

The Bloodline

Vol.02



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Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Chapter 4: The Bloodstained Dawn](#)

[Chapter 5: The Miniature Glass Garden](#)

[Chapter 6: At the Farthest End of a Promise](#)

[Epilogue: Cradle](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Chapter 4: The Bloodstained Dawn

21

As news spread of Cobalt's capture and reclamation of Ronadyphe Prison, commoners began to swarm the grounds. The Amrita they were promised should the cause prevail was far too sweet a nectar to resist. When dangled before their eyes, they were compelled to follow.

Furthermore, Nagi and Tess had returned with a gaggle of new Crestfolk recruits. In a matter of days, Cobalt evolved from a figure of folklore and rumor to the singular focus of the country's zeitgeist; the rhetoric of their righteous cause unearthed the public's buried grievances. The people of Cobalt, starting with Crow and Senak, were spreading the following news far and wide.

"Kyou is the False Sovereign. Our True Sovereign was meant to be in his place."

The Sovereign was the object of the nobles', commoners', and even the Crestfolk's respect and adoration. The hatred the oppressed felt was directed toward the nobles, whose predations on them were obvious; they hadn't directed any of it at the Sovereign. The suggestion that their faith was misplaced brought about a violent rage among the people.

"Save the True Sovereign. Defeat the False Sovereign Kyou."

Those voices spread from the outer regions of Agarthia, gradually encroaching on the center. It was only a matter of time before they reached the capital.

And finally, on this day, the True Sovereign appeared at Ronadyphe Prison.

"We have been awaiting your arrival, Lady Saya."

The moment Nagi and Saya were shown to Crow's personal room—what used to be the warden's room—Crow and Senak reverently fell to one knee, and the others followed suit in a fluster. The two of them were bewildered. Nagi

understood showing respect for Saya, a noble, but this was going too far.

“It’s been a long time. Um, what’s going on here?” Saya asked.

“Please forgive the discourtesy we showed you previously. We didn’t know you were the True Sovereign at the time.”

“We are deeply sorry.”

Hearing this from Crow was one thing, but even Senak was submitting to Saya to an eerie degree. She felt chills from what Crow just said.

“I’m... the Sovereign? Isn’t that Kyou?”

Crow shook his head. “That was all a deception. You are the True Sovereign, Lady Saya. It cannot be anyone but you.”

“Explain things properly,” Nagi cut in. “Saya’s troubled by this.”

“Nagi!” Senak yelled in anger. “Call her Lady Saya! You have to show her the proper courtesy!”

“No way. I want Nagi to refer to me as he always has,” Saya said immediately.

Crow sighed. “Well, let’s leave that for later. This all came about from Dr. Dimitri’s testimony. Professor, if you will.”

“Hmph, fine. First things first. Amrita is made through the synthesis of Sovereign’s Blood and commoner’s blood. In short, it uses a component within Sovereign’s Blood to—”

“Professor, we don’t need the full details right now. Please keep it brief.”

“Research depends on a foundation of fine and disparate details, though... Fine, then. Second, Kyou, who has been set up as the Sovereign, has not left the capital for at least the last few decades. It’s rare for him to even leave the royal palace.”

This pained Saya’s heart. It was just as she surmised. Kyou was a captive, much like Saya always had been.

“Now then, here’s the important part. Third, regardless of this farce, Sovereign’s Blood is delivered to the palace from *outside* the capital. I stole from these shipments, so there’s no mistaking it. The blood was, of course, very

real. My successful synthesis of Amrita proves this. So, what do you think this means, boy?"

Dimitri pointed at Nagi. He wasn't expecting this; his answer was hesitant.

"Uhhh... The Sovereign never leaves the royal palace, so the collection of Sovereign's Blood should take place within its walls. And yet, Sovereign's Blood is delivered from the outside, so the real Sovereign isn't in the capital?"

"Exactly."

"And you're saying that's me?" Saya asked.

"Nagi, do you remember how when you first met Lady Saya, you thought she was a commoner? Why was that?" Crow asked.

"Huh? That's because..."

"Nobody who entered the Garden seeing a girl wearing such fine clothing would think she's a commoner. Nagi, didn't you see it for yourself? Try to recall why you thought she was definitely a commoner."

"It was..."

He had definitely witnessed it happening: the pitiful sight of Saya's arms bristling with tubing.

"Nobles do not partake in blood offering. That's why you thought Lady Saya was a commoner. However, there is one other person aside from commoners who *does* partake in blood offerings."

"The Sovereign," Saya muttered.

To her, the yearly blood offerings were a matter of course. Now they were saying it was proof she wasn't a noble. Saya couldn't believe it. She was the Sovereign, and Kyou was a fake? Setting aside Nagi and Saya's confusion, a messenger rushed in to see Crow.

"Lord Granapalt has arrived!" he declared.

"Lernaean?" Saya said with a stiff voice.

Crow nodded as if he was expecting this. "Please let him through."

Shortly after, Lernaean entered, changing the atmosphere completely. All

eyes were glued to his uncannily attractive figure. Once more, Nagi was made to realize how he was paralyzed in fear before this man.

“First, Lady Saya, I must apologize for exposing you to danger. I only learned of Kyou’s handmaiden being a part of the faction scheming your demise after you had left. I took chase in a hurry and was nearly too late to do anything,” Lernaean said, lowering himself to a knee. “I met Jubilia on the way and heard of the circumstances. I have taken custody of her. How shall we deal with her? It was her duty to guard you; now that she has exposed you to danger, she herself believes a decapitation is in order.”

“What are you even saying?” Saya asked, looking down at him incredulously.

Nagi only now noticed that Jubilia’s odd behavior when they parted was because she was already prepared to face her death.

“That’s what it means to expose the Sovereign to danger,” Lernaean answered.

“Absolutely not. Jubilia is my friend. I won’t allow her to be killed.”

“Such personal interest is not permitted of the Sovereign.”

“I’m no Sovereign!” Saya yelled, baring her teeth.

“No, with Dr. Dimitri’s testimony, I did some investigating of my own. It took me some time to get definitive proof, but the Sovereign’s Blood certainly flows through your veins. You have been the True Sovereign who has ruled over Agartha for the past few centuries. You are the one who grants all your subjects life. Jubilia was incapable of fulfilling her duty as your guard.”

“Nagi, what do I do? My friend is going to die because of me...”

Saya looked to Nagi for help. He thought it over for a moment, but before he could get things in order, Lernaean cut in.

“She is my subordinate. I do, of course, mourn her loss. If she did, in fact, manage to fulfill her duty as a guard, then I would show no hesitation in sparing her. However, she denies doing so herself.”

Seeing Lernaean’s gaze directed toward him, Nagi figured out his intentions. “In that case, Jubilia properly fulfilled her duty. I can vouch for her. Saya

would've died if Jubilia didn't risk her life to protect her."

"Hmm, I see. Lady Saya, is that true?"

"It is! Jubilia saved me! If not for her, I'd be dead."

"Very well; we cannot simply dismiss the charges entirely, but we'll punish her with penitence. That is only after things have calmed down, however. This is a state of emergency. We need every skilled hand we can get." Lernaean's manner as he revoked Jubilia's death sentence was ever so casual. "Nagi, you barely pass, I suppose. Whatever. You should learn to show a force of personality a little better. If you are to protect Lady Saya, you will require such strength."

Nagi was apparently being tested. He wanted to snap back at him, but that was inappropriate, given the current situation, so Nagi summoned up his courage to respond dryly.

"I'll work on it."

"Your attitude is a little troubling. You have become the centerpiece of this revolution, after all."

"What revolution?"

"You don't know? The one to dethrone the False Sovereign Kyou, return Lady Saya to her rightful place, and liberate the oppressed commoners of the land. This is what you and the rest of Cobalt have spilled so much blood for, is it not?"

"Don't forget the Crestfolk," Saya added.

"Of course. I see, so you support the Crestfolk. I'm sure you intend to abolish their sterilization the moment you seize power. The one who spearheaded this policy was Gratos, the man manipulating the False Sovereign. He must be eliminated immediately."

"Wait a moment. I thought Gratos was your ally?" Saya asked.

"What are you saying? *He* is the true enemy."

"Then why did he help us?"

"Gratos is in a position where it would be troublesome for you to die, Lady

Saya. You are required for the supply of Sovereign's Blood to continue flowing. That's exactly why he cooperated. The world is not so simple. Friends and foes change depending on the circumstances."

"I don't get it. Someone I thought was an ally is an enemy, and someone who saved me is to be executed..."

"That's what it means to be Sovereign. That's how heavy the duty of protecting the world is. Please be at ease. I am your ally."

"Don't lie to me. What if I said I would cast everything aside and run away with Nagi?"

"I would kill that boy for deceiving you and teach you the responsibility of a ruler."

"So, that makes you my enemy. I at least know that much."

"That is precisely what it means to protect yourself. So long as you rule these lands, you cannot live as a normal person."

"You said there was a world without Sovereigns before."

"I believe I also said it was nothing but a fairy tale. Let's focus on the battle at hand. Unless you would prefer to return to the Forbidden Garden?"

Saya replied with a strong gaze instead of words. As she did, she suddenly entwined her fingers with Nagi's. He strengthened his grip in return.

"I believe you understand now. Gratos was the one to lock you in there. If you wish to escape such a fate, your only choice is to defeat him. I've come here to do just that: to form an alliance between Cobalt and the Sovereignty Faction."

"So, the time has finally come," Crow said passionately. "After Lady Saya was taken from us, I realized we were receiving a noble's clandestine support from the start. I was surprised to hear from you again, but just as you said back then, it's impossible to overthrow the government in any other way."

"Even with Halahala, I believe it would be impossible for you to defeat the knights protecting the capital. Similarly, the Sovereignty Faction is outnumbered by the Traditionalists. But if we join forces, we can rival them. What's more, we have Lady Saya."

“The rumors of the False Sovereign have begun to win the bulk of the public to our cause. It raises our morale while lowering theirs. Everything is in place. Now is the time to make a stand.”

Crow and Lernaean had already assembled a script to play out, but there was someone who opposed it.

“What the hell, man. We’re borrowin’ a noble’s strength to defeat the nobles? That’s fucked up,” Keele said as he wandered in suddenly. He didn’t show a single hint of courtesy to Lernaean or Saya.

“Keele, our objective isn’t to defeat the nobles, it’s to liberate the commoners from the tyrannical rule of nobles. We should be borrowing strength from the civilized nobles here.”

“You’re just gonna get used and thrown away after they’re done with you.”

“That won’t happen,” Lernaean said with a deep and somehow overwhelmingly persuasive voice. Perhaps this quality of his was what put him above all others. Nagi found it terrifying.

“I don’t like it.”

“It’s not a matter of you liking it. You lack a strategic mindset,” Lernaean told him.

“I know. Go take your strategy and sow your stupid seeds with Crow. I just want to butcher me some fucking vampires. So long as you keep pointin’ me at fights that get my blood boiling, I guess I’ll stick around a while.”

Crow made a bitter expression. Ignoring him, Keele suddenly realized something.

“Hang on. If we join forces with these guys, it means I can’t fight against that woman?”

“Of course not. She will be our ally. You can’t possibly lay a hand on her.”

“On the eve of our victory, I do not mind if you have a bout with her,” Lernaean added, but Keele didn’t look pleased at all.

“I want a serious fight to the death, dammit... Whatever. First, we’ve got to throw down with a whole pile of knights, yeah?”

“Of course.”

“Then I’ll make do with that for now. Get my battlefield set up already. Where do I go?”

“Keele, I seriously can’t believe you...” Crow muttered in exasperation.

“Allow me to explain,” Lernaean said in Crow’s stead. “In addition to the knights who serve directly under the False Sovereign Kyou in his royal guard, there are Gratos’ Hidden Blades, and the Order of Obsidian Blood led by Duke Togart. The Obsidian Blood manages public order in central Agarth, within the first ring road. They lack the royal guard’s individual fighting strength, but they make up for it in numbers. They are the strongest armed force in Agarth. On the other hand, our forces consist of the Order of Sapphire Blood. You may think of them as my troops. Their individual skill is no different from the Obsidian Blood, but unfortunately, we only have half their numbers. In other words, if we were to clash right now, I would be decisively beaten. Do you understand the situation so far?”

Everyone nodded. It felt like the reverberations of Lernaean’s voice had drawn the reaction out of a quiet and compliant layer of their minds, beneath conscious thought. Nagi barely managed a nod himself. The only ones who didn’t were Keele, who was perhaps not even listening, and Saya, who stared at Lernaean expressionlessly.

“So, there is a need for Cobalt to make up for the difference in strength. To that end, we’ll use the same strategy you used to capture this prison.”

“A diversion, you mean?”

“Indeed. I would like you to foment a general uprising. Widespread chaos will stall the knights from coordinating their forces. We begin with the town of Brandall, far from the capital. The Order of Emerald Blood will have to be dispatched there. While they are caught up away from the capital, we then cause an even bigger uprising in the town of Kelst—as a vital economic center of the southern region, the Emerald Blood would ordinarily be stationed there; the Obsidian Blood will have to be dispatched from the capital along the highway. Then the Sapphire Blood will swoop in on the royal guard, who are left defending the capital alone.”

“No can do. We do it like that, and you lot get all the good parts. Send me to the capital too,” Keele said.

“That was my intention. I know there are elites among Cobalt capable of fighting on the level of knights. I would like them to take part in the assault on the capital. What do you think, Lady Saya?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“Because this is your army. Isn’t that right, Crow?”

“Exactly. Nobles and commoners are fighting side by side. You are the only one who can carry our banner, Lady Saya.”

“I don’t understand this stuff...”

“Still, there is nobody but you.”

There was a hint of criticism in Crow’s voice. Saya strengthened her grip on Nagi’s hand, clinging to him for help. He squeezed back. No matter what happened, he would protect her. He believed his feelings would get through to her.

Saya nodded. “Fine. That’s the best way, right? Then let’s go with it.”

“Thank you very much.”

Lernaean and Crow bowed to her reverently. With that, the meeting was over. Before Nagi and Saya could leave, Lernaean called out to them.

“Nagi, could I have a little of your time? I would like to speak with you. Alone.”

Nagi and Saya exchanged curious looks.

Ronadyphe Prison was rife with places to have a secret conversation. That was the kind of building it was to begin with. Lernaean brought Nagi to a gloomy room with an unpleasant stench to it.

“This room was apparently used for torture. It seems all such tools have already been removed. A pity,” Lernaean said, his voice reverberating through the room. “I’m sure many who opposed the Sovereign screamed their last

here.”

“Quit putting on airs. What do you want?”

“There’s no need to be so wary of me. It would be simple for me to kill you, but I can’t possibly afford to. There’s something I must explain to you.”

Lernaeon gazed into Nagi’s eyes. That was all it took for his presence to overwhelm him, but Nagi defied the pressure and glared back at him.

“Then stop threatening me like that.”

“Quite impressive, for a commoner. Well, it’d be troublesome if you weren’t. *You* are the last piece required for this revolution, after all.”

“You said the same thing earlier. What do you mean? What piece?”

“I’ve been slowly preparing for this battle far before your grandparents were even born. Little by little, I’ve been gathering everything I need. Like Halahala. Like Cobalt. The greatest of all these was making the True Sovereign my ally.”

“And that’s Saya?”

“Of course. But Lady Saya isn’t complete. She possesses the Sovereign’s Blood, but she isn’t the Sovereign in a true sense.” Lernaeon walked in a slow circuit of the room as he addressed Nagi. “Lady Saya does not possess the royal caliber. This is likely because she has been locked inside the Garden since her infancy. A blood caliber is proof of adulthood. To acquire one, one must have a mature mind. With the resolve to fight the world in hand, one’s blood becomes a weapon. That is the true nature of a blood caliber. There was no need for such a thing growing up within that bird cage. Until you showed up, that is.”

“What are you getting at?”

“You can’t tell? By wishing to walk beside you, whose time is finite in this world, she now desires to become an adult. She recognizes the world as a battlefield and has made the resolve to walk through it. That’s what grants her the royal caliber. She is awakening as the True Sovereign.”

“The royal caliber... you mean that red butterfly?”

“I’ve never seen it myself, unfortunately. All I heard was Jubilia’s report. Lady Saya wielded the royal caliber once before that too, didn’t she? Back at the

Forbidden Garden.”

Nagi thought back to that time. What had happened was in fact similar to Ivara’s defeat.

“How do you know that?”

“I came to the conclusion after investigating the guard’s corpse. The direct cause of death was the wound you inflicted on him, but the corpse had aged visibly. Ivara’s corpse was the same. I could only believe it to be a result of Lady Saya’s power. But it seems her awakening is still at an incomplete stage. And what’s needed to complete it...”

Lernaean took a step closer. Nagi unconsciously grit his teeth at the pressure.

“Is your very existence. That’s why you’re the last piece to this revolution.” Lernaean’s lips curved into an elegant, yet ferocious smile. “Just as I said before, the difference in strength between us and the knights of the royal guard is vast. At this rate, there’s less than a one in ten chance that the revolution succeeds. You will die. She will be captured. If you do not wish for that to happen, she must become the True Sovereign. When she awakens, the revolution will be complete.”

“I don’t even know what to do.”

“Neither do I. Give it some thought. What happened when she used the royal caliber?”

Nagi thought it over, but his memories of those times were chaotic. Both were crises where he had been placed in desperate situations.

“At the very least, one of the conditions is for Lady Saya to be with you. She showed no sign of being able to use the royal caliber while she was in the palace; it’s your job to find out what is needed.”

“I’ve got no clue, though...”

“If you can’t find it, all that awaits us is ruin.”

“Why be so rash? I don’t get it. You’re a noble, aren’t you? You can live as long as you want.”

Nagi could glimpse a bottomless expression within Lernaean’s eyes.

“Being granted a long life without purpose only brings suffering. Only when one acquires hope does their life become their own. The hope once granted to us by the Intelligence was foolishly cast away. So long as we do not take it back, we will never live true lives. This is a rash decision, but all of our fates lie within your hands.”

Nagi remained stock still, unable to say a thing, as Lernaean slapped his shoulder.

“I expect much of you, Nagi. If this were a fairy tale, a kiss would do the trick.”

“Huh?”

“A joke.”

Sarcasm would be one thing, but Nagi never expected this man to tell a joke. Setting the surprised boy aside, Lernaean left the room.

22

Day after day, peasant revolts rocked Agarthia. Over half of them were unrelated to Cobalt. The rumors of the False Sovereign ignited centuries worth of resentment and spread like wildfire.

All of Cobalt’s expectations were exceeded. Agarthian society began to crumble. Villages in every region were filled with shouts of, “Throw down the False Sovereign who torments us commoners! Save the True Sovereign!”

Among the commoners, everything they suffered, from Amrita being withheld from them, to the political games of the nobility, to even their daily unease, all became Kyou’s fault for occupying the throne. They also began to believe the story that the True Sovereign who shared their suffering would solve all of their problems.

The Crestfolk believed a story of their own. To them, the True Sovereign was one of their own, a fact kept secret by the chiefs of the hidden villages through oral tradition. Somehow this had leaked to the public; now it was common knowledge.

All of their hatred and resentment lit a powder keg beneath the entirety of

Agartha. An armed revolt broke out in the town of Brandall; this one was, in fact, spearheaded by Cobalt. At first, the nobles of the royal palace sneered at the news. Nobles couldn't be hurt, so there was no problem, even if there were only a few knights stationed there. Their tone changed when word came that noble corpses stood on display in Brandall's town square, split apart at the neck and waist, the open wounds showing no signs of ever regenerating.

The people of the royal palace were in dismay. Cobalt's propaganda about the power of Halahala proved wholly accurate. Even the ones who had brushed off the capitulation of Ronadyphe Prison as some sort of mistake finally came around. In their impatience, the Order of Emerald Blood struck out to suppress the armed revolt.

That was only the beginning, however. A few days later, news came to the capital that an even larger revolt surfaced in the town of Kelst. The lord's entire family had been paraded around town and killed. Not only that, the family's women had been thoroughly used for entertainment before being murdered in ghastly ways. Their exposed corpses were apparently a dreadful sight.

The palace was steeped in fear. It was like they could all imagine it happening to themselves. The nobles only just began to realize the scale of the grudge commoners bore against them over the centuries.

Anger superseded fear, in time. Congress unanimously agreed to dispatch the strongest force available to them, Duke Togart's Order of Obsidian Blood. Dealing with the aftermath of Ronadyphe's fall was put on hold as a result of criticisms and inquest into why it wasn't recovered already. The decision to dispatch the knights, however, was largely made in a fit of furious panic. The nobles of the capital were dominated by their emotions, failing to realize they were playing into the rebellion's hands.

Two days after the Order of Obsidian Blood departed, Lernaean Edel Trouta lo Granapalt's Order of Sapphire Blood, which was supposed to be safeguarding the north, suddenly appeared in the capital.

With the help of internal colluders, the knights easily made it all the way to the royal palace. They demanded the False Sovereign Kyou and Chairman Gratos surrender themselves, as well as the abdication of the throne to the

True Sovereign, the Silver Princess Saya. The nobles immediately understood the riots' true architect.

Lernaeon was the adopted son of the militant Granapalt family. He had proved to be a child prodigy and inherited the house. He was young among the members of Congress, but that was only in relative terms in a group filled with ancient nobles. It had been over two centuries since he joined Congress.

During that time, he had gradually expanded his influence and showed ambition in creating the Sovereignty Faction. Rumors had flown about him ever since he succeeded the Granapalt house.

Nobles didn't die from old age. There were cases where a major accident would kill them before their regeneration could make a difference, but fundamentally, nobody died unless they were killed by a blood caliber. It was said that the previous Lord Granapalt died in a cogwagon accident. No noble actually believed this.

Granapalt raised the standard of revolt with the True Sovereign, the Silver Princess, in tow. In response, Congress naturally refused his demands and dispatched the royal guards to protect the capital.

The front gates of the royal palace, untouched by battle for centuries, was now the stage atop which two knightly orders stared each other down. There were more than nobles on the battlefield, as well.

"It will take another day for an urgent message from the capital to reach Kelst. After that, it will take another two days for the Obsidian Blood to make it back here. Thus, we have three days."

Lernaeon directed the crowd of soldiers at the front gate. It was an allied force of nobles, commoners, and Crestfolk.

"Our objectives are as follows: defeat the royal guards within three days, and capture Chairman Gratos and the False Sovereign. The palace's defenses are sturdy, and the royal guard are strong. But justice lies with us. The True Sovereign Saya is with us."

Saya was in the middle of the battlefield, surrounded by knights. The significance of this was tremendous. The entire coalition force's morale surged

to an unnatural height.

“Therefore, we will be victorious. Without a doubt.”

The front gate was engulfed by a roar of acknowledgment, and the trigger on the battle was pulled.

Neither Saya nor Nagi had received any training as soldiers. Nagi had grown as a warrior at a tremendous speed thanks to the Crestfolk and Cobalt, as well as from his repeated skirmishes, but fighting in an army was an entirely different beast.

It wasn't possible to judge what was going on over the vast battlefield. The only thing they could feel was the scent of blood on the wind mixed with the pressure from the raging shouts as something enormous pushed forward.

The only thing the two of them could do was wait. Saya had to be on the battlefield to maintain morale. She was being protected in the back, of course, far from the front line.

From this position, the only thing she could clearly make out was the palace walls. Saya's little brother was within them. And here she stood, fighting against him.

“How is it going?” Saya asked Nagi, who was standing next to her.

“I have no clue.”

“Something feels wrong in the air.”

“Yeah. Both sides are freely using blood calibers. It's probably because of that.”

Nagi could feel a repulsive prickling on his skin. He already knew this was instinctive fear toward blood calibers. He could feel it far more strongly from the enemy forces.

“This might be bad. It looks like their side is stronger. Plus, they've got the walls to protect them.”

“But we have the greater numbers, don't we?”

“Technically. There’s a lot of commoners from the capital among our ranks, but the only ones with Halahala are Cobalt. No matter how many extra commoners we have, they can’t hurt anyone.”

“So, there’s no point?”

“Not necessarily. Even a commoner might be able to knock a knight off balance. Using that chance, a blood caliber or Halahala-coated weapon can defeat them. That’s Crow’s plan, anyway.”

“Is it going well?”

“More or less. But dozens on our side die for every noble we defeat. We won’t be able to push through at this rate. Winning within three days seems pretty reckless.” Nagi then recalled Lernaean’s words. “Saya, I guess you still don’t know how to use it?”

She had already told him that she couldn’t use the royal caliber. And just as expected, her answer remained unchanged.

“It kind of feels like I do, but don’t. Sorry.”

Saya looked sad. He hadn’t mentioned to her yet that Lernaean believed they would lose without the royal caliber. Nevertheless, Saya surmised that great hopes rode on her using it. Did such a large responsibility really need to be placed on this girl’s shoulders? It seemed far too heavy, even if she truly was the Sovereign.

Nagi still couldn’t believe it. In his heart, he still saw Saya as the girl he had met in the Garden. He still found it hard to understand that she was a noble. There was no way he could be convinced that she could influence the outcome of this battle.

What was going on here to begin with? Nagi only wished for Saya to be free. Before he knew it, this wish led to the tremendous destruction and violence before his eyes. He couldn’t have possibly imagined this outcome.

“Will it really end with this?” Nagi muttered.

“I hope it does,” Saya answered immediately. She was thinking of the same things he was.

“What do you want to do when it does?”

“I don’t know. I understand a little more now, but I’m still ignorant about this world.”

“Same here. I’m well aware of how ignorant I am now. But isn’t that the same for everyone? Our lives are far too short. We die without really getting to know anything. Oh, maybe nobles are different, though.”

“I don’t think so. Nobles are the same. No matter how long they live, they only know about themselves... No, perhaps most people don’t even know that much.”

“Still, given a little more time, I want to learn more. Even if it’s limited, I should be able to live a little longer. Blood offerings are going away, after all.”

“Crow says everyone will be able to get Amrita.”

“Something is fishy about that. Creating Amrita requires commoner blood. It’s impossible to divide Amrita among everyone.”

Nagi had felt uneasy about the way Crow and Senak widely announced news of Amrita’s distribution. He’d dwelt on the matter for some time, and he couldn’t avoid the conclusion that there was a giant gulf between the synthesis method Dimitri spoke of and the future Crow preached to the commoners.

“Crow is only saying those things to get more allies,” Nagi said. “To win this battle.”

A mob surrounded the palace. This scenery was impossible to consider only a short while ago.

“So, what happens after it’s over? What happens when everyone finds out they won’t get Amrita?”

“I think it’d be best if we just stopped making it. In that case, there would be no more nobles and commoners, right?”

“I see. You’re right.”

A society where everyone simply had the lifespan granted to them at birth. Even as she nodded, Saya didn’t seem to realize there would be a single exception: the Sovereign. Nagi shut that thought away inside his heart.

"I guess I'd like to go around and see many places," Saya suddenly blurted.

"After the fight is over?"

"Yes. I still don't know much about the capital, and there are many other towns, right? Have you been to them before?"

"Just a few. I walked all over the place after we got separated."

"What kind of places?"

"Hmm, I was kind of desperate, so I didn't really stop to take a look around."

"Want to go look at them together?"

Saya peered into Nagi's eyes. They were now face to face, staring at each other. Nagi felt like he was being sucked into her clear, red eyes. Her white cheeks were flushed.

"I want to travel with you," Saya added in a trembling voice.

Her eyes then suddenly shot open. It was like she just heard something he couldn't.

"Huh? Just now..."

"What's wrong?" Nagi asked.

"Oh, it's gone. I lost it."

"Lost what?"

"Just now, I felt like I could get it. How to use that power, I mean. But it's no good. It slipped away."

Why now? Lernaean had told Nagi he had to find out.

"Sorry."

"You don't need to apologize, Saya."

Nagi thought it over. The situation was completely different from the last two occasions. There had been a direct threat to their lives in both cases. Nagi thought that was the key, but perhaps he was mistaken.

Looking over the confrontation of two knightly orders at the gates, Jubilia

once more felt pure awe toward Lernaean's bottomless depths. Normally, he would be a man of status, far beyond a lower-ranked noble like her, but he recognized Jubilia's devotion to her betterment and took her in directly under his command. Such treatment was unprecedented in noble society, where a family's status meant everything. Jubilia swore her allegiance to him ever since.

Thinking back on it now, he was in need of loyal subordinates for this exact rebellion. The Order of Sapphire Blood was filled with such figures. When Jubilia failed to rescue Saya and was defeated by a commoner, it wouldn't have been strange for her to be executed. And yet, Lernaean hadn't abandoned her. On the contrary, he had assigned her the important role of being Saya's personal guard. Jubilia's loyalty to him became even more unwavering.

She still didn't have a full grasp of the man, however. He had spent time beyond reckoning assembling the stage and the players for the scene playing out before her: the first war since Agarth's creation. Jubilia and all of Lernaean's primary subordinates knew he was aiming for this. Actually seeing the tragic reality was something else entirely.

Their belief in the Sovereign's eternal reign and century-spanning legacy was being shaken at its foundation. Everything up until this point was largely going according to Lernaean's plans. With the royal guard left to defend the capital alone, everything hinged now on the Sapphire Blood and the peasant irregulars' ability to cooperate and overwhelm the royal guard.

