

I

Aoikou
illust. Enji



THE HERO- KILLING BRIDE

The Blood-Soaked
Champion

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My throat ached bitterly in the parched air. The familiar scenery around me had been dyed in red, and my former comrades let out noises like the chirping of little birds as their bodies burned.

Why...? How...?

The answers were obvious, but my mind remained numb, unable to accept the truth of what had happened.

I wandered helplessly through the ruins, as though I were searching for something—and when I discovered that corpse, I understood what it was I had feared, what it was I had been searching for. Even as I gently cradled the body, it crumbled in my trembling hands, and with a gust like mocking laughter, the winds stole my child away.

I had lost everything. The family I'd sworn to protect, the friends I'd cherished, the future I'd believed in—all of them had been consumed by the flames. No matter how my body shook in anger, no matter how my throat wailed in rage, the truth remained. I had nothing left...

As I let out a silent scream to the skies, the mourning cries of countless stolen lives whirled in a tempest above me.

"Aaaaaa..."

I understood. I knew what needed to be done. This, too, was obvious. In the distance, I could hear the voices of the ones who had taken everything from me.

The things I had lost would never be restored. The lives they had stolen would never return.

Then, I would...

We would...

Chapter 1

“Assassinate the Hero? *Me?* Nope. No way. We’re talking about *the Hero* here!”

Life in service to the Gods was always filled with trials, but tonight, they were going way too far. They wanted *me*, all on my own, to go kill the Hero who’d defeated the Demon Lord? Whoever had written this idiotic order, I’d skip the inquisition and send them straight to the executioner. Nobody could possibly object.

“The Seven High Cardinals were nearly unanimous. You understand the weight that carries, don’t you? *Inquisitor Alicia?*”

In other words, if I refused, *I’d* be the one facing the inquisitors.

“Uggggh... Wish they’d all just drop dead.”

“Oh, come now, don’t say such things in front of the Gods!” the cardinal chided with a shit-eating grin.

I contemplated grabbing my bible and throwing it at the smug bastard; if I aimed right, I could probably get him right in the glasses. I resisted the urge, though. We were, after all, in front of the Gods. No matter how badly my stupid boss pissed me off, there were things I could and couldn’t do. What’s more, he was one of the Seven High Cardinals, second only to the pope himself. And so—

“Die!”

“Aha ha— Wha?”

—I settled for throwing the sheaf of documents back in his face as hard as I could.

“Come on, what kind of job is this to shove onto your darling inquisitor?” I complained. “You couldn’t push back even a little?”

“Oh, I did push back. I made counterproposals, offered compromises, raised concerns that we were being a tad hasty...” As he spoke, Glasses gathered up

the divine orders and investigative dossiers that were now strewn across the floor. “But if I’m the only one in opposition, all that does is hurt my own standing.”

Ugh. Seriously, why couldn’t this idiot just die already?

I looked up to the heavens, gazing at the icons of the Seven Gods that adorned the cathedral. My role was to follow the divine orders I was given, track down targets suspected of heresy, and dispose of them. This was my Gods-given mission and my job. Naturally, I had no authority to overrule the judgments of the Gods, and no intention of disobeying in the first place.

They could at least do a better job convincing me, though.

“Weren’t you supposed to be convening to discuss whether the Church should canonize the Hero as a saint?” I asked. “How did you get from declaring him a saint to declaring him a heretic? Seems like a bit of a leap, if you ask me.” For the cardinals to completely reverse course that quickly, there must’ve been some kind of dire new development... “Wait, no... Were there suspicions that *the Hero* might secretly be a demon?”

The man they called the Hero was a figure of reverence, humanity’s champion. He’d won his title after single-handedly slaying countless demons—all of them superhumanly powerful—and finally returning with the severed head of their leader, the Demon Lord. It had marked a turning point in human history, an unprecedented triumph over the demons...

But, of course, there would always be voices of doubt. *Was that really the Demon Lord’s head?* they wondered. *Did he really kill the Demon Lord?* But if it *was* all just a scheme, if he’d shown up with a fake head in order to take down humanity from the inside, then—

“Mmm...” My boss interrupted my thoughts. “Well, basically, they’re jealous.”

I stared at him in stunned silence. “What?”

He finished collecting the scattered documents and gave me a shallow grin. “In their wisdom, ‘the Gods’ have decided that as things stand, the Hero poses an unacceptable threat to the authority of the crown and the Church.”

“Ah... So that’s how it is.” I quietly accepted the documents as he held them

out to me once again.

I understood the reasoning now, as sickening as it always was. I'd already heard rumors of a new sect forming out in the borderlands, the "Church of the Hero" or some nonsense like that.

"This is ridiculous," I grumbled. "The Demon Lord's dead, but that doesn't mean his armies have just vanished. Everyone else is still out fighting right this minute, aren't they?" I'd noticed the cathedral was oddly quiet lately; that must've been why.

"Actually..." I thought to myself. "Hang on, was I ordered to remain here on standby so that...?"

"Bingo! It was so we could stick you with this job! Ah, it makes a cardinal proud to have underlings who are quick on the uptake!"

Not proud enough to take his damn job seriously, apparently. Also, this dumbass just said the quiet part out loud, didn't he?

"It'd be a waste to let one of the other enforcers steal a juicy mission like this one. Talk about lucky!" he said with a grin.

"What do you mean, 'lucky'? *I'm* the one putting my life on the line here," I shot back. "You know, if you keep pushing people too hard, the Gods are going to punish you for it someday."

"And if that day comes, I intend to humbly accept my fate."

"Is that so?" *In that case, shall I deliver it myself, right this second? I am a representative of the Gods, after all.*

"It looks like there's something you're *really* dying to say... What's the matter?"

"Just your imagination, Your Eminence." I didn't want to say anything at all—I just wanted to drop-kick him out a window.

"By the way, I've heard there was also a plan to bring the Hero into the royal family by offering him the princess, but apparently it didn't go well."

"Is the princess really that ugly?" We were a little ways away from the capital, and I'd never met her myself. *Huh.*

“Don’t be silly,” Glasses replied. “I wouldn’t call her a world-shattering beauty, but she’s lovely and elegant enough. Her breasts are bigger than yours too.”

Ah, yup, I’m going to kill him. I can kill my boss, it’s fine.

“She’s not the only big name they sent out to try and win over the Hero’s heart. There was the Shrine Princess of the East, the Heiress of the Southern Seas—the kinds of beauties any man would give up his life’s fortune for a single night with. And every last one of them got turned down.”

“From where I’m sitting, it seems like *you’re* the ones asking for divine punishment, tossing around women like objects.” Well, not like there was anything new about women having no power; that ship had long since sailed. “Anyway, don’t you think jumping straight from there to assassination is a bit much?”

Talk about a complete one-eighty.

“I won’t deny it.”

“If you did, I would’ve punched you into next week.”

Assassinate the Hero, huh? I wasn’t thrilled with the idea. But, well... I didn’t really have any other options.

That left me with a different problem, though: the Hero’s *special traits*.

I voiced the question that had risen to the top of my mind. “Is it really true that blades can’t cut him?”

I’d heard the rumors, but according to the dossier, his powers were the real deal. The Hero was a champion blessed with *the love of the Gods*—a supposedly divine protection that could repel any blade. So I’d get blocked even if I tried to kill him in his sleep? What the hell? That was way too overpowered.

“Are there any weaknesses?”

I kept reading through the dossier, but the lists of failed assassinations and rejected women didn’t give me anything obvious to work with. After that was a record of the Hero’s superhuman battle prowess; he’d taken the heads of too many infamous demons to keep count. He was a mysterious figure to begin

with, but these documents didn't even have anything about where or when he'd been born... Seriously, what kind of investigative dossier was this supposed to be? These investigators were completely phoning it in. I'd kill them.

"So, what am I even supposed to do here? I really don't think I can take him in a fight." I desperately hoped my boss wasn't enough of an idiot to send me out with no plan whatsoever...

The idiot leaned down to whisper gleefully in my ear, "Fight love with love...
≡"

"Gah...!" Gross!

He paused. "You sound a bit shocked."

"My apologies, Your Eminence, that was just creepy as fuck." I regathered my thoughts. "Anyway, what are you talking about?"

"Ah, right..." Glasses took the documents back from me and began flipping through them. "Yup, just a sec..."

He finally found what he'd been looking for, pulling out a few pages and tossing the rest aside.

"Presenting the Harem Project!" he proclaimed loudly. "Your mission: use your allure and your charms to break the Hero's will!"

There was a long, awkward silence as that stupid name echoed faintly through the cathedral.

"Wooooow..." I said flatly.

So, they wanted me to approach the Hero—the one who'd vanquished the Demon Lord, the one who countless talented women had already failed to seduce—and seduce him. *I* was expected to do this. *I*, an inquisitor, but first and foremost, a *bride of the Gods*.

And after years of workplace sexual harassment from Glasses over being flat-chested or not smiling enough or whatever, in a critical situation where a single misstep could make an enemy of our nation's champion, we were *really* going with "Harem"?

I stared at the cardinal. "Would you like to die now, Your Eminence?"

I'll be sure to read you your last rites, in honor of our long acquaintance... As I took out my bible, his hand whipped out in a “stop” gesture, and he wagged his finger at me with a “tsk, tsk, tsk!”

Die.

“I’m not joking at all, you know. This is ultimately just a theory, but our investigations have suggested that you’ll be able to ignore ‘the love of the Gods’ if you have *the love of the Hero*. His blessing reacts to perceived hostility and repels those who come into contact with him; so if you’re beloved by the Hero, it should let you through!”

“Uh-huh... Are you sure you mean ‘theory’ and not ‘wild guess’?” It all sounded like total bullshit.

“They say that at times, people will sacrifice their very lives for the sake of those they love!” he declared. “As a champion, as *the Hero*, all the more so!”

In other words, I’d use love to stab him through the heart. Wooow, so funny! I wasn’t laughing, though.

I sighed. “You do realize this means you’ll be losing a highly skilled inquisitor whether I succeed or fail?”

“Come now, I never said you needed to offer up your body! Every individual has their own unique form of love. There are those who experience *platonic love*, after all...” The cardinal launched into a sermon about the selfless loving care of a holy mother for her children or something. I made sure to give his words of wisdom the attention they deserved. *Mute!* ☆

I returned my focus to the documents.

“Seriously, what a pain in the ass...” I muttered. But all the same, by the ring on my finger and the vows it carried, I had no choice but to take on this job.

“All right, I understand that these are unique circumstances. But you *do* expect this to actually work, *right?*” I asked sharply as Glasses continued blathering.

Raising his arms in the air as he kept on going, the cardinal gave me a self-satisfied nod. Then he nodded his head deeply once again. Was this man a total

idiot?

“Based on my own experience, I’m virtually certain of it,” he replied. “Well-endowed women clearly aren’t the Hero’s type; so, Alicia, I’m certain you’ll—”

“Right, commencing assassination.” *You first, then the Hero.*

The corner of my bible, slammed down with murderous intent, left the cardinal unconscious for just a few minutes. As soon as he got back up, he sent me off with another shit-eating grin. I’d hoped the impact might’ve given him amnesia, but no such luck. I boarded a freight wagon that was ready and waiting for me, bound for the city where the Hero was staying.

I grumbled to myself as I sat on the hard floor of the wagon; it felt like I was a tribute being shipped out for delivery. With a deep sigh, I stared up at the ceiling I’d be getting acquainted with for the next few days, ruminating on the contents of the now-burned divine orders.

My target was the Hero who’d killed the Demon Lord, and my mission was to approach, entice, and assassinate him.

“What a pain...”

I’d had plenty of complicated jobs before, but they’d pretty much all been things like breaking into a nobleman’s heavily guarded manor, or wiping out an order of heathen missionaries who’d snuck into the capital—difficult, but all more or less workable with enough brute force, in the end. I understood fully that *those* were the kinds of jobs I was best suited for; shitty disguises, infiltration, and reconnaissance just weren’t my style. That was why I was an inquisitor and an enforcer. But now, they wanted me to build up an intimate relationship with someone, *then* kill him...

“Ugggghhhh...” I sighed once again. This was such a pain...

Just as I was feeling well and truly fed up, I saw a wagon packed with slaves passing ahead of us. They were all young children—probably being shipped out to some pervert somewhere, or to a brothel in the borderlands. Either way, their future was anything but bright. They’d get toyed with for as long as they remained entertaining, and then once they broke, they’d become pig feed. Even if they avoided that fate, they’d live out their lives being treated worse than

cattle.

I found myself staring out, frozen, and cut off my train of thought.

Well, as long as I *could* kill the Hero, all I needed to do was kill him. Divine protection or not, in the end, he was only human. As long as I could get through that legendary “love of the Gods” or whatever, I’d just stick a knife in him, mission complete.

I worked myself harder than most people, I got more blood on my hands than most people, and in return, I got to live a better life than most people. In this world, that was something irreplaceably precious.

There aren’t any Gods to look out for us here.

The “Gods” whose word the Church preached were nothing but a fantasy made up to manipulate the masses. There never had been any, and there never would be—they were just a useful lie.

But even so, for most people, seeing was believing—even if all they’d seen was a phony miracle manufactured by a bunch of frauds.

I kept staring out in silence. I didn’t want to lie to the “merchandise” on the passing wagon. But faced with a life being treated like cattle by some sick “master,” who *wouldn’t* try and pray to some made-up Gods? Who *wouldn’t* cling to a church that claimed to speak on the Gods’ behalf?

And so...

“May the blessings of the Gods be with you.”

I lifted my voice to the Gods, offering prayers I didn’t believe a word of. That was *the only reason* anyone needed me in this world, after all.

I was on my way to the borderlands, where raids by the remnants of the demons’ army were still a regular occurrence. My destination was on the front lines of the war against the demons, our country’s first line of defense: Arshelm, the World’s End. It was a seedy, violent place, and it had taken much heavier casualties than the central cities.

It wasn’t the kind of place any bride of the Gods would want to travel to alone. But all the same, by the ring on my finger and the vows it carried, it was

where I was bound to go. To serve the fools who preached the hollow words of the Gods; to kill the Hero who'd vanquished the Demon Lord.

All would be as the Gods willed it.

I'd only just arrived when I received word that a cardinal had been assassinated.

Chapter 2

I'd never known my family. According to the nuns who raised me, they'd found me passed out in front of the church one snowy morning. The adults around me had all told me how I would've died if they'd found me any later, and how there'd been snow piled up everywhere except the spot I'd been lying, and other pretty stories to get me to believe in "the Gods." I hadn't been able to just quietly nod along, though. I'm not sure why. Maybe I was colder than other people, or a little bit sharper. I just got a vague feeling that these "Gods" they kept talking about couldn't be real; and as I thought about what all those stories meant if the Gods weren't real, I saw the world behind the curtain.

Once you start to look at the world that way, even miracles turn into nothing but parlor tricks. The time we spent in prayer began to look bizarre; idiotic, even.

The reason I continued to pray anyway was simple: I had nothing else to turn to. This world was much too cruel for me to survive on my own.

Any transgression against the will of "the Gods" would leave me branded a heathen, to be persecuted or outright *disposed of*. I didn't want to end up that way. With each and every "heathen" I was sent to deal with, I grew more and more certain of that. This was what I needed to do to be allowed to remain in this world.

Luckily, the man who took me from the orphanage was one of the more tolerable assholes, relatively speaking. Compared to the idiots who mistook their convents for brothels or slave-houses, or the cardinals who saw their underlings as nothing but disposable pawns, my boss was pretty reasonable. Although I still couldn't refuse any orders I was given, he was at least willing to forgive me if I kicked him around a bit.

That was why I couldn't afford to have him lose his standing, and I *absolutely* couldn't afford to have him die on me. My current work environment wasn't the best, but it definitely wasn't the worst either; I needed to do what I could to

maintain it. I absolutely needed Glasses to stay alive...

“My goodness me, the assassination of a cardinal is simply unprecedented! It’s a cardinal sin!” High Cardinal Salamanrius, the boss who’d seen me off with a smile a few days ago, spoke cheerfully through my ear stud.

These piercings were given only to enforcers reporting directly to cardinals; they contained magicite stones imbued with spells for long-distance communication. We called it “the Guiding Light.” It was pretty convenient, all in all.

Honestly, my boss’s cheery voice was unpleasant enough that, for a moment, I raised my finger to end the call. Unfortunately, there were too many things we needed to talk about. For instance, what a shame it was that *he* wasn’t the one who’d died.

“Oh dear, I’m picking up some unwholesome thoughts!” he said.

“That isn’t how these work. Please drop dead, Your Eminence.”

A cardinal had just been assassinated. This was a serious situation where every second counted, but he sounded utterly carefree.

Since my boss seemed completely unperturbed by the death of one of his colleagues, I tried to move the conversation forward myself. “Was the victim a cardinal priest? Or a cardinal deacon, maybe?”

Compared to the cardinal bishops, who mostly stayed holed up in their cathedrals, the cardinal priests and cardinal deacons spent a lot more time out and about. The lower-ranking cardinals had fewer guards assigned to them, as well. With the Church shorthanded from hunting down the remnants of the demons’ army, there weren’t enough guards to go around; lately, I’d even heard of cardinal deacons traveling entirely unguarded. And all the while, the Church of the Hero was out there challenging people’s faith... *Wait, could the killer be from the Church of the Hero?*

Glasses gave a lightly mocking chuckle, as though he knew exactly what I was thinking. “Unfortunately, the victim was one of the Seven High Cardinals, Cardinal Chaucus.”

I stood there agape. “You’re joking. That’s impossible.”

“My thoughts exactly. I certainly can’t imagine it’s the work of human hands.”

I’d heard a lot of nasty rumors about Cardinal Chaucus. Honestly, it was a bit of a relief to hear he’d died, but...

“You think it’s demons, then?” I asked.

“At the moment, that’s the most natural conclusion. He was more cautious than anyone when it came to personal security.”

And yet, someone had slipped through and assassinated him anyway. My thoughts were racing. “This is really bad news.”

“Right?”

There was no way this would end here. With the Demon Lord dead and his armies crumbling, this could be a last-ditch effort to strike a critical blow at us in return—in which case, my boss was in danger too.

“Should I head back?” I asked.

The Hero assassination plot, or “Harem Project” or whatever, was the least of our concerns now. We had more pressing matters to deal with than this stupid infighting, and I had more than enough reason to write off the trip here and make my way home. Frankly, even if I *did* head back now, it might already be too late by the time I arrived... But if there was a chance I could make it in time, it was worth it. Sure, I told Glasses to drop dead on a daily basis, but there was a huge difference between “I wish he’d die” and “I’d be fine with him dying.”

“I’m glad you’re so concerned for me, but if the killer *does* turn out to be one of the former Demon Lord’s generals, you wouldn’t be able to handle it regardless. So I’d like you to track down the Hero and make contact with him as planned. Depending on how things go, we might need him to lend us his renowned strength.”

“You really are a total scumbag, Your Eminence.”

He’d said all that stuff about assassinating or breaking or whatever, but the moment he was in any personal danger, he switched tracks completely. Even the Gods must’ve been shocked at his total lack of principles. *O Gods, please look upon your poor lost lamb and strike him down in your wrath. Amen.*

“I can’t help it,” Glasses replied. “Man is but imperfect, after all.”

“You’re using the words of the Gods to make excuses now? You’re absolutely shameless. Also, please stop reading my mind—it’s creepy.”

“Oh?”

If I didn’t need to head back, that was fine too. Right after I’d finally been freed from the hard floor of the freight wagon, willingly stepping back into that prison would be sheer stupidity. My butt and back were already at their limit.

“Could you get me nicer transportation next time?” I asked. *At the very least, carry me around on a big fluffy bed or something, instead of a wagon floor.*

“Try to make the best of it. We mustn’t be frivolous in the sight of the Gods.”

Not like you give a shit.

“Fine,” I said. “Please take *just enough* care of yourself, Your Eminence.”

“I will. I’m not crazy about dying either.”

“Is that so,” I deadpanned.

I returned my thoughts to the mission. Once I arrived, I’d been planning to go pay my respects to High Cardinal Kyrius, the member of the Seven High Cardinals who oversaw this city. Now that one of his colleagues had just been assassinated, though, that’d be a lot more difficult. I definitely didn’t want to end up as a suspect.

“Also, please reach out to the cardinal for me,” I asked. The truth was, I’d rather not meet with him at all if I could avoid it. With all my business concluded, I moved to end the call, but—

“Oh, one more thing...” the cardinal interrupted, deliberately waiting until the last second.

I reluctantly gave him my attention. It’s hard being a loyal subordinate.

“What is it? This had better not be something stupid...”

“I’m looking forward to welcoming you home once you’ve become a woman!”

“Die!” I ended the call.

It was hard to believe *this* was the surrogate father figure who'd taken me from the orphanage and taught me all he could. If he'd been there in person, I probably would've broken his legs.



“All right...”

Whether I was manipulating the Hero or assassinating him, there was no time to waste. I hadn't wanted to stay here long in the first place.

This was Arshelm, the World's End. Here on the border, even the air felt heavy and oppressive, and the people's faces were rougher and grimmer than I was used to seeing in the central cities.

From the moment I arrived, I'd felt the gazes of passersby prickling uncomfortably at my skin. More than caution, it felt like revulsion—people here didn't seem to trust the Church much.

“What a pain in the ass...”

Gritting my teeth and bearing it, I made my way to a nearby inn. Even here, on a main street, there was a group of rough-looking men clustered around the doorway, blatantly whistling the moment they saw me. It made me sick, but I'd let it slide—dealing with these assholes wasn't part of my job.

Inside, the tavern was packed with men who were already completely wasted at midday. Most of them were mercenaries or similarly seedy types. They were unpleasant just to look at, but there weren't any knights around to defend border cities like this one; without these guys, demons would start making their way farther inland. Basically, they were trash, but too useful to throw away completely.

I'd never set foot in a place like this if I could avoid it; but—be it a brothel or a torture chamber—wherever I was ordered to go, I went. That was my role as an enforcer and my burden as an inquisitor.

As I made my way farther in, the background noise around me turned into excited chatter. Mostly *appraisal*, from the sound of it. I ignored it and continued toward the back, heading over to the innkeeper I'd read about in the reports.

A bald-headed man stood behind the bar, filling glasses with booze. His bronzed skin was covered in scars, and his build was heavyset. From the sharp, hard-edged look in his eyes, he was clearly a shady character; he looked more like a bandit chief than a bartender.

“Might I have a moment of your time, please?” I took my bible out from its holder and set it on the bar to make clear I was here on official Church business. The innkeeper glanced at it briefly, without a hint of surprise.

“What business does a bride of the Holy Church have in here?”

“I’ve been informed that the Hero is staying here in Arshelm, and I’ve traveled here to pay him my regards.”

I could tell I was on the money. The moment I said that name, there was a subtle shift in the bar’s atmosphere. I kept talking while gauging the other men’s reactions in my peripheral vision. “I’m told that men who make their living on the battlefield often frequent this inn. Would you happen to know where I can find him, by any chance?”

“Mmm, lemme think...” the barkeep stalled. He picked up a glass and started wiping it with a rag, closing his eyes in thought. “Feel like I might’ve seen a guy like that, or he might’ve gotten killed someplace... I get a lotta people in and out of here. Ain’t like I remember all their faces.”

I got the message—there was obviously no love lost for the Church here. How bothersome.

“I believe every child of the Gods has a sacred duty to aid the Church as the representatives of the Gods; do they not?” I asked.

“So what? Still can’t tell you stuff I don’t remember.” He obviously knew, though.

I let the silence hang for a moment.

“Very well. A glass of your finest, then.” I took a seat and held out a silver coin. I could force the information out of him, but it seemed like a bad idea to start a fight where the Hero might see me.

“Thought the Gods didn’t allow drinking.”

“If they watched over us at all times, even the Gods would surely grow tired.” I had no intention of actually drinking, obviously. But I’d just look ridiculous waiting for the Hero with a glass of milk in my hand. “Or do you have no liquor to serve to a bride of the Gods?”

“Oh, I do. Everyone’s equal ’fore the Gods; least, that’s how it is in this bar.” He grabbed a bottle with a worn-off label from the shelf behind him and poured me a glass. “So this here is *the drink of the Gods*, see?”

The drink he held out to me was deep red, like a melted-down ruby. Even the rich, full-bodied aroma was enough to make my head spin.

I stared at it, fascinated. “It certainly is.”

“Ain’t it?”

Liquor, too, was a gift from the Gods. As a bride of the Gods, I wasn’t allowed to indulge. My cardinal kept buying all kinds of booze, though, despite having absolute garbage taste. So, over time, I’d naturally picked up a sense for good liquor, and this glass truly held a drink fit for the Gods themselves. This was the *good stuff*, no mistaking it.

It really is a shame I can’t drink it, I pondered to myself as I rested my elbows on the bar, enjoying the fragrance and tracing my fingers along the cover of my bible.

As the barkeep stepped away, I sensed a group of men coming up behind me. I counted the rough thuds of heavy footsteps: one, two...three pairs.

“You havin’ a good time there, missy?” one of them slurred.

“I suppose so,” I replied calmly.

They absolutely stank of booze... But, well, I wanted to avoid starting any fights, *etc.* The drink in front of me had put me in a decent mood; I could get through this. Besides, even if I helped reform these guys, it wasn’t like there’d be any reward in it for me.

“Ain’t seen your face ’round here before. You ain’t from the church up here, are you? Come from down south?”

From the corner of my eye, I glared at the set of fingers that were unrestrainedly making their way around my waist, and I pointedly thumped the corner of my bible on the bar. “I must warn you, this body is promised to the Gods. If you continue your jests any further, it could constitute an act of sacrilege.”

“So that’s the deal, huh? You got a sweet face, but you get around, don’tcha, missy? Just how many ‘Gods’ have you slept with? Hmm?”

La la la, I don’t hear anything. Do you hear anything?

“C’mon, loosen up,” he continued. “We don’t get pretty things like you out here that often. To sin is human, or whatever, right, babe?”

“Hmm, was that the saying?” As I spoke, I pushed down on the man’s fingers with my left hand, stopping their advance up toward my chest. I absolutely wanted to avoid any killing that wasn’t part of my job. I wanted to avoid it.

“Eh, who cares, you’re gonna be keepin’ that fuckin’ cardinal company tonight anyway, ain’tcha? So why don’tcha have some fun with us first, huh?”

The swaggering idiot picked up my glass and downed it in one gulp.

My glass, the one I’d been planning to sneak a drink of later.

While I seethed, I shot the barkeep a look, but he simply closed his eyes. *Ah, that’s right. Everyone’s equal in here, even the Gods, was that it?*

Even as I pushed down, the fingers were still trying to creep their way up; I stopped them once again, with a firm grip this time.

“Please allow me to impart to you some of the teachings of the Gods,” I announced, with the most beatific smile I could manage.

“Huh...?”

Snap. Just as the man’s stupid face scrunched up in confusion, the sound of his fingers breaking echoed through the bar.

“Wh-Wha— Gaaaaaah!”

Undeterred, the other two unsheathed their swords in what I suppose was an admirable show of courage.

“Y-You, you fuckin’ bitch! What the fuck?!”

“Oh dear, *please* don’t cause a commotion. Pretty please?” Not that they’d ever be the types to quietly sit and listen to a sermon, but whatever. “Kindly put away your swords. To raise arms against me is an act of open defiance against the Gods.”

I thumped my bible on the bar once more to emphasize my final warning. If they backed down here, that was fine. If they tried to fight, then—

“You think soldiers are gonna let some fuckin’ cunt make a fool of us?!” the lackeys shouted.

No, I suppose I didn’t.

“We’re gonna fuck you till that pretty face is a cryin’, pleadin’ mess, y’hear?!” The man with the broken fingers kept spewing more disgusting threats as he pulled out a knife with his other hand.

Three men ganging up on one woman, *and* they were getting out weapons? Seemed like a bit much, in my opinion.

I didn’t say that out loud, but it must’ve shown on my face.

“About time you learned, bitch! Out there on the battlefield, don’t matter how much you cry and scream, there ain’t no Gods comin’ to save you! We’re gonna teach you that, good and hard!” Filthy spittle flying as he worked himself into a frenzy, the man charged at me with the knife. The booze was already kicking in, leaving his footsteps shaky and off-balance.

“No, thank you, that’s quite all right.” I quickly closed my bible on the knife, holding it in place like a bookmark, and smiled at him. “The holy pen is mightier than the sword, or something like that?”

With just a quick motion of my wrist, I twisted the bible to snap off the blade. As the man stared dumbfounded, I grabbed the blade and stabbed it into his knee, not bothering to listen to his scream.

“Did you know?” I asked, swinging the bible up to shatter the second man’s jaw. “There are times when the word of the Gods serves not to guide men, but to punish them.” I spun around on my heel, holding the book open to the third man, who’d frozen in place. “That may not put you in a mood for reading, though...” With his vision blocked, I kneed him in the solar plexus. He hunched over, and once his head was in the right spot, I slammed the bible shut hard—right next to his ear.

BANG!

The man whimpered in pain and confusion as the sweet sound reverberated through his head. Foaming at the mouth, he collapsed to the ground, blood leaking out of his ear. The man with the broken jaw and the man with the stabbed knee writhed and groaned next to him.

I sighed. This was genuinely pathetic. “If people could just act their age...”

As I looked around the bar, some of the customers were trying to make a run for it. Others had backed against the walls, clutching their bottles in panic. So *these* were the fearsome mercenaries of the borderlands, huh? Honestly, part of me just wanted to kick their asses; but even an inquisitor was still a child of the Gods, in the end. I supposed it was part of my duty to shepherd this wayward flock after all.

“All right, all right, it’s fine,” I addressed the crowd. “Everything’s *fine*. No one’s going to die, so just settle down, everyone.”

Keeping my body language carefully nonthreatening, I knelt beside the three dumbasses and offered up a prayer to the Gods.

The prayer I recited was long, elaborate, and—frankly—a pain in the ass, so I’m skipping over the long bits, but anyway...

“—and so, let your blessings be upon these men who have lost sight of your holy light, that they might find the strength to set forth once again.”

It was a pretty half-assed prayer, all in all; anyone who actually knew their stuff might’ve had a stroke if they’d heard it. But, in the end, the feeling was the important part. It wasn’t the meaning of the words that mattered, it was what you were *trying to say*.

There weren’t any Gods, after all.

“**Holy Prayer.**” As I finished praying, little grains of light began to float up out of nowhere. They gently settled onto the three injured men staring dazedly up at me, enveloping their bodies in light and healing their wounds. This miracle granted through devotion to the Gods, Holy Prayer, was really just a technique we called an *orison*. We of the Church were the only ones able to call upon this “divine grace”; it was all a scam, but those lights always looked beautiful all the same.

“If you bother me again, next time I’ll gouge out your eyes, cut off your ears and noses, and show you the end of days. Shall I do that to help you find your faith in the Gods?” I wasn’t *threatening*; I was simply offering a *proposal*.

The three dumbasses, having finally gotten a clue, fervently shook their heads no. Very well. For a large enough donation, anyone could go to the Church and receive a healing orison, but apparently these guys didn’t have that kind of money. They were practically different people from a few minutes ago—now, they looked ready to flee at a moment’s notice.

“Excuse me, please, everyone!” I announced loudly to the room, since this seemed like a good opportunity. “I’ve traveled to this city in search of the Hero! If anyone here can help me find him, please do let me know!”

I could hear the innkeeper chuckling behind the bar. I’d been trying to sound a little cute, but I couldn’t stand being laughed at.

I *really* wasn’t cut out for this... I grumpily sat back down at the bar, but before long, a commotion started around the entrance. Before I’d even turned to see what was happening, I smelled the scent of blood wafting into the room.

I silently tensed, instinctively preparing to take a combat stance, but then the crowd parted. As I saw the guys who’d been making a racket quietly returning to their seats, I realized who was standing in the middle of them.

“Hmm? What’s going on, boss? Why’s everyone all worked up?”

He was young. So much younger than I’d heard, basically just a kid. He was probably somewhere around my age. Peeking out under his hood was an androgynous face, one you could mistake for a girl’s at first glance. The Hero stepped forward and showed his gear to the innkeeper.

“Sorry, I got it all bloody again. Think it’ll come off okay?”

“If you’re tryin’ to test me out, you’ve picked up a lotta nerve, kid,” the innkeeper replied. “Bring it over later and I’ll take care of it.”

“Thanks.”

The stench of blood emanating from his whole body was thick enough to drown out any lingering traces of the holy ritual I’d just performed. For a

moment, it felt as though the boy standing in front of me was death itself.

“Is... Is all of that demon blood?” I asked hesitantly.

“Huh...? Oh, yeah. Y’know. I mean, it’d be creepy if it was human blood, right?”

“Well... I suppose it would be, yes.”

As I gave an awkward nod, a pair of eyes looked me over with the innocent gaze of a wild beast.

“You’re not one of the nuns from in town. Did you wanna talk to me?” he asked.

In any case, I had to say something to keep the conversation going. I bowed my head in greeting. “It’s an honor to meet you, sir. I’ve come here on orders from Cardinal Salamanrius, of the Seven High Cardinals. My name is Alicia Snowell.”

“Alicia... Alicia...” the Hero muttered to himself a few times, confirming that the name didn’t ring any bells, and then held out his right hand.



“Nice to meet you, uh, Sister Alicia? I’m Elcyon. People call me the Hero and stuff, but I’m just a regular merc.”

“You humble yourself, Sir Hero,” I replied as I shook the offered hand. It felt too small to be the hand of a champion. “You are a treasure to all humanity.”

“Feels kinda awkward when you say it like that...”

The Hero reached into his cloak, pulled out a leather sack that stank of blood, and handed it across the bar.

The innkeeper took it and briefly opened it to check the contents. “Just be a minute,” he said, disappearing into a back room.

“What was that?” I asked, staring after the innkeeper.

“It’s...” The Hero hesitated a moment. “Demon parts.”

Ah, so that’s why he calls him “boss.”

This inn was also a mercenary guild office, apparently. Mercenaries got bounties from the kingdom based on how many demons they killed. Since the numbers were all self-reported, I’d heard they brought back demon body parts as proof, but...

“You slew that many all on your own?”

“That’s how I stay fed.”

He took a sip from a wooden cup the innkeeper had handed him before leaving. It had an unfamiliar milky aroma, too sweet to be alcohol.

“So, what’s your deal?” he asked. “Never seen the guys here this quiet before.”

Shit. I glared over at the three dumbasses; they had missed their cue to go back to their seats and were awkwardly hovering near the bar. If I tried to put on the “frail and innocent bride” act out here, it’d turn into a joke.

“Would it be all right if we spoke elsewhere?” I asked. “I’d prefer to avoid any unpleasant rumors spreading.”

“Fine with me. Can’t just ignore a messenger from His Eminence. Let’s talk upstairs—I’ve got a room here.”

The “boss” had just returned from the back with a handful of gold and silver coins. The Hero accepted the money and walked off toward the back stairs.

I tried to hand over a few silver coins separate from my drink tab to smooth over the trouble earlier, but the innkeeper politely refused.

“Can’t just take your money, unless you’re gonna be stayin’ here.”

Unfortunately, I already had a room waiting for me elsewhere.

“In that case, a round of drinks for everyone, please,” I said. “I fear I may have sobered them up somewhat.”

“Happy to provide. I’m runnin’ a business here, after all.”

As he gave me a wink and called out to the crowd of uncomfortable-looking guys, I got a better sense for what kind of place this was. Men who lived on the battlefield, staring death in the eyes every day, needed somewhere they could relax and let go of their worries for a while.

“This is a nice inn,” I told him as I followed after the Hero.

“The regulars are good folks too. They get a bit too ballsy sometimes, though.”

“I hope they’ve learned something of a lesson today in that regard.”

The narrow wooden staircase seemed like it’d be a tight squeeze for a heavily armed soldier, but the Hero’s gear was surprisingly light. The weapon peeking out under his cloak was on the longer side of what I’d call a short sword, and I didn’t see a bow or a spear on him. It was hard to believe he’d taken on so many demons with such minimal equipment—or rather, I supposed that was *exactly why* he was the Hero.

Everyone said demons’ physical abilities were on a completely different level from humans’. That was why mercenaries fighting demons would group up into parties with assigned roles. The vanguard would focus on defense, the rear guard would look for openings to strike, and once the demon was weakened, the group would charge in for the kill. Without supporting and complementing each other, humans had no hope of crossing that fundamental physiological gap; a one-on-one fight was plain suicide. But there were a small handful of

champions out there who could somehow even the odds—foremost among them, the Hero who'd succeeded in vanquishing the Demon Lord.

As we walked down a sparse hallway, decorated with a single tiny window, the blood-covered Hero interrupted my musing. "Is this your first time seeing guys like us?" He probably meant *mercenaries*, not champions.

"I'm afraid it is," I answered. "I apologize for my ignorance in these matters. I suppose you must find it laughable."

"No, you're fine. Just makes it easier for me, is all. I get uncomfortable when people come in thinking they already know what I'm like."

