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The
DEATH
of the

AUTHOR: **HOZUMI MITAKA**

ILLUSTRATOR: **fame**

SKELETON SWORDSMAN

DOMINATING AS A

CURSED SAINT

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Grave Keeper of
the Golden City
Theophilus

That side
was me, of
course.

After it was
established
who was on
the offensive
and who was
on the
defensive, one
side soon
gained the
upper hand.

Twelve Saints—
Blizzard
Nemophila

Our swords
then crossed
three more
times. Each
time, the
difference
in strength
became even
clearer.

Skeleton
Sword Saint
Albert

Eternal Witch's
Descendant
Astrantia



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Prologue

Another

Three centuries ago, a lone mage spread a curse throughout the world—a curse that caused the dead to rise from their graves and bite the living, turning them into victims as well. Unlike ordinary undead, these victims retained their consciousness. The idea that their transformation had given them eternal life and happiness was ingrained into them.

As a result, these undead attacked the living in an attempt to spread the blessing. Just as it seemed the undead would flood the world, humanity developed a barrier and successfully contained the outbreak to twelve locations. The locations where the undead had been sealed came to be known as Forbidden Cities.

I was one of those undead sealed inside a Forbidden City. I killed all the other undead in my city, then lived on in solitude until a girl appeared from outside the barrier. Three hundred years had passed on the outside, and now, combatant holy knights formed tag teams with holy women who supported them so they could bring salvation to the undead.

The girl was a descendant of the witch who had started it all. There was no one who would become her holy knight—except for me. In order to kill the witch, I took Astrantia’s hand and chose to regain my flesh for the first time in three centuries.



“Hrah!” It was a brilliant thrust with accuracy and speed capable of hitting a small insect out of midair. When aimed directly at the eyes, the skill of the blade’s wielder made it next to impossible to avoid. At least, it would have, had the target been anyone else.

Tilting my head to avoid the incoming blow, I placed my sword on my opponent’s neck. Had it been a battle to the death, I would have simply

removed her head from her shoulders in one fluid motion and that would have been the end of it. However, both my opponent and I were using wooden swords. It was a mock battle.

My opponent was a beautiful woman with blue eyes, blonde hair, and slanted bangs. “I surrender,” said Myra, sweat dripping from her brow.

“Good effort.”

“You are truly incredible.” We both pulled back our wooden swords—the mock battle was over. Myra looked at me with eyes full of respect.

“You’re pretty incredible yourself. I only won because I have three hundred years of practice on you. That would’ve been a close match back when I was alive.”

“Really? According to the founder’s notes, you were a candidate to become one of the Twelve Knights.” Of course, that “founder” referred to Myra’s ancestor, my adoptive brother, Robert.

“Something like that. I’m sure you would’ve been chosen too if you’d been around three centuries ago.”

“I-I’m honored you think so.” We were in an outdoor training area on the campus of an academy for training saints—people who killed curions, undead turned by the curse. We had permission from the instructors to use it after class. A short distance away, two beautiful, silver-haired, blue-eyed sisters were practicing their magic.

“Don’t forget to practice fighting with your holy woman’s divine protections too,” I mumbled, looking over at the princess and Orlaya.

“I admire your flexibility in adopting the tactics of a new era and not letting your three hundred years of experience blind you!”

“Nah, I was just stubborn. I should’ve relied on the princess a lot sooner.” A few days ago, we had defeated the Pestilent Guardian Dragon, one of the Twelve Corpses—special curions located in each of the twelve Forbidden Cities. Up until then, I’d thought the divine protections provided by holy women were unnecessary, but after learning more about my partner, Astantia, I’d changed my mind.

“Still, it’s only because you fought without Lady Astrantia’s divine protections that she was able to store up so much mana in her manastones. Without that mana, it would’ve been impossible to suppress the dragon’s rampaging skeleton.” In addition to healing magic and magic to release the souls of the undead, holy women could use divine protections known as Physical Protection and Physical Enhancement. The other holy knights used their holy women’s divine protections during training, but I had fought without them the entire time. That had given the princess the opportunity to store excess mana in the manastones, which had been instrumental in defeating the dragon.

“I guess it wasn’t all bad. Still, turning back into bones every time is a pain.” Although the technique developed by the princess’s family had restored my flesh, I was still undead. As long as I didn’t lose my head, I could keep on fighting in my skeletal form. The problem was that it took a lot of mana to then restore my flesh again.

“I see. Being able to fight as a skeleton is certainly one of your strengths, but divine protections have their own advantages.”

“Let’s train with divine protections next time. You’re more experienced on that front, so you’ll be the one teaching me.”

Myra immediately straightened up in response to my request. “Of course! I’ll give it my all!”

“Thanks.” I patted Myra’s head. Since Myra was already nineteen, I figured she might dislike it, but that didn’t seem to be the case. On the contrary, she just smiled bashfully. Robert had told me to be nice to her in a dream I’d had the other day too.

“U-Um, Sir Albert! Can we go another round?”

“Sure.” Fighting someone strong was good training. We had a few more matches after that, until...

“Albert!” I shifted my attention to the angry voice I heard and found a girl with big boobs and a red ponytail, her hands on her hips. Cuphea looked just as mad as she sounded. At some point the sky had turned a shade of crimson. Apparently time had really flown by.

“Oh.” I suddenly remembered that I’d made a promise with her.

“Don’t ‘oh’ me! You promised to eat with us at the orphanage today!”

“Sorry, sorry. I lost track of time.” The princess and I had been invited to dinner. Saints were given rewards for exterminating curions. Those rewards were donated by various people who wanted to see the Forbidden Cities freed. Some wanted to see the souls of their ancestors and relatives freed, some wanted to return to their ancestors’ hometowns, and some simply mourned for the dead. Many people donated, most of them nobles.

At any rate, we had received a reward for our hands-on training the other day. A saint was a saint, even if they were still a student, so we were paid all the same. Once things settled down, Cuphea had invited us to dinner at the orphanage where she lived. She and Linum wanted to celebrate getting paid.

“I-I’m sorry, Cuphea! I got carried away training with my sister...” The princess came running over and apologized to Cuphea. Orlaya was slowly walking over as well, but she stopped in her tracks when she heard Astrantia say she got carried away with her sister. That probably made her happy. After we’d established her love for her sister, it was kinda cute seeing how much she had changed.

“At least try to keep the schedule you set for yourself,” said Cuphea. It sounded to me like she was just trying to hide her embarrassment. “Albert has a soft spot for Myra so I’m not surprised, but Astrantia too...” Cuphea pouted.

“Sorry about that, seriously. Let’s head over now. That’s gonna be it for today, Myra.”

“Of course. Thank you for your guidance.” Myra gave a polite bow.

“We’ll do this again sometime.”

“Certainly!”

Once the princess had finished saying goodbye to Orlaya, we walked over to Cuphea. “Oh, finished already?” She was still pouting. It was on us, so I couldn’t blame her. She turned her head away from us with a “hmpf,” her ponytail shaking behind her.

“Oh, you’re using the hair tie.” I saw a silver accessory as her ponytail swished by me. It was something I had bought for her.

“Don’t try to change the subject.”

“I’m glad you’re using it. It looks good.”

“D-Does it?” Cuphea’s cheeks were red, and not from the setting sun. “A-Ahem. Anyway, you guys don’t hate coming over, do you? If it’s annoying, you don’t have to...” Her voice trailed off as she spoke.

“Of course not! No one wanted to be my friend growing up since I’m the witch’s descendant! Being invited to dinner is like a dream for me!” The orchestrator behind the tragedy three centuries ago was a mage known as the Eternal Witch. She was a noble, and the princess was descended from her family. For that reason, the princess had been feared and spent her childhood without any friends.

“I’d never hate spending time with you, Cuphea. I don’t care about the brats, but at least Linum and Edel are there.” Linum was Cuphea’s partner, a holy woman with a blue bob cut, while Edel was a beautiful blonde woman who managed the orphanage. She was apparently a holy woman too, though she wasn’t active.

“A-All right then.” Us not showing up had apparently made her anxious.

“I really am sorry. I’ll make it up to you somehow.” Even though she was still just a girl, causing a woman close to me to worry made me a failure as a man. I gave a genuine apology.

“I-It’s fine. We’re saints, so training is important.”

“Nah, it won’t sit right with me doing nothing.”

“A-All right then. I’ll be looking forward to it.”

“You bet.”

“I-I’ll think of something too!” Astrantia added.

“Jeez, I get it already. I forgive you both, so stop apologizing.” Cuphea smiled as though she felt silly for all her pouting. Now that she was back in a good mood, we headed on over to the orphanage. I remembered to stop and buy a

present on the way.

“Ah, Al’s here!” The moment I stepped into the orphanage’s yard, a girl with purple pigtails clung to my leg.

“Hey. Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“You’re late!”

“Yeah, my bad. I bought you guys some sweets to make up for it.”

“Sweets!” The little girl, Linaria, jumped with joy.

“Sweets are for after dinner,” said Cuphea, though it wasn’t clear if Linaria heard her. Entering the run-down building, we headed to the dining room where the children were waiting. It seemed like they had just finished setting the table, which meant we were just in time.

“Oh, Al’s here!”

“Holy woman!”

“Tia, sit next to me!” The princess had become quite popular with the children lately. Well, she was pretty, kind, and good at magic, so I could see why. Still, if any of the boys were rude to her, they’d meet a swift punishment. I’d let the girls slide though.

“Welcome. Thank you for coming.” Edel, a beautiful blonde with all the charm of an adult woman and who filled the role of the children’s mother, gave a gentle smile as she welcomed us.

“You’re as lovely as ever, Edel,” I said. “I was thinking of getting you flowers, but I figured you’d appreciate a treat for the kids even more. Will you accept these sweets?”

“My,” Edel exclaimed, her eyes opening wide for a moment as she accepted my gift. “Thank you, Sir Albert. I’ll give these to the children later.”

“Your gratitude makes it all worthwhile. Would you allow me the honor of sitting next to you tonight—”

“Albert? You’re sitting next to me. You’re not gonna say no, are you?” Cuphea asked with a grin on her face. I knew that face all too well. It meant she was

really enjoying herself.

“Of course not. You can sit on my left, and Edel can sit on my right.”

“Linaria’s sitting to your right.”

“Yay! I’m next to Al!” Linaria cheered. Cuphea pulled me over with more strength than you’d expect just from looking at her. Linum called out to the princess, and Astrantia sat down next to her. Edel watched it all unfold while wearing a gentle smile.

Edel was one of my precious few adult female acquaintances in this city, so I wanted to get close to her if at all possible. Myra was basically a niece to me, and all the other women I knew were either outside my strike zone or not close enough with me.

Once everyone was seated, we offered up a prayer of thanks for the food and began to eat. Given it was an orphanage full of children, things got quite rambunctious. The food being more luxurious than normal probably didn’t help either. There was stew that was chock-full of ingredients, an entire roast chicken, and even softer bread than usual.

“Ugh... A man’s happiness is getting intimate with a bunch of women,” I groaned as I ate.

“Everyone has their own idea of happiness, so I won’t deny you yours, but I think there are plenty of other things to be happy about in the world,” said Cuphea, a bitter look on her face.

“Are there? Like what?”

“Well... Your family’s smiles? Stuff like that.” Cuphea blushed slightly at what she’d just said.

“You’re a good girl.” I’d figured something like that would be the first thing to come to her mind.

“Food makes me happy. Being hungry makes me sad,” said Linaria, overhearing our conversation.

“Yeah, I get that. Being hungry’s the worst. Just moving can become a pain and dark thoughts creep into your head.” I had lived in the slums for a while

until my adoptive father, Dan, took me in. Despite it being over three hundred years ago, I could still vividly remember the futility of enduring hunger in the back alleys and the misery of shivering in the cold. That was how intense the memories were. Certainly some people would have called it happiness to leave that life behind.

Linaria's spoon suddenly stopped. "Al, say 'ah.'" She picked up a spoonful of stew and held it out to me.

"Sure, whatever." I knew what she was trying to do, but I played along anyway. Sure enough, I bit down on a vegetable. It was probably one she didn't like.

"Is it good?"

"You should be grateful for anything you have to eat."

"But it's bitter..."

I sighed. "Here, this one's for you." I scooped up some meat from my own stew and shoved it into Linaria's mouth.

"Mmm!" Her face lit up with happiness. Even when it came to little girls, it was better to see them with smiles on their faces.

"You don't have to eat them all, but don't ignore the bitter stuff."

"Okay." It was nice how obedient she was. At the other table, there were children fighting over the amount of stuff in their stew and stealing meat from each other. Edel and her mother, the old lady, were stuck chiding them.

"H-Hey, Albert." I turned to Cuphea and saw her stab her chicken with a fork and pause as she held it out to me. Her face was bright red, her lips were quivering with embarrassment, and her hand was shaking. It seemed seeing Linaria feed me had given her the idea to try it herself, but her shame had won over at the last second.

I leaned over to take it from her, and she trembled in response. "It's good."

"I-I-Is it? I-I'm glad!" Her face was so red it looked like it was about to catch fire.

"Now it's my turn."

“F-Forget it, I can’t take it!”

“C’mon, Cuphea, say ‘ah.’”

“Ugh... Ah.” I cut up a piece of chicken the same way and fed her.

“How is it?”

“I can’t tell...” she answered in a shrill voice. I just chuckled. It kinda made up for not being able to sit next to Edel. After finishing our meal, we headed back to the dorms to beat the curfew.

“That was a wonderful, lively dinner,” the princess said next to me as we walked down the road.

“Funny way of saying chaotic.”

The princess giggled. “You seemed to enjoy yourself.”

I glanced to my side and saw her looking up at me. “Did you wanna try it too?”

“I’ll refrain from answering that.” After more similarly frivolous yet comforting small talk, we eventually arrived at the academy.

“Hm?” There was a carriage stopped in front of the gate. That wasn’t too out of the ordinary, but I also saw a familiar face. “Palu?” She was the holy woman of Gold, one of the academy’s top twelve pairs, the Colors.

“Oh, Albert.” She seemed to have come to see somebody off. There were people who appeared to be servants loading luggage onto the carriage as Palu spoke to the girl who was presumably the owner of said luggage.

“Did you say Albert? Then the one next to him must be Lady Astrantia.” The girl had long, wavy, sky-blue hair with a tinge of white, adorned with a lace hair band that left an impactful impression. She had a melancholic air about her, perhaps due to the lack of inflection in her voice and the way the streetlights illuminated her pale skin and doll-like expression.

“My name is Nemophila. I was one of the members of White before you two.” Astrantia and I had been chosen as one of the academy’s top twelve pairs the other day. However, that was only because White’s previous holy knight had died in battle shortly before, leaving a hole for us to fill. Nemophila must have

been the surviving holy woman. All the luggage probably meant she was dropping out of the academy. Still, something felt slightly off.

“Albert, look at the crest on her uniform.” The princess’s words made me immediately realize what was off. Trainees and official saints had different crests on their uniforms to show their status. The three diagonal bars from the upper right to lower left were the goddess’s crest, also used on student uniforms. When a student graduated from the academy, a crest with two intersecting swords was added. For holy women, the crest was located on the hem of the skirt, opposite the goddess’s crest, while for holy knights, it was located on the right shoulder. She should have still been a student, yet she had an additional crest—and it was no ordinary crest either. “Saints are given a new crest when they graduate from the academy. However, those selected to be one of the Twelve Saints are granted a unique crest.”

“It does look different from normal.” The crest on her skirt resembled several snowflakes.

“I found a new holy knight, and quite the talented one at that. Though we were a tad slower than you, we also defeated one of the Twelve Corpses.” She gave an almost emotionless smile, then looked at Palu. “Thank you for seeing me off, Palustris. I hope we meet again on the battlefield somewhere.”

“Are you really going to be okay?” Palu asked.

“I’m in perfect health. There’s no need to worry.”

She already seemed kinda weird, and now I’m hearing that she beat one of the Twelve Corpses? With a holy knight she only just met? I wasn’t one to talk, but if the Twelve Corpses were that easy to beat, they wouldn’t have been a thorn in humanity’s side for the past three centuries.

Just as I was about to speak up, someone slashed at me out of nowhere and I drew my sword. I caught the swing with my own, our swords sparking as they collided. Our eyes met across our intersecting blades. “Just so we’re on the same page, you’re picking a fight with me, right?”

He was a male holy knight with long, deep-blue hair. His pretty face and ponytail both pissed me off. “Quiet. Why is one of *you* here?” The man’s voice was filled with hatred.

“I could ask you the same thing.” Life really was full of surprises. Becoming an undead and living for three hundred years was already nonsensical, and then I had been picked up by a teenage girl, started attending an academy, and fought one of the Twelve Corpses on our very first training mission. Now this.

Curions could recognize other curions. That was why the moment we locked eyes, we knew the other was a curion. If it was true that they had killed one of the Twelve Corpses, then he was probably one of them too. I wanted to turn to the princess and ask her, but I didn’t have the leeway at the moment. No, maybe asking Nemophila would be the best bet. How was there another member of the Twelve Corpses who had regained his flesh and left his city’s barrier?

Chapter 1

Blizzard's Holy Woman

That's one way to kill the mood.

"Albert?!" the princess cried out in surprise.

"Nemophila! Stop him!" shouted Palu, telling Nemophila to stop the blue-haired guy's rampage. Supervising her holy knight was a holy woman's duty. Nemophila obeyed.

"Stop." However, Palu's request came several seconds after we clashed.

I wasn't just going to stay locking swords with him that whole time. First, I pushed him back. His sword and body were lifted slightly, unable to endure the force trying to send him flying. I tried to kick his undefended stomach, but he adjusted in midair and dodged it. He then immediately counterattacked, swinging down the sword I had knocked away a moment earlier.

I pulled back the leg I had used to kick and readied my sword diagonally, the hilt pointed toward the sky, successfully deflecting his swing and avoiding the impact. Our swords then crossed three more times. Each time, the difference in strength became even clearer. After it was established who was on the offensive and who was on the defensive, one side soon gained the upper hand. That side was me, of course, inching toward victory.

After the fourth time, the blue-haired knight finally realized he was at a disadvantage and stopped his assault, leaping back. Just before he did, I unleashed a quick swing using only my right hand that just barely missed him. Had he been just a bit slower, it would've ended the fight. "You've got good eyes." He clearly wasn't weak—it was fair to say he was a first-rate swordsman—but he was far from the best. In terms of pure skill with the blade, my adoptive father and Myra both were probably better. *That's what makes this so weird.*

“Your fighting style is like street brawling mixed with holy knight techniques,” the blue-haired knight said, murderous intent still in his eyes.

“And your fighting style seems designed to be used against other people. You weren’t a holy knight to begin with, were you?” In the past, holy knights had fought against various threats, so combating other humans was just one small part of the job. Yet his fighting style was specialized for fighting against other people. That meant he hadn’t originally been a holy knight. Not that you had to be a holy knight to become a unique curion or anything.

Then, as though right on cue, Nemophila broke up the fight. “Stop.”

“But, Princess—” he protested.

“That gentleman is like us.”

“Like us?”

“Are you going to make me repeat myself?” Nemophila smiled ever so slightly. It was an empty smile, like the freezing wind blowing through a winter alleyway.

“My apologies.” The blue-haired asshole sheathed his sword, then stood before Nemophila and dropped to one knee. Ignoring her knight, she looked straight at me.

“I apologize for the discourtesy. I hope the two of you can forgive us.” Nemophila bowed her head in apology. Her voice was entirely devoid of emotion.

Was she testing me?

“Explain yourselves,” the princess demanded. It seemed she hadn’t realized the blue-haired knight’s identity. That was to be expected considering we were covered in flesh like regular people. Only a fellow curion would be capable of identifying us as undead.

“I’ll be sure to reprimand him, so could we please ask for your tolerance?”

“That’s not an explanation!” The princess was seriously pissed. Come to think of it, she had gotten mad when Myra cut my cheek too. It was proof of how much she really cared for me. It kinda made me happy.

“Lady Nemophila, I have something I would like to ask you.” Pushing my happiness aside, I called out to Nemophila. She glanced at Palu for a moment, then looked back at me.

“Then let’s continue this another day.” She was well aware of her knight’s identity as an undead. And since he had suddenly attacked me, she knew I was one too. Furthermore, she knew that we couldn’t discuss any of it with Palu around.

“I’ll be looking forward to your invitation.”

“As will I. You’re quite intriguing.” Still kneeling before Nemophila, the blue-haired knight glared at me. If nothing else, his loyalty—or rather, his attachment to her seemed genuine. “We must take our leave for the day. Congratulations once again on being granted the title of White. I pray that the day comes where we’re able to fight alongside one another.” With that, she headed to a separate carriage from the one her luggage had been loaded onto.

The blue-haired knight stood up and opened the door for her. After waiting for her to enter, he then closed it. It seemed like he wasn’t allowed to ride with her. “Why are you here?” he asked.

“None of your business.”

“If you dare try to hurt the princess—”

“Do you have a sewing needle and thread on you?”

“What?”

“You might wanna sew that up before your master notices.” The crest on his right shoulder split. I had cut it earlier—just enough so the symbol indicating his status as one of the Twelve Knights wouldn’t tear until he moved a bit.

“Why did you do that in front of the princess?”

“I wouldn’t want a woman to feel bad that her holy knight is a weakling. Men don’t get that courtesy.” Although the blue-haired asshole gritted his teeth, he didn’t object. He rubbed the crest once, then boarded the covered wagon Nemophila’s luggage had been loaded onto without a word and it left.

“Holy knight Albert,” Palu said as she approached me.

“Just Al’s fine, Palu.”

“I’m sorry about my friend. She wasn’t like that before.”

“It’s nothing for you to apologize about.”

“I have no idea why that holy knight attacked you out of the blue.”

“The world’s full of idiots.” Honestly, trying to kill one of the Twelve Corpses on sight might have been the right call as a holy knight. Though given we were in the middle of the city, it was still reckless. “Do you know anything about him, Palu?”

She shook her head, her golden hair swaying gently. “No. I still can’t believe that she would choose a second holy knight.” It seemed like her bond with her first holy knight had been so strong that Palu couldn’t imagine her finding another before even taking the time to grieve her loss.

“And they apparently killed one of the Twelve Corpses.”

“Did her holy knight seem capable of that to you?”

“I wonder.” Although he was pretty skilled for a holy knight, we were undead. Just like I had Bone Sword Generation and Pestilent Fire, he should have had at least two abilities of his own. Actually, that meant the Twelve Corpses had become the Ten Corpses in the blink of an eye. “Anyway, let’s head back. I’ll walk you to your room.”

“All right.” The three of us headed back to the dorms together, where the princess and I parted ways with Palu and returned to our room.

“What’s wrong, Princess? You’ve been quiet this whole time.” Despite it being night, our living room was still faintly lit. A fist-sized manastone was hanging from the ceiling, emitting a pale light. They were quite valuable, so there was only one in each dorm room.

“Albert.”

“Hm?”

“Lady Nemophila’s holy knight was one of the Twelve Corpses, wasn’t he?” So that was what had been weighing on her mind: a holy woman who’d lost her knight and a mysterious new holy knight. Then that pair had suddenly taken

down one of the Twelve Corpses. Given the blue-haired holy knight's attitude toward me and Nemophila's interest in me, she had probably been able to surmise that much.

"How intelligent you are, my master." The princess trudged over to the sofa and sat down with a pensive look on her face. I sat across the table from her. "Is Nemophila related to you or something?" If that were the case, she might also have been familiar with the magic used to restore my body.

"No, our families have no connection. Of course, it's possible you may find some relation if you go back far enough, but nothing major." At the very least, the princess didn't know anything.

"Then who within your family knows about that magic?"

"All the heads of the family, myself, and my sister. None of us would ever let that information leak."

"Then maybe one of the previous heads of the family leaked something? Or..."

"Or what?"

"Maybe someone in Nemophila's family worked with the witch."

The princess's face went blank, as though she couldn't believe it. "Worked with the witch?" she mumbled to herself.

"I mean, I don't know that for sure, but the Eternal Witch was originally human, right? It's not too far-fetched to think she had research partners, friends, investors—stuff like that."

"Now that you mention it, you may have a point."

"Guess we can just ask her when we meet." She had specifically agreed to meet us, so I was confident she would get in touch. The princess nodded, then looked at me.

"What do you make of those two?"

"Nemophila's cute, though something seems off about her. Now, I don't really have a problem with that, but still, it's better to have a healthy mind—"

“Nobody asked for your preferences. Do you want me to curse you?”

After doing our usual “I’m already cursed” bit, I continued. “Anyway, there’s a lot I wanna ask her, so I think meeting them is a good idea. That said, I’m against fighting alongside them.”

“May I ask why?”

“They’re hiding something.”

“Lady Palustris said that Nemophila’s personality seemed to have changed.”

“She definitely hasn’t recovered from the death of her first holy knight.”

“While it’s unacceptable that he attacked you, the second holy knight did seem to obey Lady Nemophila. She also said we were like them.” I knew what the princess was getting at.

“You think they made a passionate promise to spend their lives together like we did?” The princess blushed at my deliberate wording. She scowled at me, then finally relented and agreed.

“Yes! I do!” She was as cute as ever.

“Did it look like they trust each other to you?”

“Well...” It was clear that Nemophila only saw him as a pawn, yet the blue-haired knight obeyed her with blind devotion. It was a pretty messed up master-servant relationship.

“I’d rather not be compared to him.”

“Because you’re a better swordsman than he is?”

“No— Well, I am, but that’s not why. Did you forget what you told me before?”

“What are you referring to?”

“I was the only one of the Twelve Corpses who killed all the curions in their Forbidden City.” That was what she’d told me the day we first met. “I don’t know why he’s obeying Nemophila, but I can say for sure that he didn’t start out as a holy knight like me.”

Even in the Forbidden Cities governed privately and not by the kingdom, it

wasn't possible to completely block access to saints. It was publicly known that the Skeleton Sword Saint was an exception that had exterminated all the other undead in his city. The nine cities managed by nobles still had a minimal level of information shared about them, and aside from my city, there were no others where all the curions had been wiped out.

Despite having three centuries to do so, that blue-haired asshole hadn't killed all the curions in his city. Of course, it was possible that he had a reason for not doing so, like Hector the Pestilent Guardian Dragon.

"Indeed, you're not the same."

"Does Nemophila belong to a noble family that manages one of the Forbidden Cities?"

"Yes, her family manages the Forbidden City where the Grave Keeper of the Golden City resides." The Golden City wasn't named that because it was actually made of gold—it was because it was famous for its beautiful flowers that were compared to gold when they blossomed. Even after the city was overrun by undead, those flowers had never withered. On the contrary, they had begun to fill the city.

The Grave Keeper of the Golden City was said to only be interested in two things: a poorly made grave he seemed to have built himself and tending to those golden flowers. Like the Pestilent Guardian Dragon, he was considered one of the least threatening of the Twelve Corpses. He would only attack when provoked. That explained why his skills were only "pretty good." He wasn't interested in anything besides maintaining that grave, so he hadn't practiced his swordsmanship. The question now was how had he escaped the city, and why was he hunting other curions?

"Not much of a grave keeper if he abandons his post."



The defeat of the Pestilent Guardian Dragon had been the hottest topic at the academy before shifting over to Nemophila a few days ago. A holy woman who had lost her knight had made a comeback and defeated one of the Twelve Corpses. In terms of narrative, it was too good to pass up.

The Shaman of the Heavenly Garden's defeat had been confirmed. The shaman's Forbidden City was an old mountain mining town that had originally been home to a certain tribe that considered the mountain sacred. The tall mountain was so close to the sky that it had been both feared and revered as a path to Heaven. Their idea of Heaven had been little different from ours, but that wasn't important.

Eventually, the lord of the territory had negotiated with greedy traitors from the tribe who had lost sight of the reverence they once had for nature, and the decision had been made to mine the mountain. All the tribe could then do was offer up almost daily prayers to the shaman to avoid incurring the mountain's wrath. At least, that was the story passed around nowadays.

In reality, it was unclear whether that shaman had in fact been the Shaman of the Heavenly Garden. The only thing that was certain was that an earthquake would occur whenever someone entered the mine, resulting in them being buried alive. Due to their frequency, it was likely a curion's unique ability. The phenomenon was likened to the mountain's wrath, giving that curion the name "shaman."

Alongside the Voiceless Mermaid, it was one of the Twelve Corpses with little to no confirmed sightings. Or at least, it had been. That all being the case, it was likely the blue-haired holy knight had obtained its ability.

"Black defeated the Pestilent Guardian Dragon, and Blizzard defeated the Shaman of the Heavenly Garden. What a time to be alive."

"It's like the hands on a clock that have been paused for three hundred years have finally started moving again." A bunch of female students were gossiping in the academy cafeteria. They were mostly second-and third-year holy women.

Many of the first-years, on the other hand, looked quite gloomy. They had witnessed the deaths of their fellow classmates during the Pestilent Guardian Dragon incident. One pair of saints and sixteen pairs of students had died in battle on that day. I couldn't blame them. Some holy women and holy knights hadn't been able to move past the shock and had left the academy.

Today I was sitting with Cuphea and Linum in addition to the princess. The princess had been worrying about Nemophila a lot the past few days. She had

gone about gathering information in her own way, consulting her older sister, Orlaya, and writing a letter to her grandmother.

“Two of the Twelve Corpses being defeated in such a short time is pretty crazy,” said the red-haired Cuphea as she tore a piece off of her bread and tossed the chunk into her mouth.

“The Twelve Corpses being gone doesn’t mean their cities will be freed right away, but it’s still a good thing.” The blue-haired Linum pulled a pendant out of her pocket and gripped it tightly, offering a prayer before digging into the rice omelet and salad on her tray.

“Oh, you’re using it, Linum?”

“Ah, yes. The pendant I used to use belonged to Mama Edel. Thank you again for giving it to me.” The pendant was a coin with three diagonal lines on it, from top right to bottom left. It was a crest that represented the goddess holy women worshipped shining light down upon them. The pendants were commonly worn by all who worshipped the goddess and used during prayer. The princess had a pendant as well, and holy woman uniforms also had the crest on them.

Linum and Cuphea had grown up in an orphanage, so any money they would have spent on buying a pendant had gone to the children’s food instead. The pendant Linum had worn when she first enrolled was a hand-me-down from her foster mother, Edel. I had bought the princess a hair clip and Cuphea a hair tie, and not wanting Linum to feel left out, I had bought her a pendant too.

“You’re welcome.”

“A-Ahem.” Cuphea deliberately brought attention to herself as she was playing with her ponytail. She was probably trying to show me that she was using her gift too.

“I’m glad you wear yours all the time too, Cuphea.” I was pretty sure I’d already told her that, but it didn’t matter.

“W-Well, I do like it.”

Linum giggled. “So much that you always stare at it before you go to sleep.”

“Hey! Linum?!” Cuphea turned bright red after getting exposed by her roommate. Learning such cute information did make me happy at least.

“I’m sorry. It’s just that the children get jealous sometimes.”

“Y-You’re right. I did feel a little bad when Linaria commented on it.”

“I’ve still got some money from the mission left over,” I said. “Maybe I should use it on something other than food.”

“That’s a good idea. Ribbons, hair accessories...maybe dolls?” Linum suggested. Her ideas turned into an entire conversation between childhood friends.

“Buying dolls for all the girls might be a bit too much. Maybe we can make them ourselves if we buy the materials. Mama Edel and grandma might even help if we ask.”

“If buying individual gifts is too much, we could try getting them all some picture books.”

“Buying books sounds good.” While I was admiring how kind they were, the princess still had a worried look on her face. I poked her cheek, my finger sinking into the softness.

“What is it, Albert?” The princess reluctantly faced me, my finger still on her cheek.

“Your food’s getting cold.”

“Oh, right...” Although she finally started eating, it was clear her mind was elsewhere. She had to have been thinking about Nemophila and the blue-haired holy knight—the Grave Keeper of the Golden City. In terms of chronology, Nemophila and her original holy knight had first visited the Golden City, which was managed by her family. While there, her knight had died in battle and Nemophila had returned alone. A few days later, she had met her second holy knight, and they had defeated the Shaman of the Heavenly Garden. The Twelve Saints’ titles were apparently based on weather, so they had been given the title of Blizzard.

There was a gap in the timeline between the death of her first holy knight and

the appointment of the grave keeper as her second holy knight. Somehow a holy woman who had lost her holy knight had made an agreement with one of the Twelve Corpses. That was the extent of what we knew at the moment. There was also the mystery of how she had obtained a means to restore a curion's flesh. Since it was a secret technique of the princess's family, it was probably weighing on her mind. We could come up with as many guesses as we wanted, but what we really needed was factual information.

"Hey, Princess."

"Yes?"

"You look like you could use a change of pace. I don't like seeing you with that gloomy look on your face." My words seemed to make her remember something.

"Why should I act all down in the dumps if I don't get anything out of it?"

"Hm? Oh, I did say that to you before." I remembered saying something along those lines back when I'd been staying at her mansion.

"You are constantly cheerful; that much is true." I had a pretty good guess as to why the princess was concerned. Freeing one of the Twelve Corpses wasn't a decision to be made lightly. Even though her family's technique had sealed my ability to spread the infection, that likely hadn't stopped her from being scared. She had been setting a curion loose of her own discretion, after all. Still, she had made the call.

Now, a holy woman had shown up who had made that same decision. Not only that, but she couldn't confirm that the technique that holy woman had used was the same as her family's. There was something suspicious about the holy woman and her knight. One misstep and the tragedy of three centuries past could be repeated. Already bearing the burden of the witch's blood, she couldn't afford to ignore the grave keeper.

"I won't tell you not to think about it, but worrying yourself sick isn't helpful. Look at it this way—whatever happens, I'll—" I stopped before I finished my sentence. *That's right. We're partners now.*

"Albert?"

“Whatever happens, *we’ll* do something about it.”

The princess’s eyes went wide for a moment, and then she smiled. “Right. Whatever problems we may encounter, we’ll overcome them together, my knight.”

“But of course, Lady Astrantia.” We looked at each other and chuckled.

“I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about, but when the time comes, we’ll lend a hand too.” I glanced over to see Cuphea frowning at me.

Linum just giggled. “I’m glad to see you’re feeling better, Lady Astrantia. You seemed down these past few days,” she said with a gentle smile.

“I’m sorry for worrying you two,” the princess replied. “If something happens, I hope we can count on you.”

“Certainly.”

“The students are supposedly going to be more active in the salvation efforts going forward, so let’s do our best.” With the defeat of the Pestilent Guardian Dragon and the Shaman of the Heavenly Garden, the biggest threats in two of the Forbidden Cities had vanished. Ordinary curions still had some variations in strength, but if they could all be defeated, the cities could be freed.

The mining town in particular might be able to resume digging after three hundred years, so people were probably eager to clear it out. Of course, the students would be stationed near the barrier so they could immediately evacuate in the event of an emergency. The actions of the Skeleton Sword Saint and the Grave Keeper of the Golden City were being kept under wraps, so there were no efforts to free our two cities. In my case, there were no curions left in the city. That meant reconstruction could begin at any time, but that would require detailing my situation, so the princess’s family had elected to keep it a secret.

“We need to start taking forming a squad seriously,” said the princess. As we started doing more inside the Forbidden Cities, it would become more important that we had allies to fight alongside.

“Yeah. I think we’re gonna need at least three pairs to actually look like a real squad.” Three pairs meant six people, which should be enough to function as a

small unit. The first people who came to mind were Orlaya and Myra and Palu and Ozias, but both of those pairs were upperclassmen, meaning they were already in squads of their own.

“A few girls did invite us to join them, but we’re teaming with you, so we turned them down,” Cuphea said with a troubled look.

“Yeah, you’re pretty popular with the commoners.” Dealing with the bullies had made them famous overnight. Noble and commoner cliques had formed in the academy, and the nobles in particular tended to look down on the commoners. Not all of them were like that, thankfully, but discrimination didn’t disappear so easily.

“That’s true, though some of them have wanted to use us to get closer to you two.” Although nobody was publicly harassing her, the princess still felt distanced from the other students due to her relation to the witch. There weren’t many people like Cuphea and Linum who approached her without ulterior motives.

If people were taking an interest in us, it was probably... “Because we have the title of White now?”

“I think so.” Linum uncomfortably nodded. So they were flip-floppers who had been afraid of the witch but now wanted to get closer to us after we’d proved our capability in the field.

“How do you feel about that, Princess?”

“Wanting to team up with someone strong is only natural,” she answered. “Still, trust isn’t built in a day. Even if we meet with them, it’ll take time for us to get a good judgment of their character.” I was impressed that she didn’t just get offended and reject them on the spot. The princess really was a good person.

Well, if that’s how my master feels, I’ve got no complaints. “All right then, for now, let’s try interviewing the people who wanna join our squad. You can handle the holy women, and I’ll be in charge of the female holy knights. No problems there, right?” The princess and Cuphea immediately scowled. Even Linum had an awkward smile on her face.

“Albert? What about the male holy knights?” the princess asked.

“I’m not talking to men, so we don’t need to interview them.”

Cuphea was the next to ask a question. “And if those female holy knights were in your strike zone, what would you do, Albert?”

“Make every effort to get acquainted with them, of course.”

“Is that right?”

“I see.” Both Cuphea and the princess smiled sweetly. It felt like the intensity emanating from them was growing by the day.

“Anyway, that’s enough joking around.” They clearly didn’t think I was joking. Steeling myself against their doubtful gazes, I continued on. “I think it’d be good for the four of us to do the interviews together.”

“I like that idea. We need allies we can support and who can support us,” said Linum. With her on board, the other two reluctantly stopped giving me reproachful looks and we decided to interview people who were interested.



A few days later, Nemophila, the holy woman who had become a celebrity overnight, announced that her next target from the Twelve Corpses was the One-Armed Giant. She was recruiting members for her extermination force.

Then I received a letter from her. It was to set up a meeting with me and the princess like we had promised the other day, which was all well and good, but...

“Orlaya and Myra are tagging along, huh?”

“Of course. I also have some questions for Blizzard,” said a girl with silver hair and icy blue eyes. The well-proportioned beauty was Astrantia’s sister, Orlaya.

“Are we getting in the way?” asked Myra, the serious, blonde-haired, blue-eyed holy knight.

“No, not at all.” *Don’t look at me so apologetically. It makes me wanna spoil you.* Myra aside, it only made sense Orlaya was curious given that her family’s secret technique being leaked could be a big issue for her. Nemophila apparently had plans in our city, so we didn’t have to go far. “All right, let’s get going.”



We all loaded up into one carriage and arrived at our destination. “That’s one huge mansion. Does it belong to Nemophila’s family?” Stepping out of the carriage, we were greeted by a gatekeeper and a massive gate. Once we were confirmed as expected guests, the gate loudly creaked open.

