives forever.”

“Dear knight, my liege’s thoughts are fathomless. They cannot be weighed by the standards of others,” Ivara said to Jubilia.

“Pardon my discourtesy.”

“It isn’t something you can simply apologize for.”

Jubilia broke into a sweat. Ivara’s status was likely higher than hers. It had been a mistake for Saya to imprudently pass the topic over to her.

“Thank you for the tea,” Saya said, forcing a change of subject as she stood up. She had just finished her cup, anyway.

“Are you leaving already?” Kyou asked.

“I can’t stay here too long. It’d be troublesome if Gratos or the like finds out, right?”

“That scoundrel... He’s so tiresome. Please come by again, sister.”

“If the opportunity arises.”

“We shall definitely prepare another such opportunity,” Kyou declared, then hesitantly asked, “How was the tea?”

After a moment’s hesitation, Saya replied, “It was a nostalgic flavor.”

With that, she excused herself and left Kyou’s room. Upon arriving at her own room, she found someone inside: Lernaean.

“I have been waiting for you.”

Just like always, this man with glamorous hair and a bulky body gave off a regal yet terrifying presence. He was the very embodiment of a noble. His aura was so powerful that Saya’s room seemed like an entirely different place altogether.

“Jubilia, you told him?”

“Lord Lernaean assisted with getting in touch with the royal guards.”

“Well, that makes sense. You *are* this man’s subordinate.”

This was Jubilia they were talking about. She was serious about abiding by the pecking order. Of course she would’ve reported everything to Lernaean. It was perfectly obvious now that Saya thought about it, but she was a little disappointed. She had started to take a liking to this serious knight, but the woman still wasn’t her ally. After being thrown a light glare by Saya, Jubilia looked at the floor.

“How was it?” Lernaean asked.

Saya didn’t feel like answering him honestly. She simply decided to speak of the most inconsequential part of her conversation with Kyou.

“He proposed to me.”

“What a foolish child. I can understand why he yet maintains such an infantile form. Well, Gratos and the like say this is a special circumstance of being the Sovereign, though.” Lernaean’s choice of words was so sharp one wouldn’t think he was speaking of his liege. “Don’t you feel the same way?” he asked.

“I do,” Saya answered. She was actually in complete agreement. It was surely intentional on his part. “So, what do you want?”

“Is there not something you would like to say to me yourself?”

There certainly was. It was now clear after speaking with Kyou that this man was the one who had plotted to bring her here. That was why she had to ask him directly.

“What do you plan on making me do by bringing me here?”

“That is precisely why I am here. I have a request of you, Lady Saya. However, before that, I’d like to hear your greatest wish.”

“My wish?”

“Think of it as our terms of agreement. In exchange for granting my request, I shall grant you one wish. Not a bad deal, is it?”

Despite there being an air of refinement to his voice, Saya could sense the risk in accepting his proposition. She couldn’t strike a deal with this man, so she believed. Yet she still felt compelled to speak nonetheless.

“I want to leave this place. And I want you to leave me alone.”

“Will you live with that boy, then?”

Lernaean had completely seen through her. Saya’s cheeks grew hot with embarrassment.

“Very well. He’s much better than that boy who calls himself a king. If he’s still alive, that is.”

“What do you mean?”

“It seems there has been an assault on Ronadyphe Prison. Information on those who performed the attack is a mess. Some say it was the Tainted... the Crestfolk, that is. Others say it was Cobalt. The attackers ultimately won, but there were heavy casualties on both sides. It wouldn’t be strange for one excitable boy to be among them, don’t you think?” Lernaean told her with a gentle smile.

“Nagi can’t die,” Saya responded, relying on her feelings without an ounce of reasoning.

“Anyone can die. Even us nobles. Well, it’s not determined that he’s dead. The probability is actually pretty low. Almost all the deaths on their side were apparently Crestfolk, after all.” Despite saying information was a mess, Lernaean spoke as if he had seen it for himself. “I shall grant your wish. But first, I would like you to fulfill my request.”

Saya held her breath, wondering what kind of request he would make of her. And what came was something she couldn’t expect at all.

“I want you to save this world.”

“Huh?”

“You should have witnessed the disastrous state of this world for yourself. The degenerate nobles, the oppressed commoners, and the Crestfolk whose very existence is denied.” Lernaean knitted his well-shaped brows. His eyes reflected a deep sorrow. “Nobles have forgotten their obligations and instead condemn the commoners. Commoners take that resentment and turn it on the Crestfolk, who are beneath them... Who do you think lies at the roots of this chain of hatred?”

This was a rhetorical question. As proof of this, Lernaean only paused briefly before continuing in a resonant voice.

“It is the Sovereign, along with the congressmen who borrow his authority, the members of the Traditionalists with Gratos at their core. We members of the Sovereignty Faction fight against them.”

Jubilia said worriedly, “Lord Lernaean, others may hear you.”

“There are no ears here. Be at ease,” he told her with a smile.

“So, what do you expect me to do?” Saya asked.

“Can’t you tell? You are the one and only member of royalty aside from that boy. Why do you think that foolish child has sat upon the throne for so long? There was nobody to replace him. Gratos hid you within the Garden so that he could create such a situation.”

Saya now knew the reason she had been confined within that miniature garden.

“But things have changed. There *is* someone who can replace him: you. Your very existence shakes the foundation of Gratos’ faction. It’s possible to reclaim the authority they have taken for themselves.”

“Are you telling me to become the Sovereign?”

“If you wish to.”

“I don’t want to be a queen or anything like that.”

“That is perfectly fine.”

“Huh?”

“The Sovereign is only required to create Amrita. It’s strange for there to be any authority to accompany that position. That boy doesn’t spare a single thought for this world or those who live in it. A system where someone like that stands at the peak is wrong. You can be the Sovereign. Kyou can be the Sovereign. It doesn’t matter either way, so long as the one who stands on top is one who truly considers the state of this world. According to legends, there was once a world where there was no Sovereign.”

“A world with no Sovereign...”

“It sounds like nothing more than a dream, doesn’t it? First, Gratos must be brought down. This brings me to my next point: I have obtained two weapons to do so.”

“Two?”

“The first is you. Your very existence shakes their foundation, after all. That’s why I would like to make your existence public.”

“How do you plan to—no, that can wait. What’s the other?”

“Cobalt.” The name that spilled from Lernaean’s lips was beyond unexpected. “You saw them too, didn’t you? Despite being commoners, they killed a knight. When I saw them fight, a thought came to mind—I wondered if I could form a common front with them.”

Lernaean had stolen Saya from Cobalt’s base. Had he been thinking of such things even as he attacked them with his blood caliber? Saya trembled at the magnitude of his schemes.

“They were just as I hoped they were. They managed to capture Ronadyphe Prison, of all places. The resulting uproar has turned the palace upside-down.”

Saya didn’t know what was so significant about Ronadyphe Prison, but there was no mistaking that it had been a major incident, and that Nagi had been involved in it.

Lernaean laughed with pleasure. “Aah, that boy... Nagi, was it? It seems he’s

also part of Cobalt. He's safe, even now."

What was with this conversation? Lernaean had been acting as if he knew everything. How much of this was all just a part of his plan?

Saya mustered up all her courage. "What are you trying to get me to do?"

"As I said before, I would like to make your existence public. It's simple. You just have to follow me for a short while. Unfortunately, it'll be nothing but worthless banquets and the like."

"That's all?"

"In this way, we will gather numerous allies. It'll be fine, nobles live long and boring lives. They're all starved for stimulation. Everyone will surely be entranced with the sudden arrival of a beautiful princess." Lernaean held out his hand. "Cobalt will destroy this country from the outside while you destroy it from within. After that, you may live as you please."

Feeling like she had no other choice, Saya gripped his hand. She had no other way of getting out of here. Lernaean's ice-cold hand caused a chill to settle in her heart.

16

On the night of Ronadyphe Prison's conquest, Nagi was unable to get a wink of sleep. After he had been tossing and turning for some time, Tess and Bandore paid him a visit.

"Nagi, I'd like you to come with us," Tess said. "Crow told us that Dimitri guy is going to talk, so we should bring a representative for the Crestfolk."

"Why me?" he asked. After all, Nagi wasn't a Crestfolk himself.

"I'm pretty bad with this stuff, and the others are even worse. Tess here has the chief's trust. Besides, I have some other stuff to do," Bandore told him.

"Tess is clever, but I'm a little anxious leaving her on her own. She wants to take you along, too."

"There's nobody else?"

“Nope. All the people we brought are good at fighting but bad at thinking. Anyway, you’re Keele’s little brother, so you’ve got some clout, yeah?”

“Isn’t Keele exactly the right person for this?”

“That guy’s no good. His personality is kinda... you know. He’s Cobalt, through and through.”

Bandore was hinting at the friction that was beginning to form between the original Cobalt members and the new Crestfolk additions.

“So am I, though.”

“You’re our guest,” Bandore insisted.

“Fine.”

“Thanks, Nagi. You’re a big help,” Tess said.

Bandore nodded. “My work here is done, then. I’m off.”

“Where’s he going?” Nagi asked once he’d left.

“He’s going around the other villages to gather warriors. We know we can win now, so there should be more people out there who want to join.”

“I see.”

Nagi couldn’t say anything else. More people were sure to die. Nevertheless, stopping now would be unforgivable.

“Let’s go, Nagi.”

The main members of Cobalt—including Crow, Senak, and Keele—were gathered in a meeting room in the prison. Dimitri was seated in the chair farthest to the back.

“We’re here as Garuga Village’s representatives,” Tess declared as she and Nagi entered the room.

“*You?*” Keele asked, looking at Nagi and cocking his head.

“Nagi is a guest of the village. Bandore accepted him.”

“Well, I guess that works out fine. The guys in the village are all dumbasses.

You're more likely to get what we're sayin'."

Tess clicked her tongue in irritation.

"Everyone's here now, so let us begin," Crow said as he scanned the room. "We have successfully captured the prison. This is only the beginning, however. This fight was for the sake of freeing Dr. Dimitri here. He is the one who developed the very same Halahala that ensured our victory."

"I told you that stuff was just a failure."

"Don't be like that. In any case, now that we have Dr. Dimitri's cooperation, we can produce our own Halahala. Thanks to that, we can fight without worrying about our inventory."

"What about the ingredients?" Nagi asked. This was the reason Crow had sought Saya's help to begin with.

"There's no need to worry about that anymore. We have procured a reliable source."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Nagi asked.

"Let's save the details for a later date. Right now, the information Dr. Dimitri has brought us takes priority. We're having this meeting to share this information. Professor, please inform them of what you told me."

"I've been repeating myself quite often, but I would like all of you to understand that what you call Halahala is nothing but a failed experiment. Do you hear me?"

Dimitri glanced around the room as everyone nodded back at him in a hurry.

"Hmm, good. The goal of my research to begin with was to uncover the secrets behind Amrita and the Sovereign's Blood. To this day, far too little is known about them. There's no mistaking that they were brought about long ago by the being known as the Intelligence. We still do not understand the reason behind this, however."

"You mean *that* Intelligence?" Nagi asked.

Dimitri nodded. "I haven't delved much into information regarding the Intelligence. Such research belongs in the realm of theologians. My own

research concerns Amrita; I aim to learn more concerning the synthesis of this drug of immortality.” He paused as he locked eyes with Nagi. “ You, what do you know about Amrita?” Feeling pressed to answer, Nagi replied, “It’s made using the blood we give during the Blood Offering Festival, right?”

“Exactly! Also, there’s one other important ingredient. Do you know what it is? Then... you there, answer for me.”

“Sovereign’s Blood, right? You just said so yourself,” Senak replied after being singled out.

Dimitri didn’t pay an ounce of attention to Senak’s annoyed expression and simply continued his lecture. “Yes! By mixing Sovereign’s Blood with commoner blood and refining it, Amrita is created. The method itself is top secret and only known to a select few nobles. So, I tried to replicate it.”

The scholar’s eyes were sparkling. He was immersed in his own madness just from speaking about it.

“However, I couldn’t get my hands on Sovereign’s Blood. That’s why I tried all sorts of things by using noble blood as a substitute first. The result was Halahala. I suppose you could say it’s a failed replication of Amrita. Thinking back on it now, it truly was a pointless endeavor. The effect granted by Amrita comes from the Sovereign’s Blood to begin with, after all.”

