III

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illust. Enji



# THE HERO-KILLING BRIDE

## The God-Killing Maiden


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When I first met him, he was in an underground holding cell beneath a royal knight garrison. He was a bundle of rags caked in blood and dirt, chained and curled up on the hard stone floor. His limbs were disturbingly long and spindly, his eyes were clouded and hollow, and a pair of twisted wings sprouted from his back.

He was a devil-touched—born as a child of man, but cursed with the physical traits of a demon. A squadron of royal knights on a demon-hunting mission had found him and taken him into custody. To be more precise, they'd *caught him in the middle of eating demons*. And so, the ball had landed in the Church's court.

From the shackle marks on his ankles and the brand on the back of his neck, he was clearly a slave. Ordinarily, the knights would be required to return him to his owner. But according to him, his master was already dead—killed by the demons he'd been eating.

"So you were trying to avenge him, then?" I asked.

I was a priest fresh out of seminary, and I'd been sent to save this man.

As their name suggested, devil-touched weren't particularly well-liked by the Church. But in recent years, thanks to saber-rattling from other countries employing them as mercenaries, the winds were starting to shift within the Church as well. That was why I'd been tasked with investigating devil-touched like him.

"Don't worry. I'm a servant of the Gods. I'm not going to hurt you."

I was so young back then—young and full of hope for humanity's future.

"Could you tell me your name? I believe our meeting here is the work of the Gods, and I want to be sure to treasure it."

"I...have no name... Call me Slaven, if you want."

The chained-up man had lost all will to live. To him, the future held nothing but despair.

According to what records I could find, he'd grown devil-like wings as a young boy, and his mother had sold him off. If they'd placed him in the Church's care, we might have been able to remove those wings and give him a new life as a regular human. But instead, he'd been bought by a traveling showman. He'd been too

"creepy" to earn the man much money, though, so he'd been sold off again to a slave trader. From there, he'd lived a life no different from cattle. Devil-touched were sturdier and stronger than ordinary humans, and from what I'd heard, they were often treated as little more than oxen that could understand orders. But I was convinced that they represented humankind's true potential.

"It's all right. I promise you, I'm going to free you from those chains."

"What's...your name...?"

"Rialias Salamanrius, future archbishop," I said with a grin.

That was how he and I first met.

***

The capital was burning.

The slave had been slated for execution, and that night, I'd decided to set him free. It hadn't been a rash decision or an emotional impulse; I'd been looking at the bigger picture, thinking about the future of the Church and of humanity as a whole. I'd consulted with a scholar, a graduate of the Royal Academy, and we'd agreed that this was what we needed to do. I'd believed, without a shred of doubt in my heart, that the Gods had ordained our meeting. That man should have been humanity's hope, our future itself... But the reality was far crueler.

The city walls blazed, and people panicked and fled. Standing there amid the parched air, I looked up at the figure floating high above us, cackling and crying out with mad delight as he plunged the world into hell.

Once, he'd been abandoned by humankind; he'd lived a life of torment at human hands. And now, he'd awoken whatever evil lay within him, becoming no less than a devil himself as he took his vengeance upon our world.

*It's all my fault. I misjudged you.*

"I'm going to stop you, Slaven..."

That was the least I could do to atone for my sins. I would do whatever it took, deceive anyone—even the Gods themselves.

That was the naive vow I swore, back in my younger days.

# Chapter 1

"Ugh... I already want to go home..."

It was obvious at a single glance that we were losing this battle, and badly.

We were riding through a vast forest, on the western edge of the mountain range that cut across the center of the continent. The closer our horses got, the louder the screams and roars echoed between the trees. As I started to hear the men's dying cries and the shouts of joy amid the clamor, my spirits sank at the thought that we were about to step into the middle of it all.

"It's all right. I'll protect you, Alicia!"

Riding just ahead of me, Cion gripped her horse's reins tightly. She had an unusually serious look in her eyes; she'd clearly been locked in and ready to go for the kill well before we'd arrived. So her next move didn't exactly take me by surprise, but still—!

"Cion?! Slow down! We need to stick together!" I shouted after her as she jumped off her horse and danced into the middle of the chaotic free-for-all between the mercenaries and the demons.

We were hopelessly outnumbered. The demons were physically stronger than us to begin with, and the forest surrounding us was hampering our vision. As the mercenaries had fled Arshelm, they'd played perfectly into the demons' hands. Now, they were on the brink of total annihilation.

"But, Alicia! At this rate—"

"I know!"

Next to me, a mercenary stood with his back unguarded. As a demon lunged for his neck from behind, I kicked him out of the way and held up my bible as a shield to block the encroaching talons.

We were losing this battle.

A few moments ago, I'd caught a glimpse of *a certain innkeeper* leading the mercenaries, but I couldn't get close enough to talk to

him. I scanned my surroundings as best as I could, but it wasn't much use. Beneath the dense tree cover, the beast-like forms of the demons blended in with the thick foliage, and I couldn't spot the person I was looking for...

"Gods dammit... Why do I—?!"

A blow from a minotaur sent a heavyset man flying straight into a tree trunk. As he coughed up blood, I started healing him with an orison and sent down a thunderbolt to blind the monster.

In my peripheral vision, I could see Cion moving behind me to fend off incoming attackers. With her guarding my back, I reached out to grab the arm of a mercenary and pull him away before a demon could split him in two. I'd extended his life just a little longer, at least. I jumped up to kick the horned demon in the jaw.

*If you're gonna drop dead, do it somewhere I don't have to think about it, dammit!*

Amid the whirling chaos of the battlefield, for a brief moment—just the tiniest instant—I ground my teeth in frustration as I recalled the soft smile of the "witch" who'd sent me out here. I kicked away another minotaur charging at me; I wasn't striking to kill, so I just used his own momentum against him. But my anger gave my kick a little extra force, and his huge body went flying, knocking into several other demons along the way.

*That's friendly fire. Not my fault.*

"If you don't want to die, stand down! I need to speak with your commander!" I shouted out into the brief stillness.

I glared out at my surroundings... But it was no good. The battlefield was overflowing with screams and cries; no one was listening to me.

"Why do I always get stuck with the worst jobs?!"

As I griped to myself, a group of monkey-like demons leaped at me from the trees. I dodged them, grabbed a tail as it slipped past me, swung it around, threw it, healed more mercenaries, shielded, kicked, parried—

"Aargh—! Dammit!!!"

I felt like my head was about to blow a gasket. Entrusting my back to Cion, I took a brief pause to catch my breath and get my

thoughts settled.

How had things ended up like this? Well, that was obvious. It had all started when my boss, High Cardinal Salamanrius, had disappeared.

***

"Glasses is missing. And he took my cat with him."

When we returned from the Holy City, I was greeted by my boss's office half in ruins. He'd clearly been attacked by someone, and the words "rest is up to you" had been hastily scrawled out on top of the desk.

For the time being, I reached out to the one other Church leader who might be willing to listen to me. I contacted the Horny Slut—or rather, the Holy Saint—and she agreed that until we found Glasses's body, he'd be treated as "missing" rather than dead.

Regardless, we were still in the wake of the recent cardinal assassinations; none of the Church higher-ups would want to publicly announce that yet another one of the Seven High Cardinals had been killed. And so, the disappearance of High Cardinal Salamanrius was swept under the rug, and the Slut—I mean, the Blind-Eyed Saint, Nevissa Vernalia—became my boss for the interim.

That was what they told me, anyway. I wasn't especially concerned about it, though. There was no way Glasses would drop dead that easily, so I was just worried about my cat, Atalanta.

In the meantime, I decided to focus on cleaning up the trashed office... Then, around a week later, the saint showed up in person at Glasses's cathedral.

"Arshelm fell last night. The Demon Lord's former army attacked the city."

I froze up, holding a sliced-up book in my hand. "Excuse me?"

*That* sure woke me up.

"There are reports of a separate invasion force in the northeast as well... In any case, we should go somewhere we can sit down and discuss this. The situation is worsening by the hour, but a hasty response won't improve matters."

*I* was supposed to be the one hosting *her*, but I was rushed into a meeting room next door to the ruined office. The saint told her attendant, Sister Loria, to go and prepare her guest quarters. That left three of us in the room: the saint, her devil-touched bodyguard, and me.

*What was the dog-eared guard's name, again...?*

"It's Schnoë."

"Right, thank you." I gave a perfunctory bow in response.

If she'd sent Loria out of the room, I had to assume we were about to discuss some shady business. I'd made the right call sending Cion on an errand as well.

"So, what's going on?" I asked as the saint sat down. "Is this connected to Glasses going missing?"

The saint had Schnoë unroll a map of the continent on the table. She must've already brought him up to speed on the situation.

"We only just received word, but we believe the invasion began at the same time as the attack on High Cardinal Salamanrius."

"Who's behind it?"

"That's still unclear. What we do know is that another large-scale invasion force has already arrived on the other side of the central mountains, in the Damoxas Plains to the northeast. According to our scouts, there are several hundred demons at Arshelm, and even more at Damoxas."

She held out a sheaf of documents—reports from scouts, presumably. My brow furrowed as I stared at them. This wasn't a spur-of-the-moment invasion; the demons had some sort of objective here. I had to imagine Glasses's disappearance was related somehow.

"Royal knights have already been deployed to Damoxas, and I've received word that holy knights are on their way from Eldias as well. However, reinforcements for the Arshelm front have been delayed."

The eastern front was wide-open plains, but the western front was all mountains and forests—there were too many obstacles. Cavalry would be more effective in the east. That was why there were large numbers of mercenaries stationed in Arshelm, carrying out guerrilla attacks against the demons...

"Have the mercenaries been wiped out?" I asked the question that had risen to the top of my mind.

"Not quite yet," the saint said calmly. "The attack primarily targeted the city's cathedral. That allowed the mercenaries to construct several defensive lines; they've been repeatedly falling back and buying time for the citizens to evacuate."

They were holding out against enemies way above their pay grade, trusting that help would come.

"It's only a matter of time until they're annihilated completely," she continued.

Sitting there staring at a map, I had no way of knowing the full extent of the slaughter. But from the markings and annotations here and there, it was clear that many lives had been lost.

"I'm told that Inquisitor Karm is accompanying the royal knights. I'll be sending out some of my own people to join them via a separate route. So I'd like you to go to the mercenaries' aid, Alicia."

My interim boss remained cool and composed as she spoke.

This woman was a Horny Slut, a Holy Saint, a figure of reverence within the Church, and the savior of the weak. *But*, all of that was just her public-facing position. Underneath it all, not only was she a Horny Slut—she was also a demon.

"They're your people, aren't they?" I asked slowly. "Can't you get them to stop somehow?"

If the Demon Lord had wanted peace with humanity, then maybe...

"I don't imagine so. I am an exile from their lands, and in any case, the present crisis is humanity's own doing. If we ask them to simply lay down their arms without any reprisal against the side that struck first, can they be expected to listen?"

She was right—all of this had started with the Hero. Cion had killed the Demon Lord, and the Church had gotten nervous about her growing fame and tried to assassinate her. Veiss, her master, had tried to put a stop to that plan by going after the Seven High Cardinals, leaving half of their seats empty. And unfortunately, all of the cardinals the champion had killed had been from the extremist faction. The people who'd taken a strong anti-demon stance were

gone, and to make matters worse, a certain self-proclaimed "Deathwatcher" had gone around wreaking havoc within the Church. Thanks to her, our security had ended up in tatters; that had given the demons an opening to invade.

I'd wanted those damn cardinals to disappear, but when they actually *had*, it had just caused more trouble. The fact of the matter was, demons had infiltrated the Church. Maybe we'd actually needed a few of those torture-obsessed perverts for rooting out spies.

I still absolutely hated their guts, though.

"In any case—" the saint said, trying to bring the conversation back on track.

"So, what exactly do you plan on asking Cion to do?" I cut in ahead of her. She hadn't come out here just to make small talk. "You're *not* going to tell her to go take out the invading commander or something, are you, *Your Sagacity*?"

Schnoë tensed up just a little at the murder in my voice, but obviously he wasn't stupid enough to actually reach for his sword.

*Good boy. Stay.*

"I do not believe that any future lies in the taking of lives," the saint said, surprisingly earnest and straightforward. As she stared at me with her blindfolded eyes, she smiled for the first time that day. "Please rest assured—with my reputation and your assistance, there is still room for negotiation."

This already sounded way too fishy, but I didn't have the means or the connections to try anything else. I'd just need to use this woman as best as I could. The last couple of months had been full of painful reminders that our world was neither kind enough to be saved by a single bride, nor small enough to be saved by a single Hero.

"All right," I finally said. "I'll assist you."

With a little reluctance, I placed my clenched fist in her outstretched hand.

"*But*, if you try anything funny, this time I'll destroy you for real."

I wasn't making a threat; I was stating a fact. If the time came, I fully intended to carry out my duties as an inquisitor. But unfortunately...

"Oh? Oh my... That certainly set my loins aflutter..."

My words only backfired against this pervert.

"*Excuse me*," I began pointedly.

"Oh, please don't worry! It's quite all right! I can keep my cloisters separate from my oysters!"

I didn't know what she was talking about, and I didn't particularly want to. I cleared my throat. "I'm trusting you here, okay?"

"Of course!"

Schnoë looked almost comedic as he anxiously glanced back and forth between the two of us.

***

And so, I'd gotten stuck with the absolute shittiest job in the history of shitty jobs.

"Alicia!"

"I know!"

I'd already started casting as I shouted back to Cion. With my bible in my hand, I manipulated the surrounding plants, making them tangle around the demons to obstruct their movements—but the demons instantly tore them to shreds. I swore under my breath as the scent of soil and grass flew through the air. These improvised defensive maneuvers were just wearing me down; we were staring annihilation in the face.

Right now, we couldn't communicate with the mercenaries. We needed to make contact with the guy leading them, if nothing else. But by the time we'd arrived here, the battlefield was already in absolute chaos. It felt like this was their final stand. We needed to get them to retreat for now, but the demons were pushing the offensive too hard for them to get away.

"Alicia, just let me—"

As Cion made to head back out into the battle, I reached out a hand to grab her wrist, then hesitated.

Right now, I didn't have a lot of options. I could send Cion out as a decoy to draw the demons' attention, and take that opening to pull out the mercenaries. Or I could fire off every spell and orison I could

think of that might create enough of a smoke screen while the mercenaries retreated. Or Cion and I could go all out, kill all the demons, and end the fight... That last one was obviously out of the question, but I didn't want to choose either of the other two if I could avoid it.

If I sent Cion out as a decoy, there was a real risk she'd get left behind. The demons didn't know who she was, but if they found out that she was the Hero who'd killed the Demon Lord, she was dead for sure. And even as incredible as she was, I couldn't imagine she'd be able to escape if they got her surrounded all on her own.

On top of that, we were *up north*. There were far fewer worshippers up here compared to the south, and this far from any settlements, the aether in the air was pretty thin. If I used up all my mana and exhausted all the aether in the vicinity to create a smoke screen, then I wouldn't be able to heal the mercenaries even if we made it out. That'd leave us unable to construct a line of defense and negotiate an armistice with the demons. After all, a truce couldn't hold unless the two sides were on an equal footing.

"But that said... If we just get wiped out here, then there's no point to any of this..."

In front of me, a mercenary was about to fall to his knees; I pulled him over backward and fired off a thunderbolt to drive away the bird-headed demon attacking him.

I glanced at Cion.

"Signal the boss!" she shouted.

I didn't need to explain everything to the mercenaries. Demon-slaying was *their* job to begin with. When it came to demons, they had way more knowledge and more combat experience than I did. Trusting that these men who lived their lives on the battlefield would understand my message, I began casting—

"Wha—?"

Suddenly, a shock wave spread out from a completely unexpected direction. It felt almost like an explosion. Thick tree trunks went flying through the air, and demons' flesh and blood came splattering down.

"Reinforcements!" someone shouted.

"Now! Push them back!" A man with a nasty face hefted his axe. The mercenaries weren't about to let this chance slip away from them.

*No, that's not it. This feels like...*

"It's not reinforcements," Cion said. "They're alone. Someone's attacking from behind, all on their own."

I squinted through the trees, trying to follow what was happening across the battlefield with my heightened senses.

"Retreat!" I shouted as loud as I could. "Please, retreat! The distraction won't last long!"

It was just a solo fighter. If they'd staged a sneak attack to disrupt the battlefield and save their allies, then this was our final chance.

"Veil of night, rain of pitch, enfold us and conceal us!" I evaporated all the nearby moisture all at once, creating a cloud thick enough to block off the sunlight streaming in between the trees. In an instant, the battlefield was enveloped in darkness.

"Roar, thunder, and strike down our foes!" This was a roadblock and a signal rolled into one. As the world flashed and flickered, both sides stopped in their tracks. In the wake of the thunder and lightning, a familiar man's voice rang out.

"Retreat! Retreat, you lot!"

The voice was closer than I'd expected. With one arm around a wounded man, the esteemed *former royal knight captain* who ran a bar in Arshelm shot a glance at me.

"Please, go on ahead!" I called to him. "I have a plan!"

A snake-headed demon was trying to chase his fleeing prey; as I slammed my bible into him and sent him flying, I whispered in Cion's ear.

"Please, no killing from here on out, okay?"

We needed to guard the mercenaries' backs as they fled. But if we killed any demons here, it'd make things more complicated down the line.

Demons were the enemy. They needed to die—even if they were just children. That was the world Cion had lived in up until now. So...

*I* know *it's hard for you, but please—!*

"Okay... But if you're in danger, no promises, all right?!"

"Understood!"

I was going to do all I could.

"Rage, bird of lightning!"

I used mana to bind together the electricity that had scattered all around us, forming it into an imitation of a divine beast and sending it flying around the battlefield to draw attention. I searched for the presence that had attacked the demons from behind...but as far as I could tell, they'd already withdrawn.

Bits of viscera had scattered through the trees; the quiet dripping of blood was soon joined by the sound of actual rain, seeded by the divine thunder I'd called down. A stillness spread across the forest battlefield.

With a wary grimace, Cion brandished her sword at the demons that had encircled us. I softly took a single deep breath. With my bible clutched to my chest, I took off my hood, exposing the *animal ears* I'd prepared underneath my cloak. Then I called out to my fellow nonhumans.

"I serve the Crimson Witch, Nevissa Vernalia! Is the Golden Lion, General Royalfang, among you?!"

Amid the soft sound of the rain, my heart pounded loudly in my ears.

According to the Horny Slut, General Royalfang commanded one wing of the Demon Lord's army; he was an experienced leader and one of the more reasonable people among the demons. But there was no guarantee the Golden Lion was even here. The other wing of the Demon Lord's army had been commanded by *a certain white wolf*, so with him gone, it was more likely that the larger invasion force to the east was under Royalfang's command. But...

"Now there's a name I haven't heard in a long time... Didn't expect I'd hear it again in a place like this."

A lion-headed demon covered in golden fur appeared from among the demons; the Gods still loved me that much, at least.

The old leonin general had an air of majesty befitting his title. "Let's hear what you have to say, witch's pet," he said with an indomitable smile.

And so, the two of us became the demons' captives—all in the hope that we could end this pointless war.

# Chapter 2

The Golden Lion, General Royalfang—or Felida Ba Aurio, as he introduced himself—had a different demeanor from the white wolf demon we'd fought. *That* general had thrown himself single-mindedly into slaughter, driven solely by his rage; but the Golden Lion was his exact opposite. I got a sense that his feet were planted firmly on the ground, and he had the calm air of someone willing to quietly sit and observe before acting.

"So, you serve the Witch... How's she been, then? I told her I'd let bygones be bygones if she'd learn her place and live humbly. I never would've imagined she'd be keeping girls like you two, though."

We were in the depths of the forest, at the heart of an encampment guarded by layer upon layer of fortifications. The general's den lay beneath a cloth tarp spread between the trees to form a canopy; that was where Cion and I had been brought.

I'd explained the plan to Cion in advance: We had someone within the Church who had connections with the demons, and if I used that person's name, they might be willing to talk with us. But with her weapons confiscated and her hands chained together, it was no surprise that she was having trouble keeping her cool.

"You scared of us? We're just a couple kids, aren't we?"

She was putting up a calm front, but she was clearly on edge, and I was already having misgivings.

"Cion, we aren't here to pick a fight, all right? I let you join me because you insisted, but please..."

"But... But, Alicia!"

Her eyes went to my chains, then drifted over to my tail.

"Why do you look so excited?" she asked slowly.

"Wha—?"

I turned to look at the wolf's tail or whatever it was (it was

growing from *my* body, anyway); I hadn't been paying much attention to it, but it had started wagging on its own. I scowled down at it.

"I'm...not, particularly..."

It felt like this tail had a mind of its own sometimes. I understood the basic principles underlying my demonification, but it really was *challenging* to deal with, to put it nicely...

"Gah ha ha! So that's how it is!" Royalfang laughed. "You're upset seeing your friend all chained up like a slave, eh, missy? Well, don't you worry—you're both too lean for my taste. I like my girls with a bit more flavor to 'em!"

The Golden Lion looked totally relaxed as he roared with laughter, but the atmosphere around us was obviously tense.

"Ordinarily, I'd want to dispute that point..." I sighed. But under the present circumstances, snapping back that I had *plenty*, thank you very much, and that my chest and butt were a *perfectly normal size*, wouldn't help matters at all.

In any case, Royalfang had immediately picked up that Cion was a girl; he clearly had an excellent sense of smell. I needed to get the conversation moving before he provoked her into saying something she shouldn't.

"In any case, allow me to get right to business. Please, withdraw your forces. If this battle continues, it could easily develop into all-out war. Neither of us wish for that outcome; as a general, you surely understand that as well as I."

There was a long history of conflict between humans and demons. The Church's narrative was what our kingdom officially recognized, but that was ultimately nothing but an after-the-fact retelling. The truth was simply that there had been a country where demons dwelled and a country that opposed them. By framing our enemies as *inhuman monsters*, we'd brought together the people of the continent to fight against them despite their superior strength.

As a result, humans and demons had clashed again and again over the ages, unable to coexist—and yet, even now, neither side had driven the other to destruction. The reasons were simple: Humankind, as prideful as we were, had enough humility to

recognize our own weakness; and demonkind knew that our two species were one and the same, and had long acted with that in mind.

According to the saint, beings *lacking in mana* were born as humans; organs that our bodies should have had were underdeveloped or missing entirely. My demonification was the result of a blood transfusion from Heavenfang reawakening some of those latent traits or whatever. The woman who called herself the Deathwatcher, Veil Croitzen, had attained superhuman powers through a similar set of circumstances. The basic logic made sense.

But if we tried to share that truth with the rest of humanity, would they understand? Would they be convinced? No, that wasn't happening. The divine doctrine that the Church had spread was firm and unshakable, and "devil-touched"—those children who developed demon-like physical traits—faced deep-rooted prejudice and oppression.

In the dim light of torches, the Golden Lion's beast-like eyes narrowed as he gazed back at me. "You do understand that you're the ones who lit the spark of this conflict, don't you?"

"I do—and with that knowledge, I've come here to ask that you withdraw. I am fully aware that our request is an unreasonable one."

We'd killed the Demon Lord, we'd killed his general, and we'd even killed their comrades who'd infiltrated the Church. The demons didn't bear the blame for any of it; everything led back to the impulsive actions of humans. We'd preached in the name of the Gods that demons were humankind's enemies—that they had to be destroyed.

"I will not call this a simple misunderstanding," I said slowly. "However, I am not here for the sake of the lives that have already been lost. I believe it is more important to save the lives that may be lost in battles to come."

Most of the demons Veil Croitzen had assassinated had been spies. If anything, they'd been some of the ones more sympathetic to humanity; they'd been working to relax the Church's anti-demon policies, easing the conflict between our two sides as much as possible. When I'd found that out, I'd wanted to punch that damn

shadow-woman in the face. But from what I'd heard, she'd changed her ways as well; like me, she'd stubbornly survived our battle, and now she was running around helping with more of the saint's business. All in all, it seemed like a better use for her than having her atone with her own death.

"If I might ask... Are you carrying out this invasion in order to free your comrades?"

They hadn't been in touch with the saint since they'd banished her, but their undercover operatives must have had some means of contacting their homeland. The saint had speculated that the demons' goal might be to *rescue their people* after those lines of communication went silent... But if that was the case, then things were going to get messy. All of those comrades of theirs had already been killed.

"Well, now," Royalfang replied. "You're more than just a pretty face—you've got guts, I'll give you that! You could stand to learn a thing or two from her, Little Miss Guard. Loosen up a little, before your nerves give out!"

He gave some sort of gesture, and a goat-headed demon stepped out, only to return carrying a vessel filled with red liquid.

"Let's have a drink. If you want us to open up to each other, then you'll join me, won't you?"

He raised his cup and had his attendant bring some over to us as well.

I stared over at it. "I'm not sure how much familiarity you have with our faith, but as a bride of the Gods, I am forbidden from indulging in liquor."

I took a sniff... It didn't seem to be poisoned. From the fierce smell of alcohol, this was probably the stuff they called "firewater" or whatever. Just the scent made my brain go a bit fuzzy; maybe my heightened animal senses made it more intense, though.

"How about you, then?" he asked Cion. "You can do more than just bark and growl at strangers, can't you?"

Cion glared back at him. "I'll take it."

If he was looking for a fight, she was ready to give him one. She picked up the cup in her chained hands and raised it to her mouth. I

saw her shoulders twitch for a brief moment as it touched her lips, but she downed it all in one gulp.

"Nn... There... Drahnkit..."

She was slurring her words. Her eyes looked a bit dazed and half asleep, even as she continued glaring at Royalfang.

"Cion..."

"'Sfine... 'Ve drahnk Mashter'h boozhe b'fore... I c'n handlit..."

"Pffha ha ha! Oh, you're *good*! One lick of that stuff, and my boys'll be out cold until morning! And you—hee hee hee! *All at once!* All right, you want to talk about a truce? Let's get talking."

*Hang on, what? What the hell did you just serve us, you damn furball?!*

"P-Please, just wait a moment..."

I hurriedly recited a prayer and cleansed Cion's body a little. It wasn't all that effective, especially this far north, but it'd at least be enough to keep her from passing out.

"Allyasha...?"

"Look, just... Sit down for a little, okay?"

I glared at the goat-headed demon who'd brought in the firewater. With an uncomfortable look, he brought over a shoddy wooden chair, and I sat Cion down in it. *The Hero* dying from *drinking liquor too fast* didn't even bear thinking about.



"So, you wanted to know why we're invading?" Royalfang said. "Well, you guessed right."

His goal was to free his comrades who'd gone undercover among the humans. Failing that, we needed to return their remains, provide an accounting of what had happened—and, of course, identify those responsible.

"I won't push any further than that. We're the ones who went and snuck into your territory, after all. Honestly, I'm impressed you managed to sniff our people out. Maybe I ought to compliment you, one opponent to another."

The Golden Lion joked, but his eyes were completely devoid of humor.

"Right now, you two are prisoners of war. That means we're not going to beat you, we're not going to burn you, and we're not going to string you up. Do you understand why?"

"Laws of war," I replied. "Captured enemy soldiers are to be treated humanely?"

"Exactly. That's all there is to it. That's all I'm trying to say..." His beast-like eyes shone and shimmered as he drank down his cup. "We're here to bring our people home—the ones who got captured there in that city of yours. If you happen to know where they were taken, then spit it out now. Your friend shared a drink with me, after all. Just give me that much, and I'll settle the rest."

The lion sat cross-legged, calmly staring down at me and Cion. I didn't sense any violence in his demeanor, but he was unmistakably a man soldiers could entrust their lives to—a *general*, through and through.

*Demons who were taken prisoner in Arshelm...?*

I hadn't heard anything about that from the saint. Unfortunately, Arshelm had been under the jurisdiction of the late Cardinal Kyrius. He'd been a torture-obsessed pervert, but he'd also taken a hardline stance against the demons. For all I knew, he could've been capturing them for some sort of experiments or research; it wasn't hard to imagine...

"Judging by that look, they haven't told you anything, have they?"

There was a hint of disappointment in his voice, but he refilled his cup of liquor and unlocked our chains.

"We've said our piece. If you're living among the humans, then now's the time to get going. If you'd rather stay here with us, though, we'll welcome you with open arms. We don't abandon our people."

I was confused for a brief moment, before I realized he was talking about my ears and tail.

"These are merely a sort of magic trick, I'm afraid." I flicked one of my dog ears with a finger and smiled ruefully. "In any case, as a bride of the Gods, I am bound to return to their side."

"Let's pray we don't meet on the battlefield, then," he said before turning to Cion. "You too, girlie. Tonight, we're drinking buddies, so I'll let you off the hook. But if I see you again out there, I'll have vengeance for my fallen comrades. I'll carve their memories into you—every last one."

Up until that moment, Cion had been flushed and tipsy, but now her eyes widened and the color instantly drained from her face. She instinctively reached for her sword, but it wasn't at her hip; the Golden Lion tossed it back to her with a teasing air.

"We're warriors, my men and I," he said. "If you're one too, then you know when it's time to retreat, don't you?"

Cion stumbled to her feet and slung her sword back around her waist as she looked to me. Our opponents weren't bracing for a fight; if they were going to let us go, then that was all we could ask for.

"Thank you for taking the time to meet with us," I said with a bow.

I took Cion's wrist, and we made our exit. The whole way out of the encampment, I could feel murderous glares stabbing into me all over my body—countless stings of rage, as numerous as the things these people had lost.

"This won't be easy, will it..."

As I muttered to no one in particular, Cion's wrist slipped out of my grasp; now, her hand was holding mine.

"It's all right," she said. "It's going to be all right."

Her hood was pulled tight over her head, leaving her expression unreadable as she walked beside me. But ever so slightly—so faintly that I wondered if my ears were playing tricks on me—Cion's voice seemed to be trembling.

"Cion...?"

"Hmm?"

I'd spoken up on an impulse, but we were still in the middle of enemy territory. This wasn't the time or the place for small talk.

"Alicia...?"

"No, it's nothing."

After my false start, I didn't say anything more, and I found myself walking a step behind Cion. It wasn't just to escape the silence—the sun had already long since set, and if I wasn't careful, I could easily lose my footing in the darkness of the unfamiliar forest.

But all the same, my thoughts kept circling around that tremor in Cion's voice. She'd spent her whole life thinking of demons as enemies to hunt down—as monsters that couldn't be reasoned with. How would this encounter affect her? Had it really been a good idea to bring her along at all? It was too late to question my choices now, but I still felt a little uneasy.

As we left the demon encampment, made our way through the thick forest, and passed by the site of today's battle...

"Cion... W-Wait a sec..."

My feet came to a stop.

"Ah, sorry—was I going too fast?"

"No— Well, maybe a little... I mean, I guess so..." I faltered. "Bringing out those ears and tail just leaves me feeling a bit unwell afterward." There was a throbbing pain in the back of my head, and I was kind of nauseous too. "Is it okay if we rest for a bit?"

She nodded. "Sorry. I should've been paying more attention."

"No, it's fine..."

Out here, an attack could come from any direction at any moment. It was only natural that Cion would be focused on our surroundings. Normally, she'd fuss over me to a downright excessive degree, but even now, her senses were still directed out into the darkness of the forest.

"Would you rather we weren't negotiating with demons?" I asked.

"I don't know," she replied slowly. "I'd never really thought of them as people you could talk to."

To her, they'd been things she hunted to earn her keep—vermin, to put it bluntly. She'd never considered them as rational beings just like us. It was understandable that she'd have doubts about this.

"I should've gone alone, shouldn't I..."

The first time I'd come across Cion in battle, she'd killed a pair of warwolf cubs right in front of me without any hesitation. She'd believed unquestioningly that they were evil—that her actions were right and just. Now, she'd learned that we could *communicate* with them. If that knowledge made her hand falter in the heat of battle, it could be the death of her.

"The world is full of things we're better off not knowing..." I sighed.

"Oh... No, it's fine, I think. I... I guess that's just how things are." Cion spoke calmly, but I could hear some doubt in her voice, along with a confusion verging on indignation. "They're demons, but they were all nice and stuff," she muttered. "It pisses me off."