The room he led me to was small and spartan, with nothing but a bed, a little round table, and a chair. The window facing the main street was shut and latched tight, leaving the space dim and claustrophobic.

He put down his things and lit a candle. I could see a bathroom attached to the bedroom, but it looked equally bare-bones; it probably didn't have any hot water.

He offered me the single chair, but I politely refused. "I am merely an envoy. Please, allow me simply to accept your kind thoughts."

There was no way I'd ever let my guard down around this freak of nature. Call it professional paranoia.

"Just feel free to sit if you get tired." In contrast to my caution, the Hero looked completely relaxed as he smiled at me, taking off his gear and setting it on the table. "Okay if we talk while I clean up?"

"Please, go right ahead, sir."

I'd expected more of an uphill struggle just getting him to let me into his room; I'd already lucked out.

"If you have any injuries, I'd be more than happy to heal them," I offered.

He didn't nod, though; he just held out his hand to gesture that I should keep talking. It seemed like he was willing to listen, but wasn't especially interested in what I had to say.

I couldn't entirely blame him—everyone knew a messenger from the Church

was never good news. Still, I had my job to do. I reached into my waist pouch and took out a fake letter the cardinal had given me, hoping it'd get the Hero to sit up and pay more attention... It was a lost cause, though.

“To put matters simply, I have been sent here to guard you. We’ve received reports that factions of the Demon Lord’s army are on the move once again, and we fear that they may target you as the Demon Lord’s killer.” I paused to get my story straight. “In order to maintain cohesion, our forces are in need of a charismatic figure to rally around. If anything were to befall the champion who vanquished the Demon Lord, our entire nation’s morale would be impacted. I hope you can understand our concern.”

It was half truth, half lies. We *were* facing attacks from the former Demon Lord’s army, but they weren’t displaying any organized movement, and there was no sign that they were targeting the Hero. As things stood, it looked more like demons were just wandering around killing as they pleased.

It was possible that it could be a ploy to distract us, but that seemed unlikely. According to the Church’s analysis, it’d be a while longer before the demons found a new leader capable of uniting their entire species. Currently, most of the knights were rushing to hunt down as many remaining demons as possible before that could happen.

Having the “Church of the Hero” pop up in the middle of this precious reprieve must’ve *really* pissed them off. Not that I cared; it wasn’t my department.

“I don’t need help. I’ve told them before.”

Yup, you sure have. The reports I’d read had gone over all those offers and refusals in detail. They’d also made it obvious that the Hero didn’t actually need any help whatsoever.

Still, I needed to press in further. I hadn’t technically gotten permission to reveal this information, but I decided to creatively interpret my orders—if Glasses had gone to the trouble of contacting me, this was probably why.

“One of the Seven High Cardinals has been killed.”

The Hero turned to look at me. “When?”

“About one week ago. The victim was Cardinal Chaucus.”

For a moment, I saw a shadow pass over the Hero’s face. “Ah... *Him*.”

“He was stabbed through the heart from behind, decapitated, and then nailed to the cathedral wall, I’m told.”

“I see,” he said slowly.

There was no mistaking it. Up until now, the Hero’s expression had been as placid as a windless sea, but now there were traces of something dark and muddled mixed in. There’d been plenty of people who’d hated that old creep, but what was the Hero’s connection to him? I couldn’t come up with anything. I wanted to keep digging, though. If my guess was wrong, I could always just pass it off as small talk.

“Sir Hero, were you raised in an orphanage, by any chance?”

His silence was all the answer I needed.

“I see. Your past is shrouded in a great deal of mystery; there are even some within the Church who speak of you as a saint sent to us by the Gods themselves. I suppose this is one question answered, at least.”

“How about you?” he asked. “The way you talk is pretty fancy. You secretly a noble heiress down on your luck or something?”

He’d deliberately changed the subject. There was something in his past that he absolutely didn’t want me touching. Personally, I didn’t like digging up those sorts of things, but for this job to go smoothly, I needed to know as much as possible about the guy I’d be killing.

“No, I...” I paused. “I’m an orphan as well. I took my vows at the age of ten; since then, I’ve served under His Eminence the Cardinal. The way I speak is... Well, I suppose you could call it a habit I acquired in order to get by in those circumstances.”

I gave him a friendly smile as I tilted my head in contemplation. My acting was perfect, if I do say so myself. I just needed to turn up the charm, and he’d let his guard down naturally...

“Makes sense. You’ve had it rough too, huh,” he said with a small hint of

sympathy. He didn't seem flustered in the slightest as he continued cleaning his equipment. I'd gotten a reaction, but there wasn't anything I could use as leverage. Normally, any guy would get at least a little self-conscious alone in a room with a beautiful girl. It was almost as though he had *no interest in women whatsoever*.

Wait, does he prefer men...? No, there's no way...

Or rather, I couldn't say for sure. I couldn't, but champions were all infamous womanizers. I'd heard prostitutes talk excitedly about unforgettable nights with tight, rugged bodies honed by battle... I hadn't paid much attention, though, since it wasn't anything a servant of the Gods needed to think about. What's more, the "champion" in front of me now had a slim build and didn't look especially muscle-bound. I cursed my own thoughtlessness, regardless—I should've listened closer to those women's stories.

Anyway, fine! Time to change tactics!

"I'm truly sorry to make such an impertinent request of you. However, if I were to turn back now, I would be punished quite harshly for abandoning my duties..." *How's this, huh?!*

Just as I was starting to lose my cool a bit, I saw the Hero's shoulders twitch ever so slightly. *Hmm.*

"Please, just for a short while... Would you permit me to stand by your side?" I gave a pleading bow, hiding my inner feelings behind a well-trained poker face.

The Hero thought for a few moments, then let out a small sigh. I got the picture now—he seemed to be quite the chivalrous type.

"All right, fine. If you're gonna get punished for not sticking with me, then do what you want. Just don't get in the way of my work, okay?"

"Yes, sir!" I gave the purest, sweetest smile I could, but...

He's not even looking at me! What the hell? Seriously, do I have that little sex appeal?!

His attention was focused on the blade of his short sword, freshly polished

and wickedly sharp. As he held it up to the light to examine it before running it along his whetstone once again, the look in his clear eyes was determined and unwavering. He had no reason at all to pay attention to the pleas of a random stranger like me. Either he was just soft, or he was completely confident in his own abilities; it was too early for me to be sure which.

“Anyway, how about you head back to the church for today? It’s pretty rough out there after dark. If a cute girl like you goes out walking alone, you’re gonna get jumped by way worse guys than the ones downstairs.”

“Thank you, I appreciate your warning.”

It was true that as a bride, I was expected to sleep by the Gods’ side. But at this rate, I’d *never* make any progress on my mission.

“I think I should stay here for the night. If anything were to happen to you on the very day we met, I would never forgive myself,” I said. “Should I make arrangements with the innkeeper downstairs?”

The Hero gave an awkward laugh as he sheathed his sword. “The boss can be pretty tough to talk to.”

“He seems quite kindhearted and friendly in comparison to you, Sir Hero.”

I’d said it as a joke, but the Hero’s eyes widened in shock. For a moment, his mouth hung open silently. Then, he suddenly cracked up.

“Damn, you’re pushier than you look, huh?” he laughed. “All right, got it. I think the room next door’s open, so just let the boss know? Tell him I said I’m fine with it.”

“Thank you, sir.”

I set down the cardinal’s letter on the table. It was important to know when to make an exit; I could always come up with a reason to visit again. First, though—

“Before I go, would you allow me to offer a short prayer?”

—I needed to make sure I had a pin on him.

“I’m not hurt anywhere, though.”

He turned to show me that all the blood covering him was from his enemies, but I knelt next to him anyway, clasping my hands in front of my chest.

“This is a custom of my faith. Could I ask you to bear with me?”

I wasn't sure how much I was fooling him, but I gave my brightest smile as I played the devoted bride. It seemed like he couldn't bring himself to say no to me performing my service to the Gods; with an awkward smile, he agreed to let me pray. Maybe he was more of a pushover than I'd thought.

In any case, keeping my feelings from showing on my face, I began diligently reciting my prayer. Through my closed eyes, I could tell the Hero was staring at me as I prayed.

The individual words held no lie, but together, they created an elaborate show designed to inspire faith in the Gods. With each word I spoke, a small speck of light appeared in the room, drifting gently through the air. Then, in the middle of my prayer, I slipped in a few *special* words.

“—and may the **gaze** of the Gods be upon him...”

As I wrapped up the prayer and unclasped my fingers, the motes of light shone a little brighter and softly floated down onto the two of us. From the outside, it must have looked like a sacred and mystical moment—a champion receiving the blessings of the Gods.

“Amen,” I concluded.

“Uh, thanks.”

“There's no need to thank me; this is merely part of my duties.”

He tilted his head and gave me a small smile. He hadn't caught on; it looked like he wasn't too familiar with orisons.

I bowed politely and stepped out of the room, keeping a smile plastered on my face. After I'd closed the door, walked to the end of the hall, and made it to the stairway, I finally let myself take a breath.

“Smells like death in there, seriously...” I muttered, sighing deeply.

The words of prayer I'd used were among the more troublesome ones in my repertoire. Calling it a *curse of surveillance* was maybe a bit overblown, but I'd

stuck a sort of pin onto him. Now I'd be able to keep track of his general location. It hadn't felt like he was planning to get rid of me, at least, but I definitely wasn't all that welcome. If he *did* try to run off, I wanted to be able to follow him. From what I'd heard, since killing the Demon Lord, he'd been going around from place to place chasing rumors of demon attacks. The fact that I'd been able to catch up to him here was nothing short of a godsend. If he'd given me the slip, I would've been stuck spending months trying to track him all across the country.

Screw that. That sounds exhausting. I wanna go home already.

But as long as I knew exactly where he was, it'd be easy to keep up with him. *Sorry, Hero, but I've got "the Gods" on my side.*

A different thought forced its way to the front of my mind. "I'm hungry..."

I might've been able to fool the Hero, but I couldn't fool my own body. I was exhausted from the long trip, and although I could heal some amount of physical fatigue with orisons, keeping up my act in front of my assassination target was mentally exhausting too. I wanted to wrap up this job quickly, then go relax in a nice hot bath. Just my slothful nature, I suppose.

"Oh...? Are you already closed?" I asked as I walked down the stairs.

The bar was completely deserted. All the customers had vanished, leaving nothing but half-empty glasses and leftover snacks. Maybe the innkeeper was secretly a demon, and he'd eaten them all—or more likely, they'd just left. It hadn't been that long since I'd gone up to the second floor, though. The sun hadn't even set yet, so why...?

"Gee, I wonder whose fault that could be?" the innkeeper replied. "Gettin' the shit beat out of 'em by a *sweet and innocent bride* made 'em feel like wusses, so they're all out huntin' now. They were sayin' they'd wipe out the last of the demons that got away from the Hero, or whatever. Just convenient excuses, basically."

"Oh dear... I'm terribly sorry about this."

He didn't sound angry, but all the same, disrupting people's business wasn't a great look for a servant of the Gods. I tried to offer a few coins as an apology,

but he still wouldn't take my money.

"Their fault for fuckin' around. Don't worry 'bout it, missy. Grab a bite to eat, why don'tcha?"

"Very well. I'll have whatever you recommend, then."

No point in pushing if he'd just keep turning me down.

With a friendly smile, he quickly started cooking behind the bar. Most inns had separate kitchens, but this one seemed to have everything right out here. I also couldn't see any other staff. Either he was *incredibly* efficient, or...

"Is that a skill you're using?"

"Mm? Ah, yeah." He kept on working while he spoke. This went way beyond efficiency—in fact, I couldn't really tell what he was doing at all. I pretty much never cooked, so I didn't know much about how it was done in the first place, but it looked as though he was dividing the cooking process into small tasks and doing all of them in parallel somehow.

"Oh...?"

As I watched, fascinated, the scattered ingredients were assembled onto plate after plate, transforming into cooked dishes. It was a different feeling from just watching a skilled chef at work. He was taking in the entirety of the space around him, constantly keeping track of all the changing elements and maintaining control of them. Most likely—

"You developed that on the battlefield, I take it?" My thoughts naturally slipped out of my mouth.

The innkeeper faltered for a brief moment, but he quickly got back into his rhythm.

"Not like I was tryin' to hide it, but damn. That easy to tell?"

"I'm sorry, just force of habit..." I apologized, but my curiosity was piqued.

At their core, skills were personal abilities developed through accumulated experience and practice. They weren't something you could pick up in a day; they took time and effort to cultivate. They also couldn't be taught, or expressed in words at all—they could only be performed physically. If you tried

to imitate someone else's skill, even if you eventually managed to do something similar, it'd still end up being a fundamentally different ability. Only the individual who'd acquired a skill could truly reproduce it. While magical spells could be replicated by following a precise series of steps, skills were a completely different sort of power.

By the way, orisons—words of prayer and acts of faith interwoven with deverbilized spells—had probably originated as a byproduct of research into the fundamental nature of skills. At least, that was my personal theory.

“You wouldn't happen to be the Hero's teacher by any chance, would you?” I didn't have any basis for thinking so, but I decided to take a swing and see if I got lucky.

The innkeeper just gave a small awkward smile as he casually shook a frying pan. “Not me, an old war buddy of mine. He left the kid here, so now I've sorta taken over lookin' after him.”

“Ah, I see.”

The Church dossier hadn't said a single word about that. If the investigators had done their research and exhausted all their leads, I wouldn't have been able to fault them for it. But they hadn't even gotten basic details I'd learned just by asking? Now I was pissed. When I got home, I'd seriously round up Glasses and the rest of them for inquisition.

“How 'bout you? You're no ordinary nun, are you? I mean, if every bride of the Gods is like you, then I guess this country's future might be pretty bright after all,” he chuckled.

“Please, rest assured. We of the Church all dedicate ourselves to our training and our worship, day in and day out, for the sake of every soul dwelling in this land. The Gods visit their blessings equally upon all who walk the earth. I hope that serves to assuage your fears.”

“Sounds like I'll get to take it easy in my old age, then.”

Even if I'd avoided that incident earlier, he probably would've figured me out sooner or later. This guy was *much* more perceptive than I'd thought.

“We don't gotta talk about it if you don't wanna. I just don't want you hurtin'

that kid, is all. I've known him since he was little, see... You get me, right?"

"I haven't the slightest idea what you mean, but let me assure you, the Hero is the pride of our entire nation."

"Long as he's still *useful*, right?"

What on earth?

"C'mon, don't get so stressed. Must be tired after the trip out here." He smiled and started setting out plates of food on the bar.

There was a creamy vegetable soup, a sautéed meat dish, a side of fresh-baked bread with a golden crust and plenty of butter... Compared to the portable rations I'd been living off, it wasn't even a contest.

I said a quick grace before digging in. As I ate, a gentle warmth spread throughout my body. It felt as though the taut threads of tension inside me were gently loosening, just a little.

"Trust me, he ain't the kinda guy who'd try and turn against the kingdom. Ever since he lost his folks, he's spent his whole life just helpin' people out."

"Indeed. That's precisely why we would like to canonize him as a saint."

"Already said no to that, didn't he?"

"Even so, with the demons still at large, we must remain vigilant; we cannot simply leave him be."

As I enjoyed the soup, I listened carefully to the innkeeper's words. This was a familiar game for me—we were feeling each other out. While he occasionally let his real thoughts slip, I maintained my facade of small talk.

"If I might ask, why did he choose to hunt demons? I've heard that he came from an orphanage; were their finances truly that dire?"

Those who hunted demons received glory and riches proportionate to the number they killed. Normally, it was a job for knights or down-on-their-luck mercenaries. And despite the large bounties the kingdom offered, people weren't exactly lining up to try it. The reason was simple: Fighting a demon one-on-one was pretty much impossible. The more people joined a party, the smaller everyone's shares of the reward got.

Still, there were mercenaries who marched out to the battlefields, spurred on by the shining figures of those rare champions who could fight demons single-handedly. If you hunted demons solo, naturally, you got to keep the bounties all to yourself. And if you managed to take down one of the more powerful ones, the reward was all the greater.

Maybe one fighter in a thousand—no, one in ten thousand—had the skills and the training to hold their own against demons, walking the line between life and death. To the reverent civilians, they were “champions”; to the envious mercenaries, they were “winners.” And the Hero Elcyon was the very greatest of them all.

“And yet, it didn’t seem as though he had any money to spare...” I mused.

All of his equipment was just standard stuff you could get anywhere. The short sword he carried wasn’t some holy relic or enchanted blade—just an old, well-worn weapon, easily replaced. He should’ve earned an immense bounty for defeating the Demon Lord, but he hadn’t upgraded his equipment, and he hadn’t retired either. He’d just continued to fight with the exact same gear as any random merc. *Why?*

All I could say was that it wasn’t for status or fame—the kingdom and the Church had tried to give him those, and he’d refused.

I briefly paused eating, deciding to cut straight to the point. “Could I ask you to explain more regarding his circumstances? Even within the Church, there are occasional voices of distrust toward him. I wish to serve as his advocate and convince others of his good intentions.”

The innkeeper took out a bottle, chuckling as he poured himself a glass.

“Weren’t you s’posed to be here servin’ the Gods?”

“To serve the Hero, sent to our aid by the Gods themselves, is to the same end.”

“You callin’ that kid an angel? Now there’s a laugh!” He gave a grim smile.

Watching his expression as he enjoyed the aroma of his drink, I couldn’t figure out what he was really thinking. As the heady scent of grapes drifted across the bar, I sharpened my tone ever so slightly.

“I’m sorry, sir, but I must ask—you *do* know his goal, do you not?”

Normally this was where I’d start getting rough, but against an old acquaintance of the Hero, my options were more limited.

“Are his wishes truly so unspeakable?”

“Hmm... If I say it’s a secret even to the Gods, what’ll you do then?”

I inhaled sharply. Before even forming the thought, I’d instinctively jumped down from my stool, bible in hand.

“Hey, c’mon, what’s wrong?”

The innkeeper’s attitude hadn’t changed at all. In that moment, though, I felt a cold shiver run down my spine.

I froze. “Who on earth...?”

“Mm?”

Taking a deep breath to calm my trembling core, I glared at my *opponent* behind the bar. My body felt slow and heavy, though, overwhelmed by the intense pressure emanating from an obviously superior foe. I felt like a frog being stared at by a snake—or maybe like a cat backed into a corner.

He gave me a smile, his demeanor still completely unchanged in contrast to my undisguised alarm. “Listen, I’m just the guy who tends the bar here and looks after the inn where you’re spendin’ the night. Sure, I used to run a li’l wild back in the day, but I still say my prayers at church every week, same as anyone. So that means we’re basically buddies, don’t it? *Multi-Prayer?*”

He paused pointedly. “Or was it ‘*Multi-Player*’?”

He knows I’m an inquisitor.

The moment that became clear, I tore a page out of my bible and steeled myself for battle.

I steel myself, but—

“I don’t wanna fight you, missy.”

—without so much as a sound, the bible and the page were gone before I’d noticed. I hadn’t even felt his presence. Now empty-handed, I stared at him

perplexed.

“Did you mean ‘*You* don’t wanna fight *me*, missy,’ perhaps?”

“I meant what I said, swear to the Gods.”

He smiled again as he slipped the page back into the stolen bible. He was the very image of a friendly innkeeper, exactly the same as before.

Who the hell is this guy?

When he’d reached across the bar, I hadn’t been able to see him at all. The message was clear: If he’d wanted to kill me, the knife he’d just been using to chop meat would already have sliced my throat open.

“Where did you learn my name?” I asked.

“Just on the job. You get all sorts of stories workin’ in a place like this. I hear you’re some kinda elite who mastered all your prayers to the Seven Gods, and then picked up magic and skills on top of that. Playin’ all the angles, huh? Damn impressive stuff.”

Impossible. Information about inquisitors *never* left the Church. And he hadn’t just said my alias; he’d known what it *meant*. This guy had to be involved with the Church or the royal court somehow. I hadn’t been briefed on any allies here, though. He was an unknown variable. My best option would be to eliminate him here and now—if I could. The situation wasn’t in my favor.

“Lemme say it again: I don’t wanna fight you.”

I stared at him silently, willing myself to calm down. I *really* didn’t want to fight him. I wasn’t an idiot; I knew how to size up my opponents. If I attacked him head-on, I’d just get pinned down immediately. The only way I’d be able to kill him was a sneak attack. And so...

“Very well. Understood. You’re quite right—I don’t want to fight you, and it seems you don’t want to fight me either.” I raised my hands slowly, carefully watching his every movement. “Let us declare a truce. The fault is entirely mine. My apologies.”

I’d take him out if he gave me an opening, but for now, it was time to raise the white flag.

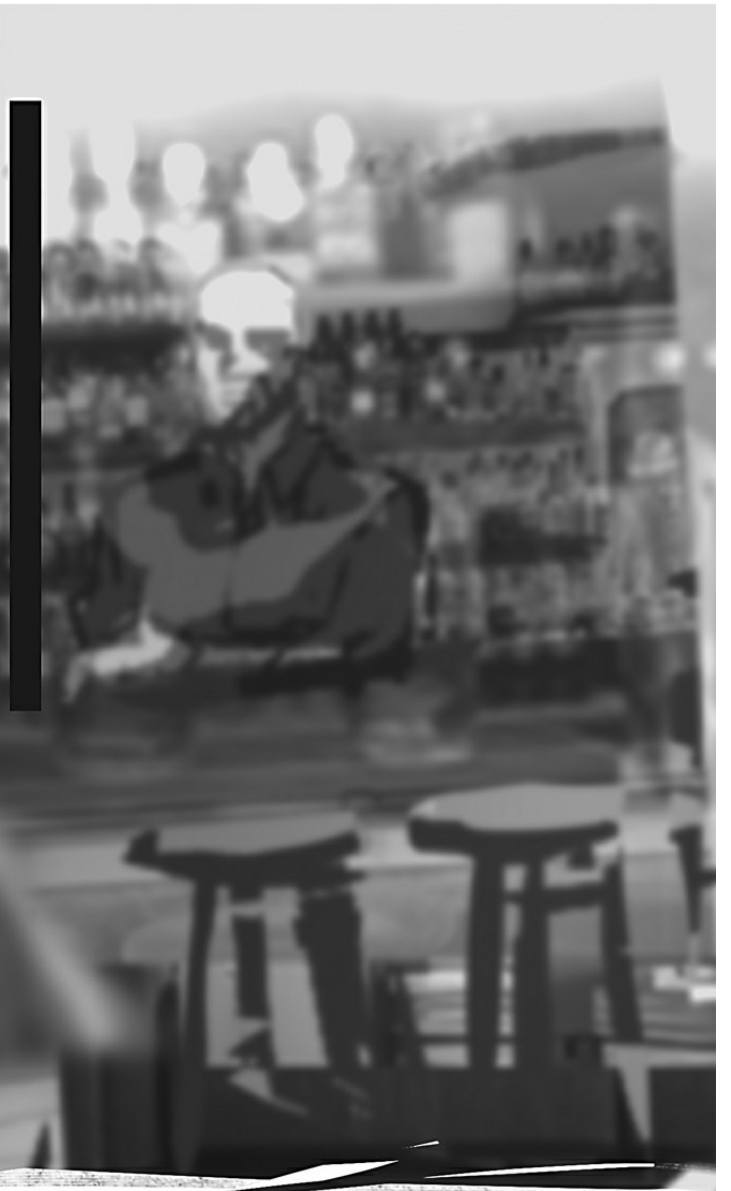
As he watched me make my plea with my hands in the air, he suddenly broke out laughing. “So that’s how it is, huh? Guess anyone they’d send after *him* would have to be a real funny one!”

“What do you mean by that, exactly?”

“Means you’re cute, missy.”

What the hell is he talking about?

Now that I didn’t need to keep up my act, I wanted to kick him in the shins. He’d probably just dodge me if I tried, though. I wasn’t going to embarrass myself any further. I calmly returned my bible to its holder and sat back down, resting my elbows on the bar.



I knew looks could be deceiving, but this guy was real trouble. At any rate, he was way tougher than anyone else I'd ever been up against.

"Will you be reporting me to the boy upstairs? Or do I need to buy your silence?"

No, he definitely wouldn't take my money. Besides, if he were going to rat me out to the Hero, he could've just eliminated me himself. In which case...

"Or will you demand my body, perhaps? Just another vile reprobate out here in the borderlands?"

If that was the deal, I'd have no choice except all-out violence after all. It'd make my job even more of a pain, but I'd just kill him and then the Hero too. All done, job complete, case closed.

"I rather fear I would lack the talent to satisfy you..." I continued, aware that I was starting to lose my cool a little as I glared at him.

Now it was his turn to hold up his hands in surrender and let his shoulders sag. "Sorry, but you ain't my type. Sure, you're a looker, and you'll really be turnin' heads in a couple more years, but, well... I already lost my wife and kid. Don't really have it in me to go chasin' skirts these days."

There was something strange in his tone as he spoke. It didn't feel like he was being entirely honest, but it didn't feel like he was lying either.

"What is it you wish of me, then?"

This man seemed happy to play the role of an easygoing innkeeper, but there was no telling what he was capable of. He clearly had me in the palm of his hand, but he wasn't trying to toy with me; it was a disturbing feeling. Personally, I would've been much happier if I could just settle this with brute force. I didn't have the energy to deal with some weirdo casually enjoying watching me stew while he nursed his drink. At this point, I'd rather have been back upstairs attending to our noble Hero.

I was running out of patience. "I—"

"He's fightin' for all the kids back at the orphanage," the innkeeper said, cutting me off. "Already lost his family once. Now he's got a new one, and

they're more important to him than anything. He doesn't wanna lose 'em again."

He downed his glass and looked at me with brightly burning eyes.

"The Church can try and judge him in the name of the Gods if they wanna. Hard for me to tell what's really *the Gods' will* from down here, though."

There was a sense of what might've been anger in his gaze, but it also felt as though he were staring straight into my soul.

"If you're gonna try and take him out, you better be ready. Those feelings of his are strong... Stronger than any faith in the Gods."

I looked back at him. "Stronger than any faith, you say?"

"Yup, that's right."

The orphanage, huh? I see...

I kind of understood. It wasn't all that rare. I'd come from an orphanage too, after all. If I said I didn't have any attachment to the place, I'd be lying, and if they begged me to help them out, I'd at least *consider* it. But even so...

"The Hero truly is a selfless and noble soul."

I didn't think I could ever be like him.

"Hey, c'mon, what's that look for? You've got a cute face, don't waste it."

While I'd been lost in thought, the innkeeper had been at work behind the bar. He handed me a wooden cup filled with a steaming, light-brown liquid. It had a faintly sweet scent, but there was something else too—a tinge of bitterness, maybe?

"What's this?"

"Just a little somethin' after a meal. Out west, they drink this stuff instead of booze. You don't see it much around here, though. If you think I'm messin' with you, fine, just try a sip anyway."

It didn't smell like alcohol. There was always a chance he'd poisoned it, but, well, that'd just be needlessly convoluted at this point.

"Thank you," I said.

There was a little bit of food left, but I didn't really feel like eating any more. I went along with his urging and raised the cup to my lips. The moment I tasted it, my eyes widened at the sensation.

"This... This is..."

"Pretty good, ain't it?"

"Well... I *suppose*..." I grumbled, taking another frustrated sip.

It was just a little too hot, but that made it even better, somehow. There was a faint scent of what might've been milk. It was a slightly different flavor from black tea; the pleasant sensation calmed my nerves and took my mind off work a little.

"No matter how much folks call that kid 'Hero' or 'champion' or whatever, to me, he'll always be a brat who's too big for his boots. I don't wanna see him gettin' himself into trouble, but well, I know as much as anyone that the world ain't always nice like that."

As he spoke, his hand ran along his left ring finger, and his expression darkened. Perhaps he'd left behind what used to be there, sometime long ago.

"Just try and do him right, 'kay? Promise that, and I'll make you a damn fine breakfast in return."

I turned my gaze away. "I'm afraid I can't. Not as long as I remain a slave of the Gods."

"Yeah, figures. I try not to have *too* much faith."

The innkeeper reached into his pocket and took out a pouch of tobacco. He smiled softly as he struck a match and lit a sloppily rolled cigarette.

"All I really want is a peaceful world, y'know?"

It was a carefree smile, one that had a way of drawing you in.

"Indeed. I wish for the same."

Not that platitudes were worth anything *out there*. But, in my heart, I really did want that. It'd make my job much easier, after all.

As the innkeeper chuckled, I moved to shift the topic. "By the way, which

orphanage was he raised in?”

I was just making casual small talk, nothing more. When I heard his answer, though, my breath caught in my throat.

That orphanage had been the late Cardinal Chaucus’s private garden.

Chapter 3

“*Shit*,” I swore to myself.

It was the middle of the night. I’d tried to visit the Hero’s room after everyone had gone to sleep, but I hadn’t gotten an answer when I’d knocked. When I’d used an orison to open the lock, there’d been no sign of the Hero inside.

His things were still there, at least. This wasn’t the worst-case scenario. But where was he?

“Ugggh, seriously,” I groaned. “What a pain in the ass...!”

I opened the window and started praying, searching out his location. Like sticking a hand into the surface of a pool and watching the ripples bounce back, I felt for the pin I’d placed...

“Found it.”

He wasn’t in the city. He’d gone out into the no-man’s-land between human and demon territory.

“What the hell is he doing out this late?”

I went back to my room to put on some basic equipment and a cloak. Then I jumped out the window and hit the ground running as I headed for the edge of town.

“O Gods who reign over us, grant me your aid and your guidance, that I might find my way to him...”

As I prayed to the Gods, my body “miraculously” sped up. This was Spec Boost—one of the most basic orisons out there. Then, steadying my breathing, I activated my Physical Boost skill *stacked on top of that*.

With a grunt of exertion, I turned my next step into a leap, flying above the rooftops. I could feel my bones creaking slightly with each jump, but I ignored it. As the still night air became a stiff breeze around me, and the lights of the city turned into blurred lines rushing past, I sped on.

I jumped right over the city gates and dashed across the unkept fields, hurrying onward to the Hero. I didn't know what was going on, but I needed to go find out. I just wanted my worst suspicions to be wrong.

My quarry was the Hero who'd killed the Demon Lord. However, he was also a "person of interest" to the kingdom and the Church, with orders out for his assassination.

The orphanage where the Hero had grown up was in the territory of High Cardinal Chaucus, a man who couldn't be called "saintly" by any stretch of the imagination—and who'd been killed several days ago.

As someone who'd come from an orphanage myself, I could easily imagine how the Hero and the other kids there must've felt as they'd suffered at that man's hands. With nowhere else to go and nothing else to turn to, they'd clung desperately to what should have been a sanctuary, only to be threatened with losing that as well. They'd held on to their lives, but what else had they been forced to sacrifice? Just thinking about it made my skin crawl.

When I'd first heard the rumors about the cardinal, I'd tried to drag him in for inquisition right then and there. My boss had stopped me, though, warning me that as things stood, all I would've accomplished was getting myself tried as a witch. And so, I'd resolved to bide my time. I'd do what I could to weaken Chaucus's standing or to gain more power for my own cardinal.

But if I'd had nobody to hold me back, if I'd had nothing except the power to fight against him head-on, then...

"No, focus. This isn't the time."

There was no point in letting my thoughts run wild. Right now, I needed to concentrate on pursuing the Hero.

By this point, the fields had given way to forests, and I'd already passed the kingdom's border.

"Where the hell is he going?"

Then, finally, the Hero's destination came into view.

I narrowed my eyes. "A demon encampment...?"

I could see a bunch of little cloth tents and the faint light of fires. Why *here*, though? It was a shock to see they'd set up their base less than half a day's ride from the city. Did that have something to do with the death of the Demon Lord?

In any case, the fence around the encampment was patchy and only lightly guarded. It seemed pretty bare-bones and frugal for a forward operating base, but the camp was densely packed with shadowy figures creeping around.

I briefly considered contacting my cardinal and getting him to send over some knights as backup—or maybe mercenaries from the city. We were too far out, though. Even if I called for reinforcements right now, they wouldn't get here in time to be of any help to the Hero. And besides, this sort of thing wasn't even my job in the first place.

"All right, let's see what you can do, Sir Hero..."

I hid myself in the shadows outside the encampment. If the Hero *did* get killed here, I could just quietly bury him and head home, problem solved. And if I could watch him in action against the demons and see what tricks he had up his sleeve, that'd make my work easier going forward. With all due apologies to the Hero, I was honestly rooting for the demons a little.

Besides, I normally hung around the capital and the neighboring cities fighting humans. Everyone talked about the incredible might of the demon army or whatever, but I didn't have a real feel for how tough they were, practically speaking.

"Wait... Huh?"

I realized the Hero's signal had disappeared. I debated sending out another pulse, but out here, one false move would get me killed. I decided to put aside my craft for now and try to feel out the Hero's presence directly...

There. I felt a faint tremor in the center of the camp, too restrained to be called bloodlust—just the gentle ripple of a leaf drifting down onto the water's surface.

Keeping silent and stilling my breathing, I crept right up to the edge of the fence surrounding the encampment. Even now that I'd gotten closer, I couldn't

sense any disturbance inside. Everything was calm and quiet. Now and then, I saw the figures of monsters walking on two legs amid the dim light.

They were wolfmen—warwolves. Like the name implied, they were beasts that looked like a cross between a wolf and a human. At maturity, they grew to be several heads taller than a human. They were aggressive, with good night vision and excellent noses.

Pulling the hood of my cloak tight over my head, I tried to blend into the darkness as much as possible and made my way along the edge of the fence. As I moved, I picked up a hint of blood mixed in with the animal smell that filled the camp. I soon found the corpse of a wolfman lying in a pool of blood among the tall grass—probably the Hero's handiwork.

In that instant, the encampment erupted into chaos. When I turned back to look, there were suddenly flames rising everywhere, and wolfmen came rushing out of their tents one after another. In the midst of voices calling out in an inhuman language, I could faintly hear the distant clash of metal against metal somewhere within the growing fire. As I searched for the source of the noise, one of the tents went flying, and I heard the overlapping sounds of dying screams coming from the spot where it had just stood. The flames swayed violently back and forth.

Amid the chaos, the cries, and the echoing howls, a shadow danced wildly through the night, splattered in red from head to toe.

"That idiot...!"

From where I was standing, this looked like outright suicide. The wolfmen lashed out at him with claws as sharp as knives and legs as thick as tree trunks. If he took even a single hit, it could easily be a mortal injury, but he dodged, slashed, and kicked his way through, seemingly without a care in the world.

That distant figure felt too aimless to be called a champion, too reckless to be called a Hero. If I had to put a name to it—

"Berserker."

Hearing that word suddenly whispered in my ear, I tried to pull out my bible from its holder, but I felt my arm get pinned as a hand clamped over my mouth.

“Mmph?!”

I tried to shout, but the hand stayed firm, and the mystery voice shushed me.

“I was wondering if you’d try and follow me. Didn’t think you’d get here this quick, though.”

It was the Hero. As I grumbled incoherently through his hand, he shushed me again, putting a finger up to his lips and looking at me expectantly. I nodded twice, and he finally let me go.

Like me, he had his hood pulled tight and was carefully concealing his presence, but he was unmistakably the Hero Elcyon.

“Wait, but— How—?” I whispered in confusion.

The shadow was still rampaging amid the flames, but *he* was right here next to me.

“Ah, right... I’ll explain later. Just stay hidden here until I give the word. Sit still, okay?”

“Hey, wait!”

He wasn’t listening. Ignoring my demands, he raced out between the tents and dashed into the middle of the wolfmen, moving in unison with the *other* warrior as they carved a bloody trail through the crowd.

Magic...? No, maybe a skill?

I could faintly smell lingering traces of human mana mixed with the scent of blood, but I was too far away to properly grasp what was happening. It was utterly obvious how one-sided the battle was, though. As lanterns toppled and the mountain of corpses grew, the flames illuminated a hellish massacre. It wasn’t just brutal; it was *incomprehensible*.

I stared, transfixed by the carnage. “If this power were ever turned against humans...”

Just for a moment, ever so slightly, I felt like I understood why the Seven High Cardinals and the nobles of the royal court saw the Hero as a danger to be eliminated. This was undeniably something *beyond human ken*.

Humans shouldn't have been able to take on demons at all without the advantage of numbers. Granted, this was a surprise attack, but regardless, these two had the demons completely overwhelmed. It was a terrifying sight. This was a power that shouldn't exist. These monsters in human form couldn't be left to their own devices.

While the threat of the demons still remained, while that *thing* was still distracted chasing its prey, it needed to be wiped out.

I'd made the wrong call. The innkeeper's words earlier, the Hero's attitude toward me, none of it mattered. Whatever "protection" he might have, I should've just followed the will of the Gods and killed him then and there.

If I take advantage of this chaos, though... Right this second...

As I stood there and contemplated stepping into the middle of that dance of slaughter and madness, it was clear beyond doubt how badly I'd misjudged things.

In that moment, I suddenly noticed a menacing presence creeping up behind me. I let out a startled noise and heard one in return; we'd both spotted each other at the same time.