As we strolled through the vast front yard, the princess finally answered my question. “No. If I recall correctly, this is...”

“In terms you may understand, this mansion belongs to the one in charge of the Shaman of the Heavenly Garden’s Forbidden City,” said Orlaya, finishing her sister’s sentence.

“Oh, I get it. Since Nemophila solved one of their headaches, they owe her.” As a result, they had provided her with a place she could stay and hold meetings. We were welcomed inside the mansion and guided by a maid. Although she was cute, it obviously wasn’t the time to hit on her. We stopped in front of a room and the maid proceeded to knock on the door. Nemophila’s voice responded from within, and the maid opened the door for us.

It was a massive room. The door to the balcony was open, allowing a gentle light and refreshing breeze to fill the room. The curtains and Nemophila’s sky-blue hair waved in the breeze. She was sitting in a chair with tea utensils and snacks laid out before her. Her face looked as beautiful and hollow as ever.

“I’ve been waiting for you. Oh, Black is here as well.”

“Is that going to be a problem?” Orlaya asked.

“No. It’s nice to see you again, Lady Orlaya.”

“I wish I could say the same.” Considering they had both been members of the Colors while at the academy, it made sense that they’d met before.

“My, have I done something to offend you?”

“That’s what I’m here to find out.”

“Is that so?” Nemophila ordered the maid to prepare some tea, then asked us to sit down. However, there weren’t enough chairs. Since Nemophila had only expected two guests, that meant Myra and I were left standing. Holy knights

were bodyguards to begin with, so I didn't have a problem with that. The blue-haired asshole was standing beside the door we entered through, which I only mentioned because he was also a holy knight.

"Please leave," Nemophila ordered without so much as looking at him.

"But, Princess..." he protested.

"I would prefer it if you didn't make me repeat myself."

"Pardon me. I will patrol the estate." The blue-haired holy knight bowed deeply and left the room.

"For one of the Twelve Corpses, you have him well trained," Orlaya said sarcastically, a hint of surprise mixed in. It was her first time seeing him, so it was to be expected.

"No, he was like that from the start." Nemophila gave an emotionless smile.

"From the start?" A question escaped the princess's lips, and Nemophila nodded in response.

"Once our tea is ready, I will explain everything from beginning to end." After that, the maid placed the tea on the table. We turned down her offer for additional chairs, and once only the relevant parties remained in the room, the conversation began in earnest.

"There are many people who think curions can be utilized, my family included." That made sense. Though it was imperfect immortality, a curion could regenerate any damage as long as they had their head. I had theorized before that they could be used as test subjects for magic and weapons. There were probably people who had come up with all sorts of uses for them. "The Heavenly Swords possessed by the Twelve Saints are one of those uses."

"Heavenly Swords?" I tilted my head in confusion. Neither the princess nor Myra seemed to know of them either. Orlaya's expression, however, remained unchanged.

"I'm not surprised you haven't heard of them," said Nemophila. "Only a select few know of them. Contrary to what many believe, the Embodiment of the Spirit that curions possess is not limited to the Twelve Corpses." Infection,

regeneration, and unique abilities: these three features were possessed by all curions. Although I had never encountered any, there were some curions who possessed unique abilities of their own—somewhere between normal curions without special abilities and the Twelve Corpses.

“I’m aware of that,” the princess replied.

“The Heavenly Swords are the royal family’s greatest treasure, and only twelve are said to exist. When one is used to defeat a curion, it steals their ability. That sounds quite similar to what the Twelve Corpses do, doesn’t it?” So the holy knights in the Twelve Saints got new swords with special powers. “That said, the Heavenly Swords are imperfect. The abilities the swords hold become unusable after ten to fifty years, and they are unable to hold more than one ability at once.”

So they can’t maintain the powers they steal for long, and they’re limited to only one. The duration of the abilities aside, it was clear they were different from the Twelve Corpses’ ability to steal each other’s powers. I possessed both Bone Sword Generation and Pestilent Fire, which meant I could use multiple powers at once. That aside, it was definitely similar. It was probably—

“That technology was created by the witch, wasn’t it?” the princess asked in a strained voice, practically forcing it out. Technology concerning the undead was certainly suspicious.

“It’s possible. I don’t know the specifics, but it seems likely that the Eternal Witch has interfered with our world on several occasions.” That sounded plausible. I had to imagine that on top of utilizing the imperfect immortality of curions to its fullest extent, she had developed an even better version of the revival spell that had been used on me and the blue-haired asshole.

That meant she could appear in any era, with any appearance she wanted. She could have blended in with the early members of the exorcism agency when it had first formed, or she could have killed members of the nobility or royal family and taken their places. It was impossible to hunt for her based on physical features.

Still, a technology being introduced by the witch didn’t mean it should be ignored. The barriers sealing the Forbidden Cities, the spell the princess used to

restore my flesh, and the Heavenly Swords the royal family gave the Twelve Saints were all based on her knowledge. Even the fact I was still around three centuries later was due to the power of undeath she had granted me.

“I understand your surprise, Lady Astrantia, but we haven’t even reached the main topic yet,” I whispered to the princess. She took a deep breath to compose herself, then nodded.

“Were you thinking you could utilize the Grave Keeper of the Golden City in the same way, Lady Nemophila?” Astrantia asked.

“It was my family, to be precise. We had confirmed that *it* was fond of the golden flowers and that it created and manipulated different plants to ward off intruders. If we could find a way to harness that power, we would be able to make a fortune.” Being able to create an unlimited number of plants could certainly make you rich. You could manufacture mass quantities of potions that required rare plants or create cotton, hemp, vegetables, and grains at will. I could come up with endless ways to use such a power. However, thinking you could use one of the Twelve Corpses for commercial purposes seemed a little naive to me. “One day, my father ordered me to enter the city as the bodyguard of the person who was to negotiate with the Grave Keeper of the Golden City. You can probably imagine how that turned out.”

“Negotiations failed. And that was when you lost your holy knight.” Orlaya really didn’t mince words.

“That is correct, Lady Orlaya. Both the negotiator and my holy knight were dried out like mummies in an instant. All that remained were desiccated corpses, as though the plants had used them for sustenance.” I had figured as much. The blue-haired asshole was the one who had killed Nemophila’s first holy knight. Now he was her second holy knight. What was she thinking? “Things became quite strange after that. After seeing my face, it knelt before me.”

“He called you ‘Princess’ before,” I interjected, remembering when we had crossed swords.

“As you say, it seems to view me as its princess.” Although the blue-haired holy knight’s loyalty seemed genuine, Nemophila treated him as merely a tool.

Now I finally understood why. His loyalty was real, but it wasn't for Nemophila. It was loyalty for someone he had once served mistakenly directed at her. It was a more precarious situation than I'd expected.

"That's why I wasn't killed. After I somehow managed to return home, I was able to piece together the fragments it had told me to reach a conclusion." Nemophila took a deep breath before continuing. "The head of our family, his wife, and their children remained in the city during the incident three hundred years ago. The records state that our bloodline continued only because the younger brother of the head who had been staying at their estate in the capital succeeded the family. Of the children who remained in the city, two were girls around my age."

"So the head of your family three hundred years ago happened to have a daughter who looked like you? And the Grave Keeper of the Golden City, a knight who served them, mistook you for her?" the princess asked, the look on her face revealing her disbelief.

"I suspect so. We must look quite alike for it to mistake us." Since she had the same blood running through her veins, it wouldn't be far-fetched to think they might have had extremely similar faces. Nemophila had only survived because of her resemblance to a young noblewoman from three centuries ago. While it was a remarkable coincidence, it was hard to say if it was a fortunate one. "As for the revival spell Lady Astrantia and Lady Orlaya are so concerned about, it has been passed down in my family as well."

"Wha—" The princess cried out in shock, and even Orlaya knit her eyebrows.

"To be precise, the materials were discovered when the ruins of our estate in the Golden City were explored long ago."

"Wh-What do you mean?" the princess asked.

"Someone in her family was connected to the Eternal Witch three hundred years ago," Orlaya said to her bewildered sister. I had kind of expected as much, so I wasn't surprised. The Eternal Witch had to have had collaborators, and apparently one of Nemophila's ancestors was one of them. After her family had discovered the spell, they'd waited for any chance to use it. Now, in Nemophila's time, the opportunity had arrived.

That meant the witch's collaborators could likely be found across the country. With the exception of Nemophila's family, they had probably feared being discovered and had hidden their ties to the witch. That was why only the princess's family was detested for their relation to the witch. I'd never heard of any other family being scorned for that reason. They'd hidden their tracks well.

"Based on our discussion thus far, I have a request I'd like to make of you, Lady Astrantia." We didn't expect her to have called us here just to share information. Nemophila was finally getting down to the real reason she had invited us.

"What is it?"

"I'm sure you're all quite uneasy right now. We don't know when its delusions will come to an end. It may obey me for now, but that won't last forever." She was right. The only reason Nemophila had control over the grave keeper was because he wasn't in his right mind. He thought she was his master from three centuries ago. Who knew what would happen when he finally realized his mistake. If it happened in the middle of town, it could result in a massacre. Yet Nemophila had brought him outside the Forbidden City knowing the danger he posed. Her mental state was just as dangerous as his.

The two members of Blizzard, who were supposed to be part of the Twelve Saints, humanity's greatest hope, were a threat to mankind. And now Nemophila had a request for us.

"I would like Sir Albert to kill it."

Chapter 2

New Allies

Nemophila smiled gently, yet the princess's face was twisted with confusion. "You would surrender your holy knight to another family?" she asked.

Nemophila smiled even harder, tilting her head slightly. "Bringing salvation to curions is a saint's duty, is it not?"

"Hold on. Explain why you want Albert to kill him," Orlaya interjected before her sister could get emotional.

"It's simple. I decided to make use of it because I believed doing so would let me kill as many curions as possible. However, with Sir Albert here, it no longer serves any purpose."

Oh boy. She's hopeless. On the surface, Nemophila seemed kinda like me. But deep down, she was a fundamentally different case. Wanting revenge was fine—I had survived to get revenge on the witch, after all. But she was falling apart. It wasn't that she was prepared to do whatever it took—she was just running wild. The death of her holy knight had broken her mentally, and now she was trying to take as many enemies with her as she could.

That was why she had brought one of the Twelve Corpses outside and used it to take on other curions. Now that she had found a more useful member of the Twelve Corpses, she was simply discarding her old tool. Getting rid of a dangerous tool might seem logical, but if she had truly been in her right mind, she wouldn't have brought someone so dangerous into the outside world to begin with.

The princess had decided that I could be a potential partner for a variety of reasons, including Robert's notes, the fact that I had killed all the other curions and driven back saints without killing them, and her personal conversations with me that determined whether I had any humanity left. Nemophila, however, hadn't done that. She had freed the blue-haired asshole knowing full

well that he wasn't sane. She had willfully started off with the wrong move. She couldn't be trusted.

"It currently possesses two abilities—the ability to create and control plants, Golden Garden, and the ability to cause earthquakes and landslides, Tremor Transmission. If he kills it, Sir Albert will obtain those two abilities."

"What is it you seek in return?" asked Orlaya. Although she had likely also recognized Nemophila's mental state, she seemed more interested in gathering information in case a dialogue could be established.

"I was hoping our families could share authority over Sir Albert." She was throwing away an unwieldy tool that could break at any moment and replacing it with a new tool that seemed relatively stable. Because said tool belonged to Astrantia, she was proposing that they share it. "Personally, I would be satisfied simply killing curions, but my family originally intended to make use of its power. Yet aside from its role as a knight, it has proven utterly useless. Even when I commanded it as its princess to use Golden Garden, it simply froze up and wouldn't activate it."

Our abilities were controlled by our wills. If he wouldn't use it even when ordered to, there was probably something weighing on the blue-haired holy knight's mind. Even I might be reluctant if I was asked to use Hector's flames to light a bonfire. There was a big difference between being capable of using an ability and deciding to actually use it. The people who sought to utilize curions as tools probably didn't account for the fact that undead were once living people with wills of their own. They seemed to have forgotten the simple fact that humans didn't act on logic alone.

"In order to continue killing curions in the future, my family must benefit as well. That is why we want to consolidate all the powers in Sir Albert and share the benefits between us. Fortunately, Sir Albert seems to have established a good relationship with Lady Astrantia. I believe there is room for us to cooperate." Nemophila continued without waiting for us to respond. "I believe it goes without saying the potential profits Golden Garden could provide. Of course, we promise to reward you as well, Sir Albert. My family will do everything in their power to arrange a beautiful woman to your liking. What do you say?"

“Enough of this!” The princess slammed the table and stood up, rocking all the tea utensils on the table. Her chair fell over behind her.

“What’s the matter, Lady Astrantia?” Nemophila smiled at Astrantia without so much as raising an eyebrow.

“What do you think holy knights are?! You treat your own holy knight like a tool, then suggest sharing someone else’s?! I won’t stand for this discourtesy!”

“I think it would be a mutually beneficial—”

“Did you treat your first holy knight that way?” For the first time, Nemophila’s smile disappeared. “Would you be able to frivolously suggest sharing the holy knight who gave their life for you?”

Though her smile briefly crumbled, it was plastered back on Nemophila’s face a moment later. “I see now that my words were quite rude. I underestimated how important Sir Albert is to you.” As far as Nemophila was concerned, the Twelve Corpses were just tools for killing curions. It was probably hard for her to wrap her head around our relationship. “If I may ask, what do you think of the proposal, Sir Albert?” She turned her gaze toward me.

“I’ve already decided whose side I will die at. All the beautiful women in the world couldn’t change that.” Truth be told, my mouth was watering at the idea of being able to meet a new beauty, but it didn’t compare to the princess. I had only just recently vowed to die with her.

“Lady Astrantia means that much to you?”

“She does.”

“I suppose I’ve been rejected, then.” Nemophila gave a faint smile, not showing even a hint of disappointment.



After that, Orlaya grilled Nemophila for more information, which she gave up without any reluctance. Once that was over, we got ready to head back. “Oh, and students who are members of the Colors are permitted to join the mission to defeat the One-Armed Giant, if you’re so inclined,” Nemophila said as we were leaving.

“She got us,” I said once everyone had boarded the carriage.

“Albert?” The princess gave me a worried look.

“Albert is correct. The results of these negotiations didn’t matter to Lady Nemophila from the start,” Orlaya responded.

“What do you mean?”

Seeing the princess’s confusion, I decided to explain. “They probably didn’t care since agreement would be beneficial to them, but aren’t matters between families usually handled by the family heads?”

“Th-That’s true...” Even if both parties were holy women who had contracts with the Twelve Corpses, it would still be something that required discussion between the family heads. The real negotiations likely wouldn’t take place until after this meeting. “So why did she want to meet us today?”

“To drag you and me into the mission to defeat the One-Armed Giant.” My explanation might have been too concise, as the princess still seemed lost. Realizing that, Orlaya followed up.

“The moment she realized Albert was one of the Twelve Corpses, it probably didn’t take her long to surmise that he was the one who defeated the Pestilent Guardian Dragon. And as she said, she is concerned about her holy knight. She wants Albert to kill him, and what better place than a Forbidden City?”

“I wouldn’t feel confident killing him in a mansion or city,” I added. I might have been the better swordsman, but he had two special abilities. He would surely resist when he realized I was after his life, and who knew what kind of damage he’d do to our surroundings then. If I was gonna kill him, a Forbidden City was the place to do it. We just had to pray he didn’t go on a rampage until then. But if he did, at least we wouldn’t have to worry about him spreading the infection. If the spell was the same as the princess’s family’s, then his ability to

infect others had been sealed.

“We don’t know when the Grave Keeper of the Golden City might run wild, and he’s currently outside the Forbidden Cities. We can’t ignore this for long,” said Orlaya.

“You’re right,” the princess agreed.

“In addition, we can’t get the academy, agency, or other families involved.”

“Because then they might discover Albert.” Exposing Nemophila’s family to take down the blue-haired asshole would give her every reason to take us down with her and expose our secret. The usage of the Twelve Corpses by both families had to be kept under wraps.

“Additionally, if they were to successfully defeat the One-Armed Giant, the grave keeper would possess more abilities than Albert.” He would have three to my two. The guy was already unstable and would get even stronger. We couldn’t just let him be, so our participation was mandatory.

Since we hadn’t immediately skipped ahead to joining the Twelve Saints, she had probably realized we weren’t interested in status. Today’s discussion had been a way to drag us onto the battlefield in spite of that. Nemophila had made it impossible for us to ignore them. Despite her current mental state, she had obviously been smart to begin with. That intelligence clearly hadn’t waned.

“I would’ve liked some time for the princess to grow,” I said. That was the whole point of her being a student. Why did these problems keep popping up one after another?

“I also want to avoid exposing my sister to danger, but this isn’t something we can ignore.”

“While I appreciate your concern, I’m prepared to fight,” said the princess.

“You’re going to need even more intense training. Can you keep up?” Orlaya asked.

“Of course!” The princess nodded with determination. During my fight with the guardian dragon, Hector, I had come to realize that I needed her strength. After Hector had been defeated, his bones had started moving on their own,

and it had been the princess who had brought him salvation. It was possible the same thing would happen with the giant and the grave keeper.

Come to think of it, it was unclear why Nemophila had selected the One-Armed Giant as the next target. Maybe there was some connection between Nemophila's family and the family managing the giant's city. Alternatively, it could be that she wanted the blue-haired holy knight to obtain the giant's ability in the event that we didn't behave according to her plan. If the Skeleton Sword Saint wouldn't do what she wanted, she would continue using the Grave Keeper of the Golden City.

We would have Nemophila, Orlaya, and other holy women participating in the plan with us this time. Still, I didn't have a clue how things would turn out. No matter what, it was my duty as a holy knight to cut down my enemies and protect the princess.

"Hm?" As the carriage bounced, I noticed Myra staring at me with sparkling eyes. The entire previous discussion had gone by without her saying a word. Granted, that was probably the proper way for a holy knight to handle that situation. Even though I was involved, I was probably the weird one for interrupting my master. Oh well. "What's up, Myra?"

"Nothing. I was just admiring you."

"Uh-huh. Why exactly?"

"No reward wavers your resolve to serve your master faithfully. You're the very model of a holy knight! And that line about being prepared to die by Lady Astrantia's side! It made my soul tremble!" Myra was so moved she was shaking.

"Oh." I had just used our promise as a reason to turn Nemophila down. It did kinda sound like something a loyal holy knight would say though. Seeing my adoptive brother's descendant gaze at me with admiration was kinda embarrassing. I turned to the princess to escape her gaze and saw her hanging her head, her face so red it looked like steam was about to pour out. It seemed she was also embarrassed due to what I had said.

"Myra is correct. Your loyalty is quite admirable, Albert. I will continue to trust you with my sister," said Orlaya.

“Of course...” This was probably how the princess felt when I made fun of the things she said. It was a compliment in this case, but that just made it even more unbearable.

“Lady Orlaya! I’ll serve you until my life gives out!”

Please don’t say things that were clearly inspired by me right in front of my face, Myra. At least save it until you’re in private. This is so awkward.

“That’s the spirit. I’m counting on you, Myra.”

“Certainly!” Black was having a nice moment; meanwhile, one member of White was red in the face, while the other wanted to jump out of the carriage in embarrassment. There was a lot to think about, from the battles with the One-Armed Giant and the blue-haired asshole to forming a squad at the academy. But for the time being, all I could do was pray that the carriage would hurry up and reach the campus.

“C’mon, Cuphea, don’t get so angry.”

“I’m not angry.”

After class had let out for the day, the only ones in the empty classroom were me, the princess, Cuphea, and Linum. We were sitting in four chairs lined up in a row, about to conduct interviews for potential squadmates like we had discussed the other day. But just a few minutes before the first interview was scheduled to begin, I had to cool off the red-haired beauty to my right.

“Look, you’re clearly in a bad mood.” On the way here, I had told her and Linum that we were participating in the mission to defeat the One-Armed Giant. Although I hadn’t given all the details, I felt it was right to inform her, both as a squadmate and as a friend. Cuphea had said they would join as well, but they didn’t meet the qualifications. For a student to participate, they had to be one of the twelve strongest pairs in the academy—the Colors. Now that the princess and I had earned the title of White, there was no problem for us or Orlaya and Myra of Black. However, that wasn’t the case for Cuphea and Linum. Cuphea’s mood had immediately soured when I’d explained that.

“Why do you two have to participate? You only just enrolled at the academy.”

Cuphea seemed to be worried about us.

“Sorry, Cuphea,” said the princess. “My family has gotten involved in this, so we don’t have a choice.” While she kept part of the explanation a secret, it wasn’t a lie.

Nemophila and the Grave Keeper of the Golden City made up Blizzard. A holy woman driven to the brink of insanity by her thirst for revenge and a loyal knight shackled to a pledge he had made to someone else three centuries ago—ignoring such disturbed saints wasn’t an option. Especially the knight—he was one of the Twelve Corpses, brought outside the barrier with the princess’s family’s technique. As a member of the witch’s bloodline, the princess felt a sense of responsibility to deal with him.

“Still!” Cuphea protested.

“I think Cuphea’s just frustrated she can’t do more to help you two,” the blue-haired Linum said, patting her childhood friend on the back.

“Y-Yeah! I’m not mad at you!” So she was upset that she couldn’t lend her friends a hand. Same old Cuphea.

“Then in that case...”

“What?”

“Help us next time.” Apologies or consolation weren’t what she needed. She needed reassurance that she’d be of use in the future.

Cuphea was taken aback for a moment, then laughed. “You got it. I’ll catch up to you in no time!” she declared, her ponytail swinging with confidence. Finally, she was back to normal.

“Unfortunately for you, I’ll keep pushing ahead. Better get used to watching my back.”

“Hey! This is the part where you’re supposed to say ‘I’ll be waiting’ or something!”

“Aha ha ha.”

“Jeez...” Although Cuphea pouted, she clearly wasn’t as upset as she had been a moment ago.

“You really have a knack for cheering her up, Albert,” said Linum.

“Linum?! Don’t be weird!”

“Well, I did promise to take her on her first date after she grows up a bit.”

“Not you too! What are you talking about?!” We’d promised to get much closer two years from now.

“What, is it not your first?”

“I-It is, but...” Cuphea’s voice trailed off, her face redder than her hair. It was cute, but I might have teased her a little too much. At the very least, I needed to end the conversation on a serious note.

“And so no other man can take that honor, I promise we’ll return safely. Just keep training and wait until then.”

“Okay...” Cuphea nodded her head like an obedient child.

Good. That settles that is what I thought, until the princess pulled on my sleeve. She shot me a silent glare, but that silence spoke volumes. “Of course, I haven’t forgotten my promise with you either.” My final moments were already decided. I looked her in the eyes as I spoke, and she let go of my sleeve. It seemed like she had let me off the hook for now.

“What’s this promise with Astrantia?” Cuphea, on the other hand, was not so forgiving.

“Oh, look at that. Our first interviewee is coming.”

“Are you trying to brush it off? Well, whatever. I can imagine what it is.” She probably figured it was some kind of date, but it was a bit heavier than that. Of course, it wouldn’t have been polite to correct her.

During that exchange, our first interviewees really did arrive. The classroom door opened, and they approached the podium where the teacher usually stood.



We interviewed four pairs, but none of them really clicked.

“I know there’s strengthening magic, but these holy knights are kinda

lacking,” I said. Just meeting someone can give you a good enough idea about their abilities. In that regard, all four of the holy knights we had interviewed were underwhelming, to put it nicely.

“While I realize I have a lot to learn myself, I have concerns regarding the mana quantity and control of the holy women. Of course, that’s just when it comes to them fighting alongside us,” said the princess. They would grow in the future, but right now, they wouldn’t make dependable allies.

“Couldn’t that change if Albert trained them like he did for me?” Cuphea asked.

“No, you showed talent from the get-go. Plus, you had the guts to get stronger even if you had to discard your pride. I’m not a miracle worker.”

“O-Oh...” Cuphea replied bashfully.

“Judging someone is a heavy, nerve-racking responsibility, but our lives are on the line so we have to get it right.” Although Linum was shy and reluctant to measure someone’s worth on a pass-fail basis, she understood how important these interviews were and was doing her best.

“Right. We have to take this seriously and keep going so we can find someone to fight alongside.”

And so, we were on to our fifth pair. I was caught by surprise when I saw the holy woman enter the room. She was someone I—no, we all knew. “Well, if it isn’t the bully.” She was a haughty noblewoman with long, blonde hair, and the same noblewoman who had harassed Cuphea and Linum during our first few days at the academy. She had humiliated Cuphea during their mock battle, then had gotten a taste of her own medicine during the rematch. After that, she had behaved herself and had been in our group during the hands-on training in the Pestilent Guardian Dragon’s city. She’d always had talent as a holy woman, so she had made it out alive. However, something was different.

“You’ve got a new holy knight,” said Cuphea, already picking up on it. There was a female holy knight standing next to her—not the holy knight who had made it back from the Forbidden City with her.

The holy knight had androgynous features and blonde hair that was long near

the front and gradually shortened toward the back of her head. She wore men's pants rather than the skirt female holy knight uniforms came with, and her eyes were like beautiful jade gems. In some ways, she kinda reminded me of Myra back when we'd first met. At a glance, she didn't seem half bad...in terms of sword skill, of course.

"My name is Agrimonia. Holy woman."

"And I'm her holy knight, Hypericum."

In the past, Agrimonia never would have come here, let alone introduced herself. "You know this is an interview to join our squad, right? Are you sure about this?" I asked the former bully.

"Yes. We're here today to see if we'll be judged worthy of fighting alongside you."

It seems like she really has changed. People didn't change easily, but it wasn't impossible. I'd heard that her holy knight had retired after the hands-on training. Likewise, Hypericum's holy woman had dropped out of the academy. Left behind, the two had paired up. Witnessing so many lives being lost during training had made Agrimonia come to realize the foolishness of her actions. Saints didn't have the leeway to discriminate based on status. Staring death in the face had finally made her understand.

Some people never came to realize that fact. Since she had been able to change, I thought there was still hope for her, but it was Cuphea and Linum she had a history with. Cuphea in particular had been treated horribly by Agrimonia's previous holy knight. She'd had her clothes ripped in front of all the other students and had been mocked viciously. The perpetrator might have been gone, but Agrimonia was the one who had ordered it. I wondered if she could forgive her.

"Lady Cuphea, Lady Linum, I would like to formally apologize for my actions." Agrimonia bowed deeply in apology.

"Sure. I forgive you," Cuphea answered indifferently.

"If Cuphea's fine with it, then so am I," Linum agreed.

"R-Really?" Agrimonia looked up, baffled by how easily she had been forgiven.

“I already got you back. Besides...I was able to become stronger as a result.” Cuphea glanced at me, her cheeks flushing. She had probably remembered how we had become friends through our training. She was as cute as ever...and still so forgiving. “What about you? Won’t your noble friends have an issue with you teaming up with us?” Some of Agrimonia’s friends had lost their lives during the hands-on training, but not all of them. There might be some who viewed joining our squad as betrayal.

“I don’t mind.” She was prepared to leave her comfortable environment in order to get stronger. Like Cuphea had once said, Agrimonia wasn’t weak. She was a talented holy woman and had almost certainly been training since before she’d entered the academy. Her new holy knight wasn’t bad either.

I looked over at the other three, and they all nodded in agreement. “Then how about we start with a trial period?” I said, facing the interviewees again.

Agrimonia’s eyes went wide with surprise. She had probably expected to be rejected. “C-Certainly. I’ll do my best.” Hypericum bowed next to her, and we had our new candidates.

Chapter 3

A Holy Woman's Loss

For the time being, our squad was complete. There was the princess—the silver-haired, blue-eyed Astrantia—and me; the red-haired, irritable Cuphea and the blue-haired, attentive Linum; and finally, the blonde, former bully noble lady Agrimonia and her new holy knight, the androgynous-looking beauty Hypericum.

Although it seemed like a dream harem at first glance, the tragic reality was that four of the members were off-limits. Only Hypericum was over twenty. While I was making some headway to become acquainted with her, the glares from the princess and Cuphea made things difficult.

The two newest additions seemed to possess enough skill to be made into formal allies. Compared to Cuphea's unorthodox, self-taught style, Hypericum's swordplay was simple and effective. Agrimonia's mana and mana control were both in the upper echelon of her year. If we all trained together and worked on our cooperation, we'd have no trouble performing, even in the Forbidden Cities.

Additionally, it was decided that the princess and I of White along with Orlaya and Myra of Black would be participating in the mission to defeat the One-Armed Giant. The originator of the plan and one of the Twelve Saints, Nemophila of Blizzard, would also be participating alongside the Grave Keeper of the Golden City. Had it only been those three pairs, I would have been able to use my curion powers freely as we all knew the situation, but that wasn't the case.

Publicly, both Black and Blizzard had defeated one of the Twelve Corpses. There were many people who didn't want to lose standing by allowing those two pairs to add a third to that list. That, or some of the other Twelve Saints were joining because they genuinely wanted to save the world. Either way, it

meant more people were interfering. Regardless, no matter how many people tagged along, my mission remained the same: protect the princess and defeat my enemies.

That aside, it was finally a day off. As such, it was time to enrich my mind and soothe my soul. In other words, it was time for women.

I set off through the city in search of a new encounter. I'd been spending a lot of time with younger girls and brats at the orphanage lately, but my true passion was getting intimate with adult women. Today was the day I would realize my idea of happiness and find a grown woman to share my love with—

Or so I thought, until I saw a familiar face. A beautiful woman and a man wearing an obscene expression were standing by the back entrance of a store in an alley. I took a moment to check the name of the store and it seemed to be some kind of medicinal herb shop. While I didn't know much about herbs, I'd heard that some stimulated mana generation. Those types of shops also tended to sell empty manastones, along with manastones that had been filled by other people.

Since this city had an academy for training saints, students were probably the shop's main source of business. After completing a few missions and acquiring some extermination bonuses, even commoners could afford herbs and manastones. The old man was presumably an employee or the owner of the shop, while the beautiful woman was none other than Edel.

She was a stunning woman who ran the orphanage with her mother, the old lady. Although she seemed to be over thirty, her golden hair shone beautifully, and her skin was every bit as glossy as a teenager's. Despite that, her somber eyes and the mole beneath one of them gave her a mature allure. On top of all that, her chest was bountiful, her waist was slim, and her ass was curvy. All she had to do was stand there and her beauty would make men head over heels for her.

After confirming the uncomfortable look on her face, I silently approached the alley and hid in the shadows, ready to leap out at a moment's notice. Hopefully it wouldn't be necessary, but better safe than sorry.

"Good work today, Edel. Here's your pay." The man handed Edel several silver

coins.

“Thank you very much,” Edel replied.

“It’s hard finding people willing to fill up manastones, so you’re a big help.” That explained it. The filled manastones were provided by people like Edel. Active mages used their mana for themselves, so people willing to sell their mana were probably pretty rare.

“No, thank you for paying me for my mana.”

“You’re a former holy woman, aren’t you? Couldn’t you earn money by healing people?” I was curious about that too. She had once been a holy woman, so surely she could use healing magic. However, it was such an obvious idea that I had assumed there was a reason she wasn’t doing it. What a tactless old man.

Edel fell silent.

“Sorry, sorry, I’m sure you have your circumstances.”

“Um, I need to look after the children, so I’ll be on my way now.”

“Ah, hold on. Have you given what I said some thought? About working here?”

“I appreciate the offer, but we still have a lot of young children at the orphanage. I’d rather not be away for long periods of time.” Considering her situation, filling manastones for the store in her free time was a pretty good fit.

“Are you sure? You don’t want to be paid more? It could help get more food for those children.” I was starting to get annoyed, but I could endure it for now. He hadn’t done anything so awful that I needed to intervene. That said, pretending to care about the children in an attempt to get her to do more work didn’t paint him in a good light.

“Filling the manastones is enough work for me, thank you.” Edel politely bowed and turned the man down, and he gave an exaggerated sigh in response.

“Read between the lines a little. I’m saying you gotta work here if you wanna keep making money off these manastones.” In the blink of an eye, he revealed his true colors. Then he went to wrap his arm around Edel’s shoulder.

“You were running late, so I came to pick you up, Edel,” I said, grabbing the man’s wrist. I smiled at Edel, whose eyes went wide with shock for a moment before she caught on to what I was doing.

“Ah, Albert.” She even refrained from calling me “Sir Albert” like usual.

“I assume this is the owner of the shop?” The man gave me an uncomfortable look, and for good reason. Even though it was a day off, I was wearing my holy knight outfit. His shop’s primary clientele were holy women, meaning it was in his best interest to stay on good terms with holy knights.

“S-Sir holy knight, what can I do for you?”

“I was just on my way to pick up my precious Edel when I happened to see someone trying to touch her. I was fully prepared to punish the villain before I realized it was the shop’s owner. Did I jump to the wrong conclusion?” I slightly tightened my grip on his wrist and the man’s face went pale.

“A-Are you a friend of Edel’s?”

“Yeah. Now you wouldn’t be so foolish as to try to lay your hands on someone else’s woman, would you?”

“O-Of course not!” the man said, repeatedly shaking his head.

“Good. I would hate to think that the herb shop we rely on was run by a scumbag who took advantage of women. That would certainly disappoint all the holy women at the academy.” Rumors circulated fast on campus, and he surely knew that. It’d be bad for his business if word about him harassing a former holy woman spread. He started shaking, presumably imagining all the customers he stood to lose.

“D-Don’t be ridiculous! I was just saying how I hoped to continue relying on her for manastones in the future!”

“Oh, so you’ll keep buying them? Edel hasn’t caused you any problems?” Even though I’d stepped in this time, there was no telling if he would threaten her job out of anger later. However, if he thought treating Edel poorly would negatively impact his business in the future, he wouldn’t be inclined to do so. She’d be able to continue earning money by pouring her mana into manastones.

“C-Certainly!” I released the pale-in-the-face shop owner’s wrist with a smile. Although it had my handprint on it, I hadn’t broken it.

“All right, let’s get back to the kids, Edel.” I put my arm around her shoulder. Since she knew it was all an act, she didn’t resist. As we left, I turned back to the shopkeeper. “My holy woman will be visiting this shop in the future.”



“I-I look forward to your business.” After all I’d said, I didn’t think the shopkeeper would try anything.

I continued walking with Edel until we could no longer see the shop. “U-Um, Sir Albert.”

“Just Al is fine, my sweet Edel.”

“Enough joking...” Her cheeks flushing with embarrassment, she pulled my arm off of her. I’d be just like the old man if I tried to stop her, so I gracefully withdrew.

“Sorry, Edel. I couldn’t help myself.”

“No, I appreciate your help. And thank you for trying to make sure it didn’t cost me my job.”

“Think nothing of it. That was quite the irritating old man. Surely he knows about Cuphea and Linum?” Helping a woman in need was an admirable thing to do, but you couldn’t call yourself a man if you started threatening her the moment she rejected your advances.

“He knows, but, well...” Edel seemed to be having a hard time getting the words out.

“I get it. He was just assuming you wouldn’t tell Cuphea if it actually got to that point.” That, or he was betting no one would believe orphans even if they tried to reveal the truth. Either way, he was a scumbag.

“Most likely...” I wanted to reassure her that she didn’t have to work with that guy again, but if an alternative had been available, she likely would have already taken it. Seeing me go silent, Edel giggled.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s just that you’re as kind as the children say.” She must have been referring to how I wasn’t prying any further.

“But of course. I’m an ally of women everywhere.”

“So it seems. My mother, Cuphea and Linum, and even Linaria. Everyone is grateful to you. The boys are too, of course.” Some way or another, I’d ended

up getting close with everyone at the orphanage.

“I’d like to get closer to you as well, Edel.”

“Please, don’t tease a woman past her prime.”

“All I see is a wonderful woman. That said, being too persistent would make me the same as that other guy.”

“That’s not true.”

“Is it not?”

“Even if I turned you down, I’m sure you would still treat me and my family with kindness.”

“You don’t know that. I might demand you let me feel up your boobs in exchange for buying the kids sweets.”

Edel giggled. “That would certainly be a problem. The kids have started really looking forward to your sweets. If it came down to it, I suppose I would have no choice but to offer you my chest, past its prime though it may be.” Edel flirtatiously played along with my joke, and we both laughed.

“I do find you attractive, but rest assured, I would never force you to do anything you don’t want to.”

“The children trust you, so I do too.”

We continued rambling until Edel asked me a question. “U-Um, Sir Albert.”

“What is it?”

“Are those girls... Are Cuphea and Linum okay?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I heard that many people lost their lives during your training.” She viewed all the orphans as her own children, so it was no wonder she was worried about them. As a former holy woman herself, she had experienced the horrors of the Forbidden Cities firsthand.

“Those two are skilled. Even in an emergency, they can hold their own.”

“I-Is that right...? It’s just, I heard some of them lost their partners as well.”

“There were a few cases, yes.”

“When I think about those girls going through that, I...” Edel had a pained expression on her face.

“I understand how you feel.” I didn’t want to think about losing Cuphea or Linum either, but that was what happened on the battlefield. Those who fought could only put forth their best effort, and those who awaited their return could only pray.

“Sir Albert?”

“Yes?”

“I apologize if I’m mistaken, but have you lost someone precious to you?” If she was going out of her way to broach that question, there was probably a reason for it.

“Yes. My father was a holy knight.” I didn’t mention that he’d become a curion and I’d had to kill him myself.

“My condolences...”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s in the past now.” Just a short three hundred years ago.

“The loss of a loved one isn’t something healed by the passage of time.”

“Indeed.” She was exactly right. The human heart wasn’t so convenient as to heal the damage dealt by the loss of your wife bit by bit every year. The heart was a much more complex and troublesome thing. Some people could get right back on their feet, while others were unable to ever look forward.

“Would you like to hear my story? Though I’m afraid it isn’t a very pleasant one.”

“By all means.”

Edel’s story wasn’t complicated. She had been fairly skilled during her time as a holy woman, but eventually she’d gotten into a difficult situation in a Forbidden City. Her holy knight had given their life to act as a decoy and let their partner escape. Edel had returned alive, but the shock of losing her partner had left her unable to use magic. There was no use for a holy woman

who couldn't use magic, so she'd been forced to retire.

After that, she had started helping out at the orphanage her mother ran. Because she couldn't use magic, she couldn't use her powers as a holy woman to earn money. All she could do was fill manastones.

"Pathetic, isn't it? I lost my partner and my magic both."

"You're not pathetic."

"If I could at least use the goddess's magic, I'd be able to give the children slightly better lives."

"No, no, having a roof over their heads and an adult taking care of them is already more than enough." That alone counted for a lot.