Excluding the members of Cobalt, the commoners weren't armed with any useful weapons. They didn't even have proper training. They were only here in numbers. No matter how skilled an individual knight was, taking on hundreds of opponents at once was bound to leave an opening. That was when the Sapphire Blood and Halahala-armed soldiers of Cobalt would strike. That was the basic plan. The commoners were essentially sacrificial pawns.

It was obvious for a noble like Lernaean to care little about that, but were the commoners of Cobalt really fine with it? Jubilia had her doubts, but things made sense when she had heard that Crow was actually a former scholar. Scholars were commoners who were granted Amrita. Their mindsets were similar to nobles.

In the end, this was a fight between nobles. That was how Jubilia interpreted it. The commoners and Crestfolk were only being used. They each had something to gain upon victory, so that was enough of a reason for them to participate.

The plan was working, but even so, the high-ranking nobles of the royal guard were far too powerful. She felt this before when she squared off against Gozo and Ivara. Their talent with blood calibers was on an entirely different level. The Sapphire Blood couldn't afford to use Excitation Overdrive like she did back then. Consuming Amrita for battle couldn't be done at an army's scale.

Even as the strongest combatant in the Sapphire Blood, by her own evaluation Jubilia was still, at most, just above the average royal guard. The knights of the Sapphire Blood could only fight on equal footing against a royal guard in groups of two or three, at the cost of a few commoners.

Would they truly make it in time like this? They had given themselves three days. If the Obsidian Blood were to return, the rebel army would be suppressed without much of a fight. Nevertheless, the man standing before her was the very picture of composure. Lernaean's attitude didn't change even when the worst possible news was delivered to him.

"The Obsidian Blood has shown up on the main road!"

This had all the knights united in panic.

"Impossible! It hasn't even been a day!"

"Were our plans discovered? Perhaps there was a traitor," Lernaean said, acting as if it had nothing to do with him, then gave out his orders in a well-projected voice. "Retreat from the gate and reform our ranks. We'll be caught in a pincer attack at this rate."

"Yes, sir!"

The knights left in a fluster. That was when Jubilia realized something terrible.

"If they're coming from the main road, the message won't make it to the rear in time!"

"I know."

“Lady Saya is there!”

“I know that as well. Calm down.”

“I shall go rescue her.”

“I heard you weren’t in peak condition.”

“You need not worry about the side effects of Excitation Overdrive. I can still fight.”

The burden on her body was a lot more serious than she had imagined. Even though the side-effects had abated somewhat with the passage of time, just activating her blood caliber was agonizing. She needed at least another month to fully recover, but Jubilia believed she could simply push through the pain. She was getting ready to dash off when Lernaean called out to her in a cold voice.

“That’s unnecessary.”

“Why?”

“Even in this situation, there is still a prospect for victory. I’m simply waiting for it. There’s no need for a rescue.”

Lernaean implicitly admitted that he was purposefully exposing Saya to danger. He was likely hoping to trigger the royal caliber to activate. And as she came to this understanding, words spilled from Jubilia’s lips, spurred entirely by emotion.

“Then I shall return this sword to you.”

A knight’s true weapon was their blood caliber; the sword a knight carried at their waist held purely ceremonial meaning. It was a symbol of their loyalty. To surrender it was to tender one’s resignation.

“The Obsidian Blood will not lay a finger on Lady Saya. You may even aggravate the situation. Do you still wish to do this?”

“I have a grasp on what you’re planning, Lord Lernaean. I can understand, but I simply cannot shut my eyes to the danger this poses to Lady Saya.”

What in Agartha am I doing? she thought to herself. Her admiration and awe

toward Lernaean remained unchanged. They actually felt greater than before. And yet, Jubilia chose to throw that all away.

“So she truly does possess the qualities of a ruler,” Lernaean muttered.

Jubilia didn’t agree. Her actions weren’t out of loyalty to the Sovereign. It was actually the opposite. It was precisely because she had spent time with her that Jubilia knew how far away that girl was from being a ruler. She was just an innocent and powerless girl. The only things she possessed were her desire for freedom and her longing to be with the boy named Nagi. A girl like that wasn’t meant to be used as a tool for battle. And above all else, that girl had called Jubilia her friend.

“Take your sword, you’ll need it. Devote it to whoever you wish.”

“Yes, sir.” Jubilia’s short acknowledgment carried a flood of emotion.

“Just pass that boy a message for me.”

She didn’t really know what kind of coded message this was, but she promised to convey it nonetheless.

“I thank you for your service until now.”

After bowing deeply for his gratitude, Jubilia ran off.

Just as Jubilia predicted, the rear line of the Sapphire Blood was in a disastrous state upon being beset by the Obsidian Blood. Not only were they attacked where they were least expecting it, the onslaught was fierce. The forces of the Sapphire Blood were being scattered and routed.

Jubilia managed to find Saya and Nagi in the chaos of the battlefield. Nagi had his Halahala-coated knife held out, facing off against several knights, protecting Saya to his rear. He was out of arrows and had cast aside his bow. The enemy knights were in the process of surrounding him.

“Excitation: Blood Blade!”

Jubilia cut her way into the middle of the knights with her blood caliber in hand. They were incapable of dealing with her ambush. Three of them fell in a single breath, opening the path as Jubilia ran up to Saya.

“Lady Saya, are you hurt?!”

“Jubilia! Did you come on your own?”

“I quit my job,” Jubilia proclaimed, though Saya didn’t really understand. “I can explain later. Nagi, I have a message from Lord Lernaean.”

The situation hadn’t actually improved with Jubilia’s arrival. They were still surrounded, and escape was impossible. The knights were still keeping their distance, wary of Jubilia, but an attack was sure to come.

“It’s not actually a joke,” Jubilia said, relaying Lernaean’s words verbatim. “I don’t know what he meant, though.”

“What’s not a joke?” Nagi was perplexed at first, but came to a sudden realization. He looked like he was at his wits’ end. “You’re kidding me. They said blood calibers were proof of adulthood, but will that really work?”

“What’s the matter?”

“Jubilia, lend me your ear for a sec.”

Nagi beckoned her over. She complied, somewhat suspicious of his actions. They were in the middle of a battle, so this was pretty outlandish, but Nagi was desperate. Jubilia kept an eye on the enemy and brought her ear closer to Nagi’s mouth. His whispered question was so unexpected that it seemed completely out of place in the current situation, but Jubilia immediately figured out the meaning behind it.

“It’s possible... I think,” she said with a nod.

“Seriously?”

“What are you two whispering about?”

“S-Saya, it’s nothing,” Nagi stuttered.

Jubilia was once more shocked by Lernaean. She never considered he would think of such a thing. It was true she could actually be a hindrance here. Well, she did just give him a push, so there was some worth in her arrival.

“Be quick about it if you don’t want to die. These bastards likely won’t lay their hands on Lady Saya, but neither of us will be shown any mercy. If that

really is true, it's the one and only way of saving everyone."

"There's a way?" Saya asked.

"That depends on you, Lady Saya. I'll keep the enemy at bay for as long as I can. You lot help as well."

Jubilia was no longer a knight. The others had no reason to obey her, but they did so anyways. Now protected by the Sapphire Blood, Saya and Nagi were left alone.

"Saya, uhhh..."

Jubilia fretted as she listened to Nagi's voice. She lightly parried the blow coming at her from the front and cut down the enemy knight. The cleanliness of her strike surprised even herself, despite the fact that she was far more interested in the conversation behind her than the fight in front of her.

"There's something I want to tell you."

"Mm."

Jubilia suppressed her urge to yell at him to just do it and redirected her anger toward the enemy. The knight faced her unreasonable outburst of anger and was cut down in a single slash.

After getting cornered, Jubilia had come to Saya's rescue. That was fine and all, but her behavior was strange. Actually, it was Nagi who was being strange. When he heard Lernaean's message, his behavior had clearly changed.

The two of them whispered to each other, and Jubilia said it was the one and only way to save everyone. If there was a way, then it had to be done quickly. And yet, Jubilia and the other knights left Nagi and Saya behind on their own.

Nagi averted his eyes while fumbling over his word. "Uhhh... There's something I want to tell you."

"Mm."

I wonder what it is? What does he need to tell me at a time like this? I would suppose it must have something to do with saving everyone. Saya figured that much out herself, but she didn't know what this method was. She wanted to be

told quickly, but Nagi was being strangely inarticulate.

“Uhh, how do I even put this?”

“Nagi, are you okay?”

“I’m okay...” Nagi held his head and took a deep breath. “I’m okay.”

He looked right into Saya’s eyes. His green pupils made Saya’s heart leap. It had been quite a while since he looked at her like this. *This is the person who saved me from that prison.*

Nagi grabbed Saya’s shoulders with a strong grip. The stiff feeling of his hands hurt a little, but she felt the heat from them far more than anything else. Saya was shaken. What exactly was Nagi trying to tell her? She was scared, but she wanted to know. His eyes were filled with determination, and then, he slowly opened his mouth.

“Saya, I love you. I want to be with you. I want to live with you forever.”

Before Saya could even unravel the meaning of his words, Nagi awkwardly embraced her. Her mind couldn’t keep up. She could only feel the heat from his bony, rugged body.

Nagi continued with awkward movements as he pressed his lips against hers. Saya was shocked. She only realized Nagi was kissing her a moment later. In that instant, a torrent of emotions swirled in her heart. She could tell; this was love.

“I love you too, Nagi.”

She wanted to be with Nagi. She wanted to go everywhere with him. But here, there were those trying to obstruct her desires. And with those overflowing emotions dominating her heart—she knew what to do.

Heat gathered on the back of her hand. It took on the shape of a crest. Scaled wings sprouted from her back. The vibrant butterfly wings that shouldn’t have been a part of her body felt as natural to her as if they were there since birth. This was Saya’s blood caliber.

She mastered its use in an instant. Saya could see a bird’s eye view of the entire battlefield. She knew everything that was going on from the interior of

the palace all the way to her current position. She could sense the blood flowing within every knight. She could sense her own power flowing within them.

She had to stop them. She couldn't be with Nagi otherwise. The wings on her back were larger than her body. Countless little butterflies fluttered out like scales, covering the entire battlefield in the blink of an eye.

The butterflies danced about and came down upon the knights who were trying to capture her, stopping the power which flowed in their blood.

More. More. I need to stop everyone who's getting in our way. I can do it.

Saya's consciousness burned away in a white haze, overcome with a sense of exaltation and omnipotence.



Chapter 5: The Miniature Glass Garden

23

The battle's outcome was decided the moment those crimson butterflies took to the skies. It was impossible to escape them. Nobles and commoners, friend and foe alike, collapsed at their touch. Jubilia's detachment fighting to protect Saya were no exception. In fact, they were the first to be touched, and the first to be dominated by Saya's power.

Yes, domination. The moment her power flowed within them, their blood calibers ceased to function. They were all made to understand by instinct that the owner of this power was the Sovereign. Every single person touched by the butterflies consequently lost consciousness. The flying swarm—Saya's royal caliber—gained total supremacy of the battlefield in the blink of an eye. Its range extended all the way to the royal palace's gates.

Holding Saya in his arms, Nagi was spared. He stared at his surroundings in a daze as everybody in sight crumpled. Jubilia believed this was perhaps because Nagi had been touching Saya during the royal caliber's activation. He wasn't the only one unaffected, however. The butterflies' power didn't reach the Crestfolk, either. As a result, the Crestfolk... and their allies in the revolutionary army, seized victory ever so easily.

The butterflies eventually vanished. They hadn't reached the palace interior; Lernaean's group managed to escape them by retreating indoors. A skirmish broke out with the knights protecting the grounds, but at that point, the trend of the battle was already determined. Even without being touched by Saya's royal caliber, its mere presence could be felt far and wide. It made it clear to everyone where the True Sovereign's loyalties lay.

Having lost their just cause, the morale of the defending forces plummeted, and the palace capitulated in no time at all. The False Sovereign Kyou and the mainstays of the Traditionalists, including Gratos, were all arrested by

Lernaean.

The revolution was a success. The problem now was that when the butterflies had vanished, Saya collapsed.

“Then let us begin,” Lernaean calmly declared from the chairman’s seat in the Congress Hall.

Nobody could object to him sitting there. He was undeniably the greatest person of influence at this point. The one person who stood above him, Saya, wasn’t seated atop the throne overlooking the assembly.

Two days later, Saya opened her eyes a single time before falling back into her continuous slumber. There was no threat to her life, but she couldn’t leave the depths of the palace. Lernaean built his new order in silence during the Sovereign’s absence.

Crow’s group in Cobalt were the ones who most greatly anticipated these changes. They made sure to spread the sentiment that the nobles of the Sovereignty Faction shouldn’t be the only ones to enjoy the fruits of their victory far and wide.

To that end, a discussion was to be held at Congress. Everyone present understood that this very gathering would decide the new order of society. Present for the assembly were the Sovereignty Faction, headed by Lernaean, and the key members of Cobalt, including Crow, Senak, and Dimitri.

Jubilia stood at Lernaean’s side, as she always did. She had already returned her sword, so she was no longer under his command. She was once more assigned as Saya’s personal guard and watcher. In name, she was under the Sovereign’s direct command. An official designation hadn’t been made, since Saya remained asleep, but nobody had the leisure to pay attention to such trifling details amidst the chaos.

Jubilia figured she had been called to simply even out the numbers. Any noble would’ve sufficed. She watched over the discussion with such thoughts in mind, seeing as none of this involved her.

“Common folk paid more dearly with their blood in that battle. They have played the leading role in the revolution,” Crow said, his speech eloquent and

poignant.

“Precisely,” Lernaean replied calmly. “But it is also true there would have been no struggle if not for the strength of the knights. That is why we drafted to have the primary position of office be split between nobles and Cobalt.”

“But are the military posts, including the security of the capital, not all allocated to nobles?”

“Is there any other choice? Public order in the entirety of Agarthia, especially in the capital, is urgent business. The only ones with experience in handling this are the knightly orders. The doors will eventually open to commoners, but shouldn’t we be expedient about this matter for now?”

“Isn’t it going too far to give the nobles a monopoly over the current positions, though?”

“In exchange, important positions regarding financial and domestic affairs have all been allocated to you. You may not realize this, having been excluded from such matters up until now, but the more prestigious posts have largely been allotted to commoners.”

“But...” Crow hesitated to continue.

“This is what you’re trying to say, isn’t it? ‘Hand over the posts regarding the final say on Amrita to us commoners,’” Lernaean declared calmly, yet with an overbearing tone.

Crow choked trying to come up with an objection. His intentions were completely transparent to Lernaean.

“Unfortunately, it’s still too early for that. The time will eventually come, but that time isn’t now,” Lernaean continued.

“Why?! Dr. Dimitri has already unraveled the means of synthesis—the upper echelon’s most closely guarded secret! The truth is already out of the bag!”

Dimitri’s doctorate, stripped from him during his stay at Ronadyphe, had been restored.

“The Amrita he can create is still incomplete. I believe he knows this best,” Lernaean said.

Dimitri winced at this. “Unfortunately, you’re right... None of the trial subjects, including those here, were capable of manifesting a blood caliber. I can’t call it Amrita in that case. However, so long as my research can continue, I’ll definitely succeed.”

“You know that’s impossible right now. Lady Saya remains bedridden. We’d rather ask that you see to her treatment, Professor.”

“I will be of assistance, of course.”

“You should know, Dr. Dimitri, having been touched by that power. *That* was the real Sovereign’s Blood. Lady Saya is the one we should all be serving.”

Dimitri hung his head without replying. He was caught between this sudden outburst of loyalty within him and the ideals he had lived his life by to this day. He no longer knew what to do. That was how tremendous the effect of the royal caliber was, despite its diminished effect on Dimitri from his forced abstention from Amrita.

“Professor! Are you betraying us?!” Senak yelled.

“I don’t comprehend how treating Lady Saya is equivalent to betrayal,” Lernaean responded coldly. “Take back your statement. Such words can be interpreted as wishing harm upon the Sovereign.”

From what Jubilia could see, Cobalt was being led about by the nose. The conversation had begun on the topic of the monopolization of Amrita, but now it was about something else entirely. Senak’s slip of the tongue had been baited out.

“I retract my statement and apologize,” Senak said meekly. With this, Cobalt lost its aggressive position.

“Be at ease. Amrita will be distributed among you. We cannot make any new batches of Amrita so long as Lady Saya’s condition remains as it is and the Blood Offering Festival does not take place, but the palace retains a stockpile. Such are the current times. As cabinet ministers, your lives will likely be targeted, so this is a natural consideration.”

One of Cobalt’s members audibly gulped. That slight sound revealed their true motives beyond anything else. They wanted it. They wanted eternal life, just

like the nobles. Many commoners who partook in the revolution were the same. They believed they would be able to receive Amrita when the revolution succeeded. That was why they had thrust themselves into such a dangerous battle.

Saya wasn't in a state to create more Amrita, however. They would have to hold out with the current stockpiles for a while. Jubilia could tell that this was a negotiation based entirely on the flow of Amrita. As proof of that, those who had nothing to do with Amrita weren't present: the Crestfolk.

They had obtained what they wished for as a result of the revolution. Lernaean promised to improve the treatment of those afflicted with bloodmark disease. The policy of sterilization had also been put to an end, of course.

Jubilia still felt uneasy, though. Was it right for them to be absent? She had recognized the Crestfolk as the Tainted before the revolution. She couldn't cast away such preconceptions, but the boy named Nagi was close to them. That same boy was the lover of Jubilia's lady and friend, Saya. Saya herself also possessed next to no aversion toward the Crestfolk. As such, Jubilia wanted her own heart to follow their trend.

Now that Saya was the Sovereign, the Crestfolk were sure to be acknowledged. Wouldn't it be proper to call them to such discussions? Jubilia kept these thoughts to herself.

"Now then, how about we call it a day here? I am sure you are all aware of how pressed we are for time," Lernaean said, his voice clearly resonating through all the corners of the silent assembly hall. "Come now, it's time to let blood flow for the sake of the new era."

People were packed into the plaza before the palace gates. A wooden stage had been built there for this precise occasion. It was unbelievably sturdy, considering its hasty construction, and it was festooned with elegant ornaments and high-quality furniture. All of this was made to be a suitable place for the man who ruled over Agarthia for the past few centuries—in fact if not in name—to die.

Jubilia left the Congress Hall with everyone else and was guided to the VIP

seats. She scowled at how vulgar it was to turn an execution into a public spectacle, but she couldn't say that she didn't want to watch.

The former chairman Gratos was brought up to the gallows by two knights. The crowd cheered enthusiastically. Gratos was dressed shabbily, but he kept his posture straight, still giving off an imposing impression. Even now, he hadn't lost his dignity. Lernaean and Crow walked up to the gallows behind him.

Crow made the public declaration. The two men had come to an agreement that Crow would run the execution, in large part to satisfy the disproportionate number of commoners who had come to watch, but there was, in fact, one other reason. Lernaean had no need to stand out on this stage. On the contrary, it was important for Lernaean not to stand out here as a display of the newfound harmony between nobles and commoners.

"We will now commence the execution of the criminal Gratos. This man set the False Sovereign on the throne and confined the True Sovereign Saya to the Forbidden Garden, all so he could do with Agarthas as he pleased."

"Kill him!" someone shouted, angry roars filling the plaza shortly after.

Lernaean looked over Gratos coldly and pronounced, "Speak now if you object."

"I hid Lady Saya in the Garden for her own safety. The power of her blood is far too strong; it injures her own body. It was a measure taken to avoid the awakening of her blood. Now all of you have released it. I've heard Lady Saya has, in fact, collapsed and is currently bedridden."

"Even so, there was no need to prepare a fake ruler."

"It was so that Lady Saya could live in peace. It was for the stability of Agarthas. There needed to be a clear and visible Sovereign. Lord Kyou is guilty of no crime. Everything is mine to bear."

"The criminal is also guilty of monopolizing Amrita and oppressing commoners," Crow continued.

"How foolish. It's impossible to release Amrita to commoners. None of you understand a thing. The world beyond Agarthas is a poison-filled wasteland where humanity cannot survive. The Intelligence only left us with limited lands

and limited blessings. Maintaining that is the one and only way we can survive. That's what the blood offerings are for."

"We have the True Sovereign with us, as well as the leading Amrita researcher, Dr. Dimitri. It's possible to supply the commoners with Amrita."

Jubilia believed Crow was lying. Lernaean had just curtly cut down such a claim mere moments ago. Regardless, Crow and Lernaean remained calm.

"Ridiculous. Those with a high affinity toward Amrita were the ones to become nobles to begin with. Why do you think that is? It's because we didn't have the surplus to bless those with low affinity. Lernaean, you should be well aware of this. You know how precarious an equilibrium this land of Agarthā maintains."

"Just like that glass box decorating your room."

Nobody present knew what Lernaean was talking about.

"Exactly. I'll give it to you. Every time you look at it, remember my words. After a while, you'll come to understand. Sacrifices need to be made to protect Agarthā."

"There is more than one form of equilibrium."

"But how much blood will flow before you find such a thing? Allow me to make a prediction. The death and destruction all of you will bring about will be far greater than the sum of every cruelty under my regime."

"Please be at ease. I've already found the proper form I need. It's the way this world was originally meant to be."

"You can't possibly mean..."

Lernaean cut off Gratos before he could say anything. "Crow, commence the execution. Nobody is looking for words here, just blood."

"I sentence the criminal Gratos to death!"

The people roared at Crow's declaration, drowning out anything Gratos had to say.

"His former excellency shall die by my hand, in which lies centuries of

gratitude,” Lernaean stated as he held up his hand.

This was the public showing Lernaean had prepared. There was no way of executing Gratos without a blood caliber or Halahala. Lernaean whispered something into Gratos’ ear, causing his eyes to shoot open.

In the last instant, he tried to scream, “This man is—”

“Excitation.”

The moment Lernaean spoke that word, Gratos’ head was separated from his body. The crowd cheered wildly. The words Gratos tried to voice disappeared into nothingness. Lernaean’s blood caliber had precisely severed his vocal cords.

Jubilia ruminated over Lernaean’s actions as the heat from the crowd’s cheering began to dissipate. He had calmly displayed his blood caliber in front of an enormous crowd. This wasn’t likely to become a problem. Jubilia couldn’t see it at all this time, either. Even though she had served under his command, Jubilia had no idea what the true nature of Lernaean’s blood caliber was. All she could ever see was his enemies cut to ribbons by his voice, but that was impossible.

She didn’t believe it was a whip, as Lernaean had told her once before. A blood caliber had to have the form of a weapon made of blood. Saya’s royal caliber was difficult to describe as a weapon, but it was definitely born of blood.

Jubilia felt a shiver run down her spine. Then, she found this strange. There was a time where she earnestly thought of how she could be of use to him. It hadn’t been that long ago. But did this man, who looked like he had everything in his hands, really need the help of others?

“I’ll accept your gift,” Lernaean muttered as he looked down upon Gratos’ severed head.

His voice was drowned out by the noise in the plaza. He no longer had any interest in Gratos. Kicking the head into the crowd below, he didn’t even seem to care that the people were treating it like a plaything.

At the news that Saya had finally woken, Nagi ran to her room in a hurry. Dimitri and Jubilia were already inside.

“Nagi,” Saya muttered quietly.

Her complexion was poor, and her white skin almost looked blue. Even haggard as she was now, there was a beauty about her that hadn’t been there before. Nagi was arrested by the image of a flower which could only bloom for a single night, but put such thoughts to an end.

“Lady Saya, you must rest,” Jubilia said, stopping Saya from sitting up.

“But Nagi is here.”

Jubilia’s decision was correct. Just the attempt had Saya breathing raggedly. Her silver hair spilled over her forehead. Seeing this made pity and love overflow in Nagi’s heart.

“Saya, are you okay?!”

He ran over to her bed, but was blocked by Dimitri. “Hang on; stop right there. It’d be bad for you to touch her, Commoner’s Hero.”

“What’s with that?”

“You don’t know? You are the Commoner’s Hero who saved Lady Saya from the Forbidden Garden all on your own. The lot from Cobalt have spread the news of your exploits quite enthusiastically.”

Nagi didn’t really care about such things. He met Saya’s eyes, and her pallid cheeks turned the slightest tinge of red as she averted her gaze.

“So, how’s she doing?” Nagi asked.

“Do you know that Lady Saya collapsed because of the burden on her body from activating the royal caliber?”

“I know, I was there.”

“How envious! To be able to witness the awakening of the royal caliber in close proximity! I would’ve loved to be there!”

“Is this guy okay?” Nagi said, pointing at the excited professor.

Jubilia shook her head. “He’s a strange man, but there’s nobody out there

more well-informed about why Saya collapsed. Gratos may have known more, though.”

“Obviously. It wasn’t possible to research the Sovereign’s Blood openly. That’s why I got thrown into jail. There’s no way anyone out there knows more than me.”

“Cut to the chase already,” Nagi said in frustration. “Focus on Saya’s condition. How do we heal her?”

“Lady Saya collapsed because the royal caliber is far too powerful, consuming a tremendous amount of the Sovereign’s Blood’s power. Surprisingly, what had been accumulating for centuries was pretty much all used up in a single activation. However, it could be said to be good fortune that the royal caliber stopped like that.”

What could possibly be good about Saya collapsing? Nagi wondered.

“If it didn’t stop, all of the knights there would’ve dried up completely and died, just like those two who died from its previous, limited activations. You were there both times, too. How envious...”

He was likely referring to the Forbidden Garden’s guard and Ivara.

“Lady Saya’s royal caliber interferes with the blood in others,” Dimitri continued. “A commoner touched by this will lose control of their body and pass out. It’s much like losing consciousness from hypoxia, though the specifics are somewhat different.”

Nagi thought back to the sight of all those bodies collapsing one after another at the touch of the scarlet butterflies.

“There’s more to it than that, too,” Dimitri said. “Upon touching a noble, it halts the effect of Amrita. It makes sense, considering Amrita comes from the Sovereign’s Blood. As a result, a noble’s blood caliber will no longer be able to maintain itself, and their prolonged lifespans will be lost.”

Nagi recalled the corpses of the Forbidden Garden’s guard and Ivara. Both of them had shriveled up.

“But that didn’t happen. Lady Saya lost consciousness, and the royal caliber

deactivated.”

Nagi could now understand why this was good fortune. There were a great number of nobles in that battle. All of them were on the verge of becoming desiccated corpses, including Jubilia and all their other allies. Saya had been moments away from making this happen. Nagi’s gaze fell upon Saya, who avoided his eyes. She knew of this and regretted it.

“So, how do we heal Saya?” Nagi asked, getting the topic quickly back on the important matter at hand.

“The only thing we can do is wait for her to recover naturally.”

“You mean she’ll get better with rest?”

“Yes, but I don’t know how long it will take. It could be a year, or ten, or a hundred, or maybe even longer than that. It could take eternity itself.”

“What?”

Nagi couldn’t get a proper grasp on what Dimitri was saying.

“I plan on advancing my research to shorten this time span, but things don’t look good right now.”

“Hang on, does that mean Saya will be like this forever?”

“For now.”

Nagi felt like his vision was shaking.

“Sorry, Nagi,” Saya said in a feeble voice.

“Saya...”

Nagi tried to walk over to her bed once more on impulse, but was blocked by Dimitri again.

“Wait, I forgot to mention the most important part. You mustn’t come close to ‘Lady Saya,’” Dimitri added, clearing out his throat. “There’s no mistaking you were a factor in awakening her royal caliber. If she were to end up using it once more, it would be a genuine threat to her life. I would like you to take care in keeping your distance.”

“No way...”

I can't meet her anymore? I can't see Saya again? he thought to himself. He had confessed his love for her on that battlefield and Saya had responded in kind, but he couldn't see her anymore.

"It should be fine for them to meet once in a while, Dimitri, much like now," Jubilia said, throwing them a lifeline.

"Well, this much should be fine..." Dimitri reluctantly agreed. "But bodily contact is strictly off limits."

"Nagi, what do you plan on doing? Will you be living in the capital?" Jubilia asked.

"I thought of it, but... Me being here actually means Saya's condition will worsen, right?"

"To put it simply, yes," Dimitri replied bluntly.

"She'll get better one day?"

"I don't know when. It's possible you'll reach the end of your lifespan before that happens."

"Dimitri!" Jubilia yelled reproachfully, but the man in question didn't seem to know what was wrong about his statement. Fortunately, it didn't seem like Saya really heard him.

"Sorry. I'm definitely going to get better, so..." she said with a feeble smile.

"Yeah, I know. I'm going to stay in Garuga Village for a while. They say they prepared a house for me there. I thought of turning them down, but I'm going to take them up on it after all. In truth, I wanted you to come live with me there, though."

"That sounds nice," Saya replied with a rapt and near-silent voice.

Jubilia felt her chest contract. She knew Saya was being serious.

"It would be difficult for Lady Saya to leave the palace," Jubilia added sadly.

"I at least know that much. That's why I planned on staying in the capital. If that will make Saya's condition worse, though, I'll keep my distance. I'd end up wanting to come see her all the time if I lived close by."

"I see," Saya muttered. It was surely painful for her to speak too much. "But you'll come visit... once in a while, right?"

"Of course. Garuga Village is right outside the capital. We've walked from there together, remember?"

"Mm."

"So, get some rest and get better soon. When you're recovered, I'll come by every day."

"Mm..."

"Jubilia, take care of Saya. Not that you need me to ask you."

"Please leave it to me. I swear by my sword... well, I suppose I'm not a knight anymore, so I'll swear by our friendship."

"Our friendship?"

"Aren't we? Lady Saya and I are now friends, so I thought we were as well."

