II

Aoikou

illust. Enji

The Hero-Killing Bride

The Blind-Eyed Saint




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The candles' flames fluttered in the drafty room, making our shadows dance. A sweet fragrance filled my nostrils. The screams that rose up with each slice into meat, each breaking bone, were music to accompany a banquet of the heavens.

As I crushed and tore, as I bathed in blood, the pleasure that flooded through me felt somehow unreal—bizarre, even, as though I'd wandered into a dream.

"Kill y…" a voice groaned. "Gonna…kill you…!"

"Uh-huh, sure you will."

The fingers clutching at my ankle clawed into me, and even that pain only made my smile wider.

That's right, this was no dream—this was reality. The pain was what assured me that all of this was real.

Such joy, such bliss!

I looked down at the man at my feet, his body severed below the waist. He glared up at me with rage burning in his eyes. As I took in that gaze, an unstoppable giddiness overcame me.

"Kill you… Kill— Kill you…!"

"Oh? Ohhhh?"

He was just spewing invective, but still, couldn't he manage a little more variety?

"C'mon then, kill me!" I taunted. "You're gonna kill me, aren't you?! Get your shit together!"

I pulled him up by the hair—his head had already gotten a lot lighter—and slammed his face into the floor. The beautiful sound of his nose breaking rang out through the room. I lifted him again, looking into his crimson eyes, but they were almost completely unfocused.

"Hey, nope nope nope! Too soon!"

I brought up my knee to shatter his jaw. The lukewarm blood that splattered onto my cheek felt so wonderful, it gave me goose bumps!

"You don't get to die yet, fucker!"

As I watched the blood bubbling out of him, my face softened into a smile. He was still breathing. I could feel the life within, feel that there was *still something left to kill*.

A man who'd sworn to kill me was still living. Who could imagine that would be so delightful?

"Damn… It really is great to be alive," I sighed happily.

I thanked the Gods for granting me this power, this good fortune—this miracle.

“…ll…nd…”

“Hmm?”

The man was still hanging on to consciousness. I leaned in closer to listen to his words.

“One of the others… They’ll…”

…find me and come kill me.

“Pffha!” I just couldn’t keep the smile off my face. The laughter welled up inside me and didn’t stop. “You guys are gonna come right to me? Sweet, I won’t have to bother searching!”

His jaw was starting to heal, so I tore into it again. His scream was like the roar of a dying beast, and I could feel every cell in my body rejoicing at it.

Still, this wouldn’t be enough to satisfy me. All of this was for vengeance—for justice. For the sake of the world, for the sake of humanity, I would go on killing. I would kill and kill until not one of these bastards remained.

I was the Deathwatcher—Veil Croitzen, their cross in the darkness.

Chapter 1

It had been almost one month since the attack by General Heavenfang, the white wolfman who'd once served under the Demon Lord; almost one month since the murders of three of the Seven High Cardinals, who held power second only to the pope within the Church's political hierarchy.

With autumn steadily taking hold, deep crimson leaves adorned the courtyard garden in the cathedral of High Cardinal Salamanrius. As I passed by, I looked out at the scene in front of me and sighed to myself. This courtyard was supposed to be a calm and peaceful space—a rest area for cathedral staff like me. But right now...

"What on earth is this supposed to be?" I muttered wearily.

My beloved cat, cradled against my chest, gave an adorable "mrow" in reply.

Awww, such a good kitty! I raised a finger to scritch his chin.

Still, I did have to pay attention to what was happening around me, as depressing as it was.

"C'mon, keep your feet moving!"

"Whoa?!"

Cion—the Hero Elcyon, slayer of the Demon Lord—was roughhousing with a squad of a dozen knights from the Holy City.

"Ah ha ha ha ha!"

As she took on the powerful knights clad in shining silver armor, she laughed with the air of a berserker—or maybe a *drunkard who'd gotten a screw loose* would be closer. She danced away from their strikes, countering with kicks, throws, and stomps. She was thoroughly amusing herself with the holy knights, toying with them as she pleased.

"Phew, that worked up a good sweat!" she said with a smile. "You're all so strong!"

"You're, um, as formidable as the stories tell, Sir Hero..." one of the knights replied awkwardly.

"Not at all! I've still got a ways to go!"

While the knights lay collapsed on the ground around her, panting and heaving as though on the brink of death, Cion

seemed completely relaxed and at ease. Looking down at them, she briefly moved aside her hood to wipe sweat off her brow. Then, she carefully pulled it back up to cover her head before reaching out a hand to the fallen knights.

"Well now..." I sighed.

Someone's been having fun, I see...

Honestly, the whole situation felt a little surreal.

During last month's fight with General Heavenfang, the Hero Elcyon had lost the legendary champion who'd served as her master, and she'd taken on more than a few injuries herself. She'd decided to take a short break from fighting on the front lines; for the time being, she was staying here at my cathedral.

I'd originally approached her as an assassin. After the Hero had vanquished the Demon Lord and become humanity's savior, the Church had grown less than fond of her, and they'd formulated a plan to kill her. They'd sent me out after her, and I'd been *supposed* to take her life, but...at the moment, my divine orders to assassinate the Hero were on a temporary hold. The higher-ups were on the alert in case of more attacks by the Demon Lord's other generals or whatever, and I'd been left dangling in between the Church and the Hero.

For my part, I'd been recovering from injuries that could easily have cost me my life, so I wasn't complaining if they didn't rush me to carry out my mission. Still, the Gods were fickle, and there was no telling when they'd change their mood. If they ordered me to bring them the head of the Hero once again, I'd have to stick a knife in her right away... But, well, that didn't matter right now. It wasn't like worrying about it would get me anything.

I sighed once again.

Anyway, that was enough reminiscing. I stepped into the courtyard, refocusing my mind on my present situation and the role I needed to play.

"You've gone a little overboard, Sir Hero."

"Alicia!"

Cion rushed over to me with a childlike smile on her face, but I dodged her and knelt down next to the collapsed holy knights.

"May these men who have striven and fallen be granted the strength to rise up once again..." I prayed.

As though in response, countless specks of light rose up around us. The lights settled onto the knights' bodies and began healing their injuries.

This warm light, infused with kindhearted love, was an orison known as “Holy Prayer”—a miracle granted by the Gods. Officially, it was exactly what it sounded like: a manifestation of the love of the Gods brought about through prayer. In reality, though, it was all a sham. It was just a ritual developed to convince people to believe in the Gods, and there wasn’t actually any need to produce all those lights in the first place. It was nothing but a performance, a parlor trick. But, all the same, it really did heal people’s wounds and relieve their fatigue.

Another great thing about orisons was that they couldn’t be reproduced through simple imitation. By knowing how to perform them, even an unimposing girl like me could be afforded respect and reverence as a *bride of the Gods*.

“My deepest thanks,” the knight captain said. “You’re the one who was accompanying His Eminence the Cardinal, Sister…?”

“Alicia, Captain Schwartz. This is…our third time meeting, I believe?”

He chuckled awkwardly. “My apologies, I’m terrible with names. Please do forgive me, Sister.”

“Please, think nothing of it, sir. Our role is simply to support all those who serve the Gods. There is no need for you to remember my name.”

The middle-aged man with a chiseled face bowed his head in embarrassment, and I responded with a benevolent smile. While I was at it, I clasped my hands together in front of my chest and made a show of offering up another prayer. I knelt reverently, reciting my words of supplication to the Gods in a manner befitting a nun worthy of serving under His Eminence the Cardinal—yet another *performance*.

“May the protection of the Gods be upon you. Please be careful not to overwork yourselves.”

“Ah, thank you, there’s no need…”

He sounded flustered at having a younger girl concerned over him.

Well, isn’t that cute*.*

“In any case, this was sure a surprise,” he said. “I’d heard the rumors, of course, but he’s truly incredible…”

He looked over at the Hero, who was now surrounded by his subordinates. With all their injuries healed and their exhaustion gone, the men were chattering about this or that move as they reflected on their practice bout. As they bantered, they peppered

the Hero with questions about “his” abilities and techniques.

“Frankly, I’d only half believed it,” the captain continued. “You know how it is—the people on top always blow their achievements out of proportion. But, well, he really taught us a rough lesson. He’s that good, and he’s still growing—it’s honestly terrifying to think about… Or, no, reassuring, I guess I should say?”

“Indeed. I was surprised as well when I first met him.”

Surrounded by the burly figures of the knights, the Hero Elcyon was completely hidden from view. Her build was small and slight for a warrior, especially a Hero. She always kept her face hidden under her hood, so people didn’t generally notice, but her facial features were actually quite childlike as well. If she simply changed her outfit, no one would possibly imagine her as a demon-slaying champion. She grew her hair out a bit to camouflage her face, but it was hard to say how long she’d be able to keep that up…

“Well then,” the captain said. “We’ve picked up some stories to share back home; I suppose it’s time we set out. Please give His Eminence our thanks for his hospitality.”

“Of course, sir. Please do take care.”

He called his men to attention, and as they headed out on their actual mission, I saw them off with another prayer. Their footsteps were a little off pace as they marched away, though, and I could sense a certain amount of exhaustion from them—doubtless the result of Cion toying with them. They’d probably been hoping for a pleasant round of sparring to lift their spirits, but this was hardly a good way to start off a journey. I just hoped it wouldn’t interfere with their duties…

The Demon Lord was dead, and there were mercenaries hunting down the remnants of his armies, but there was still plenty of unrest throughout the kingdom.

To make matters worse, during the recent attack by the Demon Lord’s former general, three of the Seven High Cardinals had been killed. As a result, the Church was facing a new wave of internal strife. During this interstitial period pending the selection of three new cardinals, *the remaining high cardinals* were engaged in their own power struggles, each of them trying to expand their influence or whatever.

“Well, not like it’s my problem.”

My responsibilities were solely those of an inquisitor. It was a

simple enough job: Whenever anyone was foolish enough to preach heresies against the Gods or defy the Church, I was sent out to find them and make heads roll.

I'd leave the monsters for the holy knights to handle. To each her own, and *my* own did *not* include demons, thank you very much. I'd learned that the hard way during the incident with the white wolf general, and I never wanted to fight another one of those guys ever again. I was perfectly happy spending my time peacefully praying in the cathedral and popping out on occasional quick errands when needed.

"Um, hey, Alicia...?"

"What is it?"

I turned around to see the small figure of the Hero herself standing behind me. The mighty and ferocious champion was looking at me with a meek, timid air.

"Are your injuries doing okay...?" she asked. "I heard you had an examination all morning..."

"Yes, everything's healed perfectly. Not even a single scar."

"Thank goodness... Your recovery was taking way longer than I expected; I was really worried..."

For someone really worried*, you seemed to be having plenty of fun toying with those knights earlier. Was that just my imagination, perhaps?*

I absolutely wasn't going to say that out loud, though. Or show it on my face, for that matter.

"Sir Hero Elcyon, I must offer my sincerest apologies for any concern or inconvenience I have caused you. As of today, I, Alicia Snowell, shall be resuming my official duties. I hope I may rely upon your support as always, Sir Hero—"

"Wah, hey, cut it out! Nobody's around, just call me Cion like normal!"

"I'm just joking, Cion. I'll continue to serve alongside you from now on; I'm looking forward to working together."

She chuckled shyly. "Yeah, me too."

We continued making casual small talk, but beneath the surface, my inner thoughts were cold and calculating.

The Hero Elcyon was renowned far and wide as the champion who'd killed the Demon Lord, but underneath, she wasn't that different from any naive, energetic young girl. We needed to keep that hidden no matter what, but this girl...

"If any of those guys had pinned you, they would've found you

out right away for sure," I pointed out.

"Huh?"

She probably wouldn't slip up like that to begin with, but if she somehow *had* ended up in that position by accident, how exactly had she intended to explain the contents hidden underneath her leather chestplate?

I mean, they weren't *that* big yet, so maybe she could've gotten away with it, but still.

"I know you need exercise, but please refrain from that sort of behavior. It's bad for my nerves."

As I told her off in a slightly exaggerated tone, Cion made a grumbling noise and puffed out her cheeks in a pout.

Okay, that's cute, but I'm still not letting you off the hook.

"I promised them we'd go harder the next time we met up..."

"Absolutely not."

"Doesn't training holy knights help out the Church too?"

"No, that's far outweighed by the harm it would cause if you were revealed to be a woman."

"Grmmmm..."

"You're not a child; please don't sulk like that."

A woman couldn't be the Hero. Even within the Church, aside from one singular exception, a woman could only become a regular nun or a bride of the Gods. If word got out that Cion had been lying about her gender to claim the role of Hero, there'd be big trouble; and doing it for the *reward money* paid out by the Church would definitely be a capital offense. She'd been deceiving and exploiting the Gods, after all.

I'd be severely punished as well for knowingly helping cover up the truth. I could snipe back all I wanted that the rest of the Church hadn't caught on at all, for all that they preached the words of the Gods; but that wouldn't be any excuse. Even if that lie had all been for the sake of helping out impoverished children, someone would need to take responsibility.

I sighed wearily.

In summary, life just sucked. Here in this world the Gods had so kindly created, any hopes or dreams above your station would do nothing but lead you to ruin. We all just got swept along on the current, living out our lives cautiously as we tried not to drown.

"In that case, Alicia..." Cion smiled at me, completely unaware of my inner thoughts. "Could I ask you a favor?"

Yup, you always do.

"If it's something I can assist with, then by all means," I replied, agreeing carelessly like an idiot—or rather, I just didn't think it through at all.

"Could *you* spar with me?"

There was a long silence.

"Pardon?" I asked.

Cion excitedly took up a bare-handed fighting stance. I looked at her askance, trying to figure out if I'd misheard her, but she was completely and utterly serious.

"I was thinking about it back when I saw you going up against that wolfman! I bet you'd be great at close-quarters combat, Alicia! I really wanna try fighting you!"

"Hold on, Cion. Anyone could see us out here. And in any case, I'm a bride of the Gods. I can't engage in that sort of crude, violent behavior—"

"You do though, don't you? I saw you kick the cardinal in the head the other day! You've actually already picked up some moves, right?!"

Hmm? Now that's odd... I've always been making sure nobody else is nearby when I kick my boss in the head.

"Cion... Have you been secretly following me around, by any chance?"

"Gh!"

Don't you "Gh!" me. This girl, I swear...

I'd be totally fine with her seeing me carry out my public-facing work as a bride—as a nun of the Holy Church. But if she saw me discussing my secret duties as an inquisitor and an enforcer, that'd be it. It'd be a huge pain to smooth that over.

"You *have* been following me, haven't you?"

"L-Let's forget about that for now..."

"All right, *if* you swear never to do it again."

I'd just have to stay even more alert for Cion's presence... What a pain.

"Anyway, c'mon, please? I won't use skills or anything, and I'll be sure to go easy on you! It'll be like rehabilitation for getting back to your duties... Sorta? Right?"

I let out a long, exhausted sigh.

We hadn't been acquainted for that long, but I'd already come to realize that once she got started arguing, there wasn't any stopping her. She'd back off if I really insisted, but she was

basically a kid staring at a new toy—in other words, until she was satisfied, she'd just keep on bugging me about it forever. I'd have to deal with her inviting me to spar over and over until I finally caved and accepted.

"I'm still recovering, so please, be *gentle*."

"Yeah! I will!"

She's really happy about this, huh?

"Feel free to use your orisons, Alicia! Skills and stuff too, whatever you want!"

"Yup, got it."

Still, I wasn't about to take her on for real, and I didn't want to let my cards slip and put myself at a disadvantage when the time came. Most importantly, I was playing the role of a *frail and innocent bride*. Showing off techniques that would let me fight head-to-head with *the Hero* could end up planting the seeds of suspicion.

"O Gods, I beseech you, lend me your strength..."

While Cion stood in front of me, excitement written all over her face, I began praying and activated my Spec Boost orison. The soft aura of light enveloping my body was something she already would've seen during her bout with the holy knights, and there were plenty of regular priests who could perform this incantation as well.

"Here goes!" Cion called out.

"Uh-huh, go for it."

Normally I'd stack various other things on top of the orison, but, eh, this was fine for now. Only half caring about the fight, I moved to react to the Hero as she closed in.

Slap, slapslap. I parried her chops and slipped into the blind spot on her dominant side, sweeping her feet out from under her. I'd disrupted Cion's stance, but she just planted a hand on the ground and let loose a series of kicks.

Ah, right, what was this move called? The one that's like an acrobat trick... I pondered to myself as I blocked and dodged.

Just as Cion started losing momentum, I grabbed her ankle and tried to pull her over, but she twisted her body around with perfect timing to drag me down with her.

"Ngh..."

Yeah, that hurts.

I really had been half-assing this too much, I supposed. I cleared my head and got a bit more serious. I jumped back up at

the same time as Cion and caught her with a kick.

"Gh—!"

Oh hey, did I get her?

I was doing pretty good for someone who'd just recovered from her injuries. Testing the motion of my agile limbs, I charged in for another attack and—

"Ah—"

—got too cocky.

Maybe head-on strikes just weren't my style. As my fist shot out straight ahead of me, Cion ducked in underneath it with a little chuckle. Then, her fist launched up from right in front of my chest, aiming directly for my jaw without any hesitation. I could tell that was really going to hurt if I took the hit, so without thinking about it—

"**Physical Boost**!"

—I immediately activated a skill as well. Moving superhumanly fast under the stacked effects of the skill and the orison, I escaped the uppercut despite my late start. I twisted and dodged, carefully taking aim within this compressed span of time.

Too bad for you, Cion. With one hip lowered, I followed my momentum to launch a roundhouse kick right into her, but—

"Huh?"

—Cion wasn't there.

"Checkmate!"

I felt her fingers against my neck from behind, somehow. I'd frozen up after having my target suddenly disappear at the moment of impact. At the sound of her proudly declaring victory, I quietly lowered my leg and looked over my shoulder at her.

"What was that you said about not using skills?"

"Ah, um... Oops?"

I gave her a long stare.

Well, not like it actually matters or anything. Whatever.

"Alicia...?"

"No, it's fine."

Faced with her apologetic gaze, I completely lost my will to argue. I accepted her offered hand to help me back up and brushed the dirt off my clothes. Sulking over my loss would just be childish, after all.

More importantly, when I'd stacked my orison and skill, I'd felt like my body was moving even better than usual. Maybe it just

felt that way because I'd been recovering, though.

"Hmm...?"

I didn't really get it. In any case, I didn't feel anything amiss with my body—it was probably just my imagination.

While I pondered back and forth, I felt a really, *really* excited gaze directed right at me.

"What is it?"

I cut off my train of thought and turned back around to face Cion, who was wearing an evil grin from ear to ear.

"Man, I was totally right, wasn't I? You've really got potential, Alicia! That was way more fun than fighting those knights!"

"They're a squadron trained for fighting in group battles. I'm simply—"

"Ah, yup, I know, I know. You're a bride of the Gods, you don't engage in acts of violence, this is all just stuff you've picked up for self-defense. It's totally fine, Alicia! I won't tell anyone!"

I looked her carefully in the eyes. "Really? Can you promise me that?"

"Huh...? Uh... Sure?"

Ah, nope. I can't trust that face.

"If you ever tell anyone, I'm never speaking to you again. Got it?"

"Huh?!"

Cion had been thinking of it all pretty lightly, but that was simply how important my *public image as a bride* was. I *never* kicked my stupid boss in the head in front of other people, and I didn't stomp on him either.

"Got it..." she said. "It'll just be our secret, okay? But... Can we do that again sometime? In secret?"

Look, c'mon, even if you say it all shy and eager like that...

Sensing that our banter had calmed down a bit, Atalanta (my darling kitty) came sidling up next to me. I picked him up and cradled him in my arms.

"You're kind of unfair, Cion..." I sighed.

"Huh? Why?"

"The way you do it without even trying makes it even worse."

Her nature and her talents meshed together well, though; that was why she'd been the one to vanquish the Demon Lord.

"Honestly, this girl..."

"Hmm? Heh heh..." she chuckled.

"I wasn't complimenting you."

Right at the last moment, just as I'd had her perfectly locked in my sights, she'd somehow disappeared. She'd slipped right past me… Or maybe I'd only been *tricked* into thinking I'd caught her at all. I wasn't sure what had actually happened there. Regardless, her well-honed prowess at one-on-one combat was truly incredible.

Demons were far more physically powerful than humans, yet Cion went around hunting them all on her own; she'd always been exceptional. But after witnessing last month's showdown against the white wolf general firsthand, I'd felt in my bones that her prowess at *killing* was something humankind needed. At this point, I kind of understood why His Eminence, High Cardinal Glasses, had ordered me to tame her. Well, there were a few other people out there who weren't so fond of that idea, but…

"Eh, no point worrying about guys who aren't even here," I muttered.

I buried my face in the soft floof of Atalanta's head to recover some vitality. This was an important resource that not even prayer to the Gods could provide me with. I let out a happy sigh.

"Hey, Aliciaaa…"

Cion was looking at me with a slightly dissatisfied expression. I didn't even need to ask what she was after.

"No. Please don't come any closer, Cion. You'll scare Atalanta."

"Aw, c'monnnn…"

Cion pouted, but a no was a no. Maybe she just set off his animal instincts; whatever the reason, Atalanta simply refused to warm up to her. They said that cats were more fickle than the Gods themselves, after all. We'd already given it a few tries, and I refused to put Atalanta through any further stress.

"Besides, if you get even a single scratch from a cat, they'll start suspecting humanity's champion has been abandoned by the Gods, and you'll end up facing the inquisitors."

"I don't want that to happen…"

Until recently, no one had been able to leave a scratch on Cion. People said she was protected by "the love of the Gods"; it had set her apart even from the Heroes of the past. But during last month's incident, that protection had vanished. When Cion had absolutely insisted on holding Atalanta and I'd let her try grabbing him, he'd clawed her across the face. There was no mistake about it—she'd gotten a cut, and I'd panicked and jumped in to heal it.

The Church higher-ups had come up with some idiotic theory that receiving the love of the *Hero* would let me bypass the love of the Gods, but as things stood now, pretty much anyone would be able to kill this girl—assuming they could evade her abnormally sharp senses, that is.

"Aliciaaa!"

"Please don't get so clingy. There's no telling who might be watching."

"C'monnn…"

I sighed. Frankly, Cion was a bit *too* unguarded with me lately. *I'd* been the one who'd tried to get close to her and make her open up as much as possible in order to carry out my mission, but having her act this needy was a nuisance in its own way.

"You were completely disinterested in me when we first met, weren't you?"

"Grmmm…"

I was a bride of the *Gods*, not the bride of the *Hero*. A few of the assholes writing my divine orders seemed to have other ideas, but I didn't give a shit. I served the Church to protect my own interests, not to benefit a bunch of greedy self-absorbed priests.

"Are you really all right not returning to the front lines?" I asked. "You're still sending money to the orphanage, aren't you?"

"Ah… Well, I actually got the bounty for defeating that white wolf too, so I wanted to take a break for a little. I'm not bothering you, am I…?"

"Not at all. We're quite grateful to have you down here in the south… I simply worry whether it's right of us to monopolize you."

"I can't just leave you alone, Alicia. Besides, there might've been other demons in on the cardinal assassinations!"

"I suppose so…"

Ever since the Heavenfang incident, Cion had become unusually concerned about my safety. She'd declared, with a look of complete seriousness, "If anything happens, I'll protect you for sure this time, Alicia!"

But if she ever found out that I'd been hiding the truth about that incident—part of the reason things had ended up this way—would she hate me for it…?

No—even then, our noble Hero would probably still try to believe in me. That was how far I'd slipped into the empty space

in her heart reserved for *something precious*. I'd somehow ended up there through the will of the Gods, regardless of my own intentions.

I felt just a little bit guilty about it. If I were able to compartmentalize it out as simply part of my job, it'd all be so much easier—

"Ah, excuse me, Sister Alicia! Could I have a moment?"

I looked up toward the sudden voice calling to me from somewhere. My boss, High Cardinal Glasses, was waving to me from the window of his third-floor office. His idiotic face didn't have a single shred of concern.

"Ah..."

I briefly locked eyes with Cion, wondering whether I should bring her with me. He'd called out to *me* and not the Hero, though, which presumably meant it was *that* kind of business. I set Atalanta down on the lawn.

"Sorry, I'll be back in a bit," I told Cion. "Do you think you could keep an eye on Atalanta in the meantime? If he tries to run off outside, you can grab him if you need to."

I stroked Atalanta's head as I spoke. Cion wanted to get along with him too, so she wouldn't ask to come with me.

"But... Won't he get scared? Is it really okay?"

This girl chickens out at the weirdest times.

"It's all right. Just be sure to give him some space."

"O-Okay!"

Cion curled up a hand into a cat paw gesture, but she seemed to have adopted a fighting stance. As we stared at her, Atalanta and I both tensed up involuntarily.

I'm counting on you, Atalanta...

Atalanta looked up at me with a face that seemed to be asking, *Are you for real right now? Seriously?*

I felt bad for him, but as I weighed the danger of being overheard against the well-being of my beloved kitty, the scales tipped just barely—just by the *tiniest* fraction—in favor of my job.

"If anything happens, I'll heal you, okay?"

"Mrr?!" Atalanta stared at me wide-eyed.

I gently patted his head and then made my exit, returning to my duties—not as a nun but as an inquisitor. I thought I could hear Atalanta yowling behind me, but I hardened my heart and shifted my mind over to my work.

What followed would be secret even from the Gods.

* * *

"Wisely done. You can read through the reports for the details, so to sum it up briefly: Members of the Church are being brutally murdered by a mysterious assailant—three already this month, sixteen in total going back further. I can't say for certain that none of those were part of the Heavenfang incident, but regardless, this is clearly an emergency situation. Therefore, I'm sending you to guard Her Sagacity Saint Nevissa."

I stared across the desk. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

My stupid boss, Cardinal Salamanrius—one of the Seven High Cardinals, second in authority to the pope himself—had an unusually serious gleam in his glasses as he carefully handed me a sheaf of reports. I could never tell what this guy was thinking, but having him cut straight to the point like this was downright bizarre. I silently cast my gaze down at the documents.

"Is it really all right for me to leave?" I asked slowly. "Why are you sure you'll be safe?"

"Call it an extralegal arrangement. His Holiness the Pope is away from the Holy City on a pilgrimage, and with most of the holy knights out in the field, there aren't enough personnel left to protect the saint. In exchange for dispatching you, I'll be given the right to designate who'll be filling the last of the empty seats among the Seven High Cardinals. The reward is worth the risk."

Yup, that tracked. *Of course* the corrupt bastards who ran the Church would use this "emergency situation" as an opportunity for more power plays; no surprise there.

"Just to make certain, there's no possibility that *you* might be behind this incident, is there, Your Eminence?"

"No, this one's got nothing to do with me whatsoever."

His completely serious answer was genuinely disconcerting. I let out a sigh. If Glasses would just be his usual Glasses-y self and joke around like normal, I'd be able to beat him up without any reservations.

"Why are these always the jobs I get stuck with…?"

I skimmed over the reports. They were nothing but detailed lists of the victims' causes and times of death, their social classes and births, the locations of the churches they'd served at, and so on. They didn't have anything at all in common—even the factions they'd belonged to were all over the place. If someone told me the culprit was just wandering around from place to

place killing anyone they didn't like, I'd believe it completely.

"Sorry, but we don't have any leads whatsoever on the killer's motive or identity. The one bright spot is that there haven't been any casualties in the Holy City as yet... There are a few other places that have gone untouched so far, but thinking in terms of risks and contingencies, our first priority should be to shore up defenses in the city where the pope governs and the saint resides."

So basically, we need to do something so the worst possible outcome doesn't come to pass...

"Officially, the request we've been issued is for *the Hero Elcyon* to guard Her Sagacity," Glasses continued. "You're being dispatched as an intermediary and an observer."

"Sounds easy enough, if that's really all I'll have to do..."

My *actual* orders were probably going to be to leave the guarding to Cion while I secretly tracked down the killer or intercepted them or something.

"I don't suppose the killer would be kind enough to just drop dead on their own someplace far away from me," I pondered wistfully.

Maybe they could get food poisoning or be trampled by a passing horse or something.

"Don't worry, it'll be fine. I know you'll be able to overcome whatever trouble comes your way."

"Shall I smash those glasses, Your Eminence? I don't want to encounter any *trouble* whatsoever."

I glared at Glasses. He was acting even creepier than usual today. I was about to be away on another extended trip, and I couldn't bear the thought of leaving poor Atalanta in this asshole's care once again. But, that said, bringing him with me would also be dangerous, wouldn't it...? I'd been able to give him plenty of love and affection while I'd been recovering in my sickbed, but being parted was heartbreaking all the same.

"It looks like you're getting a little distracted there..."

Glasses sat down in his chair and rested his elbows on the desk. He interlaced his fingers in front of his face, leaving his mouth concealed behind his hands as he stared at me. Something about that pose *really* pissed me off.

"What is it?" I asked. "If you've got something more to say, then please *sum it up briefly* as promised."

"Indeed. We mustn't keep things from each other. The only

lies worth telling are those that bring people happiness."

"Did you get that from a book?"

"You may find surprising encounters awaiting you in the Holy City, but please be sure to devote yourself to your duties," he replied evasively.

"I'm right, aren't I?"

No response.

Say something, dammit.

"Every new encounter is surprising, isn't it?" I said, filling the silence. "Coming to know another person is an endless series of surprises. With every meeting, we set forth into a new world brimming with wonder."

Source: a book I'd been reading in bed.

"You're fresh out of recovery, so maybe you're just feeling off... Still, I feel like you've gotten snarkier than you used to be, haven't you?"

"Not at all, Your Eminence. I've merely done a little thinking as to how I live my life."

At any rate, I wasn't beating up Glasses...*yet*. That in itself was an excellent display of ladylike refinement, if you asked me.

"Hmm... Yeah, I guess..." Glasses said, visibly deflating.

What the hell had this asshole been hoping for?

"In any case, Sister Alicia. I hereby order you to guard Saint Nevissa and investigate the killer. Depending on the situation, you may need to deal with them on the spot, but please try to capture them alive if at all possible. After all, they might have a larger organization backing them... You understand, right?"

"Of course I understand. Do I look like an idiot, Your Eminence?"

"Whoa, scary..."

Now he'd really pissed me off. I stepped forward with my left foot and swung my right leg up into a kick, sweeping sideways to send his glasses flying with the tip of my foot.

"Wah!"

The glasses flew onto a bookcase, briefly spinning in place before settling down onto the shelf.

Dammit.

"As you can see, I've returned to peak physical condition, so please rest assured, Your Eminence."

"Ah... Yup... Also, could you please try and take care of the interpersonal situation around Her Sagacity as well? I hear

there's been some discord lately."

"Is that part of my job?"

"No, but c'mon, please? As a favor?"

Screw you.

By the way, even though I'd kicked his glasses off with a good deal of force, the lenses were perfectly intact.

Drop dead.

"Well then," I said, turning on my heel to take my leave. We didn't need to keep up this conversation any longer.

"Ah, one more thing," Glasses said, deliberately calling me back at the last second as I headed for the door. "I know this isn't part of your job, but please—would you share your wisdom and guidance with Her Sagacity and help ease her worries, Sister Alicia?"

"Me? Don't you have that the wrong way around?"

"No, *you're* going to guide *her*—the Holy Saint herself."

I had no idea what he was scheming, but I didn't have any right to refuse—same as the Hero-killing mission, in the end. The only option I was permitted was to nod my head.

"Understood. I'll go get nice and chummy with Her Sagacity. Okay, asshole?"

"Please do."

I returned to the courtyard to find Atalanta trembling nervously while Cion stared at him. I retrieved my cat and explained the situation. We'd prepare for our travels that same day; the next morning, the gentle rocking of a stagecoach would carry us out of Clastreach, the battle-scarred City of Marble.

Even as I glowered with frustration at whatever new drama scripted by the Gods might await us, we headed off on our journey to Eldias, the Holy City governed by the pope himself—

—our journey to Her Sagacity, the Holy Saint Nevissa Vernalia.