"Thank you. That store was one of the few places willing to hire a former holy woman who couldn't use magic. They usually suspect I lost my faith in the goddess." Edel had a difficult time finding the words. There probably were holy women who couldn't use magic because they'd lost their faith, and being lumped in with them wasn't good. People wouldn't want a manastone filled by someone with no faith. Even if that wasn't the case for Edel, she had no way of proving it. It was natural for employers to be concerned.

"And that's why you had no choice but to continue going to that shop." Even though it was obvious he was only interested in her body, he was the only one who would give her a job. Still, thanks to the warning I'd given him, she'd be able to continue selling her mana there.

"I'm just afraid a tragic separation will befall Cuphea and Linum in their pursuit to become saints to help their family."

"A tragedy, huh?" *Hmm... What should I say?* She had a point, but still...

"Sir Albert?"

"Edel, may I ask you a question as a holy knight?" *All right. I'm just gonna speak my mind.*

"G-Go ahead."

"On the day you lost your partner, were you injured at all?"

Edel gave an apologetic look. “No... I alone returned unharmed.”

I knew it. She's looking at this the wrong way. “That’s a wonderful thing.” She must have thought I was mocking her, as her usual gentle expression turned angry. “Your holy knight protected their holy woman. Is that correct?”

“Ah...” Her eyes went wide, and then she froze up.

“If I allowed my partner to escape unharmed, I could go into the afterlife with my head held high.” They had allowed a beautiful woman to escape the battlefield without a single injury. There was no greater deed as a holy knight. “I’d be upset if my partner felt guilty about being the only one to survive. I’d rather she be grateful that I saved her.”

It was perfectly understandable why what happened would be considered a tragedy. Someone had died. That was a sad thing. As the one who had survived, I could understand her sorrow. Nobody would rejoice after losing their partner. However, they had accomplished something they could take pride in as a holy knight. In this era, holy knights existed to protect their holy women, and Edel’s partner had done just that.

“Is that so?” Edel finally squeezed out a few words.

“I think you have a better idea than I do what your holy knight would say.” I was just giving my perspective as a holy knight. From the holy woman’s perspective, she surely wanted her partner to live. However, there were some situations where the only options were dying together or one person surviving on their own. No partner would want the one who lived on to drown in their depression for the rest of their life.

Edel remained silent for a while before finally laughing quietly. She had probably imagined what her partner would say—something that she couldn’t help but laugh at.

“Did you say something?”

Edel gave me an impish smile. “It’s a secret.”

“You’re gonna make me jealous.”

Edel giggled. “Again with your jokes.” I wasn’t joking. Sorry to her former

partner, but I wanted to get closer to her. “You’re a strange man, Sir Albert.”

“Not a handsome one?”

Edel giggled again, brushing my comment off like an adult would. To her, I was still just a teenager. “I don’t think I would have gotten this emotional if anyone else had told me the same thing,” she said.

Normally you’d get angry when someone you didn’t know very well tried to tell you about your trauma, but there were exceptions. If the other person had been through the same thing, it was easier to open up to them. You might find their words strangely persuasive. I might have looked like an eighteen-year-old kid, but I’d lived over three centuries. She’d also just found out that I’d lost my father, and I’d experienced battle during the hands-on training. She had probably perceived what I’d said as the words of a young man who’d experienced loss, rather than the words of a kid who didn’t know anything about the world.

“I’m glad you don’t just see me as some brat lecturing you.”

“I’ve been punishing myself deep in my heart for so long. I never thought about what that person would have wanted. Maybe I could have imagined it, but I dismissed it as just being self-serving.” Immediately turning around after your partner’s death and deciding to enjoy the life they had saved was probably a little too positive. Everyone needed time to mourn, and everyone was different in how long it took for them to come to terms with a death. “You’re right. I should be grateful for the life I still have.”

This conversation wouldn’t suddenly make her overcome her past, but I hoped it would at least lighten her heart a little. A beautiful woman was a beautiful woman, melancholy or not, but a smile should be bright and cheerful.

“If it were me, I’d be happy to hear that.” A certain girl suddenly popped into my head—the holy woman Nemophila of Blizzard. What I’d just said to Edel also applied to her. When Edel had lost her partner, her grief had stripped her of her magic. When Nemophila had lost her partner, her desire for revenge had led her to free one of the Twelve Corpses. What they had done was different, but the cause was the same.

If she could confront the feelings of the partner who had sacrificed their life

to protect her, maybe there was still a chance for her to change. The question was whether my words would reach her or not. I'd only managed to reach Edel because the circumstances had aligned favorably.

"Sir Albert?" Edel looked at me curiously as I was lost in thought.

"Oh, sorry. About what you said earlier. It's natural for you to be worried about Cuphea and Linum as their mother figure, but you might consider telling them that yourself."

"Maybe you're right. They never asked about my past out of consideration, but maybe it's because we care about each other that I should tell them my experience. That way we can support each other. This conversation has changed my perspective on things." Of course, both of them coming home safely was still the optimal outcome.

"They have Lady Astrantia and me with them as well. We even have some new allies."

"Your squad, right? I hope you'll continue to take care of them, Sir Albert." Edel bowed deeply.

"Of course."

"And also..." Edel fidgeted nervously when I looked at her.

"What is it?"

"Um... Would you be willing to listen to me again sometime?" Her cheeks were flushed, and there was a hint of moisture in her eyes.

"If you'll have me, I'll be happy to." In the end, it seemed like I'd managed to close the distance between us a little. It wasn't what I'd planned, but days like this certainly weren't bad.



A precise thrust was headed right for me. While I could have tilted my head to avoid it, instinctually, I knew it wouldn't be enough. I immediately retreated, and the sword cut through the spot where my windpipe had been just a moment before.

I see, she predicted that I would dodge it, so she turned her attack from a

thrust into a sideways sweep. However, she had used so much force that her entire body went with it. I grabbed her left arm and lightly yanked it, then swept her legs out from under her as she was about to fall forward. Once she fell to the ground, I pressed my wooden sword against her neck.

“I-I surrender.” Cuphea regretfully capitulated. She held out her empty left hand, and I helped her up.

“That last attack sure was something.”

“You usually just barely dodge out of the way, so I thought I’d try to take advantage of that.” Anticipating your opponent’s dodge and using that to make sure the next attack hit was a simple yet effective strategy.

“That tactic would definitely work against some enemies, but it isn’t without its own issues.”

“Yeah, I was so focused on the follow-up attack that I wasn’t keeping in mind how my body would react.”

“Exactly,” I replied. “It gets bad for you if you fail to finish things with that blow.”

“I need to make sure all my moves flow together while still trying to outsmart my opponent...”

We were at the academy’s outdoor training grounds after class. We used to do most of our training at the orphanage, but with the recent additions to our squad, we’d started doing it on campus. The former bully, Agrimonia, was training with the princess as they were both holy women. Although I couldn’t see them right now, things seemed to be going well. They were still figuring out how to work as a team, but it was only a matter of time. The cool beauty with androgynous looks, Hypericum, was studying the mock battle between Cuphea and me.

“Can we go one more round?” Cuphea asked.

“Sure thing.” We put a little distance between us, then began another mock battle. I deftly parried Cuphea’s incessant onslaught. While she was the type to learn by feel, she was also good at putting her actions into words. She would use training to test out stuff she felt worked and then she’d improve by

discussing the results. Repeating that process allowed her to learn quickly.

“By the way, Albert.” Cuphea spoke to me as we crossed swords. Multitasking was another aspect of our training. Focusing on the battle sounded good in theory, but it meant you lost sight of what was going on around you. Concentrating too hard would get you cornered by curions, so staying aware of your surroundings while analyzing the battle was critical. Although there were probably some duos who preferred only the holy woman to stay vigilant, it was best for the holy knight to stay on their toes as well. The idea was simple. If you could maintain a conversation while fighting, then you could split your focus between fighting and remaining alert while engaged in real combat.

“What is it, Cuphea?” To test whether I could really handle both combat and conversation together, I went on the offensive. I knocked Cuphea’s sword away, then unleashed a downward swing before she could recover her stance. Using the momentum of her swing, Cuphea put distance between us and successfully evaded my attack.

“You met Mama Edel in town the other day, isn’t...that...right?!” she asked, approaching me a second time with three consecutive swings. Behind the clacking of our wooden swords, there was a tinge of unhappiness in Cuphea’s voice.

“Yeah.”

“What did you talk about?”

“She didn’t tell you?”

“She said you two met up and left it at that.”

“I see.”

“Well, she did tell me and Linum about her past.” Though Cuphea’s sword was moving as fast as ever, she had a sad expression on her face. It seemed like Edel had told them the story of how she’d lost her holy knight.

“And?”

“It’s sad that she lost her holy knight, but I’m glad she survived. I’m forever grateful to her holy knight.”

“Did you tell Edel that?”

“I did, but she seemed to have already moved on without us saying anything.”

“Is that right?”

“She also told us she’s been worrying about us again. Linum and I agreed to do everything we can to survive so we don’t make everyone sad.”

“Sounds like a good story to me.” All the characters were good people and beautiful women. It was quite pleasant on the ears. I could practically picture it in my head.

“But!” Cuphea’s assault grew more forceful.

“But?” I asked, calmly dealing with the raging fire assailing me.

“She’s been talking about you nonstop ever since!” It seemed Edel and I had really closed the distance between us.

“I’m honored.”

“You didn’t lay a hand on Mama, did you?!” Cuphea shot me a sharp glare. Somehow it felt sharper than the swings of her sword.

“You’ll have to ask Edel.”

“I did! And she laughed me off, so now I’m asking you!”

“I see, I see.”

“Well?!”

“No need to worry; nothing like that happened. She isn’t the type of woman to abandon her kids just to meet up with a man.”

“Th-That’s true, but...”

“Of course, a woman taking care of all those children needs some comfort and excitement in her life. Nothing would make me happier than being the one to provide it.”

“Albert.”

“Yeah?”

“She may be my foster mother, but Mama Edel is a real mother to me.”

“Yeah, I know.” I’d spent more than enough time at the orphanage to know how much all the children loved Edel.

“And you said you wanted to get intimate with me in two years.”

“I remember. I’m practically counting the days.”

“Yet you still hit on Mama?”

So that’s it. She’s torn because the guy who promised to go on a date with her is hitting on her foster mother. “Don’t worry. I’m confident I can cherish both you and Edel.”

“That’s not the problem!” With an angry shout, she brought her wooden sword down on mine with so much force that they both broke in half upon impact.

“Whoa, that was a good one.” It was a pretty powerful swing. Cuphea seemed to be the type whose strength increased with her emotions. It was also excellent that despite being emotional, she had remembered her previous defeat and managed to retreat without exposing any openings. However, without our weapons, that was the end of the mock battle.

“You’re getting stronger and stronger,” I told her. I’d never had a chance to appreciate it before, but it made me happy seeing young people with bright futures ahead of them. Well, at least when it came to women. Maybe it was proof of my age.

“Don’t try to brush it off by praising me.” Her shoulders heaving, Cuphea was clearly still angry.

“C’mon, don’t get so mad.”

“I knew you were a womanizer, but Mama too?!”

For a so-called womanizer I’d been entirely celibate since arriving in the city. I missed the maids from the princess’s mansion. That said, I had certainly been hitting on any attractive women I saw. “I really didn’t do anything, but if you’re that serious about it, I can stay away from Edel.”

“Huh?” Cuphea seemed to be taken aback by how easily I had given in.

“I wouldn’t wanna be responsible for the relationship between you two taking

a turn for the worse. Besides, I promised you first.” Although I wanted to get intimate with women, I didn’t want to do it at the cost of their happiness.

“It’s too late now. She’d get sad if you kept your distance from her.”

“Then what do you want me to do?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll never forgive you if you make Mama cry.”

“I know.” I took her feelings for her mother seriously.

“A-And if you make me cry, Mama won’t forgive you.”

“I know that too.” She almost sounded like she was pouting. Naturally I had no intention of making Cuphea cry.

Cuphea let out a big sigh. “Of all men, why did it have to be one with zero control around women...?”

“You sound like an old granny.”

Cuphea glared at me before her expression softened. “Mama’s been more cheerful lately, and I think that’s probably because of you.”

“I see.” That was probably what had been really on her mind initially. However, deep down, she was unsatisfied with the arrangement and had decided to hit me with that first.

“You’re always helping me and my family, huh?” I’d helped the old lady and the kids with the thug before, Cuphea and Linum with their bullying problem, and then Edel the other day. Now that she mentioned it, it did seem to keep happening.

“It’s just a coincidence.”

“Still, thanks,” she said with a sweet smile befitting a girl her age.

“You’re welcome.” Somehow we’d managed to close things on an amicable note. However...

“Are you two dating?”

“Eek!” Cuphea jumped in surprise. Apparently she’d forgotten Hypericum was observing our training session. Although Cuphea had grown a lot, it seemed she still had a ways to go.

“No, we’re not going out. I’m not interested in girls under eighteen,” I answered.

“I see,” Hypericum replied.

“That reminds me, you’re over twenty, right?”

“Yes, I’m twenty-one.”

“So, what do you think of guys like me?”

“The diligent study I can see in your swordplay consistently astounds me. I would absolutely like to have you train me as well.”

“Thanks. I’d be happy to, but I was asking what you think of me as a man—”

“Albert?” Having recovered from her shock, Cuphea stared at me with vacant eyes.

I smiled back at her. “Don’t worry, Cuphea. I cherish all women—”

“Have some restraint!”

Our eventful academy life continued on. We’d be going on a curion extermination mission in a few days. We were supposed to bring salvation to the remaining curions in Luzarigue, the city that had been home to Hector the Pestilent Guardian Dragon, and free the city.

Although it was relatively safer now that the guardian dragon was gone, we still couldn’t get careless. On top of that, completely clearing out the city would require multiple trips. Still, it’d be valuable experience for the students and our first chance to work as a squad.

Chapter 4

A Saint's Job

We safely arrived in Luzarigue. The defeat of the Pestilent Guardian Dragon had made it less dangerous, and as a result, a full-fledged effort to wipe out the rest of the curions and free the city had begun. Of course, there were so many that it wasn't going to happen overnight. That was why they had gone so far as to mobilize students as well.

With Hector gone, it was probably a good idea for me to remember the city's actual name—I couldn't just call it the Pestilent Guardian Dragon's city anymore.

"It's been a while...or not, I guess." Having already dismounted from the carriage, we gathered as a squad by the gate. I spotted a few actual saints nearby as well.

"Indeed. It still feels like it was only yesterday," said the princess. Her combination of cuteness and beauty was as exquisite as ever. Her blue eyes and silver hair tied up in two long pigtails seemed to sparkle, and her pale skin seemed nearly translucent. Pushed up by her holy woman uniform, her chest made it hard to believe she had only just turned fifteen. "Albert, my knight, I can feel your disrespectful gaze."

"I would never."

"Can you swear that to the goddess?"

"If being captivated by my master's charm is disrespectful, then by all means, punish me however you see fit."

"H-How am I supposed to respond to that...?" The princess blushed as I kept my composure and maneuvered out of the situation.

"Excuse me? Since we're a squad now, would it kill you two to not go off into your own little world?" A dazzlingly beautiful girl with a toned body and red

ponytail was frowning at us. Irritable yet compassionate, Cuphea also had an ample bust.

“I’m fond of your fitness and beauty as well, Cuphea.”

“Quit it,” she said. Although she turned away from me, I could see her flushed cheeks.

“Naturally that goes for you as well, Linum.”

The blue-haired Linum giggled softly. “Thank you, Albert.” She was a little shy, but once you got to know her, Linum was easy to talk to. She had a presence about her that calmed everyone around her and made them feel at ease. In terms of bust, she was every bit as impressive as Cuphea.

“Monia and Hypericum too.” The bully who had turned over a new leaf, Agrimonia, had long, golden hair and slanted eyes. She wasn’t nearly as stuck-up as she had once been. She even let me shorten her name to Monia. It was a concession the old her never would have made. I’d even seen her apologize to Cuphea and compensate her for her uniform the other day. That didn’t automatically make things better, but it was clear she was genuinely remorseful. Since Cuphea had moved on, there wasn’t anything for a bystander like me to say.

“I’m impressed you’re so relaxed,” said Monia. She seemed to be nervous—and it wasn’t just her. The blonde beauty with an androgynous appearance, Hypericum, was shaking ever so slightly.

“How can I calm myself down like you all?” Hypericum asked. Fear was pretty foreign to me to begin with, so it was difficult for me to answer. It was possible there would come a day when I feared something and finally understood it. Lately I’d been feeling tremendous pressure from the glares of the princess and Cuphea when I talked to women. Perhaps that indescribable feeling was fear.

“I’m afraid too,” said the princess. “However, my desire to free the souls of the curions is even stronger, and that’s what motivates me.”

“For us, it’s our family. Yeah, we’re scared of dying and it saddens us to see curions, but we wanna return home to our family safe and sound,” Cuphea followed up, exchanging a glance with Linum and nodding.

Then it seemed like it was my turn. “If you’re afraid of dying, just stay close to me. I’ll always protect girls.” The princess shot me a look that said, “that doesn’t solve anything,” so I continued. “But if that’s the case, it’d be safer for you to stay outside the city.”

Monia and Hypericum’s eyes went wide, then they closed. When their eyes opened again, all their doubt had vanished. Their fear was probably still lingering, but they’d realized who they were. The memory of the classmates we’d lost on the previous visit was still vivid. However, even though we could have run away, we’d all decided to stay at the academy. That meant we’d already chosen to continue fighting—there was no reason to hesitate now that we were in front of the gate.

All right, I’ve confirmed that our squadmates are all ready to go. It’s about time to enter the city... However, it seemed not everyone was present yet. The final carriage arrived, and a group of saints stepped out. Among them were some faces I recognized. The students surrounding the carriage started freaking out.

“Eek! It’s Gold! Lady Palustris, who broke the record for maintaining divine protection for the longest time, and the knight of steel who protects her, Sir Ozias! They’re so cool!” a nearby holy woman shouted. Gold was the pair the princess and I had fought during our entrance exam. They were members of the academy’s twelve most talented pairs—the Colors. The blonde-haired holy woman Palustris had fought alongside us during the hands-on training. Ozias had probably been there too, but that didn’t matter. Not responding to the shrieks and cheering, Palustris calmly stepped away from the carriage.

“Look! Violet’s here too! Lady Setigerum, whose attack strengthening is said to be the best in the academy, and Sir Craig! Rumors say he was able to cut right through a stone building using her divine protection! It’s an honor to fight alongside them!” Setigerum was a beautiful girl with distinctive long, wavy, purple hair. In terms of age, she was definitely a girl, but the allure she possessed was too captivating to belong to a teenager.

The standard holy woman uniform had a gap that exposed the chest, and because hers was larger than usual, it looked like her bountiful chest was on the verge of spilling out. She had a bewitching gaze and a mole by her lower lip.

Everything about her was right up my alley—except her age. There was a serious-looking man walking next to her, but I didn't care about that.

"Princess, why don't you try dressing like that?"

"Do you want me to curse you?" she asked with a beautiful smile.

"I'm already cursed..." I responded, dejected. Not giving up, I whispered into Cuphea's ear next. "I'd like to see you in an outfit like that."

"It's not appropriate for the children, so no," Cuphea replied.

"R-Right." While I enjoyed making her blush, I had no choice but to relent when she mentioned the orphanage. Something like that could certainly influence the children's sexuality.

Oh well. I'll just have to burn Setigerum's outfit into my eyes. The princess and Cuphea shot me cold glares as I stared at her.

"Lady Setigerum is seventeen, you know," said the princess.

"So you're not interested, right?" Cuphea asked.

"Being in or out of my strike zone has nothing to do with attractiveness." As I explained, the next pair stepped out of the carriage.

"Wow! Even Bronze is here! It's Lady Euryops, the princess of a foreign country who wields a sword even as a holy woman, and Lady Serrulata, who swings her two swords like a raging storm!" This time both members of the pair were women. Excellent.

Euryops had silver, shoulder-length hair, tanned skin, and red eyes. It was pretty unusual to see someone wielding a sword while wearing a holy woman uniform. Although her eyes looked sleepy, she didn't have any openings. Serrulata had two swords and similarly brown skin and red eyes. Her long, black hair was shaggy, and her teeth were razor-sharp. She had a wild look that was charming in its own way.

"I knew they would come! It's Black! Lady Orlaya, who was said to be a shoo-in for the Twelve Saints the moment she entered the academy, and Lady Myra, who's called the second coming of the hero!"

Orlaya was the princess's older sister. She had long, silver hair, icy blue eyes,

and a slim yet voluptuous figure. Aside from the wintry aura she gave off, she looked quite similar to the princess.

Myra was a holy knight with blonde hair, blue eyes, and straight bangs. She was my adoptive brother Robert's descendant. That made her something like a niece to me. When she noticed me, her face lit up and she waved. She was kinda like an overly affectionate dog in a way. It was cute. The sharp hostility I'd felt when we'd first met was nowhere to be seen.

"It doesn't seem like Pink is here, but there's nothing more reassuring than having Lady Orlaya's squad here! They're the strongest squad on campus!"

Thanks for the play-by-play, unknown holy woman. Apparently, everyone who had just arrived was part of the same squad. The missing pair, Pink, wasn't participating. Five of the academy's twelve top pairs being in the same squad was a ridiculous concentration of strength. Orlaya's charisma must have been on another level to bring them all together.

"Your sister's impressive," I said to the princess. Despite the handicap of being the witch's descendant, she had made the other top students at the academy recognize her strength.

"Y-Yes, she is." The princess seemed equal parts proud and frustrated.

I whispered quietly so only she could hear. "What are you getting frustrated for? Sure, she's got a strong squad, but you've had the Skeleton Sword Saint with you from the beginning."

The princess pulled her gaze away from her sister and turned toward me, smiling like a blooming flower. "You're right. I'll have to become a holy woman deserving of you."

"That's the spirit." Acquiring experience so she could accomplish that goal was important, and this mission was perfect for that. As I was thinking to myself, Bronze's holy knight approached me. She was a woman with beautiful brown skin, sharp teeth, disheveled hair, and red eyes, all of which gave her a wild, rowdy impression. She carried two swords, one on either side of her hips.

"Are you Albert?" Although it looked like she was glaring at me, that was probably just how she looked.

“Yes. You must be Lady Serrulata,” I responded in gentlemanly fashion. The moment our eyes met, a single image flashed through both of our minds—the image of what would happen if we drew our swords right then. Skilled individuals could gauge their opponent’s strength to a certain degree just by confronting each other. We were estimating each other’s strength based on our observations and pitting ourselves against each other in our heads.

Realization flashed across her face and she took half a step back. Her reaction told me that we had come to the same conclusion in our heads—at her initial range, I would have beheaded her before she could even draw her swords. However, now that she had stepped back...

“Indeed. At that range, you’re just barely out of my reach.” She would have just enough time to draw her swords.

Sweat running down her face, Serrulata gave an aggressive laugh. “Sorry for testin’ you.”

“It’s quite all right.”

“You can talk normally. Formality’s not my thing.”

“Thanks. It’s not mine either.” I wasn’t certain where I stood relative to the knight of a foreign princess, so I had treated her respectfully, but she didn’t seem to be the type who cared for that stuff.

“Gotta say, I don’t get it. How have I never heard your name before?”

“I lived a quiet life before Lady Astrantia took me in.” It wasn’t a lie. I’d spent a long time alone in a city even the dead no longer inhabited.

“Yeah? Well, ya won’t catch me complaining about havin’ more strong people around. I’ve been curious about you ever since I heard you beat Ozias. Myra’s been singing your praises too, so I wanted to meet you.”

“And now that you have met me, what do you think?”

Serrulata grinned. “I get it now. Any other day and I’d be challenging you to a match.” Sparring with her would be a good time. Add our holy women into the mix and things would get even more interesting.

“Let’s do it sometime. There aren’t too many people who use two swords, so

it might be fun.”

“It’s a promise.”

“Rest assured, I always keep my promises with women.” I didn’t think much of what I’d just said, but Serrulata seemed to be taken aback.

“Woman? Y’know I ain’t too feminine.”

“I apologize if you don’t like being seen as a woman, but in my personal opinion, you’re quite beautiful.”

“O-Oh, really?” Although it was hard to tell, her cheeks turned a little red.

“Absolutely.”

“A-All right then.” Serrulata bashfully scratched her cheek, trying to brush it off. How cute.

“Serrulata, let’s go.” A voice called out to her from the squad a short distance away. It was her partner, Euryops. Myra was next to her with a look of discontent on her face, probably because she’d had to restrain herself while Serrulata had just walked right up and started talking to me.

“Sorry, my princess is calling, so I gotta go,” said Serrulata.

“Later.”

“Yeah...” Serrulata returned to her squad.

With the arrival of the final squad, the mission could finally get underway. But before that, as was custom, I was subjected to the glares of the princess and Cuphea.

“You gave her a genuine compliment, huh? All you did was talk about my skull when it was my turn,” the princess pouted.

“I won’t deny that she’s beautiful, but is there any woman you wouldn’t compliment?” asked Cuphea. I listened to the detailed explanation of the mission as I attempted to pacify them.

The saints and Orlaya’s squad would head to the center of the city to exterminate the strongest curions, while most of the students would exterminate curions near the gate so they could easily evacuate. The plan was

quite simple. It was common knowledge that stronger curions tended to gather near the centers of the Forbidden Cities.

Even after three centuries, the degree to which curions recovered their sense of self varied. Some wandered around the edge of the barrier trying to get out, while others recognized that they couldn't escape. They would return to living whatever constituted life for them, or they would train themselves so that they could bless any intruders who ventured inside.

Exterminating all the curions in a city was an arduous, time-consuming task, and during it, I had seen all sorts of undead. From couples holding hands as they walked down the street to children playing tag—they were all enjoying the eternity the witch had given them. When it came down to it, the witch's curse was eternal life. When they bit the living, all they were doing was sharing that blessing. They all had their own lives. At least, that was how they saw it. And I had taken that from them.

"Albert?" The princess gave me a worried look.

"What?"

"It's just... You had a sad look on your face."

"Must be your imagination. Anyway, we weren't sent to the center of the city despite being part of the Colors, huh?"

"They were probably taking the rest of our squad into consideration, as well as the fact that we were only just given our title."

"Guess that makes sense." After the explanation, the squads were going through the gate one by one. The atmosphere was pretty tense. This place certainly wasn't some kind of playground, but everyone seemed a little too on edge. The tragedy that had occurred during the previous mission was probably weighing on everyone's mind. "How about we throw a party as a squad once this mission's over?" I proposed in my usual tone.

"A party?" The princess tilted her head.

"Yeah. It's our first mission as a squad, so let's celebrate."

"I think that's a wonderful idea," Linum agreed.

“Returning alive is definitely something worth celebrating.” Cuphea gave her approval as well.

“I-Is it all right for me to come as well?” Monia seemed a little hesitant.

“Of course. You’re a member of the squad. Hypericum too,” I assured her.

“Thank you,” said Hypericum. It seemed like she’d also be joining us.

I glanced over at the princess, who was acting a little fidgety. Because of her connection to the witch, she had been all alone in her hometown. She was probably happy to have an opportunity to celebrate with friends.

I had deliberately spoken loud enough so the others could hear us, resulting in similar discussions erupting among the nearby squads. While focusing on the mission was important, going into it with such a gloomy outlook wouldn’t produce good results. The princess smiled softly when she saw what was going on.

“Now I get it. It seems my knight has a kind heart after all.”

“Of course. My heart is made of nothing but kindness for women.”

“It’s not just women I see with cheerful looks on their faces right now.”

“They’re just extras.”

Finally, it was our turn to go through the gate. “May we accompany you?” I heard a familiar voice. It was Nemophila. Her arrival hadn’t been planned, so she must have come in a hurry. The other students were confused as well.

“What are you doing here?” the princess couldn’t help but ask.

“The liberation of the Forbidden Cities and salvation of the undead is the desire of all humanity. I thought I’d help out.” The Grave Keeper of the Golden City was standing next to her. Although the onlookers were surprised by the sudden appearance of members of the Twelve Saints, none of them knew the danger the pair posed.

Entering my formal knight mode, I spoke to the princess. “Lady Astrantia, they came all this way, so why not allow them to accompany us?” If they were entering Luzarigue either way, we might as well keep an eye on them.

“I suppose,” said the princess. With our other squadmates’ approval, Blizzard joined us.



Passing through the gates, we entered a dead city. No longer maintained, the buildings had decayed and the roads that had once been paved were missing stones. The groans of the dead echoed through the streets. Since the dead are drawn to the living, they soon found us. And as those dead gathered, we saints sent their heads flying.

We had been assigned to an area on the main road that was a ways away from the gate. That we were neither by the gate nor in the center of the city was presumably based on the academy’s rating of our skills. If we proved ourselves, we would likely be assigned to the center before long.

“Ah, I knew it.”

“Some who have yet to receive the blessing.”

“How pitiful.”

Curions poured into the main road. Although we had killed a good number of them the other day, it hadn’t even made a dent in the total.

“All right, let’s get to it,” I said. Linum and Agrimonia deployed their divine protections on their partners.

“Go on, kill them. That’s your job.”

“Understood, Princess.” Despite the lack of concern in her order, Nemophila still gave the grave keeper her divine protection to maintain appearances.

As I confirmed that everyone was ready, I called out to the princess. “Princess, can I get your protection?”

“C-Certainly!” I had thrown out my rule about fighting by myself. She was my partner, so why not rely on her? The princess offered up a prayer, and a pale light engulfed me.

Drawing my bone sword, I kicked off the ground beneath me. Beheading three of them as I dashed forward, I plunged into the swarm of curions. I ignored the body parts that littered the ground, targeting the curions that were

standing and mobile.

I cut off the head of a curion whose right arm I had shattered with my previous attack, smashed through the skull and down to the sternum of a curion that had approached me after losing its wrists; then, as I pulled my sword back, I destroyed another's shoulder blade and ribs to reach its neck. It might seem like you were limited in how you could attack curions, as you needed to remove their heads to truly kill them, but as long as you beheaded them in the end, you were free to fight however you wanted. I just had to cut through anything blocking their necks.

It didn't just apply to me either. With the divine protections of their holy women, modern holy knights were more than capable of doing the same thing with their enhanced strength.

When most of the walking corpses I could see were dealt with, I noticed something snapping at my feet—it was the upper body of a curion. This was the kind of thing that happened when I didn't pay attention to where all the pieces went flying. I used to be a lot more careful, but now that I had a holy woman's divine protection, surprise attacks were simply warded off by a pale light and couldn't reach me. I could fight knowing I was safe.

"Sorry, but there's no point in trying to curse me." I was already cursed. Before the curion could say anything in return, I crushed its skull with my foot. A clean kill couldn't save anybody. Not me, and not them.

Looking around, I saw my squadmates finishing off the rest of the surviving curions on the ground. The grave keeper, while using his sword, killed them with complete indifference. Of course, he wasn't using his powers. His face was emotionless—he didn't show any feelings for the undead he killed.

It was easy to confirm that three-century-old curions were dead, as their bones would turn to dust. If the skeleton still remained, it wasn't truly dead yet. After the first wave of curions was defeated and scattered to the wind, the second wave arrived without giving us any time to breathe.

"Hmm?" At the other end of the road, I saw a particularly tall curion approaching us at great speed. *No, wait. It's not that it's tall...* "It's riding a horse?" Naturally, both the horse and its rider were nothing but bones.

“Slaying those who only wish to bless you is the work of the devil! It won’t be tolerated!”

“Seriously? Is that a holy knight from three hundred years ago?” Even now, he was passionate about protecting the people from harm. Maybe he had come from the center of the city—if that was the case, he was probably pretty strong. It was possible the Embodiment of the Spirit had given him a special ability.

“Albert!”

“It’s all right, Princess. I’ll take care of that one. The rest of you deal with the others.” The rest of my squad got to work immediately. They were quite dependable.

“Princess, what should we do?” the grave keeper asked Nemophila.

“Follow Sir Albert’s orders.”

“As you wish.” It seemed like Blizzard had entrusted the knight to me.

“It won’t be tolerated, huh? Then what are you gonna do? Kill us?” I asked the knight.

“No! I shall punish you, then grant you the blessing myself! You shall atone for your sins by blessing even more than you have killed!” Although the holy knight’s sense of justice remained, his top priority was now spreading the blessing. He hadn’t been able to escape the witch’s spell.

“Fraid not. I’m gonna be adding to my sins by killing you too.”

The skeletal cavalryman charged at me. No sane individual would attempt to challenge a mounted knight with only a sword. Whether you were trampled or sent flying, you wouldn’t make it out unscathed. A large horse moving at high speeds became a weapon unto itself. As its hooves clacked over the shoddy road, I thought to myself.

Hooves are technically nails, right? It shouldn’t have them anymore... Its horseshoes should have been destroyed or come off by now too. Does that mean it can run as fast as when it was alive just on the bones of its feet? It seems just as fast as any living horse to me. Oh well, I guess it’s not a big deal. Being able to continue moving as just bones is already illogical.

There was something else I was curious about. “Quick question. Is that horse a stallion?”

“So what if it is?!”

“It doesn’t really matter. I’d just feel a little bad if it was a mare.” A horse was a knight’s partner. Back in the day, I’d had my beloved horse, Viola. Killing mares never sat right with me since it would remind me of her. Standing directly in the way of his horse, I held my sword over my head.

“Are you insane?!” the knight cried out in astonishment.

“Try me.”

“I’ll take that as a yes!” The knight gave in to my provocation and charged at me. Cutting me down as he rushed by wasn’t his aim—he was planning to trample me with his horse. Even as a skeleton, a horse running at full speed packed a punch, but I didn’t look away.

I waited for it to get so close I could see the individual grains of dust it was kicking up. Carefully measuring the shrinking distance between us, I sprung into action the instant it got close enough. *Now!*

I swung my bone sword down onto the horse’s nose, smashing through its cranium and severing its lower jaw. However, it took a lot more than that to halt a charging horse’s momentum. Its vertebrae from its forelegs to its ribs all shattered to pieces upon impact with my sword. The bones from its hind legs to its tail veered off course without me even touching them, tumbling to the ground and sending the knight flying.

“Gaaaaah!” The horse’s bones turned to dust and disappeared before the knight hit the ground. Approaching the knight as he stood back up, I called out to him.

“Looks like I was sane after all.”

“Argh! Why do you not use that strength for justice?!” The knight swung at me. His sword seemed surprisingly unused. While it wasn’t brand-new by any means, it certainly didn’t seem three centuries old. He had probably plundered it from a holy knight. I couldn’t imagine any of the Colors being defeated, so it likely belonged to someone he had killed in the past.

“Justice, huh?” I parried his sword three times and got a decent grasp of his strength. The fourth time, I put some force into it and his sword broke in half.

“Wha—?!”

“Later.” As I moved to behead the knight, my sword was repelled just before reaching him. It was as though an invisible wall was in the way.

“You’re wide open!”

“I wouldn’t say that.” The skeletal knight lunged at me with his broken sword, and I avoided it by leaping to the side. As he passed by me, I swung my sword at his back, only to be repelled again. However, unlike last time, my sword very nearly touched his bones. There really was an invisible barrier. It was similar to a holy woman’s divine protection, but without the light.

“Whoa! Y-You would attack someone from behind, you coward?!”

“You sure are active for a dead guy.” *Doesn’t all that screaming hurt his throat? I guess not. He doesn’t have one.*

“Nonetheless, you reacted well for never having seen my power before! You have my praise!” Turning around to face me, the skeletal knight adjusted his posture and held his broken sword like a dagger.

“I know there are some of you with weird powers out there, so it wasn’t a surprise.”

“My power is a holy shield that repels evil! I call it Absolute Holy Prote—”

“Save it, I’m not gonna remember.” What was he doing telling his enemy about his power anyway? I could understand if he were bluffing or trying to buy time, but that didn’t seem to be the case. As he said, his Embodiment of the Spirit was an invisible shield.

“How dare you interrupt me, insolent cur!” I was getting tired of listening to him talk. He had definitely been the type to get ridiculed by other holy knights for shouting about guts and pride back when he was alive.

This time, I was the one on the offensive. Although he was able to fend me off temporarily with his broken sword, he wouldn’t be able to keep it up for long. I soon shattered it all the way down to the guard, leaving only the handle and

pommel. It couldn't be used as a weapon anymore.

"You're a knight. Try dying with some grace." Spouting something I didn't really mean, I unleashed a diagonal slash upward from his lower right to his upper left. This too was deflected—not by his sword, but by the invisible wall. He tried to take advantage of the opening, but it was futile. I had expected my attack to be repelled from the start, so I used the momentum to rotate my body and unleash another slash, this time from the upper left to the lower right.

"Wha—?!" The knight didn't seem to have anticipated that, as the attack wasn't reflected this time, and I sliced diagonally through his neck and upper body. His body hit the ground and stayed there. "You realized in such a short amount of time that my Absolute Holy—"

His body disappeared before he could finish his sentence. He could only use his defensive barrier to protect himself. If he could have used it on his horse or sword, I was certain he would have. He could deploy it instantly, but it required him to actively do so. Once deployed, it wasn't constantly active, nor did it activate automatically. That was why he had been so panicked when I'd tried to slash him from behind.

Knowing all that, the rest was simple. I'd just needed to kill him before he had time to consciously use his ability. I'd attacked him head-on, deliberating baiting him into activating the barrier. Not expecting his defensive ability to be used against him, the skeleton knight had been in a state of shock before he died. He'd realized in his final moments that I had understood the true nature of his ability. He was no weakling. The fact that he'd had an ability to begin with was proof of that.

I looked back at my squadmates and saw that they had wiped out the second wave as well. *I didn't get that skeletal knight's power*, I thought to myself as I regrouped with them. I had absorbed Hector's Pestilent Fire, so why hadn't I gotten the holy knight's "Absolute whatever"? *Is it because he wasn't one of the Twelve Corpses?*

As I recalled, the Heavenly Swords given to the Twelve Saints could only steal a single special ability. Meanwhile, I, one of the Twelve Corpses, had two abilities at once—my own and Hector's. Heavenly Swords were also burdened

by restrictions like the power potentially disappearing after ten years. Despite apparent similarities, the two forms of powers might have been quite different after all. That would mean it was only possible for me to get new abilities from the Twelve Corpses—a pretty good thing, as far as humanity was concerned.

Although ordinary curions didn't kill each other, the Twelve Corpses were a different story. There was me, obviously, but even the Grave Keeper of the Golden City was killing his fellow curions. If there weren't limits on our ability inheriting, the Twelve Corpses could go around killing other curions for their powers and very quickly get out of hand. Knowing that wasn't on the table was good news. That said, it was always possible for there to be a loophole when the Eternal Witch was involved.