I felt myself being sized up by the sharp eyes of a beast—a massive wolfman.

"Wha—"

An arm whipped out toward me with a burst of speed driven by pure instinct. After being taken by surprise too many times in one day, I was off my game, and my own movements were awkward and clumsy. Before I could even think, I'd been snatched up by a huge set of fingers.

I felt every bone in my body screaming at me. As all the air was squeezed out of my lungs, the orison I'd reflexively started reciting died in my throat.

I let out a strangled swear. With prayer no longer an option, I activated my Physical Boost skill, but it wasn't enough to escape. I could writhe against the crushing grip, but I still didn't have the strength to push it away.

I grunted in pain and frustration as I properly took in my foe. Its overall appearance was about the same as any of the other wolfmen—the physiology

of a wolf, but with a human bodily structure. However, this one was a couple times bigger than the rest. The bulging veins and muscles across its body looked tough enough to bounce back blades. On top of that, it was covered from head to toe in thick, hard fur that gleamed like armor.

“Why do I...! Gotta...!” I gasped out.

I wanted to avoid overexerting myself, but I was out of options. For just a moment, I stacked some extra magical strengthening on top of my skill, forcing my way out between the fingers. Still in midair, I ripped a page out of my bible and used a spell to ignite it into a ball of flame. The bible was a limited resource; I needed to be careful not to use it up, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

“Blaze Burst!”

I burned out the monster’s eyes with a blast of flame, and as I landed, I swung around to kick it in the back of its knee. Its core was much harder than I’d realized, though. It was like kicking a mountain; the recoil sent pins and needles all the way down through the leg I was standing on.

Fine, then—

“Graaaaah!” I yelled, immediately twisting around to strike the behemoth with my bible. My arm shot forward just as it was turning to face me. As I recited my orison, *stacked on top* of my skills and spells—

My foot carved a hole into the earth as I stepped into my attack, and I heard bones breaking in my right arm as it connected. Still, the hit landed, and the wolfman’s huge body went flying. It disappeared into the darkness of the forest, knocking over trees as it went.

Finally, the distant sound faded away to nothing.

I panted heavily, breath ragged with pain and exhaustion. I started praying to heal my broken arm, along with the many other injuries that were now alerting me to their presence. Even as the pain faded, though, my pulse was still pounding in my ears. I took in one more deep breath, then slowly let it out.

That thing had been tougher than I could’ve imagined. When I was up against humans, two stacks of casting was enough to make most people splatter, but

just now...

“It’s dead, right...? It’s gotta be.”

I could vaguely feel a phantom pain from my healed injuries still lingering in my mind.

There was no way that monster just now had been a normal demon. It might’ve been one of the ones with an alias and a hefty bounty, but as a bride of the Gods, I probably couldn’t expect a bonus. All that work for no reward...

I sighed and refocused on my actual job. “Anyway, where’s Sir Hero—”

I was only able to react to the blow at all by sheer luck, and even then, I couldn’t manage to fully dodge it. I was unceremoniously sent flying, and by the time I understood what was happening, I was already rolling across the dirt.

“Oww...”

I spat out the blood welling up in my mouth. As I raised my head, the great roar of a beast resounded through the sleeping forest. I grimaced involuntarily at the earsplitting cry of murderous rage.

“Oh, you’ve *got* to be kidding me...”

The giant looked even bigger than before as it approached me. Its gait was twisted and limping, but those eyes that should’ve been burnt to cinders were already starting to heal.

I hadn’t been underestimating demons. I knew what they were capable of, and I thought I’d understood, but it was still unbelievable facing the real thing. It wasn’t just its eyes—broken bones jutting out of its skin set back into place as I watched, and soon even the wounds had vanished completely, leaving only bloodstains behind.

Demons really were a completely different class of being from humans. With their exponentially vaster reserves of mana, they could easily repair and augment their own bodies. That was one of the reasons our fight against the demons had always been such an uphill battle.

“This isn’t even...my job...!”

No matter how much work I put in here, it’d just be backbreaking labor with

no reward. In fact, my back might literally have been broken; I wasn't in a mood to appreciate the humor.

Personally, my top priority was just getting out alive. I would've quite liked to make a run for it if I could. The wolf had me locked in its sights, though, and it clearly had no intention of letting me get away. At this point, my only option was to destroy it completely, even if I needed to stack every last trick I had. Just as I was resigning myself to firing off my entire arsenal at once, a voice whispered in my ear—

“Don't worry, it's okay.”

I felt a gentle wind rush past me, and I saw a flash of silver trace a clean line through the air to slice into the wolf's right arm.

“I'm here to save you.”

Pulling his blade out of the wolf's shoulder, the Hero easily dodged a swipe from its other arm, and his counterattack effortlessly cut into the thick limb.

“Wha—?” I watched, dumbfounded.

With the air of a chef filleting a tender piece of meat, the Hero dyed the wolf's body in blood.

“What the... *How*...?”

He didn't have an advantage in speed. The wolfman had better mobility and was attacking much more rapidly—and yet, it couldn't manage to catch him. Dodging killing blows by a hair's breadth, the Hero stabbed his blade into the wolfman bit by bit. Slipping through the gaps in that iron pelt, he cut into its joints—shallow at first, but deeper with each successive strike. As I watched his figure gradually becoming painted in red, I remembered the moment when he'd walked into the inn.

Now I see. If this is how he fights all the time, of course he'd end up covered in blood...

Now the wolfman was the one getting frustrated. Giving up on catching the Hero, it turned its focus back on me, roaring as it closed in and raised its arm to strike. There in the darkness, it looked as though a tree were falling down onto

me. As I stared up at it in a daze—

“Don’t move...!”

—the Hero cut in front of me, catching the brunt of the blow with his arm and shoulder.

“Eh heh heh...” Even as he gave a pained groan, his smile never left his face.

Then, he returned his attention to the beast, fixing it with a sharp glare. He took a small breath, and then struck up at its arm, pushing it back and following through to slash along its length. Charging in at its unprotected belly, attacking with his full strength now, he let out a wordless battle cry. He carved into the demon’s body, then turned around to stab in a knife and twist it upward. Dodging a counterattack, he jumped up over its head. The wolfman swung its arms upward, futilely trying to catch the hovering shadow, and the Hero used the momentum to jump even higher. His cloak fluttered in the breeze as he began to descend—a devil floating down from heaven.

“GRAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!!!”

As his yell rang out, his blade came down to pierce right through the giant’s eye. Twisting his wrist in a gouging motion, he kicked its face in before its huge fingers could catch him. He jumped down to my side, the exact same smile still on his face.

“You okay?”

His movements were casual—careless, even. I struggled for words as I stared at him.

“Um, yeah...”

The monster glared at us with its one remaining eye, showing no sign of backing down even as it groaned in pain. The pressure emanating from it was impossibly greater than any human I’d ever faced.

And with that monster at his back, *the Hero* simply smiled.

“You must’ve been scared. Sorry about that.”

As soon as he spoke, the demon’s giant body split in two. It was chopped in half straight from head to groin, and a burst of viscera spilled out everywhere.

“The fuck? Thought there was someone sneaking around—the hell’s a Church bride doing out here?”

Stepping through a massive shower of blood, the *other shadow* emerged—a man with a more beastly air than any of the beasts I’d seen. He stared down at us in annoyance, tilting his head in thought. He looked pissed, like he might start beating us up any second.

“Veiss...the Bloody...?” I asked in confusion.

“Yeah?”

He’d been called “the Hero” back in his day, and even after leaving the front lines, he was still a legend—humanity’s strongest champion.

Veiss turned to Elcyon. “How many times do I gotta tell you, kid? Quit worrying about me. I’m fine on my own.”

“C’mon, Master, you’re not as young as you used to be! What happens when you’re *not* fine anymore and I’m not there?”

“*Huh?! I’m still in my prime, you little shit!*”

While they argued, the Hero and the champion walked through the smoldering encampment, finishing off any wolfmen who were still breathing. The battle had already ended before I knew it, and as I took care of healing my own injuries, the two of them had shifted into cleanup.

Most of the demons in the camp had been slaughtered by these two, and the remainder had left their friends for dead and made a run for it. An army couldn’t function without a leader; that was as true for demons as it was for humans. Reduced to nothing but a disorganized pack, a group like this was easy pickings—so the champion said with a smile.

“The hell was that stunt you pulled, though? Jumping in to save some stranger and getting cornered? What, you think you’re hot shit now just ‘cause you killed the Demon Lord?”

“I wasn’t cornered—you were right there, Master! I was just working with you like always!”

“Fuck’s sake. Thought I taught you never to count on anyone but yourself,

didn't I?"

"I... That's..." the Hero muttered. "Whatever. It worked out, so it's fine."

"'Fine' my ass."

Veiss Volg was a mercenary turned champion, a living legend who'd slain countless demons; I'd read reports about him before. He'd fought his way across one battlefield after another alongside the kingdom's knights—always charging in ahead of everyone else, and always returning covered in more blood than any of his fellow fighters. That was how he'd earned his nickname: Veiss the Bloody. Until the current Hero appeared, anyone talking about "the Hero" would've been referring to *him*.

"Do you always fight alongside him?"

The *new* Hero nodded as he cut off a wolfman's ear. "Always treats me like a nuisance, though."



I could hear something complicated in the way Elcyon called Veiss “Master,” but the old Hero training the new Hero seemed perfectly on-the-nose as stories went. Maybe that was just how these things always worked. I operated behind the scenes, so I didn’t have much contact with people out in the spotlight like these two. I couldn’t really tell what their deal was, but from the way the pair had fought together earlier, the strong bond of trust between them was undeniably obvious. That mad dance of blood and fire had felt like a familiar ritual between the two of them, a practiced exchange as they found their harmony together.

“Whenever you die, it’s not gonna be pretty, Master,” the Hero declared with a bit of grumpiness as he ran his sword through a wolfman who’d been trying to stay hidden.

The champion was a head or two taller than an average man. Stabbing a two-handed sword as long as my entire body into a mountain of corpses, he stroked his stubble and laughed.

“You think guys like us get to choose where we die?”

Beneath his rough, violent exterior, a pair of intelligent eyes stared down at me. His beast-like gaze felt similar to the Hero’s and the wolves’; maybe that was just how champions were, human or not. Still, this man was an outlier somehow, even compared to them. His air of hidden depths and mysterious secrets was the same as the innkeeper’s, though.

“So, what’re you up to, Miss Multi-Player?”

The Hero looked confused. “Mul... What?”

“Multi-Prayer means ‘one who prays to the many Gods,’” I explained hurriedly while the champion watched me with a look of amusement.

First the innkeeper, now this guy? Why does everyone know who I am?!

It sounded like the Hero had never heard that name, though. The champion must’ve said it with that in mind. In other words, it was a threat—*“Try anything funny, and I’ll blow your cover.”*

“I have been tasked with guarding the Hero,” I said, trying to regain my

footing. "Might you allow me to say a small prayer, in honor of our newfound acquaintance?"

"I must respectfully decline, my lady," he replied in a lightly mocking tone. "I ain't the kinda guy who asks the Gods to protect me."

"Truly a valiant champion through and through, I see."

Die! I fervently wished while I smiled at him. If he'd just entrusted himself to the Gods, I could've killed him easily, but no such luck.

From there, they moved on to hunting down stragglers.

"Do you always use these sorts of tactics?" I asked.

"Yeah," the Hero replied. "Charging in from the front and duking it out is the knights' job. We basically just do sneak attacks."

As they wandered around setting fire to food stores and other supplies, we eventually reached the outskirts of the encampment. Out here, there were just empty tents; it was unbelievably quiet compared to the hellish scene earlier. There were hardly any corpses out here either.

"It seems your abilities are more than a match for theirs, though."

"Nuh-uh. Show 'em any weakness, and they'll sink their teeth right in." The Hero, with his unbreakable protection granted through the love of the Gods, sounded completely serious as he spoke.

Veiss looked down at him, smiling proudly. "Never let your guard down. They say a rat'll bite a cat if it's cornered, but we're more like ants killing elephants."

Rather ferocious ants, aren't you?

"Was that finishing blow earlier a skill, perhaps?"

"Huh?" Veiss glared at me. "Didn't the Gods teach you not to poke your nose into how other people kill?"

No dice, huh.

"I was simply surprised. I never would have believed that a human could overpower a demon so utterly."

The Hero's moves and the champion's killing blow had been genuinely

superhuman. At least, I didn't think I could ever pull that off.

Well, if I stacked everything together to the absolute limit, it might be a different story...

"I have some familiarity with magic, you see," I explained. "I'd hoped you might be willing to share if there were some spell you made use of...?"

"Mmm... Sorry to disappoint, but Master and I don't use spells much. Just basic stuff like starting fires or cleaning wounds."

"Sides, who's got time to fuck around doing fiddly spells in the middle of a fight?" Veiss added. "We've got our hands full just with skills. Maybe it's different for the Gods' beloved bride, though, huh?"

Looked like I'd accidentally given the game away a little.

"Well," he offered, "if you teach us how to pull off a holy miracle or whatever, we can give you a quick lecture, show off a skill or two. How's that sound, missy?"

In other words, if I wanted them to show me their tricks, it'd need to be a quid pro quo.

"The Gods will always come to the aid of any who seek salvation in their time of need."

"Seems like they're kinda picky, ain't they? Out here, guys who depend on the Gods always die first. If you've got time to pray, just get to work—that's what I always say." The champion laughed heartily, but I could tell he wasn't letting his guard down a fraction.

I didn't have any choice but to back off and drop the subject, at least while this guy was still around. I could keep investigating the Hero's weaknesses later, bit by bit.

Luckily, even after I'd tailed the Hero all the way out here, he didn't seem distrustful of me at all—in fact, he was even trying to look after me. Viewed objectively, I'd been acting absurdly suspicious, but he was still friendly and tolerant toward me all the same. Maybe that was just part of being the Hero.

"Guess that's it, huh," Veiss said.

While we'd been talking, the hunt for stragglers had brought us all the way to the far edge of the encampment.

Just as we turned around to head back, Veiss suddenly kicked over a nearby tent. Inside, there were two small shadows.

I stared down at them. "Are those...warwolf cubs...?"

"Yup."

They were hunched down together on the ground, trembling as they tried to shield each other.

"So demons have children too..." I said wonderingly.

"Yeah, of course."

I knew I sounded stupid, but I hadn't thought about it at all before. I was genuinely surprised.

The two shivering figures wrapped in a blanket looked like they might've been around four or five years old. They were small—still too young to survive on their own.

"Children..." I muttered to myself.

As I looked at them, I saw just a faint flicker of something familiar. A flash of the kids I'd known from the orphanage who'd lost their parents in the war.

"So... What will you do with them?" I spoke without much thought as I tried to put a lid back on my own memories.

Sure, they were demons, but they didn't look like the monsters that had been sprawled at our feet. There was something cute about them—lovable, even. Their ears, their mouths, their noses, and their sharp claws and fangs were all clearly inhuman, but more than anything, they just looked like puppies.

And yet—

"What? Kill them, obviously." The Hero blessed by the Gods spoke into the darkness of the night, not the slightest hint of doubt on his face.

Veiss sighed, his shoulders slumping in exasperation. "Just drop it. Your logic doesn't mean shit out here. Or, what, you gonna say we should let 'em go

'cause they're just kids, *Sister*?"

"But— No, I—"

Even as I struggled to pull my thoughts together, I understood that what I was saying made no sense. Demons were the enemy. They were humans' natural foes, monsters that rejected the words of the Gods. Children or not, killing them was righteous and just; there was nothing wrong with it. There was nothing wrong with it, but, still...

I tried to find words and came up empty. At the sight of those cowering figures right in front of me, my feelings just couldn't stay calm. In my head, I understood it all, but my heart couldn't keep up.

"Guess this is too much for Miss Bride of the Gods, huh?" Veiss said.

He gave the Hero a look and moved to stand in front of me, blocking my way. There was a tiny measure of kindness there, along with a self-deprecating acknowledgment that he and the Hero weren't like the rest of us.

"You really shouldn't have come out here."

As the Hero quietly spoke those words, his sword ran through the two small bodies. While they breathed their last, coughing blood and spilling tears, I just stood there and watched.

Demons were evil, a menace, a threat to all humanity. Nothing wrong was happening here.

Nothing—

"It's kill or be killed. You don't gotta like it."

I looked back at Veiss. "I suppose not."

I wasn't in any position to demand morality in the taking of a life, regardless.

"Stupid..." I mumbled to myself, swallowing down those words along with my lingering feelings.

In the name of the Gods, every life is precious in equal measure, after all.

We ended up riding back to town in the cart Veiss had come in on. By the

time the walls came into view, the sky was already starting to lighten. I sat half asleep in the back of the cart, staring listlessly at the young Hero sitting across from me as he silently looked out at the surroundings.

Just like the reports had said, he was about the same age as me. I thought I'd seen my share of hell growing up, and I knew that the world I lived in didn't run on pretty ideals. But even so, I kept coming back to one thought: The world he saw and the world I saw weren't the same.

Humans and demons were fundamentally different beings. I'd just experienced that stark divide firsthand. And I'd seen power that could one-sidedly brutalize those very same demons too...

"O holy light... Please, guide my path..."

Eyelids growing heavy, I repeated my prayers over and over as my thoughts blurred into a haze and the cart carried us on.

Nod nod. Nod.

With the exhaustion from my trip and the exertion from the battle I'd gotten caught up in, the threads of tension in my body had loosened, leaving me more relaxed than normal—

"Waah?!"

I awoke to the sensation of the cart being kicked. At some point, we'd made it back to the inn. As the Hero and I reluctantly got up and out of the wagon, Veiss stifled a yawn and got back into the driver's seat, telling us he had a room somewhere else.

"Now stay the fuck away from me, dammit," he snapped before leaving. It seemed like his parting words weren't directed at me, but at his own apprentice.

Guess they've got some stuff going on, huh? I thought to myself, but I couldn't really get my mind in gear.

Half leaning on the Hero, I made it up to the second floor before I finally reached my limit. I stumbled and slumped over as the Hero supported me. My memories after that were a blank.

When I woke up, though, I was in an unfamiliar bed, stripped of all my equipment except my nun's garb, staring up at the ceiling.

"No way..."

I'd left myself totally unguarded. I could've been killed then and there. At the very least, the innkeeper knew my real identity. I quickly got up, feeling for anything amiss with my own body. Then, I saw the Hero asleep in the corner.

I'd stolen his bed, apparently. He hadn't taken off any of his equipment, and his cloak was wrapped tightly around him as he sat in his chair. More than caution, the feeling I got from his sleeping form was a powerful sense of rejection.

Without any particular feelings, I quietly got out a knife and stepped over to him. There was plenty to think about, but first and foremost, I needed to test this.

The only people who seriously believed in "divine protection" were pious idiots. There weren't any Gods. Orisons, magic, and skills all had *logical explanations*, ultimately. The same would be true for whatever "protection" the Hero really had.

And so, I brought down the knife.

If I put any killing intent into the strike, I'd alert him. Instead, I did just as I'd done many times before, emptying my mind of all emotion and thoughtlessly letting the knife swing down. Down at the Hero, who *definitely* wouldn't be saved by any sort of *miraculous intervention*—

"Well, that figures."

With a sharp, high-pitched snap of metal, the broken blade of my knife flew away through the air. I briefly worried the noise would wake him, but he seemed to be deep asleep with no sign of stirring. I felt around for other presences to make sure nobody else had seen me, but as far as I could detect, there was nobody lurking nearby. He and I were the only ones in this room, at least.

There weren't any Gods, and there wasn't any divine protection. But all the same, my blade really couldn't cut him.

“Ugggggh... What a pain in the ass, seriously...”

It looked like I’d have no choice except to charm him as originally planned. I’d just have to follow my orders and seduce a Hero who wouldn’t even take off his armor with someone else in the room.

“What a fucking pain...”

I tried to come up with ways I could get closer to him, but I had no experience with romance and no real ideas. Besides, if this was about getting him to *open his heart* rather than luring him in with sex appeal, this was really a job for a priest or a saint. If I’d had any talent for this stuff, I wouldn’t have become an enforcer in the first place. So, what was I even supposed to do?

I gave an exasperated sigh.

After thinking around in circles for a while, I decided to go with the most obvious approach I could find. I took off the Hero’s cloak and set to work removing his blood-covered armor, just as though I were treating any injured person.

If he woke up, he might push me away. Still, after taking over his bed, I couldn’t just leave him to sleep in a chair. Hero or not, anyone would get exhausted after fighting all night, and it seemed like he’d been keeping watch the whole trip back too. This was perfectly normal *treatment*, and whatever the Hero might say, I had *nothing* to feel guilty about *whatsoever*.

“Why’s this stuff gotta be so complicated, though?”

His armor was light, but when it came time to actually take it off, I was having a hard time working with the leather. It was all strapped on tightly enough that I almost wanted to just cut it off.

I had to get a little rough, but eventually I managed to remove his gear. Taking off his clothes seemed like it might be going a little too far... But, on the other hand, they were already stiff with dried bloodstains. If I was going to move him back onto the bed, I might as well go ahead and give him a change of clothes too. And so, as a helpful attendant working on behalf of the Church, I reached down and started unbuttoning his shirt—and then, as I looked down at the Hero, my fingers ground to a halt.

“What...?”

My thoughts stood still. Time might’ve stood still too, for all I knew.

The Hero’s body was well trained but still slender. I could see scars here and there, presumably from before the protection had taken hold. Those weren’t important, though. Obviously, the Hero hadn’t been born the Hero; it was an honor that had been bestowed after countless victories over the demons. There was nothing strange about that.

“But, no, this means...”

All kinds of thoughts were racing through my head. Did I have the wrong person? No, how would that explain the knife breaking? Besides, everyone else had been calling this kid “Hero” too. Was it all an act to protect the real Hero? No, I couldn’t imagine those mercenaries pulling off an elaborate trick like that. Nobody had been lying to me. If someone had been fooled, it wasn’t just me—it was *all of humanity*, from the very start. Everyone who’d worshipped the Hero without knowing the truth.

“Is this for real...?”

The Hero who’d vanquished the Demon Lord, and who I’d been ordered to seduce and assassinate, was about my age—

—and she was *a girl*.

Chapter 4

“How the hell am I supposed to seduce a girl?!”

I’d raced back to my room and immediately gotten on a call with the cardinal.

“That’s why I told you there’s *no need to give up your purity*,” he replied.

“That’s not what I—” *Wait, hang on. Did this asshole—*

“I knew from the start, of course. I’m a cardinal, after all. Did you really think I wouldn’t have realized that the Hero Elcyon was secretly a girl?”

I’m going to fucking kill this guy!

“If you were already aware, then why did you not see fit to inform me, *Your Eminence?*” I asked with barely contained rage.

“Oh, I trusted that with true love on your side, you’d realize right away. By the way, Elcyon is a pseudonym—her real name is Cion Kreuzwell. In any case, you figured it out quicker than I expected! Could it be the two of you are already *sleeping together?*”

“We are *not*...!”

Whatever. I didn’t want to waste my stamina and my magicite stone’s remaining charge on this crap.

“So, basically, everything so far is going as expected?” I asked.

“Absolutely. The Heartful Plan is completely foolproof.”

This fool is already changing around the plan name, isn’t he? He was probably hoping I’d point that out, so I decided to ignore it.

“I was opposed to assassinating the Hero to begin with,” he continued. “If you can win her over and shoot her through the heart in the more *poetic* sense, I’d much prefer that outcome.”

“Ah, yes, *that’s right*,” I seethed. *That’s way more of a pain for me, dammit!*

I angrily raised my hand to my ear, but he interrupted me before I could end

the call.

“Ah, just a minute.”

No matter how annoying he was, Glasses was still my boss. If he wanted my attention, I had no choice but to listen, unfortunately. This was probably going to be something utterly stupid anyway.

“Is it true you wiped out a group of warwolves near the border?”

He’d picked that up incredibly quickly. I’d been passed out for a while, but still—we’d only just gotten back into town a few hours ago. I couldn’t help thinking that the news had traveled *too* fast...

“Yes, that’s correct. I didn’t do anything, though,” I answered.

Just how much *had* he figured out? Sometimes my cardinal’s information-gathering skills were genuinely scary.

“You were able to deal with a splinter group of the demon army threatening our borders, eliminating them before their fangs could reach us. Excellent news indeed. It was a truly admirable feat, and word has already begun spreading through the city—‘Hooray for the Hero,’ ‘He’s protecting us from the shadows,’ that sort of thing.”

Shit. I grimaced. “What is it you’re trying to say?”

Uggggh... Seriously, my stomach hurts...

“The other cardinals are furious.”

“Yup, that figures.”

They would be, wouldn’t they.

I was the secret weapon they’d sent out to *stop* the Hero from accumulating more victories on the battlefield, and right after I’d arrived, the latest news was the Hero fending off a group of approaching demons. Obviously, they’d be asking what the hell their enforcer was even doing.

A lot of that victory was actually thanks to Veiss, but even if I were to bring that up, I didn’t expect anyone to believe me. He hadn’t been seen in years, after all.

“The situation was somewhat out of my hands, but all the same, I must apologize. There were a number of unexpected developments—”

“To be clear, I don’t blame you in any way. This may simply be the guiding hand of the Gods at work. You have nothing to worry about.”

Then don’t bring it up in the first place, asshole. I didn’t say that out loud, but I *was* a bit pissed at my boss for bugging me about it.

Seriously, how much had he figured out?

“In any case, my mission proceeds unchanged?”

“Yup!”

He ended the call.

“Uggggggghhhh...”

Seriously?

I curled up on the floor in frustration, arms around my knees.

I was up against a *girl* here! My sex appeal wouldn’t work on her, and I didn’t have any familiarity with people who did *that sort of thing*.

Actually, hang on—all those beautiful women who’d been sent out before had only gotten turned down because they were the *same gender*, right? If they were gonna send someone else, they should’ve gotten a guy this time! Why the hell did my cardinal think sending *another woman* was a good idea? Was he a total idiot?

“No... He’s definitely got a sick sense of humor, but he’s not an idiot. He can’t be an idiot...”

I wished fervently for that to be true as I prayed to the Gods for any guidance at all in my increasingly confusing situation. Then, I left my room, taking just a few basic essentials with me.

I needed to go meet the member of the Seven High Cardinals who presided over this city. I hadn’t been able to get in at all yesterday, but this time, I was easily granted an audience with him as soon as I arrived.

I made my way into a huge cathedral built from carved stone. It wasn’t as big

as the grand cathedral in the Holy City, but it was definitely one of the larger ones I'd seen. However, I wasn't guided into the pair of towers overlooking the city or into one of the ordinary meeting rooms. Instead, I was ushered down several flights of stone stairs into a dimly lit underground torture chamber.

As the priest who'd led me down here returned upstairs, closing the door behind him, the man standing in the center of the room spoke.

"Ah, my apologies for the distasteful decor," he chuckled without the slightest trace of shame. "Given the present circumstances, it would be most unfortunate if anyone were to overhear our conversation. I do hope you can appreciate my concern."

"I understand completely, Your Eminence. It appears there are a great many threats lurking of late."

Pretending to resign myself to the situation, I carefully looked over the room, thinking through my options in case things took a turn for the worse. The only exit was a single iron door that seemed to have been locked from the outside. I'd have no choice but to kick it down... Whatever, I could probably manage it. This was strictly a plan for the *worst-case scenario*; I could allow myself some extreme measures.

Anyway, this place really is distasteful, huh.

The room was filled with tools and equipment not for killing, but for *breaking*. Breaking bodies and spirits, with pain and pleasure and numbness. The dark stains covering the floor must've been all that remained of the people who'd ended up in here.

"Those who stray from the path of righteousness must be apprehended swiftly and given their proper punishment," he said. "That is for the sake of their own salvation as well, is it not?"

He'd been torturing people as a send-off for his dead colleague? Pretty much all of the Seven High Cardinals were at least a little weird, but Cardinal Kyrius was especially *twisted*, even compared to the rest of them. I felt like my soul was getting contaminated just standing here talking to him, so I decided to get my apology over with as quickly as possible.

“Your Eminence, I cannot apologize enough for the difficulties my incompetence has caused. I am prepared to accept whatever punishment you may deem necessary.”

I bowed my head low, keeping my hiss of frustration carefully locked inside my chest. Inwardly, I swore I’d smash my boss’s stupid glasses as soon as I got the chance. At the moment, though, High Cardinal Kyrius was walking toward me at a slow, relaxed pace, setting all my nerves on edge.

The orders of the Seven High Cardinals were absolute. Even if they were the orders of a cardinal from an opposing faction, I might not have an *obligation* to obey them, but I did have a *responsibility* to do so. That was just how things worked—that was the kind of power the Seven High Cardinals held within the Church. *If only they’d all drop dead, the lot of them.*

“I don’t know how things are where you come from, but out here, close to the border, heathens and heretics run rampant. Word of the Hero’s accomplishments spreads quite quickly—perhaps because the people see his fate as tied directly to their own. They’re utterly incorrigible. I myself would quite like to work closer to the capital, but unfortunately, there are only so many seats to be filled.”

“Perhaps this, too, is the guidance of the Gods,” I suggested. “There must be some task they wish you to accomplish here.”

“Hmm... Perhaps. Raise your head.”

If this were my cardinal, I’d be kicking the shit out of him right now, but I resisted with all my willpower.

“To tell you the truth,” he continued, “I’m not one to concern myself with little details, personally.”

As he paced around me, I could feel his slimy presence behind my back as though it were clinging to me. He kept speaking, seemingly oblivious to my disgust.

“If the Hero can be induced to speak a single word of blasphemy against the Gods, I am quite happy to handle the rest. No matter how durable his body may be, his spirit will easily break when placed before the Gods. Is that not so,

Inquisitor Alicia?”

“Indeed, Your Eminence.”

I could read between the lines—he didn’t even need me to get those words out of the Hero in the first place. With or without a confession of sin, he could extract whatever words he needed, sooner or later.

Just how many sinners had been toyed with and shattered within these walls? In the privacy of my heart, I felt pity for all those souls who were now just stains on the floor. Their fates must have been worse than I could imagine... It was absolutely sickening.

“I shall do my utmost to guide him accordingly. I would like to conclude my work quickly as well.”

“Very good. Please, my dear, don’t misunderstand—I, myself, hold you in the highest regard. Alicia Snowell... Such an outstanding specimen of youth...”

He took a lock of my hair between his fingers and held it up to smell it. I could hear his breathing getting louder and rougher as he sniffed. He was standing close enough that I was seriously worried he’d start licking me.

“Truly...*maddening*.”

I let the silence hang as long as I could get away with.

“Indeed, Your Eminence.”

If I kicked down the door right this second... He’d probably hold a grudge, wouldn’t he.

“If, by any chance, you ever do stray from the will of the Gods, I shall personally oversee your *penance*.”

“How gracious of you...”

I stared out at the instruments of torture arrayed in front of me.

I really, really hate this job.

“I pray that that shall never come to pass,” he added.

“Yes, Your Eminence.”

Yeah, right. High Cardinal Kyrius made some sort of weird snorting noise as he stepped away, visibly trembling with excitement. *Probably imagining me tied down there right now, the fucking creep.*

Glasses was one thing, but I really couldn't get away with beating up any of the other cardinals. If worse came to worst, I'd just have to make a full speed retreat. I was ready to unlock the door with an orison or do whatever else I needed to get away...

Buuuut...what if I actually just kill him, though?

Just as I was mentally preparing to wipe this sanctimonious fraud off the face of the earth and then shove the cleanup onto my boss, High Cardinal Creepo pulled himself together a bit and gave me a more priestly smile.

"In any case, let us conclude our business here. I wouldn't want to affront the Gods by detaining you any further. I have some data we've collected on the Hero waiting for you upstairs. I don't know whether it will be of any use, but please do look it over."

"Thank you, Your Eminence. Your support and assistance are most appreciated," I said with another bow.

Above my head, I could hear the pig making a loud snuffling noise as he exhaled. I found myself instinctively holding my breath. I just couldn't deal with this, physiologically.

Thankfully, the door opened back up without any incident, and I made my way out without breaking character. But I did vow to the Gods that the moment Glasses got enough power, I'd slice this bastard's head off.

In one unexpected stroke of luck, the documents they'd prepared for me were actually pretty well put together. That probably said more about the cardinal's subordinates than it did about the man himself. Their records of the Hero's activities were simple and clear, but incredibly detailed, almost as though they'd been right there watching everything. Maybe people were just more resourceful out here by the border? Seriously, I wanted these guys to come work for us back at Glasses's cathedral.

Rather than fighting on the front lines, the Hero had been going deep into

enemy territory all on his own—or *her* own, rather—and bringing back the heads of high-ranking officers. That meant that although regular people *heard* all about the Hero's exploits, they pretty much never got to see anything themselves. As a result, the Hero's legend and fame had grown to rival the Gods, and yet information about her actual fighting style was scarce.

"All that glitters is not gold... No, that's not quite right..."

In the end, these were just stories written down on paper. As I read through them, though, the truth was starting to come into focus. Now I just needed to confirm it with the Hero herself, but...

"How's that conversation gonna go...?"

I was already feeling pessimistic as I walked into the inn, but my expectations were immediately lowered to rock bottom.

"Heyyy, the champion returns!" a drunken voice slurred.

"Siiiiiiiis!" a crowd of mercs shouted.

I stared back at them, feeling my face twitching involuntarily. "What...?"

Looked like they were back from the battlefield again. The sun was still high, but they were already completely wasted. Getting drunk in the early afternoon was just their usual routine, apparently.

"Our goddess descends!" one of them called out.

"With her blessing we go!" the rest responded.

"Her merciful bosom!"

"—Has time still to grow!"

I'm going to kill them all.

They continued their chorus, oblivious to my death glare. Nobody seemed to care about last night's scuffle anymore—as I walked through the bar, I was greeted by one overly friendly voice after another. Even considering the power of alcohol, they'd done a one-eighty so fast it seemed to have shaken a few screws loose. Honestly, it was going past annoying and into outright weird.

"Have I given you some sort of blessing?" I asked a few familiar faces.

The three dumbasses sidled up to me, all wearing ass-kissing grins. “Well, yeah...! Eh heh heh...”

Uggggh... I’d love to see these three and Cardinal Creepo fight it out, actually...

They reeked of booze. Turning away in disgust, I met eyes with the innkeeper, who answered my question with an awkward smile.

“They’ve been goin’ around huntin’ down the survivors from that demon camp you two took out. Real pack of hyenas, this lot.”

“Heyyyy, c’moooon, extermination’s honest work too, ain’t it?”

Cut out that stupid voice. And those grabby hand motions too.

I sighed. “I have not aided you in any way, and I have done nothing to warrant your endearment.”

“Nah, c’mon! You takin’ down the real nasty fuckers made our job way easier! Way less guys got killed than usual too. The Gods really don’t fuck around, huh?”

I felt a slight dip in the mood at the acknowledgment that there *were* still a few deaths. But even so, the men laughed and shouted without showing a hint of concern.

“We’re goin’ to church every week from now on! Ain’t that right, fellas?”

“Yeaaaaaah!!!”

If you’re gonna show up, then lay off the damn booze.

I sighed and decided to do my best to ignore them. I took a seat at the counter, head slumped in exhaustion.

“It’s true that *those two* defeated an especially large one... Does it really make that much of a difference, though?” I asked. “These men were facing demons all the same, were they not?”

“Well, yeah,” the innkeeper responded with a shrug.

Anyway, I really needed something to drink.

“I’ve got some of the stuff from last night on ice if you want. How ’bout it?”

he offered.

I took him up on it; regardless, I just needed something to calm my nerves. But—

“Sure, demons are demons, but the ones these guys were huntin’ were all kids. They’ve still got claws and fangs, but they ain’t fully grown. It ain’t that hard if you get ’em surrounded.”

I froze.

“Pardon?”

Out of professional habit, I was instinctively eavesdropping on the conversations going on behind me as well. All around me, voices proudly swapped stories about terrified children fighting back after getting cornered, or charging in on suicide attacks to try and protect the other kids. As far as the mercenaries were concerned, they’d been *killing demons*—adults or children, it was all the same thing.

But—

I just—

I heard a sharp noise of panic and looked down to realize I’d slammed my bible on the bar.

“S-Sis...?”

The room had gone deathly quiet. The mercs were frozen in place, half standing from their seats.

No. I’m not thinking straight.

I slowly took a deep breath in, then let it out. “My apologies. I lost my composure.”

I mindlessly ran my fingers across the cover of the bible. It was a holy book which held the words of the Gods—a signpost for all those who had lost their way, for all who wandered in search of the light. I had its contents completely memorized.

Demons are the spawn of the darkness, mankind’s fated foes. They are vile

beings of slaughter and conquest, disrupting the harmony of the world—so it was written. There was no need to doubt or hesitate. In fact, plucking out the scattered seeds of evil as these men had done was a praiseworthy deed, deserving of gratitude. They'd done *the work of the Gods*. That was something to be honored, not punished.