Chapter 2

The Holy City of Eldias was said to be a city built from faith. It was located in the southwest of the continent, and the pope's sovereign authority over the city was officially recognized by the king. It wasn't far from the royal capital—with a fast horse, you could travel from one to the other within a day. However, the two cities differed radically in both layout and temperament. While the capital, Gracefort, was constructed in a straight path leading to the palace by the sea, the city of Eldias unfolded outward from the grand cathedral at its center. The people of the capital swore fealty to the nobles and the king, but the citizens of the Holy City were bound together by their unshakable faith in the Gods.

Every morning and evening, as bells rang out through the streets to mark the hours of worship, the entire city fell silent. Every single person paused in their work and offered up their prayers. They thanked the Gods for their protection—for bringing them safely through another day, and for sending the stars to light the heavens even as the night closed in.

"Any crime committed here is considered an act of sacrilege against the Gods," I explained. "That's why they call Eldias the most peaceful city in the world."

It was a calm, orderly place, far removed from war and conflict. The fact that the Hero had been dispatched here at all was already a testament to the strangeness of the present circumstances.

"Your face isn't that widely known, but there are probably a fair number of people here who attended your victory parade in the capital. So please, try not to draw attention to yourself, Cion."

"Whooooa..."

I turned to look at her. "Are you listening, Cion?"

"Huh? Ah, yeah! It's fine, don't worry about it. I'm used to this stuff!"

Cion disembarked from the stagecoach, instantly enraptured by the gleaming white streets. I understood the feeling—Eldias was a beautiful city in a different way from Clastreach. Still...

"Is this your first time here?"

Cion's eyes swept ceaselessly over everything around us, filled

with curiosity more than caution.

"Well, yeah—Master and I basically lived on the front lines. You must know this place like the back of your hand though, right, Alicia?"

"I've only visited a few times on errands for the cardinal. I'm not *that* familiar with it."

"Ah, gotcha," she said. "It's so pretty..."

I'd done my best to explain the importance of our mission and the crisis currently facing the Church, but did this girl actually understand at all?

As though she'd sensed my concern, Cion's face instantly turned serious, and she took hold of my hand.

"Don't worry, it'll be fine! I'll protect you, Alicia!"

"That's not what I..."

Well... Whatever. It's fine. It's not like anything's going to happen right this minute. We should start by meeting the saint herself, finding out if there've been sightings of anyone suspicious in town, that sort of—

"Huh?"

"Alicia! Over here!"

In an instant, Cion had vanished from my side. She'd wandered off a short distance to a market stall that was opening up shop.

Does she have zero *sense of danger?! Seriously, this girl...!*

Carefully keeping my frustration off of my face, I quickly walked over to find Cion examining a small knife, holding it up to the light with a cheerful smile.

I stared at her. "What are you doing?"

"Oh, I was just checking out all the stuff they've got here! Look at this knife! Pretty, right? Plus it's got letters or something engraved on it, isn't that cool?"

"It's a hymn to the Gods. That's not for practical use."

"So it's for rituals and stuff?"

"Yes—all the goods in this city are. Everything here is used for expressing gratitude to the Gods, so I doubt it would suit your tastes."

As I spoke, I took the knife from Cion and handed it back to the shopkeeper. I moved with delicate poise befitting a bride of the Gods, and I diligently offered a small prayer along with my thanks.

"Let's go. Her Sagacity will be expecting us."

“Aww, c’mon! Let’s look around a little more, Aliciaaa!”

Honestly. She really is a child…

That feeling left an awkwardness nagging at my brain. If it came down to who was protecting whom, *I’d* probably be the one getting protected. But whenever I looked at Cion’s innocent face, I felt like I’d gotten a troublesome little sister. It called up memories of my days back at the orphanage, leaving me ill at ease somehow.

This isn’t like me…

It’d already been almost eight years since I’d left. Between then and now, I’d disposed of countless “heretics” in my role as an enforcer for the Church. And *now* I was playing at being a regular nun? All the dead souls I’d left in my wake would be raging against me if they could see. *Look at you, trying to have an ordinary happy life…* they’d say. *How dare you…*

I had no intention of letting myself feel guilty about it, but nevertheless, the thought sent something dark and blunt sinking down through my chest. Professional habit kicked back in, though, and I pushed all those irrelevant thoughts outside my mind, as though they’d never been there at all.

“Well then…”

In any case, I cast my gaze around the streets. I wasn’t Cion, but I found myself struck by the beauty of this place as well. Everything here was designed to elevate people’s faith, from the decorations that lined the streets to the entire city itself. The scenery around us had a sense of consistency and unity; even when you knew the truth behind the scam, it was still an incredible sight. A less charitable observer could call it *zealotry*, but at any rate, the architecture on its own didn’t contain any malice. All of it was simply meant to heighten the Gods’ power and illustrate their glory. Essentially, the whole city was built up out of pure and innocent worship for the Gods.

And so, any *foreign element* that found its way in would disrupt the harmony of the entire city.

“Do you feel it too, Cion?”

“Huh?”

Cion was in full-on tourist mode and didn’t seem to have picked it up, but from the moment we’d arrived, I’d had an uncomfortable feeling that we were being watched.

There was something in the gazes of passersby, in the sense of probing vigilance that all the people gave off.

It doesn't feel like they're focused on us, though. It's more like the entire city is on edge…

"Well, after everything that's happened, I suppose it's obvious they would be…"

Unlike the serial killings within the Church, the high cardinal assassinations and the attack by the Demon Lord's former general had been too big to cover up. The kingdom's elation following the slaying of the Demon Lord had already cooled, and with the remnants of his armies still at large, people's fears and anxieties were growing by the day. That was exactly why His Holiness the Pope—the leader of the entire Church, a man whose influence was felt all throughout the kingdom—had begun his current pilgrimage. He, and his large retinue of holy knights, would travel from place to place to remind the people once again that *the war was over*.

"So most of the city's knights are out of town?" Cion asked.

"That's right. From what I've heard, they've kept only the bare minimum needed to maintain order."

The figures of holy knights on patrol were conspicuously absent from the streets. The few knights we'd met at the entrance checkpoint were the last we'd seen. That didn't necessarily mean an increase in crime, but every little disruption to daily life had a way of making itself felt…

As I contemplated, I noticed a crowd of people surrounding a few holy knights on the main road leading to our destination, the Pontifex Cathedral. With the crowd closed in around them, the three knights were starting to panic. They were clad in shining silver armor with gold detailing, reminiscent of fine pottery. Over the armor, they wore crimson capes that would normally be reserved for ceremonial occasions. These were elites straight from headquarters. The unusual thing, though, was that the crowd weren't cheering for the knights—they were *yelling at them*.

"What's that?" Cion asked.

"It looks like they're transporting criminals."

With the knights were six figures chained hand and foot, covered by cloaks that were basically rags. Normally, I'd expect to see them being carried in on a wagon, but maybe they needed tighter security? It looked like they had come in through the main gate and were heading to the cathedral on foot.

The insults flying at them were unlistenable.

I took Cion's arm and turned away to a side street. The commotion was blocking the road, and I wanted to avoid any unnecessary trouble. Our job *wasn't* to help them out, after all… But a moment later, a rock flew in from somewhere in the crowd and hit one of the prisoners in the head. The figure crumpled to the ground, and the hood slipped off of her head, revealing the face of a young girl—probably not even ten years old. Sprouting out of the top of her head were *dog ears*, and as she dazedly tried to wipe at the blood running down her forehead, the hand she raised was a *paw*.

"Disgusting…!"

"Why would Her Sagacity possibly…"

After a brief moment of stillness, the whispers and curses picked up with renewed fury. "Abomination against the Gods," "filthy blood"—those words weren't just directed at the girl, but at the *other children* with her as well. Presumably all of the chained-up figures had the same sorts of *animallike traits* somewhere on their bodies.

I stared out at them. "Devil-touched, huh…"

It was my first time seeing one. They weren't my department, so I only knew what I'd picked up in passing. People said that they were cursed from birth, or that they'd been demons in past lives; whatever the reason, they were children born with *those sorts of traits*. They were considered impure beings in the eyes of the Gods, and if a parent discovered that their child was one of them, they were obligated to report them to the Church. They were shunned and ostracized children; by the time they grew up, most were killed or forced to flee the country.

"I feel bad for them, but there's nothing we can… Wai— Hey!"

Shit!

By the time I realized I'd been too slow, Cion was already knelt down next to the devil-touched girl, gently placing a hand on her cheek and examining her wound.

"Are you okay? It must hurt… I'm so sorry…"

Cion spoke with a pained expression, almost as though the girl's injury were her own doing. She took out a cloth from the pouch at her hip to wipe off the blood.

A variety of reactions spread across the crowd at the sight of this intruder dashing over to the target of their vitriol. Confusion, unease, rage…

"You're the ones…! You're the ones who call the wolfmen onto

us!!!” one of the gathered people screamed at their backs. His arm was wrapped in bandages, and he had a nasty scar on his forehead; the holy knights were holding him back, but that didn’t stop him shouting. Judging from his words, it sounded like he’d lost his home in last month’s attack by General Heavenfang.

“If it weren’t for that, then I’d…” He kept spewing what-ifs, filled with unbridled anger.

“I’m sorry…”

Those faint words fell to the ground, almost drowned out by the noise around us.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry…”

Her hollow eyes were oblivious to the dripping blood and to Cion right beside her. Her mouth just moved mindlessly, over and over and over. The small figure, repeating apologies with tears of pained regret, seemed to strike the nerves of the *victims* around her.

“Apologies aren’t gonna fix this!” The invective continued flying.

“Kill them!” a voice spilled in from somewhere, demanding vengeance.

“Kill them, kill them, kill them!”

It had started as just one or two people venting their own frustration, but now it had become a shout that seemed to set the entire city shaking.

“Kill the traitors!”

“The Gods’ judgment upon the impure!”

Voice after voice made their faith manifest, demanding the deaths of children.

Cion’s face was trembling with anger. She still seemed to have some self-control, though. She cast a pleading glance over to me, looking like she was about to start crying, her gaze begging me for permission to *take action*.

No, you can’t. I shook my head back at her.

If Cion demanded the protection of these children, using her role as *the Hero* as a shield, people *would* probably listen. But that would also leave a stain on the Hero’s name. If the Hero—the chosen one blessed by the love of the Gods, the slayer of the Demon Lord—were seen protecting devil-touched children, it would sow the seeds of distrust among the more zealous believers. For the Church higher-ups who’d demanded the Hero’s assassination, this could end up becoming the perfect excuse to

assemble the inquisitors.

You can't do it, Cion... There are some things we can't do anything about. Just like I can't go against the Gods, you...

I lowered my gaze to my bible in its sling at my hip.

"Agh!" came a shout from somewhere in the mob.

A short shadow slipped in between the holy knights, charging at one of the prisoners. In his hand, gleaming wickedly in the light, was a small knife—

"Cion!"

"Ngh...!"

Before I'd even shouted my warning, she'd already leaped up to grab the boy's arm. The knife slipped out of his hand and hit the ground with a dull sound.

"Lemme go! Lemme go, dammit! I... I just...!"

The boy kept on yelling things like "It's all their fault" and "If it weren't for these bastards, my mom and dad would still..." and so on, with tears in his eyes and rage in his voice.

Cion stared silently at him. She could easily shut him up if she wanted to, but she just furrowed her brow in sadness as she cast her gaze to the young assailant in her grip, to the mob stunned into momentary silence...and to me.

There was nothing we could do. But if this commotion got any worse, someone was bound to realize Cion's identity sooner or later.

"I'll handle it."

Glasses would probably get complaints later, but it was still better than letting the Hero face off against civilians. If I twisted an arm or two, I could intimidate the crowd into cooling off. It was an easy enough job, just... If a bride of the Gods engaged in violence in the Holy City of Eldias, the domain of the pope himself, "unbecoming conduct" wouldn't even *begin* to cover it. This would be a nightmare.

Still, if the alternative was *the Hero* ending up as the villain, I needed to step in and take the heat instead.

"Everyone—"

As I grabbed hold of my bible and raised my voice, *her voice* rang out at the exact same moment.

"Everyone, please, I beseech you to lower your arms."

Her elegant and refined tones drowned out my own words, leaving a brief stillness in their wake.

"I beg of you... Please."

She was a bride clad in manifold layers of pure white vestments, with a nun walking at her side to attend her. With each step she took, the bells attached to her staff chimed out until she came to a stop right in front of us.

“Please, calm your hearts…”

With a strip of black cloth tied across her face, “the Blind-Eyed Saint” *looked directly at us*.

The moment the Holy Saint appeared, it was like a spell had been cast upon the crowd. At the mere sight of her, old men sank to their knees, tears streaming down their faces; people who’d been raising their voices in anger just moments ago hung their heads sadly as they prayed. It felt as though a messenger of the Gods themselves had descended to earth—I could almost swear I saw the entire world shift in hue around her. Faced with this scene, Cion and I lost our words as well.

“You are the envoys sent by High Cardinal Salamanrius, are you not?”

As she addressed me, I knelt before her without a second thought. It wasn’t a matter of etiquette—I could only call it *instinct*.

***

“I’m so sorry, Your Sagacity. This is all the result of my lapse in awareness… I should have been more observant…”

“Sister Teresa, please, raise your head. You bear no fault in this.”

We’d traveled with the saint to an orphanage on the edge of town. As we stood outside a small room holding the boy who’d attacked the devil-touched children, the graying nun who ran the orphanage apologetically explained the situation to us.

Apparently, this orphanage had been converted from an old church on the saint’s orders; she visited a few times a month to comfort the children or whatever.

“Normally, they wait patiently for me to arrive…” the saint added. “But with the absence of the knights who usually guard me, it seems one of them came out to look for me.”

They told us that nothing like this had ever happened before; it was a completely unanticipated turn of events.

“Please, leave the boy to me and go attend to the other children, Sister. I wouldn’t want them to worry at your absence.”

“You truly are too kind, Your Sagacity… I cannot thank you enough.” The older nun gave a deep bow.

“You as well, Sister Loria.”

“But, Your Sagacity—”

The saint’s attendant glanced nervously at the two of us.

“It’s all right. Please, see to the children.”

At the saint’s urging, the attendant nodded reluctantly and headed away to the other children. The saint’s posture was graceful and regal, showing not the faintest trace of doubt as she saw the nun off.

All in all, the saint was a far more mysterious person than even the rumors suggested. It wasn’t just her incredible air of charisma. Her white vestments, even as they covered up the pronounced curves of her body with layer upon layer of fabric, still felt intensely *provocative* somehow.

“Am I rather unlike the saint you envisioned from the stories?” she asked.

“Ah— No, Your Sagacity, I…”

Faced with her unflinchingly direct question, I stumbled over my words. I felt an utter clarity of intent from her, as though she were gazing right into my heart.

The saint let out a delicate laugh, *looking carefully* at me and then at Cion as she gave a little smile.

“I suppose I’ve yet to introduce myself,” she said. “It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Nevissa Vernalia; I’ve been graciously permitted the title of Saint.”

“Alicia Snowell, Your Sagacity. And this is—”

“And you must be the great Hero Elcyon, slayer of the Demon Lord. I’ve heard much about you. It is truly an honor to meet you at last.”

She warmly extended a hand; Cion hesitated an instant before reaching out to shake it.

“It’s good to meet you. I’m Elcyon Cromwell, the Hero.”

The saint weighed Cion’s hand in her own. “It seems far smaller than I’d expected the hand of the Hero would be…”

“Ah, um, yes—!”

Seriously, how many times have I warned you you’re gonna get found out?



“What was it that drove that boy to such lengths?”

I deliberately changed the topic, redirecting the saint’s attention to the other side of the door. I *was* also concerned about the kid, though. He’d calmed down once she’d spoken to him, but the murderous rage he’d displayed toward the devil-touched was far beyond what any child should have.

“His parents were killed by demons right before his eyes,” she explained. “I’m told his family were traveling merchants, and they were attacked on the road between towns. By the time a knight patrol found them and came to their aid, his parents were already beyond saving…”

“I see…”

If those demons had been wolfmen, then he could easily have seen echoes of them in the figure of that girl being transported.

“I’ve explained time and again that the devil-touched aren’t demons; they’re simply human beings, the same as you or I. And yet, even still…”

With a sad expression, the saint felt for the door handle and made her way into the room. I’d heard that people didn’t need sight to navigate spaces they were sufficiently familiar with, but even so, her footsteps were shaky. Cion and I hurried in after her to make sure she wouldn’t fall over.

The boy sat in a chair by the window of the small study. The moment he saw the saint’s face, he stood up and glared at us; Cion placed a hand on her shoulder and let her know to stop.

“Johann…?” the saint asked.

“Why…?! Why’d you…?” the boy started, raising his voice angrily as soon as the saint spoke. “They’re the bad guys, aren’t they?!”

It sounded as though all the emotions he’d been bottling up were exploding out of him all at once. The saint just quietly shook her head, though.

“Even if that were so, you must not give over your life to vengeance.”

“Why not?!”

She gently knelt down to match his eye level, placing her hands on the boy’s shoulders as she wove her words.

“Johann…” she said. “I’m certain that your parents protected you with their lives so that you could live freely, in peace and plenty—not for the sake of revenge. You mustn’t let hatred make you its prisoner… Do you truly believe your parents would wish

that of you?”

She softly raised a hand to the boy’s cheek, gently stroking her fingers along as though feeling out the shape of his heart. Her movements were cautious and slow, as if she were truly touching the innermost depths of his soul.

“And if you ever were to take another’s life, then someone would come to bear a grudge against you in turn. If they were to carry that same hatred toward you, and seek to end your life… That would pain me terribly…”

“It would…?”

“Yes, it would. Just as your parents wished for your happiness, I wish for it as well—yours and everyone’s. Please, can you understand…?”

There was a short silence as the boy looked into her blindfolded eyes with a troubled expression. But after a few moments’ hesitation, he nodded his head.

“Okay. I understand.”

“Then all is well.” She nodded back at him. “Go return to the others, won’t you?”

She sent him off, then ran a hand along a desk as she stood back up.

“My apologies for bringing you to see such an uncomfortable moment,” the saint said with a shy and awkward smile.

Cion’s eyes were wide with astonishment, and my brow was furrowed in thought.

“Do you always care for them in that way?” I asked.

“I am the one who insisted on taking them all in, after all. By rights, it ought to be my responsibility to look after them as well, but with my eyes as they are…”

She leaned her head to the side with a look of unease and slumped her shoulders, as if to say that this was the most she could do for them.

“Surely this work should not fall to one such as yourself, Your Sagacity?” I asked.

“I believe that all of us have greater roles to play than simply carrying out our assigned duties.”

Oh, is that so.

There wouldn’t be much point in me saying that, though. At any rate, I could never see myself following her lead.

While the pope and the Seven High Cardinals below him held positions supported by the staff of the Holy Church, you could

say that the *saint* was supported by all those who believed in the Gods. Unlike the pope, who received divine orders from the Gods and conveyed their words, she was a figure of beauty and charisma who heard the wishes of the *people* and conveyed them up to the Gods. Basically, her job was to be everyone's mom.

"I'm sure you must find this laughable, Sir Hero. I understand fully that not all the problems of the world can be solved by kind words and platitudes… Still, I believe that adults have a duty to let children dream while they're still young—don't you agree?"

"I-I'm not…"

As the conversation suddenly turned to her, Cion floundered for words, but I could see that there was a storm inside her chest. Cion's family had been killed by demons as well; she was another war orphan who'd ended up in an orphanage, just like that boy.

"I was robbed of my eyes by demons, but strangely, I hold no resentment. After losing my sight, I feel as though there are a great many things I have come to see more clearly," the saint said wistfully. "I imagine that sounds absurd; I do hope you won't laugh at me…"

Her innocent, girlish smile set me on even higher alert. According to the stories, every single person who met with the saint came away saying they would gladly give up their lives for her—even hardened bandits and mercenaries who cared for nothing except coin.

"There's no need to stare at me with such concern. I don't bite," she said with a smile. "I simply wish to be friends with everyone."

I looked down at the palm of her hand as she held it out to me.

"Both of us seek to guide this world to a better future. Is it truly so difficult to do so hand in hand?" she asked.

She wasn't so charismatic that it was impossible to disagree with her, but her mysterious charm inevitably left a feeling of guilt in anyone who rejected her words—that was how she seemed to me.

"Do I truly appear so terrifying in your eyes, Sister Alicia?"

"No, I…"

I'm simply here to do my job. That was how I'd wanted to answer, but the words stuck in my throat and wouldn't come out

properly.

"I..."

I tried again, but thought better of it. There was no point in stirring up unnecessary conflict. I mentally filed this as *just part of my job*, and reached out to take the offered hand, when—

"Huh...?"

—a strange sensation ran through me. I had a clear, undeniable feeling that I was being watched. I instinctively turned my head to find the watcher, casting my attention outside the window. A moment later...

"Saint Nevissaaaaa!!!" a group of voices cried out.

Bang! The window slammed open almost hard enough to break the frame, and a gaggle of excited children poked their faces and bodies through.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Your Sagacity!"

The nun who'd been attending the saint ran up behind the children, red-faced and apologetic as she frantically tried to peel the kids away.

"Oh my..." the saint said. She only had a brief moment to be surprised before—

"Saint Nevissaaaaa!"

—another group of children charged in from down the hall. The older nun who ran the orphanage scolded them as she followed behind, but it was like herding cats.

"My apologies," the saint said. "Let us continue our conversation later—perhaps after we've returned to the cathedral?"

She smiled at the children as they crowded around her, and I simply answered with a shrug of my shoulders.

Wait, no, that's right, she can't see, I reminded myself, and answered with words instead.

"If you're short on hands, then by all means, have our dear Hero play with the children as well. He's been rather *lacking in exercise* lately, it seems."

"Alicia?!"

Cion turned to me with a look of shock, but no one was about to ask for her opinion on the matter.

"Hero?"

"You're the Hero?!"

"Wha, ah, ummm...?!"

In the blink of an eye, Cion was surrounded by children and

dragged outside along with the saint. Soon, all that remained were the echoes of her pitiful cry of “Aliciaaaa?!”

I stood alone in the silent, empty room in the wake of the storm. I cast my gaze outside again, but even going right up to the window and taking a look around, I couldn’t spot any suspicious presences.

“Was it just my imagination…?”

The sunlight of a calm and pleasant autumn afternoon shone in through the window. There were trees planted in the back garden; even here in the city, the space was overflowing with greenery. As the children ran and played outside, their faces looked utterly unclouded. I’d expect most orphans to carry at least a little resentment toward the world—at least a bit of a destructive impulse—but I couldn’t spot even the smallest trace of it. Even the boy who’d tried to attack the devil-touched girl earlier was laughing and playing with the others as though nothing had happened, crowding and tugging at Cion as they rolled about on the lawn. Their laughter was almost absurdly filled with childish glee.

“Let children dream while they’re still young, huh…?”

Nevissa Vernalia, carrying that principle to heart as she engaged warmly with the children, was every bit the image of a saint. I couldn’t ever imagine being like her… Not that I had any interest in trying to be.

They kept on playing with the children until the bells rang out to call everyone to evening prayer. We ended up taking our dinner there at the orphanage, and by the time we made it to our original destination, it was already getting late.

“I truly cannot thank you enough for your assistance. I do hope you haven’t become disillusioned with me after such an embarrassing display…”

As we stood in the Pontifex Cathedral—the heart of the Holy City, the focal point of all prayer—in front of the saint’s private quarters, she bowed her head to Cion and gave an awkward smile.

“No, not at all!” Cion replied, shyly waving to her.

At any rate, now that we’d seen Her Sagacity safely back to her room, our work was done for today. I felt far more tired than I should’ve been, but this was all part of the job—I’d just have to put up with it.

Honestly, I really wanted to head back to Atalanta right this

second, though.

"We'll return to meet you before breakfast, but if you have any concerns in the meantime, please contact us at once, Your Sagacity. We are fully prepared to respond at a moment's notice."

"You really are serious to the end, aren't you?" she replied with a more casual smile. "It might be difficult for you, but please try and get some rest, okay?"

She instructed her attendant to guide us to our own quarters, then disappeared into her room.

"Come along, then."

The nun carefully locked the door before turning back to us with a dour look—you could call it grouchy, even.

"Whew..." Cion sighed. "She's really amazing, isn't she? Her Sagacity, I mean."

"I suppose so," I replied.

The nun walked quickly and silently ahead of us; I wasn't sure whether she was listening or not.

You're supposed to be guiding *us, right?*

Well, whatever. I shifted my thoughts elsewhere as I took in the interior of the cathedral. The priests who passed us in the halls were brisk and rushed in their movements. This was the nerve center of the Holy Church, where the words of the Gods were put into writing as divine orders. The grand cathedral saw a constant stream of worshippers coming to offer their prayers day in and day out, so the security here was supposed to be tighter than other cathedrals, but...

"They're really sparse, aren't they..."

There were far fewer holy knights around than I'd expected. As we walked through the grounds, we passed by priests in elaborately decorated vestments and nuns moving with careful poise, but there were almost no knights on duty to watch for suspicious activity inside. There were no signs of life in the neighboring dormitories either.

There were all sorts of incantations set up inside the grand cathedral, but even so, this was anything but reassuring. This was the residence of the pope himself, as well as a site for meetings of the Seven High Cardinals, after all. Typically, large numbers of holy knights would live in the dormitories set up nearby, and the organizations that oversaw various regional churches also had their headquarters in the area. This was

essentially the very heart of the Church. It was shocking to see their security so understaffed…

I hadn't heard any whispers or complaints about the saint anywhere, so this "interpersonal discord" Glasses had mentioned didn't seem to have anything to do with it.

Well, as long as nothing happens, it's all fine… I guess?

The Gods, in their fickle whims, always seemed to send down trouble at exactly these sorts of times, though.

"Right here," the nun said, showing us to a two-person room just off a main hallway.

It wasn't huge, but it wasn't cramped either—the perfect size for two people to sleep. I thanked the nun and dismissed her.

"Cion, how about we take a walk around the grounds before bed?" I proposed as soon as we'd set down our bags.

This was my first time here, and the mental map I'd built up from looking over floor plans wasn't the same as actually walking around and getting a feel for the place firsthand. If worse came to worst, we couldn't afford to waste time running in circles trying to find the saint's room.

"I was just thinking the same thing!"

Cheerfully smiling about us being on the same wavelength or something, Cion kept her cloak on and followed me out of the room.

I'd expected there to be at least a nun or someone on observation duty, but the hallway was completely deserted. We softly closed the door and walked down the hall, keeping our senses alert and our footfalls quiet.

"By the way, Cion, did you notice? That nun who was attending Her Sagacity was glaring at you all day."

"Huh?! Why…?!"

I stifled a laugh, surprised at her overdramatic reaction.

"Did I do something wrong…?"

As I realized she was genuinely worried about it, I suddenly found myself sighing instead. Being this dense was almost a talent, in a way.

"She's probably jealous. You're the Hero—the legendary champion who saved the world from the Demon Lord. I suppose it's natural she'd worry about you seducing Her Sagacity."

"Ah… I see…"

Champions *were* infamous womanizers, after all. Placing one on ceremonial guard duty would be one thing, but assigning a

champion to remain at Her Sagacity's side at all times would be unthinkable under any normal circumstances. Although... Even before the plan to assassinate the Hero, the Church had already been trying to buy "him" into their organization. Maybe one of the factions involved had reached out to Glasses with exactly that in mind.

Thinking about it properly, that theory became even more plausible when I considered why *the Hero*—ostensibly a man—and *myself*—a bride of the Gods—had been placed in the same bedroom. The schemes of these self-aggrandizing bastards, using the guarding of the Holy Saint as a pretext to strengthen their own influence, were suddenly painfully transparent. I could all but imagine their stupid reasoning: If either I or the saint got knocked up by the Hero, the Church's future was secure.

"This is just pathetic..." I muttered.

Here I was, faithfully serving the Gods to my utmost as always, and these megalomaniacal priests just did whatever the hell they wanted...

"These carpets are so soft!" Cion cheerfully noted.

"They are," I sighed.

Our pure and innocent Hero didn't seem at all concerned about it, though... Did this girl have any understanding of just how deep into enemy territory she'd been thrown?

"Remember, Cion—please act with the utmost care at all times. If you're judged to have turned against the teachings of the Gods, you'll be dragged off to the inquisitors on the spot."

"I understand. I'll never put you in danger, Alicia!"

Ah, nope. She doesn't get it at all.

"Alicia...?"

"Ah, no— Anyway, um, how are things looking? Do you feel anything?"

"Huh? Hmm... Mmm...?"

The truth was, I still had that feeling that someone was watching me. I couldn't tell where it was coming from, though, or even what direction. If Cion wasn't concerned, then maybe it was just my imagination. Still, it was tugging at my nerves too much to dismiss entirely.

"I guess I do kinda feel like I'm being watched, maybe...?" she said. "But it's like, well... Like my body feels a bit antsy, y'know? It's like when people talk about the eyes of the Gods being on us, right?"

“Ah, that must be—” I started, then second-guessed myself about whether I should explain.

That was probably an effect of the way this cathedral was constructed—the way the city itself was constructed, really. There were incantations across the entire Holy City to create the *feeling* that “the Gods are watching.”

The unease I felt was something different, though. I could clearly feel the presence of a *living being* watching stealthily with bated breath.

I fell silent, lost in thought.

“What is it?” Cion asked.

“Do you feel anything besides that? Like there’s a person watching us?”

“Mmm…”

Cion tilted her head, trying to follow my gaze. Maybe it really was all in my head? Cion was more sensitive to the presence of demons than I was. If *she* said nothing was wrong, then that was that.

“Well, if it’s just my imagination, then that’d be ideal…”

All the same, I just couldn’t shake that unsettling feeling. But no matter how carefully I scanned our surroundings, I couldn’t spot anyone.

“It’s all right! I’m here with you!”

“Ah…”

Now it looked like I’d gotten Cion hyped up over nothing… Well, whatever. A bit of extra caution never hurt.

“If you notice anything off…”

“Let Alicia know right away!” she said eagerly.

I sighed inwardly. “Please do.”

Eh, it’s fine.

We walked on, continuing our exploration of the cathedral grounds. Once I’d gotten my muscle memory aligned with my knowledge of the floor plans, we headed through a courtyard garden back toward our room, when—

“Father…Carol…?”

—I suddenly caught sight of an unexpected figure.

Cion turned to look at me quizzically as that name slipped out of my mouth.

A man in his late middle age stood by a cart, directing a few other priests. He smiled warmly as he noticed me, then walked over to us with a calm and familiar gait.

“If it isn’t Sister Alicia Snowell. It’s been such a long time. Have you been well?”

I’d wondered if I might’ve been mistaken, but it was really him.

“It’s good to see you again, Father Carol Snowell…” I replied. “I never imagined that I would meet you here, of all places.”

“Oh? My, that High Cardinal Salamanrius is a rascal, isn’t he? I let him know ahead of time that I’d been reassigned here, but he must have wanted to surprise you.”

Faced with his cheerful smile, I could feel my own expression softening as well.

“His Eminence truly is mean-spirited. Had I known that at the time, I would never have accepted his invitation to work for him.”

“Then the fault is mine for sending you off to him. Please allow me to offer my deepest apologies, my dear.”

As he gave an exaggeratedly formal bow, I couldn’t help letting out a laugh.

“I’m glad to see you’re the same as ever, Father.”

“And you as well.”

We exchanged a warm handshake. I looked up at his face, noticing a few more wrinkles than I remembered.

“Alicia…? Who’s this?” Cion asked nervously.

“Ah… My apologies. Allow me to introduce you. This is Father Carol Snowell, headmaster of the Snowell Orphanage where I was raised.”

“And you must be that legendary champion—the Hero Elcyon Cromwell, slayer of the mighty Demon Lord. I must truly thank you for traveling all this way to come to our aid. Please, defend us from whatever evil may be at hand.”

“Ah, y-yes, Father…!”

His words had their own sort of charisma, different from the saint’s. Cion stiffened up nervously, but she awkwardly reached out to accept his offered handshake.

I couldn’t help but feel bemused about this whole situation, but I got the picture now. If Father Carol had asked for us to come out here, then everything added up. I had to imagine there’d been some internal squabbling over the decision to have the Hero guard the saint in the pope’s absence, but he must’ve already laid the groundwork ahead of time.

“By the way, Alicia, you ran into some devil-touched children in town, didn’t you?” he asked. “I hear you held back the Hero in

a confrontation with civilians and even moved to take the blame in his stead. The knights said there was a bride glaring at the crowd, looking like she was ready to argue with the Gods themselves."