"I see. Friends, huh? Got it. I'll trust in my friend."

"I won't let you down."

The two of them exchanged nods.

"Nagi, until next time," Saya said reluctantly.

"Yeah, see you later."

Nagi turned on his heel. Saya couldn't see his face anymore. His vision was blurred with tears. He left the palace in a rush, as if to make sure his tears wouldn't spill. He ran wholeheartedly, the world around him a complete haze. Just how much cruelty did this world hide? His hand went to clasp the necklace at his chest, just like when he sought to reunite with her before.

25

Saya's recovery was faster than Dimitri expected. In around half a year, she could get up and walk around without a problem. Her complexion had also improved, her eyes regaining their original luster. Still, she wasn't the same as

before.

Her cheeks were gaunt, and the deep color in her eyes gave a glimpse at the complex emotions rampaging within her. Her appearance, which could once be called sweet, was now highlighted with a hint of adult beauty, as if she was becoming a woman.

Jubilia wanted to believe this change wasn't a reflection of the poor condition of her body, but rather of the growth of her mind. Saya was a girl who was rapidly becoming a woman. Even Jubilia, who saw her on an everyday basis, was surprised at the speed of this change.

Saya still wasn't allowed to walk around for extended periods of time. That time she once spent escaping from the Garden and walking a mountain path with Nagi almost felt like a dream now.

"I hope Nagi comes back soon."

"He was just here last week," Jubilia replied with a smile.

"I'm better now, so I want to see him every day."

"You still haven't recovered completely. Besides, he must be rather busy himself. He *is* the commoners' hero. He's famous now that Cobalt has publicly announced his name."

"But Nagi is staying in Garuga Village, right?"

"Yes. Nagi is living with the Crestfolk. However, Crow's group needs the legitimacy his role in saving you gives them. Without that, the credit for our victory at the palace gates lies at the nobility's feet."

"It's weird for Nagi to be a hero."

"I'm sure you're lonely, having your personal hero taken away from you."

"That's not what I mean."

"You'll be able to see him every day when you get better."

So Jubilia said, but Dimitri was of the opinion that she should keep contact with Nagi to a minimum. Despite the fact that Saya's condition was gradually improving, it didn't change the threat the royal caliber posed to her life, should

it activate.

“But it’s so boring here. Oh, not that it’s your fault, Jubilia.”

“I know.”

“I’m locked up once more,” Saya muttered sadly.

This girl was the same as always; her freedom—the only thing she really wanted—dangled just beyond her reach.

“Is there anything interesting going on?”

“This again? Even if you ask me, I only know about the current state of affairs.”

“Then let’s talk about it. Is Lernaean still killing people?”

“Such a violent topic... Executions of counterrevolutionary forces carry on apace. Not a day passes where the gallows go empty.”

“How long will this go on?”

“I don’t know. When the new order is properly established... I think.”

“Lernaean and his inner circle achieved that long ago. Crow and the others are even being called neo-nobles, now that they’ve been given Amrita. Where did the commoners’ ally go?”

“Their lives are in danger, given their current position. I’ve heard that those who had become cabinet ministers were given Amrita as a special case for public safety. Crow was a scholar to begin with, so he must have taken Amrita before, too.”

“I wonder if this is what Crow wished for. He wanted Amrita. He wanted to become chairman. Just like Lernaean.”

“I don’t believe that to be the case...”

“You love Lernaean, don’t you?”

The way Saya always reduced everything to love showed she was nothing more than a young girl. That was exactly what she was, after all. She was simply a girl in love with a boy named Nagi. However, the blood flowing through her body wouldn’t allow that.

Jubilia found the innocent love budding between Saya and Nagi to be tremendously dazzling. That was why she was afraid for them. It was impossible for such a flower to bloom within this raging storm.

“Lady Saya, Dame Jubilia, a visitor has arrived from Garuga Village.”

“Nagi?!” Saya yelled, practically leaping up in joy.

“No, it’s a woman named Tess.”

Saya collapsed back into a state of dejection.

“Let her through. Lady Saya, it’s rude to be so clearly despondent.”

Tess arrived shortly after. It would be normal for Saya to envy this girl for being at Nagi’s side at all times, but mysteriously enough, Saya didn’t seem to hate her. Tess also seemed to bear no hatred for Saya, setting aside her position as the Sovereign entirely.

“I bet you’re disappointed I’m not Nagi.”

“That’s not true,” Saya replied, her tone crestfallen.

Even Tess could see through this facade completely. “Sorry for keeping Nagi in Garuga all the time.”

Her tone was inappropriate for speaking to the Sovereign, but Saya wished for this herself. Nagi and Tess were special exceptions.

“Mm. I’m jealous. I wish I was you, Tess.”

“Lady Saya, you cannot make such statements.”

Jubilia was flustered. Such a remark would be a tremendous problem if heard by others.

“It’s okay, I won’t say it anywhere but here.”

“It’d be nice if we could switch places,” Tess suddenly said. “I want to see your child already.”

“Wh-What are you saying?!”

“Jubilia, there’s no need to yell all the time,” Saya said, leaving Jubilia in dismay. “Anyway, why are you here, Tess?”

“Right. I rushed over with a message from Nagi... I guess it’s more of a message from Garuga Village, though.” Saya’s eyes sparkled at the mention of her lover’s name, which left Tess feeling apologetic for stating it that way. “The chief, Zamin, is about to die. Nagi would like you to come see him, if possible. The Crestfolk pay respect to the dying. He wants you to show them that you’re still our ally, even after becoming the Sovereign.”

“That’s a little...” Jubilia muttered.

She had immediately understood the logic behind Nagi’s request. He had a good grasp of Saya’s condition. It wasn’t impossible for her to go to Garuga Village if she rode a cogwagon at a gentle pace, but it would still be a burden on her. And yet, Nagi wanted her to come anyway, so it had to be serious. The public image of the Crestfolk in the eyes of the new administration must’ve been rather bad. Jubilia’s own apprehensions seemed to be correct.

The Crestfolk had suffered the most losses during the revolution. Despite this, they couldn’t even receive the blessings of Amrita in the first place. Jubilia believed they would be satisfied if the government simply rescinded sterilizations, but that wasn’t quite right. The commoners could still cling to the dream of obtaining Amrita one day, but such deception didn’t work on the Crestfolk. Moreover, no Crestfolk were part of the new administration. It was obvious they would be discontent.

And now they were requesting Saya rush over as Zamin lay on the verge of death in a bid to quash such sentiment. The Sovereign’s arrival would be a strong declaration to the Crestfolk as a whole.

“I’ll go,” Saya answered, perhaps unaware of the anguish Jubilia was going through.

“But what of your condition...?”

“Dimitri said I’m mostly fine now. It’ll be okay if I ride a cogwagon. I’ll go back right away if my condition worsens. So, please?”

“Very well. I’m sure Lord Lernaean will permit it for just a few days.”

“Yay. Oh, I guess I shouldn’t be celebrating. Sorry, Tess.”

Saya had suddenly remembered this was about Zamin being on his deathbed.

“I don’t blame you, but when you get to the village, save the smiles for when you’re alone with Nagi. Everyone’s on edge.”

“Okay.”

Even as Jubilia felt depressed over how to get this approved, she felt warmth in her heart seeing Saya truly happy for the first time in a while.

Two days after receiving the request, Saya and Jubilia departed for Garuga Village. Nagi asked other important government officials like Lernaean and Crow to come too, but they had all declined.

“This isn’t the time for us to be involving ourselves with the Crestfolk. We’re far too busy.”

According to Jubilia, what’s what Crow had said. It wasn’t even possible for her to meet Lernaean. Regardless, they had unexpectedly received permission for Saya to go to Garuga Village with relative ease. Fortunately, Saya’s condition didn’t worsen during the careful ride to their destination.

Saya maintained a grave expression, even as she was itching to meet Nagi. To her, this was the best she could do. She only understood what it meant for Zamin to die in the broad, academic sense. However, the moment she saw him on his deathbed with her own eyes, those feelings crumbled away. He was so weak that it was strange he was still alive. She couldn’t believe this was a living human. His wrinkles were deep, and his skin was ashen. She could feel the very presence of death about him.

“Is this a disease...?” Saya muttered.

“No, his lifespan is up. The chief has lived a long time now. It’s simply time for him to go,” Tess plainly told her.

“Lady Saya... How... grateful I am,” Zamin said, his eyes still closed. It was possible he couldn’t even see anymore, even if they were open. It seemed his ears could still hear, however.

“Chief, don’t push yourself,” Nagi said, gripping Zamin’s hand.

“That won’t do... This must be said... Everyone except for Nagi, Tess, and Lady

Saya, please leave the room.”

“That—” *cannot possibly be allowed*, was what Jubilia wanted to say.

“Please go. I won’t let anything happen to Saya,” Nagi told her.

“Jubilia, step outside, please.”

All the Crestfolk turned to Jubilia in unison. She could understand just how much weight this dying man’s word carried with them, and had no choice but to comply.

“Nagi, I’ll leave Lady Saya to you. Be sure not to allow any danger to befall her.”

“Of course.”

Jubilia left with the others. Shortly after, the only ones in the room were Zamin, Nagi, Tess, and Saya.

“I shall tell you of the secret known only to the village chiefs.”

“Is it okay for me to listen to this?” Saya asked.

“It involves you as well.”

His voice was so quiet that it felt like it could vanish at any time, but Zamin’s tone was unexpectedly firm.

“We Crestfolk have pledged our allegiance to you since long ago, Lady Saya. You surely don’t remember, but we do so because you are the one and only bearer of the True Crest.”

“So... I’m your comrade?”

“Indeed. There should be a crest on your hand as proof of that.”

Saya looked down at her hand. There was a mark there left over from when she used the royal caliber, its clean, planned lines suggestive of some foreign hieroglyph. Zamin claimed this was the same as a bloodmark.

“I heard you say that before,” Nagi said, Tess nodding in agreement.

“There’s more. Our disease... Bloodmark disease occurs because we awakened incompletely.”

“What do you mean? Awakened to what?” Nagi asked.

“The Sovereign’s Blood.”

Nagi and Saya gasped whereas Tess cocked her head.

“So, we’re failed Sovereigns?”

“Yes. The one who granted us the Sovereign’s Blood blessed with eternal life and power was the Intelligence. Everything was put in place so that we could live in this world where humanity could no longer survive. However, the power granted to us was far too great. It wasn’t suited for humanity. Thus, the Intelligence ruled that only one person, the one who possessed the most suitable qualities, could awake to the Sovereign’s Blood.”

By means inscrutable to herself, Saya understood what Zamin was saying. Just a little while ago, she would’ve given up on trying, but lately she was subject to Dimitri’s long-winded speeches on a daily basis, so she could vaguely keep up now.

“Dimitri told me the source of the Sovereign’s Blood should be flowing through my veins... Is that what you mean?”

“It flows through all people. It is simply dormant in others. It only awakens within the blood of the chosen Sovereign.”

Nagi suddenly realized something here. “Is that what you mean by incomplete awakening?”

“Yes... We are those who awakened to the Sovereign’s Blood in an incomplete form. Our bodies hold the means to rebel against the law the Intelligence left behind. We get a fever, and a bloodmark appears on our bodies. That is the true nature of bloodmark disease. It is also the reason we have longer lifespans than commoners.”

“So... Bloodmark disease is a good thing?”

“Nagi, you’ll do well to learn. Good and evil cannot be so simply determined. To the people who control Agarthia, it is a definite evil. Amrita no longer works on us as a price for our awakening. Amrita is the power given to the one and only Sovereign. Our bodies have awakened to another power, even if only half

way, giving us a resistance to Amrita.”

“But you live longer than commoners, right?”

“Above all else, we are a terrible inconvenience for the nobles. The Crestfolk cannot even be used as ingredients for Amrita, so the rule based on Amrita and blood offerings crumbles around us. That’s why we’ve been hunted. Furthermore, the far greater misfortune for both us and the nobles is... bloodmark disease is inherited by children.”

Tess was the first to realize the truth implied by these words. “That’s the reason for the sterilizations?!”

“The Crestfolk had to be hunted down, but if a parent is told to hand over their child, they would try to hide them away to keep them alive. That’s why the nobles allow a single generation to live.”

“Making us incapable of having children means our population won’t surge.”

“Exactly. Much like how wheat sowed in cold weather will eventually grow resilient to the cold, our bloodline should have gradually awakened to the Sovereign’s Blood. One day, there would surely be those who obtain the True Crest, much like Lady Saya. That couldn’t be allowed to pass.”

“And it was brought to an end by sterilization,” Nagi said.

Zamin nodded slowly. His movements were so frail it felt like he could come to a stop at any moment.

“All of you shall create a new era. I would like you to watch over it, Lady Saya.”

Saya nodded timidly. The corners of Zamin’s mouth curved the slightest amount in satisfaction. It was such a faint movement that Saya didn’t even realize what had happened.

“Chief...?”

“Zamin?!”

Tess and Nagi raised their voices, making Saya finally notice. Zamin had breathed his last. All that lay there now was a wrinkled, withered corpse composed of skin and bones. This was death by old age. Saya was shocked by

how sublime it was. She couldn't even believe Zamin had once resembled Nagi and herself. This would never happen to Saya for all eternity.

That was when she realized a terrifying truth. One day, Nagi would die of old age. She couldn't hear Tess and Nagi screaming Zamin's name. She still couldn't hear anyone after Tess called the others in and cries of sorrow filled the room.

Saya lost her footing and sank to the floor. She was struck down by the cruelty of the reality she came upon as all of those voices resounded as if they were far, far away.

"Lady Saya, are you all right?! I didn't think you would be so shocked..." Jubilia said as she grasped Saya's shoulders.

"Saya. Can you hear me? Saya!"

Nagi's voice sounded so distant. Even now, Nagi wouldn't touch her. Even though he did so out of care for her own health, it felt far too lonely. Even though Nagi would die one day. Even though he would die before she did.

"To think Lady Saya would grieve over the chief's death to such an extent," one of the Crestfolk said.

Not a single person realized the true reason for Saya's tears.

"Saya, thank you... Jubilia, take Saya somewhere she can calm down."

"No. Nagi, don't go."

"I'm not going anywhere."

Nagi smiled to put her at ease, causing her chest to throb. It brought her fear and sorrow.

Liar.

"So, the old rock finally kicked the bucket."

That was all Keele had to say when he dropped by Garuga Village immediately following Zamin's death. By the time the funeral rites finally got underway, Nagi was exhausted. When he was informed that Keele was at the village entrance, he ran over in a hurry, only to be met by such words. Nagi felt anger toward his

brother boiling up within him for the first time in a while.

“Quit speaking like that.”

“Hah! Acting like his full-fledged successor now?”

“Zamin chose me and Tess. We protect this village.”

“How splendid. You forget how many Crestfolk died ’cause of you?”

“Still, the sterilizations are over. Even the commoners and nobles are accepting the Crestfolk.”

“Like hell they are. People don’t change that easily.”

“You fought for this too, Keele!”

“I was fine just killing nobles. I wanted to run wild. I still do. I haven’t changed either.”

“Seems you’re out attacking nobles as always.”

“You’ve got some good ears out there.”

“Stop it.”

Nagi stared into Keele’s eyes.

“No way,” Keele said with a cold look and a cynical laugh.

“This is an important time! The new administration is acknowledging the Crestfolk! To that end, nobles and commoners have to get along. You’re just being a bother!”

“I’ve always been like this. I do what I want. I got kicked outta this village, so I don’t got no reason to listen to you.”

“Then get the hell out of here!”

“Fine. I’ve got no business in this shitty village anyways.”

Tess rushed in as the two of them became belligerent.

“Hang on! Nagi, calm down. Keele, come offer flowers to the chief’s grave. He was worried about you until the end.”

“Tess, you and Nagi are the chief now. Say it right.”

“It’s just a minor detail.”

“It ain’t minor. It’s important. Fix it,” Keele said with a glare.

“Fine. Come offer flowers to Zamin’s grave.”

“My dear little brother is telling me to get the hell out, though.”

“Nagi, calm down. Zamin was worried about Keele. He’ll surely be happy.”

“Fine, I get it already.”

Nagi still felt irritated, but Tess was right.

“Well aren’t you a fine adult now, Nagi.”

“I don’t want to hear that from you.”

Nagi felt like his head would rapidly cool if he admitted it.

“Keele, return to the village,” Nagi said reluctantly. “It’s just as you said. Too many people died in the fighting. We’re short on hands everywhere.”

“I already told you, I only do what I want. Were you even listenin’? Besides, I’m surprised you can spout such crap after running your mouth a couple seconds ago.”

“That’s what I thought you’d say, but I still had to ask.”

“Hah.”

Keele gave him a scornful laugh. He seemed strangely happy. The two brothers stood there at the entrance staring each other down as a voice called out to Nagi.

“So this is where you were. I was looking for you, Nagi. Lady Saya isn’t feeling well. She’s quite depressed. We were thinking of returning now that the funeral service is—” Jubilia realized Keele was there in the middle of speaking. “So, it’s you.”

“Yo, Jubilia. I’m glad to see you.”

Their gazes clashed. An instant later, Jubilia and Keele put their hands on their sheathes at the same time.

“Hey! No fighting in the village!” Nagi said in a fluster.

“What a waste. It’s a perfect chance to settle things.”

“You’re right. I’ve been thinking of how I wanted to show you the skills I’ve polished since you defeated me.”

“Hah?! When the hell did I beat you?”

“Both of you, stop... Do this elsewhere.”

That was undoubtedly Nagi’s true feelings on the matter. It was out of the question for Jubilia to fight Keele inside the village. Jubilia should’ve known better, but had lost her presence of mind when faced with this man.

“Somewhere else, huh...? Good idea. Jubilia, come with me,” Keele suddenly said, causing Jubilia to stiffen up.

“Huh?”

“Lately, I’ve been keepin’ up the good fight on my own. Let’s do it together. You’ve been gettin’ rusty cooped up in the palace, yeah? I wanna go at you when you’re in tip-top shape.”

It sounded like a bad joke, but Keele was serious.

“Don’t be foolish. There’s no way I can do that. I’m a noble.”

“That so? It’s a hoot.”

“Out of the question.”

“Oh well. Guess I’ll visit the old rock’s grave, then leave. Tess, where is it?”

“You really never change...”

Jubilia’s exasperated voice seemed awfully envious for some reason. Perhaps it was a reflection of Nagi’s own heart on this matter.

26

In the end, Saya returned to the palace without seeing Nagi again, under the pretext of poor health. She couldn’t muster any strength in her limbs, so this was true, in a sense. Upon returning, even worse news awaited her. Kyou’s execution had been confirmed.

Saya ended up in opposition to the boy, but even now, she didn't hate him. She didn't really intend to dethrone him. She simply wanted to freely be with Nagi. That was all she wanted. Regardless, the situation had become so serious. As a result, many people died. This boy who yearned for his older sister would also die.

Kyou was being held in the prison beneath the palace. The sight of him, far more haggard than she was, locked behind iron bars, caused Saya's chest to tighten. The shadow of that haughty boy could no longer be seen.

"Si... Lady Saya."

Kyou stopped himself from calling her sister. Saya was the Sovereign now. It felt unnatural to her. It made her restless.

"Kyou, um... Are you well?"

The moment those words left her lips, she regretted it. There was no way he was, but Kyou smiled back at her.

"Yes... We are well." He had a smile on his face, but the emotions behind it were completely hollow. "Thank you for coming. We heard you had collapsed."

"Mm. But I'm well enough to walk around now, so I came to visit you."

"Thank goodness... Really. Thank goodness..." Kyou cast his gaze to the floor. "Um... There's something We must tell you. Something We must apologize for."

"What is it?"

"If possible, We'd rather nobody else hear this. Could we speak alone?"

"My apologies, but that isn't possible," Jubilia said.

This was the royal palace. It was different from Garuga Village. There was no way such a conversation would be allowed. Jubilia truly did look sorry. She was kind, so this boy's state surely grieved her.

"But... this can't be heard by too many people."

"Jubilia. Could you have everyone else step aside while you remain?"

"If that is all, then it should be fine. All of you, wait outside for a moment. I shall guarantee Lady Saya's safety. This is the Sovereign's request. I shall take

responsibility.”

The other knights who were here to watch Kyou excused themselves from the room.

“Jubilia will end up hearing, but it’s all right. She won’t tell others of what you say.”

Jubilia nodded. “Very well, please go ahead.”

“It’s okay, Jubilia is my friend.”

“Friend... I’m jealous you can be Lady Saya’s friend.”

Saya smiled at Kyou. “Aren’t you my little brother.”

Kyou hung his head even lower. “We’re not. That’s what We need to apologize for,” he said with a trembling voice. “During the revolt... the rebellion, Gratos confessed to me that you are not Our elder sister.”

“Huh?”

“There was dissent within the royal guards. Even if Lady Saya is the True Sovereign, the Sovereign’s Blood would simply be inherited by Us if you were to die. It would be fine to crush the entire rebellion, yourself included. But Gratos put such thoughts to an end. We were the only one he told why he did such a thing... We are a fake, he said.”

Kyou finally raised his head, but his gaze was completely hollow.

“It was apparently true that you had a little brother. You remained asleep when you awakened to the Sovereign’s Blood, so Gratos and the nobles of the time had to seat someone on the throne for face value. Naturally, they chose your baby brother... but he apparently went missing. Thus, We were chosen. You were the one to truly possess the Sovereign’s Blood this entire time. Your substitute could’ve been anyone. We... didn’t know any of this, and were raised while being told We had an elder sister. Not only that, We truly believed We were the Sovereign. We didn’t even notice We were being secretly fed Amrita, like a fool.”

Kyou hung his head down once more.

“Gratos didn’t tell this secret to anyone else. To protect Us. But Our execution

has been decided now. Such a secret is too heavy for Us to bear alone.”

When Saya first heard that Kyou was the little brother she parted with ages ago, she didn’t know how to feel. She was truly at a loss now, but there was one thing for certain.

“We’re truly sorry.”

This boy, apologizing to her with tears in his eyes, looked ever so pitiful.

“Kyou, would it be better if I was your older sister?”

“Of course.”

“If we weren’t siblings, maybe we could’ve gotten married without any issues, you know?”

“Regardless, you had no intention of becoming Ours, did you?”

“Nope.”

“In that case, We would’ve wanted you to be Our elder sister. The thought that We had a relative out there supported Us all this time, after all.”

“Then you can call me your sister, as you always have.”

“Huh?”

Saya was surprised at herself as she said this. It just felt so natural when the words left her lips.

“Nagi is dearest to me. Jubilia is my friend. I decide such things about myself on my own. I was taught to do so, after all... So, you’re my little brother. That’s all there is to it.”

“Lady Saya, are you forgiving me?”

“Don’t you mean sister?”

“Sister...”

Tears fell from Kyou’s eyes. His gaze was no longer hollow. He was unable to stop the flood of emotions once his tears started flowing. Saya moved to wipe his face through the iron bars when Kyou grabbed her with both hands. He cried as he clung to her.

“Sister... We’re sorry for being so shameful.”

“It’s fine. There’s nothing to be ashamed of. Even Jubilia is crying.”

“Huh? Th-That’s not...” so Jubilia started, but her eyes were moist.

“It’d be nice if my real brother was still alive.”

“That’s true. Even if the details of his disappearance are unknown, it’s possible, considering he’s a noble,” said Kyou. “Perhaps he looks far more like an adult than we do.”

“You’re right. It’s not necessarily true he lived without knowing anything about himself like we did.”

“Sister, your case was because of sickness; there was no helping it. We were simply a fool.”

“Enough of that already.”

Kyou finally smiled for real. It brought Saya relief to see this.

“If he’s alive, then that means I have two little brothers. I wonder if that means he’d be your brother too?”

“That’d be nice... If so, all of us can...”

Kyou smiled again, but stiffened up completely.

“What’s the matter, Kyou?”

“It’s nothing.” All light vanished from his eyes once more. “We don’t have the right to say such things...”

“Say it, Kyou. Aren’t we siblings?”

Saya stared at him. Kyou returned a slight nod. The wall covering his heart had become ever so brittle during this conversation.

“Sister... We...”

Kyou’s words dribbled out. They were far too weak and fragile for the words of one who reigned over Agartha for centuries. They were his honest and true feelings.

“We don’t want to die...”

“It’s okay,” Saya replied instinctively. “I’ll protect you. You’re my little brother, after all.”

After leaving the prison, Saya and Jubilia quietly proceeded down a corridor.

“Jubilia, can I ask something of you?”

“That depends on the request.”

Saya cut right to the chase. Jubilia’s voice was stiff, seeing as how she already knew what Saya was about to ask.

“I want to save Kyou.”

“I believe that would be difficult to accomplish.”

“I know, but as the Sovereign, my word should hold some weight, right?”

“The former Sovereign has incurred far too much enmity. Even if you vouch for him...”

Saya could understand why Jubilia trailed off.

“You’re right. I can’t even free myself from this place. Lernaean and the others are the ones to decide on that...”

Saya stopped walking. She hated the idea, but there was only one person she could go to.

“I’m going to see Lernaean.”

Regardless of the sudden visit, Saya was easily allowed to enter Lernaean’s office.

“Lady Saya herself has come to visit. There’s no way I could refuse a meeting, is there now?” Lernaean said, seated in his chair with his arms spread out elegantly. Saya really did hate this man.

“Lord Lernaean, please clear the room,” Jubilia said.

Lernaean nodded and waved his hand lightly, which was all it took to empty the room. There were only the three of them present now. Lernaean didn’t require any guards to begin with.

“Now then, what do you need?”

“I want to save Kyou.”

“I see...”

Even Lernaean was slightly bewildered by this request. His discomposure showed for the briefest moment before he replied.

“He is your enemy.”

“But he’s my little brother.”

Lernaean thought it over for a moment. Saya wavered over whether or not she should mention the truth, but decided to cut to the chase.

“I know he isn’t actually my little brother.”

“So he told you... Still, you consider him as such regardless?”

“You already knew.”

“Of course I did. Well, I suppose only Gratos’ inner circle knew. They’ve all been executed already. I assume he’s the only one Gratos told. Nevertheless, this secret cannot be released to the public. Doing so would actually increase demand for his head. Someone who wasn’t even royalty posed as the Sovereign, after all.”

As always, Saya was unable to read Lernaean’s true intentions behind his disinterested speech.

“Well, sparing his life would be difficult. He’s an especially bitter enemy to Cobalt’s commoners. They will definitely demand his death.”

“But if you were to say otherwise...”

“Even if I do, or if you do, it wouldn’t be possible. There’s no way of sparing his life through proper means.” Lernaean folded his fingers together and leaned forward on his desk. “If the prisoner is to vanish, however... It would be rather hard to execute him, wouldn’t it? Much like when you were abducted from the Garden.”

“I wasn’t abducted. I left by my own will.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter either way. For some reason, the security there was

insufficient, so that boy was able to use the opening to abduct you. The soldiers protecting the palace are devoting themselves to provide the best of security, but we're short on hands right now. It wouldn't be strange for the prison guards to be insufficient on a certain day. It's possible such a day could overlap with a moonless night. By coincidence, of course."

It was clear what Lernaean was suggesting. That was precisely why Saya found it eerie.

"Why are you offering your cooperation?"

"I'm not. Besides, it's natural to grant any of your wishes, Lady Saya."

"Thank you."

"Your gratitude is unnecessary. This agrees with my own goals. But if you insist... Let's say you owe me one. Don't worry, I won't request anything outlandish."

His own goals. Saya felt like she wanted to ask what these were, but didn't at the same time. Being put in his debt was one thing she should've never allowed. She was tormented with regret, but didn't mention it. In any case, Kyou was her priority right now.

After leaving Lernaean's office and returning to her own room, she asked Jubilia, "When's the next new moon?"

"In four days. The former Sovereign's execution is in one week... meaning this will be the last opportunity."

"Jubilia, I have something to ask of you," Saya said, staring into Jubilia's eyes. "I'd like you to call Nagi."

"An appropriate choice. He's succeeded in such an act before, and we can only ask someone we trust absolutely. Is this truly alright with you, though?"

Saya returned a firm nod. "I want to save my little brother."

"Very well. Normally, I couldn't possibly leave your side, but we cannot entrust this task to another. I will make arrangements to see to your safety immediately, although I should be back by nighttime."

"You'll get back that quickly from Garuga Village? It took so long by

cogwagon.”

“Have you forgotten? As a former knight, such a thing is trivial if I put my mind to it,” Jubilia replied with a grin. “My feet are especially fast. I do believe I put this on display when we first met.”

“You were really scary back then.”

“How about now?”

“Not at all. You’re kinder than I thought you were, and easily moved to tears.”

“Th-That’s... rather embarrassing,” Jubilia muttered with flushed cheeks.

“It’s a good thing. I like that part of you, Jubilia.”

Jubilia turned even redder.

“In any case, please get some rest! You must be tired.”

Tess stood on night watch at the village entrance. She had terrific natural eyesight, which had kept her on watch duty for a while now. She was also the one who had located the cogwagon Nagi and Saya were riding when they first met.

Now that Zamin was dead, she ought to have been elsewhere, sorting out which of his duties she’d be taking on. Garuga Village lost many of its able bodies during the revolution, though, so they didn’t have the leisure to search for a replacement at the gate posting.

Tess spotted a shadow in the distance and raised her guard. Nobody would go out of their way to come to Garuga Village in the middle of the night. Tess had been in a strangely foul mood since Zamin passed. The figure turned out to be someone she recognized.