"Seems like you're pretty worn out, comin' all the way out somewhere you've never been before," the innkeeper said, handing me a glass.

The drink inside was paler than the one I'd been served last night, and it had a sweeter smell. The innkeeper helpfully shooed away the three dumbasses, who were still hanging around looking like they wanted to say something. He filled his own glass from a bottle of liquor and raised it slightly.

"You made it through another day. For these folks, that's already worth a toast."

He looked over at the dumbasses; they were wearing shy smiles even as they stood around uncomfortably. To me, they were nothing but a nuisance, but to him, maybe they were more like a bunch of kids. They were a bit old for that sort of treatment in my opinion, though.

"It's just..." I started. "I simply have a lot on my mind, and I find myself at something of a loss. Whether with regard to *him* or to the Church, there are far too many unwelcome complications."

Aid the weak, punish the wicked. My job wasn't sunshine and rainbows; I couldn't afford to believe in that kind of simplistic logic. However omnipotent and omniscient the Gods might be, there would always be flaws and disturbances in the world. We were born out of those imperfections, and we existed to mend them—thus, we would naturally be driven to better ourselves and the world. So I'd once believed. But...

"Some days, there are just too many walls in the way, and I can't stand it..."

It wasn't like me to let out these sorts of complaints out loud. I regretted the words as soon as I said them, and I quickly lifted my glass to drink it all down.

It was sweet, but bitter as well. It didn't numb my senses the way alcohol would, but I still felt myself calming down a bit.

I thanked the innkeeper, handed him a silver coin, and got up from my chair.

The cardinals all had their own ideas, and if I couldn't comply with their wishes, that'd be treated as a failing on my part. But even so, I wasn't a knight who'd sworn fealty to them, and I wasn't a slave either. I was simply a servant of the Gods. As for the rest... Eh, Glasses could take care of wiping his own ass. That was that, and there was no point in worrying about it.

My mission was simply to win over the Hero—*even if she was a girl*.

Although, honestly, that had left me with even more doubts about this job. Could this, too, be a trial set for me by the Gods...? *As if*.

Anyway, I couldn't just blow off my mission. Abandoning my duties would be *rebellling against the Gods*, after all.

Ugh, what a pain.

Just as I was about to head to the second floor, the innkeeper brought out a tray of food.

"Bring this upstairs for him, 'kay?"

"Treating a bride of the Gods as a serving maid? How audacious of you."

"C'mon, don't be like that. I've got my hands full with these guys."

He had a point there. Even while he spoke with me, his hands were constantly in motion, filling one order after another.

"Have you considered employing a server, perhaps?"

"What kinda weirdo would wanna deal with this bunch all day?" he shot back. "Here's a spare key. Maybe you don't need one, tho', since you're so *loved by the Gods* and all."

"Would these miscreants' lack of education not be *your* responsibility, as master of the house?"

"Look, they can come off kinda shitty, but they ain't bad guys, okay?"

"Hmm... Is that so?"

Not like I really care.

I picked up the wooden tray. It had some vegetables and meat sandwiched between neatly sliced bread, along with a glass of the drink I'd just had. It looked like a much less substantial meal than what the people behind us were eating.

"This seems more like a light breakfast than lunch, don't you think?"

"I mean, he's prob'ly still sleepin' right now."

He *had* been out and about all night, but wasn't this still a bit late to sleep in?

"He's just a spoiled kid, after all," the innkeeper added with a laugh.

I slumped my shoulders in resignation. "Is that really how things are?"

"Yup."

What a stupid thought—the *Hero, refusing to get out of bed*.

As I walked up the stairs, tray of food in hand, memories of my time at the orphanage flashed through my mind. Bringing food to the children who couldn't come out of their rooms had been my responsibility back then. Sometimes, kids who'd lost their homes and families in demon attacks got so scared of the outside world, they'd hole up inside their own world and refuse to come out. I'd speak to them, share the words of the Gods with them, and help guide them so they could walk out into the light.

That was why I'd been so happy—grateful, even—when I'd been scouted by the cardinal. I thought that my selfless devotion to the Gods had finally been recognized.

When I found out Glasses was recruiting me as an inquisitor, though, I did kind of want to murder him. But even so, I managed to convince myself that fulfilling my duties would ultimately help save more children like the ones back there. If I could protect even one child from losing sight of the light and wandering lost in the darkness, I would keep on killing those who called the darkness down upon us. I found a way to believe that my work would help bring more peaceful days for everyone.

At least, that was, until I'd studied the foundations of orisons; until I'd learned that the Gods were nothing but a convenient lie created by the Church; until I'd

realized that the ones I'd been killing weren't fools who rejected the Gods' teachings—they were just regular people who the Church wanted out of the way.

"EIII! Elcyonnnn! Are you awake?"

I hadn't really been sure how to approach her, but for now, I decided to just knock on the door and talk to her like normal. Now that I'd found out we were both girls, I'd just have to change tactics and focus on being someone friendly and relatable. There was always a chance the Hero Elcyon—or rather, the Hero Cion—might be a homosexual, but she probably wasn't *that* much of a weirdo. Besides, if she were, then why would she have let all those beautiful women just pass on by?

I waited a moment. "Yup, definitely awake."

There hadn't been any response to my knock, but I could faintly hear movement inside. Either she was a rough sleeper, or she was on high alert—most likely the latter. She'd probably already guessed that I was the one who'd taken off her armor.

Come to think of it, the innkeeper must've known the truth about her too. Did that mean he trusted me, or not?

Anyway, what to do? She probably wouldn't just attack a messenger from the Church, but I needed to be prepared for every possibility. I carefully slipped the key into the door and felt the lock click open as I turned it. Holding the tray in one hand, I placed my other hand on my bible and pushed open the door with my shoulder. Inside, the Hero was...

"Huh?"

What the...?

Inside, I was greeted by the sight of a cocoon of blankets. Judging by its size, the Hero was clearly inside. What was this girl even doing?

"Um... Elcyon?"

When I called out, I saw the cocoon twitch slightly. The one cowering under the blankets was definitely our noble Hero.

What the hell? Quit acting so scared. You're the Hero, dammit.

"Um, what are you doing...?" I asked hesitantly.

The Hero answered after a pause. "I'm, uh... I'm not doing anything..." Her voice came out muffled from inside the blankets.

Not doing anything? I mean, I guess that's true, technically.

"I must say, this is a bit of a surprise. I would have expected one revered as the Hero to be more firm and unshakable, but it seems you have a cute side as well."

"Wha—?!"

In response to my gentle teasing, a head popped out from the blankets, like a turtle peeking out of its shell. Her face looked...well, healthy enough. If the issue had been physical, then I could've just thrown orisons at the problem. If it was psychological, though, that'd be way more of a pain to deal with.

"It's quite all right. You have no cause for concern. The Church is already aware that you are a woman."

"Huh...?"

Well, not the Church, just my cardinal, but same difference.

"Really...?"

"Really."

I decided to jump right into the topic she was probably the most worried about. With these sorts of things, just getting straight to the point as quickly as possible was the best strategy—that was what my experience back at the orphanage had taught me.

"I must apologize for my impertinent actions. However, my responsibility is to ensure that you are in peak condition at all times, Sir Hero. I do hope you can understand."

I just needed to act like everything was fine and normal while keeping a close eye on her reactions. I couldn't show any doubt or hesitation here.

"Although it may have been somewhat forward of me, I simply hoped to

ensure that you were able to rest as well as possible. It seems I may have alarmed you as a result, however. I am truly sorry for my lack of consideration,” I continued.

“Ah, um— N-No, that’s...? Uh...?”

Even as I apologized, I maintained control of the conversation, drawing her into my own pace.

“I’ve brought you some breakfast. Please, go ahead and eat, but would you be willing to talk with me while you do? Going out on your own as you did last night creates difficulties for me as well... I’d quite like to try to build up more familiarity and trust with one another, if that would be all right with you?”

While I spoke, I set out the dishes on the table and smiled softly at her. I was guiding the flow of the interaction, but with a pretense of leaving the final decision in her hands. If I just unilaterally forced my way in from start to finish, that could easily backfire on me. My best option was to get in close enough, then wait for her to take the final step.

I felt a wave of nostalgia as I thought back to interactions I’d had at the orphanage. If the girl I’d been back then could see me now, though, she’d probably despise me. Now, I’d become an inquisitor, and I was using those same skills to murder people.

“Sir Cion.”

When I said her real name, I saw her body twitch a bit and her hair stand on end. It seemed like just the sound of her own name had already become something special and unusual for her.

“So... The Church isn’t upset the Hero’s a woman?”

“Why would we be?”

“Why? Well, uh...”

The Hero retracted half of her head back into the blankets and started mumbling something or other.

So, the Hero was a woman. Was there a problem with that?

Yeah, *no shit* there was a problem.

There had never been a single female champion before, and if there had been, she would've just been declared a saint instead. No matter how much I devoted myself to serving the Gods, I could never even become a deacon, let alone a priest. A woman couldn't be anything but a *bride* for the Gods to love and protect. We could support and aid champions, but nothing more. The first God had been a man, after all, and the first Goddess had been born from one of his bones. There wasn't any deeper justification, but all the same, that was that. Women couldn't become champions. No, not couldn't—*mustn't*. It would be a deviation from our proper place, and an act of rebellion against the Gods.

This girl must've understood as much—that was why she'd lied about her identity in the first place. And simply the fact that she'd lied about it was already grounds to declare her a sinner. Honestly, this would be perfect ammunition for everyone who wanted to force the Hero out of the spotlight. Any of the other cardinals would be overjoyed to hear about it.

Obviously, I didn't let any of those thoughts show on my face. I just kept up my kind, caring expression as I spoke to her.

"You are a champion beloved of the Gods, and the slayer of the Demon Lord. Even if you are a woman, those facts remain unchanged."

I wasn't *technically* lying. My policy was to avoid unnecessary lies.

"Of course, there is also the disposition of the royal court to consider, and so we cannot reveal your identity to the public at large. Nevertheless, we who serve the Gods are your steadfast allies."

Okay, *now* I was spouting complete bullshit. Still, I wanted to live as honestly as I could. Not that that meant much, given my line of work.

"Really...?"

"Indeed. The Gods are on your side."

"Oh. Huh..." the Hero muttered to herself. It sounded like I just needed one last push to convince her.

I gently reached out my hand, speaking kindly and softly as though I were comforting a crying child. "It must have been difficult, carrying this secret on your own all this time... Please, allow me to bear this burden alongside you

from now on. That is why I have come here.”

I let my face soften into a warm and tender smile, trying my best to imitate the expression of a saint I’d seen once in the cathedral... My face was starting to cramp, but I pushed through it, keeping all my focus on holding my expression in place.

I really hate myself sometimes.

She might’ve been the Hero, but she was also kind of like a little kid. And here I was, tricking my way into her heart in order to murder her. If there *were* any Gods up there, I’d done more than enough to deserve their fiercest wrath.

But there weren’t any Gods, after all.

Cion seemed to have been taken in completely by my brilliant performance. I could see her deflate as the tension left her body, and she returned my smile with a teary-eyed one of her own.

“Thank you... Sister Alicia,” she sniffled.

Easy pickings.

“Just Alicia is fine, Sir Hero.”

“Okay... And you can call me Cion.”

“Understood. Allow me to address you as Sir Cion, then.”

“Sure.”

Like shooting fish in a barrel... Or taking candy from a baby?

Honestly, it seemed like *anyone* would’ve had a pretty easy time winning her over, not just me. It had probably started out as a spur-of-the-moment decision, but going by a false name must’ve been eating away at her for a while now. As her alias spread, and she got called by that name more and more, maybe she’d gradually started feeling like a different person and losing sight of her original self. They say that names have a way of tying your heart down, after all.

From the looks of things, she hadn’t heard the name “Cion” in a long time. For her, it was more than just her real name—it was *evidence* that she couldn’t become a champion.

In a way, I kind of understood her nervousness. If they found out she was a woman, the nobles would instantly abandon any pretext of treating her as a champion and move against her with full force. She'd be constantly hounded by people after her power—or her physical traits.

So, I kind of understood. I sympathized, even. Those were my off-the-job feelings, though.

“When you chose to conceal your identity... Was it for the sake of the orphanage?”

“Wow, you really looked into everything, huh?”

“No, that was just a lucky guess.”

Cion, now out from under the blankets, silently stared at me agape for a few moments. Then, her mouth widened as she started laughing.

“You're way sloppier than I expected. I thought you'd be all strict and uptight and stuff.”

“It's fine—we can leave the paperwork to the cardinals.”

After all, they'd just be dead weight otherwise.

I kind of wished the guys downstairs would take a leaf or two out of her book, but there probably weren't that many people willing to put their lives on the line for others the way she did.

This girl must've worked as hard as she did being the Hero because of the special bonus payments offered to champions—along with the public support and protection the Hero received. This world was a harsh place for people without power, and there were only so many kids you could feed on a mercenary's pay.

“Did you give them the entirety of your reward for defeating the Demon Lord, then? That feels somewhat extreme simply for returning a favor. You truly are selfless, it seems.”

“Selfless, huh...?” she pondered. “I don't really get that sorta stuff, honestly. As long as I can help people out, I'm happy with that.”

Cion's face seemed completely honest as she spoke. Still, I got the sense she

wasn't truly happy in the depths of her heart. What sort of darkness lay within the Hero who wielded her sword for the sake of humankind and her home...? Maybe it wasn't actually that big of a deal, though. It felt like there was something in there that I wouldn't be able to see unless I got a little closer.

"Now, please, enjoy your meal. Or if you dislike being watched while you eat, shall I turn to face the wall?"

"Nah, it's fine. Seems like you're different from the people who've come over before. You can stick around."

Cion neatly made up her bed and pulled out the chair.

"Or, uh... Do you want some too, Alicia?"

Hmm. I pondered briefly. Come to think of it, does this girl even have any friends?

Now that she'd let her guard down, taking her up on her offer to get even closer might be the right play. Then again, getting *too* close might seem suspicious. Although I wasn't proud to admit it, I didn't exactly have a lot of friends myself, so I honestly wasn't sure what the right call was. Since I didn't have any ideas one way or the other, I decided to just go with my gut.

"Yes, please," I said awkwardly.

We ate together, splitting everything between the two of us, but...

"Ah..." I stared at Cion.

Cion stared back at me.

It wasn't quite enough food. The innkeeper had thoughtfully served portions that would've been just right for Cion on her own. Split between two hardworking girls, though, it was a little lacking. We exchanged a silent look, clearly both thinking the same thing.

This was on me for not thinking things through, I supposed. I stood up, but Cion stopped me.

"I'll go ask the boss to make us more," she said.

Oh. Well, I guess that's fine too.

“Actually, would you like to go for a walk?” I asked, unlatching the window and smiling at her. “The weather’s quite lovely today.”

The days were getting shorter as winter approached, but the sun would still be out for a while longer.

“You must have expended some consumables in yesterday’s battle. I assume you tend to resupply the following day, when you can?”

Just a normal everyday chore. If I framed it in terms of practical necessities, she’d go along easily.

“Please, allow me to assist you. Two sets of hands are better than one, after all. You have someone here who can help carry bags, so you might as well make the most of it.”

Stepping in too close would make me look suspicious. But in actual fact, it seemed like once Cion decided to let someone in, she pretty much dropped her guard completely.

She blinked a few times in surprise. It seemed to take her a bit to process what I was saying.

“Sure, that sounds nice,” she eventually replied with a shy smile.

She’s hopeless. She’s completely hopeless.

If my job had been to *protect* her instead of killing her, I would’ve had my head in my hands right now. Honestly, at this rate, it didn’t seem like I’d have any issues at all getting through her “divine protection” or whatever.

She ushered me out of her room so she could prepare a bit. I stood outside in the hallway, thinking to myself.

I’d followed her around while she worked all night, and I’d made an unexpected discovery at the end of it. Nothing had been going the way I’d planned, but in the end, my job was proceeding incredibly smoothly. It’d only be a matter of time before she opened her heart to me completely.

Was that really for the best, though?

I’d come face-to-face with the terror of the demons, and I’d finally understood what humanity was up against. You could say it was none of my

business, ultimately, but even so—if there was someone powerful enough to vanquish the Demon Lord, was killing them to protect the Church’s interests really such a good plan?

“I mean, not like there’s much point in me thinking about it...”

Still, the fear I’d felt last night wouldn’t be brushed away that easily. I felt a chill run down my spine. I’d been confident in my skills. I’d believed I had what it took to force any normal opponent into submission.

“I don’t like this...”

After I’d had my weakness thrust in my face, after I’d been shown how small and powerless I truly was—

“Um... Sorry! I didn’t mean to keep you waiting, uh...”

“Ah—” I turned around to find the Hero standing behind me with an uncomfortable expression. “No, that’s—that’s not what I meant...? I was just, uhh...”

C’mon, Alicia, time to show off your acting skills, dammit! You just saw how gullible she is, didn’t you?!

Trying to calm my nerves with an internal pep talk, I opened my mouth to deliver a perfectly crafted excuse, when suddenly, a sound echoed through the hall.

Cion stared at me.

I stared back at her, face reddening.

It was the pathetic, banal sound of my stomach rumbling.

“No, hey, listen—! I, I’m not a glutton or anything...!”

If I’d been able to cutely brush it off like that, I would’ve felt at least a *little* better. After all, that was the optimal solution I’d arrived at based on my long years of experience and my finely honed intuition. Instead, though—

“S-Sorry...” I said, shrinking in on myself with genuine embarrassment.

I quickly tried to regain my composure and course-correct, but Cion was already laughing warmly.

“It’s fine, don’t sweat it! Everyone gets hungry, right?”

“No, listen! I just—!”

“It’s all good, really. Honestly, it’s a relief seeing you’re not just a prim and proper nun, Alicia.”

Cion went on about how I was always acting like a perfect bride of the Gods and stuff, while I did my best to contain my unresolved frustration with an annoyed pout.

“I-I wasn’t...”

“Uh-huh?”

I did my best to correct her mistaken impression, but it didn’t seem like she’d believe me.

Why is nothing going the way I want it to?

“—and some salves, just the usual number’s fine. If you’ve got any interesting ones in, I’ll check those out too,” the Hero said.

I stood around, waiting impatiently and idly watching the cheerful shopkeeper as they retrieved a little box from the back shelf.

“Didn’t think it’d take this long...” I muttered to myself.

Just walking around visiting all of Cion’s usual shops had already eaten up a ton of time. I wasn’t totally sure how long it’d been, but it felt like at least two hours had gone by. The sun was already starting to get low, and a few shops were lighting up their lanterns.

“Sorry, Alicia! Almost done!”

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it,” I called back.

After taking me up on my offer to help carry things, she was trying to be at least a little mindful about not keeping me waiting around, but mostly she was just absorbed in picking stuff out. She didn’t really seem to be listening to me, so I just vaguely brushed her off. Whoever said women took forever shopping, they didn’t know how right they were. I only really cared about basic essentials,

though, so maybe I was a bit biased in that regard.

We'd grabbed some snacks we could eat while we walked, but Cion had only taken a couple of bites. That meant I was left to finish the rest.

"Now she's really making it look like I'm the one stuffing myself," I grumbled as I tossed the last bite into my mouth.

It wasn't like I was a big eater or anything, really. Honestly, I was just bored. Now that I didn't have any more food, I'd completely run out of things to do. If I'd been helping her shop, offering suggestions on what to buy and what to avoid, I might've been able to distract myself a little. But it'd be a bit suspicious if a simple nun like myself had detailed opinions on weapons and battlefield salves.

And soooo...

"This really is a pain," I muttered.

I'm seriously not cut out for this shit...

Cion instinctively suppressed her presence at all times, so if I didn't keep careful watch, I'd lose sight of her right away. Not even being able to relax made this whole thing even more painful. I was so, so tired. I mean, c'mon—my normal job was basically to jump in, beat or stab people to death, and then bounce. I was trained for short, decisive fights. So this sort of long-term work, continually trailing a target, was unfamiliar, uncomfortable, and just not my style.

I mean, it was still my job, so I'd do it anyway. Not like I had any other options, right?

I sighed deeply. I was noticing my thoughts starting to head off in weird directions. I stared listlessly up at the sky, hoping to clear my head. Between the frustration of a job I wasn't suited for, the exhaustion of a long trip, the battle from last night, and all my accumulating worries and stress, I was just about at my limit.

I slumped my shoulders in resignation, turning my gaze back down. As I stared out aimlessly, I met eyes with another aimless gaze directed back at me.

“Oh...? Ohhhhh?” I made my way closer.

He twitched with a bit of alarm at my sudden approach, but he stayed hunkered down instead of running away. His curiosity must’ve outweighed his nervousness. I set down my bags and knelt next to him, holding out a finger. The stranger slowly, tentatively brought his nose closer to sniff at it.

“Ah ha ha ha!” I laughed as his breath tickled me.

Even I had to admit I was acting weird. I was, but still...

“You’re such a cutie! Isn’t that right?” I asked.

He sidled up closer to me, and I seized my chance to pet all around his neck.

So floofy! Awwww, he’s purring!

“Alicia...?”

“Eek!”

I wasn’t the only one who sprang up in alarm at the sudden voice from behind me. Up until that moment, my new friend had been thoroughly relaxed. He might’ve even been about to roll over and show me his tummy. But at Cion’s arrival, Mr. Kitty immediately jumped up and ran off down an alley.

“Aw...” I sighed.

“Um, I’m sorry...”

I stood back up. “No, it’s fine.”

Such is life. Swift meetings and swift partings; ships passing in the night.

He hadn’t seemed like anyone’s pet, so it was natural he’d react that way. More importantly—

“When did you get here?”

“Well, uh...” Cion said awkwardly. “Around when you started going ‘meowwww’ and ‘d’awwww’ and stuff, I guess...?”

What was she talking about? I’d said no such things.

Anyway, that wasn’t the issue. I’d be burying my humiliation along with Cion herself soon enough, so that was fine... Well, it wasn’t really, but anyway.

The *point* was, I'd been constantly keeping tabs on Cion's presence that entire time. I already had strings on her from my orisons, and after last night's battle, it was clear that this girl was way stealthier than I was. So I'd been constantly keeping my awareness on her, to make absolutely certain I didn't lose sight of her. And yet, I *hadn't noticed her at all*. At some point, she'd come up right behind me before I'd even realized it.

If we'd at least been in the middle of a battle, it might've made sense. After all, she was the kind of freak who could sneak into the demons' territory all on her own, kill their boss, and slip right back out. I could see her battlefield habits tended to stick with her in her daily life, but even so—

"This is unfortunate..." I muttered to myself.

Cion, oblivious to my thoughts, tilted her head quizzically. To me, though, even her look of childlike innocence felt uncomfortably like the inscrutable gaze of a monster.

"Do you like cats?" she asked.

"Huh...?"

She must've been doing her best to figure out what was on my mind. It was a pretty natural conclusion, I supposed.

"Ah, well... Yes, I do. The truth is, I had a pet kitten back at the orphanage. Money was tight, though, and he got sick, so..." I trailed off.

"Oh... I'm sorry."

"Huh? No, it's all right."

I was lying anyway.

It was true I'd had a kitten at the orphanage, but my darling kitty was alive and well. My stupid boss was looking after him for me while I was away from home.

"Anyway, I could use a snack," I said, changing the subject with a smile.

As I tried to return her focus to our shopping trip, I kept on pondering. Cion might be an even more troublesome opponent than I'd realized. I'd need to keep my guard up.

There wasn't actually any shopping left to do, though. Cion had already picked up everything she needed, and now we just had to head back to the inn. To keep the conversation moving, I picked out a random food stall to buy something that looked tasty.

"Would you like anything, Cion?" I offered.

"Uh... Nah. I'm good, I think..." she answered slowly.

It sounded like she was still stuck on stuff from earlier.

"Animals just don't seem to like me much," she admitted.

"Ah..."

Yeah, someone like you probably sets all their instincts screaming at them to run away.

That was a thought to keep to myself, though.

"There's a knack to getting along with them. I'll teach you sometime."

"Really?!"

"Mhm, really."

Maybe my trusty partner (purrtner?) would be able to put up with her? I didn't feel great about that plan...

"In any case!" I tried again to change the topic. "I'm rather surprised to see so many people out and about, even here in the borderlands. It's quite a lively city, isn't it?"

As I'd seen last night, we were less than half a day away from the demons' territory. There were hardly ever attacks on the city itself, but even so, it was honestly strange to see so many people living here. And so many goods, as well—they'd had pretty much everything we needed.

"I think people can live just about anywhere if they try," Cion said. "And there's plenty of folks who couldn't leave even if they wanted to."

That was why she fought for all of their sakes, she told me, smiling under the red-tinged sky. As she turned to look out at the streets—now bustling with people preparing for dinner—I could see a hint of sadness in that smile.

“I mean, it’s the same for you, right?” she asked.

“Well...”

That was probably true, I answered her with a nod. Below the surface, though, my inner thoughts were much colder.

With the threat of the demons looming, people became more dependent on the Church. It got harder and harder for them to defy the cardinal out here, no matter how much he oppressed them. Their lives were dominated by made-up “Gods,” and they were made to believe that whatever the representatives of those Gods did, it was for the good of the people.

“People just aren’t all that strong,” Cion said. “That’s why we gotta help each other out, right?”

Cion really is the paragon of a champion.

She kept on staining her hands with blood, not for the sake of personal gain, but because she wished for people’s happiness from the bottom of her heart.

And what about me?

Even thinking that way was a mistake. I realized too late that I was being driven into someplace I shouldn’t be.

“This isn’t good...” I muttered.

“Huh?”

I was being poisoned by this girl—by humanity’s Hero.

“I just remembered something I need to take care of. I’m going to go visit the church for a moment. I apologize, but could I ask you to carry these bags back?”

“Huh...? Yeah, sure. I mean, I don’t mind; it’s all my stuff anyway. How about I just come along, though?”

“No—that’s all right. I’ll be finished quickly.” I gently but firmly rejected Cion’s offer, careful not to come across as *too* forceful.

I needed to cool my head for a bit. Also—

“Okay, see you later.”

“See you later.”

As I smiled and waved back at her, I turned my focus to the unease I’d been feeling for the past short while. No, it was more than unease—this was the voice of experience telling me something was wrong.

“One thing after another... What on earth is it this time?”

The more I looked around, the more certain I became. It wasn’t just that I’d been too distracted by unnecessary thoughts to notice. I could feel someone watching me, but the actual watcher was *missing*. It felt like my *mysterious observer* was standing nearby—like we were making eye contact when I turned around—but there was nobody there. As I looked at the people walking down the street, I couldn’t spot anyone who seemed to fit the mark, but—

“Ah, I see.”

Right there. After a few moments, I noticed a spot that passersby were unnaturally avoiding as they walked. I pulled my bible out of its holder.

“May the protection of the Gods be upon us, and may we be **set apart impassably from all others...**”

I immediately activated an orison to cordon off the surrounding area, forming a dome with a radius of about a dozen meters around me. Anyone who tried to pass through would find themselves unnaturally redirected to go do something else, and everyone who’d been inside silently left. All that remained was a single hooded figure standing in the deserted street.

“My goodness me, to think you can dismiss people so easily! I’d expect nothing less of a first-class enforcer!”

As the figure slowly stepped closer, clapping their hands mockingly, I finally realized who they were.

“Inquisitor Karm...” I gritted out.

Black eyes, black hair. Even his vestments, which must’ve been white at some point, were stained black. This was one of my colleagues, as much as I would’ve liked to forget he ever existed. In fact, I really *had* managed to forget about him for a while—that was why I’d gotten careless.

This city was under High Cardinal Kyrius's jurisdiction. Karm worked under him, so it was only natural he'd be here too. If I'd realized sooner, maybe I could've gotten Glasses to help put a tighter leash on him... Anyway, there was no point in regretting it now.

"What a delight it is to see you well, Sister Alicia. It's been far too long. Why, we haven't met since... Ah, yes, the festival—"

"You cracked a bishop's skull open and turned it into a fountain. My head hurts just remembering it."

"The fault was entirely his for defying the will of the Gods. Had you known his sins, you would surely have delivered judgment upon him just as I did."

"Is that so...?"

His inexplicable friendliness toward me was nothing but a bad sign. Of all the inquisitors I knew, Karm was the absolute worst. Asking what he was doing here would just be a waste of breath. This freak operated on a logic that only he understood.

"Blessings be upon our reunion! Blessed are Ye, O Gods...!"

He suddenly fell to his knees, clutching his pendant as he prayed—the perfect image of crazed devotion. There was only ever one principle behind his actions: *"As the Gods will it."*

Even among the Holy Church, his faith was especially strong. He was a self-proclaimed "apostle of the Gods," punishing anyone he found who went against their teachings—regardless of the Church's orders. He disregarded the authority of the Church so often, they'd even tried to bring him in for inquisition. For *some reason*, though, he'd killed the inquisitor and then burned a nearby church to the ground, saying he'd "received a revelation from the Gods." That church had turned out to be a hideout for a cult of fanatical heathens, all of whom he'd rounded up for execution.



Obviously, there'd been a lot of casualties among uninvolved worshippers and ordinary citizens as well. The incident had left plenty of complete bystanders scarred physically and psychologically. And yet, miraculously, not a single person had died. In fact, it eventually came out that the heathen infiltrators had been working on schemes that would've led to much greater casualties if they'd come to fruition.

In the investigation that followed, Karm had calmly maintained that he'd simply followed the guidance the Gods had granted him, and that he'd done nothing unusual whatsoever.

The inquisitors were still unable to deliver a verdict, even now. After all, the only people who should've been able to hear the voices of the Gods were the pope and a handful of saints—and yet, Karm's delusional ravings that he could hear them too just kept getting more and more believable. As an emergency measure to tide things over, they'd tried to appoint him as a cardinal deacon, but he'd refused, saying “the Gods have decreed it is not yet time” or whatever.

It was all so infuriatingly nonsensical, I seriously wanted to kill him. The more authority he got, the easier of a life he could have—and yet, he'd just kept on wandering around as he pleased, carrying out his “faith” as he saw fit.

And so, the Church turned a blind eye to the vestments he wore, *stained black by blood*; the ring that should've been on his finger, *pierced through his lip* instead; and all those other little details. “This is all the will of the Gods, apparently, so we of the Church are not to interfere under any circumstances,” was the word. Let sleeping Gods lie.

If anyone went against him, whatever power or authority they had within the Church would be utterly meaningless. If you asked any member of the Church who they wanted to avoid ever running into, the name at the very top of the list would be Karm the Zealot. He was the kind of guy you only met once in a lifetime—in a manner of speaking...

“Now then, Sister Alicia. It seems you have plans of your own, and so I've waited patiently. Are you satisfied yet?”

“Hmm. Would you allow me to punch your lights out, perhaps?”

“I see, I see. That’s not what you truly wish to do, though, is it? The Gods have told me so. You mustn’t act against your own wishes, Sister Alicia.”

I exhaled sharply in frustration.

To the best of my knowledge, there weren’t any orisons that let you read minds. It could’ve been some sort of magical spell from the borderlands, or maybe a skill he’d developed, but there were no traces of mana usage in the air.

“Oh, don’t look so disheartened, Sister Alicia. I quite enjoy that willful side of yours.”

“Thank you kindly for the compliment,” I said flatly.

I couldn’t lie to him. He and his ridiculous “voices of the Gods” would catch me out instantly. There *weren’t even any Gods*, dammit.

“In any case, on the subject of waiting—when do you plan on assassinating the Hero?” he asked.

I suddenly felt like my heart was caught in a vise, but I managed not to let any reaction show on my face. It was an admirable feat, if I do say so myself.

Asking him how he knew about my mission, or why he thought I was stalling, would just be a waste of time. If I lied, he’d see through it. And so, I decided to respond with nothing but the truth.

“I will carry out my job when the time comes.”

“And that time has not yet come?”

“That is what I believe.”

“Ohhhhhh?”

His gaze swept over me as though he were looking into my heart itself to examine my faith. His wide-open eyes were like black pits of tar, devoid of even the tiniest flicker of light.

“Is that reeeeeeeaaaaallllly trueeeeeee? Sister Aliciaaaaaaaa?”

Just the mad fervor in his voice alone felt as though phantom hands were squeezing around my throat with every word. If I told him “I can’t hear these voices of yours” right now, he might actually strangle me to death.

“Please don’t say my name like that. I am simply another humble disciple of the Gods.” I brushed off his gaze, reaching down to place a fallen apple back on a fruit stand as I spoke. “I do not believe I have done anything to defy the Gods you serve, Inquisitor Karm.”

So, what now?

If I just kept on hedging and dodging, I’d never be able to get him to see things my way. Nothing mattered to this freak except the voices of the Gods; all of us humans were utterly irrelevant. No matter what he might be called to sacrifice for the sake of his faith, he wouldn’t care at all.

But, he’d still have to defer to *someone else* who could hear the voices of the Gods, right...?

I took a breath. “If, for some reason, you believe that my selection for this mission was in error and you wish to intervene personally, then I ask that you first seek the approval of the pope. His Holiness, too, closely heeds the words of the Gods. Perhaps there has been some miscommunication somewhere.”

“I’d heard it was High Cardinal Salamanrius who placed you in this role, wasn’t it?”

“And he, in turn, was given this charge by Pope Agarius. There’s no way a fool like him would be entrusted with overseeing such an important mission otherwise.”

“Salamanrius the Noontide Lantern...”

“Indeed. My superior is utterly useless, you see.” I gave a little smile, doing my best to convert all my irritation at Karm into murderous rage toward Glasses.

I had no idea if the pope had actually put Glasses in charge of the assassination, but this would buy me some time, at least. The pope wouldn’t just drop everything to make time for the Church’s problem child, and Karm wouldn’t be able to ignore whatever “voices of the Gods” His Holiness might’ve heard.

“I see. Very well, then. I suppose I’ll journey to the Holy City.”

“Indeed. My mission may well be over by the time you return, though.”

So get going already, dammit. You’re the one slowing me down right now.

As long as he stayed away from me, he was basically harmless. His rotten heart was just the result of innocent faith in the Gods taken to extremes. He prayed once more for the success of my mission, then turned to walk away toward the city gates.

Once this job was over, I was seriously going to take a vacation. I wanted to set aside some time to pray to the Gods for a while. After all, while I was praying, I didn’t have to do anything. Frankly, it was much more comfortable than dealing with this heretical freak. I let out a sigh of relief as I watched his retreating back—

“Oh, by the way...” The zealot turned, speaking casually, as though he were making small talk. As though this guy, who never spoke about anything except the Gods, were making *small talk*.

“Those rumors that *the Hero is a woman*... Are they true?”

He’d turned just his head around to face me, staring at me with eyes like a dead fish. I lost my words as I stared back in shock.

That alone seemed to be enough of an answer for him.

“Well then, I must hurry on my way.”

He looked away, kicking off the ground as he burst into a run—straight toward the inn where Cion was staying. But just as suddenly, he hit the brakes, seeming to notice something. He stopped in place, twirling his finger around in the air as though he were waiting for a dragonfly to land on it.

“Hmm,” he murmured. Then, he immediately started punching the *invisible wall* right in front of him. Each hit sent tremors through the air and left red stains on the wall of the dome as his knuckles became bruised and bloodied.

“Mhm, mhm.”

He didn’t seem to be using any sort of craft, just punching over and over with single-minded determination.

“Sister Alicia,” he said eventually. “Would you dispel your orison, please?”

Karm turned his head to look at me once again with those ghostly eyes.

“I will not. Killing the Hero is *my* responsibility.”

I tightened my grip on my bible and wiped sweat off my forehead. I had a bad feeling about this. I had pretty much no idea what this freak was going to do. I thought he might charge right at me, but he didn't show any sign of attacking. His genuine lack of malice made him way too hard to read.

“I didn't say I would kill her, did I?”

“Your actions are speaking for you, aren't they?”

Right now, I wasn't actually using my orison for warding people off. This was a type of magic spell for completely isolating ourselves and the space we were in. Orisons were easy to maintain once I'd activated them, but spells were much less energy efficient, requiring a continual expenditure of mana to keep them going. Plus, memorizing spells was a pain too. Magic didn't have a lot of advantages, but it could at least create a wall strong enough to keep a crazed fanatic from breaking out once I'd trapped him.

“Would you please withdraw, as a favor to me?” I tried.

“Hmm...?”

I didn't need to hide what I was doing any longer, so I took a deep breath and steadied my stance. I still wasn't fully rested after last night. Honestly, just standing here was giving me a headache, and my entire body felt sluggish. At this rate, I could keep the barrier up for about ten minutes—no, probably less.

“How troublesome,” Karm sighed. “How very troublesome. The Gods have granted you such talent, and yet why, *why* must you be so stubborn? It boggles the mind. It makes me so, *sooo...saaad...*”

Karm dramatically clutched his bloody hands to his face, staring up at the evening sky. The blood left on his cheeks formed lines like tear tracks, and even as his hollow eyes stared at me, he twisted his body around again to continue punching the wall.