There was great passion in Dimitri’s voice.

“To put it tremendously roughly, Amrita is the dilution of Sovereign’s Blood with commoner blood. Diluting it too much will make it lose its effect. That’s when I came up with an idea: there’s something the Intelligence planted within the Sovereign’s Blood. Commoner blood acts both as a solvent and as fuel. The foundation of life within commoner blood reacts with something within the Sovereign’s Blood to grant the recipient life itself. That’s how Amrita works. In truth, noble blood can also be used for the dilution process. They simply don’t do it because it’s meaningless to take noble life to grant noble life.”

Dimitri then turned his attention over to Nagi and Tess.

“Oh, you two over there, you’re Crestfolk, right? I don’t know much about the Crestfolk, but it’s said their blood can’t be used as an ingredient for Amrita. It’s

as if there's some sort of impurity mixed within. Tainted is quite the appropriate term for it."

"How dare you!" Tess snarled.

"Oh, there's no need to get angry. I simply stated the truth. Have you noticed, I wonder? Why is it that the Crestfolk have much longer lifespans than commoners? They say it's because they don't participate in blood offerings, but that alone wouldn't do the trick. It's possible that something akin to Amrita is at work. That's what I mean by impurity. In a sense, you could say the Crestfolk are actually closer to being royalty. Mmm! This is a wonderful theory!"

Humming a tune, Dimitri started scribbling down his own thoughts. Nagi understood why this man had been thrown into a prison; his ideas defied the very essence of their society.

"Even nobles live short lives when deprived of Amrita. Actually, to put it bluntly, there's nothing biologically different about nobles and commoners. Meaning... right. Nobles resemble commoners, while the Sovereign resembles the Crestfolk... I see, I get it now."

Groans began to spread throughout the meeting room. The words Dimitri had stated as obvious were far too radical for the members of Cobalt who were trying to rebel against the nobles. Dimitri paid them no mind at all as he continued.

"Well, there's much about the Crestfolk that remains unknown. I've been incapable of obtaining any samples," Dimitri grumbled, then suddenly grinned as he shot a glance at Tess. "Oh, right! If you lend me your cooperation, I'm sure I can ascertain all sorts of information! I'd be truly grateful if you could provide me with blood or a corpse... No, while we're at it, a living body which I can thoroughly examine would be amazing!"

"Definitely not."

"Why?" Dimitri was disheartened by her rejection.

"Professor," Crow cut in, "you've gone off track. Get back to Amrita."

"Mm. In the end, I managed to get my hands on some Sovereign's Blood using some rather extreme methods. I even succeeded in producing Amrita. Well, I

was arrested for it, though.”

As the man spoke, Nagi realized something extremely important. “You can make Amrita?”

“If I have Sovereign’s Blood, yes. I even have proof. I secretly stashed away the Amrita I made before I was arrested. There’s not a lot of it, though. Having said that, there’s enough for everyone here... Oh, the two Crestfolk excluded. Everyone *e/se* would be able to become immortal for a while if they consumed it.”

Nagi felt as though he had just been punched. What had this madman just said? Nearly everyone here could become immortal?

“So, as long as you had some Sovereign’s Blood, you could mass produce it?” Crow asked to get things moving along.

“Of course. But it’s quite the pain to get, just so you know. I mean, I was jailed for it, so I would know. I threw quite a lot of money around and cozied up to a close aide of the Sovereign, but the Sovereign himself didn’t even seem to know the blood offerings existed. I have no idea how they conceal it from him.”

“Then how did you get Sovereign’s Blood?” Crow asked.

“I stole some from a crate being brought to the royal palace for the production of Amrita.”

“Wouldn’t it have been guarded by a tight security detail?”

“Naturally, but it’s always possible to find an opening. In any case, an opportunity comes around every year during the Blood Offering Festival. I’ve got all the time in the world, so I can just wait for the right opportunity. A few decades are nothing for the sake of accomplishing that.”

“You’re a noble?” Nagi asked. He took a look at Dimitri’s graying hair. He didn’t look anything like a noble.

“More or less. Oh, my hair? My dosage of Amrita was slashed while in prison, so I’ve been aging little by little. That’s the kind of punishment we receive. It’s what works best against nobles, who tend to think they can live forever. I thought I’d go insane. If not for the passion for my research, I probably

would've lost my mind long ago." Dimitri laughed, but everyone else in the room was under the impression he was already insane.

Crow took over from there. "If we're capable of taking the royal palace, we'll be able to capture the Sovereign. That way, we can also get some Sovereign's Blood. If it goes well, we'll be able to distribute the Amrita the nobles have been monopolizing to everyone in Agarthia."

"I see. That's a great idea! But distributing it to all the people might be rough. The Sovereign will dry out completely if you do that."

"In that case, there's also the option of distributing Amrita in rotations. That'll be enough to extend everyone's lifespan beyond what they have now, right?"

"Well, depending on the amount... yeah. Besides, my research should be able to advance dramatically. I might be able to make Amrita without relying on the Sovereign's Blood this time! No! I'll prove I can do it! Even if it takes centuries!"

"Amrita doesn't work on us, right?" Tess asked.

"I might even be able to do something about that. Nothing is impossible unless it's thoroughly tested and proven otherwise."

Dimitri spoke with a glimmer in his eye. He could already clearly picture himself continuing his research with a large supply of the Sovereign's Blood at his disposal.

"If we make this public, we should be able to find more allies among the commoners who have been uncooperative up until now," Crow said with confidence.

He wasn't wrong; so Nagi thought. Just the allure of living a little longer had been enough to motivate Nagi to sneak into the Garden. Many would surely leap into action if Amrita was dangled before them.

Nagi recalled the faces of the people of Strano Village. Unlike before, he could see many of them lending a hand. And if that happened in every village of Agarthia... Just imagining it sent a chill down Nagi's spine.

"Do you understand now? Our next objective is to secure the Amrita the professor has hidden away. Once we have that, we'll expand our influence."

Crow's words resounded throughout the meeting room.

17

Even though it was nighttime, it was bright as day. The nobles gathered here were dressed to the nines, and a flowery scent permeated the air. At Lernaean's insistence, Saya was visiting the residence of an influential noble.

"Your dress today suits you, as always."

Saya was wearing a jet-black dress this time. It was tailored to match her girlish body. The outfit splendidly brought out her silver hair and red eyes. When she had first seen herself in a mirror, even she had felt a little charmed.

"I've said it many times already, but it doesn't make me happy to hear that from you."

She ached to show herself off to a certain commoner boy instead, but that day would never come. The sheen of the fabric showed how tremendously expensive this dress was. A commoner could go their entire life without seeing such a thing.

"How harsh," Lernaean said with a refreshing smile.

He was also wearing a luxurious outfit to fit the evening party. It suited him so well that Saya hated it. When he grinned in response to her looking him up and down, she felt nauseous and averted her gaze.

"I think you look wonderful as well, Jubilia," Saya said.

"Erm, thank you. I'm not used to this sort of clothing, though, so it's a little hard to move in."

Jubilia blushed. She was also wearing a dress. It was a subdued amethyst color with an elegant, minimalistic style. Nevertheless, the soft and mature womanly curves which were usually hidden beneath her uniform were far more charming than any unnecessary decorations. Her blonde hair was tied up in a different manner than usual as well.

"I can't seem to calm down without my sword. I *am* here as your guard."

Lernaean sneered. “What purpose is there in that? So long as you have your blood caliber, there is no point in bringing a sword along.”

“Well, that’s true.”

Lernaean had been continuously bringing Saya out to evening parties as of late, all for the sake of accomplishing his goal.

“You made it!” shouted the owner of the residence, waddling his way over.

He was a stereotypical noble, with a plump body. He was rather low in rank, but he held much influence in the capital because of his successful business ventures. That was what Saya had been told on their cogwagon ride here, at least.

“Lord Granapalt, Lady Saya, thank you for coming this evening. It truly is an honor to have the rumored Silver Princess visit my abode.”

“Thank you for the invitation, Lord Rudike,” Saya said with a courteous bow.

The baron was deeply moved. “Ooh, how lovely.”

The guests were astir upon seeing Saya’s figure as she entered the estate’s ballroom. After ten days of showing herself at evening parties, she had become a celebrity. The topic of the Sovereign’s older sister, who had been hidden up until now, had spread like wildfire among the nobles. They were constantly trading tales of her unusual silver hair, red eyes, and sweet appearance. It seemed many people had already asked Lernaean to bring Saya to them.

Her job was simple. All she had to do was show up to parties, exchange a few greetings, present herself pleasantly to those around her, then leave immediately after. Lernaean apparently wanted to avoid having her stay at the parties for too long.

“It would cause your mystique to fade,” he had said. Saya was actually grateful for this; she was completely clueless about the necessary etiquette, to say nothing about her complete inability to dance. Still, Lernaean didn’t mind. Allegedly, the nobles only sought the honor of having the rumored Silver Princess visit them.

She was planning to leave right away this time as well, but that didn’t come to

pass. Right when she thought it was about time to head back, a maid rushed over to Lernaean and whispered something in his ear. His expression changed completely, which Saya found unusual. Had something that serious occurred? The reason for his expression quickly became apparent.

“Everyone, your attention please! The Sovereign is here!” cried one of the baron’s attendants.

Kyou, Gratos, and Ivara entered to the announcement. The guests were shocked by the impossible situation before them.

“The Sovereign himself has come to a baron’s estate?” someone muttered.

The host of the party, Baron Rudike, ran over and prostrated himself before Kyou.

He began, “For you to grace us with your presence in such a—”

“Lord Rudike,” Gratos interjected, “we’ll be intruding on your party. Forgive me, but this was the Sovereign’s wish.”

“There is no need to apologize! For you to come to such an insignificant affair in this humble abode of mine, I...”

“It truly is an insignificant party. You should not be in such a place, sister.” Kyou’s voice, cold as midwinter ice, sent shivers through all the guests, not to mention poor Rudike. It was the first time Saya had seen this side of Kyou.

“So, you really have been dragging Lady Saya around. I’m astonished, Lord Granapalt,” Gratos said.

“You say the strangest things,” Lernaean replied indifferently. “It was our liege’s request for me to bring Lady Saya around like this.”

“What?”

“Our liege stated that all of Lady Saya’s requests are to be granted. She asked to know about noble society. Thus, I have brought her here.”

Saya nodded as Lernaean prompted her for confirmation. Gratos definitely remembered the conversation himself. He made a bitter expression and fell silent.

“There is no worth in seeing such a pathetic party, sister.”

“That’s not true. All of this is new and unusual to me.”

The people around them began murmuring when they saw Saya speak with Kyou as if they were equals. Her next words caused even more ripples, however.

“I wonder how long a commoner could live on the money required for this single dress. They would surely never eat such overly luxurious food in their entire lives... And still, you call this party insignificant.”

Saya’s words decisively leaned in favor of commoners. The Traditionalists, led by Gratos, and the Sovereignty Faction, led by Lernaean, were in the middle of a heated argument in Congress over the treatment of commoners. The guests were left with the impression that Saya’s statement was very close to Lernaean’s position on the matter.

“Who cares about mere commoners? We shall prepare an even more beautiful dress for you. We shall also provide as much food as you’d like.”

“That’s not what I’m saying. The commoners live in poverty while offering their very lives to nobles; then they die. Why is that? Why was our world made this way? I want to know.”

“Isn’t it obvious? It’s because both commoners and nobles all belong to the Sovereign,” Kyou declared. “And you also belong to Us, sister!”

“That’s wrong,” Lernaean refuted. “With all due respect, my liege, Lady Saya is the one and only member of royalty aside from yourself. Her standing should be right up there next to yours.”

“What are you saying?” Gratos shouted. “The Sovereign’s Blood chose Lord Kyou. That’s why he is the Sovereign. Even if she is his elder sister, she is no different from any other noble.”

“Hmm. Unfortunately, a youngling such as myself has never lived to see royalty other than these two. However, Chairman Gratos, you were alive at such a time, were you not?”

“I was.”

“In the time when multiple members of royalty coexisted at once, I’ve heard there was an order of succession. Lady Saya and Lord Kyou are twins. What happens to the succession in this case?”

“You know full well, you shameless little...!”

“Please answer me.”

“In such a case, the order of succession is equal. Hence, Lord Kyou was chosen.”

“If I may ask: why? Furthermore, why has Lady Saya’s existence been kept hidden for such a long time?”