"Well, you see, I..."

"It's all right, you've done nothing wrong. If the Hero had revealed himself under those circumstances, that would have turned into a different sort of disaster. In any case, it was our own lapse in caution that allowed the crowd to surround the children to begin with. We ought to have taken more care to transport them at a time with fewer people on the streets. We've been shorthanded, but all the same, it was an oversight on our part. I cannot apologize enough—and to you as well, Sir Hero."

Cion and I were both taken aback by the older priest suddenly bowing his head to us.

"You acted to save children in peril," he continued. "That was truly good-hearted and admirable of you. It brings me joy to see what a wonderful bride you've grown into."

"Yes, Father..." I said slowly. "Thank you."

As I bowed back to him, I felt a painful twinge deep in my chest. He must not have been told that I'd been assigned to work as an *inquisitor* after I'd left to serve under High Cardinal Salamanrius. Information regarding inquisitors was top secret, after all. He knew about my public-facing role as the cardinal's assistant—not just a nun, but a *bride of the Gods*, acting under divine orders. But he could never have imagined that I'd been tasked with *slaughtering heretics*.

"Could I ask what you thought of them, though?"

"Of who, Father?"

"The devil-touched children. They're rounded up on our orders, and Her Sagacity has them sent off to various different orphanages—all of it regardless of their own wishes. It's saddening, isn't it? Children of man, made to bear the weight of sin from the moment of their birth..."

As I silently considered his question, images flashed through my mind: the animal-eared girl, her forehead bloodied by a thrown rock, and the boy who'd charged in to attack her with a knife.

"People call them avatars of impurity, but in truth, they are nothing of the sort," he said. "The fault lies not with them, but somewhere in the course of events that came before them,

leaving them burdened with the blood of demons. They are merely victims in all this. So please, my dear, don't think ill of them."

"We never have," I replied. "Neither he nor I bear them such prejudice to begin with, Father."

"I see... It truly is a relief to see you the same as ever."

Another sharp twinge of pain stabbed through my chest, leaving my smile shaky. There was no way I could ever tell him about the blood that stained my hands.

"Her Sagacity is really quite whimsical, isn't she?" I asked, desperate to change the topic. "I never would have imagined her playing so freely with children. She truly is a wonderful person—every bit deserving of the title of Holy Saint—but I was somewhat surprised all the same."

Maybe I'd played it up a little too hard. I didn't mean a word of it, and the hollow praise left a sour taste in my mouth. But Father Carol's reaction wasn't at all what I expected.

"Wonderful... Well, I suppose she is..."

He spoke as though something were caught in his throat. I furrowed my brow in confusion, and Cion did the same.

"Is there something that concerns you, Father?" I asked cautiously.

"No, never mind. You're a clever girl; I shouldn't go speaking out of turn."

"But, Father..."

Father Carol brushed past my apprehension, carrying on the conversation with his usual smile.



“Please, help her find her way. You and she really are very much alike.”

What’s that supposed to mean…?

Before I could ask him more, a voice rang out.

“Father Carol, we’ve finished unloading!”

The monks were calling him from across the courtyard, wearing the cheerful smiles of people whose work was done.

“I’m sorry, it seems I have to go. We’ll have time to talk more tomorrow.”

With a quick farewell and a bow to Cion, Father Carol returned to his duties. He looked and acted as though nothing at all were amiss.

“First the cardinal, now him? What the hell do they want me to do…?” I muttered.

“I would like you to *return to your room* and *get some rest*.”

I turned around at the sudden voice. The nun who’d guided us earlier was standing behind us.

“I see you’ve been speaking with Father Carol,” she said. “He truly is an admirable man. Had he come from a better background, he could easily have become one of the Seven High Cardinals by now.”

She’d come out here to scold us, but her gaze had turned to Father Carol’s back as he helped the monks push the cart away to a storage shed. The depth of her respect for him was plain to see.

“How long has Father Carol been serving here?” I asked.

“About two years now,” she replied. “He received a personal summons directly from His Holiness and has served as the chief administrator of this cathedral ever since.”

“Why would His Holiness have summoned him here…?”

Quite the career advancement for a humble orphanage headmaster…

“He and His Holiness come from the same town; I’m told they even attended seminary together.”

That was news to me. Thinking back to my memories of the orphanage, though, it all made perfect sense. Even though it was out in the borderlands, there’d been an endless stream of visitors from across the kingdom. Sometimes it had felt less like an orphanage and more like a regional meeting place for the Church.

“I really ought to thank him…”

As I spoke, though, those feelings left a faint bitter taste in the back of my mouth.

I wasn't sure what the nun made of my reaction, but she puffed out her cheeks in frustration.

"If you truly feel that way, then *please* return to your room and rest! If any issue arose while you were out here, it would be treated as Father Carol's failing. Even Her Sagacity is worried at you wandering about despite your exhaustion from your travels! I am fully aware that recent events have been disturbing, but if you are not in proper condition to assist when needed, then what use will it have been to summon you here to begin with? You as well, Sir Hero!"

"Uh..."

Watching the nun standing ramrod straight, doing her best to loom over us, Cion let out an awkward laugh. It *was* about time we returned to our room, though.

If it's so important to be well rested for Her Sagacity's sake, then shouldn't you *be in bed too?*

***

With a large yawn and an exhalation of "I'm beat!" Cion tossed off her cloak and flopped down onto the soft bed. Watching her, I also removed a few of the more *cumbersome* parts of my vestments and sat down in a chair.

"I wasn't sure what it was gonna be like guarding the saint, but it's nice there's someone you know here, right, Alicia?"

"It is," I replied. "As long as nothing goes wrong, this could end up being a rather pleasant vacation."

I checked outside the window to confirm that there weren't any potential footholds on the wall, then closed the curtains.

"You're kinda happy, aren't you?" she asked.

"Anyone would be at the sight of a familiar face."

"Ah, yeah." She pondered. "So was that guy your old master, Alicia?"

"Yes, I—" I started, before an image of *that champion* flashed through my mind.

"Huh?"

"No, it's fine."

Cion herself didn't seem particularly concerned, so I continued talking.

“I’d describe him more as my teacher, really. He’s the one who taught me how to read and write, after all.”

“Makes sense. I thought you seemed kind of alike.”

“Alike…?” I asked slowly, caught a bit off guard. “Me and Father Carol…?”

“Yeah!”

Cion was always an open book. If anything, I kind of felt like *she* had more in common with him than I did, but…

“If that’s the case, then it’s certainly gratifying to hear…”

It meant that I’d been doing a good job playing the role of a proper bride.

I had some feelings about those holy knights’ report on my actions in town, but even so, I really did believe I was much more *mature* now than I’d been back at the orphanage. Back then, well… Even I had to admit I’d been horribly childish.

“Oh, yeah… Remember that stuff the saint was saying? What’d you think of it, Alicia?”

“What in particular?”

Cion sat up on the bed, a thoughtful look on her face as she continued speaking.

“You know, not giving your life over to vengeance and all that stuff. I mean… Maybe she’s right, but still. I get how that kid felt too, y’know? Demons killed my family, and they wiped out the rest of the village too… For a while after that, I was scared all the time—I’d keep hearing everyone’s screams from back then, whether I was asleep or awake. And then, once I’d calmed down, I started hunting down the demons.”

It was only natural that today’s events would call back all those old memories. Eyes downcast, Cion forced herself to keep her expression calm and relaxed.

“So I want to kill all the demons, and I think there’s nothing wrong with getting revenge. Obviously it’s dangerous, and I know I’ll get burned by it someday too, but… I mean, wanting to avenge people isn’t really about logic at all, is it?”

“I…suppose not.”

Cion had lost one precious thing after another to demons. For her, *vengeance* was something familiar, something obvious… But that was exactly why her master had stained himself with blood and vanished from the world of humanity. Even now, I could still see his bitter expression as he’d told me that he didn’t want her ending up like him.

“But she won that boy over with nothing but words…” Cion mused. “There’s no way I could ever do that.”

“That’s precisely why they call her a *saint*.”

No one else could do the things she did. That was why she was recognized as a messenger of the Gods.

“Besides,” I continued, “you and that boy aren’t the same. He wasn’t attacking demons—just devil-touched children. It’s not as though *they’re* the ones who robbed him of his family.”

All he’d done was lash out in misdirected anger. His actions truly wouldn’t have accomplished anything except breeding more unnecessary hatred.

In any case, the saint was special. She wasn’t like us. I was already painfully aware of the Holy Saint’s unique and mystical gifts; it almost felt as though she’d been born onto this earth to receive that title.

“Alicia…?”

I looked back at Cion. “Never mind.”

My thoughts weren’t the same as Cion’s, but I had concerns of my own. Using just her words, she could halt people in their tracks and bring them over to her side. It was honestly a bit…well, *creepy*.

“Excuse me for a bit; I’m going to go take a bath,” I said. “Sorry, Cion, but I’ll bring you back some hot water in a bucket or something, so you can—”

“Ah, no, it’s fine—I can take care of stuff on my own…”

Cion hesitantly got off the bed and stepped over to me. She softly placed a hand on my forehead and furrowed her brow.

“You okay? You seem kinda worn out…”

“I’m just tired; that’s why I’m going to take a bath. I know you must be tired too, Cion, but, well… Let’s just call this a bride’s special privilege, okay?”

I brushed her off with a joke, doing my best to keep her from worrying. Then I gathered up just a few of my things and stepped out of the room.

If Cion *did* say she wanted a bath too, the Church would probably send over a handpicked bride as the *Hero’s* special privilege…

“But Cion’s not interested in that sort of thing anyway, right…?”

While we were in Glasses’s backyard, we’d been able to get her some privacy, but that wasn’t a possibility here. If it seemed

like everything was fine, I'd book us a room at a luxury inn somewhere, and then Cion could take all the baths she wanted.

While I pondered, I couldn't help letting out a gleeful chuckle, and I found a spring in my step as I walked down the halls. The truth was—although I really did feel bad for Cion—I'd kind of been looking forward to the baths here. Out on the road, we hadn't had so much as a chance to wash off properly, let alone a warm bath. I could clean off the dirt with orisons, but nothing really compared to a long soak in some nice hot water. I'd earned a bit of a reward, hadn't I?

Luckily, the cathedral's famous baths were completely deserted. Humming cheerfully to myself, I stripped out of my vestments and stepped through a wooden doorway into the grandest bathing hall in the entire kingdom.

They said these baths had been constructed by the same architect who'd designed the royal palace, sparing no effort or expense. Extravagant waterfalls of hot water ran down into the baths with a pleasant splashing sound. As I felt the steam touch my skin, my face naturally softened into a smile.

"Oooohhh... Oho! Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, I see..." I said, nodding meaninglessly at everything and nothing.

Having this much hot water constantly flowing could only be described as a miracle of the Gods. I'd heard rumors that the water was created by a vast magicite stone, but the actual design of this place was a mystery. They said the architect who'd constructed it had been several centuries ahead of his time, and even examining the plumbing mechanisms was considered taboo. Apparently, long ago some idiot had tried to open up the baths in the capital to figure out how they worked, and he'd rendered them permanently inoperable. He'd been executed, obviously.

"This place was built centuries ago, and after all that time, we still haven't figured out how to reproduce it... It really is absolutely criminal..."

Doing my best to contain the joy bubbling up in my chest, I washed off the dirt and sweat from my travels in preparation for a soak in the baths. We'd run into awful sandstorms and torrential rains on the way here from Clastreach; my hair was a dried-out mess, and on closer inspection, my skin was covered in scratches.

I sighed. "Blessings be upon the Gods... Blessings be upon

mankind…”

I was feeling impatient, so I delivered a pretty half-assed orison to fix up my skin. Meanwhile, I wiped off the dirt and carefully washed out the grease from my hair. I worked some soap into a lather—ooh, this stuff looked expensive—and hummed to myself some more as I scrubbed myself off.

“Man… I really do feel bad for Cion…”

She was a girl too, after all. She didn’t really care about this stuff, so bugging her about it wouldn’t help much, but there was nothing wrong with cleaning yourself up a little.

“If I washed her off, she’d probably smell like Atalanta when I’m giving him baths…” I smiled to myself.

She really did feel like a wild animal. That must’ve been something she’d picked up in order to survive out on the front lines, though—getting rid of your human smell, or something like that. Demons were acutely sensitive to the flow of mana, but from what I’d heard, a lot of them also had sharp noses like the warwolves. So, yeah. That was probably what it was.

“But still, we’re not on the battlefield *now*.” As I thought to myself, I ran my hands through my hair, brushing off the excess water. “She really should— Huh…?”

I froze up involuntarily, feeling a strange sensation in between my fingertips and my head.

“Hmmmm…?”

I felt around with growing suspicion. There wasn’t any pain. I’d just healed all my cuts with an orison moments ago.

“Huh?”

I brushed aside a drop of water that had fallen into my eyes, then slowly opened them again. As I felt around once more, I glanced over at the mirror, and there *they* were.

Animal ears.

I stared, frozen, at the mirror. “Wha—?”

I had ears. Ears like an animal—like a dog.

“Wha… What the fuck?!”

In a growing panic, I felt them with my fingers once again as I looked into the mirror. Feeling a sudden *squish* from behind me, I turned my head, and my eyes flew to what was growing from the base of my spine.

An impossible organ. A wordless scream.

I was unmistakably looking at a *dog’s tail*.

“Shit shit *shit*!!!”



Before I'd even gotten my thoughts in gear, my body had already started moving. I dashed out to the changing area to grab my vestments, hurriedly got myself some approximation of dressed, threw a large towel over my head, and ran for it.

None of this made any sense! Was I dreaming after falling asleep from exhaustion? Had someone slipped me some kind of sketchy drug? Possibility after possibility raced through my mind.

Regardless, if anyone saw me like this, I wouldn't have any time to make excuses before they branded me a devil-touched and stripped me of my title as a bride. No, I'd be lucky if that was all they did. If things went bad, they'd declare I was "a sinner who consorted with devils despite being a bride of the Gods" or some crap like that, and I'd go straight to the inquisitors... If I was *lucky*, I'd *only* get burned at the fucking stake!

"Aaaaggggghhh!!! Dammit!!!"

Why the hell is this happening to me?!

I called up my boss on my ear piercing while I searched for a hiding spot. I ended up on the second floor of a chapel, holed up behind a pillar on a terrace outside a stained glass window depicting the Gods. It was a cold autumn night, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

"C'mon! Fucking pick up, dammit!"

I sat in the shadow of the pillar, stamping my heels angrily as I called over and over. I didn't know exactly what'd happened, but I was positive Glasses had pulled some kind of crap while he'd been healing me. Ordinarily, I was forbidden from starting calls from my end except in emergency situations; but if this wasn't an emergency, then what the hell *was*?!

None of my calls were going through, though. It was still too early for him to be asleep, so either his hands were full, or he *didn't want to pick up* for some reason. I listened to the sound of my call waiting to connect, getting more and more pissed off with every ring.

"Ah, hello, Allisha?" Glasses yawned.

"About damn time!"

I'd finally managed to reach Glasses. His stupidly loud laughter echoed through my piercing; he seemed to have guessed exactly what was going on.

"Sounds like it's kicking in hard! Ha ha ha!"

"Don't fucking 'ha ha ha' me, Your Eminence!!! What the hell is this?!"

Twitch twitch.

The way my tail and ears moved completely independently of my own volition was utterly obnoxious.

"Hmmmm? If you're calling me, then you've already got a decent hunch, don't you?"

I heard the splash of something sinking into water.

"Wait… Were you not answering my calls because…?"

"Ah, yup. I was washing my hair."

I. Am going. To kill him!

"In any case, you're saying it's exactly what I think it is?" I asked.

"Yup, most likely—especially considering tonight's the full moon."

I glanced up to see a big round autumn moon hanging beautifully in the sky—and the moment I looked up at it, I felt a tingling at the base of my tail.

"Scarlet Brave…" I muttered.

"That'd be my guess," Glasses agreed.

"Weren't she and Veiss supposed to be the only ones who had that skill?"

"Well, you needed blood transfusions and whatnot, so you ended up with all sorts of stuff mixed in. I gave you some of the Hero's mana, General Heavenfang's blood, that sort of thing…"

"You *what*?!"

He gave me a demon's blood…?! What the hell was he thinking?

"I mean, you've got a pretty special blood type, right? It was certainly unorthodox, but you would've died from blood loss otherwise, and this result is a huge surprise, can't believe my eyes!" he singsonged.

"Will you *please* quit screwing around?"

If he'd been here in person, breaking his glasses would've had to wait until I'd broken a few *other* things.

"Anyway, it *is* the full moon. They say wolfmen get more vicious on nights like tonight, so that's probably tied into it… So when morning comes, you should be A-okay! Why not just think of this as a little one-night adventure and enjoy the dog-ear life?"

"I've got a damn *tail* too!"

"Aw, disappointed? I guess you *are* more of a cat person…"

"*Drop dead!!!*"

He'd already ended the call.

Well, it *was* true a cat tail might've been easier to hide if I

wrapped it around my waist or something…

“Agghhhh, dammit,” I groaned. “This sucks…”

My face was screwed up on the verge of tears, my vestments clung uncomfortably to my body with the moisture they’d absorbed, and the hem in the back was rolled up awkwardly around my tail. And, on top of that, I still had the towel draped over my head to hide my ears. My reflection in the window was the very picture of a *suspicious person*.

“What am I gonna do?”

I *really* didn’t feel like heading back to our room looking like this.

Although, if I have to explain the ears and tail, maybe I ought to just take the opportunity to tell Cion the truth about the side effects of Scarlet Brave? If I tell her, “You’ll end up like this someday too,” even she *might…*

“Mmm…”

No, I really can’t see that turning out well…

I curled in on myself at the foot of the pillar. All the heat that had been flushing my body had gone cold, and as I looked up at the night sky, I really did feel like I was about to cry.

“Gods, if you can hear me? I really, really hate you…”

If they actually existed, I was ready to kick the shit out of them until they gave me a proper apology for everything.

“Pretty weird getup you’ve got there, huh?”

Leaping up in alarm at the sudden voice, I grabbed hold of my bible and braced for a fight. I couldn’t find the speaker, though. This terrace didn’t have anywhere to hide, period. I scanned the surroundings carefully, but all I could see around me was the dark expanse of night.

“Lemme warn you now. If you scream, that won’t end well for either of us.”

I whipped around as the voice whispered right in my ear—but before I could activate a spell, they grabbed my wrist, and I felt something cold pressed against my neck. The faint scent of blood pierced my nostrils.

“If I wanted you dead, I would’ve just taken you out without saying anything, right? I’m not here to kill you. Understand? Comprende?”

“Perhaps you intend to enjoy yourself with me first,” I said slowly.

“Sounds fun, but I’m not into playing with brides. I *only* go

after *demons*," my assailant said as they released me.

In an instant, I brought my right hand over to push back my left hand holding my bible, putting all my force into a strike backward with my left elbow. But my attack found nothing but empty air, as—

"Hell yeah, that's more like it! Nice moves, Miss Inquisitor."

—the speaker moved over to my opposite side.

"How do you...?"

"It's obvious just looking at you. The way you move is nothing like a normal bride. Plus, *this bible* gives me a real nasty smell."

With a start, I realized too late that my bible had disappeared from my hand. I could faintly see what looked like a person's shadow floating in front of me in the dark of the night. With an air of fascinated curiosity, they tried to open my bible from the right cover, then from the left. Finding they couldn't get it open, they gave up and began twirling it around on a finger.

"Damn, what the hell is this thing?" they asked.

"Please return it. I'll be scolded harshly if I lose it."

"Cool, sounds like it'll be a good enough hostage, then."

Before I could even register their words, the bible disappeared into the darkness with a splosh, as though it'd been swallowed up by a swamp in midair.



“Do you understand what you’ve just done…?” I said, gritting my teeth. “That provocation could be taken as a clear declaration of war.”

“Try and see it my way, okay? My life’s on the line here too. Can’t have a real chat while you’re waving that dangerous thing in my face.”

I couldn’t tell if they were a man or a woman. Their silhouette was hazy and their voice was androgynous, plus it got distorted occasionally—it was already a pain just making out what they were saying.

“Like I said, I wanna wipe out the demons,” the shadow continued, breezing right past my frustration. “Our interests are aligned, right? Miss Inquisitor of the Holy Church?”

“Demons are not my department,” I replied stiffly.

“But it’s what the *Hero* wants, isn’t it?”

I quietly glared at them.

“Sorry, but I’ve been watching you for a while now. I can see you like the Hero—and vice versa, ’course. If the Hero’s up against demons, you’ll wanna do whatever you can to help out, right?”

This asshole, just talking like they know everything…

“Even so, where, exactly, do you think you are? This is—” *—the Holy City of Eldias. There’s no way there’d be…* I started to say, before my thoughts trailed off into a strange silence. “Are you actually telling me there are demons, *here*? In this city?”

“Not in the city. Inside the Church.”

That was impossible. It had to be a bluff. But as my mind raced to poke holes in it, I found myself running into doubts. I *couldn’t say for sure there weren’t any*.

I thought back to Heavenfang, the white wolf general who’d served under the Demon Lord. If he’d been telling me the truth before he died, then *the Demon Lord had wanted peace with humanity*.

If that was true, and if the Demon Lord hadn’t just been spouting empty idealism, then it wouldn’t be strange at all if he’d planted some sort of operatives inside the Church…

“I already took out over a dozen of them for you. Wouldn’t kill you guys to send me a thank-you card, would it?”

In other words, *this intruder* was the assassin the cardinal had briefed me on—the one whose goals and motives were a total mystery. And now they were telling me they’d been going around

executing undercover demons up to no good inside the Church? Damn.

"If your skills are so great, then I see no reason you should require my assistance," I said.

"I want your help, but I'm not asking you to off anyone. That's my department, okay? I want *you* to investigate a target—figure out if they're really human, or if they're actually a demon. Not like I can just say 'Sorry, my bad' once I've already killed 'em, right?"

Got a point there, I guess.

I could feel the eyes of that formless figure as they watched my mind waver.

"So, then… Who are you asking me to look into?"

"Saint Nevissa Vernalia."

Their words hung in the air for a moment.

"I see."

I wasn't surprised. But it didn't seem possible either.

"You've got the wrong target," I said. "Unless you're claiming that *the Hero* would have somehow failed to sniff her out?"

Cion had years of experience fighting demons. To her, the mere presence of a demon carried the weight of death itself. Demons produced exponentially more mana than humans; even if they didn't release it, that excess mana would leak out from their bodies, producing a *smell* that was impossible to ignore. It set our instincts screaming, freezing us in place like a frog in the gaze of a snake. Demons were humans' natural enemies—when we felt their eyes on us, our bodies instinctively prepared for death. The saint had definitely creeped me out, but that was just personal incompatibility, not the sensation of a different species.

"Throw out everything you think you know," the shadow said. "Guys who act like they're the smartest in the room always die first. I know I'm weak—that's why I've survived this long."

"You're requesting my aid, and yet you refuse to show yourself at all?"

I could tell the assassin was giving me a cold smile.

"Think about it. There's monsters inside your organization, we can't tell humans from demons—how the fuck is anyone supposed to sleep at night?"

"All of your words could easily be lies you're telling in order to manipulate me."

"Ain't like I can say shit to that. All I can do is pray to the Gods

you'll believe me."

A killer turning to the Gods for aid... Now there's a joke. Not one I can laugh at, though.

"Anyway, we both want the same stuff. C'mon, work with me here—for the sake of the world, for the sake of humankind, all that shit. Figure out the truth about that woman, and I'll give you your book back, 'kay? Later!"

"Wait—what shall I call you?"

I rushed to question the retreating presence. I'd been hoping to get at least some sort of lead on their identity, but—

"You can call me the Deathwatcher."

Wowwww...

I felt my entire body cringe involuntarily at the name they gave.

"If you're *really* all right with that, then that's fine, I suppose..."

Sensing my hesitation, the Deathwatcher reconsidered.

"Fine, call me Veil Croitzen."

"Vale... What?"

"*Veil Croitzen...* Look, we're done here!"

"Hey, wait! We are *not* done!"

Poking too hard at their terrible taste in names had been a bad move. With a sensation like a sudden gust passing through, the presence I'd felt in front of me vanished completely.

"If 'Veil Croitzen' was your other idea, you should've stuck with 'Deathwatcher'..."

My sincere criticism was drowned out by the nighttime wind and faded away amid the darkness.

***

A few minutes after getting my bible stolen by a mysterious intruder, I mentally reviewed my situation and found myself with my head in my hands once again.

I stepped quietly down a deserted hallway, keeping my ears and tail covered up. To anyone watching, *I* would've looked like the suspicious intruder here. I was used to solo infiltration missions; I just needed to conceal my presence and keep my senses sharp as I moved. Unfortunately, my inescapable awareness of my dog ears and tail constantly dragged my thoughts off track.

"Ugghhh, dammit! I hate these stupid things...!"

My tail moved around like it had a mind of its own. It was part of my body, so presumably it was moving in concert with my own emotions or something, but the movement kept threatening to throw me off-balance. On top of that, my sense of hearing had gotten weirdly sharp; even just the sound of bedsheets shifting somewhere on another floor made my whole body twitch and tense up.

"Hmm... I wonder if they'd grow back if I just tore them off..."

I could close up the wounds with orisons, after all. Part of me wanted to just go for it, but I remembered hearing that cats' tails were connected to nerves across their lower bodies, and losing their tails left them unable to walk properly. I had a dog's tail, not a cat's—and actually it wasn't even a *dog's*, it was a *wolf demon's*—but still...!

"Aaaggggghhhh!"

Feeling like my head was about to explode, I covered up my ears with both hands. I did my best to keep an eye out so I could smooth things over somehow if I encountered anyone, buuuuut...

"Huh?"

It was always times like these when I'd run into something weird.

"What are you doing, Cion?" I asked with slow resignation.

"Wha—?!"

She jumped up at the sound of my voice from behind her. She'd been crouched in the corner of a stairway right next to the saint's quarters, peeking out into the hall. She looked absurdly suspicious (not that I was in any position to talk).

"H-How did you find me...?"

"What do you mean, 'how'? If you keep creeping around like that, then—" I started dismissing Cion's question, before realizing what she was trying to say. "Wait, Cion... Were you concealing yourself for real just now?"

Cion stared silently back at me, eyes wide with shock.

"That doesn't make..."

No, actually, maybe it does *make sense.*

I'd never been able to see through Cion's stealth before, but with the ears and tail my demonification had given me—well, the tail probably had nothing to do with it, but anyway... Maybe these ears had finally let me sense her? There was still a lot I didn't understand about how this was affecting my body, but I'd

need to investigate more.

"Uhhhh..." Cion began tentatively.

"Ah?!"

Cion's gaze briefly returned to me, but after a moment, it started drifting right and left, then up and down.

"Don't stare at me like that, it's distracting..."

"Um, uh, b-but, Alicia...! Alicia, you've—! You've got...!"

"Getting a blood transfusion from General Heavenfang caused some unintended side effects, and apparently my body gets like this during the full moon now," I explained quickly. "It probably doesn't pose any risk to my health."

It was going to come out sooner or later anyway, and it didn't even look like I'd be able to keep it hidden for the rest of tonight, so I decided to just get the explanation out of the way right now. I definitely didn't have the heart to tell her about Scarlet Brave, though.

"W-Wow..."

Cion stared at me with open-mouthed amazement. With a look of fascination, she reached out an arm...

"Cion?" I asked sharply, narrowing my eyes.

"S-Sorry...! You just looked really cute, I couldn't help myself..."

"Couldn't help yourself"? Don't I remind you at all *of the guy you got in a fight to the death with?*

"It just reminds me of that wolfman more than anything, don't you think?" I asked.

"Oh... I guess?" she replied slowly. "If I'd done a better job back there, then none of this would've happened to you, Alicia... And now maybe people are gonna think you're devil-touched because of those ears, and they'll kick you out of the Church, and..."

"Ah, Cion? Um, this really isn't all that serious..."

Well, honestly, it *was* a pretty serious problem, but it wasn't like having her worry over me would help anything—or rather, the point was that I could handle my problems myself.

"In any case, was there something in particular you were checking for here?" I asked. "Did you sense demons nearby or something?"

I glanced over at the saint's room, and Cion followed my gaze. I decided to keep quiet about what I'd heard from the assassin for now. It'd just make things more chaotic, and I didn't want to cloud Cion's judgment with weird preconceptions.

“I dunno. I just felt like I smelled someone using mana inside—or maybe one of those orisons like you use?”

No matter how much I concentrated, I couldn’t hear anything from the other side of the door. If I cast my focus out *farther*, I could hear the sound of nuns cleaning up dishes in the dorms past the saint’s quarters and across a side road, but the inside of the room was completely silent. If she was elsewhere and the room was empty, then that’d be fine, but I was concerned about that mana flow that Cion had picked up.

I stepped out of the shadows and over to the saint’s room.

“A-Alicia?!”

“We won’t know for sure unless we get closer.”

With any luck, it was just a false alarm. Regardless, *guarding the saint* was what we were here to do. Cion had been sneaking around while she investigated, but we could just move around openly carrying out our mission.

“Anything?” she asked.

“Hang on… Just wait a moment.”

I placed a hand to the door, putting all my focus into my fingers and my ears. I reached out with my senses… On the inside of the door, I could faintly feel active craft.

“I’m feeling…”

Dispelling bystanders and…soundproofing?

My head jerked up with a start.

“A-Alicia?!”

Cion stared at me in surprise, but I didn’t have time to worry about her.

I’d heard just the faintest sound of a woman screaming. Someone was crying out from inside the room.

“We’re breaking down the door.”

“Wha—?!”

Cion tried to stop me, but I ignored her and lowered my stance. I cast my Spec Boost and Secret Revive orisons stacked on top of each other, and then—

“Hyah!”

—threw my momentum into a kick that sent the door flying.

On the other side of the now-empty doorframe was a simple but elegant suite of rooms. The two of us stepped in together.

The soundproofing must’ve been cast right along the plane of the door. As soon as we entered, it was obvious that the screaming hadn’t just been my imagination.

“The bedroom...!”

I followed my instincts, running straight toward the voice. Inwardly, I recited a blessing to the Gods, readying a defensive orison in case I got hit with a counterattack the moment I walked in.

“Are you all right?!”

I threw open the door, stepping inside as—

“Ah, ahhh, aaaahhhhh!!!”

I stood there in dumbfounded silence as a woman’s fevered scream echoed through the room.

“Ah... Uh, wha—?”

Well, it was maybe less of a *scream* and more of a *moan*.

“Oh? Oh my...” came a voice from the bed.

The saint stopped her *passionate grinding* as she noticed us. She turned around to face us, naked except for the white bedsheets covering her lower body, shyly placing a hand to a flushed cheek.

“Please don’t look at me like that... It’s terribly embarrassing...”

Her staff, propped against the side of the bed, fell over with a jingle of bells.

“Uhhhhhhh...” I trailed off.

The *Holy Saint* was a *Horny Slut*.

The fuck?



Chapter 3

“Ngh… Haahhhh…”

As I splashed cold water over my head, the outlines of my thoughts started to get a little less hazy.

It was the morning after we’d discovered the saint *in flagrante delicto*. Cion had gotten a bit overstimulated and hadn’t been able to sleep afterward; she’d finally nodded off around sunrise. Right now, she was still conked out. I’d had some trouble getting to sleep myself, all in all. I was concerned about it hindering my duties, so I’d decided to start off my morning with a cold shower.

“Just about the only good news is that my ears are gone, I suppose…”

The ears and tail had disappeared at some point when I wasn’t looking. They’d shown up all of a sudden last night, and they’d vanished just as suddenly. They were part of my own body, but I had no clue whatsoever about the actual mechanics of how they appeared and disappeared—or *retracted*, maybe? It felt like I’d become the host for some sort of mysterious parasite, and I didn’t like it one bit. Even setting that aside, I just wasn’t in great shape this morning.

“Probably safe to assume at least some of that is from the demonification…”

Using orisons or magic to *re-create* lost body parts put a heavy strain on both the caster and the target, consuming a great deal of stamina. It would’ve been nice if the energy of the ears and tail *appearing* and the energy of them *disappearing* canceled out to zero, but reality wasn’t nearly that convenient. It was entirely possible that it cost energy both to grow them *and* to get rid of them, adding up to twice as much wasted stamina.