I gritted my teeth. Each time Karm's fists crashed against the boundary, the air shivered, and my stamina for maintaining the barrier was depleted further

and further. He didn't need to fight me directly at all.

This dumbass doesn't even know a spell from an orison, dammit...!

"O Gods, O heroic spirits, O masters of arms. I beseech you, grant your might unto my body..." I prayed as I ran, activating Spec Boost. The ground shuddered with each step I took.

"Ngh, this—"

—hurts, dammit!

I let out a grunt of frustration and kept charging forward. I didn't have enough stamina left to stack a spell on top like usual. Orisons were one thing, but I wasn't even sure I'd be able to activate my Physical Boost skill like this. Even if I could, that wouldn't leave me with enough strength to treat my injuries. If I stopped my barrier spell, then we'd end up in a race back to the Hero; in the worst-case scenario, it could turn into a messy brawl with Cion dragged in as well. At that point, I'd be in an even worse position—I might actually die. Even if I *did* manage to take care of Karm, I had no idea how I'd explain any of it to Cion. And if she figured out why I was really here, that'd be it. I'd have no choice except to go all out and kill the Hero, and if I could do *that*, I would've done it already!

So, basically, "This is all...! Your fault...! Glasses!!!"

I'd never heard of inquisitors duking it out against each other before, but I didn't give a fuck!

I swung the corner of my bible down hard, aiming right for Karm's skull. This book was custom-made and strong enough to block an axe blow. If I hit a vital spot, I'd destroy him instantly! But—

"What's got you so desperate, Sister Aliciaaaa?"

—Karm dodged it easily without even turning around. He continued punching the wall rather than me, painting his smile red with splatters of his own blood.

I tried to grab one of his arms, but he casually dodged that too. I aimed a kick at his backside, but it slipped past him and slammed into the wall. My head *really* hurt now, and my body felt so damn heavy...!

“Don’t waste your time. The Gods see all,” he said with a beaming smile.

I swore under my breath and gritted my teeth, tightening my grip on my bible. If I was going to end up destroying myself no matter what, then—

“Physical Boost! Pump Up!”

—I might as well go down swinging. In the instant before Karm’s fist connected with the wall again, I stopped maintaining the barrier, and then stacked a skill *and* a spell on top of my Spec Boost orison.

“Graaaaaaaahhh!”

I threw aside my bible and aimed a punch right at the nuisance standing in front of me, putting all the force I could muster into it. I was sweating blood from the sudden rush of force, and I felt a sharp jolt of pain from my leg breaking as I stepped into the punch. But, for all that, my fist flew out with superhuman speed.

“Ohh—?”

In my red-tinged vision, I saw the zealot finally turn to face me, eyes wide. He dodged my opening blow, but my real goal was the roundhouse kick I launched into as my fist swung past him.

“Die!!!”

As I kicked him right in the chest, the effects of the barrier dissipated. The figures of passersby became visible once again, and Karm’s body went flying—right down the main street.

Miraculously, he didn’t crash into anyone as he flew. He rolled across the ground, stopping inches away from getting run over by a cart. The horses whinnied in alarm at his sudden appearance, and a commotion broke out among the people nearby.

“Ngh... Gah...” I panted, falling to my knees as the pain hit me. I clutched at my aching head and tried to hold back my sudden nausea.

People were beginning to panic at the sight of a nun and a priest covered in blood in the middle of the street. I limply raised up my hands to placate them, and did my best to put together a smile as I spoke.

“Everything’s...*fine*... Simply a, a slight difference of opinion—”

This was the worst. A disgraceful display like this was absolutely unbecoming of a bride of the Gods. I wasn’t as bad as Karm, but if the higher-ups found out about this, I’d get a hell of a scolding.

“Blessings of the Gods...” I clasped my hands together with trembling fingers and started healing my injuries with Holy Prayer.

Regardless, I needed to get myself moving, if nothing else. I couldn’t fully heal my broken right leg, and my left foot still had several broken toes from the kick, but I somehow managed to stand up anyway.

As I hobbled over to Karm, I could see his chest faintly rising and falling. It looked like I’d avoided the worst possible outcome. I’d struck to kill him, and I wasn’t entirely thrilled that I’d failed. Still, on balance, beating an inquisitor to death would’ve been a problem—even if it was Karm the Zealot. Glasses probably would’ve come under fire as well, and it would’ve been a whole hassle.

Welp. Good thing this zealot’s tougher than I thought, huh?

“Anyway, please don’t die on me... Not yet, at least,” I muttered to him.

I didn’t feel great about it, but I knelt down next to him and offered up a bare minimum of prayer.

If you’re gonna die, go do it somewhere I don’t have to deal with it.

“Take care of the rest yourself, got it?”

This is an act of mercy and benevolence. So be grateful, you fucking psycho.

After I’d finished my quick prayer, I tapped my piercing to contact the cardinal. I needed to get the higher-ups to put some pressure on Karm so he’d never come after me again. I didn’t actually expect Karm to listen to them, but it was better than nothing. If they still couldn’t keep him in line, I guess I’d need to get the pope to come deal with him after all...

“Hmm?”

Looking down, I noticed Karm’s lips moving.

“What is it?”

My call wasn't connecting, so I reluctantly leaned in closer to listen.

“Behind...you... Sister Alicia...” he said faintly.

“Huh?”

The moment I turned around, my entire body tensed at the killing intent radiating toward us.

What...? Why? Why didn't I notice earlier?

Beads of sweat ran down my face, and I grimaced in frustration at my own foolishness. Backlit by the moon, a figure perched on top of a nearby building looked down at us with a piercing glare. It was a white wolfman, fangs bared.

“How long has it...?”

No, it probably hadn't even noticed us until I'd dropped the barrier. And yet, somehow, the idiot lying next to me had realized it was there *before the barrier went down*—that was why he hadn't managed to dodge my kick. His senses were too good, and he'd instinctively reacted to an even worse threat than the attacker right in front of him.

“Can you move...?” I asked falteringly.

There was no response. Maybe he'd passed out.

“Hey...!”

I gave him a quick shake, not daring to look away, but it was no use. He didn't even twitch. Wait, had he actually died? I mean, I was the one who'd knocked him out, but I didn't have any chance against that monster on my own. It was on a completely different level from the giant that'd attacked me at the demon encampment last night. The overwhelming aura of pure violence emanating from it was absolutely on par with the Hero and her champion mentor.

It didn't seem to be about to attack, but its glare alone left my chest tight and my breathing shaky. As I tightened my grip on my bible, I imagined the casualties if a battle broke out right here. I hesitated—should I warn the people around us? If a panic broke out, that could easily be the trigger that set everything off, and if the wolfman *wasn't* here to attack the city, the chaos

would make it harder to track it.

Protecting people from demons wasn't part of my job description in the first place. Monsters like this one were for the knights and mercenaries to deal with.

Just as I was about to give into my mounting stress and make a run for it, a voice sounded in my ear.

"Can you hear me, Sister Alicia?"

My spiraling thoughts stopped in their tracks for a moment.

"Cardinal Salamanrius... There's a demon in—"

"Cardinal Kyrius has been assassinated," he cut me off.

"Pardon...?"

My boss calmly explained that the cardinal's body had been found inside his tightly guarded cathedral. There were no witnesses, and there hadn't even been any sign of an attack until they'd discovered the corpse.

Everyone's attention was focused on me and Karm right now, but even so, not a single person on this crowded street had noticed the demon. It all added up. This monster was overwhelmingly powerful and incredibly stealthy. There was no way I could beat it. If Karm hadn't warned me, I probably would've been killed before I'd even noticed it.

My only option was to run. I'd pretend I hadn't seen it, blend into the crowd, hide my presence—just stay uninvolved and act harmless, and I'd make it through.

Demon-slaying wasn't our job. We were tasked with killing *humans* who defied the Gods. *Monsters* weren't our problem...

"Ngh..."

I wasn't like the Hero. I knew that. I *thought* I'd known, anyway. I had no interest whatsoever in saving the world. But still...

"Guess I've just gotta go for it, huh?"

If I let it be, the casualties would just pile higher and higher.

Images of the camp we'd attacked flashed in the back of my mind.

I couldn't beat it, but if I could at least get strings on it here and now, maybe we'd be able to do something about it.

"I really have been poisoned, haven't I?" I muttered ruefully to myself.

I opened my bible with trembling fingers and tore out several pages as I started to pray. I couldn't use my barrier. I could heal my wounds, but I didn't have the stamina left for magic. I might be able to activate a skill, but in my current condition, if I tried to buff myself, my body wouldn't be able to take it.

The cardinal was probably contacting the Church, so reinforcements would show up in a few minutes... No, wait—the city's top Church official had just been killed, so they'd be in absolute chaos. It might take a while longer...

Still breathing raggedly, I pulled together whatever thoughts I could manage and formulated a plan. I needed to protect the townspeople and attach those strings...

"This might really be it for me..."

Gods... Help me.

With a desperate prayer, I lined up the bible pages in the air in front of me. These pages, each one inscribed with the words of the Gods, could be said to be *part of the Gods themselves*.

"I beseech you, defend us as we stand at the brink of despair—"

A jolt of pain ran through my skull, and I clutched at my forehead as I launched the pages toward my target. As they sliced through the air, glowing with light, the monster regarded them without so much as raising an eyebrow. Then, with one swipe of its arm, it tore them all to shreds.

"Shit!"

The scraps of paper fluttered through the air, and people's gazes naturally turned upward to follow them. Reflected in their eyes was a ball of pitch-black flame, dark enough to swallow up the night itself. The wolfman conjured the flame in one huge furred hand, and then tossed it down with a snarl—right toward me, fallen to my knees and unable to move.

Ah, yup, I'm dead.

I looked up helplessly, wordlessly, at the pure world-devouring darkness closing in on me. My arms dropped limply to my sides. My body had run out of energy just before my spirit. I couldn't move a muscle. The darkness grew closer, filling my vision...

"Agh!"

A cheer rang out.

The silence broke as onlookers' emotions instantly shifted from fear to envied awe. And as I stared at her from behind, I understood why those like her were called "champions," why *she* was hailed as "the Hero."

"Sorry I'm...late...!" she grunted out.

This girl, looking back at me over her shoulder with a pained smile, was...

"Champion of all humanity, guided by the Gods..."

Beneath the moonlight, as I watched the white-furred monster parry a blow from a sword flying down through the air, my consciousness faded away. It was a painful, suffocating sensation, like being sucked down into the depths of a swamp. But in the midst of it, one single ray of light from the heavens shone down upon me.

Chapter 5

When I was little, there was a landscape I'd see over and over in my dreams. I didn't remember anything about my father or my mother, but I'd dream about walking all alone through a field blanketed in white snow. I didn't know if it was a real memory or just my imagination. But every time I had that dream, I'd wake up the next morning with my fingers shivering terribly.

It felt almost like a warning—that if I were abandoned by the Gods, by the Church, that dream would become reality. Every time I was reminded anew of that terror, I'd try to stave it off by devoting myself twice as hard to my spiritual studies and my selfless service to the Church. I delved into orisons more deeply than anyone, and I did my best to live by the Gods' teachings.

None of that changed when I became an inquisitor, and none of it changed even when I learned the true faces of the evil bastards who manufactured the Gods.

"Please, we haven't done anyth—"

"Yeah, never mind all that."

And as I answered, I pulled back the sharpened bible page I'd been holding against the trembling man's throat, slicing his head off.

Just another boring day at work.

The truth was that there weren't any Gods, but that didn't change anything about my world. It just meant that *the adults who ran the Church* were the ones who'd actually taken me in and sheltered me. *They* were the ones I needed to keep on being useful to—not some invisible higher power. That was much easier to work with, all in all.

I wasn't blessed with a particularly gifted intellect or a particularly strong body compared to anyone else. I had no connections I could turn to and no family I could rely on. There were countless children out there dying in the gutters, and I was nothing but one more of them. I knew the world, and I knew

myself—and what I'd learned was that I had pretty much no chance of making a living without anyone supporting me. This world wasn't kind or gentle enough for a woman to get by on her own.

And so, I hadn't had any choice.

Anyone would stain their hands with blood and take the lives of others if that was what it took to earn their keep. We made use of whatever we could get our hands on in order to keep on surviving—that was just obvious. Nobody wanted to end up as pig feed.

After all, there weren't any Gods in this world of ours. There were just *people* who tricked and exploited others. But no matter how many holy lies the bastards spouted, no matter how much they manipulated their followers, all I could do was keep living on their good graces. I had no hope of living my life nobly, selflessly, like some champion or Hero out of a storybook. This was just how people were. Such were the limits of these creatures known as humans.

We showered champions with so much fame and glory because they were our ideals, ultimately. People everywhere wanted to be like them, even though they'd never be able to. That was why common folk praised the champions, worshipped them—like gods, almost.

And so, I...

I found myself back in that snowy field again. I was surrounded by nothing but a pure white plain, stretching out as far as the eye could see. Around me, the blizzard raged on.

Underneath my feet, *crimson mud* was welling up from nowhere. It began to take on shapes, wrapping around me, clinging to me. It blanketed me in wordless cries as it tried to drag me down into the depths of hell.

Is this hell?

Maybe someone else would've laughed at that idea—if there weren't any Gods, how could there be a hell?

I could see more and more familiar faces among the swarm of wraiths closing in around me. These were the "heathens" and "heretics" I'd murdered. They'd all had lives; they'd all had hopes and dreams. They'd all believed in something

other than the Gods the Church preached of, and they'd all tried to follow their own senses of justice. Someone in the Church had seen them as nuisances, I'd been sent out, and they'd been killed—for nothing except defying the will of the Church.

"It's my fault..."

There'd been a man who'd pleaded with me that he had children. He'd clutched at my wrist with a shaking hand, saying he had a little daughter waiting for him to come home, begging me to spare him. Now that same hand was clutching around my ankle, trying to drag me down with him. What must have happened to his family, deprived of their father, was too obvious for words. They wouldn't even have been able to go to the Church for aid...

"But, I'm sorry."

I had no intention whatsoever of giving up this life of selfish murder. Killing was what I needed to do for the sake of my own survival. To live in this world—to avoid being *disposed of*—my only choice was to do whatever the Gods commanded. And so...

...I'd made up this convenient dream of absolution.

I didn't struggle or resist. I let them torture me however they wanted, let them drag me down. Down into the mud. Down into the depths of hell. I let it all happen—even knowing that it was nothing but a loathsome farce of self-serving narcissism.

I was still scared of being thrown away by the Gods, still scared of being left to wander that field of snow...

...still the same stupid girl I'd always been.

I felt like I'd spent a full day having a terrible dream. That's what it was, a bad dream—one I didn't want to think back on.

"Nn..."

I woke up in a bed at the inn. Before I'd even fully come to my senses, I was clutching the pendant at my chest and praying. I knew there weren't any Gods,

but sometimes I just felt unbearably anxious without *something* to turn to. I repeated thanks and apologies over and over until the shivering in my fingers calmed down. Finally, once my breathing had settled, I managed to take stock of my situation.

The Hero had saved my life once again, it seemed.

“Huh...? Oh, you’re awake. Sorry, I should’ve knocked.”

I stared up, confused. “Mm...? It’s fine. Good morning...”

“Morning,” Cion said.

Looking up at her, I saw she’d taken off most of her armor, and she was carrying a bucket and a towel. As she came over to my side, she almost had the look of a nun going around treating the injured.

“You were sweating really bad, so I figured I should wipe it off,” she said awkwardly, brow creasing.

She had a nervous smile, and she was holding the bucket and towel like she had no idea what to do with them. I got the sense she wasn’t actually used to this sort of thing at all.

“I’m sorry. Thank you for your help,” I said. “I can handle it myself, so just set those down there.”

“Ah... Okay?” She put them down on a desk.

I sluggishly sat up in bed and started unbuttoning the shirt I was wearing. My usual vestments were neatly folded nearby, with my bible and other equipment sitting next to them. I had no memory of returning to the inn, so Cion must’ve defeated the demon and then carried me back here.

“Were you also the one who treated my injuries...?” I asked hesitantly.

My body was completely wrapped in bandages. I couldn’t call it competent treatment, even for politeness’s sake. Naturally, I was concerned about how my wounds were looking, so I started taking off the bandages to investigate—besides, I’d need to change them anyway if I was going to wipe myself off. As I unwrapped them, an answer to my question came from a completely unexpected direction.

“I took care of the treatment!”

I yelped and instinctively covered myself up. Turning around, I saw Karm’s face hanging upside down outside the window.

“B-Brother Karm...”

At least I was still calm enough to avoid calling him “Inquisitor.”

Rather than “how are you hanging outside the window” or “*why* are you hanging outside the window,” the question that surfaced urgently to the top of my mind was “why are you here with the Hero,” but—

“How’d things go with the Church?” Cion asked casually.

—I quickly realized that things had already developed in a direction I wasn’t thrilled about.

“Oh, it’s a mess,” Karm replied. “After last night’s commotion, the common folk are demanding sanctuary, and the nobles are fleeing—it’s absolute chaos. On top of that, there are already power struggles breaking out over the selection of a provisional cardinal. They really are such fools...”

I exhaled sharply.

Karm was acting a couple notches more bright and friendly than usual, but he still had those dead-fish eyes as he gazed at me. He climbed in through the window like he owned the place, giving me a cheery smile. I could see Cion grimacing a little, but she didn’t try to tell him off. Things must’ve been proceeding on the pretext that the Hero was a *man*—if she kicked out Karm, she’d have to explain why it was fine for *her* to stick around.



I could more or less imagine Cion thinking through her options. If the Hero Elcyon had *that* sort of relationship with a bride of the Gods, then it'd be a different story... But if she said that, Karm might try to kill me for rebelling against the Gods, and it could lead to nasty rumors regardless. For the sake of the orphanage, she couldn't afford to have her name dragged through the mud—that was probably her train of thought.

"Is there some business you have with me?" I asked Karm.

"Like I said, I've been praying for you on your behalf. How are your injuries, hmm?"

"Thank you kindly for your assistance. However, it is no longer required."

I could handle the rest on my own. As the sicko got closer, I pulled the blankets around myself protectively, firmly refusing his help. Thankfully, Cion also stepped over to my side to back me up.

"I see. That's excellent to hear. If anything were to befall you, the Gods would scold me quite harshly, you see... By the way, will you be returning to your own cardinal?"

I contemplated his words. "You're right, I expect I'll have to."

My fingers brushed against my piercing. I was concerned about whether I'd gotten any calls while I'd been unconscious, but the piercing didn't provide any way of checking.

In that case, though, what would I do about Cion...?

"How much have you talked through together? And what happened after all that?" I asked Karm and Cion, hoping to get on the same page. They both slumped their shoulders, though, unwilling to answer.

"The truth is, I only came to after it was all over," Karm said. "The Gods tell me that *he's* the one who fought off the demon, but I don't know the details."

Okay, so? I turned my gaze to Cion in search of an explanation, and she let out a little sigh.

"It's my fault for letting it get away. I'm sorry I couldn't finish it then and there. It did a bunch of damage to the city too, and then it ran off... I think

Master's chasing after it now."

"Veiss is?"

So then, she'd stayed behind... To take care of me?

"Was that really all right?" I asked.

"Huh?"

She didn't seem to really be thinking about it, but she must've wanted to follow him. Seeing my puzzlement, Cion eventually put the pieces together, and she gave me an embarrassed look.

"It's fine, really. He already yelled at me to stay away and all, and I couldn't just leave you alone like that, Alicia."

"Well... If you say so..."

I could see her feelings written on her face. Her master was the one she *really* couldn't leave alone, wasn't he?

"Anyway, it's our fault for not noticing quicker," Cion said. "Sorry it took me so long to come help you."

"It's all right," I replied. "Just the fact that you came to the rescue is already enough."

The fact was, if Cion hadn't shown up, we'd probably be dead. The unconscious Karm would've just been collateral damage, but I was definitely the one who'd picked a fight with it first.

"I mean, servants of the Gods like you two aren't supposed to be in battles in the first place, right? I'm really sorry."

Cion bowed her head apologetically, and Karm took it all in with a shallow grin. It looked like the injuries from our infighting had gotten passed off as wounds from battling against the demon.

"Oh, it's fine!" Karm said. "The Gods have commanded us to support you, you see. These little injuries are nothing to worry about!"

What a pile of bullshit. Karm gave the Hero a friendly pat on the back, wearing an extremely punchable grin.

“However, if you’re of a mind to repay her... You really should do her a favor and sleep with her. She fought so hard for your sake, after all!”

“Wha—?!” someone shouted. I’m not sure if it was me or Cion.

We turned to stare at each other in shock, and then—

“Ha ha—?”

—my hand shot out without thinking.

“A-Alicia...” Cion said nervously.

I took a moment to compose myself. “Apologies. I lost my temper.”

I’d thrown a pillow with a bit of extra force from a skill, slamming squarely into Karm’s face and suffocating him. (Only for a moment, okay?)

“Ah ha ha!” Karm laughed. “Look at you blushing! You’re such a cutie, Allie!”

“I’m going to kill you!”

Seriously, will this freak just shut up already?

As I glared at Karm, the innkeeper showed up with a knock on the open door.

“If you’ve got that much energy, looks like there’s nothin’ to worry about,” he said, bringing in a light meal he’d prepared and setting it down on the table.

He stepped over to my side and quietly whispered in my ear.

“What...?” I muttered. “Where did you...?”

“Like I said, you pick up a lot runnin’ a bar.”

As he stepped out and headed back downstairs, I was left stunned—“pick up a lot” didn’t even begin to cover what he’d just shared with me. He’d definitely leaned on his mysterious connections to get that information.

“Looks like things are kicking off,” Karm said, staring out the window. For a man of blind faith, he really did have sharp eyes. Even here by a back alley, I could hear the clatter of carriage after carriage racing through the streets. The nobles, and anyone else with any power around here, were starting to make their getaway.

“They really do move quickly,” I muttered.

No matter where they went, the threat of the demons would still follow them, and fleeing in a panic like this was just asking to get their houses burgled. Plus, if they got unlucky, they'd run into bandits before they even made it to the capital.

I, however, was facing a more pressing problem.

"Seems like you'll have a hard time finding a ride," Karm said.

He was infuriatingly casual, especially for someone who'd just lost his own boss, but there was no point in sniping back at him.

Anyway, if Veiss was chasing the demon, that made things simple.

"Please, would you come with me to Clastreath?" I turned back to Cion and gave her my honest plea.

Clastreath was the city overseen by my boss, High Cardinal Salamanrius. It was near the capital—and obviously very far from the front lines.

"To help guard your cardinal?" she asked.

She picked up my meaning immediately. She must've already heard about the latest cardinal assassination.

"Look, I'd love to help out, but..." she trailed off.

"I understand," I said.

She was the Hero, and she had the Hero's responsibilities. Her job wasn't to be a bodyguard for some cardinal, putting one individual's safety above everyone else's.

I had more to say, though.

"I'm not requesting you to guard the cardinal. I'm requesting you to *slay that white warwolf*."

Cion looked at me. "And you think it's going after the cardinal in Clastreath next?"

"I can't be certain. However..."

There was a brief pause. I really wanted to do this *after* I'd gotten changed properly, but...

“What’s wrong?” Karm asked.

For better or for worse, he just wasn’t going to treat me as a woman. I resolved to murder him *later* and pushed him outside of my thoughts for the moment.

Now just stay out of my field of vision. Actually, get the hell out of my room already, dammit.

I sighed and gently clasped my hands in front of my chest in prayer.

“We, who have lost our way, beseech your light to guide us...”

I unclasped my hands to reveal a small light floating above my palm, drawing patterns in the air.

“What’s that?” Cion asked.

“This is what I used to follow you the other night.”

“Wow...”

Well, it wasn’t *actually* the same thing, but whatever.

“And it says the demon’s heading for your cardinal?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Thankfully, Cion was a veteran fighter and quick on the uptake. It was so much simpler not needing to explain every little thing.

“There are already horses ready for us, it seems. If you’re willing, we can set out immediately.” I looked her over. “Also, that wound on your arm...”

Cion fell silent.

“May I see it?” I asked.

“Did the boss tell you?” she sighed. “Seriously, he’s always fussing over me and stuff...”

The truth was, I hadn’t learned the demon’s location from the Gods, but from the innkeeper. I’d just provided a bit of supporting evidence. All of it was for Cion’s sake, I supposed.

With a pained smile, Cion took off her leather glove and rolled up her sleeve.

Underneath, her right arm was being devoured by *darkness*.

I stared at it. “This isn’t a poison, is it? It’s a curse.”

“Yeah. His prayers didn’t help either,” Cion replied, gesturing to Karm.

As the conversation turned to him, his shoulders slumped in disappointment. There was no way he’d half-assed it—he’d genuinely hit a wall.

Twisting veins of darkness trailed up from Cion’s hand all the way to her shoulder, *pulsing* disturbingly like blood vessels. It wasn’t a parasite, though. It looked as though a part of Cion’s own body was trying to consume her.

“That was from protecting me, wasn’t it?” I asked.

“No, it— That’s not—”

“There’s no need to hide it,” I said. “The Gods see all.”

Thinking back to the moment when Cion had fended off the wolfman’s flames, I faintly remembered her face twisting in pain. This was a curse that had slipped past even her divine protection.

“It... It must be painful,” I said.

I reached out to touch it, and she immediately jerked her hand away, proving my point.

So, this was why Karm had failed to treat it. If we left it alone, it’d spread all over her body, and then... Whatever happened next, it wouldn’t end well. Curses like these were always bad news.

“If you kill the caster, it should disappear. Our goals are aligned,” I said.

Cion nodded. “Yeah... You’re right. Honestly, I’d feel better coming along with you too. Besides, I don’t want the boss worrying about me more.”

So this was what it took to move the champion who’d stubbornly resisted one request after another from the Church? It still seemed strange that a simple bartender had earned so much of her trust and faith.

“Just who is he, really?”

I’d assumed I wouldn’t actually get an answer, but Cion spilled the beans immediately.

“He used to be a royal knight captain. Retired almost a decade ago, though.”

“Dishonorable discharge for insubordination, wasn’t it?” Karm chimed in.
“He’s pretty famous around here.”

Wait, even Karm knows about him? The hell? Plus he’s absolutely making fun of me, dammit.

“I’d love to hear *all about* this *famous former knight captain* while we’re on our way,” I said sharply.

Seriously, how are our intelligence division’s reports so half-assed?! Those absolute idiots, just throwing shit together like it’s not their problem!

“Well then, I’ll take my leave,” Karm said. “Sister Alicia, I mended your vestments where they’d been torn, but I don’t think this size is—”

“Get the hell out already!”

I kicked him out the window rather than the door.

Just worry about the Gods, asshole!

“Alicia...?” Cion said nervously.

“What.”

“No, uh, well... It’s nothing.”

“Good.”

Sure, my clothes are a little large, but that’s... It’s an issue of practicality! If they were too tight, it’d be hard to move, so, yeah! See?

Making excuses to nobody in particular, I got changed and packed my bags. If Cion was coming with me, it’d be killing two birds with one stone. Now it was just a race against time.

“I don’t think they’re that small or anything...” Cion muttered.

She was talking to herself, so I ignored her. We didn’t have time for this. And *sure*, maybe compared to *her*...!

I kind of hated Cion a little now. Not for any particular reason, though.

After a mentally exhausting morning, we arrived at the stable the innkeeper had pointed us to. When I saw who was waiting for us there, I couldn't help slumping my shoulders in despair.

Well, yeah, I kinda figured, but still...

"And what might the Gods' favorite lackey be doing here?" I asked pointedly.

"I go where the Gods guide me," Karm replied cheerfully. "I'm told you've never handled a pair of reins, and driving a cart is hardly a task worthy of the Hero. Besides, given the hurry, driving in shifts will help us get there faster."

"Huh?"

Can this asshole please drop dead already?

I thought it, but I didn't say it. It didn't look as though he'd gone to get any luggage from the church, and he wasn't even wearing a cloak. If I just left this idiot alone, he'd wind up dead sooner or later.

"That's true. The boss said there were horses ready, but he didn't say anything about getting us a coachman," Cion said, looking up with an awkward smile at the black-clad priest sitting at the front of the cart. She loaded in her bags, then climbed in herself.

"Listen, Cion. He isn't a good person—not by any stretch of the imagination."

"Huh? Really? He seems nice enough... I mean, aside from the sexual harassment, I guess. Anyway, he's your trusty comrade, right, Alicia?"

Wait, no. Hold on. What the hell gave you that idea, exactly?

"Oh, Sister Alicia and I go way back," Karm replied with a smile steeped in evil.

I resisted the urge to swear at him, bottling up my emotions as I spoke.

"Since when, exactly, have you and I gone way back...?"

"We've known each other since before you were assigned to your current church, haven't we, Sister Alicia?"

"Sister this, Sister that—will you cut it out already, *Brother?*"

This was my fault for not finishing him off. My responsibility. Someday... Someday, I'd kill him...

I took a deep breath. “I see. Indeed, as you say, having more hands will be helpful. And if you insist on handling the horses, then...”

Karm nodded his head up and down cheerfully.

Die!

“However, I would advise you to be cautious,” I said. “One never knows what might happen on the road.”

“Oh, of course. I would never presume to have the two of you guard me. I’m perfectly ready to look after myself.”

That *wasn’t* what I’d meant, but unfortunately, I couldn’t say so out loud. If I tried to get rid of him and messed up, I’d end up looking suspicious. Normally, I’d eliminate obstacles by any means necessary, but against Karm, I was at a disadvantage. No matter how much I set it up as an accident, no matter how much I concealed my killing intent, he’d *sense* it coming and dodge it anyway...

“If you try anything funny, I’ll kill you,” I said, climbing into the cart and putting the full wrath of the Inquisition into my glare.

“It’s fiiiine. All shall be as the Gods will it,” he said with an infuriating smirk.

Drop dead.

If Cion hadn’t been around, I would’ve punched him out of the cart. Just the thought of working alongside this asshole was making my stomach hurt.

“Besides, I must admit I’ve taken something of an interest in our noble champion,” Karm added, just to make things worse.

“Excuse me?”

“To be able to remain so calm and composed while afflicted by such a powerful curse—he must truly be blessed with the love of the Gods.”

“Mmm... I suppose so...”

He really was absolutely shameless. There was no way he believed a word of what he was saying.

“Just... Don’t get in our way, all right?”

“I simply obey the voices of the Gods. ☆”

I gave up on arguing with the idiot; it was time to get moving. I placed my hands on the two horses pulling the cart.

“I’m sorry, please bear with it,” I said.

I didn’t feel good about what I was about to do, but I began to recite a prayer.

“—**Spec Boost.**” I activated my orison.

“They’ll need new prayers every hour,” I said to Karm. “I don’t care if you drop dead, but if you work *them* to death, I’m seriously going to kill you.”

“Leave it to me, O bride of the Gods.”

I sighed. When this job was over, I was seriously going to take a vacation. Also, I’d have to see if I could pull some strings to get this asshole sent somewhere far away on missionary work. As long as he was nowhere near me, he could practice whatever faith he wanted, for all I cared. Out of sight, out of mind.

“Well then, our three-day three-night nonstop ride begins now! Destination: Clastreach, the City of Stone! Off we go!”

Karm spoke in a cheerful singsong as he set the horses moving, while I sat in the back clutching my head.

“Please don’t die on me, Cardinal...”

If Glasses got killed after all this, it’d be a complete disaster. If he wound up dead, the Church—the kingdom, really—would definitely end up going all out against the Hero, shifting tactics from assassination to banishment or openly lethal force.

“May the protection of the Gods be upon us...”

I wasn’t Karm, but I still offered up my own prayers to the Gods. At the same time, though, I cursed this world where even the death of the Demon Lord had failed to quench the flames of war.

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Every time I finished fighting and returned from the battlefield, they always greeted me with praise and cheers.

I slaughtered my enemies; I stained myself with their blood. I was one of those rare and precious murderers who might've just been senseless killers in another time. But here, in the midst of the war, we were *champions*. We had the reverent eyes of the world upon us. They sang songs of my glory and started calling me by a title in place of my name—just like the champions and Heroes of old.

I didn't know what those men had thought, what they'd felt, what had kept them fighting. I didn't need to. I fought for myself and for the things I wanted to protect, burning my life away in battle. I had no regrets, and no other way to protect what mattered to me.

The Gods of this world were heartless and cruel, ignorant of our thoughts and uncaring of our feelings. Here amid the laws of nature, of taking from others as they took from us, violence was our only recourse.

Once I came to stand in the shoes of the champions of old, I understood that it must have been the same for them. And I also understood why they'd disappeared.

We sacrifice the one who for a thousand's sake must fall / And sacrifice a thousand for the sake of saving all.

Even knowing those words were a curse, I kept throwing myself into one battle after another. I kept fighting as a champion to protect our world. *If I can save a thousand, then one's an easy sacrifice to make*, I thought. I stained myself with the blood of countless stolen lives. I believed that I was laying the foundation for a peaceful world someday.

But when I lost *one* who was worth more to me than *all*, I gave up being one for the sake of a thousand. It was the easiest decision I'd ever made.

In the end, I was just the same as those other champions—even if that meant throwing away the title and resigning from the service.

After all, to the Gods above, those *champions of the world* were nothing but slaves.

+ + + + +

“—So our royal knight captain got together a few of his men and stayed to

protect the people of a village they'd been ordered to abandon," Karm said cheerfully.

As he wrapped up the story he'd started telling around sunset, he stretched out in the coachman's seat.

"But, well, all their fighting was for nothing in the end. Most of the villagers who fought alongside them died anyway. The only survivors were maybe a dozen kids who'd been hiding out in the orphanage. He committed a court martial offense, and that's all he got for it." Karm stifled a disinterested yawn. "He had an impressive track record, and his men had a lot of respect for him too. So they let him off lightly and discharged him from the knights, or something like that. At least, that's what I've heard. Does that about cover it?" he asked, turning to Cion.

"Yeah, pretty much. If you asked him, though, he'd deny the whole thing — 'I'm just a simple innkeeper.'"

"Is it true his wife passed away?" I spoke up.

"Huh? First I've heard," Cion said. "They say he was engaged to a girl from some noble family back when he was a knight captain, though, so maybe that was her?"

I felt Cion's tone get a little bit brighter. Girls her age enjoyed love stories, and it seemed the Hero was no exception. Personally, I had no interest in exploring the topic further, though.

"So that must be how he's connected to the Church..."

That explained how he'd known my alias. The knights and the Church worked hand in hand. Out in the field, there were occasional squabbles between the holy knights and the royal knights, but the higher-ups were on very friendly terms. It also made sense that he ran a guild office—maybe it was a way to help support his old friends.

"Is he that famous around here?" I asked.

"Yeah, he's a face everyone knows, at least."

Karm didn't lie. He didn't care about anything other than the Gods to begin

with.

“Seriously...” I muttered to myself. “That investigation was ridiculously sloppy...”

Information was a powerful weapon—especially information that related this closely to my target. I let out a frustrated sigh at the Church’s total lack of respect for me, then carefully collected myself. I sheathed the sharpened blade of my murderous rage for the time being, got back into character as a humble bride of the Gods, and spoke calmly to Cion as though nothing was the matter.

“Was he the one who introduced you to your master?” I asked.

Chasing after her master was Cion’s real goal right now. He was clearly someone deeply important to her.

“Ah... No, it’s the other way around, really,” Cion mumbled. “Master pushed me off onto the boss.”

“Hmm...”

That hadn’t cleared up much. It sounded less like she didn’t want to talk about it, and more like she didn’t understand it that well herself.

“Did he get fed up because he thought your skills were lacking?” I asked in a joking tone.

Cion gave an awkward smile. “Honestly, it didn’t even get that far. He refused to take me on as an apprentice in the first place, but I kept following him around bugging him about it... One day, he dropped me off with the boss and left.”

“Ah, I see...”

To him, the innkeeper was an old buddy, but from Cion’s perspective, she’d just been abandoned with a man she didn’t know at all. The innkeeper seemed like he did a good enough job looking after her, and it just meant Veiss had that much trust in him, but even so...

“How awful of him,” I said.

“Yeah! It’s awful, isn’t it?!” Cion fumed and pouted, looking less like the Hero and more like a petulant young city girl. “The boss kept telling me ‘he’s got his

reasons' and 'you're just a kid, he doesn't wanna burden you' and stuff like that, but I'd been begging Master to take me on for so long, and he just—!"

She looked like she was about to start stomping her feet in frustration.

"I'm sorry..." I said, trying to placate her.

Cion just grew even more animated, brow creasing as she ranted.

"So then, okay?! I snuck up on Master in his sleep! Right when he'd least expect it!"

I heard Karm let out a snort of laughter.

"I-I see... That was, um, quite *bold* of you, wasn't it?" I said carefully.

Cion chuckled. "I'll never forget the look on his face..."

Obviously, that had just been a surprise attack, and not anything sexual... Probably not, anyway. I mean, not like I knew, really. *Anyway...*

"Veiss the Bloody was once declared a saint, wasn't he? To think that even that legendary champion, dauntless slayer of the Gods' demonic foes, could meet with such humiliation..." Karm teased from the coachman's seat.