“I’d like to see Nagi.”

It was Saya’s guard, Jubilia. This was no relief to Tess; she tightened her stance. She thought the knight had left with Saya, but apparently, she came right back. This could only mean some sort of urgent business.

“What do you need so late at night?”

“I’d like to relay it directly to Nagi.”

“Is this about Saya?”

Tess didn't really need to ask. There was no other reason for Jubilia to come here. Saya was the eternal occupant of Nagi's heart. Lately that thought was like a quiet itch under Tess' skin. Nagi and Tess had inherited the position of village chief together, but she believed Nagi was the true chief. He was the one to move everyone during that battle, after all. The people of the village listened to anything he had to say. Even though Tess was raised here, it was difficult for her to speak strongly against the elders. Tess believed her role existed to compensate for the fact that Nagi wasn't Crestfolk.

There was a mountain of problems here in the village, and yet Saya dominated Nagi's thoughts. Even if Saya was the bearer of the True Crest like Zamin had said, and all Crestfolk were meant to follow her, Saya was the Sovereign. There were plenty of people in the palace who devoted themselves to her welfare already, like this knight before her very eyes. In contrast, the only one who could lead Garuga Village was Nagi.

“Come with me,” Tess said hesitantly.

She hid her inner irritation and guided Jubilia into the village. Both Nagi and Tess were shocked by what she had to say.

“By Kyou... you mean the former Sovereign, right? Wasn't he an enemy? And you're telling us to go out of the way to kidnap him before he's executed?” Tess told her.

“He's Lady Saya's little brother. No, I suppose he isn't really, but...” Jubilia looked somewhat troubled and stumbled over her next words. “It has gotten rather complicated...”

“Tess and I serve as the village chief together; there's no need for secrets.”

Jubilia nodded. “I see. In that case, I'll tell you. He's not her brother by blood, but Lady Saya still wishes to save him.”

“It's not all that strange in this village,” Tess said. “The Crestfolk come from all over and become family after the fact.” Tess paused there and looked Nagi in the eyes. “Nagi, you're our family too, you know?” Nagi returned her gaze, and for some reason, Tess turned red before continuing. “What's so weird about it?”

We can't make children. That's the only way for us to have families."

"I didn't think it was weird. I'm just happy. I thought Keele was the only family I had now. You're right. Being related by blood isn't the only important thing."

Tess completely forgot to say anything back. Not only that, she completely zoned out of the conversation. That was how deeply Nagi's words resounded in her heart. Being related by blood wasn't the only important thing.

"Jubilia, I'll do it."

"Nagi, I'll go too," Tess said in a fluster upon suddenly hearing him consent.

"No, you've got the village to take care of, remember?"

"We can leave it all to Bandore for now. I think this is more important. The bearer of the True Crest is special. That's what the chief said. You're actually the one who shouldn't be going." Nagi didn't seem to understand what Tess was saying. "You're the chief here, Nagi. The village can't afford to lose you right now."

"You're the chief too, aren't you?"

"Why can't you tell that everyone's hopes are in you, not me?"

It seemed like this was going to turn into a big argument, so Jubilia stepped in. "Sorry, but keep your quarrel for later. We don't have the time. I can't remain away from Lady Saya for long."

The two of them regained their composure.

"Don't get too emotional, both of you," Jubilia warned them. "You're both still young, but you're the chiefs, right?"

"I'm not young anymore. You know how long we commoners live."

Nagi's words reminded Tess that he was a commoner. His lifespan was shorter than that of a Crestfolk. That was why Nagi lived fast and reckless—so he could break Saya out of her cage before his life was over. To him, Tess and the Crestfolk were just something he was looking after while handling that. The thought clawed at Tess' heart. Why was it always Saya?

"I'm returning to Lady Saya's side. I'll see you on the evening of the new

moon.”

Jubilia relayed information on the bar they were to meet at, then hurried off. Nagi and Tess began preparing for the journey. Even though they were used to going to the capital, they needed weapons this time. There was also the problem of where to go after abducting Kyou, as well as considering whether to bring along supplies. As they thought such things over, the door violently burst open.

“Hey! That woman was here just now, right?! I thought she went back already!”

It was Keele. Tess thought back to old times. When she first came to this village, this man taught her everything, like an older brother. He ended up leaving shortly after, but he showed up once in a while to trouble Zamin. There were those in the village who hated him, but Tess was attached to this eccentric man, just like a little sister would be. His true sibling was Nagi. If Nagi contracted bloodmark disease and became a Crestfolk, perhaps she would be treated like his sister too. Such a dream seemed ever so sweet to her.

“You’re still here?” Nagi asked.

“Dumbass. I was walkin’ off ’cause I didn’t wanna stay in this hole too long when I saw a shadow from afar runnin’ crazy fast through the forest. That woman’s the only one I know who can jump like that. I thought maybe she changed her mind and wanted to come along on my killin’ spree, so I ran back here.”

Keele was out of breath.

“There’s no way she did. Jubilia already left.”

Nagi was always cold to his brother. He said he was bad at dealing with him ever since they were kids, but from Tess’ view, it looked like Nagi depended on Keele. On the other hand, Keele’s treatment of his brother was even easier to understand. On the surface, he spoke ill of Nagi, but Keele never talked to people he had no interest in to begin with.

“Fuck!”

“She’s headed for the capital. I doubt you can catch up, though.”

“Hang on, what’d she want over here?”

“And why do you want to know?”

“If I know what’s going on with her, maybe I can fight her even better. Spill the beans already.”

Keele had a strange fixation on Jubilia. Nagi simplified what Jubilia’s account was for him.

“Hmph. Kidnap the False Sovereign, huh?” Keele said, baring his teeth with a ferocious smile. “Sounds fun. I’ll help out too.”

“What?”

“You two are little weaklings on your own, yeah? I’m saying I’ll lend you a hand.”

“Why?!”

“That woman might gimme the fight I want if I put her in my debt. Besides...” Keele paused, giving a slight smile. “Isn’t it obvious to help a little brother out?”

Nagi made a face like he couldn’t parse the scene in front of him. Tess felt a sharp pang of envy.

27

“Hey, give it up man, it’s no use talkin’ to them.”

“But it’s possible they’ll change their minds, right?”

Upon arriving in the capital, Nagi, Keele, and Tess headed to Cobalt’s shared quarters. The neo-nobles of Cobalt, including Crow, didn’t live in the palace. It helped cement their claim that they hadn’t reinvented the old order. But how was it in reality? The three visitors were denied entry at first.

“Lord Crow is busy. He doesn’t have the time to meet anyone without an appointment.”

Hearing this, Keele poked Nagi. “Hey, give ’em your name.”

“What?”

“Just do it.”

“I’m Strano’s... no, Garuga Village’s Nagi.”

The gate guard’s reaction was dramatic.

“Th-The Commoners’ Hero?!”

“What’s with that?”

“Oh come on, the man himself don’t know ’bout it? I can’t get a decent drink anymore without hearin’ your name praised in song. This is what happens when you only visit the palace and Garuga Village,” Keele remarked.

“No, he might be a fake. Pardon me, but do you have any proof of being the Commoners’ Hero?”

“Even if you ask me for proof...”

Nagi was troubled by the question, until the memory of the password he once used with Crow flashed into his mind.

“Oh, tell this to Crow: Captured Princess. He’ll get it.”

The gate guard left for a while, then returned.

“I’ve gotten confirmation. Please excuse me for keeping you waiting.”

Nagi was surprised by how much the gate guard’s attitude changed. However, when Nagi and Keele tried to pass, the guard stopped them once more.

“Pardon me... I only have permission to let the hero enter. As for the two Crestfolk, um...”

“Huh? They’re both Crow’s acquaintances.”

“Aah, give it up. It’s useless. We’ll just kill some time around here and meet up with you later.”

“Nagi, don’t worry about us. We’re used to it.”

Keele and Tess put a stop to Nagi’s objections. With no other choice, he was guided into the building on his own. Crow awaited him within the room he was brought to. Nagi felt odd; Crow was hardly ever alone when they’d met before.

“Where’s Senak?”

“Oh, he quit. Our ideologies didn’t mesh.”

“He quit? Wasn’t he your friend going way back?”

“In the end, that man took offense to the fact that he wasn’t given Amrita. He was jealous of us. Just like your older brother. The two of them seem to be conspiring together. There are suspicions he stole confidential documents from the palace. He should be thanking me that I chose to stop at simply ending our friendship.”

Crow’s words were far too bitter for someone talking about a former friend.

“So, what did you need? We’re busy here. We’ve got many responsibilities now. Meeting you like this on the spur of the moment really is a special exception.”

“I want to stop Kyou’s execution. It’s Saya’s request.”

Crow knit his brows. “How foolish.”

“He’s her little brother. Isn’t it obvious she wants to save him?”

“She is the Sovereign before all else. Making such emotional decisions is a mistake.”

“Maybe so, but he’s her only family.”

“And how many commoners do you think were killed by nobles because of this family of hers? The same goes for the Crestfolk, doesn’t it?”

“That’s true... But still.”

“In any case, stopping the execution is out of the question. We’re about to start a new battle, after all.”

“A new battle? I didn’t hear anything about this.”

“It’s already begun. We’re fighting against the backlash. There are too many forces out there looking to waste the fruits of the revolution. Our next battle is to eliminate them and firmly root the new order.”

Nagi felt an ominous ring from Crow’s words.

“Is this why we’re still executing people?”

“Precisely. We fill the gallows now with the nobles who can’t keep pace with our reforms and the merchants who support them. They’re conspirators, counterrevolutionaries... There are far too many of them to write off as harmless crackpots. They’ll lose their foundation upon Kyou’s execution. That’s why we can’t stop it, even if it is the Sovereign’s request. It’s a good thing you’re here now, though. I have something to speak with you about.”

Crow spread his arms wide.

“Please move to the capital. You were one of our own to begin with; we would welcome you. I can even prepare a seat in Congress for you. The Commoners’ Hero has that much value.”

“No thanks, I’ll pass. I have a mountain of things to do at Garuga Village.”

“So, you still remain with the Tainted. You aren’t the type of person meant to concern yourself with such trifling matters. If you wish to protect Lady Saya, then you should be in the capital.”

Nagi didn’t miss Crow’s slur; he decided to pretend he didn’t hear it.

“I can’t be by Saya’s side. I’ll want to see her all the time if I stay in the capital.”

“That’s your problem as an individual. You just need to protect her as a public figure. Right now, the Sovereignty Faction reigns supreme. It’s the Granapalt administration. You *know* that man is dangerous.”

“But Lernaean fought by Cobalt’s side against Gratos.”

“There was no other choice at that point in time. It’s clear as day he intends to be the next Gratos. When that time comes, Lady Saya will be his marionette. Are you fine with that?”

“So will Cobalt let her be free?”

“Of course we will. We’ll grant her wishes.”

“Saya’s wish is to save Kyou’s life.”

“That’s a different matter.”

They were talking past each other.

“In any case,” Crow continued, “we evaluate your worth highly. Just as I said, I can prepare a seat for you in Congress. I’m not sure you properly understand the significance of this.” Crow paused there for a single breath. “All members of Congress are granted Amrita. You can obtain a longer lifespan.”

Nagi remembered now. This had once been his dream.

“You don’t have much time left. After you die, Lady Saya’s life will continue. Who’s going to protect her then?”

Crow did have a point. Regardless, Nagi put his answer on hold. Now wasn’t the time to be thinking about this.

“I’ll consider it... In any case, it seems nothing can be done about Kyou.”

“Please give it up. Execution is the only option.”

“Understood.”

“Well, that’s about the gist of it. They’re totally actin’ like they’re nobles now,” Keele said as he chomped down on a meat skewer he’d bought somewhere or other.

The three of them were now seated at a table by the road near the marketplace. The way Keele wiped the juices from his lips using his thumb made it look like he was really enjoying himself.

“I’ve got some for you too.”

Nagi accepted the meat from his brother and took a bite. Nobody was watching him. He could scarcely believe he was being called the Commoners’ Hero.

“It’s good, but three bloodpence? It’s a fuckin’ rip-off,” Keele grumbled.

“The price on everything has gone up. Everyone’s pissed,” Tess added. She had long finished her own meal. “It’s because everyone stupidly believed everything would get better once the False Sovereign was defeated. There’s no way it would. And then there’s the execution parties they’re throwing every single day to try and distract people from their dissatisfaction... Haah, they’re sure having fun.”

“Is that the reason they’re executing Kyou?” Nagi asked.

Keele scoffed at this. “They’ve got hundreds of years of grudges piled up; it’s useless to ask for forgiveness.”

“Wasn’t it all Gratos’ fault?”

“Even if he was a fake, that kid called himself the Sovereign. That means he’s got some responsibility. No helpin’ that.”

“Keele, aren’t you here to help?”

“Yeah, I am. I still get to kill me some goddamn vampires here.”

“You really never change.”

“That so? From my view, everyone else is changin’ too much. Or not; I guess you haven’t. You’re the same ol’ softie as before.”

“Can it.”

“Tess, how ’bout it? You turn into a fine woman yet? Oh, but fallin’ for a guy like this is, you know... You’re not gonna be a fine woman if you don’t fall for a good man.”

“Shut up.”

Keele was in strangely high spirits as he chattered on pointlessly, listening to their complaints.

“So, what do we do?”

“The new moon Lernaean mentioned is tomorrow. Our only choice is to sneak into the palace at that time.”

“It could be a trap, ya know?”

“Still, there’s no other way.”

“There is. A simple one. Just abandon Kyou.”

“We can’t. He’s Saya’s family,” Nagi immediately replied.

“He ain’t her real brother, right?”

“Even so, I think he’s her family... What would you do in this case? Say I was being executed.”

Nagi asked on the spur of the moment, but thought he was being stupid for doing so.

“I’ll abandon you. Obviously.”

Keele’s answer was just as expected. Nagi felt relieved to hear it for some reason. Everything around him was changing, but his older brother was still the same. He was the same hateful brother Nagi always knew.

Keele then averted his eyes. “Well, just as I said, I’ll lend you a hand. I’m pretty bored here... If this is a trap, it just means I get to kill me even more nobles.”

“Tess, you wait for us out here. If... If we don’t come back, let the village know.”

“That’ll be a problem. In that case, I’ll go. I can’t have any kids, so it doesn’t matter if I die. You can’t die, Nagi.”

“You still have to protect the village, don’t you?”

“The same goes for you. I want you to live.”

“You can cut the lover’s quarrel there... Sorry Nagi, you’re both coming. We need every fightin’ hand we can get.”

“Why’re you giving out the orders?”

“Shut it, you’re supposed to listen to your older brother.”

Nagi was getting annoyed, but Tess seemed to be in agreement.

“Okay, it’s decided then. I’ll protect you, Nagi.”

And now that it was two on one, his opinion was thrown out the window.

Nagi’s worries were completely betrayed by how easily they managed to infiltrate the palace.

“Now then, shall we?”

After following Jubilia from the designated meeting place, the group arrived at Kyou’s prison without being challenged once. They used a passageway meant for servants; normally, there’d be guards stationed along the way.

“The hell’s going on? There ain’t a single guard around. How boring,” Keele said in astonishment.

“The palace is short on hands. It’s bad enough that security is lacking. It just so happens that a transfer happening today means there’s a time when no guards are present. Having said that, the locks are obviously still in place, so they’re not particularly worried.” With that, Jubilia pulled out a key. “The key is properly being managed too, just like this.”

“Lernaean, huh?” Keele spat out bitterly.

“It’s true the palace is in a rickety state. Order can’t possibly be maintained as we burn through what remains of the nobility. It’s just a coincidence an opening was made at this time.”

“With everything set up so perfectly, did you even need our help?” Nagi asked.

Jubilia shook her head, then handed the key to Nagi.

“The form it takes is important in such cases. That’s why I can’t accompany you any further. You simply need to head straight from here, then retrace your steps to get out.”

“What do you mean by form?”

“We don’t have the time to speak of it now. The *coincidental* absence of guards won’t last for long.”

With that, Nagi held his tongue and proceeded onward. The young boy they found locked up in the prison was pale and haggard. He wore dirty clothes, and his blond hair was sticky with grease. Seeing him like this, nobody would be able to tell he was called the Sovereign just a little while ago.

“Get up,” Nagi said.

He figured Kyou was sleeping, considering how late it was, but the boy’s response was quick. Any sleep in such a cell had to be light. The only part of his former self which remained was his haughty tone.

“Who goes there?”

“Garuga Village’s Nagi.”

“We know that name. You’re the commoner who deceived Our sister.”

“Well, you could say that.”

“What have you come here for...? We suppose that much is obvious. Just kill Us.”

Nagi was perplexed. Didn’t Saya say that he wanted to be saved?

“I’m not here to kill you. I’m here to save you. Saya asked me to.”

“Impossible. Our sister did?”

Kyou was clearly shaken at the mention of Saya’s name. His eyes trembled.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“Exactly what it looks like. You asked Saya for help, and she asked me. So, I’m here to save you.”

“Lies. There’s no way a commoner would come to save Us. Commoners are Our enemy.”

“Hey, I ain’t no commoner,” Keele cut in. “I’m a Crestfolk.”

“Same here,” Tess added.

“Leave that kinda trivial stuff for later. I don’t care if you’re a noble, a Sovereign, or whatever. You’re family to Saya. That’s why I’ll save you. That’s all there is to it.”

Everyone turned to Nagi at once.

“Trivial? Us being Crestfolk? I thought you were stupid, but you really are a dumbass.”

“It *is* trivial. The revolution put an end to the sterilizations. The Crestfolk are no different from commoners now.”

“I’m not as bad as Keele, but people don’t change that easily. I’m pretty sure only a few people share your thoughts on this, Nagi,” Tess muttered.

“Trivial, is it? So, that’s why you’re a hero,” Kyou said.

“I’m no hero. Quit spouting nonsense. Let’s get out of here. Jubilia told us to hurry.”

“Hopefully, there’s at least one guard on the way out...” Keele muttered ominously.

“Don’t jinx it.”

Kyou was haggard, but he wasn’t debilitated to the point where he couldn’t walk. Nagi’s group took Kyou down the path they came from. They didn’t end up getting through without bumping into anyone this time. There were several knights waiting at the side entrance, as if to substantiate Keele’s hopes. Next to the knights was one other ominous presence.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Who knows? Lernaean, cut the farce and let us through,” Nagi replied.

“It’s meaningless to take Kyou with you like that. This boy isn’t royalty. Why do you think he’s lived for centuries despite that?”

“Amrita, I guess?”

“Indeed, the effect of which should be just about to wear off. This boy has lived far longer than most nobles. The kickback will surely be tremendous. He’ll age rapidly, meaning he won’t survive if you take him out like that. Without this, at least.”

Lernaean made a show of a package he was holding. There was likely Amrita within.

“Hand it over.”

“And what will you give me in return, Nagi?”

Nagi wasn’t sure how to answer.

“Nagi, don’t listen to this ass. Nothin’ good will come of it.”

“Keele, no need to speak so ill of me. I simply came here to ask something of Nagi. It’s but a small request. So long as he keeps his word, I’ll hand this over. There’s enough Amrita in here to prolong his life for ten years.”

“What do you want?”

“I’d like you to stop meeting Lady Saya.” Nagi began to react on impulse, but

Lernaean continued before he could. “Is what I’d like to say, but I doubt she would accept that. I’d like you to lower the frequency of your meetings little by little. You know it’s dangerous for her to see you, right?”

“But...”

“I don’t mean forever. We are also searching for a means to help Lady Saya recuperate. If her health improves, you can visit as often as you want, but now is not the time.”

Lernaean’s request made sense. Saya was still far from recovered from the toll the royal caliber took on her; Nagi’s presence still posed a threat to her. He was fully aware of this, but Nagi and Saya couldn’t help but want to see each other. Saya desired Nagi’s presence, and he responded in kind. They couldn’t touch each other, but such emotions spurred them on. As a result, Nagi had to come see Saya at least once a week. There was a part of him that already believed this was untenable. Lernaean’s words seeped their way into Nagi’s mind.

“Fine...” Nagi answered.

“You simply have to decrease the frequency little by little. You understand, don’t you? This is for Lady Saya’s sake.”

“Yeah.”

“Nagi, are you really okay with this?” Tess asked, looking into his eyes.

He was unable to maintain eye contact and averted his gaze. He nodded while still somewhat hesitant over the matter.

“Then you may have this,” Lernaean said, handing the bundle over to Nagi.

“The hell are you plannin’?” Keele snarled with a glare.

“I simply wish for Lady Saya’s happiness, as well as that of those who live in this world,” he replied with a mocking smile.

“Hey, I’m the one who abducted this brat. Nagi’s got nothin’ to do with it. You got that?”

Lernaean immediately understood the implications of this. “Very well. Lady Saya’s lover, the Commoners’ Hero, is far too famous. It would turn into an

uproar were it to be known he is the False Sovereign's abductor. I was thinking the same thing myself."

With that, Lernaean took his knights, walked past Nagi, and disappeared into the palace.

"Sorry, it's Our fault..." Kyou muttered sadly.

"You'd better stop talking like that. It's weird," Tess said.

"Huh?" Kyou looked completely confused.

"A kid like you... well, I guess you're actually way older, being a noble and all, but normal people refer to themselves as I and me."

"I... me... So, what will happen to me now?"

Nagi had talked this over with Keele beforehand.

"You're goin' to Leshva," Keele told him. "We'll take you there. We've got an ol' friend there in the slums. He's a pitiful jerk called Senak, but I guess he's pretty trustworthy."

"Oh yeah, Keele," Nagi said, recalling something upon hearing Senak's name. "Crow mentioned you and Senak conspiring about something. He says you stole some kind of confidential documents?"

"Well, we were just lookin' into a lil' somethin'. We ain't done yet. That don't matter right now. Anyway, he's way better than those rotten bastards in the capital."

"Disguise yourself so that you don't stand out and live in the slums," Nagi said, turning to Kyou. "There are plenty of kids there who've lost their parents. You'll mix in so long as you wear some dirty-looking clothes. He'll help look after you so that you can at least get by, but he doesn't have all that much time to spare himself. Find some way of living there and make the best of it."

"How do... I do that?"

"Figure it out yourself," Tess answered.

Kyou looked dumbfounded. He likely never even contemplated such a thing before.

“No need to look like that. It’ll be fine. Humans were made to live like this to begin with,” Tess told him, which still wasn’t much of an answer.

“If you’ve got no other way, then go sell your ass or something,” Keele cut in. “I’m sure you’d fetch a high price.”

“Hey! Don’t say that!” Tess growled at Keele, but he remained indifferent.

“He’s supposed to be dead, and now he’s gonna live. That kinda choice exists. You better resolve yourself.”

Again Nagi wondered what kind of life Keele led after being driven out of Strano Village. Now wasn’t the time to delve into that, however. They had to get going quickly.

“We shouldn’t stay here for long, let’s go,” Nagi said.

Tess and Keele nodded back to him, and they walked into the moonless night with Kyou timidly following behind.

28

“It seems Keele Strano and the False Sovereign are still at large,” Crow said, addressing the members of Congress.

“Your former comrade certainly is skilled,” Lernaean said, shrugging his shoulders. His sarcasm irritated Crow.

“I don’t believe the knights are even seriously investigating this matter.”

“A regrettable opinion. The knights are always serious. We have far too many enemies, however, and far too few hands to go around.”

“Keele Strano is dangerous. He has great skill and a list of achievements to back them. Furthermore, he’s the older brother of the Commoners’ Hero. There are many among the Tainted who treat him as their savior too. It could ignite a new spark.”

“I know that much.”

Saya was relieved to see that Lernaean wasn’t really paying Crow any attention. She was the one who had asked Lernaean to allow Kyou to escape.

Nagi, Tess, and Keele were the ones to do the deed, but only Keele was branded as the culprit. Arrangements were already made so that there would be no real investigation, just as Lernaean had promised.

Saya sat atop the throne overlooking Congress as they debated, wanting to return to her room the entire time. She wasn't allowed to make any statements here. Lernaean was the one who truly ruled here. Just like Kyou, she was an ornamental ruler.

"We cannot allow the Tainted to unite. Lord Lernaean, you do understand, don't you? Especially considering today's agenda."

"You mean the reinstitution of sterilizations for those afflicted with bloodmark disease."

Saya was completely shocked by Lernaean's calm statement. "Sterilization?! What's the meaning of this!"

"Lady Saya," Lernaean immediately said, cutting her off, "please refrain from making disorderly statements. We shall explain in due time."

Saya couldn't say anything back to him.

Crow went on to describe the topic in a sonorous tone. "Sterilizations have been suspended ever since the revolution. However, now that blood offerings have recommenced, it's a certainty that a proportion of the populace will contract bloodmark disease."

"Congress was in agreement last time that the reinstatement of the blood offering system was an urgent agenda item," Lernaean added.

Murmurs of agreement spread throughout Congress. This was perfectly natural, in Saya's opinion. Everyone here regularly took doses of Amrita.

"Unfortunately," Crow continued, "we still do not have a means of preventing bloodmark disease. As such, the spread of such contagion is extremely dangerous to the blood offering system. Blood from patients with the disease cannot be used for Amrita, after all. Furthermore, it's hereditary."

Crow swept his gaze across the room. Everyone was focusing on his every move.

“This problem has plagued us since ancient times. In all that time, no one has found a groundbreaking solution. Though it pains me, we are incapable of finding one ourselves. Thus, a thought came to mind. There is no other way of dealing with this problem than by doing what was done up until now. In other words...”

Crow paused for dramatic effect.

“The reinstitution of sterilizations. I do, of course, feel pity for the Tainted. If we could one day discover a valid treatment for bloodmark disease, then there would be no need for such drastic measures. Such research is to continue as it has. However, I believe that sterilization is a pertinent temporary solution.”

Congress was filled with voices of approval. Saya recalled what she saw at Garuga Village. She heard the same thing from Zamin’s dying mouth back then. Now she was seeing it from the entirely opposite perspective. Saya’s mind fell into chaos as the debate came to a close.

“Then let us vote. All in favor of reinstituting sterilizations.”

A thunderous roar reverberated through the room. The motion passed with unanimous approval. It was at this point that Saya finally realized there wasn’t a single Crestfolk present.

“Why reinstitute sterilizations?!” Saya yelled as she opened the door to Lernaean’s... Gratos’ former office.

“Lady Saya. Raising your voice like that is bad for your health. Please calm down,” Jubilia said, but was unable to do anything about Saya’s rage.

“How could I possibly calm down? Do you know how much the Crestfolk hate sterilization?”

“Of course I do,” Lernaean replied in a completely calm tone, “but nothing can be done.”

“Why? Because they can’t help make Amrita?”

“Exactly. If bloodmark disease were to run rampant, the current order will crumble.”

“What’s wrong with that? There’s no need to rely on Amrita and live a long life.”

“The people will perish.”

Lernaeon’s voice was tranquil, yet Saya could feel a certain dreadfulness behind it. He was like the surface of a calm body of water hiding a raging torrent beneath it.

“As the Sovereign, you must know of this... of the cruel reality behind this world. It is known to only a select few.”

“What do you mean?”

“Should I excuse myself?” Jubilia asked.

Lernaeon shook his head. “If Lady Saya deems it necessary, then you may remain.”

“Jubilia, stay here.”

“Very well,” Jubilia replied with a nod.

“Do you remember that?” Lernaeon asked, pointing at the glass box which remained where it was from the time Gratos occupied this room. As before, there were small fish swimming within as bubbles frothed up from the aquatic plants. “A box made by the Intelligence. Such is the true identity of Agartha. Humanity is incapable of living within the poison and miasma beyond the box.”

“Gratos said that people once lived beyond Agartha.”

“Indeed. Humans were the ones to render the world like this. They destroyed their own planet. The Intelligence helped us escape annihilation. Jubilia, can you recite the passage from the creation of Agartha?”

“Born of man yet wiser than man. Many, yet one. Recursive, yet multifaceted. That which is known only by name and existence. 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.”

“Yes. Humanity conceived the Intelligence for menial ends, but it far exceeded them. The crops, the purification of water for reuse, even tools like the cogwagon are all miracles left behind by the Intelligence. We cannot even begin

to understand them. Among all these miracles, Amrita is most precious to humanity's survival."

Lernaeon pointed over to the window, which provided a view outside the palace.

"Even within Agarthia, small traces of poison remain. Without Amrita, humanity is only capable of living for a tremendously short time. Even without the blood offerings, those without Amrita—commoners—won't even live for thirty years. That's why the Intelligence granted us Amrita. To protect civilization."

Lernaeon rose to his feet and picked up a bowl decorating his desk. It had a smooth white surface and was ornamented with a simple yet beautiful design.

"Take this bowl, for example. Craftsmen say it would take at least thirty years to make something like this. That's why skilled artisans are given Amrita. Even if they don't live like nobles, their lives are extended to the same amount of time humans once had in this world. The same goes for scholars, like that man Crow, for example."

Lernaeon flashed a small smile.

"That man's incentive for starting a revolution seems to be because he was reaching the limits of the lifespan granted to him as a scholar. Perhaps I'm being a little too malicious; he has his own sense of justice, in a way. There's no mistaking this was one of his motives, though."

Though he spoke in jest, his eyes weren't laughing at all.