“The answer to both questions is the same. Lady Saya had a weak constitution. She was bedridden the entire time from sickness. She has healed over the long flow of time and is now finally able to travel outside, with accompaniment. We have been concealing her existence out of consideration for her safety.”

“I don’t remember that,” Saya said, to which Gratos nodded.

“Of course you don’t. You’ve been sleeping all this time, after all.”

“So, Lady Saya was not chosen as the Sovereign because of her weak constitution?” Lernaean asked.

Gratos shook his head. “Nobody decides who will rule. The Sovereign’s Blood chooses. Has even this knowledge been lost to time? Or perhaps you’re pretending not to know.”

“It’s chosen by blood?” Saya asked.

“Lady Saya, the Sovereign’s Blood chooses who would be most suitable to rule among all members of royalty at the time of succession. No one may interfere.”

“I’ve heard of this theory,” Lernaean said. “That scholar came up with it, didn’t he?”

“No, it’s truly the case. It was common sense at the dawning of Agarthia. That mad scholar simply discovered it in the ancient records. The Sovereign’s Blood chooses the most suitable ruler at the time. In the event that the Sovereign

dies, as unforgivable as such an event would be, or if the Sovereign loses their qualifications to rule, the Sovereign's Blood will be inherited by the next member of royalty."

"So, Lord Kyou was chosen in such a way, you say."

"That's right. Pretty much all members of royalty lost their lives during the time of chaos. Only the twins here survived, and the Sovereign's Blood deemed our liege fit to rule."

"So, for argument's sake—and I assure you, I mean nothing of it—say something were to happen to Lord Kyou. What then?"

"Say anymore and I'll consider this treason, Granapalt!" Gratos roared.

Kyou held him back. "Calm down, Gratos. That's why We've been saying that We should wed our sister. By doing so, everyone's problems will vanish, won't they?"

"I refuse," Saya blurted.

Fires of rage blazed in her heart. Royalty? The Sovereign's Blood? The order of succession? Hidden away due to a weak constitution? Having to wed Kyou? What were these people even talking about? How could they say such things as though she weren't there? Why did they get to decide on everything of their own accord?

"Do you mean that, sister?"

"I have no intentions of marrying you."

The Sovereign's expression went blank, but only a moment later, his face contorted in anger.

"Curse you, Lernaean! You've tricked Our sister!"

Kyou moved to turn on Lernaean, but Saya shook her head.

"You're wrong. It has nothing to do with him. I don't know about marriage, but there's someone I want to see again."

Saya possessed very little of her own; all she had was a single, precious memory. She wouldn't allow that to be trampled underfoot, which was why she

couldn't stop her mouth from moving.

"And who in blazes is that?! What sort of status does he hold?! It's impossible for Us, *the Sovereign*, to be inferior to anyone!"

"He has no status at all."

Saya met Jubilia's gaze. As a lower-ranking member of nobility, Jubilia was not allowed to speak up here, so she tried to stop Saya with her eyes. She knew full well what Saya was about to say next, so she silently pleaded with her to keep her mouth shut. Saya understood, but she couldn't help herself. She had to say it to reaffirm her own identity.

"The person dearest to me is a commoner, after all."

A commotion broke out in the crowd. The guests had been enjoying themselves at first; it had looked to them like there was a rivalry going on over Saya's love between Kyou and Lernaean. Before they knew it, it had become an extension of the debate going on in Congress. However, even if the ones participating were higher on society's ladder than normal, this type of political debate was inevitable during evening parties. They could simply enjoy themselves while listening and having some wine.

But what about now? The Sovereign's older sister, of all people, had just declared she chose a commoner over the Sovereign. The guests had no idea how to take it and were left in complete confusion.

Saya scanned the faces of the spectators. Completely shaken, Kyou couldn't bring himself to speak. His handmaiden, Ivara, was glaring at Saya with burning rage. If it were possible to kill someone with a glare, Saya would have been dead by now. Jubilia looked like she regretted her inability to stop Saya, while also showing concern for her. Lernaean's expression bore a mix of shock and irritation; it seemed this affair had thrown his plans into disarray.

As for Gratos, his eyes looked cold, as if they didn't reflect a thing. Saya felt a chill run down her spine upon realizing what lay deeper within him. Gratos was exhausted. It was as if his long, long years had suddenly caught up with him. Weariness was written all over his face.

"My liege, let us depart," Gratos said.

“Right...” Kyou replied in a dazed voice.

The two of them walked off. Ivara turned around to shoot Saya on more glare. It seemed this handmaiden couldn't forgive Saya for hurting her liege.

“Lady Saya, we should also depart.”

Saya nodded back at Lernaean. “Of course. Lord Rudike, I'm sorry for being a bother.”

“Erm, please, think nothing of it.”

“Wait a moment; allow me to fetch my sword.” Jubilia ran off and retrieved her weapon, then stood next to Saya. “Sorry to keep you waiting.”

As they left, all the guests watched them go with bated breath.

Lernaean let out a deep sigh after boarding the cogwagon. He managed to get his emotions under control.

“You've done something terrible. You've brought disgrace to the Sovereign.”

His voice was extremely calm. It was his usual tone, as if he was making fun of her somehow.

“You're going to be dragging him off of his throne anyway, right?”

“In the end, yes. But it's too early. You have insufficient allies in the capital as of now. And yet, we've meddled this much...”

“You let your mouth run a bunch yourself.”

“Some things needed to be said. This is just stating the obvious, but there's no way I'll allow a wedding between yourself and the Sovereign. We had to object to it no matter what.”

“So, I objected.”

“In the wrong way. You completely threw any and all rules to the wayside. What do you think, Jubilia?”

“With all due respect, sir, I believe Lady Saya's life will be targeted.”

“That's probably true.”

“Huh?”

Jubilia’s comment surprised her.

“Your statement denounced and ridiculed the Sovereign’s authority. At least, that is how many nobles will take it. Furthermore, you are royalty. It wouldn’t be strange for people to interpret it as a declaration of rebellion.”

“I don’t plan on doing anything like that.”

“Nobody believes your... bold statement, either.” Jubilia stopped there. Saya implored her to continue with her eyes. “That you wish for marriage with a commoner boy over the Sovereign, that is.”

“Then how did they take it?”

“Many nobles believe it was just nonsense said purely for the sake of humiliating the Sovereign. Those angered by this will target your life.”

“We should get her out of the royal palace as soon as possible. It will take some time to prepare, however. Lady Saya’s escape should originally have taken place a little later... around the time a particular rumor reached their ears.”

“Rumor?”

“You’ll know sooner or later. I’m reluctant to say this, but with all that’s happened, there’s only one person we can rely on.”

“Who?”

“Gratos.”

Saya was confused. Gratos was supposed to be Lernaean’s political enemy. They had even had a heated argument just moments ago. Hadn’t this crisis come about because Lernaean had said needless things to Gratos to begin with?

“You made Gratos an enemy with your statement. He surely wouldn’t think of killing you, though. He believes you belong in the Garden. He should provide his cooperation in getting you away from the palace. In return, he will request you to be sent to the Garden.”

“I don’t want to go back there.”

“Is it better to be killed, then? I don’t plan to abandon our agenda over such a small roadblock. Cobalt is also gathering allies. As such, when we are victorious, you should be able to reunite with him.”

I want to see Nagi again. When I do, I wonder what will happen to this feeling in my heart? What kind of face will Nagi make? How will he look? If I can see him once more, I don’t mind returning to the Garden for a short while.

Once she had gathered her thoughts, Saya nodded. “Very well. I’ll call for a meeting with Gratos tomorrow.”

Lernaean and Saya confronted Gratos in his office. Jubilia wasn’t allowed to enter. The private office of the leading figure of the royal palace was far simpler than Saya had imagined. One could say it was a separate space from the rest of the palace, which was decorated with opulent grandeur. The scrupulously maintained furniture in the room was straight out of another era. The fact that it had all been in use for so long yet had no visible defects was proof of its quality.

One of the few decorations in the room was a box made of clear glass. The box was completely airtight and had no visible seams or lid. Enclosed within was water, aquatic plants, and small fish. The fish appeared to be alive and were nibbling at the plants. It was a mysterious scene, as if one section of a river had been cut away and isolated within the glass.

There wasn’t a single ornament aside from that. It was like a representation of Gratos himself. Only his deep eyes revealed his immense authority and personality to others. His well-groomed beard and combed hair gave the impression that Gratos was a sculpture created long, long ago. His eyes, which were like gems that had lost their luster, stared at Saya. Just from that, she felt like she was being sucked into them.

“You’ve done something quite troubling. To think you would insult the Sovereign in such a way.”

Gratos was in deep lamentation over this. Was this because of Saya’s safety, or perhaps the safety of Agartha that he continued to protect to this day?

“I didn’t mean to make fun of Kyou.”

“I wager you didn’t. However, noble society doesn’t take such statements at face value. Nobles are creatures who chatter about what they’ve read between the lines.”

“Are you not the one who robbed Lady Saya of the chance to learn by locking her away, Your Excellency?” Lernaean cut in.

“Everything was done with Lady Saya and the land of Agarthā in mind.”

“You did all that for my sake?”

“Yes. Just as I said yesterday, your body truly was weak. As a child, you were always sleeping. Haven’t you ever found it strange that you possess no memories from before your time in the Garden?”

She did. Indeed, Saya had no memories from outside the Garden. Not only that, she didn’t even remember how long she had been in that place. Those never-ending, unchanging days seemed to stretch back forever.

“Lady Saya. It seemed that you were born too early. Even after your birth, you continued to sleep as if still within your mother’s womb. Regardless, you were slowly growing little by little. With our long lifespans, we could wait for your growth. Thus, we placed you in the care of a cradle until you grew up to be healthy. That was the Garden’s purpose.”

A cradle was meant to house a growing child, but it was something very different.

“I grew up a long time ago, though. Why wasn’t I let out of the Garden?”

“We thought to do so when you showed proof of being an adult. In other words, when you came into possession of a blood caliber.”

Gratos’ explanation contradicted Saya’s knowledge.

“Kyou said that royalty don’t possess blood calibers.”

Gratos and Lernaean exchanged meaningful looks.

“He even told you about that? Err, how should I put this? First things first—members of royalty do in fact possess blood calibers. However, theirs take on a

significantly different shape from the rest. In that way, saying they do not possess blood calibers is not exactly wrong.”

“A different shape?”

“It was once called the royal caliber. It does not take the shape of a weapon. Even I have only seen it once, a very long time ago. Back then, it took on the shape of a swarm of butterflies. To this day, I have never seen anything quite so beautiful.”

“A swarm of butterflies?”

That certainly differed from a weapon made of blood.

“The royal caliber is proof of the Sovereign’s power. It dominates everyone and everything nearby, forcing them to submit.”

“Does Kyou possess that? It didn’t seem like it to me.”

“That’s the other thing. This truly is a secret known only to a select few.”

Gratos slightly lowered his voice. The door was shut, so it was unlikely anyone was listening, but the gravity of the matter simply urged him to do so.

“Even the Sovereign is not aware of this... He cannot manifest the royal caliber. However, it is far too cruel to tell him so. Thus, we told our liege that royals lack blood calibers entirely. Fortunately, there were no other members of royalty to speak of. Very few people knew of this in the past, so it was easy to conceal the truth.”

Blood calibers were the very manifestation of a noble’s pride. That was what Jubilia had said, anyway. If so, those who lacked them bore a considerable amount of shame. Saya could understand why Gratos had gone so far as to deceive Kyou to keep that hidden.

“Anyway, you’re saying I was locked away in the Garden because I’m not an adult yet?”

“Yes. If possible, I would like you to return there immediately. I’m sure you’ve heard from Lord Granapalt already, but your life is in danger.”

“Because I don’t possess a blood—no, a royal caliber? I have no means of defending myself.”

“Your arrival here was nothing more than an unfortunate accident to begin with. I am opposed to how Lord Granapalt has treated you, but we are at least in agreement about this situation. We would like for you to hide yourself until the situation calms down. Not in the Garden, which has already been compromised. We shall prepare another location for you.”

Saya cast her gaze to the floor in silence.

“Please be at ease,” Lernaean said. “An attack like the one on the Garden will never happen again. The one who was managing that place was slowly embezzling the security funds over a long period of time. That’s why the security was full of holes. They’ve already been dealt with, and we’ve tightened up our inspections. Such a thing will never happen again, I assure you.”