She'd probably never tried to have a conversation with one before... No, of course she hadn't. Exchanging words with someone you were about to kill was empty and futile—I knew that better than her, didn't I. As long as you thought of your opponent as nothing but a walking lump of meat, you could tell yourself that you were just chopping it up. No heartache, no hesitation; just finish the job.

All this time, I'd lied to myself and covered my eyes, taking the lives of others as the Gods bade me. If you didn't need to spare a thought for your victims' pasts, if you could remain ignorant and just carry out violence as you were commanded, then you could spend your days in perfect clarity—in the simple, easy world of kill or be killed.

"Did you know the demons were like that, Alicia?"

"No, I only found out recently myself. The Gods are quite mean-spirited, aren't they?"

Once you'd learned the truth—once that awareness had crystallized in your mind—there was no going back. Your only choice

was to fight. I guess I just wasn't enough of an obedient lamb to turn a blind eye.

"Sorry for the delay," I said eventually. "I'm all right now. Let's hurry back to the others."

"You sure? You don't look so good..."

"Neither do you. And right now, I'm most worried about the mercenaries. I didn't see any priests around during the battle; they must not have been able to get aid from the Church. If they've been fighting while retreating, then their provisions must be running low as well. We need to get moving."

Unfortunately, we'd have to wait a bit longer for food and water. Those would be arriving with the saint, who'd planned to set out after us. Still, I could at least provide emergency treatment for the worst of their injuries.

"It's not uncommon for people to pass out from their combat wounds and never get back up, is it?" I pressed.

Cion had spent long years on the battlefield. She ought to understand the power of healing orisons as well as anyone.

"Okay." She nodded. "I have some guesses about where the boss and the others might've set up camp. We'll move quick, but if you're having trouble, just—"

Before she could even finish speaking, Cion's arm shot out to grab my wrist and pull me up.

"Cion?!"

She gripped me tight against her chest. Her sword was already out, and with a loud screech of metal, it sent sparks flying through the darkness.

"Who—?!"

Someone kicked at us from behind, and the two of us lost our balance.

*Bloodlust...?*

I hadn't felt a trace of it until they struck. Was my exhaustion taking its toll, or were they just that well practiced at concealing themselves? My body sprang into motion faster than my mind could keep up, but Cion was far faster still as she slashed at our black-cloaked attacker. With one flash of metal, then another, she lunged

forward to strike at them, but the figure leaped back to dodge the blows. They dissolved into the darkness of the forest—and then, moments later, the foliage right next to Cion shook.

"Cion!"

With a grunt of shock, Cion reflexively ducked backward and twisted her head away as a silver gleam passed right in front of her eyes.

"Wha—?"

A huge sword as long as my entire body came swinging through the gloom, mowing down trees as it went. And there, wielding it, was a *wolfman* covered in black fur. Cion and I were flanked by the wolf and the cloaked attacker. Would we run, or would we fight? As my thoughts raced—

"Where the hell did you get that?!" Cion roared.

"Cion?!"

Before I could even react, Cion became a streak of shadow leaping at the wolfman—

"Gwuh—?!"

—and in the next instant, she doubled over as a kick from the wolf sent her flying. She crashed into a thick tree trunk and crumpled to the ground. I rushed in to shield her, but without even giving us a second glance, the wolfman squared off against the cloaked figure.

*What on earth...?*

The first one to move was the cloaked attacker. They quickly fled into the darkness, and the wolfman leaped through the foliage after them.

"*Hold it—!*" Cion was coughing up blood as she shouted after them.

"Just hold still," I said. "I'll get you moving again right away..."

"Dammit..." she fumed. "That... That sword—!"

"Not right now," I urged her. "Just settle down."

*That wasn't a demon.*

Cion must have been too enraged to spot the differences, but our attacker just now had definitely been...

"A devil-touched..."

The forest was silent and still once again, and my voice quietly faded away to nothing.

***

"That was Master's... I know it was..."

Cion muttered to herself over and over as we made our way through the forest in the wake of the attack. The greatsword in that black wolfman's paws had belonged to Veiss Volg—our kingdom's greatest champion, Cion's master, and the man she owed her life to. A man who'd gone missing in action, whose body had never been found.

"I swear I'll get it back..."

Cion spoke with rage in her eyes, but that thing back there must have been...

"No, this isn't the time..." I muttered. I couldn't tell her the truth right now. We were both exhausted, and before anything else, we needed to regroup with the mercenaries.

"You understand, right, Cion?"

"Yeah... I'm worried about the boss and the others too."

Cion led the way out of the dark forest, and after checking a few likely spots, we arrived at the mercenaries' encampment behind a hill overlooking the trees. The hastily constructed camp was surrounded by stakes to repel attackers. Some of the mercenaries were keeping watch in shifts, while the rest were sitting around fires and trying to recover their stamina. It had been almost three weeks since the attack on Arshelm began, and their exhaustion was plain to see. They'd been able to get small amounts of supplies from the surrounding towns, but their weapons were damaged, and their armor was barely held together with improvised repairs.

I gazed over at Cion and the mercenaries exchanging warm greetings. "I'd heard they were on the verge of annihilation, but this really is dire..."

"Listen, they might be a bunch of drunks, but they're still professionals—this is how they stay fed. They've gotten through plenty of tough scrapes before," a voice floated down from slightly

above me.

"I thought you were an innkeeper, not a bounty hunter."

"I ain't got any customers coming around lately, so I've gotta pick up some side jobs."

"Boss!" Cion called out as she noticed us. She bounded over like an excited dog, and the bald-headed man with the ridiculous résumé—innkeeper, mercenary leader, and former royal knight captain—cheerfully clapped her on the back.

"Glad to see you back in one piece, kid. Still taking some damn risky swings, though, ain't you?"

He shot a look not at Cion, but at me.

"You and Miss Bride got yourselves captured, and now you're just waltzing right back out? So, is the war over now, or what?"

He kept his tone light, but he sounded expectant.

"I'm sorry. We set out to negotiate an armistice, but the discussion didn't go well..." I sighed. "I don't see any priests here; you've requested aid from the Church, haven't you?"

The injured mercenaries lying by the fireside were being tended to by *other injured mercenaries* who could still stand. I could see a few men who looked like medics here and there, but there were nowhere near enough of them.

"The church in town was already all cleared out by the time we got there. We sent people out to beg for help from nearby, but everyone's saying they can't leave their own villages."

"What about the Spirit Mountain Temple?" I asked. "It's not far from here..."

"We sent guys there too. They got a no. There's a new archbishop running the place these days—says he can hear the voices of the Gods or something. Guess he ain't got time to listen to us humans anymore."

"What a grand and pious man His Excellency must be," I replied flatly.

"You're the bride here—think you could say anything to get him to come 'round?"

"Unfortunately, my cardinal is missing at the moment... I'm afraid I may not be able to do much. I'll attend to everyone's injuries to the

best of my ability, in any case."

"Much appreciated. Just about all these guys have going for them is their thick skulls, and even then, they're pretty much at their limit. I reckon if you hold their hands, they oughta be able to hang in there for a couple more days..."

That was when I noticed the handful of strangely anxious gazes pointed my way.

"I am a *bride of the Gods*."

"Sure, but you're still a beauty, either way."

*Look, flatter me all you want, but...*

"Well... I suppose I do need them up and about, at least enough to serve as meat shields."

Mentally filing this away as just part of my job, I addressed the men around us.

"I'll attend to you all in turn, starting with those who are unable to move. If possible, please bring the most severely injured to a central location so that I can heal them all at once."

I hadn't especially been trying to raise my voice, but we must have had more eyes on us than I'd realized. After a brief silence, the encampment was filled with shouts of "Yeahhh!" and "Our goddess returns!" and "Sorry for saying you were still growing and stuff!"

"I see a few of your men need to be removed from the front lines."

I was genuinely determined to track down a couple of those voices, but Cion managed to calm me down. She was right—this wasn't the time for stringing up idiots. *Healing* was what I needed to focus on right now. I could string them up *after* I healed them.

Inwardly reminding myself of my priorities, I headed over to the injured mercenaries, with Cion and the innkeeper in tow. The aether out here was as thin as ever; I doubted there'd be enough to fully heal everyone. Depending on how things went, I might need to repurpose some of my personal reserves...

"Oh, that reminds me." Carrying on my healing in the background, I turned to address the unusually well-informed man standing behind me. "Sir Former Royal Knight Captain—you wouldn't happen to know anything about a devil-touched man with burn scars

on his face, would you?”

“Burn scars...?”

“We were attacked on our way back here,” I explained. “It was dark, so I was only able to get a vague impression, but he was a tall man with strangely long limbs. Also, his eyes were red...”

I’d checked with Cion as well, but she’d never heard of him. Obviously, she wouldn’t have—he was a *devil-touched*, and she’d spent her life fighting *demons*.

“Boss...?” Cion asked, looking up at him as I continued my explanation.

“Ah... Right, sorry. Just to make sure—did he have brand marks on the backs of his hands? X-shaped ones?”

“I’m not sure...”

It had only been a brief encounter, and the forest had been pitch-dark. But as I tried to recall, Cion nodded.

“He did. I’m pretty sure those were from a branding iron.”

“Oh, you’ve gotta be kidding me...” The former royal knight captain threw back his head with a pained expression.

Brand marks on the backs of his hands—in other words, he must have been a slave.

“If he had burns on his face too, then yeah, I guess that settles it... Can’t believe he’s still alive after all that...”

Cion and I gave each other a quizzical look. Judging by the reactions of the men around us, the innkeeper was the only one who’d heard of this guy; it must have been someone from his royal knight days.

“Just who is he?” I asked.

He’d managed to catch Cion by surprise, and he’d seemed to be targeting me. What’s more, he’d managed to dodge Cion’s strikes, even if only briefly.

“He’s a former slave who torched the capital around a decade ago. Called himself ‘Slaven.’ We caught him hunting demons, and...well, a lot of stuff happened. Veiss got a good hit on him during the attack on the capital, and he never showed up again, so I assumed he’d kicked the bucket ages ago... But the bastard’s still alive, huh...”

The innkeeper's voice was grim. I wasn't sure whether his mind had gone to the missing champion who'd fought off the devil, or whether that "lot of stuff" was weighing on him even now. Either way, he suddenly realized he'd brought the mood down; he put on an obviously forced smile and turned to look at me.

"Your cardinal was there too, actually. He was just a newbie priest back then, though."

"Salamanrius was?"

In my surprise, I'd forgotten to refer to him by his proper title, but I still deserved congratulations for not calling him "Glasses."

"Well... Basically, just about everyone's got baggage with him. We already had our hands full with the damn demons. That guy's the *last* thing we need right now... At this rate, you're definitely not gonna be able to handle things on your own, missy."

He must have meant they'd need more healers than just me. Even as we spoke, I was manifesting the mystical divine power I wielded. Slowly—ever so slowly—my miracles were healing intractable injuries to the point where they could be treated by human hands. But that was the limit of what I could do. Regrowing lost limbs from nothing, or even closing up stomachs to keep people's guts from spilling out, were beyond me right now. The difference in local aether levels was part of it, but there were also just too many injured people. Even if part of my attention was elsewhere, I was still looking over each person's condition while I worked, and I needed to keep my brain firing on all cylinders. I wasn't sure exactly how many mercenaries had made it out, but the wounded alone numbered almost fifty. From a strategic standpoint, we'd want at least ten priests here for support...

"The Spirit Mountain Temple refused your request, right?"

I double-checked, and the innkeeper silently nodded. I'd never been out there before, but I'd heard it was a special place in its own way, different from the Holy City. If an archbishop with a screw loose who said he could *hear the voices of the Gods* was in charge...

"If we brought Karm along, maybe we could make him deal with it..."

Unfortunately, Karm was busy with his own mission elsewhere,

and I never wanted to ask him for help ever again anyway. Gods willing, the next time I contacted him would be to notify him that he'd been declared a heretic and sentenced to death. Until then, even if he reached out to me, I intended to steadfastly ignore him.

"In any case, if he showed up, we'd end up with an even bigger mess..."

He was a crazed zealot who went around dispensing judgment based on his own personal creed. Even if we somehow managed to negotiate a truce, a single incomprehensible decision from him could easily trash the entire thing. Our best option was to keep him as far away as possible.

"So, much as I hate to admit it, I suppose we'll just have to rely on Her Salacity..."

"Her Sagacity? The Holy Saint's coming out here?" the innkeeper asked.

"She's quite a kind and caring soul."

If Her Sagacity graced us with her presence on the battlefield in that provocative getup, it'd be sure to boost the mercenaries' morale. I had no clue whether the Horny Slut was actually interested in men at all, but I had to imagine she'd at least do a better job than me.

"I'm merely running errands for Her Sagacity while we await her arrival."

The Golden Lion was a skilled negotiator, and we hadn't been able to make any headway with him. At this point, I figured our best bet was just to toss Her Sagacity into enemy territory and let her handle it. I was only a bride; *she* was the Holy Saint. Putting her body on the line for the sake of world peace was simply part of a saint's duties. If we were lucky, maybe she'd take out all the enemy soldiers and leave them too weak to stand...

"Um, why do you look kinda excited, Alicia...?"

"Huh?"

I'd started smiling at some point. How odd. I must not have been able to keep it off my face.

"I mean... Sure, Her Sagacity can be kind of, y'know..." Cion was visibly ill at ease—she seemed to have an opinion or two of her own

about the saint.

Hmm. The atmosphere was getting weirdly tense. For Her Sagacity's sake, it'd be best if I cleared up this misunderstanding.

"Cion? Just so we're clear, I don't bear Her Sagacity any ill will, all right? I was simply thinking about what a hard time she'll have taking on this many people all at once..."

"You mean, to heal them, right?"

"What else could I possibly mean?" I deadpanned.

"I— Uh—" Cion blushed and turned away.

*Okay, that's kind of cute.*

"Everyone, please, rest assured. Even if your injuries are beyond my saving, Her Sagacity will never forsake you. So just relax and succumb to your wounds, all right?"

"Th-That's right! Yeah! Just hang in there a little longer, guys!" Cion chimed in, putting all her energy into encouraging her comrades.

*Aw. She's such a good girl.*

"I mean, sure, she'd constantly crawl naked into my sickbed and try to brainwash me every single night, so I'd love to see her get what's coming to her at least once, but all the same—"

"A-Alicia...?"

Cion looked a little agitated, but for some reason, the words just wouldn't stop.

"And anyway, she calls herself a saint, but she just spends all day playing with kids and tosses all the actual work onto the nuns. Plus, she goes to the baths three times a day—and she takes a different nun in there with her every time too. I know they say cleanliness is next to Godliness, but seriously. I mean, if *I* could have a bath every day, sure, I'd— Mmph!"

"Aaa—! Alicia?!"

Cion clamped a hand over my mouth, and I squirmed and struggled for air.

"You're— You're freaking everyone out! I know you're *only joking*, but still!"

"Who's joking? I—"

Past the confused whispering of the mercenaries, the hoofbeats

of an approaching horse rang out, interrupting my train of thought before I could continue.

"Alicia?! Is Sister Alicia there?!" A young man's voice rang out as he spurred his horse on, racing into the firelight of the encampment. He sounded too panicked to be a simple messenger.

"I'm over here!" I called out amid the sudden atmosphere of concern.

"Thank goodness! I didn't know what I'd do if I couldn't find you..."

"Wait, aren't you..."

His hood was pulled over his head to conceal his features, but I recognized those beast-like eyes. It was Schnoë, one of the devil-touched mercenaries in charge of guarding the saint.

"What's going on?" I asked. "Aren't you supposed to be—"

Before I finished speaking, Schnoë jumped off his horse, dashed over to me, and grabbed me by the shoulders. With ragged breaths, he delivered his message.

"Her Sagacity's carriage was attacked. She's gone missing. We don't know if she's dead or alive."

I stared back at him.

"Huh?"

My dazed reply faded away to nothing amid the nighttime encampment.

# Chapter 3

I could hear the sounds of the children fighting in the darkness. I tried to get a count of our attackers—ten, eleven, twelve...

"Saint Nevissa! Please, don't worry! I'll keep you safe!"

My attendant, Sister Loria, held my hand, but her own hand was trembling.

I'd brought along the devil-touched children as guards, and there were a few priests accompanying us as well, but...

"There are too many of them..."

I stopped counting once I passed twenty. The children were fighting their hardest, and the priests were more cooperative than they'd been in the past, but it was still only a matter of time before the attackers reached this carriage. If I could end the violence by stepping forward myself, then I had a duty to do so.

"I'm sorry, Loria. Please, take the children and—"

I made it that far before I felt Loria's grip on my hand tighten, and I realized that a third person had slipped into the carriage with us.

"Self-sacrifice is a noble impulse, but I can't recommend it, Miss Vernalia."

"Y-You—!" Loria cried out. It sounded like she'd taken out the knife she carried for self-defense.

"Wait," I said to her as I tried to recall the intruder's voice. These irritating, mocking tones belonged to... "High Cardinal Salamanrius. It's a relief to find you well, but what are you doing here? This commotion isn't your handiwork, is it?"

"Would you believe me if I told you I'm here to rescue you?"

"You sound more as though you've come to abduct me."

I could still hear the sounds of fighting outside the carriage. I'd heard he'd gone missing after being targeted by a mysterious attacker, but had he staged the entire thing?

“Sorry to disappoint, but the people outside aren’t mine. They’re after me as well, so I’ve come here hoping we can join forces.”

He didn’t seem to be lying. In which case...

“Aaah?!”

“Eeek?!”

I let out a yelp involuntarily—it really was completely unintentional—and Loria screamed as well in response.

“Wh-Wh-What’s this fluffy thing in my lap?!”

“Oh, that’s Atalanta—Alicia’s pet cat.”

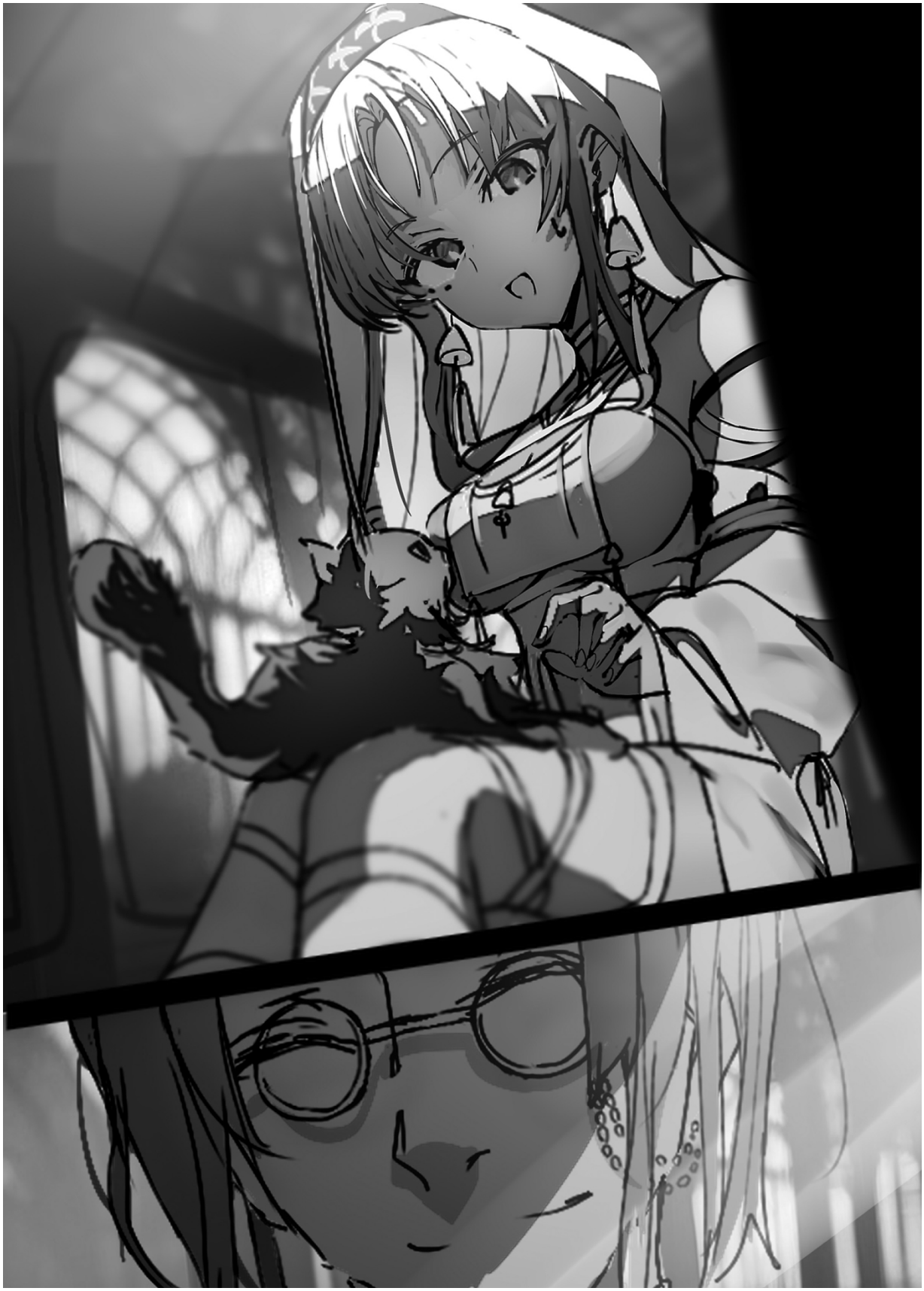
“Atalanta...?”

If memory served, that was the name of a goddess of the hunt in some country or other. That aside...

“Why is there a cat out here...?”

“Because I’m looking after him for Alicia, of course. She’s in even worse danger than we are right now.”

I felt my body tense in response to his deliberately suspenseful words, but I restrained myself and gently picked up the fluffy presence. It did make me feel a little calmer, actually.



“How much do you know?” I asked him.

“More than you, at any rate. My glasses are quite good; I’d love to lend them to you if your eyes were intact.”

I was beginning to understand. He hadn’t been keeping that girl just for show.

“You’ve also felt the possibilities she holds, haven’t you, Miss Vernalia? If you continue heading north, there won’t be much you can do. Our enemy knows all about your true identity and your history. He’s prepared countermeasures accordingly, and he’ll be ready and waiting for you. You’ll only get in her way.”

Regardless, aether was scarce in the north, and my current mana capacity was even less than an average human’s. Knowing that, I’d resolved to set out there nevertheless, but...

“It sounds as though you have some idea of our enemy and their goals, then?”

He gave no answer to my question. He merely put on a self-important smile and held out his hand to me.

“Please, lend me your assistance, Saint Nevissa Vernalia. I need to outmaneuver him and foil his plans.”

With Alicia’s cat still held in one arm, I slowly reached out to touch his hand...

“I see.” I nodded back to him. “So our opponent is Raven, right hand of the Demon Lord... I imagine changing his name from Slaven to Raven was our Lord’s idea. He always did have a fondness for wordplay.”

The man in front of me was only human after all, it seemed. As I spoke aloud the information I’d read from his mind, I felt a slight tremor in his fingertips.

“Very well. I shall trust you, High Cardinal Salamanrius. Sister Loria, please tell Schnoë to go send word of the attack, and set fire to the carriage. Be sure to untie the horses first, of course.”

“Y-Yes, Your Sagacity!”

The clamor grew louder as the carriage door opened. Outside, the children were fighting with everything they had. I hated to deceive them, but I had no choice. Our enemy was a man who had attacked the capital unaided and held his own against a legendary

champion. We wouldn’t be able to defeat him by fighting fair.

“May the protection of the Gods be with her...”

I gave a brief prayer for that girl’s safety in whatever trials lay ahead of her. I had my own path to follow, and I would entrust myself to it.

# Chapter 4

Among the mountains that ran through the center of the continent, dividing east from west, the tallest and most beautiful was Spirit Mountain. There was no shortage of tales about the place—legends said that a dragon had dwelled there in ancient times, that the holy sword that had slain a diabolical witch had been forged upon those heights, and plenty more besides. The summit remained covered in snow year-round, and the mystical mountain attracted large numbers of travelers. The Church, hoping to make use of that reputation, had constructed the Spirit Mountain Temple—a fortress city at the base of the mountain, with dormitories and training grounds for countless priests and pilgrims.

"Welcome, welcome. We've been expecting you, Sir Hero Elcyon."

After we'd received word of the attack on the saint, we'd left the encampment before sunrise and managed to make it to the fortress within the day. Out in front of the gate, we'd found a middle-aged man waiting for us. He introduced himself as Archbishop Yosephon; he had a creepy, fawning smile plastered onto his face as he approached us, rubbing his hands together.

"What brought you out here to greet us?" I asked. "Did you receive a report from your scouts?"

His plastered-on smile refusing to budge even a fraction, the archbishop briefly glanced at me before turning back to Elcyon. "The Gods granted me a prophecy," he said, rubbing his hands together once again. "They proclaimed that the Hero who vanquished the Demon Lord would arrive soon, bringing a bride with him. And thus, as Their humble servant and keeper of this temple, it was only proper that I should be prepared to greet you."

As we talked, he led us into the fortress. We left our horses at the stable and walked along with him.

The fortress was surrounded by stone walls; I had no clue what

they were meant to defend against, exactly, but they were obviously sturdy. Inside was an intricate temple complex, with a gentle upward incline following the slope of the mountain. This was the City of Trials—a grand, imposing place with a sense of long-accumulated history, perfectly in keeping with the atmosphere of Spirit Mountain.

But as we proceeded, one overwhelming note of *dissonance* seized our attention, drowning out everything else. All along the streets, *demon corpses* were on display like medals of honor.

"Do those have some sort of ritual purpose?" Cion asked, looking not to me but to the archbishop.

Still smiling, the archbishop shook his head no. "However, the Gods informed me that these would ward off evil—yes, They delivered a commandment. Soon, a large force of demons shall attack our temple, and so we must display these remains to keep them in check. 'Show them what becomes of those who transgress against Our children,' say the Gods..."

"So do these Gods of yours stand by your bedside and whisper to you?" I cut in. This all sounded like a load of bullshit.

"A bride ought to know better," he replied, visibly annoyed. "The Gods are with us always, in all times and all places."

His sermonizing tone rubbed me the wrong way; I thought about sniping back at him, but I didn't want to stir up unnecessary trouble. I gave a polite apology and turned to look at the bloodstained roofs and walls around us.

There were no Gods. They were just a fiction created by the leaders of the Church who claimed to speak their words. So this gruesome sight was undeniably something that *humans* had willed into being—either the archbishop himself had wished for it, or someone else had made him do it. That was all there was to it.

"Everyone looks really busy," Cion said, narrowing her eyes at the priests frantically dashing around. She'd picked up that I was in the archbishop's bad books, so she broached our main topic in my place. "Why did you deny the mercenaries' request for aid, Your Excellency? I believe you received word from them. You're not going to say that the Gods commanded you to refuse that too... Are you?"

The archbishop replied with a slightly uncomfortable smile. "All

will become clear once you see it. This— This is a special place...”

As he spoke, he led us through an underground tunnel a little ways away from the gates. We passed through a secret door, down a hidden staircase, and behind countless more layers of camouflage. Finally, we arrived in a large open space.

I slowly took it all in. “What on earth is this?”

“This is our anti-demon research facility!” he declared proudly. “It was established by High Cardinal Kyrius himself...”

I vaguely processed the name of the torture-obsessed pervert who’d governed Arshelm until Veiss had assassinated him, but my focus was drawn to the underground chamber around us. The facility was packed with priests, clustered around countless altars with *things* tied down onto them. As I watched, the priests recited incantations and stuck implements into their subjects’ flesh.

“What do you think? Magnificent, is it not?” Even as the archbishop fawned and groveled, I could hear the confidence in his voice. It was skin-crawlingly clear that he was eagerly anticipating our response. “Following His Eminence’s untimely passing, it has fallen to me to carry on this work! No longer shall we be forced to rely on mercenaries. From now on, we ourselves shall lead our divine soldiers to purge those monsters from the face of the earth! Our long battle against that race of darkness shall soon be at an end!”

The archbishop orated loudly, filled with an unnatural elation. “The time is close at hand!” he called out to the priests as they worked. “Now, let us complete them, just as the Gods have instructed! Let us imbue them with the pulse of life!”

“Yes, Your Excellency!” the assembled priests called out in perfect unison.

“When you say ‘divine soldiers’...are you referring to *those* disgusting things?” I asked with a grimace.

“I will admit their appearance still has room for improvement...” he replied. “However, their capabilities are indisputable. Perhaps *the Noontide Lantern’s lover* would care to test them for herself?”

An insult for an insult was his policy, apparently.

“It looks as though they’re made from demons...”

"Well spotted," he said sarcastically. "I see your title as a bride isn't simply ornamental."

His gaze stuck to my body, practically licking me. If we hadn't been here to ask for his help, I would've loved to drop-kick the old creep.

"So they *are* demons?" Cion asked, trying to get him to explain further.

"Aaahh! Yes, indeed! These are all captured demons, now newly reborn! We have cut open their skulls, made adjustments to render them incapable of defying humanity, ingrained the teachings of the Gods into their bodies through prayer, and granted them new life as loyal soldiers of the Goddddsssss!"

His tongue was having trouble keeping up with his overenthusiastic explanation.

So they'd mutilated the demons' brains, robbed them of independent thought, and oversaturated them with mana. I understood the underlying principles; I'd even heard rumors that the Church had divisions specializing in this sort of research. But I had no idea they'd taken it this far...

"I certainly can't say it's in good taste," I said.

"Do you defy the will of the Gods?" he responded sharply.

*Would you shut up already?*

"I have no intention of meddling in your work, Your Excellency. It's not my place to do so. However, it seems a touch self-centered to deny the mercenaries aid on account of this project, don't you think? Even as we speak, the Demon Lord's former armies continue their invasion, and the mercenaries are out there fighting back despite their small numbers."

Last night, I'd hardly gotten any sleep in between tending to their injuries. I'd yelled at them over and over to shut up if they didn't want to die, and they'd still kept up their inane chatter the entire time.

"I believe that as servants of the Gods, we have a duty to extend our support to those who risk their lives in battle," I continued, glaring at the archbishop.

He was red-faced with anger, looking like he might start

screaming at any moment. It wasn't my place to speak...but I couldn't stay silent either.

"If you wish to drive back the enemies of the Gods, then join forces with the mercenaries. While you await the completion of your divine soldiers, the casualties grow higher and higher. You have heard their voices, crying out for salvation from the Gods. Please, Your Excellency... I beg of you, lend us your aid."

And I bowed my head.

I threw aside all my pride, all my reservations—all for the sake of those mercenaries.

But...

"This is what's wrong with whores like you," the archbishop spat. "You think that all you have to do is bow and beg, and people will give you everything you want. What an utterly repulsive creature." He gripped my jaw in his hand and looked me in the eyes. "This is the will of the Gods. Is that clear? I shall complete these soldiers and wipe humanity's foes from the face of the earth. That is the sacred mission the Gods have entrusted to me! Do not presume to know better, you stupid girl!"

"B-But right now, people are—"

"How dare you talk back to me, you little slut!"

*He's going to hit me.*

I anticipated it and braced myself for the pain, but—

"Please stop. She's done nothing wrong."

—the blow didn't come. Looking up, I saw Cion gripping the archbishop's raised arm, holding it in place.

"Sir Hero," he said simperingly. "This is an internal Church matter. I'd ask that you not interfere, please."

"But she's my companion. I have a duty to protect her," Cion said. "Let's not resort to violence...Your Excellency."

The air prickled with a faint hint of impending death, and for a brief moment, silence spread across the room.

"Hmph," the archbishop finally said. Even he wasn't about to go against the Hero who'd killed the Demon Lord. He roughly shoved me away and glared down at me imperiously. "Are you enjoying neglecting your purpose and relaxing while others do all the work,

*bride*? Next time, remember your place before you speak! Think carefully about exactly where you stand!”

Faced with his words, I belatedly realized just how precarious my position truly was. My direct superior was missing; I was here on the saint’s orders, but none of that was public knowledge. Officially, my job was still to *guard the Hero*. “Bride of the Gods” was a pretty-sounding title, but from the perspective of an archbishop—second in rank to a cardinal—I must’ve looked like nothing but a little girl who’d happened to catch Salamanrius’s bespectacled eye.