What the Twelve Corpses actually were wasn't clearly defined to begin with. Ostensibly, they were just the most threatening curion in each city, but given the conditions around ability inheritance, it seemed like there was more to it than that. If nothing else, it was clear that they could grow stronger by killing each other.

Given the existence of the barriers, it was impossible for the Twelve Corpses to escape and enter other Forbidden Cities, but there were already two exceptions to that rule—both of whom were right here.

"Albert? Were you injured?" I met the princess's eyes as she looked at me with worry. They were as beautiful as ever, as if the blue of the sky were locked away inside them.

"Nothing to worry about."

"Really?"

I chuckled in response. "I know this isn't the place for me to be stubborn. Though I would've gotten hurt if it weren't for your protection." Fortunately, it seemed like any kind of impact was treated as potential damage and blocked by the divine protection.

"Good." Her genuinely relieved smile was irresistibly adorable.

"Still, I can't believe you cut down a charging horse without Physical Enhancement. You sure you didn't come straight out of a book or something?"

Cuphea asked with a conflicted grin.

“Thanks. It’s nice knowing you see me as some hero out of an epic.”

“I didn’t say all that.”

“But if that’s the case, I wonder who’s the maiden I’ll be wed to.” I meant it as a joke, but neither the princess nor Cuphea looked amused. It seemed wise to stay away from that topic. “Jokes aside, you all did great. I was able to focus on my duel thanks to you.” Fights with curions tended to devolve into chaotic free-for-alls, so I was fortunate to have allies capable enough to let me focus on the foe in front of me.

“It’s all because you went to face that knight yourself,” Linum said with a gentle smile. She truly was the squad’s soothing force.

“Indeed. Were it not for that, the knight’s charge would have disrupted our formation,” Monia said in a serious tone.

“Lady Agrimonia is correct,” Hypericum followed up. It seemed they were praising me. Even though most of them had yet to reach womanhood, their words still felt nice.

I shot an expectant look at the princess. Seemingly guessing what I was thinking, she made an exasperated face and cleared her throat. “You did well, my knight.”

“I should be thanking you for your divine protection, Lady Astrantia.” We shared a look and then laughed.

“You could learn a thing or two from Sir Albert’s valiance.” Nemophila looked between me and the grave keeper with a faint smile.

“I will do my best,” the grave keeper responded.

Why had she come with us today? No, I knew why—it was a silent reminder. By allowing me to witness what the grave keeper was capable of, it was easier to imagine what might happen if he went berserk. She was trying to emphasize the danger we faced so we’d go along with her strategy to defeat the One-Armed Giant.

Then the third wave of curions arrived. A single glance at the rest of my squad

assured me that they had plenty of stamina left. “Looks like our work isn’t finished.”

“Once we’re done, let’s retreat back to the gate.” Everyone nodded in agreement with the princess. Mana and stamina weren’t endless—they would gradually get used up as the series of battles dragged on. When acting as a squad, it was crucial to think about your allies. The princess was handling the situation well.

Readying my bone sword, I engaged the oncoming curions.

Chapter 5

The Party

The curion search-and-destroy operation in Luzarigue proceeded smoothly. Even though there were way too many of them to finish things in a day, we still had managed to take out around five hundred to a thousand in total.

This time, there were zero casualties on our side. That none of the curion hunters had become curions themselves like last time was cause for celebration. Our current objective was to reduce the number of enemies. Losing an ally meant they would become another enemy, which was incredibly disheartening.

Finished for the day, we all celebrated everyone's safety outside the gate. As the mission would take several days, we were staying in the closest city rather than returning to the academy.

"I'm glad everyone's okay." The blue-haired Linum, the squad's source of comfort, mumbled with relief as she looked around.

"Yeah. Things went much smoother compared to last time. I feel like I can move even faster now."

"No, Cuphea. No matter what you say, I won't remove your protection."

"I-I know," the red-haired Cuphea pouted. By forgoing her Physical Protection in favor of Physical Enhancement, she had obtained incredible speed during her rematch against Agrimonia. Perhaps reminiscing about how that felt left her unsatisfied with her performance in the Forbidden City. However, Linum wasn't going to risk removing her protection in a situation where one bite would spell the end. Cuphea understood that, so she just silently pouted.

"I understand the feeling. As a fellow holy knight, watching Sir Albert fills me with both admiration and frustration." The androgynous holy knight Hypericum expressed her sympathy for Cuphea.

“Exactly!” Cuphea enthusiastically nodded her head. They were both quite skilled for their age. It was just that despite looking eighteen, I had three hundred years on them, and I trained diligently enough that it wouldn’t be easy for them to catch up.

“It might feel frustrating, but you two are still growing. That said, I’m gonna keep getting stronger, so you’ll never catch up to me.”

“There you go again... Just you wait. I’ll get even faster,” said Cuphea.

“I’ll endeavor to get closer to you one step at a time,” Hypericum added. The belligerent Cuphea and quiet Hypericum both burned with competitive spirit, and their holy women watched over them. Their desire to improve was admirable.

Blizzard had already distanced themselves from us and were greeting the instructors and Orlaya’s squad.

“Albert, I’m going to report the number of curions we saved,” said the princess.

“All right, I’ll go with you.” Leaving our squad behind temporarily, the princess and I went to go make our report.

Because curions from three centuries ago turned to dust, they didn’t leave behind any proof of their defeat. So how did they calculate the number of defeated curions? Surprisingly enough, it was done verbally. If someone said they had defeated ten, then that number was added to the count. It might seem like that would lead to people inflating their results, but that wasn’t actually the case.

To start with, excessively inflating your numbers could lead to your downfall. Stronger individuals were more likely to be sent to dangerous locations, so making yourself look better than you actually were would only hasten your death. While that was a good deterrent, it didn’t completely remove the possibility of falsified reports. However, the second reason all but prevented any lies.

The reports were delivered while in the presence of a statue of the goddess—the very same goddess that granted holy women their magic. What holy woman

would be able to lie in front of the goddess who granted them her power? It might not seem obvious to those who weren't religious, but for those who believed in a god, lying in front of that god was a grave sin. Even some of the most evil people out there were honest only in front of their god. In the case of this goddess in particular, she granted holy women her magic, so her existence was undeniable. That was why holy women had to give the reports.

"The pair of Linum and Cuphea defeated twenty-four, Agrimonia and Hypericum defeated twenty-one, and Astrantia and Albert of White defeated sixty-four, one of which possessed the Embodiment of the Spirit. Is that correct?" A member of the exorcism agency saints belonged to was present to receive the reports. Although students usually reported to their instructors, due to the large-scale nature of this mission, things were being handled a bit differently.

The staff member pulled out a document from a plain desk and recorded the extermination numbers. She was a serious-looking woman wearing a different uniform from the holy knights and holy women. While I would have loved to get intimate with her, now wasn't the time to hit on her. There were better ways to get to know someone. My eyes were subconsciously drawn to her chest, which was nearly large enough to rest on the desk, but I held myself back. There was a small, wooden statue of the goddess next to her.

"Yes, that's correct," the princess answered.

"Do you swear to the goddess?" The staff member looked at the statue.

The princess clasped her hands together in front of her chest and nodded. "I swear to the goddess that my words are true."

"Excellent." That concluded the report. It might have seemed casual, but swearing to the goddess was a big deal. To the faithful, it was more than sufficient.

"S-Sixty-four?"

"Their other members also got over twenty."

"In total their entire squad got over one hundred."

"Our squad didn't even get twenty total."

“They even beat one with the Embodiment of the Spirit?”

“Th-That must’ve been some crazy battle...”

Our surroundings were abuzz with chatter. Our results were apparently a little above average. Blizzard had killed forty themselves, but I knew they hadn’t been going all out. I was curious how Orlaya’s squad had done—they’d probably taken down even more than we had.

“I’ve already said as much, but you did an excellent job, Albert. It’s no wonder everyone is shocked. First-years don’t usually report numbers like that.” The princess seemed to have heard them too.

“Well, we’re not typical first-years.”

“True. It may seem like a small number compared to what you have already done, but freeing sixty-four souls is something we can be proud of.”

As the Skeleton Sword Saint, I had killed all the undead in my city. Sixty-four was nothing compared to that. Still... “You’re right.” For three centuries they had been unable to die, filled with the false happiness the witch had forced upon them. I had allowed them to move on to their next lives. No matter how small the number, that was a saint’s duty.

“I’m quite proud of you.”

It felt kinda somber, so I asked the princess a question on the way back to change the mood. “Hey, Princess.”

“What is it?”

“If a holy woman lied before the goddess, would she lose her magic?”

She paused to think for a moment. “That’s what I was taught, but I don’t think it’s entirely accurate.”

“You don’t?”

“You lose the ability to use the goddess’s magic when you lose faith in her. So even if you lied to her—”

“As long as your faith doesn’t waver, you won’t lose your magic?”

“I suspect so.”

It could be kinda hard to wrap your mind around, but for example, if a loved one were kidnapped and you were forced to lie to the goddess, that could be a scenario where you had to lie while still maintaining genuine faith. In that case, the goddess probably wouldn't take her magic away from her follower. Although you'd lie with your words, deep down, you would remain faithful.

"Of course, lying to obtain rewards and prestige is unacceptable behavior as a believer, and the goddess would surely be disappointed." In short, believers couldn't inflate their achievements in front of the goddess.

"Believing in a god sounds rough."

"No, knowing the goddess is watching keeps me motivated," she responded without hesitation. It seemed she really believed that.

I guess you can't go against her teachings if you think the goddess is always watching.

"Do you not believe in the goddess?" she asked, a hint of sadness in her voice.

"If you believe in her, then I'm sure she exists."

"What kind of answer is that?"

"I'm saying I believe in you, not some goddess I've never seen." The princess stopped in her tracks. I turned around out of concern and saw her flushed cheeks. "You all right, Princess?"

"Y-Yes. I-I'm fine." Although she nodded repeatedly and started walking again, her gait was awkward and forced.

"You don't have to get so embarrassed. We swore to the goddess to be together for the rest of our lives, didn't we?" That promise had been made the same day we'd defeated the Pestilent Guardian Dragon. Compared to that, this conversation was just small talk.

Remembering our promise, the princess trembled and nearly tumbled over backwards. I quickly wrapped my arm around her back to prevent her from falling. Her body was soft and slender, and it felt like it could fade away at any moment. It was also surprisingly warm.

"Sorry, guess I kinda overdid it with the teasing." It seemed like it had been

too stimulating for the pure princess.

“You were teasing me?” There was a hint of moisture in her reproachful gaze.

“Yeah. But none of it was a lie.”

“Is that right?”

I helped her to her feet, then backed away. Had I made her mad?

“Me too.”

“Huh?”

“I believe in you too.” Leaving it at that, she started walking again. Even though I was behind her, I could see how red her ears were.

Not good. Although she was outside my strike zone, lately I’d been finding my master extremely cute. I caught up to her and walked by her side. “Sorry, Princess. I didn’t quite catch that. Could you say it one more time?”

“That’s not true. This is just more of your teasing, isn’t it?”

“Let me rephrase that. I heard you loud and clear, but I still want you to say it again.”

“No. And stop grinning before I curse you.”

I laughed as she puffed out her cheeks. “I’m already cursed.”



“Cheers to a successful mission and to everyone making it back alive.” Everyone held up their wooden mug. The first day of curion extermination in the Forbidden City Luzarigue had safely come to a close.

After taking a carriage to the nearest city, our squad was throwing a party just like we’d agreed. Everyone around me at the table was a beautiful woman or girl. Starting clockwise from me, it was Cuphea, Linum, Monia, Hypericum, and finally, the princess. That meant Cuphea and the princess were sitting next to me at the round table.

Although we were the center of attention since we still had our saint uniforms on, no one dared to approach us. Holy women typically being children of nobility was common knowledge even among commoners. No one was foolish

enough to hit on someone when one wrong move meant death.

“I-It’s my first time in a place like this.” Holding her mug with both hands, the princess drank just enough to wet her lips.

“We haven’t either. Eating out feels like a waste, so we barely do it,” Cuphea said, spearing some meat with her fork and bringing it to her mouth. Since most of Cuphea and Linum’s reward money went to the orphanage they lived in, they hadn’t been able to have experiences like this.

“It’s my first time drinking too. I’m a little nervous.” Linum was swaying happily from side to side with foam around her mouth. Although being fifteen meant you were an adult and could drink, alcohol tolerance was a different matter and depended on the person. Had she really gotten tipsy off one sip?

“So commoners really eat at places like this, huh? I’ve heard about it, but I’ve never experienced it for myself.” Monia looked around curiously.

“While some places are quieter than this, others are louder.” Hypericum apparently had experience in pubs like this.

As a commoner, I felt right at home. Even three centuries later, the crowded, noisy atmosphere of pubs hadn’t changed. It was comfortable precisely because it didn’t pretend to be anything it wasn’t. I had wondered if commoner food would suit the noble ladies’ palates, but the princess and Monia ate without complaint.

That said, holy women would have to camp on the way to the Forbidden Cities and fill their stomachs with preserved food and portable rations. To ensure they could stomach it when the time came, they even ate them in class. Noble ladies who wanted to become holy women were surprisingly resilient. For a while, the night continued peacefully.

“Albert! I’ve got somethin’ to say to you!” Cuphea stood up and turned to me, her face as red as her hair. Because she was bending forward, her boobs landed on my head. Soft yet weighty, they bounced above me.

“What is it, Cuphea?” I responded calmly, focusing on the top of my head.

“You went on a date with Astrantia even though you told me to wait two years!” She must have been talking about when I went to the festival with the

princess. I'd thought she'd forgiven me after I got her a gift, but apparently it was still bothering her.

"I told you, that wasn't a date."

"Then what was it, my knight?" To my right, the princess puffed out her equally red cheeks, then pressed her forehead against my shoulder. Was she trying to protest my denial?

Oh... Once again, being fifteen in this country meant you were an adult, so drinking wasn't an issue for everyone here. However, the only ones who had experience with alcohol were me and Hypericum. You couldn't tell how you would handle it until you tried it, so rather than risk having their first experience in an important situation, we had decided it would be better to try it at a party surrounded by friends.

Neither the princess nor Cuphea seemed to have much tolerance for alcohol. Linum giggled as she rocked back and forth. It looked like she was a happy drunk. Her childhood friend, on the other hand, was an angry one.

"Shee! Ashtrantia thinksh it wash a date!" Just as I thought she was going to sit back down, she grabbed my arm and vented her frustration. She was already slurring her words—was she really this bad of a drinker? No, she didn't seem to be sick. Rather than a bad drinker, she was just a bad drunk.

Normally I would have rejoiced as her boobs forcefully engulfed my arm, but as she'd said herself, I couldn't make a move for another two years. However, that only applied to us as a man and woman.

"Then do you want to go somewhere together too?" I didn't mind hanging out with her just as close friends.

Unfortunately, Cuphea was repulsed by my offer. "Now it seems like I'm forcing you!" She absolutely was, but I kept my mouth shut.

"No, I really want to."

"You do...?" Her timid behavior was like that of a fickle cat that rarely became affectionate. It had destructive force behind it.

"Of course."

“Then let’s do it.” She nodded.

Thinking it was settled, I went to take a drink, only to find that my right arm wouldn’t budge. Cuphea was grabbing my left arm, so that was the one I had expected to be immobile. Turning to the side, I found Astrantia clinging to my right arm. “Princess?”

“Albert, my knight.”

“Yes?”

“I’m proud to have you as my holy knight, and I know that doesn’t give me the right to intrude on your private life, but...”

“Yes?”

“But I’m not happy!” the princess whined, puffing out her cheeks.

“You’re not making this easy...” I barely managed to eke out. The words wouldn’t come out when I looked at the tears in her eyes.



“I don’t like imagining you surrounded by women when the day we promised comes.” After we’d settled everything, when the princess died, my life would also come to an end. That was what we’d promised. She had wanted to be alone with me in that moment, but it seemed like she was worried it would be a crowded scene, given my personality.

Imagining it almost made me laugh. However, I saw how serious she was and straightened up. “It’s all right. That won’t happen.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“I believe you.” Relief on her face, she promptly fell asleep, her head resting against me. Before I knew it, Cuphea was doing the same.

“Maybe we should’ve had the party another day.” As I was overwhelmed by both pleasant and torturous feelings, the party continued on.

Despite Hypericum having several drinks, her complexion never changed. She was a heavy drinker. Monia, on the other hand, was the type of drunk who spilled her guts while sobbing about how much she regretted her past.

Before long, the two who had fallen asleep woke up and our mostly female squad engaged in lively conversation. Although Monia and Hypericum were a little distant, we seemed to have bridged the gap between us a little. In that sense, the party was a great success.

The next day, all the girls save for Hypericum were hungover and had to use healing magic to cure their headaches. Of course, we never would have gone to a pub when we had a mission the next day unless that was an option.

“G-G-Good morning, my knight.”

“L-Let’s do our best today, Albert!”

The princess and Cuphea seemed to have a complete recollection of their night of drinking and were embarrassed by their actions. Maybe it’d be for the best if they refrained from drinking in the future.



The curion extermination mission in Luzarigue lasted three days. That marked the end of the students' role—the rest would be carried out by official saints. Most of the students were exhausted due to their lack of experience fighting in Forbidden Cities, and we'd made good progress in those three days anyway. There were probably also other reasons that couldn't be disclosed.

As had been the case during my time as a holy knight three hundred years ago, certain people were very particular about who got the finishing blow and how it would contribute to their status. Add nobility to the mix and the situation got even more complicated. I could imagine that when the city was eventually liberated, there would be childish bickering over who killed the final curion. Oh well. It didn't concern me.

At any rate, there was one event left before we would hop back on the carriages and return to the academy—the announcement of our kill counts. How many curions had we exterminated the past three days? The top ten pairs would have their results announced, though it was limited to students only. Official saints like Blizzard who had stopped by on the first day didn't count.

"In tenth place, we have the pair of Agrimonia and Hypericum with sixty." The two recent additions to our squad managed to break into the top ten. They both seemed surprised at the result. After ninth place, another pair from our squad was announced.

"In eighth place, we have the pair of Linum and Cuphea with seventy-one." The childhood-friend pair made the cut too. Cuphea's ponytail swung with triumph, while Linum silently clasped her hands together. After seventh and sixth place, some familiar names were announced in fifth place.

"In fifth place, we have Palustris and Ozias of Gold with one hundred and three." It was the duo who had been our opponents during the entrance exam and later our allies when we'd defeated the Pestilent Guardian Dragon. Palu had once told me that among the Colors, they had the eighth-most confirmed kills. Still, it was impressive that they had cleared one hundred in three days. There were some squads that couldn't even break twenty collectively in a single day, so the Colors really were on another level. Seeing that the totals had reached three digits, some of the other students started whispering.

“In fourth place, we have Setigerum and Craig of Violet with one hundred and nineteen.” Setigerum was a beautiful, purple-haired girl with a mature allure that made it hard to believe she was a teenager. The princess and Cuphea would glare daggers at me if I stared at her for too long, so I managed to restrain myself.

“In third place, we have Euryops and Serrulata of Bronze with two hundred and two.” Serrulata had tan skin and black hair, and a wild sort of charm about her. I’d promised to take on her dual swords in a mock battle in the future. Conveniently, she happened to be looking back at me when I looked in her direction. I mouthed the word “impressive,” and she scratched her nose bashfully. How cute. Euryops also used a sword despite being a holy woman, which had probably contributed to their high kill count.

Only first and second place were left. The pairs of note who had yet to be announced were Orlaya and Myra, and the princess and myself. For some reason my squadmates seemed to be more nervous than I was.

“In second place, we have Orlaya and Myra of Black, with two hundred and seventy-one. And in first place, we have Astrantia and Albert of White, with two hundred and eighty-five.” An uproar broke out around us.

“Well done, you two.”

“You did it!”

“I-I can’t believe they beat Black.”

“Congratulations.”

Linum, Cuphea, Monia, and Hypericum all congratulated us. Honestly, since curions at the center of town tended to be stronger, ranking higher didn’t feel quite as impressive. Orlaya’s squad had put up those numbers in an area crawling with powerful curions. Although we had gradually been deployed closer and closer to the center, we had only defeated four curions with the Embodiment of the Spirit in these past three days. In terms of squad total, we had been handily defeated as well, and we couldn’t claim to have won based on quality of kills either. Despite that...

“You won’t even let the older sister you admire beat you, eh, Princess?” This

result meant a great deal to my master—to the girl who didn't want her talented older sister to bear the burden of defeating the Eternal Witch alone.

"R-Right!" the princess said happily.

"An excellent result," her older sister Orlaya said as she walked over to us.

"Sister! Th-Thank you."

Orlaya's holy knight, Myra, was with her, as well as Serrulata from Bronze. "Just what I'd expect from you, Sir Albert," said the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Myra. She was my adoptive brother Robert's descendant and something like a niece to me. There wasn't an uncle in the world who could feel bad when his niece looked at him with such sparkling eyes.

"Thanks. You did great too." I reached out and patted Myra's head out of habit, but fortunately she didn't seem to mind. Seeing her giggle with embarrassment filled me with the urge to feed her tasty food.

"Whoa, Myra's actin' like a puppy. What relationship do you two have?" Serrulata looked at Myra and me with astonishment.

"I guess we're kinda like distant relatives. The family that raised me was connected to Myra's ancestors." My explanation just barely qualified as the truth. The family that had raised me was Dan and Milna, and Myra's ancestor was Robert. Robert was their son, so that counted as a connection.

"Huh. Myra never told me that."

"We only just met recently, and I didn't find out until later," Myra explained. That wasn't a lie either. Neither of us had had any idea about that connection when we had first met. That was why we'd pointed our blades at each other and I'd ended up giving her slanted bangs.

"Coincidences like that really happen, huh?"

"No, the hero Robert brought us together," Myra said enthusiastically. If it hadn't been for Robert cooperating with the princess's family, they never would have had the idea to form a contract with the Skeleton Sword Saint, so she technically wasn't wrong. Though from the perspective of someone who wasn't privy to the details, her statement would have sounded like a maiden talking

about fate.

“S-Sure. I didn’t realize you had such a passionate side.” Serrulata was clearly at a loss for words. I couldn’t blame her—the coolheaded Myra I had first met was nowhere to be seen. That said, maybe she still kept a cool head when it came to things that didn’t involve me.

“Anyway, what are you doing here, Serrulata? Should you be leaving Lady Euryops on her own?”

Serrulata scratched her head in response to Myra’s question. “Well, same as you, I guess. I wanted to congratulate Albert on getting first.”

“But you two just met three days ago. You barely know each other.”

“Sh-Shut it! What’s the harm?!” Serrulata’s tanned skin flushed slightly red with embarrassment.

Softly taking her hand, I smiled at her. “Thanks, Serrulata. I see you two also took down more than two hundred.”

“My hand— Uh, yeah I guess!”

“I’ve heard a lot about your raging twin swords. Wish I could’ve seen them in action.”

“I-I’ll show you next time. I wanna see your sword skills too. Hey! You’re up to my upper arm now?!”

Still gripping her hand with my right hand, I felt her arm with my left hand, gradually moving upward. Serrulata was surprised, but she didn’t push me away. “You’ve done a lot of training. These are the arms of a beautiful swordswoman.” Though her hands were calloused and her arms were muscular, I truly believed that made her even more beautiful. Beauty came in many forms.

“The way you’re movin’ your hand is kinda dirty, don’t ya think?”

“Not at all. I’m appreciating your beauty from a purely artistic perspective—”

“I hope you’re prepared to take responsibility for your actions if you go any further.” A silver-haired, red-eyed girl with dark skin was staring right at me, her eyes narrowed from sleepiness. She was Bronze’s holy woman, a foreign

princess who wielded a sword herself—Euryops.

“P-Princess?!” Not comfortable being seen like that, Serrulata quickly pulled away from me.

“It’s a pleasure, Princess Euryops. I am Lady Astrantia’s holy knight—”

“Albert, yes? You may forgo the formalities and speak to me freely.” When someone of high status told you to speak freely, you weren’t actually all that free, but when I looked over at Serrulata, she nodded, her face still red.

“Then Euryops it is.”

“That’s fine.”

“So, you mentioned taking responsibility for my actions.”

“I meant exactly what I said. I won’t tolerate anyone toying with my Serrulata.” Although her tone was dispassionate, it was clear from her words how deeply she cared about her partner.

“I wouldn’t tolerate a villain toying with her either.”

“Good. Then let us pray that such a person doesn’t appear.”

“Wh-What’s with you two?! Besides, I ain’t some frail maiden!” Serrulata protested.

“Indeed. You could tear them apart yourself,” said Euryops.

“You got that right!” The conversation seemed to have calmed down now.

“By the way, when do you wanna have that mock battle, Serrulata?” I asked.

“Oh, good question.” Serrulata put her hand on her chin and pondered.

As she did, I felt someone tug on my arm and found Cuphea looking at me while wearing an unhappy expression. “You haven’t forgotten about our promise to go out together, have you?” It looked like she clearly remembered the promise we’d made at the party.

“Of course not.”

“What’s this about a promise, Albert?” Serrulata asked.

“Albert promised to go somewhere with me. That’s all,” Cuphea answered

before I even had a chance.

Serrulata narrowed her eyes. “Oh? Well, what’s the harm? Women gather around strong men anywhere ya go. So, about that mock battle.”

“R-Right.”

“Let’s do it the day after we get back to town,” Serrulata proposed, looking at Cuphea. Sensing her intention, Cuphea took a determined step forward and locked eyes with her.

“Albert? Let’s go on that outing together the day after we return to the city.”

“Hold it, girly. He’s got plans. Didn’t ya hear?”

“Plans? He hasn’t even agreed to them yet.” The two glared at each other, their ample busts pressing together. Neither backed down, sparks flying between them.

“Let me remind you, I won’t allow anyone to toy with my Serrulata.”

Why are you bringing that up now, Euryops? No, I knew why. She was telling me not to take her holy knight lightly.

“Me, Mama, and our whole family w-won’t forgive anyone who makes Cuphea cry,” Linum added, seemingly forcing herself. She was trying to support her childhood friend in her own way. Squaring off against a foreign princess to back up her childhood friend took guts—I had to give her that.

The question now was how should I handle the situation? Even with no right answer, abstaining wasn’t really an option.

“What’s it gonna be, Albert?” Cuphea and Serrulata asked in unison.

Making a decision here was far more difficult than killing nearly three hundred curions. Faced with a question that would be problematic no matter whom I prioritized, my answer was simple—I would prioritize the one who asked first. That meant the mock battle with Serrulata.

The key was that I had subtly shifted the content of the question. Cuphea and Serrulata were asking “Who do you choose, me or her?” However, I shifted the question to “Do I prioritize the person who asked first or the person who asked later?” She was still unhappy about it, but in the end, Cuphea accepted it. It

wasn't in her nature to tell me to ignore prior commitments and put her first.

I had successfully navigated a perilous situation. That said, I knew that Cuphea was aware I had simply dodged the question and had allowed it to slide. I would have to do my best to get her back in a good mood when we went out together.

Chapter 6

Bronze

The day of the mock battle with Serrulata that I had decided to prioritize soon arrived. Her partner, Euryops, suggested that we battle as real saints, so the princess would be fighting as well.

Both pairs stood facing each other on the training grounds after class. It was a battle between two of the top pairs at the academy—Bronze and White. Myra, who had just happened to show up, was acting as the referee. A short distance away, Orlaya was also watching, which made the princess a little nervous.

“Just do what you always do,” I reassured her.

“R-Right.” Although she nodded, she immediately froze up again. Her sister’s gaze had a significant impact on her. Still, once the battle started, she wouldn’t have the leeway to worry about any spectators.

“I’m lookin’ forward to seein’ what the first-place scorer is made of.” Serrulata gave a ferocious grin, revealing her sharp teeth as her long, black hair swayed behind her. When combined with her sharp red eyes filled with eagerness, the impression she gave off was that of a wild animal. Her partner, the silver-haired Euryops, projected calmness and tranquility like a lone wolf.

Serrulata held two blades, and her holy woman Euryops drew a sword of her own. As this was a mock battle, we were all using wooden swords.

“Princess, I’m counting on your protection,” I said.

“Of course.”

Myra raised one hand, then lowered it. “Begin!”

On her signal, three people immediately dashed forward—me and both members of Bronze. Serrulata’s posture was oddly low to the ground, almost like she was running on four legs. Her swords approached me as though crawling along the ground, closing in on me like a stag beetle’s jaws.

Strengthened by her holy woman's Physical Enhancement, they came at me with enough force to overpower the princess's protection and break my ankles.

Rather than backwards, I jumped to the left to avoid her. Euryops was to my right, so I was creating distance with her as well. She seemed to have predicted my moves and unleashed a swift thrust while I was in midair. I could have repelled it, but doing so would have left me vulnerable to Serrulata's follow-up. That said, being in midair, my options were limited. Instead, I determined the trajectory of her thrust, then grabbed her sword and pulled.

Euryops's eyes went wide. We were using wooden swords, and I had the princess's Physical Protection on top of that, so I managed to stop her thrust as particles of light protected my right hand. After landing, I locked eyes with Euryops, who had been pulled off-balance, then pushed her at her holy knight with a grin. Serrulata would have to go to the left or right. Either way, I would be able to deal with her.

"Lift up your legs." Euryops immediately responded to Serrulata's curt order. Falling down after being pushed by me, Euryops lifted her knees up to her chest, creating an opening for the black-haired beast to dart through.

She picked the most direct option! The jaws were closing in on me once again, but I had options. I drove two stakes into the ground right in her swords' paths. One was my own sword, and the other was the sword I had stolen from Euryops just a moment ago. I stabbed the two swords into the ground before her swings could gain momentum, blocking her attack. I then went to stomp on her now exposed head, only to stop just before committing.

Realizing that her attack was going to be blocked, Serrulata had released her swords, placed both her hands on the ground, then moved like she was going to roll forward, passing between the two swords I had driven into the ground. Just as her feet were pointed skyward and she reached the proper trajectory to strike at my chin, she unleashed all the power stored in her folded arms. If I had noticed even a moment later, I would have been hit.

Pulling a sword out of the ground, I leaped to the right. I had expected Serrulata to pass by me, but that didn't happen. She grabbed the wooden sword I had left behind, deftly shifting her posture in midair, and landed on the

flat of the blade. Then, using the sword as a foothold to jump off of, she pulled it out of the ground and swung at me.

“Ha ha, not bad.” She had impressive control over her body and courage. Her attacks didn’t leave me any breathing room.

“Right back at ya!” she replied, baring her sharp teeth. Her cheeks were flushed from the excitement of battle.

Yeah, I get the feeling. Knowing that the fight would continue no matter what I did was a little annoying, but more than that, it was thrilling. If she were an enemy, I would kill her and be done with it. Allies, however, I could fight over and over. Still, that didn’t mean it was okay for me to lose. Beating people like her was how you could tell just how strong you had gotten.

I met her oncoming downward strike head-on. With an upward swing, I split her wooden sword in half. Still in the air with her arm raised, she looked completely vulnerable.

One second. No, not even that—one tenth of a second. That was how little time I had. I shifted my focus away from a follow-up attack and instead readied my sword to defend myself. Then her attack came.

Her left hand should have been empty, yet it was holding a wooden sword. She swung horizontally and I just barely blocked it in time. However, my guard was poor, and although I was unharmed, my sword was unable to withstand the blow and shattered.

Tch. If I’d been a tenth of a second faster to notice, I could have saved my sword. How she’d acquired the sword in her left hand was clear as day—Euryops had thrown it to her. Despite their simplicity, the precise movements they had gone through to achieve that result were impressive. Euryops had slipped into the blind spot created by Serrulata’s body, keeping her actions hidden until the last second. Then, with perfect timing, she had thrown the weapon so it would land precisely in her partner’s hand. Serrulata was just as impressive, swinging the sword like she’d been holding it from the beginning without so much as turning around.

They had to have a lot of experience together to be capable of that. Their teamwork was immaculate—no doubt the result of their bond together and

harsh training. Having only met less than a year ago, there was no way the princess and I would be able to imitate them. It was truly superb.

Throwing away the broken sword in her right hand, Serrulata replaced it with a new one. Euryops had probably thrown that to her as well, which meant Euryops had lost her weapon. She thought restoring Serrulata's two-sword style would give them a better chance at victory than continuing to wield a weapon herself and had put aside her pride. They really did make a good pair. Choosing victory over attachment was my kind of style.

Serrulata bore down on me with her two swords. Changing to a backhand grip, I fended her off with the remaining half of my wooden sword, using it more like a knife than a sword. Two swords means twice as many attacks—that was the sort of logic a child learning swordplay for the first time might be drawn to. It sounded nice if you could actually pull it off, but it was just as nonsensical as saying that you'd be twice as efficient at doing paperwork if you could write with both hands at the same time. If you're making twice as many moves, you have to be able to think about twice as many things and have a body that can keep up. But on the other hand, if you were talented enough, it was certainly possible.



“Havin’ fun, Albert?!” Serrulata’s entire body was in motion. She was not only captivatingly muscular—she was flexible too. Her arms moved like whips with swords attached to the ends. Every attack was precise, heavy, fast, and shockingly lax. And because she was using two swords, it felt endless.

On top of that, she wasn’t limited to just the left and right. She thrust and slashed in every possible direction, sometimes striking from both sides at once, and sometimes delivering consecutive strikes from one direction. She even incorporated subtle changes in direction and feints.

The number of swings I had to parry in the blink of an eye was dizzying. The clack of wooden swords striking each other assailed my eardrums. The unknown holy woman the other day had described Serrulata as a storm, and her onslaught was every bit as destructive as raging winds.

With her strength reaching heights beyond what met the eye with Physical Enhancement and her bold offense backed up by her confidence in her holy woman’s Physical Protection, she was a picturesque example of a formidable warrior born in the modern age. Their position as one of the top pairs in the academy wasn’t just for show.

“Ha ha ha! Can your eyes keep up, Albert?!” I could tell Serrulata’s excitement was reaching its peak.

“I can see everything just fine.” *Perfect*. In an instant, I deflected her right attack with my wooden sword and repelled the left with my elbow.

“Whoa!”

Even Physical Protection had its limits, so it couldn’t be used recklessly, but it could function as an invisible shield at key moments. It was my first time using it as such in this battle, so Serrulata was caught off guard. Taking advantage of that, I leaped straight at her.

“Nice try!” Serrulata lowered her shoulders and unleashed two thrusts aimed at my eyes. It was the same tactic I had used against Palustris and Ozias of Gold during the entrance exam.

Physical Protection covered your body in faint particles of light, but it didn’t cover the eyes for a very simple reason—the light would make it difficult to see.

This would become quickly apparent to any saint, making it a weak spot when fighting other saints. It was the one area that would always be exposed, so Serrulata's decision to target it made sense. I couldn't rely on the protection to brute force my way through like I had before. Whether I tried to dodge her attack or block it, I would inevitably be one step behind—so I decided not to dodge it.

“Wha—?!”

It was the only way to catch her with her guard down. The faint light that had been blocking my field of view deflected her twin swords, then faded away. In my now clear vision, I saw Serrulata's swords recoiling from the unexpected impact. By then, the tip of my broken sword was already pressed against her neck.

“I give.” Serrulata relaxed her arms, dropping her wooden swords. Her surrender marked the end of our match.

“You sure? You could probably block a strike to the neck with Physical Protection,” I said with a smile.

Serrulata gave me a bitter look. “Are ya really gonna make me say it? If you were ready for me to attack your eyes, then I'm sure you were ready for the follow-up too. Your attack was strengthened by Physical Enhancement enough to break through my protection, right?” For all her wildness, Serrulata had a good head on her shoulders. That was probably the source of her strength.

“That's not all, Serrulata. He could have aimed for your eyes as well,” Euryops added, walking over to us.

“Yeah, true. People don't usually cover their eyes.” In a real battle, that was more efficient. Even with healing magic, stopping just short of striking the eyes was dangerous.

“I have no qualms with the outcome, but I do have a question,” said Euryops.

“Ask away.”

“Protecting your eyes is dangerous because it blocks your vision. Proper implementation requires perfect timing, like you had just a moment ago. How did you achieve that?”

“That’s easy. We had a signal. Right, Princess?” I turned to look at Astrantia, who was walking over to us.

“Yes, it’s as Albert says. Although, this time, we also got lucky.”

“You had a signal? Wait, luck?” Serrulata tilted her head in contemplation, then realized something.

“I get it. When you said you could see everything just fine, that was the signal, wasn’t it?” Euryops asked.

The princess and I nodded. “Exactly.” Our signal was a phrase involving the eyes.

“We were fortunate that our signal phrase fit so naturally into Albert’s conversation with Lady Serrulata,” said the princess. Although I could have just said “I can see” whenever I wanted, they hadn’t suspected anything because it had flowed with the conversation.

“Was that just one of many strategies you two have, or is it something you prepared specifically for this mock battle?” asked Euryops.

“We haven’t been together for very long, so we don’t have that tacit understanding of each other like you two, but that doesn’t mean we aren’t in sync. We’ve put a lot of thought into what it means to fight as partners.” That said, I’d only started genuinely treating her as a partner after the battle with the Pestilent Guardian Dragon, so it had been pretty hastily prepared. “We pulled it off perfectly this time, Princess.”

“Still, I thought my heart was going to stop. I’d prefer to avoid doing this often if possible.” I’d end up with a hole in my eye socket if we messed up, so I understood the feeling.

“Aha ha ha, glad we got to practice in a mock battle then.”

“I understand it could be a useful strategy against certain opponents, but...” The princess had a troubled look on her face.

“Gaaah! We lost!” Serrulata scratched at her head in frustration.

“I’m impressed you were able to keep up with Serrulata your first time going up against her, Sir Albert.” The referee, Myra, joined the conversation.

“Why do you sound so proud of him?” Serrulata asked with a confused look. She had no way of knowing Myra’s ancestor was my adoptive brother, so I couldn’t blame her.

“You as well, Lady Astrantia. Your faith in your holy knight was marvelous.” Myra praised the princess too.

“O-Oh, thank you,” the princess said bashfully.

“Having a naturally strong holy knight can be advantageous in that you can preserve mana that would ordinarily be spent on Physical Enhancement. If you store that excess mana in manastones, it will come in handy during emergencies.” Orlaya offered some advice as she descended from the spectator stands.

“O-Of course! That’s what I’m doing!”

“Good. On top of mastering the basics, it’s important to understand your holy knight. Bronze can serve as an example in that regard.” They were definitely in perfect sync.

“It’s a shame I didn’t get to see much of Euryops’s swordplay.”

“Oh, that’s right,” said Serrulata. “Sorry, Princess. I ended up taking your sword.”