Saya was well aware of that. In all likelihood, Lernaean had been the one who’d inspired the manager to embezzle those funds, but he would never admit it.

Thus, she made her decision. No matter how she tried, it didn’t seem like she could avoid being locked up in another place like the Garden once more. Some part of her had known this from the beginning. As such, she wanted to at least get *something* out of their meeting.

“Very well, but I have one condition. Gratos, I would like you to answer a few questions.”

“If that is all, then ask away.”

The man before her eyes essentially controlled the world. Saya decided to have him address the doubts lurking in her heart. She had figured out a little about herself by now; it was the outside world she remained ignorant of.

“Why are the commoners and Crestfolk tormented so?”

After a short pause, Gratos replied, “Do you see that box over there?” He pointed to it. The fish swam about in the swaying, glimmering water. “This is something that existed long ago, before the creation of the land of Agarth. This box is completely airtight, and there are plants and small fish within. The fish eat the plants and breed, while the corpses of the multiplying fish become food for the plants, allowing them to grow. It’s completely isolated from the

rest of the world. Normally, light is required to raise plants, but it seems this glass has some sort of mechanism which renders external light unnecessary. It is said this was created by the Intelligence.”

Even though she felt somewhat perplexed by the sudden change in topic, Saya silently waited for him to continue.

“This box has remained sealed for over a thousand years now. However, the world locked inside has carried on. If the small fish were to multiply too quickly, they would eat up all the plants, leading to the fish’s extinction. If there were too few fish, there wouldn’t be enough material to feed the plants, causing them to wither. The inside of this box is maintaining an extremely dangerous equilibrium. Agartha is just like this box.”

“How so?”

“Are you aware of the shape of Agartha?”

Saya shook her head.

“Agartha is surrounded on all sides by enormous mountain ranges. They are high enough that it’s impossible for humans to cross over them and survive. These mountains were created by the power of the Intelligence to isolate Agartha from the rest of the world.”

“The rest of the world?”

Lernaean opened his mouth to say, “That’s—” but Gratos stopped him with his gaze.

“That’s a secret known only to a few nobles. Before the creation of Agartha, the world was a vast place. The land of Agartha is but a tiny portion of the world itself. Long ago, the world was populated by over ten thousand times the inhabitants currently living in Agartha. However, all those lands are no longer populated. Agartha is the only exception.”

“Then, what of the rest of the world?”

“It is an impure world filled with poison and miasma, although no one can confirm it for us. They say just entering such territory causes one’s muscles to rot and one’s bones to dissolve.”

“How do you know if nobody can go there?”

“The Intelligence taught us. Agartha is a small box the Intelligence left for us in this world which can no longer be inhabited by humans.”

The small fish swam around in the glass box as bubbles floated to the water’s surface.

“The Sovereign, nobles, commoners... and the Crestfolk. They survive while maintaining a dangerous equilibrium within this sealed land of Agartha. Much like how these fish cannot live outside the water, we are also incapable of living on the outside. All we have is the incomplete immortality granted to us by Amrita, as well as the land itself. That’s why we drew the lines in the sand.”

Gratos closed his eyes. It was as if he was recalling ancient memories. In doing so, he seemed to age rapidly.

“We split the world by drawing lines. Between royalty and nobility. Between nobility and commoners. Between commoners and Crestfolk. Everyone is set apart by their bloodlines. Finally, the dangerous equilibrium of the world stabilized. The chaos we went through to reach this stage led to the near extinction of royalty and the loss of most knowledge from the past. Much blood was spilled for us to finally be able to create these divides.”

“That’s why everyone has to suffer?”

“Indeed. If not, then everything will fall into ruin.”

“But there’s no salvation for the people who are suffering now.”

“It’s just as you say. When one considers the grand scheme of things, however, there is no other choice.”

“That’s arrogant. Commoners only live for a few decades, don’t they? They’re not even allowed to consider all that.”

“That’s precisely why nobles—and royalty—must be the ones to see it through. This duty falls to you, Lady Saya.”

Gratos stared at her, his gaze unwavering. She couldn’t see a single hint of the weariness she had witnessed during the party.

“I do not believe that to be the case,” Lernaean said from Saya’s side. “There

are far too many problems in Agarthā right now. It will surely hold for another hundred years, but two hundred is pushing it. I believe stability has already been lost.”

“Lord Granapalt, I know this is the pet theory of the Sovereignty Faction. I’m sure you’ve also filled Lady Saya’s head with such thoughts. As Agarthā’s primary overseer, however, so long as there is no guarantee that what lies beyond your proposed changes is something we can weather, I cannot approve.”

“There’s no way we can provide such a guarantee. Nobody has ever walked this path!”

“That’s precisely why I’m telling you to figure out a way. If you can prove there will be no dire consequences, then I won’t object.”

“I’m telling you, we don’t have time for such a diversion!” Lernaean yelled, his voice louder than before.

“Lord Granapalt, this is not Congress. Time is of the essence, as you say.”

“Fair enough.”

“First, we must consider Lady Saya’s safety. Let us make preparations for a quick escape. Lady Saya, I have a request of you. Could you please meet with the Sovereign once more? He has been in low spirits ever since yesterday. I would like for you to at least bid him farewell.”

Seeing Gratos’ expression soften, Saya nodded.

The little fish in the glass box continued nibbling away at the plants, and the plants swayed to and fro as if in protest.

“Sister! Please do not leave!” Kyou yelled as he ran over to Saya.

She had come to his room with Jubilia in tow. It seemed he had already been informed that she was leaving the royal palace.

“I can’t afford to do that. Apparently, my life is at risk. I’m just reaping what I sowed.”

“From what We’ve heard, those targeting your life are Our supporters, are

they not? Why do Our supporters do things that We do not wish for? That would make them Our enemies.”

The one to rebuke Kyou here was Ivara. “My liege, nobles are not that simple. They do not differentiate so simply between friend and foe when their relationships slide fluidly from one to the other.”

“You always try to befuddle Us like that, Ivara. You have watched over Us ever since We were little, but We are no longer a child!”

“Sulking like that shows you are still a child.”

“Urk...”

He wasn’t a child. He couldn’t be. Saya was astonished by this. Kyou should’ve already lived for several centuries. And yet, his words were that of a child.

“As a proper adult, would you listen to my explanation, my liege?”

“Fine. Speak.”

“First, you have some fault in this. Going to the baron’s estate was a terrible idea. I should’ve tried harder to stop you.”

“But We heard that rascal Lernaean was parading Our sister around. Many people have even been proposing marriage to her, have they not?”

That was the first Saya had heard of this.

“Even so, you should not have acted in such a way. It was also a bad idea to declare your marriage with Lady Saya in such a place. The Sovereign’s marriage is no trifling matter.”

“Mrgh... But she was going to be snatched away from Us.”

It was far too much of a mystery that this child was the Sovereign.

Ivara glared at Saya. “Also, you were far more at fault, Lady Saya. Comparing what could never be compared, and choosing a *commoner over* the Sovereign was something that should never have been spoken aloud.”

Saya didn’t reply; Ivara was right. Nevertheless, there was no falsehood in what Saya had said. As such, she didn’t regret having said it.

“Such a declaration is capable of shaking the foundation of the Sovereign’s

position. The leader of Congress, Gratos, and the Traditionalists already have the Sovereign in their grip. They claim our liege is still a child and indulge themselves in the good and evil that comes from it. The current incident is something those who wish to save our liege from such a situation could not possibly allow. Those in the Sovereignty Faction are the ones targeting your life, Lady Saya.”

“Isn’t that Lernaean’s faction?”

Why would they target her life? They had just promised to form a common front, but Ivara’s next words dispelled Saya’s doubts.

“More or less. It has departed from its original meaning. The Sovereignty Faction is now nothing more than a label for all those who oppose the Traditionalists. Lord Granapalt, whom you’ve made your ally, is a prominent figure within that group, but only a portion of the other members actually heed his commands.”

The more Saya heard about the political state of the palace, the more her head throbbed. This magnificent palace disguised all sorts of poison. The people who lived here were surely used to it, but Saya was different.

“Even if the Sovereign wishes you to be his partner in marriage, there would be those who resent you, Lady Saya. To them, he is their one and only ruler. Despite your being royalty, they swear no fealty to you. They are frustrated by your sudden appearance. Now that you’ve made such an appalling statement in public, they will surely aim to take your life.”

“We shan’t allow it! We must stop them... She is Our one and only sister!”

Kyou rose to his feet, his eyes brimming with tears. He was just too honest. Saya realized that she didn’t hate this boy at all. He was the only little brother she had. Marriage was out of the question, but there was a choice of living alongside him. However, Saya had promised to help Lernaean overthrow this ruler. In doing so, she had chosen Nagi.

“That’s why I came to say my farewells. We’re not parting forever,” Saya said in a gentle voice.

“But... We’re lonely...”

“You’re an adult, right? You can’t be so selfish.”

“Even you, sister? You’re also treating Us like a child?”

“I mean, you’re my little brother, right?”

Kyou looked up at Saya in surprise. “Yes. We are your little brother.”

Saya nodded, surprised by the fact that this boy, who was supposed to have everything, seemed to have nothing at all.

“Is the place you’ll be hiding in even safer than the royal palace?” Kyou asked.

Saya didn’t have an answer to that, so she looked to Jubilia, who nodded. “It’s a noble’s mansion in the outskirts. Security is far tighter there than in this enormous palace.”

“Then what about getting there? How many guards are accompanying you?”

“We’re in a rush, so only a few chosen elites are going in a single cogwagon.”

“That’s far too dangerous!”

“Both the route and destination are an absolute secret. Currently, even I know nothing of them. It’ll be fine so long as information doesn’t leak. It was decided that wasting any more time would be even more dangerous.”

“In that case, how about we offer her a skilled warrior to go along as her guard?” Ivara suggested to Kyou.

“That’s a wonderful idea.”

Jubilia knit her brow. “With all due respect, I am already responsible for guarding Lady Saya.”

“We know nothing of your skills. You cannot be trusted.”

Jubilia gulped.

“Oh! Ivara, you shall protect Our sister.”

“Me?” Ivara replied as she stared back in wonder.

“Indeed. You’re strong. That’s precisely why you were assigned as Our handmaiden.”

“But I have my duties to attend to.”

“It is only until Our sister reaches a safe location. Then you can come right back! We will surely be fine for such a short period of time.”

Jubilia began to object. “That’s—”

“This is Our command! Understood, Ivara?”

“Yes.”

Both Jubilia and Ivara hesitantly agreed to his proposal. They had no choice but to obey.

“Please be at ease. I am fairly capable with a blood caliber,” Ivara said with an elegant bow.

Her sleek movements, which revealed no weaknesses, reminded Saya of the beautiful flowers that grew in the garden, their thorns softly swaying when caressed by a breeze.

18

About a month had passed since the battle at the prison. Surprisingly, the nobles never launched a counterattack. The capitulation of the prison had been far beyond any expectations. The royal palace was in chaos, so they had yet to determine any plan of action. According to Crow, it meant Cobalt’s collaborator within the palace was hard at work.

During that time, Cobalt’s situation had changed drastically. All of the Amrita Dimitri had left behind was recovered. With Amrita in hand, Cobalt chose two people to receive it as an experiment: Crow and Senak. There had been objections to the leader himself serving as a guinea pig, but Crow shot them down.

“I’m no good at fighting. If I don’t brave at least this much danger, nobody will follow me anymore.”

In the end, the experimental administration of Amrita was a success. Crow and Senak gained the physical strength and regenerative abilities of nobles.

“Still, you’re even weaker than a low-ranking noble. And you’ve got no blood caliber.”

That was Keele's evaluation after a mock battle with Senak.

Dimitri had a hearty chuckle over this. "Obviously. Noble lineages are supposed to be chosen based on their compatibility with Amrita. It matches my hypothesis that commoners have poor compatibility. Well, it'll probably get better over time with repeated doses, but we don't have that much of the stuff."

According to the scholar, the effects would fade away in about a month.

"This stuff's amazing. I can actually have a proper fight with Keele," Senak said in awe of his newfound strength.

"Lemme just tell you now, I held back a whole lot."

"I know. Even a normal knight would be a cinch for you. Still, it's crazy to think you're not on par with the royal guards yet."