"I-It's not like Master's stupid, or like he usually leaves himself wide open or anything, okay?!" Cion hurriedly clarified, expression stiffening. "I just, y'know, I was better than he gave me credit for, is all—"

"Indeed, I understand completely. Even without consulting the Gods, that much is clear to me," Karm assured her.

"Really...?"

I wasn't sure whether they were just on the same wavelength somehow or whether Karm was deliberately humoring her, but either way, they got along surprisingly well. Maybe Karm's mindset of "all is equal before the Gods" was actually easier for Cion to engage with.

Still, though... If you try anything funny, you know what'll happen, right?

Taking utmost pains to avoid Cion noticing, I shot Karm a death glare. He'd behaved himself well enough while I was unconscious, but a single *word from the Gods* could instantly send this freak on a rampage. However, Karm simply

waved back at me with a wide, cheerful smile. Did this idiot think I was just feeling left out of the conversation? Cion also turned around to look at me in confusion.

I was so, so tired. It had nothing to do with recovering from my injuries. As I contemplated having to suffer through *this* all the way back to the city, I just...

“Ughhhh...” I let out a deep sigh of frustration.

“You okay?” Cion asked.

She was genuinely concerned for me out of the kindness of her heart. Honestly, if we’d met under different circumstances, I felt like she could’ve been a good friend—one I’d want to have by my side. But this girl was the Hero, and I was a bride. As a slave of the Gods, I had to carry out my mission, or else I’d lose my place in the world.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I think I’ll be recovered by the time we reach the city, but would you be willing to keep watch on our surroundings?”

“Yeah, of course! You’re letting me ride with you and all, so I’ll help out too!”

I was confident that I wouldn’t slip up, but the longer I kept up my act, the more I could feel a knot of tension building in my shoulders.

Looking at her like this, though, it seemed like there was a lot the Hero was missing. During the attack on the city, as she’d stood there with me at her back, I’d seen a glimpse of divine light in her figure. She’d won wealth and fame far beyond the wildest dreams of any normal girl. But even so, looking at her face in profile, I saw a vague loneliness in her as she gazed out from the cart.

I wasn’t sure whether she was missing her master far ahead of us, or whether that loneliness was something older and deeper. Maybe it had come to follow her as she journeyed alone through fields and mountains, hunting one demon after another.

Regardless, *the Hero Elcyon* felt like a sad and solitary creature. Looking at her now, like this, nobody would be able to imagine her swinging a sword and showering herself in blood. She looked slender and fragile, like she’d break if you held her too tightly.

Why...?

Maybe she was dealing with a lot more baggage than I'd realized, even setting aside the two-faced bride sitting next to her.

"My apologies, but I think I'll go ahead and take my rest now," I said. "Karm, be *certain* not to trouble the Hero, is that clear?"

He grinned. "You should have more faith in me, Sister Alicia!"

No way. If I ever trust you, it'll only be after I've killed you.

Agh, no—actually, I still won't be able to rest easy until I've burned the body. Honestly, even if he were nothing but bones, I still feel like he might come crawling back.

"Cion, if anything happens, wake me up right away, okay?"

"You're such a worrywart, Alicia..."

I wrapped a blanket around myself and curled up on the hard floor of the cart, doing my best to recover what stamina I could.

By repeatedly reapplying a new orison every time it ran out, we were keeping the cart running at full speed continuously—though at the cost of chipping away at the two horses' lifespans. The sun had set a while ago, and the only thing illuminating our path was a dim light Karm had conjured up. Normally, it would've been time to stop and set up camp, but right now, every minute counted. We'd already long since raced ahead of the nobles fleeing the city, and we'd probably catch up to the demon before the night was over.

Demons' physical abilities were incredible, but their power worked in bursts. Unlike horses, wolfmen's legs weren't suited for prolonged endurance. However abnormally powerful this monster was, I couldn't imagine any wolfman being able to keep on running all day and all night. We hadn't heard about any waypoints being attacked either.

It was always possible the demon had turned around, but that really would be too good to be true. Most importantly, Veiss was chasing it too, and we hadn't caught up to him yet either.

From what I'd heard, Cardinal Chaucus had been murdered on his way back

from a meeting of the Seven High Cardinals. He'd been heading west from Arshelm on a route that traced along the front lines. With the deaths of the two cardinals closest to the front, the kingdom would be rushing out knights to defend the border, leaving the interior of the country shorthanded.

What's more, it was almost the new moon. The night was pitch dark—perfect for anything to hide in.

“I really should've put that string on it directly...”

Attaching the string indirectly via my bible pages had been a mistake. I didn't think it had noticed me applying it, but my sense of its location was getting fainter and more distant. At this point, it was hard to be sure the responses I was picking up were even from the demon at all.

“It feels like I'm waiting for my daughter to bring home her date,” my cardinal said with an air of deep emotion.

While I'd been pretending to sleep, I'd finally managed to get a call to go through. Under any other circumstances, I would've ended the call right there. Instead, I silently nodded at him to get to the point. Right now, I just needed any bit of information I could get about that white warwolf.

Unfortunately, taking advantage of the fact that I couldn't talk back, the cardinal cheerfully rambled at length about whatever random garbage. In the end, all I got was a vague report that the wolfman was *bad news*.

“It's descended from a clan called the Wolves of Heaven. The others call it 'General Heavenfang.' Seems like they're pretty furious about their Lord getting killed.”

I'd gone to the trouble of warning him that he was its next target, but he sounded completely at ease. Glasses kept on going in the same casual tone.

“They're the enemies of the Gods, and yet they name themselves 'Heaven.' Don't you think that's interesting?”

I really don't.

I glanced over at the coachman's seat to check on Karm and looked up at Cion's smiling face as they talked. It sounded like they were having an equally

pointless conversation of their own up there.

The fang of heaven, huh...?

It didn't really matter at all what they called themselves or what they were thinking. In the name of the Gods, the demons had to be destroyed. Unto the children of the Gods, prosperity. Unto the enemies of the Gods, swift judgment...

"Anyway, I'll contact you again if I learn anything new," Glasses said. "You might already have arrived by then, though. Remember, it's always darkest before the dawn. Be careful."

Uncharacteristically, he ended the call not with a prayer to the Gods, but with a warning to me.

In a moment of unusual clarity, I pondered to myself. Just how long would we keep repeating this, over and over, in the name of the Gods?

"Demons are evil. They have to be killed..."

I just couldn't get the deaths of those warwolf cubs out of my mind. If there really were Gods out there, all they'd need to do was tell me, "This is right," and I'd be able to accept it...

No, that didn't matter either. None of this was my concern. Do as the Gods commanded, wipe out their foes, and bring peace to this world—that was our role as brides of the Gods. I didn't need to think about anything else. I just needed to carry out my mission.

Even if that demon was attacking someone out there right this minute, it *wasn't my responsibility*.

Cion might get upset, but it had nothing to do with me. She tried to save as many people as possible, protecting everyone she could reach, but I wasn't like her. I simply obeyed the will of the Gods in order to hold on to my own place in the world. I just needed to stay close to her, work my way into her heart...

"...and then go in for the kill..."

But however much I ran through it all in my head, I still felt like bit by bit, I was getting steered off course from my original goal. It left me uneasy.

I wasn't Karm, but still—if I'd been able to cling to blind faith in something, that would've helped a little... Unfortunately, though, I knew the true faces of the fools who preached in the name of the Gods. They wrote up self-serving divine orders to satisfy their own desires; they eliminated anyone they wanted out of the way; and bit by bit, they built up a peaceful world for *themselves*. The Gods were nothing but props in their play.

"This is stupid..."

There aren't any Gods.

Before I knew it, I'd drifted off to sleep. When I woke up, the string I'd put on the wolfman had slipped off completely.

Had it slipped off, or had it been cut off?

I had no clue, honestly. But as things stood, the wolfman could be anywhere, attacking anyone, and we had no way of knowing. All we could hope for was the Gods' guidance, or their random whim.

The wheels of our cart kept on turning, like an angel of death circling down overhead, preparing to show itself.

After all, everywhere I'd ever traveled, death had always accompanied me.

Up above us, the world was blanketed by a heavy and suffocating sky.

Chapter 6

Clastreach, where High Cardinal Salamanrius held court, was also known as the City of Marble and Water. It was one of humankind's greatest trading hubs, and tourists flocked from all over to see the famous canals that ferried people and goods through the city. It was located in the southeast of the continent, and it had never once been attacked by demons.

Our destination was the grand cathedral that stood imposingly at the city's center. The moment we arrived, we handed off our worn-out horses to the monks who ran the stable, and I headed inside to look for Glasses.

Despite the arrival of the legendary Hero, there wasn't much of a reception. There just weren't a lot of people around, period. We'd already been short on personnel to begin with; now, the cardinal assassinations and the demon attack up north had left the cathedral even more understaffed.

Of course, that also meant there was nobody around to keep our cardinal under control.

"Welcome, welcome! I'm glad to see your travels were safe. I am this cathedral's cardinal, Salamanrius—although I believe we've met once before, haven't we, O Hero Elcyon?"

"We have, Cardinal Salamanrius..." the Hero said awkwardly. "You're, um, looking well...?"

You're looking brain-damaged, High Cardinal Salamanrius.

The cardinal was completely and utterly screwing around. He gesticulated dramatically as he stepped forward for a handshake, and he'd replaced his usual spectacles with a pair of nose glasses—the kind you'd use for putting on a show at a party. The nose glasses didn't have any lenses, and he reached out to shake *my* hand instead of Cion's. (That was *absolutely* on purpose, though.) On top of that, for some reason, he was cradling my cat, Atalanta, in his other arm.

Even Cion, who'd normally know how to conduct herself in front of a cardinal,

seemed to be at a bit of a loss.

“Our intelligence division is working on tracking down the demon, so for now, please do take some time to recover from your travels. My cathedral’s baths are absolutely top-class.” Glasses—or rather, Nose Glasses—kept on talking, ignoring our concern and confusion. “In fact,” he continued, leaning in closer to address Cion, “why not have my trusty subordinate scrub your back for you? The two of you can spend some private time together and wash all your troubles away...”

My troubles were only growing by the second, and it didn’t seem like they’d wash out that easily.

“Excuse me, Your Eminence,” I said sharply, kicking my boss in the shins and grabbing his cheek to pull him away from Cion.

Seriously, drop dead!

Also, Atalanta was really freaking out. Was he scared of Cion?

“I have reports to make, so please proceed without me, Sir Hero,” I said. “There should already be a room prepared for you.”

Another bride showed up behind Cion to assist her in getting settled. She was young, close to my age. I didn’t remember the faces of all my colleagues, but she wasn’t wearing the communicator piercing that denoted an inquisitor, so she must’ve been a *normal* nun. As a bride of the Gods, there was no way she’d get close with a *man* like the Hero, so it’d probably be fine.

Luckily, Karm had run off somewhere as soon as we’d arrived in the city, saying he’d “received guidance from the Gods” or something. So, with any luck, we wouldn’t need to worry about him either. If anything went wrong, it’d be entirely on Glasses.

“As His Eminence says, please do get some rest,” I told Cion, just to make sure the message got through.

“I’m fine, though.”

“You’re clearly not. Please, I insist.”

I meant it. As of this morning, the curse devouring her body had already

spread up to wrap around her neck and down to her stomach. At this rate, it'd cover her completely sometime tomorrow or the day after. There were plenty of people who saw the Hero as a nuisance now that the Demon Lord was dead, but with that white wolf looming over us, letting her die right now would be much too reckless.

"Now, shall we be going, Cardinal?"

"Aah... Sister Alicia, there's no need for such a rush, the God of Time will—
Owww! That hurts! Agh, please, just hold—"

Pulling on his cheek not quite hard enough to do any real damage, I headed off to take care of my own job. The hint of loneliness I saw in Cion's face as I walked away must've just been my imagination.

"Well then, let's hear your report, Inquisitor Alicia."

As soon as we entered the cardinal's office, he instantly shifted back to business.

But also, take off those damn nose glasses already.

I'd spent the whole trip back here worrying about him, but the moment I'd seen his face, my first thought had been "*I wish he'd died.*" Humans truly were strange creatures.

"I really do wish he'd died, though..."

"That was out loud, Alicia."

"Oh dear, please do excuse my rudeness. Speaking of rudeness, shall we get to the point?"

I yanked the conversation sharply back on track. Also, while I was at it, I took Atalanta back from him.

Awww, that's right, you get scratches! You missed me, didn't you, cutie?

"So, how was dealing with the Hero?" he asked.

"There's not much to deal with—she's just an innocent, trusting kid. You really didn't need me for this mission; pretty much anyone could've killed her in

her sleep.”

All the people who’d tried and failed before me had simply been the wrong ones for the job. They didn’t need some dazzling beauty; they just needed a nun who could get her to open up and hear her out. Honestly, I hadn’t been the best candidate myself—I’d long since strayed from that path, after all.

“Wouldn’t this have been a better job for Saint Nevissa? They say she can get the most hardened criminals to open their hearts to her, right? If you’d asked her, she might’ve been able to take out the Hero instantly.”

The cardinal shook his head.

“It’s true that she has a talent for guiding lost lambs back into the fold, but that’s not quite what we’re looking for. What we need isn’t someone to guide the Hero and help her set down her burdens. We need someone to *tame* the Hero, Sister Alicia.”

So, basically, he wanted to squeeze as much value out of her as possible while she was still useful?

“You really are a piece of shit, Your Glassesness.”

“You wound me,” he said with an exaggerated sigh and a melodramatic gesture of woe. “This is much more peaceful than assassination, don’t you think?”

I really, really wanted to smash his face in. Not with my bible, even—just my bare fist.

“Besides,” he said, “if that angers you, then that means you’re coming around to her side, at least a little. This is a promising development.”

“What makes you think I’m on her side, exactly?”

I was perfectly calm and composed, keeping my expression neutral as I listened to Glasses. I wasn’t the kind of amateur who’d get shaken up by a conversation like this.

“In any case, we really don’t have time for this. Just how many people do you think have died, Your Eminence?”

“Three, I believe. One more got killed while you were on your way here—or

rather, that's when his body was found, at any rate."

"You..." I stared at him in resignation.

He spoke without a care in the world, even though he could easily be the next victim. What the hell was wrong with this guy?

"Or, wait... Do you already know where our target is?" I asked.

"I don't know anything about it," he said, handing me an envelope holding a decree from the Gods—divine orders.

Ah, yup. That checks out...

"I'd *thought* the security here was too lax, with High Cardinals getting killed one after another. Our people are already out evacuating citizens and capturing the target, aren't they?"

"I haven't looked inside," he replied with a grin.

"Like you don't already know what it says..."

Gods, my stupid boss pissed me off. But that said, at least he was on top of things. Whatever I thought of him personally, all in all, this idiot was still one of the more reasonable cardinals I knew—*relatively speaking*.

That was exactly why I couldn't just let him get killed.

"It really is a delight to have such a talented inquisitor working for me," he said. "As my most trusted subordinate, you'll be the one to finish this off, after all."

"Absolutely not. Demons are out of my jurisdiction."

This wasn't like when I'd encountered it in the middle of the city. I knew full well that I wasn't suited for taking down things like *that*. And besides, if Church personnel were already moving in, there shouldn't have been any reason to send me out in the first place.

"No, this mission is definitely *your job*, Inquisitor Alicia." The cardinal took off his nose glasses and stepped over to gaze out the window.

"Hang on... Are you saying that demon is actually a *human*?"

That white wolfman? No way. That thing was undeniably a genuine warwolf.

In that case, then...

I let out a sigh. "I really don't think this is the time for infighting..."

"I couldn't agree more. But the world is filled with people who'll try and seize the chance to further their own schemes exactly when we most need to stand united. Those dead cardinals' cities have been in chaos these past few days."

"And you're thrilled to see rival powers collapsing, aren't you?"

"I hold no ambition to power whatsoever," the High Cardinal said. "All that I do, I do for the good of the people and of the world. That obviously includes my master scheme of Hero seduction, the Harem Project."

Uh-huh, sure.

Still, there was nothing I could do about it and no point in arguing over it now.

"Anyway, I'm glad to see the investigation is already complete," I said.

The envelope holding the divine orders was sealed with the emblem of the Church overlaid with a scythe. This mark was used exclusively to indicate secret documents for inquisitors. I had no clue who'd come up with it; I think it was supposed to symbolize an angel of death or something? Kinda on the nose, isn't it.

"And you'll have Cion guard you?" I asked.

"If she's willing to, at least. Besides, keeping her here out of your way will make your job easier, won't it?"

"Well, I don't think she's the kind of girl who'd go out looking for me just because I'm not around."

At the end of the day, I was a bride of the Gods. It was natural that I'd prioritize my own duties; there was no reason for her to find that strange or suspicious.

"I'll back you up, so you just focus on your own work, all right?"

Something about his tone kind of nagged at my senses, but whatever.

"I *really* don't think this is the time for infighting," I sighed again.

I set down Atalanta and opened the envelope. Nose Glasses—or rather,

Regular Glasses once again—quietly prayed while I read it.

“May the protection of the Gods be upon us as we walk our paths...” He adopted a priestly air as he spouted his bald-faced lies.

This was how the Church operated. The higher-ups preached in the name of the Gods to advance their own agendas, and we—*the slaves of the Gods*—were their obedient accomplices. Same story as always.

“Do take care, Your Eminence.”

I burned the divine orders with a candle and left the room. I’d already memorized the orders’ contents—not that there was much there to begin with. This letter from the Gods told me nothing except where to go and when.

We inquisitors were always given as little information as possible. It wasn’t our place to question the decisions of the Gods, after all. We had no need to know who our targets were or what sins they’d committed. We simply arrived on the scene, killed everyone there, and returned to our churches. Anyone who tried to fight us would be subject to execution on the spot—that was the extrajudicial authority wielded by enforcers of the Gods’ will. Whether we were facing royal knights, wealthy nobles, or even Heroes blessed with the love of the Gods, the rules we followed were absolute and unyielding.

So all I needed to do was follow the directions I’d been given and carry out my mission. My role, as the Gods’ servant and as their bride, was simply to dispose of anyone who flouted their divine will.

I sighed deeply as I got my thoughts back in order. I’d arrived at a run-down lodging house off a back alley. The man behind the counter had his young daughter on his lap; as soon as he saw me come in, he sent her away to the back and gave a small gesture of prayer. He must’ve already been warned of what was coming. I walked up to the third-floor room I’d been directed to, not bothering to knock.

The door opened when I turned the handle. Maybe the occupant hadn’t bothered locking it, or maybe they’d *unlocked* it in anticipation—I didn’t need to know which. All I needed to do was take out my knife and go through the same well-practiced motions I’d carried out countless times before.

That was all I had to do.

But...

“Ah... So that’s how it is...”

The moment I saw the figure sitting there, waiting for me, I felt as though I understood everything. No—maybe I should say everything clicked into place.

He sat casually on the bed with his knees up. I kept all emotion out of my voice as I addressed him.

“I really did have some respect for you... Sir Champion, who was once called Hero.”

I had to admit, they’d chosen the right bride for the job. I couldn’t imagine a better warm-up for killing the Hero herself.

“Nn...” he yawned. “Sure took your time, huh? I was just about to fall asleep.”

“In that case, I’m quite sorry for interrupting you. Personally, I would much prefer to catch you off your guard, so could I trouble you to return to sleep once again?”

“Mmm, that’s gonna be a bit tough now. If I had a sexy lady to lie here with me, I’d be down to give it a try, but *you* don’t exactly get me in the mood.”

“Fair enough. I *am* about the same age as your dear apprentice, after all.”

He rested both hands behind his head and stretched out his back. He was unarmed, but his movements were casual and unconcerned.

“Damn, inquisitors are getting soft these days. Far as I know, any of your buddies woulda just come right at me with that thing—no questions, straight for the throat. Or, what? You finally starting to come around to Cion’s side?”

No. That wasn’t it. I’d just seen a familiar face, understood the motive that had led him here, and felt a sort of bitter irony—that was all.

“So, ain’t gonna ask why, huh?”

“It’s quite obvious. Simply the Church reaping what they’ve sown, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, guess so.”

Once the Hero had fulfilled her purpose, she'd be assassinated. This champion had understood that perfectly, and before we could kill his apprentice, *he'd* gone in to do some killing. That was all there was to it; no mysteries there. You could call it karmic justice, even. The Church had stepped on a tiger's tail.

"If you care for her so strongly, you could stand to be a little kinder to her, couldn't you?" I asked.

"Sure, if this was the kinda world where you could survive on smiles and nice words."

"No matter how harsh you are, everyone dies when they die."

It was at least a relief that the one killing cardinals hadn't been the Hero herself. Still, this was no laughing matter. With the former Hero revealed as the culprit, the higher-ups would be thrilled to finally have the perfect excuse to go after Cion. *"Humanity's champion is sure to turn against the Church too, sooner or later."*

"The protection guarding that girl's life is also your doing, isn't it?"

"Oh? Saw through that too, huh? Damn."

"Indeed... Or rather, there weren't any other likely suspects, and for a man as renowned as *you*, it's perfectly plausible."

There weren't any Gods in this world. Even the powers we called "orisons" and "skills" weren't all that different from magic once you picked apart their inner workings. They all had their own formulae, and they all required someone to activate and maintain them. In the end, they were all merely phenomena produced through the application of mana.

Going for a walk while you slept was impossible, and keeping your craft active while you slept was equally impossible. That was why the Hero's gift, which stayed active even while she was asleep or knocked out, had become known as "the love of the Gods." Even the Church's elite inner circle of con artists, who fully understood the true nature of orisons, had been unable to track down the caster. And no wonder, if the caster was actually the former Hero—I could easily see this legendary champion evading their search.

"Just who was it who said magic was too difficult to use during battle, hmm?"

“Hey, I ain’t the only one with tricks up my sleeve, am I, Multi-Player?”

No—this wasn’t something you could just get accustomed to through practice. I knew that better than anyone. In that moment, this man felt incredibly distant—incredibly strong. Did I really have what it took to defeat him?

“It really is a pity having to face off against humanity’s champion,” I said, still internally trying to get some measure of the gap between the two of us. “Was there truly no other option? No way to negotiate with the Church?”

“Those really the words of someone who kills for a living?”

“I suppose not...” I replied slowly. I knew the judgments of the Gods couldn’t be overturned that easily. “And yet, even if you told Cion to give up being the Hero, she’d never listen.”

“Yup, that’s the deal.”

There was the orphanage, for one thing... She’d poured pretty much all of her reward money into supporting them, but I couldn’t imagine that was all they needed. Without the Hero’s backing, they’d get cut off and abandoned right away.

“Seriously, why’s everyone gotta be such damn hard-asses, right?”

“My thoughts exactly. I’d much prefer to live a little more flexibly myself.”

As long as Cion kept on fighting as the Hero, the Church would never rescind their assassination order; and as long as this champion kept on killing cardinals, I’d have no choice but to do my job as an inquisitor.

“In any case,” I said, “I won’t make you suffer, so I’d quite appreciate it if you would cooperate peacefully and allow me to kill you.”

“That what the Gods tell you to do?”

“Indeed. My divine orders are absolute.”

He chuckled as I bowed my head slightly in apology.

I sheathed my knife and took my bible out of its holder. I preferred a blade for quick assassinations, but if this was going to turn into a fight, I was more used

to working with blunt instruments. I really had wanted to persuade him to go along quietly if possible, but it looked like that wasn't in the cards.

"Aren't you going to brace yourself?" I asked.

"I'm braced right now."

I stared at the champion in silence. He was still lounging on the bed with his knees up, exactly the same as when I'd walked in.

I'd been dealing with this bullshit nonstop these past few days, one asshole after another. Seriously, why was everyone acting like they could see right through me? Who the hell did they think they were?

What's more, even though he didn't look "braced" at all, he wasn't leaving a single opening. I could easily tell that if I charged in without a plan, I'd get intercepted instantly.

"If you're not gonna come at me, mind if I beg for my life a bit first? Just wanna ask you something real quick."

"What is it?"

"Eh, it's pretty basic shit," he said. "Just a question about the Gods' teachings. So, everyone's equal before the Gods, right? Lots of guys out there believe that stuff, and hell, they're probably right. Ain't like anyone's life's got any more weight than anyone else's, underneath it all. We're all just lumps of meat, blood, and bones in the end."

He reached over to the bedside. I instinctively went on the alert, but the champion just pulled out a bible a couple sizes smaller than mine. It was stained and worn; it looked like he'd picked it up out of a junk heap.

"There's only so many lives you can save, and there ain't really anything separating them from the ones you take—'s all subjective. So, how do *you* decide where to draw the line?" His scarred face twisted in a scowl, and his eyes gleamed with the sharp gaze of a beast taking in its prey. "Just what is it you wanna protect so bad, you'll stain yourself with blood for it?"

"*That's* what you wished to ask me?"

It was a foolish question. The answer was obvious.

“All shall be as the Gods will it.”

All so they wouldn't throw me away. All so I could keep being a devout slave of the Gods.

He looked me over slowly. “Damn, you've got it pretty rough too, huh?”

“Would you believe I hear that a lot?”

We both found ourselves laughing.

“They prefer their brides obedient and dutiful, you see,” I said.

I tore a page out of my bible and took up a fighting stance. As I did, the champion's smile vanished instantly.

“So... You really can't be there for *her*?” he asked.

“This body is promised to the Gods alone, I'm afraid.”

“That's a shame. If she had someone like you by her side, I wouldn't need to go around doing all this dumb crap.”

His smile was lonely, with an air of resignation. There was no way he actually meant any of that, though...

“Well, guess that's enough talk for now.” Every trace of emotion instantly left his face as he stood up and brandished his weapon. “Time to get back to killing.”

The blow came at me right from the side.

“Wh—?!”

It was nothing short of a miracle that I managed to block it with my bible in time. As his sword swung through the air, just the shock wave sent cracks through a nearby wall. I slammed right into the wall myself, feeling the building and my body vibrating with the impact.

“Impressive...” I gritted out.

I didn't have the strength to mount a counterattack. Faced with this blazing ferocity, it was taking everything I had just to keep myself together. I'd reflexively activated my skill to boost my physical abilities, but even so, the force of the collision had shattered my left shoulder. I immediately healed it

with an orison, but my right arm seemed to be cracked as well, judging by the sharp tingle that ran through it.

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep it sheathed,” he said.

“I’m not sure if you’re aware, but people *do* still die from being hit with blunt instruments.”

As I spoke, I kicked off from the floor. This tiny room wasn’t a good space for swinging around such a long sword. I briefly landed on the opposite wall, then immediately kicked off again, aiming for the base of his neck—

“Shi—!”

I sensed danger and changed course, jumping all over the room while I searched for a blind spot. He didn’t try to follow my movements with his body.

The Hero was back at the Church right now. From Veiss’s standpoint, we already had a hostage. The whole time he was fighting me, he also needed to keep his “divine protection” active. There was no way he should’ve been able to use any other craft while sustaining such a powerful barrier spell—*but*, every time I tried to launch an attack, I felt a *chill* run through me like he was about to grab hold of my leg.

“Gh—!”

All the same, I couldn’t just keep waiting for an opening. If this turned into a battle of attrition, *I* was the one who’d be at a disadvantage.

I steeled myself, building up every bit of speed I could, then adjusted course and jumped in. I flew at him faster than an angel of death, once again aiming right for that vital spot at the base of his neck.

My timing had been perfect as I’d jumped from blind spot to blind spot—if he’d tried to track my movements one by one, there was no way he’d have been able to catch me in time. And yet, without an instant’s hesitation, the champion turned around, gaze fixed straight at me as I leaped in. He was going to intercept me. If he knocked me down, I was screwed, but—

“Fuck it!”

—if I backed off now, I’d just be handing off the initiative to him again. Urging

myself to keep going, I threw my bible page forward to stop his right arm as it swung down—

BANG!

The sudden explosion knocked back his sword, dulling his movements briefly. I could make it...!

I twisted my body around, aiming a kick at his unguarded waist, when I was suddenly caught by a strike from *above*...

“Agh...!”

I glared up at him. The champion had let go of his weapon as it flew up in the air, bringing his arm down to hit me and moving for another blow from the side.

“Physical Boost, Spec Boost—!”

I instinctively activated a skill and an orison. In that instant—that brief flash, shorter than the blink of an eye—I was just barely able to outpace him and get to his unguarded back. Gritting my teeth, I swung down my bible. Another twinge ran through my arm as I struck, but the corner of the book finally hit him squarely in the neck. It was a blow that would shatter bones, twist his head sideways. The force of the impact sent one of his legs crashing through the floor as cracks spread out across the floorboards.

But the gaze of those beast-like eyes didn’t waver even a fraction.

“You... You’re joking, right...?”

It felt like I’d hit a boulder. My bible slipped out of my fingers and fell to the ground.

“Sorry, missy. I’m just built different.”

Veiss yanked me up by the elbow as easily as picking up a doll, tossing me aside effortlessly. He raised his sword in his right arm and swung it down toward me. The strike destroyed the walls and the ceiling, smashing right through the bed to shatter the floor as well...

I lay on the floor in a daze, listening to the nearby screams and watching debris from the building fly down around us.

“Fight’s over,” Veiss said. “You tried your best to do your job, just like the Gods told you, but I was too tough and turned the tables on you. You’re beat to shit—they’ll believe you.” He paused and looked down at me. “It ain’t your fault, okay?”

He slung his sword across his back.

“Just tell your bosses it was all me, got it?” He gave me a mean-spirited smile, but he spoke with all the dignity and charisma befitting a champion of legend.

“Gh...”

I felt a tinge of loathing at how small and pathetic I was—as a fighter, and as a person. I knew it was pointless making comparisons, but still... Was it really impossible for me to be like them?

Not that I had any particular intention of trying to.

“My cardinal is opposed to assassinating the Hero,” I said slowly. “He would much rather she gave up her title and left the war behind.”

I just wanted to protect myself. It didn’t matter how any of this turned out. As long as I could hold on to my place in the world, that was all I needed.

“Please go after a different cardinal. That’s all I have to say.”

I picked up my fallen bible and put it back in its holder, but my knees were too shaky to stand. It wasn’t from the damage I’d taken, though. It was probably just...

“Seriously, what am I even doing...” I muttered to myself.

Ever since I’d started this Hero job, absolutely nothing had been going my way. I’d been pretty proud of my track record up until now, but this was downright demoralizing, honestly.

As I gave a deep sigh, a large hand came to rest on my head. It felt like someone comforting a little kid.

“Can you stand?”

Whose fault do you think it is I’m down here, dammit?

“Please stop. I’m not a child.”

“You’re a child until you can walk on your own two legs.”

I pushed aside the arm he offered to support me, but he reached out a hand instead. I grudgingly took it, and he pulled me back up to my feet.

“Why don’t you just kill me...?” I asked.

There was nothing to gain by letting me live. I’d failed to dispose of him once, but as long as I was still part of the Church, I wouldn’t be released from my duty. As long as he was still alive, I’d need to keep coming after him, again and again.

He just smiled at me, though. “I would’ve if you’d been trying to kill me for real, *Multi-Player*.”

I looked back up at him in silence.

You’re wrong. It’s not that I didn’t use everything, it’s that I couldn’t. That’s all it was.

“Eh, whatever. There’s plenty more I wanna say, but... Well, after I made this big a mess, ’course you’d show up, *Cion*.”

I followed his gaze upward. There, through the crumbled wall, past the shattered roof—there she stood.

“M-Master...?”

“Yup, that’s me.”

I was bruised and bloodied, and Veiss was waving cheerfully. What went through Cion’s mind as she looked between the two of us?

“Gh—!”

Without a word, without a question, she drew her sword and closed in to swing it down at her own master.

“Hah, good job, kid! No hesitation, that’s the way!”

“Tell me...! Tell me I’m wrong! Just explain everything, and I’ll apologize! But —!”

Veiss blocked Cion’s strike with his own massive sword, still in its sheath. He took some distance, and Cion jumped down next to me.

“You’re hurt,” she said. “You look awful... I’m so sorry about my master.”

“No, uh...”

Her immediate concern for *me* left me at a loss, and I struggled to find words.

“Aren’t you going to ask what happened?”

“I don’t need to! If he beat you up like this, then I’ve gotta beat him up just as bad first!”

Wait, is this girl actually seriously angry?

“Um, I...”

“I misjudged you, Master! Hurting me is one thing, but how could you do this to a poor innocent nun?!”

“Quit fooling yourself, kid,” Veiss taunted. “I ain’t like you. I like women, and when I see a juicy piece of ass, I go for it—that’s how champions are!”

“You...!!!”

Hey, hang on... Excuse me...?

As Cion’s rage grew, the air around her seemed to shimmer like a heat haze. It wasn’t just my imagination—the pressure emanating from her was overpowering, even stronger than when she’d been fighting those demons.

“Please calm down,” I tried to tell her. “I’m all right, and I can heal these injuries right away, so—”

“No way! Of— Of course you’re not all right...!”

Ummmmmm? What...? Listen a second? Please?

While I stood there, increasingly confused, Cion brandished her blade at her master with unequivocal bloodlust.

“I’m... I’m going to set you straight,” she gritted out to him. “I’ll make sure you learn your lesson and never do this again!”

“Damn, you sure talk big these days, don’tcha?”

Ugh, dammit... Screw this!

As the master and pupil grew more and more heated, I exasperatedly forced

my way in between them, softly pushing back Veiss's greatsword and Cion's blade.

"Calm down, both of you. Everything is fine. All of us are on the same side, and my injuries are simply the result of an unfortunate accident."

"But, Alicia...!"

I calmly shook my head. Cion's anger wasn't directed at *me*. If I let myself get caught in it, that could easily end up upsetting her even more.

"Sir Veiss, you as well. Why must you speak in such a misleading fashion? This can't be how you treat her all the time, can it?"

"The fuck d'you mean, 'misleading'? *She's* the one who jumped in to pick a fight. Keeps getting taller, but she's still the same little brat she's always been—hasn't grown a damn bit."

I let out a sigh. That poor kid... This explained a lot, honestly.

Besides, from where I was standing, it was obvious that Veiss had never had any intention of fighting her in the first place. *He* was the one who'd started this whole mess in order to protect her.

I couldn't afford to let this commotion escalate any further. Above all else, having a champion and the Hero fight it out in public would be an incredibly bad look. (The Church higher-ups would probably love it, though.)

"Nothing good will come of this. Please put away your swords."

As I placed my hand on Cion's and gently pushed it down, I could feel her confusion and hesitation through the touch of her slender fingers. She seemed to struggle inwardly for a moment, still unable to fully calm herself, but finally she put her sword back in its sheath.

"You still owe me an explanation for all this, Master."

"Mm? Nah, ask *her* instead."

"Please don't make this my problem," I sighed.

All of this was the Seven High Cardinals' fault, really. When the people at the top screw up, it's always the workers on the front lines who suffer for it.

“I’ll handle the cleanup, so I’d advise you to leave the city sooner rather than later, Sir Veiss. And please be careful to refrain from any discussion of your squabble with the Church.”

I could see the owner of the half-destroyed lodging house peeking out from the stairway. I’d need to do a *lot* of work shutting people up after this mess.

What a pain in the ass...

I clutched my forehead in frustration as I contemplated the work ahead of me...

“It seems I’ve been spared the trouble of searching you out. Perhaps I ought to thank the Gods... A foolish notion.”

It was a voice that squeezed around my heart with a grip of iron.



“The Gods have long since forsaken us, after all.”

Amid the hubbub of bystanders and the rush of the wind, it was nothing but a small exhalation, less than a mutter—and yet, it shook me to my core.

“That’s—”

A moment slower than the two champions, I spotted the figure standing on top of a distant bell tower—a white-furred wolfman wrapped in a tattered cloak. It was that demon, something-or-other...

“What was its name again...?” I muttered.

I was embarrassing myself, but this was outside my jurisdiction, after all. Then the air shook.

My piercing gave out a warning tone that only I could hear, followed by the voice of a panicked Church official.

There’d been explosions at a dozen spots around the city and reports of fires breaking out. The casualties were already massive, and there were confirmed sightings of demon attacks amid the flames... The voice continued.

The sky looming overhead grew thicker and darker, and the air began to take on a tinge of smoke.

“I see. So that’s General Heavenfang, huh? We showed up to pay you a visit and everything, but you skipped out on us. Seems like *we’re* the ones getting spared some trouble—guess the Gods are on our side.”

While Veiss casually provoked the demon, I struggled to avoid being swallowed up by its overwhelming presence. Even beneath its thick fur, I could clearly see its body was far more powerful and developed than any human’s could ever be. This was the innate gap between humans and demons—the singular nature of a species adapted for the taking of lives...

“Before I kill you, let me make certain. You *are* the ones who slaughtered my comrades, are you not?”

The burning rage in its eyes proclaimed exactly why it had come here.

“I shall take your silence as confirmation.”