“In any case, I’d better be careful around the night of the full moon and the day after…”

Moving sluggishly, I drew another bucket of water up from the well and dumped it over my head.

I’d left my usual vestments in our room and dressed myself in one of the tunics commonly worn by acolytes in training. The thin, unadorned fabric clung to my skin, but these clothes were designed for working up a sweat in, so they weren’t all that

uncomfortable to wear wet. The skintight feeling was honestly a little pleasant, even.

Still, my aimless thoughts kept spinning round and round and round inside my head, returning to the same questions over and over. The shadowy assassin, the demons inside the Church, the saint's sex life...

"Well... No, that last one doesn't really matter..."

I was a bride of the Gods, but the Holy Saint was simply a *saint*, no more and no less. Her role was to convey the voices of the people up to the Gods. Whatever she got up to in the bedroom, it wasn't my concern.

"Sister Alicia? Good morning."

I turned around at the sound of bells. Behind me was none other than the saint herself. She stepped out of a hallway into the morning sunlight of the back garden, accompanied by the nun who'd been "attending" her last night.

"Good morning, Your Sagacity," I said slowly.

"Please, just 'Nevissa' is quite all right. I believe I said as much last night, did I not?"

"I'm afraid that simply will not do, Your Sagacity," I replied.

The attendant nun stood one step in front of the saint, silently listening to our conversation. Last night she'd had a bit of a haughty air as she'd told me and Cion to return to our room, but now her face was red and downcast. I never would've imagined that she'd wanted us back in our room for her own personal convenience... It made sense, though. She couldn't afford to have us snooping around while she went to receive Her Sagacity's loving attentions.

"Um, Sister... About last night..." she said nervously.

"I have no intention of spreading any rumors around. The fault was entirely ours, and if you would be willing to overlook the damage to Her Sagacity's door, we could ask for nothing more."

"I-I see. Thank you..."

It was hard to tell if she was happy, embarrassed, or both. Even after speaking up, she was having trouble looking me in the eye; her gaze wandered off to a corner of the garden.

The saint put her hands on the duplicitous nun's shoulders, turning her around to face her.

"There is nothing you need feel ashamed of, Sister Loria. The Gods could never forbid us to love, or to be loved in return."

“Your Sagacity…”

“It is only a sin to drown ourselves in pleasure, losing our dignity as human beings… You have done nothing to spurn the love of the Gods.”

“I… Yes, Your Sagacity!”

Watching the nun visibly regaining her confidence under the saint’s guiding hand, I couldn’t help but be impressed despite myself.

“Have you been in the baths, Your Sagacity?” I asked.

Her hair still had a bit of moisture in it, so they must’ve been on their way back.

“We have. They’re lovely for washing away the sweat,” she said with a smile.

Yupppp, I’m sure they are. You must’ve had quite a lively *night, after all.*

“Perhaps I should have invited you to join us,” she continued. “I was concerned about you after all that; I’ve been rather hoping to talk with you more.”

“Please allow me to accept merely your kind feelings, Your Sagacity. I require cold water in order to wake myself up properly.”

Luckily, the nun who’d been, ahem, *serving under* the saint had panicked and dived under the covers the moment she’d noticed us, so she hadn’t seen my dog ears. If she’d tried to accuse me of being devil-touched, I’d been planning to use her relations with the saint as a bargaining chip. If I didn’t need to blackmail her, though, then all the better.

“By the way, Your Sagacity, I heard from Father Carol that the devil-touched children are being taken in and cared for on your orders?”

“They are. I conduct interviews with every one of them and do my best to send each one off to wherever they can best live a peaceful life.”

“Do the scars of ostracism and persecution truly heal so easily?”

“Perhaps not…” she sighed.

She placed a hand in the bucket of water and spoke words of prayer. Her incantation took form, and balls of water floated up from the bucket. They turned into fish of all shapes and sizes, swimming through the air.

After losing her sight, she must have needed to develop a lot

of skill at handling mana—either that, or the Deathwatcher was right, and she really was a demon. But the mana that flowed out of her was only a faint trickle, entirely on par with a regular human.

"We may be able to heal the wounds that afflict their bodies, but as for the wounds upon their hearts… Those nightmares etched into their souls may continue to burden them for as long as they live."

But even so, she took those children in and took responsibility for them… She really was incredible.

According to Cion, people who'd become devil-touched were more physically powerful than regular humans; they had a great deal more mana as well. They were still nowhere near the level of demons, but they far outstripped ordinary people. In neighboring countries like the Federation and the Republic, where the Church's influence was weaker, a lot of them found work as mercenaries—that was what she'd heard from her master, apparently. All of that was news to me; those facts must have been too *inconvenient* for the Church to acknowledge.

"So you've been taking them under your care to ensure that they won't turn against humankind eventually?" I asked.

"That's not quite it… Most of the children I take in are cared for at various orphanages under my oversight, but I also arrange asylum abroad for those who wish it. If they're willing, they can travel away to the northeastern lands where discrimination is less severe."

Eldias wasn't far from the sea, and there was a small port town just a little ways south of here. They were probably put onto ships there and transported north along the coast.

"I don't understand… Why go so far for them?"

If even a few of them began rebelling out of a desire for vengeance, *she'd* be the one blamed and denounced for it—they'd say she was *just asking for trouble*. Employing devil-touched children as mercenaries would be bad enough, but her plan seemed like it had nothing but downsides. After all, the upper ranks of the Church were all a bunch of corrupt bastards who demanded payment just for healing the sick.

"I, too, am a woman burdened by my past," she replied. "I understand those children's pain all too well."

The fish swimming through the air dove into flower beds around the garden, bursting with splashes of water.

“I simply wish to teach them that this world is not filled solely with suffering.”

Nevissa Vernalia gave me a sad smile. Her hands were clasped to her chest, as though gesturing at wounds that were still carved deep within.

She had to know that what she was saying wasn’t true. She understood perfectly that not everything could be solved by platitudes. Even so, she was willing to spout lies to those children if that was what it took to push them forward.

“I know I must sound foolish. You’re perfectly welcome to laugh.”

“Not at all, Your Sagacity. Your ideals are truly admirable.”

It’s a nice story, and as long as it’s not causing any problems for me, you can feel free to say all the pretty words you want.

“Your Sagacity, shall we?”

Sister Loria spoke quietly, taking our silence as the end of our conversation. The saint nodded.

“We’ll see you later, Sister,” she said to me, turning back toward the building with a chime of bells…

Then she stopped right in her tracks.

“Your Sagacity…?”

The nun turned back to her with a puzzled look. Saint Nevissa lifted her gaze to the top of the garden wall.

“Did you wish to see me?”

That was when I finally noticed them.

I really am off my game today…

There was a shadow on top of the wall. Suddenly, cloaked figures emerged from the shadows of trees and behind pillars, moving in to surround us.

“You’re Saint Nevissa Vernalia?” A man stepped out from inside the building to block her way. “How about you give us back our brothers?”

“Someone—!”

“Too slow!”

The man leaped at Sister Loria before she could scream for help. It was a superhuman burst of speed—almost on par with a demon.

“I-In the name of the Gods—”

“Nap time.”

She frantically tried to cast an orison, but she wasn’t nearly quick enough. She’d jumped in between the saint and the

attacker, but a kick to the side caught her and sent her flying.

"Too slow indeed." I slipped in behind him, grabbing him by the scruff of his neck and throwing him aside as I cast my orisons. You always need to start your incantations the moment you see the enemy.

"**Shackles of the Firmament**, **Sinner's Repentance**!"

Golden chains manifested out of thin air to wrap around the attackers' arms, and sacred tree roots sprouted up from the ground to grasp at their ankles.

"If you wish to surrender, now would be the time," I said.

"You trying to make a fool of me?!"

With a loud snap, the man tore apart the celestial chains that no human should've been able to break. He ripped out the roots at his feet and charged at me once more. His hood fell aside to reveal a face more like a beast's than a man's, with a set of nasty-looking fangs bared at me.

"Make a fool of you? I would never dream of it," I replied, activating a skill and manifesting more celestial chains in my hands. I dodged the man's charge and moved in to wrap the chains around his throat, but—

"Shi—!"

—moments before I could reach him, he kicked off from the ground and jumped at me, and I had to raise my arms to guard myself against a strike from his knees. I didn't manage to roll with the impact properly, and my feet left the ground as he kicked me back. Instead of taking the opening to strike at my exposed stomach, though, the man dashed right past me.

He's not after me—he's after the saint.

"O Gods, shield us in our weakness—!"

I created an invisible wall in front of him, and he slammed right into it and went sprawling back.

"*Schnoë!!!* Dammit, *no*!"

Seeing their friend fall, the other attackers cried out and snapped through their chains as well.

"Now they're making it sound like *I'm* the bad guy..." I grumbled to myself.

I began setting up a new barrier around the saint. Before I could activate it, though, I had to duck out of the way as a woman took a heavy swing at me from behind.

She's got cat ears... And a tail? Wait, that's kind of cute—! I thought for the briefest moment.

The murderous glare aimed at my back sent a shiver down my spine. I rolled and dodged, not wasting an instant looking back. Suddenly, a heavy impact hit the ground in front of me, sending up a cloud of dust. A huge man had swung down an axe to carve deep into the dirt. He was covered in thick hair; he looked sort of like an ape, except way too muscular.

"We'll handle her! Get the saint!"

"Got it!"

There were six attackers total—four for me and two for the others. Sister Loria had frantically set up a defensive orison around herself and the saint, but the shell protecting them shook worryingly as it weathered blow after blow imbued with beast-like strength. It wouldn't hold for long.

"Why do I always have to deal with this crap?!"

With growing frustration, I dodged the stabs, axe swings, grabs, and kicks aimed at me. I was doing my best to maneuver so I could take on my attackers one at a time. But whenever I tried to push in to counter and incapacitate one of them, some sharpened animal instinct would send them retreating back in an instant, and another one would block my way with an attack to protect their friend. They weren't as tough as demons, but they were still a pain. If I tried to go after them as they retreated, it was obvious I'd end up seriously injured.

"We who seek your holy light…"

As I fought and prayed at the same time, I lamented the loss of my bible. Given where we were, I could use all the orisons I wanted, but they still took time to cast. My bible held an arsenal of spells I'd input in advance that I could activate just by providing mana. Still, to think I'd be left at this much of a disadvantage without it… I swore inwardly.

I was just overwhelmingly underequipped, period. I was doing my best to counter their attacks using the chains and swords of light I could create with my orisons, but without my bible for bludgeoning or my knife for slashing, I didn't have anything I could use for a decisive strike.

"Even so—!"

I'll just need to make do with what I've got—

But, one of the men who'd been going after the saint suddenly switched targets. With a fifth attacker unexpectedly coming at me from my blind spot, my rhythm briefly fell apart.

"Gh—!"

A knife I should've been able to dodge slipped through to catch me in the side as I held up chains to block an axe blow.

"Dammit—! Gimme...a break!"

As I sidestepped to avoid the huge man looming over me to pin me down—

"Ah..."

—my leg suddenly gave out, and I lost my balance completely. Luckily, I managed to dodge the man, but I couldn't get away from the axe swing that followed right after. I somehow managed to block it with my chains...but I couldn't stop the force of the impact. Carried by the momentum, I went flying away and rolled along the ground.

"Aul!" one of the attackers called out.

"Got it!"

As I lifted my head, I saw the giant who'd sent me flying bring down his axe onto the translucent barrier guarding the saint. The divine protection shattered without a sound. A smaller woman charged in from beside the man.

Suddenly, a figure jumped in between the saint and her assailants.

"G-Get away, Your Sagacity— Ngh!"

The attendant used her own body as a shield, taking the attacker's short sword in the saint's stead.

"Loria...?"

For the first time, doubt spread across Nevissa's features. Seizing their opportunity, the attackers closed in on her one after another. There was nothing left to stand in their way... But—

"**Shackles of**...**the Firmament**... **Sinner's**...**Repentance**..."

—at the last second, my chains and roots wrapped around them once again.

"Fucking—! Lemme go!" one of them snarled. His knife wavered right in front of the saint's face as he struggled against the chains.

"We...pitiful sinners..." I groaned out. "May ye bless us with...your merciful love...as we walk our path—!"

With my vision swimming, I put a hand on my uncooperative knee and managed to get myself standing. I poured in magic to strengthen the restraints; the roots grew thicker, and the chains constricted tighter around the attackers.

"Ghh—!"

As I watched them writhe in pain, I finally let myself exhale.

Agh, my head hurts…

Twinges of pain shot through my side. I couldn't feel my right arm—it was still attached, but it was just dead weight. I drew in another breath to start healing myself, but—

"Hhh…"

—the overwhelming pain left me in tears, and my prayer died on my lips. My throat hurt. I couldn't breathe. Was it my lungs? My guts? Either way, I was screwed…

"Sagacity… Call for…"

I tried to get the saint to shout for help in my stead, but at the sight of a shadow racing in behind her, I wrung a cry out of my chest.

"*Nevissa!*" I screamed, forcing my legs into motion and leaping toward her. But I was too far away…

A dull gleam shone out from within the rising shadow, and a knife plunged down inexorably toward the saint's chest.

I'm not going to make it.

In the very instant I'd resigned myself to defeat, I felt a rush of wind, and relief flooded through me. They say a Hero always shows up in the nick of time…

"Wha—?! What the hell are you?!" Cion shouted.

She'd jumped in at the last second to stop the blade. The shadow stared silently back at her, not answering her question.

After a momentary standoff, the shadow vanished along with their weapon. A sudden stillness enveloped the garden.

"What was that thing…?"

Cion had charged in without any idea what was happening. She looked all around, finally locking eyes with me as I lay sprawled on the ground.

"Cion…"

"Alicia!"

She rushed over to me in a panic, wrapping her arms around me to help me up. The movement sent an intense jolt of pain shooting through my insides. As I groaned and screwed up my face in agony, Cion looked down at me with worry in her eyes.

"I'll get you to a healer—"

"Wait, they're…" I gritted out. "My orison's almost…"

Just as I lifted a hand to Cion's chest to push her away, the roots and chains binding the attackers reached the end of their lifespan. Suddenly freed, the devil-touched looked to us in confusion, then sprang relentlessly back into motion to attack

the saint—

"*You'll pay for this.*"

The killing wrath emanating from Cion made even my blood run cold. The attackers were instantly frozen in place.

"W-We—"

"*Shut up.*"

Whatever the man was about to say in his defense, he suddenly crumpled to his knees as Cion appeared behind him.

She incapacitated the remaining attackers one after another before they could even scream. She didn't draw a weapon; she just knocked them out cold with quick chops of her hand, one by one. With her years of experience fighting demons, taking out devil-touched must've been easier than stealing candy from a demonic baby.

By the time a panicked group of priests arrived on the scene, all of the attackers were unconscious on the ground, and the saint had just about finished healing her attendant. The holy knights didn't show up until even later.

According to them, someone had knocked out all the guards on duty and locked the doors from the inside. Sure, they were short-staffed, but this was utterly pathetic. I wanted to find whoever was in charge of security and punch him in the face.

They thanked me for guarding the saint in their stead, but my entire body hurt too much for me to care. On top of that, I looked like a mess. The tunic I'd been wearing was covered in mud and all torn up—and in some pretty provocative places, to boot. I knew there wasn't any ill intent in their gazes, but being the center of everyone's attention was the absolute last thing I wanted right now.

"I'm so sorry, Alicia," Cion said. "I should've gotten here sooner..."

"It's— It's all right, Cion. We're all alive; that's what matters most."

"But—"

I cut her off with a prayer, focusing on healing my own injuries. All of this damage, on top of the strain of last night's demonification, was honestly pretty taxing. Nevertheless, this was the Holy City of Eldias—the focal point of all prayer. As I recited my blessings, I began taking in aether from the surrounding air.

Fundamentally, magic entailed converting the caster's own

mana into various forms before activating it to perform spells. Orisons, on the other hand, were designed to draw on an *external* source of power. Prayers to the Gods actually contained formulae that converted worshippers' *excess mana* into *aether*—a form of power that only Church personnel were able to use. Aether generated from believers' mana was released into the atmosphere, then retrieved and expended to perform divine miracles. That was the secret behind orisons—the trick that differentiated them from magic, which required casters to make do with only their personal reserves of mana.

In other words, in a place *filled with worshippers* like the Holy City, I could do a lot more for injuries that I wouldn't be able to fully heal under normal circumstances. With enough concentration and prayer, I was able to get myself moving again. I could still feel a bit of lingering pain in my abdomen, but I'd just have to deal with it. Healing craft fundamentally relied on *self-repair*.

My eyelids felt unbearably heavy. Combined with the aftereffects of my demonification, my exhaustion was pretty much at its limit.

"I'll return to our room and change clothes. You stay here and guard Her Sagacity, Cion."

"No way! You're barely standing—I'll go with you!"

Is she seriously doing this in front of all these people?

"We mustn't have you forgetting your priorities, Sir Hero..."

I shaped my face into a smile, doing my best to convey that I was fine. Cion's expression didn't change, though. She stared at me with eyes that looked ready to burst into tears at any second. Her hood was pulled tight over her head, so the priests behind her couldn't see her face, but I wonder what they must have made of the Hero fussing over a simple bride.

"Please, don't cause trouble for me..." I said.

I tried a less familiar angle of attack, giving her a pained look to get her to relent out of pity. Cion responded with an unfamiliar expression of her own, her mouth pressing tight into a thin line.

"But, Alicia—!" she said, still refusing to back down.

This was getting us nowhere. Just as I was about to resign myself to the worst outcome and suggest we bring Her Sagacity with us, I felt a soft flutter of cloth settling around my shoulders.

"Please let me look after Sister Alicia, Sir Hero Elcyon. No

matter what may be lurking within the cathedral, rest assured, I'll guard her with my life."

"Father Carol..."

He'd just finished debriefing the saint. He draped his coat over my shredded tunic and put an arm around my back to support me.

"Oh, don't worry—I used to carry this girl back to her room all the time, whenever she was about to pass out from getting too wrapped up in her magic practice. She's in safe hands, I promise."

Even Cion had no choice but to give in at that point.

"Thank you, Father," she said reluctantly.

Face downcast, she returned to the saint's side, turning occasionally to glance back at us.

"Shall we, then, Sister Alicia?"

"Thank you, Father..."

He met my exhausted reply with a warm, familiar smile. As I walked down the hall with weary, faltering steps, I suddenly recalled countless memories of being walked through the orphanage just like this, back when I was young and inexperienced. I'd sneak out all the time to the nearby mountains, firing off orisons and spells until I ran out of mana. I'd end up sprawled on the ground, too exhausted to move, and he'd make me get up and walk anyway.

"You never carried me even once, did you, Father?"

"No, I didn't," he said with a smile. "After all, the best way to learn from your failures is to experience the consequences for yourself."

He'd given me that lecture over and over back then. *Taking on more than you can handle will always come back to bite you*, he'd told me.

"You pushed yourself much too hard out there... That right arm isn't fully healed, is it?"

He'd seen right through me. I had to admire his perceptiveness.

"The bones are connected, at least, but I felt like I'd pass out if I tried to heal it all."

"Of course you'd be worn out after such a long journey," he sighed. "We shouldn't have had you begin your guard duties the same day you arrived. You ought to have gotten a full day to rest and settle in first. I truly am sorry, my dear."

“None of this is your fault, Father. This is simply…” I faltered for words. “I failed to manage myself well.”

If I’d understood the symptoms of my demonification sooner, things would’ve been different. Or if I hadn’t gotten my bible stolen…

“Father Carol,” I said slowly. “Would you permit me to ask you a question in confidence, just between the two of us?”

“What is it?”

I scanned our surroundings. I couldn’t feel anyone around except for us; pretty much everyone else was busy dealing with the mess in the back garden. Right now, we probably wouldn’t have to worry about being overheard. I lowered my voice and asked my question.

“Is it true that there are demons undercover inside the Holy Church?”

He stared at me for a moment. “Where did you hear that?”

“I received a tip from an anonymous source. I’m still skeptical—it simply doesn’t seem possible. But if it *were* true, it would paint a great many things in a different light.”

The Hero assassination plan, the attacks by the remnants of the demon army—if they’d all been spearheaded by *demons inside the Church*, then…

“You know something, don’t you, Father?”

His silence spoke volumes. It told me far more than any awkward attempt at smoothing things over.

“You’re aware of the fundamental difference between humans and demons, yes?” he asked.

“Mana volume. Simply put, demons’ bodies have more extensive mana-producing systems than humans do.”

“Very good. Just as those children we call ‘devil-touched’ are born with physical traits that most humans lack, demons have bodily structures unlike those of human beings. Typically, they’ll have animallike bodies, wings, or other obvious distinguishing features. *Typically, according to our understanding.*”

Taking a slow, pained breath, I relied on Father Carol to support my body while I forced my bleary head to concentrate. My mentor chose his words carefully, working to convey his meaning without touching on anything taboo. I tried to piece together the understanding he was guiding me toward.

“Her Sagacity cuts off those distinguishing traits from devil-touched children, then sends them out into the world to live

without fear, the same as any other child. There's a limit to how much she can do, but it's not impossible; that's why she does it. She explained it all to me the day I first started working here. Officially, we've *disposed of them*; she asked for my help keeping our stories straight."

All for the sake of every living child—all out of a wish to help them step forward into tomorrow.

"Is His Holiness aware?" I asked.

Father Carol gave me a slightly uncomfortable smile. "I imagine he is. His Holiness tends not to involve himself too often in our decisions."

"I see…"

"The more lives we can save, the better… Still, it's best not to pry too deeply into the shadows of the Church. You've always had a passion for knowledge, so I can imagine how tempting it must feel. But I want to be able to keep on watching you grow for a while longer yet. So please, try not to stick your nose into danger. Think of it as the selfish request of an old man."

"Am I really that precious of a pupil?"

With a smile, he told me that even when he couldn't see me with his own eyes, just hearing stories of my accomplishments always brought him joy.

For the rest of the walk back, my thoughts were hopelessly hazy; my head was off in the clouds somewhere. I gave vague responses to whatever he said, and I stumbled wearily into my room once he'd guided me back.

"Just rest for today," he said, shutting the door after me.

Alone, I let out a weary sigh. I tossed aside my clothes, checked that I didn't have any remaining wounds, and collapsed onto the bed.

Father Carol had told me to rest, but I was still concerned about the shadow that had waited for an opening to slip in and attack the saint. If that was the killer from last night, then I had a duty to be at my charge's side protecting her. I had to go, but… I couldn't move a muscle. Between the lack of sleep, the physical strain, and the flood of new information I still wasn't sure how to process, my eyelids felt so heavy…

"A wonderful bride, huh…"

The guilt I felt toward Father Carol was more than a small part of my exhaustion. He'd raised me like a parent and sent me out into the world, trusting me to serve the Gods as their bride. No

matter what, I could never bring myself to tell him that I'd devoted myself to the work of a killer—let alone that I had divine orders to assassinate the Hero, on hold or not.

"I'm just..." I sighed. "So tired..."

I buried my face in the pillow and let my eyes close. Soon enough, my exhaustion brought a wave of drowsiness, and with the warmth of the soft sheets around me, I felt my mind sinking down into slumber.

Even if I fell asleep, with him out there running things, there wouldn't be any issues. I'd already done the cold calculations in my head—it was one of my worse habits.

"Rather an unbecoming state for a bride, don't you think? Sister Aliciaaa?"

As my body suddenly tensed up, I reflexively threw a pillow in the direction of the voice. Then, with all the force I could currently muster, I threw the knife I'd had hidden under the pillow. I wrapped the sheets around myself and took up a defensive posture as I glanced over. Some red was seeping into the pillow where the knife had stabbed through it, and the *intruder with a pillow pinned to his hand* was looking over at me with a creepy smile.

"Careful there, you could've killed me," he said cheerfully.

"I meant to. If only you could have fallen off and died just now..."

A zealot clad in pitch-black vestments was standing outside my window. Without a trace of shame, the heretical inquisitor Karm took a seat on the windowsill, pulled the knife out of his hand, and tossed the bloodstained pillow out the window as he smiled back at me.

"It's a delight to see you so full of energy. The Gods are delighted as well, you know."

"Have the Gods not told you that priests shouldn't enter brides' bedrooms?"

And sneaking in *through a* window *deserves the death penalty—could they pass that along too?*

"Ah, you're looking stressed out, Sister. Try taking some deep breaths. The air really is *exquisite* out here..."

Nobody asked, you heretical piece of shit!

I tightened my grip on the sheets I'd pulled up to my chest. If I screamed, maybe Cion would come save me. I seriously considered it for a moment, but...

“Well, what is it?”

Whatever he was here for, I decided to just get it over with as quickly as possible and get him to leave. I didn’t need to fight it out with this asshole for real.

“I have a message from High Cardinal Salamanrius. He says, ‘I’d like to focus on work, so please don’t contact me for a while.’”

“Oh, does he now?”

Even if I did contact him, he’d probably just blow me off anyway; I didn’t want to call him in the first place.

“Something’s really bothering you, isn’t it, Sister Alicia?”

His voice had gotten closer. When I turned to stare over at him, his face was right there next to me. Normally, I would’ve punched him into next week, but right now I didn’t have the spare energy for that, so I let it slide.

“Nothing’s bothering me at all…”

“Sisterrrrrr,” Karm chided. “All lies are transparent before the Gods. And before I who hear Their voices.”

Even so, anyone would rather take their troubles to the grave than vent to this psychotic zealot.

“Listen well, Sister Alicia. You are a truly marvelous person. You are unique in all the world—beloved of the Gods Themselves, even.”

I honestly didn’t care at all. I lay there silently, tuning him out. I *tried* to tune him out, anyway. But as Karm spoke casually, the corners of his mouth turned up, his words had a strange way of carrying themselves deep into my ears.

“You are you, Sister. Not the saint.”

“I… I know that. Obviously…”

I sat up as I tried to retort. I was a bride. I wasn’t *her*. I glared at Karm, but he just kept on talking in the self-important tones of someone reciting divine orders.

“All and one. Good and evil. Seeking to divide one from the other is a wrong in itself. Let all be as thy heart wishes. Let all be as the Gods will it…”

I suddenly noticed his fingers reaching out. They lightly touched my ear as Karm’s devilish whispers continued working their way in.

“Do as you will, and all shall be well.”

I felt a chill run through my entire body. But I couldn’t find the strength even to push his arm away. I just stared up at the black-clad madman backlit by the sun shining into the room.

“I’m on your side,” he continued.

No matter what I said, it wouldn’t get through to this guy. Lunatics like him just lived as they pleased, without a care for the trouble they caused others.

“Allow me to accept merely your kind thoughts,” I finally responded.

“Mm-hmm?”

He meant no harm. For Karm, any evil deed was an act in defiance of the Gods, and as long as I didn’t go against the “Gods” he believed in, he wouldn’t bear any hostility toward me.

“I added myself to your contacts,” he said. “If you need anything, give me a call! ♪”

With a start, I reached up to touch my piercing.

Karm smiled cheerily at me, swaying his head back and forth. “Now I’ll be able to hear *your* words as well!”

Sparkling in his earlobe was a brand-new piercing—on loan from Glasses, most likely.

“Why would he…?” I muttered.

These piercings were rare and valuable tools—absolutely not something to hand out lightly.

Is Glasses in some sort of trouble…?

“I’ll be in town for a little while, so I’ll see you around! ♪” Karm said, turning away with a twirl.

“Ah, hey—! Wait!” I found myself calling out to him as he put a foot up on the windowsill to make his exit.

He really was an utterly incomprehensible man. But even so, the Church still saw value in this zealot and his “voices of the Gods” or whatever. One way or another, his power was the real deal.

“What do you think of Saint Nevissa?” I asked.

Even if Karm didn’t *answer*, I knew for sure he’d *respond*. It wasn’t that I trusted him, or that I relied on him. But whatever voices this guy heard in his head, they’d be able to see the truth; and judging by all of his actions up until now, he definitely wasn’t one of the demons.

“Seeking your own answers in the hearts of others is the endeavor of a fool, Sister.”

As the black-clad zealot crouched on the windowsill, ready to jump back out at any moment, he turned just his head around to face me and gave me another narrow-eyed smile.

“The Gods see all.”

He jumped out the window and disappeared.

What's that supposed to mean? That doesn't answer anything. I knew I should've ignored him from the start.

"Ugggghhh…"

I didn't have the energy or the will to chase him. I let myself fall back onto the bed once again and stared up at the ceiling.

"Now I'm even turning to *Karm* for help… This absolutely sucks…"

I was more exhausted and worn out than I'd realized. As I reflected, I softly closed my eyes. I knew that I had to get back to Cion as soon as possible, but my body refused to move. It wouldn't hurt to take a little nap before I headed back.

"I'm sorry, Cion…"

Somehow, I really *had* become a frail and delicate bride after all. As I apologized for my weakness, I sank into sleep.

***

I feel like I dreamed about old times.

In my days back at the orphanage, I'd always carried a field of snow inside my heart. I was just a child, all alone in an unfamiliar land. If the Gods abandoned me, I wouldn't have been able to live on my own.

But Father Carol had taken me in. He'd taught me all kinds of orisons, and he'd taught me how to live in this world. He'd helped me, guided me, as though he were filling in my missing roots—as though he were taking the blurred boundary between me and the world, and drawing a clean line. He'd trained me to do *the work of the Gods*, serving in their name to save and protect as many people as I could. My role and my status as a bride of the Gods were all thanks to him.

In the end, I'd never managed to remember who I was, where I was from, or why I'd been wandering alone in that field of snow. But one thing I knew for certain was that he and his teachings had saved me.

I could still remember the day the cardinal had come to pick me up. Thinking back on it now, having learned the difference between reality and my naive ideals, it was just an embarrassing childhood memory to keep to myself. But back then, I hadn't been able to believe it was really happening. I'd been so, so proud. I'd vowed to become a bride who'd bring honor to the

name of the Snowell Orphanage.

So… The dreams I'd carried that day were something real—a precious, irreplaceable part of my own past.

So precious that I felt ashamed to show my old mentor what I'd become.

***

In the following few days, there weren't any noteworthy incidents. I'd been on high alert, ready to face the Deathwatcher no matter when they showed up, but I didn't feel their gaze on me anymore. Time just flowed on, smoothly and gently.

Occasionally, we'd accompany the saint on her trips out to the city to speak with people, or we'd get pulled around by the kids at the orphanage. Looking back, it was hard to even imagine all the chaos and panic of the day we'd arrived.

Maybe after watching the attack by that group of devil-touched—after seeing the saint do nothing to defend herself, even faced with mortal danger—the Deathwatcher had decided she wasn't a demon after all. I hadn't caught a single glimpse of them or felt their presence since then.

A couple days later, just as I'd started to wonder if maybe we'd get a report of new victims someplace else far away, Cion burst into our room in a panic. She'd gone out ahead of me to start guarding the saint, but now she came running back in without knocking. As I stood there in the middle of changing clothes, she dashed over to grab me by the shoulders. Her breathing was ragged, and her forehead was covered in sweat. After a few deep breaths, she told me the news.

Father Carol Snowell, chief administrator of the Pontifex Cathedral, had been assassinated.

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"Well, that was fucking pathetic."

I swore to myself as I stepped on the corpse. The piece of shit hadn't begged for his life even once, hadn't fought back at all. He'd just let it all happen, and I was absolutely pissed about it.

I'd seen tons of guys who'd called me an inferior species or said they'd curse me in hell or whatever crap, tossing out the same tiny handful of repetitive insults, and then finally started

begging for their lives just as they were about to bite it for real. Laughing in their ugly, fucked-up dead faces always put me in a great mood. It really reminded me that I was doing the right thing.

But what the fuck was wrong with these assholes? When a scumbag got to die without ever dropping the good-guy act, it just left *me* feeling fucked up. Why wouldn't they let me feel my blood boiling, feel my body trembling as I screamed in joy?