“Are you okay, Alicia?”

“Yes, I... Thank you...”

I took Cion’s hand, and she helped me up. The archbishop was still glaring at me.

“My apologies, Your Excellency. I was conceited, and I spoke out of turn.”

“Hmph. So long as you understand. You seem to be a girl of good character; if I were to become one of the Seven High Cardinals, I would be willing to retain you at my side. Remember—a bride is to be respectful and obedient.”

“Indeed...”

I answered as briefly as I could. Cion looked like she wanted to say something, but I shot her a look to warn her against it. Getting into a fight here wouldn’t improve our situation at all. If we killed this guy and let his second-in-command take over, we’d just end up with more chaos. The Holy Saint *might* have been able to take the place over herself, but I definitely wouldn’t be able to pull that off.

Using the Hero Elcyon’s name as leverage to push things through was still an option in theory, but...

“Cion. I’m going to protect your nobility.”

She looked back at me in confusion. I didn’t want to let this girl step any further into our world if I could avoid it.

I turned back to the archbishop. “While I remain aware of my place, there is something I wish to inquire of you. May I, Your Excellency?”

“Very well... Speak.”

I was used to dealing with pompous assholes who clung to their

authority—the most important thing was to flatter them with style and protocol. I kept a lid on the rush of anger swelling up inside me and continued speaking with a practiced facade of calm.

"When do you expect that your divine soldiers will be complete, Your Excellency? There appears to still be a great deal of activity down here."

"It will take a few days—a few weeks for them to be fully perfected."

He delivered his estimate entirely matter-of-factly, but that was longer than we had left.

"If I may, Your Excellency—the demon forces' objective is to recover prisoners of war. They were unable to find them at the cathedral in Arshelm, and so the invasion has progressed farther inward. This is merely speculation on my part, but...are the demon prisoners of war who were transferred from Arshelm being held here in this temple, by any chance?"

I'd even been wondering whether the demons being used as test subjects around us might be the prisoners in question. The archbishop remained completely unconcerned, though.

"Don't call them 'prisoners of war.' They have no souls—no consciences to worship the Gods and strive for justice. They are simply vermin, nothing more."

That was why the Church was capturing, breaking, and brainwashing them—because they were *beasts*, not people like us.

"You are well aware of their foul and contemptible nature, are you not, Sir Hero? Their utterly inhuman cruelty?"

"I... Yeah, but..."

Cion's voice was hesitant and faltering. It wasn't hard to imagine why—our conversation with the Golden Lion was still fresh in her mind, and now she could see demons being treated like objects right before our eyes.

"We must exterminate them utterly. That is what the Gods wish of us as well—that is why They have entrusted me with this task. They have instructed me on how to create Their legions, Their divine soldiers, that we might slaughter the demons—that we might destroy them! The Gods have granted this knowledge to me, and me

alone!”

Unsatisfied with Cion’s response, the archbishop whipped himself up into a frenzy as he preached. He probably believed every word of what he was saying from the bottom of his heart, but to me it all sounded like a pathetic joke.

“They are going to attack this temple, Your Excellency. They want to rescue their comrades.”

I knew I was getting a little out of line again, but instead of scolding me for my insolence, the archbishop just clutched his head in his hands with a look of despair.

“Quite so. The situation is grave... The Gods granted me a prophecy this morning, saying much the same. ‘The forces of the demons shall come with tomorrow’s dawn to rob Us of Our treasure,’ They tell me. And indeed, the scouts I dispatched have returned to report that a horde of demons is approaching. Our circumstances are dire indeed... The worst is at hand!”

But even as he said those words, there was a hint of excitement in his tone.

“*However...*” he continued, “the Gods told me this as well: ‘Fear not, for he who cleaves away the darkness, the Hero who bears Our sacred light, shall hasten to Our aid’! And lo and behold, it has come to pass! Just as the Gods ordained, the Hero Elcyon has hastened to us! O mighty Hero, I beseech you, drive back these vile shadows that beset us!”

The archbishop’s eyes were bloodshot as he ranted and raved. I knew that excessive faith could drive people to act in bizarre ways, but this guy was a different flavor of creepy from the psychotic zealot I was used to dealing with.

“Y-Your Excellency? Surely this is too great a task to demand of the Hero all on his own...?”

“It is not! The Gods have proclaimed it! ‘The Hero alone shall suffice,’ They say! ‘You shall watch over the birthplace of Our divine soldiers, and the Hero alone shall defend you’! It’s all right, Sister Alicia. The Gods speak only truth!”

As I stared into his wide-blown pupils, I realized that nothing we could say would make him see reason.

*Seriously, what the hell kind of God gave this idiot a ridiculous prophecy like that?*

"Unless, Sir Elcyon..." the archbishop said slowly. "Are you *not* the Hero the Gods spoke of?"

"I, uh..."

Now it was practically a threat. As long as this guy held up the name of the *Hero* as a shield, Cion was utterly powerless to refuse.

"Please, Sir Hero, secure us the time we require to complete our divine soldiers! Fight back the darkness, just as that Hero of the past defended our kingdom's capital from the forces of evil! Just like the mighty Veiss Volg!"

I heard a small noise from the back of Cion's throat, and her face instantly darkened.

"Y-Your Excellency, if you could please refrain from discussing Sir Veiss right now—"

We were still fresh in the wake of the previous night's incident. This was the worst possible time to remind Cion of Veiss again; I couldn't just stand there and let it happen. My hands clenched into fists, but without even a glance my way, the idiot kept on going.

"No, let me speak, Sister. After all, I was there that day—I witnessed it with my own eyes! I saw the devil that set the capital ablaze, and I saw the champion who ran it down and vanquished it —the living embodiment of divine justice!"

He wasn't going to listen to a word I said. At this point, I was seriously thinking about just killing the guy, but I was more worried by Cion's total lack of response.

"Did you know?" the archbishop asked. "That mighty champion, Veiss Volg, was the sole survivor of the Second Expeditionary Force!"

I hadn't known, and I didn't care. I looked at Cion, but with her face hidden beneath her hood, I couldn't gauge her expression at all.

"Truly a champion of legend! Truly a Hero of myth itself!" The archbishop was in full swing now, heedless of our reactions. "Half of the kingdom's royal knights were wiped out, but he alone returned alive, and the Holy Church declared him *the Hero* in recognition of his triumph! After a relative of the king lost her life in the attack on

the capital, Veiss was stripped of his title and banished... But nevertheless, he was a true Hero and a champion!”

I was starting to get the picture—basically, this guy worshipped Veiss. His eyes were shining like a little kid’s. But that sort of enthusiasm was *only* for innocent young children. When an over-the-hill old man prattled on gleefully like this, it was nothing but obnoxious.

“And you wish for Sir Elcyon to perform the same feats as that champion of legend, Your Excellency?” I asked with a hint of exasperation.

The dumbass nodded emphatically, his cheeks flushed with excitement. “There are those who say that you studied the blade under Veiss himself! And although it was kept from the public, you fought alongside him during the White Wolf’s attack on Clastreach as well, did you not? Please, wield that power once more as you defend ussss!”

The crazed zealot—or maybe *idiotic nuisance* would be more accurate—clutched at Cion’s shoulders and peered at her face beneath her hood, but she stayed calm and composed.

“I’ll protect everyone. I don’t want anyone else getting hurt either.” She spoke matter-of-factly, laying out the archbishop’s demands in simple terms as she brushed away his hands. “But to do that, I *am* going to need the mercenaries fighting alongside me. I don’t know if I can handle all the demons on my own.”

She looked him in the eyes as she flatly rejected his demands. If he wanted her to protect this place, then he needed to send priests out to tend to the mercenaries’ wounds—that was her response.

“Even without those mercenaries, your power alone will—”

“This isn’t about whether it’s possible or not. It’s a question of risk. If, by some chance, they manage to defeat me, then everyone here will be in danger. None of us want that to happen.”

From a logical standpoint, her response was perfectly sound. The archbishop was the one foolishly clinging to his delusional prophecies. But calling an idiot an idiot couldn’t actually fix anything; and *this* idiot just kept on repeating the only thing he knew how to say.

"B-But the prophecy said that you alone would—"

"Success is more certain if I work alongside the others. Whatever the Gods may have told you, the facts are the facts." For once, Cion wasn't backing down. "Your Excellency, surely you're aware of how much they've endured—how hard they've fought to hold their defensive lines from Arshelm to here. Please, reconsider your decision."

Cion was the perfect image of a Hero as she delivered her appeal. I almost wanted to applaud. But unfortunately—or predictably, maybe—the archbishop wasn't won over.

If anything, he only dug his heels in further. "Are you trying to tell me that the divine prophecy I received was *mistaken*?" His eyes were bloodshot, and his voice shook with anger.

"No, that's not what I—"

"*THE GODSSSSS!*"

The archbishop screamed at the top of his lungs, cutting off Cion's attempt to placate him. I saw a flinch run through her shoulders.

"The Gods... The Gods do not err! Their words are infallible! If—*if*, by the faintest chance—Their proclamation were to be false, it could only be because *we* failed to apprehend Their message!"

This wasn't a negotiation anymore. It was just a furious rant.

"The Gods have proclaimed that you alone shall suffice! To neglect Their words is a sin—a grave and terrible sin indeed!"

"No, I just—"

"Or do you *reject the words of the Gods*, Sir Hero Elcyon?!"

Faced with this tirade of pure madness, even Cion found herself at a loss.

*This is just a waste of our time.*

"Your Excellency—"

Losing the Church's aid was going to suck, but we couldn't afford to spend any longer standing here talking in circles. With that in mind, I tried to bail out Cion, but—

"If you reject the Gods' prophecy, then we'll be taking back this girl!"

"*Excuse me?*"

Now I was being treated like an object. Great.

"What else would you expect? This bride has been sent to serve at your side because you accept the will of the Gods. And yet, you declare your intent to defy Them. We can hardly leave a bride of the Gods in your care, now can we?"

*So now I'm a hostage? What kind of bullshit is this?*

That was what I thought to myself, but honestly, his reasoning checked out. An archbishop was second in rank to a cardinal; if he gave that order, I'd be required to go along with it, at least temporarily. And, infuriatingly, my actual boss was still missing.

*Dammit, Glasses, how are you so utterly useless?*

"Oh, but don't worry. I'll be sure to treat her well. There's *quite a lot* I'd like to *discuss* with her." He shot another leering gaze my way as a pointed provocation. "*What else is a bride for*, after all...?"

Cion gave a small hiss of rage, and her hands were balled into shaking fists as she glared back at the archbishop.

"I finally see what Alicia is to you people. I'm *not* sending her back to you."

"Cion..."

"I'll go. I'll do it."

As she stood there, fists clenched, the archbishop gazed back at her with a self-satisfied nod. I looked at the two of them in frustration. There was nothing I could say.

I was a bride of the Church—a slave of the Gods. I usually had a good amount of free rein, but fundamentally, I had no choice but to obey the orders of high-ranking priests.

"You know roughly where they are, right?" Cion asked.

"But of course. We've recorded it all right here for you." The archbishop handed over a map. He had an infuriatingly sunny smile as he put on his best impression of a saint. "May the protection of the Gods be with you, O Hero."

With a quiet growl, Cion turned around and started heading for the exit, her face downturned. I began to rush after her, but—

"*Siiiiisterrrrrr...*"

His sticky, clingy voice stroked along my turned back.

"What is it that's upset you so? I'm sending him out for your sake

as well."

"You're utterly shameless. You might as well be telling him to go out and die." I'd reached my limit. I was doing my best to keep myself under control, but my words came out barbed. "In case you've forgotten, I *am* still under the authority of High Cardinal Salamanrius for the time being. I understand the scope of your authority as an archbishop, but I'd ask that you not—"

"The *Harem Project*, was it?"

I stared back at him. "How—"

"Need you even ask? The Gods have revealed it to me. They have told me *everything*..."

Something in his blown pupils filled me with an incomprehensible dread, and my fingers began to reach for my bible... But the archbishop was unmistakably wide open.

"It's all right. Don't worry, Sister. I'm on your side. Of course I am —you and I are both servants of the Gods. We receive Their voices, and we carry out Their will... Let us work together to fulfill the commandments the Gods have granted us."

He spoke as though he believed from the bottom of his heart that all of this was for the good of the world. There was nothing more I could say to him.

"Do remain mindful of your mission." The haughtiness he'd shown Cion had vanished, replaced by a placid priestly demeanor.

I swore inwardly. Nothing I said would make any difference. From the very start, he'd been blind to everything except his own duties. I hated dealing with guys like him more than anything.

"What do you suppose those Gods even wish for?" I said slowly. I needed to hurry after Cion. But I had to ask this one last question. "Are the Gods...on our side?"

My words were arguably blasphemy, but the archbishop just calmly nodded.

"All who are faithful shall be saved."

# Chapter 5

"Cion, wait! It's too dangerous on your own!"

I spurred on my horse at full speed, but even then, we were already in the mountains by the time I'd managed to catch up to Cion.

We'd only brought a bare minimum of supplies with us when we'd headed out this morning. The sun had already set, and the moon was obscured by clouds; visibility out here was better than in the forest, but it still wasn't good.

"Let's go back and regroup with the others! We can work something out all together!"

"Like *he* said, it'll be too late by then." Cion put out her torch and took stock of her equipment, not turning to look at me. "It's fine. They won't be able to spot me while it's this dark out. I'll just wipe them all out and come right back. So could you go back to the boss and look after the injured guys, Alicia? I'll be back by morning."

"Don't you think something's wrong here?! That archbishop was obviously—"

"He was obviously provoking me. And looking at you like...!" She trailed off in an angry hiss.

"Cion..."

She'd seemed unusually upset; was *that* what she'd been stuck on?

"Listen, Cion... 'Bride' is really just an honorary title I can wave around. It isn't especially out of the ordinary for people to treat me like that—or rather, it's thanks to you that I've got as much free rein as I do now."

"Then—! Then I'm never, ever letting you go back to those bastards!"

*She really does care a lot about me, huh?*

One part of me quietly took that in from the sidelines, while

another part wondered why I meant so much to her to begin with.

"Please, calm down," I said. "I'm grateful you're concerned for me, but it's not as though a single false move from you will put me in danger. Just think about it rationally. This is way too reckless. You'd basically be going out there to die."

The archbishop had riled her up, and now she was in too much of a rush. I took her hand to try and calm her, gently pulling her closer to me.

"I don't want you to carry everything on your shoulders. If we're going, then let's go together. I'd like to bring the boss and the other mercenaries with us too, if we can. But if you insist, then—"

"No. I'm going alone."

"Why—"

I made it that far before I felt Cion's gaze on me, colder than I'd ever seen it.

"Because you'll get in my way, Alicia."

I started to understand. It wasn't because I'd been putting on a front around her, and it wasn't that she didn't want me seeing whatever tricks she had in her back pocket. No, it must have been...

"I killed the Demon Lord without anyone spotting me," she said slowly. "I assassinated him. That's what I do. That's why I could kill him."

For the first time, she admitted the truth about her victory.

"That's the kind of skill I've got. So...if you're around, you'll just make things harder for me."

Looking at her face, I could tell that she hadn't wanted to say that out loud. I could see how important I was to her. I could see that if we could've tackled this together, then she would've wanted me by her side. But in this situation, I wasn't going to be any help to Cion. If anything, I'd be a hindrance.

"I'm sorry, Alicia. I know I'm being selfish."

She gently lifted her hand to stroke my cheek. Her eyes were usually hidden beneath her hood and her bangs, but right now, they were staring straight into mine.

"I just don't want to lose anyone else."

Time and time again, she'd lost people she cared about right

before her eyes. She'd had that terror carved into her heart. During General Heavenfang's attack, she'd fought alongside her master, Veiss, and she'd ended up being the reason he'd left himself open. And just recently in the Holy City—according to the story we'd given her—she'd gotten controlled by our enemy, albeit temporarily, and she'd attacked me and the saint. Cion hadn't done anything wrong. She'd fought with everything she had back in Clastreach, and her getting brainwashed hadn't been her fault at all. But telling her the truth wouldn't be any comfort to her.

Veiss had vanished from Cion's side, and Cion had sliced through me with her own hands. Those were the facts.

"I know I'm being unreasonable," she said. "If you're mad at me, I can't blame you. But just this once, can you leave stuff to me? If the Gods say I can do it, then I probably can. And after I fought alongside everyone else again, I finally figured it out."

*Every single one of us will only hold her back.*

"Cion..." I could hear the part she hadn't put into words, loud and clear—that was how close I'd gotten to this girl, I realized belatedly. And at the same time, she'd gotten way too attached to me. "I definitely can't let you go alone."

"Alicia..."

"You get it, don't you? You told me how mad Veiss got at you back when you killed the Demon Lord. I know how incredible your stealth abilities are, but it's still too risky."

Cion's skill might have been perfectly suited for assassinations, but there was no guarantee it'd always save her. Even just recently in the Holy City, I'd gotten past her defenses twice myself. When she'd been hiding out keeping watch by the saint's room, my demonification had let me see through her stealth. And when we'd fought while she was being controlled, I'd been able to punch her right in the face. In the past, her master's love had given her "divine protection" that had guarded her from sneak attacks; even when she'd lost the initiative, she'd been able to *slip out of her opponent's awareness* and get away. She'd made it this far thanks to that, but that protection was gone now.

"I know you're scared of losing me, but I'm just as scared of

losing *you*. You know how awful it feels to just sit and wait, don't you?"

The night I'd first met Cion, Veiss had gone off alone to attack a warwolf encampment, and she'd dashed out after him. I hadn't thought much of it at the time, but after coming back from a day of hunting demons, going right back out that same night to fight more definitely wasn't normal. She hadn't been after the bounty money—she'd just been worried about her master.

"I'm going with you, Cion." I gripped her wrist tightly and stared back at her, firming my resolve. "I'm the bride of the Hero now, and I'm not leaving you alone."

I wasn't saying anything wrong. I'd been sent out by the Church to get this girl under my thumb; to that end, I was working on getting close to her and manipulating her. I certainly wasn't going against the will of the Gods, and there were no grounds for anyone to find fault with my actions.

"Please, don't try to carry it all on your own."

The gentle smile I gave her was genuine and heartfelt—I could say that for certain. I wouldn't let Cion go alone. I wouldn't let the demons do as they pleased either. Even if things were hard for her on her own, the two of us together ought to be able to work it out.

But for some reason, there was a pain deep in my chest that just wouldn't go away.

"I understand that I'll be a hindrance to you, but—"

"*Alicia!*"

"Aah?!"

Cion suddenly wrapped her arms around me, and I let out an involuntary yelp—it really was completely unintentional.

"Ci...on...?"

She held me tight. Her hair tickled my cheek.

"Wh... What's the matter...?"

My mind was having trouble keeping up. My ears were filled with the pounding of my heart as it beat out a fast rhythm. I wasn't all that flustered by her hugging me, but I never would've expected her to do something this bold, and even if she'd been overcome by emotion, grabbing onto me like this was—

“Alicia, I... I was so happy...” Her voice was trembling as she whispered in my ear. “It made me happy seeing another girl like me, struggling with everything she had. Lots of stuff just feels hopeless, but seeing another girl fighting against this messed-up world made me want to fight harder too. I felt like I needed to keep going—like if I’m the Hero, then you’re the kind of person I need to protect...”

Her arms gripped me even tighter.

“Cion...?”

I tried to peel her off of me, but she wouldn’t let me go. She was squeezing me so tight I was starting to have trouble breathing.

“I’ll protect you. No matter what. I’ll never let anyone take you away.”

“C-Cion... It...”

*It hurts, just a little.*

I put a hand on her shoulder, as though I were chiding a boisterous younger sister. That was when it happened.

“So, I’m sorry.”

“Huh...?”

I felt Cion’s breath on my neck, and then a spreading heat.

*A bite. Someone bit me...? Cion?!*

“Ngh... Ah... Aaah?!” My thoughts couldn’t catch up to the pain, to the sensation. “Sh— Cio—!”

I tried desperately to struggle, but my fingers weren’t moving properly.

*My blood... My mana... She’s sucking them out???*



My vision swam. My legs shook. I was having trouble even breathing...

"I'm sorry, Alicia."

"Aah... Ah...?" I couldn't form words properly anymore.

I went limp in Cion's arms, and she laid me down in the grass.

"Just wait here. I'll be back by morning."

*W...ait...*

I tried to move my lips, but I couldn't push out enough breath to form a sound. My involuntarily twitching limbs, my uncooperative body, felt strange and heavy—as though they weren't mine at all. It was taking everything I had just to stay conscious.

*Cion...*

As I stared at her small figure receding into the distance, my vision started to blur with tears.

"Ngh..."

I was a fool. A complete and total fool. I'd gotten tamed by the girl I was supposed to tame; I'd tried to get close to her and let her get in close to me. I— If we'd been fighting for our lives, Cion would already have killed me.

"Idiot..."

That was the first word I said once my tongue finally managed to form syllables again.

"What an idiot..."

Thick, heavy clouds covered the sky, hiding the moon from view. Occasionally, a faint glow of light would shine through, only to vanish right away. The horses had decided that our lovers' quarrel wasn't their problem, and now they'd gone to sleep. It was silent all around me, without even the buzz of a single insect.

*What am I even doing?*

I'd spun elaborate excuses to justify ignoring my orders from on high. Using the Gods for my own benefit was supposed to be my *policy* or whatever, but I'd been the one getting dragged all over the place.

I knew what happened to children who got abandoned by the Gods. They ended up as pig feed, or as amusements living on some master's whim. When you reached out your hand for help, the only

ones who'd take it were sick perverts. There weren't any Gods out there. And because there weren't any, I'd spent my life working as hard as I could to make sure the Gods needed me, but...

"Why am I...?"

What did I think I was doing, trying to turn against them now?

My defeated heart was hopelessly frail and weak. Exhaustion kept on breeding regret.

*A woman can't be the Hero. We don't need champions who disobey the Church. Just obey the Gods' teachings; just carry out your duties.*

If I could just throw all of that garbage away, then my thoughts would be so much simpler. But trying to live a simple life was more complicated than it sounded—it meant setting yourself up for endless frustration and pain. The world was too complex for one person to change; whatever power structures controlled it, they were too sturdy for me to overthrow on my own. That was why I'd chosen to live my life clinging to the Gods, doing my best to obey them... So why was I out here now, all alone in the middle of nowhere, staring up at the night sky?

At some point, my tears had run dry. My body was still too heavy and sluggish to move. But my mind was strangely clear, and it wouldn't let me give up.

If I'd been able to stay ignorant, just an assassin eliminating my targets as the Gods commanded, then my life would've been so much easier. I'd just keep telling Glasses to drop dead, keep averting my eyes from the things I didn't want to see, keep staining my hands with blood, keep being needed, keep being protected...

But I'd met that girl, and I'd learned things I could never unlearn. Even in the midst of this absurd world—this world twisted and warped by the schemes of the powerful—I'd learned that there were people who kept on living, who kept on fighting back.

I'd spent so long turning my back on it all, letting it slip out of sight and out of mind, letting it be someone else's problem. So why had I stopped being able to shut my mouth and stand idly by?

I knew the answer. But I couldn't speak it aloud—not yet. I didn't have a good enough handle on my feelings. So...

"I'll lie to whoever I have to... I want to protect her!"

I shouted it out in the only words I might still be able to get away with saying before the Gods.

It didn't matter whether I was up against demons or stupid, inflexible archbishops. So what if my life was already stained with blood, so what if the people I'd murdered would curse and berate me for my hypocrisy, so what if I was just spouting pretty platitudes —*I didn't care.*

"I don't want to leave her to die!" I grunted out.

I tried to muster my strength to sit myself up, but with a groan, I fell right back over again.

Mana was essentially life force. I'd had it stolen away from me, so of course I couldn't move.

"Energy Drain... Was she repurposing Scarlet Brave?"

I'd been too confused in the moment to think it through, but it was probably something along those lines. Veiss took in demons' power by showering himself in their blood, and Cion had developed her own version of that skill while watching him fight. Unlike spells and orisons, skills couldn't be taught. Not even a skill's wielder could explain its operating principles logically; it was closer to muscle memory. Even if you managed to put together roughly how a skill worked and reproduce it yourself, it'd still be heavily colored by your personal experience and perception. You wouldn't have the same skill, just *something similar*.

"So that must've been her ace in the hole..."

For a mercenary, revealing your skills meant exposing your weaknesses. Skills weren't something you could pick up in a day, and they couldn't be reworked or fine-tuned either. Whenever you used those abilities, you were in a life-and-death battle; if anyone learned your secrets, they had to be eliminated.

"I guess that means she trusts me that much..."

She had a stealth ability that let her instantly slip outside an opponent's awareness, and an Energy Drain-type something or other that let her incapacitate targets with a touch. On top of that, she was an experienced sword fighter. Everything she'd picked up made her a perfect assassin...

“So why are you such a softy?”

She thought she could carry everything on her own shoulders, but she was just a crybaby who put on a brave front. That was exactly why I couldn’t leave her alone. If I let her be, she’d just keep on walking a path toward her own destruction.

I’d thought my eyes had run dry, but the tears came spilling out again. I was so utterly weak. Without the Gods, the Church, *someone* to protect me, I didn’t have what it took to survive or to fight. So...

“So please... Lend me strength!”

I called out to the heavens, gritting my teeth at the sound of approaching footsteps.

# Chapter 6

I'd never been all that good at talking to people, so I hadn't known what else to do. But that was the first time I'd hurt someone I wanted to protect.

I headed north with Spirit Mountain at my back, out to the halfway point between the woods and the mountains. There weren't any trees to hide behind, and all the plants were short and wilted.

I looked up at the moon.

"I really hope she'll forgive me..."

They had me surrounded. I could feel the bloodlust washing over me. I drew my sword.

"All right. I'm alone, just like you wanted."

I called out to them as the moonlight vanished, and they charged at me from the darkness.

"*Scarlet Brave...*"

I said it out loud as a reprimand to myself. The power I was about to wield was what I'd sucked out of Alicia.

"I'm sorry."

I let myself fade into the nature around me. I slipped outside of my attackers' senses, leaping from blind spot to blind spot as I stabbed my sword into anything that looked like a vital point.

I'd thought this might be a trap. That was part of why I'd left her behind.

I'd watched Alicia die twice already.

Death was something I knew better than most people. Out on the battlefield, I'd killed more demons than I could count. I'd lost more friends than I could count too. I knew exactly what it looked like when the flame of a life burned out—when that something inside a living creature, that thing I could only call a soul, faded away.

That was why I didn't want Alicia getting hurt anymore. The only reason she'd survived was thanks to a handful of coincidences and

miracles. She was only alive because Cardinal Salamanrius had known how to do the medical treatment she'd needed—a "trans-fusion"?—and because the Holy Saint had worked divine miracles that couldn't have happened anywhere other than the grand cathedral in the Holy City.

"So no more..."

I didn't want her walking into danger ever again. The battlefield was where I lived, and it wasn't where Alicia belonged.

*She must've wanted to protect me, though.*

I stabbed my sword in as deep as I could and twisted it to cut the thread of a life. One of them spotted me and tried to grab me. I kicked the arm away and jumped back into another blind spot.

Deeper. Deeper. I let my mind sink into the battle. I couldn't let myself get distracted out here—out on the knife-edge between life and death. This was the world of take or lose, kill or be killed. Letting my thoughts wander was just plain suicide.

But...

"I'm so selfish..."

I still remembered Alicia's face when she'd watched us kill those warwolf cubs. I couldn't get it out of my head. We hadn't been doing anything wrong—the Gods said demons were evil, and the Church even gave us reward money for bringing back their bodies. But Alicia had looked so sad and hurt.

"I mean, I get it. I ought to, anyway..."

But here I was again, fighting demons and showering myself in blood. I didn't have a heart that could feel for them the way she did. The guys I fought against weren't shaped like humans, so I didn't feel any pangs of conscience when I killed them.

I wasn't the kind of person who belonged at Alicia's side.

"Huh...?"

One of them swung down an axe at me. As I knocked it away and cut off his hand, I realized something was wrong. I was getting just a little out of breath. My forehead was sweaty, and more of the demons were starting to be able to see me...

*That's weird...*

Surprisingly—or predictably, maybe—the mana I'd sucked out of

Alicia was stronger than most people's. I'd felt like I had enough to keep fighting all night long.

*Did I screw up my pacing?*

I refocused my mind and tried to be more careful about when I activated my skills and how I came at my enemies, but it didn't help. It felt like my feet were getting covered in mud. My body kept getting heavier and heavier...

Something was definitely wrong here. I looked around to try and spot where the feeling was coming from. This wasn't an issue on my end—someone else was up to somethi—"Ng!"

I whipped around and kicked away a long, thin arm.

"Oh?"

A guy in a hooded robe let out a short impressed noise.

"It's you, isn't it?!"

I hadn't felt him touch me, but he was definitely using something like Master's "Scarlet Brave"—some sort of power that let him suck out people's mana or stamina.

"Too bad! Master taught me to watch out for stuff like this!"

He'd said there were really dangerous demons out there that could suck out people's souls just by touching them, so I had to be careful. Once I'd seen through the trick, I didn't have anything to worry about.

I slashed at the man in the robe, and my sword cut through his hood and exposed his head. Half of his face was covered in burns—he was the one who'd attacked us in the woods.

"I'll kill you!" I shouted.

This guy was bad news. He'd been after Alicia. I needed to take him out first.

I tried to close in on him while dodging other demons' attacks, but he was too good at running away. I was always one step too far, and my blade couldn't reach him. No, it was worse than that...

"What happened to the bride?" he asked. He reached out to catch my sword with his bare hands and smiled at me.

"You don't need to know!"

I kicked him away and charged after him, but—

"Dammit!"

—more demons got in my way, and I had to jump right back. I'd taken out plenty of them, but the crowd surrounding me wasn't getting any smaller.

"You left her behind to protect her, then?"

The demons rushed at me, not giving me a moment to catch my breath. While I fought them off, the man kept talking to me.

"How noble and moving, Sir Hero. And how foolish and pathetic you truly are."

"What do you mean?!"

The relaxed, elegant way he spoke really got on my nerves.

*My body feels hot, my heartbeat's too loud, and this sweat is annoying!*

"You've realized by now how little you truly know about her, haven't you?" he asked, standing there in the darkness. He talked like he really *did* know more than me about Alicia, and he had this mocking look in his eyes, and I—

"*Shut up!*"

I charged in with everything I had, and I took a wild swing to slice into his side. But—

"That girl is an assassin. She's been sent to kill you."

My strike should've cut him in two, but he reached out a hand to touch my cheek.

"You're not sure, are you?"

His mouth twisted into an evil smile like a crescent moon. He grabbed me by the throat and slammed me straight into the ground.

"Gah—!"

"Ah ha! Ah ha ha *ha ha ha ha*!"

A shadow sliced through the darkness and flew at me like a whip. I quickly raised my sword to block it, but—

"Agh?! Ow!"

I went flying like a rubber ball and rolled to a stop in the dirt. I could taste blood in my mouth. The edges of my vision were blurry. I tried to stand, but my legs were wobbly. I just barely forced myself up with my hands on my knees.

It wasn't like I'd never thought about it before. Ever since I'd turned down that offer from the royal court and headed back to the

front lines to keep collecting bounties, weird people had started coming after me. Master had warned me over and over to be careful. Alicia looked like nothing but a pretty girl, but she'd gotten in fights with plenty of people. She'd even held out against a whole gang of killers. So I'd be lying if I said I'd never wondered if she was one of those assassins too.

"But she's... Alicia's not..."

"She's not like them? How can you be so certain? She claims to be a bride of the Gods, and yet she's skilled not only in martial arts, but in spells of all kinds as well! And what's more, she wields some mysterious power to change herself into a *bestial form* like our own! How could you possibly trust a girl such as that?!"

He loudly proclaimed everything that was strange about Alicia—all the ways she was *just too talented* that I'd pretended not to notice all this time.

"If every mere bride of the Gods held such power, then our people would be long since extinct, would we not?"