Keele now had a large quantity of Halahala at his disposal and more experience fighting against nobles. His martial prowess was also greater than before. Nagi had been serving as his training partner. Well, he called it training, but it was pretty close to one-sided bullying. Nevertheless, Nagi had managed to grow from it, but he felt like the gap between their skills was growing ever wider. It was understandable for Senak to be pleased over having a "proper fight."

"This will give our forces a real boost. And that's not all," Crow said. He was planning to apply the outcome of their experiments elsewhere. "We'll also publicize the fact that commoners can use Amrita. Our bodies are proof of that. That's the other reason Senak was a guinea pig for this."

Soon after, Crow and Senak split up and began going around to villages in every region. They administered small doses of Amrita to people who came forward in each village. The results were dramatic. With the reality that even commoners could gain immortality from Amrita thrust before them, the people's attitude changed completely. Rumors began to spread, and Cobalt gathered up allies all across Agarthia in no time.

Meanwhile, Nagi was acting separately from them. He went back to Garuga Village with Tess. According to Bandore, they had to report to Zamin that Nagi

was now their honored guest.

“You’re here,” Zamin murmured, lying in his bed. He seemed much weaker than the last time Nagi had visited. “No need to look at me like that. As you can see, I don’t have long left.”

With that, Zamin smiled in amusement. Nagi had no idea what to say.

“It seems Bandore has decided to make you our guest.”

“Yeah.”

“As such, you are one of us now,” Zamin said with a nod. “There is something I want to tell you. Tess, could you help me up?”

“You’re fine as you are, Chief,” Tess told him, but Zamin was stubborn.

“That won’t do. This is important. Tess, you must listen as well. I’m glad you came here, Nagi; Garuga Village is filled with hot-blooded types who don’t care to hear about the past,” Tess helped him sit up against the wall. “Now then, where to start...? Aah, let me tell you about Lady Saya first.”

“About Saya?”

“Yes. That is the name of the one with silver hair who bears the True Crest. Such is the legend passed down among us Crestfolk.”

“What makes the True Crest so special?”

“Our crests are imperfect. That’s why we suffer. However, it’s said that one day, the bearer of the True Crest will return and guide us.”

Nagi recalled how Zamin had treated Saya with a strange amount of respect when he first met her. The change came about when he had seen the color of her hair. Moreover, he had decided to cooperate with Nagi only after hearing Saya’s name.

“This legendary Saya is said to have the True Crest on the back of her hand.”

“Huh? She doesn’t have—”

Nagi stopped. Hadn’t he seen something like that before? The vague recollection tugged at his mind.

“Well?” Zamin asked.

“Wait a second.”

Back when Nagi had defeated the noble in the Garden, a crest had taken shape on the back of Saya’s hand.

“I saw it. Yeah, it was on the back of her hand. There was a red crest there for just an instant.”

“Oh my, it’s just as the legends say. We village chiefs have carried this story all on our own throughout history, merely hoping... Goodness me.”

A single tear ran down Zamin’s cheek.

“Chief, explain it a little more clearly,” Tess said with a troubled grimace.

“The Crestfolk were born long, long ago. It was right after the Intelligence departed Agarthia. At the time, we devoted our loyalty to the bearer of the True Crest. However, its final inheritor, Lady Saya, suddenly vanished. Ever since then, we have been waiting for her return. And now, she has finally come back to us.”

“Hang on, that was a super long time ago, right? They can’t possibly be the same person.”

Nagi recalled that Saya was a noble, so she could have been living for hundreds of years. She herself had said that she was over a century old already.

“Was that person really Saya? She never mentioned anything like that.”

“It’s said that Lady Saya was but a baby when she vanished. It wouldn’t be strange for her to know nothing of this.”

If so, it meant Saya had been in the Garden ever since then. Nagi couldn’t even fathom the amount of time she had spent there.

“Lady Saya is the one the Crestfolk are meant to follow.”

“Does that mean Saya is also Crestfolk?”

Zamin was a little troubled by this question. “No, not really. If Lady Saya is a noble, then she isn’t Crestfolk. Amrita has no effect on us.”

“It has no effect?” Tess cut in. “So, even if Cobalt wins, we’ll be the only ones who can’t become immortal?”

“Indeed. Our blood rejects the power of Amrita. We do not participate in blood offerings because of our resistance.”

“So, even though we’re fighting alongside everyone, we’ll be the only ones left out? The commoners are going to be the only ones benefiting from this again?” Tess stared at Zamin.

“Tess. Why did you decide to fight? For Amrita?”

Zamin’s words had Tess faltering. “I... I chose to fight because...”

“Why did you want to go with Nagi?”

“Because I want to be treated like a human... and I want to stop the sterilizations.”

“Then there is no need to worry about Amrita.”

“But—”

“Y’know, Tess,” Nagi called out to her, “eternal life probably isn’t all that great.”

“Huh?”

“Didn’t I tell you what Saya said to me when I first met her? Being given a long life with no purpose brings nothing but suffering. Saya has actually lived for a long time, so can’t you take her word for it?”

“Listen carefully, you two,” Zamin said abruptly. “This information is only supposed to be known to Crestfolk village chiefs. Now that you’re aware, the door to chieftdom is open to you, so you may take my place. I entrust the future of this village—and of all Crestfolk—to you.”

“Huh? Hang on a sec. I’m not even a Crestfolk to begin with.”

Tess whipped around to face Nagi. “What are you saying? You’re already our comrade. If you’re that worried about it, wanna get married? Everyone will accept you if we do.”

Her sudden proposal had him rather flustered, but Zamin brushed it aside and continued the conversation.

“What do you wish for, Tess?”

The girl thought it over and took a deep breath. She shut her eyes and remained that way for a while. After opening her eyes, she declared, “I want to follow Nagi until this fight is over. I can think about Amrita after that. I’ll save Saya—that’s what you want, right? You’re fine with that too, right, Nagi?”

Nagi nodded.

“Mm. Then you two may inform the other hidden villages about this. You still require more allies, don’t you?”

Nagi and Tess began visiting the hidden Crestfolk villages all over Agarthia. The responses were varied; there were villagers who came forward with their assistance upon hearing about the bearer of the True Crest, but there were also those who rejected the idea of fighting alongside commoners. Nevertheless, they were gathering up a great deal of allies.

Even though they passed by Strano Village, Nagi didn’t stop to visit. He felt like he had been exiled from it. Besides, Crow’s group had surely made their way through it already. Nagi’s plan was to walk past the area uneventfully, but Nerthe ended up spotting him once more.

The first thing he said to Nagi was, “Hey. Is it true we can get Amrita if we join Cobalt?” His attitude was completely different from last time.

“Crow says Amrita will be available to everyone if we win the fight,” Nagi replied ambiguously.

“In that case, we’ll be able to live long lives like nobles, yeah? Amazing. I was on the fence about it, but I’m gonna join Cobalt too! Bring down the False Sovereign and grant everyone immortality!”

“The False Sovereign? What’s with that?” Nagi asked with a cock of his head.

Nerthe laughed. “Oh, come on. Cobalt’s gonna defeat the False Sovereign, right? You don’t know? They’re saying the Sovereign in the palace is a fake.”

“I see. Sorry, I’m in a rush.”

“Okay, then. Let’s meet again!”

Nerthe walked off in a great mood. After he left, Tess finally spoke up. She

was wary of the unknown commoner, so she had her hood pulled over her face.

“I’ve heard that before. Loads of people are saying the current Sovereign is a fake. Together with our story, it’s turning into a fight to defeat the False Sovereign.”

“Why’s that?”

Cobalt’s objective was supposed to be to defeat the nobles. It seemed completely different.

“I don’t know. I think Crow and the others are the source of the rumors, at least. It looks like they’re spreading from the places they’ve been to already.”

Something about it felt strange. With that on his mind, Nagi decided to head back to Ronadyphe Prison for the first time in a while. Nagi and Tess left Garuga Village at dawn and arrived there at dusk.

The prison was currently being used as Cobalt’s headquarters. There were rumors of a large-scale dispatch being deployed from the capital to take back the prison, so everyone inside was hurriedly preparing for that.

At the entrance of the prison, he met Crow, who was just on his way out. “Hey, Nagi. You came back at a good time. It seems Lady Saya is away from the capital.”

“Huh?”

“Her life is being targeted, so she’s going to take refuge in Duke Griesfelt’s villa.”

“Wait, what?”

Nagi was shaken by the news. Crow went on to give him directions. Duke Griesfelt’s village could be reached from the capital by going west down the main road and turning south down the first ring road. If Nagi left from Ronadyphe Prison and went south down the first ring road, he could get there faster than a trip from the capital. It was possible to intercept them where the western main road met the first ring road.

“If you leave right now, it’s very likely you’ll be able to catch up to them. I thought to send someone, but if you’re available, I want you to be the one to

go. You're fast on your feet. Considering the path, you should be faster than a cogwagon."

That was everything Nagi could hope for.

"Got it," he responded with a nod.

Crow's next words were far more outrageous than expected, though.

"You'd better hurry. We have information that someone has sent an assassin after Lady Saya."

"You should've said that sooner!"

Nagi ran off without listening to another word. Although he didn't realize it, he was fiddling with his necklace as he went.

19

The cogwagon Saya was riding was headed straight west down the main road. Jubilia, Ivara, and a royal guard who worked under Ivara were riding in the passenger compartment along with her. The knight had introduced himself as Gozo. He had a toned, muscular body which made his skill apparent, and his face was accented by extremely dark eyes.

"Today we'll be going all the way to the first ring road; then we'll stop there for the night," Ivara said.

"Wait, why are you the one in charge?" Jubilia objected.

"Lady Ivara holds the highest rank among us, so it is only a matter of course," Gozo answered, his tone arrogant.

"I am Saya's guard here."

"Weren't you informed that the Sovereign appointed me to this post? Do you intend on defying our liege's command?" Ivara challenged.

Even though Jubilia was displeased, she kept quiet. The atmosphere in the cogwagon was terribly awkward. Saya's life was already in danger, so this just made her even more depressed.

The journey was completely different than when she had first gone to the

capital. Absolutely everything she laid eyes on had been new to her back then. Now that she knew what lay beyond all this scenery, it didn't shine in the same way as it had before. Even though her time in the capital had been quite short, she felt like she had learned more than in the rest of her life.

Still, a thought occurred to her. Maybe the scenery only seemed to shine back then because she had been with Nagi. If she could meet him once more, would the world regain its light? Only by reuniting with him would she find out for sure.

She wondered where he was now. According to Lernaean, he had been part of an attack on a place called Ronadyphe Prison. Saya didn't even know whether that was nearby or far away. Was this cogwagon bringing her closer to him? Or perhaps farther? Saya might never meet Nagi again.

Her heart throbbed painfully at the thought. The scenery sank farther and farther into the darkness. As the cogwagon shook to and fro, Saya began to doze off.

"Lady Saya," Jubilia said as she shook Saya awake. "It's a little early, but it seems we're stopping for the night."

They were at a small settlement where the western road intersected the first ring road.

"Apparently, one of the villagers is offering up their house for us to stay in."

"Really?"

Ivara returned to the cogwagon and said to Saya, "Be at ease. We have secured the chief's house, which is in the best state among all the buildings here. Still, the area is rather seedy."

"What about the people who live there?"

"Who knows? They'll sleep somewhere or other, I suppose. There are plenty of huts around. They won't die from sleeping outside, either. Come now, this way."

The chief's house was in fact the largest in the village. It was split up into several rooms.

“Let’s assign this room to Lady Saya. The bed here is the best one, after all. You use that room over there,” Ivara declared.

Jubilia scowled at her. “It will be troublesome if I am not assigned to the same room as Lady Saya.”

“But there is only one bed in the room.”

“Then I shall use the floor.”

“You mustn’t,” Ivara replied coldly. “Do you not have any pride as a noble? A knight is one who exemplifies the difference between commoners and nobles, remember?”

“Nothing more than a common knight. Your bloodline is evident,” Gozo added dismissively.

Jubilia somehow managed to hold back her rage. Knights of the royal guard were of an entirely different status from other knights. Many of the royal guards were high-ranking nobles. On the other hand, many of the common knights, who had to come in frequent contact with commoners, were pretty much all lower-ranking nobles.

“Is there a room where the two of us can sleep together?” Saya asked.