"We've gone off track. Human civilization is an aggregation of knowledge far more delicate than this bowl. Amrita is indispensable if we're to have the time to pass it down to the next generation. Without this, humanity will have no choice but to eventually devolve into living like beasts. And then..."

Saya held her breath. It didn't look like he was putting any strength into his hand at all, but the bowl suddenly cracked. A fissure ran down its surface, and the bowl shattered to pieces. All that was left in Lernaeon's hand were small fragments.

"It crumbles. Whether or not they have any ill intent, the Crestfolk cause

society to crumble at its roots. Allowing them to live for one generation is the greatest compassion we can show them.”

Lernaeon dropped the fragments onto the ground. They made no sound as they landed on the thick carpet. He then walked up to Saya and peered into her eyes.

“But the Crestfolk have longer lifespans than commoners,” she somehow managed to strain out.

“True. They do, in fact, live longer than commoners, but their limit is still at most double that of a commoner. It would be impossible for any of them to live to a hundred... Unfortunately, there are many things essential to our world’s functioning that only someone with a noble’s lifespan can master. Above all else, a stable government cannot be maintained by mayflies. Lady Saya, do you wish to turn Agarthia into a land of conflict upon your ascension to the throne?”

Saya couldn’t find any flaws in Lernaeon’s argument. Everything he said sounded right, but something was fundamentally wrong here. She didn’t know what it was, but that was how she felt. She just couldn’t turn it into words.

“I do pity the Crestfolk for being forbidden to have children, but it’s common among nobles not to have any children either. Leaving behind descendants is an instinct which belongs to animals. Humans have surpassed such instincts. It cannot be allowed if it costs us the whole world.”

Saya inadvertently turned her gaze to the glass box. Its glimmer reminded her of where she’d first heard the story behind it.

“But that’s exactly what Gratos said too.”

“It’s different!” Lernaeon shouted roughly. “My aim differs from Gratos’ in form... That man tried to maintain the currently established equilibrium, distorted and dangerous as it is. I’m different. What I aim for is the original, complete land of Agarthia.”

“It’s incomplete?”

“Indeed. We distorted the way of Agarthia without even knowing it. The Intelligence did not leave this manner of world behind for us. In its original form, everyone was meant to be blessed with eternal life. Why do you think

commoners and Crestfolk suffer? It's a byproduct of the world's incompleteness. Why did the Intelligence leave behind such an imperfect world? It didn't. The world has simply deviated greatly from what it was meant to be." Lernaean managed to regain his composure. His voice was back to its usual calm tone. "I will correct the world."

"Is that your aim? A world where everyone is blessed?"

"Is it not obvious? I obtained status for this very purpose. Lady Saya, I'm sure you are discontent now, but could you place your faith in me? We cannot avoid having some suffer temporarily. But all of this..." A strong light glimmered in Lernaean's eyes. "... is for the sake of a complete world."

Saya was unable to say anything else. Lernaean's will was simply too strong. She realized he was manipulating her. She had started trembling before she knew it. Why was this? Why was the person she wanted to cling to more than ever before not with her now?

"Nagi," Saya unintentionally muttered.

"Aah, there's something I must inform you of regarding that boy," Lernaean said as if suddenly remembering something.

His voice was far too flat and calm. There wasn't a single emotion behind it. Saya felt a chill run down her spine. Her instincts were telling her she couldn't listen to what he was about to say. Once she did, she could never turn back. But even as she blocked her ears, she was incapable of blocking his voice out.

"He will die soon."

Saya couldn't understand what he just said.

"He's a commoner," Lernaean continued. "Commoners die quickly. To you, it must be the tiniest amount of time. Nobles know this, which is why it is our custom not to grow attached to commoners. This is obvious to any noble, but you may not have realized this yet. So, though it may be presumptuous of me, I felt I should let you know."

"Nagi... will die?"

She'd tried to stamp the memory of Zamin's death down, but now it surfaced

in perfect clarity.

“Yes, with certainty. At the earliest, in a handful of years. At the latest, he won’t hold out for another ten.”

“Why?”

“Why? You ask the strangest question. Such is the limits of his lifespan. The poison in this land is constantly eating away at his body. It’s natural for him to die. If nothing is done, that is.”

Saya realized the implications behind this. “Something can be done?”

“Of course. It’s simple. You should know of the method yourself, Lady Saya.” Lernaean flashed a refreshing smile. It was a completely flawless smile, capable of making anyone’s heart flutter. “You grant him Amrita. Such a thing is possible for him. He’s the Commoners’ Hero, after all. It wouldn’t be difficult to make him a member of Congress. He could also be conferred Amrita based solely on his achievements. He is far more qualified than the nobles all around us.”

Nagi could become a noble. Saya had never even thought of that.

“In truth, he wishes for this himself. Did you know? The reason he went to the Garden was apparently so that he could get money to buy Amrita.” Lernaean sighed in astonishment. “Unfortunately, Amrita cannot be bought by a commoner, no matter how much money they have. The serums circulating on the black market are nothing but convincing fakes. The only thing to ever get close to the real thing was what Dr. Dimitri managed to synthesize. Such fakes are enough to stir up a commoner who fears his short life, however.”

“Nagi wishes for this too?”

“There’s no other choice to begin with. It would be a different matter if you allow it, though. Nagi dying in but a few more years, I mean.”

“No,” Saya responded immediately.

It’s impossible for me now... I can’t live without Nagi... Without him, I’ll just return to that life, to those endlessly repeating days of imprisonment.

“In that case, go convince him. Convince him to take Amrita. Oh, I’ll hand a little over to you. Now that I think of it, you do owe me one. Shall we consider

this a request of mine? This is quite the desirable outcome for me. The death of a talented man like him would be a loss for Agarthia.”

Lernaean took a small bottle off his desk and handed it to Saya. She just realized it had been there this entire time. How much of this was playing out atop Lernaean’s palm?

“Do you understand now, Lady Saya? About the necessity of blood offerings and sterilizations, that is.” Saya stretched her hand out toward the bottle as Lernaean smiled. “Being granted a long life without purpose only brings suffering. Only when one acquires hope does their life become their own.”

Saya knew the words Lernaean muttered. It wasn’t clear to her where she had heard them before.

“Why do you know those words?” she asked.

“It’s an old saying. There are few who still remember it... So, do you wish for a world where he doesn’t exist? If not, then take it.”

Saya had no choice but to accept.

“Nagi, come here.”

Tess’s voice was stiff as she called Nagi from the door to his house. It seemed she had rushed over. Her chestnut hair was disheveled, and her black eyes were shaking. Nagi felt worried seeing her in such an abnormal state.

“What’s wrong, Tess?”

“We... we were betrayed.”

“What do you mean?”

“Bandore brought back a notice. They’ve reinstituted sterilization. The Sovereign... Saya betrayed us.”

She was controlling her voice, but her heart shook with anger. Nagi couldn’t look directly into her eyes. He rushed out of the house as if running away from them and headed to Zamin’s former abode, which had since become the village’s assembly hall. All of the village’s prominent members were present. The tension in the air about them was ready to burst at any moment.

“You’re here,” Bandore said.

“Give me the details.”

“There’s been a public proclamation in the capital, apparently. It says blood offerings and sterilizations are being reinstituted.”

“That can’t be. Blood offerings are one thing, but sterilizations?”

“The recommencement of blood offerings means new outbreaks of bloodmark disease. So, their response is the same as it was before. By performing sterilizations, they *permit* us to live,” Bandore said, as if spitting filth from his mouth. “The proclamation was marked with the Sovereign’s name! She’s just another vampire!”

The word Nagi hadn’t heard since the revolution ended reverberated in the air.

“Impossible! This must be some sort of mistake. Saya wouldn’t approve of such a thing.”

“She might have changed...” Tess muttered, “just like those guys from Cobalt.”

“This can’t be... I’ll go to the capital and check.”

“What’ll you do if Saya really betrayed us?”

“I’m telling you there’s no—”

“Nagi! Listen to me!” Tess protested, cutting Nagi off.

He fell silent. Her tone teetered on the edge of rage. She grabbed his shoulders and looked directly into his eyes. Tess’s gaze pierced through him. Her eyes were trembling ever so slightly.

“I know how you feel. I also want to believe that Saya wouldn’t do such a thing, but you and I are the chiefs here. We were entrusted with this village. We have to consider what to do if this is really true. Right?”

Nagi remained incapable of saying anything.

“Both of you give some thought about how to take this pronouncement first,” Bandore cut in. “What came up with it can come after that.”

Nagi's head finally managed to cool as he processed his elder's calm opinion.

"We can't accept this."

"Of course not. This is just the same as before. What did we even fight for?" Tess added with a nod.

"So, what do we do?" Bandore asked.

"We have them repeal it," Nagi said.

"How?"

"This definitely isn't Saya's fault... Lernaean is the one who decides everything."

"If so, it'll be hard to get it repealed. Once that man decides something, he does it."

"That's why I'm thinking the only way is to take up weapons once more and fight."

The room nodded in agreement as bloodlust filled the air. The Crestfolk were eager to fight the Sovereign who denied their very sanctity. Nagi forcefully suppressed the agitation in his heart. What would happen if they went to battle? The conclusion was clear no matter how he thought of it.

"We can't, though. There's no way we can win."

"We won once before."

"The situation was different. We had noble allies... and we had Saya."

The reason for their victory could largely be attributed to Lernaean's forces, and above all else, Saya's royal caliber. They couldn't expect either of these factors this time.

"But there's no other way!" Bandore yelled.

"Saya's name is on the proclamation. She might be able to repeal it."

"If she's our ally, yeah," Tess said with a nod. "But what if she's not? What'll you do, Nagi?"

"I'll..."

“Will you abandon us and side with her?”

Just imagining that Saya had changed felt like it would tear Nagi’s heart apart. The villagers stared at him. He looked them in the eye, one after the other. There was a myriad of emotions behind them: anxiety, jealousy... and trust.

“I was... I was entrusted with this village, just like you were. I took up that responsibility. Besides... this is the only place I have now.”

Nagi realized there was an alien clarity to his voice. The room had fallen silent, hanging on his every word.

“I’ll do my best to convince Saya, but if that doesn’t work...” Nagi couldn’t even believe the words forming in his throat, but he knew there was no other way. “We’ll have no choice but to take up arms and fight the Sovereign once more.”

He couldn’t take back what he said anymore.

29

Nagi dropped by the palace on his own. It was the middle of the night. He had the same rope in his hand that he had once used to infiltrate the Garden. It didn’t seem like he could see Saya through proper means. When he dropped by in the afternoon, the guards turned him back coldly.

“Lady Saya’s condition is worse than usual; please show some consideration,” so they said.

He wasn’t even allowed to speak through Jubilia, so Nagi backed down. Relying on the transformed Cobalt was obviously out of the question. Thus, he decided to handle things himself. He had the layout of the palace memorized because of his repeated visits. He never actually put it into practice before, but he had always considered ways of sneaking into the palace to see Saya.

The time had come for all that plotting to come to fruition. Nagi tossed the rope up onto a protrusion from the wall without making a single noise. Even in Garuga Village, Nagi focused his time on hunting. What’s more, the forest near the village was more abundant than the one near Strano, so his meals were far better than before. Nagi’s muscles were stronger now. It was easy for him to

scale the side of a wall all the way up to Saya's room.

He couldn't have infiltrated the palace so easily before the revolution. He was fortunate the guards patrolling the area had yet to fully reorganize. Above all else, he knew the area around Saya's room perfectly.

"Saya, it's me; open up," Nagi said, tapping on the glass of her window.

He couldn't possibly shout, so he was a little worried whether his voice carried into her room, but before long, the window opened.

"Nagi, what are you doing?"

It wasn't Saya. Jubilia opened the window, her hand gripping a drawn sword.

"Let me in. I have something I need to speak with Saya about quickly."

"Why didn't you come during the day?"

"I did. They didn't let me in."

"Jubilia, please let him in," Saya said from behind her.

Jubilia let out a small sigh and sheathed her blade. "Come in. You can't stay for long. Even you won't get off lightly if you're discovered."

"I know." Nagi slipped through the window. Saya sat up in bed. She looked delighted, leaving Nagi feeling dejected. "Saya, we need to talk."

He wondered what kind of expression he was making. He was at least sure he didn't show innocent delight the way Saya did.

"Jubilia, give us some time alone."

"Lady Saya, I can't..."

"Please."

"Just five minutes... I'll be right outside the door. Please inform me if something comes up."

Nagi nodded. "That's fine with me."

Jubilia left the room.

"This reminds me of the first time we met," Saya remarked.

“I was thinking the same thing.”

“It was much flashier back then, though. You suddenly fell through the ceiling.”

Nagi stood next to Saya’s bed. He slowly touched her arm, her hand. Just looking into her eyes, hearing her voice, was enough to send sweet emotions through his chest. He ran his hand through her silver hair. A delicate feeling wrapped around his fingers. He moved his palm over to her cheeks, whiter than her hair. When he first met her, he was astonished that such a beautiful color could exist. Now somewhat gaunt, her cheeks seemed scarily more beautiful than back then. He had to protect her. He had to protect something so delicate and lovely.

“Nagi,” Saya muttered, closing her eyes vacantly. “You can’t, the professor said you can’t.”

“Just a little.”

Nagi pressed his lips against Saya’s. That tiny amount of time felt like eternity, but still felt like it ended in an instant.

“That’s all?” Saya asked.

“One day, when your body properly recovers.”

Saya’s expression stiffened up. Nagi could’ve never predicted the next words to leave her lips.

“One day... Nagi, how... how many more years will you live?”

“Huh?”

Saya’s eyes were serious. They were trembling in fear.

“Tell me, Nagi... How much time do you have left?”

Nagi thought it over. Now that she mentioned it, he hadn’t considered it for a while. Just some time ago, it was all that was ever on his mind. Was it because he was surrounded by Crestfolk who lived longer than commoners?

“If I’d have to guess... five, maybe ten years? I might go a little longer than that if I don’t do any blood offerings.”

Those were also being reinstated, apparently... By the command of the girl right before him.

“Is that really all? It’s just like Lernaean said?” Saya said in a trembling voice.

Lernaean? He was the man Nagi had to be the most vigilant about. His heart shook, but before he could question Lernaean’s involvement, Nagi completely lost sight of what he was about to say because of Saya’s next utterance.

“It’s no good... That’s not enough... They say my body will take years... maybe even decades to heal.”

Nagi didn’t reply. He had been keeping himself from thinking about this. Saya stared into Nagi’s eyes. There was some sort of resolve taking shape in her gaze.

“Nagi, please. Drink this.”

She pulled a small bottle from the bag she kept by her pillow. The liquid within was a familiar red.

“That... can’t be...” Nagi couldn’t believe it. It wasn’t possible.

Saya nodded. “Yes, it’s Amrita. If you drink this, you’ll be able to live longer.”

Why does Saya have that...? Nagi’s heart was dominated by confusion.

“You... really betrayed us?”

“Huh?”

“You’re just another vampire?!”

What followed was tremendous anger. He was seething with such rage he forgot he couldn’t raise his voice here.

“Huh?”

Saya trembled in fear as he suddenly raised his voice. Nagi closed in, roughly grabbing her shoulders.

“You ended up the same as those other nobles?! Stealing from commoners! Stealing from Crestfolk!”

“That’s not...”

“Blood offerings and sterilizations... They’re all for Amrita, aren’t they?”

“That’s... Lernaean said...”

“Lernaean... You allied with him, rather than us?”

“I-I didn’t! I just wanted to...”

Jubilia barged into the room, sensing something was wrong within.

“Nagi, what are you doing?! Step away from Lady Saya!”

Seeing that Jubilia was about to draw her sword, Nagi immediately ran for the window. No... her arrival was simply the impetus for him to move. He wanted to get out of there as soon as possible. He wanted to get away from Saya.

“Goodbye, Saya...”

“Nagi, wait!”

He wanted to get away from the girl he loved who had changed so much. He ran beneath the starry sky. He laughed at the crescent moon hanging overhead. He couldn’t even remember how he managed to slip out of the palace, but muscle memory carried the day. Nagi arrived at Garuga Village before the night was over.

Tess was awake and waiting for him. He definitely had a horrible expression on his face. She was surprised upon seeing him, said nothing, and embraced him tightly. Nagi surrendered himself to her arms. A dull pain pierced his chest as something hard pressed against him. It was something that had been hanging around his neck all this time: a necklace containing Saya’s blood. Nagi took off the necklace. He couldn’t continue carrying it anymore.

“Nagi, what happened?”

“Saya... changed.”

Tess gulped. She shook her head repeatedly, then took a deep breath.

“Is Saya... our enemy?” she asked.

Nagi nodded, and Tess fell completely silent. She then pointed to the necklace still in Nagi’s hand.

“Is that why you’re throwing that away?”

“Yeah...”

“If you don’t want it, then give it to me.”

Tess took the necklace from Nagi. He simply let her. He didn’t really pay it much attention when he was wearing it all this time, but now that it was gone, he felt strangely dejected by its absence. He now realized it wasn’t just the necklace which was gone. He had lost something within his heart. Something big. Something precious.

Nagi looked at Tess as she dangled the necklace from her hand. This Crestfolk girl had her wish stolen from her by disease. The world was filled with those who stole, and those who were stolen from. The Crestfolk were the people who had everything stolen from them. They continued to be stolen from, losing far more than Nagi had lost just now.

Nagi had gotten them involved in the revolution. He did it so that they could retrieve even just a little of what was stolen from them. They won, but victory was nothing more than an illusion. With an empty hole gouged out of him, Nagi found just one thing which remained deep within his heart. It was what Zamin had entrusted him with. All that was left to him now was the reverberation of a dead man’s voice.

“I’ll protect Garuga Village... I’ll protect the Crestfolk...”

Power had changed Saya, of all people. Nevertheless, commoners... and Crestfolk, couldn’t simply stand by and allow themselves to be killed. Nagi clung to the fate Zamin had entrusted to him, to the sense of responsibility he felt. If he didn’t, he wouldn’t be able to keep on his feet.

Tess looked into Nagi’s eyes. Her big, black pupils reflected the moonlit scenery. “I think... I love you.” Her words surprisingly didn’t feel abrupt to him. “I hated commoners. I envied them. They had what I wanted. That’s why when I first met you, I couldn’t help but hate you. But you didn’t hesitate to touch me. You were a weird commoner. You were stupid, childish, and shallow. That’s why I ended up falling in love with you... But...”

Tess shook her head lightly. She looked like she was both crying and smiling at the same time.

“My feelings didn’t matter at all. You only ever looked at Saya, and I loved you and Saya being together. I loved the way Saya looked at you. I truly believed it

would be great for you two to have kids.”

“Nobles don’t want kids. Especially royalty.”

“I was mistaken. The thing I wanted was an illusion from the very beginning... So at the very least, I’ll take this.”

Tess tied the necklace she took from Nagi around her own neck. Her bloodmark-stained nape looked bewitching under the moonlight. Unsure what he even wanted, Nagi wrapped his arms around her, and she hugged him back.

Her well-trained and supple arms squeezed Nagi hard enough for it to hurt, but the hurt felt like some kind of salvation to him. He felt like he would collapse in an instant if he didn’t have such support from her.

Their lips met under the dazzling moonlight.

Chapter 6: At the Farthest End of a Promise

30

Saya once more found herself gazing at the window. It was as if she could see the faint afterimage of the boy who had come through it, but there was no way he was actually there. Nagi clearly told her “goodbye.” He wasn’t ever going to come again.

“Lady Saya. This will affect your health. Please lie down.”

Saya gave Jubilia a half-hearted reply but kept her eyes fixed on the window.

“Nagi said I betrayed him...”

Because she held Amrita out to him.

Because she acknowledged sterilization.

“Even though I did it for his sake...”

“You did,” Jubilia said.

This conversation between them had repeated many, many times now. A wave suddenly rose within Saya’s heart. She felt like she would be swallowed by it, and could only repeat the same words to hold it at bay.

“Hey, Jubilia. What should I have done? Nagi’s going to die! I had no choice... But listening to Lernaean... just so Nagi doesn’t die...”

Saya spoke from the heart, aggravating the pain in her chest.

“Please have some rest for now...”

“What’s Nagi doing?”

“That’s a little...”

Jubilia held her tongue. It was clear something was going on, which she didn’t want to mention.

“Answer me!”

“Will you take some proper rest if I do?”

“I will.”

Jubilia hesitated, but gave in to Saya’s demand.

“The Crestfolk have flocked to the capital in protest and sent a letter to Congress. They’re... demanding the repeal of sterilizations.”

Saya didn’t overlook Jubilia’s awkward pause.

“That’s not all, right?”

“They’re also demanding your abdication.”

“Abdication... What else?”

Jubilia was flustered by Saya’s persistence.

“I’m begging you. Please get some rest.”

Saya could guess what Jubilia was hiding.

Haah... Why is it that I only figure out the things I don’t really want to know?
Even though she couldn’t figure out the one thing she really wanted, Nagi’s heart.

“They’re saying they want me dead, aren’t they?”

Jubilia fell silent. This was enough of an answer.

“Nagi wants me dead...”

“You’re wrong. It’s only a portion of the Crestfolk calling for your execution. Even if there are voices out there making such demands, it isn’t Nagi’s wish.”

“No, Nagi called me a vampire. He called me a monster who steals the lives of others. That’s why he’s fine with me being killed... I betrayed him, after all.”

“Lady Saya, please get some rest... You promised.”

Saya did as she was told this time and lay down. She prayed a dreamless slumber would befall her quickly.

“You all know the reason we have gathered here today.”

Lernaean’s ever-calm voice resounded through the room as he overlooked Congress.

“Of course we do,” Crow replied in irritation. “Do you think any among us don’t know of the Tainted’s protests? They have already left, but the citizens of the capital still tremble in fear. To many of our people, the Tainted were nothing more than bandits whispered about in rumors.”

“Were they not formerly Cobalt’s... *your* comrades?” Lernaean said cynically.

Congress was astir.

“Objection! It’s true we once had a united front with the Tainted... the Crestfolk, who came in protest, but that was nothing more than a temporary alliance!”

“The Commoners’ Hero is among the Crestfolk as well. Were you not the one constantly reminding everyone of how he is part of Cobalt?” Lernaean immediately retorted.

Crow let out a small groan. It was clear to everyone that Cobalt’s position within Congress was rapidly deteriorating.

Saya watched them without an ounce of interest, but the mention of Nagi sent a ripple through her heart. She was in attendance today as well, but everyone there knew she was nothing but a meaningless figurehead, including Saya herself. That was why nobody paid her any attention.

“Perhaps we were being too impatient?” Crow continued, trying to regain his standing. “For the moment, we should at least repeal the policy on sterilizations.”

“Repeal?”

The air around Lernaean took a complete change. He was calm, yet it was clear that the vessel in which he kept his every fiery impulse had come unstoppered. Everyone involuntarily held their tongues, like housepets who had stepped on the tail of a beast.

“Very well. It may be inevitable for some of you to voice such opinions, seeing

as you are unaware, but so long as you call yourselves congressmen, you're obliged to know *why* sterilizations are necessary."

Lernaeon's voice spread over the silence.

"What is it that separates nobles, commoners, and Crestfolk to begin with? Let's have a specialist give the answer, shall we? Dr. Dimitri."

"Hm?"

Dimitri didn't seem to think he would be nominated to speak here. He was a little agitated, but still answered without hesitation.

"Everything is based on Amrita. Those who gain long lives from Amrita are nobles. Those who offer their blood for the sake of Amrita are commoners. And those unrelated to Amrita are the Crestfolk."

"Precisely. So, what gave birth to Amrita?"

"The Intelligence. It goes without saying."

"Indeed. However, did you know the way Amrita is now differs from the Intelligence's original intentions, Professor? Amrita was meant to bring everyone eternal life."

"What?!" Dimitri yelled, jumping up to his feet. "Everyone...? That's impossible! Amrita's production requires the blood of commoners!"

"Allow me to explain from the beginning. Originally, only the supreme members of Congress were privy to this knowledge. You'll understand how the world was meant to be once you hear the details. That's why Gratos fought to keep it hidden. Amrita was bestowed upon us by the Intelligence to allow humanity to survive in this poisoned world. With its blessings, humanity was meant to live in the eternal paradise of Agarthia. However..."

Lernaeon paused briefly. Everyone awaited his next words with bated breath.

"Man committed a sin. They succumbed to lust and multiplied in number."

"That's the legend of creation..."

"It's no legend. It's a historical fact, Professor. Saved from the time of apocalypse by the Intelligence, our ancestors acquired eternal life, yet foolishly

tried to fill the lands once more. As a result, our blessing weakened.”

“Weakened... I see. The factor which grants the blessing of Amrita lies within the blood... The more people multiply, the thinner it gets!”

Dimitri’s eyes shot open. There was a glimmering light of the mad thirst for knowledge within them.

“Meaning that factor lies within commoner blood... And that means...” Dimitri continued mumbling to himself.

Lernaeon ignored him and carried onward. “People began dying of old age. That’s when the people first realized what was happening. But by that time, they could no longer curb their own growth. In a panic, they predicted what awaited them in the future. Professor, what do you think they concluded?”

“If it thins out beyond a certain extent, people will die before they can even have children. Once the population diminishes, their lifespans will stretch out once more... As that cycle repeats, human lifespan will reach a balancing point... No, but when life is too short, the work force diminishes, and society can no longer be maintained?”

“You’ve confused several factors, but you’re essentially correct. They predicted that human lifespan would settle around 20 to 25 years of age... And everyone here knows these predictions were right.”

“Commoners.”

“Yes. But a world made up of only commoners would make it impossible to pass down knowledge and technique. That’s when our ancestors turned to the Intelligence for salvation. The Intelligence forgave our sins and once more bestowed us a gift: the Sovereign’s Blood and the recipe for Amrita. The Intelligence then departed into the starry skies.”

“I got it! By gathering the portion of the thinned-out blood which grants eternal life, and using the Sovereign’s Blood as a medium... *That’s* the secret to Amrita!” Dimitri yelled, his expression overflowing with passion.

“I’m glad you catch on quickly. Just like that, we managed to establish a stable society. But unfortunately, a factor which threatens the balance appeared. Over the passage of time, some commoners were born with no affinity to Amrita.

Their blood conflicts with the key factor of the blessing, and internal hemorrhaging causes an irremovable mark to appear on their skin... I'm sure you all know what this is."

"Bloodmark disease," Dimitri answered, having fully embraced his role as the representative student.

Lernaeon nodded. "What's worse is that this disposition is hereditary. If left unchecked, bloodmark disease will taint all commoner blood. When that happens, Amrita can no longer be made."

Lernaeon looked around Congress. His intentions were clear. Everyone present had received the blessings of Amrita, after all. After confirming that the meaning behind his words had seeped throughout the entire room, Lernaeon nodded.

"If that happens, our society will crumble. The nobles tried turning to the Intelligence once more for salvation, but the Intelligence never returned. We had no choice but to take matters into our own hands."

He was getting to the core of the matter. Lernaeon let his sonorous voice fill the room.

"The answer is simple. The Crestfolk must be eliminated. That was far too pitiable a choice, however, hence the policy of sterilization... Yes, sterilization was a kindness. Now then, how did that turn out for us?"

"They rioted against us!" someone yelled.

"Rioted...? They've only protested. It hasn't reached the point of an armed riot," Jubilia muttered.

Her voice was quiet enough that only Saya could hear her. The one congressman's voice broke the dam, and yelling quickly filled the hall, laying blame for all the world's ills on the Crestfolk. Lernaeon quietly watched this unfold, then gestured to them to stop. The entire room fell silent in an instant.

"Your anger is understandable. I am also in agreement. It is true that their disease-ravaged bodies are pitiable, but if they turn their unjustified resentment toward us in revolt..." Lernaeon said, pausing to slowly make his declaration. "Then unfortunately, there is no choice but to exterminate the

Crestfolk.”

“Agreed!”

Voices of approval filled the assembly hall.

“Massacre them all!”

“Lady Saya, this can’t be allowed... The Crestfolk are just normal people who have contracted a disease. What is Lord Lernaean even thinking...?” Jubilia said quietly next to Saya. She was shocked. Her voice was trembling. “Please, you’re the only one who can stop this.”

Saya looked over Congress. Her remarks weren’t normally permitted here. She was terrified. What could she possibly do against this surging wave? But in this moment, a serious decision was about to be made before her eyes: the decision to wipe out the Crestfolk.

That would include Tess and Keele, as well as the one currently considered to be their leader, Nagi. Saya had approved of sterilizations because she listened to what Lernaean said, and as a result, Nagi abandoned her. But right now, there was something she could do. Saya took a deep breath.

“Stop right there!” she yelled as she rose to her feet. “In the name of the Sovereign, I won’t allow such a thing!”

All eyes pierced Saya at once.

“Lady Saya,” Lernaean said in a calm voice. “This is Congress. Your statements are inappropriate here.”

“Even if all of you decide to exterminate the Crestfolk, I will never agree to it!”

The entire hall was astir. Lernaean glared at Saya. Her legs trembled, faced with his overwhelming pressure head on. Jubilia gripped her hand from the side, reassuring her.

“It’s okay. There are many among Congress whose loyalties lie with the Sovereign. They aren’t likely to allow this motion to pass easily after hearing your statement.”

As a large uproar began to pass through the hall, Lernaean swept his right hand in a wide arc. That simple gesture brought silence back to the room. His

dominance was still well in effect.

“Dr. Dimitri, I believe you are responsible for Lady Saya’s treatment, are you not?”