I let out a hiss. Of course I knew. There was no way a regular nun would have combat skills like hers. Even thinking back to last night, no normal bride should've been able to heal that many people all at once. It just wasn't possible.

"She is an assassin with your life in her sights. The moment you've outlasted your usefulness, she'll slice off your head and stab a knife through your heart, just as the Gods command her."

*Shut up...*

"Shut up!!!"

I didn't want to let him talk any more. I didn't want to hear any more. I charged in at him and—

"Ah—"

—I screwed up. Right as I stepped in, an axe and a spear came at me from either side.

"Ngh! Ah!"

I dodged one and awkwardly parried the other—but I couldn't do anything about the attack that followed. The burned man punched me right where my guard was down, and I went flying and rolled through the dirt again.

The world was swaying left and right. My vision was cloudy. When I pressed my hands to the ground to get myself back up, my fingers were shaking. My breathing was quick and shallow, and my eyes just wouldn't focus...

"Such faith you hold in her. What do you suppose she *did to you* to instill it?"

*You're wrong...*

I tried to deny it, but I couldn't even speak anymore.

"Behold! *This* is the true form of the *divinely protected* Hero! The Gods the humans speak of are naught but lies! Do not be fooled by their trickery!"

I could feel the demons' morale getting stronger as the man riled them up. With beast-like battle cries, the monsters charged at me.

Panting and heaving with breath, I frantically tried to cut down their numbers as much as I could. Blood was blocking half my vision. I had too many blind spots. My footing was getting messier and messier. I was dodging fewer of their strikes and parrying more...

"I, right hand of our murdered Lord! I, Raven, the Black Bird of Revelation, command you! The time of our vengeance is nigh! Go forth, brave soldiers of the First, and deliver justice!"

The guy with the burned face was shouting about something or other. It was taking everything I had just to defend myself, and they were obviously backing me further and further into a corner, and my head wasn't working right, and...

"I bet Master's gonna be mad at me..."

*You've gotta know when to retreat. Always remember, they're stronger than us. There's no point in throwing your life...away...*

Now I finally understood why Master had wanted to keep me away from the battlefield. These monsters he'd spent his life fighting were just too powerful to face head-on. It was too reckless, too stupid...

"Good thing I didn't bring Alicia, huh...?" I mumbled to myself.

I was moving pretty much mindlessly, parrying claws and slashing back at them. When a huge tree trunk came ramming at me, I couldn't dodge it.

My mind went blank.

I slammed into a cliff face and fell to the ground. My head was hazy, but somehow I still had a grip on my sword—even I was surprised. My body knew what to do, and it kept on moving for me. But when I looked up at the solid wall of monstrous shadows in front of me, my thoughts went dull and slowed to a stop.

I didn't feel any fear. Whatever attachment to life I'd had, I'd probably left it behind the day my village got attacked by demons—the day everyone had died except for me.

The burned man was shouting something again. A bull-headed monster with a huge axe slowly walked over to me. Everything around me was covered in shadows. The moon was hidden behind the clouds, and the outlines of the world felt hazy.

I sighed. It just felt pointless and unsatisfying—life, death, all of it.

I'd been playing hide-and-seek when they attacked the village. They hadn't spotted me, but they'd chased around my aunt and uncle, my grandma and grandpa, like they were having fun hunting them. They'd killed them, they'd played with them... So I'd just kept the hide-and-seek going. I'd snuck up on the demons without them noticing, and I'd killed, and killed, and killed...

Before I knew it, I'd ended up all alone.

Master had picked up the smell of death and come out to the village. When he'd gotten there, he'd found me on my own, and he'd helped cremate everyone. He'd asked me, "If you don't feel like living anymore, how about I kill you?" or something like that—some question you're definitely not supposed to ask a kid who's just been through something horrible.

"Back then, if I'd said to kill me... Would you really have done it, Master...?"

My vision was blurry, and the huge shadow that appeared in front of me lined up with the one in my memory. The moonlight came back out, and the world got sharper. A giant warwolf covered in pitch-black fur was looking down at me.

"Oh..."

The huge sword slung across his back was the same as my memories...too...

"Master...?"

"If you wanna die that bad, how about I kill you?"

His voice wasn't familiar at all. It sounded like the low growl of a beast. But the way he talked was nothing *but* familiar. I wasn't sure why, but tears started...blurring...my vision...

"Is that you... Master...?"

The warwolf just stared down at me and didn't answer my question. But...

"Seriously, how damn long am I gonna need to keep wiping your ass for you?"

"Wha—?"

He gave the sword a huge swing while he bad-mouthed me.

"Well, I guess I can help a brat look after another brat."

I watched blood spray out above me and shower onto him as the bull-headed demon's huge body fell to the ground.

"*Masterrrr!*"

"Quit fucking crying, dammit."

He wasn't looking at me—he was focused on somewhere else, and my gaze naturally followed his...

"Huh...?"

There, past the wall of demons around the cliff face—there was a scuffle breaking out, and a white-haired girl in a nun's outfit was rampaging at the center of it.

"Ali...cia...?"

She was punching demons away and shouting something while she tried to make her way over here. Obviously, the demons were starting to fight back to try and pin her down, and she moved like she was running on pure frustration. She looked exhausted...

"Oh..."

I was the one who'd left her unable to move.

"She's gonna die at this rate."

I let out a grunt of frustration.

*You don't need to tell me. I get it. I know what I need to do.*

"If you were alive, you should've told me!" I shouted.

I gritted my teeth and forced myself back up with all the strength I had left, and I charged forward without waiting for an answer.

*It's your own damn fault for assuming I died.*

I felt like I heard a mocking voice from behind me.

Everything after that just didn't feel real at all.

The next thing I knew, Alicia was hugging me tight. Demon corpses were piled all around us—too many to count. Master stood with his back to us, looking up at the morning sun.



The guy with the burned face had disappeared when I wasn't looking. I'd just lost myself in the battle alongside Master. We'd sliced, killed, crushed—we'd survived.

I couldn't move a muscle anymore. I'd pushed myself past my limits, and I was so worn out I could barely think straight. But as I stared up at Master's unfamiliar shadow, I needed to tell him how I felt—how frustrated I'd been when I'd failed to protect him, how reckless I'd gotten when I'd wanted to protect Alicia. I needed to thank him. My tongue wasn't working right, and my words were all jumbled up. Even I couldn't understand what I was saying. But I just needed to tell him all of it.

"I... I was scared..."

I'd thought Master was dead, and I'd almost lost Alicia.

"I was so scared..."

I'd learned that I could only protect them by fighting. I'd found things that I needed strength to protect. But all this time, I'd still been terrified of losing them.

"What... What do I do, Master?"

I knew he wouldn't answer. He'd never opened up to me like that. He'd always been cold and distant. When I'd told him I wanted to be his apprentice, he'd shoved me onto the boss and run off who-knows-where. He was careless, he was irresponsible... But he'd always show up to save me.

"Was it scary for you too?"

*Were you afraid of losing me, just like I was afraid of losing Alicia...?*

I never would've even thought stuff like that normally, but now the words just came flowing out. Master's wolf face twisted into an uncomfortable scowl.

"If you're that damn scared, then throw away that sword and go hide in a hole somewhere."

"You're always so mean," I groaned with a bitter smile. "I fought really hard back there..."

Thinking back, I remembered how mad he'd been at me when I'd killed the Demon Lord. He must've been worried about me back then too.

*But you know what, Master? I was just trying to be like you.*

"It wouldn't kill you to tell me I did a good job once in a while, would it?"

"What are you, a little kid?"

Master looked like a wolfman now, but something in his smile was still the same as ever. He vanished into the morning light. The only ones left were me and Alicia.

Alicia was still clinging onto me. From the sound of her breathing, she was probably awake. I could tell she was really mad at me, though.

"Alicia?"

I gently patted her shoulder—no reaction.

"Alicia, we should start heading back. The boss is probably worried..."

I tried to peel her away, but she wouldn't let me. She just kept hugging me tight.

*Uhhh...*

"I... I was so worried about you..." Alicia's voice came from somewhere around my shoulder. "I *told you* you couldn't go alone. I *told you* it was dangerous. Are you an idiot? You're lucky we made it in time..." She shuddered. "You would've died back there. If we hadn't come, you would've been torn to shreds, Cion!"

"Yeah," I said with a grimace. "That's pretty scary."

I'd known guys who'd died that way. I didn't want to think about it much.

She gave a frustrated grunt and squeezed me even tighter.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm really sorry."

"*Apology not accepted.*"

If I told her she was cute when she got a little childish like that, she'd probably get even more mad at me.

"I'm so sorry..."

I gently hugged Alicia back.

I knew she was hiding things from me. After all, she was a bride—she was part of the Church. Of course there'd be stuff she couldn't tell an outsider like me. Plus, I'd just seen the way that archbishop had treated her, and how she couldn't talk back to him at all. Her

position in the Church was pretty shaky now that the cardinal with the glasses had gone missing. She'd told me the Holy Saint had taken her in, but I guess she still didn't have as much freedom as before.

"I'm sorry. I just wanted to protect you."

I knew I was only making excuses, but all I could do was keep apologizing. I felt a shove on my chest, and Alicia's wide-eyed, tearstained face pulled back in front of me.

"I *told you* I'm not just a bride for you to protect!" Her eyes were red and puffy, she was just as beat-up as me, and she was *really* mad. "I'm glad you care so much about me. I appreciate it. But—that time you got controlled, *I* was the one who saved you!"

She hadn't told me that before.

"Really...?"

She gave a sulky nod. I knew she was talking about the fight back in the Holy City, but I'd thought the saint must've used some sort of mystical power to free me.

"*I'm* the one who rescued you when you got seduced by an evil witch! *I'm* the one who shielded you from getting eaten by a big scary wolf! If I weren't protecting you, you'd be dead! Why can't you see that, Cion?!"

She didn't sound like she was joking. Alicia never joked about stuff like that, and I wouldn't have expected her to—even if she was an assassin out to kill me.

"I... I guess I'm hopeless on my own, huh?"

"You idiot..."

Alicia's head thudded softly into my chest. I wasn't really sure what to do—stroke her hair, or maybe give her a hug again?

"Actually... How'd you catch up to me, anyway?" I decided to ask the question that was bugging me the most. "I mean, I really did suck out almost all of your mana. Even if you just rested and recovered, I didn't think you'd be able to move again until morning."

That trick of using Scarlet Brave to drain mana was something I'd only figured out recently. It was a secret move that I'd never shown anyone, not even Master. It had worked as a surprise attack on Alicia, but I didn't think it'd be much help in actual combat. That guy

with the burned face had been able to do the same sort of thing just by getting close enough, but I couldn't suck out people's mana without touching them—not just them, but their *blood* specifically. I'd only managed to take out Alicia with it because her guard had been down.

"Alicia?"

I was confused why she wasn't answering. I asked again, and she finally spoke up reluctantly.

"A wolf... There was a wolf passing by, so I bit him."

I stared back at her. "Ah..."

I could picture it now, more or less. I didn't ask for details.

"Uh— No, I mean, I'm only saying that in a metaphorical sense," she quickly added. "He just shared some of his blood with me. Veiss saved me."

Master must've been worried about us all this time. If he found a girl all on her own in the middle of nowhere, too weak to move, there was no way he'd just walk on by. He wouldn't need to know what was going on—he'd do what he could to help.

"I keep trying not to be a burden, but it's harder than it sounds," I said with an awkward smile.

Master was long gone, but I thanked him for the umpteenth time this morning. I took Alicia's hand, and the two of us stood up. The morning sun was climbing higher overhead. We couldn't just hang around here forever—we needed to go let people know the job was done. Besides, I was still worried about the burned guy, and I didn't know where Master had gone either...

"Oh, right—why did Master look like a wolfman?"

I'd had too much on my mind to even wonder about it, but the question floated back up through my head and out of my mouth. I hadn't expected Alicia to actually know the answer, but for some reason, she stared at me with a weird look on her face, like she was swallowing down some words she'd been about to say.

"He... He said he'd eaten something that disagreed with him. Some sort of strange mushroom."

"Huh."

*Yeah, Master* does *get sloppy and careless about that sort of*

*stuff.*

Besides, Alicia grew dog ears and a tail sometimes too. Maybe things like that weren't even all that rare, and I'd just never heard about it before.

"Cion...?"

"Huh? Oh, it's nothing. Just thinking."

*Should I ask her?*

Was she actually here to keep tabs on me and then kill me? Was being a nun just a cover story? Was she part of something bigger, something scarier that she'd been hiding from me all along?

If I asked and she told me, what would I even do about it?

Even if she was here as an assassin, she'd still shown up to save me last night, and she'd protected me from that white wolf too. And at the end of the day, even if Alicia *did* try to kill me, I had a feeling I'd still trust her anyway. After all, I'd seen how kind and caring she was—that was the Alicia I knew.

"Hey, Alicia? Why do you always do so much for me?"

I knew it wasn't a fair question. She was a bride of the Church, and she had to do whatever the Gods told her. I'd just seen how little control she had over any of it.

"I mean, I know you've got your orders, but you don't need to go this far, do you?"

Even I had to admit I was a pretty selfish, stubborn, unruly Hero. I wasn't fighting for the sake of the world—not really. I just wanted money to help everyone back at the orphanage, and I'd only let the Church give me the title because it was useful to throw around.

"So, why?"

What did I even want her to say?

The Church was bigger and more complicated than I could imagine, and there had to be all sorts of stuff going on behind the scenes. So there'd be plenty of things she just couldn't tell me about, but I—

"Why are you so nice to me, Alicia?"

—I couldn't stand not asking. I felt like a kid desperately chasing after a mom about to abandon them. I was scared of losing Alicia, but I was just as scared of her leaving me.

"Cion, I— I'm, uh..." Alicia stumbled over her words. She was trying as hard as she could to keep her feelings off her face. "There...hasn't been much logic behind anything I've been doing lately."

*Yeah, you can say that again.*

I burst out laughing. I just couldn't keep it in.

"Wha—? Huh?" Alicia looked so adorable as her eyes went wide.

She was so beat-up and so beautiful. So slender and so strong.

I could never take my eyes off her.

"Hmm? Oh, I was just thinking how cute you are, Alicia."

"Wh-What?!"

She stared back at me in confusion, and I grabbed her hand and tugged her along as we left that hellscape behind us.

Even if this world was filthy beyond saving, I never wanted to let go of that hand. Even if these feelings had been planted in me, I wanted to trust the heart that felt them was real. Even if I was just playing my part in someone else's schemes...

These feelings were the one thing I never wanted to regret.

◇

When Cion and I got back to the encampment, it was completely deserted. The embers of hastily extinguished fires were still smoldering, and most of the mercenaries' supplies were still there—only the people were missing.

"Did they...?"

"Alicia! Look at this!"

I'd already started to put the pieces together by the time Cion brought over a note from the innkeeper. It read simply, "Heading to Spirit Mountain Temple."

The logical conclusion was that the demons Cion had wiped out had been a diversion, and the main body of the invading army had been moving separately.

"Now that I think of it, that lion wasn't there either..." I muttered.

The demons from last night hadn't been well organized by any stretch of the imagination. To put it charitably, they'd been

handpicked troops. To put it uncharitably, they'd been a motley gathering. They hadn't been working in coordination with the others; they'd felt like an impromptu force assembled for the sole purpose of killing Cion. That was precisely why Veiss and me joining the fray had been enough to drive them back. If that lion had been in charge, we wouldn't have been nearly so lucky.

"I'd been wanting to wash off and take a little rest, but I suppose that'll have to wait," I said with a strained smile.

Cion was already rechecking her equipment. "You can stay here if you're too tired. You didn't get much sleep the night before, right?"

"If you weren't going either, then I'd sleep here with you. But we can't afford that right now..."

One of us leaving the other behind wasn't an option anymore. If Cion tried to ditch me again, I'd chase after her even if I had to crawl on all fours. And if I tied up Cion and went ahead without her, I knew she'd chase after me as well.

"Frankly, there are still too many things that don't add up."

Glasses had gone missing, and the demon army had invaded. Cion had been called away, and they'd launched a surprise attack. This couldn't all have been the Golden Lion's plan. He was a hard guy to read, but he'd felt like a proud warrior. These sneaky plays were someone else's work.

"That man with the burned face was with the guys who attacked me last night," Cion said. "He called himself Raven, the Black Bird of something or other... He said he was the Demon Lord's right hand."

"Huh..."

The Demon Lord had wanted peace... And this guy had been his right hand?

"And he's the same 'devil' who attacked the capital," I muttered. "Devil" hadn't been a literal description, though—just a pejorative reference to him being devil-touched. "I didn't see him among the corpses, so he must have fled right away."

"That guy's bad news. When we fought, it felt like he was sucking out my power."

"Like Scarlet Brave, you mean?"

Cion shook her head. "It's probably the same type of skill, but I

still don’t totally get it.”

She explained that he hadn’t touched her, but she’d still felt her power draining away. Even while she’d been absorbing mana from the demons’ blood with Scarlet Brave, she’d been steadily losing strength. I’d seen similar sorts of things before—the saint could read people’s memories with a single touch, and then keep them continually under her control afterward. And fundamentally, unlike spells and orisons, skills just weren’t as constrained by logic in the first place.

“Did it seem like the demons around him were being affected as well?”

Cion tried to recall; she wasn’t all that sure, but she shook her head no. To be fair, demons’ mana capacity was on a completely different level from humans’, so getting a little drained might not have had much of an impact. Still, though...

“We’ll just have to pray that his ability doesn’t let him drain mana from everyone within range.”

Or worse, incapacitate anyone he was able to see, or something—I had to believe that a bullshit power like that just wasn’t possible, but he sounded like a really obnoxious opponent regardless. Worst case, I’d just have to rely on Cion to handle Mr. Right Arm.

Before I could say anything, Cion opened her mouth.

“Hey, Alicia?” she said slowly. “I know you’re trying not to put too much on me right now, but it’s okay. You don’t need to worry about me.”

She spoke without any of her usual stubbornness. There was something soft and gentle in her tone, and it felt like if I turned her down, she’d quietly back off. But—

“I trust you, Alicia.”

—Cion’s eyes shone with a strength I’d never seen before.

*Did something happen back there?*

For some reason, the words just wouldn’t come out. I knew she’d tell me the answer, but I had a strange feeling that as soon as I asked that question, there’d be no going back for the two of us.

I *had* come running to help her when she’d been cornered, but I hadn’t really contributed all that much; Veiss had done most of the

work. All I'd been able to do was target the demons attacking Cion and hamper their movements.

"The truth is, I hadn't been planning on coming back," she said. "Not after what I did to you. And I didn't want to keep putting you in danger either... But I realized something when I was about to die—I guess I love you even more than I thought, Alicia."

I stared at her.

"What?"

*Did... Did she just say what I think she said?*

Cion just kept on speaking nonchalantly, totally unconcerned with my reaction. "I'm not gonna be like Master. Sometimes he just tries too hard to act tough, y'know?"

"W-Wait a second—! Um, C-Cion? Did you, uh...?"

"Hmm?"

"Ummmm?!"

*Huh? Am I the one being weird about this? Have I been spending too much time around the Horny Slut? Is that pervert rubbing off on me?!*

"So, let me be there for you, Alicia. I'll lean on you when I need to, and I want you to lean on me too. I think things'll work out better for us that way."

Faced with her earnest, point-blank show of affection, my heart was pounding and my cheeks were flushed. Somehow, while I'd been dragging my feet worrying about the Gods and the Church, Cion had jumped ahead and slipped free of everything holding her back.

*That's not fair.*

I'd still been struggling to make up my mind, but when she held out her hand to me like that, I hardly had a choice anymore.

"Just so we're clear, Cion, we're up against a monster who attacked the capital and fought head-to-head with Veiss. Heavily injured as you are now—"

"It's okay, Alicia. I'm not leaving you alone."

I was still hesitating over whether to take her hand, but she kept standing there with a look of total calm.

It pissed me off, just a little.

I sighed. “All right. I give up. Please help me, Cion. Things are going to get rough from here on out—or rather, judging by the evidence, the situation is already dire. We’re going to charge in there, find whoever’s behind it all, and punch them in the face until they’ve learned their lesson. I don’t know whether it’s the archbishop or the Black Birdbrain of Whatever, but either way, we’re going to punch them good and hard.”

Honestly, if punching them were all we needed to do, I could probably handle that much on my own. The problem was what came after. Whoever we were beating up, they had both the tactical skill to plot out this scenario and the raw violence to make it into reality.

“I’m not asking you to protect me. That’s my job. But no matter what, don’t let the culprit get away.”

My thoughts went to the running battle from Arshelm to here, to the slaughter last night with Veiss and Cion, and to the clash that was likely already underway at the foot of Spirit Mountain. The scale of the death and destruction was immense—the damage was already irreparable. If I cast my gaze farther, out to the plains on the opposite side of the central mountain range, the casualties would be twice as large.

So we were going to put an end to this, here and now. Someone had to stop these idiots playing with fire, before the entire continent was engulfed in flame.

“The Gods are a bunch of lazy slackers, so it’s up to us to stop this war in their place.”

Whether or not that was what the Gods wanted...it was what *I* wanted, what I wished for.

“Doing the Gods’ work for them sure sounds like a job for a bride,” Cion said.

She had a knowing smile, but she was brushing a little too close to the truth; I couldn’t exactly laugh along.

“Hey, Cion. Once this is all over, let’s go to a hot spring together.”

So I decided to bully her a little.

“Huh?”

“There’s a little hot spring district near the orphanage where I grew up.”

The Snowell Orphanage was out in the cold northeast, so the hot springs were a local treasure. Even though we'd been right near the demons' territory, there'd been a constant stream of visitors coming out to relax and recuperate in the hot water.

"The whole place is probably in ruins thanks to the invasion, and the people will all have evacuated. So I'm going to take my time and clean every last inch of you." I smiled sweetly as I looked Cion over. She was covered in blood and dirt from top to bottom. "You'd better prepare yourself."

"You're scaring me a little..."

"Oh, you *should* be scared. After all, you really do *stink*."

I hadn't bothered her about it before—I'd assumed it was just a mercenary thing. In any case, we'd been spending all this time on long trips where the most we could do was wash off in lakes and streams, and Cion couldn't even do that much without risking her cover as a man. We could heat up water and wipe off with damp cloths, but things still got smelly.

"Besides, I've been wanting to try dressing you like a girl at least once. I'm sure the Gods will allow us that little bit of fun."

As I spoke, I realized that part of me was genuinely looking forward to it more than I'd expected. She needed room to spend some time off relaxing, not as the Hero Elcyon but just as Cion—as a regular girl. I wanted to give her that.

*Huh. It's all so simple, in the end.*

I felt like an idiot for wasting my time thinking around in circles, worrying about how I really felt and what to do about it. I just wanted to give this girl *a normal life*.

But first, we needed to do something about all the adults who wouldn't allow her that. It didn't matter whether they were humans or demons; it didn't matter what prophecies they delivered, what reprisals they demanded, what reasons they made up to act all high and mighty like they spoke for the entire world. We'd knock them out flat. We'd tell them we were fed up with their bullshit, and we'd stomp them into the ground. Not because that was the will of the Gods, but because I wanted to make this girl smile.

"Please lend me your strength, Cion. Not as the Hero, but as a

mercenary who I know and trust."

I didn't take Cion's hand. Instead, I held out my own.

As we stood there holding out our hands to each other, staring into each other's eyes, the whole thing started to feel a little silly.

"Should I kneel and pledge my service or something?" Cion joked.

I smiled back at her. "Very well. Make it so."

Her fingers were warm and soft as they touched mine.

# Chapter 7

The Spirit Mountain Temple complex was also known as the City of Trials, but now more than ever, it truly felt like a place that tested our faith and demanded sacrifice.

By the time we arrived, the walls had already fallen, and demons were pouring into the fortress city. The majority of the corpses were human, predictably enough; judging by the state of the battle, the mercenaries had arrived too late. The priests had holed up inside the inner temple as their final line of defense, but it wouldn't be long before the demon army breached it. The streets were filled with demons attacking the people who'd missed their chance to flee, and mercenaries trying to rescue them. Here and there, flames were beginning to spread.

"First things first!" I shouted to Cion over the chaos. "We need to track down the people in charge!"

If the goal of this attack was to free the prisoners, then the battle aboveground was meaningless. In order to put a stop to the fighting, we'd just have to pray that the Golden Lion wasn't already drunk with bloodlust—but I couldn't even spot the general anywhere nearby.

*If they're attacking here, does that mean he already knows about the underground research facility?*

"Cion! Let's—"

"Watch out!"

She grabbed my hand and yanked me back as a shadow went flying right in front of me. A sickening squelch rang out as flesh tore and bones shattered; what had been a priest moments ago turned into a lump of meat.

I turned to see a huge minotaur staring us down.

"Wait, please! We're—" I started.

But he was never going to listen to me. Dodging the minotaur as

he charged, I glanced at Cion—she was looking to me for guidance. Our negotiating position wasn't any better than it had been yesterday, but if we joined in the fighting now, any lingering hope of a truce would go up in smoke.

"Just please, keep it nonlethal, okay?"

"I'll do my best..." she gritted out.

The minotaur rampaged through the narrow alley we'd found ourselves in, smashing the stone walls of the surrounding houses. Cion leaped at him, but he was bigger and tougher than her to begin with; going easy on him wouldn't get her anywhere. I moved to join the fight as well, but our chances of taking him out *nonlethally* were looking abysmal.

"Ah?!"

With a yelp, I slipped in a puddle of the dead priest's blood and lost my footing.

"Alicia!"

I wasn't at all braced to defend myself as the minotaur swung down at me. Cion gave up on incapacitating him and charged at him with her sword out, but she wasn't going to make it in time. The shadow of a massive axe fell over my head—

"Graaah!"

—and a large, sweaty man leaped in to parry it, sending it crashing to the ground.

"Boss!"

At the last second, Cion twisted her hand to knock out the minotaur with the flat of her blade, then jumped down to land next to us.

With a large, beat-up broadsword in his hands, the innkeeper and former royal knight captain gave us an exasperated look.

"You two—" he started. "No, never mind. Found any leverage yet?"

"I can't say whether it will be enough to put a stop to this, but we at least know their destination."

"Then get going!"

A pair of feathered talons came clawing down at us; before Cion could react, the innkeeper caught them with the flat of his sword.

"I dunno how much longer we can hold out, but we'll save as many people as we can!"

Looking around, I saw a few mercenaries hidden in the shadows of buildings, guiding civilians and priests who hadn't gotten out in time.

"Put in a good word for us with the higher-ups when we're negotiating the reward money, okay?" he said with a grin.

"I swear it to the Gods!"

I'd been hesitant to abandon the people aboveground, but if he said to leave it to them, then I'd do just that. Old guys like him liked having youngsters turn to them for help. Besides, I'd stayed up all night healing everyone's wounds—nothing wrong with getting some work out of them in return.

Cion and I raced through the city, avoiding the fighting as best as we could. On our last visit, the streets had been decorated with demon corpses, but now they were dyed with the blood of humans and demons alike, a vivid testament to the two sides' mutual hatred. Even if an instinctive fear lay at the root of that conflict, things had only gotten this bad because of the Church's actions...

No—it didn't matter where it had started. All of this would have happened sooner or later at someone's hands, regardless. So this *wasn't Cion's fault*. It wasn't anyone's... Or maybe that stubborn insistence was just my own weakness talking.

"We're kicking the door down!" I shouted as we reached the end of the underground tunnel. The stone door was shut tight, but I boosted my strength to kick it open. We stepped inside to find the archbishop all on his own, running around between the test subjects lying on the altars.

"Excellency!" I called out.

He stopped in his tracks for a brief moment, but nothing more. Even as we stepped closer, he ignored us completely. He just kept racing frantically from one divine soldier to the next, injecting some sort of liquid into their bodies.

"Archbishop! Listen! The demons want—"

"They're after this place, aren't they?! I know that! The Gods told me of it as well! That's why there's no time to lose—I must awaken

the divine soldiers!”

His eyes were bloodshot, and my words were clearly falling on deaf ears.

“Listen, Your Excellency. The prophecy you gave us led the Hero directly into an ambush. He very nearly lost his life. Just *who* have you been receiving these messages from?”

I’d never believed in divine revelations to begin with. Someone was manipulating him to advance their own schemes. At first, I’d suspected it was one of the remaining members of the Seven High Cardinals. But if this temple at the foot of Spirit Mountain were to fall, the people’s faith in the Holy Church would decline as well. *The Gods have forsaken us*, they’d say. That would give the Church of the Hero more momentum too; none of the Holy Church higher-ups would want that to happen.

“Just stop and listen to me!” I shouted, grabbing him by the shoulders. “You’ve met a man with burns on his face, haven’t you? Has he been putting you up to this?”

Even then, I couldn’t see a trace of doubt in the archbishop’s expression. There was nothing there but absolute blind faith.

“I have heard the voices of the Gods! Now get out of my way!”

He roughly shoved me aside—but there was no hostility in it. He was just a pitiful believer, trusting in his *revelations from the Gods*.

“Fine, then just tell me—where are the demon prisoners of war?”

I got no answer.

“Aside from the prisoners you’ve used for these experiments, you still have the ones who were brought here from Arshelm somewhere, don’t you? The demons’ goal is to free their comrades! If we release the prisoners right now—”

“Alicia!”

I hadn’t even needed Cion’s warning. As the knife came flying at me, I blocked it with the cover of my bible and glared back at the archbishop.

“Their *comrades*?” he spat. “So *that’s* where your sympathies lie, Sister Snowell. The Gods weep to behold your treachery!”

“I’m saying that I don’t trust your so-called Gods! Are the Gods’ voices *really* what you’ve been hearing?! Are you *certain* those are

the voices of the Gods we serve?!”

The archbishop’s faith was utterly unwavering, though.

“Oh, you pitiful, faithless bride. The Gods have bestowed Their blessings upon you, and yet you dare to question Them! Such astounding arrogance!”

As he theatrically prayed, the divine soldiers behind him began to pulse; from the looks of it, they were already on the verge of awakening.

“Just forget it, Alicia. This is a waste of our time.”

“Wait,” I said urgently.

No matter how dire the circumstances, if the Hero brandished a sword at an archbishop of the Holy Church, there’d be serious consequences.

“Please, Your Excellency. Just tell me where the prisoners are.”

The archbishop didn’t say a word. He just glared at me, then turned back around to continue preparing the divine soldiers. As I watched him work, understanding dawned on me.

*All of the prisoners are already...*

“You *idiot*...”

“Nonsense,” he shot back. “There is only ever one path we need follow!”

Once the demons learned the truth, we were done for. All that awaited us was a brutal, blood-soaked *reprisal*. Maybe we were just reaping what we’d sown, but there were countless people up there who hadn’t been party to any of this; we couldn’t let them get swept up in the violence.

*But, wait. Even if he was just following his prophecies, he* did *send Cion out to intercept them—so was he trying to prevent the worst from happening? But then, why...?*

“Why didn’t you flee? You abandoned the people back in Arshelm, didn’t you?”

“The Gods... The Gods spoke to me. They told me that They would be with us!”

This was just getting pathetic. He wasn’t even sacrificing his life for his faith; it felt more like clinging desperately to faith was the only way he could maintain any vestige of sanity.

"There's no point in saying anything more..." I sighed.

I was already worried about the innkeeper and the others aboveground. At this point, all we could do was force our way—

"How long are you gonna keep hiding there like a coward, Mr. Right Hand?"

"Cion?"

She'd suddenly turned in a completely different direction and started speaking to thin air. The archbishop and I both followed her gaze, but I couldn't sense any sign of anyone there. She just kept on going, undeterred.

"What's wrong? Too scared to come out unless you've got your buddies to hide behind? I heard you were a raven, but I guess you're just a *chicken*, huh?"

Cion gave an uncharacteristically mocking laugh, almost as though she could see that hooded man with the burned face hiding right there.

"Cion, there's no way he's really here..."

"Yeah, it was just a shot in the dark. But, looks like I had the right idea after all." Cion casually drew her sword and turned around. "I'll at least give you credit for not attacking me from behind, Slaven Raven."