“There are, but they’re terribly shabby,” Ivara said in an uncompromising manner.

“I’m fine with that.”

“You cannot. The Sovereign will scold me if you are not given the highest quality room.”

“Jubilia, or whatever your name is,” Gozo said with a scoff, “are you making light of the royal guard? We serve closer to the Sovereign than any other. If you cause any more trouble, then I shall have to start thinking of your punishment.”

“You do not possess the authority.”

“Do you really believe that?”

Jubilia had no choice but to fall silent. Seeing her like that, Saya decided to yield. “Jubilia, I’ll be fine on my own. Besides, it’s only for one night.”

“But—”

“Lady Ivara and I are here, and we’re more than enough of a security detail. You’ve got no role to play here,” Gozo said provocatively.

Jubilia bitterly bit down on her lip.

“Are we all in agreement, then?” Ivara asked with a saccharine smile.

She then whispered something in Saya’s ear, so quietly that Jubilia couldn’t hear. “When everyone is asleep, I will come to get you... and help you escape. I will take you to that commoner boy.”

Saya was shocked by what she said and just barely managed to keep herself from yelling. She kept a tight hold on her expression and nodded slightly, but she was unable to do anything about the hope and elation blooming in her chest. She was going to reunite with Nagi sooner than she expected.

With a glance at Jubilia, Saya could tell that the knight was still vexed about their separation. It truly pained her to try to run away from this woman who thought so much of her safety.

However, Jubilia was Lernaean’s subordinate. Their interests were currently aligned, but he wasn’t Saya’s ally. Her true goal was to see Nagi again.

That night, Saya lay in bed, fully awake. Before long, the time had come. The window opened without a sound, and Ivara slipped inside. Even as she descended from the windowsill, her movements were completely silent. If Saya had been asleep, she surely wouldn’t have noticed the intrusion. What Saya didn’t realize was that this proved that Ivara was no mere handmaiden.

“Lady Saya,” she whispered, rousing Saya from her bed. “This way.”

The floorboards creaked as Saya walked over to the window. It was likely a quiet sound, but it felt to her as though it echoed greatly through the stillness of night. Saya’s heart thumped in her chest.

Ivara whispered to her so closely that Saya could feel the woman’s breath tickling her ear. “Worry not; the other knights won’t hear this level of sound from their rooms. They’ve been placed a little farther away, after all. Come

now.”

Saya nodded and hopped out of the window. Her room was on the first floor. The ground outside the window was soft. Ivara jumped nimbly through the window after her, then went ahead of Saya and gave her a slight nod. Saya took it to mean “this way,” and she nodded back.

Ivara broke into a run, and Saya ran after her. Thanks to the soft ground beneath their feet, Saya’s footsteps were nearly as quiet as Ivara’s. Their silhouettes seemed to glide through the darkness.

When they reached the edge of the village, Ivara finally spoke up. “It should be all right for us to speak after coming this far.”

“Thank you, but... why?”

“I wonder?”

Ivara smiled. For some reason, this expression made Saya feel extremely uneasy. She could only think of a single reason for Ivara to help her.

“Did Kyou order this?”

“Call him your liege lord,” Ivara snapped, her smile vanishing in an instant. “Even if you share his blood, you cannot compare to the Sovereign. Your attitude toward our liege is far too casual.”

Right then, Saya’s fight-or-flight instinct kicked in. She had to get away. This woman before her was way too dangerous.

“Excitation: Blood Claws.”

Red claws extended from Ivara’s fingertips—this was her blood caliber. The blades were thin and about the same length as a butcher knife.

“You must be made to know of the Sovereign’s greatness, and of his nobility. He is the one who supports this very world. Alas, how heavy is the burden on his delicate shoulders?”

Ivara’s voice dripped with ecstasy, as though she were whispering of her intimate love. She was unhinged. Regardless, Saya was unable to get away from her. She couldn’t even take her eyes off Ivara. It was as if she had been cursed in some way.

“Those who threaten the Sovereign’s place cannot be allowed to exist. Everyone must be made to understand that—including you and your foolish supporters.”

Her deranged eyes locked on to Saya. The chill running down her spine caused Saya to shout, “Jubilia!”

“It’s useless. That knight won’t come for you,” Ivara said with a giggle. “If I deliver your head to Granapalt or the like, those imbeciles who defy the Sovereign will surely realize their stupidity. But that isn’t enough. You can’t die without knowing the splendor of the Sovereign. That would be unforgivable.”

One of Ivara’s claws brushed against Saya’s cheek. She kept her strength perfectly under control, slicing only a single layer of Saya’s skin.

“I’ll teach your body all about the Sovereign’s majesty.”

With a grin plastered on her face, Ivara rammed an index finger through Saya’s palm. Saya let out a scream from the intense pain.

“What a beautiful voice. This is nothing, however. The crime you committed cannot be forgiven so easily. Now then, what to do? Perhaps I’ll take these beautiful fingers of yours and tear them apart one knuckle at a time. Aah, but that won’t do. It must be slower... Yes, first I’ll insert this beneath your nails.”

Ivara reshaped her claws into needlelike shapes and put them on display in front of Saya.

“Did you know that the fingers are some of the most sensitive parts in the entire body? Even a grown man would cry and beg for mercy if he experienced such punishment. But please, be at ease. I have honed this skill for over a hundred years. I’m well versed in the best way to do it. Cry out beautifully for me, okay?”

Ivara’s voice was rapturous as she imagined the scene to come, and she shuddered delightedly at the thought. The pain had released Saya from her curse, so she turned around and ran back toward the village.

“How foolish.”

Ivara caught up to Saya in two simple strides. Her speed rivaled—no,

surpassed—Jubilia’s. Now standing next to Saya, Ivara stabbed a claw into Saya’s thigh.

“Let’s make it so you can’t run away, shall we? If you try to run again, I’ll cut it off.”

Saya collapsed with a screech, and Ivara laughed.

“You really don’t understand, do you? Your only choice here is to die. Aah, I see now; you lack all common sense.”

Ivara explained things with composure as Saya lay there on the ground.

“Those wounds won’t heal so easily. They’re wrought by a blood caliber, after all. Normally, you would heal in a couple of days, but unfortunately for you, you won’t be alive by then.”

Ivara held up the claw on her index finger and flicked it over Saya’s shoulder. The sharp blade of blood cut the strap of Saya’s dress.

“Repent,” Ivara whispered, using the same sweet voice she had used when she’d lured Saya out.

She then thrust the claw into Saya’s shoulder.

Saya shrieked. The intense pain sent tears flooding down her cheeks. Nevertheless, Saya didn’t lose consciousness; Ivara was making sure of that. She planned on inflicting continuous pain while keeping her just on the verge of consciousness. After that, she intended to kill Saya.

Ivara was far too fast; Saya couldn’t escape her grasp. Still, she didn’t give up. The only thing she was capable of right now was buying time. If she could stall long enough, Jubilia might notice her missing. Fortunately, they were still at the edge of the village. If Jubilia noticed, help was sure to come.

Jubilia woke up from her light sleep. She had ended up in a separate room from Saya because of Ivara and Gozo. Regardless, leaving that girl alone for the night was unforgivable. Thus, Jubilia intended to check in on Saya frequently. It wasn’t only because this was the duty assigned to her—before she knew it, Jubilia had begun to harbor feelings of kindness toward this mysterious girl said

to be the Sovereign's older sister.

At first, their relationship had been that of pursuer and pursued. After that, she had taken up post as her guard, keeping an eye on her. Now, she truly wanted to protect the girl. Saya was far too defenseless and desperate. Jubilia believed that she wanted to at least be her ally within the royal palace. She deeply regretted her inability to keep Saya out of danger.

"Where are you going?" a voice said as she came out of her room.

It was Gozo. He was also awake. Was he doing the rounds? His duty here was also to protect Saya, so it was entirely possible, but Gozo's tone made Jubilia uneasy.

"I'm checking on Lady Saya's room."

"Give it up. She's resting. Don't interfere. I've already verified her safety."

"You cur... Did you enter Lady Saya's room?"

"Not me; It was Lady Ivara. Obviously a man wouldn't be permitted to do such a thing. We royal guards aren't so ignorant."

"Then it's no problem if I do the same. I'm going to check on Lady Saya. I won't wake her."

"Stop. Lady Ivara said she is not to be disturbed."

Gozo was being strangely obstinate. The feeling of unease within Jubilia changed to suspicion.

"Step aside. I only plan to open the door and check."

"You can't. Are you refusing to listen to a royal guard?"

"Indeed. I am Lady Saya's guard. Her safety takes priority above all else."

Jubilia's suspicion turned to conviction now that Gozo was refusing to budge. She flung open the door to Saya's room. It was completely empty. The windows were thrown open to the outside.

"Lady Saya?! Where—"

"Excitation: Hardy Blade!"

Jubilia jumped from the spot at once as a bloodcurdling voice came from behind. In the next instant, an enormous sword—Gozo’s blood caliber—slammed down where she had just been standing.

“Where is Lady Saya?! What about Ivara?!”

“That’s none of your concern!”

Jubilia clenched her teeth. She had been deceived by the two of them. A sudden attack from a blood caliber proved they were up to no good. Saya was surely in danger.

The knight thought things over while dodging the strikes from Gozo’s greatsword. Getting caught up in a fight with him was exactly what they wanted. She had to go look for Saya as soon as possible.

However, the interior of this place was extremely narrow. The only exits were the door and the window. It would be difficult for her to get away while Gozo was attacking her. In that case, Jubilia only had one course of action.

“Excitation: Blood Blade!”

A slender red blade manifested in Jubilia’s hand.

“You’ll let me through.”

“You think I’ll step aside just because you asked?”

“I don’t.”

Jubilia lunged forward. Here in this cramped building, her weapon gave her an advantage since it was able to weave through any obstacles. Her attack was blocked by the small buckler on Gozo’s left arm. It was made of some sort of high-quality material. Even a blood caliber seemed incapable of easily piercing it.

“Tch.”

“Like an attack from a lowly knight could ever hit me. I’m a royal guard!” Gozo boasted.

Jubilia somehow managed to suppress her panic and think things over calmly. Gozo was strong. His enormous blood caliber put his status as a high-ranking

noble on full display. The sheer volume of blood he was using was completely different from the slender sword Jubilia's aptitude allowed for as a common knight. It was impossible for her to block that blade.

Nevertheless, Jubilia was confident in the skills she had drilled into her body. The only one to ever surpass her in a sword fight was that swordsman from Cobalt. As proof of that, Jubilia's blade was overwhelming Gozo.

"I can't believe you're making me waste this much."

Jubilia surpassed Gozo's weapon with enough speed and repeated strikes to get him to grumble. At this rate, she was sure to win the battle, but it would take too much time. Gozo's defense was tight, protected by the wide swings of his enormous sword and his shield. Jubilia's only option to break through was to deliver countless blows. She was in a race against time, however. She had to go rescue Saya as soon as possible.

To that end, Jubilia decided to make a gamble. She pulled a small bottle from her pocket and chugged its contents.

"Is that Amrita?!"

She completely ignored Gozo's shock. She didn't have the time to pay attention to such trivial matters. A torrent of power coursed through her. Her entire body turned into a raging flame.

Jubilia corrected the grip on her sword. She focused on the blood flowing through her, imagining strength being delivered to every part of her body.

As she focused that strength into her legs and her dominant arm, her limbs burned with scorching heat.

Gozo held up his buckler in a panic. It was a reliable defensive stance. Jubilia had been forced into a hard battle because of it. But now, she didn't care about her foe's defenses.

She focused only on the power flowing through her body. She suppressed the rampaging heat, which forcefully surpassed her own aptitude through sheer strength of will.

"Excitation Overdrive," she said as she unleashed a thrust.

Blood burst from Jubilia's fingertips. Her blood caliber swelled in size, becoming enormous for a single instant, piercing through everything in the blink of an eye.

The shield Gozo held at the ready, his armor, and even his heart were all penetrated with ease.

Gozo died without even knowing what had happened. Perhaps that was for the best. He couldn't possibly have permitted the defeat of a royal guard such as himself, so knowing nothing of it would surely leave him happier.

Despite winning the fight, Jubilia wasn't exactly in good shape. Her blade returned to liquid form, and fresh blood pumped through her body. She staggered and nearly collapsed, but just barely managed to remain on her feet. Sweat came from her every pore, and she was just barely able to withstand the tremendous nausea that assailed her. The excess of power overflowing from within was now attacking her body.