I felt like shit. This absolutely sucked. Hearing murderous monsters acting all pious and holier-than-thou, spouting pretty bullshit like "it doesn't have to be this way" and "we can understand each other if we try" and all that crap—it made me want to puke. When they didn't fight back, I just got more and more pissed. So I'd try harder and harder to rip off their masks. But it was almost like these assholes *knew* that the way they could really get to me was by keeping up the holy act all the way to the end. They'd look at me all sad, like *I* was the one suffering. No matter how many I killed, my heart didn't clear up—it just got cloudier and cloudier.

The bastards treated us humans like we were lower than insects, but they'd have this look in their eyes like they pitied us. It made me sick, seeing them look so sure that *they'd* always be the ones on top.

Demons were humanity's enemies. They *had to be* our enemies. My body remembered what they were, remembered that they were vicious monsters who saw humans as less than cattle. So I had to kill them. I had to wipe them all out, every last one. I'd do it for the sake of the world. I'd do it so all the kids out there could live free and happy. But... This world was just too full of evil. I could kill and kill and kill, but how many damn years would it take until I'd killed them all?

No, fuck it. Thinking about that shit was a waste of time. Every moment I waited, they'd keep on taking lives.

Even if this was a dream no human could achieve, *I* would see it through.

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Chapter 4

Father Carol Snowell's funeral rites were conducted with care and dedication by Saint Nevissa Vernalia. As bells rang out, she prayed to the Gods, bidding them to bless his soul and guide it unfalteringly to their side. The motes of light created by her words mingled with the flames of the candles carried by countless mourners, lending the proceedings a strange and mystical air.

They'd found his body in pieces, scattered across a stained glass window overlooking the cathedral hall. When the priests had arrived for their morning prayers, they'd felt something was wrong the moment they'd opened the door. They'd smelled blood and looked up to see the carnage… That was what they'd told us.

Everyone had fallen speechless at the horrifically brutal murder; when I'd raced over with Cion, even I'd found myself clutching my hands to my mouth in shock. Had he been torn apart while still alive, or had he fallen victim to the killer's cruel madness even after death? I could sense a wave of revulsion spreading across the onlookers as we were confronted with the depths of human malice and heartlessness. And as I stood before his body, I was lucidly aware of my own heart freezing over, second by second.

The sudden loss had left all the other priests too confused and stunned to act, so I'd been the one to investigate. But I'd known it was pointless. I hadn't been able to find any clues about the killer or anything that would help track them down.

Veil Croitzen was an assassin who could transform their own body into shadows and move freely through the darkness. I didn't know their identity, and their true motives were still unclear. If the murder weapon was just a shadow lurking in the dark, then searching for it would be hopeless.

I hadn't been able to find anything. So I'd done the only thing I *could* do—cleaning up the body and restoring the sacred space of the cathedral. The shards of the stained glass window had been hopelessly mixed up with his viscera; I'd expected it was beyond repair. But the saint's attendant, Sister Loria, had come

to me with tears in her eyes and begged me to let her help. I'd left the restoration to her; I hadn't really known what it looked like originally, so I wouldn't have been able to fix it, and she must have needed something she could do to honor Father Carol's memory in her own way.

But why…?

I was lost in thought as I watched the quiet advance of the funeral procession.

Father Carol Snowell absolutely wasn't a demon. His origins weren't hard at all to track down—he'd been born in a little town in the middle of nowhere, and he'd lost his family to a plague. He was an ordinary human, with a life and a history to match. I couldn't be certain that he didn't have some other hidden side to him, but as I gazed over at the endless line of mourners coming to pay their respects, I could say for sure that he wasn't a person anyone would have reason to hate.

If he'd come from a better background, he could easily have become one of the Seven High Cardinals—Sister Loria hadn't said that out of any personal bias or favoritism. It was plain to see just how deeply everyone had loved him, and just how many people he'd saved. I was one of them as well, but I'd…

A small, bitter noise slipped out from my chest.

I should've been more observant. I should never have let my guard down. Back in the garden, I should've caught and killed Veil Croitzen, even if it meant pushing my body to its breaking point.

With a head full of wavering shadows, I left the cathedral hall and let my feet carry me down to the underground cells near the edge of the grounds. The devil-touched prisoners weren't aware of what was going on outside, but at the sight of the bride they'd fought that day, they glared out through the bars with the gazes of wild beasts.

"None of you are at fault, but I would appreciate your cooperation."

Their interrogation by the holy knights had been entirely perfunctory. Their attack hadn't resulted in any deaths, and so by Her Sagacity's mercy, they'd been spared execution. They would be sent into exile on a ship that arrived once a month from an island nation in the far east; until then, they were to be left alone. But the situation had changed. They were now my one and only lead on that mysterious assassin.

“Through my investigations, I’m aware that you were guided into the cathedral by an accomplice. I’m also aware that your accomplice is a highly dangerous individual going by the aliases ‘the Deathwatcher’ or ‘Veil Croitzen.’”

In theory, there could be *another* mysterious intruder with the power to manipulate shadows, but even so, Veil was the prime suspect.

“I would like you to tell me his or her identity and abilities. I am not offering you a bargain. I am giving you an order.”

Strangely, I felt much more calm and collected than usual, and my thoughts had a startling clarity. It was almost as though the Gods themselves were guiding me; I knew exactly what I needed to do next, what actions I should take. My heart was in chaos, but my mind was sharp and focused.

“Yes, I am fully aware that Her Sagacity has pledged to safeguard your lives. Therefore, you have no reason to comply with my request… Unless, for instance, I were to offer to let you out of here.”

However, I wouldn’t be able to release them in defiance of the saint’s instructions.

“Therefore, this is not a bargain, but a command.”

As I spoke, I activated the magical formula I’d laboriously put together from scratch. A giant fireball appeared, its bright glow out of place amid the dimness of the underground cells.

“Let me cut to the chase.”

I tossed the fireball at the nearest devil-touched.



There was a bloodcurdling scream. The man's deep voice rang out, echoing through the cells. The pain of being burned alive must have been unimaginable.

"Don't worry. It's all right. I'm not going to kill you."

And then I prayed. The large apelike man had been engulfed in flame, and most of his hair had already burned away. But the love of the Gods began mending his wounds, healing his red-and-black-charred skin and regrowing his dark-brown hair before my eyes.

"Conversion, absorption, separation, combination."

As I followed up with a second formula, the flames suddenly regained their momentum.

The second scream was even more desperate than the first. The throat-rending cry was starting to hurt my ears.

"Wh-Wh-What the fuck is wrong with you?!"

The dog-faced man seemed to be their leader. Panic and fear were plainly visible on his face.

"I would rather not be doing this, myself..." I said. "However, I see no other way to prevail upon you to talk."

I couldn't hear the voices of the Gods, so I had no choice but to do things the hard way and seek my answers in the hearts of others.

"Would you please answer my question? Just who is your accomplice, the Deathwatcher? Where are they currently?"

The burned apelike man fell over with a faint groan. As I waited for an answer, I healed him with another prayer. It looked like his consciousness was getting hazy; as his comrades called out to him, he only gave vague noises in response. Even with all his wounds healed, he twitched and trembled on the ground, drawing shallow, shaky breaths.

Seeing their friend's suffering, even these hardened devil-touched seemed to be faltering. From what I'd heard, they hadn't said a word to their interrogators except for "eat shit." They'd sounded like a pretty tough bunch, but, well—such was the power of a baptism of the Gods.

"I haven't crushed your throats...*yet*. Out with it."

As I spoke, I put together another formula.

Accumulation, conversion, compression.

A few spheres of liquid began floating in the air. The cute cat-eared girl snarled insults at me as she watched.

"Fucking Church inquisitor! You're nothing but a bloodstained

slave of the Gods!”

“I am. What of it?”

The balls of *sulfuric acid* slipped between the bars of the cell and splashed onto her, dissolving skin and muscle. Another scream rang out at the searing agony.

The exposed bits of white bone were oddly glossy. I felt a strange laugh trying to spill out from my throat. A smell drifted through the air, letting me know that I had *new raw materials*; the intense pain must have made her lose control of her bladder.

“Accumulation, conversion.”

As I began processing them with another formula to prepare my next strike, I healed the cat-eared girl with a prayer.

“Answer me. Tell me everything you know.”

I wasn’t going to kill them. But I had no intention of letting them go either.

I’d searched all over, wondering if the Deathwatcher was still lurking somewhere in the cathedral. I’d called out their name, not caring if I embarrassed myself. I’d felt for their presence. But I hadn’t found anything—not a single trace of them, not a single whiff of their scent.

“If you still refuse to answer, then I suppose I’ll need to change tactics.”

Maybe I’ll need to obtain the assistance of some of the devil-touched children being held in the medical wing…

“We don’t know…” the wolflike man muttered. “We don’t know shit! We’re just here to save our friends who got taken away! We don’t know jack shit about your Veil whoever-the-fuck!”

“Schnoë!” one of the others called.

“Shut up! This bitch is fucking psycho!”

“You wound me. I am perfectly calm and rational—not insane in the slightest. If I were truly mad, we would be unable to hold a conversation to begin with.”

As I finished speaking, my hand slipped, tossing down some sulfuric acid for him to enjoy.

“Gh— Gaaaaaaaaaah!!!”

“*Schnoë!*”

The smell of dissolving flesh really was absolutely intolerable, especially in an underground room with just a small air pipe near the ceiling. I didn’t want to stay here any longer than I had to.

“You fucking…whore of the Gods!”

“As I said, I don’t deny it. I have offered up my body to the

Gods as their bride; that's all I am, in the end."

Hmm, maybe his legs next…? No, I should be fine to push harder; it looks like devil-touched recover more quickly than most people.

I refocused my thoughts.

"**Shackles of the Firmament**, **Sinner's Repentance**."

I incanted my orisons, summoning chains and roots to hold their bodies firmly in place. In parallel, I cast a spell to reshape the iron cell bars into spears, their tips pointed at the prisoners.

"I'm now going to carve through you with these," I announced.

The spears began rotating rapidly with a high-pitched whine. I sent them moving closer to the prisoners, one for each of them, aimed for spots that would *avoid anything vital*.

"I'm not going to kill you. I simply want information."

The faces of the devil-touched were drenched in fear.

"Where is your accomplice?"

They looked back and forth at one another, frantically shaking their heads.

"I see."

Screams of terror reverberated through the cell. The devil-touched cried out, trying to writhe away from the rotating spearpoints as they slowly closed in.

Nothing I haven't seen before.

When people were faced with mortal danger, no matter how staunchly they might have rejected the Gods before, they'd always seek salvation from some higher power or miracle. The more utterly inescapable the reality, the more desperately they'd try to avert their gazes from it.

"So foolish…"

If nothing more had happened, then I wouldn't need to be here at all…

As I resigned myself and prepared to plunge the spearpoints in, they were knocked away with a sudden clash of metal.

I stared silently at the figure that had jumped in between me and the devil-touched. Her shoulders heaved as she caught her breath, and she seemed confused and uncertain. But as she looked at my face, her expression hardened into a snarl of fury, fangs bared.

"*What the hell are you doing, Alicia?!*"

I stared back at her. "Cion."

I'd taken too long down here.

“Did you come here looking for me after I left the ceremony?”

“I asked you a question!” she shouted.

The devil-touched fell silent; they hadn’t yet managed to process what was happening. I just stared back at Cion. It was perfectly obvious what I’d been doing, wasn’t it?

“My job… I— To lay Father Carol to rest, I—”

“That’s not what I mean!”

Cion had never grabbed my shoulders this roughly or forcefully before, no matter how dire the situation. Her eyes were filled with shock and outrage as she stared at me, and her mouth twisted wordlessly in anger.

“You know full well that none of this is gonna bring him back! Alicia, you’re…”

“I’m what, exactly?”

I knew what she was trying to say. But this wasn’t just me pointlessly lashing out.

“Listen. That shadow we saw is the culprit behind the serial killings within the Church. You faced off with it during their attack, didn’t you? Our enemy is a shadow that can change its shape at will—no matter how hard we searched, we couldn’t find a trace of it. That thing is what—”

“*Alicia!*”

Cion looked back at me with pleading eyes. Her jaw clenched tightly in frustration.

“Please, Alicia… Don’t lose yourself…”

Seriously, what does this girl see in me?

It felt as though there were bells ringing inside my skull—bells tolling for the dead.

“You’re the one who needs to calm down, Cion.”

She was the one frantically shouting at me; I was perfectly calm and composed.

“These devil-touched are the only lead we have. I’m absolutely certain that the shadow facilitated their attack. They wouldn’t have been able to work in coordination without some sort of advance planning, so they must have some means of contacting —”

There was a loud noise, and my field of vision suddenly swayed.

I looked over at her, confused. “Cion…?”

She gritted her teeth and let out a small, sharp exhalation. As I felt the heat slowly spreading across my cheek, I realized she’d

slapped me.

“It can hide anywhere, anytime, without anyone knowing!” she shouted. “It could’ve just snuck into their secret meetings, couldn’t it?! You said it yourself, Alicia, even you couldn’t find a trace of it! If it was eavesdropping on them, then they wouldn’t know anything about it, and if they *were* connected to it, then there’s no way it’d just leave them here! If they could lead us to it, *they’d already be dead*! Why don’t you get it, Alicia?! If you’d kept going like that, you… You could’ve killed them—!”

And…? So what if I had?

“Cion, I—”

“You can’t let yourself get sucked in! You… You’ve got to hang on to yourself!”

This all felt like a bad dream. But as the stinging pain of my cheek finally started to assert itself, I processed that this was reality. Cion was right here in front of me. I just stared back at her in a daze.

“I… I wasn’t…”

Without a sound, the chains and roots binding the devil-touched vanished. Their shackles fell to the ground with dull thuds. I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t come up with anything to say.

No… I’m just an inquisitor, an enforcer, and a killer. Even if I had *killed them, I—*

“Alicia…”

Cion was looking at me. Just looking. Straight at me.

“Cion, what do you even see in me…?”

I was about to say something I shouldn’t. I was keenly aware of that, but with those eyes staring directly into mine, I couldn’t leave it unsaid. But—

“Please, don’t say such things. Please… I beg of you.”

—a voice rang out amid the stillness, accompanied by the chiming of bells. I looked up to see the saint standing at the entrance.

She walked down the stairs, cutting in between me and Cion to kneel beside the devil-touched and begin healing their injuries. She spoke kindly and gently to them, as though trying to heal their wounded souls as well.

The devil-touched just stared dazedly back at her, as though discovering salvation in a single ray of light shining down into the depths of hell.

I quietly took in the scene. “I will accept punishment for my sins.”

“Alicia!”

I just… I couldn’t keep watching any longer.

Cion tried to stop me as I walked away, but she didn’t chase after me. She must have understood the danger of leaving the saint all alone down there with the group of devil-touched. No matter how emotional she got, at heart, she was a trained mercenary accustomed to life-and-death situations.

I passed through the back garden and walked along the rear of the cathedral, trying to keep out of sight. Although the funeral was over now, I could still see people gathered inside, struggling with their grief. I felt a swell of emotion rising up in my throat, but I swallowed it back down, squeezing my eyes shut tight.

I… I wasn’t wrong. I wasn’t wrong, was I? I was perfectly calm and composed and rational, just like normal. My thoughts weren’t clouded at all, and even my physical fatigue was pretty much all gone. Everything was fine. Sure, maybe I’d gotten a little rough back there, but I was just doing my job.

“I’m… I…?”

I stopped in the shadow of the building to take a second and catch my breath. Suddenly, a chill ran through me. I crouched down, unconsciously hugging my arms around my knees as my clenched teeth began to chatter.

I… Why am I—?

I had nothing to be frightened of. It wasn’t like his death had any impact on my life to begin with. We hadn’t even been in touch since I’d left the orphanage. His murder didn’t affect me whatsoever.

“Nothing’s— Nothing’s changed… So why—”

I frantically wiped at the tears that had started spilling down my cheeks. I covered my face with both hands and forced my emotions back down.

I didn’t have time to sit here and cry. Every moment I wasted here, that assassin was setting their sights on their next target. I had a job to do.

“Demons or humans, none of it matters…”

The killer was just like Karm—just another mad zealot living by their own personal creed. No one except them could say whether their beliefs made sense. No matter how misguided or utterly illogical their actions were, to them, they were driven by

Truth itself. I couldn't think of them as humans like the rest of us. They were freaks who'd stepped outside the circle of humanity—they were *heretics*.

"And killing heretics is my job…"

I gritted my teeth with determination. I put a lid on all my memories that had been dredged up on the tide of emotion, and I stood up firmly on my own two legs. If my enemy was lurking anywhere within my sight, I was ready to kill them here and now. I glared out at my surroundings, scanning every shadow.

I wasn't nearly lucky enough to run into the killer right there, of course.

***

I was washing my face at a well near the main entryway, trying to get my feelings back in order, when a voice called out to me.

"Oh, hello there…"

I'd been planning to go out and gather more information, but I'd figured no one would take me seriously with my eyes all red and puffy. Sure enough, the moment the old nun saw my face, she came over with a worried look.

"I'm so sorry…" she said. "You're the one who cleaned up his remains, aren't you? Thank you, Sister."

She bowed her head, moving quickly and smoothly for her age.

"Not at all, I— I was simply doing my job…"

As I replied, I searched my memory, trying to recall where I'd seen her before. Her face softened into a smile as she watched me.

"Ah, I'm sorry, my dear. I'm Sister Teresa—the headmistress of the orphanage out in town."

Ah, that's right… My memories fell into place. We'd met a few times while visiting the orphanage with the saint. She'd also showed up to collect a couple of children who'd snuck out and come over to the cathedral to play.

"Would you have time to talk a little?" she asked. "He— Father Carol was an old friend of mine. Not long ago, he asked me to look after you if anything were to happen to him…" Her voice faltered, welling up with emotion. "I'm sorry…" she said with a sob. She took out a handkerchief and held it to her eyes,

standing there silently for a moment.

"Let's go sit down," I suggested. "I... I don't have anywhere in particular I need to be right now."

We walked over to a bench in the shade of a tree, a short distance away from the cathedral's entrance.

"I'm so sorry..." she said as we took a seat. "I know this must be much harder for you..."

"No, I was just..."

What was I to Father Carol?

To me, he'd been the headmaster of my orphanage, and my teacher, and the mean old priest who hit me whenever he caught me doing mischief.

"He... He'd hit me all the time," I said.

The aging nun—Sister Teresa—smiled as though recalling a bittersweet memory.

"He and I grew up in the same orphanage," she said. "Oh, he was a terrible scamp when we were young. He settled down as he got older, but back then, he'd talk back to the priests whenever they tried to tell him off. 'Only the Gods can judge me!' he'd say..."

It was hard to imagine. The Father Carol I remembered had been scary when he got angry, sure, but the rest of the time, he'd always had a warm, kind smile.

"A little while ago, while I was here on an errand, he told me, 'A pupil of mine is going to be visiting soon. If anything happens, please, look after her for me.'" Her face was calm as she recalled memories of her deceased friend. Her eyes were closed, and she wore a gentle smile. "At the time, I had no idea what he meant. Maybe his long years of experience were speaking to him. I can't help but wonder if he'd seen this coming, somehow... Ever since he became the chief administrator here, he'd been grumbling about all the pressure he was dealing with, from inside and out. It wasn't like him at all..."

"You're saying... Father Carol felt like he was in danger?"

"It's not that unusual. It's always dealt with behind closed doors, but priests and nuns working at the center of the Church do get mysteriously killed from time to time. Working here in the Holy City—and as the chief administrator of the Pontifex Cathedral, no less—means you can't avoid coming into contact with the *darker side* of the Church. Knowing him, I thought he'd be able to handle it, but—"

Sister Teresa cut herself off with a sob as the tears came welling up again, and she pressed her handkerchief to her eyes once more. Watching her, I tried to pat her back soothingly, but she sat back up and forced a smile.

“It’s all right, dear. I’m fine…”

She took a deep breath, then turned to face me.

“Listen, now. You mustn’t go seeking to avenge him. That’s not the path you’re meant to walk, Alicia Snowell.”

Her eyes gazed unwaveringly into mine as she spoke.

“I’ve met a great many children like you. Young, talented, with a strong sense of justice… But that’s exactly why you need to use your talents to help and save others. The moment you brandish your power in anger, those pure feelings become sullied, and your path twists toward evil…”

Holding my hands in her own, Sister Teresa gave me a soft smile.

“Helping others is what he would want for you as well. He always spoke so proudly about what a kind girl you are…”

I felt something squeeze tight inside my chest, and all the memories—all the feelings I’d pushed away—came flooding out as tears. Once they started flowing, I was helpless to stop them.

“I— I’m—”

“It’s all right. It’s okay to cry. Cry all you need.”

As she gently held me, I leaned into her warmth. And I cried. I sobbed out loud, ignoring the gazes of mourners leaving the cathedral, just letting my feelings carry me wherever they would.



“I’m sorry…” I mumbled.

“It’s all right, dear. There isn’t that much else for old folks like me to do.”

Just how long were we out there? By the time I’d tired myself out crying and my feelings had finally settled down, the sun was starting to sink lower in the sky.

“Honestly, though…” Teresa sighed. “He must not have wanted to worry anyone, but he could’ve at least asked for help, couldn’t he?”

She put a bit more brightness into her voice as she spoke. She was probably trying to cheer me up. I could tell she was experienced at handling children; she did run an orphanage, after all. But I also couldn’t help feeling a bit of a rebellious impulse—I *wasn’t* a child anymore.

That was when I realized I was finally thinking straight again. I’d argued with Cion back there, but I was the one who hadn’t been seeing things clearly. I’d need to apologize to her later.

I sighed, letting the tension out of my shoulders and emptying my head for a moment.

I’d really been out of control. I hadn’t screwed up this badly in a long time. The devil-touched prisoners wouldn’t have any physical injuries, though—so whether I’d be punished was entirely up to the saint and what she chose to report.

“Well, if this gets me taken off the mission, maybe that’s for the best…”

Maybe I could head back to Glasses and let Cion handle guarding the saint on her own. The more conservative faction of the Church had refused to allow a male guard to be placed in the saint’s personal quarters, but after the murder of the cathedral’s chief administrator, even they’d have to shut up and concede the point.

The Hero Elcyon would be guarding Saint Nevissa around the clock; with security that tight, not even our friend the Deathwatcher would be able to launch an attack. No matter how undetectable they were, I couldn’t imagine Cion slipping up and letting them through. And if *Cion* couldn’t stop them, it wasn’t like anyone else would have a better shot. Besides…

“His Holiness the Pope will also be returning soon.”

I had no way of knowing how fast his pilgrimage was progressing, but according to the planned itinerary, he’d be visiting the capital in less than ten days and then returning here.

At that point, the Holy City's security would be back at full strength, and our presence would no longer be needed.

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't angry, but all the same…"

My orders were solely to investigate the killer and capture them alive if possible. There was no need for me to step into danger of my own accord.

Teresa spoke up once again; she must've been waiting for me to get my thoughts in order.

"I've never been the sharpest," she said slowly, "but I've always believed that it's people, not the Gods, who make meaning out of all the lives in this world—all our meetings and all our partings. So I want to find some meaning in this parting too. I owe him that much after letting him take over from me as chief administrator here. And I hope I'll be able to carry on the meaning and purpose of his life as well."

She turned to gaze up at the sky. Her face was carved with deep lines, reflecting the prodigious length of the path she'd walked. The sky above us was high and distant, shining with all the deep hues of autumn.

The Church taught that the souls of the dead rose up into the heavens. But just as there weren't any Gods, there wasn't any such thing as souls either. There were no spirits of the dead watching over the living, but even so, we tried to do right by their memories that lived on in our hearts. That was what it meant to carry history—what it meant to be human, perhaps.

Sister Teresa needed to start heading back to the orphanage, so I walked with her to the cathedral gates.

"My apologies for losing my composure," I said with a bow of my head. "Thank you for your help."

"It's quite all right, dear," she replied with a bright smile. "I'm glad I could spend time talking with someone else who knew him well."

I knew I'd made a humiliating display of myself, but strangely—maybe because she was an orphanage headmistress—I didn't feel all that embarrassed. I felt a bit of ease and comfort, even, as though I'd returned to my childhood days. It left my spirits lighter.

With our conversation over, the old nun turned to leave as I saw her off.

"Now I just hope that girl will rethink things a little after all this…" she muttered.

My mind had already shifted to thinking about how to apologize to Cion once I got back to our room. But something in the nun's sudden remark caught at my attention and wouldn't let go.

"'That girl'?"

"Ah— I'm sorry, I was just talking to myself. I didn't mean for you to hear," she said, embarrassed.

"No, I was just wondering…"

What was it? Just now, something had…

"Nevissa Vernalia…?" I asked slowly.

As that name slipped out of my mouth, the nun stared at me in surprise. She quietly stepped in closer, looking as though she were afraid of the consequences if anyone else overheard me say it.

"How…?"

"Father Carol said something similar to me. He asked me to help Her Sagacity find her way. But, well—it didn't seem as though she bore any faults, so I'd been puzzled as to what he might have meant…"

"He… Did he, now?"

Teresa's expression visibly darkened as I explained. She had a strange look in her eyes as she gazed back at me—not quite pity and not quite regret. With a hesitant air, she leaned in to whisper while staying vigilant for anyone watching nearby.

"I mustn't say this too loud, but…" She spoke as though she were sure we were being overheard by some invisible presence. "He'd been concerned about it all along. He said that even if forgetting the tragedies of the past allows us to move forward, it can never be a lasting solution…"

No matter how we avert our gazes or cast it from our minds, the past will always catch up to us sooner or later… As she spoke, she gently put a hand to my cheek and gave me a soft smile.

"Saving a person truly is a difficult thing, isn't it?"

Amid the glow of lanterns beginning to light the streets, she quietly made her way home. Her retreating figure looked painfully lonely in my eyes.

"What on earth…"

What did she mean by that?

My mind hadn't been able to put it together. But it spiraled in the depths of my heart, like a truth I'd long since understood.

The saint and the killer. The Gods and the demons.

I turned back to gaze up at the towering shape of the grand cathedral. It loomed large before me, like a dark fortress where a terrible evil dwelled.

Chapter 5

It was late at night when I got back to our room. Cion didn't greet me—or rather, she wasn't there to begin with. She'd left just a short note on the desk: "Guarding Her Sagacity."

Reading it, I felt something a little complicated and uncomfortable swelling inside my chest. I knew I'd been the one in the wrong, though.

From there, I headed straight to the underground cells.

I'd just gotten back from a half-day trek out to the port. I'd been wandering around the docks, talking to sailors and dockworkers who helped transport devil-touched for the saint. Without my bible on hand, I'd wondered if I'd have a hard time proving my identity. But I needn't have worried—this was the pope's doorstep, after all. At just the sight of me walking around in my vestments, everyone had been friendly and helpful; I hadn't had any trouble finding the people I needed.

I'd spoken with a well-known shipping company that exclusively worked for the Church. They'd told me that once a month, the Church brought them a group of devil-touched to transport to a city in the northeast. Originally, their job had just been to carry the devil-touched to exile in the middle of nowhere, though. All the talk of orphanages and asylum had only started after Saint Nevissa Vernalia had been inducted into the Church.

"She's absolutely incredible," a heavily tanned sailor had told me. He seemed to be the face of the group. "Before she showed up, we couldn't relax for a second—we had to be careful they didn't bite our hands off when we tried to feed 'em. But once she started coming out here with 'em, they were all calm and sweet as can be. It's like she's an animal tamer or something!"

In the past, more than a few people had gotten injured on their jobs transporting devil-touched, but once Nevissa had arrived, their work had become much easier. The children would be relaxed and peaceful even as they disembarked, as though the saint had exorcised whatever evil was haunting them.

"Does Her Sagacity always see them off personally?" I'd asked.

"Yup. She'll stand right by the gangplank, putting her hands

on each of their shoulders and saying something to 'em. I mean, they must've been starved for love ever since they were little, right? So maybe feeling the saint's love helps 'em understand their own sins or something? *So say the Gods, the embers of thy sins shall burn thy heart*—is that how it goes? That sorta thing."

The biblical allusion must've been intended for my benefit, but unfortunately, he hadn't quite understood the verse properly. It actually went, "So say the Gods, the embers of thy sins burn fiercely in the depths of thy heart." In other words, *you know your own sins better than anyone*. It taught us that no matter how hard we try to hide our sins, we can never truly escape them.

When I'd asked other sailors about the saint's *farewell ritual* by the gangplank, they'd all told me the same thing. Even devil-touched who'd been violently snapping and snarling moments ago would become quiet and calm the moment they heard the saint's words. They stayed that way even after getting off the boats; they'd settle into their new homes and get fresh starts in a new city, leaving their old lives behind.

"You're a bride of the Church and all, so maybe you don't wanna hear about it, but we've got a few of 'em working at our shop up north. Sure, they'll clam right up when it comes to talking about the past, but they're good kids at heart. Real strong too."

The sailors' attitudes toward the devil-touched were a stark contrast with the persecution we'd witnessed in Eldias. It wasn't hard to see why—a mutual lack of understanding inevitably led to discord. Unlike people in the northern cities closer to the front lines, most people down here had never seen an actual demon in their lives. They just had a vague, half-formed impression based on the Church's teachings. All they knew was that demons were "humankind's enemies" and "an evil that must be destroyed." The devil-touched were the closest thing to demons most of these people had ever encountered, so they ended up facing the brunt of people's fear and anger.

"Give the saint our best when you see her. Let her know we'll send out all the ships she wants!"

He'd tried to get me to take a few fresh-caught fish as a gift, but I'd steadfastly refused. The things he'd held up hadn't looked anything like fish; they'd been incomprehensible creatures with countless wriggling legs.

“They’re real tasty!” he’d said, but I wasn’t touching them under any circumstances.

I just couldn’t. No way. They were *wriggling*.

***

“I think they’re called ‘octopus.’ Have you ever tried one?” I asked as I walked down the stairs into the cathedral’s underground cells.

I’d been hoping to lighten the mood at least a little, but as I arrived at the cells, I fell silent. Even as I stood right in front of the devil-touched prisoners I’d tortured earlier that day, none of them reacted at all to my presence. They were all staring off into space with unfocused eyes, devoid of any will or vitality.

Looking them over, I felt a sinking feeling as wheels turned in my head.

“If they’re just playing possum and waiting for an opening, they’re incredible actors…”

I unlocked the door and stepped into the cell to examine them up close. Nothing. I tried touching them; I even lifted up their arms to put their hands around my own throat. Still no reaction. They just sat there with the blank gazes of dolls.

“I’d been planning to apologize, for whatever it’s worth…”

This wasn’t because of what I’d done to them. Not even people who’d broken under torture ended up like this. If nothing else, they’d still have an instinctive avoidance response to the person who’d hurt them. This total lack of any reaction was something else entirely.

In other words, *someone else* had done something to them while I wasn’t around.

“How are things on your end, Brother Karm?”

As I walked back up the stairs, I put in a call to the person I least wanted to talk to. At first I’d been hoping I could go through Glasses as an intermediary, but I hadn’t gotten a response no matter how many times I’d called him. So I’d been forced to contact Karm directly. I hated owing him a favor, but if he could help assuage the sick feeling in my gut, it was worth it. Before I’d headed out to the port, I’d sent the zealot over to the saint’s orphanage.

“It’s pretty much what you expected,” he answered. “I couldn’t find *a single one* who remembers.”

I quietly took in his report. “I see.”

I wasn’t especially shocked. After seeing the state of things downstairs, I’d already more or less understood. But at the same time, deep down, I’d still been hoping I was wrong. I felt my shoulders slump a little. As my thoughts turned to what I needed to do now, my heart grew heavier and heavier.

“Thank you, Brother. I’ll handle things from here, so…” I sighed. “I appreciate your assistance.”

“The Gods have spoken to me, Sister. They bid me leave this city now.”

“Do as you please. If you’d like me to repay you, please send an invoice to Glasses.”

“*Sister.*”

There was something odd in Karm’s tone. I unconsciously stopped in my tracks.

“What is it?”

“You are an arrogant and vainglorious *bride*, Sister. Please be careful not to forget that.”

“I’m fully aware, Brother.”

Outside, the sky was covered in clouds, and the light of the moon had disappeared. Our call had already disconnected, and the world was enveloped in darkness. Only the scant flames of a few candles painted the world around me in faint silhouettes. That was why we sought the light—to sustain our hearts when they were on the verge of breaking. To illuminate our paths as we walked this world of shadows.