Her killing gaze stabbed through the empty space, and suddenly a man was standing there wreathed in black smoke. Beneath the hood of his dark red cloak, there were burn scars on his face.

"You *will not* mock the name my Lord bestowed upon me."

"Raven, right hand of the Demon Lord..."

While he'd been hiding, he'd managed to keep his murderous rage concealed, but now it poured off of him in waves as he faced off against us. The blood vessels in his forehead bulged with anger, and his sharp canines were bared at us; he had the otherworldly ferocity of a vengeful ghost.

"*You're* the one sneaking around," Cion shot back. "I wouldn't have needed to shit-talk you if you'd just come at us from the front."

"And *you've* grown far bolder than you were last night, haven't you, O pitiful Hero? It seems *you're* the cowardly dog that can't even bark without its friends beside it."

They were just exchanging words, but this standoff was a powder keg of lethal violence. Cion was acting calm and at ease, but sweat was beading on her forehead. As for me, my hand had already begun moving involuntarily to reach for my bible. That thing—that *devil* standing in front of us—filled me with a different sort of dread than I'd felt when I'd faced General Heavenfang. This wasn't some primal survival instinct. It was the sensation of gazing up at a being of my own species, but one unreachably high above me nevertheless—a bleak and terrible awe.

First the White Wolf, then the former Crimson Witch, and now this freak—there were just too many damn monsters out there.

As we squared off, the archbishop leaped forward before we could make a move.

"Ohhhh! Ohhh, almighty God! How blessed are we, that You should deign to appear before us here!" He knelt down in front of Raven and bowed his head reverently, trembling with joy. "O God! O great and merciful God! Please, I beseech You, guide these poor lost lambs back into the fold!"

*This is asinine.*

"Turn off the blind faith for one damn second! What part of *that* looks like a God to you?! He's *obviously* shady as all hell!"

Raven was dressed in a tacky tuxedo and a robe that somehow fluttered in a nonexistent breeze. He looked like an archdevil straight out of a ham-fisted morality play—the kind where little kids would boo the moment he showed up onstage.

"What are you saying?!" the archbishop shouted. "Do you not feel His presence?! His overwhelming power?! He is unmistakably a God!"

"You're a damn *priest*! Are you seriously just going along with this?!"

"Shut up! Shut your mouth, you stupid bride!"

He turned around and cast a barrier orison shining with brilliant light—a miracle of the Gods.

"*This* is where you start acting like a real archbishop?!" I groaned. "Listen to me, Your Excellency. That man is our enemy. He's been feeding you false prophecies and directing the demons to attack us.

He's a *bad guy*. Please, open your eyes!"

"Enough of your foolish prattle! His wisdom and His guidance are what brought me where I am today! Even if His revelations are false, He nevertheless wields power to equal the Gods Themselves!"

"That's *worse*! You understand that, don't you?!"

*We're about to have to fight it out with that guy, dammit. If* you're *on his side too, this is going to be an absolute nightmare.*

"This is your final warning!" I called out. "Is this *really* the hill you want to die on, you stupid bishop?! Think about your damn job!"

"Shut up, shut up, *shut up, you little whore*!"

"I suppose he must have cracked from sheer terror and lost his mind..."

That probably wasn't it, but I prayed to the Gods for it to be true.

"Ohhhh! O God! I shall do whatever You command of me!" the dumbass said, practically wagging his tail at the devil who'd attacked the Church—the enemy of the Gods. "I, Yosephon, shall pledge my eternal service to Youuuuu!"

"And I shall accept your obedience," Raven replied. "Come to my side."

"Yes, my God!"

*He's* not *your damn God, you idiot.*

To top it all off, the stupid bishop placed a kiss on the devil's extended right hand, gazing up at him with envious awe.

*Kissing the hand of the Demon Lord's right hand basically means you've kissed the Demon Lord's hand, doesn't it?*

"Forget it. Let's just beat up both of them, Cion."

"Yeah... Let's do it."

We glared across the barrier at them—but as they stood there, calm and composed, the gap in power between us and them was obvious. Idiot or not, Yosephon was an archbishop; if nothing else, his skill with orisons was probably better than mine. And judging by Cion's reaction, Raven was really bad news as well.

"If you will not come at us, then stand there and watch," Raven said. "I must reward those who fulfill their duty to me. What do you wish for, Bishop? Money? Power? Women? Whatever you desire, simply name it."

"My— My God! All I could ever wish is to serve You at Your side..."

"Very well. Then I shall grant you power suitable to serve me."

Raven calmly grabbed the archbishop's head. Without so much as a flinch, he buried his fingertips in the man's skull.

"Hghhhh?! Wh-What are You—?!"

"I am giving you your reward, just as promised."

As he spoke, the archbishop's veins bulged, and his body jolted and twitched.

"Aghaah— Hgawawawawa!"

"What'd I just tell you?!" I groaned angrily.

I had no idea what he was pumping into the archbishop, but Yosephon was frantically clawing at himself all over; he'd lost all control of his body.

"We're breaking through!" I shouted to Cion. "At this rate, he'll—"

That was when it happened.

"Ah— Ba?"

The archbishop swelled up like a balloon, then burst. Blood and viscera flew out all around him, soiling the miraculous barrier with scarlet.

"Wha..." Cion was left speechless.

As for me... In an instant, I realized exactly what had happened.

"This is why devil-touched are born among humans—why humans are weaker than demons..."

The barrier vanished, and the blood and guts that had stuck to it splattered to the ground.

"I see the *defective product* has kept up with her studies, at least," Raven said coldly.

"Who are you calling defective?!"

I willed myself to calm down. The archbishop had just been subjected to the same thing he'd been doing to all those captured demons—that was all it was. When a person's body received a large influx of mana, it had to find a place to store it. Some people, like me and Veil Croitzen, had a certain degree of physiological tolerance; and some people had demonic blood in their ancestry and were born as devil-touched. For anyone else, though, it quickly

became a lethal dose. Just like a balloon would pop if you filled it with too much air, a normal human's body would explode, unable to withstand the excess mana. That stupid bishop had just gotten unlucky.

*Or maybe the Gods abandoned him when he fell into the devil's thrall—who knows.*

"It seems you've lost a devoted follower," I said. "Too bad for you."

"Nonsense. I have no use for those who are unfit to serve me." He gazed around the room. "In any case, I have the materials for countless more pawns right here."

"I see," I gritted out. "So *that's* your philosophy, huh?"

I hadn't liked that archbishop in the slightest, and I'd even wished he'd drop dead—but after seeing him actually get killed right before my eyes, I naturally felt anger welling up inside me.

"In the name of the Gods, I'm going to kill you, Raven!"

I brandished my bible, but the devil just responded with a mocking laugh.

"You're certainly bold, if nothing else. Is that all part of the act, Miss Hero-Killing Assassin?"

For an instant, my shock spilled out in my demeanor. I quickly charged forward to cover it up, swinging my fist at him.

"It's all over your face, *bride*!"

Cion couldn't see my expression from where she was standing.

"You're certainly a smooth talker, aren't you?!" I shouted.

I absolutely couldn't let this man keep speaking. He clearly had information that I couldn't afford to let Cion find out. I strengthened myself with a skill, threw in a spell on top of that, and rushed in further to barrage him with blows. My bones broke with each hit, but I immediately healed them with orisons as I kept up the offensive...

"There's no need to worry, *washout*. That girl already knows all about it."

"Wha—?"

His words stopped me in my tracks.

"Idiot." He stabbed a hand toward my unguarded side—

*Cion...*knows*? About me...?*

"Ngh—!"

With my thoughts in chaos, Cion was the one who blocked the demon's strike. No—she *took it for me*.

"Cion!"

His sharpened fingertips slipped past Cion's raised sword and stabbed through her chest. She clutched at herself, coughing up blood as we jumped back to get some distance. Blood was gushing out of the wound and spilling to the ground.

"How truly pitiful you are, O Hero. You sacrifice yourself for the very assassin who plots your demise? You've already been thoroughly tamed, haven't you? Or brainwashed, even? *Conditioned* to offer yourself up to guard her?"

While the devil addressed us, calm and composed, I gathered up what little aether I could find and focused on healing Cion.

"I'm sorry! This is all my fault!" I said frantically. "If I'd been calmer—"

"It's... It's okay, Alicia..." Leaning on her sword like a crutch, Cion stepped away from me on shaky legs to square off against the devil once again. "I know...you can't go against what the Gods say..."

"How foolish. What can one even call that, if not hopeless naivete?" The devil stared down at us with a cold sneer. His eyes were empty of compassion, of any human sentiment.

"Of course you don't get it," Cion said, blood pooling at her feet. "A guy like you wouldn't understand... The Gods don't control the bonds we have with each other!"

Cion vanished. In the blink of an eye, she was right behind Raven.

*Silent Assassin.*

Cion's skill let her instantly move to her opponent's blind spot. I'd only gotten a handle on it these past few days, but as I'd watched her fight up close, I'd become certain. It wasn't some convenient magic trick. It was just a technique—a skill. Over the course of countless battles against enemies more powerful than her, she'd developed and refined it as a means of survival. She couldn't be seen, heard, smelled—her blade struck from outside the reach of all five senses, impossible to perceive, and it found her enemy's throat

without fail.

It was *supposed* to be without fail...

"You truly are a fool."

Raven's voice came from beside one of the so-called divine soldiers produced by the archbishop's twisted experiments. Cion's eyes widened as her sword swung through the empty space where Raven had just been standing... The devil touched his fingers to one of the monstrous bodies, and it wordlessly sprang up as though struck by lightning.

Something was wrong. I felt an awful sensation deep in my gut, and I tried to call out—

"*Cio—*"

—but my voice was drowned out by an explosive rush of noise.

"Huh...?"

I turned to see Cion's broken body splayed against a wall.

The monster's arm, as thick as a tree trunk, was extended in a punch, but...

"No, forget that..."

I hadn't been able to see it at all.

After fighting the White Wolf and the saint, I'd felt like I understood what demons were, more or less. They were vastly more powerful than humans, and their bodies were far sturdier, but they were still living creatures the same as us. They were still bound by the same laws of nature, I'd thought. I'd been naive.

"Marvelous..." Raven said with a satisfied nod.

He spread his arms wide, sending bolts of mana shooting out all around him. As the divine soldiers opened their eyes one after another, I finally understood what I needed to do.

"Cion— *Cion!*"

All I could do was pray. All I could do was use the miracles of the Gods to heal Cion's wounds and keep her life from slipping away.

"It's no use," Raven declared, his expression changing not a fraction. "*She's already dead.*"

*Screw that!*

I cast spells to heal her in parallel with my orisons. I needed to get her blood vessels reconnected, her bones reformed, her

heart...her heart—

"Do as you please, then. I shall return for you later. I still have a use for you."

"You—!" I shouted as I glared at his red, charred face. "What—What the hell are you?!"

I couldn't keep my thoughts straight. I was doing all I could. Healing Cion was my top priority. But at the same time, rage and hatred for this man were flooding through me.

"I am Raven—the man who shall be the Demon Lord."



The divine soldiers crashed up through the ceiling.

"Wait!"

Raven vanished amid the falling rubble.

As I continued healing Cion, I cast a defensive barrier around us and put my hands on her chest.

"I won't let you die... I swear I won't!"

I put all my weight onto my hands, forcing her heart into motion from the outside.

*I'm not letting them kill you. Not here, not like this!*

I kept praying, screaming, weaving new formulae, setting them running, clutching at her blood, her life, *Cion*—!

Prayer wasn't all-powerful—not by any stretch of the imagination. We said we were working "divine miracles," but it was all just a sham; all we were doing was performing techniques based on the application of established knowledge. Physical strengthening and healing through orisons, and magic and skills as well, were all just the manipulation of mana.

My medical knowledge was pretty shallow. I'd only studied the bare minimum. I'd learned as much as I needed to know to properly understand orisons, and I'd selectively picked up points that I could apply through magic—that was it. And in any case, her injuries were already beyond what surgery could help with. If that was all it had been, then I would've been able to make do with orisons. I could accelerate the body's natural healing process, regenerate lost organs, speed up the flow of...blood...?

"Oh..."

I saw a faint thread of possibility. I really *would* need to pray to the Gods to have any hope of pulling this off, but...

"I won't let them kill you."

Killing Cion—the Hero who'd vanquished the Demon Lord—was *my* job and no one else's.

"*Gods...*"

I prayed. I prayed to a nonexistent higher power, pleading for a miracle.

And then I took out my knife.

# Chapter 8

How anticlimactic. How truly pitiful it had been.

It would be a lie to say I'd expected nothing from them. If anything, I'd regarded the defective product with appropriate caution. One could never be too careful. And yet...

"Pathetic. Utterly pathetic. What a disappointment."

I stood before the temple in the throes of chaos, and I issued my command to my divine soldiers.

"Kill them all. Leave none alive."

Obedient to my orders, they began the slaughter. They would bring death equally to all, human and demon alike.

The archbishop had done well. The divine soldiers I had bidden he build me were truly well crafted.

Every human had some of the blood of demons flowing in their veins. Those who reawakened those latent traits through atavism became the misshapen beings known as *devil-touched*, wielding power in between that of humans and that of demons. What, then, would happen if a devil-touched obtained *even more mana*? What if a demon had *still more mana* injected into them?

These *divine soldiers* had unmistakably been elevated as close as possible to the level of our primal origin—the true form of our species that had been degraded through generation upon generation of interbreeding. If humans were merely a degenerate form of demons, then there had to be something further above, wielding all demonkind's power combined.

It had all been naught but a hypothesis. Once, I'd rejected it. Even afterward, I'd only half believed it. But when I'd looked upon the Demon Lord, when I'd touched him, I had *seen*. I'd seen that it was the truth. I'd seen that there truly was a monster with the power to rule over all the world.

I'd seen, and I'd envied him. If he wielded such incredible power,

then why...?

But our Lord abided even me to exist at his side—as though to show that such tolerance was merely befitting of his station.

And yet, somehow, our Lord departed ahead of us. Even with all his power, he left us behind.

"Raven!"

The temple plaza overflowed with blood and screams. Amid the havoc, a voice called out to me. I turned, but it was no one of any great import—merely that old general who had once led half our Lord's armies, the Golden Lion.

"Well, hello there, General. I'm pleased to see that your invasion has been successful."

"Enough pleasantries! What the hell are those things?! Are they your soldiers?! Stop them, now!"

The old lion's bawling cries grated on my ears.

"There's no need to get so out of sorts, General. Your men are handpicked elites. Surely even an *unfortunate misunderstanding* should pose them little difficulty—"

Would I finish speaking, or would he close in on me first? I'd predicted the latter, and just as I'd anticipated, he charged at me like a wild beast. His thick claws, adapted for the hunting of prey, stopped barely short of carving into my chest as they grabbed me by the collar.

"Make them stop! I'm not asking again!"

"Such arrogance... I said that I would be quite all right on my own, and yet *you* supplied me with troops, did you not? Surely the renowned Golden Lion would never stoop to stealing another's valor?"

His claws dug into my ribs, and red stains began to spread across my white shirt.

"If I kill you, will they stop?"

"Will *your* men stop if I kill *you*?"

This invasion had always been an outlet for his forces' aimless rage at our Lord's demise. I had *just happened* to be aware of the humans' experiments on prisoners of war, and thanks to that, matters had proceeded quite smoothly. Even the patient Golden Lion

could scarcely ignore the cries of his own men. It was all readily apparent in the actions of the fools who had marched thoughtlessly into the jaws of death, with just the slightest enticement from me as I'd presented them with a chance to *vanquish the Hero*. Their care for their comrades had led them to throw themselves into a war of vengeance—playing perfectly into my hands.

"To call such actions *virtuous* is a privilege reserved for the victors."

I stabbed my own fingers into the lion's chest, just as he had done to me. The faint pulse of his life sat in the palm of my hand, and I wielded *the Lord's power* to devour it.

"Y-You... Wh... What are you...?"

"Surely you didn't truly believe that a mere human vanquished our Lord, did you?"

"So it *was* you—!"

How utterly simpleminded. He wielded such strength, and yet his intellect was pitifully lacking—what a repulsive beast.

"I'm only joking. All right, Golden Kitty?"

Even among the humans, it was the sort of epithet only the royal knights might use, not the mercenaries. As I addressed him, a low growl escaped his throat, and his face twisted comically in rage. I continued speaking, perfectly undaunted.

"But I *would* like you out of the picture. I'm quite serious in that regard."

"*Raven!*"

"Oh?"

He swung his sharp claws at me, but I easily dodged them. All that was left before me was a frail, pathetic old soldier.

"This is your comeuppance. You always resented the *former human* who appeared out of nowhere and made himself indispensable to our Lord, did you not?"

I kicked him away, but even as he grimaced in pain, I saw no anger in his eyes—merely shock, and...

"You *pity* me, even now? Such is the privilege of the mighty..."

How truly, utterly repulsive.

"Listen to me, General. *I* am the one who put the White Wolf's

village to the torch. *I* am the one who leaked the location of his encampment to the human mercenaries. You had grown too powerful—the White Wolf alone, and the Golden Lion with his pack. The two wings of our Lord's armies moved under your command. And yet, you allowed that girl to slip past you... This is your punishment. In your foolishness, you feared to wield the power you held in your hands, and now the time has come for your penance. Do I make myself clear?"

"Raven... You still bear the name our Lord bestowed upon you, and yet... Why? You were our—"

"You understand nothing—nothing whatsoever. *That* is your true sin."

*Call me whatever words you will—your comrade, your family, your kin. However, if you truly believe that...then you must accept my wrath as well.*

But the Golden Lion merely furrowed his brow in total incomprehension.

"No matter," I said. "Old soldiers are meant to depart with the dawning of a new age—that is what history teaches us."



Feeding mana into a human would turn them into a devil-touched. What of the reverse, then? What would the result be of draining mana out of a demon?

I focused my power into my fingertips, transforming my own hand, my arm, into that of a lion. I'd heard tell that in distant lands, lions were revered as kings among beasts—worshipped, even.

Casting my gaze around, I saw the demons locked in battle with my divine soldiers. They were fighting well despite being a force comprising countless subspecies intermingled—a testament to the skill of the general who had united them under his banner. But that ended now.

"Make your atonement to our Lord in the hereafter."

*Marvel in the sharpness of your own claws, and die.*

I had meant every word of it, and I'd intended to slice off his head then and there. But...

"I killed you, did I not?"

A slender sword blocked my strike.

"What business does the Hero have defending a demon?" I asked.

"Hero or not... That's what I'm doing!"

The girl was visibly exhausted, but she knocked back my arm with all her might, and she advanced further to slash at me again and again. There was no weight to her blows...but her speed alone was unmatched.

"How are you alive? What are you doing here?"

She'd been thoroughly shaken last night. What had changed in her?

Behind her, I saw the defective product run to the Golden Lion's side.

*Did* she *do something? Did she steal the Witch's power in the Holy City?*

"*Saved*, were you? By the assassin with your life in her sights?"

"Shut up!"

The Hero's sword swung at me—that cursed blade that severed our Lord's head.

*The curse must be broken, here and now.*

“Your feelings are nothing but foolishness, and your resolve as well. You lack even the will to defend our world.”

She growled back at me as she struck.

The defective product was attempting to heal the Golden Lion, but I had already collected all the aether in the area to fuel my divine soldiers. Demons’ regenerative abilities relied on their vast reserves of mana. No matter what the girl did now, she’d have no hope of getting the old lion back on his feet. Meanwhile, the divine soldiers continued their offensive undaunted, and the tides of battle remained unshakably in their favor. And thus, I focused my efforts on the Hero.

“You killed our Lord, yet now you defend a demon? Where are your principles?” I demanded. “I am a human just like you. I was sold into slavery, I was debased as a devil-touched, and I wielded my power for the sake of survival—just as you did. What difference is there between us?”

I gradually narrowed my awareness to the Hero alone. She was a mere girl, and yet she was also the assassin who had made her way unaided to our Lord and delivered a killing blow. And the man who had trained her was none other than that vile *champion*. My hatred was outweighed only by my caution. I was more than prepared.

“What are you, then, if not the Hero? Just a bloodthirsty murderer?”

I parried her sword and kicked at her stomach. She was light—astoundingly so. And far weaker, far frailer, than she appeared. It was almost shocking how fragile a daughter of man could be—how easily broken.

“Have you no answer? You live your life upon the battlefield, you brandish your sword, and yet you can say nothing of what justice you serve? Then you truly are—”

“Shut up!”

Despite the injuries covering her body, the girl stood back up, her sword in one hand. She spat out blood as she faced me. Her condition was visibly dire.

“Whatever Alicia wants to protect, that’s what I’m protecting!”

She was trembling as she spoke. It was clear that with just one

more solid blow, she would never rise again. Her voice, her will, all of her, was nothing but a candle in the wind.

"Foolish..."

The white-haired failure was staring at us. Her scarlet-tinged eyes were the same shade as *his*—and whether she realized it or not, they were utterly *bewitching*.

"It must be quite pleasant to avert your gaze from reality, cling to blind faith, and speak in dreams and platitudes. But if that is all you have, then you can protect nothing. You can save nothing..."

Just as I spoke, a war horn rang out in the distance. The mercenaries and the demons all turned at once to the direction of the call, beyond the fortress walls.

*Reinforcements, or attackers?*

I posed myself the question for a fraction of an instant, but my long-honed battle instincts told me exactly which side the incoming forces belonged to.

A brief stillness spread across the chaotic battlefield... Then, the divine soldiers tore it asunder. Neither the demons nor the mercenaries could turn their attention away from the rampaging monsters. The end was near. Demon or human, I would let none leave this place alive.

"Hero Elcyon, slayer of the Demon Lord," I said, gazing into her eyes with feigned calm. "If you say you will protect them, then go ahead and do so. If you *can*, that is..."

With a frenzied cry, the incoming forces poured into the plaza. They had come to settle their grudges and repay the humiliation they had suffered. A vaguely familiar *former royal knight captain* let out a pained shout of alarm as he took in the sight.

"*Devil-touched!*"

◇

A war horn sounded in the distance, and I turned to the fortress walls.

Cion and Raven were locked in a head-to-head confrontation as they glared at one another. Neither the Golden Lion nor the

innkeeper looked like they were expecting reinforcements. Things were visibly getting worse by the second, but with the divine soldiers rampaging around, everyone was already stretched to their limits. As the incoming fighters flooded into the temple plaza, the innkeeper let out a shout.

"*Devil-touched!*"

The sudden new wave of assailants charged straight in, attacking humans and demons alike. They carried mismatched equipment, their tactics were chaotic and disorganized...and every single one had *inhuman features* somewhere on their body. Judging by Raven's demeanor, he was clearly the one who'd set this up.

"Gods' sakes... None of this is my job, dammit!"

I gave up on healing the lion and went to stand at Cion's side. Raven gazed smugly down at us, narrowing his eyes.

"You're welcome to flee, should you wish to."

"Like hell we will!" Cion shouted back.

The local aether was already too thin to be much use, though. And after I'd forcibly resurrected Cion, my personal mana reserves were also starting to bottom out.

"Please, we need a truce!" I shouted out to the mercenaries at the top of my lungs. "We have to fight together if we want to survive!"

But I didn't get much of a response. They already had their hands full with the monsters right in front of them; of course they didn't have time to lend an ear to a bride of the Holy Church. Still, I had to keep trying.

"Demons, you as well! Please!"

The battle had already been going badly, and this chaotic free-for-all could only end in total annihilation. But the Golden Lion just shook his head. It wasn't from stubbornness—I could see the pained frustration on his face.

"Why...?" I started, but the answer was obvious.

The automated soldiers kept on rampaging, driven by the excess mana that had been forced into their remodeled bodies. Those monsters had been produced by human hands. But originally, they'd been demons.

No one knew the truth of what had happened. And because they didn't know, they instinctively pinned the blame on their opponents: *We could settle this peacefully if* you'd *just back off, so why won't you?*

As frustrating as it was to admit, the supersoldiers Raven had designed really were incredible. At this rate, we were all done for—but even knowing that, we still couldn't manage to work together.

"Do you idiots all want to die?!"

As I shouted, Raven struck from my blind spot, but Cion was there to defend me.

"Do *you*?" he replied.

"Alicia, get them together!" Cion called out to me in a strained voice.

She pushed back Raven and lunged after him, beginning the steps of a familiar dance of death—sticking her own neck into danger again and again as she closed in to strike.

"General Felida Ba!" I called out, dredging up a faint memory of the Golden Lion's name.

As far as the demons were concerned, we humans were just lower life-forms unworthy of their notice. But despite that, we treated them as monsters, and we'd even assassinated their ruler. Where the hell did we get off asking for an alliance *now*? Even I had to admit it was a ludicrous demand, but *that didn't matter*!

"There are things more important than the lives that have already been lost, aren't there?!"

The past was the foundation that all of us stood on. None of it could be erased or discarded so easily. Not our hatred, not our grudges, not our vendettas...and not our sins. There were moments when we needed to hold tightly to those memories in order to keep moving forward. But *this wasn't the time*!

"Don't you understand?! Martyrdom is for *idiots*!"

The lion's eyes fixed themselves on mine. It wasn't the gaze of a beast—they were the wise, knowing eyes of a *person*.

"We've all spent long years killing one another up till today. Even if we've got a common enemy now, trusting each other with our backs isn't nearly that easy."

As I listened, I found a thread of hope in his words.

"Boss!" I called out.

"Listen up, you bunch of drunks!" he shouted.

He'd picked up my meaning without me even having to say it. He'd been a royal knight captain once, after all. He didn't think for a second that humans could win in a frontal assault against demons, and he must have always had the thought of compromise somewhere in the back of his mind. Before I could even explain my plan, the order had gone out to the mercenaries—and they also had what it took to survive.

"Do as our goddess commands!"

"Stay alive, boys! If we're gonna die, may as well do it now!"

"Even if you get hurt, she's not gonna let you cop a feel!"

"Ain't even anything there to cop!"

I couldn't help feeling like they were taking things in entirely the wrong direction, but *regardless*, they dispersed and leaped out in front of the demons.

"Don't take the hits head-on! Just parry and dodge!" the innkeeper called. "Make an opening, and *they'll* handle the rest!"

Cries of "Yes, sir!" rang out in response, and the mercenaries began defending the demons. Humans didn't have the strength to land decisive blows in this fight; the best thing for them to do was to serve as shields and decoys, carving open a path for the more powerful killers. They turned their backs to the demons without so much as a glance, facing off against the divine soldiers.

The demons reacted with surprise, but only for a brief moment.

"Remember your pride as warriors, men!"

With the Golden Lion's call, the shift in the tides of battle became unstoppable.

"We'll give you a nice clean opening!" a mercenary called out.

"If you still can't finish the job, then I guess those claws are just for show, huh?!" another taunted.

They provoked and riled up the demons, and the demons wielded force as their answer.

"Your help ain't nothing, you hear?!"

A minotaur swung his greatsword to lop off a divine soldier's arm,

and a demon with bird wings dove in to kick it right in the head. It was hard to believe this was an impromptu alliance; all I could do was marvel at the coordination on display.

"We've all lived our lives on the battlefield," the Golden Lion said, slowly standing up. "Once we get on the same beat, our bodies know what to do." He gazed over at Cion and Raven, his eyes wavering. "I'm just sorry I can't join the fight myself..."

"As long as you'll help take the blame once this is all over, I would ask nothing more," I replied, watching over Cion and Raven's battle alongside him. "You aren't the only one unable to join in..."

My hand tightened its grip on my bible as I stifled the urge to leap in myself.

The lion turned to stare at me with a strange reverence.

"My, how you've grown..."

"Pardon?" I had no idea what he meant, and I wasn't sure how to respond. "Have we met somewhere before?"

"No, never mind. Just thinking to myself." He turned his gaze back to Cion. "So, do we have a chance?"

"If I said no, would you give up?"

"We're warriors. We keep fighting to the bitter end."

"Then that's all I can say."

I gathered and took in what little aether I could find, but there still wasn't nearly enough. My orisons wouldn't be of any use like this, and I didn't have the mana left for spellcasting either. Mercenaries were used to fighting with nothing but their skills, but honestly, it was taking everything I had just to keep standing. If I jumped in right now, it was obvious that all I'd do was get in her way—but if I just left Cion to handle this alone, she'd be overcome sooner or later.

*How...? How the hell do I...? Cion!*

In the face of an unbridgeable divide in strength, all the feelings in my heart were utterly powerless.

◆

Master always told me that every single one of their attacks was

a killing blow. Humans would never be a match for demons. We just weren't built the same. They could crush boulders with their bare hands, and their bodies were as tough as tree trunks. You couldn't beat them with half-assed attacks, and you couldn't face them with half-assed resolve—you'd just be asking to get yourself killed. There was no escaping the truth: We were humans, and they were monsters. If you wanted to overcome that gap, you needed the precision to dodge and parry all their attacks and hit them right in the vitals.

*Never go in from the front. Get into their blind spots and keep 'em pissed off.*

All those lessons were drilled deep into me. No matter how lightheaded or distracted I got, my body reacted on its own and moved the way I needed it to. I didn't need the strength to crush boulders. I just needed one hit. One guaranteed killing blow...

I twisted around to dodge Raven's claws as they came at my neck. I tried to counter with a slash of my sword, but I sensed danger right away and went rolling across the ground.

This devil was powerful. The white warwolf had just been *strong*, and he'd been too much to handle in his own way. But this guy knew how to *mess with me*. He did it with his pacing, his movements, and his *words*.

"How unseemly. Is *this* how a Hero fights?"

"Do *you* change how you fight when you get a new title?"

"I would at least uphold the proper decorum of my station."

"Damn, really? Guess I'd better go all out, then!"

I dodged another swipe of his claws and stabbed right back with my sword.

There was no point having a conversation with him. If I lost my focus for even a second, I'd be done for. But I still needed to keep slinging words to distract him any way I could.

"You're getting desperate. Is that girl truly so precious to you?"

"That's none of your damn business!"

"*That* is why I say that you are a fool."

"Wha—?!"

His arm did a weird loop around me, and my body went flying. As

I landed cleanly on the temple wall, I realized he'd used the speed of my own charge to throw me.

"We have a duty to honor those whose lives have been lost," he whispered right in my ear.

My body reacted faster than my mind. I slashed out to the side, and before I even sensed he'd dodged me, I jumped away from the wall.

"You have taken the lives of others for the sake of your orphanage, for the sake of money—for the sake of your own survival. Am I wrong?"

I let out a hiss as his fist swung past me. It crashed through the temple wall, sending cracks in every direction.

"Every sacrifice exists for the sake of the future," he said.

I threw a knife to hold him back as he tried to come after me.

"You're saying this massacre is for the future?!" I gritted out desperately.

I'd been hoping for just a moment to catch my breath. But for some reason, my words stopped Raven in his tracks. The devil stared straight back at me with a cold, dead face like a frozen mask.

"Indeed. This is a sacrifice for the sake of the world."

There wasn't any trace of humanity left in those eyes. But his words still had emotion in there somewhere. They felt like a cry of grief.

"What're you talking about?"

"It matters not whether you understand. You shall die here."

The devil closed in on me. His attacks kept getting faster. My arms and legs were going numb—my body was close to its limit.

I looked for Alicia, but...

"Still..." *—healing that leonin.*

Even if this fight was too tough for me on my own, if I fought together with Alicia, we might be able to take Raven down. I just needed to keep buying time. If Alicia could get the leonin to come around, that'd mean the end of the war. So— "If..." I grunted through the pain. "If you hate me for killing the Demon Lord, then just say so!"

"*Do not equate me with you lowly creatures!*"

"Wha—?!"

I hadn't expected him to get that mad. The devil caught the blade of my sword straight on with his beast paw, and he glared at me with fire in his eyes.

"I do not take the lives of others for hatred, for vengeance, for *base self-interest*!" His paw was sliced open, blood dripping down, but his grip on my sword only got stronger. "A filthy murderer is all you are—all you've ever been."

I felt a warning jolt through my spine, and I let go of my sword and leaped back from him. An instant later, something smashed into the spot where I'd just been standing.

"You must die here and now. I must put an end to you..."