“It’s quite all right. I made the decision because I believed it was the correct one,” Euryops replied. Normally I would have had to deal with Euryops on top of the raging storm that was Serrulata. Neutralizing that threat early on had made things significantly easier for me.

“We mighta lost this time, but let’s do this again.”

“Sure.” Serrulata and I laughed and shook hands. However, her face soon turned red and she pulled her hand back. “Hmm?”

“S-Sorry. I just thought you were gonna touch me again.” Now that she mentioned it, I had touched her arm last time.

“Sorry if I made you uncomfortable.”

“Th-That’s not it.”

“Glad to hear it. In that case—” I made an exaggerated hand movement and approached Serrulata, and then Euryops got between us.

“Holy Knight Albert.” Her unreadable red eyes peered up at me.

“What’s up?” Although she was the princess of a foreign country, she had given me permission to speak casually with her.

“I’m quite interested in you.”

“Wha—?! Princess?!”

“I’m honored.” I placed my hand on my chest and bowed.

“Most people are left at Serrulata’s mercy when they fight, particularly the first time. But not you.”

“No, no, she definitely surprised me.”

“You have a lot of experience fighting monsters, don’t you?”

“Ah... Yeah, I guess so.” Now that she mentioned it, it might have been my experience from three centuries ago that had allowed me to deal with Serrulata’s animalistic style. Fighting so many different monsters had trained me to handle all sorts of different attacks.

“My country devotes a lot of effort to fighting monsters. I decided to attend this academy because I believe this country’s saint system could be utilized for dealing with monsters.”

“I see.” The advent of curions hadn’t eliminated the threat posed by monsters—they were still troubling many countries. Come to think of it, what were the people who exterminated monsters in this country called these days? Holy knights were an occupation that fought alongside holy women to kill curions now. I’d have to ask at some point.

“I’m sure a warrior like you is in high demand.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I’ve got prior commitments.” I looked at the princess and saw her looking back at me. She had apparently been listening restlessly and now had a look of relief on her face.

“That’s too bad.”

“It pains me as well.” Turning back to Euryops, I made a distraught face.

“Heh.” Did Euryops just smile? Her expression immediately returned to normal, so it was hard to tell. “Holy Knight Albert.”

“Yeah?”

“What if I invited you on a date?” Serrulata, the princess, and Myra all went wide-eyed.

She hasn't given up, huh? Euryops had probably long since figured out I had a weakness for beautiful women and was trying to use that to convince me. Unfortunately for her, my romantic interest began at age eighteen, and she wasn't there yet. “I'd be happy to.” That said, treating future beauties coldly wasn't what I was about.

“Then when do you want to do it?”

“Whenever is fine, but I've got prior commitments there too. I made a promise with Cuphea, as you're probably aware.” Euryops stared at me in amazement. I saw Serrulata making the same expression behind her, and then I realized why—normally you would prioritize a noblewoman over your plans with a commoner. I thought she might be offended, but a moment later she very clearly smiled.

“Wonderful. My interest in you is just growing and growing.” Apparently, it'd had the opposite effect. Maybe she was glad my devotion to commitments wasn't all talk.

“I'm glad to hear it.”

“So, after Holy Knight Cuphea, then?”

“Sure.”

“We can discuss the details at a later date. Let us be off, Serrulata.”

“P-Princess? Th-That date stuff is just a joke, right?” Serrulata asked nervously.

“I desire strong individuals. Of course, I don't mind letting you be the one to win him over.”

“I-I’m not really cut out for that kinda thing.”

Euryops let out a long sigh.

“Did you just sigh?! That’s kinda harsh, don’t ya think?!” The tight-knit pair continued their conversation as they walked off.

Now that I was left alone, I was a little hesitant to turn and face the princess. Steeling myself, I looked back and saw her puffing out her cheeks.

“I’m certain there’s nothing to worry about. Given his goal, I can’t imagine he would consider going to hunt monsters in a foreign country.” Orlaya was as cool and composed as ever.

I nodded my head and smiled at the princess. “Exactly. I’m your holy knight until the very end.”

“But you’re still going to go on a date with Lady Euryops, aren’t you?” I averted my eyes from the pressure of the princess’s reproachful gaze.

“Yeah.”

“I can’t with you!” she complained, hitting my chest. If her sister and Myra hadn’t been there, I was sure she would be cursing me. I let her continue hitting me until she calmed down.

At any rate, we were victorious in our mock battle against Bronze.

Chapter 7

A Date With Cuphea

The day of my date with Cuphea finally arrived. We had planned to meet up in front of the fountain at a plaza in the city. Even though I arrived a bit earlier than we'd agreed, Cuphea was already waiting there. Although there were several other people also using the fountain as a meeting place, she stood out among the crowd.

While her red ponytail was the same as ever, her outfit was unlike anything I'd ever seen her wear before. She was wearing a jacket over her white shirt, along with a brown miniskirt. It matched her energetic vibe while also displaying her femininity—it was an extremely appealing look. The front of her jacket was open, showing off her explosive chest.

Combined with her natural beauty, it drew the eyes of many passersby. However, she was completely oblivious to their gazes as she nervously played with her bangs. I called out to her.

"Cuphea!"

"A-Albert!" A smile spread across her face as soon as she noticed me. Her cheeks were tinged ever so slightly pink—perhaps from nervousness. A few nearby men were clearly captivated by her reaction, but they backed off after seeing my clothes.

"Sorry, did I keep you waiting?"

"N-No. I just got here early."

For the time being, I just stuck to the usual pleasantries you say when meeting up with someone. "That outfit's cute. It looks good on you."

"Y-You think so? It's not weird?" Cuphea looked at me nervously.

"Yeah, I like it."

“O-Oh... Good. I didn’t own any cute clothes, so Linum and Mama helped me buy these.”

“I’m honored.”

“Huh?”

“You bought new clothes for our date, right? I’m happy you care so much.”

“N-No, I... Well... Yeah...”

“You look good.” Cuphea’s face turned red as I piled on the compliments.

“I-I get it already! Thanks!”

“No, I should be thanking you for dressing so well. Just seeing that is enough to make today a good day.” I put my hand on my chest and expressed my admiration.

Cuphea pouted her lips. “Wh-What’s that supposed to mean? Anyway, you’re just wearing your holy knight uniform, huh?”

“Yeah, it’s easier this way,” I explained, tugging at the collar of my coat.

“Easier how?”

“I’d be worried about you getting hit on during our date if I came in my regular clothes, but nobody’s dumb enough to hit on a holy knight’s woman.”

“Wh-Who are you calling...?” Imagining something, Cuphea’s face turned even redder.

“Sorry, I just meant from their perspective.”

“I-I know! You don’t look that strong at first glance, so there are probably a bunch of people who don’t take you seriously. The uniform helps keep them at bay.”

“Exactly.” Weaklings couldn’t become holy knights, so the uniform was proof that the wearer had a certain level of strength. Unless you were a real idiot, you wouldn’t pick a fight with a person wearing one. It was kinda like insect repellent, so it came in handy. It functioned the same way it had three centuries ago.

“Even if I did actually get hit on, that shouldn’t be a problem with you around.

I could even fend them off myself.”

“Men interrupting our date is the real problem. Besides, I’d rather avoid fights if possible.”

“Hmm...” Cuphea averted her eyes. Red to her ears, it was obvious she was embarrassed. She really was cute. “Wh-What?!” Seemingly noticing my gaze, she glared at me.

“It’s nothing. Let’s get going.”

“Oh, s-sure.” Cuphea coughed to compose herself and brushed her ponytail back with her hand. As she did, I caught sight of a hair tie with a silver decoration—she was regularly using the gift I had gotten her. “S-So, where are we going? I hate to admit it, but this is my first time going out with a guy. I don’t really know what I’m doing.”

“Your first date, huh? That’s a heavy responsibility.”

“D-Don’t worry about that.”

“I’ll do my best to make sure you enjoy it. Let’s head this way first.” The two of us walked off together.



“Wow...” Cuphea let out a childlike exclamation, then immediately put her hands over her mouth.

We had arrived at a theater. When planning the date, I had secretly asked people close to her what she might like, and her childhood friend Linum had given me some very useful information. Much to my surprise, she had borrowed some of Linum’s romance novels and had gotten really into them. One of them was regarded as a classic, and upon learning that it had been turned into a play, I had rushed to secure us seats. After some effort, I’d managed to get good seats so close you could see the sweat flying off the actors.

It was a story about love between people of different social standings and seemed to be quite popular among women. While I wasn’t one to care about other people’s love affairs, the actresses were beautiful and talented, so I didn’t

mind watching them. It was also cute seeing how Cuphea's expression changed throughout the play and how hard she clapped with the rest of the audience at the end, so I figured it was safe to call it a success.

Cuphea was moved to tears, so I handed her a handkerchief. "Thanks," she said, wiping her eyes.

"You're welcome." After leaving the theater, she was still excited and kept going on about the play, until...

"Hey, Albert."

"What's up?"

"The play was really fun, but those were pretty good seats, right?"

"Like I said when we went in, I just happened to be given two tickets. They were free." One of the things I'd been concerned about when planning the date was the budget. Not because I was worried about my wallet, but rather because Cuphea, Linum, and Edel all cared deeply about the orphanage and poured all their money into it. I figured if I took her on a blatantly extravagant date, Cuphea would feel guilty and wouldn't be able to enjoy herself.

That was why I wanted it to seem like I'd acquired the tickets by pure chance. There were only two, so we couldn't bring anyone else, and they'd go to waste if she refused. The play's showtime had been coming up, so I'd managed to convince her that I hadn't spent money, I'd just gotten lucky. It might have seemed like an insignificant thing to lie about, but sometimes that sort of lie was surprisingly effective at lightening the mental burden of accepting a gift. Also, if I'd told her that I'd just bought them, she probably would have insisted on paying half. That was just the type of person she was.

"Seats that good? For free?"

"It must be good karma for all my noble deeds."

"Uh-huh." Cuphea looked like she still had something to say, but she didn't press the matter and I decided to change the subject.

"It's a little late, but wanna get lunch?"

"Sure. Um, wanna come to my place?" While it was an honor to be invited to

a woman's house, it had a slightly different meaning in this case—she was asking if I wanted to eat at the orphanage.

“That’s fine, but this is a date. I’d like it to just be the two of us.”

Cuphea nervously played with her lips in response. “O-Oh.”

As we headed to our destination, somebody called out to me. “Oh, if it ain’t Albert!” I looked over and saw the fruit seller standing under the eaves of his shop. My number of acquaintances increased the longer I stayed in the city, so naturally my number of male acquaintances had increased as well. It would have been nice to limit it to only women, but life didn’t work that way.

“Can’t you see I’m on a date? Have some manners,” I reluctantly responded in a displeased voice.

“Oh, pardon me. Wait, is that the lass from Edel’s place?” Apparently, he knew Edel. Blushing, Cuphea bowed politely.

“Does it matter? See you, old man.”

“Wait, wait. At least take this as an apology for interrupting you,” the man said, tossing us two fist-sized fruits. I caught them and waved goodbye as we left his shop behind.

“You know him?” Cuphea asked. I handed her one of the fruits and she hesitantly accepted it.

“He’s got a cute daughter.”

“Oh.” Cuphea gave me a disapproving look.

“Look, she was only like fifteen or something. I’m not interested.”

“Uh-huh.” Her tone was completely flat, making it hard to tell if she actually believed me.

“One time, there were some guys harassing her while she was tending the store.”

“I can see where this is going.”

“Aha ha ha. As you can imagine, I drove them off and the old man was really grateful when he got back. He probably remembered me from that.”

“That sounds like you.” The sharpness disappeared from her gaze and she gave me a gentle smile.

Several more people called out to me after that. There was a man running a food stall, the beautiful owner of the flower shop, an old woman street vendor, and a little girl with her mother. Although talking to men was a waste of time, I could never ignore a woman, no matter her age.

“Has it ever crossed your mind that maybe you know too many people?” Cuphea asked.

“I explore the city on my days off, so I meet a lot of people.” I was just looking for women, but that hadn’t been going too well recently.

“I don’t feel like it’s that easy to get so close to someone that they’ll call out to you whenever they see you.”

“I’m sure they’re just bored. Anyway, we’re almost there.” We arrived at a stone building with a sign marking it as a restaurant.

“Are we eating here?”

“Nah, there’s still somewhere I wanna visit, so I was thinking we’d get food to go.” Entering the restaurant, I scanned the kitchen and quickly found a man with a scar around his eye. “Hey, old man!” I called out to him.

“Oh, Al! Lunch to go, right? Hold on just a sec.”

“Sure.” I had spoken with him ahead of time, so it didn’t take long. A short while later, a girl came out holding two bundles wrapped in big leaves. It was the owner’s eleven-year-old daughter.

“Here you go, Al.”

I took the bundles and paid. “Thanks.”

“Is she your girlfriend?” the girl asked, looking up at Cuphea.

Cuphea’s face immediately turned red. “N-No!”

“She’s not, but we are on a date,” I explained.

“No fair! I wanna go on a date too!” Her idea of a date was probably along the lines of a playdate, but I still couldn’t agree to it.

“Once you’re a little older.” Seven years older, to be precise. Then neither I nor the law would have a problem.

“It’s a promise!”

“Hey, Al! Don’t you dare lay a hand on my daughter!” an angry voice echoed from the kitchen.

“Ha ha ha.” Chuckling, I left the restaurant with Cuphea.

“She’s bigger than Linaria, but she’s still a child, you know?” Linaria was one of the girls from the orphanage. She called me “Al” and seemed to be fond of me.

“Their food is good and cheap, so I go there a lot. One time that girl got hurt, so I asked the princess to heal her.” The owner had been so impressed that a customer had arranged for a holy woman to heal his daughter that he’d been doing all sorts of services for me since. His daughter also seemed to be really fond of me and the princess.

“I’ve lived in this city my whole life, and I’m pretty sure you know more people here than I do.”

“A lovely lady could be around any corner, so I lend a hand whenever possible.” I had been certain Cuphea would glare at me, but she didn’t say anything. After walking a little farther, we reached a park.

“Oh, this is a nice place. The children play here all the time. Linum and I would come here when we were little and I’d force her to play tag with me.” Linum had told me the same thing. According to her, after being forced to exercise with Cuphea, she would make Cuphea play house with her.

“It’s a good place to relax.”

“Are we gonna eat here?”

“Yeah. There should be a good spot around... Ah, there it is.”

“That’s...” There was a space underneath a large tree that was fortunately unoccupied. We walked over to the shade and took a seat.

“There was a spot like this in the play we just watched.” I had read the original book as well, so I knew there was a scene where the main couple

secretly met beneath a tree.

“Y-Yeah.” Cuphea’s face went red.

“Here’s yours,” I said, handing Cuphea her lunch.

“Th-Thanks.” It was a simple sandwich filled with meat and vegetables, but the seasoning of the meat combined with the freshness of the vegetables was delicious. Cuphea accepted it, then took out her wallet. “I’ll pay for mine.”

“I believe in treating the lady on a date.”

“Well, I believe in paying my fair share.”

I figured this would happen. “Then I’ll respect your opinion.”

“Thanks.” I told her the price and accepted her payment.

We ate our lunch, listening to the rustling leaves in the gentle breeze and the voices of children running around a short distance away. For dessert, we had the fruits the fruit seller had given us.

“Not bad, right?” I asked.

“It’s delicious.” Our lunch passed by peacefully. Cuphea looked beautiful, faintly illuminated by the sunlight filtering through the trees. “Albert.”

“Hm?”

Cuphea was nervously twiddling her thumbs in her lap. Eventually, she managed to eke out a word. “Thanks.”

“For what?”

“Th-The date today.”

“I just hope you enjoyed it.”

“I had a lot of fun...but that’s not all.” Maybe she had realized it. Not only had I lied about the ticket, but I had chosen our lunch in anticipation of her wanting to split the cost and picked this spot after reading her favorite book. “You respect girls themselves, but also the things they care about.” Her eyes glistened with moisture, her cheeks were flushed, and her lips were relaxed. Her smile was so beautiful I wanted to capture it in a painting and preserve it.

“I was just trying to score some points with you.”

I feigned ignorance, and she giggled in response. “If that’s the case, then should you really be telling me?”

“I guess not.”

“Jeez...” Cuphea gave an exasperated smile. After remaining silent for a while, we saw a happy-looking couple walking by holding hands. “Albert.”

“Do you wanna hold hands too?”

“Huh?”

“Never mind.” Maybe she hadn’t been looking at the same thing.

“Are you and Astrantia really gonna help fight the One-Armed Giant?” That had probably been weighing on her mind for a while. Only the elite could participate in that mission. As far as students went, you had to be on the level of the Colors, which meant Cuphea and Linum couldn’t join.

“Oh, that. Yeah, we are.”

“Isn’t it dangerous? I mean, you’re really strong, but still.” Cuphea looked at me with worry.

“It is, but we’ve gotta do it.” The Grave Keeper of the Golden City and his holy woman, Nemophila, weren’t normal. We couldn’t ignore one of the Twelve Corpses being on the loose—who knew when he’d go berserk.

“B-But why? We only just enrolled at the academy.” I also had hoped to have a little more time to allow the princess to grow. When we’d first made our contract, the plan had been for her to spend three years developing her skills, then hunt the Twelve Corpses after she graduated. I hadn’t expected to get dragged into consecutive fights against them. I couldn’t blame Cuphea for worrying.

“The princess and I can’t pass up a chance to fight the Twelve Corpses.”

“Because Astrantia’s a descendant of the Eternal Witch?” Cuphea and Linum typically avoided that topic, but that didn’t mean they were unaware. They had become friends with the princess knowing full well she was related to the witch.

“For her, maybe. In my case, it’s just revenge.”

“Revenge?”

“Yeah. I became the princess’s holy knight to kill the witch and rid the world of undead.”

Cuphea opened her mouth as if she had something to say, then silently closed it. She was a good girl—she was probably thinking it might reopen old wounds if she pried further. Given that I couldn’t be honest with her, I appreciated that. I couldn’t tell her that my adoptive father had become a curion, and then because I couldn’t kill him, I had become undead as well. Then I had rid my city of all other undead, as was my duty as a holy knight.

The feeling of happiness that had been implanted into me; the anger that had welled up in me after I returned to my senses and felt that disgusting happiness; the very fact that I was from three centuries ago—I had so many secrets I couldn’t reveal even to those closest to me.

“I see.” Cuphea squeezed out a couple words that were neither affirmation, denial, or even a question—she simply showed she was listening.

“I’m not doing it for a commendable reason like wanting to save the souls of the dead.”

“Neither am I. I only became a holy knight to earn money for the orphanage.” There weren’t many options for uneducated orphans who couldn’t rely on their parents’ connections to earn money. Even three centuries later, that hadn’t changed. Becoming a saint—a path that was available to everyone with talent and capability—was probably one of the few options she had.

“Guess everyone has their own reason for fighting.”

“Yeah.” Fighting for noble reasons didn’t make victory any more likely. That was fine, but the atmosphere had grown oddly sentimental.

“We should probably head back soon,” I finally said.

“Wait. Um...” Flustered, Cuphea pulled something out. I waited for her to speak. “I-I wanted to give this to you.” She handed me a pendant. It was one of the popular ones with the goddess’s crest on it. Believers and holy women

always had them, but I didn't have one myself. Not because I was a holy knight, but because I wasn't really a believer.

"Were you worried about me because I didn't have one?"

"Whether you believe in the goddess or not is up to you, but I do. And I pray that she gives you her protection." Cuphea's hands were shaking.

It was clear the One-Armed Giant mission worried her a lot more than I had initially thought. Going to fight one of the Twelve Corpses meant staring death in the face. Accepting the pendant, I took her hand. "Thank you."

"It's fine... Just come back safely." There were tears forming in the corners of her eyes.

"I will. I promised to take you on a date in two years, after all."

My joke got a giggle out of Cuphea and then she frowned at me.

"I wonder if it'll end with just a date when I turn eighteen."

"That's up to you."

"R-Right." I put the pendant in my pocket as her cheeks flushed red.

"Shall we head back?" Standing up, I held my hand out to her. She looked at it for a second, then took my hand without a word and stood up, using the momentum to press her lips against my cheek. They were soft, but unfortunately, she pulled away before I had time to appreciate the warmth.

Her face became the brightest red it had been all day as she giggled impishly. "Th-That's as far as we go today!"

I placed my hand on my face as though feeling the lingering traces of her affection and the sight of her sweet smile. Then, though I was reluctant, I returned to my normal self. "Wonder how far we'll go in two years."

"H-Hey! Don't get any ideas!"

"Sounds like you're the one with dirty thoughts."

"I'm gonna get mad."

"Aha ha ha." Considering she'd told me to drop dead last time I said something like that, this was proof of how much closer we had grown. We

headed home as I thought to myself.

Chapter 8

Departure and a Conference

The days passed in the blink of an eye, and soon it was the day before we would depart to defeat the One-Armed Giant.

That night, the princess and I were invited to the orphanage for dinner. The other members of our squad, Monia and Hypericum, had also been invited, but they had turned it down. Although Monia had changed her ways, her noble mindset still resulted in her clashing with Cuphea a lot. It would still take some time before she'd be comfortable visiting Cuphea's family.

Our dinner was rather extravagant, especially compared to the usual dinners at the orphanage. There were several entire roasted chickens lined up. The children's eyes sparkled as drool ran down their lips, and even those who usually got along started bickering over their share of meat.

"Hey! No fighting!" Sitting to my left, Cuphea scolded the children.

"But his piece is bigger!"

"That's not true!"

"Liar!"

"You already ate yours!"

Cuphea and Linum had splurged a little with the money they'd made from the extermination mission in Luzarigue.

"Give me a break... I'm sorry about them. This is supposed to be a dinner party for you two," said Cuphea.

"It's fine. I'm happy just getting to see you and Sister Edel," I replied.

"I'd say thank you, but I'm not giving you Mama."

"What about Lina?" asked a little girl with purple pigtails sitting to my right.

She was Linaria, one of the children who was oddly attached to me.

“What?”

“Does seeing me make you happy?”

“It feels pretty normal.”

“Huh?!” For some reason, she looked shocked. Seeing her slump her shoulders, clearly dejected, made me feel kinda bad. Kid or not, a woman was a woman. I was a failure of a man to make her sad. I stabbed a crispy piece of meat on my plate with my fork and put it in her mouth. “Mmm! Yummy!” Linaria smiled again.

That’s better. “Kids should be smiling.”

“Do you like my smile?” If I said no now, we’d be stuck in an endless cycle.

“I guess you could say that.”

Linaria giggled and gave a content smile. She continued smiling at me for a while after that. Children tended not to know moderation, so when they were praised for something, they would do it over and over again.

“All right, enough,” I said, patting her on the head. But she still just smiled happily. *Why am I stuck with a kid when the alluring holy woman Edel and other beautiful girls are right there?*

“No fair!” shouted a boy watching me and Linaria. “Share some with me too!”

“Shut it, brat.”

“You’re picking favorites!”

“Have you still not realized that I always favor women?”

“No, everybody knows that.” He had an exasperated look on his face for some reason, and the kids I sometimes practiced swordplay with nodded in agreement. Watching them, Cuphea couldn’t help but laugh.

“Hey, Cuphea. As their older sister, teach these brats some respect.”

Cuphea just giggled. “He shouldn’t be shouting, but what he’s saying is true.” I couldn’t argue with that.

“Hey, Al.” Linaria tugged at my sleeve.

“What?”

“Did you have fun on your date with Cuphea?” I could see Cuphea freeze up upon hearing the question, and the other kids immediately lit up.

“Yeah! Tell us about it! Cuphea wouldn’t tell us anything!”

“H-Hey! Stop yelling during dinner!” Cuphea’s scolding came a little too late.

“All right, why not? I’ll tell you all about the fun day we had together.”

“Gah! Albert, stop!” The children all laughed as Cuphea covered my mouth, her face bright red. Finally, Sister Edel and the old lady who ran the orphanage chided them for being too rambunctious.



After eating, the princess and I got ready to return to the dorms. The princess had spent most of the dinner peacefully chatting with Linum. Under the darkening sky, we said our goodbyes.

“Thank you for the meal, Edel. I apologize for all the rowdiness.”

“It’s quite all right. The children were happy to see you.” The voluptuous blonde holy woman with a mole under her eye smiled at me.

“Just the children?” I asked teasingly.

Edel put a hand on her cheek and giggled. “I was happy to see you too.”

“As was I. I wish we could’ve spoken more.”

“Next time, then.”

“It’s a promise.” I tried to take her hands, but the princess pulled on my arm and cut me off.

“We have to get up early tomorrow. It’s time to head back, my holy knight.” Though her reasoning was sound, Astantia’s cheeks were puffed out. Cuphea was also standing nearby, shooting me a glare.

“Cuphea, this’ll be the last time we see each other before I leave. Why don’t you give me a smile?” I said to her.

“Maybe if you didn’t hit on Mama I would.”

“Aha ha ha.” As I laughed, she approached me and gripped my hand for a moment.

“Be careful.”

“I will.”

“Make sure you and Astrantia come back.”

“You got it.”

“All right then,” Cuphea said, finally giving me a smile. Edel and Linum put their hands in front of their chests, praying for our safety.

Just as we were about to leave, Linaria came running out. “Al!”

“What is it?”

“Here!” She handed me a four-leaf clover. They were exceedingly rare and said to bring good luck.

“You’re giving this to me?”

“Yeah! I found it for you!”

“We helped too!” some of the boys said bashfully.

“It’s so you’ll come back safe and sound,” Linaria said.

“Is that so?” I didn’t know the name of the emotion I was feeling in my chest. What did people call this feeling that tickled the heart? It was like my body was gently floating—like I’d just eaten delicious, warm food. The closest thing I could come up with was gratitude or joy, yet I didn’t feel like either of those fully encapsulated the core emotion.

“Al?”

“It must have been hard to find.”

“Yeah, but we wanted to do something...” Tears welled up in Linaria’s eyes. They were kids without any money, so this must have been the only thing they could come up with. They had probably gone through painstaking efforts to find it. Still unable to truly grasp the emotions inside my chest, I accepted the clover.

“Linaria—and you brats too.” The children all looked at me. “Thanks.” I held the four-leaf clover in front of my chest and smiled, and then the children blossomed into smiles too. Everyone at the orphanage continued waving until we disappeared from sight. When we turned the corner and could no longer see them, the princess mumbled something.

“We have to return alive.”

“Well, I’m already dead.”

“There you go again.” While chatting with the princess, I stared at the clover in the palm of my hand. Why had something so small shaken my heart so much? “They worked hard to give you that good luck charm. You better take care of it.”

“She might be a little girl, but it’s still a gift from a woman. I’ll keep it safe.” The princess giggled in response. “What’s so funny?”

“You just can’t be honest.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“You’re trying to act like it’s no big deal, but I see you looking at it like it’s a precious treasure.”

Was I looking at it that way? “Treasure? This thing? It might take a while, but anybody can find one.”

“It’s not the gift itself but rather the feelings of the children that make it an irreplaceable treasure.”

“Feelings...”

“You were happy, weren’t you?” Linaria and the other kids had looked for it because they wanted me to stay safe. Maybe I had reacted to those feelings.

“You might be right.”

“I know I am.”

It’s like my heart is a vessel being filled with liquid. What’s this feeling of fulfillment called? I’ve been around for more than three hundred years and I still have no idea. I think I felt something similar back when I was living with my

adoptive father, Dan, but even now, I don't have a clue what it is. I guess I'll just call it "happiness" for the time being.

"I-I wish I could do something for you too," the princess said nervously.

"Hmm?"

"W-Well, Cuphea got you that pendant, and the children gave you a good-luck charm. I feel like I should do something as well." The princess's cheeks turned slightly red. I wasn't sure she realized it herself, but she was touching the flower hairpin I had given her.

"Princess."

"Y-Yes?"

"They gave me those things because they can't go with us. But that isn't the case with you—we're going to the Forbidden City together."

"I suppose..."

"Which means you can protect me directly. You just have to give me your divine protection, right?"

The princess's eyes went wide like she had only just now realized that. Then she giggled. "Yes, you're absolutely right. Albert, my knight. I'll make sure that you return alive."

"Astrantia, my holy woman. I'll make sure that you return alive." We shared a look and laughed, then headed down the street to our dorm.

Participating in the mission to defeat the One-Armed Giant would be three pairs from the Colors—Astrantia and Albert of White, Orlaya and Myra of Black, and Euryops and Serrulata of Bronze. In addition, we would be joined by three pairs from the Twelve Saints. There were Nemophila and the Grave Keeper of the Golden City from Blizzard, as well as two other pairs known as Scorching Sun and Drizzle.

Although it was ahead of schedule, I was itching to fight the Twelve Corpses. I was going to kill them all myself.



The day of the One-Armed Giant extermination mission drew near. We took a day off from the academy and headed to the Forbidden City.

The princess and I were traveling in a shaking carriage, while Black and Bronze were traveling in separate carriages of their own. Since we were leaving together and heading to the same destination, I figured traveling together would've been fine. Maybe it was so the nobles could maintain appearances. Nemophila and the blue-haired asshole of Blizzard were already at the Forbidden City.

"Hey, Princess."

"What is it?" The princess's beautiful silver hair looked as vibrant as ever. She peered at me with her sky-blue eyes.

"There's no telling what may happen this time around. How much should I hide my strength?"

"I don't follow."

"I know how much of a pain it'll be if I get found out. The Twelve Saints with us might even try to kill me on the spot." My past and my accomplishments wouldn't matter. Even the fact that the princess had sealed my ability to spread the infection probably wouldn't make a difference. I was a curion, and one of the Twelve Corpses at that—that alone made me a threat to mankind. If my identity was revealed, I could kiss my days living as the human Albert goodbye. It was clear that it'd be a problem.

"That's true..." The princess had a pensive look on her face.

"The problem is that it'll affect you and your family too."

"Indeed. If the worst comes to worst, I may even face the death penalty."

Watching as she pushed aside her emotions to muster those words made my heart feel like it was in a vise. "Don't say that." While I understood that she had accepted her fate long ago, I didn't like imagining her dying.

"Albert."

"What's up?"

"I agree that it's necessary for you to hide your identity to the best of your

ability.”

“Yeah.”

“But your life and bringing salvation to the Twelve Corpses comes first.”

“Got it. I’m glad to hear that.” Getting myself killed in an effort to keep my identity under wraps would have been ridiculous. I was relieved to know that the princess agreed. Still, telling me to prioritize my own life while knowing it may come at the cost of her own was just in the princess’s nature. “One other thing.”

“Yes?”

“Don’t worry. Even in that worst-case scenario, I won’t let them send you to the gallows.”

The princess’s eyes went wide; then her expression turned curious. “And how exactly would you prevent that?”

“I’d take you and we’d run away together.”

“You’d give up on defeating the Twelve Corpses?”

“Nah, we could just visit the Forbidden Cities while on the run. You’re already on death row, so who cares if we add trespassing to your list of crimes. As long as we kill the witch in the end, that’s good enough for me.”

“I suppose that’s also an option. However, if it came to that, you wouldn’t need me anymore, would you?” the princess mumbled with a slightly uneasy look.

“What are you talking about? You’ve gotta finish me off before you die. I’m not gonna let you go and get executed on your own.”

“Oh, that’s right.” The princess flashed a joyful smile despite the talk of her own execution.

“Anyway, I’ll try to be careful so it doesn’t come to that.”

“I certainly hope so.”

We passed the time on the carriage engaging in all sorts of conversations like that.



Three centuries ago, it had been standard for holy knights to stay at inns when dispatched to other cities. When dispatched to a village without an inn, the village chief who had hired them might offer them a place to stay. When that wasn't an option, they would often camp outside.

However, things had changed for modern saints. There were still times when they would stay at an inn, but when traveling in small numbers, they would usually stay at a noble's residence. That was only possible because more than half of holy women were nobles themselves.

We met up with the other members of the extermination mission at a noble's house in the nearest city to the one home to the One-Armed Giant. We entered a rectangular dining room, with a similarly rectangular table in the center, already lined with food.

"Sir Albert!" My adoptive brother's descendant, the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Myra, looked at me happily.

"Oh, you made it, Albert." Following her was the holy knight I had sparred with a few days ago—Serrulata of Bronze. Her dark skin was as beautiful as ever.

Naturally their partners, Orlaya and Euryops, were also present. So were the revenge-obsessed holy woman Nemophila and the Grave Keeper of the Golden City.

"Are we the last ones?" I asked.

"No, Scorching Sun hasn't arrived yet," Myra replied.

I took a head count and we were indeed two people short. That meant the two saints I didn't recognize had to be Drizzle. Sure enough, the crest on their uniforms had several blue strips that presumably represented rain. Noticing me looking at them, they came walking over, the holy woman moving particularly briskly.

"You think I didn't notice that?" Drizzle's holy woman asked. Her holy woman uniform seemed to have been remodeled to have a hood attached. And no ordinary hood either—it had long bunny ears on it. It was hard to imagine they

had any practical function, so I assumed they were just for decoration. Wearing the bunny hood was a young girl with deep-blue hair.

No, that can't be right. You can't even enroll at the academy until you're fifteen and considered an adult. She's barely bigger than Linaria. You're telling me she's an adult?

"I'm talking to you. You're not gonna say you can't hear me, are you?"

Still perplexed, I responded to her. "Did I do something?" For now, it was best to act the part of the respectful knight.

"That look on your face had 'what's a cute little girl doing here?' written all over it." She was pretty audacious to call herself cute.

"Apologies if I offended you." I bowed my head.

"Huh. You're rather obedient, aren't you?" The girl—or rather, woman—seemed taken aback that I had apologized so readily.

"My, he seems to be a gentleman. Isn't that nice, ma'am?" Drizzle's holy knight finally caught up. In contrast to her holy woman, she was quite tall. She was slender and had long, orange hair that draped over her left shoulder. The beautiful woman's narrow, fox-like eyes were striking. Her height wasn't the only thing that contrasted with her holy woman—the size of her chest did as well. However, I wasn't going to repeat my previous mistake. Careful to avoid glancing at her chest, I looked her in the eyes as I spoke.

"Ma'am?" It'd be one thing if they were both holy women, but I didn't think holy women and holy knights had that kind of hierarchy.

"Oh, pardon me," the holy knight said. "This is Irislaevi. She prefers when those younger than her refer to her as 'ma'am.'"

"I'd be lying if I said it didn't feel good to be respected by my juniors in life," said Irislaevi.

So that's how it is. "Then should I call you ma'am as well?"

Irislaevi lit up at my proposal. "Of course you can. You've got potential! Uh, I didn't catch your name..."

"Albert."

“All right then. Have a cookie, Albert,” she said, taking out what seemed to be homemade cookies from her bag.

I bent down to meet her gaze and accepted one. “Thank you, ma’am.”

“Good, good. You’re so adorable and obedient.” Irislaevi patted my head. Seeing her as anything other than a kid was difficult, but if she was an adult, then it was only right to treat her like one. An older woman was patting my head at the moment.

“I’m honored.”

“You’ve more than expressed your respect. You may speak normally from now on. I’m a kindhearted senior.” She did her best to puff out her chest—or rather, curve it.

“Will do, ma’am.”

“You’re a quick learner!” For the time being, it seemed like we’d get along fine as long as I didn’t treat her like a kid.

“Wow, you’re incredible, Albert. I’ve never seen her take a liking to someone so quickly.”

“Hey, Lycoris. Who said anything about liking him? I’m just spoiling my junior.” Apparently, the fox-like woman’s name was Lycoris.

“I’m very happy to have met you, ma’am.” Granted, I definitely had a few centuries on her.

“You’re gonna go far, Albert. Have another cookie.”

“Thanks.” Irislaevi looked extremely satisfied.

“Aw. What about me?” Lycoris pouted and stuck out her lips, upset that I was getting all the attention.

“I’ve felt a lack of respect from you lately,” Irislaevi said.

“But there’s no one who ador—respects you as much as I do.”

“You were about to say ‘adores,’ weren’t you? You can’t fool my ears.”

“I would expect nothing less, ma’am.” Lycoris smiled at Irislaevi.

“I-I guess I— Wait, didn’t you basically just admit it?!”

“I would expect nothing less, ma’am.”

“Ugh, this is why I can’t stand you!” Irislaevi stomped in frustration. They certainly seemed to get along.

“So, why are you two participating in this mission?” I asked out of curiosity. The princess, Orlaya, Myra, and I were all here because we couldn’t ignore the Grave Keeper of the Golden City. Serrulata and Euryops were probably here because they were part of Black’s squad. They also might have taken a liking to the princess and me. Why members of the Twelve Saints would participate, however, was a mystery to me—though I’d understand if it was out of a sense of duty.

“Because I have the ability,” Irislaevi said matter-of-factly. Like someone proud of their strength and seeking a place to show it off, she was simply aware of her talents and eager to use them. It was a simple enough answer.

“I’m here because I wanted to be with the one I respect so much,” Lycoris said cheerfully.

“Lycoris...” Irislaevi was so moved she was holding back tears. Lycoris giggled, looking truly delighted. “You’re not teasing your senior, are you?”

“If I was, it would be coming from a place of love.”

“That’s not an answer.”

They were a rather unique duo, but there was no doubting their strength. You couldn’t be chosen to join the Twelve Saints unless you had defeated several curions who had obtained special abilities. In addition, members of the Twelve Saints were given Heavenly Swords—weapons that could each store one special ability from a curion they defeated. Combine that with a holy woman’s divine protection and a holy knight’s skills, and they were probably stronger than any individual from the Twelve Knights three centuries ago.

Now, what’s the final pair like? Munching on one of the cookies Irislaevi had given me, I tossed the other into the princess’s mouth and waited for the final pair’s arrival. The cookies were extremely sweet. They had clearly been made with a lot of sugar.



In addition to introductions, today was supposed to be a conference to discuss our strategy for taking down the One-Armed Giant. After greeting everyone in the dining room of the nobleman's house, we all took our seats.

The princess was to my right, and Irislaevi—the holy woman of Drizzle whom I had just met—was to my left. Calling her “ma’am” seemed to have pleased her greatly. Seeing that Irislaevi had taken the seat next to me, Bronze’s holy knight, Serrulata, looked upset for a moment, then reluctantly sat in a different chair.

“I’d like to start eating already. Has anyone seen Scorching Sun?” asked Drizzle’s holy knight, the fox-eyed Lycoris.

Then, the dining room’s door slammed open. “Sorry I’m late!” A woman with bright-red hair with a slight yellow tint entered the room. Her hair was tied up in a ponytail on her right side. She had amber eyes, healthy skin, and toned muscles. Although her uniform was that of a holy woman, the skirt was extremely short and her chest looked like it might spill out at any moment. Not only that, but her makeup was perfectly done and her nails were vibrantly colored. She seemed to be around twenty.