In an instant, it vanished from the bell tower, and a deafening crash echoed from right next to me. Veiss went flying right through a wall, knocked into the next room by the force of the demon's kick. Cion reflexively drew her sword to swing at it, but in the next instant, it was already nothing but an afterimage.

"I see... So that's why..." I muttered.

The shadowy figure landed on the rooftop opposite us, regarding us casually from above. It was way, way too fast. That didn't seem to be the result of any craft—just its baseline physical abilities. Even if I used a skill or a spell to boost myself, I still wasn't confident I'd be able to follow it with my eyes.

The two champions were similarly outmatched. As Cion recovered her stance after missing her swing, I could feel a new tension radiating off of her. It had a different tone than what I'd felt during her fight with Veiss, and it was directed squarely at the white-furred beast.

So *that* was the general that had served under the vanquished Demon Lord...

In the midst of the chaos, a call came through on my piercing. I pressed a shaky finger to it, and the voice of my cardinal sounded in my ear, urgent but still calm. He relayed more details about the attacks, along with estimates of the scale of the upcoming casualties. I swore inwardly.

Holy knights had already been dispatched along with monks and mercenaries, but the sound of clashes continued ringing out across the city. Amid the rising screams, I saw things falling from above—parts of what had once been people. Every second we stood here facing off with this monster, the violence was spreading and the deaths were piling up. I had no official duty to protect the city, but I wasn't heartless enough to just stand by and watch it happen.

"Can... Can you stop that thing?" I asked the two of them, my voice shaking.

In answer, the champion drew his greatsword from its sheath.

"*You* wait here," he told Cion. "I don't need you getting in my way. I can handle this on my own."

"Don't be stupid, Master! You know it'll be easier with both of us fighting!"

Veiss was still treating his own apprentice like a nuisance, and Cion was still

arguing back at him. On the surface, it seemed like this was just how they were all the time—but all of the casual ease I'd felt from Veiss earlier had completely vanished. Cion didn't seem to have noticed, but he was seriously trying to leave her behind. *That* was how dangerous this enemy was...

"Gods..."

I offered up a desperate prayer, casting Spec Boost on both of them. As I did, the wolf's fangs bared in a smile. Taking that as their signal, the two flew out like arrows on the wind. A pair of blades arced down at the pale white monster, but it handily dodged them as they crashed into the roof below. I climbed up to the roof as well, trying to follow their movements as they leaped back and forth, but—

I swore again. *The champions* were clearly the ones on the ropes.

They slashed out at it, putting all the speed they could muster into every single strike, but even the wolfman's afterimage eluded their blows. It reacted to their movements with the ease of a choreographed dance, countering with swipes of its claws. They twisted and jumped aside, avoiding taking any hits, but the city let out screams in their place. Amid the wild spectacle, more and more scars of violence were carved into buildings and streets. The two of them were unscathed for now, but how long would they be able to keep that up?

"Outta my damn way, Cion!"

"*You* stop swinging too far!"

The master and pupil were still fighting with each other, even while they battled the white wolf.

"What are you doing, Veiss?!" I shouted.

This was the worst communication I'd ever seen. Maybe this was how they always were, but unfortunately for them, this was a fight where *business as usual* wasn't going to cut it. As the wolf loomed behind Veiss, Cion leaped in to cover him. It wasn't that they couldn't go on the offensive—it was more that they were constantly getting in each other's way and then having to jump in to defend each other.

"C'mon, go back and protect the girl!" Veiss yelled.

“*You’re* the one in danger right now, Master!”

Cion ducked as a kick flew over her head. She stabbed up with her sword, but the wolf easily dodged it, and Veiss’s greatsword came dangerously close to cutting Cion in half as he swung down at the same time.

“Ngh...”

Glancing at each other in frustration, they finally realized that they were both being jerked around by the monster in front of them.

“Fine—if you’re gonna stick around, then work with me properly. If you can’t do that, then get lost.”

“Like it’s *my* fault...?! ”

They kept snapping at each other, but they were finally starting to move to the same tempo. Even so...

“It’s just a matter of time, isn’t it...”

I watched the two of them, thoughts racing. The might of these champions truly was incredible; they far outstripped the rest of us in power and skill. *They* were the ones who’d snuck into a demon encampment all on their own and razed it to the ground. But in the end, they were only miraculous among *humans*. Faced with an equally gifted champion among *demons*, they were outmatched—completely and utterly.

It wasn’t even that their opponent was predicting their movements—it was simply observing and reacting. It was just that much faster than them, and every one of its blows hit much harder than theirs.

“Can you hear me, Cardinal?” I asked urgently.

“Hmm? What’s up? Something wrong?”

I was only supposed to start a call from *my* end in the event of a serious emergency, so he should’ve been able to take a damn hint. Instead of sniping at him, though, I got straight to the point.

“What happens if two champions get killed by a demon?”

“Well, if that were to happen with a bride of the Holy Church on the scene to

support them, there'd certainly be questions raised. I expect there'd be demands for someone to take responsibility..."

Best case, they'd order me to atone with my own life. Worst case, they'd just execute me themselves. Either way, I was screwed.

"I'm *seriously* going to punch you in the face later."

"If you return in one piece, then I'll humbly accept my fate. Of course, I also have no intention of simply abandoning my best inquisitor to her death."

I'm holding you to that, Glasses...

With those words, I ended the call. I took a deep breath in, then let it out slowly.

Okay, focus. This is all for self-preservation. And Glasses says he's not abandoning me, so I can count on backup too.

"All right, let's do this."

I couldn't change anything just watching from the sidelines. I leaped into action, racing across the rooftops. The two champions' moment of doom was approaching steadily, but I'd make sure it didn't come to pass.

Even if I joined the fight, I wouldn't add much alongside them. Still, I might at least be able to give them an opportunity. It might only last an instant, but if I put everything I had into one attack, maybe I could create a decisive opening for the two of them to strike.

"Spec Boost, Physical Boost... Lightning Reflex!"

I combined orisons and skills to raise my reaction speed to its absolute limit—I'd need this much to keep up with their movements.

"Overspec—!"

Finally, as I jumped into the fray, I released the mana I'd been carefully refining. I felt the buff take effect immediately, and the world seemed to squeeze tighter around me.

As I dodged the enemy's blows and retaliated with kicks of my own, the sound of something ripping echoed inside my ear. I avoided its claws and tried

to counter with a slap, but these movements were taking a toll on me—jolts of pain shot through my right knee and ankle as I stepped forward, and blood vessels and muscle fibers tore in my outstretched arm.

“Shit...!”

This was idiotic. Frontal assaults—*especially* against demons—weren’t my job, dammit!!!

“Quit it, missy! You’re gonna die!” Veiss shouted while blocking a claw swipe he hadn’t managed to dodge in time.

“Shut up!!!” I screamed, pressing in further.

Two champions against one demon. Just one moment was fine. I just needed to give them one single moment of opportunity...

“Ngh...” I grunted as my field of vision gradually turned red.

Cion had managed to slip into a blind spot; I slammed my bible into the white wolf’s side, trying to give her a way in. Pain and numbness spread through my hand—it felt like I’d hit the side of a mountain, or the earth itself, even. As the wolf’s gaze silently turned to glare down at me, I forgot to breathe.

Then, its focus shifted to behind. Ignoring both me and Veiss, it twisted around and launched a kick up at Cion.

“Gah—?!”

Neither of them had time to dodge. The white wolf weathered Cion’s killing blow with nothing but its own strength, and Cion barely parried its claws as she flew through the air. It aimed another attack at her small shadow as she struggled to regain her balance. Seizing the opening, Veiss swung down his greatsword.

“Pathetic.”

“Wha—!”

The wolf easily dodged the blow, then kicked out at Veiss, knocking him down onto the roof with its claws.

“You idiot!” I shouted.

If I stopped to think, I'd get killed. Instead, I stepped into death's reach myself, gritting my teeth in frustration and covering it up with a twisted grin. I threw a torn-out bible page straight at the wolf, letting it conduct the spark as I ignited my orison.

"Wrath of Heaven!!!"

A burst of electricity shot up through the wolf's jaw, leaving a brief stillness in its wake. The electric current wreathing my body had exploded out, carried forward by the words of the Gods, to become a bolt of lightning hammering straight through my enemy's skull. No matter how sturdy its body was, this attack would pierce past its defenses to destroy it from the inside, delivering a fatal blow—at least, that's what *should've happened*.

Instead—

"Do not think ill of me, child of man."

—as I struggled to clear the blinding white afterimages from my vision, a massive hand pinned me down.

I'd known full well it wouldn't work. I could never become some demon-slaying Hero. Even when I was killing *humans*, I needed to catch them by surprise to be absolutely certain I'd win. When it came to a head-to-head fight, I had to run myself ragged to get anywhere at all. At best, we'd both go down; at worst, I'd just get crushed.

I knew all that, and that was why...

"I won't be the one to kill you."

Before the beast's thick fingers could crush my throat, a blade swung up to slash deep into its arm. An arc of blood flew up through the air, and at its base, another pair of beastly eyes gave a piercing glare. He hadn't managed to slice off its arm entirely, but it was a solid blow, cutting all the way to the bone. For the first time, the wolf had a hint of frustration as it showed its fangs.

"Still pathetic?" The champion grinned fearlessly, even as blood streamed from countless injuries across his body.

The wolf kicked him away with a fierce howl, but...

“Aren’t you forgetting someone?” I asked, as Cion’s blade came flying down.

The Hero cut into its left arm as it swung, carrying the momentum forward to drive her sword deep into its side. She twisted the blade into the gap between its ribs, stabbing in at its internal organs. The wolf gave a monstrous roar of pain, but it still remained standing.

Fangs bared, it whipped its body around to send Cion hurtling toward me and followed up with another attack. Unable to move with me right behind her, Cion took the full force of the blow, launching both of us straight into a belfry. Thankfully, I’d at least had enough warning to soften the impact with a combination of orisons and spells, keeping our injuries to a minimum.

I’d already experienced the terror of the demons firsthand, leaving me slightly better equipped for this fight. Still, the stark difference in power between us and them was all the more daunting for it.

“It’s...incredibly strong...”

This was the true might of one of the Demon Lord’s generals. The huge wolfman we’d encountered back in the forest was puny in comparison. That horrible monster was nothing but a puppy now—it was a terrifying realization.

“Agh, dammit...!” Faced with such an overwhelming foe, Cion was grumbling and griping as well.

We’d gotten some distance from the warwolf, but I could still see it glaring as it clutched its bleeding arm. Veiss stood facing it opposite us, visibly staggering. I couldn’t get an exact handle on the state of his injuries from over here, but there was a huge bleeding gash across his forehead, and he’d closed his left eye against the dripping blood. It looked like the hit he’d taken earlier had broken his right shoulder too; he was doing his best to brandish his greatsword one-handed.

And yet, even while we caught our breath on the sidelines, the white wolf’s injuries were already starting to regenerate.

“Talk about all pain and no gain...” I groaned.

“Seriously,” Cion agreed, spitting out a mouthful of blood as the two of us looked on in frustration.

The white wolfman looked back at us, but it didn't move to strike again. It simply stood there, body shaking in anger.

"Weak...! All of you...! *This* is what robbed me of my comrades?! My *family*?!"

It howled in rage, heedless of our presence. Then, daring us to come at it, it cast its crimson eyes to the crowd of onlookers gathered on the street below. Following its gaze, Cion jumped up and charged out with a yell, but before she could make it, the monster had already leaped down to paint itself red with blood. As the people stood paralyzed with fear, it devoured them, tore them to shreds, scattered their entrails.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!" Cion bellowed, swinging her sword.

The wolf picked up a girl cowering on the ground and threw her at Cion. As Cion frantically tried to catch her small body, a swipe of bloodied claws tore into both of them—right before Cion's helpless eyes.

"You—! Fucking idiot!!!"

At the last second, Veiss grabbed Cion by the collar, saving her from a lethal injury. Still, as the two of them jumped back up to the roof, I could see that their wounds were anything but shallow.

"It's far too late for regret," the wolfman snarled. "This is no more than what you yourselves have done. You must pay for your sins with your own lives."

Death itself gazed upon us, silent and inescapable. It could easily have sliced off our heads that very second. As the wolfman glared up at us with its glowing red eyes, it crushed the body of some nameless bystander under its heel, as though to declare that this was not an execution but a *judgment*.

I felt no fear. All that remained was a hazy sense of despair. Our country's two greatest warriors were here in the fray, and still, our enemy was untouchable.

"How the hell..." *...did Cion defeat the Demon Lord?*

Wait, no. Maybe she didn't defeat him at all?

The physiological gap between demons and humans was as stark as the divide between heaven and earth. That was just as true for Cion as it was for the rest of us. Knowing her incredible talent for stealth, her showdown with the Demon

Lord must've been an *assassination*.

The moment we'd come up against a demon head-to-head, we'd already lost. The Hero who'd slain the Demon Lord was right here, but even one of the Demon Lord's *generals* was too powerful for any human to kill. Before the might of the demons, humans were...

"Hey, c'mon, quit making that face."

Veiss smiled down at me without a hint of worry. His pupil stood motionless next to him, still frozen from the shock of watching a girl get slaughtered right in front of her. He gave her a kindly pat on the head, then stepped forward to face the wolf alone.

"Ain't like you're any better. You fuckers have been killing plenty of brats too."

"*You* are the ones who started this bloodshed."

The warwolf growled with rage, and the champion laughed while he slashed at it again and again. As the pair clashed, staining themselves scarlet with each other's blood, it grew harder and harder to tell which was the monster. I felt a sort of resemblance between the two of them howling in each other's faces and carving into each other's bodies. Even wielding superhuman power, they understood that there were things their power couldn't truly protect. That was why they roared; that was why they killed. They took lives, they crushed their enemies, all so that no one could take away the things they cared for. That was the belief they clung to as they fought. If I had to describe the difference between them, it was...

"Huh...?"

As I watched, the precarious balance of the fight was starting to shift, and *not* in the direction I'd expected.

It wasn't that we'd been getting in his way... I didn't *think* that was it, anyway. His body was drenched in blood, and his injuries were only growing. And yet, bit by bit, Veiss's sword began piercing through the wolfman's hide. The wolf's red eyes twisted in shock at the absurdity of it, and the champion just kept on grinning.

“Sorry, buddy. I know full well I’m a freak.”

In that moment, those crimson eyes widened as though they’d made sense of the trick. The wolf’s burning rage redoubled as it roared.

“So that’s it... *That’s* why...! That’s how you— You *monstrosities*!”

“That’s Heavenfang for you—right on the money!”

The champion’s smile was easy and unconcerned, but even though he was on the offensive now, I could see the fatigue setting in. His leg shook as he advanced, and bit by bit, his moves were starting to get sloppy.



“What’s wrong, doggy? Miss your kids?” Veiss taunted.

“GHHH—!”

The wolf blazed with wrath, its red-splattered fur standing on end. It pounced straight at the champion, and he swung back at it with a mocking grin. Despite the provocation, though, the wolf hadn’t simply charged in thoughtlessly. Its movements were measured as it dodged the blade, and it lashed out with its claws at the perfect angle to strike a lethal blow. If Veiss took his eyes off of it for even a fraction of a second, he’d be dead. And yet, even in the midst of it all, his bloodstained face still shook with laughter.

“Well, too fucking bad! It’s kill or be killed, pal! I hate you, and you hate me—welcome to the damn battlefield! I don’t give a fuck about your anger, and no matter how many strangers get killed, it ain’t my damn problem! The dead fuckers just didn’t make the cut, that’s it. The hell else d’you expect?!”

“Shut up, shut up, SHUT UP!!!”

With all the world’s senseless horror as his livelihood, the champion swung his sword. He struck to eliminate anything that threatened his world—just as he’d always done.

“Then perish with your own words in your ears!” the demon roared back.

That was why the white wolf howled—to inflict him with that same suffering.

It swung out with a wild kick, missing Veiss. Clutched in its dexterous claws, though, was a chunk of rubble—a killing shot that seemed to fly faster than sound. Even as we realized it was heading right for us, Cion and I were both frozen, wide-eyed, unable to move as—

“Ow, fuck... That hurts like a bitch...”

“Master, why...?”

Veiss had been one step away from running his sword through the monster, but without any hesitation, he’d jumped in to shield us.

“This is why... I told you... Stay out of my damn way...”

“Master!” Cion shouted in warning as a shadow loomed behind him.

“If you would die protecting them, then enjoy that final glory.”

The warwolf’s razor-sharp claws slashed into the champion’s unguarded back as he stood still in front of us. Then, a kick to the side sent his body flying, slamming into another belfry. The building collapsed, and he vanished amid the rubble. His sword quietly slid off the edge of the roof, disappearing down below us.

Cion stared out in pained horror.

“MASTERRRRRRRR!!!” Her cry echoed across the rooftops.

“So you do have care in your hearts for others. How could you not, after all...”

Even with one of its opponents defeated, there was no joy in those red eyes. As it stared down at us, there was even a trace of disappointment.

“Now, let us put an end to this.”

“Gh...”

A rough grip tightened around my arm, and I flailed uselessly as it hoisted me up into the air.

“Alicia...!”

Cion leaped up to try and rescue me, but—

“You will watch.”

—a casual kick sent her sprawling back.

“Ah, yes... I remember you from that night...” It carelessly tossed a ball of fire at her, setting her body aflame.

“Ngh— GAAAAAAAH!!!”

Cion rolled on the ground, trying to extinguish herself, but the fire refused to go out—was it even fire at all? As she struggled helplessly, the black swirls devouring her body came to life in response, pinning her down and writhing wildly across her.

“Know the suffering of those you burned, and die.”

Still, even with countless snakes of dark flame constricting around her, Cion

reached out a hand to grasp at the wolfman's ankle.

"Let...Alicia...go!" she demanded, glaring up at it.

"Your determination is admirable, I admit." With those words of praise, it tossed down another ball of flame. Cion screamed again, and the snakes squeezing the life out of her grew even stronger.

"Honestly... This behavior is rather unbecoming of a general, don't you think...?" I gritted my teeth against the pain, desperately searching for any hope of winning.

"Do you understand in the slightest what it is you have done?"

"Excuse me...? I was simply there with them; I played no part in any of it. I'm collateral damage here, *at best*. In any case, *General*, fighting you is entirely outside of my responsibilities. In fact, my job is to go around killing those humans you despise so much. I'd say our interests are aligned, really... Wouldn't you agree?"

Honestly, I was genuinely sort of hoping we could manage to get along, one professional killer to another.

"Do not abase me with your comparisons."

The sensation came a second later than the noise.

"Gh—!"

I'd seen it coming, so I managed to keep myself from screaming out loud. Still, the sharp pain running down my arm from my broken wrist was nearly unbearable.

"Sadist...!"

"I do not wish to hear that from *you*."

It met my open frustration with a quiet anger. Its eyes were the eyes of a beast, but in their depths—in the fierce sense of loss shining out from within—they were much the same as a human's.

"Why do you take the lives of others for the sake of your own desires?" it asked. "Surrounded by so many blessings, what more could you possibly wish

for?”

“Don’t you know? Human desire is boundless...”

For the sake of survival, we debased and killed others. That was what humans were.

“I see. Then there is nothing more to be done.”

The white warwolf kicked Cion off the roof as she writhed in pain.

“If you yourselves have chosen death, then it is time to accept your fate,” it said, baring its fangs.

“What are you talking about? *You’re* the ones who started—”

“Is that truly what you believe?”

That was when I realized that I’d misunderstood the nature of the fierce emotion in that gaze. I’d thought that this beast was driven only by vengeance, nothing more. But it, *he*, the white wolf—

“To think that our Lord sought to live in peace alongside you humans, and yet...”

—his eyes shone with regret, with mourning for a shattered future.

“Surely you joke. The *Demon Lord*, seeking peace? Ridiculous. Do you have any idea how many humans have died at your hands...?” Even as I spoke, I already knew I was wrong.

“You look upon this horror, this devastation, and you speak in *numbers of the dead*?”

I’d been wrong from the very beginning.

“If we amassed our strength, we could drive you to extinction within a year.”

The champions and the Hero fought to halt the advance of the Demon Lord’s armies; the knights put their lives on the line to protect us. That was what I’d always been taught. No—that was *common sense*. That was what all humanity believed. We knew that we were far weaker than demons, but we believed that with a handful of champions, with the power of human beings standing united, we could hold them at bay.

“You don’t truly believe the protection of the Gods guards your lives, do you? Those *imaginary beings* that have never once come to our aid?”

At some point, I’d completely forgotten the pain. The entire world as I’d known it, everything I thought I’d understood, was being overturned.

“If we truly wished it, wiping you from the face of the earth would be utterly trivial...”

I felt a pang of frustrated dread run through me. It was true. Just one single demon had downed the Hero and crushed a champion. He hadn’t needed any plan, any strategy—just a single outburst of violence.

“Humans truly are such foolish creatures,” he said.

I gritted my teeth. I couldn’t deny it. I couldn’t deny it, but still...

“Even so...! I’m not simply giving up and letting you kill me!”

I was fed up with just getting my ass kicked, and it looked like things were only going to get worse from here. Fighting through the pain, I twisted myself around to whip my bible out of its holder with my left hand. I couldn’t get enough momentum, though; it slammed into his neck, but it didn’t do any actual damage.

“You fear death, yet still you take the lives of others. Why?”

“I do it to survive. What’s wrong with that?!”

“I see.”

There was no disappointment in his gaze. He’d just reconfirmed what he already knew, convinced himself of the facts—that was all it seemed to be.

“Then you truly do reap what you have sown,” he said. “Perhaps it is meaningless to avenge a line that has already been ended. But even so, as the one who remains, it is my duty to finish this.”

He reached out a claw to press its tip against my throat. The cold sensation made my face tighten into an involuntary grimace of a smile.

“I don’t suppose you’d be willing to let me go if I begged for my life?”

“Did you heed the cries of my children?”

“Ah... Yeah, that figures...”

Here, on the other side of the knife, there was nothing I could do except wait to be crushed at my opponent’s whim. This was the law of nature, encompassing humans and demons alike. It was nothing I hadn’t already known, but *ugh*, it absolutely sucked.

“I shall grant you one final mercy. Pray to your Gods as you perish.”

I’ve never expected any Gods to save me in the first place, dammit!

Still a sore loser to the very last, I looked around desperately, trying to search for anything I could use... And there, as I looked, there *he* stood.

I let out a sigh of resignation. This was just too much for me. My thoughts had stopped completely. As the white wolf noticed the presence behind him and turned around, he lost his words as well.

“Ahhhh...! How wise, how glorious are Your teachings, O Gods! Blessed are Ye!”

His entire body was stained dark red. His skin was covered in lacerations—I could see muscle and even hints of bone peeking out here and there. With the face of an undead horror fresh from the grave, he stared up at the monster holding me. Even knowing his twisted smile of joy wasn’t aimed at me, it still made my blood run cold. The figure in front of me emanated a more terrible mad fervor than I’d ever felt in my entire life.

By the time I’d gotten my brain working again, he’d already come up right behind the wolfman.

“So, how many punches will it take for *you* to die?” he asked gleefully, already pulling back his fist for a *second* strike.

His nails were cracked and torn, of course—but there were chunks of blood and flesh gripped in his fingers. With each hit, he let out frenzied screams of delight.

“Madman!” the wolf shouted, tossing me away to deal with Karm’s sudden intrusion into the fight.

Unable to brace myself at all, I landed roughly and went rolling across the

ground. My entire body hurt. Plus, my arm was broken.

“Uggggghhhh... This is the worst...”

Every part of me wanted to run away, but I knew that wouldn't actually solve anything. Instead, I stared up in resignation, watching my colleague fight. Even as a sharp strike of claws carved into his shoulder, he kept on cackling wildly. When he stepped back, I saw dripping crimson *lumps* clutched in his other hand and tumbling out onto the ground.

“You sick abomination!” the beast roared.

“Aaaahhhhhh...! Glorious, glorious! Such great fortune the Gods have seen fit to bestow upon me!” the priest laughed.

Karm looked and sounded like he'd completely lost his mind. As he charged back in once again, I couldn't even manage a sigh.

This must've been the sudden errand he'd disappeared on. Maybe the moment he'd run off, I should've realized that the demons had already snuck into the city. This *servant of the Gods* had been going around wiping them out all on his own, with more speed and precision than anyone else.

“Could've given us a damn report, couldn't he...?” I muttered.

He'd been *Cardinal Creepo's* direct subordinate, though; with that sadistic old bastard dead, this lunatic was running wild. Without a tight leash on him, he only ever did exactly as he pleased.

“I'm sorry, Alicia... I couldn't save you...”

Cion limped over to me. With the wolf's attention occupied elsewhere, the flames constricting her had died down.

“I'm all right,” I replied. “I'm concerned about Veiss too, but right now, we should focus on getting through this.”

She was worried about me, but her injuries looked worse than mine. The curse devouring her body had grown even bigger, spreading out to cover pretty much her entire body. I didn't think I could provide much more than a comforting gesture at this point, but I tried an orison anyway. Thankfully, the light that enveloped her body began to treat her visible wounds, at least. With a

little time, they'd heal fully... Well, maybe not *fully*, but she'd at least have an easier time moving.

That wasn't the only issue, though. As I looked in Cion's eyes, I could see that the psychological damage of losing her master was weighing heavily on her as well. If she hadn't come out here, then Veiss wouldn't have had to protect her—that was probably what was going through her head.

"I suspect that things would have ended up this way regardless, sooner or later," I said, trying to assuage her guilt. "The demon was targeting you as well, and Veiss would have rushed to your aid whenever that danger found you."

I wasn't good at this, but I did my best to care for her mind as well as her body. Here and now, that was the only role permitted to me.

"You're so kind, Alicia..."

I'm not kind at all. I just don't want to die.

There was no way I could ever bring myself to tell her that, though.

Averting my gaze from Cion's pure and innocent eyes, I turned my sights back to the wolfman and tried to come up with a last-ditch strategy. Faced with a freak who absolutely refused to back down no matter how badly he got torn up, even the general was at a loss. If we could take advantage of that opening somehow...

"Would you be willing to tell me the nature of your skill?" I asked slowly.

As trusting as she was, even Cion hesitated at that request. Revealing all your cards, even to your allies, was a blunder to avoid at all costs. That was especially the case for skills. Unlike spells and orisons, skills were singular abilities wielded by particular individuals, so you couldn't adjust and improve them in the same ways. That meant they could easily turn into weaknesses as well as strengths. They weren't to be shared with anyone, no matter how deeply you trusted them.

Against our current opponent, though, secrecy was a luxury we couldn't afford.

"Your and your master's movements seemed substantially less powerful than

what I observed that night in the woods. Why is that?”

Cion still remained silent.

Under the circumstances, it was entirely possible I was just mistaken. But even the champion’s final burst of power had looked much slower and weaker than the mad dance I’d witnessed back then.

“Cion,” I implored. “I understand I’m not in any position to demand your trust, but please...”

The longer this fight dragged out, the worse things would get for us. It looked like Karm had already taken out a few of the other demons, but I could still hear the sounds of clashes echoing across the city. While we struggled to take down this one demon, the casualties continued to pile up higher and higher. If I got stuck with the blame for that too, I’d be screwed even if I made it out of this alive.

No matter what it took, I needed someone to kill that demon and protect the city. I needed the Hero. I needed Cion...

I needed someone convenient I could cling to—someone who’d save me.

“Ah, well...” she sighed.

I had no idea how to interpret the awkward smile she gave me right then. Had she decided there were no other options and resigned herself? Or had she given in to *my* request...? I was still sorely lacking as a nun; figuring out what she was thinking was beyond me. But Cion fixed her gaze back on the general and began to speak.

“I’d really appreciate if you didn’t tell the Church about this...”

Her and her master’s techniques went against our teachings, she explained, and I nodded. Frankly, my craft wasn’t entirely in line with the Church’s teachings either; I was in no position to criticize.

“I call it ‘Scarlet Brave.’ The more blood we get covered in while we fight, the more powerful we get all around. There’s no limit to how high it goes—at least, I don’t think there is...”

It was somewhat similar to a vampire’s Energy Drain ability, apparently.

Demons had vast reserves of mana throughout their bodies, and Cion and Veiss's ability refined that mana and converted it into physical power. They were somehow able to make use of that power, despite being *humans*—that was what she was telling me.

“Vampires *are* among the most powerful types of demon. The Church certainly wouldn't be pleased to hear that you possess that same ability.”

“Right?”

Or rather, they'd probably be thrilled that they'd finally found an excuse to declare her a heretic for real and send us out, but anyway...

“Is that really...” *...even possible?*

Not logically, but *physically*. They might get stronger and faster, but there was no way their bodies would be able to handle the strain. It was a similar effect to my multi-casting, after all, even if the method was different. I could easily feel the feedback that those sorts of techniques created, and it was obvious that if I pushed it too far, my skill would just end up destroying my own body.

“I suppose if you're simply 'built different,' then there isn't much I can say to that...” I muttered, recalling Veiss's words.

In any case, we didn't have any other options, so we'd just have to go with it. I steeled myself. Karm was buying us time, but—unlike me—he could only strengthen himself *or* heal himself, not both at once. The moment I got her healed enough to stand, Cion would say “we can't just leave him to die” or something and jump right in—with or without a plan. If she was going to throw herself away regardless, we needed to give her the best possible odds of winning.

I *really* didn't want to die, after all...

I opened my bible and began casting while I explained.

“I'm going to boost your strength with my usual orison and spell, then stack an extra self-destructive one on top of that.”

I still wasn't sure it'd be enough. That was why I was going all out for the sake of survival, throwing both of us into harm's way. I preferred to avoid taking

unnecessary risks, and I didn't have any obligation to go this far. But if we just sat here waiting, death would come for us on its own. This was our only hope.

My mission was to *kill* the Hero, but here I was, supporting her in her fight... If this was all the will of the Gods, then they really were absolute assholes.

Seriously, drop dead!

"Honestly, I can't keep this going for very long. And even as strong as you are, I don't think you'll be able to withstand it either. So, please... Finish it in one hit."

She smiled. "That's sure a tall order."

"Veiss protected you because he knew that you'd be able to defeat that demon. I believe in you too, Cion."

Welllllll, not really, but whatever.

Trusting in even my shallow faith, the Hero nodded back at me. Smiling softly at her, I began my incantations.

This wasn't power gained through faith in the Gods—this was a shameful technique devised to go beyond the intended limits of humanity. Under the circumstances, praying seemed kind of absurd; but faced with any hopeless situation, all we could ever do was place our hopes in a higher power or in dumb luck. I just needed to get all those uncertain, unreliable elements as close to zero as possible.

From the moment I'd started this mission, I'd known it wouldn't end well...

"May the blessings and guidance of the Gods be with us."

Just as I spoke, Karm came flying through the air toward us like a bundle of torn-up rags, rolling along the ground to land at our feet.

"Are you alive down there?" I asked.

"I hear Them... I hear the voices of the Godsssss..."

He coughed up blood and passed out. Or died, probably. Whatever, he'd be fine. I ignored him and focused back on the wolfman, who was catching his breath on the sidelines. It looked like Karm had done a good job leaving our

enemy's thoughts in disarray, at least.

"...Spec Boost, Overspec!"

Moments before those crimson eyes alighted on us, I activated the craft I'd cast on Cion. In an instant, she tore through the air in a straight line toward and *past* the wolfman.

"Gh—!"

She slammed her right foot into the ground to brake herself, then swung her sword as she pivoted. It drew an arc upward as it slashed through the air, painted red with the wolfman's blood.

"GROOOOOOOOOOAGH!!!"

The wolfman howled in response, fur bristling as he followed Cion's movements. As she parried his claws, rooftops went flying; as she launched a sweeping kick at him, cracks spread beneath her pivot foot. The roars of the bloodstained white wolf and the ringing of metal echoed over each other. Cion roared right back, as though trying to drown out his voice.

With the champion defeated, the protection guarding her was gone. Even if it had remained, any one of the white wolf's attacks could easily be a killing blow. Cion was putting everything she had into every single strike. If she took even one clean hit, she was finished. And still, she swung her sword with deathly resolve, trying to slash into her enemy's body as many times as she possibly could. But—even with her body operating at and beyond its limits, even then—

"It's still not enough...?"

The general's claws grazed Cion's cheek, cutting loose her tied-back hair. I held up my right hand, supporting it with my left, wringing out every bit of mana I could dredge up to keep my craft active. But as I looked out, as I saw the difference in power between us and our opponent, I despaired. That basic physiological gap was still overpowering, absolute—an innate superiority that couldn't be overturned so easily.

With another light graze of claws, Cion's equipment fell apart and scattered.

"You... You're a *woman*?" the wolfman said in surprise.

He still sounded like he had power to spare. With a grunt of frustration, Cion sped up even faster in response.

Cion wasn't weak—not by any stretch of the imagination. I'd never seen anyone fight with the speed she was displaying now. But even so, her opponent was just too absurdly powerful.

Each time the white wolf bled, each time a bit of his flesh was sliced away, he grew *faster*. I didn't know if that was a skill or just some innate characteristic of demons. All I knew was that the gap between them wasn't shrinking—it was *growing*.

Fueled by all his frustration and anger over the deaths of his comrades, fueled by the memories of all the lives that would never be restored to him, he was fighting to kill us. I didn't truly understand that feeling. I wouldn't try to. To me, those justifications were no different from the Church's nonexistent Gods. And so...

“Ngh...”

Don't think about it. There's no point. Whatever burdens this monster is carrying, whatever he thinks as he fights, it's not my job to care about it—

“Can you hear me, Alicia?”

The cardinal's voice from my piercing interrupted my thoughts.

“We're getting ready to fire off a long-range multilayered orison. How are things looking with the Hero and the general?” he asked.

“They're both pretty worn out, but the balance is seconds away from crumbling, I'd say.”

“Perfect. In that case, just make sure she stays close to the target.”

“... Are you telling me you're going to *take them both out*?”

“Am I?”

I heard the sound of my teeth grinding involuntarily.

“If you do that, people will be up in arms about the Church killing the Hero!”

“Nope, there's no problem. The Hero's protected by the love of the Gods,

after all. Our orisons are completely powerless in the face of that divine protection. If the Hero *were* to die, then that would clearly be because he expended the last of his strength in a desperate fight to the death, unrelated to our actions.”

Glasses spoke cheerfully and casually, as if he didn’t know the whole thing. The man who’d been providing that “divine protection” was already—!

I gritted my teeth. “What happened to all that talk about seduction and whatever?”

“Things come up; plans change. Besides, getting all your work wrapped up at once is exactly what you want, isn’t it?”

My boss was pushing me along, reminding me that I just needed to get my job done, same as always. I just needed to obey the commandments of the Gods. There was nothing to feel guilty about.

“...As the Gods will it.”

The wolfman was still nowhere near his limit, and Cion was wearing down her body with every move she made. She was running out of time. On top of that, each time they clashed, the curse grew bigger, ate away at her more, constricted and writhed tighter against her. The monster and the curse... Even faced with both of them, she moved with incredible speed, far greater than she’d shown in her fight against her master. Every one of her attacks lashed out with enough force to send shock waves through the air. She fought and dodged, aiming for the kill. If she failed to avoid even one hit, only death awaited her, but she showed no trace of fear.

As things stood, it was next to impossible for anyone else to step in. There, in that world on the razor’s edge between life and death, nothing existed except for her and her opponent. There was no way I’d be able to reach them there.

For the sake of those who’d been lost already, for the sake of those who’d be lost in the future, the two of them fought with all their might to kill one another.

And the Gods had commanded me to abandon her—to *sacrifice* her.

“Seriously... What the hell are they thinking...?”

The Gods must be fools.

And I'm a fool as well.

Before I knew it, I was racing toward her with a pained grin on my face. I prayed, giving myself the bare minimum of treatment, then kicked off across the rooftops. I didn't need to think about anything else. After all, I'd only ever been able to survive by taking the lives of others.

I could hear my boss shouting something in my ear. I heard him, and I ignored it.

Whatever. Who cares anymore.

Right now, I just needed to get in there directly. Mana was much stronger passed through direct contact rather than at a distance through a medium. And so—

“Perish!”

“Gh—!”

Just before I arrived, Cion parried the wolf's claws with her sword. The claws gripped the blade, though, pushing it away as his jaws lunged at her unguarded chest. Those vicious fangs must've been stained with the blood of countless soldiers. If they caught her, she'd be torn to shreds. And so, I—

“Gah—! Wha...?”

—I twisted my way in between them, letting the razor-sharp fangs sink into my right shoulder. I could hear a noise echoing through my body—the sound of bones shattering and muscle tearing. Then, a second later, the pain raced through my entire body, and blood came gushing out of the wound near my neck. The sudden drop in blood pressure almost dragged my consciousness away with it... But—!

“Ci...n...!”

Even as my blood poured out onto her, I reached out my left hand to touch her and activated my spell.

“Limit Break.”

It was exactly what it sounded like—a forbidden spell that overrode your body’s survival instincts, converting your deepest reserves of life force into mana and drawing out everything, body and spirit. It was a buff powerful enough to destroy the user’s body.