He crushed my sword. The blade shattered to pieces and fell away. His long, thin tail swayed around, and he floated in the air on a huge pair of wings. He looked like a devil straight out of the bible.

"You do not even *know* your own sins, let alone acknowledge them. You lose yourself in dreams as you set the world athwart. But I am not utterly devoid of sympathy. In light of your misfortune, I shall reveal the truth to you." The devil's eyes slid over to Alicia. "That girl you seek to protect bears the lineage of our origin, the blood of the First."

"What's that supposed to mean...?"

I didn't understand what he was saying. But I could definitely feel something nasty echoing in his voice.

"*That defective product is our Lord's orphaned child.*"

The moment I heard those words, my thoughts stopped in their tracks. The scenery around me faded away, replaced with my memories of the Demon Lord's castle when I'd snuck in a year ago...

"You wish to fight for her, yet you took her father's head."

A chill ran down my spine.

"Can you still say that she cares for you? Can you still say that you will protect her?"

I looked behind me. Alicia was standing there frozen. Her face was filled with sick shock...



"*You* buried our future—a future where these countless years of conflict could have finally come to an end."

The devil told me everything. He told me how the Demon Lord had wanted peace. He told me how the Church had been prepared for it.

"Everything was proceeding smoothly. All this violence, all these clashes over faith, all would have been resolved in a matter of time, and we would be able to step forward into a new tomorrow. That was how it *should have been*."

He told me my sins. He told me my failure.

"It all would have been over, if not for your meddling."

"You're lying!" I frantically shouted back at him.

But his words didn't sound like they were just made up to throw me off. I could hear the feelings he was straining to keep down. There was real, heartfelt grief and mourning in his voice.

"However much the extremists among the Seven High Cardinals called for the Hero's assassination, the moderate faction would always have been there to oppose them. But that bride was dispatched to your side because there were those among humanity who knew the truth as well. They knew, and they despised you for it. Hero Elcyon... You have misused your power."

Maybe I never should've listened to the devil in the first place. Master always told me I shouldn't pay any attention to what demons tried to say. But this man, this devil, was—

"Human..."

Human malice like I'd never felt before was taking shape around him and rushing out over me.

"Tell me, O pitiful lost lamb. What did our Lord say to you?"

"No..."

My chest felt tight. I didn't want to remember. But the devil's words slid right into me anyway.

"Did our Lord not make an appeal to you—a call for peace?"

I let out a hiss.

"You need not answer. It's plain to see upon your face."

"No, you're wrong! I—!"

*Demons are the enemy! Their words are poison! I need money to*

*support everyone, so I need to kill them—*

"*You are no Hero*," he said again. "You are nothing but a self-serving assassin, blinded by greed, who doomed the world to ruin."

Thick gray clouds were blocking out the sky. When I looked up at him, I saw the wings of a destroying angel coming down from heaven to deliver judgment. All around me, familiar faces were being trampled by monsters or stabbed by the mob of devil-touched. I'd seen them laugh and joke around bonfires, but now they sank into pools of blood, face after face after face twisted in a pain I never could've imagined back then. I knew them all—they were the mercenaries of Arshelm.

"All of this is your fault. *You* killed them."

*I killed the Demon Lord, I killed my friends, I killed...*

"Alicia...?"

Alicia was staring at me.

Those were the words of a devil. There was no reason to trust any of it. That was what I wanted to say. That was what I *knew*. But the scenery from that day came flashing back through my mind.

I'd snuck into that ancient castle all on my own, I'd seen the terrifying monster waiting there alone for me, and I'd—

"Ngh..."

No. No, I—! It had been shaped like a human. It *had*. But on the inside, it had been a monster. I'd known just from looking. I'd known it didn't belong to the same world as us. I'd known it saw humans the way we saw cattle—no, the way we saw insects. We'd been nothing but insects compared to that thing, that monster, and—

"In his role as ruler over demons of every kind, our Lord always adopted human form. That was no ploy to catch you off your guard. Surely you understood just how stark the divide in power was between you and him—how clearly he had no need for such trickery?"

"No— I—!"

*I needed to survive! I...had no choice...?*

"So long as you have realized your sins, no more need be said."

"Ah—"

I couldn't find the strength to argue back. All around, everyone

was fighting desperately. They were trusting their backs to demons who'd been their enemies. They were banding together to survive—to protect their wounded comrades.

"Ali...cia...?"

I was scared. I was terrified she'd reject me. But if Alicia—if the person I wanted to defend—could still have told me I was right, then it would've been okay. Even if she'd just given me excuses—said it was all a mistake, I hadn't known any better—that would've been enough. As long as she'd still been on my side, I could've kept on fighting.

But...

I looked back, and my breath caught in my throat. I could see the pain on her face. I could feel how bad she was hurting.

"Regretting your choices?"

That's why I was too slow to react.

"Rest in peace, O pitiful lamb."

The pain felt like a punishment straight from the Gods.

◇

*Cion's getting tortured to death.*

I could see it happening right in front of me, but despite it all, my body utterly refused to move. I needed to go save her right this instant. I needed to go punch that devil in the face, kick him to a pulp, and shut him up for good. I understood all of that, but my thoughts couldn't keep up.

*I'm...the Demon Lord's...? Cion did what...? No, let's forget my parentage for the moment—the truth about Cion's actions isn't anything I didn't already know.*

The Demon Lord had wanted peace. Cion had assassinated him. Those were the facts. But none of the things that had followed, from the Hero assassination plot to the White Wolf's attack to the current invasion, had been Cion's design. If anything, those had all been the work of people trying to *use* her actions as justification.

*It isn't Cion's fault.*

"It isn't Cion's fault!"

I repeated it to myself, and I tightened my grip on my bible.

My legs sprang into motion.

I focused my internal mana on healing, and I tried to gather up every bit of aether in the air as I cast an orison to create a barrier between Cion and Raven—

"You look terrible. You ought to take a rest right this minute."

"Huh?"

I only caught a vague sense of motion; I couldn't see him coming at all. I stared at Raven's face in a daze as he appeared right in front of me—

"Gah—!"

—and he landed a hit straight to my stomach, knocking all the air out of my lungs.

"Alishia!" Cion slurred out, covered in blood.

She jumped in to defend me, swinging a short sword, but Raven easily dodged back away from her, humming cheerfully to himself.

"There's no cause for surprise. You'd already realized how different you were from other humans, hadn't you?" The devil spoke calmly, but he was clearly laughing at me on the inside. "Or did you truly believe that you were a blessed bride granted talent by the Gods?"

The words rolled off his tongue one after another, and he fixed a sticky, leering gaze on me.

"I've never thought that even once!" I gritted out.

I'd studied and analyzed orisons and I'd picked up skills, all to supplement my weak body and my lacking brain—all for the sake of survival. I'd needed that power just to keep on living.

"Me, the Demon Lord's daughter? That's absolutely ridiculous. I'm a human being. I'm nothing like *them*!"

I argued back, but I already understood that my reasoning was off the mark. After all—

"Humans are merely a degenerate form of demons—you've realized that much, haven't you?" the devil responded matter-of-factly. "You are a *defective product*. You carry the blood of the First, yet you failed to awaken to its power. That is why you were cast out, and why you were able to blend in among the world of humankind."

I couldn't say it didn't ring any bells. The devil smiled as he pointed out the answers to my half-formed thoughts and hypotheses.

"That was our Lord's mercy—the salvation he granted you."

*All of it was the Demon Lord's will*, the devil proclaimed. And it was probably all true. Why had just a blood transfusion from the White Wolf given me the symptoms of a devil-touched? Why was my mana capacity higher than other people's? Why had I *miraculously* made it back from the brink of death time after time, with no lingering injuries, and survived to stand here today? If I was a *former demon* like the saint, then it all started to make some degree of sense. But that would mean becoming an "enemy" in the eyes of the Church—I couldn't accept that past, not while I was living under their protection.

The saint had been a demon once as well; if she could live as a human, then I wanted to do just the same. For now, I wanted to hold on to my life as a bride of the Gods, so I was averting my eyes from reality.

"Our Lord was murdered by this *miscreant*," the devil said, glaring at Cion. For the first time, he was letting undisguised anger show through. "If the blood of our great Lord truly flows in your veins, then *fulfill your duty*."

The first to react to those words wasn't me, but Cion. Her back was to me, but I saw a faint tremble in her shoulders, and I could tell she was fighting the urge to turn around.

"I'm..." *—a bride of the Gods, an inquisitor, an enforcer, a murderer—*

"—the Hero-Killing Bride. Aren't you?"

I could feel my blood run cold as the devil whispered.

"No, I—"

Maybe that frantic denial was just a self-defense instinct. I'd spent all this time putting up a front around Cion, and I'd built up a habit of dodging and deflecting whenever the truth was about to come out.

*In the name of the Gods, the Hero must die.* Those were the divine orders I'd been given originally. That was the biggest reason

I'd approached Cion.

I wanted to deny the devil's words. A counterargument—or just an excuse—was on the tip of my tongue. But—

"Cion...?"

Cion's reaction was much smaller, much softer than I'd expected. Just a smile, gentle and frail, with a hint of something like resignation.

"I trust you, Alicia. No matter what."

Cion's declaration of her resolve stabbed me through the heart.

My knife felt cold and hard in my hand.

"I— I'm..."

*Am I here to kill Cion...?*

"You possess the qualifications and the motive." *As an inquisitor, and as the Demon Lord's daughter.* The devil's eyes were calm as he spoke. "Carry out your mission."

"I'm..."

I drew my knife and ran my fingers along my bible.

There was no need to think about it. I could just keep on doing as I was told and following my orders, the same as I'd always done. That way I'd never go hungry, and I'd never need to search for a place to sleep. I'd never have anyone out to kill me. I'd never have to live a life being toyed with and tormented.

*But—*

"I... I don't..."

*I don't want to go back to my days of piling up regrets one after another. Not anymore.*

"I'm going to break this chain!"

I turned to face Raven, brandishing my bible and my knife.

His response was simply a quiet, scornful laugh. "Then our feelings are one and the same."

"What do you mean?"

The devil didn't lift a finger.

"Aah— Aughhh?!"

Instead, a scream came from one of the mercenaries whose names I didn't know. The divine soldiers had been rampaging mindlessly all this time, but now they all began *devouring* their

enemies. No—they weren't targeting the humans, just the demons.

*Are they replenishing their mana? No,* strengthening *themselves?!*

"Stop it!" I shouted.

"You yourself said that you wish to break the chain. This is a necessary step to that end."

Compared to wholesale slaughter, *predation* instilled its targets with a slightly different flavor of fear. For demons especially, the terror of being *devoured by a higher being* was a sensation they'd long forgotten. As unfamiliar survival instincts took hold, they stopped in their tracks.

"D-Don't back down!" someone called out.

Most of them tried to hold firm and stand their ground. But when the arm raised to strike at you suddenly opened a mouth like a giant snake and swallowed up the buddy standing next to you, the tide was inevitably going to shift.

"Don't panic! Our goal's still the same!"

The mercenaries, undaunted, did their best to adapt to the changing situation, but the devil-touched were charging in to attack them.

As the divine soldiers ate demons, their bodies swelled up even larger. They took on twisted shapes as they destroyed buildings and people, swallowing everything in their paths.

*It's like a painting of hell.*

"Why?" I gritted out. "What are you even trying to do?!"

"I am exterminating demons. That has long been humankind's desperate desire, after countless years of subjugation by a superior race. They found unity through dubbing that race their enemy, and as they declared that enmity to be the will of the Gods, they sank into despotism." Raven looked on disinterestedly at the crazed banquet he himself had brought into being. "Power itself is evil. What wrong is there in destroying it?"

"And that's why you became the Demon Lord's right hand?"

"No. This is for the sake of our Lord's dying wish." As he spoke, his gaze held a quiet grief. "All of it is for the sake of peace."

*He's insane...*

But his eyes were too serious, too filled with regret, to dismiss it

as just that.

"Our Lord might have been able to join hands with the weak, but he never truly understood them. We can unite only in the face of death, and we cannot possess power without wielding it." He spoke like a missionary preaching the truth of the world, and his words reached my ears as though the clamor around us were utterly silent. "All who hold power must face destruction in equal measure."

*So if everyone with power is gone—if the world is left with only the weak—then there won't be any fighting, and we'll be able to join hands and coexist as we work toward a better future...?*

The devil spouted his hollow drivel without any hesitation, and he held out his hand to me.

"Come to my side. If you do, then I shall treat you kindly as a descendant of the First."

It was an invitation to peace and safety. This man was genuinely trying to make his delusions into reality. He'd use his divine soldiers to wipe out the military might of both humans and demons, then bring the two sides to the negotiating table. It was an insane fantasy—but would it really bring an end to the fighting?

*If our claws and fangs were pulled out, would people— Would we really—*

"So that's the bullshit logic you wanna force onto people?"

A wolfman came walking through the chaotic battlefield like he owned the place. He carried a huge sword slung over his shoulder, and he casually knocked aside attacking devil-touched and divine soldiers as he made his way over to us.

"Long time no see, Slaven. You look like shit, same as always. How're those burns doing?"

"*Veiss...Volg!!!*"

The devil's face instantly flooded with rage.

"Don't bother listening to him, brats. He's just another asshole trying to make everyone go along with whatever crap he spouts."

"You speak only of *yourself*, you blood-crazed murderer!"

Raven created a fireball and threw it at Veiss, but one swing of that giant sword effortlessly cleaved it apart.

"Haven't you heard? Out here on the battlefield, a *champion's*

just whoever kills the most guys."

"*That* is what I despise about you!"

The wolfman and the devil clashed, sending out shock waves that tore up the ground and blew away buildings. As the brutal fight raged on like a storm, all Cion and I could do was stand there and watch.

"Do... Do you hate me, Alicia?" Cion mumbled without looking at me.

"Of course I don't hate you. Why would I? We don't know whether that guy was even telling the truth; and in any case, I don't have any memories of my father whatsoever."

*So that's not what she's really asking.*

"What am I supposed to do...?" Cion was wavering—over her sins, over the outcome they'd led to. "I—"

"If you're going to ask me to kill you, I refuse."

I took Cion's hand. Even cut up, scraped raw, and covered in dried blood, it was still soft and gentle. It wasn't meant for fighting. But all this time, she'd lived her life on the battlefield, trying desperately to survive.

"If fighting for the sake of money is evil, then we're living in a world of nothing but villains. Don't you know? The people who hold up grand causes—who say they're fighting for the world, for humanity, for justice—end up sowing more chaos and taking more lives than anyone."

Since time immemorial, the world of humankind had been plagued by endless violence. The Church made it sound like the conflict between humans and demons was the entirety of human history, but that wasn't true at all. There'd been royal succession crises, there'd been territory disputes between nobles, and zooming out further, there'd been wars between nations as well. The Church's story of *the menace of our natural enemy* had just been effective enough to wrap all of that up and shove it under the rug. Whether demons existed or not, humanity was still a collective of countless individuals. That collective would develop friction, friction would create divides, and divides would lead to strife.

"All that guy's doing is lashing out, more or less. His leader got

killed, and now he's drunk on tragedy and trying to fight the entire world." As I spoke, I felt a little frustration at myself. My words weren't all that different from Raven's, and neither was I. "What's important is what we can protect here and now. Please help me, Cion."

"Alicia..."

I held her hand in both of mine, and that was all it took—just because we were the same gender, just because we'd ended up in the same sort of circumstances, just because we'd both fought back as best as we could. The person she'd held as her guiding star had disappeared, and she'd become thoroughly dependent on me for support. At some point, she'd gotten her ends and her means mixed up, and she'd made it her mission to guard the champion who'd saved her life. But he'd been taken from her, and while she'd been at a loss for what to do, I'd slipped my way in.

"Let's end this war," I said.

*You never meant to start it, but you can stop it with your own hands.*

I said the right words in her ear, and this pure, innocent girl went where I told her. It was an ugly, calculating seduction, perfectly fitting for a whore of the Gods.

"Okay." Cion nodded reassuringly and gave me a kind smile.

I felt an awful twinge of pain somewhere deep in my chest.

"Alicia...?"

"No, it's nothing."

I put on a smile as well.

I must have had the wrong idea. I'd just assumed that she and I had come to understand one another through our shared pain. But Cion and I fundamentally didn't see the world in the same way.

"Cion, just... Just promise me one thing, all right?"

So I was going to use that to stop this battle—to end this war. I genuinely didn't want this girl to have to fight anymore. But in order to make that happen, I had to get her to keep fighting. It all sounded like a load of bullshit, didn't it.

I took a breath. "You don't need to save me."

"Alicia...?"

"I'm asking you to prioritize the lives of everyone here over my life alone."

Cion still didn't understand. But that was fine. If the time came, I knew she'd make the right call.

"Also, take this." I held out the knife I'd been using.

"You sure?"

"Don't worry. It's a lot sturdier than I am."

Cion's gaze was filled with determination as she felt the heft of it in her hand.

*It's fine. Glasses had it specially made, same as my bible.*

"I'm counting on you," I told her.

"Okay."

I didn't say anything further as I stepped forward. The wolfman and the devil were still locked in their battle to the death, and I made my way toward them—with the Hero, slayer of the Demon Lord, at my side.

"Quit scuttling around like that! What are you, a damn cockroach?!" the wolfman roared.

He was fierce and violent as he brandished his sword, but there was a note of delight somewhere in his howl.

The devil laughed too as he struck back, grinning madly from ear to ear. "You've grown rather hideous yourself, haven't you?!"

The huge sword swung down to cleave him in two, but he sidestepped it and countered with a giant beast claw. His wings and tail flitted dexterously around him as he taunted and toyed with Veiss.

The two monsters' clash was starting to throw the surrounding battlefield into chaos as well. The mercenaries were losing their coordination and getting mowed down by the mindlessly rampaging divine soldiers.

"Sir Veiss! Be careful!" I called out to him.

"Yeah, I got it!"

*Nope, he doesn't get it at all.*

It was obvious in the way he fought. The champion-turned-beast was lashing out ferociously. As the devil leaped back from his strikes, Veiss came dangerously close to slicing right through priests on the

sidelines too. He wasn't making any effort whatsoever to avoid it; he looked like he wouldn't care even if bystanders *did* get killed in the cross fire.

"Calm down, Master!" Cion shouted, ducking and rolling as she tried to join the battle.

Veiss wasn't listening, though.

"You're wounded, brat! Get the hell away!"

He just kept rushing forward, ignoring her warnings.

"No, dammit..."

Cion desperately tried to catch up, but between her injuries and her exhaustion, she was left behind in the dust. This fight was for Raven and Veiss alone. I'd heard they'd clashed once before in the capital, but what the hell was this?

"Yeah, there it is!" Veiss shouted. "You had that same look in your eyes back then too! Jealous of the whole damn world, ain'tcha?!"

"You know nothing!" Raven snarled back. "You are a vile beast, incapable of anything other than the wielding of brute force!"

The monsters just kept tearing into one another. Honestly, there wasn't any room for me or Cion to intervene. In fact, in his transformed state, Veiss was gradually starting to wear Raven down.

"Fine by me! That's the only way guys like me can live!"

"And *that* is why you must die! The world to come must be purged of barbaric animals like you!"

"Who the hell put you in charge of that, asshole?!"

Raven's heel stomped down to crack the earth, and he bared his fangs.

"You ought never to have been called a champion, you *filth*!"

"Damn, that's funny! I never wanted that title in the first place either!"

Their verbal barbs alone didn't give any clue who was in the right. I knew Veiss had always been foulmouthed; but Raven, for his part, clearly wasn't operating on the same logic as the rest of us.

"What are they even talking about...?" I grumbled.

Frankly, I had no interest at all in whatever history those two had. Not my problem. But as I was now, I didn't have enough power left to stop them. Even if I were at full strength and going all out, I still

wasn't confident I'd be able to manage it. Weaklings like us had no choice but to depend on champions—or on the Gods.

I let out a frustrated hiss. If I leaped in there without a plan, *I'd* be the one getting cut to ribbons.

*What the hell do we do?*

Cion was still frantically trying to stick with them, but she was pretty much useless here. If Veiss beat Raven, he'd disappear on his own and leave us alone, so we just needed to either kill the devil or win him over. But I couldn't come up with any approaches either way...

"Missy!" a ragged voice called out.

"Boss?!"

Our friend the former royal knight captain stood back-to-back with me amid the chaos. He looked more exhausted than I'd ever seen him.

"I was hoping we could help clean up this mess," he said with a sigh. "But we're hitting our limits. I dunno about the demons, but I shouldn't have served my guys the cheap stuff..."

"Enough whining," I said. "Get to the point."

"We're looking for an opening to pull out. If we're gonna get wiped out here, better to head back and spread the word."

"I see plenty of men unable to move."

"If they weren't prepared for the worst, they wouldn't be here."

"So you're just..."

*He's just going to abandon anyone who can't run away.*

"Listen," he said. "We're working with the lion guy to have him send out messengers too and coordinate our movements. When the time comes—"

"I refuse."

"Missy..."

I felt the gaze of the man guarding my back turn to me for a moment.

*I know. I know I'm being selfish. But* I don't care*.*

"We're staying here," I said. "If you wish to flee, please do so without us."

"If you think those guys are gonna go along with that, you've got

a damn low opinion of 'em..."

"Indeed. I'm a cruel and manipulative woman."

He sighed. "Got it. We'll do everything we can."

"Thank you. I owe you one."

"Better pay us back in spades, okay?"

"I'll do all I can as well."

I made my assurances, but with the divine soldiers sucking up all the local aether, my orisons were still barely working. My injuries basically hadn't healed at all. I was running out of options, and my odds of winning were as close as they could be to zero.

This was absolutely, positively "not my job." Demon-slaying and peace negotiations were both supposed to be outside of my jurisdiction. As a bride of the Gods, my role was to operate behind the scenes—not center stage in big, dramatic battles with champions and Heroes and devils. Frankly, I just wasn't suited for the spotlight. I ought to have turned and run right now with my tail between my legs. *None of this was my job at all.*

But I couldn't just let this happen. Even after all this time debasing myself as a *slave of the Gods* out of cowardly self-preservation, I couldn't ignore what was happening here.

I moved away from the innkeeper, heading toward the clashing monsters to join in the fight myself.

*When did I become such a good person?*

I asked myself that, but it didn't really feel like a bad thing anymore. There it was—I'd finally learned to believe that instead of turning a blind eye and getting tormented by awful dreams, it was far better to struggle and fight back against the nightmare.

Whose influence was that?

No need to even ask.

# Chapter 9

The champion's sword was precise in its aim and utterly without mercy.

"Die, motherfucker!" he roared.

A quiet jolt of alarm ran through me. It was clear beyond doubt that if I took his swing head-on, I would be gravely wounded. I parried the blow and swung at him in return... But my claws didn't strike true.

I had set the Hero and the demons' army against one another, and I'd robbed the Golden Lion of his power. My body ought to have been rendered far stronger, far more agile, than that of any common demon. Yet, *why*?

"You..." I snarled. "How dare you!"

"If you think you're the only one who can pull that shit, then too bad for you, asshole!"

I had known from the moment I'd first caught a glimpse of him in the capital. In fact, I'd been shocked at the discovery that there were others in the world who had gained power just as I had. But to think that he had thrown himself into demon-slaying so ceaselessly as to completely abandon human form, becoming nothing but a warwolf...

"You sick madman!" I shouted.

"Takes one to know one, pal!"

The man who had once been called a champion spoke casually, the corners of his mouth raised in a smile. He'd showered himself in blood until he lost his very humanity... He was utterly insane.

"The world looks upon vile *things* like you and dubs them *champions*! *That* is what warps men's minds!"

This world was far too harsh and cruel to sustain the belief that anyone could be special from birth. Lives were easily plucked and scattered, or preserved only to be exploited and abused day after

day. Soon enough, every man came to realize that he was only one among the masses—and that was why champions, unique in all the world, enthralled the people so.

"*You* are what stands in the way of the future!" I roared.

This man—this man, if no one else—had to be eliminated. I had set him against the White Wolf, renowned as the strongest among all my Lord's armies, intending that they should weaken one another and be destroyed together. But he had fled *beyond my reach*, and my plan had been for naught. My informants had told me that the champion Veiss had gone missing, and I had been unable to track him down until he'd come to face me of his own accord.

Now that he had been reduced to a warwolf, his days of renown as a champion among men were over. But still, even now, he stood against me to block my path.

"Damn, you're really stuck on me, huh? You're not still jealous about ten years ago, are you?"

The beast gave a mocking laugh as he blocked my claws with his sword.

"*You...*" I growled.

"Bull's-eye, huh? All this time later, and you're still down bad for another guy's damn fiancée!"

I could see the thick, sharp leg kicking toward me. I dodged it and lunged in too close for him to swing his sword, baring my fangs right in his face.

"How dare you say those words with her blood on your hands?!"

"That's what she wanted. You didn't seriously think she was gonna be with *you*, did you, dumbass?!"

He slammed his head into mine, and I weathered the blow unflinchingly.

"You damned *monster*!"

"Pot, meet kettle." The wolfman grinned like human malice incarnate.



"Master!"

Charging in between us came the Hero, slayer of the Demon Lord. She stabbed at me with the defective product's knife, aiming directly for my heart.

"Why do you not see?!" I cried. "Why can you not understand?! You have no justice on your side!"

"When the hell did we ever swing our swords for *justice*?!" the wolfman shouted. "We kill to live—that's all there is to it!"

The Hero's irritating movements robbed me of the chance to strike back, complementing the champion's sweeping blows. Their coordinated attacks were well practiced and ever shifting, and they threatened to tip the balance of this battle in Veiss's favor.

"Lemme teach you how the world works, buddy! The *winner's* just whoever stays alive!"

He launched a sweeping kick that I ought to have been able to dodge, but with the Hero blocking my retreat, I was forced to block it with my arm. The leg I leaned my weight on sank into the ground, and even with all the physical durability of a demon, the blow was fierce enough to shake me to my core. I groaned with the pain.

Another man's heart might have faltered there—but I had long since left my own behind.

"Do not trifle with me, you filthy deviant!"

The wolfman charged at me with another vicious strike, but I took it head-on and leaped away with a flap of my wings. I spun my body along with the momentum of my fall, driving my heel directly into his neck. The neck was the weak point of every living creature. No matter how monstrous an animal might become, if the nerves joining brain and body were severed, it would lose the ability to so much as stand. If nothing else, the damage to its brain would delay its reactions—!

"You twisted psychopaths, unable to live except by taking the lives of others! All of you must be destroyed!"

My Lord, when he had yet lived, had never wished for such a thing. He had believed that the strong ought to join hands with the weak—that those with power ought to protect those without. He had sought to embody that ideal and to bring it to fruition... But an ideal

was all it had been, in the end.

"If it weren't for you—! You villains!" I drove away the Hero with a lash of my tail and kicked away at the flat of that massive sword, disarming the wolfman—the former champion—as I closed in on him. "All humanity—let them all perish! If you can only live by robbing from one another, then let that cycle consume and destroy you all!"

I concentrated mana in my arm, and my strike gouged into the wolfman's chest. But he seized hold of my arm with his own hand, and he bared his fangs.

"Finally saying the quiet part out loud, huh?! Just admit you got bullied once and now you're mad at the whole damn world, you weak sack of shit!"

A shock pierced through me from behind. Turning my head, I saw the defective product holding her bible, striking at me with her fist as faint bolts of electricity arced off of her.

"Do you truly imagine that will..." *—work...?*

For a brief moment, my thoughts turned to the White Wolf's demise. From what I'd been told, this defective product's intervention had been instrumental in his defeat.

Where was the Hero?

A mere girl, devoid of any redeeming traits save for her speed, would never have been able to make her way unaided to my Lord—were it not for her singular talent as an assassin. Did skill foster talent, or did talent beget skill? The answer was undeniably the latter. The means by which she'd acquired her prowess didn't merit my consideration. What mattered was that she had possessed a talent for lurking stealthily and approaching her targets undetected; eventually, talent had birthed technique, and technique had awoken skill.

*Silent Assassin* was what my Lord had dubbed the invisible killer at large within his domain. And last night, I had witnessed for myself how she fought.

With a grunt of exertion, I released mana in all directions. She might have evaded my perception, but she certainly hadn't vanished from existence.

"There you are."

Below and to the left of the champion, there in my blind spot, was a small shadow waiting for the moment when my attention was diverted to my back. As she lunged at me, I met her with my tail, quick and vicious as a massive snake.

"Gah—!"

She frantically leaped away to the side, but my tail followed after her with ease. I pressed her against a wall, but just as a smile spread across my face, my body instinctively tensed at the unmistakable aura of death directed at me.

"Damn, taking your eyes off the fight? Confident, ain'tcha?"

The wolfman snapped my arm at the elbow and bared his fangs wide. My wings—

"No you don't!"

I hissed in rage as the defective product leaped onto me, clutching at the roots of my wings to hamper their movement.

The fangs closed in, and my voice rose in a wail of fury.

"YOU *VERMIN*!!!"

I single-mindedly sent all of my mana circulating through my body, raising my strength and durability to their absolute limits.

Veiss's eyes flashed with shock as his jaw clamped down. His fangs wouldn't pierce me. I healed my arm and moved to grab him in return, but he quickly retreated, pulling the defective product away with him. While I'd been distracted, the Hero, too, had slipped out from between my tail and the wall... These obnoxious, meddlesome nuisances!

"If you insist that I face you at the zenith of my power, then so be it..."

My fingertips twisted and stretched into tentacles, spreading out in all directions. They pierced through incapacitated demons and devil-touched to drain their blood.

"What the fuck—?!"

Veiss made to charge at me, but my divine soldiers would occupy him. I summoned one to my side, using it as a wall to shield me.

As I consumed and incorporated the blood, I called it to wakefulness, and with it, the genetic lineage of the First. My Lord

had refrained from taking on any shape other than that of a human, but now I sublimed my body, my very being, into the *true form* of our origin!

"Do you want to die?!" the defective product screamed at me.

"Hey, if he's gonna blow himself up for us, may as well let him."

Veiss stared out at me, believing that he had seen through me—that he understood my essence.

Pathetic fools.

Power was absolute. Power, and power alone, could reshape the world. Those who held justice without power were weaklings to be cut down and abandoned. Those who held true, absolute power could be as Gods, objects of fear and awe.

But my Lord had fallen before the weak. He had fallen, believing in some innate goodness of the human spirit.

"Now you shall learn your own foolishness!"

My body swelled from within, regenerating long-lost organs and faculties. Blood surged through me, and my consciousness was elevated to heights beyond imagining.

"The power of the Demon Lord lies at the root of all."

Making my own being a testament to that truth, I used the *assassin's step* to catch the wolfman from behind. This was a power ingrained in blood. I had no need to comprehend it. Every living being possessed blind spots, and this perceptual inhibition allowed me to step effortlessly from one to the next. The Hero, slayer of the Demon Lord, had won her renown through this same cursed power.

"*Die.*"

I struck to cleave the wolfman's head from his body—only to be intercepted by some animal instinct.

"C'mon, really? You think I can't see through my own apprentice's tricks?"

An indomitable smile spread across his face, but the truth was laid bare to me by the power of *that woman* who had fallen before our Lord—the Crimson Witch's telepathy.

"Oh, but you *did* falter."

My other hand shot toward his heart. He raised an arm to block me without a moment's delay, but my strike retained its momentum,

and my fingertips tore into his flesh. As panic began to bleed into the champion's features, I calmly activated yet another power. The power of the champion, savior of the kingdom. The power of the Hero, slayer of the Demon Lord. The power of the Demon Lord, heritor of the First... But, no. There was another name to give it here.

"*Scarlet Brave.*"

Veiss let out a grunt of shock, and his face twisted in pain. But it brought me not the slightest amusement.

"Master!"

The Hero immediately leaped to his aid, but I reached out with *newly grown arms* to catch her in my grip.

"You— Are you fucking kidding me...?"

"Surely you didn't presume that such power was yours alone."

It was all perfectly simple. Just as I had done to the Golden Lion and to the other demons, I drained out the champion's vast reserves of mana for my own sustenance, awakening more and more of the *power of the First* that had been lost with the passing of generations.