Her appearance struck me as a little odd, but things had probably changed over the last three centuries—or so I thought, until I saw the princess looking wide-eyed. At the very least, it wasn’t a kind of fashion popular among noblewomen.

“We’ve been waiting for you, Lady Campsis.” Nemophila of Blizzard greeted her with an emotionless smile.

“C’mon, Nemo! I told you before, that’s not cute! Call me ‘Sis’!”

“Pardon me, Lady Sis.”

“That’s not what— Well, whatever! I’m Sis! For the new faces, nice to meetcha!” Campsis said, looking over the table.

“My name is Glenn. My apologies for our late arrival. Our carriage ran into some monsters on the way here.” Oh, I had totally forgotten. There was a tall, good-looking blond guy in his midtwenties standing next to Campsis. I had been so unenthused about his presence that I’d neglected to even make a mental

image of him. Oh well. No part of his slicked-back hair, blazing red eyes, or large sword at his hip caught my interest.

The only thing the two members of Scorching Sun had in common was the crest representing a brilliant sun on their uniforms. I smiled at Campsis and the others exchanged greetings with her.

“Huh?! You and Al are first-years, Tia? Like, you only just recently enrolled at the academy?”

The princess responded to Campsis’s surprise with an awkward smile. “Y-Yes, that’s correct.”

“Wow, and you’re already Colors! You must be really strong too, huh, Al?”

“I guess,” I replied.

“How honest!” Campsis seemed to find my response funny and giggled.

“Campsis, take a seat. We can save the chatting for later.” Glenn, or Greg, or whatever his name was, urged her to sit down.

“You’re no fun, Glenn.”

After giving thanks for our meal, it was finally time to eat. After taking our time eating the slightly cold food, we got down to business.

“Once again, I would like to give an overview of the One-Armed Giant.” Since she and her family had devised this mission, Nemophila took the lead. “The giant is the member of the Twelve Corpses that calls the Forbidden City Trislimigante home. It’s active throughout the entire city and uses its unique ability, Tracking Field, to detect and eliminate intruders.”

I was familiar with Trislimigante. At the time it was built, it had rested near the border of an enemy country. There was a large fortress nearby that had been used to repel invasions, or so I’d heard.

“Supposedly, the giant was once an excellent soldier who protected Fort Gigareno.” That jogged my memory. The giant had once been known as “The Giant of Trislimigante.” Maybe that was why it attacked any who posed a threat to the curions in Trislimigante. Even in death, it still considered them under its protection. And saints coming through the barrier were enemies threatening

the peace. Three hundred years later, it was still trying to protect its country.

It held a deep love for its country. If we could just communicate with it, we could convince it that we weren't enemies. *No, probably not. The people of Trislimigante who have obtained eternal life are gonna try to kill us, and we're gonna have to fight back. There's no way to avoid the giant seeing us as hostile.*

"When it detects any trespassers, it lets out a shout and the citizens evacuate to the center of the city. Then the giant begins eliminating the intruders." Instead of going around and killing other curions like I had, the giant protected them and as such was recognized as an ally. It was different from me, who had sought to slaughter all the undead as a holy knight, and Hector the guardian dragon, who had killed undead that approached the church to keep his promise to his friend. The giant was trusted by the curions in its city.

"Thus far, two pairs of previous Twelve Saints and hundreds of ordinary saint pairs have lost their lives to the giant." That meant it was strong enough to kill people chosen as the Twelve Saints—people on our level. "We must bring the giant salvation so that their sacrifices aren't in vain." Nemophila's emotionless words echoed futilely through the dining room.

After that, we all verified each other's abilities and shifted to the actual strategy meeting. Naturally, I didn't mention my Bone Sword Generation or Pestilent Fire. The blue-haired asshole hid his Tremor Transmission but passed Golden Garden off as the ability to create and control vines stored in their Heavenly Sword. Given that he and Nemophila were members of the Twelve Saints, it was a believable lie to allow him to use his powers out in the open.

"Ordinarily, we would have the Twelve Saints fight the giant with the Colors offering support," said Scorching Sun's holy knight, G-something-or-other. He was probably thinking that young holy women shouldn't be on the front lines, no matter how outstanding they might be. It was the adult stance to take. Many adults would have been happy to send their underlings on a suicide mission, so he seemed like a decent person. However, I particularly despised handsome men, so my opinion of him wasn't going to improve.

"Hey, can I ask a question?" I raised my hand.

"Go ahead." Nemophila nodded.

“The giant won’t attack its citizens, right?”

“That’s correct, Sir Albert,” Nemophila replied with a smile.

“Then why don’t we sever their limbs and take them hostage? That way the giant won’t be able to attack us.” I immediately got the impression that most people in the room were repulsed by the idea. Only the princess’s sister, Orlaya, and Drizzle’s holy woman, Irislaevi, seemed to seriously consider it. Nemophila remained smiling.

“Heh heh heh, a logical proposal. I think it’d be an effective strategy,” said Irislaevi. “It’s worth trying.”

“By adopting this strategy, the holy knights wouldn’t be required to protect their holy women to the same extent and would be granted a greater degree of freedom,” Orlaya added. The two of them understood the advantages.

“Curions are victims of the witch’s curse. Their lives have already been irreversibly warped—causing them unnecessary suffering and using them as shields is unacceptable.”

“Now, now, Glenn. Exchanging ideas is important.” Campsis tried to calm her holy knight.



Glenn or whatever seemed to be saying he couldn't accept the proposal for ethical reasons. Most of the others seemed bothered by that as well. I could understand why, but as far as I was concerned, eliminating curions was more important than ethics. *Well, maybe the inability to be pragmatic is just part of human nature. After all, I wound up dying because I couldn't bring myself to kill my adoptive father, despite it being my duty as a holy knight.*

"Anyway, I don't think that idea would be too effective. Well, maybe for a bit, but it wouldn't last," said Campsis. I found myself inclined to agree. Rather, it was what I had expected someone to say.

"Yeah, that's true. It might work at first, but once the giant gets backed into a corner without being able to fight back, it'll realize that all its citizens are gonna end up dead too if it dies."

"Exactly. It probably won't like it, but I think it'll eventually decide that it needs to kill the enemy, even if that means killing the hostages too."

Honestly, I think it would be worth it even if the giant hesitated just a bit, but... I felt like I was painting myself as a villain here. "Then how about we split into a few groups and attack from different directions. The giant can't be in two places at once, so it'll have to make a choice. The group it chooses to go after will buy time while the others head for the city center. Once they arrive, they fire off some kind of signal and the diversion group retreats. Then we figure things out from there."

Glenn scowled once again. "Are you suggesting that we escape the giant's attacks by hiding among the citizens it's trying to protect?"

"You got it. If it tries to attack us, it'll end up killing its own people. That'll make things difficult for it." It wouldn't be able to finish us off unless it was prepared to slaughter the very people it was fighting to protect. What would it do then?

"But, Albert, that will also exhaust our divine protection extremely quickly." I nodded in response to the princess. That was the natural result of diving into a crowd of curions. The blue-haired asshole and I would be fine, but the others would be forced to fight a war of attrition against the hordes of curions closing in on us.

“True.” No matter how strong the enemy, you couldn’t constantly go all out. A contest of strength was different, but if you wanted to win, it was best to have options. I didn’t mind if my suggestion was rejected. However, if the beautiful women and girls present got into trouble fighting the giant, they might be able to use it to survive. It could buy them time for backup to arrive. I’d just wanted them to have another option to keep in mind—in that sense, the conversation had been a success.

“You’re an interesting one, Al! We have these conferences every once in a while, but I’ve never heard an idea like that before!” Campsis exclaimed. That made sense. I didn’t really expect such ethically dubious strategies to be suggested by a group that wanted to bring salvation to the dead.

“Well, it was just a suggestion at the end of the day. Fighting the giant head-on is obviously best if we can manage to kill it that way.”

“Ya really do get it, Albert!” Serrulata had looked conflicted throughout the conversation, but her face finally lit up. Given her personality, simple plans were probably more her speed.

The logical process for combating the One-Armed Giant would be to take its remaining arm, then go for its head. *Cutting off a giant’s head, huh? Maybe if I make a huge sword with Bone Sword Generation...*

“Glenn’s probably gonna have to be the one to deal the finishing blow,” Campsis said. Scorching Sun’s Heavenly Sword, Radiance, supposedly had the ability to produce a glimmering blade of heat. Campsis seemed to be implying that it could even scorch and cut through a giant’s neck.

I looked over at Nemophila. If what she had said before was true, I wanted to be the one to finish off the giant myself. If one of the Twelve Corpses was defeated by someone else, its power would disappear. That said, if the Grave Keeper of the Golden City defeated it, he would gain a third ability, while I would still only have two. Nobody privy to the full situation wanted the already unstable grave keeper to get any stronger. I was certain that me, the princess, Orlaya, Myra, and Nemophila were all in agreement on that.

“While that’s fine as a basic plan, the battlefield is constantly changing,” Orlaya replied nonchalantly. “Be it support or a finishing blow, whoever is

capable should do what they can.”

“Oh, nice one, Laya. I agree; if someone’s in the position to finish it off, they should go for it. Given who’s here, I think that’s probably optimal.”

Now it wouldn’t be an issue if I killed the giant. I wasn’t planning on letting someone else do it anyway, but it was nice knowing that it wouldn’t cause any trouble.

After that, we took a few days to refine our plan, then finally set foot inside the Forbidden City of Trislimigante in order to kill the one who had been protecting its undying citizens for three centuries straight—the One-Armed Giant.

Chapter 9

Manner of Death

Trislimigante had gates to the north and south that saints used to enter the city. While we could have split into two groups, the gates were so far apart that it would have taken too long to back each other up if one group got attacked, so we decided to all enter together. Once inside the barrier the plan was to split into several groups and surround the giant.

Though they were crumbling in places, the city's outer walls and gate were still largely intact. That in itself concerned me. "If the giant's trying to protect the city, why hasn't it sealed off the gates?" I asked. It seemed logical to prevent invaders from entering the city in the first place. Piling up rubble would have been enough to repel most ordinary intruders. Was it thinking that it would rather know where we were coming from than force us to create new entrances?

"Oh, you've got a good eye, Al," Campsis replied as we approached the gate. She was Scorching Sun's holy woman, a beautiful, flashy woman with a side ponytail. "The giant's waiting," she continued, pointing both her index fingers at me.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Y'see, there were people who safely escaped the city three hundred years ago. Do you know the famous hero Robert? He's from a different city, but kinda like him."

"Yeah, I'm familiar with him." I wasn't sure how to respond after hearing my adoptive brother's name out of the blue like that. Myra shot me a concerned look.

"According to records left by the survivors who fled the city, the giant was the one who helped them escape. One survivor even promised to come back when the city was peaceful again."

Well, someone had certainly been optimistic. Maybe the situation had been a little different from my city's, but promising to reunite with someone when the city was crawling with undead seemed crazy to me. "I get it. So the giant's leaving the gates open to reunite with those who safely escaped?"

"Probably." Normal people couldn't live for three hundred years. Perhaps it hoped they'd turned into curions and would return. Although back then the giant had probably helped them flee to keep them alive, it had ended up becoming a curion itself. It wouldn't be strange for its mindset to have changed slightly.

"That would explain why the gate is unharmed," said Drizzle's holy woman, Irislaevi. With her bunny hood on, it was hard for me to see her as anything but a child.

"Right?"

"But I have a question for you, holy woman of Scorching Sun—why have I never heard this story before?" Irislaevi asked with her hand on her chin.

"It's not surprising you don't know about it. It was a story passed down in my hometown," Campsis replied.

"So survivors from Trislimigante settled in your hometown?"

"Exactly, Iris."

"I see." Irislaevi nodded in acceptance. "Also, don't give me such an undignified nickname," she added after a short pause.

"Aw, you don't think it's cute?"

"If I got any cuter, I'd suffer from cuteness overload."

"Aha ha ha, sorry, I don't really follow."

"No, she's correct," Irislaevi's partner, the fox-eyed Lycoris, said. "If she got any cuter, it would reach a critical level."

"Well done, Lycoris. You understand well."

"But of course, ma'am."

"They're in their own little world, huh?" Campsis said with a smile, giving up

on trying to understand.

“What happens if it reaches a critical level?” I asked, keeping the conversation going.

“Worst-case scenario, there could be casualties,” Irislaevi replied.

“That’s right. We only barely avoided any deaths when she added that hood to her uniform,” Lycoris added.

“Because a guy tried to make a move on you or something?” Though she was a child in my eyes, she was still a grown woman. It wouldn’t be strange for men who were into that to approach her. That said, I didn’t even need to imagine what sort of fate someone who approached one of the Twelve Saints with ill intent might meet.

“No, because I got a nosebleed and nearly died,” said Lycoris. Apparently, she was the casualty in question.

“Lycoris is the only person I’ve ever seen create a sea of blood with a nosebleed.”

“Aw, no need to praise me.”

“You’re a pretty positive thinker to interpret that as a compliment.”

“Well, for your partner’s sake, it probably is a good idea not to be too cute,” I said in agreement. Everyone had their own tastes.

As we were having that silly conversation, we finally reached the gate.

“The Twelve Saints will go first. After a short wait, the Colors will enter as well,” said Scorching Sun’s holy knight. His name was Glenn, if I recalled correctly. The ones who entered first were more likely to be targeted, so he was volunteering for the role.

“Campsis, Irislaevi, Lycoris, Nemophila—be careful.” I wished the four women heading inside luck, and Glenn looked at me with an exasperated smile.

“You’re pretty relaxed, huh?” he asked.

“Wishing men luck is gross.”

“I’m impressed you can keep your composure before a battle with one of the

Twelve Corpses. It's like you're a seasoned veteran."

"I don't want a man's praise."

After another exasperated look, Glenn joined the blue-haired asshole and the four beautiful women and disappeared through the gate. Only the three pairs from the Colors remained.

There was me and the princess, Orlaya and Myra, and Serrulata and Euryops. Most of us were quietly trying to calm ourselves, but Serrulata was shaking—a ferocious smile adorning her face.

"I'm lookin' forward to finally gettin' to fight one of the Twelve Corpses. It's been banned up until now," she said. Even members of the Twelve Saints had lost their lives fighting them—a student definitely wouldn't be granted permission, no matter how skilled they were. However, with the consecutive defeats of the Pestilent Guardian Dragon and the Shaman of the Heavenly Garden, things had changed for the first time in three centuries, resulting in the current mission to exterminate the One-Armed Giant. "And I'm excited to see what you're really made of, Albert." Serrulata flashed me a smile.

"I'm also looking forward to you wielding real swords." We were in different squads, so I hadn't seen her fight since our mock battle.

"Sir Albert! Please watch my swordplay too!" Myra joined our conversation.

"Sure, I'm looking forward to seeing what you've got as well." In Myra's case, we had drawn swords the moment we'd met, but I wasn't going to bring it up again. That said, given her bangs were still slanted, she probably didn't mind too much. She was still young and had grown a lot in this short time. I really wanted to see her skills in action.

"Serrulata, our goal is the salvation of the undead."

"I know, Princess. But you know how I am." Despite having a sword at her hip herself, Euryops reined in her battle-crazy partner. The two seemed quite close.

"Myra, don't you get carried away either. We aren't here so you can show off to Albert."

"My apologies, Lady Orlaya." Orlaya's voice sounded cold, but I knew the

kindness she had deep down. Myra was usually a loyal, composed knight—she would only get emotional when it came to her master, Robert, and me. Together, the two of them were generally a very coolheaded duo.

I looked over at my own partner—a beautiful girl with silver hair and blue eyes.

“Albert? Is something wrong?”

“Stay close to me this time, Princess.”

“Of course. I remember the strategy.” Given the giant’s offensive prowess and range, it was best to stick together.

“Ha ha ha, you’re a little dense, aren’t you, Astrantia?” Serrulata laughed. “Albert’s worried about you.”

When told that, the princess’s face flushed red with embarrassment. “Oh, sorry. I—”

“Enough chatter. We’re going in.” Everyone immediately straightened up at Orlaya’s words.

The moment we passed through the gate, we were welcomed by a piece of rubble headed straight for us. A massive lump of stone that had presumably once been part of a building flew at us. Had we been targeted? No, that couldn’t be it. The outside couldn’t be seen from within the barrier. That meant its intended targets were the members of the Twelve Saints who had entered earlier.

“Heavenly Sword—Vulpine Razor!” Someone leaped at the oncoming lump of debris—it was Lycoris, Drizzle’s holy knight. Her sword split into six parts and surged toward the hunk of stone. The orange, ribbonlike blades sliced through it in an instant. “Sorry! Good luck with the rest!” The debris, now transformed into a fine meteor shower, rained down on us with slightly diminished force.

“Princess, Physical Enhancement.”

“Right!”

“Myra, clear the way.”

“Of course!”

“Serrulata, we’re moving too.”

“Roger!”

The other two holy knights, myself, and Euryops all drew our swords and faced the oncoming debris. The pale light of Physical Enhancement shimmered around me. There were about six pieces that were on a collision course right for us. Although they had a little less force behind them now, getting hit would still result in a crushed head, and even a graze would probably tear off the impacted body part.

However, I wouldn’t let that happen. With several flashes of my bone sword, I effortlessly sliced the rubble like cake. It either fell to the ground or flew past us without losing any momentum. The other three followed suit. Once the immediate threat was dealt with, we turned our attention to the source of the debris—a giant.

Like mermaids and fairies, giants were sometimes counted among the ranks of fantasy creatures. In fact, I had never heard any stories about giants existing in the modern day. But at the very least, they seemed to have still been around three centuries ago.

Its legs dwarfed even two-story buildings. The skeletal giant had an imposing presence, like a mountain that had sprouted two legs. Its left arm, however, was missing. Its remaining right arm was covered in metal bits and tattered cloth—likely remnants of what had once been armor. Each step it took shook the ground, its fist created gusts of wind, and its roar was so loud it rocked our very souls.

First a dragon, now a giant, huh? As much as it felt like something out of a story book, the tale of a dead holy knight killing a dead giant was now undeniably reality.

Thorny vines wrapped around the giant’s legs, six ribbonlike blades drew its attention, and scorching heat engulfed its upper body. The Twelve Saints were already fighting it.

“We should move, Princess.”

“Right!”

As far as I was concerned, the One-Armed Giant's greatest weapon was its range. I knew how far a human was capable of reaching but not a giant. Even if we tried to have our holy women support us from a distance, if they ended up still being within the giant's range, it might not be possible to protect them.

While all the others had experience, the princess was still just a first-year—I'd be lying if I said I was confident she could defend herself from the giant's attacks. A holy woman's divine protections varied based on her skill. For example, if we were to say the princess's Physical Protection doubled her defenses, Orlaya's might quadruple hers. The numbers were arbitrary, but the point was that not all holy women were equal.

To begin with, Physical Protection was a spell devised to defend against the blessing spread by curions—in other words, a spell to protect against being bitten. It wasn't infallible. Blocking even a single piece of debris that could crush you in an instant was impressive. Even as she was now, the princess would probably have been able to block the rubble I had just cut apart. However, a stronger attack might prove too much. That was where the flawless formation I had devised came into play.

"I-I'm not too heavy, am I?" The solution was simple—I would fight with the princess on my back.

"No, you're soft." While her featherlight weight didn't bother me, the feeling of her well-developed boobs pushing against me was impossible to ignore.

"That isn't an answer."

"Press against me more if you want."

"How about I curse you instead?" I had already started running as we spoke. The princess's arms were wrapped around my neck, and her legs around my waist. She had blushed at the unladylike shamelessness of it during practice, but she wasn't the type to complain during the real thing. As Orlaya kept her distance from the giant, Myra charged in solo while Serrulata and Euryops were running side by side.

"If this is a success, we might popularize this strategy."

"P-Please focus on the battle at hand," the princess said, sighing into my ear.

“I am.”

The thorns created by the blue-haired holy knight ensnared the giant’s legs, but they only served to buy time. Tearing them off, the giant used its left foot to try to stomp on the princess and me.

“Princess, maximum strengthening.”

“Of course!” I was engulfed by a pale light and received the divine protection of Physical Enhancement. She was brave to bet everything on her holy knight who didn’t devote any effort to defense when one mistake would mean becoming a stain on the ground. A massive shadow loomed overhead as the giant’s foot bore down on us with a gust of wind—almost like the moon was falling from the sky to crush us.

“It’s like a kid stepping on ants.” I readied the sword at my hip. *Not yet. It won’t reach just yet.* My attack wouldn’t connect unless I did it the moment before it crushed us. Our only way out lay in the moment just before our deaths. I had to wait until the last second. *Now!*

My entire body sprung into action. My feet pushed off the ground, transferring that force from my knees to my waist. This force was added to the twisting of my waist, flowing seamlessly to my upper body. All that energy was channeled from my arms to my blade, resulting in an explosive impact upon contact with the enemy. Then my partner’s divine protection was added, completing the slash.

Ordinarily, the princess and I would have been crushed in less than a second. But we didn’t succumb to that pressure. My bone sword collided with the giant’s foot, and although all my muscles and bones screamed in protest—tearing and fracturing—I didn’t yield. In fact, it was quite the opposite.

“You should’ve tried learning a thing or two these past three centuries, big guy!” My sword dug into its metatarsals and cuneiform bones—in other words, the middle of its foot, halfway between its heel and toes—then sliced clean through. “Not all ants go down so easily!”

The giant let out a silent cry. That single attack had turned its left foot into a club. Its balance thrown off, it lurched forward. With the princess still on my back, I jumped to the giant’s left and retreated.

“Albert! Were you injured?”

“Just my muscles a little. Can you fix them?” While my bones would be healed by my curion powers, my living flesh wasn’t so convenient. I looked over at the giant as the princess healed me with the goddess’s magic. Cracks were easily healed, but fully severed portions of bone required time to regrow. As long as we didn’t drag things out too long, it would probably be without its foot for the rest of the fight.

Although the giant managed to avoid falling to its knees, it couldn’t attack us again—it didn’t have a left arm. If it tried to turn and use its right arm, we would be long gone. Not that it had the leeway to do that in the first place. Six orange ribbons and a cluster of thorns flew out from a nearby building and wrapped around its right arm—it was Lycoris and the blue-haired asshole.

“Excellent work, White! I won’t let this opportunity you’ve given us go to waste!” Glenn, the handsome blond holy knight, leaped onto the giant’s arm and ran up it. “Heavenly Sword—Radiance!” The sword in his hand was red-hot. It was unlike a holy woman’s divine protection—bright enough to burn the eyes, it was akin to the sun itself. “Rest well, defender of your country.”

Glenn sprinted up the giant’s radius and humerus, jumped onto its shoulder, and arrived at its collarbone. Continuing to run, he aimed to sever the cervical vertebrae. His instant reaction to the events, quick coordination, and following movements were all first-rate. To be honest, I wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d finished things then and there.

However, with the sound of creaking bones, the giant turned its skull toward Glenn and opened its lower jaw. Then it bit down on Glenn’s elbow, a little bit past his Heavenly Sword. I couldn’t blame him for being unable to react. Seeing a curion put stress on its neck—its weak point—by moving it beyond its natural range of motion was new to me too.

“Whooooaaa!” Because he was unable to maintain his grip on his sword, Radiance’s blade returned to normal. It couldn’t maintain its ability when its connection to its wielder was lost. But the bigger issue was Glenn. If the damage had been beyond what his Physical Protection could defend against, he would have just been blessed.

“It’s fine! He wasn’t bitten!” Campsis shouted, alleviating everyone’s fear. Although her voice was practically a shriek, with none of her usual cheer, she probably wasn’t lying. Her divine protection was still active, so he hadn’t been infected.

Still, we couldn’t be relieved just yet. The giant returned its skull to its normal position, then spat Glenn out like it was discarding the seeds of a fruit. It was so fast I couldn’t even see Scorching Sun’s holy knight as he flew through the sky. I heard the sound of him crashing into a building a moment later, but now wasn’t the time for me to check on him.

“Lycoris! Let go!” I shouted. Had she reacted just a moment sooner, she might have made it in time. The giant forcibly removed the restraints on its right arm, tearing through the thorns and sending Lycoris tumbling through the air.

“Lycoris!” Irislaevi screamed. She let go of her sword after she was already flying through the air, and her body was blown all the way outside the barrier.

“Damn it.” Both Glenn and Lycoris had been protected by their partners. If they managed to offset the impact, it was possible for them to survive damage that would kill a normal person ten times over. Immediately changing course, I moved to cover the now defenseless holy women. “Nemophila! Have the blue-haired asshole back up Irislaevi! I’ll head over to Campsis!”

Nemophila turned to me, the indifferent smile she had been looking at the giant with still on her face. “Why?”

“Huh?”

“More importantly, you should be aiming for the giant’s head, Sir Albert.” She considered her revenge more important than the lives of her comrades. After losing her partner, all she cared about was bringing as many curions as possible down with her.

“Sir Albert! I’ll protect Lady Campsis!” The moment Myra shouted at me, I immediately turned my attention to Irislaevi. I was closer to her than Myra was, but it’d be cutting it close. The giant’s fist was already coming down like a hammer on the two-story building she was standing on.

Physical Enhancement strengthened your base abilities, so for someone with

a childlike physique like Irislaevi, avoiding the oncoming attack was impossible. The core concept of saints was that holy women strengthened holy knights, and holy knights protected holy women. A holy woman without a holy knight wasn't expected to survive long.

I dashed forward with enough force to crush the stone paving beneath my feet, racing through the ruined city at a speed that left the wind behind. Jumping on top of buildings, I hurried to Irislaevi. *Should I slash it? No, the building isn't gonna hold!*

That left me with only one choice. "Strengthen me more!" Euryops and Irislaevi added their own Physical Enhancements to the princess's, increasing my speed even further. A moment before Irislaevi was pulverized, I managed to pick her up and leap to another building. As I heard the building she had just been standing on collapse behind me, I spoke to Irislaevi. "Are you all right, ma'am?"

"Albert..." She was a slim, petite woman and fit snugly in my arms. Although we'd only just met, I was truly relieved that I had been able to save her.

"I'm sure Lycoris is okay. But you need to stay alive to see for yourself."

Her eyes moist, Irislaevi nodded. "Yeah. Thanks."

Carrying a beautiful girl with another beautiful girl on your back wasn't an experience you got to have very often. Looking around, I saw that Myra had managed to rescue Campsis as well.

"Nice goin', Albert!" I heard a voice behind me. Slipping behind the giant, I jumped to the ground from the roof of a different building and finally turned around. The giant was pulling its arm out of the building it had just destroyed, yet its hand was missing. Its wrist was glowing reddish orange. It had been burned by Radiance, but Glenn hadn't been the one to do it.

"Yeah, that's definitely something she would do." In our mock battle, the moment her own sword broke, she had used her partner's to continue fighting. It was Bronze's holy knight, Serrulata. She had replaced one of her swords with the Heavenly Sword Glenn had dropped and used it to cut off the giant's hand.

"How do ya like that, giant?! All it takes is twelve puny humans and you're

already fallin' apart!" Serrulata shouted, baring her sharp fangs with a smile.

Although we had to be cautious of the giant's range, its ability wasn't an offensive one, so we were making progress damaging it. Well, progress at the cost of two holy knights who were now out of commission. At any rate, if we could continue chipping away at the giant and eventually cut off its head, that would be good enough. Still, if it was that simple, the giant wouldn't have survived for three hundred years. It was best to assume it still had something up its sleeve.

The Grave Keeper of the Golden City concerned me too—he had only used his powers to restrain the giant so far. Looking past the giant, I locked eyes with Nemophila. She grinned at me, though I had to assume she no longer had the ability to feel fun.

"Irislaevi."

"I know. I'll give you my divine protection now." The petite holy woman in my arms had already shifted her focus without me needing to say anything. Even without her partner, she stayed focused on the task at hand. That willpower was probably something all the Twelve Saints possessed. Glenn and Lycoris were by no means weak—the Twelve Corpses were simply that dangerous.

"Thanks, but I've got one other favor to ask."

"Leave that to me as well. You want me to keep Astrantia safe, right?"

"I appreciate it, ma'am." Myra and Campsis were probably thinking the same thing I was, and we all formed up behind the giant. I set Irislaevi and the princess down.

"Albert?" the princess asked.

"Princess, I want all three of you holy women to work together from here out."

The princess looked at me in confusion for a moment, then nodded. "You want the three of us to strengthen you, then protect you with all three of our Physical Protections when the giant targets you?"

"Exactly. Glad you're quick on the uptake." I looked over at Campsis, the

other holy woman missing her holy knight.

Noticing my gaze, she shot me a brave smile. “There’s no sign that his protection broke. Glenn’s alive; don’t worry.”

“Yeah.” I didn’t reject her claim, but I also didn’t touch on the traces of tears around her eyes. She had shown the willingness to fight, so I would respect that.

“Sir Albert.”

“Yeah, let’s go.” At Myra’s urging, we took off running. We couldn’t afford to stand around talking forever.

“I’ll back you up.”

“Appreciate it.” Myra was the holy knight who usually took the leading role in her squad, but because she knew my situation, she devoted herself to support this time. Suddenly, a chill ran down my spine. I wasn’t shaken or anything—my experience had just subconsciously told me I was in danger. “Something’s coming!”

While it wasn’t a specific warning, a skilled holy knight would know how to prepare themselves. In addition, the cause of the chill soon became clear. The giant planted the knee of its intact right leg and handless right arm on the ground, using them as pivots to swing its left leg. It almost looked like a leg stretch to loosen up the body or a very low roundhouse kick. However, those analogies were only applicable if it were human—on a giant’s scale, the effects were quite different.

All the buildings in the path of the giant’s left leg crumbled like baked goods, sending debris flying everywhere. It was like a storm had broken out directly in front of us. With a single rotation of its leg, the giant had kicked up a violent tempest that left the destruction of a natural disaster in its wake. Battered by the heavy winds, we had to avoid a downpour of rubble and debris.

It was so unreal I couldn’t help but laugh. If it could cause this much destruction in a single action, it was more than capable of slaughtering hundreds of saints. The One-Armed Giant was a walking calamity—one that had survived three centuries and was even capable of healing itself.

But I wasn't the same person I had been a moment ago. The princess was currently in a position where she and the other holy women could support each other. That meant I'd be okay. I put more strength into my legs than before. No longer carrying anyone, I could move even faster. The moment I dashed forward, I heard the crash of rubble landing behind me. I continued running, weaving through gaps in the raining debris. And that wasn't all.

"Perfect." I jumped, leaping from one piece of falling rubble to the next. Like a stone skipping across a river, I quickly reached the giant's eye level. That said, it was kneeling since it couldn't stand at the moment.

"You made it, Albert!" Another holy knight had done the same thing—the tanned, dual-wielding swordswoman Serrulata. I had come from behind the giant, while she had charged in head-on. Radiance was glowing in her right hand. Given how things had gone thus far, the blue-haired asshole would soon restrain the giant with his thorns. Apparently, the giant thought so too.

"This thing's pretty agile." The giant had jumped, though probably not in response to Serrulata and me.

It went straight up. It was more than just an evasive maneuver—the impact from such a massive body hitting the ground would be immeasurable. It understood its enormous size and weight and was using them as a weapon. Not finished yet, it brought its right hand up to its jaw and started crunching it with its teeth. Then it spat.

Despite not having lungs or vocal cords, curions could speak. By sucking in and exhaling air, they could create vibrations. Similarly, the giant could chew its regenerating bones, then spit them out as projectiles.

"Serrulata, jump!" Immediately sheathing my sword, I clasped my hands together.

"Ha ha ha! I've got this, Albert!" Quickly picking up on my plan, Serrulata landed in my hands. I threw my arms up, lifting her into the air as she jumped. Deflecting and sometimes burning the barrage of projectiles, she managed to reach the giant in midair. Then, her sword shining like the sun, she severed its lumbar vertebrae. The giant's body was split into upper and lower halves.

"Now it's the One-Armed One Half Giant!"

After launching Serrulata, I drew my sword again and landed as I deflected bits of bone raining down on me. Once I hit the ground, I immediately raced over to where I expected her to fall. It felt like the opening to a story where a beautiful woman falls from the sky as I caught her in my arms.

“Whoa... Oh, it’s you, Albert.” She was taller and more muscular than the princess, so she had more weight to her. That said, it was a negligible amount.

“Nice one.”

“All thanks to you. Uh, this is kinda embarrassing though.”

“I hear it’s called a princess carry.”

“Stop... I ain’t suited for this.”

“Nonsense. I’ll do it anytime you please, Princess Serrulata.”

“Kn-Knock it off.” Once we were far enough away from the giant, I put her down.

Then the giant’s upper body fell, shaking the ground beneath us. Its lower half was crumbling to dust and wasn’t an issue, but its upper half alone was plenty dangerous. The tremors shook the ground so hard it was impossible to stay upright, and several buildings were unable to endure them and collapsed. I looked over at my allies to make sure everyone was all right.

“Wanna go one more time, Serrulata?”

“We’ll keep goin’ ’til it’s dead.”

Seeing the giant without most of its body reminded me of a helpless insect crawling on the ground after having its wings plucked off, but there was no room for mercy. In addition to Serrulata and me, everyone with a sword took off running.

“Mmm...” The giant groaned, yet that didn’t change what we had to do.
“Meet... O-One more...time...”

Guess that wasn’t a groan. Come to think of it, there’s no reason a giant wouldn’t be able to talk.

“Meet. W-We promised.” The giant had been this city’s guardian. On that day

three hundred years ago, it was said to have done everything it could to help people escape. Some of them had probably been its close friends. It had promised one of them, or maybe several, that once the city was peaceful, they would meet again.

“Damn it.” The witch’s curse was truly disgusting. It would be easy to say that its promise could never be fulfilled, but that wasn’t entirely accurate. I was a curion myself, but by visiting their grave, I had reunited with my adoptive brother and mother. Whoever had made the promise to the giant had escaped to Campsis’s hometown, so maybe there was a grave there. Maybe that would make the giant accept reality. But we couldn’t let it into the outside world—even with the princess’s spell, who knew how much mana it would take to restore a giant’s flesh.

In the first place, it was one of the Twelve Corpses. Even if it was to defend the townspeople it had sworn to protect, it had still killed countless saints. It couldn’t be allowed to run free. I knew as much, but that didn’t make it any more pleasant.

Several people with divine protections raced to kill the giant. The closest were Euryops, the blue-haired asshole, and Myra. Serrulata and I had jumped a ways back, so we were slightly behind.

“Is my princess gonna be the one to finish it off?” Serrulata grumbled. She sounded both frustrated and happy. A moment later, Euryops was sent flying. “Huh?!” Serrulata stared in shock. She had just watched her partner hurtle through the air like she’d been struck by a carriage.

To make matters worse, it hadn’t been the giant that had sent Euryops flying—it had been a holy knight who was supposed to be our ally. Twisting thorns had sprouted from the ground, striking her in the side.

“You!” Unlike Euryops, Myra knew the blue-haired asshole’s true identity and managed to react to his attack. She sliced apart the thorny spear that was aimed at her.

“What the hell’s wrong with you?!” Serrulata roared, running over to her partner. The Grave Keeper of the Golden City gave no reaction.

“What is the meaning of this, Lady Nemophila?” Orlaya, the princess’s older

sister and holy woman of Black, asked coldly.

“Surely you understand, Lady Orlaya. The extermination of the Twelve Corpses is more than just humanity’s dearest desire—who defeats them is incredibly important.” She wasn’t wrong. Getting results was critical for any organization, but to the individuals and factions that made up an organization, who got those results was also important.

No one had been able to defeat the Twelve Corpses for three centuries. There was no greater honor as an individual, as a member of an organization, and as someone of noble blood. It wouldn’t be out of the question for the one to achieve such a feat to be praised as a savior for generations to come. Even though we were allies, I could understand why they wanted to be able to say they were the ones who had dealt the finishing blow.

However, that was all on the surface. Achievements or renown didn’t matter to Nemophila. *Is she trying to set things up so that if I don’t get the giant’s Tracking Field, the blue-haired asshole will? She knows I can’t let that happen, so she’s forcing me to fight him here and now.* The grave keeper was just following orders as her loyal retainer. Whoever emerged victorious here would obtain the Skeleton Sword Saint’s Bone Sword Generation and Pestilent Fire, the Grave Keeper of the Golden City’s Golden Garden and Tremor Transmission, and the One-Armed Giant’s Tracking Field. All five abilities would belong to a single member of the Twelve Corpses.

“Albert!” the princess shouted. I turned to see her panicking, pointing behind herself. Squinting, I saw a cloud of dust rising up and several figures inside it. It seemed like the situation was about to be plunged deeper into chaos.

“My, that’s a problem. The citizens must have noticed that the giant was in trouble and come to its aid. It looks like they’re quite fond of it.” The smile didn’t leave Nemophila’s face.

Had the curions taking shelter in the center of the city come running to help the giant? Curions didn’t usually act in an organized manner. When they did act in a group, it was often because they had been family or friends when they’d been alive. Otherwise they would just gather to spread the blessing.

That said, there were exceptions. The Boss of the Prison Quarter had the

ability to control other curions, but the One-Armed Giant had achieved the same result without any special power. The citizens were willingly standing up to protect it.

Even the Colors would eventually be engulfed when faced with an entire city's worth of curions. There was a limit to how long we could keep fighting, and the only members of the Twelve Saints we had left were two holy women—we couldn't count on Blizzard anymore. If we could make quick work of the giant and then retreat, completing the mission would still be on the table, but thanks to the grave keeper, that wasn't happening.

"Split into two groups. Albert and Astrantia will deal with those two lunatics, while everyone else will handle the horde of curions." Everyone but Blizzard obeyed Orlaya's command. Euryops sprung into action as well, so she seemed to be okay.

"How wonderful. So many of the dead will be returning to Heaven today." Nemophila clasped her hands together, praying to the goddess.

"Cut the crap already, Nemophila. Wake up."

Nemophila just giggled in response. "Why don't you tell me how, Albert? How can I awaken from this nightmare?" Her partner had been killed by the Grave Keeper of the Golden City because she had been forced to enter the city under her family's orders. I only could imagine how her feelings of loss, guilt, and hatred toward her family were all intertwining, twisting her heart—it was no wonder she called it a nightmare. "The only time I feel any relief is when a curion dies. What other salvation do I have?"

Still, I couldn't allow anyone else to get wrapped up in her self-destructive behavior. The divine protections given to me by Irislaevi and Campsis faded. They needed them to fight off the oncoming horde of curions. Only the pale light of the princess's blessing still covered me like always.

"We never did settle things." The blue-haired asshole looked at me. Despite being the newest member of the Twelve Saints, he had already been given a Heavenly Sword. Now that he mentioned it, he had attacked me when we'd first met.