“But it’s not as though our sins disappear in the dark either…”

I straightened the rumpled collar of my vestments and turned on my heel, heading for the grand cathedral. I made my way to the Holy Saint, she who had descended to this earth to save all who suffered.

Amid the darkness, I stepped forth to unmask the saint’s sins.

+ + + + +

When was it I stopped being able to sleep in the dark?

That’s obvious. It was when they captured me.

Back then, the pain was the only thing that let me know I was still alive. My throat was parched, my voice was failing, my flesh was carved away, my bones were broken—but even then, I couldn’t die. I didn’t resent life’s hold on me, though. If anything,

I was grateful for the pain.

I'm still alive. I'm not dead yet.

Clinging to life was how I rebelled against the monsters that tried to break me—not just my body, but my spirit as well.

It all started on a regular autumn night, back in the village where I grew up. We were on our way home from the Festival of Thanks when we saw someone's corpse lying in the road in front of us. *Someone's*—we couldn't tell whose it was, not anymore. Then we heard the screams. They were coming from the village square, where people were still cleaning up after the festival. Something was out there in the darkness, and people were dying.

My legs froze up. I knew we needed to run, but my body just wouldn't move. I slapped at my legs to force them into motion, and then I grabbed my sister's hand and pulled her away. Not toward home—out of the village, out into the woods. It wasn't safe here. We just needed to get as far away as possible.

My mom had drilled into me what I needed to do if demons ever attacked. I went through her instructions over and over inside my head as we fled into the forest. We ran and ran, stumbling over countless tree roots, almost falling... Until the darkness swallowed up our path.

When I came to, we were chained up inside the church. That was when I understood that I'd never know peace again.

They were torturing my mom. All that was left of my dad was a head lying on the floor. I could see other familiar faces all around. My body already knew what was going to happen to us—what they were going to do.

My little sister hadn't woken up yet. I hugged her close as I searched for an opening. Even if the rest of us were done for, I had to find a way to save her, at least. There weren't that many demons; I could only see three of them. There was still hope...

But my sister was the first one they ate.

They did it right in front of me.

Right before my eyes, as I screamed at them to stop, they toyed with her and tore into her flesh.

After that, I lost track of whether it was night or day, or even whether I was awake or asleep. Still, my mind refused to break. In the midst of my vague, indistinct awareness, the pain was all that remained—the sole evidence that I was still in the world of the living. My heart never grew numb. My rage, my grief—all the

emotions in my body would run wild in an outburst of murderous fury. And then I'd be *disciplined* for it, time and time again.

My throat was parched, but never crushed. I must've been more fun to play with that way. I was just a toy—a toy that groaned and shouted and screamed bloody murder.

Early on, I'd felt the presences of other children nearby every now and then, but they'd all long since disappeared. I was the only one left alive.

Even then, not a single part of me wished to die. I held out, I clung to life, I waited and waited. The longer I refused to break, the more bored they got with me. If I kept on biding my time, I'd get my chance sooner or later. I'd find an opening, and I'd kill them all...

But then, one of them had an idea for a change of pace.

"How about instead of making it break, we try and play with it *without* breaking it?"

They all laughed at the new fun they'd discovered, and from that point on, they got more careful. More *precise*. They made a game of trying to crush every scrap of my human dignity, every shred of my attachment to life. They wanted to see me beg them for my own death.

They fed me a diet of their fluids and parts of my own body. Whenever they broke anything, they'd *fix it*. Whenever they flattened anything, they'd pump it back up. They kept on toying with me, trying to find the very limits of how far they could push me.

I would've been spared so much suffering if they'd just killed me. But I still didn't die, and some vital, human part of me refused to let me break—no, refused to let *them* break me.

I prayed and prayed. I prayed to the Gods—to the shards of idols that lay ruthlessly shattered around me. I prayed for a power that would let me kill those monsters. I prayed for a future that would let me see them wiped out for good.

And my prayers were answered.

Their darkness itself became my ally.

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Chapter 6

The cathedral hall was lit by countless candles shining through the night to mourn the dead. A breeze blew in from somewhere, making the shadows dance.

Cion stood by the entrance along with the saint's attendant, Sister Loria. I told them I needed a moment alone with Her Sagacity, and thankfully, they both obliged. Loria's mind was clearly elsewhere to begin with, and it seemed like she hadn't heard about what I'd done down in the cells. Cion needed a bit more of a push, but when I encouraged her to go get a bit of fresh air, she agreed, albeit reluctantly. She looked like she also had things she wanted to say to me, but, well... Right now, I just didn't want her overhearing my *conversation with the saint*. If I did end up needing her help, it'd be once the talking was over.

"Well then..."

After the two of them stepped out, I carefully made sure the doors were shut tight, then headed farther in.

I found the saint in front of the altar. She knelt beside the coffin, hands clasped in prayer, with her staff lying on the ground at her side. The hall was filled with the clear air of nighttime, and curls of incense smoke rose up from the altar and drifted off into the dark.

Father Carol wasn't here anymore. Souls were nothing but a fantasy. I knew that full well, but my gaze still followed the smoke upward as it floated away through the opened skylight. The lingering wisps of a soul.

The altar beneath the coffin was completely buried in flowers left by mourners—a testament to the love and admiration people had held for him. His achievements in life were far greater than anyone could ever know; they were as numerous as the miracles achieved by every single soul he'd saved. He'd shared his teachings freely, reaching out a hand to anyone whose heart was lost and guiding us into the light. That was the kind of man he'd been.

When I'd talked back to my teachers and insisted there was no way to be sure the Gods were real, he'd smiled softly and told me that I didn't have to believe in them if I didn't want to. It was the

first time I'd ever heard that from anyone.

"Nothing in this world is ever absolutely certain," he'd said. "No one can speak in absolutes—not even the Gods themselves."

All and one. Good and evil. We could only ever observe the world from within our own perspectives, ultimately. There would always be things beyond our understanding; the only way to comprehend the incomprehensible would be to become a god. Seeking total understanding was conceited and foolish—an impulse born of madness.

"I know that I'm not capable of understanding everything, and I don't intend to try."

We were only human. We could never be gods. And *she* stood too far outside the bounds of humanity for me to understand her mind. She was just too different from me—in the way she lived her life, in the shape of her soul. I could never truly know what she was thinking. But I knew what had happened; I knew what she'd done. Even as human as I was, I could infer and investigate, and the truth would come into view.

The saint finished her prayers and stood back up, staff in hand. As she did, I spoke to her turned back, my heart filled with a feeling not unlike resignation.

"Please, answer my question, Saint Nevissa Vernalia. Why...? Why did you..."

...kill Father Carol Snowell?

The Holy Saint, defender of the weak, turned around to regard me silently. She gazed at me with lightless eyes, beneath eyelids covered by cloth, as though *asking my intentions*.

"I suppose I ought to compliment you," she finally said. "You figured it out quicker than I expected."

"It's not as though you had any intention of hiding it to begin with, did you?"

She responded with only a light shrug of her shoulders.

"To be fair," I continued, "I wasn't able to find any actual evidence that you killed him..."

All I'd been able to determine was that Father Carol had been tortured and then killed. There'd been no signs of a fight and no eyewitnesses.

The assassin who called themself "the Deathwatcher" would've been able to pull it off, but they'd told me they only killed demons. I wasn't about to take them at their word, but Father Carol absolutely hadn't been a demon. In any case, the

Deathwatcher was supposed to be targeting the saint. After launching their attack with the devil-touched and getting blocked by Cion, it wouldn't make sense for them to commit a deliberately flashy murder and put everyone on high alert.

So I'd shifted my focus to a new prime suspect—to a woman Father Carol had specifically been keeping a careful eye on: Her Sagacity herself.

"Were you not concerned that I might simply deny the truth when you presented your accusation?" she asked.

"A woman who can erase memories would have no need to deny anything."

"So you managed to figure that out as well." The saint showed no sign of surprise and made no attempt to refute me.

"You didn't seem to have any intention of hiding that either."

Looking back now, I finally understood the sense of revulsion I'd felt toward the saint. She hadn't been interacting with the children or the devil-touched as *people*—it had all felt like a sort of *willful self-delusion*. She treated them almost like pets, taking control of them and robbing them of their freedom while showering them with affection.

"For the record, I've never put a collar on Atalanta. He has a bell, but I always tell him that he can go live free if he ever wishes to."

"I'm afraid I have no idea what you're talking about," she responded. "In any case, I won't deny it. To be false to one's own soul is a grave sin, after all. But I truly do love you all, from the bottom of my heart. I swear it in the name of the Gods—those feelings are the truth."

With a chiming of bells, she straightened and stepped down from beside the altar. She remained the very picture of a saint, delicate and beautiful as always. But the very fact that she retained that air of grace, even after I'd laid bare her darkest secrets, spoke volumes as to the threat she posed.

"Do you imagine that the Gods will forgive any act if it's done for the sake of love?" I asked.

"I don't have much interest in debating the nature of justice with you, Sister. It all varies depending on where one stands. What matters is how many people we can save."

The saint stopped moving, keeping a bit of distance between herself and me. She quietly looked up at the stained glass window adorning the cathedral—at all the wonders and

blessings of the Gods, portrayed in vivid color. She continued speaking in her calm, clear tone.

"I simply see children walking a path to their own destruction, and I wish to save them from that fate. You could never ignore someone drowning right before your eyes, could you?"

Her words held no lie. This woman was genuinely trying to save those devil-touched children—to keep them from being sucked in and swept away on the tides of malice. The Gods were nothing but words in our mouths, unable to offer any real salvation. But she worked in their place to save every single child she could, with her own two hands.

"You think that by covering up people's eyes, you can make the past disappear? You truly are conceited beyond belief."

"Am I, now?"

I'd had Karm go to the orphanage and ask all of the children how they'd ended up there. That wasn't a question you'd ask an orphan normally, and if you did, it wouldn't be that odd if they couldn't give an answer. There were plenty of children who instinctively locked away their memories of whatever horrors they'd been through. But if *not a single child could remember what had happened to them*, something was obviously wrong. What's more, Karm could see through lies. None of the children had been lying to him; they genuinely couldn't remember. They'd forgotten their own pasts—forgotten the tragedies that had befallen them. The devil-touched children who she'd sent off must have been the same.

"You steal away their memories, then slip into the empty spaces in their hearts—some *caretaker* you are."

Lost and confused, not knowing left from right, you'd naturally become dependent on anyone who stood by your side and treated you kindly—just like Cion had gotten so excessively attached to me. It was like a baby chick imprinting on the first face it saw as its parent.

"But Sister Teresa and Father Carol knew about it, didn't they? You had them pass along instructions to the knights and the other staff to keep anyone from getting suspicious about the memory loss. 'Please don't ask the children any questions that could dig up old wounds,' or something like that."

It made perfect sense why the devil-touched who'd been sent out from the port had become so calm and peaceful. She'd taken away their memories, told them that they didn't need to recall

whatever painful things they'd been through, and sold them fantasies of happy days awaiting them in a new land.

She was taking advantage of them at their weakest… It made me sick.

"There was no way the two of them would let you get away with it forever."

Sister Teresa had gone against the saint and been forced out of the cathedral. And Father Carol had tried to stop her.

"But still, why? Why did you need to kill him?!"

She could *erase memories*. She shouldn't have had any trouble incapacitating him. She could've just made him forget everything she didn't want him knowing; he'd be putty in her hands. The Church was dealing with one crisis after another, from the mysterious serial killings to the assassinations of three High Cardinals by a former demon general. She could've fabricated some sort of incident and had everyone involved suffer from some well-timed memory loss. Everything would be wrapped up neatly, and the truth would vanish into the dark.

"If you have that much power, then *why*?"

It had gone from a question to a plea. For the sake of my own ego, I needed there to be some reason he'd had to die.

As though she could see through all of my thoughts, the saint turned to gaze at the coffin with a soft chime of her bells.

"He told me that sweet lies were a false kindness, not a lasting solution," she said slowly. "And that a good-hearted, trustworthy inquisitor would soon be on her way."

He— He knew all along? Father Carol…knew about me?

With all my might, I forced down the emotions bubbling up inside me.

"And *that's* why you killed him?" I asked the saint again.

If she could have told me "I knew I'd be in danger if that inquisitor brought the Hero along," or "I had to eliminate him before he started dropping hints"—if she could have explained it all, if she could have confessed her sins and told me it was all for the sake of saving those children, if she could have shown me even the slightest tinge of regret—maybe I still would have been able to forgive her. Maybe I could have told myself that it wasn't my job to wander the hazy space between good and evil, or to draw the line between the two. Maybe, as an inquisitor, I could have turned a blind eye and let her go.

But even my faintest hopes were dashed as the saint spoke

without a hint of care or concern. With no sign of remorse, with an air of simple necessity, she declared:

"He rejected my salvation. There was nothing I could do."

I felt a strangled noise escape my throat.

I can't do it.

All this time, I'd been carrying Father Carol's words in my heart: "Help her find her way." I'd done everything I could to keep my feelings under control, but as I listened to the saint's casual dismissal, I was overcome with frustration, sadness, defeat…

"I… I can't…"

I turned my gaze away from the saint.

"You didn't need to kill Father Carol. With your power, there were so many other things you could've done. But in the end, taking lives is all you know how to do…"

She was a demon, not a human; but I didn't feel like laying the blame there.

Even if she'd never looked at us as equals—if she'd sought to rule over us, to bring about peace through absolute devotion to her—some part of me felt like maybe I might have been able to accept even that. Just as the Church worshipped the Gods, we'd elevate the false saint as our new god and live under her protection. Even if that were the shape of the world to come, if it could be a world free of killers like me, then maybe…

"But you were wrong," I continued.

Under the reign of a tyrant who'd given up on their ideals, the cycle of violence would never come to an end.

"You never should have killed him!"

Even if the two of them could never understand one another, even if she were threatened with inquisition—as long as she called herself a saint, as long as she claimed to serve justice, she had a duty to reckon with her own self-deceit.

"By your own deeds, you've defiled the title of Holy Saint!"

My knife was in my hand. I would never accept her. I *couldn't* accept her—not in the name of the Gods, not by my honor as their bride.

"You have *no right* to call yourself that name!"

What I was about to do was an act of rebellion. I could talk about the Gods all I wanted, but as far as the Church was concerned, justice was on the saint's side. She was the representative of the people before the Gods; she stood

alongside the pope at the pinnacle of the Church's power structure. To resist her was to go against the Church itself, plain and simple. But even so...

"*I won't allow it!*"

Father Carol had told me to help her find her way, but...

I'm sorry. I can't.

I apologized to him inside my heart.

I could never save or guide anyone to begin with. That was why I'd spent all these years killing countless people, trampling over their lives. All their hopes, all their futures—I'd plucked them like flowers.

After all that I'd done, maybe I had no right to judge this woman at all. But she was the one person I could never, *ever* forgive.

"Hell yeah. That's a great look you've got in your eyes, Sister."

Turning toward the voice, I saw a figure appear amid the pews—the slender form of a killer clad in shadow itself.

"That's a plenty good reason to kill someone."

I stared at them. "Veil Croitzen."

The shadow laughed mockingly.

I wasn't surprised to see them. I'd had a feeling they'd show up, even. I'd sent Cion away, leaving the saint unguarded; there was no way they'd pass up a chance like this.

"Anyway, she's a demon. I can promise you that. Up to you whether you wanna believe me, though."

The silhouette that stepped out into the candlelight was a woman with the air of a lonely moon on a starless night. Her ashen hair was stained red in places, and her left and right eyes were different colors.

"For the record, I *do* have orders for your capture as well," I said.

"Aw, c'mon, loosen up a little. I'll go with you if I gotta, okay? I can tell you all about how that guy died too. I was watching the whole thing, after all."

You were watching, and you didn't help?

"Hey, don't glare at me like that. *You're* the one who couldn't save him—don't act like it's my fault."

"I... I know that," I grumbled.

As she stepped over, slowly and soundlessly, the killer transformed the shadows around her into countless duplicates of herself. Her mouth twisted into a fierce grin, her fangs bared

at the saint.

“Anyway, first things first—time to kill this bitch!”

She crouched down low, then kicked off the ground along with her shadow clones and closed in on the unguarded saint.

No—she *tried* to close in on her. But as soon as she took a step, one of the shadows next to her exploded from the inside.

“Wha—”

Before she could speak, the shadow next to that one and the shadow behind her burst apart as well. Spears of light and pillars of flame suddenly manifested out of thin air, destroying her clones one by one. The killer stopped in her tracks as a giant appeared in front of her, swinging down a massive war hammer. Behind it stood the figure of the saint in prayer—a holy villainess, freely wielding the miracles of the Gods as her own.

“Ha ha...”

The killer disappeared beneath the great hammer with a short cry, neither a laugh of astonishment nor a scream of terror—followed by the sound of flesh and bone being crushed.

“All shall be as the light guides us.”

The clean chime of bells echoed through the cathedral hall, drowning out any note of dissonance.

The saint’s blindfolded gaze turned to the wall of the second-floor terrace.

“**Killing Thorn of the Tree of Life**.”

At the saint’s quiet incantation, a golden lance shot out to pierce through the body of the killer as she appeared up above.

“If you surrender, I will spare your life.”

Without waiting for an answer, a hail of arrows rained down onto the shadow. As shot after shot pierced through her, her body twitched and writhed, spouting blood.

The fight was utterly one-sided. I knew how to cast the same orisons she was using, but all of them took time to activate. They were all high-level incantations, poorly suited for regular use—and she was casting them *instantly*? What’s more, this was the Holy City of Eldias. We were standing in the very focal point of faith and prayer, the Pontifex Cathedral. She could keep casting all the orisons she wanted and never have to worry about running out of mana.

But—

“Lemme clear something up for you, real quick...”

—before I knew it, the pincushioned shadow had begun

dissolving like mud.

"*I don't fucking die!*"

"Nobody is immune from death."

The shadow raced around faster than my eyes could follow. From the darkness beside the coffin, a wicked blade emerged to strike at the saint's unguarded back. But without even turning around, the saint manifested a set of celestial chains; they shone with golden light, cutting through the darkness.

The killer quickly dodged, then pulled out a knife from within the shadows to push away the chains as they closed in after her.

"Too slow!"

As Veil leaped, the chains froze in midair. Suddenly, I noticed the *shadows* stretching out from every bit of darkness inside the cathedral. They ran all through the hall like a spider's web, tangling around the chains to halt them in place.

"Need a second to repent your sins?!"

The killer pounced down from a strand of shadow. The saint awaited her with an air of placid indifference.

"I confess my sins on a daily basis, thank you."

The saint dodged the first strike, but Veil immediately jumped back around, aiming right for her head. She was lined up perfectly for a killing blow.

"Gah—?!"

But when the blood came spraying out, it came from the shadow. In the blink of an eye, shafts of light had appeared from nowhere to intercept the killer in midair.



“I’m perfectly happy to continue this until you understand.”

Veil let out a grunt of pain as countless beams of light battered and pierced through her. More and more of the shadows fell away with each strike, and blood danced through the air. The saint was torturing her to death—there was no other word for it. The hall resounded with piercing cries, somewhere between agony and madness. Finally, the light gathered to form a giant figure, swatting the killer away to roll across the floor.

The saint was surrounded by innumerable motes of warm light. It was as though all the vast legions of the Gods stood at her side to guard her.

“Are you satisfied yet?” she asked disinterestedly.

The killer tried to get up, but her uncooperative body immediately crumpled back to the ground.

“You are not to blame,” the saint said. “I see your will and your wishes quite clearly. Your heart carries no wrong. But for now, please…”

Her outstretched fingertips beckoned the killer to submission.

“Please, take my hand.”

“Ngh… Ha… Ha ha—!”

Laughter came spilling out of the shadow’s mouth. She kept laughing, louder and louder.

“*That’s* what I’m talking about! *Now* you feel like a proper demon! Now I’m *really* pissed!”

The saint sighed. “So be it.”

She turned to me. “Sister Alicia. Could I ask you to dispose of this woman? As a bride of the Gods, please deliver their justice to this fool who defies the Holy Church.”

There was no threat in the saint’s voice. She continued speaking in the calm tones of someone making an ordinary request.

“Killing is *your job*, is it not?”

How dare you say that to me with his blood on your hands, Nevissa Vernalia!

“You’re right. It is. Killing is my job, *not yours*.”

My actual mission was to investigate or capture the assassin and to guard Her Sagacity. If Veil Croitzen was the culprit behind the serial killings within the Church, then the case was closed. The Holy Saint had defeated the villain by her own hand. All I needed to do now was drag the killer before the Inquisition and let her face the Gods’ judgment. My job would be done, and I

could relax.

But…

"I am a *bride of the Gods*!"

I'd lived my life upholding the Gods' teachings and obeying their laws. I'd stained my hands with blood time and time again in order to go on living. My path, my justice, lay in obeying the Church. That was how I had to live.

But—!

"I owe you no obedience!"

I enveloped the blood-covered assassin in the healing light of prayer.

The Deathwatcher wasn't looking good. It was hard to tell with the shadows covering her, but it looked like she'd torn every muscle and broken every bone in her body. I had no idea how she was even still alive. We talked about people's lives hanging by a thread, but hers was hanging by nothing but a shadow.

"You intend to let her go?" the saint asked.

"No, I simply won't allow you to kill her," I replied. "I still have *plenty* of questions for her!"

I genuinely did have a lot I needed to ask her about the demonic infiltration of the Church, as well as the real identities of the people she'd murdered. She was much too valuable to kill here and now.

"What becomes of this woman's life is subject to *my* judgment as an inquisitor," I continued. "Even if you were truly a saint, this is *not for the Gods to decide*!"

I'd staked my position. *No matter what, I refuse to recognize your authority.*

But amid the silence, the saint simply gazed back at me. She displayed no emotion, made no rebuttal.

"I see," she said. "So you reject me as well…"

The bells chimed sadly, echoing through the dark of the night.

"We truly did lose someone quite precious to *both of us*, didn't we?"

A growl of rage rose up from inside me. Operating on pure reflex, letting my anger carry me, I lunged at the saint. Out of force of habit, I activated my Physical Boost skill; my head was still clear enough to remember that, at least. But she effortlessly halted my reckless suicidal charge, summoning golden chains to wrap around my body.

The saint stood there in the dim light, unreachably distant,

her gaze overflowing with sadness and pity.

"I wish he could have stayed with us as well..." With an air of heartfelt sincerity, she turned back to the coffin and softly laid a hand upon it. "But he refused to accept that."

"How can you say that, after what you did to him?!"

That wasn't the way a man like him should have died. Even as a Church enforcer, I could say with conviction that it wasn't a death fit for any human being. But she'd...

"To the very last, I tried to prevail upon him to understand. But he rejected my wishes. He saw me as a hateful thing, and he sought to destroy me... Even at the cost of his own life." The saint's words were tinged with bitterness. "He willingly sacrificed himself for what he believed in. I couldn't be so cruel as to erase that deed."

I... I don't understand. What the hell is she saying?

"He tried to fight her, right at the end. Blew himself up to try and take her with him."

I turned to see Veil Croitzen spitting out an explanation with a hateful grimace as she got to her feet.

"He... He what?"

"Made *me* feel like shit just watching. Her Saintness over there didn't take him seriously one bit, not from the start. But don't let her fool you! No matter what bullshit she spouts, she's still stealing all those brats' pasts and treating them like pets!"

Still unsteady on her feet, she stepped over to me and gripped the golden chains binding me, tearing them to pieces as she vented her frustration.

"We can't let her live..." she said. "These bastards shouldn't exist! They're monsters! We've gotta kill them before they get us! They've all gotta die!!!"

The woman calling herself the Deathwatcher screamed with rage from the bottom of her heart. In that moment, overlapping her, I saw a glimpse of the boy who'd attacked that devil-touched girl. The shadows wrapped around her looked almost like vengeful ghosts.

"Even so, those children bear no sin. And neither do you."

"Huh?"

The bells rang out to accompany the saint's words, leaving silence in their wake.

"It was a distant place of fields and farmlands, where even the traveling merchants seldom visited. The people were far from

wealthy, but they lived hand in hand and supported one another. They didn't need a life of plenty; they were content to live out their days in peace, there in that village."

"What're you—?"

The saint's unprompted words had a mysterious cadence that captured the ear. I watched the killer's face twist and darken as she listened.

"Stop it..."

Blood dripped from her clenched fist, and her widening eyes were filled with fear.

"One autumn night, as the harvest festival came to a close..."

"I said *stop it*!!!"

The killer tried to charge at the saint, but she stumbled on her still-healing leg and her body toppled to the floor. Even as she groaned in pain, she glared fiercely up at the saint's gentle smile of merciful love.

"A painful past will only eat away at you," the saint said as she held out a beckoning hand.

"Don't fucking talk like you know shit!"

The killer swore furiously, but a strange panic was slowly spreading over her face.

The saint read her memories. In that one instant...

If she could erase memories, it'd make sense for her to be able to read them as well. But, why was she—? No, I could see it. Faced with an enemy who wouldn't stay dead, crushing their spirit was the obvious play—especially for a witch with power over memory. Once all that remained was a broken doll, the saint could easily manipulate her as she pleased.

"Why was it that you alone survived? Why was it that even after all they did to you, death never came, and your body was able to heal again and again?"

The saint wove her words with cruel precision, as though breaking every bone in Veil's body one by one—slicing away every bit of will to stand and fight again.

"Do you truly not understand *what that signifies*?"

"The Gods gave me this power so I could kill you bastards... So I could wipe out evil!"

"No, you're wrong."

"The hell I am!"

But she was. There weren't any Gods in this world of ours. The Gods were nothing but a fiction constructed to receive people's

worship; they didn't show up to hand out miraculous salvation. If this woman had been tortured by demons and escaped with her life, it had to be...

"Atavism."

"What?" The killer faltered for a moment as she took in the unfamiliar word.

"Just as the children we call 'devil-touched' arise due to demonic blood somewhere in their ancestral bloodlines, the changes in your body were triggered by the *demonic blood you carry within you*. Does that sound familiar? Do you recall being given any of their blood? Made to *ingest it*, perhaps?"

The killer's jaw clenched. That must have rung a bell for her.

"Not just any blood transfusion would cause such an effect, though. In all likelihood, one of the demons that attacked you must have been a *distant cousin* of sorts. That coincidence allowed their blood to awaken whatever ancient memories lingered within your body, causing your transformation."

It was obvious where the saint was heading.

"As you are now, *you are a demon as well*, are you not?"

"*SHUT UP!!!!!!!!!*"

Running on pure rage, Veil charged toward the saint. From behind, her figure looked painfully sad and pitiful.

"This world holds many truths that are better left unknown."

The shadow's advance was cut off by the light. Before I could do anything, it slashed and pierced through her, sending limbs flying through the air.

"It truly saddens me..."

What was left of the assassin splattered to the ground. The shadows became pooling blood spreading across the floor. In the stillness, the guardians of light dissolved silently into thin air, their work complete. The evil had been destroyed—struck down by the hammer of the Gods.

"Now, what about you, Alicia Snowell?" The saint gave me a beautiful smile, the killer's flesh and blood splattered across her face and her vestments. "If you wish to forget everything and live a life of happiness, then I will—"

"Do you ever fucking shut up?"

"Wha—?"

The saint and I were both caught completely off guard. She turned around with a look of surprise—but the assassin's pitch-black blade was already right in front of her.

“*Die.*”

A single flash of metal.

Just as the blade swung out to slice through the saint’s slender neck, *Veil Croitzen’s right arm* went flying away in a clean arc.

“Gaaaaaaaah!!!”

Screaming and clutching at the stump of her severed arm, she tried to retreat, but *Cion* pursued her with a look of total calm. Her blade gleamed in the candlelight, slashing deep into the killer’s unguarded side. She twisted around to aim a kick right at the open wound, sending Veil’s body flying. Then she jumped back over to the saint.

“C-Cion...?”

I found myself calling out her name; but Cion didn’t respond at all. She took up a defensive stance at the saint’s side, looking over in my direction. Not glaring at me, not looking down on me, but just quietly *observing*.

In the stillness of the cathedral, mingled with the Deathwatcher’s shallow, halting breaths as she lay sprawled on the floor, I could hear my own heartbeat pounding in my ears.

“Thank you for saving me, Sir Hero,” the saint said.

“Not at all,” Cion replied impassively.

“No...”

I felt a cold, sick feeling run down my spine. My brain refused to understand, insisting it wasn’t possible, but my instincts screamed at me to face reality.



“Your painful past is better off forgotten. Entrust yourself to me, and I shall free you from your suffering.”

Cion had always hated taking off her hood in front of anyone else, but now the saint’s pale fingertips gently pushed it aside. She stroked her fingers softly and smoothly along Cion’s exposed cheek as though examining her anew.

“You really do have quite an adorable face.”

I stared helplessly at the two of them. “How? *When?*”

When I’d walked in here, Cion had been her regular self. I hadn’t felt any sign at all that she was being controlled, so how…?

“If you cherish her so dearly, then you should never have left her side.”

I let out a frustrated hiss of breath.

Had she done it today, while I’d been away from my guard duties? No, maybe she’d been setting it up from the very beginning. Ever since the day we’d first met her, this woman had been abnormally touchy-feely. Physical contact… Or maybe even just the tones of those bells…

“Damn it!”

Why? Why hadn’t I realized sooner? I knew she could manipulate memories; why hadn’t I considered the possibility that she could control our very thoughts?

“What matters now isn’t what you could have done, but what I’ll do with you… Don’t you think?”

“Seriously—!”

I didn’t know what sort of state Cion was in right now, but I couldn’t see the faintest trace of vitality in her eyes. Was this brainwashing a temporary phenomenon, or the product of having her memories tampered with? Either way, this woman was absurdly dangerous. Now I finally understood why Father Carol had chosen death.

“Why settle for being a saint? Why not call yourself a queen?” I asked bitterly. “With that kind of power, you could easily rule the world if you wished to!”

“No, I couldn’t. That is why I stand before you now.”

As she smiled softly, motes of light rose into the air all around her.

“Gods, I beseech you,” she prayed. “Please, bestow your blessings upon this frail body. Please, grant me a miracle, that I might rise again.”

All of the light that had gathered around the saint—all of the aether produced through prayer—began to shift back into its original form. The points of light fused and compressed together; their soft white glow, with its pretense of holiness, was replaced by the crimson glare of *mana* flowing into her body.

My legs shook and faltered, refusing to let me charge at her. All I could do was stand and watch amid the red-lit world. There was a flash of light, and the rushing pulse of an unknowable monster made the candle flames gutter.

"There are far, far too many things in this world that are better left unseen…"

The saint's body was filled with the aether of the grand cathedral—mana extracted from countless worshippers in prayer. She removed her blindfold and smiled at me; her glowing red eyes overflowed with *tears*.

"I wish to save you all—to protect you from this terrible world."

A strangled laugh escaped my throat. *Where does a dictator get off acting like a tragic heroine? How self-centered can you get?* Comebacks flashed through my mind one after another. The shaking of my legs had spread to my entire body, though, and I couldn't get the words out.

"So many face persecution for the circumstances of their birth. So many fall victim to tragedies out of cruel happenstance. So many become trapped in cycles of hatred and vengeance. The devil-touched children are far from alone in this. This girl, who took up the heavy mantle of the Hero on her tender shoulders; and you, who chose to live chained to the Gods, obediently taking the lives of innocents—all of you have a right to live in happiness, do you not?"

The crimson-eyed witch addressed me with tearstained cheeks.

"Throw away your past. Forget the sins that burden you, and set forth anew on the life you ought to have lived!"

The all-consuming red glow of her gaze was focused intently on me.

"Hey, Gods? I *really* hate you," I groaned.

My body was gripped by an overwhelming terror. It was the same sensation I'd felt when we'd fought General Heavenfang—the primal fear of an animal in the face of a far more powerful predator.

“So you want me to just forget all my painful memories like those kids at the orphanage did? Give up my past and start over?”

“It’s all right,” she replied. “You’ve all suffered more than enough already. What need have you to put yourself in further danger?”

The saint’s words were infuriatingly sincere.

“I alone shall bear the weight of all your sins. So please, take my hand…”

Her outstretched hand, offered without any hesitation, held not a trace of malice. She really meant all of it. This woman genuinely wanted to take on everyone’s sins and use her brainwashing to build a world free of suffering—a world with no more winners or losers. A utopia.