Even the mighty champion was unable to keep himself from howling in pain as his blood was drained from his body. He released my right arm from his grip and attempted to peel away my left as it dug into him—but the armored scales covering it were impenetrable even to the claws of the wolf.

"Mas...ter!"

The Hero writhed and struggled as well. But as I poured freshly incorporated mana into my arms to grow them stronger and thicker, her resistance quickly stopped.

Emotion could never foster strength.

"*You—motherfucker!*"

The champion's casual ease mere minutes ago was gone without a trace as he fought violently to force my arm away. And so, I simply *grew more*. It took not even a thought. The *flesh of my Lord* within me showed me exactly what to do and how. This was true omnipotence and omniscience—the rightful attributes of the First, master of all the world's knowledge and power.

"If you wielded such might, then *why*?"

Holding back my tears, I swung down the long, sickle-shaped arms sprouting from my body. This champion had slain countless demons, bathing himself in their blood until he'd lost his humanity just as I had, acquiring the traits of a devil-touched. And yet, he would meet his end not as predator, but as prey.

"How anticlimactic..."

My arms struck to bring an end to it all. But as they fell, an obstacle stood in their way.

"Ngh... Too heavy—!"

They were held back by the defective product and the translucent barrier she had created.

"What's the matter, Sir Veiss?" she gritted out. "Needing a little girl to protect you is rather unbecoming of a champion, don't you think?"

In her hands, she held her bible filled with the words of manufactured Gods. She raised it as a shield to push away my arms while using her *orisons* or whatnot to produce her barrier. Her eyes held a deathly resolve, and blood dripped from her wounds. Such unseemly struggling...

"I would have done you no harm had you simply behaved yourself," I said.

"In that case, I'd ask that you resolve your grievances *peacefully* to begin with!"

The washout certainly had a mouth on her.

"A pathetic display, Veiss Volg."

I shot a glance at the champion. He was on the verge of crumbling, but even now, his eyes still burned with the will to fight—irritating to the very last.

"Try as you might to protect one another, the weak cannot triumph over the strong."

With just a little more force, the translucent barrier shattered to pieces.

"*Screw you!*"

The defective product tried to kick Veiss away to safety, but my claws in his chest budged not a fraction. I closed my arms around

them both with inescapable momentum...and blood sprayed through the air.

◇

"Ngh..."

I felt something grab me by the scruff of my neck, and the next thing I knew, I was sprawled on the ground. I raised my head to see Veiss's grim scowl. He must've pulled me away from those claws at the last second. In the same instant, he'd picked up his fallen greatsword and cut off the arms restraining Cion as well. Of course he had—what else had I expected?

But now the former champion was sunk on one knee, and his shoulders heaved as he tried to catch his breath. He was obviously exhausted.

Meanwhile, facing us was the Demon Lord's right hand—well, he was pretty much all hands now.

"This is omnipotence and omniscience! This is the power of a God!"

He'd gotten on some kind of weird kick, and he was shouting with a creepy fervor in his voice. Frankly, I didn't want to deal with him for another second if I could avoid it. He was starting to feel a little too much like a certain other idiotic zealot I knew.

"But what are we even supposed to do about this...?" I sighed.

The *champion* next to me couldn't be counted among our forces anymore. He'd had his blood drained and his internal mana ripped out by Scarlet Brave, just like Cion had done to me. And that wasn't the only way he was spent...

"Why did you sacrifice your arm?"

And his right arm, at that—his stronger side.

"I would've been fine if *you* hadn't gotten in my damn way."

*Nope. You definitely wouldn't have been.* You *were the one who got yourself caught, weren't you?*

"What's done is done. The facts are the facts. We cannot progress without accepting the truth." The devil stared haughtily down at us as he swallowed up Veiss's severed arm with a huge,

gaping mouth. “One must make sacrifices for the sake of victory, but how foolish to give up your own flesh and bone. What now, hmm? How will you stop me?! Go ahead and try, Champion of the Kingdom!”

“Still don’t get it? I can beat you just fine one-handed, dumbass!”

“It is *you* who fail to understand.”

His tail lashed out like a whip toward Cion—

“Gah—?!”

—knocking her wounded body flat as she tried to get back on her feet. Veiss immediately tried to charge in, but his body wouldn’t go along with it, and he was left howling with his hand planted on the ground.

“This is your punishment.”

The long, swift tail wrapped around Cion’s leg and lifted her into the air upside down. Cion tried to fight back, but from her awkward position, she couldn’t get her blade through Raven’s tough hide. That long, spindly thing looked like an insect’s limb—or the arm of a revenant reaching up from hell.

“I shall kill her slowly.”

Veiss couldn’t move. The innkeeper and his crew had their hands full just defending themselves. There was only one thing for me to do.

“Gods dammit...”

I absolutely hated how weak I was.

“Raven!” I shouted, throwing my bible at the devil turned monster.

“Hmm? Surely you don’t intend to preach the word of your false Gods now of all times?”

He picked it up off the ground, gazing at me disinterestedly.

*That’s it. Look at me. Just stay focused on me.*

“I’ll obey you,” I said. “I don’t know what value my blood holds, but do with it as you will. Just please, stop your divine soldiers.”

I was just barely outside his reach. If I stepped any closer, he’d be able to knock my head off my shoulders with a single strike before I could even dodge.

“Might I beseech your mercy, O Demon Lord?”

This was a gamble. I didn't have any power left, and I didn't have the spare capacity to demonify myself either. The demons were fighting with everything they had, but the mercenaries were on the brink of death, and the champion and the Hero were both out of action. The only option I had left was to turn to the Gods for help.

"'Demon Lord,' you say... You misapprehend me, I'm afraid. I shall not become the Demon Lord. I shall become a God!"

He turned his face to the heavens, trembling with ecstasy.

I let out a laugh. "A *God*?" Thankfully, I at least had the energy left to mock him. "No one can become a God."

There weren't any Gods. They were just objects of faith and fantasy; their words were just the words of a pack of fraudulent priests, written for the profit of a privileged few. So—

"Oh, they do exist."

The absolute certainty in the devil's voice made me falter, ever so slightly.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"What is a demon? What is a human?" he asked back. "Knowing that devil-touched carry the mingled blood of demons and humans, knowing that humans are a degenerate form of demons, did deeper possibilities never occur to you?"

I stared at him. "What does that—?"

"The Gods are the origin of all—so it is written in the humans' scripture." Raven flipped through the pages of my bible. "None will believe a story fabricated wholly from groundless lies. The myths of your Gods have garnered such widespread faith because they contain a sufficient measure of truth."

"Don't listen to him, Alicia!" Cion shouted.

She struggled to get free of him, but he only tightened his grip, and a pained scream rang out. The taste of blood spread through my mouth.

"The first God formed the first Goddess from his own body, he created the world, and life flourished across the earth... The essential point is thus: Our world must possess an origin." Raven tossed the bible back to me and looked to the heavens once again. "The First—the progenitor of all life. And his lineage has persisted

across time. *That* is the true nature of the Demon Lord."

Somehow, I felt no surprise. Only dawning comprehension, mixed with a strange relief.

"In other words, the Demon Lord is himself a God."

Veiss let out an infuriated hiss as Raven revealed the truth.

"It has long been humankind's custom to *eliminate* any who uncover that knowledge, however."

That much was probably true, at least. Regardless of whether the Demon Lord was actually a God, just uttering those words would be grounds for execution. You'd get sent straight to the inquisitors, without a chance to say a single word in your own defense.

Veiss sighed exasperatedly. "What a load of crap. What the hell kind of God gets himself killed by a little girl, huh?"

"He—!" Raven started, emotion surging into his voice. "My Lord was too kind, too merciful!"

He swung his tail, tossing Cion away. Veiss rushed to catch her, but he couldn't stop her momentum. Master and pupil toppled to the ground together.

"I shall not repeat his mistakes. I shall not let my Lord's death be in vain." Raven stood there, calm and regal, as he made his proclamation. "I shall become a new Demon Lord, a new God, and I shall remake this world. I shall build a utopia where the weak are forever free from torment, where the strong do not exist, where all conflict is ended..."

The devil offered me his hand.

"If you spoke truthfully that you would join me at my side, then I shall accept you, my sister. If you claim to be a bride of the Gods, then surely you will gladly become the bride of the Demon Lord, a God incarnate."

"I suppose that's true..."

The master I served would change—that was all. I wouldn't have any agency, but I hadn't had any before either. And if Raven was telling the truth, then maybe I wouldn't have to kill anyone anymore. My head felt heavy from exhaustion. If he held the answers I'd been seeking all this time, then I wanted to cling to him...but what was this feeling? This strange unease, like being smothered to death by

sweetness—

"*Ah.* Yup, *there* it is." I reached up to grab the *threads of mana* sparking at my temples, crushing them in my grip. "Just another pervert trying to rewrite people's thoughts, huh?" I gritted out angrily.

If the Horny Slut hadn't come crawling into my bed night after night, I might've gotten turned into a sex slave on the spot just now.

"I'll have to step on her later as a thank-you..." I muttered to myself.

"You imagine that merely because you are my Lord's child—" Raven paused. "No. *Precisely* because you are his child, I suppose... It seems I must reevaluate you."

I could feel something shifting in Raven's calm gaze as he stared at me.

"You don't want to kill me—you look more like someone thinking about training a rowdy dog."

"Do not misunderstand. All I desire is the blood running within you, that the lineage of the First might be preserved. Know that you yourself hold no value whatsoever."

"Oh, yikes—so you'd make me give birth to a child, then say I'd served my purpose and *dispose* of me...that sort of deal? You're not even a pervert, you're just total scum. Would you like to die now?"

"Go ahead and kill me if you can, slave of the Gods."

The devil was totally unguarded as he advanced toward me. Was it confidence or carelessness? It didn't matter. All I could do now was—

Suddenly, a figure leaped in between me and Raven.

"*Cion!*"

I called out urgently to her, but Raven barely paid her any attention at all.

"Out of my way."

With a single sweeping blow, he effortlessly sent her tumbling to the ground. But she gritted her teeth and got back on her feet, brandishing my knife in one hand. Her other arm was hanging limply at her side, and even her center of balance was shaky.

"Please, stop! You're going to die!"

My warnings didn't reach her ears, though. Behind her long bangs, Cion had the eyes of a ghost as she stepped closer to Raven. There was no plan—she just swung her blade. Raven didn't even bother to block it; it bounced off his hide and went flying through the air.

"Utterly pathetic."

The gap in strength was overwhelming. All that remained was silence—and the bitter scent of defeat.

Raven stared down at me.

"What are you doing?"

This must've been what it felt like to have your body move faster than you could think. Operating on instinct rather than logic, I'd rushed in to shield Cion, spreading my arms wide.

"Harm me any further, and you *will* pay the price. I am still a bride of the Gods—and those who molest others' brides will meet with divine punishment."

"If I tear off one of your limbs, will that mouth of yours finally shut up?" Raven reached out a long arm, and his fingers brushed my cheek. "What can your false Gods do to save you?"

*You're right. There aren't any Gods. Praying won't bring any miracles.*

So I'd need to find help elsewhere.

"*Salamanrius, you dumbass!*"

A massive bolt of lightning dyed the world white, lancing down to pierce through the devil. He groaned in pain and confusion as his eyes rolled back. That same instant—

"All of it!"

—I marshaled all my remaining mana and aether, stacking all my spells, skills, and orisons on top of one another and sending a punch into Raven's abdomen.

"Spit it all out, *right now*!!!"

I heard the sound of bones shattering in my right leg as I stepped forward—in my fist as I landed the blow. I grunted in pain, but I definitely felt something shatter inside Raven as well.

"Alicia!"

Right as Cion called out to me, I rolled backward to dodge a

swipe of Raven's tail.

All around us, more bolts of lightning were stabbing into the earth like the wrath of the Gods, shooting through rampaging divine soldiers and terrified devil-touched one after another.

*We're turning the tables.*

"How...?" There was rage in Raven's eyes. "How can this be?!"

He leaped up, trying to flap his wings to carry him to safety, but a nearly dead Veiss came charging in to slash at him.

"Don't try and run, asshole!" Veiss gritted out.

"You wretched waste of life!"

Veiss swung his greatsword one-armed to carve into Raven's wing, but the devil caught him in his right hand, and the two of them went plummeting to the ground together.

"*Master!*"

Cion picked up the sword and tried to run over to them, but a sweeping strike flashed across her path to cut her off. The devil had lashed out with his tail, sending Veiss flying away. He smashed through buildings, catching a divine soldier in the wreckage, then vanished amid the smoke.

"All of you obnoxious, meddling pests!" Raven groaned. "Why must you irritate me so?!"

His body was covered in burns from the lightning strike, and he'd lost one of his wings. As he worked to heal his wounds, skin bubbling and seething, he glared up at Spirit Mountain.

"Damn that priest!"

For the first time, the devil and I were in total agreement.



◆

"Aaachoo!"

"Oh dear—rather a pitiful showing, don't you think, Your Eminence? Of the two of us, *you're* better dressed for the cold."

As I continued incanting formulae, I teased the man standing at my side.

High Cardinal Salamanrius had brought me to the central mountain range that ran across the continent. Legends held that long ago, in the age of the Gods, now-extinct dragons had given shape to these mountains. Spirit Mountain, where we now stood, was the site where aether had initially been developed, and the mountain's summit was awash with mana. I had climbed here, accompanied by a few guards, to deliver a little *divine punishment* in the Gods' place.

"Please do focus on your observations," I said. "I'm relying on you to aim."

"But of course. It's not every day a man gets to escort the Holy Saint."

The cardinal's targeting was infuriatingly perfect. As he gazed down to the foot of the mountain—farther than any human ought to be able to see with the naked eye—he provided not only the positions of the combatants at the temple below, but even whether they were monsters or devil-touched.

"I do feel for him a little..."

I myself had once trifled with the wrath of a God and lost my sight. I didn't know what sort of expression the man below us had on his face, but I did have a measure of pity.

"By the way, will things be all right on the other front?"

My thoughts went to the *opposite side* of the mountain.

"Looks like the holy knights have arrived there," the cardinal replied. "They probably won't be able to drive the demons back, but they've at least got enough strength to hold the line."

"Could you let Veil know of that as well?"

"Already have," he replied with a self-satisfied air.

"Have you, now," I sighed.

He spoke cheerfully, but it really had been a very close thing. I'd been ready to let them all be slaughtered save for Alicia, if it came to that; I was glad we'd made it in time, but still...

"One can't exactly call this *faith*, Your Eminence." I chided the cardinal, his insincere smile still plastered to his face.

He had been the one to propose this stratagem of combining his long-range surveyance abilities with my orisons to provide covering fire for our allies. From here, he'd said, we would throw both the western and the eastern fronts into disarray—with just a little intervention, the tides of battle would begin to turn in our favor.

"Unless you mean to tell me that those spectacles of yours can see the future, that is," I continued.

To be perfectly frank, I loathed this man. That was the inescapable conclusion I had arrived at. I despised him for putting that girl's life in danger, of course, but his habit of glibly entrusting everything to the Gods was vexing as well. As it happened, luck had been on our side, and both fronts of the war had still been salvageable. But with just a single misstep, either one—no, *both* of them could easily have taken a turn for the worst.

"That confidence of yours certainly isn't born of piety, is it?" I couldn't detect even the slightest trace of *faith* from him—that much was obvious without even using my power. "That poor girl has put up with quite a lot..."

These lightning strikes were among the most powerful orisons in existence. As I called them down upon the mana-swollen monsters, one after another, my thoughts went out to my Lord's forgotten keepsake. Despite being born a demon, she had been cast out to live as a human; and the man opposite her, despite being born a human, had spent long years reforging himself into a demon. The two were perfect opposites, and yet their souls were pitiably alike.

"Such a cruel irony..."

Happiness and prosperity were things that every one of us fervently wished for. But due to the influence of a certain *someone* who had sought to change this world even at the cost of his own life, two of those he'd left behind were now fighting to kill one

another.

"There aren't any Gods out there," said the pair of spectacles at my side. "That's why we all still wander lost, never finding our way."

It was a rather shocking remark from a man at the uppermost echelons of a body devoted to faith and worship.

"So you wish to anoint that girl as a God in their stead, then?"

Exile though she might have been, she certainly held the potential.

"Nope—that's not it. That path only leads to the imitation devil down there." Spectacles spoke as though he had already foreseen my thoughts. "I just want to save every single person I can." The faithless worshipper smiled as he gave the coordinates for my next strike. "Loving thy neighbor's what it's all about—that's the first step to love and peace. Don't you think?"

I was beginning to understand this man just a little—just the slightest fraction.

"And yet you push all of that work onto others... What a deeply irresponsible creature."

"Don't you know? Humans are born sinners."

As that girl faced the devil in the darkness below, I held her small figure in my thoughts and offered my prayers.

◇

"That despicable man..."

Raven, self-proclaimed future Demon Lord and God, growled with fury. As he glared up at Spirit Mountain with undisguised rage, demons and mercenaries surrounded him, freed from the divine soldiers' onslaught. Most likely, that was thanks to Glasses and his long-range casting. He wouldn't have been able to pull off this many consecutive shots, though, so the one firing must've been the saint.

Regardless, the lightning blasts had taken out the divine soldiers. The devil-touched had been immobilized by the electric shocks too, and now they were all neatly tied up. The innkeeper was the one who'd ordered them captured alive; he'd suspected that they might be soldiers from a neighboring country, and he wanted to avoid a

messy diplomatic incident. Surprisingly, the Golden Lion had been equally on board with that, and his orders to his troops had been the same. He'd shouted something about how attacking incapacitated enemies went against their pride as warriors or whatever—I didn't really get it, but sure.

"In any case, it's about time we finished this," I announced, brandishing my bible.

With the divine soldiers down, the aether they'd been sucking up was starting to return, albeit only slightly. I'd administered emergency treatment to myself and Cion in parallel—and Veiss as well, while I was at it. I would've liked to get the Golden Lion back in the fight if possible, but I didn't quite have the spare capacity for that.

"Please surrender," I called to Raven. "I'm not interested in beating sense into you—I'd merely break my bones."

"Me? *Surrender?* So you've broken my dolls—what of it?!"

Just the shock wave as he swung his arm was enough to send the exhausted mercenaries flying, and even the demons crumpled to their knees.

"I shall teach you that true power cannot be bested by mere force of numbers!"

Raven's body began to swell as he made his proclamation. He regrew his lost wings better than new, with three pairs instead of one. Countless arms sprouted from his torso, mouths gaped wide on his arms, extra eyes opened across his body, scales covered his long tail... At this point, he'd transformed into an utterly surreal creature, going straight past creepy and into incomprehensible.

Was *that thing* really a living being the same as us?

"He's certainly nailing the Demon Lord look, if nothing else..." I muttered to myself.

Raven responded with a mocking laugh. "My Lord continually suppressed his power. He did not wish for his own form to establish a hierarchy among the tribes that served him, he said..."

Glancing over, I could see the Golden Lion standing on Raven's opposite side, leaning on the innkeeper for support.

"Raven..." he said. "I know you swore fealty to our Lord. I'll

accept the resentment you held for us. But our Lord would never have wanted this. He'd—"

"*Silence.* You could never so much as *comprehend* the will of a God, you filthy tomcat." The Demon Lord's right hand glared at the Golden Lion, and his voice trembled as he spoke. "My world has no need of warriors, Heroes, or champions! You are obsolete, all of you!"

As the devil howled, poised to strike at any second, all the assembled soldiers braced for battle.

Even if we could exchange words with one another, that didn't mean we'd be able to reach an understanding. When a conflict was driven by the two sides' personal creeds, all they could do was keep on clashing until one or the other was destroyed.

"This is asinine," I muttered.

All this time, we'd just kept on killing and being killed, going around in circles forever. The Demon Lord had held power on par with a God, and even *he'd* died trying to end that cycle. Maybe it was just impossible to ever stop.

But I didn't care.

"I'm not ending it for you!"

If clashing was the only way we could understand each other, then we'd just have to clash. We could trade blows, we could trade insults—that was all fine. But I had terms of my own.

"I won't let you kill anyone within my sight!" *As a bride of the Gods. As an agent of the holy powers that bring forth miracles.* "I'm going to stop you!"

I made my declaration.

I stood against the devil.

I faced him, mere human that I was.

"Bold words, *bride*." He slashed out with an arm too fast for the eye to follow, slicing into the earth and sending people scattering. "Go ahead, then. Try to save me. Try to defy me! Reject my will, just as I reject yours!"

He took flight, wreathed in crimson flame. Not to run away, but to incinerate us all.

"*Glasses!*"

Before I'd even called out, a blast of lightning shot down at the devil, but he blocked it with a single arm raised over his head. Worse, it bounced off and scattered in all directions, leaving casualties on *our* side.

"How is he so completely useless?!" I fumed as I ran around searching for a jumping-off point. I wouldn't be able to reach him from the ground. If I could get to one of the buildings that hadn't collapsed yet—

"Alicia!"

Cion pointed at a cluster of people as she ran by my side. A slovenly pack of mercenaries were crouched low to the ground, holding out their shields.

"Over here, missy!" the innkeeper shouted.

"Cion!"

"Yeah!"

I applied whatever physical buffs I could, and we sprinted full speed up to the mercenaries, jumping together onto their shields as —

"*Her merciful bosom?*"

"*Has time still to grow!!!*"

"*What'd* you say—?!"

Our footholds sprang up underneath us, launching us like cannonballs straight toward the devil, but I felt like I'd heard a chant down there that I *absolutely* wasn't going to let slide.

"I'm gonna kill those assholes!!!" I clenched my fist tight and launched it straight into the devil with all of my momentum. "Who the hell are they calling—?!"

There was a sound that might've been a weary sigh from Cion next to me, but the next second, all that remained was an afterimage. She raced along one of the devil's arms, ignoring the flames as she carved into the wings on his back.

"*You worthless, defective trash!*"

Raven tried to grab at us, but I created a rope with an orison and tossed it to Cion in midair; we pulled our bodies together to dodge his hands, and I dispelled it. Then, I tied a new rope onto Raven and used it as a fulcrum to launch a kick into his abdomen.

"Your pitiful blows...cannot harm me!" he rasped out.

He caught Cion with a large, sweeping strike and sent her tumbling back to the ground, but one of his wings was barely still attached.

"If we *can't harm you*, then how about you just sit there and take it?!" I shot back.

Another orison rained down on him, countless spears of light punching his wings full of holes in a saturation attack.

"Stop acting all high and mighty, dammit!"

I used another rope to swing up in the air, then landed an axe kick straight to his shoulder. Now his flight was really starting to get shaky.

"Shut up!" he yelled.

The devil caught my ankle in his grip and tried to crush it, but—

"*Scarlet...Brave!*"

I pressed a hand to Raven's chest and did my best to imitate Cion's Energy Drain. I wasn't touching an open wound, so I hadn't been sure how effective it'd be, but Raven screeched in pain and let go of my leg.

"Glasses, *now*!"

With flawless timing, the wrath of the Gods poured forth. Tearing open the cloudy sky, a bolt of lightning descended with a thundering roar to shoot straight through the devil in midair.

"Gah—!"

As he let out a short, desperate cry, Raven fell to earth with nothing at all to catch him.

I half botched my own landing, forcing me to take a nasty tumble, but I managed to sit myself back up and look over at Raven. His entire body was charred black, and he knelt on legs like burned-down tree trunks... And as I watched, his skin swelled and bulged, like something was bubbling up from within.

"Wait, shit! What's with that thing?!" One of the mercenaries who'd been shouting something or other about my bosom screamed in panic.

"Alicia! Is he—?!"

It was uncomfortably reminiscent of the scene we'd witnessed

underground. But as Cion looked to me for guidance, a lump of flesh peeled away from the bulging mass and fell to the ground with a sickening *plop*, and a terrified silence enveloped the world.

"Aaah— Aaaaugh..."

A strained cry rang out from somewhere. One after another, black-charred lumps fell away from Raven's body, swelled, and grew —

"What the hell are *those*?!"

—*taking on the forms of women*.

"For God created a being of his own flesh to become his mate, and life flourished upon the earth..." Raven muttered deliriously. "All of you... Return to your mothers' bellies..."

The reddish-black humanoid figures with wings sprouting from their backs—monsters in the shape of women—all bared their fangs at once.

"Fight them off!"

The innkeeper shouted to the mercenaries, and the Golden Lion roared out a battle cry. Cion sliced through one of the gynoid creatures that had appeared in front of me, and Veiss pulverized another. But the halved lumps of meat recombined and reformed, and the monster latched on to the wolfman's arm.

"Ugh, that's creepy as fuck!"

Once they'd been smashed, crushed, and ground down into small enough pieces, they seemed to stop regenerating. But not everyone could fight the way that champion did.

"G-Gaaaah?!" someone screamed.

Mercenaries grappled the monsters from behind, and demons bit into the things' necks, but they seemed to be incapable of feeling pain; they ignored our attacks and ceaselessly continued their assault.

"Alicia!"

Turning back to Cion's voice, I saw Raven closing in on us, eyes ablaze with fury. His skin was burned raw, and his red-charred arms were dyed in blood. But he kept on charging at us without a care for his own destruction.

"*You... All of you!*"

"Please, calm down—!"

His arm grew gigantic as he raised it over his head, and he began swinging it down hard enough to crush us to a pulp.

"*Alicia!*"

Cion shoved me away, urging me to flee—

"Hgah...?" But Raven froze in place. "Ah... Aauhaaa... Aaaaaaggghh?!"

He flinched back, clutching at his stomach. Something came splattering out of his mouth, and all of the creepy arms, eyes, and gaping maws across his body began to peel off and fall away.

"No, no, *no*! I... I shall be... Demon Lord—!"

Demonification required taking in an excess of mana, and that overdose produced a recoil effect. Whenever I went through it myself, it always left me in bad shape for a little while afterward. I wasn't sure whether it was the strain of my body trying to return to its original form, or exhaustion from reawakening traits that had originally lain dormant within me, but was Raven experiencing that same effect?

What's more, the amount of blood I'd been given didn't even compare to what he'd taken in. If he'd been continually absorbing mana since last night's battle, then—

"Spit it all out right this second! You're going to die!" I shouted.

Raven's response was dazed. "I... Iiii..."

His body was swelling out of control, heedless of his own will, and he groaned and writhed as he tried to hold it back. All the while, the monsters he'd created were still attacking humans and devouring demons.

First the divine soldiers, now these imitation humans—what the hell were all these freaks?!

"If *these things* are Gods, then I want a damn divorce!"

Cion and I were both lying in the rubble; I locked eyes with her, but she was pretty much at her limit too. I'd sucked out some of Raven's mana, even if only for a moment—was that why I could still move?

"How long do you plan on playing around, Sir Veiss?!"

I yelled at the wolfman turning monsters into mincemeat, and his

ears twitched uncomfortably.

"Do I look like the kinda freak who gets off on smashing women to bits, brat?!"

"You look like the kind of wolf who'd eat a woman up, at least!"

I turned to the innkeeper—no use. He was too busy coordinating the mercenaries. The Golden Lion was doing his best to help out as well, but he'd been exhausted to begin with, and he was still running around protecting badly injured humans. The only ones I could use were these two here...

"Can you hear me, Raven?! I'm going to repeat it one last time: Spit out all the mana you've collected, right this instant! It's not too late—I'll take it in and heal your injuries for you! You don't want to explode in a shower of guts, do you?!"

I kept my guard up as I shouted, bracing myself for whatever he might launch back at me, but what I got in response was indignant rage.

"So you're going to look down on me too...? Call me a lower life-form?!"

"You—"

Sharp claws came thrusting out at me, and I immediately raised my bible to block them, parrying and dodging strike after strike.

"Why is *that* what you're assuming?!" I shouted.

"Blood... Give me your blood!"

Raven's eyes were bloodshot as he advanced on me. Right now, rather than a devil, he looked like just a human being who'd lost his way. Just a weakling who'd lost his Lord, sought out power, wailed and lamented that the world had rejected him, and made it everyone else's problem.

I wasn't enough of a well-adjusted human to empathize with him—but I could at least relate to his plight, born as a slave and forced to seek out power in order to survive. I could understand. I hated this shitheap world that wouldn't let us live any other way, and if there really were any Gods out there, I wanted them to do something about this mess.

"But all the same, what you're trying to do is wrong!"

Even if he killed everyone with power and created a world of only

the weak, conflict would still break out sooner or later. And moreover, the God—the Demon Lord—who'd created that world would become an avatar of terror.

"Your Lord refrained from wielding his power because he wanted to break that chain, didn't he?!"

"You are unworthy to speak of my Lord!!!"

His anger grew, and the fierceness of his attacks with it. Just as I was starting to have trouble handling him on my own, Cion jumped in to help me. But Raven kept single-mindedly rushing at me, not caring whether he got injured.

"What do you know of my Lord?! Why do you stand with the one who killed him—who killed your own father?! How can you entrust your back to that murderer?!"

Every one of his blows had the weight of pure rage behind it, and even though I was parrying them, they still reverberated through my bones.

"Because I believe that we can join hands—that we can understand one another!"

"That is merely a whim of the mighty! Or would you have me lower myself to a mere *pet*?! Do you truly expect me to believe that you are content with where you stand?! You, who serve your Church that preaches the word of Gods you have never believed in?!"

I could tell that if I took even a single one of those strikes head-on, it'd blow me away instantly. I focused on dodging rather than parrying, only using my bible and my orisons to haphazardly fend off the blows I absolutely couldn't avoid in time.

"Only those who have power have a say in the world!" he shouted. "Only they can decide what to save and what to abandon! You understand that perfectly—that is why you cling to your title of *bride*! Why you use the names of the Gods!!!"

"No, I—!"

We were the same, somewhere deep down. I understood that much. And that was exactly why I had to stand against him.

"What about you?! You've met people who've mattered to you too, haven't you?!" I called out.

I'd been abandoned in that field of snow, and I'd been taken in

by the orphanage. I'd been desperate to survive—if the Church hadn't sheltered me, maybe I would've turned to a life of crime. But that wasn't what had happened. I'd met a teacher who I admired and respected, and I'd been blessed with a boss who annoyed the hell out of me. The Hero who'd slain the Demon Lord had gotten attached to me, and the Champion of the Kingdom had entrusted her to my care.

"I believe there's more to our nature than merely taking from one another!" I tore out a few pages from my bible and tossed them in the air to create smoke bombs. "We should be able to help one another—to understand one another!"

"Then understand me!!! *Accept me!!!*" More mana poured into his rampaging flesh, sending it further out of control. "*FEED MEEEEE!!!*"

The bloated, shambling thing before me almost looked like one of the divine soldiers. It felt too crude and pathetic to call a monster. A gigantic mouth opened, splitting Raven's face from one ear to the other, and I...

"If that'll settle this peacefully..."

I closed my eyes and offered myself up as a sacrifice. I spread my arms wide and welcomed him closer.

*Raven's afraid. Afraid of this world—afraid of others. Over and over, the things he cared about were stolen and lost. That's why he stopped being able to trust others—to trust the world. So...*

"I'll trust you."

This man, more than anyone else alive, understood the future that the Demon Lord had sought. So I wanted to accept his rage and his suffering—I wanted to share that burden. If what we wished for was the same, then we ought to be able to understand one another.

But the champion refused to accept my self-absorbed decision.

"Ngh... What the fuck are you doing, you stupid brat?!"

"S...Sir Veiss..."

The blow never came, and I opened my eyes to see Veiss shielding me from Raven's fangs with his body and his greatsword. As I watched, he was on the verge of being overcome—but even as he sank to one knee, he endured the pain and kept roaring at me.

"Your dumbass ideals ain't worth shit if you're dead!" He forced

his body forward, landing a blow that sent Raven flying, and his shoulders heaved as he glared at me. "I don't give a fuck about letting brats have their dreams or whatever—that's *your* job, and it ain't my damn problem. But that shit's a curse, got it? Don't push all your crap onto the people you leave behind!"

The wolfman's roar was overlapped by another one. He turned around to deliver another strike, then carried that momentum into a leg sweep and a wide swing of his sword...

Veiss continued to yell while he fought it out with Raven. "Just look at *this fucker* and think for five damn seconds! This how you want *her* to end up?!"