Letting out a small sigh, I readied my bone sword. "Sure. I've been planning

on killing you from the start anyway.”

“That makes two of us. Any undead who threatens the princess will fall by my hand.” The grave keeper devoted himself to Nemophila, conflating her with his former master.

“I’m not gonna lose to some delusional freak who should have died three hundred years ago.”

“And why exactly is it that *you* still cling to life?”

“I don’t want a man showing interest in me. Gross.” Our clashing swords signaled the end of our conversation. Our first encounter had given me the impression that he had honed his skills against humans. Given he apparently used to be a knight who protected a noblewoman, that assumption seemed correct. For some reason he didn’t have his holy woman’s divine protection, but that wasn’t a reason for me to hold back.

We slammed our swords against each other. A dull sound rang out as my bone sword collided with his Heavenly Sword made of an unknown material. In a simple contest of strength, I would never lose. He retreated as though he’d been repelled, and I launched a follow-up attack.

First, I sprung forward and unleashed a thrust at his eyes. He tilted his head to dodge it, but I expected as much. Next, I swung my sword horizontally at his neck. The blue-haired holy knight reacted immediately, relaxing his knees and using his weight to drop to the ground. Not letting my sword fly over his head, I stopped partway through and brought it down on him. It was an attack consisting of three parts: a thrust, a horizontal sweep, and a downward swing.

With a slight grimace, the grave keeper put strength back into his knees and jumped backwards. Any one of those attacks would have killed an ordinary person—it was impressive he could dodge them all. Then again, if he hadn’t been at least this capable, he would have been exterminated a long time ago, so I probably should have expected it. At any rate, he successfully avoided my three-part attack. That was why I added a fourth.

“Bone Sword Generation.” A bone blade pierced through his chest, sticking out like a sickle. The grave keeper hadn’t noticed it emerge from the ground behind him and had impaled himself on it as he jumped back.

“S-So you’ve given up on trying to hide it, have you?” The moment he’d dodged my first thrust, I had extended a bone from the sole of my foot through the ground, then, predicting where he would go, I’d brought it to the surface just as he jumped.

Sure, I had used my ability, but it wasn’t like I was running around as a skeleton. “I just have to make sure nobody notices.” Aside from White and Blizzard, everyone else was dealing with the horde of curions that had arrived from the city center. They didn’t have the leeway to look at what we were doing behind them. That said, the aftermath would be an issue if I shed my flesh, so I was still limited in what I could do.

“Why didn’t you aim for my neck?” Even as he pulled himself off the sickle piercing his abdomen and blood gushed from the gaping wound, the blue-haired asshole remained calm. I didn’t think any further pursuit would reach him, so I made the bone I had generated disappear for now.

“I’d feel bad for you if I ended things too quickly.”

“You may be an unserious man, but you don’t strike me as the type to reveal your hand on the battlefield without reason.”

“There’s no reason for me to be talking to you, yet here I am.” Or so I said, but I hadn’t actually been holding back. His reactions had been just a bit too fast for me to reach his neck. The fact that he was moving faster than in our previous bout was probably proof of his seriousness. *Oh well. I just have to factor his current speed into my plan next time.*

Ending our conversation, I approached the grave keeper once again. As I brought my blade down, intent on cutting him in two, he casually raised his own sword. Although I had fully intended to cut right through his sword, my bone sword suddenly broke and lost almost half its length. The unharmed grave keeper then swung at me before I could recover.

As I ducked, his sword passed over the top of my head. I thrust my broken sword at the wound in his abdomen, but the moment it touched him, the rest of the sword turned to dust and crumbled away. This time not even the pommel was left. He then swung his sword at me, which I barely managed to dodge by the skin of my teeth as I retreated.

“What’s the matter? The sword saint can’t hold on to his sword?”

The first time, I couldn’t tell what had caused my sword to break. The second time, I was paying close attention, yet all I saw was my sword turn to dust. “That was Tremor Transmission, right?” It was the Shaman of the Heavenly Garden’s ability. It seemed there was more to it than just causing landslides and earthquakes.

“Oh? You recognized it?”

“Well, it can’t be Golden Garden, and it doesn’t look like your Heavenly Sword has an ability stored in it. That only leaves Tremor Transmission. Doesn’t take a genius to figure it out.” Still, I couldn’t immediately figure out how Tremor Transmission would cause my sword to break. Maybe a scholar would have been able to identify the logic behind it, but I wasn’t that smart. However, I could formulate the necessary hypothesis to continue fighting.

As the name implied, Tremor Transmission was probably the ability to convey vibrations. Strong enough vibrations could shake the earth and even collapse mountains. It was as simple as a pile of wooden blocks falling when the table they were on was shaken. Vibrations had the power to disrupt and destroy the connections holding things together, and his ability could probably apply that to other objects. That was how he had reduced my bone sword to dust. At least, that was the hypothesis I was going with for now.

“All right.” I created a dagger with Bone Sword Generation and held it with a backhand grip.

“What are you playing at?”

“You got real talkative all of a sudden.” A weapon’s length and range had a big impact on its effectiveness. When faced head-on, a dagger wielder wouldn’t even be able to get close to a longsword wielder. My actions must have seemed incomprehensible to the grave keeper.

Realizing that my stance was meant to deflect his sword, he unleashed a concise slash that didn’t reveal any openings. I waited until his sword was almost on top of me, then pointed the tip of my dagger at the ground. I deflected his attack not with my dagger but with the back of my hand. The grave keeper immediately pulled back, but he was too slow.

This time, a flash from my dagger lopped off all the fingers on his right hand except for his thumb. If the contact was brief enough, it seemed like Physical Protection could defend against his Tremor Transmission. I thought back to when my sword had crumbled a moment ago. His first contact with my sword had only been for a moment, so I'd just lost part of the blade. The second time around I had tried to thrust it into his abdomen, so it had touched him for a longer period of time and completely crumbled to dust. That was why I thought the length of the contact had to be important.

I had actually wanted to test if the strength of the vibrations needed to destroy skin, flesh, and bone differed, but if it could be blocked by divine protections, then that was fine too. I figured he wasn't constantly enveloping himself and his sword in the vibrations, so I had deliberately allowed him to read my movements so he would focus his Tremor Transmission in his sword. My prediction turned out to be correct, and I'd been able to sever his fingers with ease.

"You adapt quickly," the grave keeper said, growing ivy to replace his missing fingers. He was pretty adaptable in his own way.

"I've got to if I wanna kill you quickly."

"Enough nonsense." Vines emerged from the earth like tree trunks—it was the work of Golden Garden.

"I didn't wanna talk to you anyway." Making my dagger disappear, I touched my hand to the back of my neck. The pommel of a sword emerged from my skin, and when I grabbed it, a blade was formed by Bone Sword Generation. In my hands was a greatsword clad in purple fire—a Dragonflame Bone. *I'm borrowing your strength, Hector.*

I wasn't sure whether he was trying to open a hole in my stomach or strangle me as a swarm of vines attacked me, but either way, it wasn't happening. Purple flames roared with a swing of my greatsword, incinerating everything in my vicinity.

"Plants and fire are a bad match. Tough luck." Plants burned. Even the powers of the Twelve Corpses couldn't change that.

"I can't compete in swordplay, my new ability has been seen through, and my

original ability is completely ineffective.” The grave keeper gave a self-deprecating chuckle.

Is he...? No, there was no point in thinking about it. I burned away the grave keeper’s plants, then moved to cut off his head. If he had used his abilities on a large scale, the fight probably still would have been going on. However, despite not being in his right mind, he was loyal—he would never put Nemophila in harm’s way, and he wouldn’t even consider taking Nemophila’s fellow noblewoman, the princess, hostage.

It was a clash between two curions who’d had their flesh restored, using only small-scale abilities and sword skills. That meant victory was in sight. The battle would be settled in another second—

That moment, we both fell back, racing to our respective holy women.

“Albert?!”

“What are you—”

The princess and Nemophila were both confused. Had neither of them noticed yet?

Barely making it in time to protect the princess, I swung my Dragonflame Bone. Three of the six orange ribbons had been closing in on her. I managed to deflect them by a hair’s breadth. It was a Heavenly Sword. Even the princess’s divine protection might not have been enough to endure it.

“Wha...? Th-That’s Lady Lycoris’s. Why—” I heard the princess’s wavering voice behind me.

“Guess it was watching us and learned that Heavenly Swords can be used by other people.” Just like Serrulata had used Glenn’s Heavenly Sword, Radiance, the upper half of the One-Armed Giant had found Lycoris’s Vulpine Razor and waited until the grave keeper and I had let our guards down.

It was likely due to Tracking Field that it knew where we were. It didn’t just tell the giant if there were enemies present—it allowed the giant to constantly track their positions and movements. Essentially, it functioned as an extension of its senses, though there were some conditions to it.

“A-Albert.”

“It’s fine. I’ll finish off the giant real quick and—”

“Th-That’s not it.” Gently touching my back, the princess’s hand was shaking. I followed her gaze and saw the other holy woman the giant had targeted.

“What are you doing?” Nemophila mumbled in astonishment. She had fallen onto the ground, and before her was the grave keeper, his body pierced by three blades. Whether due to his injuries or simply the position his holy woman had been in, he hadn’t been able to block the attack in time. Instead, he had shielded her with his own body, pushing her out of the way and taking the attack himself.

Worst of all, his neck was halfway severed. The way things were going, it would be the giant who inherited his two abilities.

Chapter 10

The Grave Keeper of the Golden City

Just as I was about to settle my fight with the grave keeper, the giant had used the Heavenly Sword Vulpine Razor to attack both of our holy women. Although we had both succeeded in protecting our partners, the grave keeper's wounds had left him on death's door.

Even for a curion—let alone a human—his injuries were nearly fatal. For those of us who would meet our deaths a second time if our heads were cut off, a massive gash in the neck was seriously bad news. If the grave keeper were to die now, both of his abilities would go to the giant.

That left me with only one option—I had to kill him first. Carrying the princess in my arms, I raced toward the grave keeper and Nemophila. He was managing to hold down his neck, but he'd already lost a lot of blood. Her holy woman uniform covered in that blood, Nemophila kept her eyes locked on him even as we approached. She might not have even noticed us.

"What... What a foolish curion." Though she berated him, her voice was shaking.

"M-My apologies."

"Did you think I would forgive you for killing my partner if you gave your life to protect me?" The Grave Keeper of the Golden City was the one who had killed Nemophila's first holy knight. Now she wanted nothing more than the death of the member of the Twelve Corpses who had sworn fealty to her. Her scorn was so great that she had invited the princess and me to her estate and requested that we kill him.

"No, Princess. I simply..."

"Allow me to rectify your ignorance—I asked Sir Albert and the others to kill you. I thought of you as nothing more than a sacrificial pawn. Yet you would

give your life to protect me. You truly are a hopeless fool.” Nemophila seemed to be trying to make the grave keeper hate her—to make him think that protecting her had been a mistake.

The grave keeper gave a wide smile. “I’m aware.”

His smile only intensified Nemophila’s shaking. “What? Th-Then why did you...?”

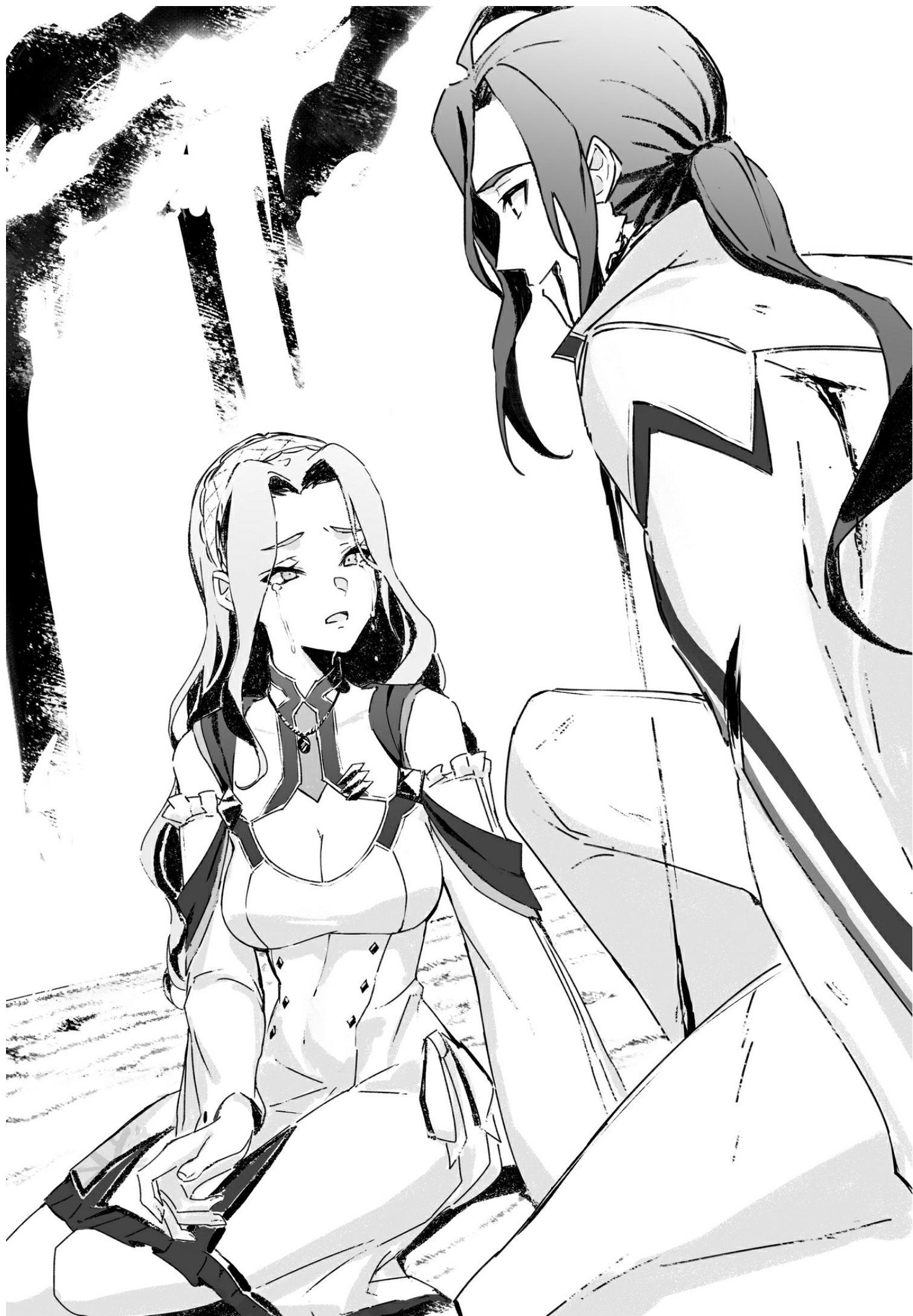
“I betrayed you once already. That’s why I decided that when I was granted another chance, I would devote myself to you until the end.”

“I’m not your princess!” Nemophila shouted. “And you’re not my holy knight! Don’t you realize that?! You killed my holy knight! That person tried to protect me, and you killed them!”

“Yes, I did.”

“You tried to kill me too! And you should have! Now because you said you’d serve me, I’m stuck fighting alongside my partner’s murderer!” Nemophila’s true feelings finally burst to the surface. Due to the nature of her station, she had been unable to refuse the order by the head of her family to team up with the very curion who had killed her partner. She had only managed to get this far by bottling up her emotions. Now that her life had been saved by that same person, her heart had been thrown into disarray once again.

“My apologies.”



Tears welled up in Nemophila's eyes as though the dam holding back her emotions had burst. "Why didn't you die? You should have just let Sir Albert kill you!"

"I intend to do so." The grave keeper's words made her finally notice us.

"He's not quite dead yet, Nemophila. We made it in time," I said.

"Sir Albert..."

I looked at the grave keeper. "We're calling this my win, right?"

Despite how pale his face was, the grave keeper chuckled. "Yeah." Then I wasn't stealing the powers of someone on the verge of death—I had won them fair and square. It was a much better outcome than letting the giant steal them, both for him and for me.

"Albert." The princess softly tugged on my sleeve. She understood that we had to kill him, but beheading a curion who looked human and who had just protected his holy woman was bound to take its toll on her mental state. Especially since her own holy knight would carry out the deed.

"You don't have to look."

The princess's expression contorted for a moment; then she shook her head. "No, we'll bear this burden together."

"All right then." Raising my sword over my head, I looked at the grave keeper.

"I leave my princess in your care," he said. He was a member of the Twelve Corpses who had killed countless saints. He was a man who had long since lost his sanity, a threat who could go berserk at any moment, and someone who had conflated another girl with his past master. His only redeeming quality as a holy knight was the fact that he had protected his holy woman.

"Sure thing." Acknowledging his request, I brought my sword down.

"Thank you, Skeleton Sword Saint." Thus, after regaining his sense of self three centuries later, the grave keeper was beheaded and died for good at my hand.

My field of vision immediately changed—it was just like what had happened

with Hector. I was about to see the grave keeper's memories.



"Theo! Are you even listening?!" Nemophila was sitting in front of me—no, it couldn't have been her. These were memories from over three hundred years ago. In addition, she was far more expressive than Nemophila and seemed to not even be fifteen yet.

She had to be Nemophila's ancestor the grave keeper had served when he'd been alive. Still, they looked exactly alike—a real spitting image.

I— No, the Grave Keeper of the Golden City was sitting in a carriage with his master, Ixeris. Reliving his memories felt like remembering my own past, so I'd lose myself if I wasn't careful.

"My apologies, Princess."

"Is something on your mind?"

"No..." The truth was, the holy knight Theophilus was feeling down because his master, Ixeris, had gotten engaged. He secretly pined for her, so it was difficult for him to accept.

As it turned out, it was difficult for her to accept as well. "I don't wanna get married," she whined, letting out a long sigh.

"I think it's a good proposal," said Theophilus. Due to his position, he couldn't reveal the feelings he held deep down.

"He's old enough to be my dad!" Indeed, Ixeris's fiancé was a man from the same generation as her father who was planning on taking her as a concubine. However, noble marriages were generally intended to strengthen the bonds between families. It was a common occurrence, and it wasn't a knight's place to object. Ixeris sighed again. "Why must I marry somebody I don't even love?"

"Nobles place a great deal of importance on family ties."

"I know. I get that this is what's best for father and our territory, but that doesn't mean I have to like it." The pouting Ixeris shifted her gaze from out the window and turned to face Theophilus. Her eyes were damp, and her expression held equal parts hope and anxiety. "H-Hey, Theo."

“Yes, Princess?”

“I-If I said I didn’t want to get married no matter what and asked you to help me, um...would you run away with me?” It was basically a confession of love. The way she was blushing up to her ears, the way the pitch in her voice raised—in her own roundabout way, she was declaring that she wanted to be with him. Theophilus would regret his decision for the next three centuries.

“You mustn’t say things like that.” He couldn’t betray the family he served, and he didn’t think running away with him would make her happy. As a servant, Theophilus’s answer was probably the best one he could have given. But as a man, it was the worst.

Needless to say, Ixeris’s heart was very deeply wounded. “Right... Of course. I-I’m sorry for bringing it up.” She looked back out the window, trying to hide the tears welling up in her eyes.

Theophilus was unable to say anything in response to his beloved master’s sniffing. That incident marked the beginning of the darkness that spread in Ixeris’s heart.



Some time had passed since his master’s engagement had been decided. She seemed as cheerful as ever on the surface, but something had changed.

“Lady Candy!” She had started regularly meeting with a certain noble lady.

“It’s nice to see you, Lady Ixeris.” She was a girl in her late teens with long, white hair. According to Theophilus’s memories, the woman called Lady Candy only met with his master privately in her room, and he wasn’t allowed inside. In fact, he was barely even given the opportunity to greet her. However, he did have a memory where he happened to exchange a few words with her, so I was able to glean her appearance from that.

Her features were strikingly similar to Astrantia’s and Orlaya’s. *Is she the witch?!* Instinctively, I could just tell. Her clear skin, ample bust, and beautiful face were all similar to the princess’s, yet they could never be mistaken for each other.

The girl I’d sworn to spend my final moments with never wore the expression

of a harlot who enjoyed toying with others, never smiled to manipulate people's hearts, and above all else, didn't have such dead eyes.

Ixeris invited the girl into her room and told Theophilus to wait outside. Just before the door closed, the girl looked at him.

"Does a conversation between maidens tickle your curiosity, Mr. Knight?"

"Certainly not."

She giggled. "I'm only kidding. Besides, even if you listen in, the future will remain the same." Her eyes were clearly fixed on Theophilus, yet it felt like she was speaking directly to me.

"I need to speak with Lady Candy. Wait here, Theo," said Ixeris.

"As you wish."

Welcomed by the lord, the white-haired girl ended up staying in the city for a while. Ixeris opened her heart to the girl like she was an old friend and grew more cheerful by the day. It should have been a cause for celebration, but anxiety gradually filled Theophilus's chest—like the emptiness of a bowl after water slowly leaks out.

One day, he was visiting the estate's garden with Ixeris.

"I love these flowers. They're as beautiful as the sun." Ixeris was quite fond of a certain yellow flower. "Theo, did you know that long ago, a poet compared a place where these flowers bloomed in abundance to gold? The story spread so widely that some even believed it really was gold."

"Yes, I am aware. The rumors attracted not only miners but bandits as well, leading the knights of the day to have to subdue them."

"I wonder why that poet would compare such beautiful flowers to something like gold."

"I haven't the slightest clue how poets think."

"I guess you wouldn't. Though if they really were gold, they'd never wilt." Ixeris's eyes turned vacant, as though her previous smile had all been a lie.

"Flowers may wilt, but then they bloom again," said Theophilus, trying to

bring some life to her eyes. Ixeris looked from the flowers to Theophilus as though hoping for something.

“Then will you continue to come look at these flowers with me every time they bloom?”

“Certainly.”

“Really?”

“I am your knight.”

Ixeris giggled. “Then it’s a promise.” Her smile didn’t hide her still-empty eyes.



Then, a tragedy occurred.

One morning, Theophilus was waiting outside the room where his master and her family were eating breakfast. Upon hearing commotion and cries of pain from the other side of the door, he raced inside as quickly as he could. Inside was the head of the family; his wife; his eldest son; his eldest daughter, Ixeris; and his second daughter.

The four of them aside from Ixeris were all behaving strangely. Their faces were pale, their eyes were vacant, and they were groaning, spilling their food on the floor. The moment Theophilus and the other servants opened the door, those vacant eyes immediately locked onto them. Their arms swinging, they slowly approached their servants.

“Wh-What in the world is this?”

“Ah, Theo. Everything is fine here. Shall we go?” With a captivating smile, Ixeris took Theophilus’s hand and exited the dining room. Theophilus was so taken aback that he couldn’t even resist. Behind him, he could hear the screams of his coworkers. In contrast to his confusion, Ixeris was happily humming as they continued down the hall.

“L-Lady Ixeris.”

“Yes, Theo?”

“What was that just now?”

“What do you mean?” She giggled. “You’re funny. But I like that about you.” Something was wrong. Her casual and relaxed disposition was out of the ordinary given the situation.

Ixeris returned to her room and, still giggling, ushered Theophilus inside.

“So!” she suddenly called out to him. “I’ve been thinking about this ever since that day! I was really sad that we wouldn’t be together anymore! You know that, right?” Her eyes were sparkling, but the light was like a torch being held in total darkness. Rather than seeming reliable, it only emphasized the horror of the spreading dark—it was a dangerous brilliance.

Still, Theophilus could tell she was talking about their trip home after her engagement had been confirmed. “I can’t stand the idea of having a child with someone I don’t even love,” she continued. “He even told me to leave you behind! He must not have liked how close we were! How awful! I thought I’d rather die than marry someone like him! But Lady Candy showed me the path to salvation!”

The witch must have enticed her somehow. Although Theophilus’s confusion nearly swallowed me up, I knew it was the witch who had caused Ixeris to change for the worse.

Ixeris took something out of her pocket—a bottle filled with black liquid. “This is called a ‘Drop of Blessing.’ It’s incredible! It gives whoever drinks it eternal life!”

“Eternal life?”

“That’s right! I’ve been thinking a lot. Like, why do I have to get married in the first place? Leaving behind kids is important for nobles, but why is that? To continue the family, right? So if the family can continue forever without needing kids, then I don’t need to get married!”

“Princess.”

“If father and my fiancé can continue ruling their territories forever without having kids, then that solves everything! I can be free!”

“Princess!”

“And when I’m free, we can be together forever, can’t we?”

At that moment, Theophilus realized that rejecting her that day had pushed her down this path. “P-Princess, what have you done? What happens to the people who drink that liquid?” The intelligent knight that he was, Theophilus quickly pieced together that she had slipped the liquid into her family’s breakfast.

“You’re interested too, huh? I’m glad! The people who drink this turn immortal! And when they kiss somebody, that person turns immortal too! Isn’t that lovely?”

“I-It can’t be...” It was a curse. The cursed individuals turned into living dead—the targets of holy knights. There was no way to save them.

“Oh, am I sensing some doubt? Don’t worry. I know it seems like the curse of the living dead, but it’s actually different. That one is a curse that just makes people’s bodies continue moving after they die, but this blessing can keep their souls inside their bodies! We can remain who we are and live together forever!”

Theophilus had to do something. If this curse spread, it would cause incalculable damage. Yet to stop it, he would have to lay his hands on the family he served and kill his coworkers who had already been infected. To begin with, the undead sought out the living. However, they hadn’t made any attempt to attack Ixeris while she had been in the dining room. There could only be one explanation—she was already cursed and just wasn’t dead yet.

“Princess... Did you drink it?”

“Of course I did,” Ixeris said happily, throwing herself into Theophilus’s chest.

Despite knowing that she had cursed her family (and soon the city and entire world) to be with him, he couldn’t shake her off. She didn’t even seem to be aware it was a curse in the first place, which only served to make her seem more off. Theophilus was terrified of her looking up and trying to kiss him—yet he couldn’t stop it. He was infected with an eternal curse by kissing the very master he had resigned himself to never be united with.

“With this kiss, our love is eternal. Unlike that nonsense people swear in front of the goddess, this eternity is the real thing. There is no sickness, only health.

Let's support each other for as long as we live, Theo, my knight."

"Princess..."

Her cheeks flushed red, Ixeris put her hand over her lips and giggled. "I've always wanted to do that, Theo."

Had it not been for the curse, Theophilus might have been happy. Although he would feel guilty about it, being united with his beloved might have been worth it. "But, Princess..."

"What? You've been sulking this entire time." Seemingly unconcerned about her actions, Ixeris puffed out her cheeks—just like an ordinary maiden.

"About this blessing." He had to calmly think of a solution. All Theophilus could do at this point was to come up with something, anything, to lighten the burden of her sins—even a little.

"Oh, you must be curious! Sure, ask away." Getting the wrong idea, Ixeris puffed out her chest with confidence as though she fashioned herself a tutor.

"You said their souls remain, but your family just now..." Didn't look like they were in their right mind.

"Right, apparently it takes time to adapt. But in your case, I'm sure it'll be instant. You're really clever. Anything else?"

"If it's similar to the living dead, then does that mean our bodies will eventually rot away?"

"That's correct." Ixeris nodded like it was merely a minor detail.

"A-And you're okay with that?"

"Hey, Theo. Have you ever thought about what love really is? I love those yellow flowers, but would I hate them if they were blue? What if they were the same color but the shape of their petals changed? If they bloomed during a different season? What has to change before you perceive something as a different object?" Theophilus had no idea where she was going with this. "At the end of all that thinking, I realized something—it doesn't really matter. As long as I remember the flowers were yellow, then no matter how they change, that feeling of love within me will never fade."

“Princess, I’m not sure I follow.”

“You’re so thickheaded. I’m saying that obviously I love your blue hair, blue eyes, gloomy face, occasional smile, calloused hands, strong muscles, and pale skin, but my love for you won’t change when all those things are gone. And I’m confident you feel the same way. Right?”

Theophilus thought she was beautiful, but he couldn’t imagine his love for her would disappear if that beauty was marred. No matter how appealing, it was just one piece of the whole he loved. Even when it was lost, he would remember her as she was, so he could appreciate her point.

“And you’re smart, Theo, so I’m sure you’re worried about holy knights too.”

He was indeed. She had served the infectious liquid to her family at breakfast and they had turned immediately after ingesting it. The curse spread at a terrifyingly fast rate—and once it did, it wouldn’t remain the secret of a single town. The holy knight headquarters in the capital would dispatch an army including the Twelve Knights to conduct an extermination operation. If that happened, their eternity was nothing more than a dream.

“Don’t worry about them. This is all Lady Candy’s plan. She has a bunch of helpers like me across the country, and we’re all spreading the blessing at once today.”

“Th-Then this is happening all over the country?”

“That’s right! Isn’t it lovely? Lady Candy said she wanted to create a world where nobody dies. She’s such a wonderful person. I was so moved when I heard her plan!”

Instinctively, Theophilus knew that was a lie. The young noblewoman his master affectionately called Lady Candy didn’t have such a compassionate heart. As the two spoke, the commotion around the estate grew louder. It seemed to signal that the town’s collapse was progressing quickly.

“So, Theo. Now we can be together forever without any— Ah...”

“Princess?” Ixeris looked at Theophilus with dead eyes, devoid of even their dark sparkle. Her healthy skin was now as pale as a corpse. Her lovely face was emotionless, drool running down her chin. She groaned and turned away from

Theophilus before exiting the room. He had already been cursed. There were still others who needed to be infected.

“Princess...” Soon, Theophilus would be joining her. He would wander the streets and bite people until he adapted to the curse. Given what he had heard, he knew what steps were necessary to get the situation under control—quarantine and extermination. But if this same chaos was occurring throughout the country, such a feat would be immensely difficult to accomplish. Quarantine aside, extermination was beyond his means. He couldn’t lay a hand on Ixeris or the family he served. The only option left to him was to prove his loyalty. “I promise, I’ll find you and protect you.”

It was all he could do. Then, Theophilus lost consciousness. The voice inside his head preached about the magnificence of his blessing, and he left the mansion full of undead and headed into the city.



How much time had passed since then?

“Theo... Theo.”

It felt like he had just escaped from being submerged in water—like the membrane covering him had just been ruptured. Theophilus’s consciousness suddenly became clear, and he saw a skeleton standing before him, stroking his cheek.

“Princess?” Although she looked nothing like her former self, Theophilus was confident the skeleton was his master.

“Yes, it’s me,” she giggled. “I’m glad I found you. It wasn’t easy.” It seemed she had adapted to the transformation faster than he had.

“My apologies. I should have been the one to find you.”

“It’s fine. More importantly, take a look around.” While the city hadn’t quite reached the point of ruin, it was certainly desolate, likely because the ones who had maintained it were now gone. Their fellow undead sporadically walked the streets, their bones clacking as they passed. “There aren’t many people living the same way they did before just yet, but the city’s transformation has been complete for a while.” Ixeris took Theophilus’s hand as she walked. She seemed

to be headed to her estate.

“What about outside the city?” Theophilus asked.

“It’s awful! They put up a big barrier and cut the city off from the rest of the world!”

“A barrier technique that powerful must be a closely guarded secret.”

“I heard Lady Candy’s family specialized in that kind of spell, but there’s no way she’d betray us. I’m sure something unexpected happened!”

Theophilus didn’t believe the noblewoman had ever been an ally to begin with, but he held his tongue. “Then we’re trapped inside?”

“Yes, that’s correct.” Had it truly been outside the mastermind’s expectations, or had she simply kept quiet about the possibility?

“What about your family?”

“I haven’t found them yet. Even if I could convince father to rule the territory once more, so few have adapted that it would make that quite difficult. I’m just going to wait patiently.” She truly was the same as she had been while alive. If anything, she actually seemed more relaxed. The curse really did allow you to retain your soul. “Oh, that’s right. Do you remember our promise?”

“Which promise?”

“Did we make that many? Maybe we did. I’ll give you a hint—flowers!”

“Ah, is it the season when those yellow flowers bloom?”

“It sure is! Let’s go look at them together.”

“As you wish.”

Theophilus returned to the estate and with Ixeris at his side, they observed the flowers. Although his vision and sense of smell both functioned differently from when he’d been alive, he could still perceive the flowers’ beauty and fragrance.

“I’ll be able to look at these flowers with you forever from now on.”

“Yes.”

“That’s a boring response.”

“My apologies. I believe I dropped my sword somewhere.” As a knight, not having a sword to protect his master with made Theophilus anxious.

“Oh, you mean before you adapted. There should be a spare somewhere around the estate, so—”

Ixeris suddenly crumbled to dust in the middle of her sentence.

“Princess?” Before Theophilus even had time to process what had just happened, he sensed a presence approaching. Purely on reflex, he leaped backwards, causing the incoming sword to cut through his left arm rather than its original target.

“Oh! You must’ve been a pretty good fighter when you were alive to avoid that!” There were intruders—a man and a woman. The man was wearing an outfit that resembled a holy knight’s uniform, while the woman was wearing a uniform Theophilus didn’t recognize. The closest thing was the clothes worn by holy women at the church, but the colors and design were far removed from what he was familiar with.

However, there was something more urgent. “What did you do with the princess?”

“Huh? You saw it yourself. I sent her to Heaven.”

Although the actual time it took for him to grasp the man’s words was no more than a few seconds, the agony Theophilus felt lasted for what seemed like an eternity. “So you killed her.”

“You all died a long time ago. I’m just setting your souls free. You should be thanking me,” the man sneered.

They clearly weren’t from the city—they had come from the outside. That must have been how people on the outside viewed the undead. For Theophilus, that moment was the turning point. He went from being an ordinary curion content to spread the blessing to being a unique specimen who couldn’t find happiness in it.

Theophilus had killed both the man and woman before he knew it. Turning

them into curions didn't even cross his mind. His desire for revenge had won out over the urge to spread the blessing. He frantically collected the dust that had once been his master and desperately cried out as it slipped through his fingers.

"Y-Yes. Let's view the flowers next year, and the year after that. W-We promised, after all." He had lost his master and, with her, his sanity. Barely conscious, he dug a grave and buried her remains. Then he decided that the least he could do was decorate the city she rested in with her favorite flowers. Using the ability to create plants he had obtained, he made sure the yellow flowers were always blooming. Seeing him defend the flower garden he had created, people from outside named him the Grave Keeper of the Golden City.

Then one day, Nemophila and her holy knight entered his territory. An intruder wearing the same uniform as the man who had killed his princess ravaged the grave he protected, so Theophilus killed them. However, when he went to finish off the holy woman, he realized something—she looked just like his master. He felt his heart tremble.

"Princess!" He knew at first glance that she was a different person, but he didn't care. He sought salvation from the girl. He sought a chance to undo the regret of not being able to save his master.



"Albert!" A girl's voice brought me back to reality.

The body of the blue-haired asshole—no, of the holy knight Theophilus was in front of me. By some coincidence, his head was in the arms of his holy woman, Nemophila. Had it flown over there or had she picked it up deliberately? She seemed to be in an odd daze.

"Albert! Can you hear me?! I can't hold out much longer!" I didn't know if it had been a few seconds or a few minutes, but I had been out of it for a brief period of time. The princess had already been through this when we killed the guardian dragon, so she had been protecting me. The giant's series of attacks using Vulpine Razor's ribbonlike blades were fended off by a pale light.

"Got it. I'm up now." Answering the princess, I approached Nemophila. I had to get her back on her feet so the three of us could move. "Nemophila." When I

grabbed her arm, Theophilus's head fell from her hands and rolled on the ground. Even if we wanted to bury him later, we didn't have time to worry about his body right now.

"Ah."

"We need to move." I couldn't talk, given I'd just been lost in someone else's memories, but we couldn't afford to leave ourselves exposed on a battlefield.

"S-Sir Albert?" Her unfocused eyes wandered as though she'd just woken up and looked at me.

"Do you see anyone else?"

"No, but... I was just with my princess..."

"Huh? Hold on." Judging from her reaction and the way she'd said "my" princess, I knew exactly what had happened. "You saw his memories too, didn't you?"

"Memories? O-Oh, right. Those weren't my memories... They were the grave keeper's..." I knew full well how intense the memories could be. You might even mistake them for your own if you weren't careful. Somehow, Nemophila had seen his past just like me.

Was it because she was touching part of his body?

Nemophila giggled. "So the originator of it all wasn't the grave keeper but my ancestor. This blood of mine perverted his loyalty, yet I resented him for killing my holy knight. My family was an accomplice to the one who caused everything!" Nemophila's family already knew of the connection they'd once had with the witch, but they believed they were merely research associates prior to the witch committing her heinous crimes—not direct accomplices in carrying them out as we'd just learned.

No one knew of the role the grave keeper's master had played in spreading the curse and dragging her own family and territory into it. Nobody knew except for the grave keeper and the witch herself. However, now wasn't the time for that.

"Please, think about this later."

“Who am I supposed to blame now?” Nemophila asked.

“A-Albert!” The princess was panicking. Clicking my tongue internally, I decided to change plans. I stood in front of the princess with the greatsword I’d used to fight the grave keeper and repelled all six oncoming ribbons. “Thank you! I-I’ll get a barrier back up immediately!”

My master was out of breath. She’d clearly been working quite hard. “It’s okay. Take a breather and compose yourself.” I wanted to charge in and finish off the giant, but the princess was out of mana and I couldn’t leave her behind with the unstable Nemophila. And I still had one other concern.

The entire reason I wanted to retreat was that our problems didn’t necessarily end when the Twelve Corpses were dead. Their bodies might start to move again, as had been the case with Hector. Yet Theophilus’s body showed no signs of moving. *What’s up with that?*

Was it because he’d died after having his flesh restored? Or was it because he’d accomplished his desire? Hector had been protecting the church for over three hundred years; however, because I’d killed him, he’d been unable to fulfill his promise. Maybe his regret had made his bones move on their own.

Since Theophilus had resolved his regret by protecting his princess this time, perhaps there was no reason for his body to move after he died. Whatever the reason, I was grateful for it. I didn’t wanna have to kill the same person twice, and fighting the giant and the grave keeper at the same time would’ve been a major headache.

“Sir Albert, Lady Astrantia, please leave me,” Nemophila said emotionlessly. She had lost the target of her revenge, looked into his past, and realized that her ancestor had been the cause of everything. It was easy to imagine how that might have messed with her head. Still, the battlefield was no place to wallow in sentimentality.

“Gah, shit! There’s no end to ’em!” A short distance away, Bronze’s holy knight, Serrulata, was shouting.

“Language, Serrulata.” Her partner, Euryops, chastised her with a grim expression on her face.

“Sir Albert! I’m sorry!” Black’s holy knight, Myra, apologized in a regretful tone. It was immediately apparent why—some of the curions from the city center that they had been holding off had broken through.