Excitation Overdrive was a way of forcefully drawing out power to rival even a high-ranking noble. This technique had been granted to her by Lernaean. It was accomplished by taking an excess dose of Amrita, which was normally impossible to get. There were rumors of it being sold for ridiculously high prices on the black market. That was where Lernaean had gotten some to give to Jubilia.

By taking a dose over what was normally administered, Amrita brought out terrifying powers. However, the cost far outweighed the benefits, and the side effects were terrible. Fatigue and a dull pain spread throughout her entire body. It took everything for her to stay standing.

Still, she had to go. She had to protect that silver-haired girl.

Thus, Jubilia leaped out of the window.

Saya opened her mouth, ready to take a risk for her survival. She had to stall as much as she could.

"Kyou won't forgive you for killing me," she said daringly.

"You still refer to my liege as such."

“He’s the one who told me to. I simply responded to his request. Do you plan on defying your liege’s orders?”

She used the exact same logic that Ivara had used against Jubilia on the ride here. Ivara couldn’t disregard this and thus remained silent.

“Did Kyou tell you to kill me? He didn’t, right?”

This question apparently prodded Ivara’s weak point. She said nothing, so Saya kept talking. As long as this conversation continued, she could stay alive. She was calm. It helped that the bleeding from her wounds had stopped, and the pain was beginning to subside.

“What exactly is your objective?”

“To erase all who defy the Sovereign and bring solidarity to this world.”

“Then you’re mistaken. I didn’t defy Kyou!”

“Lies. I know you call him the False Sovereign.”

“What?”

“It’s no use playing dumb. I know Granapalt and your Sovereignty Faction are secretly spreading insolent rumors of how the Sovereign is a fake, while you’re the true Sovereign.”

Saya had never heard of this before.

“I’m the Sovereign? There’s no way that’s true.”

“Exactly. It truly is worthless drivel, but there are those who believe it.”

“That’s why you’re going to kill me?”

“Precisely.”

It was no good. Saya wasn’t getting through to her.

“But Kyou told you to protect me!”

“You’re deceiving my liege. The Sovereign has no older sister. He is the one and only person I protect. Thus, my liege must remain alone.”

What she said caught Saya’s attention. She found it strange. Why did that boy, who sat at the peak of all authority in the capital, show such attachment to

Saya? She thought it was because she was the only one in the world who shared his blood, but she realized that wasn't all. Despite being surrounded by so many people, Kyou was alone, just like Saya had been back in the Garden.

"Have all of you been isolating Kyou on purpose?"

"Of course. That is how the Sovereign should be."

"That's not right!"

"In this way, the land of Agarthia continues to exist. Change is unforgivable. Your existence is impermissible—even if my liege doesn't wish for this to happen. Aah, how pitiful he is."

Ivara scowled as she spoke ecstatically. She then turned a sudden and serious gaze at Saya.

"I now understand that it's impossible to get you to realize how magnificent the Sovereign is. So, the time for talking is over now. All that's left is for you to die."

Ivara raised her hand, and Saya held her breath.

"You won't lay a hand on her!"

Jubilia charged in with her slender sword in hand. Ivara dodged the thrust with a click of her tongue. Jubilia slid between Saya and Ivara, holding her blade at the ready.

"You being here means Gozo is..."

"Dead."

"I see."

Ivara nodded at Jubilia's curt reply. Her attitude showed a complete lack of concern for the life of her subordinate.

"I didn't think he would lose so quickly. You've pushed yourself a little too far to accomplish that, haven't you?"

Just as she suggested, Jubilia's breathing was unnaturally rough and her entire body was steeped in sweat. Even if she had sprinted all the way here, her condition was abnormal.

“Lady Saya, I apologize for being late. Please run away from here.”

“It’s futile,” Ivara said coolly. “Her leg is useless now. I’ll be able to catch up right away.”

“Then I’ll strike you down where you stand.”

“Unfortunately, that’s also futile. Judging from your state, you used Excitation Overdrive, didn’t you? I’m afraid to say the side effects are far too great. How foolish... Or maybe not? You wouldn’t have been able to eliminate Gozo so quickly if you hadn’t done so. This girl would’ve been dead already.”

Jubilia groaned in response. Ivara had seen through her completely.

“But the result is the same. Both you and that girl will die by my hands; then it’ll be over.”

“Neither one of us will be dying here.”

Jubilia took another swing at Ivara. Her movements were as deft as usual, a testament to her tenacious spirit. However, when faced with a formidable foe like Ivara, even the slightest deficiency could cost Jubilia her life. Ivara easily dodged the thrust and even had the leisure to criticize her.

“How magnificent. To think a lower-ranking noble could display such skill. It’s enough for me to want to invite you to the royal guard. But this isn’t enough to reach me.”

Ivara caught Jubilia’s sword using two of the claws jutting from her fingers. The slender blood caliber creaked under their might.

“Ugh!”

Jubilia’s weapon dissolved, falling to the ground as flecks of blood.

“A wise decision. Had your blood caliber broken like that, then your mind would’ve suffered major damage. But what will you do now? You’re already weakened from using Excitation Overdrive, so wasn’t that the last Excitation possible for you? Your only choice now is to fight without a blood caliber. The reality that your weapon was about to break is proof enough that you should simply acknowledge your defeat. Give it up.”

Jubilia didn’t answer. Instead, she drew the sword at her waist.

“And what do you plan on doing with that toy?”

Ivara laughed. A moment later, however, she suddenly rolled to the side. The sound of something cutting through the air rushed through the space she was just occupying as an arrow flew past her.

“Reinforcements?!” Ivara yelled.

A human figure ran her way as if to answer her question. The intruder readied their bow once more and unleashed another arrow. Ivara dodged this one as well, and the figure dashing toward her drew a knife. Ivara spread out her claws in both hands and stood ready to intercept.

It was unbelievable, but there was no way Saya would mistake him for anybody else.

“Nagi!” she yelled.

Emotions gushed up from within her. Their intensity made her feel like her thoughts would come to a complete stop. Nagi had come to save her. But it was no good. Nagi couldn’t win against Ivara. He was going to get killed.

And yet, she couldn’t contain her joy.

She couldn’t let Nagi die, so what was she to do?

Delight and fear roiled within her heart, growing into a tempest. Then, *something* within her began to arise.

20

Nagi ran as fast as he could. He sprinted down the shortcut from Ronadyphe Prison and came out onto the first ring road. He then headed straight south toward the intersection with the western highway Saya was taking.

He suppressed his growing impatience as he covered a distance that would normally take half a day of walking. He simply kept running.

It had already been evening by the time he’d left Ronadyphe, so he arrived at the intersection in the dead of the night.

He wavered, wondering which way to go. If Saya had already passed through,

he had to go south to chase her to Duke Griesfelt's villa. On the other hand, if she had yet to come this way, Nagi had to head east toward the capital to intercept her.

It was highly likely that Saya was riding a cogwagon meant for nobles, so it would stand out considerably. If he asked around the local villages, he could find out if a cogwagon had passed through. He decided to take a short nap, wait until morning, then ask the locals for information.

However, his plan never came to be. When he arrived at the village he planned to rest at, he heard someone scream in pain. There was no way he would mistake the owner of that voice for someone else.

Nagi forgot about the fatigue from his journey in an instant and ran toward the voice at full speed. The screaming continued. Something bad was definitely happening. He could see three small shadows in the distance. One of them was Saya. He would have recognized her no matter what she was wearing. Another one of the figures was probably that knight, Jubilia. The last was a woman he didn't know.

As he grew closer, he saw that Jubilia was fighting against the unknown woman. It looked like the familiar knight was protecting Saya behind her. However, she wasn't in good shape, so she was being pushed back. In that case, perhaps the other woman was the assassin Crow had mentioned. Saya's life was in danger. Nagi's rage and anxiety bubbled to the surface.

He reflexively drew a Halahala-coated arrow from the quiver on his back, pulled back the string of his bow, and unleashed a shot. His target was somewhat far away, but this was still within Nagi's effective range.

The assassin dodged Nagi's arrow and yelled, "Reinforcements?!"

Nagi drew the knife at his waist and ran. Although his protective instincts had nearly taken over, a small part of him remained calm. He knew his enemy here was far beyond him. Regardless, Nagi didn't stop.

It was clear that Saya would be in grave danger if the assassin wasn't stopped now. Having grown as a warrior, Nagi could clearly envision his own death at the hands of this opponent. In terms of strength and power, she was way out of his league.

The assassin dodged Nagi's knife and thrust at his vitals with her claws. He knew it would be the death of him, but this might give Jubilia a chance at victory. Even if there was the smallest possibility, he had to stake his life on it.

He used his very life to protect this girl, just as he had promised. He stepped forward, coming to terms with his demise.

A crimson butterfly fluttered through the air.

It was so beautiful, he thought he was seeing a hallucination on the verge of death. Both Nagi and the assassin stared at it as it flew—and then it swooped down upon her.

Her movements came to a sudden halt, and the life vanished from her eyes. Nagi wasn't one to let this opportunity pass; he reflexively slashed at her throat. Strangely enough, the assassin didn't even utter a sound as she collapsed. The butterfly fluttered up from her frozen body and danced about among the gushing blood.

It was a repulsive yet entrancing sight. The scene had his heart astir. The butterfly landed on Saya's wounded palm and dissolved into her blood. There was a crimson crest on the back of her hand, and her eyes were dyed a deep red.

"Saya!"

Nagi ran over to her and grabbed her shoulders as she sat there in a trance. Saya's eyes returned to normal, and at the same time, her consciousness returned.

"Nagi?"

He embraced her tightly. She was soft, warm, and alive.

"We meet again," Saya said, feebly returning his embrace.

He could hear the beating of her heart, and she could hear his. How great it would be if their two hearts could become one. By doing so, they could share the same blood.

There was so much he wanted to say, but all of his words were lost in the warmth of her body, the feel of her skin, and the comfort of her scent. That

didn't go on for long, however, as Nagi remembered Jubilia was still nearby.

"You have my thanks for protecting Saya, but I'm going to have to ask you to release her," he told Jubilia, putting his hand to the hilt of the knife at his waist, ready to draw it at any time.

"I cannot possibly comply with that. I have been charged with Lady Saya's protection. I shall escort her to Duke Griesfelt's villa."

"There's no guarantee it's safe there anymore," Saya said, turning to face Jubilia herself. "It's entirely possible there are enemies like Ivara hiding there."

"It's still better than the capital."

"No, there's an even better place. I'm going with Nagi. To Cobalt."

"You know I'm with Cobalt?" Nagi asked, surprised.

Saya nodded. "Lernaean told me. He says he has a common front with Cobalt."

"No way. Lernaean is our enemy, right? We actually fought with him that one time."

"He thinks his goals are in alignment with yours. He's likely already in contact with someone there. He knew about you being a part of the group. How did you know I was here?"

"Crow told me. He said you were leaving the capital... Oh, I get it. Lernaean was the one who told Crow."

That wasn't all. Crow was strangely well informed of the situation in the capital. If his source of information was in fact Lernaean, nearly everything else made sense. Still, it was rather odd.

"In that case, why did Lernaean attack Cobalt?"

Saya looked straight up at Jubilia. "Tell us what's going on."

"I can't," Jubilia muttered, averting her gaze.

"Is she actually going to tell the truth?" Nagi asked.

"It's all right. Jubilia must tell me anything I want to know."

“Ugh...”

“You’re sworn to your duty as a knight, right?”

Nagi was somewhat confused by their conversation. Their relationship had changed a great deal since he last saw them. They used to be predator and prey, but now they were like two good friends.

“Very well,” Jubilia said with a sigh. “There are many things I do not know about Lord Lernaean’s plans, but I’ll offer my thoughts on what I do know. His goal is to change this distorted world where nobles thrive and commoners suffer. To that end, he intends to overthrow the organization Chairman Gratos built around the possession of the Sovereign. That’s what he needs Lady Saya for.”

Nagi was shocked. His objective sounded extremely similar to Cobalt’s.

“Long before I came into his service, Lord Lernaean put many things in place to accomplish his goal. He isn’t one to lose his patience in the face of his objective. His plans have gradually been moving forward over a tremendously long period of time.”

“Just like how the guards at the Garden slowly vanished over the years. Nagi, how did you find out about the Garden?”