The moment the spell hit Cion, she disappeared from my field of vision. It wasn’t that I’d lost consciousness—she was simply moving too quickly to perceive. The wolfman, though, immediately let me go, turning to fend off the killing blow coming at him from behind. I couldn’t help but be impressed, I suppose.

“I really do have such a troublesome subordinate...”



As I heard that distant whisper, the sky cracked open, and an immense blast came down from above. The lightning I'd let loose earlier was puny in comparison. My vision whited out, and I heard a groan of confusion from somewhere in front of me. The bolt from the heavens hit the wolfman head-on, briefly paralyzing his body. The building underneath us began to crumble from the shock.

"GRAAAAAAAAAAH!!!"

Cion's figure came slicing through the light. She slashed down at the wolf, cutting a clean line from shoulder to waist, then turned around on the spot to strike again—twice, thrice, driving her blade into his body over and over. If we couldn't finish him here and now, we'd be dead, and she fought with the full desperate force of that understanding. With all her body, all her spirit, she kept on carving into the beast as dark stains spread across his hide.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!!!"

For the first time, the white wolf truly let loose all of his rage into a single earsplitting roar. Cion roared right back at him, bringing down her sword for one final blow. She pierced deeper and deeper, wearing the expression of a beast herself as she twisted the blade.

There was a wordless noise—the sensation of the strings of a life breaking. As the wolf sank to his knees, it was clear that something vital had been cut off, some thread tying together the body and the soul.

A little gap opened in the thick, heavy clouds enveloping the sky, and a ray of light shone down. Amid the stillness, the wolfman turned his gaze upward, laughing softly.

"Gods... Pour out your wrath. Judge these fiends who wallow and writhe in blood. Deliver...your justice..."

Without a cry, without a moan, he collapsed into the pool of blood he'd spilled. With his final breath, he'd declared humanity fiends and called on the Gods to punish us. But that ray of light shone on Cion in blessing, and the white wolf sinking into the blood at her feet looked far more fiendish. It felt like a scene out of a religious painting.

After a brief silence, a cheer rang out from the crowd of people watching in the distance. In the midst of the cheering, the Hero turned back toward me, looking like she might burst into tears any second. As I looked at her pained smile, I fell to my knees and slumped over as well—just as he had. Down into the flowing remains of things that had once been lives.

“Nh...”

But as I fell, she was there to catch me, to hold me tight.

I looked up listlessly, watching the Hero shouting something or other while huge wet tears rolled down her cheeks and fell onto me. My thoughts weren’t forming properly. I’d lost too much blood. I couldn’t hear anything, and even the sensation of warmth was growing distant. I couldn’t move a muscle.

I could feel the thing I called “myself” disappearing.

The boundary between me and the world was becoming hazy.

And I thought to myself, maybe this was where humankind found the Gods—in this sensation of becoming one with something.

And so— Well, no, that wasn’t really why. Whatever.

Just a habit ingrained into my body—that’s all it was, really.

I wasn’t thinking anything in particular, just repeating the same thing I’d always done.

I began to pray.

Please...

+ + + + +

To protect my land; to protect my family and my friends—that was the only reason I fought. But before I knew it, they had come to call me “General.”

The fangs that would reach heaven. General Heavenfang.

I’d found the title embarrassing, but when I’d urged those around me to stop, it had merely amused them and spurred them on. That all felt like so long ago now.

“Ah...”

I had lost the Lord I'd served, I had lost the soldiers who'd followed me, I had even lost my family—and now, I was about to lose my own life as well. All my old glories were distant memories. I'd spent so many happy days with those dear to me, blissfully unaware that everything would be snatched away one terrible night. Now those days were all in the past, where I could never return.

I let out a voiceless cry.

Foolish... It was all so foolish.

I could see it all in the eyes of this champion who stood before me, brandishing her sword. That same fear that the things she cared for would be stolen away, that same dread of losing anything more, that same rage at those who would try to take it from her. She was far too frail to call a warrior, far too young to call a champion...

Who had hoped for this miserable fate? Whose wish, whose design was this pitiful ending?

I felt no regret at being robbed of this shell of a life, the life of one who had already lost everything. And yet, if—at the end of it all—I could be permitted to lament one single wrong...

"Gods... Pour out your wrath. Judge these fiends who wallow and writhe in blood. Deliver...your justice..."

I prayed for a day when they would sink into the mire of despair. I prayed for the Gods' judgment upon these creatures that believed unquestioningly in their own righteousness, not even comprehending the depth of their sins.

Even here, on the brink of death, I felt not a trace of these Gods' presence. And I pleaded with them all the same.

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Chapter 7

I think I dreamed of a beast.

He'd been robbed of his family and his friends. He'd had nothing left to protect—and that was why he could never lay down his arms. He'd simply carried on with single-minded purpose, staining himself with blood until the day he drowned in his own.

They were terrifying, certainly—monsters impossibly powerful in comparison to us. But in their care and compassion for others, perhaps they were actually far more pure and unsullied than we were...

And their curses had blazed all the hotter and fiercer for it.

Just like the champion who'd sacrificed himself to save that girl, they must also have had things they'd wanted to protect, things they'd burned their lives away for...until only dust remained.

So, as I'd watched that white wolf die at Cion's hand, somewhere in my heart, I'd...

"I'm telling you, it was right out of a painting of a holy mother. I should've pulled in some artists to join our records division..."

"In any case, I'd like to change clothes. Could I ask you to leave now?"

When I'd woken up in one of the cathedral's beds, I'd been greeted by my darling kitty and Glasses's stupid small talk. Thanks to him, I'd already completely forgotten whatever I'd been dreaming about. It seemed like a good idea to catch up on what had happened while I'd been asleep, so I'd shut up and listened for a while. But after all of his pointless rambling, I was just about ready to go back to sleep again.

I really don't give a shit what I looked like as I was dying. I lived, so whatever, who cares?

“Yet *another* fascinating trick you’ve pulled off, hmm?” he asked pointedly.

“I haven’t the slightest idea what you mean. All I did was simple prayer, nothing more. Call it a miracle, if you will.”

“Ah, I see. A miracle, huh?”

“Indeed. A gift from the Gods.”

I suggested he might want to commission a painting to commemorate such a sacred moment, and the cardinal didn’t push on it further. It wasn’t like he had any intention of making an issue out of it, regardless. If word got out that he was harboring a *heretical inquisitor* who could *manufacture miracles* through an in-depth analysis and understanding of prayer, his position would be in danger too. He kept me around all the same precisely because I was *useful*.

“It’s a relief to see the Gods haven’t given up on me yet,” I said sarcastically.

“Really? I always believed in you, myself,” Glasses countered with an indomitable smile.

I hate him so, so much.

“Anyway, could you please get to the stuff I *actually* want to hear about, Your Eminence?”

“Ah, in that case, I should tag out and let her take over. She’s been worried sick about you this whole time, you know.”

“Huh?”

As he stood up from his chair, the door opened in response, revealing someone nervously standing on the threshold.

Well, I say *someone*, but I could already guess who it was.

“Alicia...? You’re awake... Alicia, you’re really alive...?”

Stepping anxiously into the room, Cion gave the cardinal a look, and he tactfully made his exit. She walked toward me slowly, as though she were seeing a ghost.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I’m alive.”

“Thank goodness...!” she sobbed out, suddenly dashing over to me.

“Hwuh?” I said in confusion as she wrapped me in a hug without any hesitation. “Wh... What’s the matter?”

“I was so, so scared! I just kept thinking, what if you died, and it was all my fault... I can’t find Master anywhere either, and—and if you were gone too, I’d...”

What the heck?

“Ah... Um, uh, Cion...? I, well, I’m terribly sorry to, um, to have caused you such, ah, concern?”

“Allishaaaaa!” she wailed, still clinging to me.

“Um...?”

Uh-huh...? This seems a bit overdramatic, doesn’t it?

When I asked, she told me I’d been asleep for three full days. The doctors had even said I might never wake up, apparently.

My stupid boss hadn’t mentioned a single thing about that. *Seriously, drop dead!*

“Anyway, you haven’t been able to find Veiss?” I asked.

“Yeah...”

For a brief moment, a terrible worry flashed through my mind. He’d had three days, though—more than enough time to kill Glasses if he’d wanted to. Either he was really dead, or...

“I’m sure he’s all right. That champion doesn’t seem like the type to die so easily.”

That was pure wishful thinking, but anyone who’d earned the title of champion ought to be able to make it out of tougher scrapes than that. And above all else...

“Having your master die and *that idiot* survive would be too stupid even for a joke,” I said, tossing a hate-filled glare over to the side.

Karm was laid out in the other bed, his usual all-black vestments replaced with all-white bandages. Lying there, sound asleep, he almost made for a

believable corpse. I wouldn't have minded at all if he'd succumbed to his injuries, but guys like him just never seemed to die. That was one of the reasons I couldn't find it in myself to believe in the Gods.

Could you please just die already, Karm?

And besides, maybe they were short on space—there must've been countless other injured people, after all—but why the hell was I stuck in the same room as *Karm*? I was a *woman* and a *bride*, dammit. It wasn't like *he'd* turn out to secretly be a woman too... Right?

"By the way, what ended up happening with the wolfman?"

The conversation had veered off on a tangent, so I tried to steer it back on track. I already more or less knew what the answer would be, though.

"They strung it up in the square."

I nodded slowly. "Right..."

The demons under his command who'd joined him in the attack were probably out there too. Demons who'd been killed by the knights usually got hung up on public display as a show of strength. But Clastreach was far from the front lines, and the threat of the demons hadn't felt all that real and tangible until now.

That was exactly why they were doing this, I supposed. The casualties from that attack must've been massive, and the demons' bodies would serve as a focus for everyone's anger. They'd strengthen the people's sense of unity—along with their faith in the Hero and the Church, who'd fended off the attack.

I fell silent, lost in thought.

"Alicia?" Cion asked tentatively.

"Never mind, it's nothing," I said, trying to collect myself.

But, well... There was still something I couldn't dismiss in his vendetta against us, in his howls of rage—something that kept prickling at my feelings, just a little. I couldn't actually see a difference between Veiss, who'd gone around killing cardinals for Cion's sake, and the wolfman, who'd been driven to avenge the deaths of his friends and family. The only thing really separating them was

that one was a human, and one was a demon...

These thoughts weren't normal. Cion was completely unconcerned about it, as she should be. *I* was the one who was turning against the Gods.

"I suppose I should go perform my prayers," I said.

I didn't know if any of this was the will of the Gods or just the whims of mortals. But regardless, I hadn't been thrown away just yet, and that meant I needed to keep on offering myself up to the Gods. That was what was required of me in order to go on living in this senseless and irrational world.

"Cion...?" I asked, picking up a subtle tremor in her feelings.

She'd already been a bit on edge to begin with, but now she was looking visibly restless and uncomfortable for some reason. Did she need to pee or something?

"Hey, um, Alicia... Why did you protect me?"

"Ah..."

Because she's the Hero.

She was our only hope of fighting back. If we lost her, we'd have no chance of victory; and if I hadn't done what I did, we never would've been able to get the upper hand on our attacker. I'd technically acted against my stupid boss's orders, but the fact was, even *that attack* hadn't actually been enough to bring down General Heavenfang. We needed the Hero's power, plain and simple.

But if I told her that, she'd probably...

"Uhhh..."

"Uhhh...?"

I couldn't get my words to come out right. I wasn't held back by any fear in Cion's eyes; but for a brief flash, I recalled that champion who'd thrown himself in front of her, just like I had.

"My body just started moving on its own," I finally said.

"Oh." Cion gave an awkward smile.

With a lonely expression, she turned her gaze down to examine her own

fingernails.

“I wanted to be a shield for him,” she said. “I just wanted to repay him somehow, however I could... But all I ever did was cause him trouble. Even when I killed the Demon Lord, he got really mad at me, y’know? I just wanted to help make stuff easier for him, but nothing ever really worked out right. And now I’ve caused trouble for you too, Alicia... I’m a failure of a Hero.”

This girl was the Hero, but more than that, she was still just a kid. Even after all those attempts on her life, she wasn’t suspicious of me at all. All we’d done was spend a few days working together, and she’d opened her heart to me completely. Maybe that was just part and parcel of being the Hero; I couldn’t say. In any case, despite wielding the power to slay demons, she still had the psyche of a child.

It was a dangerous combination, in a way. If people like the Church higher-ups—the kinds of people who’d mobilize their organization to assassinate humanity’s savior for their own personal gain—decided to try and *use* her, it’d be all too easy to make her dance on their strings. The Church had opted for assassination because of their own preconceptions—*the champion who vanquished the Demon Lord couldn’t possibly be that naive and immature.*

Most of her upbringing was shrouded in mystery. All I really knew was that she’d spent time in an orphanage, and that she’d grown up on the battlefield alongside a champion. She likely hadn’t known her parents. In other words, considering that champion’s attitude, she’d... Cion had never known *love*.

She knew that love was something that existed in the world, but she’d never thought of it as something that *she* got to receive. She was even said to be blessed with the love of the Gods themselves—it felt like a terrible joke.

“I... I’m here for you, Cion.”

It wasn’t that I was sympathizing with her. This was all in order to kill her. Just a ploy to help me get my job done—that’s all it was.

“I’d be in trouble if you were to die, after all,” I continued. “My duty is to protect you, you see.”

She opened her mouth like she wanted to say something, then closed it again.

This really was a pitiful story, though. The person who'd truly loved her and cared about her had vanished from her side, and now a duplicitous woman had taken his place to fill this girl's ears with whispers of false love. What sort of twisted Gods would possibly allow this?

"So, you..." I trailed off.

What was I trying to tell her? I searched for the end of the sentence that had started to come out of my mouth, but I couldn't find anything.

Finally, I just said whatever I could think of to break the uncomfortable silence. It came out as a pathetic excuse, no real comfort to anyone.

"You haven't done anything wrong, Cion," I said. "Whenever anyone seeks the death of another, death inevitably comes to follow them in turn. It's simply a law of nature—a rule set forth by the Gods."

No one could ever one-sidedly take lives without consequences. We all existed within one vast cycle—the wolfman, the champion, and the two of us as well.

But if maybe, just maybe, one truly wished to break free from that cycle...

"Unless... Will you give up being the Hero?"

I'd only suggested it casually, as a joke, but the look on Cion's face as she took in my words made me think it might actually be a real option.

Now I understood why Veiss had been so harsh with Cion. This girl was definitely gifted with talent and skill worthy of a Hero—a *genius of slaughter*. But that didn't mean she was innately someone who could only live by taking the lives of others. Back then—no, maybe now, all the more...

She really did have a kind and caring outlook. She'd fought for the sake of the orphanage she'd grown up in, and for her master who wandered alone from one battlefield to the next. Even setting them aside, she couldn't sit still when she was faced with innocent people whose lives were in danger. She took on so many burdens—not for her own sake, but for others'.

Wielding her sword to keep people safe might've been righteous and good, but it was also an act of self-destruction. "Hero" was a pretty word, but in the

end, all it meant was a sacrifice offered for the sake of our world. That champion hadn't wanted to see his apprentice follow that path.

"If I put down my sword, even more people are gonna lose their lives," she said. "I... I can't let that happen."

"Why?" I asked.

"What do you mean, 'why?'"

"They're just strangers, aren't they?"

At any rate, *I* didn't care about anyone's life except my own. I followed the Church's teachings, obeyed their will, and carried out my job for the sake of my own survival. I wasn't like Cion, fighting to save others.

"I think you may be weighing your own life a little too lightly," I said slowly.

If I were Veiss, I'd have a headache too.

"I don't know what sort of circumstances you grew up in," I continued, "but you've already gone far above and beyond in fulfilling your role. I think it's perfectly fine for you to lay aside your sword now—for your own sake."

That was probably what he'd wanted too. This girl had decided, all on her own, to go out and slay the Demon Lord. No parent would be happy to see their child rushing off toward death like that—even if they weren't related by blood.

Cion looked at me. "Is that what *you* think, Alicia?" she asked. "Or... Is that what the Church told you to say, or something?"

I stared back at her in a daze. She'd caught me completely off guard.

"Which is it...?" she asked again.

She had a look of worry as she tried to gauge my reaction, but I found myself letting out a laugh in response. Uncalculated, unrestrained—just pure, simple laughter.

"So you *do* know how to doubt people, Cion!"

"Huh—?"

I didn't know what she'd made of my answer, but I reached out a hand to her startled face and gently stroked her hair. While I was at it, I gave Atalanta neck

scratches too as he curled up next to me.

“It’s all right,” I said. “Everything’s all right. You’ll be okay. I know you will.”

Spending time with this girl really did remind me of life back at the orphanage, back when I was everyone’s big sister. She was always a handful, and I couldn’t take my eyes off her. I’d never actually had a family, but still—I couldn’t help thinking that this was what having a little sister might’ve felt like.

“He really was overprotective...” I sighed.

“Huh? Um... Uh-huh...?”

She didn’t really get what I was talking about, but that was fine for now.

I cut off the conversation and shooed her out of the room, telling her I wanted to get changed. Karm was still pretending to be asleep in the other bed, so I kicked him off onto the floor to vent some frustration. Then, I climbed up onto the windowsill.

“Just where are you off to, Sister Alicia?” he asked, like it was any of his damn business.

Besides, if he could hear the voices of the Gods, then he’d already know the answer, wouldn’t he?

“Just heading out to do a little transgression,” I replied. “I imagine the Gods will forgive me, just for today.”

He silently held up his right hand with a little smile, as though to say, *No concern of mine.*

“Thank you, I owe you one.”

It really was surprisingly considerate of him.

I left Atalanta lying on my bed and jumped out the window, wearing nothing but a cloak draped over my bedclothes. I raced across the rooftops, heading toward the person who’d been trying to call me for the past short while. I could feel my bones creaking a little with each jump, but I couldn’t just ignore him—he really did seem to be getting impatient.

He was waiting for me, cloak fluttering in the breeze, at the top of a bell

tower overlooking the square. Overhead, the sky was perfectly clear and blue. Normally there'd be market stalls open down below, but today that lively atmosphere was absent, and the mood was heavy and grim. The corpses of a dozen demons were strung up at the center of the gathered crowd. There must've been plenty of people down there who'd lost their homes and families. They glared up at the demons with impotent rage, picking up stones and throwing them as they tried to reckon with their pain and grief.

He stood hidden in the shadows inside the bell tower, looking down at the crowd.

"So you *are* alive."

He had the hood of his cloak pulled up, face hidden deep inside so nobody would spot him, but it was obvious who he was.

My communicator piercing had been sounding in my ear continually: "Come out to the bell tower by the square if you want it back." Just those words, repeating over and over, almost like an automated message. "Get over here already!" It was absolutely obnoxious. I deserved to be congratulated for keeping my frustration from showing on my face.

"Yup, your cardinal saved me. Said 'Thank you for your assistance in vanquishing the suspect behind the cardinal assassinations,' the four-eyed fuck. There's no way those glasses are real."

I was in complete agreement with his attitude toward Glasses, at least.

"Well, aren't you lucky. You've been given a scapegoat for all your sins."

"Just means the bastards are using me, doesn't it?"

Even after they'd saved his life, he still hated the Church.

Well, no mystery there.

"We make use of everything we're able to use," I said. "That's simply how the Church operates."

"Hey, I ain't disagreeing. Anyone'll do the same, if that's what it takes to survive."

Despite his words, I could still feel an air of violent rage around him—as

though he might go off to beat my boss to death any second.

Hmm... I'm safe though, right?

Right?

"Anyway, you sure got here quick, huh?"

"If you were willing to wait longer, then I'll return after I've gotten dressed properly."

"Nah, the quicker the better," he said, tossing me my bible.

As I caught it, I gave him a look of puzzlement, squinting at him carefully. For a moment, I thought I'd seen something unpleasant underneath his hood.

"Rather rude of you to run off with someone's possessions and not offer a single apology. I had this specially made, you know."

While I quipped at him, I tightened my grip on my bible and recited a prayer inwardly. Up until that moment, he'd been downwind of me, but I'd started to notice a *strange smell* coming off the champion.

A few weeks ago, I wouldn't have been able to figure out what it was. But now, that smell called up vivid memories—ones that were etched deep into my brain.

"Hey, relax, okay? This is what I called you out here to show you. Don't flip out and attack me, got it?"

He pulled back his hood, revealing that part of his face had taken on the features of a beast.

"The champion was secretly a demon all along'... That's not quite it, is it?"

"Nope. I'm all human, born and raised. No demon blood in my family either. Basically, it's a side effect. First time it's gotten this bad, though."

"From Scarlet Brave?"

"I'm not the one who started calling it that, okay? The name's all Cion."

"I see..." I said, setting aside Cion's terrible taste in names for now. "That explains why you didn't die from a direct hit to the vitals with my bible."

This guy's literally given up his humanity.

"And Cion?" I asked.

"Ain't told her. She's probably never even noticed."

"That's not what I mean," I said slowly.

If she was using the same skill, then her body would also—

"Don't make that face. I've soaked myself in *way* more blood than her, okay?"

I stared at him in thought. His epithet *was* "the Bloody," after all. If he said he'd gotten bloodier than her, I couldn't argue with that. But if she kept on imitating his fighting style, then sooner or later...

"I see," I said. "So that's why you want her to lay down her sword."

"You get it, right?"



He cared for his apprentice, and he knew that no matter how much glory she won, all that awaited her was ruin. It was obvious why he'd want to keep her far away from the battlefield.

"I would say you have a duty to explain all this to her."

"Even if I did, the world ain't nice enough for her to survive without it."

"True... I suppose it isn't."

If any normal human got clawed in the back and then buried under a pile of rubble, they'd be nothing but a lump of meat, no matter how extensively they'd trained their body. This man probably owed his life to his own body's demonification more than the cardinal's treatment.

This world just never gets kinder, does it...

She'd just keep on wading in blood all the same. She'd be showered in praise and fame, but she'd keep on losing things she cared about—lamenting her own powerlessness time and time again.

The restoration of the city was going to take a long time. It wasn't just the spot where we'd been fighting—all over the city, roofs were smashed in and towers were teetering. Setting them back upright would be impossible, so they'd need to be torn down and rebuilt from scratch... It sounded like a huge mess. Not my department, though.

"Is there a way to treat it?" I asked.

"Hell if I know. Never met anyone else with a skill like this one, so I ain't got a clue. Honestly, *you'd* know this shit better than me, wouldn't you, missy?"

"You overestimate me. If I had that depth of knowledge, even you wouldn't be able to get the upper hand against me."

"Ah, yeah, that tracks."

Now he was kind of pissing me off. I didn't think he was trying to make fun of me, but still.

"Was that all you wished to discuss?" I asked.

"You gonna ask me to offer up my head before I go?"

“Do you truly believe your head has any value anymore?”

If anyone saw his face, it'd be absolute chaos. *Veiss was supposed to be humanity's champion, but he'd been wielding the power of demons...* If that was the extent of the rumors, we'd be getting off easy. If word started spreading that *the champion was a demon himself*, then the Church's judgment would also come into question—we'd recognized him as a *Hero*, after all. As the one who'd brought in his head, I'd need to be silenced—I could easily end up *disappearing*. At that point, what the hell would I even be working for?

“Well, whatever.” He paused for a moment. “Take care of her, okay?”

“My job isn't to look after that girl.”

“But you don't wanna kill her either.”

“Don't I now?”

Honestly, even I was a bit fed up with myself. *I really am starting to sound like a fraud, aren't I?* Maybe everyone who preaches the word of “the Gods” naturally ends up that way, sooner or later.

“So you think you can still use her,” he said. “Maybe that's all it is, but still—you're one of *us* now.”

I stared back at him.

I really don't need you acting like we're friends all of a sudden, okay?

“Do I look like a psychopath who enjoys getting showered in blood?”

“There ain't anyone who does.”

Oh, there is. We've got one right back at the cathedral... Wait, is it just me, or is our side worse than theirs?

“If you wanna pretend to obey the Gods while you go around doing whatever you feel like, that's up to you. But still, there ain't a lotta people who'll do that for other folks' sake, not just for themselves. Ain't like you'll get jack shit for it in return, right?”

“Indeed. So I have no reason to do such a thing.”

I'm just looking out for myself here.

“If that’s really what you think, then you’re a damn good actress.”

“Is that so.”

Ugh, shut up already. I hate this asshole.

I decided to lash out at him, just a little. “That girl’s going to keep on chasing your shadow, you know,” I said. “You’re her ideal—the person she admires more than anyone.”

All the more so if he’d been killed in the line of duty. She’d try to carry on his legacy, thrusting herself into danger and proudly expending her life for the sake of others. Even if she learned that she was letting a curse eat away at her body all the while, she wouldn’t hesitate or falter.

That girl was the Hero, after all.

“Yeah, well, sorry for leaving that to you too.”

His rough, violent expression suddenly shifted. Now, Veiss had the lonely smile of a parent worrying about their child as he looked at me.

No. You don’t get it. I’m not one of you, not at all. I just don’t want to die. I’ve never once wanted to expose myself to danger to save someone else...

Even the other day, my prayer had activated and just barely managed to catch me on the brink of death, but I owed the rest to the cardinal’s treatment. Even if his and his colleagues’ schemes had landed me in this mess in the first place, I still couldn’t live without the aid of the Gods. I still needed them, even knowing they were nothing but a fiction constructed and used for personal gain.

“You can’t just expect me to—” I started, but the champion was already gone.

He’d jumped down from the bell tower, kicked off of the wall, and raced away, leaping from rooftop to rooftop.

As I stared after his retreating figure, he looked exactly like a demon—from this far off, he was the very image of the white wolf we’d killed.

“Just gotta have the last word, don’t you...” I grumbled.

I absolutely couldn’t stand him. I sighed in frustration.

Beneath the clear blue sky, along the shaded streets, the bustle of the city

was beginning to return—even amid the buildings scarred by violence and destruction. It felt odd to see normal life resuming after all that had happened, but maybe it was precisely *because* we were in the aftermath of such a terrible disaster. The world kept on turning, fueled by stolen lives.

Kill or be killed. We did what we had to in order to survive—even if that meant trampling on the lives of strangers, on the hopes of others. We had no choice but to soak ourselves in blood. That was just the way of this world—an insurmountable truth.

“So, how long do you plan to stand there eavesdropping?” I asked.

“Oh?” came the reply. “‘Eavesdropping’ is such an unpleasant word, don’t you think? I was simply following my subordinate out of concern—I wouldn’t want her getting eaten by a nasty wolf.”

My boss, High Cardinal Glasses, emerged from the shadows of the tower.

“Impressive as always, Your Eminence—you lie as easily as you breathe,” I replied. “The champion probably noticed you as well.”

“He certainly knows how to read a room. Just like me.”

Oh yeah?

“So, you’ve managed to collect the Hero and get the champion on a leash as well, I see... Could it be that this is what you’d envisioned from the very beginning?” I asked.

“Oh, of course not. All of this is simply the will of the Gods. Let us give thanks to them for their blessings, Sister Alicia.”

My boss shamelessly adopted a pose of prayer. I was *pretty* sure that even if I kicked him around, the Gods wouldn’t have any complaints... But he *had* just saved my life, so I’d let him off the hook this time.

“I’m told the Demon Lord wanted peace with us, apparently. What do you make of that?” I asked. “I’m sure you managed to *overhear* that too, didn’t you?”

“Oh? First I’ve heard...” he replied. “Well. Whatever the truth may be, at this point it’s all in the past; there’s no way to confirm it. Whatever the facts were, it

doesn't change a thing about the state of the world today. The gulf between them and us can't be bridged that easily, after all."

"I suppose not..."

I'd experienced that truth firsthand—that fundamental gap between demons and humans. The reality was that one species far outstripped the other...

"And that's why the Gods commanded their destruction," I muttered.

Even if the Church hadn't spread the teaching that demons were evil, any human faced with that terror would easily arrive at the same conclusion on their own. They would try to stamp out every spark before it could turn into a raging fire. Even *humanity's champion* would be subject to that judgment.

"The Gods truly are heartless, aren't they?" I said.

Obviously, I hadn't told *her* about it. Back during the fight, she'd had much more pressing issues to deal with, and she wouldn't have heard any of my conversation with Heavenfang. And regardless, she wouldn't want to hear that her deeds had just set off even more conflict and violence.

"Wish they could've just sorted it all out among themselves, somewhere far away from me."

Then it would've been someone else's problem, and I would've been spared all of that frustration and peril.

"You sound awfully pessimistic," Glasses remarked. "It's not like you."

"I'm just tired, okay?"

He gave a little chuckle. I had no clue whether he actually got how I was feeling at all, though. He probably understood completely, and this was him trying to act sympathetic.

"That champion was right, you know. You really did save everyone, Alicia Snowell—the city, and the two of them as well. You should be proud of that. They weren't saved by a miracle from the Gods, but by your own hands."

"You do have a talent for bullshitting, Your Eminence—I'll give you that, if nothing else."

“Giving my subordinates the care they need is part of being a good boss! ☆”

“Next time, maybe try *caring*.”

Besides, I hadn’t done anything particularly unusual. I’d just killed someone, same as always. The only difference was that it had been on my own initiative.

For the first time, I’d gone against the Gods and killed someone of my own volition. And meanwhile, I’d saved the person the Gods had told me to kill...

“Hmph!”

I took out some anger on Glasses, launching my bible right into his stupid smug face. His nose was bleeding, but his glasses didn’t have a single crack. One of these days I’d smash those damn things, mark my words...

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I fully intend to carry out my mission. *It’s my job, after all.*”

“That’s true, it is. Not that I was going to say anything—I don’t have any concerns at all on that front.”

I hate him so much.

And so—

“Hmph!”

—I went in for another hit, throwing a punch at him with all my strength. But this time, it swung cleanly through thin air in a pathetically graceful arc.

“Looks like you still have a ways to go as a proper bride!” he laughed.

“Die!”

I kicked at him two or three times in frustration, but he dodged me easily.

“All right, time I headed back!” the idiot called out, making a run for it.

I didn’t have the slightest interest in chasing after him. With a long, deep sigh, I stared back out across the city.

All around was the wreckage of people’s livelihoods. The remnants of stolen lives.

Humans didn’t have the eyes of Gods. No matter how much a person

schemed, there was only so much they could hope to control. And yet... Looking behind the curtain, three cardinals from rival factions had lost their lives, and one of the Demon Lord's former generals had been vanquished under High Cardinal Salamanrius's watch. On top of that, he'd gotten a champion in his debt and the Hero at his disposal. It was all too stupid of an outcome to dismiss as pure coincidence. It almost felt as though we were all dancing in the palms of the Gods' hands...

"This is idiotic..."

It was all just an illusion in the end—one more grand performance staged by the Church, one more mirage to marvel at.

There weren't any Gods, and there wasn't any such thing as *fate* either.

I clutched my bible full of lies. I could still smell a faint trace of blood on the wind as it rushed past me.

This world spread out below me was overwhelmingly huge, too big to even get a handle on. What moved it wasn't the will of any Gods, but the countless hopes and schemes of everyone who lived within it—and the violence that tangled around them. And thus, the winners rewrote the world, seizing the right to reshape it as they wished. It was something I'd long since understood, too obvious for words.

The world was so vast, so immense. It wasn't something a single person could ever hope to control—not even one of the rare few we called "champions." We all fought and struggled against the current, trying not to be swept away. But all the same, in the face of this reality filled with schemes and hopes all clashing against one another, we were utterly powerless.

That was why I wanted to remain a bride. That way I'd be provided for, and I wouldn't have to cower in fear at the world's senseless violence. The ring on my finger was a chain binding me, but it was also a blessing.

But... If, by some chance, there were someone who could raise her sword against this world of ours and cut her own way through, then...

My thoughts trailed off.

That was the stupidest delusion of them all.

Right about now, she was probably starting to panic after noticing I wasn't in my sickroom.

"Can't help but laugh, can you..."

Back then, as my blood had poured onto that girl, she'd been trembling.

She'd been scared of losing what mattered to her, and she hadn't wanted to let anyone take anything more away from her. That was why she'd chosen to take lives herself—and she was probably right to.

Champions who were beloved by the Gods, who used their power to save absolutely everyone, only existed in fairy tales. The real world wasn't nearly so nice. You had to take from others before they could take from you—that was reality.

But as she'd trembled with the fear of loss, her face had been... It hadn't looked anything like the way anyone would imagine the face of a *Hero*. All I'd seen was a poor, pitiful girl, and I...

"No, that's enough of that," I muttered to myself. "The Gods don't overlook any transgression, do they?"

I cut off my train of thought.

Our goals ought to be aligned. I wasn't going against the Gods' teachings at all. *Use everything there is to use*—if those were "their" teachings, then as their bride, as their slave, it was perfectly natural for me to follow them.

Was that logic a little too tortured, maybe?

All the same, the Gods were the ones who'd taught me that way...

"As if," I chuckled.

A pleasant breeze stroked at my hair. I squinted out from the tower, and I found myself laughing as I reflected anew on just how ridiculous our world was.

I'm not going to sink myself in blood like those champions.

There weren't any Gods. There was no salvation awaiting us, and the miracles we called down with our prayers were nothing but fakes. So all I could do was get close to the Hero, seduce her, and kill her—as long as that was the Gods'

will, and as long as I was the Gods' bride.

"A Hero-killing bride..."

I'd follow my divine orders, issued in the name of false Gods, and I'd carry out their justice.

For now, at least.

Afterword

Thank you for picking up *The Hero-Killing Bride: Volume 1*!

For most of you, it's nice to meet you. For some of you, hello again, it's been a while.

I'm a humble writer by the name of Aoikou. I've been ignoring the demands of the market and the state of the world and simply throwing my ball wherever I feel like. Somehow, though, I ended up winning an award and making my professional debut. I'm honestly shocked—I'm still half convinced this is all a terrible prank. But that said, you're reading this book right now, so I guess it's all real. Wow...

I think authors should let their works speak for themselves, so I don't have much to write about here. In any case, this is a story I've wanted to write more than anything, and I'm truly grateful I've gotten the chance to share it. If you've enjoyed reading it as well, then that's the greatest possible happiness I could ever wish for as an author.

For now, I'll be checking the online reviews with shaky hands. Please be kind and gentle, if you can.

Put "Sequel please" as the review title, and "Schrödinger's panties" as the review body. I won't explain further. You'll get it.

Now, I've written right up to the page limit, and I'm almost out of space, so it's time for acknowledgments.

First, my thanks to the editorial department at HJ Bunko, for picking out this story from among countless other submissions. I had no idea whether this was a story anyone wanted to read, so thank you all for deciding that it was worth putting out into the world; I'll work as hard as I can to return that favor.

Thank you to my editors, Kobayashi-sama and Rinrin-sama, for beating my fast-and-loose prose into shape and for helping me remember the joys of creative work. I've put you through a lot of hassle with all the weird habits and

idiosyncrasies I've picked up while writing on my own; I'm going to keep on throwing wild pitches with all my might, so I'd appreciate it if you could keep on catching them.

Also, thank you to Enji-sama for putting up with all my finicky instructions and delivering illustrations that far exceeded my wildest dreams. The moment I saw the character designs for Alicia, I felt as though the world of the story had opened up right in front of me. I truly can't thank you enough; I'm on my hands and knees.


And finally, to everyone who picked up a copy of this book, thank you all so much.

This story has only just begun. At the moment, I'm not sure how long I'll be able to continue it (and honestly, getting canceled after two or three volumes is pretty commonplace these days). All I can really do is pray to the Gods, but there aren't any Gods for me to turn to, so the only ones I can depend on are all of you.

So please, help me with word-of-mouth marketing if you can. (Please!)

I hope we can meet again in the afterword of volume 2.

—Aoikou



“No, you’re
going to use
your allure and
your charms to
break the
Hero’s will.
Well-endowed
women clearly
aren’t his type,
so—”

“Assassinate
the Hero? *Me?*
Nope. No way.
We’re talking
about the *Hero*
here!”



“Right,
commencing
assassination.”



Salamanrius,
the Noontide Lantern

One of the Seven High Cardinals and Alicia's direct superior. He gave Alicia her orders to assassinate Elcyon.

Veiss,
the Bloody

A legendary mercenary formerly known as the Hero. He's Elcyon's master.

Elcyon,
the Demon-Slayer

A mercenary who vanquished the Demon Lord and became the new Hero. She's Alicia's assassination target.

White Wolf,
General Heavenfang


One of the former Demon Lord's generals. It carries a vendetta against Elcyon for killing the Demon Lord.

Alicia,
Bride of the Gods

An inquisitor also known as Multi-Player (or Multi-Prayer). She's on a mission to approach and assassinate Elcyon.

Karm,
the Zealot

A heretical inquisitor who ignores the Church's orders, driven by his mad faith in the Gods. He's fascinated by Alicia and her talents.



The
Hero who'd
vanquished
the Demon Lord,
and who I'd been
ordered to seduce
and assassinate,
was about my
age—and she
was a girl.

“Is this for
real...?”











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The Hero-Killing Bride: Volume 1

by Aoikou

Translated by Faye Duxovni Edited by Maral RahmanPour

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