Dimitri had trouble catching his breath over the sudden change of topic. “Y-Yes...”

“How is her condition? Is her mind and body sound? Can she make proper judgments?”

Dimitri immediately understood his endlessly cruel intentions.

“With all due respect, Lady Saya’s health is extremely poor. She is in no condition to be making sound judgments.”

“Dimitri! You bastard!”

Their exchange was so shameless that Jubilia roared at him. At the same time, confusion spread among the Congress members.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Lernaean said, bringing them under control. “Please recall once more. It is Amrita which gives you eternal life. What is it that we must do now to protect that?”

Silence fell over the room. Amrita was the weak point of every Congress member. So long as it granted them eternal life, they couldn’t possibly allow it to be lost. The temptation of Amrita was a poison spread among them by Lernaean. Everyone present recognized by now that Lernaean held absolute power here, as the one who held it in his clutches.

“Lady Saya has had her heart stolen by a rebel in her infirmity, affecting her ability to make sound decisions. Take the Sovereign to her room.”

At Lernaean’s command, the knights posted near Saya approached her. Jubilia stood in their way before they got too close.

“Do not touch her.”

Her hand was on the sword at her waist.

“Jubilia. You will be deemed a traitor if you draw your blade.”

“You’re the traitor, Lord Lernaean. What are you even thinking? Exterminate

the Crestfolk? Ignoring Lady Saya when she tries to stop it? Is this your ideal?! You weren't like this before... Did you not try to save the commoners from their own suffering?!"

Lernaean chuckled cynically. "You simply believed that I did. What do you, or anyone else, know of my ideals? They haven't changed. Not ever; not even once."

"Jubilia, it's okay. Stand down," Saya said.

"But..."

"You'll just get arrested if you oppose him now... Lernaean, please forgive her. I'll come quietly."

"Very well. Now then, return to your room," Lernaean said, turning back to face the room. "We shall have Lady Saya get some rest so that her condition doesn't worsen. Given the extenuating circumstances, I shall make this decision without the Sovereign's approval. The Crestfolk and the despicable factor of bloodmark disease shall be wiped from this world!"

"Hear, hear!"

Voices of approval filled Congress as Saya bit down on her lips. She couldn't stop it. She was too late in taking action.

Nagi, what should I do...? Oh, I don't... have Nagi with me... anymore...

Saya was all alone, swept by the great wave of hatred within Congress.

31

Many of the Crestfolk who protested across Agarthia did so in the form of peaceful marches. They were bad-tempered people by nature, however. Nagi believed this would naturally lead to riots. That had to be avoided at any cost. They might have forgotten it after tasting victory, but nobles weren't opponents they could normally win against.

Nagi's forces only possessed a small amount of Halahala left over from the revolution. Even if they took up arms and resorted to battle, it wouldn't be much of a fight. That was why Nagi took the path of reaching a compromise

through negotiation while avoiding an armed conflict.

Things moved counter to Nagi's intentions, though. News reached him that the Crestfolk village near Kelst had been attacked. Around the time they began gathering warriors to send help, the handful of vanishingly lucky informed them of the village's utter annihilation. Nagi was taken aback, but the news didn't stop there. Keele informed him that this was no isolated incident.

"The Purifiers?"

Keele stood in front of the key members of Garuga Village, including Nagi, Tess, and Bandore, in their assembly hall.

"That's what they call themselves. The Tainted must be purified for the sake of the True Sovereign Saya, so they say."

"Lernaean's the one behind it all," Nagi spat out bitterly.

Keele nodded. "I bet he is. Lernaean Edel Trouta lo Granapalt... That asshole's tenacity for wantin' all Crestfolk dead is abnormal. I mean, his house's been thinkin' of how to do this for centuries now."

"Centuries?"

"His family's the one who started the sterilizations. We finally figured it out from the docs Senak snuck outta the palace."

"Is this what you said you were looking into before?"

"Yeah. I've been thinkin' 'bout it all this time... No matter how much I keep killin' and killin' these nobles, there's no end to them. So, instead of offin' a buncha nobodies, I thought maybe I should try killin' the guy who started this whole sterilization bullshit and fucked me up. I kinda gave up on it for a bit. How was I supposed to figure that out? Pretty much the only place that's got that kinda thing written down is palace archives."

"So, that's what Senak took?"

"Yup. After the revolution, the guys from Cobalt got to swagger 'round wherever they wanted. It was pretty hard to find this crap, considering Senak's smarts, but he finally turned it up. The congressman who proposed sterilization as a policy was Norg Edel Trouta lo Granapalt. He's long dead now, but that's

Lernaeon's pop."

"Lernaeon's father started the sterilizations?"

"Lernaeon himself was alive at the time. He definitely had a hand in it. We've really been some big ol' dumbasses here. Even if we didn't know at the time, we ended up helpin' him seize power."

"So, doesn't this mean it isn't actually Saya's fault?" Tess asked, bringing things back on track.

Nagi shook his head. Tess had gotten angry at him before for only thinking about Saya. Now that Nagi had decided to fight, she was saying things to cover for her. It could've been for Nagi's own sake. It was like she was speaking as a representative for Nagi's abandoned emotions, allowing him to choose far colder words than he normally would have.

"It doesn't make a difference. Even if she was told to say it, the Sovereign's words are Saya's words. Tess, she's changed. She's trying to kill us. We have to accept that."

"So, what do we do? That lot should be on their way here pretty soon," Bandore said. It seemed so far removed from reality.

"Who makes up the Purifiers?"

"Mostly commoners."

"No nobles?"

"It's a haughty name, but they picked it out for themselves. The Sovereign gave 'em free rein to start slaughterin' us. It's a gatherin' of dumbasses."

"Commoners we can fight. We're not gonna lose," Bandore said in a strong tone.

Nagi objected, however. "If it's only commoners, yeah. But if we drive away the commoners, the knights are coming next. We'll lose if that happens."

"Then what should we do?!" Bandore yelled.

"We've got no choice but to make allies of the commoners."

"They *just* attacked the Crestfolk, remember?"

“There’s all sorts of commoners out there. The ones attacking the Crestfolk should only be a small portion of them. The large majority of commoners should only be caught up in the fervor.”

“Aren’t those the nastiest bunch?”

Nagi shook his head. It wasn’t the time for that. “Our only enemies are the nobles. If we keep it that way, we’ll at least have the advantage of numbers. There’s no other way to do this. Just like during the revolution.”

He knew this was nothing but a naïve ideal, but no matter how much he thought about it, there really was no other way.

“How? That time, Saya... the Sovereign was on our side, That’s why commoners and nobles joined us,” Tess said, her words weighing heavily on Nagi’s heart.

“That was a mistake. That’s how Lernaean managed to hijack our revolution.”

“You’ve got it backwards, man. Lernaean planned the whole fuckin’ revolution to begin with. We were just dancin’ to his tune,” Keele said teasingly, making Nagi grab his older brother by the collar.

“Still! There was supposed to be significance in our fight!”

“There’s only significance if we survive. You’re the chief. Cool your head off. Nobody’s easier to kill than a guy who gets all emotional.”

Nagi glared at Keele. His brother’s eyes were perfectly calm. Seeing that, Nagi managed to regain his composure.

“Think it over. Who’s our enemy? Who really started all this shit?”

Nagi thought it over. The answer was clear.

“Lernaean.”

“So, our only choice is killin’ him.”

“That’ll be tough,” Bandore remarked. “We can’t even get close to him.”

“Fuck, that last time was our best chance. If I knew he was the mastermind behind the sterilizations back then, I would’ve killed him.”

“Besides, he’s stupid strong himself, isn’t he?”

Keele nodded. "He can use that blood caliber of his from a distance. That's not supposed to be possible; fucker's cheatin'."

"Really?" Nagi asked.

"A blood caliber loses its shape if it leaves its wielder's hands. That sword Jubilia uses can't be thrown, for example. It'll just turn back into blood. But Lernaean's definitely worked from a distance. Nobody knows what it really is. He says it's a whip, but that's kinda fishy."

Keele's words tugged at something in Nagi's mind.

"Huh? In that case..."

Keele looked at him curiously. "What's up?"

Nagi shook his head. He second-guessed the thought the moment it took shape.

"No, it's nothing. I don't think I'm right."

"Whatever, man. Just spout it out. What'd you think of?"

"I know of a blood caliber which works from a distance. It's not technically a blood caliber, though."

"What?"

"Didn't you see it for yourself?"

Keele still didn't seem to know what Nagi was getting at.

"The royal caliber. It was a bunch of butterflies made of blood. They weren't attached to Saya's body."

"The royal caliber...? So, you're saying Lernaean's is also a royal caliber?"

"There's no way I'd know."

"So long as the royal caliber works from a distance, it means it isn't weird for some blood calibers to do the same? Or maybe Lernaean's got something special which is close to a royal caliber...?"

"I don't know what exactly it is," Tess cut in, "but how do we even fight someone who can attack from who knows how far away?"

“Before that, how do we even get close to him?” Bandore grumbled.

“If only there was somewhere we could draw him out.”

The conversation was starting to go off track. Just as Nagi was about to get things back in line, someone ran into the room.

“There’s an uprising in Leshva!”

“Was it the nearby village?” Tess asked curiously.

There was only a small Crestfolk village in that vicinity. They weren’t supposed to have a force capable of causing an uprising.

“No! They’re commoners! The False Sovereign Kyou is leading it!”

Jubilia watched over Saya as she slept. No matter how often she repeated this, she didn’t seem to be getting better. Her sleeping figure was ever so fleeting. Her silver hair draped over her increasingly gaunt cheeks. Its delicate luster was lost and clung to her sickly face.

When Jubilia tried to fix it, she ended up touching Saya’s cheek. She felt like she couldn’t believe Saya was really there if she didn’t. Her beauty seemed so far apart from this world.

Saya let out a small voice, causing Jubilia to pull back her hand. The sleeping girl slowly opened her eyes.

“Sorry. Did I wake you up?”

“It’s okay. All I’m doing is sleeping all day, anyway. More importantly...”

The time Saya spent awake was getting shorter and shorter. Each time she woke up, she would always ask the same question.

“Tell me, Jubilia. What’s going on outside?”

“That’s...”

Jubilia hesitated to answer her. Saya was being imprisoned in her room as always, under the pretext that she was going insane. Only Jubilia was allowed within. To be precise, Saya refused anyone else.

Saya had changed ever since that day she spoke up in Congress. She was no

longer a languid girl who had lost her lover. She was actually trying to proactively find out how things were going outside the palace.

Jubilia was her only source of information now. The knight attended Congress only to fulfill this duty. The gaze Lernaean had turned on her for nearly drawing her sword that last time was endlessly cold, but she didn't care anymore.

Right now, she just wanted to grant the wishes of this little girl; this pitiful girl trifled with by her own blood. Jubilia ended up biting back at Lernaean before she even knew it, just to protect this girl, despite him being the man she once swore her loyalty to.

At first, she only served as this Sovereign's guard by going with the flow; now, she truly wanted to protect her. It was unbecoming of Jubilia as a knight, but she didn't want to protect Saya the Sovereign. She wanted to protect Saya the girl. She had quit being a knight, so in the end, it didn't really matter. That was why she was permitted to be here. That was why she was reluctant to tell Saya of what happened in Congress today.

"Please."

"Today... Reports of 'victory' were delivered from every region."

"Victory?"

"Of Crestfolk villages being destroyed."

"That's a *victory*?" Saya snapped, but immediately calmed down. "Sorry, there's no use in getting angry at you. I'm the one asking you to tell me."

"Don't be. Allow me to continue... The only exception is Leshva. The commoners and Crestfolk there have started an uprising against the capital."

"What does that mean?"

"There are those in Leshva claiming you are being imprisoned because of the prime minister's evil intentions."

That was the unmistakable truth; such claims were exceedingly dangerous.

"Who could possibly...?"

Jubilia wavered over whether she should mention this, but she resolved

herself and identified the man behind it.

“Lord Kyou.”

That name sent a ripple through Saya’s frozen heart for the first time in a while.

“Kyou?”

Saya didn’t know where her little brother had gone after escaping his execution. Jubilia didn’t know either, beyond Keele’s involvement.

“Lord Kyou was apparently being sheltered by the former Cobalt member, Senak. He lived among the impoverished commoners. However, after seeing the proclamation to destroy the Crestfolk, he rose up alongside the poor.”

“Why? He finally got away from it all...”

Jubilia tried taking a guess at the feelings of the boy who had escaped the capital.

“I’m sure he couldn’t stand it. The Crestfolk saved him. He likely couldn’t forgive the ones he owed his life to being killed in your name. There are many among the populace who are aggrieved by the cruel treatment of the Crestfolk to begin with. Also, Leshva is a poor town. They have the strongest feelings of revulsion toward nobles in Agarthia. Lord Kyou moved their hearts. Even if it was just for a short time, he must’ve won them over while living among them.”

“Is that so?” Saya said, wide-eyed in shock. “Kyou really managed to live a proper life out there...”

The envy in her voice pained Jubilia. It was something Saya had always wanted for herself.

“So, what about Congress?”

“Lord Lernaean commanded the former Order of the Sapphire Blood to be dispatched... His command was to wipe them out entirely. There are many among the Sapphire Blood whose blood calibers specialize in suppressing crowds.”

“That’s overdoing it—they’re going to slaughter all the commoners?!”

“Yes. Such objections were also raised in Congress, but...”

Jubilia made her determination. She had to touch upon the one thing she didn't want to say the most, but Saya didn't want her to hide anything. Even sick in bed in the throes of despair, even if she knew she could do nothing about it, Saya wanted to see the shape of the world.

If this girl had been the Sovereign from the very beginning... Such a thought had gone through Jubilia's mind on countless occasions.

“Lord Lernaean made an announcement. According to the results of Dr. Dimitri's research, if the population of Agarthia remains beneath the Intelligence's original plans of ten thousand people, every single person could retain their immortality.”

Saya herself had no way of knowing this, but she had the exact same reaction as the congress members did when they heard of Lernaean's calculations. In other words, she couldn't understand how this was related to the previous topic. Her expression then suddenly changed upon grasping *exactly* what it meant.

“There's... too many people...?”

“Exactly. To fully actualize their calculations, after they're done with the Crestfolk, they need to quell the number of commoners. It has to be done sooner or later. That's why they decided to destroy Leshva while they're revolting.”

“There's no way Congress would approve of such a thing, right?” Saya asked in a trembling voice.

Jubilia shook her head. “His plan was unanimously approved.”

“Why...? Congress has commoner representatives. Cobalt are there, too.”

“Congress is a vestigial limb of the new state. Nobody can defy him any longer. Lord Lernaean holds the key to Amrita. For all intents and purposes, he already decides who lives and who dies. Furthermore, his pawns are hiding everywhere. Any who show defiance are immediately arrested. He's been preparing for this for a long time, it seems.”

“Why go so far? What exactly does Lernaean want?”

“In his words, to return this world to the original form the Intelligence laid out for us.”

That also meant a world where only those chosen by Lernaean could enjoy eternal life.

“I don’t want to be the Sovereign of such a world!” Saya yelled before breaking into a violent coughing fit.

Her condition showed no signs of getting better. Dimitri, who was supposed to be treating her, never showed himself, keeping busy with his research instead.

“Lady Saya... Please get some rest.”

Jubilia lay Saya back down in bed. She prayed that this little Sovereign could at least sleep in peace.

32

Nagi, Tess, Keele, Bandore, and all the warriors of Garuga ran at full speed to Leshva. When they arrived, it was more precise to say it was where Leshva once was. It had been utterly destroyed. Many of the buildings were ruined, their walls collapsed and a horrible burning stench coming from most of them. Nagi lost his voice. He couldn’t even imagine what caused destruction on such a scale.

“What happened?” Tess murmured.

Everyone was thinking the same thing. Keele was the first to answer her.

“Fuckin’ vampires. They used their blood calibers.”

“What?”

“You can’t break buildings like this with any kind of human strength. Blood calibers, on the other hand... It hasn’t been that long since the uprising here. The only thing capable of doing this so quickly is that fucked up power. I bet they set the fires afterward.”

“Weren’t blood calibers only meant to be used in fights between nobles?” Nagi asked.

“That don’t mean they *can’t* use them against commoners and buildings. There are blood calibers which specialize in it... Lernaean went and gathered a whole bunch of assholes like that.”

“What for?”

“To wipe out an entire town of commoners. Just like this.”

Nagi looked over the scenery. Nothing was moving aside from debris and smoke. He couldn’t believe this was a town filled with people just a few days ago. Was this scene Lernaean’s... and Saya’s desire?

“Let’s look for survivors. We need intel,” Keele said.

Nagi nodded back to him. Their group traversed the mountains of rubble. Once in a while, a horrible miasma would waft over them. Excrement, rotten food... and corpses. The bodies had been left in the open, without being properly buried. Maggots and flies swarmed all over them.

After some time, they finally found a survivor. It was a man trying to move a heap of corpses around. Nagi’s group drew closer, and the man turned to them with empty eyes.

“You’re... the Tainted.”

His lifelessness made it impossible for Nagi to feel angry at his use of the unforgivable slur.

“Yeah.”

“Scavenge all you want. You should be able to find something worth money lying around. Everyone’s dead anyway.”

“We’re not bandits.”

Nagi didn’t blame the man for his prejudice that the Crestfolk were bandits. He just looked so dead on the inside.

“Oh yeah... They did say something like that, I guess.” A small light flickered in his vacant eyes, and words began spilling from his mouth. “I was against it.

Opposing the Sovereign wouldn't do us any good. But they were all idiots. They were all good guys. That's why they listened to that kid, and that's why it ended like this."

"That kid? Kyou?"

"Yeah. That's him. He got the town involved... Then the knights came... Then everyone died."

"What exactly happened? What started all this?"

"What started it...?"

The man fell silent. He remained that way for a while, then began retelling his story.

"It all started when the guys in the slum stood up against the government officials for the Tainted. There were those among them who were friendly with the Tainted. It was a pretty common squabble. Ever since the revolution, it happened just about every day... But the official killed one of them. That wasn't good. Those guys from the slum are tight. It turned into a riot in no time. That's when that kid came out."

The man fell silent once more. Nagi's group stood there staring, waiting for his next words. The wind changed directions, gradually bringing over that horrible stench in the air. Nagi was desperate to hold back his urge to vomit.

"He was apparently... the former Sovereign. He was just a kid, but there was a strange intensity to him. He told us to join forces with the Tainted and fight. He said that after the Tainted, the nobles would kill the commoners next. Turns out he was right."

The man cast his gaze over the corpses all around him.

"What happened to the kid? Was he killed?" Keele asked.

The man shook his head. "He was captured. Everyone else died. My friends, my family, everyone."

With that, the man took the corpse he was carrying and violently tossed it atop a cart.

"Need help?" Nagi asked.

“Stop. I don’t want the Tainted to touch them. They were good friends of mine.”

“Why are you still alive?” Bandore asked coldly. It was clear he was angered by the man’s statement.

“I was hiding in my house, trembling in a corner... watching my wife and daughter get raped to death. I just hid and watched... Hid... Watched...”

“Coward.”

“Bandore, cut it out,” Tess said, but the man went on to provoke him further.

“That’s right, I’m a coward... Hey, you gonna kill me? You Tainted filth.”

Rage filled Bandore’s body. Nagi placed a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

“This man spoke the unforgivable slur,” Bandore protested.

“This is an abnormal situation. Let it slide.”

“Hey! Kill me! Just kill me!” the man screamed.

Hearing that, astonishment washed away all of Bandore’s anger.

“Let’s go,” Tess said.

Nagi nodded. There was a strange light in the man’s eyes. Nagi wanted to get away from him as soon as possible.

“Hey! Come on! I’m begging you! Please! Kill me! Just kill me!”

Nagi ran as if to shake off the man. A little ahead of him, Keele had his gaze fixed upward. He was acting on his own, as usual; apparently he’d found something.

It was the building which likely sat at the center of town. This area had also been reduced to rubble, with the exception of a single structure. It looked like some sort of sculpture; the base stood about twice the height of an average person.

Something was placed atop it. Keele stared at it silently. His tranquil profile was one Nagi had never seen before. His gaze was locked onto something. Something was piled atop the stand, like vegetables for sale.

Upon realizing exactly what they were, Nagi forgot to breathe. Vomit surged up his throat. They were human heads. Men, women, children, adults, all mixed together.

“Nagi, isn’t that Cobalt’s...?!” Tess said in a fluster.

Nagi noticed it right after her. There was a familiar face in the pile.

“Senak...”

Nagi averted his gaze.

“Meanin’ these are all the perps behind the riot,” Keele said calmly. His voice was so relaxed it hurt.

“Let’s get them down from there and bury them,” Nagi said.

He couldn’t possibly leave a former comrade out in the open like this.

“We don’t got the time for that. Leave it to someone else.”

“But...”

“Look at that, right below the pile of heads. Oh, you still can’t read?”

There was a large paper affixed to the stand. It was likely a proclamation from the capital. Nagi shook his head. Back when he lived in Strano Village, his life was too short for him to bother to learn how to read. After the revolution, he didn’t have the time to.

“It says the False Sovereign Kyou’s execution is taking place in the capital. It’s gonna happen in one week,” Keele said. Tension ran through the air. “We’ve gotta get ready. If we don’t head to the capital now, we won’t make it.”

“Get ready for what?”

“Lernaean’s sure to come out for the execution. We’ll kill him there,” Keele answered, then looked up at Senak’s face once more. “It’s the last opportunity this guy gave us.”

It took Jubilia the better part of her resolve to inform Saya of the news. The shock she would receive would be far too great, but she couldn’t keep it hidden.

“Lord Kyou has been captured. The date of his execution has been decided

on.”

Saya’s eyes shot open. She hung her head for a while, still sitting up in her bed. She was deep in thought. Jubilia couldn’t fathom what was going through her mind beneath that silver hair, but she had a terrible premonition.

“I’m going to go watch,” Saya said quietly, filled with resolve. Jubilia’s premonition was right on the mark.

“That’s a little...”

“Jubilia, don’t misunderstand me. I told Kyou I would protect him. I need to do everything I can.”

“But there isn’t anything you can do...” Saya didn’t respond. Her silence made Jubilia realize exactly what she was planning. “Lady Saya! You couldn’t possibly mean...!”

“Don’t say it. If you stop me now, I’ll lose my nerve.”

Jubilia had no choice but to fall silent.

“I’ve been thinking all this time,” Saya continued. “Who am I? Why was I born? What have I been living for? What am I meant to accomplish in life? I wanted a reason of my own. But just maybe... I’ve been thinking too much about simply staying alive.”

Saya’s red eyes were serene. Jubilia could feel her chest tighten at the beauty of their color. Saya continued speaking, as if pouring her soul into each and every word.

“I started to wonder. Would dying for something be the same as living for something? In that case, I want to stand against Lernaean. I’m the Sovereign, after all.”

Jubilia could almost hear the sound of the emptiness in Saya’s heart being filled in.

“I didn’t want to be anything like a queen. I just wanted to be free. I ended up like this by going with the flow. Back during the revolution, though, everyone fought because I’m the Sovereign. This fight would never have started if I wasn’t around. That’s why I can’t run away now. I’ve realized far too late...”

Aah, this girl really is... Jubilia thought to herself in admiration.

"I know there's basically nothing I can do. I can't become a proper ruler, but I can at least protect my little brother. I promised to."

"A promise, huh?"

"Nagi always protected me, just as he promised. Until I betrayed him, that is. That's why I want to keep my promise to Kyou."

"Lady Saya, your words are much like a knight's vow."

"Not that I have a good impression of knights, you know," Saya said bitterly.

Jubilia strained a smile. Saya's sensibilities were closer to that of a commoner or Crestfolk than that of a knight.

"Well, I suppose you don't," Jubilia said. "Originally, knights were held in high esteem for their vow to protect the weak. I read stories of times long past that were like that. I yearned to become that kind of knight. The knightly orders were far removed from such ideals in reality, though."

Jubilia had once believed Lernaean to be the man worthy of her loyalty. He looked so strong when he appeared before her, back when she was scorned as a lower-ranking noble. Perhaps Lernaean was actually in the right, but his righteousness differed from Jubilia's. She had someone else worth devoting her loyalty now.

"Lady Saya. In my eyes, you are a splendid Sovereign."

"What's this all of a sudden?"

"I meant to do this during the revolution itself, but you ended up collapsing, and I lost my opportunity to do so. Lady Saya, please accept my sword. Please make me your knight."

Saya didn't understand the meaning behind such an action, but accepted regardless.

"Thank you, Jubilia. Umm, what should I do?" Saya asked with a troubled expression, bringing a sudden smile to Jubilia's face. "Geez... Don't laugh at me."

“Forgive me. Please hold up my sword. It’s heavy, so use both hands.”

“Like this?”

“Yes. Now command me, ‘Offer up thine blade to me until the very last of thine days.’ After that, please hand me my sword.”

Saya nodded. Jubilia poured every ounce of her being into listening, as if to carve the reverberations of Saya’s words into her very soul.

“Jubilia. Offer up thine blade to me until the very last of thine days.”

Jubilia’s blood ran hot just from hearing her. Her soul told her that Saya was in fact the True Sovereign. She accepted the awkwardly held out blade and held it up vertically.

“I, Jubilia Erste lu Listella, offer you my sword until the very last of my days.”

Jubilia felt fully satisfied from her vow. She now knew why she was born. It was mysterious. Why did it take so long for her to get here?

“Until the last of your days... Sorry, I’m sure I’m going to die sooner than you are, Jubilia,” Saya casually added. This pained Jubilia’s heart.

“That won’t do, Lady Saya. You must definitely live longer than I do.”

“No way. If I do, that means I have to watch you die.”

“That’s what it means to be liege and knight.”

Jubilia’s heart was filled with determination.

I was born to protect this girl.

33

There was a strange enthusiasm hanging in the air over the palace gates, where the execution was being held. It was as if time had turned back to the days when the flagstones ran slick with the daily sacrifice of counterrevolutionaries. All for the False Sovereign Kyou.

If only he hadn’t incited the commoners and Crestfolk, the promised days of stability and wealth that was supposed to come after the revolution would

already be upon the people. They would have eternal life granted by Amrita. Such pipe dreams soared among the populace.

Nagi looked down at the masses, hidden atop a roof. He had his bow in hand, with a Halahala coated arrow at the ready. It was his duty to kill Lernaean. The Crestfolk warriors hid among the crowd. Nagi thought back to the conversation they had just beforehand.

“This really is our last chance,” Keele said, handing Nagi his portion of Halahala.

“We don’t off Lernaean here, and the Crestfolk are done for. Let me remind you, that guy’s been achin’ to wipe us out for at least two hundred years.”

The noble’s fixation verged on abnormal.

“It’s not just the Crestfolk,” Nagi said. “You saw Leshva. Lernaean plans on wiping out the commoners too.”

Keele nodded.

“Nagi, you shouldn’t go,” Tess implored him, right to the very end. “You haven’t been sterilized. You can still have children. If someone’s going to die here, then let it be me.”

“If Lernaean dies here, then the Crestfolk still to be born will be able to live proper lives. That’s far more important. Besides...”

Nagi stopped there, unable to say his next words. He was sick of himself for being so irresolute. Seeing him like that, Tess reluctantly agreed.

“Fine... Make sure you hit him.”

“I’ll cut him down before that, so don’t you worry,” Keele cut in.

Everyone laughed for some reason. It was as if the group was off to pick berries in the mountains.

Nagi smiled as he remembered this, finding the situation so strange. His mood was in such stark contrast to the excited mob beneath his gaze.

This could work. My arrows tend to hit at times like these.

“We shall now begin the False Sovereign’s execution,” a nobleman—probably

a congressman—declared.

Members of Congress came out one after the other. Nagi quietly held out his bow and waited for his prey.

“Step aside.”

Saya and Jubilia were headed to Kyou’s execution to put a stop to it when they were blocked off in a palace corridor.

“We can’t do that,” Dimitri said, a dozen knights standing by him. “Lady Saya, please return to your room.”

“I have the responsibility to see my little brother’s execution through to the end.”

“You’re going to try to stop it somehow, aren’t you? It’s useless. It’ll be bad for your heart. All you need to do is quietly sleep in your room.”

“This is the Sovereign’s command.”

“Seeing that you have lost your ability to make sound judgments, Lady Saya, His Excellency Lord Lernaean now acts with all your authority. Your command means nothing.”

“Did Lernaean put you up to this?”

“No. This is my decision as a doctor and a researcher. I won’t report this to him. I’m sure it won’t be a problem, anyway.” Dimitri paused to clear out his throat. “In any case, you’re a unique specimen. I can’t do any practical research on Amrita without you. It would be troublesome if you were to get hurt.”

“A specimen, you say?” Jubilia said, clear anger in her voice. “Just that one word is enough of a reason for me to cut you down. Lady Saya, what shall we do?”

“Hurry up. The execution could start at any time.”

“Very well. We shall force our way through.”

“Hah! Force your way through?” Dimitri said scornfully. “I brought the royal guard here. No matter how skilled you are, you’re nothing but a lower-ranking

noble. Faced with so many opponents, you can't—"

Jubilia didn't wait for him to finish. She rushed in full force and made her declaration of intent.

"Excitation: Blood Blade."

She grabbed the slender sword of blood in her hand and severed the dominant arms of two of the knights in a flash.

"I won't take your life, seeing as this was a surprise attack. Everything from here on out is a different matter, however. Step aside if you aren't prepared to die."