“Keele told me. He got the intel from Cobalt. Huh, maybe Lernaean was their source from the very beginning.”

“Lord Lernaean has sown many seeds, waiting for them to sprout. The Halahala you use is one of them.”

“Lernaean was behind this?”

“You probably know of the scholar who made it, but Lord Lernaean was the one who was secretly supporting his research into Amrita and the Sovereign’s Blood. The Halahala, a coincidental byproduct, was then smuggled elsewhere. Most likely, it went directly to Cobalt.”

Nagi shuddered at the thought. According to Jubilia, Nagi and Cobalt had been moving according to Lernaean’s plan from the very beginning.

“But at the time, Lord Lernaean prioritized Lady Saya over Cobalt. That’s likely

why he decided to have them take responsibility as her abductors. However, the combination of Halahala and Cobalt was far more than he could have imagined. His assessment changed completely when he saw a knight defeated by a commoner.”

Jubilia turned her gaze to Nagi.

“Then, your group proved capable enough to capture Ronadyphe Prison. I believe this convinced Lord Lernaean that there was a prospect for victory behind the combination of Lady Saya and Cobalt. Her existence was elevated to a serious threat in the eyes of the chairman and the Sovereign. That’s why they are targeting her life like this. The incident at the party was just the trigger, but that wasn’t the only reason.”

“What party?” Nagi asked, cocking his head.

“Jubilia, shh! Umm, I’ll tell you later,” Saya said, turning red to the cheeks for some reason. She then took a deep breath. “Right now, we need to decide on what to do.”

“Come to Ronadyphe. It’s Cobalt’s headquarters now,” Nagi suggested, gripping his knife again. “If you say you’re going to bring Saya back to the capital, then I’ll stop you by force.”

Jubilia returned his gaze.

“Ronadyphe isn’t very far, but there’s a mountain path on the way there, so a cogwagon won’t be able to get close. Lady Saya can’t go that way with her injuries.”

“It’s all right. I think I can walk now.”

Jubilia turned her attention to the wound on Saya’s leg and balked. “The bleeding has already stopped? Even though you were wounded by a blood caliber?”

Saya tilted her head. “It stopped a while ago. Maybe the wound was a lot shallower than I thought? It doesn’t even hurt anymore.”

“I don’t think Ivara was the type to make such a mistake with her level of skill, though.”

Nagi cut in, "If you can walk, then it's fine to go to Ronadyphe."

"Very well. So long as there is nowhere else to go, I have no choice but to accept," Jubilia replied.

Nagi was relieved to hear it.

"I'd like to come along too," Jubilia continued, "but I suppose that would be difficult."

"They'd definitely attack you on sight if you suddenly showed up."

Nagi's older brother would be the first to rush out for sure. He had quite the fixation on Jubilia.

"Then I shall return to the capital for now and seek instruction from Lord Lernaean. Nagi, be sure to protect Lady Saya."

"I don't need you to tell me that."

"I can tell that your skills have improved. If you were a noble, I'd even nominate you for knighthood."

"Huh? That can't be right."

"I'm well aware that this sounds strange," Jubilia said, nodding with a strangely proud expression. "There aren't many nobles who could stand and fight against Ivara."

She turned her attention to Ivara's corpse a short distance away, then gasped in shock. Upon following her gaze, Nagi and Saya immediately understood why. The corpse had completely dried up and was covered in wrinkles.

"Did I do that?" Saya asked in a trembling voice.

"Lady Saya. Was that power you used... the royal caliber?"

"I don't know. Was it?"

"Do you not know how to wield it? A noble who awakens to their blood caliber naturally gains mastery of it, much like how a baby is capable of breathing and walking without having to be taught."

Saya closed her eyes and focused, but she quickly opened them again.

“Not at all.”

“I see. In that case, it means you haven’t fully matured yet.”

“What do I have to do to be able to use it?”

“I haven’t got a clue. Lord Lernaean may know, though.” Jubilia paused there before changing the topic. “We shouldn’t remain here much longer. Please head to Ronadyphe. After asking the people of the village to deal with this body, I shall return to the capital.”

“Thank you, Jubilia,” Saya said.

“Think nothing of it. It was simply my duty. Lady Saya, we part here. I am honored to have served as your guard.”

“I’m also glad you were with me. Even though I was locked up again, it felt completely different having a friend nearby.”

“A friend,” Jubilia muttered with wide eyes.

“Sorry, am I wrong?” Saya asked bashfully.

Seeing her like that put a smile on Jubilia’s face. “No, thank you very much. I was in no position for such a thing, but in truth, I also felt as though you were my friend.”

Jubilia’s smile looked ever so fleeting to Nagi.

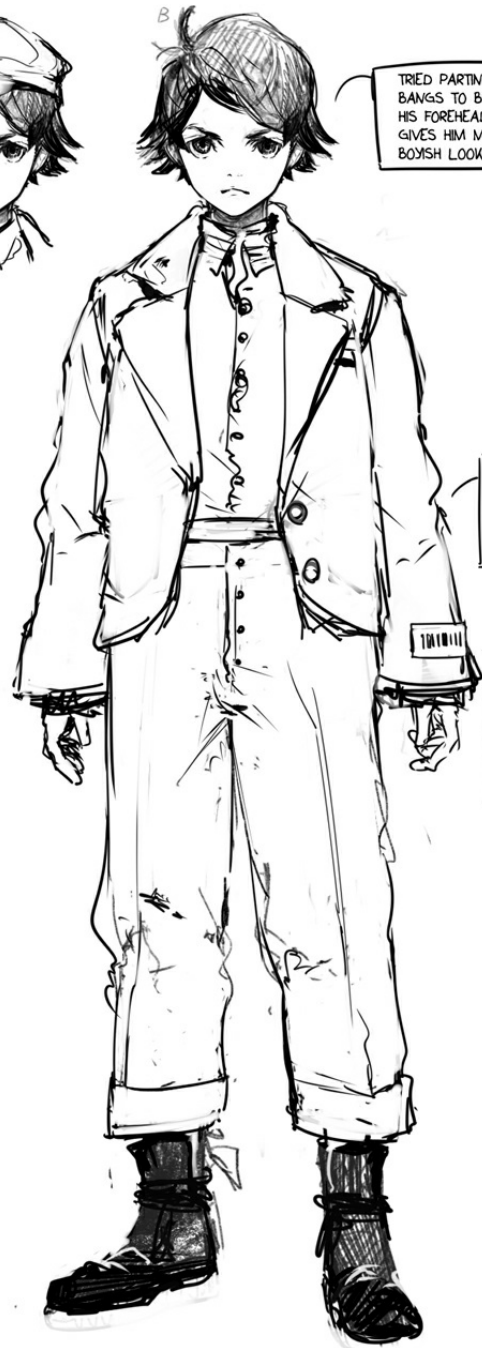
“Yeah.”

Nagi and Saya left Jubilia behind and headed north. If they traveled all night, they would arrive at the prison come morning. Countless stars shone overhead as they walked. For some reason, Saya felt like she could reach out and touch them.





B



Tried parting his bangs to bring out his forehead. I think it gives him more of a boyish look.

Used 19th-century clothes for young boys from Western cultures as a reference.

How about adding a barcode to make it feel like they're being managed?



Wentz



ALTERNATE DESIGN STRONGER FANTASY IMPRESSION



VEIL

WOVEN AT THE TIPS TO GIVE IT MORE VOLUME.



B

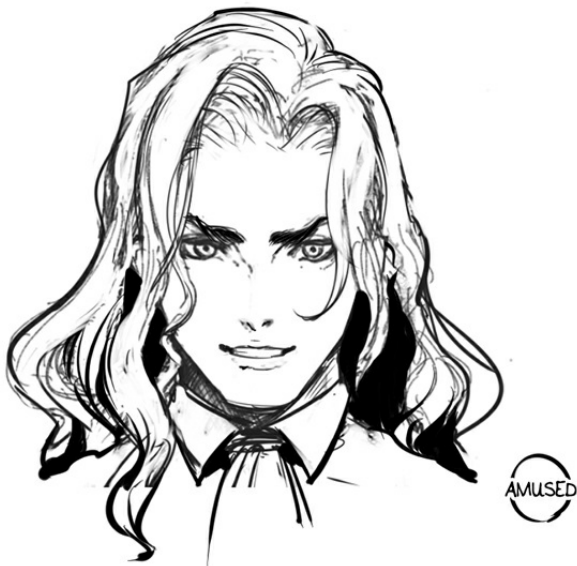
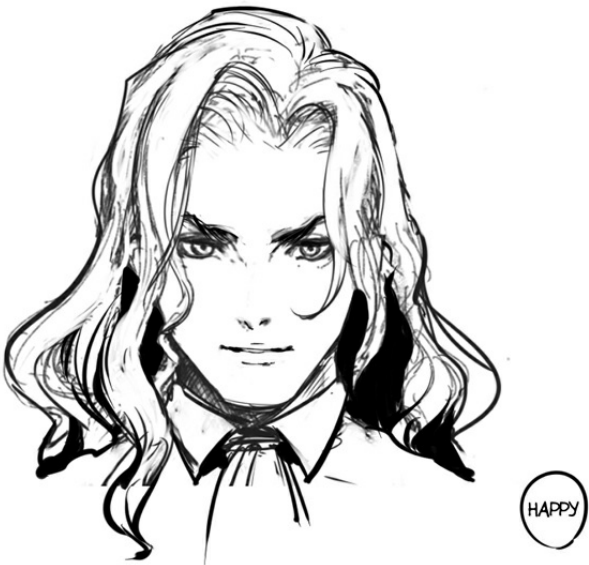
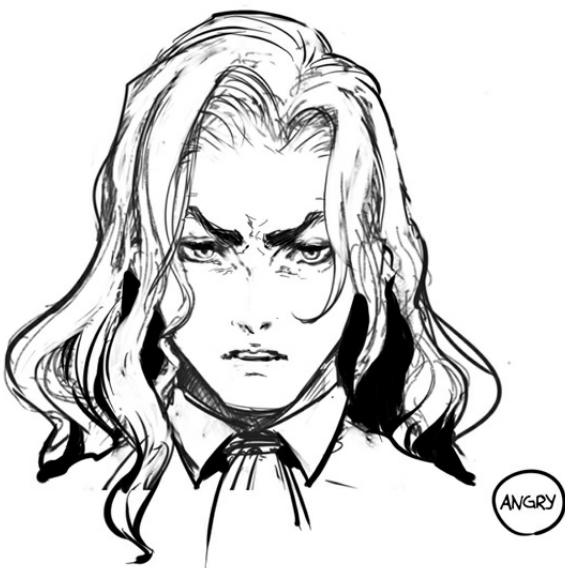
PURE WHITE DRESS

I WANTED TO MAKE HER THE EMBODIMENT OF A GIRL WHOM BOYS WANT TO PROTECT.



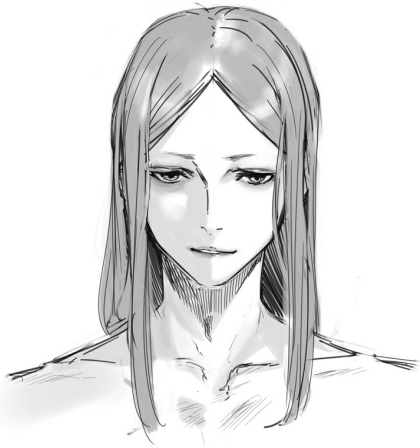
Walter





Went

■ KEELE STRANO



- THIS SILHOUETTE REALLY SUITS HIM.
- HAS A SICKLY LOOK.

■ DIMITRI EDEL TRASTALT DRASKARN



- CAN'T STOP HIS TRAIN OF THOUGHT.
- LOOKS SOMEWHAT LONELY.

■ JUBILIA ERSTE LU. LISTETA



- HAS AN HOURGLASS FIGURE.
- HAIR IS BRAIDED TO THE BACK.

NAGI
165CM



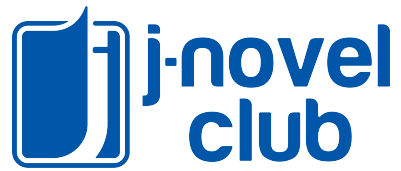
SAYA
152CM



LEBNAEAN
185CM



Wahab



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The Bloodline: Volume 1

by Taketeru Sunamori

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