“But the world you’re making would just be a dystopia ruled by a twisted tyrant!”

I took a deep breath and activated my Physical Boost skill, with my Spec Boost orison stacked on top this time. As I brandished my knife, I began incanting a formula from scratch, preparing to cast my Overspec spell.

“Please, won’t you try to understand?” she asked.

“A *saint* would know better. But you’re nothing but a dominatrix!”

She sighed. “You truly do sadden me.”

“Wh—”

A rush of wind.

“*We’ve been through this, dammit!*”

All that saved me was a split-second reflex and the weight of experience. I didn’t see her coming; I didn’t even feel her presence. My gut just told me where she’d approach from, and I swung my knife in time to block her blade. The loud clash of metal rang out through the cathedral as she stared at me, silent and impassive.

“The least you could do…” I gritted out, “…is try and act a little surprised, *Cion*!”

Still expressionless, *the Hero* continued her advance, changing up her tactics and launching one attack after another from my blind spots. As I desperately parried and dodged her strikes by a hair’s breadth, I tried to come up with a way to break through, but—

“Seriously, this girl—!”

—she was just too fast and too strong. Every time I tried to seize the initiative, I ended up on the back foot anyway. I could see plainly that if I faltered for even an instant, I'd be carved up and left to die. I focused all of my thoughts and my senses on Cion, letting my instincts guide me as I swung my knife and twisted my body to barely avoid a deadly strike.

"Please think about this rationally, Sister. Against the Hero who vanquished the Demon Lord, what hope could a mere bride of the Church possibly—"

"*I know that!*" I shouted back.

I activated a painstakingly assembled spell to create countless stone walls, blocking Cion's vision as I went after the caster: the saint herself. But—

"Gah!"

—I immediately sensed *death* right behind me. As I twisted around, her blade grazed my cheek, and—

"Agh! Wha—?"

—from the edge of my vision, Cion's flattened hand stabbed through my side.

The blow sent me flying and left me completely disoriented. Sprawled amid a scattered row of pews, I groaned and coughed up blood, but I just barely managed to sit myself back up.

"S— **Secret Revive**..."

I forced my shaky legs to stand. My vision was cloudy, but I had a solid grip on my knife at least. As I healed the most pressing injuries with an orison, I stared across the cathedral hall. Cion's next attack...didn't come.

"Please, rest assured. I won't kill you. I simply want you to understand."

Cion was back at the saint's side, looking over at me. The saint probably saw both of us as useful pawns to have under her control.

"Dammit..."

That woman made me sick to my stomach.

"You just keep talking all high and mighty... What, you think you're a god now?!" I shouted.

"None of us can ever be gods."

As the saint spoke, Cion leaped back into motion.

My left shoulder was dislocated. My injuries were healing slowly, and I felt a cold, clammy sweat covering me—I think one of my broken ribs might have been stabbing into something

important.

"Fuck's sake..."

My legs were shaking all the way down to my toes; just standing was taking all of my effort. Cion was deliberately *avoiding my vital spots* as she came at me, and so I managed to just barely put up some semblance of a defense. I was only able to fend off her blows because I knew she wasn't trying to kill me, and even then, her attacks came way too close for comfort...

"Wha—?"

She cut a gash on my forehead, and the dripping blood forced one of my eyes to shut for a moment. Right as I lost my depth perception, she delivered a clean hit straight to my abdomen.

"Gah..."

Even as I groaned and whimpered, Cion remained silent and expressionless.

"Graaaah—!"

Squinting through tears, I pushed Cion back and retreated on unsteady feet. I panted and heaved, trying to calm my breathing as best as I could.

"Just let go," the saint said softly. "You're only human. There are heights you can never reach, foes you can never equal—surely you understand that much."

Just the sound of her voice, just the scent of the mana spilling out of her, made my breath catch in my throat. The pressure emanating from her felt powerful enough to shatter me. I was simply outclassed as a living organism. I thought I'd long since understood, but that soul-crushing awareness was still utterly infuriating.

General Heavenfang had told me that the Demon Lord had wanted to coexist with humanity—and that if demonkind truly wished it, they could wipe us out in the blink of an eye.

"Of course I know that, dammit..."

Just one month ago, I'd been killed by a demon. Not *nearly* killed—I'd actually *died* back then. Just thinking back on it sent chills down my spine; I could feel my face tighten into a cold grimace at the recollection. I remembered that sensation of my own existence disappearing. I remembered the outlines of myself and the world becoming indistinct as my consciousness dissolved away. I remembered that terror, and I never wanted to experience it ever again.

Maybe humanity truly didn't stand a chance against demons.

Aside from the small handful of people we called champions, no one was capable of resisting them. Maybe we didn't have any option but to accept their rule and live as their pets.

"But even so—!" I gritted my teeth. I wouldn't let my teacher's death be in vain. "I won't—I *can't* obey you!"

No matter how much blood my body was stained with; no matter how sullied and tainted a bride I became; no matter how many innocents I'd murdered with my own hands…

"I will never avert my eyes from the lives I've taken!"

Even if killing others was the only way this world would allow me to live—even if someday, that cycle came back around, and I lost my own life in turn—I would carry no regrets. That was my duty as the one who'd plucked out all those lives; that was my cross to bear.

"Even if there comes a day when the souls of the dead seize your body in their grip?"

"I know what I signed up for."

"Even if you burn alive in the flames of hell?"

"I'll reap what I've sown!"

"Why…?" The saint grew distraught in the face of my defiant glare. "That— That is not a path anyone ought to walk of their own will!"

"But it's my past and my weight to carry."

The same went for those devil-touched children—for all of us, even those who bore no sins of their own.

"In order to live in this world—this Godless world, devoid of salvation—we need to carry it with us. Our pasts, our mistakes—all of it."

How else could our debts to the dead ever be repaid?

"Is that it, then?" The saint spoke softly, tears still streaming down her cheeks. "I see now why he thought so highly of his pupil—why he entrusted you with this."

Her crimson eyes were fixed on me, and her trembling lips formed themselves into a smile.

"But all the same, I cannot simply abandon one who would walk such a path."

The moment I saw that smile, I instinctively braced for death.

"I will no longer ask for your understanding. That would merely be an insult to you."

Blazing light shone forth at the saint's bidding, spreading through the cathedral hall as orison after orison unfolded

around us. I'd never seen a single one of these formulae outside of tomes in forbidden archives.

"Please despise me as much as you wish, for knowingly trampling your will…"

That is all that I can offer you, her eyes seemed to say.

"**Dragonbane**, **Executioner's Axe**, **Divine Lance**, **Arrow of Heaven**…"

She was practically putting on an exhibition of the most advanced orisons ever developed. These were all on a level I'd yet to master, and any single one of these large-scale incantations would normally drain every last bit of nearby aether.

"Seems a bit extravagant for one solitary bride, don't you think?" I asked slowly.

At this rate, she wasn't just going to use up all the aether in the cathedral—she'd drain the entire Holy City.

"But even so, will it suffice to break your solitary spirit?" she replied. "Only the Gods can say."

Well, isn't that just ridiculously merciful *and* caring *of you.*

The saint smiled softly at me as she prepared her arsenal. I could only manage a single dry laugh in response.

From every direction at once, the light bared its fangs.

I immediately activated the orison I'd been preparing. I created layer upon layer of barriers, then reinforced them further with magic to hold back the armaments of the Gods.

The piercing screech of barriers tearing echoed out over and over, bursting my eardrums and resonating through my gut…

"Graaaaaaah—!"

The air shook with the impact of one divine weapon after another, and even just the shock waves tore at my skin.

Gods, if you're out there, you could stand to treat people a little more fairly, couldn't you? Actually, I'm *your damn bride—how about some nepotism, huh?!* Amid the world-shattering roar, I shouted out my grievances—but it seemed the Gods had abandoned me.

All around me, spears flew out faster than sound to punch through my layered defenses and stab into the floor. The next instant, the ground rose up beneath my feet…and everything fell apart. As the impact hit, my control over my mana slackened for a split second, and she seized the opening to destroy all of my barriers before I could even react.

The wrath of the Gods rained down upon me like the will of the world itself.

“There aren’t even…any Gods…dammit…”
As my vision whited out, I felt no fear.

Chapter 7

“It feels more like a magic trick than a skill,” I’d said to her.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

Back during our journey to the Holy City, one of the rivers we’d needed to cross had flooded during the torrential rains, and the bridge had gotten washed away. The locals had been setting up a temporary bridge to replace it, but they’d told us it’d be another half a day until it was ready. We’d contemplated traveling up along the river to get to a bridge farther north, but that detour would’ve cost us an extra two days. So we’d opted to take it easy and wait.

We’d set down our luggage by the riverside and spent a while doing maintenance on our equipment, but even then, we’d still ended up with spare time on our hands. Cion had pestered me about how she needed more exercise, and she’d practically dragged me off for another round of sparring on the edge of the woods where no one would see us.

She’d told me, “I won’t strike back at all,” but then she’d countered me with a jab anyway. Still determined to get at least one good hit on her, I’d grabbed a tree branch off the ground and thrown it at her, but she’d already disappeared—

“Bam!”

She’d sent me flying from behind, and I’d ended up sprawled out in the grass. I’d hit my jaw when I fell; it had really, really hurt.

The pain had motivated me to go back over the fight in my head, hoping I could at least avoid a repeat incident the next time we fought. I’d remained at a loss no matter how long I thought, though.

“Is it some sort of perception-blocking effect? Or spatial obfuscation, maybe? I know explaining your skills is taboo, but regardless, I can see I don’t have any chance against you in a one-on-one fight. I surrender.”

“Heh heh heh…”

She always gets so pleased with herself whenever I praise her. She’s like a dog.

“But I think you’re fine the way you are, Alicia.”

“You’re right; I’m just a *delicate bride*, after all. I’ll simply hide behind you, Sir Hero.”

“Ummm… I didn’t mean it like that…”

Cion had looked a little unsure of herself as I’d glowered, but she’d kept on frantically searching for the right words.

“I mean, like—when you fought those drunks back at the boss’s place, you made sure to hold back, and you even healed them afterward, right? I don’t know if you taught them a lesson, exactly, but they got all hyped up about how they weren’t gonna lose to some bride, and they really did get their act together after that.”

“Well, now… Stranger things have happened, I suppose.”

They were just trying to save face after I beat them up; that’s all.

“I don’t think I could ever do that, though. I just thought it was really amazing, you know? And when I was up against those knights too—I can fight, but I’m no good at supporting people. Master always told me, ‘You’ve got a knack for taking lives, but you can’t protect people, so you’ve gotta put your own life first. If you’ve got time to protect something, then just focus on hunting down whatever’s attacking.’”

“That does sound like him…”

He probably meant it out of fatherly concern, but, well… We can get into that some other time.

“So you’re saying I’m admirable because I’m not suited to killing people?”

“No, that’s not what I mean!”

I just hadn’t been able to figure out what she was trying to say. And besides, if we were talking about who made a better murderer, *I’d* killed far more humans than she had.

“Sorry, Cion. Could you try and explain it a little more clearly?”

It hadn’t seemed like anything especially important, but Cion had been struggling really hard to put her thoughts together. Looking at her face, I’d felt like I owed it to her to try and understand.

“I mean—you’re really good at saving people, Alicia! It’s awesome how you can give everyone the push they need to move forward! You’re great at being a bride of the Gods!”

“Uhhhh…”

Cion’s slightly overenthusiastic conclusion hadn’t felt at all convincing. If I’d ever supported anyone, it had been entirely for my own benefit, not for theirs. All I did was use the people

around me and the names of the Gods—all for the sake of my own survival.

"I… I'm really not as good a person as you think I am, Cion…"

That hadn't been *why*, exactly, but as I'd looked into those innocent eyes, I'd let a bit of the truth slip out.

But Cion had just smiled shyly back at me.

"You are, though! I mean, you've saved me too, haven't you?" she'd said. "So next time, I'll be the one to save you, Alicia!"

You're wrong, I'd thought to myself, but I hadn't been able to correct her. All the faith she placed in me was just because of the enormity of everything she'd lost. I ought to have told her that, but I'd just nodded noncommittally and averted my eyes from that utterly trusting gaze.

She hadn't known a single thing about the real me. She'd just stood there, smiling like a child, and…

"Ughhhhh, dammit… If my life's gonna flash before my eyes, I'd really rather remember a useful spell right about now…"

All my senses felt distant, but I mustered what strength I had to sit up and raise my face.

"Cion… What am I supposed to do if you're over *there*?"

My vision was cloudy. I couldn't tell what sort of expression she had on her face right now.

The barrage of divine weapons had turned the inside of the cathedral into nothing but a mountain of debris, but somehow, the roof still hadn't collapsed. I had to hand it to those architects.

"You understand, don't you?" the saint asked. "Isn't this enough?"

Accompanied by the cool tones of bells, she told me that I'd fought long and hard enough—that I'd done all I could to resist her control, and now it was fine for me to rest.

If I took her outstretched hand, it would all be over. I'd be at peace. I wouldn't have to worry about any of the walls I'd struggled against; I could just obey the saint's will, avert my eyes from the harsh reality around me, and find happiness.

But all the same, even if that were true, I—

"I can't just leave her like that."

As I stared at Cion, now the saint's puppet, that childlike smile floated through my mind and refused to go away.

I was gradually regaining my vision. I felt my right arm—I could still move it. My legs weren't broken either. It probably helped that she'd never been trying to kill me, but more

importantly, I hadn't taken any direct hits. When the ground under my feet had been carved away and I'd gone flying, I'd managed to avoid any critical injuries. I could easily have ended up completely incapacitated.

"*Why?* Why do you persist in this?!"

The saint's expression darkened as she stared at me. Her teeth were clenched, and her tears flowed with anger as well as sadness. Looking at her face, I felt like I finally understood why Father Carol had told me that she and I were alike.

My legs were too unsteady to run, so I walked toward the saint, one step at a time.

She and I were both sore losers. I could see it now.

"You want to change the world all on your own. But you can't change anything, so you give up. But you can't ever really give up, so you let that wish seize hold of you… You decide you'd rather just take on everything yourself, if you could…"

I was finally starting to see the true form of the monster in front of me.

"You want to save the children, you want to protect me… You say all these pretty words, but in the end, you're just a self-centered child ignoring reality."

Once I saw it, it was all obvious. I felt a laugh bubbling up inside me. We really did have one arrogant saint. She'd just felt love for others and stubbornly insisted that she'd save them. She'd kept pushing until she ended up stuck in a dead end, unable to move. The woman standing in front of me was nothing but a poor lost lamb.

"Your dreams won't come true. You'll never save every child in the world—not unless you can become a god."

There were no Gods. Reality didn't work like that. So all we could do was struggle—no matter how much blood spilled from our bodies—against this senseless world.

"But— But still, I—"

I was the one who'd been overpowered, but the saint was the one starting to panic.

I didn't hear what she said next. Cion captured all my attention as she suddenly slipped in front of me.

"Cion…"

Time seemed to slow to a crawl.

I stared into Cion's emotionless eyes as she closed in on me.

Could I intercept her? No, it was too late.

I'd already said everything I could think of to say. The saint understood her own foolishness.

Maybe it was fine to let it end like this. Even if I died here, that woman would wipe Cion clean of the knowledge that she'd killed me. They'd move forward into a future without me in it—the merciful saint and the demon-slaying Hero.

Maybe Cion might even be better off that way. I was nothing but a bride of the Gods, a slave of the Church; she'd be able to save far more people at the saint's side than at mine. And perhaps Cion would be able to succeed where I'd failed and guide the saint onto a better path.

So I— Even if I disappeared from her side, I'd just—

"GRAAAAAH!"

"Wha—?"

A shadow leaped up from my feet to knock Cion's blade aside. A kick came swinging in between us, sending Cion's body flying.

"*You can talk shit once you're dead!!!*"

Grabbing me by the collar, fangs bared in my face, was Veil Croitzen—the Deathwatcher.

"If you were alive...you should have run away," I said feebly.

"Fuck that! You think I'd abandon a couple brats to save my own ass?!" the blood-soaked killer yelled as she roughly tossed me aside. "I've always hated demons. Fucking despise 'em. And now she's telling me *I'm* a demon? I wanna die right this damn second! But y'know what?! No fucking way am I just gonna kick it and let that bitch get the last word!!!"

As she raged and snarled, more and more blood spurted out of her veins, and more of the tattered shadows covering her body fell away. I could see viscera peeking out of the wound on her abdomen, and the pool of blood at her feet just continued to grow. Still, she kept on shouting.

"I hate your damn guts!" she roared, pointing at the saint. "Assholes like you with your sad-sack faces, acting like you're the most miserable people in the whole world—you fucking piss me off!!!"

She fixed the saint with a glare of pure disdain. "I'm not like you. I don't think I'm miserable, and I sure as hell don't need *you* to save me! There's loads of people like me out there, and they'd all say the same thing: Get off your damn high horse, 'cause you don't know *shit*!"

Her frenzied declaration of war left both me and the saint at a

loss. These weren't the words of a woman on death's door. They were too fierce, too sharp, too *radiant with light*.

"You can take care of your own damn wishes. We don't need anyone protecting us—we're not that weak. Ain't that right, Miss Bride?"

She pulled my bible from the shadows and held it out to me, chuckling with the grin of someone who'd seen right through me.

"Indeed," I said slowly, taking the bible from her. "You're quite right."

The two of us stood side by side, braced for battle as we faced the Blind-Eyed Saint.

"Why…? Why must you—?"

"Because we're going to live like the fools we are!" I replied.

Heavily injured as we were, fighting her was sheer madness—but if we retreated, we'd have no hope and no future. All we could do was step forward.

"There's nothing to be gained by giving up, after all."

Even if my hopes were selfish and conceited, I'd still reach out my hand. Even if my dreams were impossible, I still wouldn't give up. If prayer wouldn't grant me what I wished for, then I'd just have to seize it myself. If there weren't any Gods, then we'd just have to keep on fighting our way through life—fighting against this world and all its absurdity.

"When Cion— When the Hero starts moving, I'm going to disable all of your body's limiters just for an instant. The feedback might kill you, but please try to hang in there."

"Told you, didn't I? *I don't die!*"

"Good. Just don't let me kill you."

Our opponents were in peak condition, and we were at our limits. Using my dwindling reserves of mana to start up the formula, I cast an orison to heal myself and Veil. Fully healing our injuries would be flat-out impossible; instead, I focused on getting us stable enough to move at all. We'd just have to take out the saint in one hit.

Our odds were slim; Cion was going to intercept one of us, either me or Veil. That was fine, though. One of us had to reach that woman, no matter what. Even then, there were no guarantees we'd make it. It was a bad gamble, but we were out of options. We just had to go for it.

"Here goes."

“Ready!”

Placing a hand on the taller woman’s body, I cast a stack of Physical Boost and Spec Boost on myself, and then—

“**Limi**t—?”

“Ngh—!”

—Veil suddenly turned to face me; her arm shot out to shove me away, sending me sprawling to the floor.

“Aaagh!”

As I saw Cion’s blade run through the killer standing in my place, I finally processed what had happened.

Groaning in pain, Veil Croitzen tried to grab the sword in a shaky grip, but with an almost mocking air, the blade twisted and sliced through her. As her blood showered me, all I could do was look up in a daze.

“I am not so heartless as to ignore those who strive toward their own destruction.”

I hadn’t been able to perceive Cion at all. This was the power that had killed the Demon Lord—Cion’s *perfect stealth ability*. Even I couldn’t figure out the true nature of her skill, but one way or another, it was an utterly invisible strike.

I’d known full well that she could do that. I’d known, but…I’d forgotten? Just for that instant, I’d forgotten Cion’s power—forgotten that she was the Hero who’d vanquished the Demon Lord.

But the saint had forgotten as well. Not even Cion had noticed it.

As Cion turned to face me, she suddenly froze up, and her lifeless eyes glanced down at her own body. Countless shadows clung to her, wrapping around her arms, her legs, and her sword. Veil’s hands were gripping the hilt.

“I…don’t…*die*!”

She’d clearly been mortally wounded, but she kept on screaming through nothing but sheer force of will. Taking her shout as my signal, I leaped into action. Silencing my emotions, I charged forward, driven by pure necessity.

For the first time, I summoned up every bit of force I could muster and punched Cion right in the face. I gritted my teeth and punched her with all my might.

With a noise of confusion at the unexpected blow, she went flying and landed sprawled out on the altar. I saw Veil crumple to the ground beside me, but I kept on moving.

I'd punched Cion, Cion had attacked me after she'd promised to protect me… We could figure out who owed who *later*! Right now—

"O merciful Gods; ye who reign over good and evil, over all and one; masters of this world and all its laws…"

I prayed.

"Bestow your blessings upon this frail body!" I gritted out. "Grant me a miracle, that I might rise again…!"

The taste of blood spread through my mouth. I felt a fever rush through me, as though all my blood was boiling. It felt like I was being torn apart.

"I, child of man; I, child of the Gods; I, bride of the Gods, beseech you! I demand of you! Gods, grant me your loving kindness; grant me your miracles!"

I'm sure there aren't any Gods in this world. But if, just maybe, there really are…then answer me!

"Let the love of the Gods be bestowed in equal measure upon every child of man!"

I don't care what happens to my body… Just, please—!

As I recited the final words of my prayer, I felt every hair on my body stand on end. All of my senses were sharpening.

This was a huge gamble. I didn't understand the logic behind how it worked, and I wasn't sure I'd be able to reproduce the effect at all. But as I sent an excess of mana into my body, trying to heal myself beyond what was needed, that *directionless mana* began to re-create my "missing" parts.

"Gah—!"

It hurt like hell, but it was working.

"You're—" the saint started, confused.

"Yup… Aren't they cute?" I gritted out.

Along with my ears and tail, I brandished my slightly lengthened claws and bared my sharpened fangs.

"I'm coming to save you."

I charged toward the saint to free her from the cage she'd locked herself inside.



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How…? How did it come to this?

I still recalled the day they'd robbed me of my sight. I was trapped in a world of darkness, only able to perceive my surroundings through the sound of bells. Deprived of most of my mana, I was utterly powerless.

But even then, he told me, "We won't allow you to die." I was abandoned in the humans' lands, adding insult to injury. They wanted me to live on, wallowing in my own misery. Such was my punishment for calling myself Queen and attempting to usurp our Lord.

I contemplated debasing myself still further—becoming a prostitute, perhaps, and letting the world do with me what it would.

That was when those filthy bandits came upon me.

No longer able to produce my own mana, I found that my body now constantly demanded food. I'd grown so frail and weak, it was hard to believe this body was even my own.

When they put me in chains and told me they would sell me to a slave trader, it all felt like one grand joke at my expense. The men's laughter sounded distant in my ears; it was as though all of this were happening to someone else entirely.

I could sense a few other young girls in the cell they threw me into. They'd been robbed of their families, kept alive solely to sustain the men who tormented them, not permitted even to die. Such pitiful children of humankind…

We lived lives lower than cattle, lower even than slaves—the lives of humans denied humanity. But still, for some reason, those girls showed me kindness. They helped me eat; they cleaned my wounds. Perhaps they pitied me—deprived of my sight and unable to move my body as I wished. They were suffering as well, but still they protected me, even letting themselves be tormented in my place.

They truly were pitiful. Perhaps our shared suffering led me to empathize with them. But in my reduced state, I no longer had the power to free them. As I was violated and defiled by the men in turn, the most I could do was shoulder the burden of those girls' pain for a time.

And so, I prayed. I offered prayers to nonexistent Gods—to

those celestial beings who dubbed us vile fiends in the world of humankind.

But by pure happenstance, those prayers allowed me to grasp a sliver of the curious mana that filled this land. Its form was twisted and strange; but at its root, it was mana all the same. I took it in, and with it, I was able to reclaim a small fraction of my former power.

I slaughtered the bandits to the last man. I made them carve into their own bodies and cut the threads of their own lives. I freed the children from the cell and brought them to the nearest village to take shelter in the church.

Our days from then on were meager but peaceful. Our lives weren't filled with plenty, but they were far from terrible. I experienced the warmth of others, a warmth that I'd formerly only felt through control and manipulation. Feeling the touch of others in ways that differed from my own intentions was bewildering at times…but it certainly wasn't unpleasant.

I'd lost my power, but perhaps what I'd gained in return was worth it, I thought to myself. I truly did.

At least, until that day came.

One morning, the children were unusually late for breakfast, and so I went to wake them. They'd been up quite late last night, so perhaps they'd overslept. I knocked at their room, but there was no answer. I opened the door, wondering idly if they'd gone out without me noticing… Then, at the smell of blood, I understood exactly what had happened. Even without my sight, I could clearly picture the scene in front of me—the bodies of those children who'd chosen to end their own short lives.

They hadn't been saved at all.

Later, one of the priests told me about the terrified looks those girls had worn from time to time. They'd been too scared to so much as speak to any of the men in the village, but they'd acted bright and cheerful in front of me, trying not to worry me.

I had never hated my lightless eyes more than I did that day.

Perhaps if they'd been able to forget it all and start new lives, things could have been different. As I stood before their shared grave, I cursed my own foolishness.

I, with all my power… I'd left those girls to die.

And so, I…

+ + + + +

Chapter 8

“GRAAAAAAAAAAH!!!”

Dodging divine weapons by a hair’s breadth, one after another, I kept charging straight toward the saint. I was converting aether into mana to strengthen my body. Stacked on top of this state—demonification was all I could think of to call it—the combined effect was unbelievable. My movements were faster and my senses were sharper as I reacted to my enemy’s strikes. My body moved without even thinking. Even the magic I cast using my bible was more powerful than normal, enough to cancel out the saint’s orisons as I carved a path through to her.

“Why—? Why?!” the saint screamed at me, tears streaming down her face. “Why won’t you understand?!”

“Ngh—!”

I can reach her.

I stepped in, slashing up with my sharpened knife to just barely graze the saint’s chest. But I immediately had to twist around to kick away an axe coming down on me from behind.

“Dammit—!!!”

I just couldn’t manage to close the distance, to take that one final step. I couldn’t reach in to grab her by the collar...

“You’re only going to destroy yourself!” she shouted. “So please—!”

She ducked, dodged, and sidestepped my attacks as she tried to push me away with a barrage of blows.

“I just—!” she started. “I only want—”

“You can’t save us!”

A weak attack came at me, just barely avoiding anything vital; I caught it on my left shoulder instead of dodging. With that, I forced my way in—one last step closer.

“You think you can *save people*?!” I shouted. “Who the hell do you think you are?!”

I grabbed her by the hair and slammed my head right into her forehead. A glare filled my vision.

“Ugggghhhh...”

This stuff wasn’t my style. That was what I got for stepping outside my comfort zone.

The gash on my forehead had almost closed back up, but blood came running out again. I had no strength left in my grip, and the recoil sent my body stumbling away from the saint. Gritting my teeth, I created a chain to tie our wrists together. I pulled hard on it, but with blood dripping into one eye, I couldn't judge the distance right—

"*You aren't special!!!*"

—and I slammed right into her as she came toward me. Not a grapple, not a strike—I just collided with her at full force, and the two of us went tumbling over the altar.

My entire body hurt. I could feel tears welling up. But I couldn't fall just yet. Panting and heaving, I righted myself with my hands on my knees and glared down at the saint. She falteringly stood up as well and stared back at me.

"You're like a wild animal..."

"I've got the ears and tail, don't I?!"

Dragging the heavy chain along with me, I stepped closer to the saint.

"The words of the weak hold no meaning in this world," she said.

Still not enough, huh? Guess I'll just keep hitting her until she gets it...

As I pondered, I suddenly saw a large tear roll down the saint's cheek.

"I... I've never needed anyone to understand me..." Her voice was strained and her cheeks were damp as she gazed at me.

"You liar."

I grinned at her, and with a pained chuckle, she smiled back at me. It was a warm, soft smile, like sunlight on a gentle spring day.

"I wish we could have understood one another."

My body froze, as though pinned in place in the air.

"Ah—"

I felt the shock spread through me from the inside. I could tell without even looking that it was a lethal wound. There, on the edge of my vision... Cion's blade was stuck into my right side, piercing cleanly through my body to emerge from the other side of my torso.

"I imagine we would have been the best of friends..."

The ringing in my ears, the ringing of the bells, Cion's emotionless eyes...

“It truly is a shame.”
The blade sliced through my body, and the world tipped over.
An d I f el l a p a r . .

Chapter 9

As the Hero's sword pierced her body and sliced through her, I let out a breath. It was all over.

I'd encountered stubborn people before, but no one had ever given me as much trouble as she had.

"It truly is a shame…"

I lacked the heart to watch her figure crumple to the ground. If this was what I had to see, then I should never have restored my sight. I closed my eyes and turned away. If I witnessed the viscera leaking out of her slender body, it would sully the respect I held for her. I almost wanted to cover my ears, even, but that really would be dishonorable of me.

Even as a mere human, she'd faced me head-on with her pure and simple appeal. I owed it to her to mourn her with dignity and to carve her glory into my heart, never to be forgotten.

"Cion…" I addressed the Hero at my side with the same affectionate nickname the now-dead bride had called her by. I was about to have her bring the corpse to me, when—

"Wh—?"

—a chill ran through my entire body. My eyes widened involuntarily, and I frantically turned toward the presence I felt; such was the *overwhelming terror* that seized me.

This sensation, this aura of pure death, could only be—

"*My Lord—!*"

No, that was impossible. He was dead; even *that man* had said so. There was no way he could be here. As I searched around, trying to make sense of the situation, I saw *the bride's body melting away*. Like candy losing its shape in the hot sun, she dissolved into the shadows at our feet…

"Ah—?!"

By the time I noticed, it was already too late. A blade slashed up in a clean line, slicing my field of vision in two. The pain was too intense to keep standing; I fell over backward, sprawled on the ground. In a panic, I tried to send new orders to the Hero, but—

"Don't bother."

—the *shadow-clad bride* that had appeared before me raised

up a hand to *devour* the flow of mana—to devour those threads that she shouldn't even have been able to see.

"No… You're… This isn't—!"

I began praying, casting formula after formula to produce countless divine weapons all around her, but—

"Your prayers shall not be answered."

—they were erased in an instant, swept away by the fourfold tails that spread out behind her. I followed them with more orisons, but she dissipated those as well, devouring the mana as it scattered.

The bride gazed down at me with an expression of utter disdain. She really did look *just like him*.

"Wh-What are you?"

"I'm the Hero-Killing Bride."

The bride dispassionately raised a hand, extending crimson-stained fingers toward the Hero. With just that simple gesture, the bond tying the Hero to me was effortlessly broken, and I could sense the bride's control enveloping her in place of mine.

"The Hero belongs with the bride."

As though obeying her words, the Hero raised her weapon and held it at my throat.

"Checkmate," the bride declared.

I'd been defeated, completely and utterly.

Chapter 10

“Checkmate.”

Even as I spoke those words, I was still figuring out what had just happened. I was clearly standing here of my own will. But in that brief moment—from when Cion had killed me to when I’d carved out one of the saint’s eyes—I’d felt as though I wasn’t myself at all.

It wasn’t that unusual for someone’s body to move independently of their own volition in the heat of battle. We all had reflexes ingrained into our muscle memory; in a life-and-death struggle, our bodies often sprang into motion before our minds could catch up. That was all perfectly normal. Except… My memories were fuzzy. Maybe that was just a side effect of the reckless stunt I’d pulled—converting atmospheric aether back into mana and absorbing it into my body might have interfered with my cognition somehow.

It was all fine, though. My mind was sharp and clear now, and I could intuitively sense exactly how to remove Cion’s brainwashing. Once it was clear that the saint wasn’t going to try anything more, I snapped my fingers, and the remaining threads of mana connected to Cion instantly broke. I pulled out the mana the saint had poured into her, and I *devoured it*.

That was all it took for the light to gradually start returning to Cion’s eyes. For her, it probably felt like slowly waking up from a strange, hollow dream.

“Cion?” I called her name gently, as though guiding her by the hand—leading her consciousness back to me.

“Nn…”

Hazily at first, her unfocused eyes searched for me. Gradually, the outlines of thoughts began to take shape.

“Ali…cia…?”

“It’s me,” I said softly. “It’s Alicia.”