"Kill this woman!" Dimitri yelled. "You can use your blood calibers! Don't even scratch Lady Saya!"

The enraged royal guards manifested their blood calibers at once.

"I don't care if you're royal guards. I won't lose to a bunch of ruffians who can't keep straight who they're meant to protect."

Jubilia's heart was aflame, yet terrifyingly cold. Saya accepted her fealty. That passion gave strength to her entire body. She never felt so light before. At the same time, Jubilia kept an icy calm, searching for the path through that Saya needed.

Even as she cut down knights one after the other, she realized she was at a disadvantage. The palace corridors were wide compared to any other building, but it wasn't suitable for swinging around a long weapon. This helped compensate for the numerical disadvantage she found herself at, but still had limits.

The royal guard were high-ranking nobles to begin with. She had no intentions of losing in swordsmanship, but their skill with the blood caliber and their pure physical strength were supposed to far outstrip Jubilia's. It was one thing while they were agitated as they were now, but the longer the fight went on, the greater her disadvantage. Jubilia decided to use her ace in the hole. She roughly twirled off the cap from the small bottle she had hidden in her hand and gulped down its contents.

“Amrita... Excitation Overdrive?!” Dimitri screamed in fright.

The last time she used this, she was put out of commission for days. Regardless, her lady had told her to hurry up, so Jubilia didn't hesitate. So long as she had a means to annihilate her enemies as quickly as possible, she had no choice but to use it.

The blood caliber in Jubilia's hand transformed into an enormous sword. At the same time, her body was enhanced to that of an upper-ranking noble. Jubilia turned into a gale. Each time she swung her blade, a knight's arm was torn away and flew into the air. The royal guards were defeated before they could lift a finger.

“Dimitri, you'll do well to step aside,” Jubilia declared.

Dimitri's reaction was far beyond her imagination. “Hahaha! Wonderful! Amrita truly is wonderful!” Despite the defeat of all but a single knight he brought as a guard, Dimitri laughed in joy. “That's exactly why I can't lose the specimen. Oh well. You, hold out your arm.”

“Professor, that's a little...” his escort said, faltering for some reason.

“You do know that if you defy me, you'll be heading to the gallows next, right? You're just going to get killed by this woman, anyway. It's okay, our results show the side effects are small if it's only for a short time.”

His escort held out his arm in resignation. Dimitri smiled as he pulled out a container from his pocket. Jubilia stood on guard as he pulled out a needle which resembled those used for blood offerings. She thought it was poison, but was once more completely baffled by his unpredictable actions. He stabbed the needle into his escort's arm.

“If a recipient of Amrita orally ingests more Amrita, they temporarily gain strength from Excitation Overdrive. What do you think happens when Amrita is injected directly into the veins?” Dimitri pushed down on the plunger. “If you don't properly regulate the dosage, it's too strong for the body, tearing it apart and killing the subject. I went through quite a few knights finding the appropriate dosage, but my research bore fruit. Behold: this is the true value of Excitation Overdrive.”

The blood caliber in the guard's hand grew tremendously. It was so big it couldn't really be called a sword anymore. The guard readied the massive weapon and roared. His eyes shone with a piercing glare. It looked like he had transformed into an inhuman beast.

"Kill this woman."

The palace's corridor was far too narrow for the enormous blood caliber. Swinging it would send it crashing into pillars, but the guard didn't seem to care. He simply swept the blade. The pillars fell apart as if they weren't even there. Jubilia barely managed to escape the oncoming blow.

"You kill her and I'll give you the antidote. You better be quick, or you'll end up a cripple."

The guard reacted to Dimitri's provocation and charged Jubilia. The blade of his blood caliber collided with the ceiling and floor with little resistance. His strength had surpassed the limits of a noble and was well into the territory of fictional monsters. Any blow would prove fatal.

"Jubilia, this way!"

Jubilia jumped on reflex at Saya's command, and Dimitri stopped his escort in a fluster.

"Stop! Don't injure the specimen."

The guard's attack finally halted. Jubilia let out her breath while remaining vigilant.

"He can't attack me, so it's safe here," Saya said.

"But we won't be able to reach the execution site like this. I'll strike him down."

"Can you?"

Jubilia turned to Saya and gave her a smile. She didn't mean to, but she did anyway, despite the thick stench of blood in the air.

"Please command me to do so. If you do, I shall surely accomplish your will."

Saya looked straight at Jubilia. She could see her own reflection in Saya's eyes.

“Remove all obstructions before me, so that I may move on.”

“As you will.”

Jubilia leaped forth. This monstrous guard was strong. Far stronger than she was. Far stronger than Ivara, even. However, the pain and burden of Excitation Overdrive was beyond normal. It was likely proportional to the tremendous strength it granted.

So, what of Jubilia? She didn't feel any pain or burden on her body right now. Her lady had ordered her to remove all enemies before her. The happiness she felt far exceeded anything else. A blood caliber was a noble's pride, a manifestation of their spirit.

As I am now, I'm far stronger than any blood caliber. Such conviction overflowed within her. Jubilia stepped in, unburdened by doubt. The strength of her step shattered the palace floor. Using that momentum, she swung her sword straight down. The guard's enormous weapon moved to intercept. It was far larger than her blade. Normally, Jubilia's sword would shatter in this clash.

A stiff, dull sound rang in the air. It was the sound of a blood caliber breaking, signaling the end of the fight. Jubilia's sword had sent cracks down the entire length of the enormous blade.

“Didn't I tell you? I won't lose to a bunch of ruffians who mistake who they're meant to protect.”

Jubilia swung her sword once more. It drew a beautiful arc in the air, cutting through the cracked blade completely and slicing apart the guard's body.

“Impossible...” Dimitri muttered in a daze. “Even if you were both using Excitation Overdrive, he was a high-ranking knight directly injected with Amrita. There's no way he should've lost. Is the specimen the unknown factor?”

“It's clear to me now,” Jubilia said, shaking her head. “You have no intention of treating Lady Saya. Seeing how you created such a monster, it would be disastrous to leave you at large.”

Jubilia brandished her blood caliber. Dimitri's head tumbled to the floor with a thud. Right as she undid her Excitation, Jubilia sank to the floor. Now that her sense of exaltation from the battle was gone, the side effects of Excitation

Overdrive were overwhelming her.

“Jubilia!”

“I’m fine. More importantly, we must hurry. There’s no time.”

Jubilia stood up and held out her hand to Saya. Saya’s slender fingers grasped her hand and helped pull her up.

Nagi watched the line of politicians come out, ending with Crow and Lernaean to the rear. He quietly drew an arrow from his quiver. Not yet. He wasn’t going to make a move until Lernaean showed a definitive opening. That was the plan.

“After fleeing, the False Sovereign Kyou incited Tainted and commoners alike to cause a revolt. He was already to be executed, but continued to pile on his sins. The weight of his crimes is beyond description. Do you have any objections?” Crow asked Kyou.

“They’re not Tainted. They’re Crestfolk,” Kyou answered, tied up atop the gallows.

“This isn’t the time for idiotic wordplay,” Lernaean cut in.

“Idiotic? Lernaean!” Kyou glared at Lernaean, who returned his gaze arrogantly. “Where is my sister?”

“I’m sure she’s watching from afar. There’s no way she’ll miss this. You’re about to be killed, after all.”

“What are you scheming? You should already have everything you want. You’ve taken over the palace after imposing my sister.”

“What slander. I have proper authority here, unlike you.”

Watching Lernaean smile, Kyou suddenly realized something.

“It can’t be...”

Their conversation was cut short. A man jumped out from the masses before they could. It was Keele. A step behind him, Bandore, Tess, and the other Crestfolk warriors leaped out. Nagi nocked his arrow, but in the next instant...

“All hands! Excitation!”

At Crow's command, half of the politicians manifested their blood calibers. There were well over twenty of them. Knights had mixed in among the group.

"We knew you'd come!" Crow shouted. "Keep one of them alive! Nagi Strano is here! Exterminate the Tainted who dare defy the Sovereign!"

Keele dashed right for Lernaean, but was blocked by several knights.

"This isn't the time for me to be playing with you," Lernaean told him. "I'm busy waiting."

"Quit spoutin' bullshit!"

Keele swung his Halahala-coated sword, but the royal guards protecting Lernaean were strong.

"Well ain't this some nice prey!"

Even now, Keele laughed like a wild man.

"Of course," Lernaean said in astonishment. "They're the elites of the royal guard. You're the strange one for rivaling them despite being Crestfolk."

"Thanks for the praise!"

"But what of everyone else?"

Just as Lernaean said, the Crestfolk as a whole were having a hard time. They had a slight advantage in numbers, but their opponents were blood caliber-wielding nobles. Even the Crestfolk who were accustomed to fighting were gradually being driven back. Only Bandore was holding his ground. His large axe was a threat even to the knights.

"Crow! You traitor!" Bandore yelled as he chased Crow.

"You're the ones who betrayed the Sovereign!"

Crow fired his crossbow. Bandore dodged the shot in a panic as Tess closed in on Crow.

"How unexpected. I thought you'd run away immediately," she said.

"I have my own circumstances!"

"So, Lernaean's going to kill you if you don't put on a good show?"

Crow fired his crossbow repeatedly as if to answer her. She dodged his bolts one after the other. Once he was out of ammunition, Crow tossed his weapon aside.

“Excitation!”

He now gripped a red spear in his hands.

“I see. So, you’re a noble now.”

“That’s right! And this isn’t all!”

Crow lunged at Tess. He’d largely avoided taking part in any fighting during the revolution; somehow, between then and this moment, he’d learned some spearmanship. His technique was shoddy. Normally, it wouldn’t be difficult for Tess to handle this much, but the strength and speed of his strikes were abnormal. She was slowly losing her ground.

“It’s thanks to Dr. Dimitri! I’ve obtained a way of gaining even more strength than nobles!”

“How low you’ve fallen, Crow!” Bandore shouted as he jumped in front of Tess.

“Fallen? Quite the contrary, I’ve reached an ever higher stage of life.”

“Is that what you wanted? I never liked you.”

“What a coincidence: the feeling is mutual.”

Bandore swung his axe wildly and closed in on Crow.

“An idiot like you is truly excruciating to handle,” Crow said as he backed off.

Bandore couldn’t reach him. He readied his axe once more, but seeing Crow ready his spear from an unreachable distance, Tess screamed.

“Dodge it! Bandore!”

Crow’s spear pierced through Bandore before he could react to her voice. His spear had extended in length.

“This is a blood caliber. It’s no simple spear. Do you understand now? You can’t win against nobles,” Crow declared coldly as he watched Bandore groan.

Crow pulled the spear out with a twist of the handle. He scowled at the intestines twined around the tip, then swung them off.

“Oops. I ended up killing him. I was ordered to toy around with you lot as long as possible.”

“You bastard!”

Tess charged in, but the difference in range between her spear and Crow’s blood caliber was far too large. Tess had lost her composure and let herself get pushed into a corner.

“I’ll be very careful not to kill you. I need you to lure out Nagi Strano.”

Tess couldn’t dodge his thrust; the spear’s tip found its mark in her right arm. The weapon easily tore through bone, leaving her hand dangling from a single piece of skin. Her scream echoed through the battlefield.

Saya and Jubilia rushed to a room in the palace where they could look down over the front gate. Jubilia was unsteady from using Excitation Overdrive, while Saya was in poor health. This led to it taking more time than they imagined.

There was supposed to be no small number of government officials and ladies of the court gathered there to watch the False Sovereign’s execution. However, as they got closer to their destination, they crossed paths with ladies running the other direction.

“What happened?” Jubilia asked one of them.

“It’s a Tainted rebellion!” one of them yelled, not stopping her flight.

“The Crestfolk?”

“It wouldn’t be strange for Nagi and the others to come to rescue Kyou. No, they’re definitely here. So long as they knew when and where the execution was taking place.”

Hearing this, Jubilia had a sudden revelation. “Oh no, this is a trap! Lord Lernaean plans on dealing with the leadership behind the Crestfolk, Nagi and Keele, right here and now!”

Realization dawned on Saya as she got her unsteady feet moving.

“Let’s hurry!”

Nagi looked down over the chaos. Bandore had died. Tess had lost an arm. Nagi reflexively held up his bow when he heard Tess scream. Crow had his spear held ready and was closing in on her. Nagi’s thoughts ran wild. He decided beforehand that he absolutely would not loose a single arrow until Lernaean showed an opening. Once he did, his position on the roof would be exposed.

All of the Crestfolk knew this was their very last chance. That was why they came out here so recklessly. They did so to grasp the future, even if they had to sacrifice each other. No matter what happened, Nagi had to save his arrow for Lernaean.

But...

“Huh?”

Crow looked down at the arrow sticking out of his chest. He couldn’t even say anything before dying in a daze. The arrow had pierced him square in the heart. At the corner of Nagi’s vision, he saw a curtain flutter from one of the palace windows. Was someone watching from there? Now wasn’t the time to be worrying about that, though.

Nagi quickly nocked another arrow and took aim at Lernaean. He knew full well he was being naïve for thinking Lernaean wouldn’t notice. And sure enough...

“Excitation.”

Nagi felt like Lernaean’s quiet voice reached his ears. Just by moving his finger ever so slightly, Lernaean shattered the arrow the moment before it hit him.

“Nagi Strano is here. On top of the building. After him!”

The knights all turned to Nagi in unison at Lernaean’s command.

Crap. Now that they know I’m here, I’m not going to hit anything, no matter how many arrows I use. At most, I can block them off.

He didn’t have the time for that, however. The knights flooded toward Nagi’s building. The exits were all sealed before he could make his escape. Nothing

could be done now. That was when Nagi realized this was exactly the trap Lernaean had prepared for them. This was all for the sake of catching Nagi and Keele.

He was frustrated. How much were things going exactly as Lernaean planned? In just a little more time, Nagi was sure to be mercilessly cut down by the knights. The Crestfolk fighting below would also die. Everything Nagi tried to protect was slipping through his fingers. Then, he would die.

As he steeled himself for death, however, something terribly beautiful entered his field of vision. They were small red lights. Nagi covered his eyes on reflex, recognizing them instantly. The lights were scales scattered from the wings of blood-colored butterflies. Those in the plaza began collapsing one after the other. And behind that curtain in the palace...

“Saya, you... can’t...”

Nagi wasn’t able to say anymore. Upon being touched by a butterfly, his consciousness flew away.

“Is this... Saya?” Tess muttered.

Saya wasn’t supposed to be allowed to use her royal caliber. That was why Nagi had to suffer so much. But right now, in front of her eyes, her royal caliber filled the plaza. Knights, gentry, civilians—they crumpled to the ground like discarded dolls, one after another. Mesmerized by the swarm of butterflies, Tess’ grip on her open wound slackened, and arterial spray gushed from her stump. A detachment of butterflies halted in midair, momentarily drawn by the blood, then lost interest and rejoined the murmuration. Just as it had during the siege of the palace, Saya’s caliber was as effective as a passing breeze on Crestfolk.

“Wait, damn you!”

Tess spun Keele’s way at the sound of his outcry as he chased Lernaean into the palace. Tess shivered at the sight. Lernaean had been seized by a fit of manic laughter. For a moment she thought the butterflies had ignored him, until she saw a small flock tailing him smash to pieces, just like Nagi’s arrow.

Even Keele couldn't catch up to Lernaean, so long as he used the full extent of his inhuman strength. Lernaean quickly rounded a corner and vanished into the palace. The crimson butterflies burned away in a drawn-out flash of phosphorescence. Having lost his prey, Keele sized up his surroundings and ran to Tess.

"He got you good, huh? Lemme see that. Clench your teeth."

With that, Keele used the knife at his waist to cut off a piece of cloth from his sleeve and tied off her wound. The shooting agony dyed her vision a strange color. Tess clenched her teeth so hard she thought she would break her own jaw trying to hold in her scream.

"Your arm's hangin' by a thread. It's just gonna get in the way danglin' around like that. Ready?"

Keele cut loose Tess' arm without waiting for an answer. Intense pain once more ran through her body. It was mystifying that she didn't lose consciousness.

"You really got done in good," he said.

"It was Crow. He got Bandore, too."

"*That* Crow?" Keele asked, shooting the corpse a furtive glance.

Tess nodded. "Nagi killed him."

"I see."

Keele gave Crow's body a second look; this time his attention was fixed in place. Tess couldn't see what kind of emotion laid behind his eyes.

"Sorry. Nagi was protecting me..."

"Who cares? Tess, take Kyou and hide somewhere. When you get around to it, Nagi should be collapsed up on that roof; give him a nice wake-up smack. He can't be draggin' ass now. The royal caliber does a number on commoners, but not nearly as much of one as nobles get. He'll perk up right away."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm gonna kill that guy. Everyone in the palace should be passed out. Now's

the time to get 'im. I can't let this chance go."

"I'll go—"

"You'll just get in the way with your arm like that."

Tess had no choice but to keep her silence.

"See ya," Keele told her before he took off again.

He didn't even give her a parting glance. In that regard, he hadn't changed since the day he left Garuga.

The surviving Crestfolk spotted Tess and ran over. By some miracle, better than half of the crew were still standing, though it was dubious how much longer that would last. Some were less intact than Tess. She couldn't decide whether the fact that they'd held their own against the royal guard was a good sign or not. She recalled what Crow had said: they had been kept alive to lure Nagi out. The nobles were toying with them.

Tess picked out the handful of allies who were relatively lightly wounded to get Nagi and Kyou. She asked another to kindle a fire and took a seat. She felt dizzy from losing so much blood. Her body was cold. She sat there, weathering the waves of pain as someone brought Kyou's unconscious body over. A short while later, Nagi arrived.

"Tess, you okay?"

"I'm not dead, at least."

"Great."

"Like hell. Why did you save me? That wasn't your job."

Nagi thought it over a bit. "Because I wanted you to live."

"Why? I can't even leave behind my blood for the future."

"Blood isn't all there is to leave behind for the future. The Crestfolk are a family with bonds deeper than blood, right? Didn't you tell me we were family?"

Nagi's words opened the floodgates within Tess' heart. She wasn't able to attach a name to her feelings. The world took on a clarity and luster that

enthralled her and tied knots in her throat. Tears poured from her eyes.

“Are you okay? Does it hurt?” Nagi asked.

“I’m missing an arm, you idiot. Of course it hurts.”

“Right. Sorry.”

He couldn’t have realized the real reason for her tears.

“What happened? That was the royal caliber, right?” Nagi asked.

Tess felt a spike of anger. “I think so. The butterflies vanished a short while ago.”

“Even though Saya’s body won’t hold out if she uses it...”

Even now, Saya was still the only thing on Nagi’s mind. Tess seethed.

How did I fall for a guy like this? she thought to herself.

“But she still used it. To protect her brother. To protect us,” Tess said, pausing to look Nagi in the eyes. “To protect you.”

Nagi looked up at the palace. “I... I have to go.”

That’s what I thought you’d say.

“Keele’s already headed that way; he’s after Lernaean’s hide,” Tess said.

She looked around; None of the survivors looked like they were in any shape to fight.

“Tess. Take care of Garuga Village for me.”

“I can’t go with you?” she asked, already knowing the answer.

“No.”

“Because I’ll get in the way?”

“No. Didn’t I tell you already? I want you to live, Tess. Take everyone with you. I’ll be fine on my own.”

He turned to run off, but Tess stopped him.

“Nagi, wait. Take this with you.”

She took off the necklace he’d given her.

“Saya saved us. She isn’t our enemy, right?” she said. Nagi’s eyes widened and trembled. “So I’ll give this back to you.”

He nodded and accepted the necklace. It was the first time in a while that Tess saw the face of the man she fell for; the stupid man who single-mindedly chased after Saya.

“Go. We’ll wait for you two to get back. We’ll protect the village until you do, however long it takes. So come back quick.”

Nagi gave her a nod, hung the necklace around his neck, and ran off after the girl he loved. Tess watched his back until he vanished into the palace, burning the image into her memory. She prayed nothing would mend that scar for the rest of time.

“Lady Saya! Lady Saya!”

Saya finally came around, at Jubilia’s unrelenting urging.

“Jubilia...?” she muttered, opening her heavy eyelids. “What... happened?”

Saying that was all it took to send her into a coughing fit. Her lungs felt like they were covered in rust.

“You used your royal caliber,” Jubilia told her, trying to conceal the note of regret that threatened to creep into her voice.

When they reached the room overlooking the execution site, Jubilia and Saya were greeted with the sight of the Crestfolk driven against the wall. The moment they saw an arrow loosed at Lernaean, they both recognized who was responsible in an instant. Saya didn’t hesitate to use the royal caliber if it meant saving him.

“Everyone in the plaza and the palace grounds have lost consciousness. For some reason, I’m the only one you didn’t catch...”

Saya nodded back to her. She was still holding Jubilia’s hand when she unleashed the royal caliber. Like any noble, a part of her that existed beneath the strata of conscious thought and language understood its workings.

Jubilia stood up and looked down into the plaza. The people on the gallows

had vanished in the chaos.

“The Crestfolk are untouched as well. It seems they’ve taken Lord Kyou and escaped. Also...”

Jubilia cut herself off. Saya tried to get up and look for herself, but staggered and fell back to the floor. Jubilia bore her up in a fluster. Something fell from Saya’s head as she groaned in pain. The realization of what it was shocked Jubilia into silence.

“What’s wrong?” Saya asked.

“U-Um... Y-Your hair...”

Saya tried touching her own head.

“Huh?”

Her hair wrapped around her fingers and came out completely. That wasn’t all. What once had a silver luster was now a dirty white.

“What’s happening?” Jubilia muttered, watching the complexion vanish from Saya’s skin.

Jubilia knew what to call it, but it wasn’t supposed to happen to the Sovereign. Aging. Saya was rapidly aging. It was impossible. Jubilia stood dumbfounded as an entirely different voice answered her question.

“Lady Saya, you have been abandoned by the Sovereign’s Blood.”

“Lernaean...!”

Jubilia turned around at Saya’s voice. And there he was. Lernaean. Somehow, he had escaped the effects of the royal caliber. He looked different; his presence was even more overwhelming than usual. Jubilia’s body nearly fell to one knee before him, and she found she couldn’t force herself out of the pose. It was as if...

“Can you feel it?” he asked with a haughty smile. The air about him was the same as when Saya used her royal caliber.

It can’t be...

“Having used up all of her strength, Lady Saya has been abandoned by the

Sovereign's Blood. The power of the Sovereign has been inherited by the next worthy successor. You can feel it, can't you? I am your new Sovereign."

Jubilia's brain told her it was impossible, but her mind was completely betrayed by her instincts. Her noble blood screamed at her that this man was the Sovereign.

"You look like you don't understand. It's a simple matter. The True Sovereign Saya had a twin brother, but the False Sovereign Kyou wasn't the real thing. So, one might ask, *where was the real brother all this time?*"

Lernaean gazed off into the distance.

"Being granted a long life without purpose only brings suffering. Only when one acquires hope does their life become their own. I'm sure you don't remember, but we were taught these words when we were young."

"Lernaean..." Saya said in a trembling voice. "You're... my little brother?"

"That's right, sister. My little secret."

"Why have you kept silent all this time?"

"If it came out that I was royalty, Gratos would have surely killed me. That man would do anything to protect the transient order he created using the False Sovereign Kyou. All this, even though he knew this isn't how the world was meant to be. What a foolish man."

Jubilia's mind raced. Everything was falling into place. Everything Lernaean had done, the audacity and resolve he'd shown trying to push his plan for the world forward...

"That means... Everything... Absolutely everything up until now..." she muttered.

"Yes," Lernaean picked up where she left off. "all so I could inherit the Sovereign's Blood, so that I can return this world to its original state, as the Intelligence intended for us. Under my rule, there will be no commoners clinging feebly to life, no nobles living in constant flight from their own thirst; only a race of true immortals."

He looked down at his right hand. It was lined with a red haze.

“How dreadful. Even now it feels like it will flood out. Sister, this is the first time I’ve felt respect for you. You’ve kept such a thing suppressed all these centuries?” Lernaean said, looking down at Saya. “But having lost your power, you’ve begun to age... How unsightly.”

His eyes were filled with kindness and pity.

“The least I can do is send you off while you’re still beautiful.”

A crest took shape on the back of Lernaean’s hand—the exact same as Saya’s. The moment she caught on to his imminent Excitation, Jubilia leapt up purely on instinct. In the next instant, her limbs were torn to shreds. Though she had no idea what happened, she still managed to shield Saya.

“Lady Saya! Please run away!”

“But Jubilia!”

“I forgot—I saw Nagi enter the palace. Run away with him. You’re not a Sovereign anymore. You’re free now.”

“Jubilia,” Lernaean interrupted. “I’ll forgive you if you serve me once more. Talented nobles like you are worthy of eternal life.”

Jubilia stood up. She groaned at the strain of carrying her weight on her shredded legs. For reasons she couldn’t understand, she found herself smiling.

“I decline,” she told him bluntly.

“Excitation.”

A shock ran through Jubilia’s left arm. After a short pause, a jolt of agony assaulted her body. Her arm was gone from the elbow down. Blood fountained from the stump.

My arm. I sank so many years of training into that...

“I’ll ask you once more. Serve me. If you act quickly, you might keep that arm.”

“I’m telling you... I decline... I swore to serve Lady Saya. *She* is my true liege.”

“Even if I let you go now, Saya will wither to nothing without her power.”

“Then I have all the more reason to turn you down. I cannot allow my liege to

die before me.”

Saya remained unmoving.

“Lady Saya,” Jubilia said, her back still turned to her. “I’m a knight. If I were to betray you here, I would no longer be myself.”

She kept her gaze fixed on her enemy. Regardless, Jubilia knew the face her beloved Sovereign was making.

“Please. Run away. Live your own life, even if it’s short. I’ll be doing the same.”

Saya’s hand touched Jubilia’s back. Jubilia etched that feeling into her mind.

“Jubilia... thank you for everything.”

“Likewise. I’m truly happy I found a ruler worth serving.”

Jubilia focused on the sensation of Saya’s touch as she used her remaining hand to fish out her last bottle of Amrita.

“Excitation Overdrive.”

She was told that repeated use in a short period of time would have serious side effects. She didn’t care anymore. She didn’t need to think about what came after this. Blood poured from Jubilia’s entire body, pooling on the floor. A portion of it took on the shape of a slender sword. Jubilia’s fingers wrapped into a firm but gentle hold on its grip. She had never felt more like a knight.

“Are you prepared?” Lernaean asked, watching her steel herself.

“Thank you for waiting.”

“There is no need for thanks. There’s something I’d like to test here. Come at me.”

Jubilia readied her sword, despite her suspicions. If Lernaean was serious, there’d be nothing she could do. His last attack was totally inscrutable to her, and as such impossible to dodge. This brief moment of his condescension was the only opening she was going to get. If she could get just one strike in, she’d give Saya a fighting chance to escape.

Jubilia steadied her breathing. In this moment, she forgot everything about

the burning pain in her body and her missing arm. Her greatest strength was her thrust; her sword embodied that strength.

She let out a wordless war cry and stepped in. In that single step, she thrust forth her blood caliber. Borrowing the power of Amrita, Jubilia unleashed the greatest thrust of her entire life, forged through hundreds of millions of repetitions. Lernaean casually held out his hand and accepted her blade. Jubilia didn't flinch, pushing forward to skewer his heart. Her sword came to a halt the moment it pierced his palm. Jubilia realized that Lernaean's regenerating flesh must have killed her momentum.

"Just as I thought!" Lernaean yelled, his eyes shining with a fiery blaze. "So the Sovereign really can't be wounded by a blood caliber! Just as a noble can't be injured by a commoner's blade! Even Excitation Overdrive is meaningless before this power!"

Lernaean laughed, the sword still lodged in his right hand. His body tensed, and his regenerating flesh shattered Jubilia's sword. She had nothing left but a stub of a blade gripped in her hand.

"Allow me to thank you. Farewell, Jubilia."

Jubilia sensed the tremendous aura of the royal caliber overflowing from Lernaean. His attack missed by a large margin, however. Jubilia shrieked. Her left leg was missing entirely. She collapsed, but her hand kept a firm grip on her broken sword.

"I missed," Lernaean muttered, then attacked once more.

This time, it took Jubilia's right leg. Everything from her knee down was reduced to a bloody mist. He was trifling with her. Tears poured from her eyes. She wanted to scream with every breath. Regardless, her one remaining hand kept its grip on her sword. She was too far gone to explain why.

"I wonder if this will suffice?"

Lernaean gripped Jubilia by the collar and lifted her mangled body into the air like a sack. A small droplet of blood fell from his palm and dripped onto her brow. In that instant, her frozen thoughts began to thaw.

Still aloft in his grip, she swung her broken sword. Lernaean didn't even try to

dodge her feeble blow. At the very least, she wanted to make as large a gash as possible.

Lernaeon paid her parting shot no mind. “How futile...” he said. “Excitation.”

The wounded flesh beneath his torn clothes regenerated instantly, yet still left a scar. Seeing that, Jubilia felt a pang of satisfaction.

Lady Saya, please...

She was torn to shreds by Lernaeon’s royal caliber. By the time he tossed aside her head like garbage, there was nothing left in her that could feel a thing.

Saya desperately stumbled down the palace corridors toward the exit. Running was no longer an option; it took everything she had just to move. It was like her body didn’t belong to her. Her limbs felt like they were cast from lead. Her joints creaked with every movement.