“Hurry. If you leave me behind, you can still exterminate the giant and then retreat.” She was right. If I only had to protect the princess, I could fight the giant at the same time. That said, I had no intention of abandoning her. There was no need to in the first place.

“You’re a real pain in the ass, you know that?”

“Pardon?” Nemophila raised her voice, probably not expecting to be spoken to that way in the current situation.

“Two of your holy knights gave their lives to protect you! They thought you were worth sacrificing themselves for! And you’re gonna throw that away? That’d mean your holy knights were morons who died for nothing! Is that what you want?! Two dumbasses who wasted their lives!”

“Are you insulting my partner?!”

“I am! And Theophilus too!”

“I-I won’t have you making a mockery of my holy knight!” Nothing I’d said would have resonated with someone who was truly empty inside. The indignation she felt on someone else’s behalf was proof that there was still a light in her darkness.

“You’re the one making a mockery of them!”

“N-No, I—”

“If I’m wrong, then stop complaining and live! That’s the only way to repay the dead!” As the one who had taken the life of the adoptive father who had rescued me from the slums, all I could do was follow the path of the holy knight he had taught me.

“R-Repay them? What can I do now?” Some lives were forgotten and lost to history forever, while others endured centuries and were still hailed as heroes. That’s because those heroes had people to speak of their exploits after they died.

“You’re the one who decides if their sacrifices mean anything.”

“Me?”

“So, what’s it gonna be?! Are you gonna stay here and render their lives worthless by dying for nothing, or are you gonna live on and make them heroes who gave their lives for a great holy woman? It’s time to choose!”

The curions that had breached our defensive line didn’t come toward us and instead crowded around the giant. When they touched the giant’s missing parts, they melted into its bones, repairing them.

They can do that? Was it one of the giant’s abilities, or was it something every curion could do? Curions could recover damage to their bones, but they healed at a fixed rate. Could damage exceeding a curion’s ability to repair it be compensated for by receiving bones from other curions? Whatever the case, the giant’s right wrist regenerated and its severed lumbar vertebrae extended, piercing deeply into the earth.

It sat itself up using its newly healed right arm and turned to face me. The only good news was that it had let go of Vulpine Razor and that it couldn’t restore any more of its body because my allies were holding back the rest of the curion horde.

“Princess, Physical Enhancement!”

“R-Right!” Light emanating from the princess enveloped me, but it was clearly less than usual. Despite doing her best, it was plain to see that she was exhausted.

The giant turned its shoulder and used the momentum to swing its right fist. The giant bone fist approached with a roar and enough force to level even the sturdiest stone building. However, evasion wasn’t an option.

“Bring it.” Raising my greatsword above my head, I brought it down to meet the oncoming fist. A moment later, the particles of light covering me greatly increased.

“If I help you, does that mean their sacrifices weren’t in vain?” It was Nemophila’s divine protection.

“Obviously. I’m the holy knight who’s gonna kill the Twelve Corpses and steal the witch’s dream away from her.” Neither of us was going to ruin the moment by saying something like “you can’t kill yourself” or “the grave keeper was the one who killed the shaman.”

With both holy women’s Physical Enhancements powering me up, my Dragonflame Bone crashed into the giant’s fist with a thunderous roar. After a clash that lasted only a second, my greatsword tore through its hand and reached its radius. Like a crowd of people parting around us, its fist split in half and passed by on either side. The giant groaned unhappily, its arm split once again after regenerating mere moments prior.

I pointed the tip of my greatsword at the giant. “Sorry for ignoring you. Don’t worry, I’ll kill you too.”

Chapter 11

The One-Armed Giant

Taking a quick look over the current state of affairs, our side had two holy knights whose survival was currently unknown and one who had lost his life. Despite that, we hadn't retreated and were continuing to fight hard. Myself, the princess, and Blizzard's holy woman, Nemophila, were engaging the One-Armed Giant. The other six were holding back the horde of curions advancing on us from the city center.

With the help of two holy women's divine protections, I had just cleaved open the giant's right arm. "All right, what now?" Regardless of how outstanding all the members of this mission might be, human stamina had its limits.

Imagine an entire city's worth of people turned into undead. If they all rushed in at once, could six people fend them off alone? Obviously it was impossible, but they stood their ground anyway. They were holding out thanks to the holy women's magic and the holy knights' combat prowess, but they wouldn't last forever. We couldn't afford a drawn-out fight.

Despite my exhaustion, I had to make quick work of the giant. And I had one more limitation—I couldn't draw any attention to my curion powers. My fight with the Grave Keeper of the Golden City, Theophilus, had been one-on-one, so I'd been able to keep them under wraps, but creating fire or bone swords on the scale necessary to affect the giant would immediately get me discovered. Only a few people knew my true identity, and I wasn't trying to add anyone else to that list.

I had to see this fight through to the end with my flesh intact. Although I wished I could continue using my greatsword, I changed it to a normal size. With one swing, fragments of bone peeled away and clattered to the ground like scales, slimming the sword down.

"Not exactly ideal for beheading a giant, but it'll have to do."

The giant let out a pained scream for a moment, but it didn't back down. Using its split arm like a double whip, it aimed at me and swung. Only an undead would have such blatant disregard for its body.

Should I deflect it with my sword or try to cut it down? Would I be able to handle the double whip speeding toward me while protecting the holy women behind me?

"Sir Albert, please, don't hesitate to use it." As Nemophila's voice hit my back, I immediately understood what she meant—Golden Garden.

A moment later, a wall of thorns emerged from the ground, completely blocking the giant's attack. Though the attack shook the earth beneath us, we were unharmed. And the thorns didn't just block the giant's attack—they wrapped around its arm at the same time. Using what I'd picked up on earlier, I spread the roots of the thorny vines deep into the ground. It wouldn't be able to shake them off easily.

I glanced behind me to confirm I had the right idea and saw Nemophila holding Theophilus's Heavenly Sword. It was the sword given to him by the kingdom to signify his appointment to the Twelve Saints. Although it didn't actually have any power stored inside, the official story was that it contained the power to control plants. In other words, I could use Golden Garden and we'd be able to play it off as Nemophila using her partner's Heavenly Sword. I was grateful to have another option available to me, and that wasn't the only sign of things taking a turn for the better.

"Albert, mind letting me handle things here?" I saw a figure passing under the giant's legs and smiled.

"Go right ahead." The figure picked up something that the giant had just dropped, then regrouped with our allies holding off the horde of curions.

"Vulpine Razor." As she mumbled her sword's name, its blade split into six ribbons, each extending to their wielder's whim and tearing into the throng of curions.

"Lycoris!" Irislaevi's face lit up with joy.

"Yep, it's me. Your adorable junior, Lycoris." Though her uniform was in

tatters, Drizzle's holy knight, Lycoris, was safe.

"I knew you were still alive!"

"Ma'am, I appreciate the tearful reunion, but how about we save it for later?"

"Wh-What tears?!" Irislaevi shouted. True enough, now wasn't a great time for Irislaevi and Lycoris to have a heartwarming talk.

"Where's my Heavenly Sword?" The voice of the other missing holy knight echoed from atop a ruined building nearby.

"Oh, I've got it!" replied Bronze's holy knight, Serrulata.

"Pass it here!"

"Catch!" Serrulata threw the Heavenly Sword without a moment's hesitation, then drew her spare blade and continued fighting.

Scorching Sun's holy knight, Glenn, caught Radiance out of midair and swung it as he hit the ground. "This is how you use Radiance when facing multiple opponents." Violent flames erupted from his sword, tracing his slash and racing toward the oncoming curions.



With that single strike, half of the curions burned to ash in the blink of an eye. It was impressive firepower. His ability seemed pretty handy when fighting a group alone. *So that's what the Twelve Saints are all about. Their true skills come out when exterminating curions.*

"Glenn! What took you so long?!" his holy woman cried out.

An apologetic look washed over Glenn's face. "Sorry for worrying you, Campsis."

With their strength restored, the ones holding off the horde would be fine. That meant I could focus solely on the enemy in front of me. Just as I'd left dealing with the horde to them, they'd left taking down the giant to me. I had a whole bunch of beautiful women counting on me. I couldn't call myself a man if I let them down. Technically, there was also a man named Glenn included among that group, but I decided not to think about that part.

"Let's go." The giant was still ensnared in the thorns. I raced up its trapped right arm. *This thing's given us a lot of trouble. No wonder it's still kicking after all these years.* In this fight alone, it had blown away two holy knights from the Twelve Saints. But that all ended now.

Jumping off its elbow, I flew through the air and readied my sword overhead as I faced the giant's skull. It had bitten and flung Glenn aside earlier, but I wouldn't make the same mistake. Its massive maw, capable of biting even a whale in half, opened wide. Not missing a beat, I swung my sword down, striking its upper jaw. Then its upper jaw crumbled away.

The giant let out a silent scream. Its agitation was palpable. I wasn't the type to reveal my secrets, but I figured I could give it a hint. "Tremor Transmission." It was the ability originally possessed by the Shaman of the Heavenly Garden. During my fight with Theophilus, it had broken my bone sword and turned it to dust. This time, I was using it on the giant's bones.

I'd determined how much vibration it would take to destroy its body when I'd cut its arm. The giant's skull was crumbling to dust. Past it, its cervical vertebrae came into view. I continued gliding through the air, heading straight for its neck.

"Mom..."

“See ya.” Now that it had lost its last means of resisting, I severed its head. The One-Armed Giant was dead.



The giant child had been abandoned. He didn’t know who had given birth to him or when they’d thrown him away. He’d been left in a forest, as though that had been his home all along. It was there that a mage stumbled upon him living quietly and decided to raise him as her own.

Even as a baby, he was far larger than the human woman. Despite seemingly having been born with only one arm, the giant child was accepted by the woman.

“Filim.”

The name the woman had given him had grown familiar by the time he became aware of his surroundings. He considered the woman—a dwarf in his eyes—his mother. She taught him how to live in human society.

Filim wasn’t allowed to venture to the human village on his own because his large stature would frighten them. He needed permission to touch humans or objects made by them, and even then, he had to be careful. His strength could injure a human with just a touch.

As a child, Filim’s tantrums were met with patience by his mother. She played with him, made his meals, and talked to him when he couldn’t sleep at night. Without her, he likely would have died alone in the wild. Even if he had managed to survive, he would eventually have been hunted down as a monster.

One time, when he was playing in the forest, he heard the voices of humans other than his mother. It seemed like a group of human children were about to be kidnapped. Panicked and anxious, he looked to his mother, who asked him, “What do you want to do?”

“I-I wanna save them.”

“Why?”

“B-Because I think that’s what you would do.”

“My.” A bashful smile rose across his mother’s face. “Then let’s save them.

But you shouldn't get your hopes up."

"What do you mean?"

"Saving someone doesn't mean you'll be met with gratitude."

"O-Okay."

Following his mother's teachings, Filim carefully picked up the kidnappers and tossed them away lightly enough that they wouldn't be seriously injured. The ones who attempted to flee through the trees were handled by his mother's magic.

Although hearing the criminals call him a monster hurt, Filim successfully rescued the children. Then, they looked up at him with sparkling eyes.

"You're so big!"

"Did you save us?"

"You were awesome!"

Contrary to his fears, the children accepted the giant. For the first time in his life, he'd made friends. Overjoyed, he didn't understand why his mother's smile was grim as she watched him.

At first, everything was great. The children often visited Filim's house to play with the giant. Unfortunately, it didn't last. Their parents eventually told them it was dangerous, and they stopped showing up. After his friends told him what their parents had said and left, Filim hugged his knees and cried.

"Why...? I'd never hurt my friends."

Using magic to levitate, his mother patted his head. "Humans tend to fear and reject those who are different. That tendency only grows stronger as they get older. The open hearts of children turn cowardly with age."

"Humans are all gonna be scared of me when they grow up?"

"That's right. They can't understand people who are different from them. People who are kinder, prettier, stronger, smarter, or even just bigger. They're respected up until a certain point, but once you go past that, that respect turns into fear."

“How come?”

“It’s a survival mechanism. When faced with a ferocious animal bearing sharp fangs, a person must feel fear to avoid death. Fear makes them run away, come up with a way to fight back, or simply never approach that animal’s territory in the first place.”

“I’m like an animal?”

“Absolutely not. You’re a kind boy, but people only see what’s on the surface.”

Someone prettier than me might think I’m ugly and insult me. Someone smarter than me might think I’m stupid and trick me. Someone stronger than me might think I’m weak and hit me. While those things were no more than paranoia until they actually happened, they were all very real possibilities.

“Your size might hurt them or their loved ones. Most people can’t overcome that fear. Being different means living with those fearful gazes directed at you.”

Hearing the loneliness in his mother’s voice, Filim looked up at her face. “Is that why you live alone?” She lived all by herself, deep in a forest.

“Yes. As you know, your mother is beautiful, smart, hardworking, and above all, a great cook. My talent for magic is much greater than most people’s. Facing the envy of the masses made life quite difficult.”

“Were you sad just like I am now?”

“Perhaps at one point, but not anymore. After all, it’s only because I was alone that I met my adorable baby boy.” Filim’s mother kissed his forehead. “Your mother is strong, so she’s okay with being alone. However, if you want to be around others, don’t give up.”

“I shouldn’t give up?”

“That’s right. People are quick to judge a book by its cover. There’s nothing you can do about that. But if you show them that what’s inside is nothing to fear, then maybe you can change their initial judgment.”

“Then I might be able to play with my friends again?”

“If that person is worth it.”

“I-I wanna get along with everyone.”

“My, am I not enough for you?”

“That’s not—”

His mother just giggled. “I’m only kidding. Even for a giant like you, the world is a big place. I don’t want to be the sort of mother who stops her child from spreading his wings.”

After that, Filim and his mother endeavored to be accepted by the people. They went around to the nearby villages and explained that Filim could communicate and control his strength. When monsters appeared, he would exterminate them. When criminals appeared, he would stop them. He helped the villages cultivate new fields, carried large boulders to dam a river that was about to overflow its banks, and cleared a road after it was blocked by a landslide.

Before he knew it, their fearful gazes were no more. On the contrary, the kingdom’s army even requested he serve the country. Although his mother was reluctant, Filim loved humans and thought it would be great to protect the people of his country.

Eventually, he took on the name of the city nearest to the forest where he lived with his mother and became known throughout the kingdom as the Giant of Trislimigante. No matter how different you were from other people, if you kept trying until they accepted you for who you were inside, you could get along. His mother had been right. Filim was happy.

Although there were times when he had to kill invading enemies at the fort he was stationed at, he felt rewarded when he returned to the city and saw the smiling faces of his people, his friends, and his mother. The city was home to his friends from childhood, his mother who had moved there from the forest, and his fellow soldiers. He would do his best to survive and protect them, no matter what enemies he faced.

He never thought there would come a day when the people of his beloved city would become those enemies.

On what should have been an uneventful day off, he suddenly heard screams

and groans coming from all over.

“The living dead?! But the rate the infection is spreading isn’t normal! The city’s going to be crawling with undead in no time!” his mother shouted. That meant everyone in the city would die if he didn’t do anything. “Filim! Get out of the city now!”

Carrying his mother on his shoulder and picking up the few friends he had been meeting with on his day off, Filim headed outside the city. He jumped over the gate and, after putting some distance between him and the city, set everyone down.

“Filim? What are you doing?” his mother asked.

“I-I have to go back.”

“No. Those things aren’t like monsters or enemy soldiers. The curse will turn you into an undead. I can’t let that happen.”

“But I can use my size to help a bunch of people escape.”

“No!”

“But, mom, I wanna save everyone.”

“Th-Then I’ll come with you and—”

“No, mom. I want you to protect my friends.” Filim couldn’t levitate like his mother, so returning to the city almost certainly meant he’d be bitten and infected. He was already disobeying her. He didn’t want her to have to watch him die too.

“Perhaps I raised you too well.” His mother raised her head and smiled at him. Her eyes were moist with tears.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. I’m honored to have such a wonderful son. But promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“You have to come back safe and sound.” It was an impossible request.

“Okay.” But Filim knew that if he didn’t agree, she wouldn’t let him go.

“Good. Take care, my son.”

Filim looked at his friends.

“Filim! We’ll definitely meet again!”

“M-My parents are still in the city!”

“You’ll rescue the others, right?”

“Why don’t you just run away with us?”

“It’s okay,” Filim said. “We’ll meet again, and I’ll save everyone. I promise.”

After that, Filim returned to the city and helped as many townspeople escape as he could. However, his feet were bitten countless times in the process. There was no doubt he had been infected.

Swallowed up by the curse, Filim’s head was filled with happiness and he came to a realization. He hadn’t died—he *couldn’t* die. He could keep his promise and reunite with everyone, including his mother!

After only curions remained in the city, Filim had a curious thought—*The city is safe now, so why doesn’t everyone come back?* He would have gone to meet them, but some sort of invisible wall was keeping him inside the city. Where were his mother and his friends? Why weren’t they coming back?

Then Filim realized there were intruders in the city. There were thieves, humans dressed as holy knights, and humans who used holy women’s magic. The holy knights and holy women were particularly terrible—they went around killing the townspeople. Why would they do something so awful? Why would they kill kind people who had accepted him and obtained eternal life?

I know! Filim thought to himself. *Mom and the others haven’t come back because those bad people are still around! I have to restore the peace!* Filim hunted down the bad guys, eliminated them, and repeated the process over and over.

No matter how many he dealt with, it never ended. He almost got fed up with it, but his promise to reunite with his loved ones kept him going. At some point, as though to save him the trouble of hunting them down, he started being able to sense the bad guys’ locations. He continued eliminating them to restore his

city's peace and to keep his promise.

But now I'm the one dying. I'm not gonna be able to see my friends...or mom...



I was shaking. It wasn't as bad as a carriage, and it was somewhat warm. Was I on someone's back? "Mmm..."

"Sir Albert! Are you awake?" A woman's voice hit my ears, and I saw golden hair.

"Myra?"

"Yes, it's me!" Apparently, I was being carried on Myra's back. On top of that, she was running at a full sprint. She must have started carrying me while I was defenseless from watching Filim's memories.

"Thanks, Myra. You can set me down now."

"No need for concern! It'd be faster for me to keep running! Please, allow me to keep carrying you!"

"A-All right." Seeing how enthusiastic she was, I was hesitant to demand she put me down.

"I'm impressed, Sir Albert! I can't believe you even took down a giant!"

"Thanks. It's all because of you guys holding back the other curions."

"Next time I won't let a single one through!" Her voice was full of regret. Come to think of it, some of them had made it past and fused with the giant.

"I'll be counting on you."

"Of course!"

"By the way, what happened to the giant's bones? Did it start moving without a head?"

"Have no fear. We shared your report ahead of time, so all the holy women exorcised its corpse the moment it started moving."

"Good job." Relieved, I looked around to make sure everyone else was there. Now that the One-Armed Giant had been defeated, we seemed to be in the

process of evacuating the city. We didn't have the stamina, willpower, or mana to kill every single curion there, so we were retreating.

"How are you feeling, Albert?" The princess had started running next to Myra once she'd realized I was awake. Killing two members of the Twelve Corpses in the same day was new for me, so she was probably just worried.

"I'm fine. Were you hurt?"

"No, my holy knight protected me."

"He's that good, huh? I'd love to meet him."

The princess gave an exasperated smile. "I'm talking about you, as I'm sure you know."

"Aha ha ha." As a sidenote, the slower members of our group were keeping up by concentrating their Physical Enhancement on their legs.

"You did an exceptional job as well, Holy Knight Albert." The princess's older sister, Orlaya, spoke with minimal inflection in her voice.

"You saved my life too," Irislaevi added. "I appreciate that."

"Thanks for taking care of her while I was gone," Lycoris followed up.

"Nice goin', Albert. White sure did the heavy lifting this time around. It's too bad. My princess coulda been the one to deal the finishing blow if we hadn't gotten interrupted," said Serrulata.

"What's done is done. Besides, I never expected the giant to use a Heavenly Sword," Euryops replied. Bronze had come close to finishing off the giant until Theophilus had gotten in their way.

"You were awesome, Albert! I can't believe you beat the giant!"

"It's an impressive achievement." Campsis and Glenn of Scorching Sun spoke up as well. I noticed there was a headless corpse on Glenn's back—it probably belonged to Theophilus. I wondered how the others were treating his death.

Everything up until the point where he'd prioritized his own glory and attacked Bronze was known by the others, but after that, they had split off from us to deal with the horde of curions. Although I had ended up killing him, the

area had been ravaged by the giant's use of Vulpine Razor. It was possible they thought that was what had killed him. To be fair, that had dealt a fatal wound, so it wasn't even that much of a stretch.

"Hey, Campsis."

"What's up?"

"Your hometown has stories about people who fled this city, right?" She'd said as much before we assaulted the Forbidden City.

"Yeah, that's right." She looked at me curiously and nodded.

"Do any of those stories mention the giant having a family he helped escape?"

"Family? Hmm... Oh! You mean Kind Witch Ulrika? She was a human, but they say she was Filim the giant's mom."

Those stories were true. "What happened to her?"

"There's a story that says a village took her in. Until the day she died, she protected not only the villagers but also the people she had escaped the city with."

"Is that right?" I chuckled. "Makes sense." Filim's mom had kept her promise to her son. She had kept his friends safe. She'd had enough power to return to the Forbidden City, but she had instead chosen to protect her son's friends and wait for him to return.

"Do you know something about the Kind Witch?"

"Nah, the giant just seemed to want to meet somebody, so I thought it might've been her." I couldn't tell her I'd seen his memories.

"We're lucky we made it out with barely any casualties after a fight like that," said Irislaevi, my senior whom I could only see as a child.

"Didn't you think I died, ma'am?" Lycoris asked.

"I was confident nothing could kill you."

"Even though you were so happy you cried when you found out I was alive?"

"Enough already! I didn't cry!"

Like Irislaevi had said, we were fortunate to have suffered such little harm. Without the goddess's magic, Glenn and Lycoris probably would have died.

"I wonder if Nemo's okay." Campsis shot Nemophila a concerned glance.

"I can't imagine how losing two holy knights in such a short time must be weighing on her," Irislaevi replied. The two of them had very nearly lost their own holy knights in this fight. They were probably feeling pretty conflicted.

The person in question, Nemophila, was running along in silence. She seemed to be holding something wrapped in cloth. It was right around the size of a head. I had something I wanted to talk to her about, though if she'd seen Theophilus's memories like I had, then she might not need me to tell her.

Suddenly curious about the curions' movements, I turned around, only to realize that nobody was chasing us. Maybe it was because of our enhanced leg strength from our divine protections, but something seemed off.

"The curion horde didn't pursue us," Orlaya informed me when she noticed my gaze.

After I severed the giant's head and lost consciousness, the holy women had used the goddess's magic to exorcise Filim's body when it started moving, then chose to retreat immediately after. The curions hadn't chased after them. Instead, as if overcome with grief, they had knelt beside the giant's body as it turned to dust.

"That's because the people of the city accepted the giant." Having seen his memories, I knew how hard Filim had worked to earn their trust. And he'd only piled on more faith by eliminating intruders for the past three centuries. That was why the curions from the city center had come running when he'd been in trouble. Some had even offered their own bodies to restore his bones. They had built such a strong bond that their grief was even stronger than their desire to spread the blessing. Filim had overcome the difference in species, even in death.

And I'd killed that loving giant. Because that was what it meant to be a holy knight. The lives of four of the Twelve Corpses had now come to an end a second time. The Pestilent Guardian Dragon, the Shaman of the Heavenly Garden, the Grave Keeper of the Golden City, and the One-Armed Giant were

all dead. Only eight remained, myself included.

Final Chapter

The Giant's Promise and the Grave Keeper's Flowers

News of the One-Armed Giant's extermination spread through the kingdom in the blink of an eye. This time around, three pairs got the most attention.

First up was the pair from the Colors following up their performance against the Pestilent Guardian Dragon, Orlaya and Myra of Black. Second was the pair who had taken down the Shaman of the Heavenly Garden and lost its holy knight during the fight against the giant, Nemophila and Theophilus of Blizzard. And finally, there was the pair from the Colors who had assisted in the guardian dragon's extermination and delivered the final blow to the giant, Astrantia and Albert of White.

Orlaya and Astrantia were descendants of the witch, Myra was the descendant of a great hero, and Nemophila was the tragic holy woman who kept losing her holy knights, so I could see why they would draw attention. The fact that I, a holy knight who had essentially come out of nowhere, had killed the giant seemed to be making waves.

Last time I'd given Orlaya all the credit for taking down Hector, but we'd opted against going down that route again. Partially because there were just too many witnesses for it to be feasible, but on top of that, this mission had been more of a group effort. Although I had dealt the finishing blow, it didn't seem like we were going to be automatically appointed as members of the Twelve Saints. To be precise, everyone who participated agreed with me that the princess needed more time to grow.

When reporting back to the kingdom, they had managed to smooth things over by saying that while White's achievements were extraordinary, appointing them to the Twelve Saints would be premature at this point in time. That said, this feat meant an award ceremony at the academy wasn't gonna cut it. We were summoned to the capital and forced to take part in a ceremony

celebrating the defeat of three of the Twelve Corpses in such a short period of time.

In reality, the grave keeper was also dead, but we had to keep that under wraps to avoid explaining that the Skeleton Sword Saint had been set free from his city. His extermination would be reported when the opportunity eventually presented itself. Nemophila had seemed confident she could hide his death for a few years. Her family was in charge of the golden city, so they could make some adjustments on their end.

We'd be fine saving that glory until after the princess had grown enough. Once that day came, we'd enter the golden city and report back to the kingdom that we'd defeated the grave keeper. But that was a conversation for another day.

For now, the public perception was that three of the Twelve Corpses were no longer in the world. The hands of time that had been frozen for three centuries had suddenly begun to move once more. The situation attracted the entire country's attention, and the ceremony was packed with well-dressed nobles. While the beautiful women wearing expensive gems and showy dresses were nice on the eyes, it was painful not being able to approach them due to the difference in status. At least the food was good.

On the bright side, there was also a fairly hefty monetary reward and a guarantee of our status after we graduated. Saints had social classes as well—grades, to be specific. Grades were based on the level of curion you could eliminate. There were Special Grade, Upper Grade, Grade One, and Grade Two. The Twelve Saints were above Special Grade. The most skilled students at the academy, the Colors, were automatically made at least Grade One upon graduation. However, every student who had participated in the mission to kill the giant would be made Special Grade. Apparently, that wasn't normal.

Aside from that, we also got a bunch of awards with fancy names that I didn't bother remembering. It was funny how uncharacteristically nervous the princess had been during our audience with the king. Unfortunately, she'd had such a serious look on her face when telling me to behave myself that I couldn't poke fun at her.

Anyway, that's enough about the capital. The important stuff happened after.



First up was the One-Armed Giant, Filim.

"This way, Al." Scorching Sun's holy woman, Campsis, beckoned to me. She was a beautiful woman whose yellow-tinged red hair was tied up in a side ponytail to her right. Her makeup, the striking decorations on her nails, and her short skirt all gave her a different vibe from other holy women. She was flashy, if nothing else. Right around twenty years old, she was exactly my type.

Ordinarily, I would have enjoyed nothing more than having a rendezvous with such a woman, but today, I just couldn't get in the mood. "Yeah, I'm coming." I was visiting her hometown. The princess's family had just summoned her, so we were acting separately at the moment. With Orlaya and Myra accompanying her, there was no need to worry about things on her end. Since Campsis had wanted to return to her hometown to tell them about the giant's defeat, I'd taken the opportunity to join her.

"You're pretty weird, y'know that, Al?"

"Am I?"

It was a small town—just barely small enough that everyone knew each other. That being the case, everyone crowded around Campsis the moment they saw her, making it hard to reach our destination. There were a bunch of men who mistook me for her boyfriend and tried to start something, and her simply smiling and not denying it just made things more difficult.

"There are a lot of stories about the people the giant saved in this town, and some of their descendants even live here, so I get why they'd care about the giant's death, but you're different."

On that day three centuries ago, the people that Filim had helped escape the city had scattered. His mother and friends had wound up reaching this town. "I'm the one who killed the giant, so I figure I should at least pay my respects."

"To let his mom know you set her son's soul free? You're a nice guy."

We arrived at a plot of land on the town's outskirts—the graveyard. "I was

actually just planning on telling her I killed her son.”

“That makes you sound awful.”

“It’s not my place to judge whether killing undead is right or wrong.”

“It’s pretty hard on the heart if you don’t believe it’s right.”

“Maybe.” Right or wrong, I killed the undead because I was a holy knight. Whether it was painful or not didn’t matter. I didn’t feel the need to say all that though, so I just gave a half-hearted response.

“All right, we’re here. This is Kind Witch Ulrika’s grave,” Campsis said.

There was an old gravestone. It looked like it’d been cared for, but the letters carved into it were hard to make out. Crouching down, I just gazed at it for a while. *Your mom’s here waiting for you to return.* Although Filim’s Tracking Field was inside me, his soul was not. But since I’d seen his memories, I felt it was okay for me to give him some closure.

“I’m sure she’s still waiting. Make sure you keep your promise this time.”

If Heaven was real, I was certain Filim’s mom was waiting for her son there. Now that he’d been set free from the witch’s curse, they could be reunited. And then she’d give him a stern scolding. She had the right to—he’d gone against her and saved the city that had accepted him.

“All right, I’m done,” I said as I stood up. I didn’t have any more business here.

“Already?”

“Yeah. Mind showing me your favorite place to eat? I’m starving.” I exaggeratedly rubbed my belly, which got a laugh out of her.

“Sure, I’ve got the perfect place. How’s my mom’s cooking sound?”

“Introducing me to your parents feels like we’re skipping a few steps.”

“How could you say that? Aren’t we in a serious relationship?” Campsis immediately played along with my joke. She was a really easygoing girl. Had it been the princess, her face probably would have been bright red. That was what made Astrantia cute.

That day, several descendants of survivors from Trislimigante tearfully came

to thank Campsis and me. The story had been passed down from parent to child for several generations. It was odd how they celebrated the giant being set free as though he had personally helped them, but it wasn't a bad feeling. Campsis's mom's cooking also really hit the spot.



With Filim out of the way, all that remained was Theophilus.

Temporarily heading back to the academy, I regrouped with the princess, who had returned from visiting her family. Then the two of us paid Nemophila a visit.

Several days later, the princess, both members of Black, Nemophila, and I were headed to a certain Forbidden City. It was the one administered by Nemophila's family—the golden city. Unlike my city, it was still crawling with curions, so we had to avoid several fights en route to our destination.

"Sir Albert, shall we swap positions?" Myra proposed, shooting me a concerned look.

"Thanks, but I'm fine." I was currently pulling a cart loaded with the coffin holding Theophilus's body.

"Just let me know if you need anything!"

I looked over at Nemophila, who was walking in silence. After our recent mission, she had been expelled from the Twelve Saints. Publicly, she had retired. Most people sympathized with her since she had lost two holy knights back-to-back—it was hard to blame her for retiring instead of partnering up with a third.

Although Nemophila and Theophilus had attacked Bronze—ostensibly to take credit for killing the giant themselves, though actually because they were trying to steal its ability—the kingdom hadn't wanted to ruin the celebratory mood, so it hadn't given her a clear punishment. Her ouster from the Twelve Saints was probably good enough.

Their Heavenly Sword had been returned to the royal family, but it'd never had any power stored in it to begin with. That made me think our lie about Golden Garden would get exposed, but Nemophila had taken advantage of the fact Heavenly Swords can only store abilities for a limited time and claimed it

had disappeared prior to the giant's defeat. Given that the abilities lasted ten years at minimum, it wasn't a very convincing lie, but she couldn't be accused of anything since there was no way to definitively disprove her claim. At any rate, it didn't seem like it would be a problem.

From here out, she was planning on using her holy woman abilities to aid the injured. In addition, in her capacity as a former member of the Twelve Saints and the daughter of the family that administered the golden city, she promised to work with the princess and me. While the sense of loss that had been eating away at her heart probably hadn't faded, that mission might have finally allowed her to start looking forward. She was no longer obsessed with killing curions.

And so, we had used her connections to get inside the city. There had apparently been a dispute over Theophilus's body, but we'd somehow managed to get permission for this burial. Though there were probably a bunch of people jumping at the chance to study the body of one of the Twelve Corpses, his identity couldn't be made public. Since Orlaya and the rest of the princess's family were already privy to his identity, silencing Nemophila alone wouldn't be enough. They had probably weighed the pros and cons and decided handing over his body was the best course of action. Anyway, all that behind-the-scenes stuff wasn't my problem.

Despite the occasional curion, we progressed through the decayed city. With all of us together, the sporadic fights were no issue at all. We ended up at the remains of a garden in Nemophila's ancestor's estate. There was a simple grave made using piled-up stones—the grave of Theophilus's master, Ixeris.

She had been slain by a holy knight and turned to dust, but Theophilus had gathered that dust and buried it here. Nemophila and I had learned that from his memories. Myra and I dug a hole next to the grave and buried Theophilus's body next to Ixeris. Typically digging a coffin-sized hole would have been backbreaking labor, but with our holy women's divine protections, we made short work of it.

"Thank you for your help today, everyone." Nemophila bowed to us after we finished burying Theophilus.

“It’s no trouble at all. It was my holy knight’s wish as well,” the princess kindly responded. Orlaya remained silent with her usual cold expression on her face. Maybe she was simply accompanying her sister and nothing more.

“I couldn’t let a girl come to a dangerous place like this all by herself,” I said.

Nemophila giggled. Unlike before, her smile actually had some warmth in it.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“I know you came all this way for Theophilus.”

Of all the things to say. “C’mon now, you know I wouldn’t put in this much effort for a man. I’m just trying to earn your affection.”

“A-Albert!” The princess looked up at me reproachfully.

“You’ve already earned my affection,” Nemophila replied.

“N-Not you too.” The princess was thoroughly flustered.

“I’m honored.”

“However, you’re Lady Astrantia’s holy knight, are you not?”

“Yeah.”

Nemophila gave a lonely smile as she lowered her gaze to Theophilus’s grave. “He killed my holy knight, then died protecting me. I’ve given it a lot of thought, and I’m still not certain how I should feel about him.”

“Don’t forgive him for killing your partner, but be grateful that he protected you. Can those two feelings not coexist?” While it was difficult for hatred and affection to exist together, it wasn’t impossible.

“It won’t be easy, but I’d like to reach that point one day.” Letting him rest next to his master was already plenty considerate. Still, it would be a while before she could accept everything that had happened.

“Hey, Nemophila.”

“Yes?”

“I’ve got a favor I’d like to ask you.”

“Go right ahead.” She put her hands on her chest and awaited my next words.

Yet I didn't open my mouth. After hesitating for several seconds and awkwardly scratching my head, I finally spoke. "Uh, eventually, when this city is freed, could you leave this garden here?" *I'm definitely not saying that for Theophilus's sake. It's for... Yeah, it's for Ixeris.* She might have died long ago, but she was still a woman. Obviously my request was simply out of kindness toward her. I was just being my usual self—it was a totally normal thing for me to say. *So, Princess, wipe that approving smile off your face. You too, Myra. I see that look.*

"I think I can manage that." Though her father was the one who actually owned the land, she seemed confident that once the city was freed, she could at least secure a single garden.

"Thanks."

"Of course."

Our conversation ended there. Forbidden Cities weren't places you could afford to linger in, so we would need to leave soon. But before that, I still had one thing left to do. I got down on one knee and placed my hand on the ground, looking right at Theophilus's grave. "I never liked you, and I don't care about men, but I'll at least commend you for keeping your holy woman safe."

He had protected the one he loved. The old man who'd looked after me in the slums and the adoptive father who'd raised me had both told me about a man's happiness. I suspected Theophilus had found that happiness. The least I could do was recognize that. I activated Golden Garden.

"Are these...?" Nemophila sounded shocked. The garden filled with the golden flowers her ancestor Ixeris had loved. Using the power I'd taken from Theophilus, I returned the garden to its former glory.



“The golden city...” The princess let a voice of wonder slip out. Ixeris had never liked that name, but it didn’t change the flowers’ beauty.

“Shall we head back?” Standing back up, I saw Nemophila hanging her head. Her shoulders were faintly shaking.

“That was a lovely offering, Sir Albert.”

“It’s for your ancestor Ixeris.”

Nemophila giggled again. Amid the dancing golden petals, we headed to the barrier. Everyone’s lingering regrets had been laid to rest.

These continued encounters with the Twelve Corpses were unprecedented. The initial plan had been to attend the academy and give the princess time to develop as a holy woman. I hoped she’d be able to go back to training peacefully, but who knew what awaited us? Even after living three hundred years, the future remained a mystery to me.

Afterword

Thank you for picking up this book. I'm Hozumi Mitaka. Many of the Twelve Corpses appeared in the second volume. Albert defeated the Pestilent Guardian Dragon in the previous volume, but going at a pace of one per book would mean it would take eleven volumes to get through them all, even not including Albert himself. I had no way of planning such a large-scope story from the start, and when I came up with the plot of this volume, I thought, "This is what I wanna write!" So that's why things developed as they did. Thank you all for being there with the One-Armed Giant and the Grave Keeper of the Golden City in their final moments.

Now, on to the acknowledgments. I'm once again deeply grateful to my editor, Ishida-sama. I'm not good at putting my ideas for characters into words, but being able to bounce ideas off of him was very helpful. I also apologize for making you wait until the very last minute for the manuscript submission.

To the illustrator, fame-sama, thank you once again for the wonderful illustrations! I loved how the cover of the first volume had Albert and Astrantia next to each other yet standing in different locations to show that while they were a team, they were also very different. I also love how the cover of volume two shows that the main characters have shortened the distance between them. The meaning of the cover really sinks in after you read the story and see the flowers in the background and the petal in Theophilus's hand. Nemophila was probably difficult to draw since she keeps her real emotions hidden, so thank you for making her so appealing! Campsis's gal vibe and outfit were amazing as well! And Glenn looks so cool it makes me wish I'd given him a bigger role. Not to be forgotten among all the new characters, the image of Cuphea at the front is also extremely cute. At the time of writing this afterword, I haven't gotten to see the images in the volume itself yet, but thank you again for your wonderful illustrations!

Finally, I want to express my gratitude to the readers of the web version and everyone involved in the production and sale of this book. Thank you to

everyone who picked up this second volume. Though I would love to bring the next battle to you in the form of a book, even I as the author can't predict what comes next. I would appreciate it if you supported this work along with the eventual manga version. While I pray that we will meet again, for now, I must set down my pen.

Hozumi Mitaka









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The Death of the Skeleton Swordsman: Dominating as a Cursed Saint Volume
2

by Hozumi Mitaka

Translated by Jarod Blackburn Edited by Elijah Baldwin

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