Floating to the surface came confusion, trepidation…and fear.

“A-Alicia?! Wait— What’s going on?!”

“It’s all right. Everything’s fine. It’s all over.”

“Huh?”

As Cion struggled to make sense of the situation, I raised my

good arm and gently stroked her hair. She'd be fine now.

"Saint Nevissa Vernalia," I said, kneeling beside her slumped figure. "I've won."

"You have," she replied in a voice utterly sapped of will. She gazed up at me with a frail smile of resignation; she was prepared to face her judgment and accept whatever punishment might await her. "All the weak may do is obey the strong… I shall obey you, Alicia Snowell."

Her powerless eyes held only despair. No matter how grand her ideals might have been, all that mattered in the end was might. Prayer to the Gods brought no salvation; ideals were only for the powerful. That was the fundamental, incontrovertible truth of this world. That was precisely why the saint had given up on fighting and chosen to fill people's heads with dreams instead—dreams to provide an escape from this reality where the strong ruled over the weak.

I'd seen myself in her, and I hadn't liked it. I hated to admit it, but she and I really did have a lot in common, deep down. One of us had tried to bring her ideals to fruition, and the other had given up—that was the single vast, insurmountable difference between the two of us.

"I won't abandon you," I said.

She looked utterly perplexed; she must have lost even her power to read minds.

"Who'd want a world where everyone's saved by one person's suffering? That's just sickening."

She'd sought to take everyone's sins onto her own shoulders and build a paradise of sweet lies, ruling over it as its lonely queen… I couldn't stand by and let her walk that path. If I did, then what else would I let myself accept? My thoughts went to the *lonely Hero* standing awkwardly on the sidelines, glancing over at the two of us without a clue what we were talking about.

"If you're going to shoulder everything, then I won't let you carry it alone," I said to the saint. As she stared dazedly up at me, I held out my hand. "There's only so much world one person can save, after all."

Her one good eye widened, wavering faintly as though beholding something unbelievable.

"Or will you have me kill you?" I asked.

"I…"

I knew what her answer would be. If I killed her, I'd end up

regretting it; that was as obvious to her as it was to me. Demon or not, she was too *kind* to let that happen.

"I surrender," she said. The tone of her voice was simple and free, and she smiled ruefully as she took my hand. "If you don't trust me, you're welcome to strike out my other eye as well."

"Well, if you think it'll set a better example that way," I said with a laugh.

The color was gradually beginning to fade from her eyes. Her remaining mana was about the same as any regular human's. The mana I'd taken in was running low as well; my tail had already vanished at some point, and it wouldn't be long before my ears disappeared too.

"Alicia...?" Cion hesitantly stepped in as our conversation reached a lull.

"I'm sorry for leaving you out of the loop," I said.

"No, that's all right... What happened, though?"

"Well..." I started thinking up excuses. *The killer took control of you and sent you on a rampage; Her Sagacity and I had to fight as hard as we could to stop you.* I'd feed her something like that, some sort of lie that *wouldn't hurt anyone*. Then, I'd shrug it all off with a smile and a "Whew, I'm exhausted..."

But as I turned to see Cion's face on the verge of tears, my words caught in my throat. I couldn't say a thing.

"Uh..." I gave an awkward chuckle. "Well, um... You see... What happened was, uh... Ngh—" I tensed up involuntarily as a jolt of pain ran through me.

"A-Are you okay?! What's wrong?! Are you hurt?!"

Cion frantically reached out a hand to support me, then hesitated. If she touched me, she might make my injuries worse. But if she didn't touch me, she wouldn't be able to examine my wounds...

As I watched her panic, I couldn't help laughing through the tears.

"It's all right. I'll be fine. We've got two specialist healers right here—if we help heal one another, these injuries won't be any trouble at all—" Another twinge of pain cut me off.

"But, Alicia—!"

With huge teardrops welling in her eyes, Cion clutched at my shoulders. She was always saying that protecting me was her job as the Hero, but from where I was standing, *she* felt more like the princess in need of protecting. Those poofy dresses wouldn't

look good on me anyway.

"Listen, Cion..." I could feel the strength draining from my body, but I forced the words out as best as I could. If worse came to worst, I needed to say this, if nothing else. "I'm not as good a person as you think I am. I get angry and I mess up, the same as anyone. I call myself a bride, but I've never lived up to that title. I'm not someone you should look up to..."

Cion stared back at me, eyes wide with confusion. She had no idea what I was talking about. But that was fine. This was a confession; it was the monologue of a fool who'd abandoned her faith to follow her heart.

"I... I'm sorry about those devil-touched children. I let my anger get the better of me; I wasn't thinking clearly. If you hadn't come to stop me when you did, I... I would've lost myself for good..."

I'd long since strayed from a path I could be proud of. If anything, I deserved to be hated for what I'd done. Even if it had all been for the sake of survival, I'd still lived the life of a blood-soaked sinner, sustained by the deaths of others. But if I used my role as an inquisitor and an enforcer as an excuse to hurt people without any hesitation, then I'd lose all right to ever stand by this girl's side again.

"Alicia...?"

Cion's wavering eyes were so beautiful. The longer I gazed into them, the more I felt like I'd get sucked in.

"I'm glad I met you, Cion..." *Even if it was all set up by the will of the Gods.*

Here, at the end, I just needed to tell her this, no matter what.

"Don't blame anyone—don't blame yourself—for any of this."

Even if I died here, I needed to make sure that she wouldn't feel responsible—that the saint wouldn't have to erase her memories.

"This is all...on my shoulders..."

"Alicia?!"

I couldn't see Cion's face as I let myself lean on her and whispered in her ear.

"Look after the saint for me... Okay?"

The strength left my legs, and I crumpled to the ground. The sensation of blood pooling on the floor and the sound of Cion's voice calling me began to grow distant and hazy.

Death was *unsatisfying*, more than anything. It always found

its way to us, whether we wanted it or not.

Borne on the currents that carry all of us away sooner or later, I sank down into the world's depths.

But as I did, I carried a handful of satisfaction with me in the depths of my heart.

Chapter 11

“Huh—? Wha—?! Aah—!”

It was a short while after the Hero had carried Alicia away in a panic. I’d finished healing my own wounds, and I was about to start on restoring the cathedral before I lost my vision completely. As I looked around, assessing the damage, a woman emerged from the shadows.

“The Deathwatcher—Veil Croitzen, was it?” I asked.

“Eh, just forget it. That’s not my real name, and the alias was stupid too. I just realized she was making fun of me,” she replied with an air of discomfort.

The shadows obscuring her were gone, and I could see the face of the human underneath. She was elegant, with a trace of youthfulness still, but her eyes had an off-putting glare. A virtuous woman with a villainous mien, one might say.

“Oh? I rather like it, personally. Veil Croitzen, the Deathwatcher—it’s quite imposing.”

She stared back at me. “Damn, you’re pretty messed up yourself.”

She slowly approached me, holding the Hero’s discarded sword in her hand. Her eyes were devoid of emotion.

“If you wish to kill me, could it wait until I’ve finished repairing the cathedral? Also, if you’re willing, I’d appreciate if we could move elsewhere—I’d prefer to die in a place where she won’t learn of it.”

I understood that I was in no position to demand anything, but I wished to make a clean exit if I could.

If I disappeared, they’d likely declare that girl a saint in my stead; the world would be better off for it, I imagined. Her face was cold and unfriendly at first glance, but when she smiled, she was utterly adorable—lovable, even, and every bit befitting of a bride. She could carry the title of “saint” just as easily.

“Please… Would you grant me that?” I asked beseechingly.

The killer looked at me with a hint of surprise. “I thought you could read minds and shit, couldn’t you?”

“Curiously, with my vision restored, I find myself unable to see into the minds of others. It was only after the light left my eyes

that I gained this power to begin with, after all. As I am now, I have no notion what sorts of torments you intend to inflict upon me."

"Oh, it'll be nasty. You're gonna beg me to kill you, and I still won't let you die until I'm through."

"Rightly so," I replied. "Sinner that I am, I deserve no less."

Robbing a person of their past was equivalent to ending their life. In theory, I could still make them recall the memories I'd erased; but all the same, I'd taken the lives of countless children while presenting myself as a paragon of virtue. Even the flames of hell would be too gentle and mild for one such as myself.

"The fuck am I supposed to do with that? C'mon, struggle and scream a little, dammit."

"I'm afraid I've simply grown weary of this long, unending nightmare."

No matter how hard I wished, I would never be able to save the world. No matter how long I prayed, there was only so much I could accomplish. If I'd been capable of averting my eyes from the lives that slipped through my fingers—saving only those I was able to save, and letting that suffice—then perhaps I would have made myself a queen far more easily.

"So it's all right. I'm ready. Although it does pain me to abandon that girl after she promised we'd shoulder the world together…" It was almost farcical how easily I was able to face my own death with a smile, but strangely, I felt no sorrow. "I know I can trust her to carry it on."

I'd leave her all of my unfulfilled dreams—dreams of a world where no child would be born to a life of suffering. She would bring them to fruition by her own hand; somehow, I was certain of that.

"I could try to claim that this was the will of the Gods, but I imagine she'd be quite upset with me."

I was merely the Holy Saint. I couldn't hear the voices of the Gods. All I was able to do was hear out the voices of *people*. Granting their prayers was another's responsibility. Even that simple truth had been *invisible* to me.

"I mean, sounds pretty normal to me," the Deathwatcher said. "Everyone's got regrets, and we all gotta live with them. If you ask me, regretting your past just means you're *still alive*."

As the shadow approached me, I closed my eyes. I prepared myself for the end. But…

“Live, dammit. Keep living until you settle your regrets.”

The shadow walked right past me, tossing down the Hero’s sword at my feet as she strode toward the cathedral doors.

“Are you certain?” I asked. “I am still—”

“You’re a *human now*, right? I don’t kill humans—only demons.”

Nonplussed, I stared at her retreating back.

“If that’s the case, then would that not make you a *demon now*? Just who was it who said that killing humans is what demons do, hmm?”

“*Look*, bitch…”

I chuckled softly, returning my gaze to the ruined cathedral.

“I suppose we’ve both made missteps, haven’t we?”

“Yeah, guess so,” the Deathwatcher replied. “But tonight saved me, just a little. I’m not as bad as you, but I was getting fed up with this shit too. So finding out there’s demons out there who’ll *listen to reason*—that saved me.”

“I thought I was a *human*, was I not?”

“Shut up, dammit. I’ll kill you.”

Despite her threat, her voice held no hint of violence. Her next words to me were sharp and cutting, though.

“You stole someone important from that bride. Don’t ever forget it.”

“I understand that fully,” I said slowly. The past would always follow me. My sins would not disappear. “I was always prepared to carry that burden.”

“I’ve got my eye on you, got it?”

“Indeed. By all means, please continue watching me.”

I was unable to read her thoughts, but I could tell what she was feeling. Today, both of us had been reborn—carrying our pasts with us intact.

“However hellish this world may be, I vowed that we would make our way through it together.”

Just like that bride.

Chapter 12

When I woke up, the first thing I felt was imminent peril.

I could tell I was in a sickroom, probably in the cathedral's medical wing. But the more pressing concern was the *half naked Horny Slut* right in front of me, steadily creeping closer. In a moment of shock, I made the snap decision to grab her by the collar and push her over, but that only made things worse.

"Ah! No, we— We mustn't—!" she moaned.

I stared down at her, at a loss for words. Apparently, Her Salacity—I mean, Her Sagacity, the Horny Slut Nevissa Vernalia—had gotten a taste for being on the bottom as well. I shoved her off the bed and turned to look out the window; the autumn leaves had already started to fall.

"You were asleep for quite a long while," she said. "It's been three days since then. I was concerned you might never wake up, and I'd been wondering whether I ought to at least take your purity..."

"What the hell are you talking about, and do you want to die?"

"I'd gladly die by your hand, Miss Alicia..."

Shit, I screwed up. I should've killed her, actually.

"So did you just give up on the Holy Saint bit?"

"I— I would never, Miss Alicia! I'm always fully devoted to my duties..."

Get out of my face, shut up, and stop breathing like that, dammit!

As the saint crawled toward me on all fours like a dog and I tried to push her back, the sound of the commotion brought Cion rushing in. As soon as she saw my face, her expression hardened, and she charged at the saint and shoved her away. The woman Cion had been assigned to guard fell off the bed with a thud.

Miss Cion...?

"Alicia... Alicia, you're alive!"

"Yup, I'm right here. It's me. It's Miss Alicia...?"

As I watched the tears well up in Cion's eyes, I resolved never to make this girl cry ever again. Well, if at all possible, I never wanted to end up like this again, period. I didn't want to die—unlike a certain perverted saint.

“What happened to the devil-touched children?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Have there been any new orders for what to do with them?”

Unfortunately, the best person to answer my question was currently lying unconscious on the floor. (She was fine, probably.)

“Uh, well… The saint said that she’ll keep sending out ships for the ones who want to move to other cities or get asylum overseas, the same as before—or they can work as her guards if they want to. A bunch of priests got really mad about it, but when His Holiness came back, he just said ‘Let it be so,’ and that was it. Actually, a couple of them are guarding your room too—”

“It’s just a job, got it?”

The dog-eared man poked his head into the room.

“It looks as though your memories have returned, then?” I asked him slowly.

“Yup. We were just chatting about the best way to beat the shit out of you once you woke up.”

Well, that’s sure scary.

“I apologize for my actions the other day. I lost my temper and hurt you terribly.”

“We got the whole story—heard it straight from the saint,” he said. “So, you kinda ended up saving us, indirectly. We’re not gonna just forgive and forget, but let’s say we’re even for now. *But*, if you ever mess with any of my brothers again, there’ll be hell to pay.”

“Understood.”

As I gave a small bow, Cion looked at the two of us with a smirk of amusement. “Hey, Schnoë, weren’t *you* the one who volunteered to guard Alicia? You were saying you didn’t trust the Church’s knights to handle it.”

“S-Sir Elcyon—! You promised you’d keep that a secret!”

“Hmm? Did I? Anyway, you were worried about her too, weren’t you?”

“I wasn’t *worried*—!”

Everything seemed to have resolved itself peacefully, one way or another. Tuning out the bickering for a moment, I rolled up the hem of my clothes to examine my scars, but I didn’t have a single one. I’d been on death’s door after that fight, but I’d healed this much in only three days—demonification really was incredible. It was only natural they’d want that dog-eared man as a guard. The gap between humans and demons was more than

just a difference in specs; we were built differently at a fundamental level.

Maybe that power was also what had let me copy the Deathwatcher's skill and understand the mechanics of the saint's brainwashing? I'd lost myself completely in that moment; I still didn't know what had happened back there.

"Hmm..."

I idly wondered whether I'd be able to make the two noisy dogs next to me shut up for a second. I stared at my right hand and tried to focus my mana, but I couldn't remember how to control people at all. The same went for the Deathwatcher's shadow-manipulation powers—or maybe it was more like wearing shadows, or *becoming* shadows? Thinking back on it now, I couldn't even recall how it worked.

People in life-and-death situations displayed feats of superhuman strength sometimes; maybe what I'd done had all been the product of some sort of desperate survival instinct. In any case, if I didn't know how to reproduce it, then I couldn't afford to count on it in the future.

"Cion, could I get some time alone? I'm feeling a bit tired..."

"Ah— Sorry! A-Are your injuries still hurting?! Are you okay?!"

"I'm all right. I'd just like to sleep for a bit."

Cion hesitated; she looked like she still wanted to say something. But at the dog-eared man's urging, she grudgingly stepped out of the room.

"Just call me and I'll come right away, okay?"

As she reluctantly closed the door behind her, her face looked so cute and pitiful that I couldn't help but laugh to myself.

"Adopting a stray dog wasn't what I signed up for..."

I'd always been more of a cat person, but I was starting to feel like dogs weren't so bad either. I still wasn't too fond of badly trained wolves, though.

"I— I'll be your dog, Mistress! Woof!"

Crouched by the side of my bed was the Horny Slut.

"Can you *please* get out already, seriously?"

I called Cion back in and had her drag the saint away. From now on, she'd need to use her title as the Holy Saint to protect the devil-touched from persecution—did that woman understand her position even the slightest bit?

"Well, it's not really my job, is it..."

I hadn't asked them to leave just so I could be alone with my

thoughts.

I'd just spent half a week in bed. Glasses had probably already gotten word of the situation, so I figured I ought to at least *try* and give him a call now that I was awake—even if I couldn't reach him. He was fine, though... Right?

Despite my slight worry, the call connected after just a few rings, and I briefly went through everything that had happened.

"...So basically, it was all a huge mess, but I managed to get it sorted out somehow. You're welcome, asshole."

"So, you've moved on from seducing the Hero to conquering the Holy Saint as well? You really are quite the adulterous bride!" he chuckled.

I don't get even a "well done" or a "thank you"? Worst boss ever.

To be fair, my fight with the saint was something I'd done on my own initiative. I hadn't just lost track of my mission—I'd actively turned against it. So maybe I was just lucky that he wasn't mad at me, but still.

"Whatever the case, I'm glad to hear you and Her Sagacity are both all right. There were sad partings along the way, but I'm sure that your meeting will open up new possibilities for the future—just as all of us create new futures all the time, every moment of our lives."

"You can try and put a bow on this all you want, but this was exactly what you were after, wasn't it? The Holy Saint was independent of the Seven High Cardinals, but now you've got a channel to her. I bet you were also hoping for devil-touched mercenaries to supplement the shorthanded holy knights on the front lines."

Glasses was the one who'd told me that he'd accepted this whole guard mission in exchange for getting to select new high cardinals. Who knew what else he was scheming behind the scenes?

"Come now, don't be so cynical. All of this is simply for the sake of world peace. You mustn't be so quick to assume that people are greedy devils grasping at power."

"If only you *were* a devil, so I could just exorcise you and be done with it."

Not that I had any real objections to helping expand the power of the faction I belonged to. I was just a bride of the Gods and a slave of the Church. He *did* piss me off, though.

"It's a shame about Father Carol. He always said—"

“Don’t… It’s fine. I… I’ve already said my goodbyes.”

“All right.”

Having people worry over me was just annoying. At least when the person in question was Glasses.

“Anyway, you’d better prepare yourself, Your Eminence. Don’t think I’ve forgotten about the demonification thing.”

“Perhaps I should ask Her Sagacity to erase your memories for the sake of world peace…”

“Pay the damn piper for once in your life, Glasses!”

I had plenty more to say, but I could hear people coming down the hallway. It was about time to wrap things up.

“I’ll return once my injuries have healed. Please look after Atalanta until then.”

“By all means, Sister. He and I have been getting along swimmingly; we’re practically soulmates.”

No way in hell did I want my beloved kitty and my stupid boss getting along that well.

“Until later, Your Eminence,” I said. I was about to end the call, when…

“All right, Demon Lord?”

“Huh?”

For just a moment, I thought I heard some disconcerting words muffled by background noise.

“May the blessings of the Gods be with you, Sister Alicia. I’ll be awaiting your return.”

The call disconnected.

What was that just now? Did I mishear something?

“It’s probably just my imagination. I’ve been pretty tired…”

The saint had said something or other about the Demon Lord too; that was probably why.

I fell back onto the bed with a *thump* and closed my eyes. I really was exhausted. I didn’t want to deal with any more of the saint’s bullshit if I could avoid it.

“Hmm…?”

Something was amiss underneath the bedsheets. I took a look inside, and…

“Aah… Hah… Haa…”

Out wafted the fevered breaths of a dog in heat.

“Grrr—!”

“Alicia?!” Cion heard the sounds of commotion and rushed in in a panic, but—

“Agh—! It’s nothing, don’t worry about it! Just—!”

—I had other concerns.

“Aaahhh! Yes—! Harder!!!” the saint moaned as I stomped on her. She was tied up with ropes I’d created using an orison.

Cion lost all her words as she took in the scene. “Huh,” she finally said, staring down at the saint with a gaze of complete and utter contempt.

The dog-eared guard followed after Cion. When he caught sight of the pervert writhing on the floor, his face also hardened into a look of disdain—no, more like outright disgust.

“Please, punish me, Mistressss!”

As her moans echoed through the room, I regretted going against the will of the Gods, just a little.

***

I spent the next few days finishing my recovery while continually swatting away the saint’s attempts to crawl into my bed at all hours of the day and night. Then, after a brief audience with the pope, we ended our stay in the Holy City of Eldias and began our journey back to Clastreach.

When we left the city, the saint looked reluctant to part ways, but she didn’t ask to come with us. Despite everything, she understood her own position. If she’d actually fallen far enough to try and follow me, I genuinely would’ve had nothing but hatred left for her.

It’s not a sin to seek out love—only to drown oneself in pleasure.

Also, Sister Loria kept an iron grip on the saint’s garb the entire time while glaring at me with a look that screamed, *She’s* mine*, got it?*

You don’t have to worry about me taking the saint, okay? I’m *the one who almost got taken, and I don’t even want her. So by all means, please keep a tight hold on her. She probably can’t ignore anyone who needs her that badly, anyway.*

“Alicia…?”

“Oh— I was just thinking, it’s been a while since we’ve had this much peace and quiet.”

In the aftermath of the pope’s return, there weren’t any other travelers heading out of the Holy City; the gently rocking stagecoach was empty except for me and Cion. It really had been

some time since we'd gotten to relax like this. We'd spent the last while dealing with the kids from the orphanage and the devil-touched and so on, and my sickroom had been absolute chaos.

"You all right?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm fully recovered—the very picture of health."

Cion had been anxious around me ever since that night. Not only had she not been any help at all, *she'd* been the one attacking me. I'd told her over and over not to worry about it, but it was still weighing on her.

The silence in the stagecoach was oppressive.

"Cion…" I said slowly. "I know I'm a bride, and my role is to support you, but I don't need you to protect me."

"Huh?"

My words caught Cion by surprise, and she visibly tensed up with worry. I'd been struggling with myself over whether to tell her, but things had finally calmed down now that our mission was over. Somehow I felt like if I didn't say it now, I'd never get another chance.

"Wh-What do you mean…?"

"I'm not so weak that I need your protection, nor so conceited as to demand it of you."

As I spoke, anxiety gradually spread across Cion's features.

That's part of what's so cute about you.

I smiled softly at her and took her hand.

"I want to stand by your side, Cion. Not as a bride of the Gods, serving the Church, but as the bride of the Hero."

Intentionally or not, the Church had gained the *devil-touched mercenaries* as a new fighting force. With a new weapon to replace the unruly Hero in the war against the demons, they'd probably start pushing for the Hero's assassination again sooner or later.

When that happened, I'd finally have to make my choice. The Church, or the Hero—which would I offer myself to?

"Unlike you, I'm afraid I don't possess any reason to fight—I have nothing to protect, no justice to uphold, not a single thing to take up arms for."

All I'd ever done was look out for myself. All my life, I'd stained myself with blood solely for my own survival. No matter how I looked at it, it wasn't a past I could be proud of, and my sins would follow me as long as I lived. I was prepared to carry all those deaths on my shoulders—to carry this world, this hell. I

was the one who'd taken their lives, and that was my cross to bear.

"But all the same, Cion, I…"

All the same, as I'd seen the saint standing by Cion's side, I hadn't been able to help thinking, *Why?*

Why wasn't I the one standing there?

This wasn't a feeling that a bride of the Gods was permitted to hold. It wasn't a dream that I was permitted to long for, *ever*. It was a wish that I needed to reject. But…

"If… If you'll have me… I—"

My voice trailed off as I noticed the tears welling up in Cion's eyes. Before I could find the next words to say, she came flying at me.

"Alicia—! I… I—!" she sobbed out.

"Perhaps I went a little too fast there," I said.

I held the Hero in my arms and gently stroked her hair. Her body really was far younger, far smaller, than a casual glance suggested.

We didn't have the strength to protect each other. This world was full of schemes and machinations that could tear away even the things we held on to tightest. We were nothing but candles in the wind.

"Let's face the world together, Cion—even if the Gods themselves stand in our way."

Cion silently nodded her head. She nodded over and over, cradled into my chest. As she shook and trembled, I wrapped her in my arms and hugged her tight.

She's supposed to be the Hero, but I think being a heroine *suits her better.*

I smiled to myself.

Epilogue

From the moment we arrived back in Clastreach, I could feel a disturbance in the air. A priest ran up to us as soon as we entered the cathedral gates. When I heard his report, I immediately dashed in, leaving Cion behind.

I raced down the hall and threw open the door to Glasses's office without knocking. I stepped inside to find...

"Aah..."

There was a massive hole in the wall and books scattered all over the floor. There were signs of a struggle; bloodstains were splattered all over the place.

Obviously, the office was long since deserted. The attack had happened the same evening we'd left the Holy City, after all.

I lost my words as I took in the scene. Finally, I screamed out:

"Aa— A— ATALANTA!!!"

The name of my missing cat echoed futilely, carrying through the hole in the wall and off into the skies as it faded away.

Cardinal Glasses had disappeared. And he'd *taken my cat with him*.

To Be Continued

Afterword

I've let myself get carried away writing once again, and now I'm hitting the page limit. Hi, I'm Aoikou.

Instead of something conventionally popular like a tough-guy power fantasy or a coming-of-age romcom, I decided to write a story about the world's strongest nun (within the world of the story, at least), forced to fight bloody battles against some of the most powerful life-forms in existence. Thank you for following along with Alicia's story! Seriously, thank you so, so much.

Whether this series gets greenlit for a third volume is going to depend on this volume's sales! If volume 2 doesn't sell, then the curtain will fall on this story without ever revealing the whereabouts of Glasses and Atalanta, or the meaning behind those cryptic references to the Demon Lord... (Right now, as I'm writing this afterword, I genuinely don't know whether there'll be a volume 3! I really don't!)

Well, don't count your chickens, or whatever they say. For now, I'll stop talking about the future and say a little about this book.

The pivotal characters of this volume, the Holy Saint and the Deathwatcher, are essentially versions of Alicia and Cion who took different paths. If Alicia had never been taken in by the orphanage, and if Cion had never met Veiss, they probably would've ended up like those two—that was my concept for this story. It was a bumpy ride for everyone, but luckily things managed to work out one way or another. (Woof woof!)

But thanks to a certain someone's misdeeds in the previous volume and a certain someone's machinations in this one, things have developed into a huge mess while Alicia wasn't looking. That's what you get for defying the teachings of the Church...

So I'm planning for the story to take a sharp swerve next volume—hopefully. C'mon, volume 3, let's go!

I'm running out of space, so it's time for acknowledgments.

Thank you to Rinrin-sama, who took over as series editor right before the final draft of volume 1, for coming out swinging with the red ink and digging into every stray detail of the story. Your multiple-hour critique sessions-slash-interrogations helped me

give the world and characters much more depth and detail. I'm looking forward to working more with you.

Thank you to Enji-sama, the series's illustrator. I pushed off all the character design decisions onto you, and your vivid illustrations brought the story to life. Thank you so, so much. I'm sorry for always giving you such vague instructions. I truly can't thank you enough.

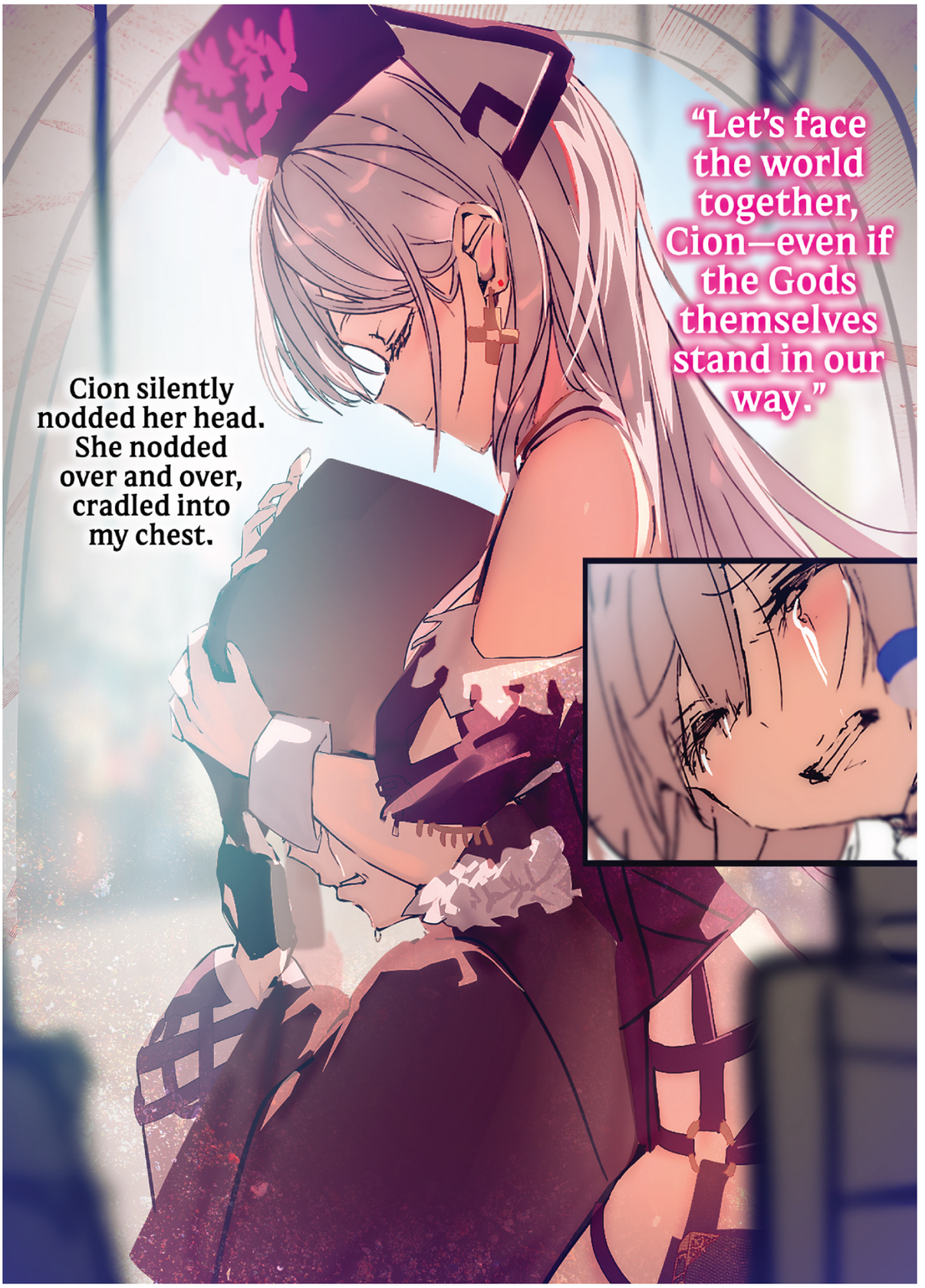
Finally, thank you to everyone who kept following the series and picked up a copy of this volume—and especially to all the readers who wrote reviews of volume 1. Every single positive comment made my thousand years of solitude all worthwhile. I'd love it if you'd stick around going forward... We'll have to see.

This has been a message from Aoikou, moving on from wondering whether Alicia's wearing panties to wondering whether the saint's wearing a bra.

Almost-visible is justice.


“Whooooa…”
“They say the Holy City of Eldias is the most peaceful city in the world.”
“Are you listening, Cion?”


Veil Croitzen
A vengeful killer whose family was slaughtered by demons. She's got suspicions about the Holy Saint's real identity, and she wants Alicia's help uncovering the truth.
Nevissa Vernalia
Her Sagacity the Holy Saint, also known as the Blind-Eyed Saint. She's widely loved by the people of the Holy City, and she takes in and cares for persecuted children.
Elcyon
A former mercenary who defeated the Demon Lord and became the Hero. She's come to the Holy City with Alicia to guard the Holy Saint.
Alicia
A bride of the Gods who works as an inquisitor behind the scenes. She's been dispatched to the Holy City to investigate a string of serial killings.

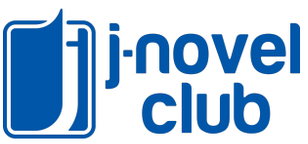

“Let’s face the world together, Cion—even if the Gods themselves stand in our way.”
Cion silently nodded her head. She nodded over and over, cradled into my chest.











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The Hero-Killing Bride: Volume 2
by Aoikou

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