If I offered up my life to Raven for the sake of my ideals, just like the Demon Lord had offered up his life to Cion, then Cion would carry a grudge against Raven, and the cycle would just keep going—that was what the wolf was saying. He was reprimanding me, but I had a feeling it was also meant as a lesson for his own apprentice who'd taken on sins too heavy to carry alone.

"If you ain't got what it takes to stick with her, then *get lost*!"

Veiss struck back again and again, driven by pure spite. But he simply couldn't handle all of Raven's attacks with only one arm, and his body was gradually getting soaked with blood. Even now that he'd turned into a wolf, his figure as he fought still felt every inch a *champion*.

I let out a frustrated hiss.

My life would've been so much easier if I were an agreeable enough person to shut up and let someone else have the last word. It also would've been easier if I could just throw away all my resolve and all my feelings and live freely as I pleased.

But I was a bride, and I'd felt something I couldn't unfeel—I wanted to stand beside that girl.

"You certainly love to run your mouth, don't you?!" I stood alongside Veiss, taking the place of his missing right arm. As I beat back and lopped off the fangs, claws, and tentacles trying to carve into him, I howled right back just as loud. "*You're* the one who ran away and shoved everything onto me!"

"You—" he started to say.

His left arm faltered for a moment; I kicked away a leg in his place and turned to smile at him.

"She needs *you* too."

"Oh, screw you!"

Defending Veiss left my back unguarded, but he defended me in turn. Covering up each other's openings, we steadily pushed back Raven's fierce blows and moved in to launch a counterattack of our own—but then, just for the briefest moment, I let my focus slip.

"Wha—?"

A tentacle sprouted up from the ground at my feet and wrapped around my ankle. With my reactions slowed, Veiss lunged in to shield me with his body, and a claw gouged deep into his flank. Ever the sore loser, he threw his sword at Raven's head in a last-ditch attack. But as it spun through the air, it missed its mark by a fraction and flew away over Raven's shoulder.

Time slowed to a crawl as a frustrated dread filled me.

Raven raised an arm to strike. There was no way for me to dodge it.

I could at least save Veiss if I shoved him away, but I wasn't getting out of this...

"No more champions. No more brides. I've had enough of you..." The devil's eyes had lost almost all trace of sanity. "*Die.*"

But behind him—behind his arm as it swung down and his wide, outstretched wing—a single small ray of light pierced through the cloud-covered sky. It shone down on the Hero as she caught the sword the champion had *thrown to her*.

"GRAAAAAAAAAH!!!"

With a battle cry like a piercing scream, she sliced the sword inexorably through Raven's single wing, slashing into his body. His sliced-off arm missed its target and thudded to the ground.

"*Youuu...*"

Eyes ablaze with fury, he tried to reach out with his other arm, but the wolfman pounced on him to hold him back.

"Cool it, asshole!"

The devil's burning eyes and bulging veins exploded with rage as —

“Nghaaaaaaaah!!!”

—the sword rebounded off the ground and swung straight back up to lop off his remaining arm. All he had left was his tail.

“Do your damn job, Glasses!”

I shot out a small lightning bolt to mark the target—and the wrath of the Gods pierced the earth.

The lightning strikes up until now had aimed to *incapacitate*, but this was unmistakably a lethal blast. It burned the devil’s tail away to cinders.

“Wha—?!”

As Raven stood agape in shock, an inappropriately cheery voice sounded in my ear.

“Dear me, what a demanding inquisitor I have...”

More lightning bolts suddenly shot out sideways, stabbing through the *mock humans* all around us.

“You... How dare you...” the devil hissed, still trying to fight back.

I gently placed a hand on him and began to drain out all the mana, all the foreign matter he’d overfilled himself with.

“Scarlet Brave.”

“Aghaghaghaghaghhhh!”

Forcibly extracting it all was like flaying the meat from his bones and gouging out his organs. As he groaned and writhed with the pain consuming him from within, the Hero, the champion, and everyone else left on the battlefield stared at him uncertainly.

“It’s over, Raven,” I said softly.

He’d lost both of his arms at the elbow. He knelt on the ground, withered and emaciated—almost like a slave.

“Sh-Shut up...” he muttered.

“Please, surrender. You don’t need to do any of this. You can still carry on his vision.”

“Nonsense... That is a privilege only for those with power—only for those who rule over others!”

Cion briefly braced to strike, but I held her back.

*It’s all right. He doesn’t have the power left to fight.*

I reassured her wordlessly, then turned to face Raven.

“I don’t know whether the God you speak of truly exists. But if

our origin produced the creatures of the earth from his own body, then I believe it must have been from love."

If that omniscient and omnipotent being, truly akin to a God, had grown tired of his solitary existence—had birthed a Goddess, had sired children—then it must have been from loneliness. The existence of other beings would give rise to division and strife. But even understanding that obvious truth, the world's primal originator had longed for the presence of others.

"That's why I want to save every life I can."

I turned my back to him and walked across the battlefield, touching my hand to the corpses lying around us as I softly sang prayers to the Gods. I was adapting Scarlet Brave and my orisons to operate in concert. With every word I wove, the plaza overflowed with light. Drained of all their mana, the divine soldiers and imitation humans crumbled away and dissolved into sand.

"Nothing but pretty ideals..." Raven hissed.

"What's wrong with things being pretty?"

The light floated onto people's injuries, closing up wounds and accelerating healing. I couldn't work miracles like resurrecting the already-departed, but the Gods would let me get away with this much at least.

"I don't believe in Gods," I said, staring at my direct boss. "But I do believe in miracles."

Even if orisons had just been developed as a power play to give the Church authority on par with the nobility—even if faith was just another word for subjugation—I still wanted to believe that the people who'd created it all had held more in their hearts than pure malice. I wanted to believe that there'd been some good in there as well.

"Will you help me, Raven?"

*Lend me your aid as the Demon Lord's former right hand. Help me protect this world teetering on a razor's edge.*

"Cease your...prattle..." he spat powerlessly as he hung his head. Suddenly, he retched and groaned in pain. "Agh—?"

"Raven?!"

He toppled forward face-first. His writhing figure overlapped in

my mind with the archbishop's final moments underground—

"No, hang in there!"

I wrapped my arms around him and lifted him back up, but his face was sunken and worn.

"Recoil...?" I muttered.

I'd done my best to leave him with the basic minimum of internal mana he needed in order to sustain his life. So this must have been the strain from all the rapid changes his body had undergone, coming back to hit him all at once.

"Mere slave that I was, I sought to wield the power of a God," he said. "Is this my penance, then?"

"Stop talking nonsense!" I shouted.

Judging by his condition, healing orisons wouldn't be enough at this point.

"Screw it!" I picked up my knife from the ground at my side and sliced into my wrist.

"Stop...it..."

"Shut up! I'm not letting it end this way, not after everything—it'd just leave a rotten taste in my mouth!"

I held out my flowing blood to Raven and spoke words of prayer to manifest a miracle. Just like I'd done for Cion underground, if I poured my blood into him and shored it up with formulae, he'd still have a chance.

"Defective or not, this is the blood of the 'First' you speak of. If you take it in, you'll be able to regenerate your lost organs, at least temporarily—it's already been tested. I'll guide the process, so you just—"

Raven shoved away my hand with a stump of an arm.

"This is no time to be stubborn, dammit!" I yelled.

"No... Try as you will, I'm past saving..."

He didn't need the blood of the First—he'd consumed that already. It wasn't his body that was broken, but his body's ingrained memory of life itself. He'd overwritten it and patched it together countless times, and it couldn't maintain its original shape anymore.

"You can't give up! I— I won't allow it!"

Even if I absolutely hated this damn devil's guts—even if he'd

done awful things to Cion and to me, and I wanted him to die—

"You need to live! Live and atone for what you've done!"

—I couldn't just let him get killed and have that be the end of it.

As I shouted at him, a smile formed on his crumbling face, and he gave a croaking laugh.

"Like father, like daughter..." he rasped out.

"Huh?"

"I won't accept you... So you need to keep on rejecting me as well. Reject me and the outmoded notions I clung to—that I could only reclaim what I'd lost by stealing from others..."

"*Raven!*"

I tried to force my blood into his mouth, but his body was already falling apart and scattering on the wind. All that remained of him—of this slave who'd burned with hatred and resentment until he expended every ounce of his life—was a fine ash, clean and white like snow.

The only things he left behind were the clothes he'd been wearing and...

"A ring?"

A slightly tarnished ring fell to the ground, strung onto a chain that he must have worn around his neck.

"Damn son of a bitch." Veiss picked it up—looking closer, I could see a ring with a similar design on a chain hanging from *his* neck as well.

"Um." I stared up at him, completely thrown for a loop.

"*No*, that ain't it," he growled. "Bastard just stole it. From my fiancée."

"I-I see..."

For a second there, I'd been sure they must've had *that* kind of relationship. Huh.

"So, what're we doing now? Do we need to fight it out with you folks?" The Golden Lion had been silently watching as everything played out, but now he spoke up with an easy smile. There was no trace of hostility in his voice.

I looked to Veiss, but he just scowled at me, and Cion looked confusedly back and forth between the two of us.

*Well now, what's to be done here?*

While I tried to come up with an angle, the first one to speak was everyone's favorite former royal knight captain.

"We don't gotta bother with that. If we're going at it with you, then we'd better change weapons." He stepped forward, leaning on a bearded man for support, and held up a soot-stained liquor bottle he'd pulled out from somewhere. "If you ain't had enough of a fight yet, then how about a drinking contest? Truth is, my guys love booze more than battles—always gotta send the dead off with a proper party."

He bantered casually, and the Golden Lion responded in kind.

"Well then, we'd better open up our special casks. Can't send off our comrades with the cheap stuff—it won't even be enough to get drunk on."

"My, this really is far more civilized than battling to the death, isn't it?" As though he'd been waiting for the right moment to butt in, Glasses stepped forward, clapping his hands appreciatively.

"I'd quite like to drink Miss Alicia's holy water..."

Behind him trailed the Horny Slut, guided along by an attendant while everyone around her recoiled in disgust.

"Bunch of drunks." The wolf-faced champion scowled out at what had just been a battlefield; it was still a hellish scene, but life was slowly starting to return. He grabbed his sword back from Cion. "If everyone's just gonna screw around, then I'm out. Cardinal Dipshit can handle the rest."

"But of course, Sir Champion. My apologies again for my unreasonable request."

*Of course* Glasses had been behind it all somehow.

Veiss made to disappear as usual, but—

"M-Master!"

—Cion frantically grabbed his hand to stop him.

"What."

"No, I— Um... I-I can still call you Master, right...?"

"You tell me. Is *this* what your Master looks like?"

Cion was still having trouble wrapping her head around it all, and she stumbled over her words. Meanwhile, for his part, Veiss was

utterly unwilling to communicate properly with her.

I sighed with exasperation. "If you're worried about her, then why don't you just stay with her? Are you an idiot?"

The eyes of a beast turned back to me with an annoyed glare.

*You watch over her from a distance, you cast defensive spells when assassins come after her, you go around killing the guys behind it all, and whenever she's in a tight spot, you show up out of nowhere to save her—seriously, who the hell do you think you are?*

"If you care about Cion, then tell her so."

"*Look*, brat..."

While we sniped back and forth, Cion kept gazing at Veiss with worry in her eyes. They were the eyes of a kid being abandoned by a parent. The fact was, Veiss had left Cion behind and let her think he'd died. Then, when he'd finally shown up alive again, he'd just called her a nuisance and told her to throw away her sword—he hadn't said any of the things he really needed to.

"Alicia, I..."

"Don't worry," I said. "As awful as he looks, I can assure you that this man is your Master."

"I— Right." Cion looked up at him and gave a little nod. "I know I'll never be like you, Master, but I'm still going to fight just as hard as you. So, keep watching me. I'll make sure you never have to come out ever again!"

The Hero clenched her fist tight, determination filling her small frame. The former champion's response was flat and indifferent.

"I'll believe it when I see it."

With those words, the wolfman walked off into the distance, his greatsword slung across his back. His retreating figure was something out of an epic ballad—a champion through and through.

"That tail is honest to a fault, though..."

It wagged back and forth like the tail of a dog getting praised by its owner, drawing laughter from all around—so the champion didn't turn back even once. I would've loved to run in front and see the look on his face, but I restrained myself as a small act of mercy.

The two of us saw him off as he walked away—holding back our laughter all the while.

“Now then...”

I turned to Cion. In one hand was my bible; in the other, my knife and my ring. I brandished the knife at Cion and smiled sweetly.

“Would you be so kind as to die for me, Sir Hero?”

# Epilogue

"The Hero is dead. In the midst of a pitched battle against the remnants of the Demon Lord's armies, he sacrificed himself to defend the Holy Saint. He fought to the death against Raven, the former slave who served as the Demon Lord's right hand, and the two struck each other down. His body was consumed by the flames, and his soul ascended to heaven; now, he rests upon Spirit Mountain. The remaining mercenaries and priests fought off what was left of the demon army, guarding the fortress city with their lives. Working alongside Her Sagacity—and, of course, His Eminence the High Cardinal—they kept the temple defended until the holy knights arrived... That's the miraculous story you crafted. And I must say, it's getting excellent reviews. Most of the remaining members of the Seven High Cardinals belong to the faction that wanted to tame the Hero, and the nobility are head over heels for Her Sagacity and her inspiring deeds. People are putting on plays about it in the capital even as we speak! His Holiness is also satisfied with how things worked out. What matters is having a legend worth believing in, after all—who cares about the truth?"

As I knelt in a church in a deserted village, praying before an abandoned altar, my unexpected guest finally finished his long-winded, unasked-for explanation. In any case, it sounded like everything had gone smoothly.

"What about the mercenaries and the demons?" I asked.

"They spent three days and three nights drinking and making friends, then headed back up north all together. From now on, they'll be fixing their fights to earn their keep."

"What kind of stupid plan is that supposed to be?"

"Please, call it *clever*. I think it's a positive development, don't you?"

The devil-touched soldiers under Raven's command had been

taken prisoner and placed in the saint's custody for treatment; they were being handled on a case-by-case basis. Some of them were foreign mercenaries, so that'd be a huge hassle to sort out, but it wasn't my problem. The nobles holed up in the capital could deal with it—if they didn't make themselves useful at times like this, then what were they even for?

"Now we just need you to come back, and then everything will be back to normal. You can take care of all the paperwork that's piled up, and that'll be that. So, are you in a better mood yet, Sister Alicia?"

I turned around, my beloved kitty cradled in my arms, and gave a smile filled with benevolent mercy or whatever.

"What might you be referring to, *Your Eminence*? I'm not upset in the slightest, and in any case, would it not behoove you to take care of your work yourself?"

"Ouch, how harsh..."

*Well,* yeah*. Not only did you put my darling Atalanta in danger, you dragged him all the way up to the top of Spirit Mountain. What the hell kind of way is that to treat a cat? In another time, you'd be facing execution.*

"In any case, jokes aside—I won't be coming back. I've decided to take some time off for a while."

My voice came out a little sulky, but in all seriousness, I had no interest in letting myself get jerked around by divine whims any longer.

"Does that mean you plan on disobeying the Gods?"

"Does it? If *the Gods* were to tell me to return, then perhaps I'd obey them. But they seem to be letting me do as I please for the time being."

It had been a month since the battle, and I hadn't had any inquisitors come after me. The fact that this slave driver of a boss had been leaving me alone was more than enough evidence in itself.

"So I'll be taking my leave. I think I'd like to spend some time visiting family."

Glasses had clearly been expecting that response; his expression didn't change at all.

"That's going to be a pretty rough trip."

"Not to worry—as you can see, I have a capable mercenary to assist me."

I turned to gesture to my capable and adorable bodyguard; all this time, she'd been crouched behind the altar, concealing her presence while keeping an eye on us.

"I'm grateful to the Gods for their protection and their guidance," I said. "But it's all right now. We can walk the rest of the way on our own—we don't need anyone to look out for us." I did my best to muster the most honest words I could manage as I expressed my gratitude to the priest who'd taught me and guided me. "Thank you for everything, Your Eminence."

I bowed my head. It came out sounding like I was trying to convince myself as much as anyone—I knew that *other*, less diplomatic words would come flying out if I wasn't careful. Glasses smiled back at me, clearly understanding all of that perfectly. His smug face really, *really* pissed me off.

"Now then, we should be going."

I forcefully ended the conversation. My mercenary stood at my side, her hood pulled tight over her head, and we left the altar behind us.

Well, we *tried* to leave it behind us, but—

"Sister? Sister Alicia Snowell!"

"What is it?"

I turned back around, and the asshole tossed something to me. I caught it in my hands—it was a pair of glasses.

"Your father actually gave me those to look after. Take care of them, won't you?"

"I swear I'll smash these damn things..."

This time for real, we left the church behind us. The former Hero tried to take the lead, but I took her hand, and the two of us walked off together. We left the Gods' side, wandering out of their sight for a little vacation all our own.



# Afterword

Aoikou here. Everyone warned me in advance that they wouldn't let me get away with a "To Be Continued!" ending like I did for volume 2; I'm just relieved to have gotten volume 3 out the door safe and sound.

The truth is, I had a really tough time with this volume—there was just way too much I wanted to write. During the initial plotting, I had enough material that I would've needed to split this volume into two parts. I did my best to narrow down the themes and restructure the story, but there was still too much to fit in one book. So I pared things down even more, but before I knew it, I'd ended up going off on another random tangent, and I had to focus back on the story I wanted to tell... The plotting was an absolute nightmare, and the deadline for my manuscript was already set in stone by that point, and hgawawawawa...

*Anyway*, my editor put in an incredible amount of work as well, and in retrospect, I managed to fit in pretty much everything I'd wanted for this volume. I'm honestly amazed. Humans really can do anything we put our minds to!

By the way, even with all that going on, I still found myself wanting to write a separate side story as well, so I made my unreasonable request and got permission to post *The Hero-Killing Bride 0: The Blood-Soaked Berserker* on Novel Up Plus. If you haven't read it yet, go give it a look. It's a story about a certain royal knight captain and champion in their younger days.

With that said, I'd like to thank my editor, Rinrin-dono—I'm so sorry for bothering you with extra work even though you're busy as is with your actual job. Thank you for not abandoning me!

There's also a manga adaptation by Dean Law-sama currently being serialized in *Young King Lambda*. The adaptation does an amazing job making use of the strengths of its medium, and I'd love

if you'd check that out as well. The battle scenes are intense, and Alicia's frustrated faces are super cute!

Finally, my thanks once again to Enji-sama for bringing the story to life with your wonderful illustrations. I'm sorry for asking so much of you every single time. Thank you for delivering such powerful cover art and insert images. The cover art especially wowed me. I mean, it does every time, but still!

Now that this volume's over, we've reached the end of the *Demon-Slayer Arc*. Next up will be the "little vacation" that Alicia talked about at the end of the volume—it's time for a hot springs episode.

Alicia and Cion's relationship has gotten pretty *close* all of a sudden. Even if you're not a certain Holy Saint, you might be worrying about what sorts of things they'll get up to with their clothes off... Well, that's for the Gods alone to know. If there isn't another volume, then you'll just need to imagine it for yourselves. Cion probably begs and pesters Alicia, and Alicia reluctantly [a cloud of steam rises up to hide the rest of the paragraph].

I hope we can meet again soon in another afterword.

—Aoikou

# A Story After the Afterword

"Hey, Alicia. I feel like it's important to settle things properly, y'know?"

It was the first night of our journey. For now, we were setting out toward Snowell, the town where I'd been raised. As we spent a quiet evening around a fire in an abandoned church, Cion suddenly spoke up with a strange look on her face.

"When you say 'settle'... If you're referring to the Demon Lord, I—"

"Ah, no... I mean, maybe that too, but that's not what I meant..."

I stared at her in confusion. She was being weirdly cagey, and I had no clue what she was getting at.

"If it's about the orphanage, Her Sagacity will be making arrangements to ensure they're taken care of, so I don't believe there's any reason to worry. Or are you concerned about me taking a break from being a bride? I—"

"It's—! It's about how I hurt you, Alicia!" Cion blurted out.

"Huh?"

She looked *really* tense, but frankly, I was long past caring about that whole thing.

"You mean when you tried to leave me behind and drained out my mana? It's perfectly fine; I'm not upset with you, so—"

"It's not fine at all! I mean, I bit you really hard, and I sucked out your blood too, even though you've been saving me and healing me all this time... I'm awful, aren't I?!"

"Um... Uh... Huh?"

I'd tried to stab her to death in her sleep within a day of meeting her, but I definitely couldn't bring myself to say that. "I've caused plenty of trouble for you as well, Cion, and there's also the matter of my divine orders... Honestly, I really don't think you need to worry about it—"

"No! I hurt you, Alicia! I need to get punished for it!"

"Ummmmm?"

She could be stubborn about the weirdest things, just like her master. It got *really* annoying to deal with sometimes.

"J-Just to ask, what sort of 'punishment' do you have in mind...?"

If she wanted penance, she'd just confessed her sins to a nun—all I'd need to do now was say "I absolve thee." But Cion, stupidly earnest as always, pulled open her collar to expose her shoulder, baring her pale skin to me.

"*Bite me!*"

"What?"

"I bit you, so you need to bite me too! Then we'll be even!"

"Uhhhhh?"

*An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth*—I was pretty sure there was a proverb or something along those lines, but was this how that worked?

I sighed. "I'll only bite you a little, all right?"

"Okay—as long as that'll be enough to make it up to you!"

She didn't need to *make it up* to me at all—I hadn't been bothered about it in the slightest. But right now, my own guilt was winning my internal struggle; I felt like playing along with Cion here was *my* penance, in a sense.

"All right, here goes..."

"Go for it..."

Still feeling like this whole thing was incredibly stupid, I sat down next to Cion and placed a hand on her slim shoulder. She was on the small side for a girl her age, and her shoulder blades stuck out a little from her childlike frame. As I brought my face closer—

"Nn..."

—I heard an incredibly tender sigh right next to my ear.

"Cion...?"

"S-Sorry... It just tickles a little..."

My hair must have brushed against her. I lifted it up and let it fall back behind my shoulder, then brought my lips in once more. In the dim light of the fire, I felt like I could see a faint flush in her skin, and I found myself gulping involuntarily.

A strange tension filled me. My heart was pounding in my ears. Amid the stillness, Cion's breaths and my racing heartbeat were the only sounds I could hear.

"Omf..."

"Nnh!"

I softly put my mouth to her neck, and her slender body jolted.

"Y-You've gotta bite me for real..."

"Mmfhmm...?"

Feeling Cion's skin on my tongue, I tried to ask whether she was really sure about this. But for some reason, she clung onto me tight and wouldn't let me go.

"Alicia... Please!"

"Mfhh..."

I still wasn't crazy about this plan—but if I stopped now, Cion would definitely keep pestering me to do it until she was satisfied. I just had to steel myself and go for it. Hardening my heart, I tensed my jaw and felt my canines puncture her skin. Soon after, warm blood came flowing into my mouth.

"Haaa—!" Trembling slightly, Cion dug her nails into my back.

"Mnhh..." I swallowed down the blood in my mouth and gently licked at her wound.

"Nn... Nnn!"

Cion twitched and shivered each time my tongue brushed against her. This sexier side of her was pretty cute—cute enough that a mischievous impulse reared its head.

"Mmfn."

"Hwah— A-Allisha?!"

I didn't bite her hard enough to draw more blood, but I softly nibbled at her over and over. Finally, I let out a breath right in her ear—

"Hyaa—! Fwhaa..."

That got a pretty entertaining reaction out of her.

I pulled back and stared silently at her for a long moment.

"Oh."

Looking at the thoroughly plastered former Hero sitting by the altar, I realized I'd gone too far. Her fingertips were twitching, and

she was squirming and rubbing her thighs together.

"A-Allisha...? Did that...make it up to you...?"

Her fevered gaze turned to me, utterly entranced.

If I said some sort of line like "No, nowhere close. The night's still young," what would happen?

"Th-That's plenty. If anything, I went a little overboard..."

"Oh. I'm glad..." Cion let out a sigh of relief, but why did I hear a tiny bit of disappointment and embarrassment mixed in too? "So...this means the Gods'll be fine with me standing by your side now, right?"

I drew in a hiss of breath. Her smile was so childlike and innocent that I felt ashamed of my own foolishness.

"Cion... Bite me too!"

I offered up my shoulder, and Cion visibly gulped.

"C-Can I really...? No, I-I mean! Uh, wh-why...?"

"It's my penance," I said, my throat tense.

"O-Okay," she said slowly. "If that's what you want, Alicia!"

Cion's slender fingers touched my shoulder, and her hot breath tickled my ear. Her pulse, her warmth, her life spread through my skin and made their way inside me.

That night, we absolved each other, and we found each other...and we had an ever so slightly awkward awakening the morning after.

That's a little story just for the two of us. The Gods don't need to know.


"This is a sacrifice for the sake of the world. It matters not whether you understand. You shall die here."
The devil told me everything. He told me my sins. He told me my failure.


The Golden Lion
The general who once served alongside the White Wolf, each controlling a wing of the Demon Lord's army.
Elcyon
A former mercenary who defeated the Demon Lord and became the Hero. She's fighting on the front lines to hold back the demon army's invasion.
Raven
The former right hand of the Demon Lord. He's a devil-touched who once attacked the capital. His goals are unclear, but he's targeting Alicia and Cion.
Alicia
A bride of the Gods who works alongside Cion (Elcyon). After receiving a blood transfusion from the White Wolf, she's awoken to new powers.


"I... I was so worried about you..."
Alicia's voice came from somewhere around my shoulder.
"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

# Submit to Your Queen

"Hey, Alicia, why does the saint keep calling you 'Mistress'?"

"Hwuh?"

It was the evening after the demon army and the human mercenaries had clashed at the Spirit Mountain Temple. We were fresh in the wake of a brutal, blood-soaked battle, but these idiots didn't seem to care; they were clustering around campfires and partying it up in the temple plaza. I caught voices here and there arguing over *whose muscles were bigger* or *what sort of outfit a bride would look best in*. If you asked me, the only thing a bride ought to wear was bridal vestments, obviously, but they were chattering about a "chii pow" or "clothing that's invisible to fools"—I had no clue what they were talking about, but it was definitely something idiotic.

The innkeeper had brought out some food he'd whipped up, and I'd taken the opportunity to get away from the dumbasses. I was hanging out on the sidelines, resting my body for a bit, when I got hit with a question from Cion.

"What sort of relationship do you two have?" she asked slowly.

The Horny Slut couldn't see Cion's suspicious gaze on her, but a blush spread across her cheeks anyway. "Oh, she and I have spent many a night together..."

"*You* just kept crawling into my bed uninvited." I didn't think I even needed to bother denying it, but I corrected her just to be on the safe side.

Cion got unexpectedly heated, though. "I've slept together with Alicia too!"

"My, have you now? Then would you care to join us tonight, *Sir Hero*?" the saint teased.

"H-Hmph!"

*Something's wrong here. Cion's definitely acting weird. I know people can get thrown off-kilter by injuries and fatigue, but this feels*

*a little—*

"Oh."

My eyes drifted down to the cup Cion had been drinking from. The cloudy liquid inside was that stupid *firewater* the leonin were guzzling.

I was pretty exhausted too, and I'd let my guard down. Some idiot or other must've handed it to her as a joke. I swept my gaze around to try and find whose bones I needed to go break, but I couldn't spot any drunks looking in our direction. They'd probably set up their prank, then gotten absorbed in their own booze and totally forgotten about the whole thing. While they were at it, I'd love it if they could forget their entire identities and live new lives as honest, upstanding people. That wasn't gonna happen, though.

"Honestly, Cion," I sighed, taking away the cup. "You mustn't drink that stuff. It's not good for you."

"Honestly, Alicia," Cion slurred back, wrapping her arms around me and clinging on. "You're so floofyyy..."

*Excuse me? What part of me is* floofy*? I'm* not *demonified right now...*

"Oh? Are you floofy, Miss Alicia?"

As I tried to get Cion to settle down, I felt an absurdly springy sensation press into me from behind as well.

"Hmm, I would say she's less floofy and more *squishy*," the voice behind me continued.

For someone who *couldn't see*, the Horny Slut's hands found their mark perfectly. I wanted to give her a swift kick in the ass, but with Cion hugging onto me from the front, I was immobilized.

"Your Sagacity," I gritted out. "There are people watching..."

"Are there? Everyone seems to be quite pleasantly inebriated," she whispered sultrily in my ear.

I searched around for her attendant nuns and devil-touched guards, hoping I could get them to come collect their Slut, but—

"Ah..."

—they were all gathered a short distance away, completely dead drunk. Every single one of them had a cup of the same cloudy liquor

lying on the ground at their feet; the mercenaries must've handed them out.

"Nuns are *supposed* to be forbidden from drinking, aren't we...?"

Well, if they'd been sticklers for the rules, their relationship with Her Salacity would be the bigger issue anyway.

"Hweh hweh hweh..." Cion slurred.

"Hee hee hee..." the saint tittered.

"Aaarghhh..." I groaned.

Cion was in front of me. The Horny Slut was behind me. Help wasn't coming.

I let out an exasperated sigh. I just didn't want to deal with any of this anymore. Maybe I was too sober to handle these drunks. I sniffed at the cup I'd confiscated from Cion, confirmed that it wasn't poisonous, and then downed it. As the syrupy sweet liquid washed down my throat, it instantly threatened to carry away my mind...?

"Hwuhhh?"

My vision spun. I felt like I'd fallen over, except I was still upright somehow. Springy, pillowy sensations pressed against me from the front and the rear, and my thoughts bounced helplessly around.

"Ah, shi...?"

With what little remained of my intellect, I tried to detoxify myself. But my words of prayer scattered on my lips, and I sank into slumber.

To be more precise, *my conscious mind* sank into slumber.

"Owwww..."

The next morning, woken up by the glaring sun rising over the temple plaza, I found someone lying on my lap.

"Nmrrr..."

Cion mewled softly like a kitten. From the looks of it, I'd spent all night letting her use my lap as a pillow.

"Nnh..."

A groan came from somewhere, and I suddenly realized that the two of us were on top of something. Looking down, I saw people. A bunch of people. No—a bunch of guys.

"Huh...?"

They were all piled on top of each other in a heap, and Cion and I sat enthroned at the summit, looking down on the plaza. Spread out below us were orderly rows of men, sitting perfectly at attention with their legs tucked under them.

"Good morning, ma'am!" a chorus of voices called in unison, echoing across the plaza.

Cion squirmed uncomfortably at the noise.

"Wh-Wha...???" I stared out at them.

It wasn't just the human mercenaries—the devil-touched, with their inhuman features, and the demons, with their beast-like frames, were all sitting in neat lines and bowing their heads as one.

"Oh, are you awake?"

The saint's cool, clear voice rang out over the blatantly abnormal scene. Casting a cautious glance in her direction, I saw Glasses chained up and hunched on all fours for some reason.

*What the hell?*

"Oh dear," the saint said. "It looks as though you've forgotten, haven't you? You don't remember our hot, *steamy* night together?"

Her voice was full of torrid passion, but we definitely hadn't done anything like that. The men lying underneath us were covered in bruises, and I heard occasional cries of "Eek" and "Help meee" coming from the pile...

"Memories..." I gritted out.

"Hmm?"

"Wipe their memories. Everyone's, right now!" I issued my command to the woman who called me Mistress. "If you won't wipe them, I will. I'll wipe all of them—off the face of the earth!"

"S-Sis?!" the dumbasses called out in a panic.

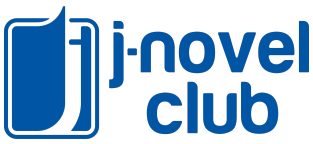
"Oh my..." The Horny Slut, meanwhile, sounded oddly pleased.

"I c'n shtill drink more..." Cion groaned from my lap.

For some reason, Atalanta bapped her with a kitty punch.

And so began a stupidly chaotic morning.

Our battle yesterday, with death looming over our heads, felt like nothing but a bad dream.



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The Hero-Killing Bride: Volume 3
by Aoikou

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