The time she had once traveled Agarthia on foot seemed so long ago. As she approached a staircase, her legs gave out beneath her, depositing her limp form on the polished tiles. This pitiful state of hers was crushing her heart.

Still, Jubilia put her life on the line so I could get away. I can’t possibly give up now.

She placed her hand on a windowsill and mustered the strength to pull herself up. She caught her own reflection in the glass. She had dull white hair, wrinkled skin, and gaunt cheeks. She didn’t recognize her own image. This, she understood, was exactly the same as that chief she saw in Strano Village, and Zamin in Garuga Village. Time was taking hold of her.

“No way...”

She recalled Lernaeon’s words. The Sovereign’s Blood had abandoned her. If the Sovereign’s Blood was what granted her eternal life, then it was plain to see what would happen in its absence. The debt of centuries of life was being repaid all at once. She had minutes left, at best.

I have to hurry.

I have to see Nagi before I die.

That's all I want.

But one step further down the staircase, Saya came to a realization.

I'm not the girl Nagi knows anymore. I'm a shriveled up, dirty, unfamiliar thing. Will he even recognize me?

There was no way he could. The strength left Saya's legs as she lost her footing once more. She fell from just a little higher this time, but the pain convinced her she'd shattered her bones. Depending on how she landed, if she tumbled down the stairs now, she was liable to die. She couldn't allow herself to go out in such a pathetic manner, but as she stretched out to reach the handrail, her arm refused to move the way she wanted and grasped at empty air instead.

Lernaeon stood still, gazing down at the ruins of his subordinate. It was a depressing sight. Despite being a lower-ranked noble, she had put her blood, sweat, and tears into her pursuit of chivalry. Such people were exactly what the new world needed. But Jubilia had betrayed him. She didn't even try to understand his ideals. He had no choice but to kill her. It was such a waste.

He could catch up to Saya whenever he wanted to, but Lernaeon refrained. The majority of the power of the Sovereign's Blood had already transferred to him, but the process would only end when Saya died. By his estimate, she had about fifteen minutes. He had no need to go out of his way to chase her.

He had another reason—one he'd be less inclined to admit. The royal caliber's burden on his body couldn't be compared to a blood caliber's. He felt like a moment of laxity would be enough to make him lose consciousness. Lernaeon had centuries of training in the mastery of his blood caliber; he knew how to rein in the royal caliber to the bare minimum of its output. It was perfectly natural for Saya to collapse, deploying it at full power every time. He would be the next to be abandoned by the Sovereign's Blood if he overused it.

Still, Lernaeon believed he could remake the world with this power. For that purpose, he had made preparations for this very moment over the centuries. Born as Saya's twin brother, Lernaeon was abducted during the chaos at the time of Agarth's creation and declared missing. The Granapalt family raised

him in secrecy. Eventually, he became their tool to usurp the Sovereign's throne.

Lernaeon had no intentions of being his family's tool. When he became an adult, he spent two centuries subverting House Granapalt. He murdered everyone in the line of succession to Lord Granapalt, manipulated the current lord to appoint him as his adopted child, then assassinated him a hundred years later. It went off without a hitch. By the time he rose to a position in Congress, no one doubted his identity. Nobody was even aware he was a survivor from the era of creation.

And then the opportunity finally arrived. Saya's escape was never part of the plan, but besides that, nearly everything went exactly as he hoped. Now, in the culmination of an age's efforts, the Sovereign's Blood was his. Lernaeon clenched his fist. A crest surfaced. The power within it was a tangible sign of his victory.

His breathing finally steady, Lernaeon began to walk. He was headed in a different direction from Saya. There was only one place for him to go: the throne. He had to sit down there and ponder his next move. As always, he had all the time in the world. He had no more enemies, after all.

The path was filled with nobles and menials rendered unconscious by Saya's royal caliber.

"Like this?"

These were perfect practice targets. His royal caliber tore the fallen nobles to shreds—far from the outcome Lernaeon had imagined. His preference was to use his weapon on a far smaller scale, cutting only the vitals. He was having difficulties maintaining any kind of fine manipulation. He didn't mean to kill Jubilia in such a gruesome manner, even if it was suitable recompense for her betrayal.

Lernaeon walked on, cutting apart bodies one after another. The fallen died before they could regain consciousness. These losses wouldn't be a problem. They were worms who coveted peace within the palace. They weren't necessary within the proper order Lernaeon aspired to build. Only the truly outstanding would remain. Dying for Lernaeon's sake like this was the highest

purpose of their lives. In any case, controlling the royal caliber required far more troubleshooting than he imagined.

“Missed again...” he muttered to himself.

“That so?”

Lernaeon turned to the new voice, spotting the Crestfolk swordsman—one of Cobalt’s pets. He was the first to act during the execution. Lernaeon had met many people over his long years. Few were worth remembering, but this man was one of them.

“Keele Strano.”

“Oooh, *His Excellency the Prime Minister* knows my *name*! I’m so honored.”

“Not the prime minister any longer. I’m the Sovereign.”

Keele cocked his head. He was insensible to the power of the royal caliber.

“How regrettable it is that you’re Crestfolk. If you were anything else, you would’ve been worthy of living in the new world.”

“Well thank fuck for that. I don’t want no part of this new world you’re makin’.”

“The whining of a sore loser.”

“We don’t know who’s gonna lose until we go at it. Otherwise it ain’t a real fight!”

Keele readied his sword slick with Halahala and charged Lernaeon. His swordsmanship was completely different from a knight’s. Lernaeon dodged, but the sword’s tip blurred like a mirage. Keele shifted his center of gravity slightly and pivoted on his left foot. Lernaeon was deeply impressed as he weaved around the strike. An average knight would be helpless before this man. This was the art of a self-taught master—a once-in-a-generation genius.

“Aah... Truly a waste to lose such talent and techniques,” Lernaeon muttered, stirring the royal caliber to action.

Countless slashes wrapped around Keele’s body, but just as expected, his aim was off. Keele’s body blossomed with gashes, his vitals untouched. They

weren't shallow by any metric, but he showed no sign of slowing. Sure enough, Keele immediately regained his footing and stood at the ready.

"Do you see now? This is the power of the Sovereign," Lernaean said, observing the shock on Keele's face.

"The Sovereign...? What's with all the showy crap? It's totally different from before."

Lernaean grimaced. "From before? Do you know about my blood caliber?"

"I know all 'bout you. Your old man is Norg Edel Trouta lo Granapalt, the guy who decided two hundred years ago every Crestfolk's gotta go under the knife."

"Hmm, what a nostalgic name. But unfortunately, you're wrong. My adoptive father's name was attached to the proposal, but the real credit is all mine."

Today really is a day for reminiscing, Lernaean thought to himself. Keele's lips curved into a smile like a crescent moon hanging overhead.

"I see. So it really *was* you."

Lernaean felt an ominous chill seeing this man's earnest smile.

"I've been lookin' for you all this time... For the guy who stole my pride, that is."

"Your pride?"

"They fucked with my body. Made a whole show of it. Didn't bother using anesthesia. Those goddamn nobles laughed every time I screamed. I'll never forget that humiliation. I've survived until now to butcher the one who did that to me."

"So long as I possess the royal caliber, that will have to remain a fantasy."

"Blood calibers fall apart when they lose contact with their owner. 'Cept yours, for some reason. That's the way your blood caliber works. "Oooohh, it's a *whip*, don't mind me, I'm just your garden variety vampire"—eat my whole ass. I know what a whip cuts like."

"Wonderful. Only a few people have seen through its true nature over the ages. You're the only one who still lives. My blood caliber is a flying blade. It's

far too quick to be seen by the eye, but just to complete the picture for you, it's shaped like a butterfly. As royalty, my blood caliber's nature has always been closest to the Sovereign's."

"So, it's just like Nagi said."

"Your little brother... Was he the one to figure it out?"

Nagi Strano. The boy blundered into Lernaean's plans by meeting Saya. By his initial evaluation of the boy he would be of no further consequence, but looking back on it, his role in the revolution was essential. It was difficult to see, but perhaps that boy truly did possess something outstanding. He, at least, could be preserved if he wished to live, even if there was no saving the elder Strano. Lernaean could always have him disappeared if he proved disappointing.

"He's just that kinda guy. He gets all *clever* at times like these. He's always screwin' up, but he gets things right when there's real skin in the game."

"When it comes to his most important decision, I wonder—will that thread of genius you see in him hold true? Will he bend the knee to me?"

"What a haughty-ass... The Sovereign, huh? Ain't the little lady the Sovereign?"

"Piece by piece, I inherit her power. When I have drained the last of it, she will be dust, and I will reach the fullness of the Sovereign's strength. It won't be long now."

"That the reason you're doin' so much target practice? I gotta show a little gratitude for you takin' the time to explain your whole business; now there's all sorts a shit I gotta try. Let's get it on!"

Keele leapt in once more. Lernaean moved to intercept.

"You still can't use that power right, huh? Your aim is shit!"

Keele bent backward. A few blades scratched him, but he was beyond caring. His movements were fascinating. Keele flowed into a vicious remise, digging his blade into Lernaean's body. He managed to avoid a fatal blow, but Lernaean couldn't dodge the strike entirely. There was no need for him to dodge at all, really. He simply did so out of habit.

“A blood caliber can never prosper against the Sovereign. Halahala is no different. Jubilia didn’t understand this; she fought to the very end.”

“Like I thought... That scar on your chest is from her, ain’t it?”

“Hmm. I’m surprised you could tell.”

“I’ve had that woman’s sword on my mind every night, all so I can beat her next time.”

Keele steadied his breathing as he spoke. It was clear he would strike if Lernaean showed the slightest opening.

“Your dream will have to remain unfulfilled. Jubilia is dead—consumed by her own folly. No matter how much she trained, her sword could never reach the Sovereign. All she accomplished in her desperation was tearing my clothes.”

There was still a scar on his chest, but the wound itself had sealed.

“She died in vain,” he said, clearly provoking Keele.

“Don’t you dare say that!”

Keele unleashed a chain of strikes. Lernaean evaded them and retaliated with his royal caliber. As usual, his aim was off, but this time he left a deep cut in Keele’s stomach.

“That’s a hit.”

“I can still move!”

“Still, it’ll be dangerous if that wound isn’t closed soon. Have you considered giving up?”

Blood stained Keele’s clothes. He acted calm, but sweat was beginning to pour from his brow.

“I should be askin’ you that question. I’ve got your whole style pinned down in my head now.”

Keele went back on the offensive. His movements were marvelous. It was unbelievable, considering the wound he had sustained. He wasn’t bluffing, either. Even when Lernaean unleashed his royal caliber, he could only inflict minor scratches now. He no longer had the means to deliver a clean blow.

Lernaean truly regretted the loss of Keele's talent. In such a short time, he had outmatched Lernaean for sheer martial prowess. Lernaean was slowly being pushed back. On the other hand, even though Lernaean couldn't deal a decisive blow, Keele's wounds were gradually multiplying. None of the cuts were deep, but combined with the bleeding from his stomach, it would take its toll in time. Keele seemed intent on settling this before that happened.

"Splendid. You're pushing me back one move at a time. You'd make a masterful chess player. But sadly enough, you have no way of securing a checkmate. You'll just die."

"Says you."

Lernaean met Keele's eyes between blows. There was an insatiable lust for blood in Keele's gaze. He was like a beast. He didn't doubt that he could kill Lernaean in the least.

"I'll prove to you that Jubilia didn't die in vain."

Keele thrust at Lernaean's heart with all the brawn he had to muster. Such an attack couldn't wound him. There was no need to dodge. Rather, accepting the blow would give Lernaean the opening he needed to kill Keele. In the moment before both men's gambits resolved, a chill assaulted Lernaean's body.

In that instant, he forgot about the limitations he had placed on himself. He unleashed the royal caliber at its full power at the threat before him. Agony ran through Lernaean's entire body, even though he had used it for just a split second.

The countless soaring blades tore Keele apart, but his killing intent far surpassed Lernaean's imagination. Despite his shredded body, Keele kept his momentum, his blade planting firmly into Lernaean. He felt actual pain for the second time that day. Keele couldn't keep his arm steady; the thrust meant for Lernaean's heart found its mark in the base of his right arm.

Keele collapsed, blood bursting from his entire body. No part of him was left unscathed. His right leg was torn apart, and his entire left arm was missing. His abdomen looked like it had been scooped out by the grasping claw of some massive predator. Regardless, Lernaean lost far more. The burden of the royal caliber's exertion tormented him. His right arm no longer moved as he willed it.

The wound itself sealed when he uprooted Keele's sword, but he still couldn't feel his arm. Lernaean drew shallow, ragged breaths as he looked down at the man who dealt him this wound. He was still conscious, but not for much longer.

"Stop... Wait the fuck up..."

Surprisingly, Keele could still talk. Lernaean ignored him and kept walking. He wanted to reach his throne and sit down. He had to get some rest. He couldn't afford to lose consciousness now. Lernaean pressed on toward his victory, just like he always had.

Saya lost her footing on the stairs and fell into someone's arms.

"Huh. You dropped in on me this time."

She knew who it was; it came as naturally as breathing.

"No... Nagi... Don't look..."

She averted her eyes. She couldn't run away in his arms like this, so it was all she could do. Nagi gasped in shock at the sight of her face. It pained her heart.

"I'm not the Saya you love anymore, Nagi."

"What happened?"

"I used the royal caliber too much... The Sovereign's Blood is Lernaean's now. He's my little brother... My life will run out soon. I'm dying."

Nagi acted as if he only heard her last two words.

"You're... dying?"

"Yes. In ten... maybe twenty minutes."

Saya already knew how much time she had left. That cruel clock marked the passage of time within her body with pitiless constancy. It was impossible to stop and impossible to ignore.

"I'm glad we could meet one last time... but I didn't want you to see me like this..."

Saya's heart was caught in a tailspin of delight, regret, and despair. Her heart was weak now, but it still thumped loudly.

"I'm glad I found you," Nagi said, his voice reverberating in her ears.

Aah... How I yearned to hear this voice... this gentle echo I sought and sought and sought, then lost...

"Sorry... I betrayed all of you."

"It's fine. I finally figured out what you've been going through. I can't stand the thought of you dying before me."

Nagi hugged her tight. The strength of his grip cemented the reality that he was here with her.

"How can I save you?" he asked.

It was just like him to cast aside every sign of futility until the world had taken everything from him.

Sorry...

"It's useless now. I can tell."

Saya's death drew closer with every second.

"You said the Sovereign's Blood went to Lernaean, right? If I defeat him, will it come back to you?"

"I'm not dying because I lost the Sovereign's Blood. It left me because my body reached its limit. I'm going to die no matter what."

"I don't want you to!"

Saya finally turned to face Nagi and looked him in the eyes. He was crying. She felt like this was the first time she had seen his tears.

"It's no use. That's just my lifespan." Saya smiled gently. It was beyond her to explain why, but seeing Nagi cry, her fear of her impending death and aging body vanished. She felt a new warmth in its stead.

"I won't leave you. I'll stay with you until the end," Nagi told her.

"Even though I'm so ugly?"

"You're not ugly. No matter what you look like, you're still Saya. I love you."

Aah... How can he say such a thing? I'm all wrinkled up. I smell bad. My hair is

a mess. But Nagi still tells me he loves me.

“Nagi, you told me I can decide what to do with my own life. I could never decide, though. Gratos, Lernaean, Jubilia, and you... I always left things to others. But I can finally say this for myself.”

I have to put my hopes into words.

“I also... want to stay with you until the very end.”

Nagi nodded.

How blessed I am... At the very end of this long life, I finally found happiness. Compared to this moment, those centuries were so dull. Even if it's just a single fleeting moment, I can die satisfied now. That's why I don't need courage to say what I need to.

“But—sorry. Nagi, I still have something I need to do.”

For some reason, Nagi smiled. “You’re right. Let’s go stop Lernaean.”

“How did you know?”

“I’ve been thinking all this time. I was the one who started this fight... We started it. That’s why we have to end it. You were thinking the same thing, weren’t you? I can tell.”

Tears spilled from Saya’s eyes. She thought their hearts had been separate all this time, but Nagi was thinking the same thing she was. He still shared her hardships.

“Lernaean is trying to exterminate the Crestfolk,” Nagi continued. “So long as he lives, the people of Garuga Village can’t survive. This chance you’ve given us by taking out all the guards is the only shot we’ve got.”

“Even if it kills you?”

“We’ve lost so many friends. Enemies too. I’m sure we’ll lose more. I’ve killed plenty myself. I can’t be an exception forever. I don’t have much time left to begin with. Let’s go together. Can you walk?”

“I can. Let me down. I have a little strength left. Besides...”

When Nagi hugged her, she realized that so long as she had *that*, she would

be fine. Hearing her, Nagi nodded and held out his hand. Saya squeezed it. His rough fingers were warm.

“Let’s go together.”

34

Nagi walked on, holding Saya’s withered hand. Her fingers were slender to begin with, but now they were skin and bones. It wasn’t difficult to figure out which way Lernaean went. They simply had to follow the trail of shredded bodies.

“He’s killing nobles?” Nagi muttered.

“Lernaean is trying to build a world where only people he has chosen exist.”

“We can’t let him do that.”

“Right.”

Nagi matched Saya’s steady pace. Once he reacclimated to the sight of the corpses, he spotted someone he knew among them.

“Keele?!”

His entire body was stained red. He’d lost an arm and a leg. Nagi ran over to the body; the husk of his brother stirred and began to speak.

“Nagi...? Kept me... waitin’...” Nagi could hear things inside Keele break under the strain of his own voice.

“Don’t talk!”

“No... I’m done for... already... Hm...?” Keele’s bloody eyelids opened; he looked up at Saya. “You’ve sure... shriveled up...”

“I have,” Saya replied with an honest nod.

“So, you’re still alive... That means... Heheh... Right on... We still... got a chance...” There was a bright spark in Keele’s eyes. “Lernaean’s... Sovereign’s Blood... is still... incomplete... as long... as you’re alive...”

Saya nodded. Despite Keele’s ragged breaths, he smiled in delight.

“Nagi... Gimme your hand...”

He used his one remaining arm to pull a bottle from his pocket. Nagi caught it as it slipped from his grip and fell toward the floor.

“This is... the last of my Halahala...”

Keele broke into a painful coughing fit. Blood, spit, and bile poured out of his mouth.

“Keele!”

“Calm down... Listen... Blood calibers... and Halahala... don’t work on the Sovereign... But so long... as the little lady... still lives... the Sovereign’s Blood... is incomplete...”

He stared into Nagi’s eyes. Nagi hated his older brother’s gaze. It always felt like he was looking right through him.

“Lernaean’s got... a scar... on his chest... Jubilia’s... last strike...”

“Is Jubilia...?” Saya asked.

Keele shook his head. Saya bit her lip.

“She didn’t... die in vain... There’s still... a scar... Normally... there wouldn’t be one... You get me...?”

Nagi nodded.

“Aim for... his heart... and brain...”

Nagi clenched the Halahala in his hand. Keele nodded in satisfaction. After another coughing fit, his voice grew even weaker.

“His royal caliber... is a buncha... flying... invisible blades... There’s a lot of ’em... but dodge ’em all...”

“Got it,” Nagi replied with a nod.

“Get goin’ already...” Keele said, closing his eyes.

“Right. Saya, let’s go.”

Nagi stood up and turned his back to Keele, squeezing Saya’s hand. The quiet breathing behind him gradually faded out.

“Bye, Keele.”

There was no response. Nagi’s vision blurred, but he walked on without looking back.

He sat atop the throne. His whole body was stained with blood—his own and that of others. Even through ragged breaths, he lorded over the ones who appeared before him. He had a gash at the base of his right arm covered in dried blood.

“Nagi Strano and Saya.”

“We’ve come to stop you,” Saya declared.

A smile crept on Lernaean’s face. “I have the power of the Sovereign. Jubilia and Keele Strano broke against me before either could accomplish anything.”

Nagi stared into Lernaean’s eyes. “They did accomplish something. Doesn’t that wound on your arm hurt? Keele did that, right? Looks like you still can’t move it.”

“When that decrepit woman dies, this wound will pass into memory with her.”

“I’m going to kill you before it can.”

Nagi readied his bow, but Lernaean sat unmoving.

“Let’s see you try.”

“You just going to sit there?”

“A king has no need to leave his throne.”

“Liar,” Saya cut in. “You *can’t* move. You’ve used too much of the royal caliber. It’s useless to try and hide it. I can tell. I can feel it through the Sovereign’s Blood, just a little.”

“So what? It would take so little effort to crush the both of you.”

Lernaean held up his left hand. Nagi made his move, expecting him to lash out with his caliber. His arrow shot true, bearing down on his heart, but shattered before it could reach its target. Lernaean had gotten the hang of using the royal

caliber defensively.

Nagi anticipated Lernaean's next volley and tumbled to the side. The ground where Nagi had been standing exploded in a cloud of pulverized stone.

Keele's warning had steered Nagi right. Without it, he would've died before he could figure out the true workings of Lernaean's royal caliber; now he could stay ahead of Lernaean's blows so long as he watched his gestures and the direction of his gaze. As the flying blades whipped past him, Nagi nocked a second arrow. This time, he aimed for the head.

"Too weak... Do you think you'll ever hit me like that?"

The arrow shattered in midair, just as the first did.

"I'll just keep trying until I do."

"It's useless. You only have so many arrows. Still, you're quite skilled. If I was a weaker man, you'd have made pincushions of my vitals. I believe you are worth granting eternal life. How about it?"

"You asked Jubilia and Keele the same thing, didn't you?"

"I did... And they refused me."

"My answer is the same as theirs. There's far more worth in living for a single instant helping the people I believe in than living forever for myself. I'll live for Saya's sake, then die. Take your eternal life and shove it 'til you can taste it when you cough."

Nagi loosed another arrow. It still didn't reach its target, but little by little, Nagi was closing in. With each shot, he closed the distance with a single large stride. Lernaean staggered from his throne to evade a shot that would have drilled a hole in his skull otherwise.

"I thought you didn't need to leave your throne?"

"What impudence... I simply realized this blade is more than enough to kill a commoner like you."

Lernaean drew the sword at his waist with his left hand. He swung the large blade around idly. Nagi unsheathed his knife and dived in, tossing aside his bow and empty quiver.

“You believe you can kill me if you stab me in the heart with Halahala, don’t you? Who knows—maybe you’re right. But you’re running out of time to find out!.”

Lernaean was wielding his sword in his off hand. His swordsmanship wasn’t at Jubilia’s level, either. Still, his fiendish strength made each swipe of the blade potentially lethal. What’s more, Lernaean still had the royal caliber. Nagi wove between the sword and intermittent volleys of his flying blades, slashing furiously with his knife. He was biding his time for the moment Lernaean showed an opening.

“Impressive. You weren’t like this before. You’ve grown since the revolution,” Lernaean said, admiration in his voice. “Unfortunately, you can’t win against me. If I do this, for example...”

Lernaean feinted, releasing his royal caliber at a new target. Nagi didn’t dodge it this time. Blood burst into the air.

“You can’t avoid it, can you? You’re far too naïve.”

There was no way he could. If he got out of the way, it would’ve hit Saya.

“Changing this world is too great a task for you,” Lernaean declared.

“Shut up...”

Nagi pushed through the pain as he jumped in once more.

“You couldn’t hit me before. Do you really think you’ll come any closer with those wounds? You should’ve tossed that woman aside. You were mistaken, and you let your chance at victory slip through your fingers for that mistake.”

Lernaean kept his composure as Nagi exposed a fatal opening. He slipped in a puddle of his own blood and lost his balance.

“Farewell, Commoners’ Hero.”

Lernaean stabbed Nagi in the stomach. Nagi’s blood coated the blade as it slipped between his ribs. The clatter of his knife falling to the floor echoed through the throne room. Lernaean relaxed. Nagi’s death was certain now. He wasn’t capable of moving with such a wound. Nevertheless, Nagi mustered the last of his strength to seize Lernaean’s sword arm in an iron grip.

“Got you... Saya, do it!”

Lernaean raised a quizzical eyebrow. In the next instant, the bottle hanging from Nagi’s necklace shattered, unleashing... a red butterfly. It was Saya’s royal caliber. The bottle contained blood from when Saya was the Sovereign. It took all the power she had left in her to activate it.

Lernaean’s eyes shot open. He tried twisting clear of it, but he couldn’t move with Nagi locking him down. The butterfly fluttered in the air as if time around it had stopped, and crawled into Lernaean’s chest through his scar. In the next instant, Lernaean screamed and bent backward. Nagi lost his hold and was flung away. Lernaean clawed at his chest, writhing from the pain in his heart.

“It’s useless,” Saya told him. “Your heart has withered. You probably won’t die right away, but there’s no regenerating that sort of wound.”

“Serves you... right...” Nagi muttered, before blood poured from his mouth in a violent coughing fit.

Right when he felt like he would collapse, Saya ran over and caught him in her arms.

“Nagi! Don’t talk!”

“You really can tell... when you’re about to die... huh?”

She held his head to her chest as his blood stained her arms.

“I’ve also... used up all my strength,” Saya told him with a smile.

Nagi returned her smile. “See? We’re together to the end.”

“Yeah.”

His body was getting cold. He couldn’t even feel Saya’s warmth anymore. His limbs felt like they’d frozen, and the sensation was spreading throughout his body. Still, he didn’t shiver.

“You two have destroyed the world,” Lernaean said, his voice sounding far away. “Saya and I are the only royalty left in the world. The Sovereign’s Blood is gone. Amrita can no longer be created. Cursed with short lives, humanity won’t be able to maintain civilization. It is sure to perish.”

Nagi felt hazy, and his breaths came in ragged spurts, but he still replied. "I'm sure it'll work out. Crestfolk live longer than commoners."

"I wonder about that? It's so dull that we won't be able to see who's right. Lifespan... such a... worthless notion..."

Lernaean's voice cut short. Nagi couldn't even confirm whether or not the man was dead now. He was at his limits himself.

"Saya..."

And feeling strangely relieved at the fact that no reply came to him, Nagi closed his eyes.

Epilogue: Cradle

“Mom! I thought you’d be here. Where’s our snacks?”

The children playing in the Flower’s Cradle’s garden came back inside as a cheerful voice called out to her.

“Just wait a little longer, I’ll get them ready now,” Tess replied with a smile.

She felt compelled to offer a prayer of thanks. The children here had never known a time when being able to prepare treats for them like this was beyond dreaming of. There was no telling what the next year would be like. There were rumors in the royal capital—well, the metropolis now—of a great political uprising. There was still no progress towards a working treatment for the poison which filled the land. More and more often, it consumed Agarth’s children.

Tess prayed once more. She prayed that these peaceful days could somehow continue. There were many people she prayed to: those who departed on their journey ahead of her. Would she be permitted to join their ranks soon? Lately, she felt like she was aging faster than before.

Crestfolk were not gifted with equally long lives. Their resistance to the world’s poison varied, and when they reached their limit, they died of old age. Tess was approaching her limit, apparently. She didn’t fear her own death at all. Instead, her thoughts drifted to the past more and more. Perhaps that was what it meant to grow old.

On that fateful day, nobody came back from the palace. She had no time to grieve. The days which followed were too chaotic for it. Nevertheless, people still had children. While it was beyond her to do the same, she chose the path of saving the children of others.

She was the one to found the Flower’s Cradle. In the wake of the sterilization campaigns, there were many who wanted children but couldn’t have any. With public order in Agarth lost, the country was thick with unwanted, abandoned

children. Many of them were born with bloodmark disease. Prejudice against the mark-bearers never went away. Even when the child was wanted, there were many commoner parents who died of old age shortly after having a child, leaving the baby behind. Organizations to help raise them had collapsed. Tess created the Flower's Cradle to act in their stead.

It wasn't an easy path. The days went by slowly and arduously, like digging a ditch with the only arm she had to spare. There were far more hardships than happy memories. After the initial upheaval came a period of brutal convulsions. They still weren't over. Blood continued to flow, drawing an unbroken red line through the flow of time. Perhaps that was simply the way of things.

Regardless, Tess tried to fix her thoughts on the good times. She had memories of many smiling children. Many survived, and upon reaching an age where they could work, they left for villages all over Agartha. That was the purpose of the Cradle. Nobody knew this place had once been called the Forbidden Garden.

Tess' favorite place here was the courtyard. There was a glass ceiling overhead. On a sunny day, warm light shone through it. At night, the moonlight gently poured down from above. Nowadays, nobody knew how to create such a glass ceiling. It came from a time of antiquity. The hole in the ceiling remained as it was.

Tess looked up at the hole. Everyone in the Cradle knew it was a habit of hers. She'd never told anyone why she liked it so much. Tess was the only person in the world who knew why the hole was there. The heroic tales sung in public didn't include the story of the hero breaking through the ceiling and tumbling into the courtyard, after all. The hero in the story gallantly came through the door to save the princess.

"Mom! Come on!"

"Yes, yes, I'm coming."

Tess looked up at the hole once more. She made a pledge to her own heart. She vowed to the dead once more, just as she had a countless number of times before. She held her left hand out toward the hole in the ceiling... toward the sky.

Her aging fingers drew distorted lines. It was proof of the days she survived. She was proud of this. Would the day come when they would grip this hand of hers? Until then, she would keep living her own life. Just as they had.

Tess' weakened heart pumped blood through her veins, sending her prayer through her entire body. With that, she took a single step forward into the uncertain future.



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